

Susan Braedley
York University

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Maintaining Honourable Masculinity: Gender and Intimate Labour in Firefighting

The relation between intimate labour, gender, race and class is frequently elaborated in the context of women's lives and their care-giving labour. In contrast, this paper examines these relations within the hyper-masculine, white, heterosexual, working class world of contemporary firefighting. Here intimate labour has two facets. First, firefighters in many jurisdictions are increasingly required to respond to a wide variety of emergency calls which involve bodily tending and emotions work. Second, due to the particular organization of fire services, firefighters have provided care to each other in a tight "brotherhood"; a brotherhood that is eroding due to the increased entry of women and people from marginalized groups. In firefighting, intimate labour to the public is increasing, while intimate labour for each other is decreasing. This analysis suggests that ruptures in gender norms are evident in this context. However, these ruptures co-exist with struggles to maintain a 'masculine dividend' of high quality secure employment; struggles which involve a continual erasure and denial of firefighters' involvement in intimate labour.

Firefighting work has changed dramatically in many jurisdictions in Canada and the United States. As fire prevention efforts yield major decreases in fire calls, many fire services have changed their service mix to respond to a variety of emergency situations. Drawing from recent dissertation research on two fire services in Ontario, Canada, this paper finds not only that firefighters are continually involved in bodily tending, calming, persuading and consoling work, but this work is a more regular aspect of their job than firefighting. Interviews with 40 firefighters, observations of firefighters at work and fire service reports and statistics provide a portrait of workers who regularly enter people's intimate spaces and relations, who provide bodily tending and emotional support of an intimate yet anonymous kind, and who frequently have very little training to assist them in these aspects of the work.

Further, changes to the composition of the firefighting labour force resulting from pressures to include women and people from marginalized and racialized groups have eroded the tight "brotherhood" of the fire hall, where firefighters form an extended occupational 'family'. The fire hall has been a sphere in which firefighters cared for each other, encouraged by the home-like setting of the fire hall, in which eating, sleeping and bathing occur through communal routine in communal spaces, but within the context of work. This blurring of a public/private divide is a distinctive feature of the organization of fire services, and, in the case studies involved here, has come under challenge.

Contradictions and paradoxes emerge in the intersection between fire-fighting's hyper-masculine image and culture, the everyday work involved in responding to calls related to emergency medical help, homelessness, mental health problems and other social needs, and the changing organizational dynamics of the fire hall. Yet, firefighters work hard to maintain their identities as everyday heroes and their occupation as a masculine preserve of high quality employment.