

# Life of a Fire Station Personnel: A Phenomenology Study

Eros John P. Maskay & Glyniselynn P. Maskay

Mountain Province State University

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## ABSTRACT

Fire personnels are known to be involving in a high-risk situations, intense physical demands and psychological stress. Further, fire personnels are frontline workers as one of the frontline workers that routinely respond to life-threatening emergencies, including structural fires, hazardous material incidents, and medical emergencies risking their personal health. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Bontoc Municipal Fire Station personnels. The study utilized qualitative techniques specifically, phenomenology to explore experiences of fire personnels. The study was conducted in Bontoc, Mountain Province, Philippines from October 2023 to October 2024 utilizing an open-ended question. The standard operating procedure of research was followed. This study offers a valuable insight into the lives of fire personnel, revealing two themes that had evolved from their experiences: (a) "Enhancing Safety and Preparedness and; (b) Commitment to Safety and Service. The experiences of the Bontoc fire personnel in responding to fire situations is a testament to their adaptability, their resilience, and their unwavering commitment to service. This study provides crucial insights to support and equip these essential frontline workers, ensuring them to continue service with enhanced safety and effectiveness and allowing them to face the flames with courage, skill, and a steadfast determination to protect life and property.

**Keywords:** Fire Personnel, Experiences, safety and preparedness

## INTRODUCTION

Fire personnels are known to be involving in a high-risk situations, intense physical demands and psychological stress. Further, fire personnels are frontline workers as one of the frontline workers that routinely respond to life-threatening emergencies, including structural fires, hazardous material incidents, and medical emergencies risking their personal health. This personnels are exposed to traumatic events that may have lasting effects on their well-being despite having extensive trainings and protocols in place. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of fire personnels to understand the emotional, psychological, and physical challenges they face in their line of duty.

Fire and rescue services are 'can do' organizations that want to help their communities however, many services faced barriers in mobilizing operational staff to assist with community activities as effectively and rapidly. It is deeply regrettable that fire and rescue services would have been better placed to assist local communities at their time of greatest need. There are challenges in delaying of safe deployment of the right people with the right skills as quickly as their communities needed them. In Padayhag (2014) noted that in the Philippines fire personnels face challenges such as threats from disoriented residents and the need to handle multiple tasks simultaneously, as well as shortages of equipment like breathing apparatuses and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Similarly, Jahnke et al (2016) highlighted that the mental health challenges stemming from traumatic exposure, emphasizing that cumulative distress negatively impacts firefighters' overall well-being. Another study by Penkhbaatar et al. (2021) highlights the acute and long-term effects of smoke inhalation, emphasizing the need for careful neurological assessments in burn patients. Further, fire personnels often share breathing apparatuses and lack air refill (Talabong, 2017). To address this challenges fire personnels develop strategies through innovative ideas. APFmag (2019) posit that innovations in personal protective equipment (PPE) design aim to balance breathability and protective.

Moreover, De Castro, CA & Cabarrubias (2023) concluded that excessive workload, insufficient manpower, and training stress fire officers, who lack a well-organized permit requirements system and emotional support groups to cope with their work-related stress. Nonetheless, Empinado et al (2023) highlighted the synergy between classical management theory and the firefighting ethos, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and rewarding the sacrifices made by these courageous responders. Furthermore, the study of Primo G & Collado V (2024) revealed a strong sense of camaraderie, enhancing workplace morale and performance. This community fosters teamwork, allowing firefighters to build friendships and acquire new skills. Social bonds among colleagues' help mitigate workplace stress.

The experiences of fire officers in the municipality of Bontoc are shaped by the challenges they face in their duties, including physical hazards, emotional stress, and community interactions. Notably, there remains a gap in literature that specifically explores the lived experiences of fire personnels in smaller, municipal settings. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Bontoc Municipal Fire Station personnels, focusing on the daily challenges in their profession. Understanding these experiences can contribute to policy recommendations, mental health support programs, and improved working conditions for fire personnels.

### **Research Design**

The study utilized qualitative techniques specifically, phenomenology to explore experiences of fire personnels.

### **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in Bontoc, Mountain Province, Philippines from October 2023 to October 2024. The participant being studied had met the following criterion: (a) fire personnel assigned in the Municipality of Bontoc; (b) had a sufficient exposure to the work environment; (c) willing to participate in the study. There were ten participants who were recruited and participated in the study consisting of 6 males and 4 females.

### **Data Gathering Tool**

The participants were asked "tell me your experiences as fire personnel" as a primary question. An ancillary question was used to encourage the participants to expand on their experience. An audio recorder and video camera were used to capture the conversation and observations.

### **Data gathering procedure**

The standard operating procedure of research was followed. Communication letter was given to the Municipal Fire Office. Written consent was secured after the researchers explained the purpose of the study and the participants agree to participant in the study. The fire personnel were interviewed at the office and at the cafeteria until it reaches data saturation. Interviews lasted for 45minutes to one hour which was recorded with the consent of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher organized the data into categories and sorted it into sub- categories to compare, contrast, and identify patterns. Outliers are outliers that do not fit with the others and are corroborated with approaches to make sense of the rich and complex data collected. Data analysis started with audio-recorded interviews and transcribed verbatim. The researcher extracted relevant statements about experiences of fire station personnels, generating themes and organizing them into sub-themes. The results were validated by participants and member checking to ensure the credibility and conformability of the research data analyses.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The researchers followed ethical rules in conducting research. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected. The data collected were secured and it was only accessible by the researchers. The respondents were not forced

to participate in the study. All information gathered during the data collection was kept confidential and was only used for this study purposes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was done to explore and understand the life of fire personnels. Through data analysis, the researchers were able to formulate two themes: (a) "Enhancing Safety and Preparedness and; (b) Commitment to Safety and Service.

### Theme 1: Enhancing Safety and Preparedness

The dedicated efforts of the fire personnels to enhance the safety and preparedness of the brave men and women who serve as the frontline against fire and other emergencies in the community. The following experience highlighted the critical need for better preparedness at a national and local level. Notably, showed that the reality on the scarcity of essential resources. It showed a clear picture of the hurdles faced by the fire personnels as verbalized by the participants *"...lack of mass production of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), alcohol, facemask and face shield"*. The fire personnels found themselves in a dangerous position having the primary role of serving and protecting but they lacked the fundamental tools to safeguard themselves. Hence, every time they are called to respond an added layer of risk and a silent acknowledgment of their vulnerability is expected. Similarly, Padayhag (2014) noted that in the Philippines fire personnels face challenges such as threats from disoriented residents and the need to handle multiple tasks simultaneously, as well as shortages of equipment like breathing apparatuses and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Further, maintaining a clean and sterile environment is crucial for preventing the spread of any microorganism that they may encounter as they respond had also become a constant struggle. This was evident when another participant verbalized *"lack of disinfectants"* as another challenge they faced. While there are disinfectant supplies it might be limited hence, persistent worrying about the potential for contamination within their own ranks and in the areas, they served added stress on their end. Furthermore, the lack of clear guidance created uncertainty and potentially increased the risk of exposure for both the fire personnel and the community people they were trying to help. This was noted as another participant expressed *"there is lack of information dissemination regarding ways and tips on how to disinfect"*. It should be made possible that practical knowledge on how to effectively and safely disinfect was not readily available.

Lack of resources was a reality to the fire personnels in Bontoc as verbalized by the participants *"we lack of resources"*. There are times that they rely on the locals and the neighboring municipality who are often hours away from the scene that also have limited resources. This was evident when the participants claimed *"we ask help from other municipalities, however they also have limited resources"* while another participant added *"that might be the reason why when we ask help it will take them time to respond"*. Another challenge that we encounter as claim by the participants *"our protective gear is minimal in protecting us from the intense heat and toxic fumes"*. With this, some of them risk their lives venturing into burning buildings with inadequate breathing apparatus, their faces show a mixture of fear but unwavering commitment. Most often *"there are also times that we cannot rely on our mobile phones to request backup"*. This for the reason that the place where the incident happens has no phone signal. Notably, the lack of resources wasn't just on equipment but it also affected the training and manpower. Participants claimed *"we were often understaffed hence we are forced to work long hours with little rest"*. it was also noted during the interview that training opportunities were scarce, limiting their ability to handle complex emergencies and new firefighting techniques as the participants claim *"we need to have frequent training to be updated with the new trends in firefighting"*.

Despite these obstacles, the fire personnel in Bontoc displayed remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. They understood the gravity of the situation and the importance of their role in protecting the community as the participants claimed *"we understand that's why we are also making remedies"*. Their efforts to enhance safety and preparedness took on a new urgency. They tried to initiate their own internal efforts to maximize the limited resources they had. Likewise in the study by Jahnke et al (2016) highlighted that the mental health challenges stemming from traumatic exposure, emphasizing that cumulative distress negatively impacts firefighters' overall well-being.

Furthermore, this theme enhancing safety and preparedness in Bontoc during this challenging period is a testament to the human spirit's ability to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity. The fire personnel, despite facing significant limitations, demonstrated courage, commitment, and a deep sense of duty to the community. Further, fire preparedness knowledge, decision-making processes, and actual behaviors of residential high-rise occupants who experienced a fire emergency in their building (Glauberma & Qureshi, 2023). Moreover, Johannes & Koray (2025) noted addressing the gaps in fire safety knowledge and preparedness among workers is critical to ensuring a safe healthcare environment. While Penkhbaatar et al (2017) highlights the acute and long-term effects of smoke inhalation, emphasizing the need for careful neurological assessments in burn patients.

## Theme 2: Commitment to Safety and Service

Commitment to safety and service shows the coping strategies employed by the fire personnel as they respond to the challenging situations they encounter. Further, it shows the importance of rigorous training, unwavering teamwork, and a deep-seated commitment to work. The fire personnels had to conduct meticulous pre-planning and risk assessment before responding to any situation considering the area and the potentials for the fire to be quickly spread. This was evident as the participant verbalized *"when our attention is called to respond we have to quickly meet to discussed some expectations and how to respond to it"*. Another participant further added *"...so that we know what to do"*. This approach allows them to anticipate potential difficulties and strategize their response even before reaching the scene. Further, the fire personnels practice effective communication and coordination as they receive a call to respond and even while on site. Similarly, according to Watkins et al (2020) noted it is important to encourage open and honest communication between spouses, especially for fire officers and their partners.

The following information has to be made clear location, nature of the fire, and potential hazards as verbalized *"before we respond all information pertinent to the call should have been made clear to us"*. While on the scene the participant verbalizes *"we utilize hand signals, radios, and verbal instructions to ensure everyone is aware of their roles and the evolving situation"*. This practice minimizes confusion and maximizes efficiency, allowing to respond in unity.

The rigorous training encompassing firefighting techniques, search and rescue, and first aid, equips them with the necessary skills to handle the physical demands of the job as verbalize *"maybe because of our training that makes us efficient to respond"*. Aside from being trained it is also important to note that the fire personnels went above and beyond their usual duties, taking on the added responsibility of educating the community on safety and preparedness hence they should be equipped with trainings. The participants verbalized *"if we train the community people on fire safety, we will be confident that it would be of great help to us"*. Another participant added *"we conduct activities that involves drills, theoretical refreshers, and the integration of new protocols"*. Further, another participant verbalized *"we discussing latest advancements in firefighting techniques and the proper use of new equipment recently acquired"*.

Fire personnels understand that with their exposure they are vulnerable of unstable psychological wellbeing. Hence, debriefing is done after any incident to process their experiences, share emotions and support each other. This was evident when the participant expressed *"after we respond we do not allow anybody of us to go home unless we conduct meeting as a sort of debriefing to decrease or overcome any trauma that we may feel"*. Another participant added *"we feel relax after our debriefing"*. Furthermore, they maintain a calm and focus even when under pressure. Similarly, Primo & Collado (2024) also recommends that it is essential to provide firefighters debriefing following tense situations and when they are conducting search and rescue operations, such as when moving dead corpses from ravines into safe areas. Further, therapeutic value of these conversations, noting the necessity of addressing stress through dialogue (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023). A study in the United States highlighted the mental health challenges stemming from traumatic exposure, emphasizing that cumulative distress negatively impacts firefighters' overall well-being (Jahnke et al., 2016) hence, there is really a need to conduct debriefing activities.

They try to use their ability to remain composed, assess the situation objectively, and make quick decisions as the participants claimed *"our actions should always be objective as we believed that it is crucial for our safety"*



*and the successful execution of our duties*". The fire personnel must have to inculcate in their mindset that they are the frontline protectors of their community hence; strong sense of purpose and community spirit is a powerful motivator. Collado (2024) recommends that to have strong leadership abilities and to preserve a productive working atmosphere, leadership trainings must be periodically implemented. This will fuel their dedication and resilience finding strength in knowing they are making a tangible difference in the lives of the people they served.

This strategies of fire personnels became their strength towards commitment to safety and community service. They meticulously cleaned and maintained their existing PPE, using every available drop of disinfectant with utmost care. They shared information and best practices amongst themselves, drawing on any available knowledge and adapting to the evolving situation. Furthermore, they actively sought out information and resources. They reached out to local government units, health authorities, and other organizations for guidance and support. They participated in online webinars and training sessions to learn about proper protocols on safety measures. Findings are consistent with the findings of LV et al. (2023), which highlights the burden of overwhelming workloads among firefighters due to inadequate staffing. Hence Primo &

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study offers a valuable insight into the lives of fire personnel, revealing two themes that had evolved from their experiences: "Enhancing Safety and Preparedness" and "Commitment to Safety and Service." The experiences of the Bontoc fire personnel in responding to fire situations is a testament to their adaptability, their resilience, and their unwavering commitment to service. The theme of "Enhancing Safety and Preparedness" highlights their constant awareness of risk and their efforts, despite resource limitations, to mitigate those dangers. Likewise, the theme of "Commitment to Safety and Service" shows the dedication that led them face dangerous situations and serve the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study emphasizes the importance of supporting frontline fire personnel in Bontoc by improving safety and preparedness through increased resource allocation and fostering a supportive work environment. It recommends a comprehensive approach, including partnerships with government agencies and non-governmental organizations, and emphasizes the need for proactive planning, adequate resource allocation, and effective communication to ensure their well-being.

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