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Chapter 6

Riding Fire Trucks and Ambulances with America's Heroes

Clifton Scott

Sarah J. Tracy

“The results are in, and the people have spoken. Once again, firefighter is at the top of the list in the annual AOL/Salary.com sexiest jobs survey. Our brave firefighters had some tough competition for the spot this year though, sharing the honors with the silver-spooned CEO, whose median salary of more than \$600,000 seems to be compounding interest not only in the bank, but also with the ladies. In the two male-dominated fields (more than 97 percent of firefighters and 96 percent of CEOs nationally are men), the fact that number one was a tie between the altruistic, brawny fireman and the bring-home-the-bacon CEO speaks volumes about what we find sexiest in men. But are these jobs really sexy?” (Pappasun, 2006).

The survey described above recently named firefighting the sexiest occupation, but when asked to comment on this finding in a media interview, one firefighter retorted, "It's a very rewarding job, but it's not sexy, not unless you think dealing with blood, germs and bodily functions is sexy." Another firefighter agreed, "Firefighting - no, it's not a sexy job." And yet, other firefighters interviewed for the same article (Pappasun, 2006) claimed that firefighting is the essence of sexy work. "Chivalry isn't dead. It is a chance to sometimes be a hero, to ride in like a knight in shining armor," said one. Another said, "It's true that when we arrive on the scene, we are all about helping them. If that makes us sexy, so be it.”

Indeed, in terms of how the public generally views the relevance of one's work, firefighting is arguably one the best jobs to be had. In the U.S., post 9/11, it is difficult to imagine an occupation endowed with more public trust and esteem than firefighting. During

uncertain times, the meanings for this work in U.S. popular culture—heroism, strength, manliness—seem to be a source of comfort for many.

And yet, as reflected in some of the quotations above, the everyday experience of actually doing the work of firefighting often seems far removed from the “sexiest occupation” surveys, beefcake calendars, and dramatic television shows that people might imagine when they witness the dramatic spectacle of the fire truck on the street. In spite of their prestige, firefighters regularly deal with tasks, clients, and situations that are physically, socially, and morally dirty. As we demonstrate in this chapter, the considerable validation given this occupation in spite of its dirtiness is in part a consequence of the “identity work” (Tracy & Naughton, 1994) that firefighters do to manage the tainted tasks, clients, and material filth that mark their everyday experience of this work. Managing the meaning of the truck and its surrounding activities is not only about “getting the job done” but also maintaining a positive, satisfying sense of self-identity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Weedon, 1997). Fire trucks are not inherently meaningful except in relationship to those who ride them (e.g., firefighters), the other objects they are intended to save (for example, victims, burning buildings), and the manner in which this work has been portrayed historically. Thus, for the firefighters, a sense of individual, collective, and occupational self can only be achieved in relation to this truck, its onlookers, the clients its technology is intended to save, and the hazards that inspire its dispatch.

In this chapter, we explore a specific form of identity work, taint management, which includes the communicative efforts of employees to “make work meaningful” by organizing the meanings of stigmatized clients, tasks, and situations. We argue that the situated, local, mundane talk that comprises the everyday discourse of firefighters in this study often appropriates broader, societal discourses in a relatively privileged effort to manage work that might otherwise seem

dirty to most outsiders (Tracy & Scott, 2006). While firefighters may seem like an unusual case, we conclude that this taint management is actually central to the identity work that firefighters, indeed all employees, are trying to accomplish as they attempt, with more or less success, to feel secure about who they are in the work they do.

Riding Along

This study is based on field research conducted by the first author at a major metropolitan fire department. The Bayside Fire Department (BFD) is a large municipal firefighting organization located in a major city on the U.S. west coast. The first author, Cliff, conducted “ride-alongs” with crews at four BFD stations. During each of these periods of participant observation, he helped out with station chores and emergency response activities, observed training exercises, ate meals with the crew, and accompanied engine, truck, and ambulance crews on fire and EMS calls. Along the way, he also conducted ethnographic interviews, informal conversations with participants that were reconstructed in field notes. Restrictions on research access did not allow for formal, structured interviewing. Consequently, his role was that of a “participant-as-observer,” since he was known to the subjects as a researcher but participated in everyday work life to the extent that he became familiar with the dilemmas faced by full participants (Gold, 1958; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 147-148).

Field notes not only reflect what Cliff observed in the field but also early, tentative ideas about potential codes, the relationship between various events being observed, as well as impressions about the entire project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Utilizing the constant comparative method (Kvale, 1996), formal data analysis began with open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), where codes were tentatively assigned to various passages of the field notes that suggested particular categories or themes. Some of these themes were partially inspired by existing theory

and others emerged primarily from the data. With an initial coding system in place, the remaining data was coded, and various categories were added, extended, combined, and eliminated where necessary.

The Irony of Firefighting as Dirty Work

So what, then, is so dirty about firefighting? Some readers may be surprised to find a chapter about firefighters in a book about dirty work in part because this notion of firefighting as dirty work is in conflict with the dominant, external, preferred image of firefighting that most firefighters labor to reproduce. If this case is any indication, firefighting rarely seems like dirty work to outsiders in part because firefighters manage taint so believably, in spite of the stigmatized tasks, situations, and people around them.

Firefighting at BFD failed to live up to that espoused ideal and instead involved a variety of tainted, identity threatening tasks, clients, and situations. In short, BFD is called a “fire department,” and its members travel on fire engines and fire trucks, but the data collected for this study indicate that the vast majority of “firefighter” calls had little to do with fire or serious medical hazards. Most of the calls that were dispatched as fire, were either a false alarm (a prankster pulling a street corner call box, or a malfunction in an industrial fire detection system), or were extremely minor (for example, a smoking fluorescent light fixture). Also, on countless occasions, the firefighters were “called off” of fires, ordered to return to the station before arriving on scene because the fire was discovered by another crew to be minor or false. In all, Cliff observed one fire during the course of his fieldwork at BFD, a small grass fire. Most calls involved minor medical concerns of the “nuisance” variety, and when firefighters were willing and able to attend to these EMS calls, they often complained about the dirtiness of this work by portraying it as incompatible with firefighting.

EMS and Firefighting as “A Bad Marriage”

In spite of the frequency of EMS calls, members very rarely spoke of EMS in positive terms. The integration of EMS and fire services under the umbrella of BFD occurred four years prior to this fieldwork, but the tension surrounding this change was immediately evident. Cliff heard stories of paramedics being forced to eat at different tables than firefighters at the stations, and in several separate conversations with firefighters and paramedics, this occupational integration was referred to as “a bad marriage.” EMS calls were rarely discussed during station meals, even when members had discussed them with some excitement while returning to the station. Conversely, mealtime conversations and ethnographic interviews often included vivid descriptions of fire suppression and victim rescues that were far removed from the EMS context. When members were willing to acknowledge this conflict between EMS and firefighting, they typically explained that EMS activities lacked the exhilarating experience of heroism. As firefighter and paramedic Will disclosed:

Well, we don't talk about it because EMS just isn't very fun. It's not heroic....

Firefighting is like riding down a hill on a bicycle really fast, maybe with your hands off the handlebars. The ambulance service is like fixing that bike. It's okay, but it's not nearly as much fun.

Like many others, Will equated fun and heroism with danger and risk, a tendency he portrayed as just a “natural” part of being a firefighter. Firefighting has long been portrayed as a manly occupation (Cooper, 1995; Kaprow, 1991; Tebeau, 2003), the performance of which is thought to be unquestionably heroic (McCarl, 1984). Firefighters tend to assume that this emphasis on masculinity is a natural part of who they are, and they are unlikely to become people who like “fixing that bike.” In his view, that is why EMS and firefighting are incompatible.

Beyond their judgment of EMS and firefighting as poorly matched job activities, BFD members seemed to have tolerated these changes as structural shifts not to be embraced but rather as identity threats that should be only marginally tolerated. Consider the following field note from an ethnographic interview with another firefighter, John.:

John and I end up talking about the Fire/EMS split. He refers to the integration of EMS into BFD as a “bad marriage.” To him, it doesn’t really work. They’re different jobs for different kinds of people. He admits that he’s been certified as a paramedic. He says this as he leans on the fire engine and averts his eyes, seeming pretty embarrassed about this certification. He follows this with, “Yeah, I’m certified as a medic, but I prefer to ride on the truck. Who wouldn’t, right?”

John not only employs the “bad marriage” metaphor but also admits with rather obvious reluctance that he has actually received the highest level of EMS training. John’s posture, speech, and facial expressions indicated the shameful, gendered identity threat constituted by his somewhat hidden status as a paramedic. It was as if John was admitting he occasionally does his own laundry at home—a necessary evil, something that changing times have made him do, not work that he wants to.

Within a variety of communicative resources, from formal structure to occupational symbols and discourse, members worked to culturally segregate EMS and firefighting. The formal structure of the organization reflected and maintained these divisions as binary oppositions. For example, while other fire departments refer to members as “firefighter/paramedics” or “firefighter/EMT,” going so far as to embroider such titles on uniforms, these labels are applied in an either/or (versus both/and) sense at BFD. On one day, a member may be working as a firefighter, and the next shift they are officially a paramedic, as

denoted by their dress, yet they will return to being a firefighter with a different uniform on the following shift. When an EMS dispatch was received at the station, someone would quickly check a computer screen and announce over the loudspeakers with a tone of resignation, “EMS, EMS, that’s an EMS call.”

Though this work was portrayed as boring if not embarrassing, the supposed lack of excitement and danger in EMS was hardly an objective, unquestionable part of the work. In fact, Cliff perceived many EMS calls as highly unpredictable, risky, and indeed heroic. EMS calls were not interpreted and portrayed in the preferred framework of heroism and excitement, but we argue this was not due to an inherent lack of these ideal qualities in the work but instead because it included stigmatized clients, situations, and tasks that emerged as identity threats.

As BFD firefighters attempted to explain their work, they highlighted the contrast between their preferred, external image and the everyday experience. It’s not unusual for members of occupations portrayed on television (for example, lawyers) to point to contradictions between public perceptions and lived realities of work. However, in highlighting these contradictions, BFD firefighters typically pointed to job features that were tainted physically, socially, and morally. It seems hardly coincidental that the dirtiest firefighting job features have emerged as a product of the addition of EMS to the department mission.

Physical Taint

Even in their fire suppression activities, firefighters do physically filthy tasks and labor in dangerous conditions (Tracy & Scott, forthcoming). Particularly in the EMS context, they deal with death, mutilated bodies, and a variety of bodily fluids. Like members of other medical professions (Hafferty, 1988; Smith & Kleinman, 1989), firefighters regularly examine the private areas of client’s bodies. Firefighter Bob attested, “We spend most of our time at this station

responding to false alarms and “shitbums”. We call ‘em shitbums because they shit all over themselves and call us. Then we have to take care of them.” As such comments exemplify, the threat of this physical taint is highlighted and sustained by pervasive talk of “shit.” An ambulance at a BFD station is commonly referred to as “the shitbox” or “the shit carrier.” Moreover, there is much talk of the problem of “shitbums.” These references to “shit” on the surface appear to revolve around the disgust that both firefighters and paramedics feel about having to deal with “bums,” homeless addicts of one sort or another who pass out and defecate on themselves. Merchants or passers by call 911, and BFD members have no choice but to pick up the person, attempt to treat them, and take them to the emergency room.

Social Taint

In addition to physical dirt, BFD members also demonstrated a frustration with the social taint of EMS work. In many cases, physical and social taint were derived from the same sources. EMS “shit work,” as it was often called, had comparatively less to offer in the way of self-edifying danger because it was perceived as less dangerous and more routine, thus offering fewer opportunities for firefighters to enact the heroic identity so often linked with their occupational community. A hero is someone who does things that others cannot, often through the demonstration of some kind of physical or emotional strength. Firefighters have been portrayed (and portray themselves) as heroic servants who primarily fight fires and through their ability to withstand physical and emotional conditions that others cannot (Cooper, 1995). Feats of strength are not heroic unless they are directed toward some apparently benevolent end, so heroes are those who help victims or potential victims, people who are weaker and more helpless than the hero. Thus, work is not objectively heroic; heroism must be (re) accomplished in relation to the comparatively weak and helpless identities of those who are in some way rescued.

This heroism can be more difficult to accomplish when clients come from a low social class. It seems safe to assume that to most outsiders, saving lives and mending the broken through EMS work is hardly the antithesis of heroism. However, within BFD the possibility of heroism in EMS work is challenged by what Page (1984) called courtesy stigma, taint associated with working in a servile position for clients perceived as unsavory because of their low class position in society. Since many EMS calls were described as illegitimate, they were a persistent source of frustration for firefighters, particularly since many of these calls seemed to be generated by impoverished citizens who were relying on the fire department and hospital emergency rooms for their medical care. Much of this difficulty could be traced to the social taint these clients represented. For example, consider this:

On the way back from the car accident, I ask them, "So what are the top three calls in this neighborhood." Tim (?) says flatly, "Bums, Bums, and more Bums. Shitbums!" Rhonda (?) adds that there are a lot of elderly people in [Little China]. Tim adds, "Yeah, and they don't know when to slow down. They'll be having chest pains and still carry six bags of groceries up seven flights of stairs."

Here, the taint is social in the sense that firefighters are potentially threatened by the servile role they must play with clients who seemingly should "know when to slow down" or "shitbums" who are not only physically disgusting but represent a lower class in society. Indeed, such clients are the antithesis of the heroism, physical and emotional strength, and independence that makes up the public identity of the firefighter (Cooper, 1995; Kaprow, 1991; McCarl, 1984). Heroes are people who personify autonomy and independence. Their superhuman qualities allow them to swiftly intervene, and this quality is made meaningful when heroes, icons of control and autonomy, save victims/clients who are dependent and in a situation that is out of their control.

However, the victims BFD firefighters most often encountered during observations were in a dependent, out-of-control situation that firefighters believed was created by the clients themselves. To save someone who is dependent enhanced a firefighter's identity only if the client did not somehow "deserve" the situation that required heroic intervention. In these cases, feigning empathy and subservience was what BFD members found difficult to accomplish. Such clients do little to aid the firefighters in their efforts to secure a sense of heroism in their work.

Moral Taint

In addition to the challenge of performing heroism on behalf of low class clients who seem to deserve their plight, the moral questionability of these clients added another layer of taint to the work. While it initially appeared that firefighters were only concerned with the physical and social dimension of EMS taint, their frustration with these clients seemed to take on a moral politic of its own. It wasn't merely that EMS clients seemed to deserve their situation because they were incompetent. They also were often portrayed as immoral, and some firefighters complained passionately that their work seemed to actually contribute to the depravity of some clients.

For example, many of the calls (fire and EMS) were perceived as illegitimate. These "bullshit calls" were a regular source of frustration for firefighters, particularly those in poor, inner-city neighborhoods in which many citizens rely on the fire department and hospital emergency rooms for their medical care. Here, firefighters often struggled to construct their work in heroic terms when they faced clients who created an unfortunate situation not through

incompetence (social taint) but dishonesty. For example, consider a common slogan often uttered sarcastically at BFD:

John says a common saying is “If you call, we’ll haul.” He says this in association with a story about a call they got one time at 2:00 in the morning. The woman was concerned that her kitchen light went out. He asked for a bulb. She gave him one, and he changed it. The light now worked. He just said nothing and walked out. He then follows this with the story of a time when he and another paramedic/FF went on a call to a house, where a woman had the flu, but the other paramedic who was actually working on her was sicker than she was.

Each crew told similar stories. These narratives can be considered a means of “letting off steam” or “venting” negative emotion about the challenges of work. However, by choosing such extreme cases, they attribute the actions of these clients (i.e., generating a nuisance call) to moral shortcomings by juxtaposing each call’s lack of seriousness against their own merit-worthy behavior (i.e., changing the client’s light bulb without comment, serving clients who are less ill than the EMS provider).

Some members also seemed threatened by association with a political system that, in their view, actually rewarded immoral behavior. Here, it seemed that America’s heroes were ashamed, perhaps understandably, of their city’s official responses to social problems. For example, Bob launched without prompting, into a global explanation of these problems—the fireboxes, the bums, the false alarms.

So what we basically have is a system of handouts for everyone. Right now, we’re giving \$350 to every person that wants it. If they want it, they get it. Since they claim to be homeless, there’s no way to check on any of this, Cliff. If you’re homeless, you don’t

have to have an address or anything. So we have people from [Middleton] who come over here, get their checks and go back to [Middleton]. Now, Cliff, we've got this councilman here who wants to take all that money and put it into social services for the homeless. That way, they can't just take the money and spend it on whatever their vice is. But, of course, because we've got all these special interest groups, it probably won't happen. So we're stuck. Like I said, Cliff, it's a very political city.

As these comments suggest, members often displayed their frustration at their role in a system that seemed to encourage the very kinds of calls they found most threatening to their preferred identity as heroic professionals that resolve serious emergencies. Since members were obligated to accommodate "shitbums" who they believed would not take care of themselves, these firefighters suspected that their labor was perpetuating the very problems they were attempting to resolve and defrauding taxpayers in the process. For example, after providing basic first aid for a homeless drug addict, Timothy, a young firefighter/paramedic stated sarcastically, "Welcome to Bayside EMS!" Firefighter Johnny, his ambulance partner, responded even more sardonically, "Yeah, if you want to do drugs, you can do them, and when you feel sad, when you hurt, we'll take great care of you so you can do more drugs." Because the "system" was corrupted by those who took advantage of handouts they did not deserve and wasted resources on their own vices, firefighters ironically portrayed their work as actively perpetuating a "system of handouts" in service of "special" interest groups with which they disagreed. As we describe next, this disdain for EMS has been enabled by historical transitions in the fire service.

Historically Situating Taint Management at BFD

This story of taint management at BFD is as much industrial and occupational as it is organizational. Therefore, it cannot be considered separate and apart from the historical

conditions that enabled the BFD, indeed the occupation itself, to emerge into its contemporary cultural position (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). While there is not space here for a full-blown historical account, it is important to consider the crucial shift in the fire service industry that, itself, can be considered an instance of taint management. As early as the late 1970's, major metropolitan departments of the American fire service began using existing firefighters to deliver emergency medical service (EMS) (Brunacini, 2002). Logistically, this shift made sense because of pre-existing, geographically-dispersed fire stations, reliable electronic communications infrastructure, and positive community relations. Economically and politically, the integration of fire and EMS services can also be considered a consequence of wavering political and financial support for expensive municipal fire departments. When mayors and city councils across the country began asking their firefighters to empty parking meters and conduct building inspections, fire department administrators began looking for ways to restructure their revenue stream (Scott & Myers, 2002). The addition of EMS, which in some cases included billable ambulance transport by firefighters in department ambulances, was framed as an economic way of coping with declining financial support from cities in a manner consistent with the implied mission of the fire service more generally.

BFD firefighters were aware of their economic dependence on EMS, a fact that is not well known to the public. As firefighter Jerry explained,

“Basically, what it boils down to is that this department costs about \$250 million a year to run. You can't justify that kind of money when you only have five great alarm fires per year. That's why they brought us in [EMS]. We're the one's running all the calls.” I ask him to explain what a great alarm call is, and he basically says it's a “real fire” that requires the dispatch of more than three stations. I said, “So how many small but real

fires [does BFD] have per year—say a house that is pretty fully engulfed in flames?” He gives me a sideways, knowing smile, which I interpreted as a reluctance to admit these statistics. He glances around, as if to make sure no one was within earshot. “Oh, I think it was 20 or 30. So that’s a huge budget for a few fires. You just can’t justify that any more. That’s not enough services for all that money. So by bringing in EMS, they have a revenue stream that I think last year covered about two thirds of the entire budget.”

This economic context and the historical conditions that enable it are worth mentioning because we interpret these shifts as instances of taint management at the organizational and occupational level. The wavering political capital and attendant representations of the firefighting occupation that brought about these changes are examples of threats to the occupational identity of firefighting. A common, pre- 9/11, perception about firefighters was that they spent most of their time playing cards, drinking coffee, and cooking meals rather than doing “real” work. Resistance to the expansion of emergency services to include EMS, which was not uniformly embraced across the fire service, can be understood as an attempt at taint management, an effort to minimize the threat of encroaching, feminizing stigma. By taking on EMS service, fire departments could not only capitalize on existing resources but also increase their financial backing through labor that seemingly remained consistent with the occupational values of heroism, emotional strength, and intervention. In comparison to the less manly alternatives of emptying parking meters and checking construction sites, the addition of EMS was thought to allow firefighters to maintain a high-status occupational role far removed from the subservience of “meter maids” and the bureaucratic restraint of building inspectors (Scott & Myers, 2002). However, as we discuss next, innovation and mission shift was resisted at BFD.

“125 Years of Tradition Unimpeded by Progress.”

In spite of this important transition, the U.S. fire service is still often described by its members as “125 years of tradition unimpeded by progress.” Innovations in the structure, practices, and technologies of the fire service industry have generally been adopted slowly and with considerable resistance (Tebeau, 2003). There are apparently few major municipal fire departments where innovations in the fire service have been more stridently resisted than BFD, opposition that remains process and product of taint management practices that emerged within the contested cultural space of the city of Bayside.

Nestled within a west coast city and region renowned (or infamous) for its progressiveness, BFD seems in many ways like a cultural stronghold, an organization clinging tenaciously to the symbols and practices of occupational tradition. Indeed, this resistance at BFD to what most would call innovations in the fire service (e.g., the integration of EMS with fire protection, improved safety equipment and risk management procedures) has arguably been at the core of what distinguishes this department from others in the larger U.S. fire service. When Cliff mentioned that he had done fieldwork in another large fire department with a reputation for leading reforms in the fire service described above, BFD members were often quick to clarify their value for tradition over change. For example, James(?) described BFD as an “old style, New York wannabe, interior attack department,” referencing an aggressive, “old school” style of firefighting that is considered unnecessarily risky by some experts (Brunacini, 2002). Within this context, innovation was often framed as a threat to the preferred meanings of the department’s work and the efforts of its members to preserve closely held traditions. Perhaps most visibly, the BFD remains one of the only major fire department to continue using wooden ladders rather than their lighter and more reliable aluminum counterparts. At considerable expense, the department

maintains its own ladder shop that builds and repairs these tools. Moreover, the department had only recently begun requiring that firefighters wear a complete set of turnout pants; the protective gear that safeguards firefighters legs from thermal hazards, decades after most major fire departments adopted this innovation. It wasn't until two years after a BFD firefighter died of severe leg burns that the department instituted this requirement, one that apparently was not stringently enforced. Two firefighters at separate stations revealed that "some" firefighters continue to wear "grandpa's turnouts," protective clothing passed down from previous generations of firefighters that does not meet federal safety standards or the department's own rules.

As we explain next, these symbols of tradition have functioned as discursive resources for ongoing taint management by sustaining privileged notions of what is valued as "real" or authentic firefighting. However, BFD members had available to them a variety of discursive resources that benefited them in their efforts to make their work seem clean to both insiders and outsiders, an issue to which we turn next.

Taint Management Strategies

Given the everyday experience of work at BFD, members found themselves in an awkward position. They were rewarded externally for the dangerous, heroic nature of their work, yet their typical workday seemed a far cry from the espoused, preferred image for which they are rewarded. Here we describe the communicative strategies and techniques members of this community of practice employ as part of their efforts to make work meaningful through discursive taint management.

Selective Social Comparisons

One way that firefighters managed taint was to construct selective social comparisons of competing BFD job roles (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). These comparisons often hinged on the contested nature of what should count as “real,” authentic work. Members’ talk often captured and reproduced disputed notions of the comparative value of EMS versus firefighting. For example, paramedics were often quick to note that they handled the vast majority of the calls at each station and that most of the fire calls were just false alarms, suggesting that EMT’s and paramedics are the ones doing most of the work. Conversely, firefighters who did not perform EMS also used selective social comparisons to define their work in comparison to EMS:

The alarm sounds, and for the first time tonight, this is not an EMS call but a call for the fire truck. After hearing the nature of the dispatch, truck captain Ron (?) turns to me and says, “Oh good, Cliff, you’re going to get to see some REAL work! We’ll show you how it’s done!” We are dispatched to a house that has been struck by a car that went out of control. A section of the garage door has been knocked out. The firefighters on our engine pull hammers and nails and pieces of scrap lumber from the truck and repair the door.

What counted as “real” to the truck captain was the rugged manliness associated with working with a physical structure (versus a person, such as an EMS client) using tools pulled from a fire truck. At BFD and other change-resistant departments, a fire truck (as opposed to a fire engine) is basically a large toolbox with wheels. Its riders are given the task of forcibly entering burning buildings, rescuing victims, ventilating roofs, and performing temporary repairs to damaged structures. When asked for tours of the truck, the firefighters did so with great enthusiasm. Their faces lit up as they proudly displayed the large, heavy wooden ladders, the heavy steel tools used for breaking down doors, and the chainsaws and Jaws of Life used to extricate victims from

collapsed buildings and cars. These symbols of strength and heroism were not just tools in typical sense (objects used to complete a task); they also functioned as tools of identity work. Discursively, they potentially sustain selective social comparisons of each group's relative worth and authenticity. These are the exclusive tools (only firefighters on trucks used them) that break down barriers between rescuers and the rescuees, and association with these tools seemed to (re)produce a heightened sense of toughness amidst adversity.

Upon hearing descriptions of how these physical tools were used, rescuing victims and breaking into burning buildings and damaged vehicles, the value and relevance of this work seemed unquestionable. The work is real, and you can get hurt or worse if it's not done well (and sometimes even if it is). For example, firefighters at every station were quick to show off wooden ladders and describe with great enthusiasm the elaborate process by which fire truck crews must work together to raise these heavy objects. In nearly every instance, they mentioned the weight of each ladder and described the sort of teamwork necessary to pull off this exercise. Of course, this talk helps to reinforce what makes truck crews different from engine crews and ambulance staff. Through selective social comparison (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), they highlight strategically one of their more crucial, challenging, and risky tasks. At the same time, they downplay the fact that, in most cases at BFD, truck crews don't directly extinguish fires and that the tools that they often boast about (chain saws, "the jaws of life," battering rams, etc.) are usually deployed in circumstances lacking the typical self-serving drama (e.g., using battering rams to knock down doors for citizens who've locked themselves out of their own homes rather than to knock down the door of a burning building). People tend to make work meaningful (Heinsler, Kleinman, & Stenross, 1990) by making sense of the objects, tasks, and clients around them in relation to a preferred sense of self. In this example, the identity work of being a

firefighter on a truck crew is accomplished when everyday talk is used to selectively portray one's work in relation to these tools (objects) and not others.

Refocusing By Celebrating Manliness

One important way in which BFD firefighters responded to encroaching taint was to accentuate and celebrate their masculine occupational identity. These highly performative gestures were frequent and blatant. Usually, these took the form of everyday talk that highlighted the emotional and physical toughness for which these members stand and the comparatively feminine weakness embodied by outsiders, particularly those who do not work with their hands or who cannot manage their lives independently. For example:

Several folks are working in the kitchen, casually getting dinner together. Some are leaning on the counters, just watching and talking. This type of conversation appears routine and includes a lot of joking and teasing. The local evening news is on. The female reporter is describing a traffic accident with some fairly dramatic inflection. Kyle is making fun of the reporter's emotional tone. He starts mimicking her in a high-pitched voice, "Oh my God, three people were injured! Two seriously! Oh my God! Oh my God!"

This ritual of ridiculing outsiders who interpret tragedy or danger in openly emotional terms emerged within all five of the crews observed at BFD. Since clients should not be ridiculed during service calls, firefighters regularly made light of clients outside of their presence (e.g., at the station, in a vehicle while returning to the station). Perhaps most importantly, this mockery was typically aimed at the target's emotional demeanor, and this particular form of ridicule tended to garner the most laughter. For example,

Sharon (?) is talking about the season finale of “Third Watch,” [a show about firefighters, police officers, and paramedics] where the main female character apparently dies in the final moments. She describes how they show her mangled body, her legs practically wrapped around her neck. She describes the emotional response of the character’s partner as he watches her die, how he “completely fell apart.” Everyone laughs at Sharon’s ridicule of this character’s emotions, even though most of them don’t even watch the show and even fewer saw the episode.

By capitalizing on cultural norms that associate the expression of emotional sadness with weakness and femininity (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), Sharon is able to positively situate her personal identity within this group of men in a traditionally masculine occupation. Sharon’s belongingness with this group is accomplished and reflected in everyday station discourse through the way she, along with her peers, characterizes the vulnerability of a fictional first responder as flawed, questionable, and something to be avoided. Once again, the firefighters’ discourse encourages a sense that they are of a different class than outsiders.

Refocusing By Celebrating Dominant Sexuality

Dominant sexuality was also employed as a tool for managing identity threats. This identity work could be accomplished in both public and private. The privacy of the fire station’s “backstage” often provided a fitting space for male sexual humor. For example:

Folks are talking, joking, and teasing as they put together dinner. One employee vividly describes how much another likes butter on his biscuits. Another claims that Kyle loves mayonnaise on his biscuits. Another says, “Oh yeah, I bet he does like to squirt a little mayonnaise on his biscuits.” He mimics a man stroking his penis and ejaculating. Everybody laughs.

By engaging in sexual banter—highlighting male excess and hypermasculine action (ejaculation)—for an appreciative internal audience of peers, firefighters are able to attempt a sense of self that is dominant, carefree, and in control even if the majority of their work time is subject to servile work in tragic, out of control situations. The practices of ridiculing emotional descriptions of tragedy and engaging in “locker room” discussions of sexuality were pervasive in a number of firehouse activities. One firefighter who could ascertain that Cliff wasn’t particularly accustomed to such talk in a workplace explained that “this kind of horsing around” was “typical” at fire stations that have a high call volume.

It’s tempting to dismiss this kind of firefighter discourse as “common frat house” behavior. However, in our view, that response would probably categorize such talk as natural, normal, and acceptable—“boys will be boys” (Clair, 1993). Instead, we believe these conversations are significant because if we move beyond a representational view of language and assume that our talk does something more than reflect our attitudes and personalities, we can see this “banter” as more than just a bawdy expressions of manliness at work. If the work outside the station renders public and collective perceptions of toughness and heroism insecure, then firefighters in their everyday work may employ such talks as a means of enacting and performing the preferred identity (Collinson, 1992; 2003).

In addition to this backstage talk, the taint of dirty work could be managed through public rituals. Firefighters benefit from an external public that applauds and maintains their status as sex symbols (e.g., “hose” jokes, firefighter beefcake calendars, and ongoing sexual connotations about “fire” and “heat”). However, firefighters could not rest easy on these meanings; they also work to sustain them. For example, one evening during the second author’s observation at BFD, the fire truck was dispatched to a “box call”—a fire call that originates from a street-corner call

box and is nearly always a false alarm. Like nearly all box calls at BFD, no fire was visible when upon arrival, and the truck headed back to the station. But rather than returning to the station directly, the driver took the exceptionally long ladder truck through the narrow streets of the upscale North Town district, which consisted mostly of high-end restaurants, bars, and dance clubs. Well-dressed pedestrians, sidewalk diners, and even some patron inside these establishments waved at the men and women on the truck.

Women, in particular, wave at us in a way that feels laced with sexual attraction; they smile broadly and seductively and turn their bodies completely to face the truck. The driver rings the brass bell on the front of the truck as we pass several groups of attractive women and they motion to do it some more. It certainly feels as though we are, in fact, rock stars.

The crew member who drove the truck that night later disclosed that this trip through North Town was a ritual that typically followed one of the evening box call false alarms on each shift. “Those box calls are a downer, but it’s fun to ride through [North Town] and ring the bell. It’s like a tradition we have.”

This ritual functions as a celebratory performance of manliness, heterosexuality, and occupational identity, which seeks to deflect the taint that might pollute (Douglas, 1966) personal and public meanings of the authenticity of this work. While “box calls” are an opportunity to do the “real” work of fighting fire and rescuing victims and thus highlight the least stigmatized features of their occupational identity, these calls typically end with disappointing false alarms. By following these “downers” with parade-like journeys through a high-status district, the potential taint of box calls is warded off and counteracted by an activity through which a more preferred identity can be performed. The bell can be rung. The ladders can

be shown. The long apparatus of the fire truck can be maneuvered tightly around packed street corners. This practice is medium and outcome of the glorified sexual status of firefighters, the meanings for which must be employed as a resource in self-objectification. The parade ritual would be much less effective if attempted from within a small ambulance. The truck symbolically reminds the public to treat firefighters in an adoring way, which in turn protects firefighters from the taint of their everyday work and sustains a feeling among the firefighters that outsiders understand their authenticity.

Conclusion

Work is an activity in which we not only get the job done and earn a living but also “come to understand who we are and who we might become” (Trethewey, 1997, p. 281). Most employees, regardless of occupation, are striving to establish a satisfying sense of self in their work, in spite of job features that would surprise or disappoint outsiders. What’s more, how individuals attempt to establish this sense of self-identity in communication with others shapes how the job gets done (or doesn’t get done). While employees all tend to make individual (subjective) sense of their work, these interpretations are developed in interactions with others as they interpret the surrounding events (inter-subjectively). Therefore, how individuals make sense of their work has a lot to do with how they collectively (together, collaboratively, inter-subjectively) interpret their environments--tasks, clients, and situations. Perhaps most importantly to this analysis, employees cannot make sense of their environments except in relation to a sense of self (Eisenberg, 2001; Weick, 1995)—as people who do a particular kind of work in a particular kind of organization.

The discourse used as a kind of tool for taint management is important for both scholars and practitioners to consider because, while employees can make choices about how they talk

and listen to each other at work, the context in which this happens is not of anyone's own choosing. The systems of meaning through which people speak and make sense of their work are usually evolving long before we enter the scene (Weedon, 1997). Because this limits what sort of talk we can use to speak about and make sense of our work, the cultural values of an organization (and in this case, its larger occupation) shape what we see as our options.

And yet, as individuals, organizations, and occupations, we are always in a process of becoming (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Cultures and identities are not fixed; they are always in process—becoming, evolving (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). They are often re-enacted (and occasionally transformed) through our discourse. Therefore, this discourse—talk that is partially enabled and purposeful yet partially constrained and pre-determined—influences how we make sense of who we are and the work we are doing. That is, it shapes how we organize.

It's important to note, however, that we aren't all equally privileged in our capacity to make work meaningful through our talk. And that's what makes dirty work so interesting. Dirty work is dirty largely because the society that surrounds it has deemed it as such. In other words, "shitbums" are dirty because our society sees them as stigmatized, dirty, and polluted (Douglas, 1966). Therefore the work of firefighters who deal with them regularly is potentially tainted by association (Page, 1984). Firefighters are typically portrayed through communication that associates them with manliness and independence, or what Cooper (1995) called "strength, robustness, boldness, stoutness, bravery, and not being womanish" (pp. 146-147), particularly in the U.S. post 9/11. Therefore, they have relatively easy access to the symbolic tools of taint management that bring to the surface preferred meanings, interpretations, and identities, and sequester those that would taint, stigmatize, or pollute their work (Tracy & Scott, 2006). No wonder the public loves them. No wonder firefighters find a way to love their work.

It seems unrealistic and perhaps unwise to assume that the occupational comparisons discussed in this study are somehow always dysfunctional or preventable. If people in organizations and occupations are to find meaning in their work, they must have a reason to come to work, a relatively satisfying sense of self that can be collaboratively constructed and reproduced through informal talk. The meaning of work is inevitably achieved at least partially through comparison. What it means to do one kind of work has much to do with what it does not mean, how occupations and organizations may be differentiated from others.

Yet, as this study has demonstrated, their clients, as well as their organizational peers can taint members, and responses to this taint can be dangerous. A key part of identity work for these groups is strategically managing these threats to a satisfying, edifying identity. The broad social values (e.g., attitudes about gender and class) members learn prior to organizational/occupational entry provide plenty of discursive ammunition for self-serving constructions of vocational identity. The risk of poor taint management is the danger that these discursive practices sustain asymmetrical values for various jobs and occupations (Clair, 1996). In the case of BFD, we see an organizational culture that devalues an activity with flesh and blood consequences that arguably remain no less significant than the preferred structure fire.

These findings suggest that organizational leaders should pay attention to the manner in which organizational and occupational identities are managed. In an age of mergers, acquisitions, and shifting organizational missions and identities, the ability to frame the meaning of change in a manner that is engaged with how members find a satisfying sense of self at work is crucial. Yet, this analysis indicates that it is important that leaders frame change in a way that allows for a secure sense of self that is differentiated yet not hierarchically valued.

Finally, if this study is suggestive of anything, it is that the thorny search for a satisfying sense of individual and collective identity is a function of everyday talk at work—even among those who are known as “America’s heroes.” This discourse shapes what work means for people, and so it has important, material consequences for the way work is experienced by members and for the quality of products and services utilized by stakeholders. The communicative nature of taint management, then, is a complex and deeply social process, one that is constitutive of the everyday decisions and practices of members.

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