

Laugh it up or Laugh it off;

The Use of Humour within the Fire Service as a
Way of Constructing, Managing and Coping with
Emotionality

Lauren Alexandra Ward, Jane
Callaghan and Lisa Fellin
The University of Northampton

Aims and Background:

Previous research:

- Exploring how emotion was constructed within the military, using interviews and analysing recruitment campaigns.

Current research:

- To explore how gendered discourses shape how occupational roles are understood
- To explore how discourses of emotionality are moderated by these gendered discourses, and constructions of professionalism

The Fire Service

- Disciplined, regimented, closed yet open organisation
- Shift Patterns and changing nature of the fire service
- Argued to be a highly masculinised subculture, dominated by males.
- Emotions argued to be inconsistent with being a 'competent' fire fighter (i.e. Being calm).

Previous Research: Humour

- **Humour as a coping 'mechanism';**
Effective Vs Ineffective
- **Humour as medicinal;**
Healthy Vs Unhealthy
- **Humour as a form of expression;**
Appropriate Vs. Inappropriate
- **Humour as a social Lubricant;**
Positive Vs. Negative

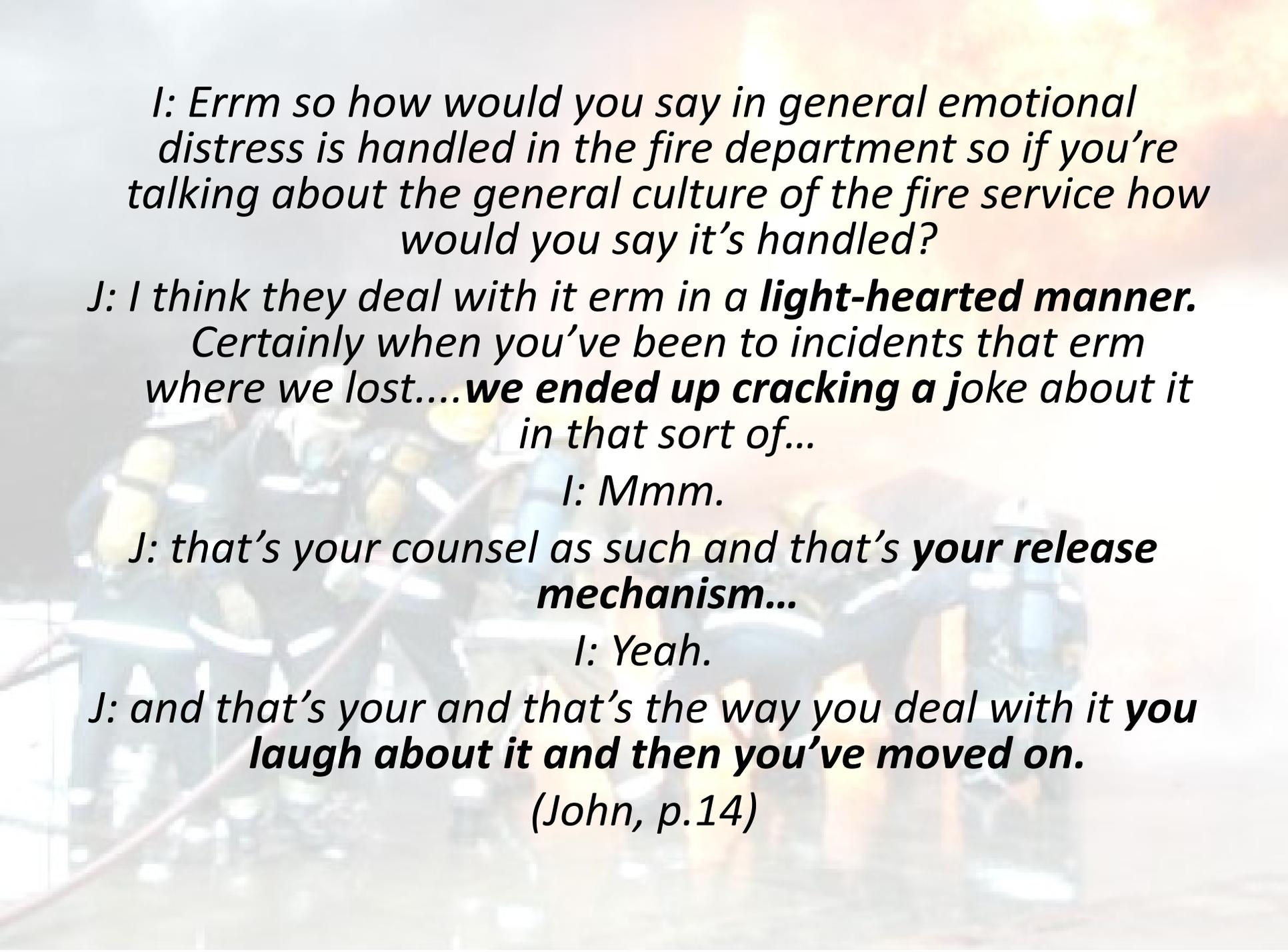
Previous Research: Humour and the Fire Service

- **Lack of research on the Fire Service**
- **Issues with measurement**
- **Slitter, Kale and Yuan (2014):**
 1. Humour as coping; a 'buffer' with 'curative properties'
 2. Humour as a bonding strategy
 3. Humour as a demonstration of 'getting by'
- **Fear of 'real' emotion as a facilitator?** (Farnsworth and Sewell, 2011)

Method



- Recruitment Pathways
- Interview Schedule
- Interviews



I: Errm so how would you say in general emotional distress is handled in the fire department so if you're talking about the general culture of the fire service how would you say it's handled?

*J: I think they deal with it erm in a **light-hearted manner**. Certainly when you've been to incidents that erm where we lost....**we ended up cracking a joke** about it in that sort of...*

I: Mmm.

*J: that's your counsel as such and that's **your release mechanism**...*

I: Yeah.

*J: and that's your and that's the way you deal with it **you laugh about it and then you've moved on**.*

(John, p.14)

I: Ooh... um... so what **would you say you find most stressful in your role**, would you say?

B: Yeah, I've, I don't think I'm a stressful person... erm... I don't think stress gets me down.

I: Mmm.

B: but I suppose **the things that effect me more are, dealing directly with people in trauma cases**, or...

I: :Yeah.

B: cases of loss, in house loss, so actually dealing with them as... I wouldn't say stressful... yeah... it's, yeah (rubbing of skin) **I wouldn't say stressful it's not, I don't get stressed, I probably get more stressed about my scrambled eggs on toast...**

I: (laughs)

B: "why can't you do it right", you know and that...

(Brent,P27)

I: Yeah, so **how do you deal with the frustration when you get back from the job** then, like what ways?

A: Well you sort of **take the mickey** out of each other with sort of dark humour...

I: :Dark humour, yeah.

A: Ermm.. **nowadays we have to be careful** about how much we take the mickey out of each other because of...

I: Yeah, what if someone says something that...

A: yeah, **someone else is getting offended by it** so...

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah **it's just laugh and a joke between ourselves.**

(Andy, p9)

J: whereas, I wouldn't say that that's a natural female trait to make light of a bad situation as a way of dealing with it, it's if I'm honest in what I've, what I've observed so...

(John, p.38)

I: So in speaking from your opinion how would you say the culture of the fire service deals with emotionally stressful events, like what do they?

B: It is literally going back to that talking.

I: Yeah.

*B: It is literally talking and convers- and **sometimes to the point of joking** and..*

I: Mmm.

*B: you know **I don't mean joking about something directly related to...***

I: Yep.

B: the incident but joking about the incidents or we tripped up or you know what I mean?

I: Mmm.

B: and some people I think deal with it that way again I, not me but you know some people come back and have a laugh but...

Conclusions and questions:

- Humour is produced as a **controlled and appropriate 'release' mechanism, managing this uncontrolled emotion**
- ...but, humour as risky to those that don't 'get it'**
- **The 'in' joke; Humour as a practice separates (and regulates) FF from non FF**
- 1. Does this represent a minimisation of distress? Or a reconstruction of effective coping?**
 - 2. Subjectivity of experience of humour?**
 - 3. How do those who do not 'get it' manage emotion? Are there other appropriate methods of coping?**