Introduction

This paper is based on data collected during a three-year organizational ethnography conducted with three fire and rescue services and one independent fire training organization in England between 2009 and 2012. The purpose of the study was to explore how organizational cultures and attitudes to stress influence how stress is discussed within the workplace and how the stress discourse influences employee engagement with organizational stress management interventions. My fieldwork coincided with a series of government reforms, spending cuts, and ongoing industrial action. As such, I found myself not only researching a sensitive topic (stress), but I was also researching during a time of tense industrial relations between the diverging occupational groups within the fire service. Over the course of my fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of the gap that existed between these groups and the impact that this gap was having on their perceptions of each other’s worth and value to the service. As I entered the writing stage of my research, I pondered over how to present my findings without, on the one hand, exposing the identity of the organizations (and the individuals within them), but, on the other hand, giving the reader an insight into the various interpretations of events, the disconnects in thinking and ideology, and the gender and hierarchical power struggles that I had encountered.

Humphreys and Watson (2009) highlight there are different perspectives across the social sciences as to how ethnography should be written. My frustrations as to how to write up my ethnography were further exacerbated by the norms of convention within my discipline. Much of the writing on workplace stress is situated with the organizational psychology domain which is dominated by ‘positivist-orientated editorial positions’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2014: 58). As such my work would be judged by the presuppositions of a conventional positivist stance and would therefore be deemed to lack scientific rigour unless presented in a conventional way. In their examination of ethnographic writing styles, Humphreys and Watson (2009) note that ethnographies vary in style from ‘minimally manipulated’ to ‘highlight manipulated’. They suggest that manipulated styles enable researchers to publish sensitive data whilst still maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. By their nature, ethnographic studies involve a small number of research settings and therefore there is a greater risk that the identity of the participants might be made visible (Murphy and Dingwall 2001). In this paper, I propose that presenting ethnographic research in the form of an ethnodrama not only protects the identity of the research participants, but also affords the researcher greater creativity in bringing the findings to life for the reader. An ethnodrama is a way of presenting ethnographic research data in the form of a drama script that is made up of important extracts from interview notes and field notes, thus enabling the data to be presented in a ‘living’ and multidimensional form rather than a flat textual form (Saldaña 2011). I selected to present the drama in three acts that for me, symbolized the different actors involved in the service. Presenting the data in this way enabled me to better highlight the ‘gaps’ I had observed between these different stakeholders. Presenting data in this form also enables the researcher to blur the boundaries between the ‘artistic’ and ‘scientific’ in a creative way that immerses the reader in the complexities and dilemmas of difficult and contested issues (Saldaña 2005).
choice of ethno drama enabled me to present my ethnography in a ‘safe’, ethical, but provocative way, that brought the daily complexities of the fire and rescue service to life.

MIND THE GAP: AN ETHNO-DRAMA IN THREE ACTS

Act 1: On the Inside Looking In: An Exploration of Traditional Firefighter Culture

Location: The meeting / training room of a 1970s-built fire station located on the edge of an industrial estate. The station, although dated, is well-maintained and spotlessly clean.

Characters:
Watch Manager (mid 40s, male)
Crew Manager (mid 30s, male)
Firefighter 1 (mid 40s, male)
Firefighter 2 (early 20s, male)
Firefighter 3 (late 20s, male)
Firefighter 4 (late 30s, male)
Firefighter 5 (early 20s, male)
The Researcher (mid 40s, female)

Scene: The watch manager arrives with a large tray of cups and a teapot. He puts the tray down on a table at the front of the room. The firefighters and crew manager follow him into the room. They are all dressed in uniform. They take a cup of tea from the tray, acknowledge the researcher, and sit down. The chairs are positioned in a semicircle around the back and sides of the room and they face the researcher’s chair which is situated on its own at the front of the room.

Watch Manager Are we ready lads? (Firefighter 3 shouts ‘order, order’ and the firefighters settle down.) This is Angela. She has come here today to talk to us about stress.

Firefighter 3 (jokingly) Well you’re in the right place for that! (Some of the firefighters laugh and gesture their agreement. Firefighter 1 rolls his eyes and changes his posture to position himself facing away from the researcher and facing one of the windows at the side of room).

Researcher (smiling) Thank you for letting me speak with you today. Let’s start by discussing the demands of your work.

Watch Manager We’re dealing with major incidents. You are going from calm to carnage and making life and death decisions based on your training and you don’t have the opportunity for routine. You know? You are suddenly dropped into someone’s life at a moment’s notice. So, you don’t have much preparation time, but you do have similar experiences to draw on.

Crew Manager Don’t underestimate the chaos. You have good days and bad days and some really bad days.

Researcher Is the job stressful?
Watch Manager We deal with stressful situations after all we are dealing with people under stress, often families.

Firefighter 1 The job is not very nice at times, but it is not stressful. You are trained to do the job, so you just get on doing it.

Firefighter 2 There are personal things and incident things. Sometimes it’s the things at home that get you. Stress at work depends on your personal life. If things are calm at home, then they are calm at work.

Firefighter 3 (Laughingly) I come to work to get away from stress! (Some of the others gesture in agreement).

Watch Manager We have to respond to an incident within minutes and this takes a level of stress to fulfil that demand. But it is a different type of stress, it’s the quick response stuff and then afterwards you reflect on the experience and on how you resolved it. That can be the stressful bit. Wondering if you did the right thing that is.

Firefighter 1 Stress is a strong word. You just get on with it, there’s nothing you can do about it. Shit happens. It’s the job we do.

Firefighter 4 I think the stressful things are all the changes they are making to our terms and conditions. (There is a general nodding of agreement around the room).

Firefighter 1 Aye the dream factory! (The others laugh)

Firefighter 4 The gaffers, they are always coming up with some new rule or procedure or something.

Watch Manager This makes things frustrating as you don’t have any control over new equipment or new procedures that are brought in. No one listens to your opinions. There seems to be a lot of change for the sake of it, but we can’t see the benefit of the changes. There is a real gap now between them (support functions) and us. In fact, I would say we are two separate organizations.

Firefighter 4 There are lots of departments, but I don’t know what half of them are for or what they do. There are some ridiculous roles. You can be a person in charge of being in charge.

Researcher Are other roles in the service experiencing similar issues?

Firefighter 1 You would have to ask them. I don’t know what any of the others do.

Firefighter 4 It’s the front line that matters and when there are cutbacks you have to cut back on the dispensable roles. Their numbers have gone up and ours have gone down.

Crew Manager I think all the gaffer roles have become more stressful.

Firefighter 4 Aye but they’re paid to take it. (Some of the others laugh).
**Reseacher** So is stress regularly talked about in the service?

**Firefighter 3** We use the term jokingly but it’s not really an environment where we talk about it.

**Watch Manager** Stress is considered a bit wimpy. *(He looks around to the others)* Can you imagine if I said to Smithy that I was stressed? He would tell me to fuck off and not be so soft! *(The others laugh).*

**Crew Manager** It can be a dangerous environment to talk about stress. We have to be physically and mentally fit to be operational and if you are not considered operationally fit there is a lot of stigma attached to that. You need to realize the type of environment we work in.

**Reseacher** So how do you cope?

**Firefighter 3** We have a good whinge. Why do you think we invited you here! *(The others laugh but Firefighter 1 rolls his eyes.)*

**Firefighter 2** There is great camaraderie. We work together, train together we even socialize together. We spend a lot of time together. We’re like a family.

**Crew Manager** We trust one another. This trust is built on competence and experience. You know that your colleagues can do the job and have your back.

**Watch Manager** Yes that’s true when we go to an incident I can step back and look around to make sure all is ok because I don’t have to tell these lads what to do - they instinctively know what to do. They have their experience to draw on and experience carries currency.

**Crew Manager** Experience is important. When you have experienced an incident before, you know how to deal with it and therefore it doesn’t faze you.

**Watch Manager** We also have very clear procedures and a chain of command to support us. That’s really important because you always think afterwards did I do anything wrong? Could I have done anything better? That’s why the procedures and the risk assessments are important.

**Firefighter 2** A lot of it depends on the incident. Some incidents are worse than others. You try to remain detached and not make a connection but sometimes you stop thinking about the job and just for a moment you are living the experience and seeing all the emotion and hearing all the screaming and shouting and pain but then you have to close it down and get back to work – you have to be detached or you couldn’t cope.

**Watch Manager** Sometimes it’s hard though when there are kids involved and you make a connection because you have kids yourself. Just now and again you encounter something that you can personally relate. That is hard.

**Firefighter 2** Sometimes it’s the not knowing that I find hard. We don’t really find out what happens to people after the incident. Do you remember that house fire where the woman wasn’t insured, and she was in a hell of a state cos she had lost everything? I often think about her when I pass that house on the way in to work. It’s all done up again now you know.
Crew Manager There is great camaraderie in the team and after an incident we all come back and have a cup of tea and talk about it.

Firefighter 3 Magic cream!¹

Watch Manager We often just sit in the canteen and have a cup of tea. If you want to talk you can. If you don’t, that’s ok too. But at least you’re not on your own. Even if the incident happens at the end of a shift we will all stay back and have a cup of tea.

Firefighter 2 Sometimes we talk about the incident and think about if we could have done anything better. It’s important to have someone else around you when you’re thinking like that or you could drive yourself mad.

Watch Manager Sitting around together is a very important part of the watch’s therapy. The gaffers who move up the ranks move away from the tea table and that’s a detrimental step because they move out of the family unit. I can’t imagine going home after an incident without having had the chance to talk to the lads. It must be very lonely.

(At that point we hear a door close and footsteps along the corridor)

Firefighter 3 Do you hear that? The lonely steps of a lonely station manager. (The others laugh).

Crew Manager As you can see we use a lot of humour.

Firefighter 1 Aye gallows humour!

Watch Manager On that note I think we will call it a day. Thank you, Angela. Lads if you can just stay back. Gerry (pseudonym for the crew manager), can you take Angela back to reception.

Researcher Thank you so much for all of your input.

(Some of the group say goodbye to the researcher. The crew manager walks with the researcher to the yard and says goodbye.)

Act 2: On the Inside Looking Out: An Exploration of the Drivers for Change

Location: The community meeting room of a recently built community fire station. The building is modern and clean and fire safety posters and information adorn the walls.

Characters:
Operational Manager 1 (mid 40s, male)
Operational Manager 2 (mid 40s, male)
Operational Manager 3 (mid 30s, male)
Operational Manager 4 (late 30s, male)
Operational Manager 5 (mid 30s, female)
Operational Manager 6 (early 40s, male)
The Researcher (mid 40s, female)
Scene: The researcher is the first to arrive and is accompanied to the training room by the receptionist. The Operational Managers start to arrive, acknowledge and researcher and each other. All of the managers are in uniform. One of the managers asks the receptionist to bring in some refreshments. The managers engage in conversations with one another, on their mobile phones, and with the researcher until the refreshments arrive.

Researcher Thank you for giving up your time to meet with me today. Shall we start by discussing the demands of the sector?

Operational Manager 1 The modernization agenda has had a big impact on the sector. It has changed our mission, our ways of working, and how we are measured. The role of a firefighter has changed significantly as a result and they have seen a lot of changes to their terms and conditions which they don’t always agree with.

Operational Manager 2 We now spend more time on prevention duties like checking people’s smoke alarms and doing talks in the community and schools. For those that have been with the service for a while it has been difficult to adjust.

Operational Manager 3 Public perceptions have not kept up to date with these changes and the public don’t appreciate the constraints we have to deal with. We now work in a risk assessment culture and we have to justify all the decisions we make based on our assessment of risk.

Operational Manager 2 Sometimes when you arrive at an incident you have to hold the public back from rushing into the fire. When you arrive, they expect you to just rush in. They are shouting ‘get in there’, ‘what are you waiting for?’ They don’t realize that you can’t just rush in there.

Operational Manager 4 We have similar issues. Why should firefighters risk their lives in situations like that and why do the public think it is ok?

Operational Manager 1 At the end of the day we are responsible for the safety of our crews and we don’t put them in situations that we consider too risky.

Researcher Which occupations would you consider the most stressful in the sector?

Operational Manager 4 Management roles are stressful. As you move up through the ranks the stressors increase. Before you take on a management role you aren’t prepared because you don’t know what those stressors will be until you do it. But we have a terrible workload. We are pulled in all directions and suddenly everything is classed as priority. We have mobiles and we are never off duty.

Researcher Is stress talked about in the sector?

Operational Manager 2 We don’t talk about it much. We don’t have any problems with stress such as high sickness rates well, not with the crews anyhow.

Operational Manager 5 There is still a stigma attached to stress. This is still a very male dominated macho culture. We don’t do stress!
Operational Manager 6 The watches tend to deal with stress on the shift. You spend a lot of time on your watch. You can also spend most of your working life on the same watch and you develop a very deep bond. You look out for one another on the job and you tend to close ranks and protect someone when they are going through a hard time.

Operational Manager 5 On the watch you are a family. You work as a collective and there is collective thinking. You recognize changes in one another’s behaviour because you know one another. You protect one another.

Operational Manager 4 This was criticized in a recent audit. It highlighted that the watches were too insular. But you miss that closeness when you move up through the ranks. When you’re a manager you don’t have a team who you can talk to. It can be a very lonely role. It is particularly hard when you have come up through the ranks and so you have experienced that closeness and then you find yourself on your own.

Researcher So how do you cope?

Operational Manager 6 I don’t think we do. We use the term ‘manager flu’. You start to notice those around you at the same level all going through the same thing and it gets to us all. As you move up your support network disappears.

Researcher What interventions do you have in place?

Operational Manager 2 We have very good interventions. We have counselling and trauma services. The problem is though that the counselling service is self-referral so the onus is on the individual and if that individual is in denial they don’t use the service.

Operational Manager 3 Trauma services can be very effective. The problem here is that it is up to the discretion of the watch manager. If he doesn’t think they are needed, then he won’t call them in and yet there may be someone who needs them.

Operational Manager 5 This is a flaw in the system. Although you can all be at the same incident there are so many different positions you can take up. The incident may have been ok for the majority, but it may have been more significant for others. The watch manager can be too much of a barrier to the crews getting the help they need. Should it really be up to one individual to decide if support is needed?

Operational Manager 2 When I was a watch manager we attended an incident and the person was dead. We all came back to the station, debriefed, and continued life as normal. Over the next few weeks however one of the crew’s demeanour and behaviour changed to a point where I had to intervene. I found out that this was his first fatality and every time he used the equipment he had been using at the scene, it reminded him of the dead body. We got him support and everything was fine. But we could have done something about it earlier. You always remember your first. I can still remember mine. So, it is important that the watches are open to this.

Operational Manager 6 We are trying to address this by having stress awareness sessions with all the crews but not everyone engages with these. I have been embarrassed by the behaviour and attitude
of some of the crews to these sessions. It will take a long time to change attitudes to stress in this culture.

**Operational Manager 5** We have come a long way, but we still have a way to go.

**Researcher** Thank you for your input.

**Operational Manager 1** Thank you for your interest. Good luck with your research.

(They shake hands and say goodbye. Manager 1 walks with the researcher back to reception. They shake hands once more and say goodbye.)

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**Act 3: On the Outside Looking In: An Exploration of the Anomie of Not Belonging**

**Location:** A meeting room in the headquarters building. The building is old and located on the outskirts of a city centre.

**Characters:**
- Support Manager 1 (mid 30s, female)
- Support Manager 2 (mid 40s, female)
- Support Manager 3 (early 50s, female)
- Support Manager 4 (early 40s, female)
- The Researcher (early 40s, female)

**Scene:** The researcher is the first to arrive and is escorted to the room by the receptionist. The room is adorned with pictures of fires and firefighters in action, and various awards that the service has received. There is a glass cabinet which houses a number of antique pieces of firefighter equipment. The managers start to make their way into the room one-by-one and take up a seat around the boardroom table.

**Researcher** Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. Shall we start by discussing the demands of the sector?

**Support Manager 1** I think the key issue we are all dealing with at the moment are the cuts. This has led to incredible uncertainty in the sector.

**Support Manager 3** We are currently going through a review of all roles in our service and this has been going on for some time now.

**Support Manager 2** It is hard for us to manage this process because we do not know if our jobs are safe. Yet we have to put a smile on and say, ‘don’t worry’. We are like swans. On the surface we are calm and in control but underneath you are thinking ‘I can’t book a holiday this year’, ‘I can’t think about that new car’. The uncertainty has a big impact on all areas of your life.

**Support Manager 4** The brigade has never been in this situation before. Traditionally people didn’t leave the service until they retired but this has changed.
Support Manager 3 The current climate has also led to a lot competition in the support roles. People are fighting for their jobs and don’t care about stepping on others to prove their worth. Some departments are keeping stuff to themselves rather than sharing it. They want to look over-worked and send a message that they are too important to be cut. But this leaves other departments more vulnerable.

Support Manager 1 There is no team work anymore. You just get trampled over. The team spirit has long since gone from the brigade. But it has also led to a widening of the ‘them’ and ‘us’ between the operational and non-operational functions and an assumption that some roles are more important than others. There is an attitude of ‘you can’t touch us’ in the operational roles and they think that they are safe from the cuts because they are too important.

Support Manager 2 It will be the support staff that will take the biggest hit and they know that.

Support Manager 3 The non-operational roles have always been considered less important. You’re only considered important if you are in an operational role.

Support Manager 2 The mood is very stressed here at the moment.

Researcher Is this the same across all the roles?

Support Manager 4 I think that non-operational managers are more exposed to stress and in particular female managers. We have less control over our workloads than the operational roles. We have to work long hours and we are pulled all over. We constantly have to justify figures, meet deadlines and there is always someone criticizing or picking fault in what you have done. You dread making a mistake. There is such a big blame culture.

Support Manager 3 We work in a debriefing culture. Always going back over things to see if things could be done better and as a result your decisions are always being questioned.

Support Manager 1 As your level of seniority increases so do the pressures. We work in a very competitive male-dominated culture and you have to constantly over perform to prove your worth.

Support Manager 2 There is a lack of respect for non-operational managers from the operational staff. They don’t really respect your skills and experience because it is not the same as theirs. They have a very insular and control orientated attitude. They are mainly home-grown managers. By that I mean they joined the service as young firefighters and have progressed up through the operational ranks and they stay with the service until retirement.

Support Manager 3 They have limited experience of the world outside the service and very insular views about how things should be done. As a female manager you are considered a bit of a shrinking violet who will not survive in their tough macho world.

Support Manager 2 I think it is a much bigger issue though. There is a media hype around too many pen pushers in the public sector draining the country of its resources. We are not only devalued by the service but also by society.
Support Manager 1 The firefighters are considered the heroes and so you feel guilty if you feel stressed. After all, you are not the one risking your life to save someone else’s. You don’t feel you have the right to be stressed.

Researcher Do you consider the operational roles more stressful?

Support Manager 1 They don’t really consider their roles stressful. They are pressurized but not stressful. They are well-trained and have a lot of specialist equipment. They tend to talk about trauma more than stress.

Support Manager 3 They talk about cuts, change, management, but they don’t talk about stress. I think in their world it is considered taboo.

Support Manager 1 I don’t think in my time here I have ever encountered a firefighter on sick leave with stress.

Support Manager 4 They don’t use the occupational counselling service much either.

Support Manager 3 The operational staff tend to deal with stress on the shift. We have a family tree of operational staff with many of our firefighters being third or fourth generation firefighters. As a third-generation firefighter you have an established tradition of how to cope and what is normal. Rather than use the formal interventions they tend to sort things out in their watch.

Support Manager 2 They have a very strong family bond and they protect one another.

Support Manager 1 Sometimes this has a negative impact though. We have had cases where the firefighter actually needed professional help and not just family help. Sometimes this protection can do more harm than good, resulting in the firefighter slipping into a downward spiral. By the time they come in for formal interventions they are often too far gone.

Researcher Is this the same for the non-operational roles?

Support Manager 2 The high sickness levels are in the non-operational functions. We have quite a number of support staff absent with stress at the moment. Some of them on long-term sicknesses.

Support Manager 3 I think attitudes to stress are changing though. As we get more diverse I think this will force change. We have very good interventions in place and we are trying to encourage staff to talk about stress more. We have an excellent occupational health unit, counsellors, and trauma services.

Support Manager 1 I think as a manager though you are expected to be strong. To be there for your team. We do have some excellent interventions, but I think we still have a long way to go.

Researcher Thank you for giving up your time to meet me.

Support Manager 3 Thank you for involving us.

(The managers acknowledge the researcher and one-by-one, get up and leave the room. One of the managers stays behind and escorts the researcher to reception. They shake hands and say goodbye.)
Reflections on Act 1

The title for Act 1 (On the inside looking in: An exploration of traditional firefighter culture) reflects the insular and sometimes egocentric views presented by firefighters. The location (a fire station on the edge of an industrial estate) here is used to symbolize both their perceived isolation from ‘the management’ and their remoteness and reluctance to empathize with the other occupational groups. Although I visited a mix of old and more recently built fire stations, I have situated Act 1 in an ‘older’ fire station to represent the significance that firefighters place on tradition and experience. The description of the fire station serves to highlight the importance placed on order, control, and cleanliness. The service is characterized by clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and operating procedures. The opening of Act 1 also captures the significance of the uniform which serves as a visual manifestation of firefighter identity and rank. Firefighters take great pride in their appearance, symbolizing their pride at working for the service. I have also included a reference to tea which was a recurring event during my time spent on station and this ritual appeared to serve a number of purposes. First, it brought the crews together as a family unit. Second, it provided a temporal structure to their long shifts. Finally, it was an integral part of the watches’ informal therapy of debriefing tactics. The characters portray the typical behaviours of this occupational group. Firefighter 1 exemplifies the resistance to engage in the stress discourse; Firefighter 2 exemplifies the more ‘modern thinking’ and sensitive firefighter; Firefighter 3 exemplifies the joker, the playfulness endemic in the service to counteract such a demanding role; and Firefighter 4 exemplifies the general reticence towards the non-operational functions and ‘the management’; Firefighter 5 exemplifies the ‘silent participant’, the firefighters who were present but did not participant in the conversation. The watch manager and the crew manager exemplify the firefighter passion and commitment to their team and the service.

Reflections on Act 2

The title for this Act (On the inside looking out: An exploration of the drivers for change) portrays the complex contradiction of cultures experienced by these managers. As operational staff they have progressed from a firefighter role and are therefore deeply embedded in this traditional culture. However, working in a management role, they are now more exposed to the complexities and difficulties of managing the service and to different and often conflicting ideologies and views. This group focused on change in the service and more specifically changes which had been introduced as a result of the government’s public sector reform agenda. These changes included a stronger emphasis for the service on prevention and the introduction of a series of corporate health and service delivery performance measures. I situated this Act in one of the more recently built community fire stations to reflect this merging of cultures and to illustrate the paradox of a service more focused on the community and yet a public who hold outdated views and unrealistic expectations as to what the service should provide.

However, although this occupational group had a strong attachment to the firefighter culture, they also appreciated the drivers for change in the sector. They considered that this had resulted in their roles becoming more stressful as they were increasingly caught between the conflicting expectations of firefighters and the fire authority. They used the term ‘manager flu’ to describe how they struggled to cope with the demands of their work without the resource of a support network (the watch) as this key coping resource was lost on moving up through the ranks. Throughout my research, I made repeated reference to stressed out managers and I reflected on the significance placed on a team
support in this environment. This group of managers were struggling to adapt to a new way of coping without their close team. The strong cultural residues associated with team working and team coping have left them vulnerable in their now individually-focused role. However, they did not openly engage in the stress discourse, as in the service ‘we don’t do stress’. They explained the efforts being made to change this stigma and improve awareness, but they also described the resistance of some of the crews to these changes. The managers discussed the tertiary interventions in place in the service however they reflected on some of the barriers to accessing these, for example, they considered that watch managers had too much latitude in the decision to engage intervention services. They emphasized that not all watch members will appraise the situation in the same way as much will depend on individual experience and the tasks undertaken during the incident (for example some firefighters may be more involved with causalities than others) and therefore watch managers need to be more sensitive to individual firefighter appraisal.

**Reflections on Act 3**

The title of this Act (On the outside looking in: An exploration of the anomie of not belonging) emphasizes the feelings of alienation experienced by this group of managers who lie outside of the dominant firefighter culture. I situated this Act in a headquarters building as throughout my discussions with firefighters, they made repeated reference to ‘HQ’ as if it were some alien planet. However, the description of the headquarters building emphasizes that although headquarters tend to be staffed by support occupations, they display the visual artefacts of the firefighter culture. Working in a culture centred on the values of the dominant occupational group has a knock-on impact for those outside of this dominant occupation. The support managers considered that there was a general lack of respect for the support functions and they considered that the threat was greater for female managers who were considered ‘shrinking violets’ who could not survive in the ‘tough macho world’. They also discussed how the tradition of debriefing that underpins the firefighter culture exacerbates this competitive climate resulting in a ‘blame ethos’ and a fear of making mistakes.

This group focused on the uncertainly in the sector created by the government’s comprehensive spending review and on the climate in the service of downsizing and budget cuts. They discussed how the spending review would have a direct impact on their roles as the job cuts would be made in the support functions rather than the operational functions. In addition, the current media attention on ‘pen pushers’ in the public service had further heightened their sense of threat and they considered that they were not only undervalued by their own service but also by society. They discussed the impact of the job review process, which they considered has resulted in a loss of camaraderie and team work in the support occupations and created competition amongst, rather than support for each other. However, although they were dealing with this uncertainty and negativity, they highlighted that they do not engage with the stress discourse as they do not consider that they perform the dangerous role and therefore they do not have the right to be stressed. However, they explained that there were high sickness levels in the support occupations. They also discussed firefighter reluctance to engage with the stress discourse or the formalized stress interventions. They considered that sometimes professional rather than ‘family’ help is needed and that this family protection can ultimately be detrimental to the individual firefighter.
Final Reflections

The title for this piece is ‘Mind the Gap’ as over the course of my fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of disconnects in views and ideologies between the different occupational groups that make up a modern-day fire and rescue service. The use of the ethnodrama enabled me to ‘safely’ present these disconnects without them being attributed to a particular organization or individual. As such, the reader is presented with a glimpse into the ‘performance’ and identity work that played out in the interviews with the three occupational groups, including my own performance as the researcher. Writing such a piece as a linear text would have lost the tension, the ‘drama’ that was pervading their everyday life during a time of uncertainty and change. Dramas of identity, of worth, of value, of loss; dramas that all played out within those interviews. I therefore suggest that writing an ethnography as an ethnodrama can facilitate a richer and more contextualized version of the ‘truth’ when researching sensitive topics, between divergent groups, during times of poor industrial relations, uncertainty and change.

References


Saldaña, J., 2011 Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stag Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.


Notes

1 They used a number of metaphors for ‘tea’ including ‘magic cream’ and ‘fire tea’.

2 Fatality or significant incident.

3 The traditional name for the fire and rescue service.

4 The majority of support managers were female, and the majority of firefighters and operational managers were male.