

Women firefighters' experiences in the Western Australian volunteer bush fire service

Cindy Branch-Smith and Dr. Julie Ann Pooley explore the issues and experiences of Western Australian women volunteer firefighters.

ABSTRACT

Recent events, such as Black Saturday, have shown how invaluable Australia's volunteer firefighters are to communities. Volunteer numbers appear to be declining nation-wide and a majority of volunteer fire services report under-representation of women in operational roles. To ascertain an understanding of experiences and issues faced by women in volunteer fire services, the aim of the current study was to explore female volunteer firefighters' experience, and how their experiences impact on their perceptions of themselves as firefighters. A qualitative research methodology was employed, which provided insight into the way in which women perceive themselves as firefighters, and the influences of past experiences which impacted on these perceptions. This study contributes towards the understanding of how to effectively engage and empower women, and also to the development of programs and strategies conducive to the enhancement of women in Australian volunteer-based fire agencies.

Introduction

In Australia, volunteer fire brigades provide the only organised response to fires outside of the built-up areas of major cities or specialised areas such as national parks (Lyons, 2001). Nation-wide, communities rely on more than 220,000 volunteer firefighters (McLennan, 2008), and it is estimated that approximately 25,000 bushfire volunteers in approximately 750 brigades are currently serving in active roles across Western Australia (WA) (Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of Western Australia Incorporated, n.d.). Volunteers are considered an integral part of the fire services in WA due to the high degree of threat to communities because of vast bushland areas.

Recent events have shown how invaluable Australia's volunteer firefighters are, for example, the events of Black Saturday (February, 2009). However, there is a relatively

scarce amount of information about volunteer firefighters (Beatson & McLennan, 2005). With total volunteer firefighter numbers declining appreciably nation-wide due to complex economic and demographic changes within Australian society (McLennan & Birch, 2005), and most brigades reporting under-representation of women within operation roles (McLennan, 2004a), it should be of interest to bushfire brigades to attempt to maximise volunteer numbers by implementing procedures and strategies conducive to increasing the number of women in volunteer bushfire brigades.

Given there are few studies about volunteer firefighters in Australia (e.g., McLennan, 2004a; McLennan & Birch, 2005; McLennan & Birch, 2008; McLennan & Birch, 2009; McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw, & Hayes, 2009) and WA (Aitken, 2000; Preston, 1993), there are fewer studies about the experiences of women in Australian volunteer-based fire services (McLennan & Birch, 2006a, 2006b), with the majority of volunteer firefighter research being conducted by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) at LaTrobe University in Melbourne. Preliminary findings accorded priority by the Bushfire CRC included identifying barriers to greater participation by women in operational firefighting roles (McLennan, 2004b).

Studies conducted by the Bushfire CRC have investigated the experiences of female volunteers specifically, with the aim of providing direction for strategies which would assist in the recruitment and retention of women volunteers (McLennan & Birch, 2006a; 2006b). Their research has been conducted with women from the Australian Capital Territory Rural Fire Service (RFS) (n=31) and the South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) (n=442). Women from both studies reported very positively on their training experiences, though opportunities for advancement and leadership were seen as barriers faced by approximately one quarter of women, with many indicating they were told by at least one man in the brigade that women do not belong in the fire service and/or are not capable of the work.

These research findings concur with McLennan, Birch, Beatson, and Cowlshaw (2007), who conducted surveys with 391 volunteer firefighters from various Country Fire Authority regions across Victoria. Results indicated women within volunteer fire services experienced specific gender-related challenges and issues. These issues included intimidation at training and

dissatisfaction with opportunities for leadership and advancement. However, as the above-mentioned studies were survey-based, little opportunity was given for women to elaborate about their experience and role as a volunteer firefighter.

In reviewing the literature surrounding this sector it appears most of the research pertaining to the retention of female firefighters has been of a quantitative and cross-sectional nature, making it of limited value in understanding the potential impact of such experiences. If more is known about the experiences of women volunteer firefighters, and the impact such experiences have, then brigade strategies can be modified to enhance the number of females within these roles. The aim of the current study was therefore to explore female volunteer firefighters' experiences of firefighting in a WA context. More specifically, the study focused on how their experiences as volunteers impacted on their perceptions of themselves as firefighters.

Methodology

Research design and data analysis

An in-depth qualitative design, using semi-structured interviewing as a vehicle for data collection, was utilised in order to discover and understand the unique experiences of women volunteer firefighters. The recruitment of participants was achieved through the distribution of information letters to all bushfire brigades in the metropolitan and semi-rural areas of Perth. Interviews were conducted either at the participants' home or fire brigade, and involved questions regarding fireground and training experiences. Data obtained from the interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and a question ordered matrix to learn from the participants' experiences (Silverman, 2000). Phenomenological analysis involves the inductive identification of themes within the data (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), while a question ordered matrix allows for viewing of responses of each participant to a specific question (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 women from eight volunteer bushfire brigades across the metropolitan and semi-rural areas of Perth. Participants were aged between 18 and 49 years ($M = 39.58$, $SD = 11.07$). Years of experience within a bushfire brigade ranged from 2 to 16 years ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 4.98$). All women held an operational role within their brigade, ranging from basic firefighters to lieutenants.

Findings and interpretations

Two key themes emerged from the analysis of the volunteer firefighting experience, within which a further six sub-themes were identified. These are summarised in Table 1. Positive experiences and outcomes refer to experiences perceived by women to be beneficial

and productive in terms of cognitive outcomes for perceptions of themselves as firefighters, resulting in feelings of achievement, confidence and satisfaction. Negative experiences and outcomes refer to experiences perceived by women to be adverse and detrimental in terms of cognitive outcomes for perceptions of themselves as firefighters, resulting in feelings of inferiority and confusion.

TABLE 1. Themes.

Theme	Sub Theme
Positive experiences and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life Meaning • Facilitation of confidence • Positive atmosphere • Competence in getting the job done
Positive experiences and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative behaviour towards women • 'Few guy' syndrome

Positive experiences and outcomes

Positive experiences and outcomes appear to have dominated the volunteer firefighting experience for these women. Positive outcomes refer not only to cognitive outcomes of specific situations encountered by women, but also to cognitive outcomes that were associated with being a female volunteer firefighter.

Life meaning

Majority of the women perceived their role as a volunteer firefighter to give additional meaning to their lives and to their personal character. Salient factors women attributed to providing additional meaning in their lives included a sense of community (SOC), personal achievement, and that volunteer firefighting provided them with an avenue in which to encounter experiences and participate in activities typically considered to be out of the ordinary.

SOC appeared to be a key factor in providing participants with a sense of meaning to their lives within their community. This refers to a relational SOC, distinguished by Gusfield (1975) as a quality of human relationships, and is distinct from the territorial and geographical notions of community. The current findings are consistent with research conducted with volunteers generally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), and in emergency management organisations specifically (Gare, 2000; Fahey & Walker, 2002), in terms of the value of being a volunteer, and its relation to SOC. Volunteer firefighter research in both Australia (e.g., Birch, McLennan, Beatson, & Kelly, 2008; Childs, 2006; Clancy & Holgate, 2004; Palmer, 2000) and the United States (e.g., Thompson & Bono, 1993; Thompson, 1994) has found similar trends for motivations to join and remain with a volunteer fire brigade. Therefore, it appears SOC is

an important and reverberating characteristic, and valued by the majority of volunteer firefighters.

A sense of personal achievement appeared to be another factor, which provided participants with additional meaning to their personal characters. Personal achievement was not necessarily a factor in motivation to join a brigade, but more as a result of participating in and completing required tasks. This finding is consistent with previous research about volunteering generally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), volunteering in emergency management organisations (Fahey & Walker, 2002), and volunteering in fire brigades specifically (Birch et al., 2008; Country Fire Authority, 1998; McLennan & Birch, 2006a). The current findings are also consistent with Childs' (2006) research with women firefighters in Australia, who reported that women enjoyed the sense of accomplishment obtained from their experiences as a firefighter.

Another area of participants' personal lives positively influenced by being a volunteer firefighter was that such membership provided participants with an avenue which competes with the normalities of their everyday lives. This meant participants felt that being a volunteer firefighter provided them with avenues to meet people outside of their everyday lives, to learn skills outside of their everyday lives, and to provide them with the means to participate in activities outside of their everyday lives.

The value of learning new and different skills is consistent with previous volunteer firefighter research in Australia (Aitken, 2000; Birch et al., 2008; Palmer, 2000), and should be utilised as a key incentive to retention (Fahey, Walker, & Sleight, 2002). The current findings therefore extend on the literature in a number of ways to provide additional information regarding the way in which women volunteer firefighters perceive their role, and the psychological impacts associated with it.

Facilitation of confidence

The facilitation of confidence in varying situations and events appeared to be the most common positive (and overall) outcome for women in terms of the impact on their perceptions of themselves as firefighters. An array of stories by the women elicited examples of how their experiences as a volunteer firefighter promoted confidence in their abilities to competently perform the tasks required of the role.

Being one of the few qualitative studies investigating the positive experiences of female volunteer firefighters in Australia, this study has provided evidence for the notion that gaining confidence is a salient and important aspect of being a woman volunteer firefighter. Although it is not investigated in the volunteer firefighter research, these findings further support the idea that a benefit of volunteering is increased confidence (Leong, 2008; McCabe, White, & Obst, 2007). Future research might assess whether this concept is as salient and as important for men.

Childs' (2006) research with Australian women firefighters also provides support for the idea that confidence is a positive outcome associated with the experiences of being a firefighter. The interview responses from the current study suggest substantial support for the high value attributed to confidence as an outcome of the firefighting experience. The current finding extends on the literature by providing insight into the positive psychological impact of being a volunteer firefighter, and proposes that increased confidence is a fundamental element of the firefighting experience for women.



Courtesy: CFA

Women reported very positively on their training experiences.

Positive atmosphere

A majority of women reported the general atmosphere within their bushfire brigade as being a positive, encouraging and supportive environment. This result is consistent with Australian research in terms of a high reporting of a positive social environment by women volunteer firefighters (McLennan & Birch, 2006a; 2006b). This suggests that while negative experiences and outcomes are areas which require research in terms of recruitment and retention, positive experiences and the generally positive environment of a volunteer fire brigade for women may also be important for recruitment and retention.

Competence in getting the job done

This sub-theme is a positive outcome experienced by women as a result of being a volunteer firefighter. It refers to the notion women were neither scared, embarrassed or ashamed to admit their physical strength sometimes meant a task wouldn't be completed the same way a man would complete the task. Rather, women felt competent the task would be completed their own way, whether that meant completing the task differently, taking longer, or asking for assistance. It appears, then, that women generally felt competent, and also comfortable, in their abilities to perform the activities of a volunteer firefighter, despite biological differences in strength between men and women. The

current finding extends on existing literature by enhancing our understanding of how women appear to be comfortable with their capabilities to perform the tasks required of a volunteer firefighter.



Courtesy: CFA

Positive experiences resulted in feelings of achievement, confidence and satisfaction.

Negative experiences and outcomes

Whilst not as predominant as positive experiences and outcomes, negative experiences and outcomes as a result of the volunteer firefighting experience were a cause for concern for these women. Negative experiences refer to situations and events women perceived to be adverse and detrimental in terms of cognitive outcomes for perceptions of themselves as firefighters. Negative outcomes refer not only to cognitive outcomes of specific situations encountered by women, but also to cognitive outcomes that were associated with being a female volunteer firefighter.

Negative behaviour towards women

A strong and recurring sub-theme, and one mentioned by the majority of participants, related to negative behaviour perceived by women; this appears to pose the most significant barrier to retaining female volunteer firefighters. These women experienced several types of negative behaviours with some occurring at training, and most occurring on the fireground.

Behaviours have been divided into two categories based on the perception of the participant as to how they perceived the behaviour to be. First, inappropriate behaviours were perceived by women to be situations and experiences they felt may or may not (that is, they were unsure) have been discriminatory behaviour towards them. These included the removal of a firehose from the women's hands whilst in the process of suppressing a fire, and negative experiences surrounding fellow male members not following directions given by them. Remembering women were unsure of the intent motivating these acts, they were left feeling confused as

to why it had happened, as though they were not taken seriously as valued volunteer firefighters, and also that these situations could potentially happen again.

Participants also alluded to the negative experiences of covert discrimination among some women and this may compound concerns for the retainment of women as volunteer firefighters. Covert discrimination was perceived by women to be an indirect and discrete form of gender-based discrimination. Perceptions of covert forms of discrimination by participants dominated this broad theme, occurring somewhat at training, and mostly on the fireground. Many participants described how they felt experiences encountered on the fireground and at training were not direct and open forms of discrimination, but more discrete and subtle. For example, women spoke of experiences involving the unfair allocation of tasks and also being used as an excuse to be dismissed from a fireground. Women also expressed that men in authoritative positions within their brigades often expressed covertly discriminatory behaviour towards them, for example, crew leaders and captains expected that women could not perform particular tasks or would only be competent in support roles rather than operational roles.

The interview responses of the female volunteer firefighters suggest substantial support for the negative and often discriminatory behaviour demonstrated towards women firefighters by fellow members and individuals in authoritative positions (Baigent, 2001; Chetkovich, 1997; Childs, 2006; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Floren, 1981; Hulett, Bendick, Thomas, & Moccio, 2008; Manolakes, 2001; Moore & Kleiner, 2001; Rosell, Miller, & Barber, 1995; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1996; Yoder & Berendsen, 2001). It appears the negative experiences of women volunteer firefighters are similar to those of other women who make in-roads into other occupations dominated by men (Manolakes, 2001). Volunteer firefighter research in Australia has also demonstrated similar findings (Gare, 2000; McLennan, 2006a, 2006b).

As previously mentioned, most of the situations reported by women to be unacceptable occurred on the fireground, with only a few occasions occurring during training exercises. Australian research has indicated most women volunteers in operational roles reported positively on their training experiences (McLennan, 2006a, 2006b), however these studies neglected to examine types of experiences and situations encountered by women at fire incidents in terms of their interactions with men. The current findings therefore extend on the literature by providing evidence which suggests women in WA volunteer bushfire services experience negative and often discriminatory behaviour, occurring most often on a fireground. Furthermore, these experiences affect women and their perceptions of themselves as firefighters by making them feel confused as to the intent of the behaviour and devalued by, and inferior to, their fellow male colleagues.

The current result may be explained by a number of factors. First, there may be less chance of this type of

behaviour being recognised by others on the fireground as opposed to training. Another possible explanation is that fireground conditions could potentially make men more susceptible to treating women in such a way, that is, stress experienced as a result of having to perform in dangerous situations (Gomez, 2009; Ordonez & Benson, 1997; Svenson, Edland, & Slovic, 1990), or the amount of time required to make decisions during a fire incident could affect decision-making and judgement processes (Kerstholt, 1995; Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; Manouchehr, 2002). Australian volunteer firefighter research is yet to determine what types of discriminatory behaviours women encounter on the fireground as opposed to training, therefore more research on this topic needs to be conducted to determine why more discriminatory and unacceptable behaviours for women occur on the fireground, compared with training.

'Few guy' syndrome

This sub-theme relates to the idea that brigade life was seen by women as a generally positive atmosphere (as discussed in 'positive experiences and outcomes' theme), but in almost all incidents women reported a small number of men within their brigade seemed to consistently express issues directed towards women. This was either expressed explicitly or in most cases the women reported that most men behaved appropriately towards women, implying there were some who did not.

From the interviews conducted it appears these women dismissed the negative experiences encountered with a small number of men, concluding in balance, their experiences with most men were positive. This finding is consistent with a study by Childs (2006), who concluded there may be a culture of tolerance within the Australian fire services whereby women accommodate, overlook, or ignore a small number of men who appear to have issues directed specifically towards women. The current findings therefore support the small amount of Australian research conducted in this area by demonstrating the 'few guy' syndrome exists for the women in this study.

Conclusion

The current study has provided insight into the way in which women perceived their roles as volunteer firefighters, and the influences of past experiences which impacted on these perceptions. Findings differentiated between positive and negative experiences and outcomes, which influenced women's perceptions accordingly. It appears that for these women, an array of positive experiences resulted in favourable perceptions of themselves as firefighters. The general experience of being a volunteer firefighter contributed to a sense of life meaning for the participants, including SOC, personal achievement, and avenues for self-actualisation.

Through gaining a sense of personal achievement, participants perceived themselves to be both confident and competent in completing the tasks required of a volunteer firefighter. Confidence as a result of the

volunteer firefighting experience was the most dominant outcome for women in the current study. Women generally reported positively on their general brigade atmosphere, however a concerning number of women reported they felt a small number of men consistently expressed issues with women.

Also of concern is the experience by many women of covert forms of discrimination occurring at training, and more alarmingly, at fire incidents. As a result, women felt devalued by, and inferior to, their fellow male colleagues. This appears to pose the most significant barrier to the retainment of women volunteer firefighters in operational roles. Of concern also is that covert styles of discrimination by men in authoritative positions within their brigades were reported by the women. This is a complex issue because the varying situations in which covertly discriminatory behaviour may occur implies there is considerable way to go in terms of eliminating these types of behaviours and attitudes, however this issue is beyond the scope of this report.

The current study's findings extend upon previous Australian research to highlight the importance of both positive and negative experiences for women in volunteer firefighting, and how these experiences impact on their perceptions of themselves as firefighters. Accordingly, as economic and demographic changes within Australian society continue to affect volunteer firefighter numbers nation-wide (McLennan & Birch, 2005), providing support, practices and activities conducive to promoting retention to this viable pool of volunteer firefighters would be of benefit.

Implications and directions for future research

This study has implications for the current body of knowledge regarding volunteer firefighting in general, and for women in volunteer firefighting roles specifically. Contemporary research on the factors impacting Australian women's volunteer firefighter experience (Beatson, 2005; Childs, 2006; McLennan & Birch, 2006a, 2006b; McLennan et al., 2007) does not entirely take into account both the positive and negative aspects of the experience. With this in mind, future volunteer firefighter research could further explore the positive experiences and outcomes for women in these roles, enabling governing bodies to better develop strategies which include a more holistic understanding to enhancing the retention of women within volunteer fire brigades.

Several key incentives which facilitate the retention of women volunteer firefighters, as well as incidents which impede retention, were identified. As a majority of volunteer fire services in Australia report under-representation of women in operational roles (McLennan, 2004b), it would be of benefit to brigades to provide activities conducive to the learning of new and different skills, to facilitate confidence for women volunteer firefighters. The issue of negative behaviour and treatment of women on a fireground emerging

from this study also has implications for the retainment of women in operational roles. Enhancement of the experience for women volunteer firefighters is important to retention of volunteer participation rates of women (Beatson & McLennan, 2005). It is clear from the results of the current study that educating volunteer firefighters on appropriate and acceptable behaviour, both professionally and socially, within brigades to assist members in accepting and encouraging women within the volunteer fire services is important.

Methodological limitations of the current research involve the sampling technique, which may have produced participants who chose to be explicit about their volunteer firefighting experiences. It is also possible that women who chose to participate in the research were confident in discussing their experiences. Although these could potentially bias results, it was intended that the current research be a stepping stone in the identification of experiences and issues faced by women who are volunteer firefighters. Generally, Australian society is extremely reliant on the work of volunteers, and it is of great benefit to understand the experience of the men and women involved in these roles as without understanding factors for the recruitment and retention of this important group of individuals, communities will suffer immeasurably.

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About the authors

Cindy Branch-Smith, is a crew leader with the Gosnells Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade (Perth), this article is drawn from her Honours (Psychology) research. She recently graduated with a First Class Honours degree in Psychology from Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

Julie Ann Pooley, PhD, is a Researcher and Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Edith Cowan University. She can be contacted at j.pooley@ecu.edu.au

