Chapter 18

Conclusion: Understanding Emergency Services in Austerity Conditions

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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 organisation are structured across blue light services. They also document significant changes affecting the nature of work, organisation, managerial scrutiny and professional identity. Some of these changes can be regarded as largely progressive, as emergency work becomes professionalised 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 organisations are learning and developing, adapting to the changing society around them.

But the chapters equally show just how much these organisations 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 organisations 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 scepticism; 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 organisations 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 organisations 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, 2018; 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 commercialised 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 organisations 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, p. 4). While there are potentially large existential rewards associated with being part of an organisation or culture with a lofty mission of serving the public and protecting the vulnerable, the pressures and strains faced by emergency organisations and the professionals who staff them are becoming increasingly troublesome. Senior professionals have bluntly complained that "money is being withdrawn from basic life-giving services".[1] 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 organisations 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 endeavour, 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.

References

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Note 1 'Huge rise in ambulance callouts as "spice" drug takes toll on homeless', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2018.