

Some Views on Risk Taking

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Firefighting is a complicated craft that utilizes, at the minimum, a great deal of technical knowledge and scientifically processed local information to provide vital public service. However, this application of technology and science must be applied at each specific fire by humans who need to have mastered not only the technical knowledge, but who possess certain skills and attitudes. In addition, firefighters need physical and emotional strengths which enable them to perform the necessarily wide variety of firefighter tasks, some of which are very harsh on the firefighter. (In some sense, medicine is a similar craft, with a scientific knowledge base, long-standing traditions, required skills and attitudes, sometimes negative results, and a desire for public service.) In preparation for this paper on risk taking, I read about firefighter heroism awards, had several long discussions with a friend who spent many years in the fire service, and thought about the countless fire type emergencies I've seen over decades of urban living. I soon understood something quite important: complicated and life-threatening decisions often have to be made very quickly by firefighters. This broadened my appreciation of what it is that such services fulfill, and my admiration for the people who fulfill them. People who enter this craft accept risk, possibly of the highest level, for the community. I've experienced the basics of risk, both in civilian and military settings, and in my own family, where scaffold construction workers such as my father, accepted frequent risks. (This included an uncle who fell off a scaffold and perished.) As I recited at my father's

funeral, “His livelihood was a high wire act...” But fire emergency services are something more, and I must confess, I cannot picture myself in such a role.

My task in this paper is to examine the concept of risk, since some percentage of firefighters who are injured or die each year experience injury or worse while working at fires and taking risks of some order and type. I have chosen to study several different questions having to do with the acceptance and management of risk, but first I want to point out that risk taking may be viewed in any of several formats. I selected “rational risk” and “irrational risk” as a format for examining risk taking in the world of firefighting. Here it occurs to me that both rationality and irrationality may be ascribed to a rescue after the fact, depending on whether the firefighter emerges safely. There may be a slim line between “Wow, he took one hell of a chance” and “How terrible; he was crazy to even try it” when one is considering rational and irrational risk taking

To begin, I reviewed the development of certain cultures to see if I could understand how people may be persuaded to act beyond common risk and accept even suicide as part of that culture or sub-culture. There have been large-scale suicidal agreements, for example, in several countries in recent years, and certainly suicide bombings. There, views are fatalistic –behaviors that devalue life are evident- and it is possible to convince even educated terrorists to commit suicide to make a political statement. One’s attitude toward life, risks, suicide, heroism, and bravado are determined by local culture and subculture, and that phenomenon would appear to have some relevance to firefighting crews, as it may to specialized military groups. As Professor Brian Wansink

observed to the Associated Press concerning his and Professor Collin Payne's 2007 study of military heroism, "The study underscores the effectiveness of team building in hazardous jobs, be it partnering police officers, having firefighters live together or organizing troops into units." Loyalty to the crew, concern for the well-being (safety) of other firefighters, and selflessness are quite evident, even in extreme cases where firefighters are trapped in burning buildings.

It would be interesting, through research, to identify the reasons which cause firefighters to go into buildings to rescue civilians, and those which cause them to take great risks to rescue other firefighters. Happily, there are countless examples of each. Of the 63 Firehouse magazine's 2007 "Heroism Awards" that I reviewed for this paper, three were for the rescue of firefighters and 60 for the rescue of civilian persons. In every case, high risk was evident on the part of the rescuers. In almost all of the cases, considering the circumstances, a lay person would pre-judge the rescuer's risk nature at that time as "irrational" or "almost irrational."

The second group I considered in my look at risk taking is composed of gambling addicts. Gambling addicts get a "rush" as they test out fate (they call it "luck") trying to achieve a permanent, positive fate over and over again: "Let's see if my luck is still holding out", until the job, the spouse, the savings, and self-esteem are gone. We know that there are those who get a rush in courting danger repeatedly. We often read in the news reports of public figures who apparently get turned on by affairs or by the misappropriation of funds, even though there is a high risk of discovery. Such gambling

Reducing Firefighter Deaths and Injuries: Changes in Concept, Policy, and Practice

tests out the danger of discovery, with turmoil in relationships, loss of esteem, public humiliation, career development, and even prison. There even may be dangers tested out that could result in serious injury or death. The latter two certainly are possibilities for those firefighters who repeatedly test out their fate/luck through risk taking.

Individuals, whether gambling for money, sex, or successful rescues, seldom make it through their entire gambling careers with fate and luck always on their side. Losing your credit rating, however, doesn't compare with losing your life, becoming seriously injured, or getting a permanent disability. (I never had much success with gamblers in my private practice, as they only came when they were losing, and could not pay their bills.)

There are those who get a "rush" courting danger repeatedly, and I judge that some low percentage of firefighters fall into that category. But while national character is a very slippery idea, it might explain some American excesses. I believe this is related to our history. Over the centuries there have been waves of migration starting with Europeans looking for new freedoms of religion, of social order and opportunity. They obviously were risk takers. I suppose that if the sailors who went with Columbus had not been risk-takers, our history might be changed from what it is. As an example of national character, I believe there is a great significance to the American Revolution which was not shared by Canada. Canadian character may have been significantly formed by its loyalties and patient waiting to have Dominion status extended within the hierarchy of European traditions of class. In contrast to the United States, in Canada I see no gun culture and a more obedient life pattern. The Canadian Medicare Plan of life-long

Reducing Firefighter Deaths and Injuries: Changes in Concept, Policy, and Practice

health care was achieved because doctors there accept a negotiated status and reward, and patients are more accepting of delays.

I recently saw a bumper sticker that said: "God, guns, and guts made America what it is. Let's keep them!" but the American national character is not easily defined. It is difficult to define American national character, especially viewing the many segments of its electorate. Over the centuries huge distinct groups poured in, but they amalgamated here for reasons of freedom and opportunity. The established patterns absorbed newcomers, and they entered this national character. Consider the development of Houston and San Francisco. People who came to Houston became Texans and Americans, and people who came to San Francisco and the free wheeling Gold Rush joined America with its defined character. So immigrants became Americans, and the nature of national character affects us all today, as it affected them. Firefighters, perhaps in some measure, are willing to take risk because risk-taking has been part of "the American Way."

The United States melting pot forms a vague structure of a country of free wheeling expectation. Part of the result of this, I expect, is the very strong concept we have of "local rule." This has resulted in an unusual organizational structure for the American fire service, contrasted to what exists in most other countries. We have thousands of autonomous fire departments, each of which governs itself, but, most importantly, we have a national fire service spirit and loyalty which bonds together individual firefighters, no matter what type of department, or where, they belong to. I'm told that fire trucks all

over our country have words painted on them which memorialize 9/11. That national firefighter bond must contribute to the tradition of risk-taking to save a life – no matter whose. Fortunately, this willingness has enabled a great many civilians and many firefighters over more than two centuries of American history to be saved from serious injury or death.

However, I understand that the purpose of this Symposium is to stimulate thinking about ways to reduce firefighter death and injury, and so I turn now to that issue. By extension, irrational risk implies chances taken when either the lives of others are not at risk, or when the chance of a successful rescue is below the limit of rationality. A problem arises at fires in forming a rational judgment, of course, because time is of the essence and information may be lacking. Never-the-less, potential rescue must be evaluated; not every life can be saved, and property destroyed does not equate with firefighter deaths. How to educate and train firefighters to approach action with rationality is the challenging task of training experts.

There are, I suspect, a very small percentage of firefighters who are influenced toward irrational risk taking by less altruistic reasons. My fire service friend told me a story of the firefighter who, by error, “rescued” a department store manikin. He was very disappointed not to be awarded an extra point on his next promotional exam. I often wondered why wealthy people get caught reaching for a little more. Money is an instrument, but the real prize is an ego trip. T.S. Eliot, in his play “the Cocktail Party”

has the psychiatrist proclaim: “All the trouble in the world is caused by people trying to be important.”

There is something adventurous and competitive in the United States in contrast with class and rank accomplishments in other countries. We seem to be reaching out for special recognition. In the fire service, this well may have an influence on practice.

There may be willingness to take that extra chance for distinction, and this may not be as present in other countries. Americans may be too adventurous and romantic. One more thought completes this cycle. Early in my psychoanalysis I reported to my European analyst that, as an American intern, scores were kept to see to see who could obtain the most agreements for autopsies from grieving families. These autopsies were needed for research and teaching. My analyst said, “Ach! In America is everything a contest?” Perhaps some have an inclination in emergency services to reach for a little more recognition? The research of Professors Wansink and Payne at Cornell University, who surveyed the characteristics of war heroes, revealed that medal winners tended to rate themselves higher in “adventurousness,” but that reluctant heroes scored higher in selflessness and working well with others.

In summary, this paper views some possible influences on risk taking as: cultural peer pressure; tendency to test luck or fate (gambling); national character; firefighter bonding; and hidden competitiveness. Whatever the motivation of the rescuer, however, a person typically does not argue with being rescued.

About the Author

Dr. Schulman is Board certified in Psychiatry and Neurology. He is a graduate of Princeton University and Downstate Medical School, NY. He was a Captain, Army Medical Corps and Director of the US Army Mental Hygiene Consultation Service, Ft. Polk, LA, a Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at New York Medical College and Senior Psychiatrist, Westchester Institute of Human Development. He recently retired from private practice.

About the Symposium

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