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Intergenerational Transmission of Service-Oriented Identity in Rural First Responder Families

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Abstract

First responders occupy a unique societal role, confronting crises, risk, and human suffering while protecting and serving others. For many, this professional commitment is deeply intertwined with personal and family identity, particularly in rural contexts where family and community ties are closely connected. This study explores the intergenerational transmission of a service-oriented identity among rural first responders, examining how family culture, community norms, and lived experiences shape motivations, identity formation, and resilience. Data were drawn from the first dozen interviews in the ongoing Trauma Survivors Turned *Trauma-Informed First Responders Research Project*, involving 11 participants representing firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, and law enforcement officers from rural Southwest Virginia. Using a qualitative, inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews focused on career motivations, familial and community influences, coping strategies, and perceptions of support systems, we identified several consistent patterns. The analysis revealed that family legacy, cultural expectations of service, and early exposure to helping behaviors significantly contribute to the development of a service-oriented identity. Participants consistently emphasized that “giving is healing,” describing how helping others provided emotional, psychological, and moral benefits that supported personal fulfillment and resilience in high-stress work environments. These findings highlight the crucial role of intergenerational, familial, and community processes in shaping the motivations and well-being of rural first responders and underscore the need for policies and support systems that reinforce these culturally embedded values.

Keywords: First Responders; Rural Communities; Intergenerational Transmission; Service-Oriented Identity

Introduction

First responders hold a unique position in society, willingly confronting crises, risk, and human suffering to protect and serve

others. For many, this professional commitment is deeply personal, shaped long before entering the workforce. In numerous first responder families, helping others is a core value modeled across generations, forming a foundational lens through which children understand responsibility, care, and community [1]. Exposure to family members who routinely respond to emergencies instills not only awareness of the emotional demands of the work but also an early sense of the social significance of service.

This intergenerational continuity reflects a broader cultural process in which stories of courage, sacrifice, and care circulate as part of family identity [2]. These narratives cultivate moral purpose, pride, and belonging, shaping how individuals envision their place in the world and influencing their future career decisions. In rural communities, these dynamics are often amplified. Smaller responder networks, stronger family ties, and deeply interconnected community relationships make family legacies of service a prominent pathway into the profession. Moreover, the constraints of rural emergency response—limited resources, expanded role expectations, and heightened exposure to community-based stressors make familial and social support essential for resilience and long-term well-being [3, 4].

Despite the significance of these intergenerational and community processes, limited research has examined how family culture and community norms shape identity development, motivation, and coping among rural first responders. This study addresses that gap by exploring how helping becomes not only a professional calling but also a familial and cultural inheritance. By centering the lived experiences of rural first responders, the analysis highlights how values of service, compassion, and community care continue to sustain those working in some of society’s most demanding roles.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how service-oriented identity develops in rural first responder families, we draw on three complementary theoretical

perspectives. First, Social Learning Theory illustrates how behaviors and values are modeled and internalized across generations. Second, Family Systems Theory highlights the relational and intergenerational processes through which service-oriented values are transmitted. Third, cultural norms around helping emphasize how broader community expectations reinforce and sustain these identities.

Modeling Service: Social Learning as a Pathway to a Service-Oriented Identity. The development of a service-oriented identity in first responder families can be understood through the processes described by Social Learning Theory [5]. Children raised in households where helping others is a central value are exposed to repeated demonstrations of service, resilience, and moral commitment. These behaviors and attitudes are internalized through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, forming the foundation for future vocational and personal choices. Parents, siblings, and extended family members serve as primary models, providing real-life examples of how to respond to emergencies, cope with stress, and find meaning in service-oriented work.

For children in first responder families, learning occurs not only through direct instruction but also through daily observation. They witness family members prepare for shifts, respond to emergencies, and share stories of courage and sacrifice. These experiences communicate that helping others is both socially valued and morally significant. Over time, such exposure fosters an enduring sense of pride and purpose that often guides career decisions long before formal professional training begins [6, 7]. The values children observe and internalize contribute to what we describe as a service-oriented identity. In rural communities, where family, work, and community ties are closely intertwined, these social learning processes are particularly influential. Children may accompany parents to community events, observe interactions with neighbors they have assisted, or experience firsthand the respect and gratitude extended to those who serve. Such experiences reinforce the desirability and moral importance of service, while highlighting the interconnectedness of personal, family, and community identities [8].

Vicarious reinforcement, a central mechanism of Social Learning Theory, further explains how the rewards of helping others become internalized. Observing parents' emotional satisfaction, community recognition, or sense of accomplishment after responding to crises functions as an indirect reward, promoting similar aspirations in the next generation. At the same time, witnessing coping strategies in the face of trauma or exhaustion teaches resilience and models emotional regulation in high-stress situations [2, 9]. Through these processes, the choice to pursue a career as a first responder emerges not merely from personal ambition but as the culmination of long-term socialization within the family and community. Social learning provides a critical lens for understanding how helping becomes embedded as a core value and how a service-oriented identity develops within first responder families, particularly in rural settings where service, kinship, and place are deeply interconnected.

Family Systems and the Intergenerational Transmission of Service-Oriented Values. Families are primary socializing agents, providing the relational, cultural, and emotional context within which values, behaviors, and identities are transmitted across generations. Within first responder families, the culture of service is often deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping not only career choices but broader conceptions of morality, duty, and social responsibility. Family systems theory emphasizes that individuals cannot be fully understood in isolation from the family unit, as family members' behaviors and values are interconnected and mutually influential [10].

In this framework, the decision to enter a service-oriented profession is not simply an individual choice but reflects a relational process shaped by patterns, expectations, and narratives within the family.

Intergenerational transmission occurs as children internalize the beliefs and behaviors modeled by previous generations and experience the implicit and explicit expectations surrounding service. For example, children raised in households where parents, siblings, or extended family members respond to emergencies may come to perceive service as a normative and morally desirable path. This transmission is reinforced through shared family stories, rituals, and celebrations that highlight acts of courage, sacrifice, and helping others. The values of service, altruism, and community responsibility become part of the family's identity, creating a moral framework that guides decisions and behaviors over time [2, 11].

In rural contexts, where social and community networks are tightly interwoven, the family's role in shaping service-oriented identity is particularly pronounced. Children observe not only the professional actions of family members but also the social recognition and interpersonal connections that accompany acts of service. Family expectations and cultural norms provide a lens through which children interpret these experiences, reinforcing the sense that helping others is both meaningful and expected. In some cases, familial involvement in first responder work fosters early skill development, resilience, and a sense of belonging within both the family and the broader community.

Empirical studies suggest that this familial influence extends beyond modeling behaviors to shaping emotional and moral understanding. For instance, children who grow up in families with strong service traditions often internalize a sense of moral duty, pride, and personal fulfillment associated with helping others, which can guide career choices and coping strategies in high-stress professions [9, 12]. In this way, the intergenerational transmission of service-oriented values operates both explicitly, through guidance and expectation, and implicitly, through observation, family narratives, and shared cultural practices.

Understanding first responder families as interdependent systems highlights how the values of service, duty, and community commitment are maintained and reproduced across generations. It also emphasizes that the development of a service-oriented identity is not a solitary process but one embedded in relational, cultural, and social contexts, particularly in rural communities where family and community life are closely intertwined.

Cultural Norms Around Helping and Service. In first responder families, helping others is often conceptualized not merely as an occupational role but as a core cultural expectation that shapes personal identity. From early childhood, individuals raised in such families observe service-oriented behaviors as both normative and morally praiseworthy. In households where parents or extended family members engage regularly in emergency response, children witness firsthand the integration of duty, courage, and compassion into daily life. Over time, these experiences cultivate an understanding that serving others is a moral imperative, a personal responsibility, and a source of communal pride [13]. Family dynamics are central to the internalization of these cultural norms. Parents, siblings, and extended relatives communicate the importance of helping through stories of past experiences, demonstrations of skill and preparedness, and discussions of ethical responsibility during crises.

These narratives often emphasize sacrifice, courage, and resilience, framing acts of service as both morally meaningful and socially esteemed. For children growing up in these environments, such exposure reinforces a framework in which the service of others is expected and valued, providing a foundation for a service-oriented identity [2, 11]. Rural contexts amplify the impact of cultural norms on identity formation. In small communities, the actions of first responders are highly visible, and the family's reputation for service carries social significance. Children growing up in these environments often see that acts of assistance generate recognition,

gratitude, and respect from neighbors, reinforcing the moral and social value of helping behaviors. The cultural expectations surrounding service thus operate not only within the household but also at the community level, linking personal identity to social responsibility in a visible and tangible way [3, 4].

Moreover, the alignment of family and community expectations creates a reciprocal reinforcement of service-oriented behaviors. Individuals internalize the idea that helping others is not merely an optional career choice but a continuation of a cultural and familial legacy. This process provides both motivation and validation, encouraging first responders to perceive their work as ethically and socially significant. It also fosters resilience, as engagement in meaningful, valued work can buffer the emotional toll of high-stress environments and cultivate psychological well-being [14, 15].

The intertwining of personal identity, family culture, and community norms further shapes the emotional and moral experience of service. First responders often report feelings of pride and satisfaction not solely from performing their duties but from honoring a family tradition of helping others [12]. The reinforcement of these values through social recognition, familial narratives, and community engagement strengthens commitment and provides a sense of purpose that sustains them during emotionally challenging work. In essence, cultural norms around helping and service do more than guide behavior; they create a moral and emotional framework that supports long-term engagement, identity formation, and resilience in rural first responder families.

Synthesis and Study Purpose. Taken together, these bodies of literature highlight the profound influence of family, culture, and community on the formation of a service-oriented identity among first responders, particularly in rural contexts. Social learning processes illustrate how values and behaviors are modeled and internalized, while family systems provide the relational and emotional framework through which service-oriented norms are transmitted across generations. Cultural expectations further reinforce these norms, connecting personal identity to moral responsibility and community engagement. To extend this theoretical foundation, the present study seeks to provide empirical evidence of how these processes manifest in the lived experiences of rural first responders. Using qualitative, ethnographic methods, the study examines how intergenerational transmission, family culture, and community context intersect to shape career motivations, identity development, and resilience in rural emergency response professionals.

Methods

This study was approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB # 24-883). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all data were collected and stored in accordance with ethical research standards to ensure confidentiality and participant safety.

Participants. Participants in this study were drawn from the ongoing Trauma Survivors Turned *Trauma-Informed First Responders Research Project*. The present study focused on an initial subset of interviews from that larger project. The sample included 11 first responders (9 males, 2 females) from rural communities in Southwest Virginia, with a mean age of 31.9 years.

Participants represented a variety of emergency service roles, including firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics, and law enforcement officers. All had a minimum of five years of professional experience, ensuring that they had substantial exposure to the practical, emotional, and psychological demands inherent in emergency response work. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture diverse perspectives and experiences within rural first responder populations, allowing for an in-depth exploration

of the intergenerational, cultural, and community factors influencing service-oriented identity formation and resilience.

Procedures. To identify potential participants, the researchers compiled a comprehensive list of emergency service organizations across 47 towns and small cities in Southwest Virginia, including fire departments, emergency medical services, and hospital emergency rooms. A total of 112 organizations were contacted. For each organization, a designated point of contact was identified, and a recruitment flyer describing the study was sent to this individual. Participation was voluntary, and any first responder who saw the flyer could contact the research team to express interest in participating.

Once a first responder volunteered, the second author of the study provided a secure link to complete a demographic survey, which collected information on age, gender, professional role, years of experience, and other relevant background characteristics. Upon completion of the survey, researchers coordinated with participants to schedule an in-depth ethnographic interview. Interviews were conducted in locations familiar to the participants, such as fire stations or emergency rooms, and for those who preferred, interviews were conducted via secure virtual platforms to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes on average, allowing sufficient time to explore participants' experiences, values, and perspectives in depth.

Instruments. The study utilized a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 14 guiding questions designed to explore the lived experiences of rural first responders in depth. The questions were developed to elicit participants' reflections on several key domains, including career motivations, family and community influences, professional experiences of service, coping strategies, and perceptions of supports and challenges specific to rural emergency response contexts. Examples of the interview questions include:

1. What experiences or influences in your background motivated you to become a first responder?
2. What resources or support systems do you believe should be in place to better support first responders in rural areas?
3. What aspects of your work do you find most rewarding?

The semi-structured format allowed researchers to maintain consistency across interviews while providing the flexibility to probe for clarification and encourage participants to elaborate on significant experiences or perspectives. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced qualitative data, enabling participants to share detailed personal narratives, illustrate the influence of family and community culture, and describe the emotional and moral dimensions of their work.

The interview protocol was reviewed by all authors of this study to ensure content validity and alignment with the research objectives. Questions were intentionally open-ended to allow participants to highlight experiences and reflections most meaningful to them, including the ways in which intergenerational transmission, family norms, and cultural expectations shaped their service-oriented identity.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, with an inductive, iterative approach to identify patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to the research questions. Two trained coders independently reviewed and coded the data, calculating Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.79$), which indicated substantial inter-rater reliability.

While the analysis was guided by three primary domains drawn from the literature (i.e. social learning processes, family systems and intergenerational transmission, and cultural norms around helping

and service), subthemes were generated inductively through repeated readings and discussion among the coders. No qualitative data analysis software was used. Coding and thematic development were conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the textual data. This approach allowed us to capture the nuanced experiences of rural first responders and the development of a service-oriented identity.

Results

Social Learning Processes. Participants frequently described early exposure to helping behaviors and emergency situations as pivotal in shaping their professional identity. Observing family members and participating in informal service opportunities provided foundational skills and instilled values of responsibility, preparedness, and vigilance. One participant explained:

“Having emergency calls day and night was my childhood background.”

“Um, I think I guess the biggest background was my father has been a firefighter for as long as I’ve been alive. I started campus rescue on a whim... and expanded on that immensely.”

These reflections highlight how observation and early participation in emergency response activities fostered the internalization of service-oriented behaviors. Participants also described how witnessing real-life emergencies informed their understanding of safety and attentiveness:

“The day of, as a kid, your dad’s a firefighter—he comes home every day... it was the first time I confronted... my dad could die on his job... death is something you keep at arm’s length.”

Through these early exposures, participants developed practical skills, situational awareness, and an understanding of the moral weight associated with helping others, illustrating how social learning processes shape a service-oriented identity.

Family Systems and Intergenerational Transmission

Family culture and legacy emerged as powerful influences on participants’ motivations and sense of duty. Many described their careers as extensions of a family tradition, emphasizing pride in carrying forward values demonstrated by parents, siblings, or extended relatives. One participant reflected on the influence of family and lived experience, including a formative event that coincided with a major national tragedy:

“April 16th happened at VT—the date of the Virginia Tech campus shooting in 2007—on the same day my father had a firefighter die on duty... it didn’t hit me as much then... as I’ve become a first responder, it has affected me more each year.”

Another participant highlighted the continuity of family service:

“It didn’t take much for me to decide to become a firefighter. That’s what my family does all the time—helping others in trouble.”

Families also provided mentorship and emotional support, helping participants navigate both the psychological demands and practical responsibilities of emergency work. One participant emphasized:

“Growing up, I always saw my mom or dad put themselves in harm’s way to help someone. It became second nature to me—I wanted to live up to that standard.”

Another noted the role of storytelling and shared narratives in reinforcing values:

“My family would tell stories about calls and rescues around the dinner table. It wasn’t just about the act—it was about doing the right thing and being proud of it.”

This intergenerational transmission embeds service-oriented norms into identity, reinforcing the notion that helping others is both a moral obligation and a deeply personal inheritance.

Cultural Norms Around Helping and Service

Participants described helping others as both a professional duty and a deeply ingrained moral and emotional imperative, reinforced by family, colleagues, and community expectations. Many highlighted the emotional and psychological rewards of service, reflecting the study’s theme that “Giving is Healing.” One participant explained:

“Every time we help someone, it reminds me why I chose this career. It gives meaning to all the hard work, the stress, and the long hours.”

In rural communities, small populations and close-knit networks amplify the visibility of first responders’ work, reinforcing social expectations and personal accountability. Participants noted that cultural norms emphasized preparation, attention to detail, and safety, often drawing from past experiences:

“It makes me more aware of safety training and harping on my guys... we need to be 100% on every call. It helps me not be complacent with safety.”

“Take the training seriously... making sure to take each step back for each call with a fresh set of eyes. New call, new scenarios, drawn on the past but know it’s different.”

These reflections illustrate a deeply ingrained service ethic, in which helping others is inseparable from accountability, vigilance, and respect for human life. Participants described how these values guided professional practice while providing emotional and psychological benefits, supporting resilience and well-being.

Summary of Findings. Across the three domains, three overarching themes emerged:

- 1. Early exposure and modeling of service-oriented behaviors** fostered skill acquisition, ethical awareness, and value internalization.
- 2. Family culture and intergenerational legacy** provided mentorship, moral guidance, and motivation to pursue a career in emergency response.
- 3. Cultural and community norms** reinforced service-oriented behaviors, promoted resilience, and contributed to emotional and psychological well-being.

Together, these findings demonstrate how intergenerational transmission and cultural context in rural first responder families shape professional commitment, identity formation, and personal fulfillment, supporting the central theme that “*Giving is Healing*.”

Discussion

This study examined how intergenerational transmission within rural first responder families shapes the development of a service-oriented identity, revealing the interplay of social learning, family legacy, and cultural norms in fostering both professional commitment and personal resilience. The findings illuminate the processes through which service-oriented values are internalized and maintained, demonstrating that the act of helping others is both a professional duty and a source of emotional and psychological fulfillment—a phenomenon captured in participants’ reflections on the theme “*Giving is Healing*.”

The analysis of social learning processes highlights the formative influence of early exposure to emergency response practices and family role models. Participants’ accounts underscore that observing parents, siblings, and extended family members engage in helping behaviors not only conveys technical skills but also communicates moral imperatives, ethical responsibility, and a sense of pride in serving the community. These findings align with broader theoretical frameworks suggesting that professional identities are socially constructed through observation and guided practice [5], while adding new evidence of how these processes operate in rural, high-stakes contexts.

Family systems and intergenerational legacies were central to participants' motivations and coping strategies. The transmission of values across generations reinforces a service-oriented identity that integrates personal, moral, and professional dimensions. Families provide emotional scaffolding, mentorship, and guidance, which help first responders navigate the psychological demands of their work. Notably, participants described the dual influence of family narratives and lived experiences, illustrating that intergenerational transmission is both structural—through family expectations—and relational—through shared stories, advice, and modeling. These findings extend prior research documenting family influence in first responder professions [1, 12] by highlighting its role in fostering resilience and psychological well-being in rural contexts.

The intrinsic satisfaction derived from helping others in times of crisis emerged as a critical motivational factor in the study. Participants emphasized that this satisfaction is not merely superficial but deeply tied to family values and cultural norms surrounding the importance of service. For individuals raised in families with a history of first responder work, the gratification of aiding others is heightened by moral fulfillment and family pride [16]. First responders who experience this intrinsic motivation tend to report more positive emotional outcomes and a greater sense of purpose in their work, which can buffer against the negative emotional impact of the profession [15]. The community-oriented ethos instilled in these individuals from a young age ensures that they perceive their role as service to the greater good, making the emotional costs of the job more manageable [14].

Cultural norms around helping and service further shape identity, professional behavior, and emotional satisfaction. In small rural communities, first responders are highly visible, and community expectations reinforce commitment, diligence, and moral responsibility. Participants reported that these norms fostered a sense of purpose and pride, providing psychological rewards that buffered the stress of emergency response work. The interplay of family, professional, and community norms illustrates how multiple ecological levels converge to cultivate and sustain a service-oriented identity, offering insight into mechanisms through which rural first responders derive meaning and resilience from their work.

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. First, understanding the intergenerational and cultural factors that motivate rural first responders can inform recruitment strategies, highlighting the value of family engagement and mentorship programs. Second, interventions designed to support rural first responders' mental health can leverage these existing family and community networks as protective resources. Recognizing the emotional satisfaction derived from helping others may also inform organizational policies aimed at sustaining engagement and mitigating burnout. Finally, these findings suggest that "Giving is Healing" may serve as both a guiding principle and a practical strategy, emphasizing the therapeutic and resilience-building potential of prosocial work.

Despite the insights provided, this study has limitations. The sample was small and focused on rural communities in Southwest Virginia, which may limit generalizability to other regions or urban settings. Additionally, the ongoing nature of the research means that only the first dozen interviews are included; subsequent data may provide additional perspectives and nuances. Future research should explore the interplay of intergenerational transmission, professional stress, and community context in larger and more diverse samples, including comparative analyses across different first responder professions and geographic regions. In conclusion, this study contributes to an understanding of how service-oriented identities are cultivated and sustained in rural first responder families. Through social learning, family legacy, and cultural norms, individuals internalize values of service that shape career choice, coping strategies, and personal fulfillment. By centering the lived experiences of rural first

responders, the findings illuminate the deeply relational and cultural processes through which helping becomes not only a professional obligation but a source of resilience, meaning, and well-being.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study offer several important implications for research, practice, and policy aimed at supporting rural first responders. First, the study underscores the value of understanding the intergenerational and cultural factors that shape service-oriented identities. Recruitment and retention efforts may benefit from strategies that engage families and highlight the role of mentorship, storytelling, and modeled behaviors in fostering commitment to emergency response professions. Programs that recognize and build on these familial and cultural influences could strengthen motivation and reduce turnover in rural settings.

Second, the study emphasizes the critical role of intrinsic satisfaction and the emotional rewards derived from helping others. Organizations and leaders in rural emergency services should consider mechanisms to reinforce these sources of fulfillment, such as peer recognition, reflective practice sessions, and opportunities for community engagement. Such measures may bolster resilience, reduce stress, and enhance long-term job satisfaction.

Third, rural first responders often operate in contexts with limited resources, heightened community expectations, and broad professional responsibilities. Policy initiatives that address these structural challenges are essential. Examples include increasing funding for rural emergency services, providing access to specialized training, offering mental health support tailored to first responders, and facilitating collaboration between rural agencies to share expertise and resources. Additionally, flexible and accessible support programs such as telehealth counseling, mobile training units, and regional peer networks could help mitigate the geographic and resource constraints common in rural areas.

Finally, future research should build on these findings by examining intergenerational transmission and service-oriented identity across larger and more diverse rural populations. Comparative studies that explore urban versus rural contexts, gender differences, and variations across first responder professions would deepen understanding of how family, culture, and community interact to shape motivation, resilience, and well-being. Longitudinal research could also illuminate how these influences evolve over time and in response to career stressors, providing evidence to guide interventions aimed at sustaining healthy and committed rural first responder workforces.

In sum, this study highlights that supporting rural first responders requires attention not only to individual and family-level factors but also to broader structural and policy environments. By leveraging familial legacies, cultural norms, and intrinsic motivation while addressing resource constraints, stakeholders can cultivate resilient, effective, and fulfilled first responder teams in rural communities.

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