"I was a firefighter": Preserving Identities, Meaning, and Purpose in the Retirement Transition

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Abstract

Retirement can be a challenging transition for many of the working population. Research using the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) has documented the important health and well-being benefits of belonging to multiple groups when coping with this challenge. The present research focused on two aspects of the model that have been relatively unexplored in this body of work; notably, the impact on health of loss of meaningful identities central to self, and the role of group compatibility in the transition. The centrality of the firefighter identity to the self-concept makes this an ideal population with which to explore issues of loss of meaning and (in)compatibility through retirement. Thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with retired firefighters elucidated how the firefighter identity shapes the experience of retirement: 1) the centrality and intensity of the firefighter role resulted in a profound sense of loss of meaning in life among retired firefighters and 2) the demanding role hindered firefighters from engaging with other social groups, which many saw as incompatible, and left them socially isolated in retirement. Results also showed that some firefighters engaged in meaning replacement and social scaffolding to navigate these challenges. The findings are discussed in relation to developing SIMIC and providing recommendations to adequately support these and other emergency service occupations in their transition to retirement.

Keywords: Social Identity Approach, Emergency Service Workers, Retirement Transition.

Introduction

This transition from work to retirement can be a source of significant stress. In part this is because it poses the psychological challenge of dealing with life change that includes loss of some identities (e.g., associated with one's profession) and gain of others (e.g., as a retiree); some of which may be desired and others less so. The social identity approach (SIA) makes the fundamental point that social group membership (e.g., being part of a work or occupational unit or team) is a key element of people's identity, making an important contribution to a person's sense of who they are (i.e., their social identity). When important social identities are lost or changed, as is often the case in retirement, this can disrupt the sense of identity continuity a person has in their life (Henning et al., 2016). Experiencing discontinuity or loss of work groups can be especially difficult for those whose occupational identity is central to their sense of self (S. A. Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). This is such a challenge so that many retirees experience a health decline following retirement (Bracken-Scally & McGillloway, 2016; Lazarus & Lazarus, 2006; Steffens et al., 2016a). Indeed, the loss of valuable identities has been associated with reduced life satisfaction and increased depression (Praharso et al., 2017), and even premature death (Steffens et al., 2016a). Therefore, understanding how to protect health and well-being before, during and after the transition to retirement is an increasingly important part of successful ageing. The present study aims to address this questions by providing a better understanding of how central work identities shape the experience of retirement and impact individuals' social networks during their work life and in retirement.

In what follows, we review theory and evidence that highlights the importance of social identities and group connectedness for health, a central premise of the Social Identity Approach to Health (C. Haslam et al., 2018a).

The Social Identity Approach to Health

The Social Identity Approach to Health (SIAH) (C. Haslam et al., 2018a) extends on this point to explain how group membership influences health and well-being; primarily through the

psychological resources they enable. In this, group memberships not only provide people with a sense of belonging, meaning, purpose, and support, but also a greater sense of control over their own lives (Greenaway et al., 2016). These psychological resources provide the basis for what has been referred to as the social cure — characterized by a positive sense of connectedness with social groups — that supports health particularly in periods of life change, challenge and adversity (for an overview, see C. Haslam et al., 2018a; Jetten et al., 2017).

Within the SIAH, the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) (C. Haslam et al., 2021) offers a theoretical framework to understand how particular features of group membership protects health during times of change. According to SIMIC, the key to successful adjustment to any form of transition is possessing multiple group memberships pre-transition (C. Haslam et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2009). This boosts the support available to people during transitions, increases the likelihood that some group memberships will be maintained through the transition, and provides the experiential knowledge and skills needed to join new groups and to integrate these into existing identity networks post-transition in ways that are compatible with a person's existing group ties (C. Haslam et al., 2008). More formally, SIMIC proposes that these effects of group membership operate via two pathways: (1) social identity continuity (i.e., involving the maintenance of existing groups across the transition) and (2) social identity gain (i.e., involving extension of one's group network through joining new groups across the transition) (C. Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2009). Furthermore, SIMIC outlines that how well people negotiate these pathways is dependent on the compatibility between old and new group memberships in the context of life changing transitions, with greater compatibility associated with better adjustment (e.g., Iyer et al., 2009).

These pathways have been found to influence how well people are able to 'manage' the retirement transition as evident in well-being and mortality outcomes (Steffens et al., 2016a); findings that have also been shown to apply across cultures (Lam et al., 2018). According to Steffens et al. (2016a), for every group membership lost post-retirement, individual quality of life was 10%

lower 6 years later. Furthermore, mortality risk in this same period was 2% if retirees maintained two group memberships across the transition to retirement but was 12% if they lost both groups. Other research shows additionally that retirees' identification with other retirees was found to be especially important for enhancing older retirees' health, while gaining new groups was vital for the health of recent retirees (C. Haslam et al., 2018b).

There are two social identity derived principles and constructs, that are particularly critical to the experience of transition, but have been underexplored in the retirement transition. The first is that people gain a sense of *meaning* from their identities, particularly the degree to which a person's group provides them with an interpretative framework to structure their perceptions, experience and behaviour (S. A. Haslam et al., 2012). The second is the importance of *compatibility* between different groups in an individual's social network. While this features in SIMIC, it is acknowledged to be an underdeveloped aspect of the model (C. Haslam et al., 2021). While each are thought to contribute to successful management of, and adjustment to, life change (e.g., C. Haslam et al., 2021), their roles in a range of transitions, that include retirement, have not been the focus of empirical investigation. Accordingly, exploration of the nature of their impact on the retirement transition would benefit further our understanding of the evidence base and our ability to develop theory. The current paper addresses this gap, in the context of understanding the retirement experiences of firefighters and contributes to further refinement of SIMIC.

The Role of Meaningfulness of Identity

According to social identity theorising, group identities satisfy the psychological need for providing meaning and purpose in life (Greenaway et al., 2016; S. A. Haslam et al., 2009). Group members' beliefs, motivations and behaviours are guided by the norms and values associated with that group membership (i.e., its identity content) (C. Haslam et al., 2018a). It is the internalization of shared norms and values that infuses group behaviours with meaning to provide a sense of "purpose and direction" to members (van Dick & Wagner, 2002), such as firefighters always face and dealt

with challenges collectively. Thereby, identification with organisations or work-related groups can reduce stress that results from adhering to ingroup norms and values (Wegge et al., 2006). It has also been suggested that some group memberships (e.g., religious groups) might function more holistically to furnish their members with a general "philosophy of life". This can inform how individuals act across multiple life domains and may contribute to reducing perceptions of incompatibility between groups in an individual's identity network (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015). Furthermore, groups also structure their members' interpretations of, and responses to, stressful situations (S. A. Haslam et al., 2005) and inform members' perceptions of, and relationships with, other groups. In effect, groups form a perceptual and experiential 'prism' or lens through which members' perceptions, understandings, and actions are shaped (S. A. Haslam et al., 2012).

Applying this to the retirement context, a person's occupational identity can be a key source of fulfilment for many people (May et al., 2004; Monnot & Beehr, 2014), and the loss of this identity can be a fundamental threat to their sense of purpose and meaning in life (S. A. Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). This is arguably felt more deeply by those in occupations that are exceptionally involving and central to an individual's self-concept (Menke & Germany, 2019). The loss of such a group through retirement is likely to be particularly devastating as people might be reluctant to accept change.

SIMIC suggests that an important way to manage the potential consequences of this change, individuals can re-orient themselves in relation to their social world and, where possible, replace the lost identity with new but equally meaningful identities (C. Haslam et al., 2019a; Jetten & Pachana, 2012). However, little is understood about why the loss of a work identity can lead to feelings of meaninglessness and what retirees can do to counter this process. For those approaching retirement, this understanding is vital to manage identity change in ways that help them to connect with groups that can provide a similar or new sense of meaning and purpose to replace the groups and associated identities that life change alters (Steffens et al., 2016a). To be able to support retirees in their transition, we need to understand people's experiences of the impact of specific losses associated

with work identities to support targeted intervention. This is especially true for those whose self-concept is extensively, or exclusively, tied to their occupational identity. Beyond this, a better understanding of how the occupational identity is embedded in a network of multiple group memberships is also needed.

The Role of Compatibility between Multiple Identities

SIMIC suggests further that multiple group memberships are more likely to have a positive effect on health and transition outcomes when these groups are compatible with each other. Compatibility is present when there is harmony between the goals, values, and motivations of members in the different groups to which the individual belongs (C. Haslam et al., 2019a; Iyer et al., 2009). It has long been recognised that people possess 'multiple selves' and that there are clear links between self-complexity and health and well-being (Koch & Shepperd, 2004). Though, investigations into the relationship between possessing multiple identities and well-being have produced mixed findings — multiple identities have been associated with both positive (e.g., the availability of resources to deal with adverse events) and negative (e.g., role conflict) health outcomes (Brook et al., 2008). Brook et al. (2008) proposed that these findings could be explained by examining properties of the "constellation" of groups that people belong to; specifically, the *compatibility* or *harmony* (i.e., the degree to which different identities facilitate or conflict with each other) as well as the *importance* (i.e., the importance placed by the individual on the identities) determine the effect of having multiple identities on psychological well-being. Among their student sample, they found a significant three-way interaction between harmony, importance, and number of groups such that well-being was enhanced through possessing multiple important identities that facilitated each other. However, if important identities were in conflict, possessing multiple identities was detrimental to well-being (Brook et al., 2008). This health-detrimental effect of identity harmony has been attributed to the stress and burden that competing demands from different groups may place on an individual.

This type of identity incompatibility was also observed in Iyer et al.'s (2009) investigation of first year students' transition to university. Those from a lower social class background were more likely to have difficulties adjusting to the transition due to perceived incompatibility between their new university student identity and their existing identities. Such incompatibility within the network was found to reduce a person's sense of identity continuity over time which had negative implications for well-being (Iyer et al., 2009). It is also possible that in the case of transitions that people may experience incompatibility between existing groups and new groups acquired post-transition (C. Haslam et al., 2021; McNamara et al., 2017), although this has yet to be explored systematically.

The tensions arising from such incompatibility requires social identity management or reconciliation. There is limited work and evidence to date on how best to manage such incompatibility. Though, work form the biculturalism literature on *dual identities*, in speaking to the importance of integrating potentially conflicting or incompatible cultural identities to support health and well-being (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), offers some insight. Studies have found that individuals can adapt a range of strategies such as compartmentalising their social networks and activities to avoid conflict (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), or engage in 'cultural form-switching' between different identities as required in different contexts (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2017). There is also research that shows that individuals belonging to multiple incompatible groups can learn to shift identities in response to social threats which helps to protect their self-esteem (Mussweiler et al., 2000) or actively embrace identities that support their other identities to improve well-being (Brook et al., 2008). In effect, under favourable circumstances, multiple identities can become resources to flexibly negotiate the challenges posed by membership of any one group (Verkuyten, 2018). Another strategy involves breaking ties with incompatible groups, which has been demonstrated in addiction recovery (Best et al., 2016; Dingle et al., 2015). Research has shown that such network changes, specifically dis-identification with 'using' groups, along with a

growing recovery identity, are vital for positive outcomes including treatment adherence, abstinence, and well-being (Dingle et al., 2015).

Within the SIAH, there are also developments in managing identity incompatibility; primarily in the context of interventions that seek to help people manage groups that might be perceived as negative, stigmatised or discriminated (i.e., GROUPS 4 HEALTH and Groups 4 Belonging; C. Haslam et al., 2019b; Ingram et al., 2020). However, more evidence of impact and success of this aspect of intervention focussing on the importance of compatibility is needed. To address this we need to fully interrogate people's experiences of the challenges and consequences posed by identity incompatibility for those undergoing a major life transition. Doing so can provide detailed insights into how best to support people in managing social identity change. In sum, research to date has yet to fully explore how people experience and manage (in)compatibility between their multiple groups as they transition to retirement.

Social Identity Management in Firefighter Retirement

For some jobs in which adversity is a defining element (military, emergency services, some healthcare professions), a person is enabled to deal with threats which would normally overwhelm an untrained individual. In part, this is due to their ability to interpret threat in relation to their role and in part due to the support they may receive from their colleagues (S. A. Haslam et al., 2005). Either way, the *loss* of this identity is then potentially a serious blow to their ability to cope both with past trauma experienced in their professional lives, as well as future challenges associated with retirement. Firefighters provide an ideal case study of this occupational grouping, given the high degree of adversity and demands they face. Moreover, the impact of shift and emergency work on firefighter families and their wider social networks mean that their job put considerable strain upon their social and professional relationships. As one might expect, this group typically face considerable challenges in retirement. Although research on the firefighter retirement experience is relatively rare when compared with that of the general workforce, there is some evidence to suggest

that emergency service retirees (firefighters and paramedics) have poorer quality of life, lower levels of health satisfaction and higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms in retirement compared to non-emergency service retirees (Bracken-Scally et al., 2014).

The strain placed upon social group memberships during and after working life as well as the loss of a meaningful identity in retirement may contribute to explaining some of these poor health outcomes. Not only do firefighters lose a valued identity in retirement, but they also lose the cohesive peer network that they relied on for support to do their jobs successfully (Bracken-Scally & McGillloway, 2016; Regehr, 2001; Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). Retaining a sense of social integration post-retirement can be especially difficult for firefighters due to the nature of their occupation, which can be a barrier to their engagement in outside interests and activities and can increase their risk of social isolation and loneliness that have known detrimental impacts on health and well-being (Kragt et al., 2017).

The Current Study

In the current study we used SIMIC as a guiding framework in adopting an in-depth qualitative approach to explore firefighters' experienced changes in their social group memberships and associated identities as they transition to retirement. Our first aim was to elucidate the meaning and sense of purpose derived from the firefighter identity to understand how this shapes the experience of identity loss occasioned by retirement. Second, we were interested in understanding issues of (in)compatibility between the social groups that firefighters belong to, with a view to determining how firefighters actively manage their identity networks both during their working life and into retirement. This investigation aims to provide insights into the processes underpinning (un)successful social identity management during firefighters' retirement transitions, but may also be relevant to other occupations experiencing similar professional challenges (elite sport, senior managers, other first responders, military veterans).

Methods

Participants

Twenty participants were strategically sampled to ensure a diverse mix of retired UK firefighters in terms of gender, relationship status, last role in the Fire Service, and reason for retirement. The sample comprised two female and 18 male retired firefighters who were retired on average for 8.63 years ($SD = 6.77$, range: 1.5-24 years). Participants' age ranged from 52 to 72 years with an average of 59.85 years ($SD = 6.16$). Fourteen participants were married, five were divorced and living with a new partner or remarried, and one was widowed. The average length of service was 29.90 years ($SD = 2.43$, range: 25-34 years). Sixteen participants had some leadership responsibilities in their last role prior to retirement. Half of the participants worked in a watch (operational firefighter team) and worked in shift patterns, while the other half worked as station managers or in senior managerial roles which involved less operational teamwork. Of the fourteen participants who retired due to reaching the retirement age of 50 for firefighters, four indicated additional other reasons such as physical health issues or ill-health of a family member. Three participants named mental health (e.g., Anxiety, Depression, and PTSD), one participant physical health, and two participant stated disillusion with the Fire Service organisation as the main reason for retirement.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via the website and social media channels of the Fire Fighters Charity. Prior to the interview, participants received a study information sheet and gave consent to taking part in an audio-recorded in-person or online interview according to their preference. Before the interview started, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study, the anonymisation of data, and participants' rights to refuse to answer any questions, terminate the interview at any point, and withdraw their participation until 30 days after their interview date. At the beginning of the interview, participants provided demographic information. Drawing on the guidelines of Brinkmann and Kvale (2014), the interviews were semi-structured to guide participants, but not restrict

discussion, and to allow them to articulate their experiences in their own words. The interview

schedule (Appendix Table 1) comprised three parts exploring (1) participants' experiences of

working as a firefighter, (2) their experiences of retirement, including the planning of it, and (3) their

life in retirement. Additional prompts were used as appropriate. Following the interview, participants

conducted an online social identity mapping exercise (Bentley et al., 2020) to collect quantitative

data[1] on their social networks in retirement. Afterwards, all participants were thanked and fully

debriefed. In total, the interviews took on average of 108 minutes (SD = 33 min; range = 45 min to

two hours 40 min). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and archived in a secure location.

Analytic Approach

Our analytic approach is best characterised as "theoretical thematic analysis" (Braun &

Clarke, 2006) guided by social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorisation

theory (SCT; Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987) and the literature on SIMIC in the context of

retirement (e.g., C. Haslam et al., 2019a).

All interviews were coded on a line-by-line basis in an initial inductive process. The resultant

codes were grouped together, and overarching themes and subthemes were discerned considering

core SIMIC concepts. This was an iterative inductive and deductive process involving all authors

which resulted in a thematic structure accounting for all the data. Within each thematic unit,

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[1] The interviews were part of a larger research project on firefighters' retirement. The project

included a feasibility study of an online intervention. As such, at the end of the interview,

participants were asked to complete a part of the online intervention that involved mapping out their

social networks in retirement and then providing feedback on the process. Completing the online

Social Identity Mapping exercise took on average 33 minutes (SD = 11 min). The qualitative and

quantitative findings of the social maps are reported elsewhere and are not part of the present

manuscript.

exceptions or deviant cases were identified and the theme descriptor was amended to ensure that all instances were accounted for (Silverman, 2001). For the sake of clarity and economy of exposition, the first two superordinate themes are described here, with a third theme focussing on a different topic (pertaining to organisational structures and change) reported in a separate publication. Extracts have been anonymised for reporting. Omitted lines in the extracts are indicated by square brackets and dots […]. Words added for clarification purposes are shown in brackets [].

Analysis

Theme 1: Firefighter Identity is a Psychological Resource to Deal with Adversity

Our first theme centred on the essence of the firefighter identity. This comprised the elements which participants felt defined this group as well as the uniqueness and distinctiveness of its identity, the intragroup bonds which flowed from group membership, and how these allowed participants to cope both with the adversity experienced during their working life, and the subsequent loss of this identity upon retirement.

Subtheme 1.1: The Meaning of Firefighters' Social Identity

When talking about how being in the Fire Service impacted their personal life, participants stressed how important being in the service was for them. They described how central and encompassing the occupation was to their lives, some going so far as to say that the Fire Service *was* their life – that being a firefighter defined who they were as a person. In other words, for these participants, their membership of this social category was a core aspect of their self-concept:

Extract 1: Interview 1, male, 63, retired crew manager

Yeah. It's who you are, it becomes who you are, very much. I mean like, I wouldn't, I mean they say these days, if somebody's a vegan, they tell you within about two seconds, you know, someone just crossed it, somebody just crossed it, you know, straight away. In those days, you know, yeah, I mean it becomes who you are. I mean before, I was [Name], before I was [Name], then, then I became

Fireman [Name], you know what I mean?

Moreover, the unique importance of this identity to the participants was typically expressed in terms of the responsibilities of the profession. Participants stressed that a central and distinctive characteristic of their firefighter identity was to help others in times of emergency and crisis. This was reported to be the core source of meaning and purpose of the job and one which came to shape how they saw themselves. Participants typically contrasted their profession to other non-emergency professions or, on occasion, to their own naïve expectations of what the job might entail.

Extract 2: Interview 7, male, 55, retired firefighter

When I joined, it was just a job. I know people joined for lots of reasons, it was just

a secure job. And you realise then that you're helping people in a massive way,

you really are. And it's the excitement in some respects, of being in a career like

that. Going to incidents where other people are going that way, and you're going

in. And you're the only people there dealing with this incident, and it's fascinating.

Here interviewee 7 conveyed how his own experiences of helping others during critical incidents transformed his understanding of the profession. While there may be many motivations leading individuals to become a firefighter, he suggested the knowledge that firefighters are those first responders who place themselves uniquely at the heart of the crisis provides the "excitement" of the job.

Notably though, while these participants were keen to emphasise how fundamental the identity was to their sense of self, this was never described in terms of individual achievements but always framed in terms of being part of a broader team. This was often described as a feeling of 'family' among colleagues, as well as the shared experience of living together both through elevating highs and devastating lows (in the worst-case scenario, death). Most participants described their colleagues in these terms, sometimes even as 'brothers and sisters', with some reporting that these bonds of friendship are for life.

Extract 3: Interview 2, male, 71, retired deputy chief fire officer

The Fire Service became a family, because you spend so much time with the people

you're working with and they depend on you and you depend on them. So it's

very… the sort of teamwork is instilled into you from the very start, you know, how

you do things. You don't do things individually although you can, you know, if you

like go 'off piste' at times. But generally speaking, you know, it's a thing where

you work as a group. And so in a strange way you live together and die together,

and that's what it is.

This interviewee emphasised how their training instilled a set of shared behaviour among firefighters. This was explicitly collective, with the normative interdependence of colleagues being contrasted to the occasional individualistic act. Crucially, the extremity of the challenges facing the team, of life and death, were posited as the source of the collective bond.

These strong bonds were in turn reported to play an important role in coping with the adverse experiences encountered in their job, with participants valuing having a team of colleagues to provide support after potentially traumatising events. Interviewee 2 in his account of the 'family feel' of his work team reported: *"And you know, the times when you see things that aren't very pleasant, they help you through that and help you understand it"*. In other words, the firefighter group provided the solidarity and meaning-making resources that enabled its members to cope with the emotional demands of the job.

Subtheme 1.2 Dealing with Costs of Identity Loss Following Retirement

Against this background of strong bonds and a central, purposive identity among firefighters, retirement was recognised as a significant challenge to their sense of who they are. While approaching retirement was reportedly anticipated by firefighters as an exciting prospect, afterwards many participants experienced retirement as an unwelcome departure from their working life. Firefighter identity provided meaningful resources during, and instilled a sense of loss following,

one's working life. Some compared it to a divorce or bereavement while others associated it with boredom and loneliness. At the same time the firefighter identity informed the ways in which participants dealt with costs of identity loss following retirement by preserving the meaning of the identity and defining attributes of their sense of self.

Extract 4: Interview 1, male, 63, retired crew manager

And it's a hell of a, it's a hell of a jump. Because one minute, without trying to sound too bloody Superman or anything like that, one minute you go out in charge of crews, you're dealing with life and death situations, you've got a lot of responsibility. And then when you go, you're just a bloke in the street [..]. But it's a hell of a stop from there, down to there. It's a real big drop. And people probably don't realise, you know, because it's such a big part of who you are.

In part the abruptness of retirement was attributed to the contrast between the urgency and consequentiality of the job and the banality of retired life. Also, the lack of an interim period, or of a de-escalation in responsibility before retirement, served to further emphasise the contrast between these two life phases. Regardless of expectations though, as interviewee 1 reports, retirement came to be recognised as a process that resulted in a fundamental loss of identity.

For most, the loss of purpose associated with the role was felt most keenly:

Extract 5: Interview 16, female, 54, retired station manager

When you talk to people after retirement you use I 'was' I was a firefighter, I was I'm a nobody now, I was a firefighter, I was a station commander, [...] awwh, I do the washing in the morning, I take the dog for a walk, it's like my whole identity has gone. [...]. I still have that identity as a mum. All my other identities have gone, and my purpose has gone.

The contrast between working life and retirement was — for this participant — reflected in her interactions with others who no longer recognised her through her professional role: now her

reported sense of self was defined only by what is no more. For this participant, the centrality of her previous occupational identity becomes especially problematic, such that not even other clearly defined family roles, such as being a mother, can fully compensate for this loss.

Similarly, the deprivation of the sense of comradeship upon retirement was also experienced as a loss. Even if retirees kept in contact with their previous station, their place in the social network was felt to be diminished:

Extract 6: Interview 15, male, 64, retired station manager

I think the transition was a little bit awkward because I think you do lose an identity with it. Even though I've told you that people identify me as [Name] the fireman. Well, you do, you do feel that actually you're not part of that anymore. Although there is a little part of your brain tells you are part of that club, you are part of that team. […]. I go to the station and I know maybe half a dozen people now, [location], whereas I knew everybody there. So little things like that tell you yeah you are really not part of that team anymore.

As interviewee 15 points out, as time passes, and with the recruitment of new colleagues to the team with whom he lacks any shared experience, he loses more and more of his connection to former colleagues, and thus his former identity.

Participants reported coping with this identity loss in two ways: providing/seeking camaraderie; and transferring their professional skills to live them out in different contexts. Each recognisably served to maintain some semblance of identity continuity, though only the first required retaining contact with other firefighters. As noted in extract 6 above, many participants did keep some form of contact with former colleagues in an attempt to maintain their feelings of connectedness. This tended to be more successful when these other colleagues were also retired, as one interviewee puts it "*when you get together with your former colleagues who are probably retired now as well. It's like being, feeling part of the team again*" (interview 15). The social connections

with other retired firefighters were reported to centre mainly around reminiscing about the past which both allowed them to re-live the identity, as well as provided a sense of continuity. Engagement with retired firefighter groups provided them with opportunities to maintain their former identity while at the same time share a new identity of retiree. Both created a basis for stronger bonds with retired firefighters than working firefighters.

Beyond engaging with retired firefighter groups to seek camaraderie, some participants engaged in occupational-related 'bridgework' to help them stay connected with people from the Fire Service, as well as to continue using their professional skills. As one firefighter who continued to teach technical rescue skills reported: "*all that changed when I retired is, I went from wearing a Fire Service uniform to sort of a corporate t-shirt really*" (interview 4). Other participants experienced identity continuity by working in jobs or engaging in volunteer work which provided them with a similar meaning and/or a strong sense of belonging as their former occupation. For example, interviewee 15 described his "lifesaving" role in the Samaritans' suicide-prevention helpline:

Extract 7: Interview 15, male, 64, retired station manager

I've done that sort of thing while I've been operational, you know, with people who wanted to take their own life. And we've dealt with people that we've been one-to-one with them, talk them through it. And being in Samaritans, we still get some of that. [...] that is still kind of a lifesaving role really. [...]. So that was that was a real social need that I felt was worthwhile doing. And so I could make a difference. And I think I did.

For this interviewee, the key element of their volunteering activity with the Samaritans was the continuation of their purpose as "lifesaver" which utilised their skillset and experience in this area and was a meaningful and consequential activity. Across this theme then, we see how the meaning of firefighting for these participants served to structure their sense of self, their relationship with their colleagues, and the ways of dealing with adversity during their working life and the

adverse experience of identity loss following retirement. In the next theme, we illustrate how this strong commitment to their professional role and the associated identity impacted their social life and shaped their social networks, and once more show how this shaped their experience of retirement.

Theme 2: Negotiating Group Engagement

This theme captures how firefighters negotiate their engagement with social groups during their working life and in their life after retirement. This theme uncovers how participants sought to align their social life around their work to create compatibility among their social groups, and the implications of this for developing their social network in the life after retirement.

Subtheme 2.1: Firefighter Identity Creates (In)compatibility within Firefighters' Social Networks

Most participants reported that the demands of the job impacted their lives beyond their work. This was particularly evident in both accounts of those on shift work, and those working 'on call'. Both working patterns impacted on life outside of work, but in different ways. While the level of disruption caused by patterns of shift-work that are not synchronised with the temporal pattern of a working week interrupted weekly routines of family life, being on call meant that family life had to continue behind the constant prospect of having to respond to an emergency. Although the specific expressions of these impacts varied across participants, all reported that they themselves and their colleagues had accepted these demands as part of the job and their life. In effect, they had to accept that they would often be absent from social events, which included important occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, with consequences for their social relationships.

> **Extract 8: Interview 8, male, 63, retired senior division officer**
>
> *Well [work] obviously had impacts on family life, certainly in terms of my*
>
> *commitment to the service. Obviously, the shift-work, you know, obviously there*
>
> *were birthdays, holidays and things, that I couldn't, couldn't be a part of because I*
>
> *was either at work and, or unable to get leave. So it obviously had all those normal*
>
> *types of impacts. I know that my commitment to the, to the service has obviously*

been a big thing, you know, in terms of my, so, devotion to duty and that kind of

stuff, has been a big thing.

While these strains had to be accepted by their families, they were reported to be less readily accepted and understood by participants' friends from outside the Fire Service. This was experienced as difficult and revealed some tensions between their work and other social groups in their life. Shift working was especially disruptive to their social life, preventing them from establishing relationships or group memberships beyond work.

In order to adjust to the demands of their work and to resolve tensions arising from the incompatibility between work and their social groups, participants described various ways in which they tried to align their social groups around work. For instance, most participants achieved this by cultivating friendships mainly with other members of the Fire Service. Perceiving their colleagues as similar and like-minded, and most importantly sharing an understanding of what it means to work unusual working patterns as a firefighter, made it easier to build friendship networks with people from inside rather than outside the Fire Service. By design and by necessity, these issues around compatibility (with firefighters) and incompatibility (with wider groups) led many interviewees restricted their social networks to fellow firefighters.

Extract 9: Interview 18, male, 61, retired senior manager

Well, basically, you lost all your friends outside of the fire brigade and the only

friendships, which you really developed, were inside the fire brigade. So, yeah,

that's how you adjusted. It has really disappointed that you were very rarely able

to see your friends that you had previous to join the fire brigade. But you get

subsumed into the fire brigade, your whole social network all your friends are

people who worked inside the service.

In effect, the job of a firefighter typically provided our interviewees with strong intragroup bonds, but also served as a source to engage with other groups in their social network. Some

participants also talked about how the social activities and events hosted by the Fire Service provided opportunities for families and friends to connect with the Fire Service. Participants working in shift systems or close to their station most often talked about the social function of the Fire Service in this way and how it supported the alignment of work and family. On occasion, being a firefighter could provide some sense of connection and belonging to one's local community. Some participants reported that their shared understanding of helping and protecting local residents provided them with a sense of being part of a community.

Extract 10: Interview 13, male, 56, retired community safety department manager

I think there's a lot of sense of belonging to the community that you work within. Whether it's, whether it's a fire station or a larger area, when you become an officer you cover larger areas. But I think it's the same, I think you just, you want to get engaged with that community because you feel you belong to it.

Of course, this sense of role-related belonging was double-edged in that once firefighters moved on from that position, their place in the community was lost or diminished. As we shall see below, this was especially the case in retirement.

Subtheme 2.2: Managing the Social Costs of Retirement

Retiring from the Fire Service and leaving the associated groups highlighted the social costs and impact of the job on firefighters' social lives. For many, decades of restrictions on social activities had taken a toll on their social networks and they faced barriers in making new contacts outside of the firefighter community. Many experienced managing the reengagement with former social group and reintegration into local communities as civilians as a significant challenge of retirement. Those who had never been proactive in their socialising, or had depended entirely on the Fire Service for their social activities, sometimes felt lost and isolated when comparing themselves to others who had not experienced similar work demands. One participant compared himself to his

wife, noting that while he had missed many of the normal social activities related to family life, she had maintained a rich social network:

Extract 11: Interview 18, male, 61, retired senior manager

When I retired in 2009 and I came home, well home after all the work done, [my wife] had all social networks within people inside the town, friends, because she met them when bringing the children up, bringing the kids to the doctor, the usual things that you do. So she had a huge social network with people within the town, and I had nobody. The only people I knew up till only two or three years ago were firefighters or ex-firefighters who lived in the town.

These difficulties could be further compounded by a lack (or underuse) of social skills. One participant reflected on the difficulties of engaging with others in retirement by comparing herself to her sister: "*She's made friends and she will go to coffee mornings, but I won't do anything like that because that's not my, I've never done that.*" (interview 16). Those who had relied on their firefighter identity in their relations with others felt this loss keenly, as one participant reported "*their role, their job defines the most people, you know, when they haven't got that definition anymore, they struggle to find a place in society*" (interview 15).

For others, retirement did afford the opportunity to begin a gradual process of re-engaging with local community life. This often took the form of discovering or rediscovering local community connections which were previously inaccessible due to the demands of firefighting working life.

Extract 12: Interview 14, male 55, retired watch manager

Saturday afternoon, probably three o'clock in the afternoon walking past [the local pub]. And my wife said to me, actually, we could go in there today, couldn't we? Because we're not working anymore. Well, I never even thought of that. You're right. So we went and took the dog in. And we've kind of got a bit of a social circle now in my local pub, which I never had before. And I've lived in this village all my

life, but those people I don't know and now I know them.

One strategy to tackle a low initial level of social connectedness was to network though others. For example, some participants reported that their partners were already embedded in the local community, and this afforded an inroad into existing social networks. Speaking to the possibility that existing social groups can facilitate the development of new social groups, a participant explained "*Because, my wife got a small business here. And I sort of started to help and support her with that. And therefore, then I met people that the social network of people that she met. So. Yeah. Massive. My wife helped hell of a lot with that*" (interview 18).

For many participants facing social isolation in retirement, family was of central importance in their lives, and those for whom work had impoverished their social networks to a very high degree found themselves reliant on family as their only form of social connection. As participant 16 reported "*my brothers and sisters they, they are my friends and we're very close. So, yeah, that's been if I didn't have them now, I've left the brigade. I haven't got any friends.*" For participants who had reported disruptions to home life during their career, retirement facilitated a heightened level of re-engagement in family life. On the most basic level, moving on from the firefighter role typically meant more freedom to plan ahead and participate in family life, as interviewee 10 reports: "*See the family more, [...] not always rushing out the door to go to work. Well I'm still going to work but I'm not rushing out. And if I've planned something now, we can do it*". Some reported a sense of guilt for their absence during their working lives and were glad of the opportunity to redress this.

Extract 13: Interview 1, male, 63, retired crew manager

It was, it was really putting family first. Because I mean like, if you're married to a firefighter, you do accept that there will be some Sundays where you can't take the kids to the park because dad's working. If you, you know, there will be some nights where you can't go out with your mates because dad's not there to look after the kids while you, do you know what I mean? There're always little sacrifices.

Across many of these accounts, this heightened engagement with family life was often reported to be part of a more general re-evaluation of life priorities, whereby retirement afforded a new opportunity to choose to spend time with loved ones. Overall, then, the impact of the firefighting role on the social lives of these interviewees was profound and had serious consequences for how they managed connectedness in retirement. In effect, the concentration of social relationships within the service, the alignment of other social networks to their work, and a reliance on their occupational identity to maintain local community connections, all meant that once retired, these individuals were extremely socially vulnerable. For some, retirement afforded an opportunity to reconnect with family, friends and social groups, but for others the reality of life after the Fire Service was much more isolated and lonely.

Discussion

In this paper we focused on firefighters as a group who in previous research have been found to be especially vulnerable to the negative health and well-being impacts of retirement. We speculated that this would likely be due to the nature of the profession, which places substantial occupational and personal demands on its members, as well as placing them in dangerous and stressful situations. Similar groups studied in the SIAH literature, such as bomb-disposal units (S. A. Haslam et al., 2005), revealed that the meaning afforded by their occupational identity, together with the support of colleagues, helped individuals to cope with these challenges. In this type of profession, the loss of occupational identity in retirement was expected to be especially keenly felt.

As expected, our retirees reported a sense of loss in purpose they had experienced during their working life and of intense camaraderie shared amongst their work group. These losses were exacerbated by the demands of the profession which required complete dedication to the job which in turn had placed strains upon family life and social networks, and for many restricted their socialisation to networks within the firefighter community. In effect, after years of dangerous and

demanding work, retirement left these individuals socially and emotionally vulnerable (Kragt et al., 2017).

Against this background, the active management of the transition to retirement comprised a variety of strategies. First, retired firefighters actively attempted to preserve or replace the meaning and purpose in their lives through 'bridgework' or volunteering activities that used their professional skills and experiences as an essential emergency helper. Alternatively, they sought to reinvigorate their impoverished social networks by keeping in contact with work colleagues or joining new groups though existing networks of family or local community ties. Nevertheless, these strategies were not successful for all, with some struggling to retain or extend their social connections leaving them with an unhappy, meaningless and isolated life in retirement.

This pattern of experience resonates with previous research showing how the transition to retirement — when impacted by loss of meaning and isolation — is often predictive of poorer health and well-being. In line with research with firefighters (e.g., Bracken-Scally et al., 2014; Kragt et al., 2017) as well as research from the broader social identity approach (e.g., S. A. Haslam & Ellemers, 2011), our current work highlights the pivotal role of identity loss and identity discontinuity in leaving individuals socially and emotionally vulnerable. To this our findings add an understanding of *how* and *why* the firefighter occupation leaves its members especially vulnerable. The high intensity-high commitment firefighter occupation shapes the identity and social worlds of serving individuals and impacts their subsequent experiences of retirement in two broad ways.

First, it robs firefighters of an identity that is central to their place in the world and how they see themselves in it. The meaning of the occupational identity comes to infuse the self-concept of individuals and appears, for some, to take precedence over other group identities that they hold. Research from the broader psychological and sociological literature suggests that multiple identities might operate in terms of a hierarchy, whereby some social identities are particularly personally important to an individual and operate across situations (Ramarajan, 2014). This is somewhat similar

to Turner-Zwinkels et al.'s (2015) notion of holistic identities (i.e., those groups that have the ability to provide members with a general philosophy of life). Here we argue that the firefighter identity becomes central to the self-concept over time precisely because it imbues life with meaning and purpose (Ramarajan, 2014). Seeing oneself as a 'lifesaver' is something that developed and was enacted through a closely bonded team. Thus, the challenge of retirement for firefighters is not just to find a way of regaining this particular sense of purpose but to enact it thorough meaningful participation in other groups. While aspects of this reasoning are in line with previous SIMIC research on workforce retirement (e.g., Steffens, et al., 2016b; Haslam et al., 2018b), the present work adds to this by highlighting the importance of group memberships that serve *both* to enable identity continuity (through maintaining professional links and skills) and identity gain (through joining a new group that enables these skills to be lived out).

The second way in which meaningful and demanding occupational identities such as firefighting can influence individuals' retirement experiences, is by undermining engagement with groups outside the profession. Our findings suggest that the firefighter identity can generate incompatibility between the individual's various group memberships during their working life, either due to the unique pressures of the occupation or through the distinctness of the shared experience of firefighters that pose a barrier to relating to outsiders. This increases the likelihood of identity conflict which must be actively managed to reduce the perceived incompatibility between group memberships given the recognised adverse consequences this has for well-being (Best et al., 2016; Iyer et al., 2009). During their working life, firefighters are therefore pressured to align groups and activities such that their social worlds come to revolve around work – including their engagement with broader community groups. While this serves a clear and achievable purpose, it can also serve initially to socially isolate individuals and strip them of accessible social resources in retirement. Later in retirement, this incompatibility appears to fade, with some becoming more able to effectively connect, and manage relationships, with wider groups. Much in the same way as

bicultural individuals benefit from integrating, compartmentalising, or switching between incompatible identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2017), our firefighters found that in life outside of firefighting work, they were able to more effectively balance and integrate the competing demands of different social groups. This often took the form of identity restoration through investing more time in neglected groups and in re-building relationships. In particular, family was a group membership that existed prior to transition and, in the absence of work demands which inhibited investment in this group, often acted for retirees as an important source of identity continuity (C. Haslam et al., 2008).

A further finding was that family group members seemed to act as a scaffold to facilitate the joining of new groups in retirement (C. Haslam et al., 2008, 2019a). It may be that using these important *existing* identities might ensure that the degree of incompatibility experienced during work life is not repeated in retirement. Overlap in membership and activities between groups alongside groups sharing common values can reduce perceptions of incompatibility in the identity network (Best et al., 2016; C. Haslam, 2018a). According to Turner-Zwinkels et al. (2015), belonging to holistic groups and the degree to which the individual is willing to use the philosophy of life these groups provide (i.e., self-defining-ness) has the capacity to reduce perceptions of identity interference (or incompatibility) between groups.

Of course, there are limitations to the current work that give some pause for thought in extrapolating from the findings. First, the interview accounts, while rich, detailed and providing insight beyond that possible from survey methods, represent sense-making of retrospective transitions. Many factors including the experience of retirement itself can shape the narrating of personal histories and while we are confident in the veracity of our participants' accounts, a prospective longitudinal qualitative study following individuals over the course of their retirement would bolster confidence in how identity processes shape people's experiences. Likewise, longitudinal survey work would help capture these effects across a broader population and give

clarity to the causal processes underpinning these experiences. Second, while the culture and public emergency nature of firefighters' jobs share parallels with those of military, police, ambulance staff and other critical occupations, further work is required to unpack the specifics of each role to determine which identity processes are unique to each role and which are generic across them. Specifically, for firefighters, so many of the challenges when transitioning into retirement come from the emotional and physical safety afforded by the consistent close co-worker crewing structure, and this is not shared by all critical occupations.

Bearing in mind these limitations, the implications of this work for supporting positive retirement in extremely demanding professional roles are multiple. For these types of occupations, successful retirement requires extensive planning that includes identity management and associated social planning alongside other forms of (e.g., financial) planning. Careful consideration of the individuals work-related needs is necessary to fully realise and anticipate the sense of loss they will experience upon leaving work (something that was experienced as a major abrupt change among most of our interviewees). Further to this, a consideration of the work-related opportunities available to retirees by way of continuing to use their skills and experiences or to develop new ones should help offset some of the loss they experienced. Likewise support in reintegrating into one's local community seemed to have the dual benefit of providing access to multiple new social groups but also affording the opportunity to take part in the full range of voluntary activities which could benefit from years of experience within the Fire Service. Finally, financial support, while often the only focus of current retirement planning, is still an important aspect of social planning (e.g., Cruwys et al., 2019): poverty isolates individuals and so a realistic understanding of the means required to live a socially enriched life as well as how to use this finance effectively to maximise social engagement would also help benefit these retirees' social resilience. With these social supports in place, we can move closer to ensuring that individuals who have endured extremes of physical and psychological

demand in order to protect others throughout their careers, can go on to enjoy a meaningful and socially secure retirement.

In conclusion, our work explores two aspects of identity loss in retirement: the profound sense of loss of meaning and the challenges posed by managing social group (in)compatibility. We show that the specific meanings associated with an occupation such as firefighting create specific needs in retirement that need to be recognised and addressed, and that the pressures of such a demanding role create unique social challenges when the role is left behind. Through an appreciation of how identity management strategies can address these social psychological needs we can begin to inform strategies for ensuring that those responsible for saving the lives of others enjoy a safe and secure life in retirement themselves.

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Appendix

Table 1

Interview Schedule

Topic	Question	Prompt
Work as firefighter	Looking back over your career, how has being part of the Fire Service impacted your life?	Did your work have any impact on your social relationships?
Retirement planning	Did you talk about retirement with anyone?	Did you talk to family, friends, and/ or workmates?
	Did you know other firefighters who had retired before you?	Did these retired firefighters talk to you about their experiences of retirement?
	Did you prepare for retirement?	Was any support for retirement planning provided by the organisation? Did you make any independent planning and if yes, what did you do?
Life after retirement	What has your life been like since retiring?	Was anything particularly enjoyable or challenging?
	Can you tell me about any changes in your social relationships? Are there some relationships you have been able to develop and/or rebuild since retiring?	What was easy/challenging in doing this?
	Have you been involved in any particular groups and/or activities?	Are these activities in any way related to your former work as a firefighter?
	Do you have any contact with your former colleagues?	Do you still feel as part of the team?