

Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture

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Abstract

Due to the increasing rates of mental health disorders and associated increasing rates of suicide in Canadian firefighters' lifetimes, it is imperative to understand how to better provide counselling services to firefighters. This study investigates how counsellors can increase their competency in firefighter culture in order to inform what future directions are needed to better serve Canadian firefighters. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis lens, interviews were conducted with six firefighters from a large fire department in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Qualitative data provided emergent themes including experiences of firefighter culture, firefighters' perceptions of counselling, and how counsellors can increase competency in firefighter culture. Implications for counsellors, recommendations for firefighter organizations, and future research directions from these findings are discussed.

Keywords: firefighter; firefighter culture; counselling; cultural competency; help-seeking tendencies; mental health

Dedication

For Mark

“There goes my hero, watch him as he goes. There goes my hero, he’s ordinary”

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List of Acronyms

APA	American Psychiatric Association
BCPFFA	British Columbia Professional Fire Fighters Association
CISM	Critical Incident Stress Management
IAFF	International Association of Fire Fighters
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
PSP	Public Safety Personnel

Chapter 1.

Introduction

I am not sure what it was about the small town I grew up in, but all my male friends wanted to become firefighters. Over the years that is precisely what happened. Gradually, I watched them become volunteers, then paid on-call, and finally career firefighters. One of these friends I would later go on to date, then marry, which provided me with the distinguished title of “fire wife”. As I watched my friends and my husband go through this process, I started to become aware of the inescapable effects of this job, and how they inevitably permeate all aspects of life.

My husband started as a paid-on-call firefighter. His pager would go off constantly. I watched him get ripped away from the middle of family gatherings, birthday parties, and Christmas morning. He left behind his friends, his family, and me. Without a single hesitation or thought about the food, company, or memories he would be missing, he was gone. He was out the door before the page even finished coming through. He would come home from his full-time job and before he could even get his shoes off, the pager would sound, and he would be gone. He would get a call at 1am, be out all night, come home and make a coffee, and then head to work. The high-pitched noise would sound at 8am, 6pm, 4am; emergencies don't have a perception of time, or of the lives they disrupt. The tone of his pager is still burned into my brain. Little did I know that the pager would be the easier part. Slowly our daily driving routes started to change. That's a hazard of working in the town you live in -- every street has a ghost. We would turn left because someone had overdosed to the right; we would circle around the block because straight through was where a child had died, or someone had drowned, or a car got hit head on. I remember when he was offered a career position at a department outside of our town. I was so relieved, no more pager, no more ghosts. The thing I didn't know about ghosts is they follow you everywhere.

When he started as a career firefighter, there were other effects which emerged from the shadows. He became the recruit, cleaning toilets, making muffins, and navigating the social groups. He went on more calls in a year than he had in five years as a paid-on-call firefighter. The call volume took a toll on him. I watched the weight of

the individuals who he couldn't save slowly pull at the furrows of his brow and the skin beneath his eyes. He would come home with the glazed look you only acquire after giving someone Narcan for the third, tenth, fiftieth time. The job he had dreamed of since he was three years old slowly morphed his face and his view of the world.

That's not to say that the side effects of firefighting are only negative, there are many amazing aspects of the job. I watched my husband create strong friendships and bonds. He connected with a community of people with the same shared experiences. He adored volunteering through the department, educating the public, and participating in city events. Some of his greatest memories involve the firehall, and so do some of his worst. That's just a part of the job.

I myself was not immune to these exposures, as I spent four years as a crisis intervention worker for victim services, two of which were volunteer and two of which were paid. I spent my weekends and evenings waiting to see if there would be a motor vehicle accident, a sudden death, a suicide, or a domestic violence call. The moment I would sign on, the hypervigilance began. My nervous system was always ready, waiting to jump into action to assist someone during a terrible moment in their life. It's a feeling I cannot explain, of returning home at 2am after spending three hours at a suicide call, putting on your pyjamas, crawling into bed and not even having a chance to close your eyes before you receive a call out for a child abduction. Despondency, enervation, numbness, none of these can truly encapsulate the feeling. The wonderful side of victim services, which is a side not many first responders get to see, was the growth and healing people experience after tragedy. The continued connection with clients for several weeks, months or sometimes years, provided me with access to this piece. Being able to witness the resiliency of the human spirit as individuals continue to fully experience life despite tragedy, was a gift that victim services provided. It was this witnessing which fueled my passion to become a counsellor.

As a counsellor in training and a previous victim services worker, watching my husband's experience with the fire service sparked a curiosity to find the best ways possible to support firefighters when they need it. When I started looking into counselling services for firefighters, I realized there were not a lot of counsellors who have specialized training in supporting first responders. Even more troubling, I realized there was a lack of training available for counsellors. At the time of writing, I only found two

courses. I then turned to the literature to try and piece together how we, as counsellors, can become more competent in supporting our firefighters when they need it. Because while I have never understood the allure of running into a burning building, someone has to do it, and it takes an exceptional person to do so. And that's exactly what my husband is, an exceptional person. That's why I wrote this for him.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

First responders, including firefighters, police officers and paramedics, have an elevated risk for both mental health diagnoses and suicidal tendencies due to frequent exposure to duty-related traumatic events (Bartlett et al., 2018; Boffa et al., 2017; Boffa et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). The fire service, in particular, has notably high rates of mental health disorders, with an estimated 17.3% prevalence rate (Sommerfeld et al., 2017), as well as alarmingly high rates of suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts (Henderson et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020). Despite this, firefighters demonstrate low help-seeking tendencies towards counsellors, with help-seeking tendencies appearing to increase only as firefighters' years of service increase (Carleton et al., 2018a; Hom et al., 2016). Current literature demonstrates firefighters' hesitancy to seek professional help is due to perceived stigma (Henderson et al., 2016; Hom et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020), embarrassment (Henderson et al., 2016; Henderson, 2020; Hom et al., 2016), a fire-service culture which embraces traditional masculine values (Henderson, 2020), and anticipated negative outcomes of treatment (Johnson et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2016). However, the most frequently discussed reason for lack of professional help-seeking is firefighters' perception of counsellor competency in firefighter experience and culture (Gulliver et al., 2019; Henderson, 2020; Hom et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020). Not only do firefighters rate counsellors' lack of awareness and understanding of firefighter culture as the biggest barrier to professional help-seeking, the president of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) has also acknowledged the lack of counsellors who are competent in firefighter culture (Gulliver et al., 2019). This highlights the need for counsellors who have specific training on the complexities of firefighter culture as both a social and an organizational construct (Johnson et al., 2020; Henderson, 2020). Specific training on firefighter culture may help to overcome stigma and treatment barriers and to effectively work with this population. However, there is currently no research on how firefighters themselves

define firefighter culture or on what firefighters look for when determining a counsellor's competency in firefighter culture.

1.2. Rationale

Overall, firefighters are an understudied professional population (Gulliver et al., 2019) and there is a scarcity of literature on Canadian firefighters, which creates a gap in understanding firefighters in the Canadian context. Furthermore, there has been no research, to my knowledge, that has focused on how to improve counselling services for firefighters. Current studies have highlighted this gap and researchers have emphasized the need for studies to be conducted on identifying what firefighters view as being necessary for counsellors to truly understand their work culture (Henderson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, there is no current research that examines how firefighters define firefighter culture. Understanding how firefighters perceive their culture is imperative to understanding how to improve counselling services for them. Furthermore, the value of considering firefighter perspectives and incorporating them into interventions has been emphasized (Jones et al., 2020). My research aims to address these gaps with the hope of informing the counselling field on best practices when working with the firefighter population.

1.3. Purpose

The objective of the current research is to gain an understanding of how firefighters define firefighter culture and their perceptions of how counsellors can become competent in firefighter culture and experience. The current study aims to increase knowledge about firefighter culture and counsellors' competency of firefighter culture using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. By examining how firefighters themselves define firefighter culture, the current study addresses the deficiency of examination of the phenomenon of firefighter culture in current literature. Due to the increasing rates of mental health disorders, specifically posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and associated increasing rates of suicide in Canadian firefighters' lifetimes (Wilson et al., 2016), it is imperative to understand how to better serve this population. This study will contribute to informing counsellors on how to increase their

competency in firefighter culture and will also inform what future research directions are needed to better serve Canadian firefighters.

1.4. Research Questions

The current study is guided by the following research question: What meaning do firefighters make of firefighter culture and how it intersects with mental health and help-seeking from counsellors?

Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Search Procedure

To conduct the present literature review I searched academic databases, including PsycINFO, EBSCO, and Google Scholar which were accessed through the SFU Library database. Within these databases, combinations of the following keywords were used to target literature relevant to the current review: “firefighter”, “firefighter culture”, “first responder”, “mental health”, “counselling”, “cultural competency”, and “Canada”. When examining articles, titles, keywords, and abstracts were reviewed for relevance to the current literature review topic. Reference lists from articles obtained in the search were scanned for articles relevant to this literature review. The search was initially completed in May 2021, however, I continued the literature review throughout the data collection process, as emerging data directed the need for further investigation of current research. After the preliminary search in the academic databases, it was established that there is strong empirical research that suggests the need for future examination on how counsellors can become more competent in firefighter culture, in order to better serve this population.

2.2. Occupational Stress

Occupational stress, which is the adverse reaction experienced by workers when workplace demands are greater than the worker can manage (Kim et al., 2013), is prevalent among firefighters. Firefighting is an inherently stressful occupation, as firefighters attend emergency situations with high exposure to critical incidents (Carey et al., 2011; Lebeaut et al., 2021; Salleh et al., 2020; Sawhney et al., 2018). Critical incidents can be defined as event exposures that are overwhelming, sudden and surpass an individual’s normal coping skills and may lead to adverse mental health consequences such as occupational stress injuries (Brazil, 2017; MacDermid et al., 2019; Nazari et al., 2020). Recent Canadian studies which measured the prevalence of firefighters’ exposure to critical incidents include a descriptive survey by Brazil (2017) of 102 volunteer firefighters from Prince Edward Island, a cross-sectional survey of 390 fulltime and 74 volunteer firefighters from over 160 Canadian locations by Nazari et al. (2020) as well as a cross-sectional survey by MacDermid et al. (2019) of 340 full time

firefighters from one fire service in Hamilton Ontario. All of these studies confirm high rates of critical event exposure in Canadian firefighters. MacDermid et al. (2019) and Nazari et al. (2020) measured critical incident exposure using the Critical Incident Inventory (CII), which is a measure specifically designed for firefighters. The CII includes six subscales that include: trauma to self, victims known to fire-emergency worker, multiple casualties, incidents involving children, unusual or problematic tactical operations, and exposure to severe medical trauma. To address the limitations of having firefighters respond only to the predetermined call scenarios as measured by the CII, Brazil (2017) created their own survey, which consisted of 16 open and closed-ended questions. Across these studies, researchers found that 85% of firefighters indicated one or more critical incident exposures over a two-month period (MacDermid et al., 2019), 85.3% of firefighters indicated exposure to one or more critical incidents over a two-year period, with 18.6% of those respondents reporting that had been exposed to seven or more (Brazil, 2017), and 96.4% of firefighters indicating they were exposed to some form of critical incident over the span of their firefighting careers (Nazari et al., 2020). These studies demonstrate the high rate of exposure to critical incidents among Canadian firefighters.

Critical incident exposure can happen on regular scenes that firefighters frequently attend such as fires, motor-vehicle accidents, natural disasters, and human injuries, all of which can be highly traumatic in nature. These incidents also put firefighters in direct exposure to blood, other bodily fluids, and dead bodies (Nazari et al., 2020), all of which are distressing in nature. Moreover, in the ever-changing societal climate, firefighters are becoming more frequently exposed to incidents that result in being assaulted in the line of duty, as well as severe injury or death to self or fellow firefighters (MacDermid et al., 2021). For example, Nazari et al. (2020) found that 67% of firefighters reported that at some point during their career, they had attended incidents in which they required police protection to do their job.

Furthermore, a Canadian qualitative analysis which explored 38 firefighters' experiences with mental health services by MacDermid et al. (2021) found that sustained exposure to critical incidents and stress has negative impacts on individual firefighters, their families and their work. At the individual level, firefighters reported brain fog, difficulty concentrating, always being on high alert, feelings of failure, fear of having to go on another call, second-guessing their performance and intrusive flashbacks. For

example, a participant in MacDermid et al.'s (2021) study shared their experience with intrusive flashbacks:

I'll give you an example. I came in on a person—she had hung herself, and I can still see her perfectly straight black hair, I can still see her pajamas, and I can still see her hanging there. And that was 15 years ago. It's like I'm still standing there staring at her hanging from the ceiling. How does it affect you? I don't know how it affects me, but it does. The memories stay (MacDermid et al., 2021).

Furthermore, on a family level, firefighters reported feeling unable to be open with their families, feeling guarded about the nature of their job, and having feelings of failure and loss of pride in their families. Lastly, on a work level firefighters reported they experienced a lack of civility with colleagues and increased interpersonal conflicts at work. Moreover, the authors linked these negative impacts to negative consequences and maladaptive behaviours at all three levels. Not only does this study by MacDermid et al., (2021) highlight the experiences of Canadian firefighters, it also demonstrates the detrimental impacts of prolonged critical incident exposure and stress on multiple dimensions of firefighters' lives.

In addition to exposure to critical incidents, firefighters also face additional occupational stressors such as disrupted sleep schedules, physical strain, shift work, constant hyperarousal, inconsistent meals, fear of death of self and others, and exposure to alarms, bright lights, and smoke (Johnson et al., 2020; Salleh et al., 2020). For example, in a mixed-methods research study, which surveyed 254 firefighters from a large fire department in British Columbia, Canada, Isaac and Buchanan (2021) found that the most frequently reported occupational stressors by firefighters were disruption of sleep, feelings of isolation from family due to work demands and stress, thoughts about past calls that were upsetting or disturbing, observing negative effects of stress on coworkers, and working with substandard co-workers during emergency incidents or situations. These occupational stressors can negatively impact physical, mental, and emotional health and may lead to a variety of health concerns (Gulliver et al., 2019; Greinacher et al., 2019; Jahnke et al., 2016; Kimbrel et al., 2011; Sawhney et al., 2018), such as emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, fatigue, irritability, and obesity (Greinacher et al., 2019; Gulliver et al., 2019), as well as musculoskeletal disorders (Kim et al., 2013). It is perhaps unsurprising then that in 2014, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reported

astonishingly high rates of deaths among firefighters due to heart attacks and other cardiac disorders, such as high blood pressure and coronary heart disease, as well as a variety of cancers (Henderson et al., 2016).

In addition to emotional, physical, and mental health concerns, occupational stress can also lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms. For example, in a study conducted by Carey et al. (2011) which examined the psychosomatic well-being of 112 American firefighters, 58% of participants reported binge drinking behaviour, 20% reported nicotine use and 5% reported overuse of caffeine. Binge drinking and alcohol consumption appear to be the most predominant maladaptive coping mechanism in the fire service. For example, Haddock et al. (2012) surveyed alcohol use patterns among 656 firefighters in the United States and found that participants consumed alcohol an average of 10 days per month, and on those days 58% of participants engaged in binge drinking behaviours.

Moreover, the occupational stress caused by regular exposure to traumatic events has been associated with an increased risk of mental disorders, which is perhaps why mental disorders are a highly prevalent issue in the firefighting industry. High occupational stress and over-exposure to traumatic events have been associated with major depressive disorders, panic disorders, anxiety disorders, alcohol use disorder and, most notably, PTSD (Carleton et al., 2018a; Henderson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020; Lebeaut et al., 2020; Lebeaut et al., 2021; Obuobi-Donkor et al., 2022; Salleh et al., 2020; Sawhney et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021).

2.3. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), outlines the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis as: 1) having an exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence; 2) presence of one or more intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event; 3) persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event, beginning after the traumatic event occurred; 4) negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event, beginning or worsening after the traumatic event occurred; 5) marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event, beginning or worsening after the traumatic event; 6) duration of the disturbance is more than 1 month; 7) the

disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning; 8) the disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance or another medical condition (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Current research demonstrates that many firefighters meet the first criterion through routine occupational-related events, suggesting that most firefighters likely already fulfill one criterion for a PTSD diagnosis, due to the nature of their career. This may be a contributing factor as to why PTSD is one of the most frequent mental disorders reported among firefighters (Bartlett et al., 2018; Boffa et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2016). However, although current literature demonstrates an increased risk of PTSD diagnosis for firefighters (Alghamdi, 2015; Bartlett et al., 2018; Boffa et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2016; Henderson, 2020; Salleh et al., 2020), the percentage of firefighters globally who currently meet the criteria for PTSD is unknown, and estimates are variable.

In a literature review conducted by Salleh et al. (2020), which examined 12 quantitative studies on PTSD in firefighters from various countries, it was found that rates of firefighters who met the criteria for PTSD ranged from 6.5% to as high as 57%. However, none of the studies in the review by Salleh et al. (2020) were conducted in Canada, which demonstrates a gap in literature on Canadian firefighters. Similar to Salleh et al.'s, (2020) findings, Obuobi-Donkor et al. (2022), found in their literature review of 32 articles which sought to determine the prevalence of PTSD among firefighters and military personnel globally, that the prevalence of PTSD was 57% for firefighters. Again, none of the articles reviewed were conducted on Canadian firefighters, and I was unable to find any published studies which specifically examined PTSD rates among firefighters in Canada.

The lack of Canadian research is further demonstrated in an article by Wilson et al. (2016), which discussed the economic impact of PTSD among first responders in Canada. The authors stated that while there are estimates of PTSD rates among first responders, there are no studies which provide an accurate representation of rates. More disturbingly, in a quantitative study conducted by Carleton et al. (2018a), which examined mental health disorders among Canadian Public Safety Personnel (PSP), which includes correctional workers, dispatchers, firefighters, paramedics, and police, they noted there is a deficiency of Canadian data regarding any mental health disorders

among first responders. This demonstrates the need for future researchers to focus on the mental health needs of Canadian firefighters.

Despite the lack of Canadian data, the rates demonstrated in current literature of firefighters from varying countries are staggeringly high and indicate that firefighters are at a greater risk of developing PTSD than are soldiers in combat zones are (Obuobi-Donkor et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2016). This may be because both the highly traumatic calls that firefighters attend, as well as the routine aspects of the fire services, such as performing CPR, contribute to mental disturbances such as PTSD (Benedek et al., 2007). This increased risk of PTSD among firefighters is particularly worrying as PTSD symptomatology has been identified as a risk factor for suicidality (Bartlett et al., 2018; Boffa et al., 2018).

2.4. Suicidality

The exact rates of suicide among Canadian firefighters are not known, however, there are recent studies examining suicide among firefighters in the United States. For example, Boffa et al. (2018) assessed the mediating effects of anxiety sensitivity on suicidal tendencies among 214 firefighters; Stanley et al. (2018) addressed associations among occupational stress, suicidality and distress tolerance in 831 firefighters; Hom et al. (2016) collected data on mental health service use and barriers to care in 483 firefighters who reported suicidal ideation; Hom et al. (2018) collected data on help-seeking tendencies in 119 women firefighters with a history of suicidal tendencies; and Stanley et al. (2015) examined rates of suicidal ideation, plans and attempts in 1027 firefighters. These studies used online surveys to collect data and participants were recruited through social media (Hom et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2015) or through larger scale studies (Boffa et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2018). Common measures used included the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Boffa et al., 2018, Stanley et al., 2018), Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (Boffa et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2018), PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (Boffa et al., 2018), Sources of occupational stress-14 (Stanely et al., 2018) and Self-Injurious Thoughts and Behaviors Interview-Short Form (Stanely et al., 2015; Hom et al., 2016; Hom et al., 2018).

The results from these studies are consistent in that they all demonstrate that American firefighters have an increased risk of death by suicide compared to both the

general population and other high-risk occupational groups, such as military personnel (Boffa et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2015). Findings indicate that 46.8% of firefighters admitted to having suicidal ideation at some point in their career, 19.2% admitted to having a suicide plan, and 15.5% admitted to having at least one attempt (Stanley et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2015). These rates are disturbingly high, especially when compared to the general population rates which are 5.6%-14.3% for suicidal ideation, and 1.9-8.7% for having a suicide plan and at least one attempt (Stanley et al., 2015). These statistics demonstrate that firefighters are more than two times more likely to have suicidal ideation than the general population (Stanley et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2015).

A study by Carleton et al. (2018b), which assessed past-year and lifetime suicidal ideation and plans of 5,148 Canadian PSPs, using a web-based self-report survey, may help to demonstrate rates of suicide among Canadian firefighters. While the authors found that across all PSP categories, the self-reported prevalence of lifetime suicidal ideation and plans appeared to be higher than prevalence rates identified by previous researchers for general population samples, they also identified that lifetime suicide attempts for firefighters specifically (3.3%) appeared comparable to, or lower than, lifetime prevalence rates identified by previous researchers for general population samples.

However, rates of suicidal tendencies may be even larger than stated as a recent literature review by Smith et al. (2021), which included 172 studies on firefighter mental health, estimates that only 40% of suicides in the fire department are reported. Carleton et al. (2018b) also acknowledged that suicidal behaviours are relatively underreported in the current literature and that there were no previous studies identified that assessed current or past-year suicidal behaviours for Canadian firefighters. This demonstrates the need for more examination of Canadian firefighters. Furthermore, Henderson et al.'s (2016) review on suicidality in the fire service reported that there is no formal database which tracks suicides within the fire services, which may contribute to underreporting. However, despite the high rates of suicidal tendencies in firefighters, current literature demonstrates that firefighters display low help-seeking tendencies.

2.5. Help-seeking Tendencies

Researchers have addressed the use of professional service utilization rates for mental health issues in a variety of populations, such as military veterans, however, this topic has been under-studied within the firefighter population and there are no studies that report actual rates of mental health services use. There are, however, studies which attempt to identify firefighter's coping strategies, preferences for mental health services and perceived barriers to services.

Gulliver et al. (2019) and Chamberlain and Green (2010) both conducted quantitative studies which, respectively, measured attitudes toward, and preferences of firefighters for, behavioural health services as well as psychological stress and coping strategies. Gulliver et al.'s (2019) study included 2,156 respondents to an online survey which was open to firefighters in both Canada and the United States. Chamberlain and Green's (2010) study included 145 participants from a fire department in Southeast Queensland, Australia. Gulliver et al.'s (2019) survey included IAFF members in both Canada and the United States, however, there is no ability to determine if firefighters' answers differed based on the country they live in, as it was not recorded which country participants resided in. The lack of distinction between countries makes it difficult to determine if Canadian firefighters answered differently from American firefighters and if firefighters have a different experience in the Canadian context. While both studies used self-report measures, Gulliver et al. (2019) created their survey to measure attitudes about, access to, and preferences towards behavioural health services. Although this survey is not a psychometrically validated instrument, it was created specifically to measure firefighters' opinions of behavioural health services, and the information it provided is important for future research. Chamberlain and Green (2010) used psychometrically validated instruments including the General Health Questionnaire 12-item scale, Brief COPE and Impact of Events Scale–Revised, but importantly, participants noted that they felt restricted in their answers by the pre-determined scales. For example, participants who used exercise as a coping mechanism were not able to report that, as the Brief COPE did not include that option (Chamberlain & Green, 2010).

Chamberlain and Green (2010) found that the use of coping strategies positively correlated with distress and posttraumatic stress, indicating that firefighters with greater mental health symptoms displayed higher help-seeking tendencies than those with fewer

symptoms. Additional studies have revealed several other factors linked to firefighters' help-seeking tendencies including years of service (Gulliver et al., 2019; Hom et al., 2016), geographic location, and income level (Hom et al., 2016). It was found that firefighters help-seeking tendencies increased with both age and with years served in the fire industry (Gulliver et al., 2019; Hom et al., 2016). This may be due to more experienced firefighters having higher exposure to psychological distress (Chamberlin & Green, 2010), as a result of more years of exposure to traumatic events. Furthermore, firefighters in smaller towns and those with a lower income were less likely to express a willingness to engage in mental health services than those in larger centers and with higher incomes (Hom et al., 2016).

Only one Canadian study which explored firefighters' experiences with mental health services was located, which is a qualitative analysis of 38 career firefighters in Canada by MacDermid et al. (2021). Although the researchers did not measure help-seeking tendencies, they found that a substantial number of mental health programs were mentioned by firefighters as being positive. Many participants provided positive comments about programs including peer support, resiliency training, critical incident response, suicidal awareness programs, and PTSD prevention plans. Furthermore, participants also commented positively about resiliency programs that focus on increasing awareness of mental health stressors, coping skills, and recognizing signs of mental health problems, such as "Resilient Minds" and "Road to Mental Readiness". Despite positive comments about these programs, many firefighters also discussed their perceived barriers to access.

Several perceived barriers to mental health access have been identified in current literature, including embarrassment (Hom et al., 2016), difficulties or delays in access (MacDermid et al., 2021), anticipated negative outcomes (Gulliver et al., 2019), and stigma (Gulliver et al., 2019; Henderson et al. 2016; Hom et al., 2016). However, recent literature suggests that one of the most significant barriers to accessing mental health services is clinicians who do not understand firefighter culture (Gulliver et al., 2019; Henderson, 2020; Hom et al., 2018; MacDermid et al., 2021). Isaac and Buchanan's (2021) mixed methods study of firefighters from British Columbia found that many participants stated the importance of mental health professionals having knowledge and training in firefighter culture and occupational awareness, as well as their preference for help-seeking from someone who understands firefighter culture and the

traumatic nature of their job. The barrier of clinicians who are not knowledgeable in firefighter culture is also discussed in a qualitative study by Jones et al. (2020), as well as a literature review by Johnson et al. (2020). Jones et al. (2020) conducted 32 ethnographic interviews with firefighters and paramedics in Arkansas. Like Gulliver et al. (2019), these authors found that a key barrier to accessing services was having past negative experiences with a clinician, with several participants highlighting those negative experiences came from clinicians not understanding the firefighting career and not being trauma-informed (Jones et al., 2020). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2020) conducted a literature review of current research on firefighters' mental health, which again highlighted the importance of clinicians understanding firefighter culture. Moreover, Johnson et al. (2020) stated that future research should investigate how to increase clinicians' competency in firefighter culture. Johnson et al. (2020) stated that "qualitative studies would be informative to identify themes specific to what firefighters view as key components needed to truly understand their work culture would be invaluable" (p. 309). The current study responds to this call.

In addition to these findings, the president of the IAFF has also highlighted the need for clinicians who are knowledgeable of firefighter culture and who understand mental health issues that are associated with the fire service profession (Gulliver et al., 2019). This demonstrates the need to investigate what firefighters think counsellors can do to increase their competency of firefighter culture. Since in first responder culture strength is valued, and weakness or the need for help can be seen as a safety risk, it creates a restriction of discussion about mental health issues and therefore the likelihood that individuals who need help will seek it is diminished (Henderson et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020). This demonstrates the need for clinicians to understand the culture of the fire industry in order to mitigate stigma.

2.6. Firefighter Culture

It is estimated that firefighters spend one-third of their time at the fire station, which contributes to strong peer bonds and the formation of a specific firefighter culture (Henderson et al., 2016). Another occupational group that has a similar formation of culture is the military. While there are studies which investigate what composes military culture, such as military language, manners, norms of behaviours, beliefs systems, a chain of command, and military identity (Atuel, 2018; Reger et al., 2008), to my

knowledge, there are no studies which focus on firefighters' understanding of firefighter culture. This may be because research on firefighter mental health is in the relatively early stages of development, with significant attention being paid to mental health in the fire service in the last 10 years (Vujanovic & Tran, 2021), or because firefighting is often viewed as a closed culture (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021), with members demonstrating an unwillingness to share with members outside of their culture (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021; Jones et al., 2020).

The limited literature that discusses firefighter culture suggests it is a seniority-based, paramilitary framework built on traditional masculine values, machismo (Gouliquer et al., 2020; Henderson, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Sommerfeld et al., 2017; Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008; Vujanovic & Tran, 2021) and a hyper-masculinized environment (MacDermid et al., 2021) that focuses on physical strength (MacDermid et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2018; Vujanovic & Tran, 2021), competitiveness (MacDermid et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2018), rationality, and heteronormativity (Vujanovic & Tran, 2021). For example, in a qualitative study of 113 female Canadian firefighters by Gouliquer et al. (2020), participants discussed the fire services as an "old boys club" (p.59), in which behaviours and attitudes of male firefighters are deeply rooted in a sexist tradition that is generational in nature. Masculine values appear to be in all aspects of firefighter culture, including in the fire services' daily routines, workplace practices and organizational structures (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008).

Furthermore, the fire service has been described as a culture of tradition which is resistant to change (MacDermid et al., 2021). The literature indicates that signs of weakness or vulnerability, such as mental health issues, can be seen as an imminent safety risk for the fire group (Henderson et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020) or an admission that firefighters do not know something (MacDermid et al., 2021). It also indicates that discussing emotion may be a source of embarrassment and a detriment to reputation (Vujanovic & Tran, 2021). This may create a need to portray a strong image and an environment in which it is difficult for individuals to seek help, or to admit symptoms of psychological burden or mental health issues (Greinacher et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020). This is highlighted by MacDermid et al. (2021), who suggest that the culture of toughness is both a coping strategy and a potential deterrent for some to disclose mental health concerns. Dark humor, which has been identified as an important aspect of the fire service (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008), is also discussed as

a part of firefighter culture, which can be seen as a helpful way to deal with critical events but may also contribute to a reluctance in help-seeking tendencies (MacDermid et al., 2021).

This image of a hyper-masculinized firefighter is also portrayed in popular culture, with firefighters being presented as heroes, who encapsulate morality, fortitude, bravery and unwavering hardness through discipline and strength (Brazil, 2017; Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008; Perrott, 2019). This image is often sexualized, and at times fetishized (Perrott, 2019). This image may have begun in the late 19th century, as during the latter part of this century the firefighter became somewhat of a cult figure, and a supreme model of manhood, whose heroic deeds were celebrated in paintings, sculptures, songs, stories posters, postcards, and advertisements (Cooper, 1995). This pop culture image of firefighters perhaps influenced the view and culture of modern-day firefighters. Cooper (1995) discusses this in the following statement:

The work of the fireman was of its very nature heroic. He daily performed acts of courage and daring, risking his life fighting fires, endeavouring to save victims or endangered colleagues. He was a hero of modern life. The firemen of today are doing in the course of their daily duty work that ranks among the heroic deeds of the century.

While the current literature and pop-culture references are a starting point for understanding firefighter culture, it is important to note that this information comes from a small number of authors, and there is no current research that explores what firefighters themselves believe represents firefighter culture. In order to address how counsellors can better understand firefighter culture, it is essential that researchers first gain an understanding of what firefighters believe constitutes firefighter culture, especially within the Canadian context.

2.7. Counsellor Cultural Competency

To provide the best service possible to firefighters, it is imperative for counsellors to display cultural competency in firefighter culture. Cultural competency is essential for a successful clinical practice, as a counsellor's ongoing attention to professional competence may increase more positive client outcomes (Leppma et al., 2016; Sandeen et al., 2018; Sue, 2001). To be culturally competent, a counsellor should use a broad and integrated approach which is congruent with client values, demonstrate sensitivity

and understanding to a client's culture, and understand client's perceptions of change as well as normative behaviours (Leppma et al., 2016; Sue, 2001). Despite multicultural competency advances in counselling practice, some professionals argue that the counselling field is not culturally competent in meeting the needs of men who adopt traditional masculine social ideology (Westwood & Black, 2012) and that there is a consistent failure in understanding the cultural competency needed to effectively engage with men and masculinity (Hoover et al., 2012). Furthermore, despite it being demonstrated that men experience more suicidal tendencies than women, (Oliffe et al., 2021; O'Toole et al., 2022) these insights have not translated into tailored suicide prevention services for Canadian men (Oliffe et al., 2021), or into mental health promotion in male-dominated professions (O'Toole et al., 2022). This lack of competency, and tailored mental health services, is perpetuated in the Canadian context as counselling training in Canada is dominated by female practitioners and programs often do not adequately address the complexity and nuances of traditional masculinity (Westwood & Black, 2012). While the gap in adequate counselling services for men is apparent, there is a dearth of literature surrounding what makes a counsellor competent in firefighter culture, which is a male-dominated field, or how a counsellor can demonstrate competency in firefighter culture.

Competency in firefighter culture is important for effective work with this group for several reasons. First, it is important for counsellors to understand the complexity and nuances of the fire group, such as the services brotherhood as both a fraternal organization and a social construct, in order to help overcome treatment barriers such as stigma (Johnson et al., 2020). By understanding the inherent stigma surrounding mental health and the barriers to access this stigma creates (Henderson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020), counsellors can work towards normalizing help-seeking tendencies which may lead to better rates of accessing services. Since firefighters hold a strong sense that other firefighters are the only ones who understand the occupational stressors they experience, having more culturally competent counsellors may help to shift this view and encourage more professional help-seeking behaviours (MacDermid et al., 2021). Furthermore, working with this population requires an understanding of firefighter specific stressors to properly formulate a case conceptualization and address unique issues related to the occupation (Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, it may be important for counsellors to understand that firefighters who identify as part of an

underrepresented group such as, for example, women, may face discrimination and microaggression on the job (Vujanovic & Tran, 2021).

While there is currently no literature that highlights ways for counsellors to become competent in firefighter culture, in Isaac and Buchanan's (2021) study, one firefighter suggested that counsellors could go on a ride-along to experience and understand the sights, sounds, and smells which firefighters face daily. More research should be done to determine what firefighters believe constitutes firefighter culture, how they experience it and how they believe counsellors can gain competency in firefighter culture. Training for counsellors and interventions for firefighters could then be formulated based on this information. This could lead to training courses for counsellors about firefighter culture and firefighter specific treatments (Johnson et al., 2020).

2.8. Conclusion

Overall, firefighters are generally exposed to high amounts of prolonged occupational stress, which may be a contributing factor to their high rates of PTSD and suicidal behaviours. Despite this, firefighters overall demonstrate low help-seeking tendencies, with the most stated barrier to access being clinicians who do not understand firefighter culture. However, there is a limited amount of research which discusses firefighter culture, and no research which analyzes how firefighters themselves define and view firefighter culture. With limited research available and limited courses for counsellors which address working with firefighters, there is a deficiency in information for counsellors to understand how to provide quality services to this population. Therefore, this study aims to address this informational gap in order to increase the number of resources available for counsellors to increase their competency in firefighter culture, and to inform future directions needed to better serve Canadian firefighters.

Chapter 3.

Methods

In this chapter, the basics of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis are introduced, and the rationale for its selection and value for this project is described. The methodological process is then reviewed including procedure, data collection, and data analysis. Methodological choices are explained and justified, and consideration is given to ethics and researcher subjectivity.

3.1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach to psychological research. Concepts and arguments from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography help to inform this approach. While phenomenology and hermeneutics can be seen in contrast, both considerations used together are necessary components to study the dynamics of everyday life (McLeod, 2001), which this study attempts to do. Phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography will be discussed in further detail in sections 3.1.1 – 3.1.3. Overall, IPA holds the belief that humans are sense-making creatures, and it is committed to exploring how people make sense of their lived experiences, in their own terms. IPA researchers allow themes to emerge from the experiences of participants, rather than attempting to fix experience into predefined categories (Smith et al., 2009).

3.1.1. Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy which attempts to study the human experience (Smith et al., 2009). Early phenomenologists, and leading figures in phenomenology, include Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Husserl established the focus on individuals' perception of their own experience, which he felt then may be able to provide information about the same phenomenon for other individuals. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre expanded on Husserl by emphasizing that the individual is immersed in aspects of the world, such as objects, relationships, and culture (Smith et al., 2009). This shift moves towards understanding of one's

personal experience of their lived world, while also understanding personal experience is in relation to the world, as opposed to in isolation. Despite phenomenology being a part of philosophy, psychologists find value in the phenomenological methods of examining and understanding lived experience. Therefore, the phenomenological aim of IPA is the attempt to understand and get as close as possible to the participant's experience and understand how individuals examine and comprehend their lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

3.1.2. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, which was created to discover steadier foundations for the interpretation of biblical texts, is the second theoretical aspect of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, and it informs IPA as the researcher uncovers how a phenomenon appears and how individuals make sense of it. Furthermore, IPA researchers engage in a double hermeneutic, as the researcher attempts to make meaning of the participants meaning of their lived experience. The researcher must have an awareness of their assumptions and recognize them during the interpretative process (Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic circle, which is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, also influences IPA. IPA analysis reflects the hermeneutic circle, as it is iterative, as the researcher moves back and forth through the data, rather than in linear, systematic steps. Overall, hermeneutics enhances the research process as it takes the individual experience of phenomenology and considers how both the participant and the researcher interpret the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

3.1.3. Idiography

The third aspect of IPA is idiography, which is concerned with the particular. It is concerned with the particular in terms of the individual, such as sense of detail, and in the depth of analysis, such as how a particular phenomenon is understood by a particular group of people in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). Due to this focus, IPA uses small, purposively selected samples. This focus on the particular contrasts with the nomothetic focus of most psychology, which is concerned with making claims at a larger population level. IPA instead offers a detailed experience of particular instances in an attempt to discover the complexity of human experience (Smith et al., 2009).

3.1.4. Fire culture as a phenomenon

IPA is well suited for this study as it attempts to discover the idiographic experiences of individuals who have a shared situation and to understand how those individuals make sense of their experience in that situation (Barton, 2020). The emphasis of this study aligns with IPA as it focuses on personal meaning-making of a particular context and phenomenon of people who share a certain experience. In this study, the people who share an experience are firefighters, and the phenomena and contexts being explored are firefighter culture and counselling experiences.

As mentioned in the literature review above, there is limited research that discusses the phenomenon of firefighter culture and there is currently no research which examines how firefighters define firefighter culture. Using IPA for this study allows participants to express their lived experience with the phenomenon in their own terms, as opposed to predefined terminology. Specifically, this study allows firefighters to define firefighter culture themselves, as opposed to using the definition used in current literature, which was created by researchers themselves. Furthermore, this study explores perceptions and views that participants hold of counselling, which allows the connections between experiences of firefighter culture and views of counselling services to be made.

3.2. Procedures

3.2.1. Ethics approval

Approval to carry out this study was granted by Simon Fraser University's Research Ethics Board prior to participant recruitment (see Appendix A). Individual participants gave their consent to participate by signing consent forms (see Appendix D).

3.2.2. Identifying the site for study

The site for the current study is a large fire department in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. I selected this particular fire department based on its anticipated richness and relevance to my research questions (Yin, 2011). I chose the current fire department because it is one of the largest departments in the Lower

Mainland with over 800 current active members. The large number of firefighters was an appealing aspect of this department for this study as it allowed a variety of potential participants, which increased the chances of having an appropriate sample size. Furthermore, since this department is one of the older departments in the Lower Mainland, I believed participants would have a strong sense of traditional, as well as current, firefighter culture. Lastly, this department is home to the busiest fire hall in all of North America, which I thought may provide an insight into the realities of busy fire halls.

3.2.3. Creation of interview guide

For this study, I conducted the interviews according to the interview guide (see Appendix E) which I created with the assistance of my supervisor and firefighters from other local departments. The questions I created for the interview guide were informed by the gaps in current literature that I wanted to explore. Before finalizing the interview guide, I discussed it with my supervisor as well as with firefighters from other local departments. My supervisor provided me with feedback on the structure and types of questions, while my discussions with firefighters from other local departments informed the wording of my questions to include more specific fire language.

Discussion of the questions with others before finalizing them is recommended by IPA. As per IPA standards, the interview guide provides a guideline for in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Furthermore, the questions were created with an intent to foster meaning-making, rather than focus on concrete causes or events. The interview guide includes 10 questions with possible prompts, as IPA recommends approximately 6 to 10 questions (Smith et al., 2009).

3.2.4. Data collection

Sample

After choosing the fire department site, I recruited firefighters from this department using convenience and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria for this study were that participants currently worked in the selected department as active suppression firefighters, meaning that they were actively responding to emergencies. Members of the department who were not currently active suppression firefighters, such as individuals who held roles in public education, fire prevention, training etc., were not contacted for

the purpose of this study. Consistent with IPA standards, a small size sample was recruited, as Smith et al. (2009) recommend between three and six participants. However, the final number of firefighters interviewed was determined by data saturation. In total, 6 interviews were conducted.

Participant recruitment

When beginning participant recruitment, Yin (2011) recommends that researchers become aware of, and sensitive to, how research sites are accessed. They highlight the need for researchers to connect with gatekeepers, who are officials or leaders of the institutions that the researcher wishes to study. When beginning my study, I inquired about the best way to connect with the fire department by asking local firefighters and was advised that the best course of action would be to first approach the fire union for the department I wished to study.

I recruited participants through a two-step process. First, I sent via email a recruitment letter to the fire department union (see Appendix B), which outlined the purpose and goals of the study as well as a brief explanation of the study. The email also contained a recruitment letter for fire department members, and a request for the fire department to forward that recruitment letter to its members if the department consented to participate (see Appendix C).

A member of the union contacted me saying they would assist me in finding participants. The union member assisted in finding participants by approaching firefighters from the department. The union member explained the purpose of the study to firefighters and provided them with my contact information. Participants were also found by other participants sharing their experiences. Therefore, participants were collected using snowball sampling. Participants who were interested in the study then contacted me via email. Once participants contacted me, I sent them the recruitment letter and consent form. Interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participant. There was no compensation provided for participants.

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling was used for this study, as several participants were found through referrals from other participants. I began my first interview with one firefighter who was a part of the union, and he then told other firefighters about the study.

Firefighters who were interested in participating then provided their contact information to the union member, who then sent me the information. I then contacted the firefighters and provided them with more information on the study.

Interviews

Interviews were scheduled and conducted on Zoom. The interviews were audio and video recorded. I conducted the interviews according to the interview guide. The interviews varied in length from 25 to 60 minutes.

Following IPA recommendations, I spent time at the beginning of the interview introducing myself and my research to establish rapport with my participants. IPA states that rapport is fundamentally important for a participant to feel comfortable enough to share thoroughly. Furthermore, I let the participants lead the interview and modified questions throughout the interviews in response to particular responses from the participant. This allowed me to investigate further into areas or topics which arose during the conversation. This also meant that the interview did not have to follow the exact sequence on the interview guide, nor did I ask each question in the same way for each participant. This allows for a more natural state of interviewing.

After I completed each interview, I transcribed it verbatim, as per IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009) and sent participants the transcript, as well as a member checking email (See Appendix F), which explained to participants that they could make additions or omissions to their interview or choose to withdraw their interview from the study.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Participant profiles

The participants in this study do not represent a diverse population, with 5 out of 6 participants identifying as male, and all participants identifying as White. This is in part due to the use of convenience sampling, as I was limited to using participants who were willing and able to be interviewed. However, having the majority of participants identify as white males is fairly reflective of this region's firefighter population as a whole, as according to Statistics Canada, in 2017 women only comprised 4.4% of firefighter

personnel in Canada (Gouliquer et al., 2020). To my knowledge, there are no available statistics on the ethnicity of Canadian firefighters.

The participant profiles are reflective of an IPA approach, as IPA is generally conducted on a relatively small and reasonably homogenous sample. The following is a brief overview of the participants for this study. The participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Note that the term “career suppression” refers to a career firefighter who works on the floor, meaning they attend incidents. The term “paid on call” refers to a casual firefighter who responds to emergencies if they are available.

Daniel – Daniel is a White male who has worked as a career suppression firefighter for 19.5 years. Daniel has spent his entire 19.5-year career working at his current fire department.

Kevin – Kevin is a White male who has worked in the fire industry for 25 years. He has worked for his current department as a career firefighter for the last 22 years. Prior to starting with this department, he was employed as a paid-on-call firefighter for another local department in the Lower Mainland for 3 years.

Cole – Cole is a White male who has worked as a career suppression firefighter for 10 years. Cole has spent the entire 10 years of his career working at his current fire department.

Dragon – Dragon is a White male who has worked in the fire industry for 5.5 years. He has worked as a career suppression firefighter for this department for the last 1.5 years. Before getting hired at this department, Dragon worked for four years as both a wildland firefighter and a volunteer firefighter for another department in British Columbia for 4 years.

Taylor – Taylor is a White female who has worked in the fire industry for 5 years. Before joining the current fire department, she worked as a volunteer firefighter for 1 year for another department in British Columbia. She has been working as a career suppression firefighter for the current department for 4 years.

Derek – Derek is a White male who has worked in the fire industry for 6 years. He has worked as a career suppression firefighter with the current department for the last 2

years. Before getting hired at his current department, Derek worked as a paid on-call firefighter for another fire department in the Lower Mainland.

Table 1.1 Participant profiles

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	# of years in the fire service	# of years at current department	Firefighting experience
Daniel	Male	White	19.5	19.5	Career suppression
Kevin	Male	White	25	22	Paid on call, Career suppression
Cole	Male	White	10	10	Career suppression
Dragon	Male	White	5.5	1.5	Volunteer, Forest, Career suppression
Taylor	Female	White	5	4	Volunteer, Career suppression
Derek	Male	White	6	2	Paid on call, Career suppression

3.3.2. Analysis

The existing literature on analysis in IPA does not prescribe a particular method for analyzing data (Smith et al., 2009). Since there is no clear method for IPA, I focused my attention on how my participants attempted to make sense of their experiences of firefighter culture, while loosely following recommendations for analysis presented by Smith et al. (2009). I analysed interviews in the order that they were completed. My analysis included transcribing interviews, reviewing of interview videos and transcripts several times, and textual analysis of transcripts with a focus on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on information which stood out to me. I completed this process for each interview before moving on to the next interview. I did this process for all six interviews before moving on to the next step of connection themes across interviews. Once the textual analysis was completed on all transcripts, I used subsumption, polarization, and numeration to group the information into themes. This process will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. It is important to note

that although I generally followed this sequence, I did often go back and repeat the process for interviews which I had already analysed as new interviews brought forward new data. This process is reflective of the iterative aspect of IPA, that is, analysis has a general structure, but can move back and forth through the structure as the data shifts and new themes emerge (Smith et al., 2009).

Video recordings and transcriptions

Interviews were transcribed using the computer software Descript. Once the transcription was written, I then listened to each video while reading the transcript to ensure that it was transcribed correctly. Since IPA aims to interpret the meaning of the participant's experience, it does not require a detailed account of the prosodic aspects of the recordings, however, I was sure to make note of lengthy pauses, hesitation, and laughter (Smith et al., 2009). Once the transcription was complete, I did not read it again until I had watched the video a minimum of three times. IPA suggests reviewing each video several times before reading and analyzing the transcription (Smith et al., 2009). This allowed me to observe the non-verbal behaviour of my participants, such as their body language, facial expression, vocal intonation, or emotional responses, and to imagine the voice of the participant during my subsequent reading of the transcripts. Before beginning my textual analysis, I read each transcript a minimum of three times to allow myself to get a sense of the overall interview structure (Smith et al., 2009). Once this process was complete, I moved on to textual analysis of the interview.

Textual analysis

I completed my textual analysis of the transcription in the order the interviews were conducted, analyzing the first transcript in detail, before moving on to the next, and so on (Smith et al., 2009). I set up each transcript with a wide margin in order to have space to write notes throughout the transcript. Since IPA holds no rules about what is commented on, the analysis was free-flowing and attempted to provide comprehensive notes throughout the transcript. After the free-flowing analysis was complete, I went back through the transcript again to specifically look at the language participants used and identify patterns. I did this by beginning to organize my comments by descriptive, which commented on the content of what was said, linguistic, which noted the specific language used by the participant, and conceptual, which focused on large concepts of the participants' experience (Smith et al., 2009). Once the transcript had been gone

through several times, and I felt that no new notes were emerging, I went through the transcript one more time using the strategy of decontextualization, to see if any more information would emerge. Decontextualization is suggested in IPA as a strategy to bring a detailed focus on the participant's specific words and meanings (Smith et al., 2009). I employed this strategy by looking at each paragraph of dialogue and reading it backwards, sentence by sentence. Once all these steps were done, I organized my notes into groups which loosely created a theme. I repeated this process with each of my interviews. To align with IPA's idiographic obligation, I attempted to look at each transcript without my knowledge of the previous transcript influencing my view (Smith et al., 2009). Once all six interviews had been analyzed this way, I moved on to the next step of establishing emergent themes.

Subsumption, polarization, and numeration

The next step in my analysis was to look for themes across interviews. I did this by using IPA suggestions of polarization, subsumption, and numeration (Smith et al., 2009). When looking across transcripts to find themes which aligned, I used polarization to look at the oppositional relationships between themes, to focus on the difference instead of similarities. This helped me discover themes which appeared to be in opposition to one another. This is seen in my theme of sense of family, where there is an opposition of belonging to a family and not being accepted into the family until you earn your way in. I also used subsumption, which is the recognition of a theme having a super-ordinate status, as it brings together a series of related themes, which become the sub-themes (Smith et al., 2009). We see this in the super-ordinate theme of hesitation to share, as it holds many related sub-themes such as hesitation in the interview, protecting spouses, and connection through shared experience. Lastly, I used numeration, which is to note the frequency of the themes among each individual transcript, and across multiple transcripts. I used this tool to indicate the general importance of emergent themes as if there was a higher frequency of a theme in individual interviews and across interviews, it suggested the theme may be of higher importance. Subsumption and numeration are demonstrated in Table 2.1: Identifying Recurrent Themes: Experiences of Firefighter Culture. This table shows what themes and sub-themes are grouped together, subsumption, and the number of participants that agreed and disagreed with each theme, numeration.

Table 2.1 Identifying Recurrent Themes: Experiences of Firefighter Culture

Super-ordinate Themes	Sub-ordinate Themes	Frequency (n=6)
Traditions		4
	Seniority	2
	Masculine values	4
	The probationer	2
Sense of Family		4
	Earning a spot	4
	Fitting in	3
Hesitation to share		6
	Hesitation in interviews	4
	Redirection to spouses	2
	Hesitation to outsider help	2
	Protecting spouses	4
	Connection through shared experience	6
	CISM	3
Dark Humor		5
A Culture Shift		6
	A new generation	3

3.4. Ethical considerations

The potential risks of participating in this study were minimal, as no questions were intended to bring up uncomfortable emotions. However, discussing experiences of firefighter culture and counselling could bring up stressful memories for some participants. In order to minimize this risk, participants were told the question topics before giving informed consent. Participants were also given the opportunity to pause or end the interview at any time. Furthermore, at the end of the interviews, participants were emailed a thank you letter with mental health resources attached (see Appendix

G). Confidentiality of both the interview transcripts were maintained by storing in password protected files which only the research team had access to.

Subjectivity of the researcher

Considering my own subjectivity as a researcher is an important ethical aspect of conducting this research. A self-examination of my own knowledge and views which have affected the way I have approached my study is important for the process of understanding my inquiry, and the findings of my research overall. I do not hold the belief that I bring a neutral or objective view to my research (Yin, 2011). Although many research methods promote the importance of an objective and unbiased interpretation, IPA recognizes that the experience of analysis will inevitably be an interpretative endeavour for the researcher as they attempt to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant (Barton, 2020). Furthermore, the nature of IPA's double hermeneutics process involves the participants' story being interpreted through the lens of the researcher, which cannot be done without the researcher first reflecting on their own experiences and bias. Therefore, it is important to consider the background factors that have influenced my interest and desire to pursue this research topic.

The first area I reflected on was my personal connections to the fire service. I have close friendships with many individuals who are firefighters for a variety of departments in the Lower Mainland. More personally, my husband has been a firefighter in the Lower Mainland for the last 10 years. Due to this personal relationship with the firefighting community, there is a level of influence on my research that perhaps cannot be untangled. First, through these personal connections, I have gained a greater understanding of the inner workings of the fire service and of the challenges that firefighters face both on and off the job. Having this basic understanding of the fire service, such as the ranking structure and specific fire terminology, may have enabled me to understand my participants more readily. Furthermore, my personal connections to the fire service have exposed me to the effects that the job has on firefighters, as I hear about the experiences and struggles of my friends and loved ones. This has influenced my research as it provided me with the curiosity to research this subject. I feel committed and passionate about examining how firefighters themselves define firefighter culture and reflecting on how counselling services can better meet the needs of this population.

The second area I reflected on was my own work experience. I previously worked for four years as both a volunteer and paid crisis intervention worker for a victim services program in the Lower Mainland. Although this position is not considered a first responder position, I worked with and alongside first responders including police, paramedics, and firefighters. I attended many of the same critical incidents that firefighters attended such as motor vehicle accidents, fires, and sudden deaths. This involvement with victim services provided me with a greater awareness and understanding of the environment that firefighters are exposed to daily. I saw the impacts that this type of job had on myself, such as the physical impacts of disrupted sleep, and the mental aspects of continuous exposure to traumatic events. This experience affected my understanding of the physical, emotional, and mental effects that can be associated with first responder work.

The last area I reflected on was the influence my education has had on my research. Being a master's student in a counselling program, I undoubtedly hold value in counselling services. It was my intention to use this subjectivity to promote a curiosity within myself for how to support and inform best counselling practices. As a future professional counsellor, I feel dedicated to continuous learning and improvement both for myself as an individual and for the counselling field.

Chapter 4.

Results

In this chapter I present findings on participants' experiences of firefighter culture, their perceptions of counselling and their suggestions for how counsellors can better understand firefighter culture.

4.1. Experiences of Firefighter Culture

An important aspect of my research was to first investigate whether firefighters themselves believe there is a distinct firefighter culture, and if they did, how they defined or conceptualized firefighter culture. Of the six participants, five agreed, with great assuredness, that there is a distinct firefighter culture. One participant, Derek, suggested that firefighter culture, as the public views it, is in the past, and that the current culture has shifted to something different. When discussing firefighter culture, participants discussed several factors including tradition, sense of family, dark humor, and a culture shift, all of which are discussed in this section.

4.1.1. "Old school traditions": Foundations of the fire services

One aspect of firefighter culture that emerged during my interviews was the traditions that are ingrained in the fire service. During the interviews, I did not explicitly ask participants about traditions in the fire services. The discussions of tradition emerged organically when I asked participants about firefighter culture. Traditions are ways of thinking and acting which are long established or inherited. The three traditions which emerged during interviews were seniority, male-dominant values, and the probationary period. It is interesting to note that only the more junior firefighters explicitly mentioned how the fire service is steeped in traditions. Derek and Dragon referred to traditions surrounding seniority and the hierarchy among firefighters. Taylor, who is also relatively junior, explicitly highlighted traditions connected to masculine values. One of the more senior participants, Daniel, also highlighted masculine values, but he did not discuss it explicitly, or in detail. That the more senior of my participants did not explicitly speak about tradition raises the question of whether they were unaware of the traditions,

perhaps due to being a part of them for so long, or if this reflected another aspect of firefighter culture -- a hesitation to share information with individuals outside the fire service (see section 4.1.3).

“Hierarchy system”: The role of seniority

Two participants, Dragon, and Derek discussed the importance of the notion of seniority within firefighter culture and the expectations of adhering to certain practices. For example, Dragon spoke of wanting to further his education and pursue a master’s degree. However, he explained to me how that might not be perceived well among senior firefighters. When I asked why he felt people would be concerned about him furthering his education, he told me that his coworkers would question his motivations and would wonder:

Like is [Dragon] trying to jump ship?

When probed, Dragon expressed his concern that furthering his education could be perceived as him trying to hasten his move up the seniority ranks. When I enquired further about why firefighters would be upset about this, he intimated that it would go against the traditional method of gaining seniority, as traditionally seniority has been based solely on how long someone has worked at a particular department rather than based on expertise gained in other contexts. Therefore, the expectations of traditional seniority structure may prevent firefighters from pursuing advancement of education or other activities that they believe give the appearance of attempting to increase their seniority. This highlights the rigidity in the structure of the fire service, and how it can inhibit firefighters from pursuing career development on their own terms. It also demonstrates how to fit into the hierarchy system, firefighters may need to put their personal desires aside in order not to disrupt the existing conditions of the ranking structure. Derek expressed a similar idea to Dragon when he discussed seniority. Derek explained his understanding of the seniority structure as follows:

I think one of the more old-school aspects that are kind of tied into this firefighting culture is the hierarchy system. That still exists. We have a ranking system which consists of officers, and then you go down the list based on seniority. And that kind of mirrors like the in-hall hierarchy we have, like, you have your senior man, you have the six-year guy, the four-year guy, and then like the junior guy.

In this statement, Derek explicitly discusses how seniority and place in the hierarchy are based on time on the job. He also highlights how there are multiple parallel hierarchies, including the overall ranking of positions, as well as the in-hall ranking, that depend on how many years someone has been working at the department. Derek's comment highlights how structured and specific the hierarchy system is, providing each person with a place based on their rank and years of service. While this perhaps reduces ambiguity in job expectations, it also appears to create a rigid structure which firefighters can feel stuck in, as seen in Dragon's comment about his fears of obtaining a master's degree.

“A bit of a boy's club”: Male-dominant values

Another traditional aspect of the fire service appeared to be the acceptance of masculine dominant values, which is seen in the language used to describe ranking. As seen in Derek's quote above, he uses masculine gendered language such as senior “man” and junior “guy”. This demonstrates his implicit acceptance of firefighter culture being built on masculine values. Derek continued to discuss hierarchy with me, and again made a comment with the same gendered language, but in this comment, he noticed himself using it. He stated:

One of the more traditional old school aspects is definitely focused around the junior man, or, person rather, um - that individual.

Here, Derek highlights two traditions of the fire service, male-dominant values, and the role of the probationer. The role of the probationer is discussed in the section below. Despite Derek noticing the male-dominant language he used and adjusting his wording, he made no comment on masculine values being a part of the fire services tradition. Daniel also mentioned masculine characteristics, although like Derek, it did not appear to me that he did so for the purpose of highlighting masculine values. When discussing how Daniel enjoys firefighter culture, he described the culture as being an:

. . .alpha, predominantly male culture.

Derek and Daniel's use of masculine dominant language is perhaps a reflection of the fire service being traditionally a male-dominated career, with females only recently being welcomed into the fire service. Taylor discussed this movement of women recently joining the fire service when she said:

There haven't been females in the fire service for that long compared to men. I think that over the last like 15-20 years, more and more females are having the opportunity to kind of come into the fire service and kind of re-evaluate maybe the certain values of people and protocols, or however you want to phrase it, in the fire service.

Taylor's comment, while highlighting the movement of women into the fire service, also suggests that there may still be hesitation in creating space for women, as she describes women as "kind of" coming into the fire service, and "kind of" re-evaluating things. Her language suggests that women do not have the same prospects and influence in the fire services as men do. Taylor then went on to discuss how despite women beginning to enter the fire service, masculine values are still a large part of the traditions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Taylor was the only participant to discuss masculine values in firefighter culture in-depth, as she was the only female identifying participant I interviewed. Taylor very explicitly discussed this idea of masculine culture when she stated:

I would say the closest comparison for someone that has no idea about fire culture, would be, it's still a bit of a boy's club.

Taylor went on to further discuss the masculine dominant tradition, and how these values affect female firefighters. She stated:

Really a large majority are males in the fire service. We just, we don't always operate the same. Men and women do not always respond the same to everything. There are definitely pieces that need to be adjusted, and more space needs to be made, I think, for women to have inputs, to balance the playing field a little bit because it has been so one sided for so long. And there is unfortunately still a lot of resistance to that.

It's clear that Taylor sees these dominant masculine values as creating a space in which women are indeed at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Connecting this to her previous comment in which she stated that women are "kind of" able to re-evaluate protocols, it appears that Taylor sees a power imbalance between the ways in which females and males have inputs in the fire service. Again, we see Taylor comment on how women are not afforded the same opportunities and influence in the fire service as men. She further went on to say:

It should be a place where all genders can show up at work and feel comfortable.

This comment suggests that due to the boy's club mentality, Taylor feels that currently not all individuals can feel at ease at work. It can be seen how the use of masculine

dominant language in the fire service, such as junior “man” and senior “guy”, perpetuates a “boys club” culture, which in turn upholds the power imbalance between men and women in the fire service, making it more difficult for women to have influence in changing the language and culture of the fire service. This cycle is perhaps one way by which the traditional masculine values are a continued part of the fire service, despite women entering the field.

Despite these misgivings about fire culture, Taylor also highlighted how the need for certain changes does not necessarily mean changing the entirety of firefighter culture. She stated:

But I also don't think that we should be trying to reinvent the wheel, the fire service is an incredible thing that has been operating, you know, for a long time.

While Taylor's comments demonstrate how the traditions of firefighter culture can be oppressive to some individuals while creating unfair advantage to others, she also highlights how there are a lot of benefits to the way the fire service currently operates, which suggests that some traditions function for positive reasons.

“It wasn't really hazing”: The probationer

As seen in the section above, one traditional aspect of the fire department surrounds the “junior man”, who is also known as the probationer. Dragon spoke of the probationary period and explained its structure in terms of length of time. He said:

That's how probation kind of works. There's your first six [months] and your second six [months]. On your first six probation, you're kind of on your own, working, doing all the cleaning, et cetera.

Here, Dragon highlights the standard 12-month period of the probationary process, as well as the actions which are traditionally expected of the probationer, such as doing all the cleaning by oneself. Derek also spoke of the traditional aspects of the probationer. He said:

Like you have to - basically you're doing every job that no one else wants to do. Like hall maintenance, cleaning the bathrooms, doing all the garbages and the chores and all that. But again, that shows your work ethic - that you're willing to go through all that and help your crew in that regard.

Derek's examples are similar to Dragon's comment about being alone during probation and doing "all the cleaning". It appears that part of the traditional aspect of probation is doing the work that is perhaps undesirable to other crew members. Derek continued by stating how the probationer can be the target of negative attitudes and actions of other firefighters. He said:

Like, I don't want to call it hazing - but you know that like, pulling a prank on the younger person, or . . . yeah. So I guess speaking to that, I have had classmates who have had a far worse experience based on their crew. I don't know if it's a personality thing and they're more, for lack of a better words - um, sensitive, to like, I guess. . . like, that sort of hazing in a sense. I'm trying to just figure out how to explain this. It wasn't really hazing, but if you've, say for instance, you've messed up on a drill. They can really easily make you feel stupid. And it goes beyond just like, "okay, you did this wrong, this is what you need to work on". There can be a lot of dialogue that takes place that can really rock your confidence. And that is just unnecessary. Like I was saying, my classmate, he went through a lot of that, just bullying in a sense, you know, just unnecessary comments that don't do anything to help develop your skills as a firefighter and getting to know the guys. So that is definitely a thing that junior firefighters have to go through. And I think, you know, it doesn't really facilitate skill development in a positive way.

Here, Derek comments about how the traditional way of teaching and treating probationers can be detrimental. Derek's comments about probation highlight some of its negative aspects and the impacts it can have on self-esteem and mental health. Derek was tentative in explaining this to me, as it was clear he did not want me to think of it as hazing, but he was unclear of another way to describe it. This is seen in his pauses and attempt to reframe the word hazing several times. Hazing, which is when someone is subjected to humiliating initiation rituals, does seem to be reflected in some of Derek's wording, such as "pulling pranks", "bullying", "dialogue that. . . can really rock your confidence" and "unnecessary comments". Derek's discussion suggests that perhaps some form of hazing can happen during probation, even if that is not the word he would like to use for it. It also implies the use of bullying as he discusses comments that are meant to make someone feel stupid and can negatively impact self-confidence. Having to withstand bullying and hazing in order to prove oneself appears to be an aspect of firefighter culture for some firefighters, but not all, as Derek highlights he has classmates who experienced this, but he did not have the same experience, suggesting that the tradition may not be accepted by all firefighters. Derek further went on to discuss the impacts of having to go through probation:

For some, I could see being alone and then having to prove yourself, and all the stresses of actually going on calls and doing the job, on top of trying to win over your crew, like you already have your plate full with serving the public and then you have to go back and keep everybody else happy, and I can appreciate that process, but I feel like it can maybe be done in a more modern manner, I guess, whatever that be.

Here, it is again shown the traditional expectations of the probationer, as they are required to “keep everybody else happy”. While Derek’s discussion of the probationary period does not appear to be directly about him, as earlier he had told me he had a supportive crew, it is told in a way that suggests he has watched someone, or perhaps several people, be negatively impacted by probation. Derek’s comments also suggest that the probationary process he witnessed is a tradition at his firehall as he states it could be done in a “more modern manner”. Derek continued his discussion of the probationer and shared his thoughts on why his particular department has such strong traditions:

I've heard from other departments that [hazing probationers] is not really a thing. I guess with [this fire department] being kind of one of the oldest and really like ingrained in old-school traditions, I think that's mostly relevant at our department.

Derek’s comment suggests traditions may not be the same across all fire departments, as they may be different, or not exist at all, in other fire departments.

Overall, participants’ comments illustrated how firefighter culture is steeped in tradition, and how those traditions still carry on today. Their discussions highlighted some benefits to traditions, such as the traditional hierarchy creating a place for everyone, but overall, it appeared that there were more costs than benefits. The discussion’s demonstrated how the traditions can prevent firefighters from pursuing educational advancements that may have the appearance of going against the grain of traditional seniority, how traditions put female firefighters at a disadvantage, and how they can create negative actions and attitudes towards probationers. These hindrances no doubt have an impact on the functioning of the fire service and the way that firefighters interact with each other.

4.1.2. “Strong brotherhood and sisterhood”: Sense of ‘family’

A prominent theme that emerged from the participant interviews was that firefighter culture entailed a strong feeling of connectedness, which some participants comparing it to a sense of family. Derek, Kevin and Taylor explicitly discussed the sense of connection as being like a family, and their coworkers being like brothers and sisters. All participants appeared very sincere in their love for the brother and sisterhood that their fire department represents to them. While Dragon discussed his feelings of connection, his discussions was about feelings of support from fellow firefighters, and collegial friendships. The comments by Dragon suggest that while although there is a sense of togetherness, not all firefighters relate that sense of togetherness to a sense of family. The levels of distinction within sense of family are discussed throughout this section.

For Derek, Kevin, Taylor and Dragon, a sense of connection and family was the first thing they spoke of when asked about firefighter culture and was the topic they spoke on the longest. Their sense of family appears to be comprised of shared connection, sibling-like relationships, supporting each other, genuine care for one another and spending time together both inside and outside of the firehall. Despite this, it seems this idea of family is not as unambiguous as it at first appears to be. The nuances of this sense of family will be discussed throughout this section.

When I asked Derek about firefighter culture, he explained how he thinks of it as a family culture. He further explained this by referring to the amount of time he and his co-workers spend together and the shared activities they engage in. He said:

We work together for 24 hours, where you operate more like a family. Like we cook our meals together, go on calls together, things like that. So I think it's more like a family oriented culture.

Here Derek describes how the firehall functions in a similar manner as a family home, as there is a group of individuals spending long periods of time together in the same space and engaging in daily activities together. When asked about his thoughts on the family culture, Derek said:

I do like the family aspect. I mean, everybody's pretty close, especially your particular crew members.

In this quote, Derek expresses how he values the sense of being a part of this family, and the closeness he feels with his crew members, which are the individuals who he works with at his specific fire hall. This poses the question of whether the entire fire department is a family, or if there are multiple families of crew members within the department. Especially in a larger department such as this one, there are perhaps some members who have never met one another, which raises the question of how one defines how wide the sense of family expands. Like Derek, Kevin also mentioned the value of being a part of the family.

I think we have a pretty strong brotherhood and sisterhood in our job now. Sorry, we've had that forever. And that's one of the things I like the most. If you ever need any help, if something goes wrong, you just got to make a couple phone calls and the next thing you know you're going to have a whole pile of people there to help you out.

Kevin expanded on Derek's sense of the family, mentioning how he could count on his co-workers if he ever needed help, demonstrating that the sibling-like relationships with co-workers extend beyond the firehall, and into all aspects of his life. Taylor agreed with Kevin's comment about the sense of brother and sisterhood within the firefighter family. She spoke about sense of family more than any other participant. Like Kevin, Taylor discussed how the brotherhood and sisterhood creates a space to support each other:

You become a part of this culture where all the sudden you have this massive extension of like brothers and sisters, if you will. There are a lot of people if you choose to lean on, that are fantastic to lean on. You have to choose to ask for help and you have to choose to create these relationships with people, but there's just like a plethora of people willing to help and be a part of your process on the job. So, there is definitely this feeling of support, and like you're being welcomed into this family.

Again, we see the sibling-like description of the co-worker relationship. Taylor discusses the support that the sense of family provides, although, unlike Kevin, her discussion of support seems to be specific to on the job. Another interesting note about Taylor's discussion is her statement of needing to choose to ask for help, which suggests that the fire family will only help if someone reaches out. However, as seen in Kevin's comment, it appears that when a firefighter does reach out for help, many members of the firefighter family, or as Kevin says, "a whole pile of people", will respond to that call for help. Taylor's comments also highlight how sibling-like relationships do not just occur when someone enters the fire service, but that individuals need to make an effort to

create the connections, However, despite this comment, Taylor spoke highly of the sense of family and highlighted how beneficial the relationships it creates are. She stated:

Being able to create relationships at work where you can confide in certain people if you're having a hard time, or maybe even share success with. I do believe that the fire culture enables those relationships.

Taylor highlights how this sense of family is created by firefighter culture, which perhaps connects to Derek's comments about how the fire services is structured around spending 24 hours together with a particular crew and engaging in all activities in those 24 hours together. The significant amount of time spent together helps to foster deeper connections and relationships. Like Taylor, Kevin highlights how he believes the sense of family is unique to firefighter culture. He stated:

I don't necessarily think you'd see that in other industries. I can't speak for other industries, but I do have friends that work in other places, and I know that they don't have this. This is totally different.

Like Taylor, Dragon also discussed the benefits of being a part of this family, such as feeling cared for and supported by coworkers. He stated:

Everyone actually sincerely cares about your well-being.

He furthered this comment by telling me a story about how his crew supported him when his grandmother died. He stated:

About a year ago on the job, my grandma died before going to work. And then just seeing how my crew responded to that, and how they helped me out. And they said, go home, take the day off. And instantly it was just very gratifying, you know, like how they responded to me.

Dragon's statement highlights how he felt a genuine care from his co-workers. His story is reflective of Taylor's sentiments about being able to confide in co-workers during hard times. His story also demonstrated that although Dragon did not ask for support, it was given to him, which opposes Taylor's view of having to ask for help.

Two participants mentioned how they spend time with colleagues both during and outside of work, conveying how they have created strong friendships with co-workers. For example, Kevin stated:

We do so much with firefighters, we do things off the job, we do things on the job. We play sports off the job. So there's a lot of time spent, whether it's working or not working, with other firefighters.

Kevin further went on to say:

I do a lot of sports activities with guys off the job, and I also hang around with guys off the job as well, more so than I do with friends of mine from high school.

Derek expressed a similar sentiment to Kevin regarding spending time with crew members on his days off. He stated:

I made a lot of friendships through work. So on the days off, I have a tendency to get together with colleagues.

Both Kevin's and Derek's comments demonstrate how the sense of family that is fostered within firefighter culture can lead to the development of genuine friendships and connections that extend outside of the fire hall. This indicates that for some firefighters, friendship formation is also an important part of firefighter culture.

Overall, a sense of family appears to be a vital aspect of firefighter culture. For some participants, the family only existed within the fire hall, for some it extended into daily life, and for some the fire family became the individuals they spent most of their time with. This demonstrates how there are several nuances in this idea of family, more of which are further discussed in the subsequent section.

***“Trials and tribulations”:* Earning a spot in the ‘family’**

A sub-theme that emerged within the theme of sense of family was having to earn your way in. It was made clear by several participants that being hired by the fire department does not mean you are automatically welcomed into the firefighter family. There is a process of putting in time and effort in order to become accepted. The process of earning your way in seemed to be particularly heightened during the initial twelve-month probationary period. Recall in section 4.1.1 how Derek discussed the potential bullying and hazing that probationers have to endure.

Having to earn one's way in seems counterintuitive to the notion of family. A family, at least ideally, welcomes and accepts new members unconditionally. However, the firefighter family is one that has a rigorous acceptance process, which brings into

question if the concept of “family” accurately captures the connections among firefighters. It seems that the construct of the “firefighter family” is perhaps more nuanced than the traditional definition of family. This was both implied and explicitly stated by participants. It is interesting to note that it was again the three most junior firefighters who discussed the process of having to earn one’s way into the family. While one of the more senior firefighters, Cole, also discussed this process, it was only to explain the reasoning behind the probationary period and how it is justified, as we will see in his comments later in this section. The other two more senior firefighters, Daniel and Kevin, make no reference to probation or having to earn a spot in the family. Perhaps this is due to them not wanting to share with me in the interviews, or due to them being so far removed, in terms of years, from the experience of going through the probationary period. The three more junior firefighters highlighted the process of probation, and how it is tied to acceptance into the family.

When discussing the feeling of family, Taylor made reference to the time it takes before one feels a part of it. She stated:

Fire culture provides, in many ways a feeling of family. So, all of a sudden you have been welcomed, or, you know, it takes a little bit of time.

Taylor’s comment about being welcomed, and then correcting herself to acknowledge that it takes time to be accepted into the family may be indicative of how normalized the probation process is in the fire department. Dragon also made reference to the idea of earning your way into the family when he stated:

After probation, that’s when I kind of realized that the culture is a brotherhood and a sisterhood.

His statement demonstrates how he felt something shift between himself and his colleagues once his probation was over. It appears that during probation, Dragon was unaware of the sense of family that the fire service provides. He went on to explain how probation works and commented on how the timeline of being welcomed into the family seems to align with the ending of probation.

But once you pass that second six, there’s a probationary exam. And you’re gradually accepted into the team with open arms. And then that to me was when I kind of realized that the culture is a brotherhood and a sisterhood, once you kind of passed and kind of prove yourself.

His comments highlight the steps that need to be taken to be invited into the family. Derek also agreed with the idea of it taking time to be accepted. Interestingly, he used the exact wording as Dragon when he discussed needing to “prove yourself” to be accepted into the family. He said:

You don't get to be involved in that team or family environment until you've gone through the trials and tribulations of proving yourself as a firefighter and on a personal level as well.

Derek's wording struck me, as it suggests how being on probation can be a time during which one feels excluded, as they “don't get to be involved” in the family feeling. This notion of being excluded from the family was also found in both Taylor's and Dragon's comments when Taylor discussed the time it takes to be a part of the family and in Dragon's reference to not being aware of the sense of family until after he had finished his probation. Furthermore, Derek's mention of having to prove oneself “on a personal level” was also seen in other comments by Dragon. Dragon talked about how he feels he is accepted in the family, but that he has worked hard to get there. He stated:

I do feel like I am respected and taken care of, but at the same time I do work my ass off.

This comment demonstrates the personal effort that is needed to not only be welcomed into the family, but it also suggests that once in the family, one must continuously work and prove that they are worthy of being there. Dragon went on to highlight the type of attitude that is needed to make the fire service enjoyable to work at. He said:

If you work hard and you are a kind person, typically it's going to be a fun place to be.

Here we see two examples of what it means to prove yourself on a personal level, examples that convey the values of the firefighter family. Individuals who do not hold these qualities would likely have a more difficult time finding acceptance within the firefighter family.

Despite having to earn a spot in the family, Dragon explained how not being immediately accepted into the family does not mean fellow firefighters won't look out for you. He stated:

But even before [we finish probation] we kind of feel accepted, they do accept you. They will take care of you and make sure you're safe.

His comment shows that there may not be a sense of fully belonging to the family during probation, nor is there a sense of being completely on one's own. While colleagues may not fully embrace those on probation, at a minimum they do keep them safe. At this level, making sure junior firefighters are safe appears to be more of a concern for their physical well-being, rather than a demonstration of acceptance in the family.

After discussing the probation period, both Derek and Dragon quickly moved on to explain why this process is necessary. Dragon focused on the physical risks of the job and the need to ensure that everyone can be counted on when he said:

Because the big part of it is, they don't know who you are, and at the end of the day they have family and friends too. Right. It's just like, how would [name] react in an emergency situation? You know, I think part of it is also for their own safety too, which is kind of a weird example, but it's true, because they want to go home today. So how you react and how they train you is a big part of it.

In other words, everyone needs to prove themselves, as the job itself involves life and death situations, and everyone wants to leave work alive. Perhaps this process of earning acceptance is to ensure that firefighters are capable of handling the stresses of the job and can be relied on by their crew members to be there for them if needed. Similar to Dragon, Derek also commented on why it is important to prove oneself before being accepted. When discussing going through the process of probation he stated:

It's like, can you fit in in this work environment? Because it is a unique environment.

He furthered by saying:

It forces you to show that you have a good work ethic, you know, you're willing to work well with others and you're going to go the extra mile to make sure that your skills are up to par.

Derek, like Dragon, discusses the necessity of having certain skills and traits, such as a willingness to "go the extra mile". This may in part be due to the necessity of these skills for the crew to function safely and efficiently and for everyone to go home safely, and alive. Similar to Dragon and Derek, Cole also commented on why this process is necessary:

At times on probation, you can feel like everybody's against you, but they just want you to learn your job and be ready to go for next time. So they

are hard on you. But yeah, it's out of them trying to teach what you need to do. So, yeah, it's all warranted.

As Dragon and Derek did, Cole highlights the need for probationers to have the necessary skills to be able to keep everyone safe.

Overall, having to earn a spot in the family was discussed by four participants and earning a spot appeared to correlate with finishing the probationary period. While Derek, Dragon and Cole discussed the justification for this process, Derek's comments about hazing during the probationary period in section 4.1.1 highlighted the negative effects that this process can have on some individuals. Derek's story highlights the stark contrast between the sense of being embraced by the firefighter family, and the rigorous and potentially damaging process firefighters need to endure in order to be accepted into the family. One may first have to undergo bullying, hazing, and other negative treatment that can be detrimental to even the most confident of individuals. This section highlights that for probationers, the sense of being part of a family is something that has to be earned. Probationers have to prove themselves personally and professionally, gain the acceptance of their crew, attend stressful emergency scenes, and potentially tolerate bullying and hazing in order to demonstrate that they are worthy of a coveted position in the firefighter family.

“Follow suit”: The importance of fitting in

An important sub-theme within the theme of earning a spot in the family related to the need to fit in with existing firefighter culture, and not stand out as being different or unique. This sub-theme highlights one way in which firefighter culture is maintained, as in order to be accepted into the culture, individuals must first prove that they fit into the culture, which in turn continues to maintain the status quo. This sub-theme was discussed by Taylor, Daniel, and Dragon.

Taylor was the participant who most openly discussed the pressure to fit in. She first discussed the idea of needing to assimilate when she said:

It's not necessarily encouraged for you to stand out in any way or be slightly different.

She then expanded:

There tends to have been a history of feeling like you just want to fit in. And maybe that doesn't allow for people to necessarily always be their authentic selves.

She furthered this by saying:

I think still in the fire culture, there's a bit of a front put on sometimes, And that is, by all means, not everyone, that's a generalized statement. But I think there's still a large number of people that show up with that, like layer of protection on at work.

Taylor's comments highlight how in the current firefighter culture there is a pressure for individuals to fit in, even if that means not presenting as their true selves and having to put on a metaphorical armor to come in to work. This relates to Dragon's comments in section 4.1.1 about wanting to pursue his master's degree but being worried of what others would think if he did, which demonstrates his hesitancy to stand out among the group.

Taylor discussed the detrimental results of having to change oneself to fit in when she said:

The [firefighter] culture seems to have created something a bit closed off. I don't want to keep over using the word culture but like there's parts of it that seem kind of closed, like if you choose to speak out or you maybe reach out or share something with the wrong person, there's a lot of stories about it not going well for people and a concern of mine is that - that is why a lot of people don't reach out and they just kind of like, follow suit.

Taylor's comments highlight how the fear of standing out not only prevents individuals from being themselves but also suggests how it can inhibit firefighters from accessing mental health services. When Taylor discusses the culture being closed and preventing individuals from reaching out, she states how it is the fear of being judged, or as she says, "it not going well", which causes firefighters to keep things to themselves and "follow suit". I interpret this to mean that she believes firefighter culture discourages individuals from discussing their mental health concerns due to a fear of how it will be perceived, and therefore firefighters do not share mental health concerns and do not feel comfortable accessing mental health services. Her comment expresses how the culture of not discussing mental health concerns sustains itself. That is, there is a culture of not asking for help, which is perpetuated by stories of firefighters who faced negative consequences from colleagues when they did reach out. Therefore, firefighters avoid

asking for help due to the fear of negative peer reactions and stigma, and thus the culture of not discussing mental health concerns is maintained. Conforming to the culture of not discussing mental health concerns is necessary for the continuation of the culture. As Taylor puts it, firefighters just “follow suit” in not discussing mental health issues. Furthermore, recall section 4.1.2, where Taylor highlighted how individuals need to ask for help and need to choose to create relationships. Taken together with her comment above demonstrates the importance of finding safe individuals to create relationships with, as firefighters don’t want to share with the “wrong” person. She continued her concern about sharing with the wrong person:

There's that fear of being judged or having an experience that. . . I went to a call before where I'm just like, “nope, that was so gross, that was the worst” and somebody else was just like, “wow, that was nothing”. And you're just like, I'm going to see that now for the next four days in my mind. Whereas to somebody else, it's nothing.

Here, Taylor gives an account of sharing her experience of seeing something on a call that she felt was disturbing and having her experience minimized by the person she shared with.

Like Taylor, Dragon also discussed the notion of trying not to stand out when he told me:

I'm quiet and don't talk back. So typically, I do those things, and things will typically go well.

Dragon’s comment demonstrates how his manner helps him to fit in highlighting that fitting into the firefighter family may be easier for some people than others, due to their personality traits. This was also seen in Dragon’s comments in the previous section, about being kind and hardworking, and again shows how the culture is perpetuated, as those with the traits which fit the culture are accepted, and those with traits that do not fit the culture are not accepted. Daniel also discussed different personalities and highlighted how some individuals may not be a good fit for firefighter culture. Daniel said:

If people were quite quiet and reserved, they might not be as comfortable as others, you know, sharing in that specific group setting ... in that sort of alpha, predominantly male culture.

This at first appears to be in opposition to Dragon’s comment about how being quiet helps him fit in. However, it perhaps highlights the nuances in firefighter culture, as

silence is good when someone knows not to talk back, but silence is bad if it is due to feeling uncomfortable in the culture. This also may relate to the different ranks that Daniel and Dragon occupy. As a more junior firefighter, being quiet and reserved may be beneficial to Dragon, while Daniel, being a senior firefighter, sees the benefit of being a more outgoing individual.

Taylor also discussed how certain personalities may have a more difficult time fitting into firefighter culture, and the benefits of having a more dominant personality. She discussed the fear of being seen as soft when she stated:

Something very common would be, like you don't ever want to be referred to as soft. So, like whatever social things happened where a certain group of people might like refer to somebody else as that, you don't want to be that person, you don't want to be referred to as that.

She continued this thought by discussing how more dominant personalities function in the fire family, which is similar to Daniel's comments. In describing who would refer to others as "soft", Taylor said:

That would be kind of like a stronger personality or like a more dominant personality or like an A-type personality speaking of somebody illy.

When I enquired further about why she thinks firefighters would call someone soft she said:

My brief experience over the few years is that there still tends to be a little bit of this like hierarchy, where certain individuals want to make sure that they come off a certain way. So they are like - almost a tier system if you think about it. It's like in a high school sports team or, kind of, when we're teenagers and we want to be part of the cool club. There tends to still be that presence that I have personally observed in the fire culture.

Taylor's comments perhaps give an example of Daniel's discussion of a more reserved person having difficulty fitting in to the culture. She demonstrates how a "more dominant personality", or as Daniel described it, an "alpha male", would speak poorly about someone who is "soft", perhaps to achieve or maintain a higher status in the social "hierarchy". When I asked Taylor if she felt this hierarchy was related to the traditional ranking structure of the fire service, she told me this was different. These comments demonstrate the valuing within the fire service of an extroverted, type A, alpha personality, and suggest that perhaps other personality types will have a more difficult time fitting in and becoming a member of the family.

Another example of how firefighters have a fear of not fitting in is seen in Dragon's discussion of wanting to obtain his master's degree. As noted in section 4.1.1, Dragon told me that although he was interested in pursuing higher education, he was concerned that doing so would prevent him from fitting in at the fire hall. Dragon felt nervous about how his coworkers would perceive this. He stated:

I want to get my master's in public safety. But the thing is like being such a junior, a young firefighter, I don't know how that will be perceived amongst more senior firefighters, if that makes sense. Right? Like "is [Dragon] trying to jump ship"? But it's just, I'm kind of a nerd that way. I like learning. I just don't even know how that will be perceived, you know?

From Dragon's statement, it is clear he values and enjoys learning, but he may not pursue the degree he is interested in due to concern that his coworkers will view it negatively. The decision to pursue a master's degree as a more junior firefighter threatens the traditional structure of firefighter culture, therefore Dragon does not want to pursue the degree, in turn maintaining the current parameters of junior firefighters. He furthered this discussion by saying how he would not tell his coworkers if he did pursue higher education. He went on to say:

You just don't know how it would be perceived. If I did it now, I probably would keep it a secret between you and I, but I wouldn't lie about it, but it's kind of keep it down low, right?

In this part of Dragon's story, he seems to have a conflict between keeping his desire for more education a secret, but also not wanting to lie about it. The tension between being his authentic self at work and wanting to fit in can be seen in his story. It also connects to Taylor's comments earlier in this section about how some firefighters feel they must put on a "front". Dragon says he would not tell anyone about his master's degree, which suggests he would present himself in a way that isn't necessarily true in order to maintain acceptance from his peers.

These discussions by participants highlight how there is a feeling of needing to fit in in order to be accepted into the family. This appears to be easier for some people than others, which is perhaps how firefighter culture maintains itself, as individuals who do not fit in, are not accepted into the fire family and therefore do not continue in the fire services. Fitting in also appears to come with detriments such as remaining silent in

order to appear compliant, creating a fear of asking for help, and not wanting to pursue career development as that may label someone as different.

4.1.3. “A little bit of a secret”: Hesitation to share

The hesitation to share with individuals outside of the firefighter culture clearly emerged in my conversations with the participants. It was seen in their hesitation to share with me during the interview, their desire to protect spouses from secondary trauma, as well as a their wanting to only connect with other firefighters.

“Inside those fire hall doors”: Hesitation to share in interviews

The first way I noticed a hesitation to share outside of firefighter culture was through my participants’ hesitation to share with me during the interviews. This was manifested in participants suggesting I ask their spouses my questions instead of them, as well as responding to my inquiry about help-seeking tendencies with statements indicating that they do not want help from outsiders. Taylor demonstrates the history of keeping what goes on in firefighter culture within the fire group when she stated:

It's like fire culture has been kept a little bit of a secret for quite a long time. There's probably a lot of people that wouldn't really appreciate things I've shared [with you].

I interpret this statement to indicate that the closed culture is maintained by firefighters pressuring one another to keep things within the group. Derek also commented on the sense of a closed group, and the deliberate effort to not share with individuals who are outside of firefighter culture. When asked about firefighter culture, Derek commented:

I think a lot of guys make an effort to kind of keep things inside those fire hall doors.

Derek’s comment aligns with Taylor’s comment that firefighters would not be happy that she shared information with me, as someone outside of the firefighter culture.

“A really valuable resource”: Re-direction to spouses

When asked about firefighter culture two participants suggested that rather than talk to firefighters I should talk to their spouses. For example, when discussing how to

define firefighter culture, Taylor suggested that in order to understand it someone would have to “get on the inside” and said:

I think a really valuable resource would actually be spouses.

Although Taylor herself was quite open in her answers to my questions, her suggestion to talk to spouses was connected to her knowing that other firefighters would not be as open as she is.

Kevin echoed this sentiment of needing to be on the inside to understand firefighters and that perhaps spouses would have that information. When discussing firefighter culture, he said:

I think you could probably ask a lot of spouses their thoughts on firefighter culture, and you could probably get a lot of insight from the outside looking in. Honestly, I think that might be a really, really good way for somebody to study about that.

Kevin further stated:

I think you might be able to get some good insight from some spouses, girlfriends, and boyfriends, depending on who you're talking to. I think that might give you some better insight.

In making these comments, Kevin demonstrates a hesitation to share by deflecting my question and stating that spouses would be a better source of information. After this statement, and pausing to think for a moment Kevin expanded on this idea when he stated:

We know as firefighters what we do and how we act and everything else, but I wonder what spouses would have to say.

Here Kevin expressed that he has the knowledge to answer my question about fire culture but by re-directing to spouses indicated his reluctance to share with me.

“Maybe I’ll talk to somebody”: A hesitation to ‘outsider’ help

Another way the hesitation to share during interviews emerged was when I asked participants about their help-seeking tendencies, two participants discussed not needing help from outsiders, which I interpreted as indicating a reluctance to share with those outside the fire service.

When I asked about previous counselling experiences, Cole discussed how he did not find it helpful and how he felt he wasn't provided with any new information that he didn't already know. He went on to say:

I don't know, I can figure my shit out for the most part, usually, I feel. But until that time I can't, then maybe I'll talk to somebody.

In this quote, Cole demonstrates a tension in his belief that he can manage his mental health on his own, and the reality that he can only figure it out "for the most part", suggesting that there have been times where he has been unable to do so. His quote demonstrates his feeling that even if he cannot manage his mental health on his own, sharing with others outside the fire service is still a "maybe". This demonstrates a strong hesitancy to share with someone outside of firefighter culture for Cole.

Daniel had a similar story of being able to handle things by himself. However, Daniel seemed to be aware that he held this notion and that keeping things to himself was perhaps not beneficial. He said:

Here's one thing I think I probably have in common with a lot of people is the 'I don't have a problem, I can fix anything' mentality and that's a wrong way to approach some of the stuff that we deal with.

His comment demonstrates how there are "a lot" of firefighter's who hold this same mentality. This is perhaps due to the culture of not discussing mental health issues in the fire service as seen in section 4.1.2. Firefighters want to uphold this culture, and therefore tell themselves that they do not have a problem, and do not need to reach out for help. It also may be connected to the themes of being judged by peers, and labeled as soft for discussing mental health, as was also discussed in 4.1.2. Daniel continued by saying:

You know, going home and saying, "I don't have a problem", but then yelling at my family is not productive.

After telling me this, he laughed. Perhaps the laugh was a recognition of his paradoxical statement, or perhaps a demonstration of a moment of discomfort. Daniel's quote demonstrates the paradoxical nature of believing that one does not have a problem, while also recognizing the negative effects appearing in his relationship. Daniel was aware that he held the belief that he does not "have a problem", which he acknowledged

is a widely held view, and was also aware of the effects of holding this view. Despite this awareness, Daniel still did not appear to access other help, such as counselling.

Both Cole and Daniel demonstrated the mentality of not wanting to access help from outsiders, which is perhaps reflective of a culture that discourages, and sometimes outright shames, discussions of mental health struggles. Recall Taylor's discussion in the section "Follow suit", where she discussed how the closed nature of firefighter culture prevents individuals from reaching out for mental health support. This highlights the stigma that is attached to mental health, and help-seeking in the fire service.

"Some things are not worth telling": Protecting spouses

Another sub-theme related to a hesitation to share was desire to protect spouses. A large aspect of firefighters' hesitancy to share with individuals outside of firefighter culture stemmed from their desire to protect those individuals from experiencing secondary trauma. This was especially the case when it came to spouses. Four participants, Taylor, Cole, Kevin and Daniel, discussed the idea of sharing with their spouses. The discussions of sharing with spouses emerged when discussing help-seeking tendencies. Interestingly, the three more senior firefighters, Cole, Kevin and Daniel also shared their fears of burdening or traumatizing their spouses. They also discussed what, and how much, they share with their spouses. When talking with Kevin about who he confides in, Kevin discussed sharing only parts of his shift with his wife. He said:

I got a spouse at home, and I can talk to her about a lot, but there are certain things that I wouldn't tell my wife, because it's not fair to her. Not because I don't think she can handle or she wouldn't want to hear it, there are just some things not worth telling because you don't want to give somebody else secondary PTSD just by something you said. So I think you have to be very careful right. But I'm lucky, I can go home and talk to her about my days and stuff for sharing calls that I go on if they're not too crazy, and if they get crazy then no [I wouldn't share with her]. That's when I talked to my friends that are on the job. I'll talk to them about that.

Both Daniel and Cole had similar stories to Kevin about sharing with their spouses. Cole said:

If I had talked to my wife - I don't open up everything. I'll talk about stuff, but I won't go into detail because I wouldn't want to, I don't know, that's

not her - She doesn't need to wear that kind of stuff, that burden. So I can tell her how I feel and stuff, but I would never go into detail about calls.

Cole's comment illustrates how he feels that it is not his wife's responsibility to carry the burden of knowing the details about calls he attends. Like Kevin, Cole discusses how he will tell his wife about certain things, such as his feelings, but not explicit details of calls. Like Cole and Kevin, Daniel discussed only sharing some things with his spouse. When asked if there are individuals he confides in, he said:

I would say coworkers first, spouse, sort of second. I don't like putting too much on my spouse because some of the stuff is pretty heavy and it's not necessarily fair because they're not used to dealing with it.

He expanded on this by explaining how sharing with a spouse can add stress to the relationship. He said:

It's just one extra thing that, you know, you're adding onto your relationship.

Daniel, Cole, and Kevin's comments again demonstrate how firefighters want to keep information within the firefighter culture, and not share with those on the outside. In this case, keeping information within firefighter culture is a way to protect outsiders from carrying the burden of their stories and a way to protect relationships.

Taylor also discussed sharing with her spouse, but unlike Kevin, Cole and Daniel, she highlighted how being in a similar service with her partner creates a different sharing dynamic. When asked about sharing with her partner, Taylor stated:

I'm fortunate to have a partner who is part of a similar, same service.

Taylor's spouse is on the inside of firefighter culture, and therefore she can share the protected information with them.

Participants' hesitancy in sharing with their partners (unless their partners worked in a similar service), out of worry of burdening their spouse or giving them secondary trauma suggests that the closed nature of the firefighter family can serve as a protective factor for spouses.

“Those guys actually get it”: Connection through shared experience

At the same time as a hesitation to share outside of the firefighter culture, participants also demonstrated a willingness to share within the firefighter culture, which appeared to be due to their shared experiences. There was consensus among all participants that there was a feeling of connection to other firefighters as they all had a sense of shared experiences.

When talking to Taylor, she explained how firefighter culture creates a feeling of connectedness to shared experiences. She said:

There's something about fire culture that you share with other people who have been exposed to it.

Taylor's comment highlights the foundation for the sense of family, a connection through common experiences of firefighter culture. Several other participants discussed this connection, and the different aspects of firefighter culture that create it. For example, Cole told me how he feels comfortable talking to his crew members due to the shared experience of calls. He said:

If it's a real shitty call, you all went to it. You're all in it together, really. So you can talk about certain things.

Both Taylor's and Cole's statements highlight how going through the same experience brings people together and facilitates open discussion. It is interesting to think about Cole's statement about calls bringing firefighters together in relation to Taylor's story as told in section "Follow suit". Cole's experience is that calls bring firefighters together, while Taylor's comment highlighted how she shared something with a crew member who had been on the same call, and it wasn't received well. This perhaps highlights a tension between a shared sense of connection, and a fear of not fitting in. Despite Taylor's previous story, she also told me she would speak to a co-worker if she is having a difficult day at work. When asked who she confides in Taylor said:

I definitely would speak to a co-worker, I feel quite confident and quite comfortable with that.

Like Taylor and Cole, Daniel discussed how shared experiences with fellow firefighters create an understanding among them. Daniel told me:

You would rather share with your coworkers because they've experienced it and been through it all and they were there, and they can relate to it a lot better.

Dragon also discussed sharing with fellow firefighters. He discussed how individuals in his life who are not in the fire service do not have the same sense of understanding. He told me:

Talking to my girlfriend, my parents, [they] don't understand what the job is, but those guys actually get it.

Kevin shared similar thoughts to Dragon. When discussing who he talks to when he has been on a difficult call, he told me he would only share his thoughts with fellow firefighters. He said:

That's when I talked to my friends that are on the job. I'll talk to them about that....We have each other, which we've been using for a long time, a huge benefit for us is we have so many guys that we can talk to.

Furthering this, Kevin discussed confiding in one another:

We call it like peer counselling, almost you know you're just talking to your friends and going out for a beer and having a chat about what happened or whatever.

It is interesting to note that Kevin tells me they call it peer counselling, which highlights that perhaps firefighter's see the benefit in counselling, but still want to share with someone inside the culture.

Like the previous participants, Derek also discussed this shared sense of experience. He highlighted how he feels even more connected to his fire classmates since they had gone through the training process together. He goes on to say:

I think I'm able to share how I'm feeling with my classmates. Because we've all been hired together. We've all gone through the same kind of, trials and tribulations. And I believe there's a lot of trust there. So definitely at that level, you can discuss how you're feeling with your classmates and people you can trust.

The theme of shared experience also appeared to extend beyond one's immediate co-workers, to perhaps include firefighters as a whole. Derek discussed sharing with firefighters from different departments, suggesting that the connection is not limited to a firefighters' specific department but instead is an occupationally wide

connection. When discussing who he shares with when he is having a difficult day, Derek said:

I would talk about things that happened at work with like fellow firefighters, with firefighters [from my department] or a different department, but, yeah, other firefighters.

What is different about Derek's comment from those of others is that he discusses how he feels comfortable talking with firefighters from other departments. It is important to note that four of the six participants worked at other departments prior to joining their present department, while two participants had only worked at their present department. Derek had worked at another department before, which may have influenced his willingness to share with firefighters outside of his current department.

This discussion of connectedness to fellow firefighters by all participants demonstrates how shared experiences can create space for firefighters to share with one another. It also re-affirmed the hesitation to share with those outside of firefighter culture, as participants discussed how it can be easier to share with individuals on the inside of firefighter culture, over individuals who are on the outside.

“Shitty calls”: Critical incident stress management

The connection through shared experience also emerged through a discussion of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program. When discussing who participants would reach out to if they needed to talk, three participants, Dragon, Cole, and Kevin, spoke about the CISM team. Through the interviews, I learned that the CISM team is comprised of firefighters from the department who have had specific training in critical incident stress management. It is a peer-based program, in which members who debrief with firefighters after a critical incident are firefighters themselves. This shared connection again appeared to be important to firefighters, and the three participants who spoke about the program highlighted the strengths of the program.

Dragon discussed how he has been a part of a few CISM discussions and how he finds them to be good. He told me:

If it's like a fatality or the call is kind of graphic in nature, they will take that rig out of service and do a CISM citizen discussion. That's more just immediately after, and I've done a couple of those things, not many, but a couple, and typically they're good.

The term “rig” refers to the specific firetruck and the team of firefighters who ride in that truck. Dragon is highlighting how the truck will be taken out of service, meaning they cannot be called out to an emergency until after the CISM debriefing is complete.

Cole described the CISM process as follows:

This day and age, like when there's any shitty calls, they'll gather everybody together and you go through a critical incident stress management, there's a CISM team and they come, everybody talks about what they did, what they saw, what they think.

While Dragon and Cole spoke about the process of CISM and why the debriefings happen, Kevin elaborated on the benefits of the CISM team in the following way:

They are trained to come and just basically recognize when there's an issue. Nobody on the team is a medical professional at all. We're just there to recognize, when something's different and that's where peer counselling comes in because we know each other, you know somebody different than they used to be. Whereas when you walk in to speak to a medical professional, they only know what we tell them, right. So, sometimes it's nice to have the peer counselling.

Kevin points out that because the CISM team and the firefighters know one another, the team is able to sense if someone is not doing well. In other words, the closeness that comes from being part of the firefighter family allows members of the CISM team to recognize if someone is not themselves and is struggling. Kevin's comments, while highlighting a benefit of the program, also reinforce the narrative that individuals outside of firefighter culture do not understand those who are inside firefighter culture.

Overall, the participants discussions of CISM highlight how firefighters appreciate the shared connections and understanding that inherently come with the CISM discussions, as they are run by fellow firefighters.

4.1.4. “That was actually really gross”: The use of dark humor

Another theme that was very salient in firefighter culture is the use of dark humor. Five of six participants explicitly discussed the use of dark humor in firefighter culture. Dark humor is often characterized by having morbid, grotesque, content which is meant to make light of serious and unpleasant situations. Dark humor may be seen as

problematic or rude to some individuals. When asked about firefighter culture, participants in general first spoke of a sense of family, and then spoke of dark humor.

Participants highlighted several reasons and benefits for the use of dark humor. For example, Dragon discussed the purpose of dark humor, and how it can act as a way for firefighters to desensitize themselves to exposures on the job. Dragon told me:

We see bodies unfortunately on a regular basis. So, you kind of use gallows humor, respectfully, to desensitize yourself to those situations.

Firefighters see extreme events on a daily, perhaps even hourly basis. As Dragon says, firefighters are continuously exposed to dead bodies, which is an extreme event that becomes normalized to firefighters. Dark humor is used to “desensitize” themselves, as Dragon says. Cole also discussed the purpose of dark humor. His discussion with me highlighted how dark humor can be used as a way to cope with calls they have been on. He stated:

People joke about stuff that they're uncomfortable with sometimes.

I interpret this statement by Cole to mean that dark humor functions as a way to process difficult calls, as joking about traumatic incidents can help to distance oneself from the awfulness of the situation. Derek discussed how dark humor can function. He stated:

People process the things that we see differently, and I would definitely agree that dark humor helps the kind of decompression, and I guess normalize the situation. It's just it's an attempt to lighten up the mood immediately after you're exposed to something like that.

Derek highlights several benefits of dark humor. First, he points out how dark humor is used as a way to process a challenging call. He also discusses how the humor helps to “normalize” abnormal situations, which is similar to Dragon’s statement of dark humor helping to desensitize. Derek also discusses how dark humor is used to “lighten up the mood” after a difficult call.

Like Derek, Taylor also mentioned how dark humor can be used to lighten up a workday. She stated:

I think that there's some common conversation about how to deal with traumatic things we witness at work. There's a dark humor that lightens it, I guess if you will. I've personally experienced that, I've heard those

things and I've also used that type of humor. I personally think within reason it's actually a nice piece to have access to at work.

She expanded on this further when she said:

When that type of humor is being used, it's to brush something off. Like that was actually really gross and I just need to say something about it. Make an inappropriate joke in a safe space and move on.

Taylor's comment elaborates on how dark humor is used as a way to cope with difficult calls. There is not often a lot of time in-between calls for firefighters to decompress and re-set, which is why it is important to have an accessible protective strategy, such as dark humor, to help them get through their shift.

Another function of dark humor appeared to be a way to connect with each other. Daniel discussed how dark humor can be a way to communicate with co-workers. He stated:

I like that I can use dark humor and joke about scenarios that we've seen and been a part of, to help deal with that and open up the communication amongst the people I work with. Like if you just ask someone, "Hey, how are you feeling?", you'll get a one-word answer, a "fine", but if you make a joke about it and start talking about it in a more light fashion, you'll get people that are more likely to open up and have a conversation about what you just saw or experienced. So I think that's kind of cool and it's sort of accepted, it's not frowned upon.

Here, Daniel again touches on the idea of dark humor functioning as a way to lighten the mood, which invites firefighters to open up more than they might otherwise. This is an important insight as it shows how dark humor is a connective strategy that assists firefighters in discussing difficult topics.

Lastly, although my participants expressed the value of dark humour they also conveyed concern for how it is perceived and potentially misunderstood by those outside of firefighter and first responder culture. Dragon told me a story about dark humor which was publicized to the general public. He told me:

I'm not condoning this by any means, but there is an example of two police officers at [a local] park and they were caught taking pictures of a dead body, and doing selfies, and just to the general public, it seems horrible, which it is horrible, but there's a certain element of gallows humor that the average person does not understand.

Here, Dragon suggests that although he doesn't agree with the specific actions of these first responders, individuals outside of the culture do not understand the function of this type of humor. This again reinforces the view that those on the inside of firefighter culture understand each other, while those outside the culture do not.

As seen in the comments by Dragon, it appears that dark humor is not just firefighter specific, but that it is used by first responders in general. Daniel also discussed how dark humor is used by all first responders. He stated:

I would say the emergency response industry in general probably has a similar sort of dark humor.

The consensus among participants was that dark humor is an important aspect of firefighter culture. It was highlighted that dark humor is only meant to benefit firefighters as it can be a means of desensitization, decompression, and connection, and can lighten the mood around uncomfortable and traumatic situations.

4.1.5. “We've come a long way”: A culture shift

As seen in the previous sections, firefighter culture is built on traditions and includes a strong sense of family among members, a hesitation to share with those outside of firefighter culture, a connection through shared experience, and the use dark humor as a protective strategy. However, all of the participants discussed how firefighter culture is shifting in a different direction. This culture shift was discussed in terms of a change for the better, with firefighters having a more positive outlook on mental health services and being more open to discussing mental health issues.

Daniel discussed the differences from when he started, and how there is more acceptance of mental health. He stated:

It's definitely being noticed over the 19 years. I mean, 19 years ago, you didn't talk about how you were feeling, so we've come a long way.

Kevin had a similar sentiment to Daniel, as he also discussed how the culture shift has led to more firefighters accessing mental health services. He said:

Do you know what, in the last several years, I believe, more and more people are accessing help from medical professionals.... Have we always had access to that? No. Do we have access to that now? We do, and we

have probably for the last, say five years plus. Where a real, true access to it for the last five years, before that it was there but maybe we didn't know how to use it. Now we've got quite an extensive mental health team we have looking after us.

Cole agreed with Kevin that access to services is increasing and seemed to have the same view of the timeline in which it has shifted. He said:

Now there's people we can call, and they can get us in touch with certain people. Whereas, like when I started 10 years ago, I don't think we had that. Just in the last couple of years that we had a chief of our, whatever they call it, mental health or whatever. So that's a new position that we never had anybody dedicated to it. So, now the atmosphere is changing a little bit.

Taylor also had a similar comment to Cole and Kevin about more firefighters accessing mental health services. Taylor discussed the shift she has seen in the four years she has been on the department, and how more firefighters are accessing counselling services:

It is really nice to see that in the short time that I've been a part of the fire department, there are a number of people that you hear talking about speaking to counsellors or going to therapy or their own mental health and wellness and so it seems to be trending upward. You get the odd conversation, people still kind of like bashing that type of work, but I have noticed there are people willing to like, speak up about it and normalize it, and that to me is encouraging.

Taylor's comment highlights how not only is access to mental health services becoming more available, but also that firefighters are more willing to talk about mental health. Cole had a similar sentiment to Taylor about discussing mental health more openly. He told me a story about how a co-worker talked to him about how he was feeling affected by a call. Cole said:

I was talking with another guy on our crew, and they had gone to - I wasn't working that night - and they had gone to a real crummy call where - whatever happened - and, he's like, "it was kind of in my head" and he's like, "I thought about it on my way to drive to work", because he lives in the city, he would have had to drive by that accident scene. He said, "you know, I didn't want to drive around because, I don't want it to kind of take over my mind space". He's like, "no, I drove by it, scoped out the scene, kind of played it through my head again" and stuff like that. But he's like, "I needed to do that". And I had never heard anybody really talk out loud about it like that before, it was just like, yeah, of course, don't try to suppress something, come at it straight on. I thought that was a good way of doing it.

Here Cole conveys his openness to hearing his coworker discuss topics of mental health, yet he also explicitly states he had never heard a coworker talk in that manner at work, which highlights the juxtaposition of the culture shift and prevailing norms.

Overall, all of the participants made reference to the shift that seems to be occurring in firefighter culture. Participants highlighted how access to mental health services is becoming more accessible and how some firefighters are beginning to talk about mental health more. However, Cole's story also suggested that it is not yet common to openly discuss mental health at the fire hall, indicating that there is still more shifting that needs to occur in order to normalize mental health discussions.

“Up and coming firefighters”: A new generation

It appeared that a catalyst for the shift in culture towards greater openness about mental health was the younger demographic of firefighters who are being hired. The three more junior participants, Taylor, Derek and Dragon, made this connection, while the three more senior participants, Kevin, Cole and Daniel, did not. Derek discussed his thoughts on the different generations of firefighters:

I think a lot of up and coming firefighters, and people my age, I think we're a lot more open to seeking help a lot more.

He went on to discuss the differences he notices between the younger and older generations of firefighters:

Their whole experience is completely different to mine. From what I hear, a lot of guys talk about the old days and it doesn't really mirror what I went through. So yeah, it's definitely different.

Taylor expressed a similar sentiment to Derek and discussed the gap in generational ideas. She stated:

I would say there's more and more of us that are being hired that are a younger demographic and that's just naturally the ebb and flow of things. Things 20 years ago were just different. That's the reality of it. There are a lot of things and people in place that are still from a little bit of a different time. In regard to communication and reaching out and asking for help when they need it, not everybody has caught up to that, and that's not, well, it is supported, but by no means by the entire culture.

Taylor's comment indicates that not everyone in the fire service is making this shift. In particular, she points out how the older generation of firefighters may not be embracing

it. Dragon also discussed this difference between generations. When discussing CISM discussions, he stated:

It's kind of uncomfortable. It's a bunch of seasoned firefighters and some of these firefighters, they're from a different generational time. Because a lot of these guys, like 20 years ago, this stuff didn't exist. So maybe it could be ingrained - that kind of behaviour. And it's not a bad thing, it's just what they have kind of been taught. So how do you really discuss openly when that's kind of the narrative in the background.

In this comment, Dragon is referring to the discussion of mental health when he says, "this stuff". Dragons' discomfort with speaking during the CISM debriefings seems to stem from a fear that if he discusses his mental health, senior firefighters will think less of him. His comments suggest that there is still an "ingrained behaviour" in firefighter culture of not openly discussing mental health issues with each other, particularly among senior members. He further highlights how not discussing mental health was, at least in the past, a behaviour that was "taught" in the fire service. Although Dragon suggests that this is a behaviour upheld by the older generation of firefighters, he states how it influences the atmosphere of CISM discussions. This aligns with Daniel's comment previously about how firefighters did not use to talk about how they were feeling. This demonstrates how this aspect of firefighter culture maintains itself. There is an unspoken understanding that discussing mental health concerns is not accepted, which creates an environment where individuals do not feel safe to discuss mental health issues, which perpetuates and reinforces the lack of discussion.

It is interesting that the three junior participants seem to attribute the shift in firefighter culture to the current new generation of firefighters entering the field and creating changes. However, it is unclear if this is the case. I expect that firefighter culture has changed with each new generation, not just the current one. Many participants, including the more senior firefighters, discussed how they have noticed firefighter culture shifting during their careers. It does seem to be the case, however, that the shift in attitudes toward mental health is recent and as such is still a change in progress. Recall how Daniel said that when he started, there was no discussion of mental health. Now in the present day, the culture is shifting towards a discussion of mental health, such as through the implementation of the CISM process. Recall Dragon's discussion of CISM, and how he stated "this stuff didn't exist" when senior firefighters first started. Even though the culture has now shifted to include CISM discussions, Dragon highlighted how

there is still a stigma in the background of CISM discussions about discussing mental health. Here, it is seen how the culture has shifted from not discussing mental health, to having more opportunities to discuss, but not being fully free of stigma around the topic. The comments from all participants show how the shift in firefighter culture is a slow and continuous process.

4.2. Firefighters' Perceptions of Counselling

Another important aspect of this research was to explore firefighters' current perceptions of counselling services and their willingness in to seek help from counsellors. As seen throughout section 4.1 Experiences of Firefighter Culture, there are several aspects of firefighter culture that likely influence firefighters' perceptions of counselling, such as a tradition of not discussing mental health, and a hesitation to share with those outside of the firefighter culture. I asked all participants if they had ever attended counselling, and if they had, what their experience of it was. When I inquired about perceptions of counselling, across participants the feelings expressed were mixed. Only one participant, Taylor, told me she found counselling to be helpful. One participant, Cole, told me he did not find counselling to be helpful. Derek and Kevin reported having been to counselling but did not expand on their thoughts of their counselling experience when asked. While Dragon discussed his perceptions of counselling, he did not answer if he had ever been to counselling.

Taylor was the participant who talked about experiences of counselling in greatest depth. When asked about her view of counselling she stated:

I think that other people aren't as open to the counselling world right, and I'm super open to it, I'm pro counselling.

Her comment connects back to the idea of a culture shift, as it highlights how although she is open to seeking counselling, not every firefighter is. Recall from the previous section how it appeared the more junior generation of firefighters was open to counselling, while more senior firefighters were resistant to it. Taylor went on to describe why she feels some firefighters are resistant to seeking counselling services. She stated:

I often wonder because of the [firefighter] culture, when, people are struggling, or when they don't feel like they fully understand something, or they're having a hard time with like another member, or they had a hard

call, there's a lot - There's this like fear of being judged by your peers. I personally would say that because of the culture, I think that people don't speak up and reach out the way that maybe people do in other careers, I don't know I haven't ever really had one (another career).

Here she again highlights how firefighter culture can create a barrier for individuals to connect with counsellors. Her comments connect back to previously discussed themes including the tradition of not discussing mental health issues, and the fear of not fitting in and being judged by peers. Despite this barrier to accessing services, Taylor reported finding benefits in her counselling experience. She described her counselling experience as a positive one saying:

I immediately felt like this person was on my team, I felt super supported and I felt like she heard me, and it was kind of like a session with a cheerleader, but also somebody who was going to be super honest about the work they want you to do. So, it was just a different vibe. I guess looking for somebody with a little bit of tough love, but I will always leave my sessions feeling really supported and really good about myself. Somebody that you have a really good connection with, that's there to hold space for you but also push you a bit and it'll help you grow.

In contrast to Taylor, Cole said:

No, I didn't find it was helpful. I haven't done much counselling in my life, but, my wife has, and she says it's hard until you find somebody that gets it. And then, then you're good. But, I was like, you're not giving me any answers that I don't already know.

This comment from Cole raises the notion of “fit” between counsellor and client, which is an important issue for the counselling field in general but may be important for this population in some very occupation-specific ways, a point that is reinforced by Kevin's comment:

And there are counselors out there that are firefighter specific. And I think over the years that's one of the things that is very important to our job and culture was to find counsellors that already understand what we were doing. That's not to say that every counsellor that says that they're available for firefighting definitely understands us. Right?

This comment from Kevin exemplifies a view expressed by all 6 participants that to be effective with firefighters, counsellors must understand firefighter culture. Unfortunately, counsellors were seen to be typically lacking in such knowledge.

Participants provided several ideas of how counsellors could gain more competency in firefighter culture including talking with firefighters, being a first responder themselves, and having references from others in the fire service.

4.2.1. “Are you fucking kidding me?”: A gap in understanding

An important finding that emerged from this research is that participants hold the view that counsellors generally do not understand firefighter culture. This perceived gap in understanding firefighter culture appears to be tied to firefighters’ hesitancy to share that was seen in section 4.1.3. What is unclear is what comes first. Does firefighters’ hesitancy to share prevent counsellors from having access to the knowledge that would provide them a deeper understanding of firefighter culture? Or does counsellors’ lack of understanding reinforce firefighters’ ideas that they should not share with anyone outside of the culture, as they do not and will not understand? Perhaps the two work together to create a feedback loop. Although it is unclear how these two factors influence each other, it was clear from participant’s comments that the perceived gap in understanding creates a barrier for accessing services. For example, participants discussed how they do not believe counsellors can understand firefighter culture since they have never experienced it, and how they believe that counsellors will not be able to understand or help them. For example, Daniel said:

I think it's hard for people in our industry to open up to counsellors, because a lot of counsellors don't have any exposures to us, and to the type of traumas that we see.

Here Daniel shows how he holds the idea that counsellors are unfamiliar with the traumas that firefighters experience and implies that such awareness is necessary for them to be effective supports for firefighters. This again highlights the feedback loop of hesitation to share and a gap in understanding. Counsellors cannot gain experience working with firefighters if firefighters do not attend counselling, but firefighters will not attend counselling because they perceive that counsellors do not have experience working with firefighters. Kevin expressed a similar thought to Daniel when he stated:

I mean a medical professional that doesn't understand how we operate might not understand where we're struggling.

This again demonstrated how firefighters feel the gap in understanding firefighter culture can hinder a counsellor's ability to provide best service. Taylor also described how counsellors' understanding of firefighter culture would be beneficial for firefighters. She said:

[Counselling has] been a very positive experience for me over the years, but I feel like if I was more closed off to counselling, [going to] somebody who maybe had a better understanding of what type of social dynamic I was encountering on a regular basis at work, then, it would be easier because then right away you don't feel like you have to explain it.

It is clear that Taylor feels one way to get more firefighters to go to counselling, is to have counsellors who are proficient in firefighter culture. Similarly, Kevin said:

If somebody was already familiar with [firefighter culture] it makes you more willing to see them if you had an occupational issue that you want to talk about with someone, for sure.

Like Taylor and Kevin, Daniel also expressed his desire for a counsellor who understands firefighter culture. He told me:

That would definitely be my preference. I would seek out counselors that understood our culture, most definitely before somebody else.

Through Taylor, Kevin and Daniel's comments, it is clear that knowing a counsellor has competency in firefighter culture eases firefighters' hesitancy to attend counselling.

Taylor explained some specific ways how a lack of counsellor understanding might cause problems in counselling sessions. She told me about how during her counselling sessions, when she discusses different aspects of the fire service, it shocks her counsellor, and can disrupt her session quite quickly. She said:

I do find that when things have come up, and I've shared stories about things at work, usually she's mostly, absolutely just baffled. Like, "they said what, they do what, what it works like that?", like, mind blown by the archaic ways of certain things and the culture, and she usually derails us just momentarily because she has, and I don't mind one bit, but she often has some sort of outbursts like "are you fucking kidding me, that's how it works?" And I feel like if I had something that I really needed help getting through, she would be able to guide me through that from like a counselling perspective, but anything to do with like the fire service she's usually thrown off pretty quickly.

Despite Taylor saying she does not mind that her counsellor becomes distracted, it is apparent that she does not feel her counsellor could help her with a work-related issue. Dragon also shared the idea that having a counsellor who did not understand firefighter culture would cause disruptions in counselling sessions. Interestingly, Dragon did not state if he had been to counselling or not. However, when we were discussing counselling, he said:

They do kind of need that background. So you can say things and you won't need to clarify. Then I can just talk the entire time. Because I think I would typically say things and they wouldn't understand. So it would kind of be like a lot of pauses, because they ask, then we clarify, pause, then clarify.

Dragon's comment is reflective of Taylor's experience in discussing work with her counsellor, as they often have to pause for clarification before continuing. Taylor and Dragon's comments show how counsellors understanding firefighter culture could allow for greater client comfort and more fluid sessions that are focused more on client needs and less on filling gaps in counsellors' knowledge. Under such conditions it is likely that clients will experience improvements and movements toward goals in counselling more rapidly than if they need to interrupt sessions to explain firefighter culture.

Derek agreed with Taylor and Dragon that counsellor knowledge of firefighter culture is important, and he directly discussed how building rapport with a counsellor who has an understanding of the fire services would be easier than building rapport with a counsellor who didn't. He said:

If you go to somebody who has somewhat of an introductory knowledge to the going-ons of firefighting, I think if you already have that common ground, which could facilitate that rapport that much easier. And you can kind of jump right into whatever is bothering you. Instead of maybe having to explain and go revisit things. And I just definitely, I could see a lot of benefits of going to somebody who already has that base level understanding for sure.

Derek's comments highlight another benefit of seeing a counsellor with knowledge of firefighter culture, being able to start discussing the presenting concern right away. He discussed how it would facilitate an easier creation of rapport, and how it creates less disruptions as clients could "jump right in" to their presenting concerns.

Kevin highlighted how counsellors' lack of understanding can extend the amount of time needed in counselling sessions. He stated:

If you were have a conversation with the counsellor, and you're constantly trying to express to them, how we are, or what we do, more so than why I need help, I think that you'd be wasting, maybe not wasting your time, but you would definitely be extending the time you need to spend with that counsellor because they would be trying to figure out what's going on in your work life before they could get down to what's going on with you.

This comment brings up not only the issue of wasting firefighters' time, but also the ethical concern of firefighters having to spend more money on counselling sessions due to the process taking longer in order to accommodate time for explanations of firefighter culture.

Despite the importance of these hinderances created by a gap in counsellor understanding, the most distressing comment was made by Daniel who told me:

I've heard counsellors have broken off ties with their firefighter clients, because they're like, "No, your stories are disturbing me, I don't even want to hear them"... It's like they're not necessarily ready to hear what we're willing to unload on them. We need people who are comfortable with vivid trauma, listening to stories about that and being able to understand that perspective of what that person's going through. I know it's something that's been worked on in the province, finding counsellors that sort of, get that.

This comment indicates how counsellors themselves may recognize their lack of competency in providing best services to firefighters and decline providing them services due to this. Given firefighters' general reluctance to seek counselling it is a matter of concern that such individuals may take the step to reach out for help, only to be rejected by their counsellor. Whether or not this is true of counsellors, what is important is the perceptions that firefighters hold of counsellors. There is a need to demonstrate counsellor competency to firefighters and earn their trust in counselling services.

Kevin also shared this idea of having a counsellor who is competent in fire culture, but at the same time highlighted an issue with identifying how to measure such competency. He said:

I think to have a specific counsellor for firefighters is a must for sure, but I don't even know what that means.

This comment demonstrates how there is also a gap in understanding how to know if counsellors have an understanding in firefighter culture or not. Cole also posed an important question of how counsellors can ever understand firefighter culture when he asked:

Can you ever understand any culture without actually being in it?

These questions of how counsellors can better gain competency in firefighter culture are discussed in section 4.2.2 below.

These stories highlight a perception among firefighters of a clear lack in counsellor knowledge about firefighter service, and the problems this creates in providing best service. This led me to ask participants how they felt counsellors could gain a better understanding.

4.2.2. Gaining competency in firefighter culture

Throughout discussions with participants, three ways in which counsellors can gain competency in firefighter culture were clear. Participants suggested counsellors could gain competency by talking to firefighters, by being a first responder themselves and by becoming a BC Professional Fire Fighters' Association (BCPFFA) vetted counsellor.

“Get on the inside”: Talking with firefighters

The most common answer that participants gave for how to gain competency in fire culture, was for counsellors to talk with firefighters and ask questions. Kevin, Cole and Dragon all suggested this strategy. Kevin said:

I'm not sure how you would ever [understand firefighter culture] without talking to firefighters. How would you ever know that?

Taylor also had this thought of needing to speak with individuals on the inside, she said:

I think you kind of have to get on the inside a little bit for this one, I can see, do exactly what you're doing with your work, speaking to firefighters, a variety of gender and time on the job.

Similarly, Cole discussed how counsellors can start to understand firefighter culture by putting together stories from differing individuals. He said:

Just keep talking with people. The more people you're talking with, the different stories you're going to get, and I guess you can kind of piece it together with that information.

Cole's view was echoed by Dragon who said:

Once you talk to firefighters and you keep doing it, you start to understand the lingo and understand the calls and et cetera.

These comments highlight the importance of talking with multiple individuals who are on the 'inside' of firefighter culture in order to understand it and the breadth of experience it encompasses. However, they also again raise the issue of counsellors needing to have exposure to firefighters in order to gain and demonstrate competency, but firefighters being hesitant to see counsellors who do not have experience with firefighters.

While there is likely benefit in talking with firefighters in order to have a better understanding of their culture, there may be a need for counsellors to explore other avenues as well to expand their understanding of firefighter culture.

“A cherry on top”: Being a first responder

Through discussions with participants about firefighter culture, there was a sense that counsellors could never truly understand a culture they have never been a part of. Two participants brought this idea forward when discussing counsellor competency. When discussing if a person needs to be in firefighter culture to understand it Kevin said:

You really do need to be in it. Because even before I got on to the fire service, I had no idea what I was walking into. And once I got here, it was just something so different than I've ever - well, I never even thought about it, so it's not even like I could have imagined it. I don't know how [a counsellor] would handle it. I mean, unless maybe you were a firefighter in a previous life, or your previous job before and you became a counsellor.

Based on his own experience, Kevin feels that others who have not experienced firefighter culture will not understand it. Dragon had the same idea as Kevin and felt that having a counsellor who had been or was a first responder, would be helpful. Dragon stated:

If the counsellor had a firefighter, police, or paramedic background, that's kind of like a cherry on top.

Dragon and Kevin demonstrate how they feel a counsellor could gain competency by having first responder experience themselves. While it is a genuine suggestion, in reality, it is likely not a realistic expectation.

Another more practical way to demonstrate competency that participants mentioned was to have members from within the first responder community recommend or support certain counsellors.

***“Tick box for understanding”:* Having references**

Perhaps the most accessible suggestion by participants for counsellors to demonstrate competency in firefighter culture is to have references. Some participants stated that counsellors could demonstrate their competency by having references from firefighters or becoming vetted, such as joining the BCPFFA directory of occupationally aware clinicians. When asked about how he would decide who to see for counselling, Daniel stated:

References would be number one.

I interpreted this comment to mean references from other firefighters. But Daniel did go on to talk about vetted counsellors when he stated:

Getting to become one of those vetted counselors, because it makes people a lot more comfortable going to talk to someone when they know somebody else's sort of already talked to them or they sort of already have that understanding. So the overall BC professional firefighters association has counsellors that are pre-vetted, and sort of given that tick box for understanding culture to a certain degree. I would definitely gravitate towards that, versus an unknown.

Kevin shared a similar idea when discussing how members of the occupational health team at the fire department can help firefighters get connected with counsellors who are occupationally aware. He explained:

We have our captain of our occupational health and safety team, and he can send us to certain doctors. So we have mental health professionals right now, so if we needed help, depending on where you live, they can send us to people that understand firefighter culture.

He further discussed his thoughts about this recommendation program when he said:

How well that is, I don't know I haven't accessed that myself, but I do know that there's been lots of guys that have had positive experiences with these counsellors.

Derek had a similar idea and discussed seeking out a counsellor who has the most experience in working with firefighters, although he did not speak directly about references. Derek stated:

But for me, just who whoever's been doing it the longest, who has got the most experience. Who's the veteran.

Overall, Daniel, Derek and Kevin presented ideas for ways counsellors can demonstrate or prove their competency such as having references, having an association such as BCPFFA acknowledge counsellors on their directory, or being recommended by the department's occupational health and safety team.

4.3. Summary

Through interviews with firefighters, a picture of a distinct firefighter culture emerged. This is a culture that is steeped in traditions, most central of which is the sense of family. Participants spoke of the process of having to earn a spot in the family and the negative effects which come with that process. All participants demonstrated a hesitation to share with individuals outside of firefighter culture but did so in different ways including a hesitation to share during interviews, with their spouses or with counsellors. Despite these differences, all participants highlighted a sense of connection and willingness to share with fellow firefighters. Dark humor was presented as a coping strategy which helped firefighters to process difficult calls, to lighten the mood and to facilitate connection and discussion. Lastly, while most participants agreed firefighter culture is shifting in a direction that is more accepting of mental health services, participants with the least amount of seniority highlighted the differences of culture within the generations of firefighters.

There were also several findings regarding firefighters' perceptions of counselling. While participants had differing outlooks on the value of counselling, they all held the perception that counsellors in general lack understanding of firefighter culture and that this lack of understanding is a barrier to seeking their services. Participants

provided several ways they felt counsellors could gain competency including talking with firefighters, being a first responder themselves and having references.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This research asked: What meaning do firefighters make of firefighter culture and how it intersects with mental health and help-seeking from counsellors? In the previous chapter I presented my findings in regard to these questions and summarized emergent themes around firefighter culture and perceptions of counselling. In this chapter, key findings will be examined in relation to current research. As well, implications for counsellors, recommendations for firefighter organizations, future research directions and limitations of the present study will be discussed.

5.1. Firefighter Culture

To my knowledge, there are no current studies which have investigated how to conceptualize firefighter culture by asking firefighters themselves hence, an important contribution of this work is that it gives voice to actual firefighters regarding how they define and experience the culture they work in. Despite this, there is current literature that discusses firefighter culture from the perspective of others. The themes of tradition, a sense of family, hesitation to share, dark humor, a culture shift and connection through shared experiences will be discussed in relation to that literature.

5.1.1. Tradition

There is a lack of literature on firefighter culture, and the literature that does address it does so briefly, drawing from more in-depth research on military culture. This literature suggests firefighter culture holds traditions of seniority, a paramilitary framework (Henderson, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Sommerfeld et al., 2017; Vujanovic & Tran, 2021) and traditional masculine values (Henderson, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Sommerfeld et al., 2017; Vujanovic & Tran, 2021). Seniority and the ranking structure were discussed in the current study by two participants. These participants discussed the structure of seniority and their fear of being seen as trying to bypass or get around the traditional process of moving through the ranks. While seniority was not discussed by many participants, suggesting it is not an aspect of firefighter culture that many participants thought about, based on the discussion that did occur, it appeared

that seniority was crucial to the structure of the fire services and to the daily functioning of the fire hall. These findings are in agreement with current research.

Current literature also discusses traditional masculine values, including machismo (Henderson, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Sommerfeld et al., 2017; Vujanovic & Tran, 2021), and a hyper-masculinized environment (MacDermid et al., 2021), which provides an “old boys club” atmosphere (Gouliquer et al., 2020) in fire halls. Ideas of traditional masculine values were discussed by several participants. Recall that Taylor described firefighter culture as still being a ‘boys club’, and that Daniel highlighted how the fire services is a predominately “alpha male culture”. Although only Taylor and Daniel explicitly highlighted masculine values, there were several discussions by participants which implicitly discussed them, and which explicitly discussed tradition. Recall that Derek discussed a traditional aspect of having a junior man, before quickly changing his terminology to junior person, highlighting how masculine culture is ingrained in traditional language used in the fire service. Participants’ discussions of masculine values is supportive of current literature which states that masculine values are saturated in firefighter culture practices, daily routines, and organizational structures (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008).

5.1.2. Sense of family

An important theme from the present study, which is not thoroughly discussed in current literature was a sense of family. In the present study, participants highlighted a strong sense of connectedness which they described as a family. To my knowledge, only one article (Jacobsson et al., 2020), explicitly discusses this sense of family within firefighter culture. Jacobsson et al. (2020) discusses how the theme of family among firefighters is one of the most prevalent features in how fire fighters make sense of their occupation. The present study supports this notion, as four of six participants discussed a sense of family. Furthermore, most participants highlighted the sense of family first when asked about how to define firefighter culture, suggesting that it is a highly important aspect of firefighter culture. This is unsurprising, since firefighters spend a large portion of their lives in the firehall; it is inevitable that their work lives and personal lives become intertwined (Moran & Roth, 2013). Although there is a lack of literature which explicitly discusses a sense of family in firefighter culture, there is current literature that does characterize firefighter culture as having group cohesion and mutual trust

among members (Dangermond et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2020). This aligns with the notion that male-dominated fields are often concerned with worker solidarity and group cohesion (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008). In the present study, participants discussed the sense of connectedness and belonging which are important for group cohesion. However, recall how a sub-theme within the sense of family was having to earn a spot into the family. Since firefighters rely on each other in dangerous situations, trust and strong group bonds are important, as their lives, and the lives of civilians, rely on their teamwork (Dangermond et al., 2022; Moran & Roth, 2013). This trust is often gained through the process of proving oneself in the fire hall by way of managing practical jokes and other forms of testing (Dangermond et al., 2022). In support of this, participants in the current study spoke of having to “prove” oneself through the process of probation, which may include being subject to bullying and hazing. Participants also highlighted that the purpose of the probationary process was to ensure that firefighters were able to manage the job. Recall how Dragon highlighted this idea of firefighter’s lives being dependent on one another when he said that at the end of the day, everyone wants to make it home. In addition, an important way to earn a spot in the family was being able to fit into the firefighter culture. This was reflected in current literature as it has been highlighted that due to firefighters’ unique circumstances of spending often 24 consecutive hours together, social integration is highly important for cohesive functioning (Varvel et al., 2007).

5.1.3. Hesitation to share

Current research discusses how due to the relatively closed culture of the fire service (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021), firefighters generally demonstrate an unwillingness to share with members outside of their culture (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). This was demonstrated by all six participants in different ways, including a hesitation to share in the interview, a desire to protect spouses from secondary trauma and an emphasis on connecting to other firefighters. For example, recall how Taylor told me that there are some people who would not like how much she shared during her interview, as firefighter culture has been kept secret for a long time.

5.1.4. Critical incident stress management

Results from current research highlight firefighters' positive perceptions of CISM programs (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021; MacDermid et al., 2021). However, in the present study, perceptions were mixed. Current literature demonstrates that firefighters have a greater preference for department led CISM than for mental health professionals (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021). Furthermore, current research highlights that firefighters believe CISM is the most important department initiative following a critical call (Isaac & Buchanan, 2021). This preference for CISM was demonstrated in this study as Kevin and Cole spoke positively about CISM. Recall that Kevin spoke about the benefits of CISM, and how peer support can be beneficial. He highlighted how peer support is important as firefighters know each other on a deeper level than a medical professional would know them. Kevin highlighted how due to this, CISM members can recognize if someone is behaving differently than normal. However, recall Dragon spoke both positively and negatively about CISM debriefing. Despite stating that the CISM debriefings are "typically good", he also described the situations as being uncomfortable and stating that he does not like to share during the debriefings. Overall, participant opinions of CISM debriefings were mixed and therefore do not support or refute current research. More research on firefighter's perceptions of department led CISM debriefings could be done in order to thoroughly answer this question.

5.1.5. Dark humor

Current literature highlights how humor is universally used by almost all public safety personnel, and how it is an important aspect of the profession (Rowe & Regehr, 2010). As seen in the present study, dark humor is highly prevalent in firefighter culture and is an important aspect to the functioning of the firehall. Current literature demonstrates several benefits to dark humor. In general, individuals who use humor as a coping mechanism have been shown to experience and respond to environmental stressors more positively than individuals who do not use humor (Sliter et al., 2014). For firefighters specifically, dark humor has several vital purposes. Firstly, dark humor acts as a way for firefighters to express feelings (Dangermond et al., 2022; Rowe & Regehr, 2010). This was discussed in the present study as participants discussed how dark humor can enable a conversation in which firefighters are able to express themselves more easily. For example, recall that Daniel discussed how simply asking a fellow

firefighter how they are doing will often provide a one-word answer, but that he said the use of dark humor lightens the conversation and often allows firefighters to feel more comfortable talking. This demonstrates how dark humor can provide a space for people to open up and facilitate more of a discussion. Taylor also discussed this as she highlighted how dark humor allows people to share in a way that feels lighter, and which they can then more quickly move on from. In contradiction to this, some current research acknowledges that dark humor contributed to a reluctance to discuss mental health issues (MacDermid et al., 2021). This differs from the current study as many participants felt that dark humor in fact allowed for a more open discussion to feelings. Furthermore, current research also suggests that dark humor is a mechanism for firefighters to desensitize (Eriksen, 2019; Dangermond et al., 2022; Rowe & Regehr, 2010) and distance themselves from traumatic situations (Dangermond et al., 2022; MacDermid et al., 2021; Rowe & Regehr, 2010). This is consistent with this study's findings. For example, recall that Dragon discussed how firefighters use dark humor to desensitize themselves to difficult situations. Most notably, current literature discusses how humor can act as a buffer between exposure to traumatic stress and PTSD symptoms (Sliter et al., 2014), which is a particularly important finding for firefighters due to their alarmingly high rates of PTSD (see section 2.3).

Despite its apparent benefits, dark humor jokes are often not shared with those outside of firefighter culture (Dangermond et al., 2022; Moran & Roth, 2013), due to the fear that outsiders will not understand or accept it, or that it may be deemed as unacceptable or politically incorrect (Dangermond et al., 2022). The fear of outsiders not understanding dark humor was discussed in the present study by one participant, Dragon. Recall in section 4.1.4 when he discussed the story of two police officers taking pictures of deceased individuals, and how although Dragon did not agree with it, he saw the dark humor aspects of it that he stated the general public would not understand.

One aspect of humor and joking culture that is discussed in current literature, but was not explicitly discussed in the current study, is the group connectedness that it facilitates. Humor has not only been acknowledged as an instrument that facilitates social bonding (Sliter et al., 2014), it has also been shown to create group cohesion (Dangermond et al., 2022; Moran & Roth, 2013; Rowe & Regehr, 2010), construct and maintain group solidarity, create norms, and set boundaries (Moran & Roth, 2013). More notably, humor has been shown as a way for firefighters to reinforce cultural norms

(Moran & Roth, 2013). Therefore, dark humor may function as a way for the traditions of the fire services to maintain themselves.

5.1.6. Culture shift

In terms of the firefighter culture shifting, the present study refutes statements from current research, as it states that the fire service is resistant to change (MacDermid et al., 2021). In opposition to this finding in current research, all six participants in the present study highlighted a current cultural shift that is occurring. Recall how Derek said that while there is a firefighter culture, he believes that it is not the same culture it used to be. Furthermore, all participants not only discussed a shift in culture, which highlights a willingness to change, some participants also highlighted how a large aspect of the culture change was due to having greater access to mental health services. This also refutes current literature that states discussion of mental health issues and emotions are an imminent safety risk for the fire group (Henderson et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020) and a source of embarrassment and a detriment to firefighter reputation (Vujanovic & Tran, 2021). In opposition to this, the present study demonstrated how participants felt in the last few years firefighters have become more open to discussing mental health concerns, the effects of difficult calls and their access of mental health services. However, the present study does highlight how there is still movement to be made, as some participants discussed not wanting to be viewed as being soft, and some participants discussed fear of being judged by their peers if they were to speak out about mental health concerns.

5.2. Perceptions of Counselling

This study sought to discover how counsellors can provide better services to firefighters. This was attempted by asking firefighters about their help-seeking tendencies, their perceptions of counsellors and what kind of counsellor they would seek out. Several results from the present study agree with current research including firefighters' perceptions of counsellors' gap in understanding firefighter culture (Gulliver et al., 2019; Henderson, 2020; Hom et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; MacDermid et al., 2021; Isaac & Buchanan, 2021) and their preference for culturally competent counsellors (Gulliver et al., 2019; Isaac & Buchanan, 2021).

5.2.1. Occupationally aware counsellors

The present study aligned with findings from current research on firefighters' preferences for occupationally aware counsellors. In current literature, the most mentioned reason for firefighters' lack of professional help-seeking is firefighters' perception of a lack of counsellor competency in firefighter culture (Gulliver et al., 2019; Henderson, 2020; Hom et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; MacDermid et al., 2021; Isaac & Buchanan, 2021). This was discussed in the current study by all six participants. All participants felt that counsellors had a lack of understanding of firefighter culture. Recall that Taylor discussed her experience with counselling. She explained how her counsellor does not understand how the fire service operates, and how she often has outbursts and momentarily derails the session due to her shock about firefighter culture. Furthermore, Cole discussed the idea that counsellors can't understand firefighter culture as they have never been in it.

While this study supports current research in aspects of barriers to firefighters' help-seeking tendencies, it also supports ideas in current research about firefighters' preferences for occupationally aware counsellors. Current research demonstrates how firefighters believe it is important for counsellors to have knowledge and training in firefighter culture, and that firefighters report a higher willingness to seek out counselling if the counsellor understands firefighter culture and the traumatic nature of their job (Gulliver et al., 2019; Isaac & Buchanan, 2021). In this study, several participants spoke of the importance of counsellors having knowledge in firefighter culture. As shown in section 4.2.1, several participants discussed the need for more occupationally aware counsellors. Kevin discussed how he would be more willing to discuss an occupational issue with a counsellor who understands firefighter culture. Also, recall that Daniel said he would seek out a counsellor if he knew that they understood firefighter culture. Despite this, participants were unsure what an occupationally aware counsellor would look like. Participants highlighted ways in which they felt counsellors could demonstrate competency in section 4.2.2, such as talking with firefighters, having references, becoming a BCPFFA vetted counsellor and being a first responder themselves.

Moreover, the findings of this study highlight ethical concerns connected to counsellor competency. Taylor, Dragon, Derek, and Kevin discussed the issue of a lack of knowledge causing disruptions in counselling sessions and extending the number of

sessions needed. While counsellors cannot be expected to have knowledge of everything, this discussion does highlight how counsellors should adhere to boundaries of competence, which are generally included in the code of ethics such as in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (2021) code of ethics. If counsellors' lack of knowledge is disrupting sessions to the extent of having to extend the number of sessions, counsellors should consider referring firefighters to other clinicians with more competency in firefighter culture.

Overall, the results of this study support current research findings that a barrier for firefighters accessing counselling services is their perception of counsellors' lack of awareness in firefighter culture. Furthermore, the results of this study also demonstrate firefighters' preference for occupationally aware counsellors, which supports findings in current research. This study contributes to current research with findings of how firefighters believe counsellors can gain competency through talking with firefighters, having references, becoming a BCPFFA vetted counsellor and being a first responder themselves. As well, the ethical consideration of counsellor competency is highlighted in this study.

5.3. Implications For Counsellors

The findings from this study have several implications for counsellors providing services to firefighters which will help to inform best practice. The results demonstrate that a large barrier to accessing counselling services for firefighters is a perception that counsellors do not understand firefighter culture and that firefighters would be more willing to see clinicians who demonstrate competency in firefighter culture. This demonstrates that counsellors who want to work with the firefighter population should take active steps to increase their competency in this area. Firefighters suggested several ways that counsellors can improve their competency. First, participants suggest that counsellors could spend time talking with firefighters. Counsellors may be able to gain a greater level of competency by talking with firefighters, and perhaps visiting firehalls. Participants also suggest that counsellors could become a vetted counsellor through the BCPFFA. During the course of my research, I found two Canadian training courses for counsellors through Warrior Health (Wounded Warriors, 2022). After taking the courses, Warrior Health provides counsellors with the opportunity to register on their occupational aware healthcare directory. I took both courses, including "Inter-Provincial

Occupational Awareness Training” and “Introduction to Trauma Exposed Professionals”. This may be a good place for counsellors to seek training and become a vetted counsellor. Lastly, counsellors may have to take extra steps in order to de-stigmatize and de-mystify counselling for firefighters. Overall, this study demonstrates that counsellors need to take active steps for education beyond their counselling degrees in order to understand firefighter culture.

5.4. Recommendations For Firefighter Organizations

The findings from this study have several implications for firefighter organizations in order to best support their members, and for helping to educate counsellors. Recommendations for firefighter organizations include having an easily accessible resource list of occupational aware counsellors and providing education for counsellors on firefighter culture and occupational awareness.

5.4.1. Maintain a resource list of occupationally aware counsellors

Firefighter organizations could maintain up-to-date and easily accessible lists of occupationally aware counsellors. Organizations could obtain a list of local occupational aware counsellors by looking at the Warrior Health occupational aware healthcare directory, or they could simply promote the directory as a source of information for firefighters. Since embarrassment has been highlighted as a barrier to mental health access for firefighters (Hom et al., 2016), having an easily accessible and anonymous way for firefighters to access counselling services may increase help-seeking tendencies. Participants in this study discussed how to access services they have to speak to someone in their department, who will then help them get connected with services. While having this help would be beneficial, having an additional resource list that firefighters could access on their own may be another important option. For example, participants in this study expressed fear of being judged by their peers and being seen as ‘soft’ if they discuss mental health issues. Having an anonymous way to access this list would help to mitigate fear of being judged.

5.4.2. Provide occupational awareness training for counsellors

Firefighter organizations could provide training services for counsellors in order to help them better understand firefighter culture. Since a preference for occupationally aware counsellors has been highlighted both in current literature (Gulliver et al., 2019; Isaac & Buchanan, 2021), and in the current study, firefighter organizations could help provide training for counsellors or work with counselling agencies to help create occupationally aware curriculum for counsellors. Participants in this study highlighted a need for a counsellor who understands their culture, the traumatic nature of the job and who can sit with their stories. Firefighters could help to provide theoretical training which helps counsellors to understand their culture and job more deeply. Furthermore, participants highlighted that counsellors could gain more competency in firefighter culture by speaking with firefighters. Firefighter organizations could also provide experiential training for counsellors by inviting them to fire halls to allow for discussions between counsellors and firefighters, and for an opportunity for counsellors to experience the fire hall setting.

5.4.3. Provide training for members on signs of PTSD

Firefighter organizations could provide training for their members on the signs and symptoms of mental health diagnosis, with a specific focus on PTSD. Since PTSD is one of the most frequent mental disorders reported amongst firefighters (Bartlett et al., 2018; Boffa et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2016), it is important for firefighters to be aware of how to recognize the signs and symptoms of PTSD. Moreover, participants in this study discussed 'not having a problem', and then describing behaviour such as yelling at their family. This suggests that firefighters may benefit from understanding signs and symptoms of mental health deterioration. Furthermore, this education may help to reduce the stigma of talking about mental health and would be a good opportunity to introduce how to access the resource list of occupationally aware counsellors.

5.5. Future Directions

This study is believed to be the first study to examine firefighters' perceptions of firefighter culture, and how they define it. Future research could examine how firefighters

define firefighter culture in a larger scope, with more participants, and interviewing firefighters from differing departments. This would help in creating a more comprehensive definition of firefighter culture. Furthermore, all participants discussed a sense of connection to other firefighters and a willingness to share with them. In addition to this, many participants discussed experiencing benefits from CISM discussions. However, in opposition to this, many participants discussed fear of being seen as soft or different within the firefighter culture. As well, some participants discussed feeling uncomfortable during CISM discussions. Future research could further investigate participants' feelings toward discussing mental health topics with other firefighters. Lastly, participants felt that counsellors could gain more competency in firefighter culture by becoming vetted counsellors with the BCPFFA. With new occupational awareness training for therapists through Warrior Health emerging, future research could investigate the therapeutic relationships between firefighters and occupational aware counsellors to see if the training does help firefighters to feel more understood by counsellors. This research could also investigate if occupational awareness training helps to improve therapeutic alliance and outcomes.

5.6. Limitations

This study was limited to participants from one large fire department in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Since the study was limited to one department, it may only demonstrate the culture of that specific department, and not firefighter culture as a whole. Furthermore, participants were recruited via snowball sampling, as my original request to have my study emailed to all department members was denied. A member of the union helped me find participants through snowball sampling, and therefore many of the participants were from the same fire hall of this department as they learned about the study through their coworkers. The limit of one fire department and a small number of participants, many of whom were currently located at the same fire hall, may have limited the variability of responses within participants.

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Appendix A Research Ethics Board Approval

Minimal Risk Approval – Delegated

Study Number: XXXXXXXX
Study Title: Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture
Approval Date: September X, XXXX
Expiration Date: September X, XXXX
Principal Investigator: Lucy Lemare Supervisor: N/A
SFU Position: Faculty Faculty/Department: Education
SFU Collaborator: N/A
External Collaborator: N/A
Research Personnel: N/A
Student Lead: Mariah Mckenzie
Funding Source: N/A
Funding Title: N/A

Document(s) Approved in this Application:

- Informed Consent Interviews, version 3 dated September X, XXXX
- Interview Guide, version 2 dated September X, XXXX
- Letter for IAFF Local XX, version 2 dated September X, XXXX
- Letter for XXXX Member, version 2 dated September X, XXXX
- Member Checking Email, version 1 dated August X, XXXX
- Mental Health Resources Email, version 1 dated August X, XXXX
- Summary of Research Email, version 1 dated August X, XXXX
- TCPS2 Certificate – Mariah Mckenzie

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human participants. The approval for this Study expires on the Expiration Date. An annual renewal must be completed every year prior to the Expiration Date. Failure to submit an annual renewal will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated. The Board reviews and may amend decisions or subsequent amendments made independently by the authorized delegated reviewer at its regular monthly meeting. This letter is your official ethics approval documentation for this project. Please keep this document for reference purposes.

This study has been approved by an authorized delegated reviewer.

Appendix B Organizational Recruitment Letter

September X, XXXX

Letter for International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) Local XX

Dear IAFF Local XX,

My name is Mariah McKenzie and I am a Counselling Psychology Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. I am conducting a research project for my thesis called "Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture", supervised by Dr. Lucy LeMare.

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how firefighters define firefighter culture and how counsellors can gain a better understanding of firefighter culture in order to provide more effective counselling services. There is currently no research investigating how firefighters define their culture, or on how counsellors could become more familiar with firefighter culture. Documenting this research may help to inform practice of counsellors and improve counselling services for firefighters.

I am contacting you to invite members of XXX Fire and Rescue Service to participate in this study. To participate, you must be an active member of XXX. This study involves an interview which will be video-recorded and conducted on Zoom (20-25 minutes). In this interview, I will ask about thoughts of firefighter culture, and counselling services. I am particularly interested in definitions of firefighter culture, and if participants feel there are ways for counsellors to better understand firefighter culture. If you believe anyone at XXX may be interested in participating in this study, I invite you to pass along the attached letter to your active members.

Thank you for considering this request. If you have any questions, please contact me at XXX or my supervisor at XXX. You can also reach out to us if you have any questions about participating. Thank you for considering this request.

Warmly,

Mariah

Appendix C Participant Recruitment Letter

November X, XXXX

Letter for XXX Fire and Rescue Services (XXXX) Members

Dear XXXX Members,

My name is Mariah McKenzie and I am a Counselling Psychology Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. I am conducting a research project for my thesis called "Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture", supervised by Dr. Lucy LeMare.

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how firefighters define firefighter culture and how counsellors can gain a better understanding of firefighter culture in order to provide more effective counselling services. There is currently no research investigating how firefighters define their culture, or on how counsellors could become more familiar with firefighter culture. Documenting this research may help to inform practice of counsellors and improve counselling services for firefighters.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in this study. To participate, you must be an active member of XXXX. This study involves an interview which will be video-recorded and conducted on Zoom (40-60 minutes). In this interview, you will be asked about your thoughts of firefighter culture, and counselling services. I am particularly interested in your definition of firefighter culture, and if you feel there are ways for counsellors to better understand firefighter culture. We will schedule a time for the interview that is most convenient for your schedule.

Participation in this study is voluntary, it is your choice if you would like to participate or not. All aspects of the study will also be anonymized, your identifying information will not be reported. If you change your mind about participating, you may withdraw from the study without any consequences.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me at XXXX or my supervisor at XXXX. You can also reach out to us if you have any questions about participating. Thank you for considering this request.

Warmly,

Mariah

Appendix D Participant Consent Form

Ethics application number: XXXXXXXXX

Version: X

Date: November X, XXXX

Consent Form – Interviews

["Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture"]

Study Title: "Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture"

Study Team: Dr. Lucy Lemare – Supervisor; Mariah McKenzie – MA student in Counselling Psychology

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how firefighters define firefighter culture and how counsellors can gain a better understanding of firefighter culture in order to provide more effective counselling services. There is currently no research investigating how firefighters define their culture, or on how counsellors could become more familiar with firefighter culture. Documenting this research may help to inform practice of counsellors and improve counselling services for firefighters.

Study Requirements

Participation in the interview aspect of this study will require participation in a video-recorded interview conducted on Zoom (40 – 60 minutes). In this interview, you will be asked about your thoughts of firefighter culture, and counselling services. I am particularly interested in your definition of firefighter culture, and if you feel there are ways for counsellors to better understand firefighter culture. This interview is intended to be conversational in nature, and you may share as much or as little detail as you are comfortable with. We will schedule a time for the interview that is most convenient for your schedule. The audio recording of your interview will be transcribed and sent to you to give you an opportunity to review the interview and make any changes you wish. There is unfortunately no compensation provided for your participation.

Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, meaning it is your choice if you would like to participate. You may also withdraw from the study before, during, or after participation without any consequences. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all data collected about you will be destroyed.

You can withdraw by emailing either Mariah at XXXX or her supervisor at XXXX. However, you will not be able to withdraw your data once the results have been published. The last day to withdraw will be May 1st 2022.

Confidentiality

This interview is hosted by Zoom, a US company. Any data you provide may be transmitted and stored in countries outside of Canada, as well as in Canada. It is important to remember that privacy laws vary in different countries and may not be the same as in Canada.

All interview recordings will be confidential, and password protected, meaning no one will be able to view them outside of the research team. The data collected will be anonymized, meaning your identifying information (such as your name, the city you live in, and your country of origin) will not be reported. You will also choose a pseudonym to be used in reports to ensure your privacy. A list which links your name to your chosen pseudonym will be kept until completion of the research project and will then be destroyed.

Use of Data

The information you provide will be used to better understand the connection between firefighter culture and counselling services. The information will be analyzed for common themes. As mentioned, names and other identifying information will be omitted to protect your privacy, but direct quotations of yours may be included. The findings of this study will be published in a Master's thesis. The thesis is expected to be successfully defended and accepted at the library by August 30th 2023. There may be subsequent publication of these same findings in an article or presentation. Subsequent publication may entail further analyses of the data, and therefore the data will be kept for 3 years after the successful thesis defense.

Upon completion of the project, all participants will receive a one-page summary of the research findings via email. The research team will retain your email address to do this, and your email address will be deleted from our records when the summary has been sent to you.

Potential Risks

The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal. No questions are intended to bring up uncomfortable emotions, though discussing experiences of firefighter culture and counselling could bring up stressful memories for some participants. If you become emotionally distressed during an interview, you will be given the option to pause the interview (for a few minutes or the interview could be rescheduled for later), and you will be reminded of the option to withdraw from the study.

Potential Benefits

The potential benefits of participating in this study include sharing your thoughts about firefighter culture and current counselling services and contributing to research that may help to improve counselling services for firefighters in the future.

Contact Information

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. You can contact Mariah at XXXX or Dr. Lucy LeMare at XXXX about any questions or concerns you may have.

Complaints

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the SFU Office of Research Ethics at XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Consent

If you would like to participate in this research, please sign below. Your signature confirms:

- You have been given sufficient time to read and understand the information about participating in this study
- You have been given sufficient time and opportunity to ask questions about this study, and you are satisfied with the answers to your questions
- You agree to have your interview video recorded
- You agree to the use of direct quotations
- You understand you are able to withdraw from the study at any time until May 1st 2022 without having to provide a reason and without any consequences

Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

If you are unable to provide written consent, it is also an option to provide verbal consent. Please check the box below if you would rather provide verbal consent over Zoom. Your consent will be video recorded on Zoom instead.

I prefer to provide verbal consent on Zoom

Appendix E Interview Guide

Ethics application number: XXXXXXXXX

Version: X

Date: September X, XXXX

Interview Guide

Greeting:

Hello. Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. It's nice to meet you. How are you?

I first would like to introduce myself again. My name is Mariah and I'm a Counselling Psychology Master's student at Simon Fraser University. I am particularly interested in counselling services for firefighters, which is why I am researching the XXXX Fire and Rescue Services for my Master's thesis.

Interview:

I have three primary topics that I'll be asking you about, with some follow up questions for each topic. However, this interview is intended to be conversational in nature, meaning I may follow your lead at times if there are questions on my list that you have particular interest in. Once again, you may share as much or as little as you are comfortable with and you can pass on any questions that you don't want to answer. You're the expert here, and if there is any additional information that you think may be helpful to share please let me know.

Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in the interview before we get started?

Are you ready for me to begin recording?

<p>1. Firefighter Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How long have you been a fire fighter? Have you worked in other places besides XXXX? - Do you think that there are aspects of fire fighting that give it a distinct fire culture? - Are there aspects of firefighter culture that you particularly resonate with or are there aspects of firefighter culture that you do not resonate with, or feel are a hinderance? - If you have worked as a firefighter in other locations, how was the culture there different or similar to the culture in XXXX?
<p>2. Help-seeking Tendencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What current strategies do you use to help manage occupational stress? - If you are feeling overwhelmed by occupational stress, is there anyone you turn to for support? - Have you ever attended counselling for occupational stress? If yes – what was that experience like? If no – Why not?
<p>3. Counselling</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What have you looked for, or would you look for in a counsellor, such as education or experience? - Are there certain things a counsellor could have or do that would make you feel comfortable to seek counselling? - If a counsellor understood firefighter culture, would it influence your willingness to attend counselling at all? - How would you know if a counsellor understood firefighter culture?
<p>4. Closing question</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To close, are there any other things you would like to share with me?

- What pseudonym would you like to use?

Closing:

Thank you so much for participating. Over the next few weeks, I will be transcribing this interview into written form. I will then send you the written document to give you a chance to review the interview and make any edits or changes to the interview you wish. This will be to ensure you are comfortable with all of the information you have shared today. After that, you will be done participating in the interview portion of this research project.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we log off today?

Thank you again for sharing your story. It was nice to meet you. Take care.

Appendix F Member Checking Email

Ethics application number: XXXXXXXXX

Version: X

Date: August X, XXXX

Member Checking Email

Hello [insert participant name],

Thank you for your participation in the research project “Into the Inferno: Counsellor Competency in Firefighter Culture”, conducted by Dr. Lucy LeMare and I.

As promised, your interview has been transcribed into written form and is attached to this email. Please review your interview and respond to this email with any edits or omissions you would like me to make. If you do not want to make any changes to your interview, please respond to this email letting me know you are comfortable with the transcription as it is.

Thank you again for your time and efforts.

Warmly,

Mariah

Appendix G Mental Health Resources

Ethics application number: XXXXXXXXX

Version: X

Date: August X, XXXX

Mental Health Resources

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. Your responses may help to inform counselling practices and improve counselling services. When the study is completed, a one-page summary will be sent to XXXX.

If you feel that you need mental health support or services, please consider contacting one of the following resources:

- Contact your Employee Assistance Program
- Contact your Critical Incident Stress Management Team
- Call the 24/7 BC Crisis Line at 1-800-784-2433
- Find a registered counsellor at: <https://bc-counsellors.org/counsellors/>

Warmly,

Mariah