



LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BUREAU OF FIRE PROTECTION OFFICERS OF DAGUPAN CITY

Cheryl A. De Castro, Cherry Cabarrubias

University of the Cordilleras Graduate School

ABSTRACT

Fire officers face numerous challenges in their daily lives, including disasters, relief operations, and community service. Their safety is at risk if they are not properly equipped, and their morale and physical integrity are tested not only professionally but also personally. This study used a case study design to gather non-numerical data on fire officers from the Bureau of Fire Protection in Dagupan City. Participants were selected based on factors such as length of service, experience, willingness to participate, gender, and status. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with open-ended questions, and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The study revealed that the experiences of fire officers from the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) in Dagupan City have shaped their identities. They have encountered both positive and negative situations, making them aware of their vulnerability in dangerous circumstances. To overcome this, they rely on their resourcefulness and willingness to compromise. Public education on fire prevention is essential to minimize compromising situations. Additionally, the participants struggle with achieving a work-life balance and seek guidance from their chief as their main advisor. The findings provide valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of fire officers in their line of duty. Changes in leadership within the BFP have sparked an active drive among officers, but the excessive workload, lack of manpower, equipment, and training place significant stress on them. Additionally, there is a lack of emotional support groups available to help fire officers cope with work-related stress. To address these issues, it is crucial to recognize that firefighters' morale is as important as their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, prioritize work-life balance, incorporate stress-management and task-management into training, implement standardized processes for permit requirements, address incomplete equipment and facilities, and upskill training and recognition.

KEYWORDS: *Lived Experiences, BFP, Dagupan City*

INTRODUCTION

Firefighting is a complex and risky occupation that involves exposure to physical and psychological stress, as well as serious chemical, biological, and physical hazards. Safety is a top priority for fire agencies, and firefighters face various hazards such as burn injuries, smoke inhalation, and sudden cardiac death. These hazards can lead to long-term effects such as anxiety, depression, burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, firefighters face a higher risk of suicide.

A study in the United States examined the mental health challenges faced by firefighters due to exposure to traumatic events. The nature of their work, including providing Emergency Medical Services (EMS), search and rescue operations, and responding to hazardous incidents and natural disasters, exposes them to a wide range of tragic situations. The cumulative effect of regularly encountering such distressing events is believed to have a negative impact on firefighters' mental well-being. (Jahnke et al., 2016).

Long and irregular working hours can lead to dissatisfaction and disconnection with families, as well as secondary trauma, which can lead to symptoms such as ASD and PTSD. This can negatively impact personal relationships. Experienced firefighters reported lower social support than recruit firefighters, leading to higher levels of depression and trauma (firefighternation,2016)

The rapid urban and industrial growth in Tehran, Iran presents new hazards and challenges for the Tehran Fire Department (TFD). High-density urbanization and the presence of high-rise buildings in narrow pathways pose accessibility challenges for fire appliances and hydraulic aerial platforms. Owners can store flammable materials without informing firefighters during pre-incident planning (Chaturvedi, 2019; Bayat, 2017)..

In the Philippines, Basic Occupational Safety and Health (BOSH) training is a 5-day program lasting at least 40 hours, mandated by the Department of Labor and Employment. Filipino firefighters are known for their bravery in battling blazes, but proper training



is essential for their ability to respond effectively and minimize injuries or fatalities. (Philippine Statistics Authority, n.d.).

The National Fire Protection Authority (NFPA) 471 provides recommended guidelines for responding to hazardous materials incidents. However, the Philippines faces challenges in meeting these standards due to financial constraints in acquiring sufficient equipment and manpower for every fire station (NFPA 471, n.d.).

Fire officers have diverse roles beyond firefighting, such as customer relations, fee assessment, building plan evaluation, fire safety inspection, and rescue and retrieval operations. Quezon City falls short of the ideal number of fire officers and fire trucks, leading to compromised safety measures. Firefighters often share breathing apparatuses and lack air refills. (Talabong, 2017). Firefighters in the Philippines face challenges such as threats from disoriented residents and the need to handle multiple tasks simultaneously, as well as shortages of equipment like breathing apparatuses and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Padayhag, 2014). Cebu City shares the same sentiment with other fire stations in the country, further exacerbated by civilian interference during firefighting operations.

The responsibility of cleaning and maintaining personal protective equipment for firefighters in the Philippines is usually assigned to the firefighters themselves. However, Criminology interns are tasked with cleaning and scrubbing the PPE as part of their on-the-job training. The lack of personnel, functional fire trucks, and adequate equipment is a common problem faced by fire officers in Dagupan City. Despite these challenges, volunteers from organizations like the Panda Fire Brigade help extinguish fires and participate in fire awareness campaigns. (Talabong, 2017; Tupas, 2019;).

This study would be beneficial to the Dagupan City Bureau of Fire Protection, as it focuses on the well-being of the fire officers and can boost their morale. The city government of Dagupan would also benefit from the study, as it would provide insights into the current situation and encourage necessary actions to address the problems faced by the BFP Dagupan. Educational institutions in Dagupan City would gain a better understanding of the difficulties faced by fire officers, potentially encouraging students to volunteer in the fire service. Non-governmental organizations like the Philippine Red Cross Dagupan chapter and "Abong na Alumni" can appreciate the dedication of the fire officers despite limited resources and continue supporting their activities. The Panda Fire Volunteers would also further appreciate the significance of their work as volunteers in hazardous occupations (Tupas, 2019).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Firefighters play a crucial role in improving fire safety in society, but the effectiveness of knowledge transfer between theory and practice remains questionable. They learn from experienced colleagues and their own experiences, developing risk assessment

skills to minimize casualties and fatalities. This learning process aligns with David Kolb's experiential learning concept, which emphasizes the transformation of experiences and the role of subjective experience in knowledge creation. (Johansson & Svensson, 2018; Cherry, 2019)

Experience, as described by Roth and Jorner (2014), extends beyond individual experiences and encompasses transactions within person-in-setting units across space and time. It is intertwined with affect, which is not solely a product of mental constructions. Occupational health, as defined by the International Labor Office and the World Health Organization in 1950, focuses on promoting and maintaining the physical, mental, and social well-being of workers in all occupations. It aims to prevent health issues arising from working conditions, protect workers from harmful risks, and ensure that the occupational environment is suitable for their physiological and psychological state.

According to Rule 1033 of the Philippine Occupational Safety and Health Standards and DO 16 series of 2001, safety officers in the Philippines must undergo the prescribed training course prior to their appointment in their respective workplaces. They are also required to meet the accreditation standards set by the Bureau. The number of supervisors or technical personnel appointed as safety officers should be determined based on the number of workers and the hazardous or non-hazardous nature of the workplace.

The unique culture of the fire service, including shared sleeping quarters and bunk rooms, poses challenges in implementing sleep health plans. Issues such as loud snoring disrupting others' sleep have been observed, and some firefighters resist additional training requirements. However, many believe that sleep health training should be mandatory for effective implementation (Firefighternation, 2016). The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) introduced NFPA1851: 2014 to ensure proper selection, care, and maintenance of firefighting protective ensembles, reducing health and safety risks related to inadequate maintenance, contamination, or damage (NFPA, 2017). Professional cleaning and maintenance packages, adopted in certain countries, offer an ideal response to the health implications of smoke contamination.

Manufacturers of fibers and fabrics, along with PPEs designers, are developing technologies and designs to minimize the risk of harmful particles penetrating the skin. The challenge lies in creating PPE that acts as a barrier to toxins while remaining breathable to regulate body temperature. Dermal exposure areas, such as the face and neck, are of particular concern for potential exposure to combustion by-products and carcinogens (APFmag, 2018).

Ergonomic hazards are common in firefighting activities, including high-rise fires, ventilation, hose-laying, and heavy



equipment transport. Firefighters face risks like high heat, flames, stress, and exposure to toxic substances. ISO and NFPA recommend limiting body temperatures during tasks. Stress management through mental training and coping techniques is crucial. Job satisfaction and burnout also impact firefighters, with factors like motivation and working conditions influencing satisfaction levels. (Chaturvedi, 2019)

The paradigm of the study adopts a comprehensive framework consisting of beliefs, values, and research methods. It begins with

targeted participant interviews to identify existing issues encountered during their duty. Thematic analysis is then used to identify the central themes of the study. The lived experiences of fire officers are explored, focusing on the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms they utilize. Solutions are developed to address the identified problem, with the goal of improving the situation of Bureau of Fire Protection officers.

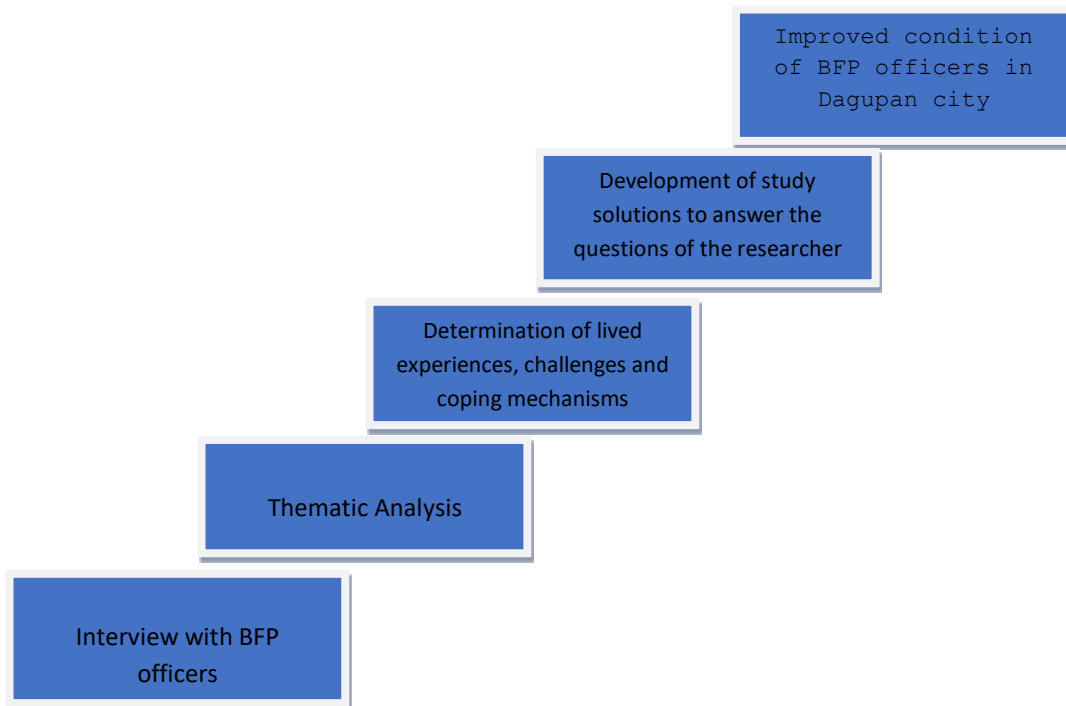


Figure 1. Research Paradigm

Objective of the study

The object of this study is to explore the experiences of fire officers from the Bureau of Fire Protection in Dagupan City and examine the encounters they have faced while performing their duties and responsibilities. The study aims to answer the following specific research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the Bureau of Fire Protection fire officers in Dagupan City?
2. What are the challenges at work faced by the Bureau of Fire Protection fire officers in Dagupan City?
3. How do the Bureau of Fire Protection fire officers in Dagupan City address the challenges at work?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of fire officers in Dagupan City, contributing to the knowledge and potential improvement of the firefighting profession in the area.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research design, population and locale of the study, data gathering tool, data gathering procedure, treatment of data, and ethical consideration of the study.

Research Design

This study employed the Qualitative research method, which is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numerical data. The Case study design was chosen as it examines in-depth purposive samples to better understand a phenomenon. An open-ended question was administered to selected samples from a specific population, and standardized, open-ended interview questions were asked to all interviewees. This approach facilitated faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared.



Population and Locale of Study

The sample size of the study was determined through purposive sampling. The participants were the fire officers of the Bureau of Fire Protection in Dagupan City, who were chosen based on their length of service, experience, willingness to participate in the conduct of the study, as well as their gender and status. Only male participants were chosen as subjects, and volunteer firefighters were not included. The study was conducted at the City of Dagupan, which is active in assisting nearby towns and municipalities when called for help in dealing with fires and other emergency situations.

Data Gathering Tools

Research instruments were used to extract data needed in the study. A semi-structured interview was used to combine a pre-determined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further. An audio recorder was also employed to capture qualitative data and ensure descriptive validity. Direct observation was used to study the subjects' reactions and the fire station itself. An observation guide on the facilities and equipment of BFP Dagupan city was formulated to be utilized during the interview proper.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sought approval from the Ethics Committee and wrote a letter of intent to the Dean of the College of Criminal Justice Education to conduct the study about the experiences of fire officers in BFP Dagupan. Upon approval, the researcher visited the station of Bureau of Fire Protection Dagupan to talk to the Chief of the fire officers if they could participate in the study. A formal letter of consent was sent to the chief of BFP in Dagupan City to allow the interview to proceed. The interview took place in the BFP fire station and the participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the interview if they felt violated or threatened.

Treatment of Data

In this study, Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data. It has six steps: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Interviews were organized according to the specific objectives of the study and identified themes for each dimension. The face-to-face audiotape recording was transcribed and analyzed according to the themes based on the specific objectives of the study. Records pertinent to the study were also accessed to elicit relevant data.

Ethical Considerations

The identity of the participants in this study was not revealed in any manner or form. To indicate a distinct and separate response among the informants, cryptic code known only to the researcher was assigned to each participant. The interview focused on the experiences of the fire officers during their work. The audiotaped interview was kept confidential by the researcher and she would

be held liable in case it was used beyond the purpose for which it was made. After the study has been approved, all materials used in the study would be destroyed or erased to ensure that matters of confidential in nature would be kept secure. The video recording was kept safe for one year and erased from the laptop computer of the researcher.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Remarkable Experience

Participants 1, 4, and 6 in a study had memorable positive experiences at work, particularly in their interactions with the community, which left a lasting impact on them. They found fulfillment in being able to assist those in need, contributing to an improved relationship between the fire department and the community. Participant 1 emphasized that their proactive efforts were gradually changing the perception of the community towards the BFP, making them more dependable authorities.

These positive interactions with the community align with the sentiments of FOI Andrew, who highlighted the gratitude expressed by people after every response, even when immediate assistance was not possible. This echoes the idea that firefighters play a crucial role in building a positive public perception of their service.

The experiences of these participants resonate with the perspective shared by Etheridge (2011) emphasizing the responsibility of firefighters to uphold the reputation and legacy of the fire service. Regardless of challenges and varying perceptions in different regions, firefighters are public servants dedicated to meeting the community's needs and fostering a strong alliance with them.

Maintaining a positive relationship with the community is a vital aspect of the BFP's service. The Fire Chief stressed the importance of going beyond their duty to gain respect and recognition from the community, similar to the police force. Positive public understanding was seen as a powerful tool for the fire administrator, with greater awareness of the services leading to increased usage in the future (De Stephano, 2016).

Unremarkable Experience

This theme captured the participants' cynical experience that had an impact on them as fire officers. The state they have undergone during those encounters is reflected in their stories.

Participant 2 recalled challenging incidents, such as a prolonged fire response and a fatal vehicular accident, which left lasting emotional effects. Morse (2016) quote underscores the unique psychological burden firefighters carry, including guilt and profound sadness from witnessing traumatic events.

Participant 3 emphasized the importance of basic training for firefighters, recognizing the risks associated with the job. The concept of "tacit knowledge" from Gary Klein's book, as



mentioned by Lovell (2020), emphasizes the significance of experience in decision-making within the fire service. However, it is also acknowledged that a strong foundation in basic knowledge and training is essential for firefighters to gain valuable experience.

Participant 5 recounted a challenging fire incident in 2007, involving a three-story commercial building with narrow access and no fire exit. This experience reflected the real-life challenges faced by firefighters and the need for proper resources and training. Morse (2020) shares that going to work knowing that there is a very good chance something will happen that will eat away at your soul becomes business as usual. Mentally preparing yourself to face death, disfigurement, madness and disease becomes the norm, whether working or not.

Coming through dismembered bodies in vehicular accidents and compromised private protection due to lack of training and private protective gear all posed disturbing encounters for the three furnace officers that made a strong intellectual imprint on them. For them, these traumatizing occasions by some means printed their vulnerability and issues in the course of that time. As a public service, the BFP embarks on difficult and dangerous situations being part of their job. This will not change, nevertheless, they are rewarded with the right recognition from the public which for them makes everything worthwhile.

CHALLENGES AT WORK FACED BY THE BFP OFFICERS

Work-Life Imbalances

Participant 1 expressed concerns about the shortage of manpower in the fire department, attributing it to limited government budgets. Tupas (2019) also noted the shortage of firefighters nationwide, emphasizing the need for additional personnel, especially during significant fire incidents. The lack of manpower not only affects the efficiency of the fire service but also has broader implications for community safety.

Participant 2 laments not having enough time for family due to the demands of their roles. The study highlighted the importance of social support for firefighters, with suggestions for short breaks involving activities like yoga or meditation to alleviate work-related stress.

Participant 3 discussed the inadequate facilities and equipment in their station, leading to inconvenience and inefficiency. The study cited data indicating delays in building fire stations and procuring firetrucks, contributing to equipment shortages and suboptimal working conditions (Roxas, 2018). It emphasized the need for proper budget allocation and management to address these issues.

FO1 Andrew pointed out the lack of communication equipment and emphasized the importance of training for designated roles within the fire department. The study referenced Bajo's research (2018), which highlighted deficiencies in equipment procurement

and the reliance on external agencies, leading to shortages of firefighting gear.

The Fire Chief mentioned challenges in issuing permits and the need for improved communication. The study identified communication as an area needing improvement, particularly in providing timely status updates to applicants. An automated system for processing fire safety certificates was recommended to address these shortcomings.

This study underscored the common challenges faced by fire officers across different stations in terms of work-life balance, equipment shortages, and communication issues. These challenges impact their ability to effectively serve their communities, emphasizing the need for better resource allocation and support for the fire service.

Lack of Life-Saving Equipment

The statements below were just some of their frustrations which they voluntarily voiced out during the interview.

The participants in the study highlighted several critical issues in their roles as emergency responders. Participant 1 mentioned challenges related to bystander interference in their work, with bystanders sometimes threatening and attempting to dictate how responders should do their jobs. A study pointed out that violence against EMS responders originates not only from patients but also from non-patient sources, including family members and bystanders. Verbal abuse, intimidation, and even sexual harassment or assault can come from colleagues and others

Participant 4 raised concerns about the lack of training, facilities, and communication equipment, which can impact response times and the ability to differentiate between true emergencies and prank calls, where emergency responders face challenges due to inadequate training and communication equipment during a crisis with numerous active fires. This highlights the significance of well-functioning equipment in emergency situations (Burroughs, 2017).

The Fire Chief expressed the need for higher authorities to address the challenges faced by lower-ranking personnel, particularly the lack of necessary equipment for training and emergency response. This emphasizes the critical need for proper training, communication equipment, and resources for emergency responders, both for their safety and the effectiveness of their services. The challenges they face are not only a concern in the Philippines but also in other countries, posing risks to both responders and the public.

Non-Compliant Clients

This theme is set on the periodic problems of both the fire officers and the clients in permits and clearances. Almost all of the participants share the same sentiment.



This study highlights several issues related to the Fire Service and public expectations. Participant 2 discussed the lack of priority in providing services, emphasizing that they prioritize senior citizens, people with disabilities, and pregnant individuals. They also reject special treatment for politicians and avoid bribery, promoting transparency and fairness in their work.

This research suggests that firefighters are aware of their dual role as employees of the Fire Service and public servants, with obligations to both entities. They recognize the importance of public awareness regarding the challenging circumstances they face in meeting public expectations (Duran et.al, 2018).

Participant 3 expressed a desire for seminars and workshops for contractors, engineers, and architects to ensure compliance with fire protection requirements in building plans. This reflects the challenge of ensuring that buildings meet fire code regulations, as some responsible persons may be unaware of violations or indifferent to correcting them.

Research findings indicate that building owners and operators may not comply with fire code regulations due to lack of awareness or indifference, and voluntary compliance can be encouraged through education and penalties (Garis & Clare, 2013)

Participant 5 emphasized professionalism and patience when dealing with clients who may be agitated or threatening. This approach aligns with the need for effective communication and education to address non-compliance issues.

This study sheds light on challenges related to public expectations, compliance with fire code regulations, and the importance of education and professionalism in the Fire Service. These challenges underscore the need for improved information dissemination and public awareness.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES OF BFP PERSONNEL

The third SOP is the management utilized to address the challenges each fire officer used in their daily work. Each fire officer has their own a.) harmonized work-life management; b.) safety risks precautions, and c.) compliance awareness or interventions.

Stress Management

The following are the stress management employed by the BFP personnel. This theme highlights various aspects of managing work-life balance, safety precautions, compliance awareness, and the need for adequate resources in the Fire Service.

Participant 2 shared his approach to managing stress, including smoking, drinking in designated areas, and emphasizing the importance of maintaining good health. The research supports self-management of stress through activities like exercise and

hobbies, which release endorphins and promote well-being. Maintaining physical health is crucial for firefighters due to the demanding nature of their job (firefighternation, 2016).

Participant 5 discussed the importance of bonding among firefighters, emphasizing the support system they have within their teams. Research suggests that male bonding and friendships among firefighters contribute to their overall well-being and mental health.

The Fire Chief highlighted the therapeutic value of talking and being heard, emphasizing the importance of addressing stress by discussing it. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) interventions among firefighters are effective in promoting emotional resilience (firefighternation, 2016).

The participants' efforts to manage work-life balance underscore the need for training in this aspect to help firefighters cope with the challenges they face in their personal and professional lives.

In terms of safety precautions, Participant 5 stressed the importance of self-awareness and mindfulness to prevent becoming a liability to colleagues. Research aligns with this, emphasizing that firefighters must be physically and mentally fit to perform their duties effectively (Mitchell & Cook, 2013).

Participant 1 highlighted the need for additional subjects related to fire safety in training to better equip future firefighters. Research findings indicate the importance of training, including first aid and specialist courses, to enhance the skills and experience of firefighters (Mitchell & Cook, 2013).

Participant 4 addressed the lack of equipment and communication resources, highlighting the challenge of being undermanned and under-equipped in the Fire Service. This issue was supported by data showing the shortage of fire stations and fire trucks nationwide.

Participant 3 discussed the challenges of compliance with fire safety codes and the need for proper communication with clients applying for permits. Research suggests that enforcement models involving penalties for non-compliance should be used judiciously and on a case-by-case basis (Clare & Garis, 2013).

This study underscores the importance of adequate resources, training, and support for firefighters to effectively manage their work-life balance, ensure safety, and promote compliance with fire safety regulations. Collaborative efforts between the community and the government are crucial to address these challenges and improve the Fire Service.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this research suggest that the changes in leadership within the BFP (Bureau of Fire Protection) have sparked an active drive among the officers, leading them to



engage in more community activities. However, the excessive workload faced by the officers on a daily basis, coupled with insufficient manpower, operational equipment, and training, places significant stress on them. Additionally, the absence of a well-organized and easily accessible system for permit requirements perpetuates the ongoing issues faced by individuals applying for permits. Additionally, there is a lack of emotional support groups available to help fire officers cope with their work-related stress. To address these issues, it is important to recognize that firefighters' morale is as important as their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, prioritize their work-life balance, incorporate stress-management and task-management into the training of firefighters, implement standardized processes for permit requirements, address the issue of incomplete equipment and facilities for firefighting, and upskill training and recognition are imperative.

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