A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Female Firefighters

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Research Background

- Firefighting is a physically demanding occupation requiring muscle strength, endurance and anaerobic capacity.
- Females perform significantly lower on physical measures simulating firefighting tasks.
- Firefighting is traditionally a male-dominated profession.
- It might be anticipated that female firefighters experience the job differently than their male counterparts.
- Females working in male-dominated professions experience greater levels of anxiety and job strain, sexism and lower job satisfaction, increased co-worker conflict and psychological stressors that increase injury risk.
- Limited research on female firefighters exists.

Purpose of Study

- To qualitatively determine the positive and challenging aspects of firefighting, effects of the physical environment and stressors encountered by females in a male dominated occupational environment.

Methods

- Qualitative study: Phenomenological Design
- Participants
  - 4 female firefighters employed by Hamilton Emergency Services – Fire
  - Mean Age: 35.2 years
  - Mean Duration of Firefighting: 3.7 years
- Data Collection
  - 4 semi-structured telephone interviews (audio-recorded and transcribed)
  - Questions were investigator developed to elicit discussion regarding: attitudes about employment, job modifications, injury reports and future recommendations for employers, treatment providers and new female recruits.
- Data Analysis
  - Bracket experiences
  - Independent coding of transcripts and theme identification.
  - Collaboration and agreement on specific themes.

Identification of Themes

Physical Demands/Difficulties

- All participants identified that firefighting is a physically demanding occupation.
  - “Firefighting is a very physically demanding job and part of my responsibility was to maintain my physical abilities.”
- Gender Related Physiological Differences
  - Participants identified inherent physiological differences between males and females requiring females to work harder to maintain their physical capacity.
  - “Females are already 20% not as strong as their male counterparts…so you really have to maintain that, or you’re going to be weaker.”

Compensatory Strategies

- Participants recognized the need for adaptive and compensatory strategies to effectively execute job tasks.
  - “Body mechanics more than anything…the guys can usually manhandle things, I had to learn to use my body a bit more effectively.”

Equipment Mal-adaptation

- Participants consistently identified that ill-fitting equipment compromised task performance.
  - “The boots are always too big on me and bunker pants…everything is just kind of big and fits more loosely because it’s suited more for a man.”

Earning Respect

- It was recognized that although public respect was freely given, peer respect needs to be earned.
  - “You have to earn your stripes basically, you know what I mean…their respect. A lot of women walk right on the job expecting their respect, and you have to earn it.”

Attitudes of Male Counterparts

- Some males demonstrated poor attitudes towards females based on perception of females ability to perform job tasks.
  - “Some people have attitudes that aren’t going to change no matter what you do, no matter how good of a firefighter you are…you’re a woman in a man’s job and you shouldn’t be here.”

Recognition of Injury Risk

- Females strive to overcome male negative attitudes and are less likely to request assistance performing physically challenging job tasks.
- Gender differences and equipment maladaptation predispose females to injury. Interestingly, 75% of participants did not identify females to be at greater injury risk than their male counterparts.

Conclusion

- Female firefighters experience physical, emotional and psychological challenges in firefighting including both role and gender-specific issues; these are consistent with known role and gender issues.
- Attitudes of male colleagues influence female perceptions and help-seeking behaviours.
- Future research to mitigate injury should examine task and consider the interaction between gender and performance demands in firefighting tasks.

References:


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