

Chapter 20

Conclusion: Understanding Emergency Services in Austerity Conditions

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‘Money is being withdrawn from basic life-giving services.’

Simon Bray, National Police Chief Council¹

Abstract:

This chapter summarizes the core themes explored in this volume on *Critical Perspectives on the Management and Organization of Emergency Services*, as part of the Routledge Critical Studies in Public Management Series. The coverage depicts substantial differences in terms of organizational and management practices across the blue-light services, but also suggests significant changes affecting the nature of work, organization, managerial scrutiny and professional identity in these services. One of the highlights of this volume is to incorporate the knowledge of both; the professional experts and academics in improving our understanding and knowledge of these important but under-researched public services. A call for further research in a thinly researched field is also made for management scholars and researchers.

Key words:

Emergency services, austerity, collaborative research, paradox, market pressures, complexity, uniformed organizations.

Author biographies:

Leo McCann is Professor of Management at the University of York. His academic background is in the disciplines of sociology and history. His research and teaching interests range over the following areas: work and employment; globalization and social change; and management history. Leo’s research is usually based on qualitative, ethnographic investigation and writing, often exploring the everyday struggles and rewards of professional working life across many occupations. He is particularly interested in the organizational conflicts that often arise between professional discretion versus centralized control and

¹ ‘Huge rise in ambulance callouts as ‘spice’ drug takes toll on homeless’, *The Guardian*, 21 September 2018

measurement. His recent research has focused in particular on white-collar and uniformed professionals, and he is currently working on a new book on NHS ambulance paramedics, to be published by Oxford University Press. He has published his research work in journals such as *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies*, *Organization, Work, Employment & Society*, and *Public Administration*. He is the author of *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, and Reasonably Cheap Book About Globalization* (London, Sage). He can be contacted at leo.mccann@york.ac.uk.

Paresh Wankhade is a Professor of Leadership and Management at Edge Hill University Business School, UK. He is the Programme leader for the UK's first bespoke Professional Doctorate in Emergency Services Management. He is also the Editor-In-Chief of *International Journal of Emergency Services*. His research and publications focus on analyses of strategic leadership, organisational culture, organisational change and interoperability within the public services with a focus on blue light services. Paresh has published in major journals including: *Work, Employment and Society*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Public Management Review*, *Regional Studies*, *Public Money and Management* and *International Journal of Public Sector Management*. His recent work (co-authored with professionals) has explored leadership and management perspectives in the Ambulance , Police and Fire & Rescue Services. He is currently working on a monograph analysing the interoperability and collaboration challenges for the emergency services.

Pete Murphy is Professor of Public Policy and Management and Head of Research at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. He is Vice Chair (Research) of the Public Administration Committee of the Joint Universities Council, and a member of the Advisory Board of the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Prior to joining the business school in 2009 he was a senior civil servant in four Whitehall departments, was a director of the Government Office for the East Midlands and is a former Chief Executive of Melton Borough Council in Leicestershire. Originally a planning officer by profession he was responsible for emergency planning and co-ordinating the response to emergencies at local, regional and national levels for over 30 years. His current research focusses on public policy, public assurance and the governance, scrutiny and value for money arrangements of locally delivered public services.

Scope

The chapters in this book cover a wide array of substantive and conceptual issues, showing the considerable differences in terms of how management, work and organization is structured across blue-light services. They also document significant changes affecting the nature of work, organization, managerial scrutiny and professional identity. Some of these changes can be regarded as largely progressive, as emergency work becomes professionalized and develops a more scientific evidence base, as technological capacity grows, as more inter-agency working takes place, and as the scope of professional practice broadens. We have also seen some significant developments whereby policy change has led to changed priorities for uniformed work, such as a much greater focus on ‘new’ forms of crime or harm that have a history of being neglected, such as domestic violence. Emergency organizations are learning and developing, adapting to the changing society around them.

But the chapters equally show just how much these organizations are struggling. Budgetary pressures have been extremely challenging given ten years of austerity measures since the global financial crash of 2007-8. Many emergency service organizations face not only very heavy demand, but also complicated changes in the nature of this demand. They face constant external scrutiny, regular changes in government policy, and a barrage of official reports informing them of the various ways in which they are inadequate and the requirements for change. Austerity conditions have in particular created a climate in which public service providers’ demands for increased funding will be received with government skepticism; instead these bodies can more realistically expect to receive instruction to eliminate ‘waste’, seek ‘efficiency savings’, and be ‘more effective’ with what scarce resources they already have (see for example NHS Improvement, 2018). Reflective of the dominance of neoliberal approaches to governance, the ‘Gold Standards’ and ‘best practices’ for efficiency and effectiveness are to be found primarily in cutting-edge private sector companies (Brown, 2015; Steger and Roy, 2010). It follows from this logic that public sector organizations should emulate multinational corporations and take managerial, accounting, and marketing lessons from global consulting firms, as if doing so would provide straightforward, uncontroversial, technical fixes.

Emergency service organizations will never enjoy the profile, status, influence and power of global consulting or finance corporations. But one could argue that, nevertheless, they are becoming increasingly high-profile. There has always been an enduring public interest in uniformed emergency work as heroic and indispensable, and their public role may become yet more prominent due to what many see as a broader social climate of anxiety and heightened sensitivities to risk, harm and victimhood (Bude, 2019; Linke and Smith, 2009). While financial and operational pressures are unlikely to ease, it could be that the symbolic capital of the ‘romantic’ or ‘heroic’ discourses associated with emergency work could be on the rise. Emergency services themselves are becoming increasingly commercialized in their form and structure, relying ever more on subcontractors and volunteer roles, appointing

‘business managers’ and marketing consultants, and trying to shape their public agenda in an increasingly hypermediated society (Granter et al, 2015).

The pressures they face are immense and multifaceted. The nature of work in today’s blue-light organizations is akin to life in a ‘greedy institution’ (Coser, 1974) – organizations that ‘make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality’ (1974: 4). While there are potentially large existential rewards to being part of an organization or culture with a lofty mission of serving the public and protecting the vulnerable, the pressures and strains faced by emergency organizations and the professionals who staff them are becoming increasingly troublesome. While in some ways their recent experiences of change reflect an increasing sophistication and growing responsiveness to social need, ceaseless operational pressure and strain can create a paradox that those who embody emergency services roles might be becoming ever more alienated in their roles and resentful of governments that provide them with insufficient support and trust.

The chapters of this book, we hope, have gone some way to providing a holistic and critical understanding of the roles of emergency organizations in contemporary society. As editors, it has been a particular pleasure to be able to incorporate the writings and thoughts of experienced emergency service practitioners alongside those of our academic colleagues. We hope that this volume will be of use to both. But, as with any research endeavor, there is always the sense that the book only scratches the surface and there remains much more to learn. If we are to understand the role of these ‘basic life-giving services’ in the detail they deserve, then we need further collaborative research that is sensitive to the often intense and sometimes unique paradoxes and complexities of emergency service working life.

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