



# Men, masculinities and firefighting: Occupational identity, shop-floor culture and organisational change

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 August 2008  
Received in revised form  
10 March 2009  
Accepted 15 March 2009

### Keywords:

Firefighting  
Masculinities  
Heroism  
Risk/danger  
Emotional labour

## ABSTRACT

As an occupation, firefighting is replete with images of maleness operating around a series of highly masculinised codes and values most notably comprising: risk/danger, heroism, fearlessness/courage, physicality, and bodily strength. This qualitative study of the UK Fire Service seeks to uncover the ways in which these masculine codes and values were evident amidst the daily working lives of a group of full-time, male firefighters. Placing respondent views at the centre of the research, findings suggest that occupational identities were based primarily upon notions of emotional strength, physical and technical competence and collective understandings of risk and responsibility. A commitment to group solidarity was also central to the masculine identities of respondents, with colleagues in administrative and managerial positions being distanced on account of their non-manual occupational roles.

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## 1. Introduction

Like a host of male dominated occupations, the UK Fire Service has traditionally functioned along heavily gendered lines; its organisational structures, workplace practices and daily routines are steeped in images of maleness. Throughout popular culture the iconic image of the male firefighter is one of quintessential bravery incorporating notions of heroism, danger and courage (Baigent, 2001; Childs et al., 2004; Tracy and Scott, 2006). Such perceptions have arguably become more powerful in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US and related events in the UK (see Boon, 2005; Yarnal et al., 2004).<sup>1</sup> Set against this contextual backdrop, how, we might ask, do fire service personnel construct their identities within this highly masculinised occupational setting? Moreover, to what extent do such masculine values and ideals manifest themselves amidst the everyday activities of workplace interaction? This small-scale qualitative study of the members of one UK Fire Service 'watch'<sup>2</sup> seeks to address these issues in order

to analyse the way in which a variety of masculinities emerged in and through the everyday lives of respondents. Firefighting provides fertile ground for the study of gendered identities both because of the popular cultural imagery within which it is situated and because of the relative scarcity of sociological research into its occupational locales. A common theme within those studies which do exist is the production of clearly demarcated occupational identities where a distinctly masculine aura pervades (see for example, Baigent, 2001; Desmond, 2006, 2007).

Focusing on the key aspects of masculine construction within the lives of 16 full-time, male firefighters at one UK fire station, this paper portrays how a specific set of norms, standards and expectations influenced and informed individual occupational identities.<sup>3</sup> Two main theoretical concepts underpin the overall narrative. First, Connell's (1987: 2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity is used to frame and contextualise discussion surrounding the construction of divergent respondent masculinities. Second, working class shop-floor culture is deployed as a conceptual theme

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of the heroic masculinisation of 9/11 see Dowler (2002).

<sup>2</sup> 'Watch' is a commonly used term in the UK Fire Service denoting a particular group of firefighters who work together as a unit on a cyclical, shift-work basis.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst we focus specifically on the occupational experiences of male firefighters it is worth noting that, within the UK at least, firefighting is an occupation open to both males and females with the first full-time female firefighter being recruited to the London Fire Brigade in 1982. Subsequent research has highlighted the heavily gendered nature of recruitment patterns since that time (see Baigent, 2001). In 1999 the then Home Secretary Jack Straw advocated that by 2009 15% of UK firefighters should be women (see Straw, 1999). The Audit Commission (2008) has more recently reported that the attainment of such a target is unlikely.

against which this range of masculinities and their specific emotional requirements can be located (see Clarke, 1979; Collinson, 1988, 1992; Willis, 1977). What transpires is a theoretically informed analysis within which respondents are categorised according to their workplace behaviours, their commitment to occupational duties, and the masculine traits which they choose to exhibit. In turn, the paper highlights the numerous spaces where the emotional aspects of firefighting become evident and are made explicit.

## 2. Men, masculinity and work

Notwithstanding the wider changes that have taken place in more recent years with regard to the reconfiguration of gender relations in work and employment in line with new manufacturing processes, fluctuating labour markets, and the expansion of the service sector industries (Walby, 1997), it is well established within sociological literature that images of maleness have historically dominated the structures, practices and routines of working class occupational settings (Acker, 1990; Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; McDowell, 1998; Whitehead, 2002). Likewise, ideals surrounding notions of physicality, danger, aggression and competence have often been cited as prime factors in the construction of working class, masculine occupational identity. For Morgan (1992), the values and beliefs underpinning such ideals remain central to the way in which modern-day work processes are organised. In his study of nightclub security staff, for example, Monaghan (2002: 334, 337), clearly identifies the way in which physicality, strength and violence are seen as: "... attributes associated with traditional working class masculinities". Monaghan also asserts that 'bodily capital,' that is, the possession of a strong and competent body, is "... intimately related to gendered, working class constructions of occupational competency." From this, and a plethora of earlier research (see for example Cockburn, 1983; Collinson, 1992), we are reminded that the ability to meet the physical challenges of particular types of work is central to the construction of certain occupational identities.

Technical competency too can act as a measure of masculine prowess at work. In his study of the US Navy, Barrett (2001) utilises Connell's (1987, 2005) conceptualisation of the hierarchical framing of masculine identities in order to analyse three categories of military personnel whose distinct occupational duties determined informal peer group understandings of masculine status. In terms of the gender order evident within this particular research setting, Barrett (2001: 84–85) argues that Naval Aviators (jet fighter pilots) were regarded as epitomising masculine ideals in their representation of "... aggressiveness, technical mastery of complex machinery, courage, and autonomy ..." and, in so doing, held sway in terms of the informal occupational hierarchy in place. Subordinate to aviators were Surface Warfare Officers (those operating surface ships such as destroyers and aircraft carriers). These men secured their position in the masculine hierarchy largely as a consequence of the harsh living and working conditions which they often endured and the significant levels of technical competence which they possessed, the central hallmark of which was the ability to demonstrate a disciplined and calm rationality under pressure. Against such powerful masculine norms, it is perhaps not surprising that Supply Officers (non-operational support personnel) were afforded least status in terms of occupational identity. With fewer opportunities to ally themselves to the hegemonic ideals so revered in military contexts, (and despite attempts to establish their own forms of competence, indispensability and status), these men were located in a somewhat lowly, feminised role as a consequence of their purely administrative function.

Like Barrett (2001), Fitzpatrick (1980) argues that occupational understandings of masculine identity may be refined and

developed when placed within the context of 'dangerous work'. In his study of underground mining in the US, Fitzpatrick (1980: 132) highlights danger as related "... to conceptions of the masculine role and associated norms which require the management of fear". As in the work of Barrett (2001), the importance of psychological (as much as physical) strength in the face of dangerous circumstance can be seen here as integral to the construction of workplace competency.

Perhaps not surprisingly, just as physical and psychological strength have traditionally been seen as key constituents of masculine occupational identity, the perceived possession of more 'feminine' (or simply 'non-masculine') behaviours has led to a marginalisation of those concerned (Whitehead, 2002). As Miller et al. (2003: 360) observe: "... any suggestion of traditionally 'feminine' traits, such as gentleness or sensitivity, encourages colleagues to brand men 'sissies' or 'fagots'. Such inferences are not uncommon in male dominated settings. That said, there is evidence to suggest that, in recent years, a feminisation of working practice has come to be seen in a more positive light in some occupational spheres" (see Adkins, 2001; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003; McDowell, 1998).

## 3. Masculinity, firefighting and emotional labour

How then might existing research findings allow us to make sense of the construction of masculine identity in the modern-day UK Fire Service? Certainly, notions of physicality, strength, risk/danger and competence are evident amidst the heavily gendered ideals which shape the occupational expectations of male firefighters at the public level. Representing the epitome of heroism, rationality and safety, firefighting has, at its very core, a series of popular cultural beliefs and values which draw heavily upon key facets of hegemonic masculinity (Baigent, 2001; Cooper, 1995; Hall et al., 2007).<sup>4</sup> Studies of the occupational conditions of fire service personnel both in the UK and elsewhere have borne out this presumption. Yarnal et al. (2004) for example, allude to the connection between firefighting and military practice, emphasising notions of heroism, bravery, valour and morality, alongside a more general commitment to community welfare.<sup>5</sup> Desmond (2006, 2007), too has identified the masculine occupational terrain of rural 'wildland' firefighters as that which demonstrates elements of extreme risk and danger. In a similar vein, Tracy and Scott (2006: 18) articulate the powerful nature of such hegemonic ideals which, they note, appear to over-ride the socially and physically 'undesirable' aspects of firefighting (i.e. 'dirty work' often carried out in difficult conditions); this acting as some kind of protection mechanism against occupational derogation at a more public level. The prestige (social, moral, sexual) associated with firefighting, they argue, "... is more iconic ... than realistic, reified in larger macro discourses more than in everyday micro practices"; a scenario which, they suggest, serves to shield firefighters from "tainted characterisations of their work."

What such findings reveal is something of a contradiction between the way in which firefighting as a job is conceptualised by those outside, as opposed to those inside, of its everyday routines. Moreover, recent research has also uncovered what might be regarded as equally contradictory evidence in relation to the

<sup>4</sup> As Hall et al. (2007) note, such beliefs and values can be located within the context of what Whitehead (2002: 122) has described as the 'heroic male project'; the imagery surrounding the publicly assertive, self-disciplined, male who exhibits a strong sense of militarism, conquest and physical endurance.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the specific connection between the fire service and military contexts, see Baigent (2001).

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