Abstract

This article is based on an ethnographic account of an association of retired fire fighters in the northern parts of Sweden. The intention is to outline how acts of storytelling and commemoration are paramount to aging in that they give a rite of passage to a particular process of aging. By this I suggest that my informants engaged in acts of commemoration in order to conflate age with experience. Investigating the interconnection between the aged fire fighters, their joint practices of storytelling and their preferences for certain tools rather than others this article proposes a revivified understanding of how the profession as a fire fighter is open to continuous modifications. The relation between different generations of fire fighters, as expressed in many of the joint narrations, showed that their exercises were masculinized and de-masculinized in tandem with the employment of professional tools. Scrutiny of the technological changes subsequently discloses a generational shift, which in turn encourages certain exercises whilst dismissing others. As the undertakings of a fire fighter rely on the instrumental utility the technological shifts contribute to fortifying differences between the age groups of the fire fighters.

Key words:
Collective remembering, fire fighters, aging, masculinity
Cut out to handle a ladder? Age, experience and acts of commemoration

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Introductory remarks

Recent accounts within gender studies, particularly within the Swedish context, have engaged extensively with the gendered implications of fire fighting activities (cf. Ericson 2004, Glans and Rother 2007, Mellström 2008, 2010, Olofsson 2009). Statistics from Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap (MSB, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) show that 76 of the 5,167 fire fighters who are employed full-time in Sweden are women, that is 1.6%, which implies a male domination, not only numerically, but also through the ways in which the profession of a fire fighter is coded. Previous research that has engaged with fire fighters in America and Britain reveals similar results; Carol Chetkovich (1997), for instance claims that ‘[t]he culture of the fire service [has] been defined largely by white men’ (Chetkovich 1997, 59). Dave Baigent (2005) also informs that ‘the work of fire fighting is extremely masculinised’ (Baigent 2005, 45), to the extent that the accomplishment of effective fire fighting is conflated with the achievement of masculinity (Baigent 2005, 47). In sum, the male dominance within contemporary fire brigades, both within and outside of the Swedish context has been outlined as part of homosocial practices in which men seek ‘enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex’ (Lipman-Blumen 1976, 16), but also as componential to technological use, risk-taking and male bonding. Enactments of masculinities, it has been argued, unfold as erratic identifications, constantly operating in relationships that are founded in power (cf. Johansson 1998, 15, Lohan and Faulkner 2004, 323–324). Hence, investigations of the rescue agencies in Sweden, America and Britain, and more specifically fire fighting activities, reveal gender as a decisive factor that contributes to affecting organizational arrangements. Seeking to add to this academic nomenclature the subsequent study specifically attends to the ways in which storytelling and acts of commemoration are linked to the construction of what constitutes a fire fighter.

The empirical material draws on group interviews and discussions with retired fire fighters, the referred-to veterans of the fire brigade, in Luleå, a small city in the Northern parts of Sweden. A more extensive presentation of my informants will be provided below, for now I note that the selection of interviewees allowed for exploration of the profession...
of a fire fighter as subjected to continual negotiations. The generational shifts within the fire brigade of Luleå brought forth what can be referred to as social practices of commemoration (cf. Connerton 1989, Middleton and Edwards 1990), that is a particular kind of conversational remembering, which is open to situated revisions, reconstructions and repairs. Hence, what might initially be thought of as an individual act of remembering is in fact cultivated by and through groups (Connerton 1989, 37). The particular acts of remembering that constitute the empirical backdrop of this article affected as well as were affected by the organizational culture within the local fire brigade of Luleå. As such they provided efficient means, not only in that they fortified fire-fighting activities exclusively in terms of male assignments, but also in that they revealed the discrepancy between the retired fire fighters and their professional heirs.

The structure of the article and the current objective

The structure of this article runs as follows. In order to empirically anchor the current proposal the ensuing section outlines the practical procedures of my fieldwork and the methods used. Thereafter, I consider some of the previous accounts that have been pursued with regard to collective remembering and equally sketch a picture of some of the voices within masculinity studies both of practices of joint narration and the gendered implications of aging processes. These accounts equally constitute the foundation of this article.

I then outline the current objective. I propose that acts of storytelling and commemoration are paramount to aging in that they give a rite of passage to a particular process of aging, and by this I suggest that my informants engaged in acts of commemoration in order to conflate age with experience. Saying this, the technological shifts within the fire brigade of Luleå continually altered the distinctiveness of fire fighting activities; as means and methods developed, were embraced or discarded, the obvious links between age and experience were disrupted. Elsewhere I have argued that the work of a fire fighter requires a plethora of equipment, which also orchestrates the members of the work-force (Olofsson 2009). This article seeks to elaborate further on the relationship between fire fighters and their professional equipment, but takes on a slightly different perspective in that it focuses primarily on how joint narration and commemoration facilitate a particular kind of knowledge and technological skill.

The empirical part of the text is divided into three sections, each of them demonstrating the collective practices of storytelling. The aim is to give substance to some of the recurring topics in the narrations of my informants and how the retired fire fighters, through commemoration, claimed access to a particular kind of environment in which they staged certain performances and particular means and methods. Specific attention is directed to the ways in which the distinguishing features of so-called traditional tools and
methods and their contemporary successors were put to work. After the empirical outline I amass relevant themes. In doing so, a conclusion is offered in which I call for further exploration of the interconnection of age and experience in male-dominated workplaces.

Presentation of the empirical material and methods employed

Between the autumn of 2008 and the late spring of 2009, I partook in the weekly gatherings of approximately ten retired fire fighters (all men) in Luleå, a small city in northern Sweden. The intention was to investigate the gendered implications of the profession of a fire fighter. Specific attention was directed to the temporal constructions of masculinity and the claimed differences between the retired fire fighters and their occupational heirs. Attending the meetings, I participated in, as well as observed, discussions, dialogues and some of the activities. My informants assembled in the basement of the city’s fire station; although they were retired from the fire fighting force, being allowed to frequent the venue contributed to fortifying their identity as fire fighters.

Apart from engaging in conversations and discussions, the retired fire fighters repaired old trucks and fire engines, arranged previously wielded instruments on shelves, and prepared for computational systematization of the equipment. As I observed the different activities, my informants told the story of the development of the local fire brigade in Luleå, often with a comparative approach to contemporary arrangements, which equally called attention to dissimilarities between themselves and the current members of the fire brigade. With more than fifty years of experience, the retired fire fighters compared the structures of today with the previously traditional arrangements; the current fire brigade’s use of GPS, Internet, hoses made of silicon and fire engines with automatic transmissions stood in stark contrast to sweeps and linen hoses, which in turn disclosed the profession of a fire fighter to be an ongoing process of identification, contingent on spatiality as well as instrumental utility. As proposed in the current objectives, the material change revealed a generational shift, which will be further outlined in the empirical sections.

In addition to field notes, I used a tape recorder, which allowed me to return to the discussions and dialogues, at least the ones that took place during the common breaks. These informal encounters followed no agenda, and questions were often formulated ‘in situ’. Topics of interest tended to follow the dialogic exchanges of my informants. Partaking in these informal gatherings, acts of remembering pervaded much of the discussions; the retired fire fighters jointly recalled events of success and achievements, but equally conveyed times of failure. The stories were not narrated in a linear order, which made it impossible to audit all the concurrent discussions; the retired fire fighters cleverly navigated between, or engaged in, different conversations, which propelled a constant mur-
mur. Individual arguments easily led to disputes and disagreements as acts of storytelling were interrupted only to be resumed minutes later. In short, recalling occasions of success, events of turnouts and battling of flames emerged through unexpected conversational turns, but equally developed into jointly pursued activities. The topics were subsequently discussed between my informants rather than with me as a researcher, but could just as well claim my immediate opinion or attention. The combination of field notes and tape-recorded conversations facilitated the process of selection: reading through the written records helped me to detect dialogues of particular interest and subsequently weed through the surrounding buzz.

The proposed methods serve to bring forth additional knowledge of how to encounter male-dominated workplaces. In the article ‘Serious games: Competition and the homosocial construction of masculinity’ Michael Meuser (2007) claims that partaking in conversations and discussions between men enables scrutiny of masculinity as conveyed and negotiated collectively. In agreement with Meuser, I also note that the specific material and spatial conditions of the fire station in Luleå contributed to joint projects of meaning-making, which in turn brought forth certain enactments of masculinity whilst dismissing others.

Previous research

In order to explore the implications of my informants’ storytelling practices I understand them as lanes of remembering. Social acts of remembering have received vast attention especially from sociologists, social psychologists and activity theorists (cf. Connerton 1989, Middleton and Edwards 1990, Wertsch 2002). James V. Wertsch (2002) for instance focuses on textual mediations of the collective memory of World War II in contemporary Russia. In doing so he argues that ‘remembering and the parties who carry it out are inherently situated in a cultural and social context’ (Wertsch 2002, 11). Wertsch goes on to argue that collective remembering is mediated in that it is facilitated by cultural tools such as written narratives, computers, pens and papers, and also socially distributed in that remembering is not in the possession of a single individual, but ‘depends on the smooth functioning of a set of reciprocally organized efforts’ (Wertsch 2002, 23). Similar to Wertsch, Paul Connerton (1989, 40) claims that remembering practices are socially constructed and negotiated in that images of the past ‘are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances’. It is noteworthy that these practices do not only create a feeling of solidarity in regard to nations, they also form crucial components in the working life. In the study ‘Organizational forgetting: An activity-theoretical perspective’ Yrjö Engeström and colleagues (1990, 141) show that acts of remembering within a particular work context bring forth certain themes such as ‘how we used to do things in the past’ or ‘what our work and organization was like in the past’. As such, collective memory
emerges because members of a group have participated in the event being remembered (Wertsch 2002).

Thus far, creation of a joint version of remembered events facilitates solidarity among the participants. As the conversations of the retired fire fighters proceeded, they fashioned their respective attachments and affinities, which in turn excluded outsiders. Through acts of commemoration, my informants were thus able to retain the image of fire fighting activities, not only in terms of a male exercise, but also as an assignment pursued by some men and not others. In doing so, they also revealed generational differences between themselves and the contemporary members of the workforce, whom, it seemed, did not always execute their duties as fire fighters. The generational discrepancy between the retired fire fighters and their occupational heirs constitutes the cornerstone of this study, and will be further enlarged upon below. For now, the intention is to recommence the outline of the theoretical backdrop of this study. In doing so, I note that the ways in which acts of commemoration are central to constructions and negotiations of masculinities have to a large extent been sidestepped within the discipline of masculinity studies.

Berit Brandth and Marit S. Haugen (2005) use examples from the Norwegian forestry industry to explore the processes by which masculinities change. In doing so they investigate what they refer to as ‘men’s talk to men’. The collective storyline of the forest workers serves as a framework for identification in that it creates and recreates a particular identity. In this particular case, textual representations in terms of forest magazines from three selected years comprise empirical examples. Brandth and Haugen take seriously the ways in which masculinity is expressed collectively; their longitudinal approach facilitates an understanding of masculinities, not only in terms of collective projects, but also as connected to technological development and (therefore) subjected to temporality. Outlining the ways in which different tools mediate masculinity, the study does not enlarge upon the generational implications. Brandth and Haugen (2005, 157) show how ‘[o]rganizations are sites of competition between men’, but leave aside factors such as the discrepancies between different age groups.

Earlier I mentioned the work of Meuser, and how he orients from group discussions in order to investigate how masculinity is accomplished collectively (Meuser 2007). Meuser’s article is interesting not only from a methodological point of view, but also in its empirical outline. Investigating male associations such as amateur soccer-teams and men’s service clubs, Meuser adopts Connell’s term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to depict how gendered hierarchies among men are expressed verbally. Similar to Brandth and Haugen (2005), Meuser engages with male-dominated sites and interprets masculinities as joint projects. He does not, however, engage with the group discussions in terms of collective remembering, nor does he develop the full implications of his work for the analysis of generational discrepancies, which admittedly serve to complicate the hierarchies within male communities. The age of the informants in Meuser’s study ranges from
20 to 60 years. As such, the informants cover several age groups, something that contributes to an additional understanding of what Meuser refers to as games of competition among men. Having said this, the text below funnels into an extended discussion in which I emphasize that the interconnection between age, generational discrepancies and acts of commemoration are paramount to constructions of masculinities.

Thus far, it is important to note that other voices within masculinity studies have emphasized the gendered implications of aging, especially in conjunction with masculinity (cf. Sandberg 2007, Thompson 1994a). For instance, the edited volume *Older men’s lives* (1994) explores the life courses of old men and the gendered aspects of aging. Focus is directed to work situations, household assignments, health and relations with friends and siblings, something that brings forth a diverse picture of the different implications of late adulthood. The introductory remarks call for further exploration of the link between masculinity and processes of aging; for ‘many people’, it is subsequently argued, ‘aging is a negation of masculinity’ (Thompson 1994b, 13). Linn Sandberg (2007) presents a radically different approach, claiming that age, at least when it comes to men, often is equated with experience, growth and maturity (Sandberg 2007, 86, 95). Contemplating the two claims, their respective disparate equally provides the background for this study.

At the same time as physical strength declines with age, which in turn might provide difficulties for men previously engaged in physical labour (Solomon and Szwabo 1994, 52–53), I suggest that the conflation between age, experience and maturity allowed the retired fire fighters to enjoy a crucial position at the local fire brigade despite the fact that they were no longer active as fire fighters.

Using Thompson (2004b) and Sandberg (2007) as a starting point, this article seeks to elaborate on the ways in which the relation between age and experience was materialized in and through the storytelling practices of my informants. However, taking precedence over the current objectives and the empirical outline, the section below intends to clarify three terms: age, generation and cohort. Their interconnection is subject to frequent discussions within aging studies, and although I have no aspirations to cover exhaustively the different terms I propose a brief outline of their respective meaning. As shown above, the objective of this article notes the interconnection of age and generation, but distinguishes between them in that it rejects the idea that the retired fire fighters comprise a homogeneous assembly. In line with the work of Ann Bowling (2005, 2), I argue that ‘[t]here is a great heterogeneity among older people’. Although my informants belonged to the same generation, their respective ages, from 50 to beyond 80 years, suggested great variations. Hence, in order to delineate the complex web of age, generation and cohort, I draw on age stratification theory. This discipline argues that ‘there is an age structure to roles, and normative age criteria for certain activities, thus with age a cohort moves to a different set of roles as a younger generation takes its place’ (Bowling 2005, 5, emphases added). With regard to such mutual, yet ephemeral interconnection, age as ‘the most ba-
sic and crucial aspects of human life’ (Eisenstadt 2009, 21) is contextualized and cultivated into cohorts as well as generations. Put differently, the number of years that a person has lived run in parallel with age structures, which in turn implies a common feature or a shared experience during a particular time span. As this study focuses on the association of retired fire fighters in Luleå it assumes that retirement does not only represent a particular phase in life (as opposed to times of childhood and those of working-life), but that it is paramount to the understanding of generational categories. In as much as the withdrawal from the work as a fire fighter served to unify my informants, it equally distinguished them from their occupational heirs.

The above section has pinpointed the complex associations between age and generation. In doing so, it has also set the scene for the current intention: to explore how acts of storytelling and commemoration give a rite of passage to a particular process of aging. The reader should now be familiarized with some of the previous studies and terms that serve as a backdrop to the current arguments, and it is time to develop the foundational arguments of this article.

Points of departure

Similar to Sandberg’s (2007) account, and as also hinted above, the encompassing aim of this study is to explore the ways in which male dominance is upheld as men grow older. As the very images of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances (Connerton 1989) storytelling practices contributed to making territories of the actions of my informants. Saying this, I especially engage with the ways in which constructions of masculinity are at once freed from and subjected to temporality.

The particular practices of storytelling that I seek to investigate unfold as part of the normative social pattern of how to also engage with fire fighting activities. As has been argued elsewhere, masculinity is not only discursively conveyed, but is part and parcel of technological utility (Olofsson 2009). More specifically, I argue that memories on occasions of turn-outs and emergencies implicitly endorsed certain ways of acting whilst dismissing others. Narration, I suggest, was therefore crucial in order to retain my informants’ dominant position as holders of professional knowledge. In his study One more last working class hero: A cultural audit of the UK fire service, Baigent (2001) notes that each watch on a fire station has an informal hierarchy through which older fire fighters pass onto the next generation the skills that are required to be a fire fighter. Similar to Baigent, I claim that acts of storytelling contribute to sustaining a particular masculine ideal that works in tandem with the profession of a fire fighter. As also stated by Hearn and Parkin (2001, 50), ‘[t]he language of male control merges with the language of men’s domination within organizations’. Commemorating the past ultimately enabled the retired fire fighters to conflate age and experience, something that becomes equally important from
a gender perspective. Age thus seems important in order to secure the link between men and fire fighting activities; older members of the workforce assume the responsibility of fitting new recruits in, and the process of what Baigent (2005) refers to as fitting-in is clearly gendered. The social formation of memory (Connerton 1989) further gave rise to particular kinds of storytelling practices through which my informants retained their position as holders of professional knowledge, a knowledge that was equally based on the conflation between age and experience. As organizational life mutually feeds off gendered subjectivities (Abrahamsson and Somerville 2007) the experience gained from years of practice was equally labelled masculine.

In what follows, I will chart three empirical examples that seek to elucidate the above arguments: the referred to American (or Stockholm) method, the facilitative features of today's fire engines and the acts of raising the ladders. Common among these three examples is that they provide means and methods through which the professional astuteness of my informants were at once freed from and subjected to temporality. As stated, the acts of storytelling and commemoration gave a rite of passage to a particular process of aging at the same time as the technological shifts contributed to re-articulating fire fighting activities.

The collective practices of storytelling

*The American (or Stockholm) method*

As I listened to one of the daily conversations, the retired fire fighters recalled the famous fire in the People’s Hall of Luleå during the spring of 2003. The subsequent dialogue was part of parallel discussions; clearly my informants found this particular topic engaging although their comments concerned different aspects of the incident. I turned to Anders and Kjell, who were particularly flippant about the actions of their professional heirs, and their joint dismissal received supportive nods from the others. Encouraged by my unwitting facial expression Anders outlined the chain of occurrences and the subsequent measures at the same time as he also moderated the emerging discussion. ‘This particular building’, he told me, ‘comprises a frame of timber, which means that it is likely to burn for hours without collapsing’. I nodded, still unsure of how the construction of the People’s Hall related to the defective actions of the contemporary workforce. Anders explained that this robust construction gives the fire fighters access to a building, allowing them to pursue a more efficient fire extinguishing exercise. Nonetheless, during this particular occasion the working fire chief had discouraged the members of the fire brigade from entering. While the fire fighters stood outside, the employees who belonged to the burning establishment had run back and forth trying to save the furnishings. Anders shook his head and mumbled something about ‘the fire fighters of today’. To him, the skewed distribution of tasks seemed to be most embarrassing. At the same time as ‘ordi-
nary people’ were rescuing property from the burning building the fire fighters, instructed to remain outside, continued to hose down the fire from a distance. With reference to the incident, Anders summarized the event: despite having been summoned, the smoke-helmeted fire fighters were forced to turn back without having achieved anything. Interpreting his outline, by not being allowed to enter the People’s Hall, the fire fighters were emasculated.

In order to understand the collective dismissal of the efforts of the contemporary workforce and the decisions made by the working commander, it is important to consider the professional implications of entering a burning building and remaining outside. From the underlying messages in many of the anecdotes, it was clear that a fire fighter is (or should be) someone who enters the burning building that others leave. Hence, the critique of my informants related to more than just this particular occasion. Contemporary fire brigades, I was told, increasingly employed what the retired fire fighters laughingly refer to as the American method or the Stockholm method. As expressed:

[Nowadays], they [the contemporary members of the fire brigades] remain on the street and hose, and in order not to risk anyone’s life, they [the commanders] never send out [their employees] into a burning building. That was never even a question for us; it was into the fire, it was forward, that was the practised method of extinguishment then.

The American method (or the Stockholm method) was subject to trivialization among the retired fire fighters. Fires, they jointly stressed, were fought and conquered by actively working from the centre of the fires as they were; merely hosing from the streets was mockingly agreed to ‘have the same effect as taking a piss’. By this, my informants claimed that it was nearly impossible to put out a fire by the American method. Hosing down a fire while standing at a safe distance in the streets was deemed to be a deficient strategy; lacking an offensive approach it was said to hinder close combats. In order to manage the flames, my informants agreed, one had to, despite impending risks of being injured or even perishing, force one’s way through fallen/falling beams, furniture and inaccessible windows.

In One more last working class hero: A cultural audit of the UK fire service, Baigent (2001) discusses how fire fighters are taught to get-in, that is getting as close as possible to the fire and then extinguishing it with a minimum amount of water. Getting-in, he goes on to argue, ‘involves firefighters seeking to “prove” to themselves, their peers and the public that they are good firefighters’ (2001, emphasis in original). Baigent, like my informants, states that ‘officers will normally make the decision to withdraw crews and fight the fire from outside, and at their post-mortems after a fire, firefighters frequently criticise officers for making this decision too early’. The working commander’s instruc-
tions to remain outside the People’s Hall of Luleå instead of getting into the burning building were fiercely dismissed by the retired fire fighters. Their flippantness towards this decision equally served to secure their own position as skilled.

The fire engines

The retired fire fighters bestowed a particular reverence towards the collection of old vehicles. Although the vehicles’ current conditions differed (one vehicle merely comprised a chassis whereas the other two served as relics for exhibition and public demonstrations), my informants devoted an extensive amount of time toward restoring and maintaining the different parts. The difficulties associated with getting hold of spare parts propelled new anecdotes. For instance, I was frequently reminded that the tyres had been shipped from the United States and that the chassis had been radically renovated and extended in order to resemble the original model. Highlighting the drudgery of shipping the tyres and the subsequent cost as well as the lengthy procedures of assembling and welding together the chassis constituted pivotal parts of what it meant to be a fire fighter, at least to my informants. Although not explicitly connected to fire fighting activities, the care for the fire engines implied professional astuteness.

During the time of my fieldwork I also had the opportunity to accompany some of my informants as they carefully navigated the antique Hansaloyd on the streets of Luleå. The vehicle was to be shipped down to the southern parts of Sweden to be displayed in a show for old fire engines, and the eager preparation suggested pleasure as well as cheerfulness. Observing the festive atmosphere, I was reminded that it was possible to see the original brushstrokes on the bonnet of the fire engine; as opposed to contemporary fire engines, the Hansaloyd was not airbrushed. At the same time as the retired fire fighters proudly demonstrated some of its characteristics they belittled the technological features that were standard in contemporary fire engines. As one of my informants had it:

Then [in the 1950s] we drove cars equipped with 80–90 HP and managed a gearbox, which required double stepping on the pedals. Nowadays [the fire engines are equipped with] 400 HP, automatic transmissions and power-assisted steering.

The simplicity with which the members of the contemporary fire brigade were assumed to operate the fire engines stood in stark contrast to the previous exercises of my informants. This was equally part of the hierarchical structures in which the physical drudgery of the earlier workforce (rather than the undemanding manoeuvres of their occupational heirs) was seen as constitutive to the image of a fire fighter. It is true that the technological features of the current fire engines facilitated turnouts, but as the physical workload decreased the profession was also deskilled. The proclaimed differences between the old
fire engines and their contemporary successors were further evident as Anders showed me the garage halls in which the vehicles of today’s workforce were lined up. Interestingly, the many technological features seemed to obstruct his outline; the detailed accounts of the old fire engines and their respective characters were transformed to vague gestures and nods. ‘One would probably not have a clue of how to even start that one’, he ultimately asserted and pointed towards one of the bigger trucks. I laughed and remembered the extensive procedures that were required in order to operate the Hansaloyd: ‘But do you think that the contemporary workforce can start the Hansaloyd?’ Anders smiled back: ‘Probably not’.

The contemporary fire engines in the garage hall were equipped with GPS and computer screens, which were regarded as useful assistants in times of alarms and turn-outs. Discussing the previous alarm system I implied that it must have been difficult to locate the position of the fire when only assisted by an upset voice at the end of a telephone receiver. Anders nodded and recalled how the fire fighters who were active during the 1950s sometimes were left with extremely vague outlines of where exactly the fire was located. Sometimes expressions such as ‘we have a fire here’ could be the only information provided. Illustrating the confusion, Anders looked at me: ‘but where exactly is “here”?’, he inquired only to continue: ‘nowadays, the information is available at once; [the exact location of the scene of the accident] is displayed on the screen. However, back then, the only way to figure this out was to think on one’s feet’. Torgny joined us and explained that technological devices such as GPS have acquired the responsibility of locating the scenes of the accidents, thus liberating the contemporary workforce from discerning vague descriptions expressed by victims. ‘Modern technology’, he asserted, ‘has resulted in them [the contemporary members of the fire brigade] not having to study the names of the streets; they simply use the GPS in the car’. Anders nodded and concluded, ‘we actually knew the names of the streets’. Acknowledging the facilitative features of the contemporary equipment, my informants simultaneously proposed a loss in professional knowledge. To know the names of the streets in the city of Luleå seemed to be intimately linked to what it meant to be a fire fighter. Interestingly, the fact that computers and GPS required a particular kind of knowledge in order to work adequately was not mentioned at all.

Acts of raising the ladders

Many of the narratives conveyed by my informants encompassed practices of turn-outs and rehearsals in which the professional skills of the previous workforce were brought to the fore. During my fieldwork, I was presented with a variety of instruments, all of which facilitated specific purposes. The ladders were of special interest. Although hydraulic means had replaced the manual acts of raising them, the ladders continued to facilitate
entrances to burning buildings. One of the old fire engines was equipped with a foldable set of wooden ladders, and during one of the initial walk rounds in the basement of the fire station Anders engaged in an extensive lecture of how to manoeuvre this particular arrangement. Similarly, remembering previous turnouts and rehearsals my informants demonstrated how they were taught to raise, climb and carry the detached ladders properly. Specific attention was directed to the referred-to fire-hook ladders: short ladders that feature hooks at the upper end. These were used to enter burning buildings through the windows. Anders explained: ‘The rehearsals with the fire-hook ladders encouraged us to experience skill, balance and flexibility in the ladders.’ Hence, sufficient use of the ladders required certain procedures; in order to move up and down quickly my informants developed and cultivated particular movements, which in turn enabled them to experience the specific features of the ladders.

The utility of the ladders is also mentioned by Baigent (2001), claiming that firefighters have a distinctive way of climbing a ladder. Although Baigent does not further elaborate on the embodied skills that are required to manage the ladders sufficiently, he mentions in passing his experience as a firefighter, and more specifically, how wielding the ladders functions on what he refers to as both a conscious and unconscious level. I will not discuss Baigent’s distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness further; rather I add onto his account an embodied implication of how to manage the ladders. The technological shifts within the fire brigade of Luleå did not only include the introduction of new features, but concerned material alterations, in this case from wood to light-alloy metal. This in turn spurred alternative exercises, something that was evident in one of the conversations between my informants. Engaging in a joint discussion, they told me that whereas four men previously were required to carry a wooden ladder that measured 12 metres, transportation of the contemporary ladders was facilitated by hydraulic steering in which the firefighters operated the ladders remotely. Similarly, previous ad hoc arrangements in which the ladders were placed in wheel rims to prevent them from falling stood in stark contrast to their contemporary successors, which were assembled on a ladder truck and managed remotely. Torgny acknowledged the technological shift:

The technique has entered the rescue agency; you can operate the ladder truck from outside. If you get too close [to external obstacles and facades] it [the ladder] stops, if you load it too much, it stops.

When asking him whether he thought that the profession of a firefighter had become less risky he nodded: ‘I think that it has become less risky’. Contemplating Torgny’s assertions, the embodied implications of manually carrying the ladders stood in stark contrast to the hydraulic steering mechanisms, which allowed for remote operation. In addition,
the new technological features seemed to discourage risk taking; in as much as the remotely operated ladders facilitated the work as a fire fighter, its astuteness served to infantilize the members of the contemporary workforce. The automatic indicators announced overloads and inappropriate advances towards external obstacles; something that equally disrupted what was seen as skilful manipulation of the ladders. As stated in the following example:

One particular day, as my informants engage in cleaning practices they find a set of slides with instructions for contemporary recruits on how to assemble the hoses, use the pumps and manually raise the ladders. The assembled men laughingly comment on what they seem to regard as clumsy arrangements and evident deficiencies. Anders however, finds the instructions humourlessly amusing and repeatedly shakes his head: ‘the fire fighters of today! They are not even cut out to crank up a ladder’. ‘That is not necessary’, Torgny responds, ‘they [the ladders] are remotely controlled’.

As the retired fire fighters dismissed the facilitative functions of today’s equipment, their professional heirs were rendered unqualified. Little or no attention was directed to the additional knowledge that was required of contemporary workforces in order to operate the hydraulically driven ladders. Rather, what was esteemed was the ability to manually crank up the ladders and engage in ad hoc solutions such as using wheel rims as stabilizing means. These exercises appeared to be componential to what it meant to be a real fire fighter; failure to manage particular tools or employ them differently called into question the professional skill as a fire fighter.

Concluding remarks

The above examples have explored the ways in which acts of commemoration and joint storytelling allowed the retired fire fighters of Luleå to conflate their age with a professional experience. Put differently, the shared narrations functioned as gateways to a particular process of aging, in which my informants claimed a foreign association with many of the contemporary exercises and technological features. Means such as computers, GPS, power-assisted steering and hydraulically raised ladders but also working methods such as the American (or Stockholm) method all served to facilitate the work of the contemporary fire fighter; notwithstanding this, such means were at odds with the preferences of the retired fire fighters.

Since ‘[w]e speak in order to create, maintain, reproduce and transform certain modes of social and societal relationships’ (Shotter 1990, 121) the collective remembering of the retired fire fighters served to stress the generational discrepancies between themselves
and their occupational heirs. In this particular case, commemoration runs in tandem with constructions (and reconstructions) of a particular masculinity, which serves, not only to fortify fire fighting activities in terms of male assignments, but equally to reveal the discrepancy between the retired fire fighters and their professional heirs. Drawing on the work of Meuser (2007) as well as Brandth and Haugen (2005), I have assumed and oriented from the notion that masculinities proceed in terms of a joint project in that it is conveyed and negotiated collectively. In doing so, my ambition has been to amalgamate masculinity studies and some of the previous research that has engaged with collective remembering. Hence, in as much as masculinities are collectively negotiated they are also subjected to temporality. Aging as a fire fighter in the city of Luleå, for instance, was intimately linked to, and bolstered by a shared set of narrations in which approval and rejection of certain instruments were brought to the fore. The abilities to, at that time, operate the Hansaloyd, to manually crank up the ladders and to enter burning buildings stood in stark contrast to the contemporary workforce’s enjoyment of facilitative means such as remote controls and hydraulic devices.

In his study ‘Fitting in: The conflation of firefighting, male domination, and harassment’, Baigent (2005) pinpoints that elderly fire fighters form an informal hierarchy within the fire brigades, which allows them to exercise power over the newcomers. Those who question the authority of their elder, Baigent goes on to argue, risk being labelled as misfits or being marginalized. Baigent’s (2005) argument is equally relevant to the purposes of this article; I have demonstrated how the retired fire fighters of Luleå enjoyed a crucial position at the local fire brigade despite the fact that they were no longer active as fire fighters. Although the technological shifts within the Swedish rescue agency rendered my informants unskilled in how to use the current instruments the intellectual shortcomings were managed and eclipsed through collective remembering of what were regarded as accurate exercises. More specifically, engaging in storytelling practices, the retired fire fighters claimed access to a particular kind of environment in which they staged certain exercises and particular means and methods. Narration thus became one of the ways in which processes of aging and experience coincided; it gave a rite of passage to a particular process of aging, and by this my informants also deskilled their professional heirs.

Exploring the gendered implications of collective remembering, this article has sought to demonstrate some of the ways in which the profession as a fire fighter is open to continual modifications. The process of growing up and of aging is indeed subject to cultural definitions (Eisenstadt 2009), and through a shared set of narrations, my informants were able not only to maintain their position within the fire brigade of Luleå, but also to conflate the process of aging with a professional experience.
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Notes

1 Upon retiring from the profession as a fire fighter in the city of Luleå, or actually from the age of fifty, it is possible to join the local community of retired fire fighters (Bergström 2008). Referred to as the veterans of the fire brigade, the accumulation serves to encourage (and reinforce) the comradeship. During the time of my fieldwork, the community had around one hundred members, although the vast majority were absent from the weekly gatherings.

2 In order to retain their privacy, the names of my informants are altered in this article.

References


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