

A Burning Issue: How ‘Stress Talk’ Impacts Recourse to Stress Management Interventions within the Fire and Rescue Service
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Abstract

This paper draws on the findings of a wider three-year ethnographic research study with three fire and rescue services and one independent fire training organisation in England, exploring the impact of occupational culture on stress. The paper focuses on how the dominant firefighter culture which exists within the service influences how stress is perceived and talked about within the service. The paper explores how a reluctance to engage in ‘stress talk’ ultimately impacts employee recourse to both informal and formal stress management interventions.

Key words: stress discourse; stress talk; firefighter stress; stress and culture; talking about stress.

Introduction

Stress is an amorphous concept (Kinman & Jones, 2005) and there are wide variations in its use and meaning (Aldwin, 2007; Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Newton, 1995) which renders the concept ‘vulnerable to political, social and economic manipulation’ (Lewig & Dollard, 2001, p.179). Wainwright and Calnan (2002, p.45) suggest that stress is not an ‘objective truth discovered by rigorous scientific enquiry’ but neither is it ‘pure invention’. The stress concept would not have become so ‘popular’ unless it was something we could relate to and therefore a stressed out person is still a stressed out person regardless of whether the stress is real or perceived. The concept therefore serves a useful purpose in bringing meaning to workers’ everyday experiences and feelings (Harkness *et al.*, 2005) and is capable of supporting a variety of interpretations and explanations (Wainwright & Calnan, 2002). Despite the plethora of work-related stress studies there has been limited exploration of the language of stress (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness *et al.*, 2005) and yet through language we make sense of psychological phenomena such as stress (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Säljö, 1999). Language is more than a means of communicating what stress is rather it is through language that stress emerges as real (Säljö, 1999). How we constitute our understanding of what it means to be stressed and how we should cope with such encounters are largely discursive practices (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Säljö, 1999). Stress is therefore constructed through discourse (Dick, 2000). Stress does not exist in a political or ideological vacuum (Newton, 1995) therefore the stress discourse not only defines the concept – what we consider stress to be – but also defines our identity - as a stressed or unstressed individual (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006). Through the stress discourse, these attitudes are interpreted and reproduced which ultimately impacts work-related actions and behaviours including worker recourse to stress management interventions (Kinman & Jones, 2005). Language should therefore be part of the theory rather than method (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006). In other words we need more of a focus on how people use language to make sense of what is going on and make sense of what it means to be stressed (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Säljö, 1999) informed by the political, economic and cultural context in which they exist (Newton, 1995).

Within the workplace, stress management interventions aim to reduce the presence of workplace stressors and therefore assist employees to better cope with stress (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Nielsen *et al.*, 2010; Nytrø *et al.*, 2000). Newton (1995) notes that interventions are generally categorised into primary interventions (interventions aimed at eliminating or mitigating the stressors); secondary interventions (which aim to make the individual more

‘stress hardy’); and tertiary interventions (which provide support for individuals who have been exposed to stress). They therefore highlight that interventions are either organisationally-targeted (at changing the work environment to mitigate the risk of stressors), or individually-targeted (to modify individual reactions to stressors or to treat and rehabilitate the stressed worker). Despite a growing interest in intervention strategies since the 1970s (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008) there is much debate as to the effectiveness of such interventions (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010; Richardson & Rothstein, 2008; Nielsen *et al.*, 2006; Noblet & LaMontagne, 2006; Nytrø *et al.*, 2000). Much of the criticism has focused on the fact that organisations adopt individually-targeted interventions rather than organisationally-targeted interventions therefore locating the responsibility for ‘managing’ work place stress with the individual employee rather than with the organisation (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007; Morrison & Payne, 2003; Noblet & LaMontagne, 2006). However, as employees are ‘nested’ (Hobfoll, 2001) within a wider organisational context (Morrison & Payne, 2003), they may have limited agency over changing their working environment at an individual level (Morrison & Payne, 2003; Newton, 1995; Noblet & LaMontagne, 2006). Workplace stress therefore needs to be understood in the context of wider factors that underpin work group attitudes to formalised intervention strategies (Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Hobfoll, 2004; Länsisalmi *et al.*, 2000; Morrison & Payne, 2003; Newton, 1995).

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by focusing on how the stress concept is understood through ‘stress talk’ and how this impacts workers’ recourse to stress management interventions. This paper draws on the findings of a wider three-year ethnographic study with three fire and rescue services and one independent training organisation in England. This paper highlights how attitudes to stress are influenced by political, temporal and socio-cultural contexts which ultimately impacts how workers perceive themselves as stressed and how this identity impacts their behaviours. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate discussion and contribute to the call for more studies which focus on ‘stress talk’.

Literature Review

Within the workplace, individuals do not exist in isolation, but are ‘nested’ in the wider families and tribes to whom they belong (Hobfoll, 2004; 2001). To understand attitudes and responses to ‘stress’ we therefore need to understand the wider socio-cultural contexts in which individuals are ‘nested’ as stress is embedded within this wider context which informs understanding, meaning and behaviours (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004; 2001). Kinman &

Jones (2005) suggest a number of factors influence workers' attitudes to stress including the media, trade unions and organisational policies and practices.

Harkness *et al.* (2005) suggest that the media are responsible for the popularisation of the stress concept. Kinman & Jones (2005) highlight that the media portray contradictory messages and present a number of popular 'stressed-out' stereotypes which Wainwright & Calnan (2002) suggest reflect the wider political and economic context associated with that period in history. For example, Wainwright & Calnan (2002) note that in the late 1970s, there was an increased media emphasis on the concept of 'executive stress' replete with message of highly stressed executives desiring to escape the rat race. They cite the popular sitcoms of the time – *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* and *The Good Life* to illustrate the point. Both examples celebrate the hero executive who escapes from the shackles of work to lead a simpler and more fulfilling life. In their review of Australian newsprint media in the late 1990s, Lewig and Dollard (2001) found that work stress was represented as 'an economically costly epidemic' caused by poor working conditions and as primarily a public sector problem. Jones & Bright (2001) suggest that by 2000 the media portrayal was a message that work is now more stressful than it has ever been. Kinman & Jones (2005) further highlight that the media discourse is one of unfavourable working conditions and bad organisational practices. They suggest that this positions the blame for stress with organisations rather than with the employee. Pollock (1988) argues that this popularisation of the stress concept by the media has led to an increased awareness of the concept, making stress a part of everyday life. She maintains that 'stress is not something naturally occurring in the world but a manufactured concept which has now become social fact' (Pollock, 1988, p.390). She suggests that the stress discourse portrayed by the media has led to our subjective perception of life as more demanding and pressurised rather than actual changes to the workplace that have led to objective increased pressure. Wainwright and Calnan (2002) suggest that this heightened awareness of the world as an increasingly stressful place leads to issues of definition with essentially any bad experience at work being defined as stress-related. This therefore positions the employee as a stressed out victim who needs protection from poor work practices (Kinman & Jones, 2005). These victims are protected by various statues and laws and organisations have a duty of care to protect their workers from undue pressure (Bicknell & Leifooghe, 2006). Pollock (1988) therefore suggests that the increased reporting of stress related illnesses is as a result of our increased awareness of stress as a concept rather than an 'objective' increase in our stress levels.

Kinman & Jones (2005) suggest that the discourse of the victimised worker has been used by the trade union movement to highlight the plight of their members and to fight for better terms and conditions of employment. They suggest that trade unions have adopted a discourse of stress as an ‘occupational hazard’ that is the result of fundamental flaws in how work is structured and managed rather than as a result of employee capability. Wainwright and Calnan (2002) highlight the active role that the trade unions have adopted by conducting large scale surveys to emphasise stress as a growing problem, a message that is then communicated to their members, the media and therefore the wider public. This rhetoric serves to gain media, public, and member support for work reform and enhanced working conditions (Kinman & Jones, 2005).

Kinman & Jones (2005) therefore argue that the way in which stress is conceptualised can influence a wide range of work-related attitudes and behaviours including how ‘being stressed’ is defined, disclosed and talked about in the work-place, and how employees behave. For example, in her study of social workers, Meyerson (1998; 1994) observed how organisational ideologies shaped attitudes to stress and informed behaviours and actions. She found that the social workers who worked in institutions underpinned by a ‘medical’ ideology interpreted ambiguity as abnormal, and were therefore reluctant to admit to ambiguities within the ‘system’. She notes that in this context, burnout was interpreted as a disease which was caused by an individual personality flaw or an individual’s failure to cope with their situation and the stigma attached to burnout in this culture of control and normality was reflected in how staff discussed, or in many cases refused to discuss the issue. Meyerson (1994; 1998) contrasts this medical ideology with the ‘social work’ ideology which has a core belief in self-determination, of each individual defining the personal meaning of health and illness. Within this framework she notes that there are multiple versions of what is normal and therefore she observed that the social work ideology is characterised by ambiguity and blurred professional boundaries, which Meyerson (1994;1998) illustrates using examples such as the chaotic team meetings, the interdisciplinary approach to decisions, and the subjective approach to diagnosis. She highlights how social workers within this environment embraced chaos and lack of control and they did not consider that this chaos and lack of control had a negative impact on the unit’s effectiveness. They interpreted ambiguity as liberating, and burnout was seen as a normal part of being a good social worker.

Similarly, defining stress as a cultural artefact Länsisalmi *et al.* (2000) examined the sources of collective stress and collective coping strategies in three independent Finnish divisions of a multinational organisation operating in the metal industry. The authors noted

that a number of distinctive collective stressors emerged in each of the three divisions which the authors state were culturally determined by their distinct business ideologies. They noted therefore that similar stressors took on a different form in each of the divisional cultures and coping strategies also differed from one cultural context to another. For example in one of the divisions, they found that a lack of fluency in the production process was identified as a key stressor. The authors explain that the 'cultural origins' of this fluctuation in the process lay in the uncooperative relationships between the different work units and hierarchies in which each individual was encouraged to complete his/her part of the 'jigsaw' with total disregard for the wider context. To cope with these fluctuations, a collective sense of responsibility had started to develop among the work groups who would blame 'others' for the delays and problems. However, the scattered work pattern in another division, was underpinned by a culture of 'time is money' and a high commitment to meet changing customer needs. The work was characterised by last minute changes, frequent interruptions and a general lack of time to complete projects and 'the feeling of chaotic urgency dominated' (p.539). Workers coped through their collective 'workaholism' and the 'heroic character of overly committed individuals was kept alive by telling stories of long working days and nights, weekends spent at work, and angry wives calling to project managers to get their husbands home ..' (p.540). The authors therefore conclude that stress appraisals and coping strategies have collective qualities that are determined by the organisational culture. They add that this has implications for intervention strategies and that rather than focusing on individual interventions, organisations need to establish 'the collective responses that are significant for large groups of individuals and from there identify interventions that will have the maximum impact in a particular organization' (p.550).

Harkness *et al.* (2005) used discourse analysis to analyse the versions of workplace stress described by twenty-two Canadian female clerical workers invited to take part in their research focus group. Their analysis revealed that the women described their experiences of stress at work using two contradictory 'interpretive repertoires', first that being stressed at work is normal, and second that showing you are stressed at work is abnormal. For the women, workplace stress had come to symbolise importance and effectiveness, 'we're only good if we're stressed' (p.127). However, although the women considered stress to be unavoidable, being unable to cope with it was considered abnormal, a personal flaw or weakness, 'similar to being labelled mentally ill' (p.128). The women therefore concealed their feelings as to display negative emotions was considered unacceptable. Harkness *et al.* (2005) claim that their comments reflect wider societal views regarding those who perform

clerical work. For example, the women talked about being undervalued and receiving little acknowledgement or gratitude for the work that they performed, they considered themselves replaceable, 'a dime a dozen' (p.128). The authors explain that the women made sense of their contradictory repertoires - being stressed at work is normal but to express stress is abnormal, through the use of their discursive strategies. Defining the workplace as stressful, enabled the women to use stress as a 'socially acceptable way of expressing negative feelings or discomfort without hurting peoples' feelings or causing offence' (p.130). However as failure to cope was considered a weakness by both colleagues and managers, the women were able to regain a sense of dignity and competence by deflecting the blame from their inability to cope with stress to their managers' inability to manage effectively. They believed that managers were to blame for stress because they lacked good people skills. It was managers therefore who had to take action to alleviate stress and they considered the individual stress management training offered by their intuitions as being therefore inappropriate. In a context where being stressed means being effective and being important, the 'stress talk' enabled the women to gain a sense of significance which contrasted with their feelings of being undervalued and unappreciated.

Stress does not exist in a depoliticised or decontextualised vacuum (Newton, 1995). Kinman & Jones (2005) therefore highlight that workers and their organisations will engage with a diverse and at times contradictory discourse regarding the nature of stress and how it should be managed. For example, from a 'psycho-medical idiom' (Wainwright & Calnan, 2002) stress is interpreted as an individual flaw or fault (Meyerson, 1998; 1994). In this context, there is a social stigma attached to admitting to being stressed as such an admission, is an admission of being weak and unable to cope with the demands of the job (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness et al., 2005; Meyerson, 1998; 1994). This stigma can influence how stress is discussed and disclosed in the workplace, and will also influence participation in stress intervention strategies (Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Kinman & Jones, 2005). Alternatively, stress may be conceptualised as natural and necessary, a demonstration of hard work and therefore the stressed out individual is perceived as a committed and successful professional, a hero, who needs to be recognised and supported in their efforts by the organisation (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006; Harkness et al., 2005; Länsisalmi *et al.*, 2000; Meyerson, 1998). Alternatively engaging in stress talk can be a means of expressing dissatisfaction with our lot whilst avoiding more complex emotions (Harkness *et al.*, 2005) providing a means of legitimately expressing dissent with the workplace (Lewig & Dollard, 2001). We therefore need to explore the subjective meanings embedded in workplace stress discourse which

reflects how stress is conceptualised and how worker identities emerge (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006).

Methodology

This study draws on the findings of a wider ethnographic study involving three fire and rescue services and one independent training organisation in England. Ethnography is characterised by its objective to explore the social meaning assigned by groups to their normal everyday activities (Agar, 1980; Brewer, 2004, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011; Watson, 2011). Ethnography as a style of research enables the researcher to employ a variety of research methods in the collection of data including participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and the collection of documents and artefacts (Atkinson *et al.*, 2001; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Although these methods are used in other forms of research, what makes their application ethnographic is their use to explore behaviours in the natural work setting (rather than a laboratory setting), with the objective of understanding ‘from the inside’ the social meanings ascribed to these behaviours through close involvement in the field (Agar, 1980; Atkinson *et al.*, 2001; Brewer 2004; 2002; Linstead, 1997). In total, over a period of three years, the researcher spent one day a week engaged in research activities with three fire and rescue services and some intensive training weeks with an independent fire training organisation. The researcher engaged in various activities with the three fire and rescue services including training simulations, community safety events, fire safety checks, and routine tasks. This paper draws on the findings from seventeen one-to-one key informant interviews with both operational and support managers and eight focus group interviews with approx. ninety firefighters.

Interviews as a research technique provide the primary means through which ethnographic researchers can discuss the phenomena of interest with participants in order to gain an understanding of these phenomena from their perspective and to explore why they have come to this perspective (Crang & Cook, 2007; Heyl, 2001; King, 2004). Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007) suggest that interviewing informants from different hierarchical levels and functional groups and who may therefore view the phenomena from diverse perspectives, should mitigate the risk of bias, as it is unlikely that all of the interviewees would have the opportunity or indeed the motivation to engage in convergent impression management.

Researchers debate the level of structure required when interviewing. Crang & Cook (2007) suggest a semi-structured approach which sets some parameters to the discussions,

while Brewer (2004) suggests an unstructured approach allowing the conversation to flow naturally. This latter approach limits the ‘researcher effect’ and gives more ‘voice’ to the participants in determining the direction of the interview. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008) suggest a hybrid ‘loose structure’ enabling the researcher to set some parameters but also allowing the interview to meander and flow. Cassell (2009) suggests that the structure of an interview will be determined by its purpose. In this study, the researcher opted for a loose structured approach which would enable the participants to talk at length and determine the direction of the interview.

Crang & Cook (2007) suggest using recording equipment to capture the intricacies of what was said and how it was said. However, Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) suggest recording equipment should not just be used as a matter of course, there needs to be an assessment of its purpose. Conversations need to be handled sensitively (Brewer, 2004) and interviewees may be anxious about issues of confidentiality (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). Brewer (2004) therefore suggests the ‘unobtrusive’ taking of notes during an interview rather than recording, and suggests there may even be times when it seems inappropriate to take notes and therefore the notebook will have to be closed, and notes written up retrospectively. For this study, interviews were not recorded with the researcher opting to take summary notes during the interview and add more comprehensive notes immediately after each interview. All of the focus group interviews with firefighters were held at their station and the one-to-one interviews were held at a local fire station or service head office.

A process of open coding was adopted to code the interview notes (Crang & Cook, 2007; King, 2004b). The process of coding is a recurrent one (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and as the interview notes were read and re-read a series of categories started to emerge. As these new categories emerged, the researcher would go back through and re-code (Crang & Cook, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As the process evolved, a set of categories and subcategories emerged (Crang & Cook, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) which as much as is possible were ‘emic’ and reflected the attitudes of the participants (Agar, 1980; Crang & Cook, 2007).

Findings

In this section, a summary of the key themes as discussed in the seventeen one-to-one interviews with operational managers (firefighters) and support managers (administrative functions) and the eight focus groups with firefighters are presented. During the interviews, a number of diverse and at times contradictory discourses emerged. Each watch considered itself to be *unique* and that *others watches are not the same*. However, there was little variation in the themes that were raised across the different focus groups and fire and rescue services. As the interviews were not recorded there are no quotes to illustrate the key points. Rather extracts taken from fieldnotes have been used to illustrate these themes. Where extracts have been used, these have been presented in italics.

Stressors

The firefighters generally did not consider their work role as stressful. A deeply embedded assumption of firefighter culture is that their work is dangerous and unpredictable and that *you have good days and bad days and some really bad days*. Firefighters therefore appreciate that their work is demanding and difficult and they accept that dealing with emergencies is a fundamental part of their role and therefore *you just get on with it*. They acknowledged that the nature of emergency response work requires *a level of stress to fulfil that demand* however they highlighted a number of resources that support them in this role. For example training serves to develop their competencies, familiarise them with their tasks and equipment, and habituate them to the emergencies they will encounter. The command structure has traditionally been based on rank and this means that the most experienced operational managers are those responsible for the more complex incidents. Firefighters therefore have trust in their operational managers' abilities to take command and take reasoned action. The firefighters also work within a culture of risk assessment and formalised debriefing and therefore they trust that their exposure to dangers is controlled. Firefighters also work in close-knit teams who have usually been with each other for some time and who are familiar with each other's skill set. They therefore trust one another's competencies to perform their role. Therefore when firefighters encounter an incident they have sufficient and effective resources (training, team, command structure, etc) to cope with the encounter.

The operational managers considered their roles stressful as they had a very large workload but also because they were increasingly caught between the conflicting expectations of their firefighter crews and their strategic body, the fire authority. They used the term *manager flu* to describe how they struggled to cope with the demands of their work

without the resource of a support network (the watch) as this key coping resource was lost on moving up through the ranks. The support managers considered that there was a general lack of respect from firefighters at all levels for the support functions. This group focused on the uncertainty in the sector created by the government comprehensive spending review of public services which would have a direct impact on their roles as job cuts would be made in the support functions rather than the operational functions.

Accountability for stress

A deeply embedded assumption of being a firefighter is that you provide a vital function to society and therefore you are highly-valued. However, the firefighters highlighted a number of internal and external changes to their working terms and conditions which they felt devalued their role which they considered to blame for the stressors of their work. For example, new attendance monitoring procedures, new performance monitoring procedures, and the proposed changes to pensions were discussed. This has led to tensions between firefighters and their operational managers. Firefighters described their managers as the *dream factory* and they considered that their managers no longer supported or cared for them. This increased their sense of loss and they felt powerless to challenge the system. However, it was difficult to establish which level of manager they referred to when they talked about the *dream factory* as the operational managers spoke with passion and commitment for their crews.

The firefighters perceived a loss of public support. They considered that the public held an out-dated stereo-typical image of firefighters and therefore did not appreciate the wider duties and responsibilities of the role. They also considered that the public no longer valued their role or valued their lives. They provided a number of examples of the pressures that the public put them under to act before the risks had been assessed or the necessary procedures put in place to mitigate risk. The operational managers also highlighted the unrealistic public expectations and they provided a number of examples to highlight the public's expectation that firefighters are 'heroes' who will go to any lengths to rescue them. The operational managers highlighted that they often come into direct conflict with the public. The operational managers are responsible for the safety of their crews and therefore assessing the risk of danger to their crews. They stated that they do not send crews into situations that are too risky, however *the public don't always like that* and they gave examples of the verbal and sometimes physical abuse they encounter in such situations.

The support managers perceived a lack of respect for their specialisms and authority from the operational staff. In particular they considered that the threat was greater for female managers who were considered *shrinking violets* who could not survive in the *tough macho world*. They also discussed how the tradition of debriefing that underpins the firefighter culture exacerbates this competitive climate resulting in a *blame ethos* and a fear of making mistakes. This group also highlighted that the media attention on *pen pushers* in the public service had further heightened their sense of threat and they considered that they were not only undervalued by their own service but also by society.

Interventions

The firefighters highlighted a number of formal interventions which included the command structure, the risk assessment processes, and regular incident debriefing which is used to inform and improve practice. They also discussed the targeted training simulations to build resilience and competence, and stress awareness training to develop individual and team stress awareness. They also made reference to the counselling and trauma services. Generally, firefighters spoke favourably about the interventions in place in their services and many of them spoke openly about having accessed the trauma support or counselling services.

In addition to the formal interventions, firefighters also highlighted a number of informal coping mechanisms. They consider their camaraderie a key coping resource. They discussed how they worked in close-knit teams and how this *family* extended beyond their work duties as they regularly socialised together at the *power hour* and sports teams and events. They discussed the importance of talking about an incident with the family as an important outlet for their ruminations. This was so important that even if an incident happened at the end of the shift, they would stay back to be together and partake in some *magic cream* some *fire tea* and engage in some *gallows humour*. Tea was a recurring event during the time spent on station and this ritual appeared to serve a number of purposes. First, it brought the crews together as a family unit. Second, it provided a temporal structure to their long shifts and served as a means of coping with boredom. Finally, it was an integral part of the watches' therapy.

Humour was also a recurring theme. However, the firefighters and their operational managers were aware that humour was contextualised to the watch and they discussed how a new member entering the watch could alter their use of humour. They were also concerned that others external to their environment (for example the public or the support functions)

would find the humour inappropriate or disrespectful. They also discussed the implications of this strong team bond when seconded to a different watch, where they felt *frozen out*. They also reflected on the impact on the higher ranks when they moved out of the family team structure. They also highlighted the impact that retirement can have on those who leave the service.

The stress discourse

The firefighters described a number of cultural barriers to accessing the formal interventions. They described a male-dominated culture in which an admission of feeling stressed was considered a *bit wimpy*. In addition to the stigma associated with stress, they also highlighted the impact on their perceived ability to perform their role and therefore *it can be a dangerous environment to talk about stress*. Firefighters who are considered mentally or physically unfit are taken *off operations* and therefore an admission of being stressed was considered an admission of not being able to perform the role effectively. In this context, the participants talked about the importance of the having an independent referral service in which personal issues could be discussed safely outside of the command structure.

The operational managers also highlighted that they did not openly engage in the stress discourse, as in the service we *don't do stress*. They explained the efforts being made to change this stigma and improve awareness but they also described the firefighter resistance in the service to these changes. Additionally, the support managers highlighted that they do not engage with the stress discourse as they do not consider that they perform the dangerous role and therefore they do not have the right to be stressed. However, across all of the fire and rescue services, the support managers explained that there were high sickness levels in the support functions. They also discussed firefighter reluctance to engage with the stress discourse or the formalised stress interventions. They considered that sometimes professional rather than 'family' help is needed and that this family protection can ultimately be detrimental to the individual firefighter.

Discussion

The dominant culture encountered in the fire and rescue services studied was the firefighter culture which permeated through all levels and functions. Firefighters accept that their role is dangerous and unpredictable however they also acknowledge that they perform a necessary and important role in society and therefore their efforts are valued by their intuitions and the public. To minimise risk, order, control, and toughness are valued qualities

which are embedded within their ways of thinking and working. Firefighters work in small teams and their safety and performance are dependent on the competencies and collaboration of the team. As such, interdependency and trust are deeply embedded values of the firefighter culture. The values and beliefs regarding the role of a firefighter inform their attitudes to stress. Stress is not openly discussed and is considered a weakness which will impact performance. As such, the firefighters highlighted their reluctance to engage with formal stress intervention strategies, preferring to make recourse to the informal mechanisms to manage stress within the watch. However, they acknowledged the limitations to this approach. These attitudes to stress impacted not only the operational functions but also the support functions who also felt reluctant to engage in stress talk and access the formal interventions. These themes will now be discussed in more detail drawing comparisons with other studies.

The firefighters in this study frequently highlighted that their role was not stressful and that it was part of their role. Avoiding thoughts and feelings associated with an incident by adopting a ‘this is part of the job just get on with it’ attitude, is a common coping strategy adopted by firefighters (Malek *et al.*, 2010; Haslam & Mallon, 2003). This strategy enables firefighters to shield themselves from the unpleasantness of the situation by focusing on the tasks required to deal with the incident. In her study with the UK police force Dick (2000) highlighted the culture of control, physical and mental toughness, and emotional detachment that permeates the police force. She suggests that this image of toughness, control, and invincibility serves as a survival mechanism to control officers’ underlying anxieties about the unpredictability and danger of their work. For a police officer, anxiety and fear are not helpful emotions as they are a reminder of how dangerous the role is, and so these emotions are culturally banished. Police officers need to *believe* wholeheartedly they are in control and invincible in order to perform their duties effectively. However Dick (2000) suggests that the cultural value placed on control and on being tough leads to officers who get injured in the line of duty doubting their abilities to carry out their duties effectively, because they fear they can no longer be relied upon in violent situations, as they might ‘lose it’ or show fear, and in doing so let down their colleagues. In this context, an admission of feeling stressed is perceived as an admission of having lost control, which would lead to colleagues and supervisors questioning an officer’s ability to perform effectively. Dick (2000) therefore questions the effectiveness of police forces’ intervention strategies aimed at alleviating stress when these are focused at the level of the individual.

There is therefore a paradox between espousing the values of control and toughness to protect firefighters from doubting their abilities to deal with the dangers of their role and yet encouraging an environment in which stress can be openly discussed. The participants in this study discussed the changes that the service is making to try and create an environment that is more conducive to 'stress talk'. In her review of her earlier study of social workers, Meyerson (1998) highlights that the traditional medicalised stress discourse which defines stress and burnout as abnormal, emotional and physical problems that need to be controlled by an individual is problematic. She suggests that a feminist postmodern perspective provides us with a revised interpretation for theorising about stress, burnout and emotions. She proposes that if stress and burnout were considered normal work experiences; if we could legitimately admit to being stressed, burned - out, or out of control; if we could freely and truthfully express our emotions, then stress would be seen as the 'normal cycle' and others would respond to us with care and compassion and allow us the time and the space to heal. In this culture of nurture rather than blame, Meyerson suggests that stress and burnout can be seen as social experiences and not individual problems with communities considering how best to care for and support members 'through the ebbs and flows of stressful work' (p.114).

The firefighters in this study frequently blamed their managers for the stressors they encountered in their role. However, during the one-to-one interviews this terrible manager who had no care, compassion, or pride for his team did not emerge. How could this go so unnoticed by the crews? In the discussions with firefighters two recurring issues which epitomised their view of management were the UK firefighters' strike (2002-2004) and the UK government's impending reform to pension entitlements. However, both of these were driven by government policy and not by their local management. The firefighters were therefore using terms such as *dream factory* to symbolise their mistrust of these wider drivers of change. It was not necessarily their managers they had lost faith in but rather 'the system'. This had led to a general cynicism and mistrust of any change in policy or direction and their anger and frustrations were directed to those who visibly implemented 'the system', their managers. The firefighters therefore engaged in this collective blame talk as a means of legitimising their dissent with their working conditions (Harkness *et al.*, 2005; Lewig & Dollard, 2000).

The participants across the functions and the services acknowledged the problem of managing the public's expectations of the fire and rescue service. Conflicts arise when public perceptions are in conflict with institutional values and beliefs. For example, Dick (2000)

notes the negative feelings expressed by police officers who perceive an imbalance in the efforts they make to do a good job in a society that seems not to value their efforts as despite their efforts, crime rates continue to rise. Greene *et al.* (2006) highlight how the public perception of firefighters as heroes can be a difficult image to fulfil and to illustrate this point, they discuss the media's attention on the New York Fire Department fire fighters after 9/11. They describe how the media hype became too much for the firefighters who were struggling to come to terms with the loss of so many of their 'brothers' and as time passed, media attention started to focus on the misbehaviour of the firefighters with a media shift from admiration to scandal. In its 2011 Fire Futures Report, the UK government highlighted the challenge of a more demanding public who expect more from their public services regardless of funding cuts. Public services are not delivered in a conventional sense and therefore the public's view of performance may be at odds with the service's view (Ferlie *et al.*, 2003). The participants of this study expressed a view that the public have scant regard for their safety. Indeed the UK Health and Safety Executive (2010) state that a particular challenge for firefighters in performing their role is the unrealistic public expectation that firefighters will put themselves at risk regardless of the potential benefits to be gained. Future research is therefore needed to explore public perceptions of the firefighter role and address the question 'what is the fire and rescue service for?'

The participants in this study highlighted the informal team discussions and 'magic tea' as the main outlet for 'stress talk'. Interdependency and trust are key features of high-dependency emergency work (Green *et al.*, 2006). Green *et al.* (2006) discuss how small cohesive firefighter teams provide support and protection for one another in life-threatening and challenging situations. They highlight that these teams provides a safe collective release for emotions and Greene *et al.* (2006) identified the importance of the fire house 'kitchen table', which is viewed as being the heart of a fire house. In an unpredictable environment where you may be called to a traumatic event at any moment, the time spent around the table is cherished for its stability and normality. In the comfort of this setting, feelings and emotions can be openly shared. However Greene *et al.* (2006) suggest this close 'paramilitary' style connection, that provides a safe outlet for the sharing of traumatic experiences, also results in an embedded reluctance to accept help from outsiders including health professionals. They suggest that stress intervention strategies therefore need to be delivered by those who have 'insider' knowledge of this close family network.

The firefighters also highlighted that use of 'gallows humour' as a key coping strategy. Studies of emergency services occupations highlight the purpose and significance of

black humour as a coping strategy (Palmer, 1983; Pogrebin & Poole, 1991; Scott, 2007; Young, 1995). Black humour acts as a safety valve (Palmer, 1983) for the release of emotions and protection against psychological harm (Scott, 2007) and serves to enable emergency services workers to maintain normal operational effectiveness in difficult and traumatic encounters (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991; Young, 1995). Humour also acts as a means to build camaraderie to help emergency services workers deal with the absurdities of their work (Scott, 2007). In their study of UK firefighters, Haslam & Mallon (2003) found that humour not only helped to break the ice and therefore acted as a safety-valve to relieve tension during difficult and emotion-laden situations, but that humour also acted as a means of sharing the emotion of the experience with colleagues, promoting closeness in the team and strengthening group membership. Haslam & Mallon (2003) noted that firefighters often ruminate on their actions and informal debriefing provided a mechanism to discuss the actions taken with those who had been through the same experience. It is important therefore that black humour is seen as acceptable and normal behaviour and is not stigmatised. The firefighters further noted that any disclosure of 'being stressed' tended to take place within the safe confines of the crew or watch. However, they acknowledged that there were also negative implications to adopting this approach as they considered that sometimes 'stressed' firefighters need formal professional help rather than informal watch support.

This study also provided an insight into how firefighter attitudes to stress impacted the stress discourse and recourse to interventions for those outside of the dominant cultural group. For example, the senior operational managers who had once been part of the close-knit firefighter crews were increasingly trying to cope with the stressors of their roles as individuals rather than as a collective. The strong cultural emphasis on interdependency and collective coping and a reluctance to engage with formal interventions has therefore created a 'cultural residue' for this group which renders them vulnerable as they no longer have the informal team support to which they have been accustomed and yet they remain wary of engaging in the stress discourse with outsiders. This loss of available resources is particularly significant in the context of an emergency service as leading trauma researchers suggests that those who are already experiencing stressful encounters, or who feel that they do not have the support of their organisations or managers, may not be functioning at their optimum levels (as their coping resources may be depleted) and they may therefore be more susceptible to traumatic stress reactions (Regehr & Bober, 2005). This may be of particular significance for operational managers who take on the dual role of being a manager but at the same time running frontline operations. This study highlights that this group may be particularly

vulnerable to stress and trauma, partly because they no longer have recourse to the coping resources of informal team support networks but also because, as previous trauma research has highlighted, the risks associated with trauma and burnout increase as length of service increases (Regehr & Bober, 2005).

In addition, the support occupations expressed feelings of guilt about engaging in the stress discourse. As a support function they did not 'feel worthy' of 'being stressed' as their work was not considered dangerous and therefore not as important as the operational functions. This group did not talk openly about 'being stressed' and worked to suppress their feelings of stress. This group considered that they relied more heavily on the formal stress management interventions such as sickness absence. The firefighters discussed their lack of understanding of the role that the support functions performed. Therefore more needs to be done to raise awareness throughout the service regarding the role of these functions. Participants across all of the services frequently discussed *disconnects* and *gaps* between firefighters, operational managers and the support functions. However during the interviews many examples of family connections which crossed these boundaries were discussed. For example firefighters who were married to staff in the support functions or operational managers who had sons / daughters working as firefighters and yet the gaps and disconnects existed strongly in their discourse.

Limitations and implications for future research

Cultures are dynamic and multi-faceted (Erez & Gati, 2004) and there are therefore a number of limitations to the generalisability of this study. First, this study took place in England and therefore in the political and historical context of on-going challenges in the relationship between the fire brigades union and the government (Burchill, 2004; Seifert & Sibley, 2005). Future research should investigate if firefighters in other geographical locations who operate in different socio-political contexts experience similar issues. Second, this research does not explore other demographic factors such as age and gender and further research is required to explore these other influences that make up the firefighters' cultural mosaic (Chao & Moon, 2005). Third, this research focused on a high-reliability occupation (Colquitt *et al.*, 2011) and therefore the findings may be contextualised to dangerous occupations. Further studies with less dangerous professions may elicit different responses.

Länsisalmi *et al* (2000) describe the 'onion-like' nature of cultural debates as culture can be investigated at a number of different levels including national, regional, professional,

or organisational. Much of the literature informing this paper was drawn from western cultures which have a generally accepted understanding of the stress concept. In his review of workplace stress and well-being across national cultures, Burke (2010) highlights the limited research available from many parts of the world including Africa, the Middle East, and South America. More research is required in these regions, as an understanding of how national cultural factors influence workplace stress is vital for the design and implementation of effective stress management interventions. Existing western terminology and approaches to interventions may be inappropriate in different national cultural contexts (Tayeb, 2001).

Conclusions

Handy (1995) emphasises the importance of researching the collective experience of different occupational groups and acknowledging the collective nature of our workplace experience which is inextricably linked to cultural issues of power and conflict. Yet Jones & Bright (2001) state that the concept of different cultural understandings of stress across occupations and organisations is seldom investigated. But why is an understanding of the stress discourse important? Hall (2008) warns that stress management interventions have the potential to do more harm than good if they are designed and delivered without an awareness of the basic assumptions that drive group thinking and behaviour. It is therefore essential that any stress interventions take into consideration the core values and beliefs that underpin a group's attitudes to stress (LaMontagne et al., 2007; Morrison & Payne, 2003; Noblet & LaMontagne, 2006; Nytrø *et al.*, 2000). This study illustrates how 'stress talk' can influence employee participation in stress management interventions. The study further highlights the importance of considering the wider political, economic and socio-cultural factors that influence attitudes to stress when designing interventions.

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