

Volunteer firefighting and family life

An organisational perspective on conflict between volunteer and family roles

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ABSTRACT

Protection to Australian communities from fire and other emergencies is provided mostly by volunteers. However, declining volunteer numbers have forced emergency service agencies to consider factors impacting adversely on volunteer retention. The current study provides an organisational perspective on the difficulties of balancing volunteering and family commitments through semi-structured interviews with managers of Australian volunteer firefighters. A thematic analysis of interviews identified several themes, including: volunteers' difficulty prioritising family needs ahead of brigade responsibilities; leaving household and business responsibilities with family members; a lack of time with family; and interruptions to family routines and activities. Findings are discussed in the context of existing research and a theoretical model of Work-Family Conflict, and inform recommendations for agencies to support families and minimise conflicts between volunteer firefighting and family life.

INTRODUCTION

Bushfires are an unavoidable feature of Australian life (Willis 2005). Outside capital cities and major regional centres, community protection against fire is provided to a large extent by Australia's 220,000 volunteer firefighters (McLennan & Birch 2005). These volunteers are estimated to save state and territory governments between 1.5 and 2 billion dollars annually through their voluntary contribution of labour (McLennan & Birch 2006). However, during the period 1995–2004, most volunteer-based fire agencies reported that their total volunteer numbers fell. This pattern of decline has precipitated warnings of a potential crisis in emergency response capability if steps are not taken to improve how volunteers are recruited, managed, and supported (McLennan & Birch 2005).

McLennan and Birch (2005) describe a number of social and demographic changes implicated in declining emergency services volunteer numbers,

especially changes in the economics of work and an ageing population. However, evidence is accumulating that other factors may be implicated in declining volunteer numbers, notably the working conditions, and organisational structures and processes associated with emergency service volunteering (McLennan & Birch 2007, 2008). The likely role of such organisational and workplace factors is consistent with research findings in the context of paid employment (Bakker & Demerouti 2007), where examples of work 'demands', for example time pressure and physical work tasks, and 'resources', i.e. job control and performance feedback (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli 2001), have been found to predict adverse worker outcomes such as burnout (Demerouti et al. 2001) and resignation intentions (Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli 2003).

Several studies indicate that findings on the working conditions and difficulties experienced by

paid employees can inform knowledge of similar issues faced by volunteer workers, especially volunteers in highly structured volunteer organisations such as the emergency services. Dollard, Rogers, Cordingley and Metzger (1999) conducted exploratory interviews with managers of Australian volunteers and identified several organisational factors that may detract from the quality of volunteers' work experiences (e.g. mismatch between volunteers' skills and work demands, insufficient training). Other studies (Metzger 2003) have extended established models of employee work stress to volunteer workers. Most recently, Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard and Metzger (2007) studied the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model of burnout (developed originally in paid employment contexts) in a sample of Australian Volunteer Ambulance Officers. They found that volunteer work demands had significant effects on outcomes such as burnout and determination to continue with the organisation.

One source of worker stress that has received considerable attention through research on paid work concerns the difficulties inherent in balancing work and family roles (Edgar 2005; Grzywacz & Carlson 2007). Although definitions of 'balance' vary (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007), Frone (2003) conceptualises successful work-family balance in terms of two main dimensions: low levels of conflict between work and family roles; and positive synergies between work and family, often referred to as work-family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell 2006) or positive spillover (Grzywacz & Marks 2000; Hanson, Hammer & Colton 2006). However, existing research has focussed mostly on the absence of work-family balance, generally in terms of elevated work-family conflict (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007). Many of these studies have found negative outcomes when employees fail to successfully balance work and family demands, including: decreased job satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki 1998); increased turnover intentions (Kossek & Nichol 1992; Netemeyer, Boles & McMurrian 1996); and perceived work stress (Voydanoff 2005; for a review see Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton 2000).

Issues relating to work-family balance are also relevant to volunteers (Meikle 2001; Mitchell 2006), and survey research suggests that family commitments may be a contributing factor in many volunteer firefighter resignations (McLennan & Birch

2008; Woodward & Kallman 2001), and a reluctance by community members to volunteer with local fire brigades (Birch & McLennan 2006; McLennan 2006). Cowlshaw, Evans and McLennan (2008) reviewed relevant literature on the families of volunteer firefighters and concluded that role conflict was likely to be a salient issue for volunteers and their families. More specifically, they suggest that despite limited research available, a model of Work-Family Conflict (WFC) (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985), specifying two main forms of conflict (i.e. time- and strain-based conflict), could be used to inform understanding of conflicts among volunteer, work, and family roles.

Based on Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) conception of WFC, Cowlshaw et al. (2008) suggest that there may be both 'time-based' and 'strain-based' conflicts between volunteer activities and family demands. Their review highlights the potential time demands on rural fire service volunteers, such as training, responding to emergencies, especially if they accept positions of responsibility (e.g. Captain, Brigade Secretary), or are members of brigades that respond to a high volume of call-outs to incidents, including motor vehicle accidents. Furthermore, Cowlshaw et al. (2008) indicate potential for additional time-related pressures on families of volunteer firefighters arising from: being on call 24-hours, seven days a week; and balancing additional time demands from (usually) full-time paid work. The number and scheduling of hours worked were not the only likely determinants of volunteering-family conflicts; stress from work-role experiences was also proposed to interfere with volunteers' abilities to perform family roles (i.e. strain-based aspects of WFC) (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). In the context of volunteer firefighting, work-type role experiences inducing stress may result from the nature of the volunteering task, for example irregular call-outs, prolonged and unpredictable absences, interference with annual vacations (CFA Corporate 1998), as well as more severe psychological stressors, such as attending motor vehicle accidents involving injuries or fatalities, that impact on volunteers' mood at home (for extended discussion see Cowlshaw et al. 2008).

This limited evidence supports a notion that failure to balance volunteer and family roles may be a source of particular difficulty for volunteer

firefighters and their families. However, despite suggestions of likely difficulties for volunteers balancing their firefighting and family roles, there is little systematic information available on ways that volunteer firefighting and family life conflict and how effects of such conflict could be ameliorated. As a preliminary step toward addressing this lack of evidence to guide agencies in more effectively supporting volunteers and their families, the current investigation sought an organisational perspective on conflicts between firefighting and family life through interviews with managers of Victorian volunteer firefighters. The sample of managers was chosen for two main reasons: a. these managers work closely with and supervise a large number of volunteers from diverse backgrounds and living situations (e.g. self-employed farmers; full-time employees), and thus have experience with a wide range of volunteer issues; and b. previous research (Dollard et al. 1999) has found managers of volunteers to be a rich source of information on volunteer-related issues.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 20 managers (or supervisors) of volunteers, employed by Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA). The CFA is among the world's largest volunteer-based emergency services, with an annual budget of around \$323 million and approximately 58,000 trained volunteers (Country Fire Authority 2008). These volunteers operate from locally-based brigades, which are semi-autonomous entities with their own management teams (e.g. Captain, Lieutenants, Secretary), and interact with the CFA 'corporate' body mostly through a small number of regionally-based operations and support staff. The current participants comprised 11 Operations Managers/Officers, six Brigade Administration and Support Officers, and three Training Managers. The sample was predominantly male ($n = 17$) and most participants were in married/de facto relationships ($n = 17$). Thirteen participants were based in regional cities/large rural towns, while the remainder ($n = 7$) worked on the urban/rural fringes of metropolitan Melbourne. Seventeen of the participants had experience volunteering with CFA, either currently or prior to joining the paid staff.

PROCEDURE

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at fire stations and CFA Regional headquarters across Victoria. Questions for the interview protocol were developed for the current study based on the broad goals of the research, and previous research findings concerning the families of career (employed) emergency workers (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George & Henderson 2005). The interview protocol contained items asking about: interviewees' background information (e.g. marital status, experience as an emergency services worker); managers' perceptions of the general pressures impacting on volunteers; and those aspects of the volunteer firefighter role seen by the managers to be difficult for families. In addition, the protocol contained probes addressing more specific issues: the day-to-day aspects of the volunteer role; less common, but potentially more demanding emergency situations; difficulties faced by families when the volunteer was away for longer periods; and what demands families faced when the volunteer returned home from a stressful incident. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

DATA ANALYSIS

The current qualitative analysis was conducted from an interpretivist paradigm (Morrow 2005). Accordingly, interview transcripts were analysed according to the inductive thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006), using the computerised data analysis software package NVIVO Version 7. Consistent with Braun and Clarke, interview transcripts were first read repeatedly before transcript extracts were systematically organised into meaningful categories. Following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke, extracts were coded for as many potential codes/patterns as possible. Once all extracts were coded and collated, the total list of codes was reduced to a smaller number of comprehensive themes. This search for themes involved looking for: conceptual 'convergence' among codes; and recurring regularities in the data (Patton 2002). The primary researcher then evaluated the candidate themes against a number of criteria (e.g. internal homogeneity, external homogeneity). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that there must be

Table 1: Summary of thematic analysis results – Conflicts between volunteer firefighting and family roles

Super ordinate theme	Difficulty prioritising family and brigade needs /demands					
Primary themes	1 Demands left with family members	2. Time away from family	3. Interrupts family activities	4. Mood and behaviour following trauma	5. Family anxiety about safety	6. Financial pressure from lost income
Sub-themes	Protecting family home from fire	(a.) Officers have more demands	Call-outs disturb sleep	Uninformed about trauma reactions	(a.) Negative effects of media coverage	(a.) Risk of losing employment
		(b.) Demands greater in urban brigades			(b.) Unaware of safety procedures	(b.) Paying workers when absent

sufficient data to support a theme, and thus themes were also evaluated according to whether they occurred across multiple interviews. The entire data set was then re-read and consideration given to whether the candidate themes accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole. Finally, the themes and supporting evidence were presented to the second and third author for discussion, where revisions were suggested and incorporated. The consensus outcomes of the procedure are described in the next section.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the findings extracted from the thematic analysis. These included a super ordinate theme; six primary themes; and nine specific sub-themes. These are discussed in detail below.

DIFFICULTY PRIORITISING FAMILY ABOVE THE BRIGADE

A super ordinate theme across most interviews reflected the difficulty some volunteers had in prioritising their responsibilities in relation to family needs and brigade demands. More specifically, managers described some of their volunteers as consistently sacrificing family commitments (e.g. birthdays, holidays) in order to meet competing brigade demands.

This was particularly the case when there were callouts to emergencies, such as fires. As one participant commented:

A lot of volunteers that come in to CFA see it as, you know, there's a thrill...They're there to protect their community but there is an element of excitement. And I think that can have a detrimental effect on a family because as soon as this pager goes off on the belt, nothing else is important in the world except responding to that pager call...The majority of volunteers that we have would put priority over most things if this pager [was] going off. No debate. No time to talk about it. Pager goes off there and they're in their gear and gone.

Several participants suggested that this tendency to prioritise brigade demands was a source of frustration for many family members.

Also, as indicated in the above extract, interviews suggested a number of possible, although necessarily tentative, reasons for some volunteers being inclined to prioritise their brigade ahead of their family, including: the excitement and thrill associated with responding to emergencies; volunteers' sense of responsibility for community protection; and group cohesion pressures to 'do their part' and pull together with their 'mates' during an emergency. As

one participant said, *'these are the blokes you train with. These are the blokes that you stand beside when you're fighting fire. So you want to go with them and support them'*. Furthermore, this super ordinate tendency to prioritise brigade ahead of family responsibilities appeared to generate several specific conflicts with family life.

1. Additional demands left with family members

A theme discussed by several participants referred to the additional household and work demands placed on family when the volunteer was responding to incidents or engaged in brigade activities such as training. Family members were described as needing to undertake additional responsibilities (sometimes with no notice) related to household/domestic tasks (e.g. cooking dinner) and child care (e.g. picking young children up from school). However, many of the participants emphasised the implications for families living on rural properties, where the volunteers' absence meant pressure to complete additional farm management tasks:

From a family point of view everyone's gotta pick up the slack. The [non volunteer] daughter or...husband cooks dinner that night. Picks the kids up. Takes them to footy or cricket training. Depending on the age of the children they also pick up a weight of extra work. They might have a note to say, 'I want you to get in that paddock of sheep and put them in the shearing shed for tomorrow because if it rains tonight then I can't shear'. So you'll see the son and daughter, sixteen, seventeen year olds, out there after school on the motor bike rounding up the sheep for their father while they're away.

A specific sub-theme highlighted an issue when volunteers were responding to fires remote from their own property. Several participants described how family members were sometimes left to defend the property from fire while the volunteer (who usually possessed the greatest level of 'fire knowledge') was absent with the brigade fighting fires elsewhere.

2. Time away from family

A common theme across interviews concerned reduced time spent with family, resulting from time with the brigade. Interviewees discussed time demands on volunteers arising from a number of sources. These included operational activities, such as emergency

callouts, as well as long-term absences, sometimes in other areas of the state or interstate (e.g. absences of up to 5 days during large 'campaign' fires). However, participants also talked about the administrative and training demands associated with, among other things, achieving and maintaining their formally evaluated operational skills.

Two sub-themes emerged from the analysis, identifying factors impacting on the amount of time required from volunteers and from families. First, (2a.) several participants emphasised that brigade officers (e.g. Captain, Lieutenant) experienced greater levels of administrative demands, for example attending meetings, than did other volunteers, and this was a source of additional time away from their families. The second sub-theme (2b.) was that time demands were often greater in urban brigades, where a more complex 'risk profile' (associated with responding to both urban structure fires and wild-fires) necessitated more training and more frequent call-outs to emergency incidents.

3. Interrupts family activities

A number of participants discussed a theme of how responding to call-outs caused unpredictable interruptions to family routines and activities. In particular, interviewees suggested that unpredictable call-outs which were given priority over family matters interrupted important 'family events' such as birthdays, and Christmas gatherings. These interruptions were described as being especially problematic for families because the peak fire danger period in Victoria occurs during summer school holidays. However, other aspects of family routines were also interrupted: one specific sub-theme identified family members' sleep being disturbed by call-outs during the night.

4. Change in mood/behaviour following critical incident stress

Several participants discussed a theme of changes in volunteers' mood and behaviour following so-called 'critical' or traumatic incidents. More specifically, interviewees described volunteers manifesting stress symptoms in the home environment, often in the form of withdrawing, not talking, and sleeping badly. The most common type of critical incident participants discussed were motor vehicle accidents (MVAs). The following extract is illustrative:

People (volunteers) don't sleep properly so it disturbs the family that he's up. You know he sits on the computer all night. He starts to drink more than what he did. He might become withdrawn. Um, now the family's going: what the hell is wrong with him? This isn't my husband that I've been married to for fifteen years that all of a sudden is doing stupid things that he's never done before...It could be the withdrawal. So why won't you talk to me? – 'I don't want to talk about it'. They put up this brick wall to cope.

Although many participants emphasised the effectiveness of current organisational strategies to support volunteers (e.g. Peer Support programs), it seemed that these efforts were not always effective in buffering the volunteer and their family from adverse effects in a timely manner:

Car accident up the road. Goes to the station, gets in the truck. Goes to the call. Comes across a horrific motor vehicle accident. Could be known to the person in these small communities. ['Harry'] deals with the issue of being there. Call finishes. Go back to the shed. Before we can get an element of diffusion in, he goes home. He's back on the tractor, back to what he was doing. Could be affected by the trauma he's just been through. And we may not know how ['Harry'] is.

A related sub-theme indicated that information and education services about critical incident stress were generally directed to volunteers only, and that some families were not adequately informed about, or helped to deal with, these changes in mood and behaviour.

5. Family member anxiety about volunteer safety

Another theme concerned family members' anxieties about volunteer safety. Managers emphasised that volunteer firefighting was characterised by limited, yet unavoidable, exposure to potential physical danger, compounded by volunteers being generally unable to provide reassurance during incidents (e.g. by calling home). Two sub-themes emerged from the analysis suggesting factors exacerbating family anxiety. First, (5a.) media coverage of the fire:

The TV camera will look for the part of the fire that's got flames shooting in the air, because that gets recognition on the nightly news. Not that ninety-five percent

of the fire perimeter is black. No, the one bit where they've got the flame...even if it was from five hours beforehand. Now the family knows very little about what's gone on. They know little about what training you've done because they haven't been involved in it. Hence, their view of the world is it's death and destruction.

Second, (5b.) anxieties were sometimes exacerbated if family members were unaware of the procedures (e.g. training) that were in place to ensure safety on the fire ground.

6. Financial pressure due to lost income

A final primary theme concerned financial pressures on volunteers and their families resulting from leaving work to respond to emergencies. This was described as a salient issue for both volunteers who took leave without pay to attend incidents, and also for self-employed volunteers who did not generate an income during this time. Furthermore, some volunteers incurred costs responding to incidents (e.g. fuel driving to the fire station). Two specific sub-themes related to this issue: (6a.) the risk of permanently losing employment if volunteers left work without permission from their employer; and (6b.) volunteers operating rural farms sometimes incurring costs paying casual workers to manage the farm while they are away with their brigade.

DISCUSSION

Declining volunteer numbers in Australian communities (McLennan & Birch 2005) have prompted research on the working conditions and organisational climates experienced by emergency services volunteers, such as volunteer firefighters. In the current study, thematic analysis of interviews suggested potential conflicts between volunteer firefighting and family. A higher order theme indicated that some volunteers had difficulty appropriately prioritising family life and brigade responsibilities, which seemed to precipitate other more specific conflicts. These included: leaving household and business responsibilities (e.g. child care; farm management) with family members; a lack of time with family; and interruptions to family routines and activities (e.g. birthday and Christmas celebrations). Several other sources

of conflict were also identified, associated with: volunteers' mood and behaviour following traumatic incidents; family members' anxieties about the volunteers' safety; and financial pressures from lost income when responding to emergencies with the brigade.

The apparent priority attached to the volunteer firefighter role is consistent with many volunteers attributing high levels of personal importance to being a volunteer firefighter in their community (Cowlshaw et al. 2008; Miekle 2001). Similar constructs (e.g. role salience; job involvement) have been examined in research on work–family balance, and identified as factors determining, in part, conflicts between work and family (Carlson & Frone 2003; Greenhaus & Powell 2003). Thus, it appears that valued or important work-related roles are likely to precipitate conflicts with family responsibilities. Furthermore, highly salient roles may include unpaid volunteer roles, such as that of being a volunteer firefighter. However, given that volunteers do not receive remuneration for their time and efforts, the possibility of volunteers prioritising the brigade ahead of family raises questions about why volunteering may generate a high level of salience. The current findings provide some possible reasons for this: the excitement and thrill of emergency service work; volunteers' sense of community responsibility; and pressures to participate attached to belonging to their brigade as a cohesive social group (for further discussion of group cohesion and organisational performance, see Wech, Mossholder, Steel & Bennett 1998). These possibilities are consistent with recent research by McLennan and Birch (2007), who identified the importance of both self-oriented (e.g. learn new skills, maintain social ties) and socially-oriented motives (e.g. protect family assets, those of friends, and contribute to the local community) to volunteer as a firefighter. Other sources (e.g. Miekle 2001) also highlight how competition among volunteers for prestige and resources (e.g. new protective clothing) can have a role in their level of commitment and dedication to the brigade.

The finding that time demands from volunteering (e.g. operational activities, training and administrative demands) reduce time with family is consistent with the notion of time-based work–family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). Although systematic

data on the number of hours typically spent volunteering by Australian firefighters is limited, Hayward and Tuckey (2007) reported results from a large sample of South Australian Country Fire Service volunteer firefighters and found that participants reported volunteering, on average, 27 hours per month during the fire season (6.75 hours per week), and 16 hours per month outside of the fire season (4 hours per week). While these time demands may seem relatively small compared to those from paid employment, such demands may nonetheless be problematic for some families because of the unpredictable nature of brigade demands (e.g. emergency call-outs) which interrupt family activities at any time; and additional family and business responsibilities being left with family members. This may be especially problematic for members of rural families, who are frequently a source of reserve labour on farming properties which are both a workplace and the family residence (Alston 2006).

The current study identified additional sources of potential conflict between volunteering and family demands that were consistent with previous research on paid emergency service workers (e.g. Regehr et al. 2005). For example, one theme implicated difficulties for families associated with changes in mood and behaviour following a volunteers' exposure to traumatic incidents (e.g. motor vehicle accidents). A previous study by Bryant and Harvey (1996) surveyed Australian volunteer firefighters and also found many reported instances of trauma exposure and disturbed functioning. More specifically, 27% of the volunteers surveyed indicated experiencing mild to severe levels of psychological distress following events, while 17% and 9% reported significant and extreme levels of post-traumatic stress, respectively. Previous research (Regehr 2005; Regehr et al. 2005) suggests that families of emergency service workers are sensitive to a range of difficulties following such traumatic incidents, especially relating to: partners being disengaged and emotionally distant; a tendency to withdraw from family; and the need to manage their partners' distress.

Other potential problems for families were related to family members' potential experiences of anxiety about the safety of the volunteer; and financial pressure on families from the volunteer missing paid work to attend incidents. Previous research provides mixed support for this account of

problematic family member anxiety (Regehr et al. 2005; Thompson, Kirk-Brown & Brown 2001) and it seems that while difficulties associated with anxiety are possible, they are not inevitable. However, the current findings indicate factors that might exacerbate such anxiety, including both media coverage of fire events and a lack of information about the procedures volunteers undergo (e.g. training) in order to maintain safety. In contrast, there is very little information available about the financial pressures on volunteers' families. However, the impact of any financial strains must be considered in light of recent and sustained drought in parts of Australia, which have placed many families (especially those from rural areas) in situations of financial strain and escalating debt (Alston 2006). As such, even seemingly minor financial pressures from volunteering may result in potentially large negative outcomes for volunteers and their families over the course of a fire season. Furthermore, it should be noted that many of the pressures on family life identified in this study may vary for families living in different economic contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The current findings indicate strategies that emergency service agencies can consider to minimise conflicts between volunteering and family life. Two of these would appear to be immediately useful. First, there is a need for information for volunteers and their families. Information for volunteers should focus on the need to more consistently prioritise family ahead of brigade responsibilities, and could be included within induction packages for new volunteers or in seminars included as components of training volunteers towards their competencies. Information for families, in contrast, should address issues including: the demands on family members from being involved with the emergency services (e.g. sacrificing shared family time); reactions typical following traumatic stress and the support services available; and the training and safety procedures that protect the welfare of volunteers. While agencies might examine adapting volunteer induction packages to include components for family members (e.g. partners), families are most likely to benefit if they are encouraged to become actively involved in this communication process. Accordingly, agencies

should facilitate brigades involving partners in the recruitment and training process. This could be done by inviting partners to participate in induction or training sessions and designing such sessions to assist families' understanding of both the demands associated with volunteering and the resources and safeguards in place to assist families.

Second, there is a need for agencies to facilitate the development of processes to better support the families of volunteers. As one reviewer of this manuscript pointed out, a uniform strategy for supporting families is unlikely to work effectively across diverse communities (e.g. urban versus rural communities). Accordingly, recent approaches to community development, for example Asset-based Community Development (Mathie & Cunningham 2003), may provide useful models for engaging with volunteer families and developing specific support mechanisms suited for the needs of diverse communities. For example, the Asset-based Community Development approach described by Mathie and Cunningham involves bringing community members (i.e. the families of volunteers) together to identify assets within the community (e.g. personal skills, social networks), and develop their own individualised solutions to community problems using these assets. In this way, communities of volunteer families may identify their own best strategies for supporting themselves using existing social networks and resources. Simultaneously, families lacking a sense of community may benefit from being brought together with other volunteer families and developing these social networks. The role of agencies in facilitating this process would be to provide the resources needed (e.g. a meeting place and trained facilitators) to bring volunteer families together and help achieve the solutions these families identify.

Several limitations to the current study should be noted. First, the current investigation focussed on the potential conflicts between volunteer firefighting and family life. However, as discussed earlier, some emerging perspectives (e.g. Frone 2003) propose positive as well as negative dimensions to the work-family interface. Although it was outside the focus of this study, several interviews did indicate the possibility of positive synergies between volunteer work and family life, including benefits to family life from having an enhanced social network, and a family member with emergency management skills.

This is consistent with the notion of work–family positive spillover (Hanson et al. 2006) and would be useful to consider in future research. Second, the current interviews with volunteer managers provided an organisational perspective on volunteer-family conflicts. This sample has the advantage of providing access to managers' observations of a wide range of conflicts faced by diverse types of volunteers. These are expected to be potentially relevant to the issues faced by Australian volunteer firefighters, and not just those from Victoria. However, it remains likely that some sources of conflict between volunteering and family are not available to outside observers such as managers. As such, there remains a need for research directly investigating the experiences of volunteers and their partners.

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