IDENTIFYING THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG ASIAN MALES TOWARDS CAREERS IN THE U.K. FIRE SERVICES

1. Background

Over recent years fire services have been attempting to recruit a greater number of people from ethnic minority backgrounds to better reflect the communities they serve. In 1999 all United Kingdom (U.K.) fire services were set formal targets for the recruitment of ethnic minorities in two Home Office documents (1999a) and (1999b). These targets followed the report of Lord Macpherson into the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1999) in which he accused all public sector organisations of being institutionally racist. This view was to some degree supported by the report of Her Majesty’s Inspector of Fire Services (1999c) into equality in the fire services.

While research, such as that of the Corporate Communications Company (1999) and C3 Consulting (2000a) and (2000b), had been undertaken into more effective methods of promoting careers in fire services, the reasons why particular ethnic minority groups did not find such a career attractive do not appear to have been fully explored.

2. U.K. Ethnic Minorities

Owen (1995) identified that 5.5% of the population of the U.K. can be regarded as coming from an ethnic minority, a total of over 3 million people. However, the Home Office Race Equality document (1999a) states that only 800 people from these groups contributed to the total of 50,000 firefighters in the country. A further Home Office document (1999b) set
blanket targets for brigades to increase ethnic minority representation without taking into account the actual composition of the ethnic minority population, either nationally or locally. This, naturally, led to brigades taking a blanket approach to advertising and promoting careers in fire services to ethnic minority groups without differentiating between the individual ethnic groups that make up their local population. The Crime Concern and SRB4 Community Safety Partnership Report (2001 p.5) asked the question “Is it valid or appropriate to have targets that group together all peoples from Asian, black and minority ethnic communities?”

As there are already separate gender equality targets that have been set by the Home Office for female representation in fire services, that are not related to ethnic background, the research concentrated solely on identifying the attitudes of young Asian males towards careers in the U.K fire services. The specific age group of 16 to 18 years old was chosen as these young people would shortly be entering the “labour pool” and should therefore be actively considering their future career.

3. **New Zealand Ethnic Minorities**

While the main aim of this research was to identify the attitudes of Asian males towards careers in the U.K. fire services, an element of the overseas visit took the author to New Zealand. On undertaking some preliminary research into the New Zealand Fire Service (N.Z.F.S.) it became clear that the N.Z.F.S. were dealing with similar issues to the U.K. fire services regarding the under-representation of their indigenous, but ethnic minority group, the Maori.
While Maori form 16% of the population of New Zealand they represent less than 5% of the 1,600 career (full time) firefighters in the N.Z.F.S. Interviews with the N.Z.F.S. National Strategic Human Resources Director, National Advisor Maori and the Responsiveness to Maori Manager of the New Zealand Police (N.Z.P.) provided valuable insights into their apparently effective recruitment strategies. These strategies included the use of powerful images that are intended to have an almost “subliminal effect” as they reinforce the message that, for example, Maori in the Police need not divorce themselves from their cultural or spiritual heritage. Both the N.Z.F.S. and the N.Z.P. also include the translation of relevant text into the Maori language to further reinforce the subliminal effect. The N.Z.F.S. logo, Illustration 1. below, shows the translation of the key message into the Maori language, “Whakaratonga Iwi” translating to “Service to the People”. An example of a Police advertisement is included as Illustration 2., overleaf, which depicts Maori officers in both Police uniform and traditional dress and which also has a translation of the relevant wording into Maori, the same strategy adopted by the N.Z.F.S.

Illustration 1.

New Zealand Fire Service Logo – Featuring English and Maori Languages
Illustration 2.

New Zealand Police Recruitment Advertisement - Police Uniform and Traditional Dress
4. Hypothesis, Aims and Research Objectives

The research commenced with the hypothesis that:

“There are a number of key identifiable reasons why young males from an Asian ethnic minority background do not find careers in U.K. fire services attractive.”

The research had three aims.

1. To identify the key reasons why young Asian males in the 16 to 18 year old age range do not apply to join U.K. fire services in comparable percentages to white males.

2. On completion of the research, to make recommendations to make U.K. fire services more attractive to this group, or to discontinue current efforts and concentrate on other ethnic minority groups that may be more likely to apply.

3. To enhance the researchers skills in research, analysis and writing.

To achieve these aims the following specific objectives were formulated.

To examine, through questionnaires and group discussions, the attitudes young Asians in South Yorkshire towards careers in fire services.

To examine, through questionnaires, the attitudes of members of the majority Asian population in their home country of India.

To examine through, questionnaires, the attitudes of a third ethnic minority group, the indigenous Maori, in their own country.

To analyse the results of the questionnaires and discussions to identify any key reasons why so few young Asians apply for careers in U.K. fire services.
5. Research Methodology

As the literature review was underway additional preliminary research that involved discussions with the “Brigade Recruitment Team” and potential recruits at recruitment events was also undertaken. Through this research it became apparent that there were seven main areas or issues that may influence an individual in their choice of a career in the fire services. These were considered to be:

- Their own personal views;
- Equality and fairness issues;
- The nature of the work involved
- Pay and conditions;
- The formal requirements of the job;
- Religious and cultural issues;
- The views of other people.

To examine each of these themes a number of statements were formulated which would give an indication of the views of the respondent. A questionnaire was developed and, following piloting, finally consisted of 40 statements which required the respondents to indicate whether they “Strongly Agreed”, “Agreed”, “Disagreed” or “Strongly Disagreed” with each statement. Additionally there were 9 questions that required a “Yes/No” response. The questionnaires were distributed to the target groups, and in the U.K discussions took place with small groups of respondents.
6. Barriers and Filters to Potential Recruits

Shuttleworth (2000 p.87) adapted Mackenzies’s 1998 workforce model for the U.K. construction industry and related it to the fire services. This was further adapted to reflect the process of selection for firefighters and provides a schematic view of the barriers and filters encountered by potential recruits and is shown overleaf as Figure 1. “Workplace Model for Fire Services”.

If the results from this study are applied to this model as specific fire services recruitment strategies, then key areas in the process can be addressed. In this model employees come from the U.K. Labour Force pool, in the case of this research, school leavers. Filters act on this population resulting in the vast majority choosing other occupations rather than fire services. It is clear that if they do not initially consider a career in the fire services then specific recruitment strategies may influence them to do so.

Those who decide to apply have additional specific occupational barriers to be overcome, these include their personal views; equality and fairness issues; the nature of the work involved; pay and conditions; the formal requirements of the job; religious and cultural issues and the views of other people. Passing through the filters they form the pool of potential firefighters and are then subject to the rigours of the selection process. It is likely that it is for these many barriers and filters that so few young Asians actually reach the “firefighter pool” and therefore ultimately become firefighters.
Figure 1. Workforce Model for Fire Services. Adapted from Mackenzie (1998)
7. Results and Findings

On completion of the research it was found that overall:

Although there are a number of minor peripheral reasons why young Asian males do not find careers in U.K. fire services attractive, there do not appear to be any major, overriding key identifiable reasons.

Moreover, those minor peripheral reasons that have been identified are mainly centred around their erroneous perceptions about fire services and the job of a firefighter.

The specific findings are detailed here.

1. Young Asians do not want to be firefighters

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I would like to be a firefighter” and is related to the individual’s personal views. The most frequent type of comment made in the discussions was “I just don’t fancy it!” The most logical deduction that could be made on the reasons for this view is a combination of the other findings stated here.

2. Not enough information is available

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I know enough about fire services to make a decision about joining” and is again related to the individual’s personal views. There is evidence that young U.K. Asians have not been provided with enough information about careers in fire services to allow them to make decisions about joining.
3. **Firefighting is considered as a dangerous job**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I think firefighting is a dangerous job” and is related to the nature of the work involved. There is clearly a very strong perception that firefighting is a dangerous job, and therefore less attractive than it may otherwise be to young U.K. Asians.

4. **Handling dead bodies is an issue**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I do not think I could handle dead bodies” and is related to the nature of the work involved. Even though it may have been anticipated that young people in the 16 to 18 year old age group would express a reluctance in handling dead bodies, the responses from young U.K. Asians were particularly strong regarding this issue. Their responses were the opposite of those of the Whites of the same age and geographical area, who would seem to have little problem with this element of the role of a firefighter. This, however, does not appear to be related to religious or cultural reasons.

5. **There is little awareness of long-term career prospects**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “There are good long-term career prospects in the fire service” this is related to views on pay and conditions. Young U.K. Asians certainly do not appear to consider that there are long-term career prospects in fire services, and if they have aspirations they will certainly be discouraged from considering a career in the fire services for this reason.
6. **There are misconceptions over the fitness levels required**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I do not think I am strong and fit enough to be a firefighter” and is related to the formal requirements of the job. The perception of firefighters as having to be “superfit” (a group discussion comment) seems to have some influence on young Asians views on firefighting as a career.

7. **Some religious beliefs are an issue**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statements, “My religious beliefs would not allow me to be a firefighter” and “Working in the fire service would make it difficult for me to observe my religious practices (such as prayers) and festivals” and is related to religious and cultural reasons. The group discussions revealed that this was a particular issue to the Muslims due to the frequency of their requirement to pray, five times per day. Although this issue is limited to a small number of the respondents, it may prove to be one of the basic problems when attempting to recruit young U.K. Asians into fire services, especially those from an Islamic background.

8. **T.V. and Radio are underused in advertising fire services careers**

This was deduced from the answers to the Question “Have you ever seen or heard adverts for jobs in the fire service?” and is related to additional information. The results from this question very clearly indicate that a large percentage, 87%, of the U.K. Asians surveyed had not seen or heard adverts for jobs in the fire services. It is, of course, accepted that the cost of T.V. and radio advertising may be prohibitive for individual brigades and this will be dealt
with in more detail in the recommendations. Overall, there appears to be a lack of information and/or advertising specifically aimed at young U.K. Asians.

These first eight findings were related to reasons that may make a career as a firefighter unattractive, or to the lack of awareness of such careers. However, there are an additional three findings that, as importantly, serve to clarify some of the other general assumptions and statements that have been made about fire services.

9. **There is no “macho male” image**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “Firefighters have a “macho male” image” and is related to equality and fairness issues. Young U.K. Asians do not appear to regard firefighters as having such an image.

10. **Fire services are not too “militaristic”**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “The fire service is too much like the military because of the uniforms, the ranks and officers” and is related to the nature of the work. Contrary to some of the previous opinions on the views of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, U.K. fire services are not regarded as too “militaristic” by young U.K. Asians.

11. **Firefighting is regarded as a high status occupation**

This was deduced from the responses to the Statement “I see firefighting as a high status job” and is related to personal views. Contrary to the view that appears to be generally held by
Whites, young U.K. Asians do not consider firefighting as a low status job. It is also clear that the often cited “caste system” has, in this case, little influence on their views of the services.

8. Recommendations

On reviewing the findings of this research it became clear that they could be grouped into three themes so that appropriate and realistic recommendations could be made. These were:

1. Information and perceptions.
2. The work involved.

1. Information and Perceptions

The recommendations related to this theme will deal with the issues identified in the following findings:

1. Young Asians do not want to be firefighters;
2. Not enough information is available;
3. Firefighting is considered a dangerous job;
4. There is little awareness of long-term career prospects;
5. There are misconceptions over the fitness levels required;
6. T.V. and Radio are under used in advertising fire service careers.
2. The Work Involved

The recommendations related to this theme will deal with the issue identified in the following finding:

4. Handling dead bodies is an issue.

3. Religious Issues

The recommendations related to this theme will deal with the issues identified in the following finding:

7. Some religious beliefs are an issue.

Recommendation 1 – Information and Perceptions

It was considered that most of the reasons identified as to why young Asians do not find careers in U.K. fire services attractive were related to their perception of the services and occupation rather than any specific, real barriers. This recommendation therefore deals with the information and approaches that will be necessary to correct these misconceptions. It is recommended that:

The image of the firefighter is changed to reflect the wide range of activities that they actually undertake, such as Community Fire Safety, Special Services, Young Firefighters’ Associations and goodwill fire safety work. This should be implemented by individual brigades and can be done so almost immediately.
Advertising literature ceases to continually use images of firefighters in firefighting uniform on, or near fire appliances, and at fires. In support of the previous recommendation it is suggested that the advertising literature specifically uses images that depict these other activities. This should be implemented by individual brigades, as well as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (O.D.P.M.), as soon as the next “print run” of advertising material is required. Illustration 3 which is from the authors own Brigade may be regarded as typical of the type of recruitment images that many Brigades are currently using, two very serious looking fit young men, albeit one of them Black, “on a jet” against a background of flames.

Illustration 3. Recruitment Literature
More emphasis is placed on the long-term career prospects available in the services by portraying more officers in their day-to-day supervisory and management roles, as well as their specialist fire safety and training duties, rather than in firefighting uniform commanding fires. This should be promoted as soon as possible through the advertising literature as previously described.

The O.D.P.M. is approached and lobbied for funding for T.V. and/or radio advertising that can be specifically targeted at those from ethnic minorities. This is considered reasonable as it is likely that this will be one of the most effective methods of increasing the number of those from an ethnic minority applying to fire services, which in turn help brigades to meet the targets that the Government themselves set. This should commence immediately and be a co-ordinated effort between the Fire Brigades’ Union, the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers’ Association, the Local Government Association and individual Chief Fire Officers.

Recommendation 2 - The Work Involved

The main concern among U.K. Asians seems to be the handling of dead bodies. It is important to establish the reasons for this concern, which will require further research. It is significant that this is also a concern among Indian Asians and may be one of the fundamental conflicts that cannot be overcome. It is possible, however, that the issue arises from the perception of the work involved. While handling dead bodies is a necessary part of the job, it may be given a greater emphasis than is appropriate. If such is the case, recommendations made above in relation to information and perception should help to lessen the effect of this issue, in
particular suggestions for portraying firefighters carrying out other duties than firefighting and placing greater emphasis on the positive elements of the job. On a practical day-to-day basis Incident Commanders should be encouraged to allocate such tasks to those individuals in their command that do not have significant personal issues with such tasks.

**Recommendation 3 - Religious Issues**

There are 3 possibilities why religion may be a barrier for U.K. Asians. The barrier may be real, being the result of working practices in the U.K. fire services. The problem may be a result of misconceptions about the nature of a career in the service. Finally, there may be a real conflict between religious beliefs and the basic requirements of a firefighters job. Comparison of responses of U.K. Asians and Indian Asians should help to identify into which category these issues fall, but further detailed research may be necessary. Those issues that do not cause problems for Indian Asians should certainly be looked at more closely and investigation into provisions in the Indian Fire Service to allow firefighters to allow them to follow their religious practices may suggest ways of improving the situation in the U.K. Misconceptions should be tackled by improving information available to Asian groups about the realities of a firefighter job. However it must be accepted that certain fundamental conflicts may be an issue that cannot be resolved.
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