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## Becoming a firefighter

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Why do individuals seek out high-risk occupations when safer ways of earning a living are available? How do they become acclimated to the dangers of their profession? This article addresses these questions by examining how individuals become wildland firefighters. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic data I collected while serving as a wildland firefighter employed by the US Forest Service, I explore how individual competences and dispositions acquired from a certain family and class background pre-condition rural working-class men for the rigors of firefighting. In Bourdieu's terms, I investigate how the *primary habitus* of self-described 'country boys' transforms into the *specific habitus* of wildland firefighters. Answers pertaining to why young men join firecrews and how they become seasoned to the hazards of wildfire are found not by examining processes of organizational socialization alone but by analyzing how processes of organizational socialization are specified extensions of earlier processes of socialization that take place during firefighters' childhood and adolescence.

**KEY WORDS** ■ firefighting, risk, work, masculinity, rurality, *habitus*, United States Forest Service

For in each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained  
the person we were yesterday ...

(Émile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, 1977 [1938])

The profession of wildland firefighting requires seasonal workers to abandon whatever job they held in the colder months for one that pays

roughly 10 dollars an hour (give or take) and that obliges most of them to live in a forest encampment, largely isolated from family and friends, in surroundings that can at best be described as less than glamorous. It is a consuming, demanding, and 'greedy institution' (Coser, 1974), which often-times erases conventional divisions between work and play, office and home, and family and co-workers, and demands that firefighters make themselves radically available. Sometimes, crewmembers do not come in contact with people besides other members of the firecrew and occasional campers for weeks at a time. Summer days are monopolized by the priority of fire, and when a blaze busts, firefighters rush off to the scene armed only with hand tools, flame-resistant clothing, hard hats, and fire shelters (nick-named 'shake and bakes') to 'dig line' in front of a lethal and combusive force that, as Johan Goudsblom (1994) reminds us, has no purpose other than to destroy. Those who choose to square off with 'the Black Ghost' must regularly work 14 (or more) hours on end, crawling through ash and dirt, hiking through steep terrain carrying 20 pounds of gear, swinging axes and shovels, sometimes miles away from the nearest paved road, let alone the nearest hospital. And they don't always win. Between 1990 and 1998, 133 firefighters died while involved in wildland fire activities. Wildfire claims, on average, between 12 and 22 firefighters' lives per year, while injuring hundreds more.<sup>1</sup>

Why do individuals choose to take part in such a demanding and dangerous enterprise? What compels them to accept the burdens of firefighting, and how do they become acclimated to this universe? In response to these questions, we might surmise that firefighters long for the *rush*, that they are overtaken by a need to test themselves, and, accordingly, that they carefully weigh the exhilaration gained on the fireline against the painful consequences of smoke inhalation, broken bones, and a fiery death. Indeed, this is the explanation most social-scientific accounts of risk-taking offer. As one analyst declares, 'What draws people to "extreme" sports, dangerous occupations, and other edgework activities is the intensely seductive character of the experience itself' (Lyng, 2004: 5). Such pronouncements leave much to be desired since they tend to reason tautologically, conflating description with explanation, and to dismiss important contexts (not the least of which are individuals' class backgrounds and the powerful influence of organizations). An even more fundamental problem afflicting these accounts is the assumption that individuals who partake in behavior defined as risky do so through rational calculation and share the same understanding of 'risk' as the analyst who studies that behavior. It is this assumption that I wish to confront here.

Firefighting – that is, marching, digging, chopping, crawling, and running amongst torching trees and smoldering ash – is a carnal activity, and in the swelter of infernos firefighters' bodies react to the dangers they face. *How*

*far should I go down the canyon wall? How much heat can I take? Is this dangerous or am I scared? Is that oak burnt straight through? Is that smoke or steam? Should I keep digging or should I fall back?* On the fireline, thousands of questions such as these must be asked and answered with such celerity that they exist in cognitive form only for fleeting moments, if at all. Decisions of risk are made at the bodily level and cannot be fully translated into articulate verbal accounts. The visceral experience of risk-taking transcends linguistic expression: it is unutterable, ephemeral, known only *deep down*.

Yet, the intuitive logic of risk – characteristically blurry and grasped only in the whirl of action – has been disfigured beyond the point of recognition. Or, better, it has been made *too recognizable*. Rational choice theorists and economists – who, more than any other pedigree of social scientist, have paid the most attention to questions of risk preferences and risk-taking<sup>2</sup> – tend to assume that risk is unvarying, precise, and self-evident enough to be formalized in a sanitary equation that multiplies the probability of the bad event by the severity of the harm:  $r = Pr[E]he$ . But rational choice theorists and economists are not the only ones who employ this mechanical way of thinking when attempting to make sense of risk-taking. Many sociologists, including social psychologists who would never self-identify as rationalists, reason in a similar fashion, claiming that risk-takers decide to dive off a cliff or storm into battle – actions treated as indistinguishable, though different in every way aside from the threat of injury (see e.g. Lyng, 1990; Lois, 2003) – only after carefully weighing the bonus of the rush against the possibility of the harm. Even Goffman, in his famous essay ‘Where the Action Is’ (1967: 238), confines risk to a cost–benefit calculation: ‘We can begin to see that action need not be perceived, in the first instance, as an expression of impulsiveness or irrationality, even where risk without apparent prize results. Loss, to be sure, is chanced through action; but a real gain of character can occur. It is in these terms that action can be seen as a calculated risk.’ Goffman is correct to assert that the risk-taker is more than a rash brute; however, the alternative he provides – a cold calculator – is equally flawed, for at least two reasons.

First, Goffman’s alternative can only account for individual, not collective, feats of risk. Theories that understand risky behavior as the result of a calculation take as their fundamental unit of analysis the rational individual. This makes it impossible to explain collective forms of dangerous behavior, such as warfare or firefighting, without treating collectives as anything but a bunch of rational decision-makers (motivated only by individual choices) who happen to be in the same place performing the same dangerous act. Although some (e.g. social engineers, military strategists) have found this approach useful, accepting it means ignoring all that makes collective risk collective, including leadership, solidarity, and communication.

It also means not recognizing that the definition of 'risk' and the decision to risk are often made at the institutional, not the individual, level (see Douglas, 1986).

Second, theorists who assume that daredevils engage in intense thought during the same moment that they engage in intense action inject scholastic thought categories into the heads of non-scholastic actors. Guilty of what Bourdieu calls the 'scholastic fallacy', they assume that people in action are at the same time people in contemplation and view an acting actor as 'a sort of a monster with the head of the thinker thinking his practice in reflexive and logical fashion mounted on the body of a man of action engaged in action' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 123).<sup>3</sup> Yet, firefighting (or any risky engagement, for that matter) cannot be sufficiently analyzed through tidy rational equations, which only suffocate bodily ways of knowing exhibited in the fast-paced commotion of action. Lighting a patch of shin-high plain grass with a drip torch, digging a scratch line with a 'combi' (short for 'combination tool', a scraping tool that melds a shovel's head with a narrow pick on a swiveling iron joint) to cut off an advancing head of fire, falling a towering conifer smoldering at its top: these are all practices of wildland firefighting that require corporeal knowledge, gained through experience – through history – not simply mental acuity acquired through rational calculation.

The challenge, then, is to make sense of risky behavior without imposing aseptic analytical thought categories into the minds of risk-takers. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* can be effectively employed to address such a challenge because it shifts our focus of attention from calculation to practice, from mental mechanics to bodily knowledge. Through the concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu advances a dispositional theory of action, a theory which treats individuals as actors who apprehend the world with all their senses – that is, not with the 'logic of the logician', but with their bodies and with the employment of a half-conscious, semi-tangible, practical logic. Thus, the concept of *habitus*, as Brubaker (1993: 220, emphasis in the original) observes,

designates the *disposition to think in dispositional terms*, – the disposition to think of social practices as engendered and regulated by incorporated, generalized, transposable dispositions rather than by rules and norms (as in much structuralist and functionalist social theory) or by conscious intentions, meanings, or calculations (as in much intentionalist social theory, including both phenomenological and rational-action theory).

To comprehend how firefighters, soldiers, or police officers come to develop a specific disposition toward the dangers of wildfire, warfare, or wrongdoing, we must examine the degree to which the dispositions they bring to the firehouse, military base, or police station correspond to the

culture and practices of these supporting organizations. In other words, we must trace the development of individuals' *habitus* over time and space, exploring how one's *primary* or *general habitus* transforms into a *specific habitus*. As Bourdieu pointed out in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000[1997]), a general *habitus* is a system of dispositions and ways of thinking about and acting in the world that is constituted early on in life, while a specific *habitus* is acquired later through education, training, and discipline within particular organizations. If some individuals take to certain professions better than others – if some seem to be ‘naturals’ at soldiering or are ‘born to be police officers’ – it is because they bring to the organization a general *habitus* that transforms into a specific *habitus* with little friction, while others possess a general *habitus* that is at odds with the fundamental structures and practices of the organization. By examining how one's most deep-seated dispositions transform into a specific *habitus*, by investigating how organizations tap into, build upon, and condition these dispositions when producing firefighters, soldiers, or police officers, we can gain insight into how the social order reproduces itself through individuals with such ‘mysterious efficacy’ (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 169).

Accordingly, this article inquires into how the general *habitus* of self-described ‘country boys’ (the social embodied) gracefully transforms into the specific *habitus* of firefighters (the organization embodied). More precisely, it attempts to understand how individuals gravitate and acclimate to the universe of wildland firefighting by focusing on how firefighters' dispositions and skills acquired from their rural, masculine, and working-class upbringings connect with the organizational common sense of the US Forest Service. As we will see, country boys come to the Forest Service already ready to fight fire and take to the rigors of firefighting *secundum naturam*, with nearly instinctual proficiency. For this reason, the Forest Service does not need to exert much effort when sculpting the deployable firefighter. The rookie does not need to be broken down and rebuilt. Rather, his dispositions and skills need only to be tweaked and adjusted slightly, since the country boy is ‘adjusted in advance’ to the requirements of wildland firefighting. It is only by exploring how the general country-masculine *habitus* transmutes into the specific wildland firefighting *habitus* that we are able to fully comprehend why firefighters deploy their bodies in front of overpowering infernos day in and day out in America's back-country and how they prepare for such a task.

The first two sections describe the dispositions and skills new recruits bring to the US Forest Service, while the subsequent two sections explain how these embodied resources effectively are put to work in the world of wildland firefighting. I conclude with a brief discussion of the potential that *ethnography of the habitus* holds for social-scientific investigation.

One final methodological note: this article is based upon ethnographic

data I collected while serving as a member of the Elk River Wildland Firefighting Crew, one of a dozen crews stationed in northern Arizona. Most of the material upon which the following arguments are built was collected during the summer of 2003, though I had served as a wildland firefighter at Elk River in previous seasons – from 1999 to 2000, and again in 2002. By taking the ‘participant’ in ‘participant observation’ seriously, by offering up my mind and body, day and night, to the practices, rituals, and thoughts of the crew, I gained insights into the universe of firefighting, insights I gleaned when I bent my back to thrust a pulaski<sup>4</sup> into the dirt during a direct assault on a fire or when I moved my fingers through new warm ash to dig for hot spots (cf. Wacquant, 2004).<sup>5</sup> My body became a field note, for in order to comprehend the contours of the firefighting *habitus* as deeply as possible, I had to feel it growing inside of me.

### Seeing like a country boy

Five of the crewmembers at Elk River are following a path well-worn by their fathers. As Kris, a 21-year-old in his second season whose father has fought fire for over 30 years, put it, ‘We’ve been around fire for *years*. . . . My father told me stories about having to lead crews on ridge tops at night where you would have to crawl. He told me stories about having to lead crews, you know, to get to a safety zone, having to walk through a little bit that was on fire.’ As children, these men became familiar with the smell of smoke wafting from their fathers’ garments. As teenagers, they knew the terminology, commands, and regulations of firefighting, and as 18-year-olds, these ‘Forest Service brats’ all joined wildland firefighting crews through a virtually natural reflex. As for the first-generation firefighters at Elk River, most came from working-class families with personal ties to the Forest Service. Although they did not descend directly from a firefighting lineage, these crewmembers nonetheless were recruited through small-town social connections. Thus, most crewmembers knew firefighting long before they entered its ranks. Their fathers and friends had dug line before them, and because of their embeddedness in networks of firefighters, they did not find the profession an alien one.<sup>6</sup>

Of the 14 male crewmembers at Elk River, most are young, in their late teens and early 20s, though one recently turned 40 and another is 55. These two older men have over 20 years of experience under their belts. For the rest of the crew, however, the modal number of seasons is three. All the men are single except for two, both of whom are married with children. Four men are Native American, four are Hispanic, two are biracial (African American and white), and four are white. Crewmembers vary in racial composition, age, religion, and what they do after the season ends.



However, all share the binding similarity of a rural upbringing. In fact, every wildland firefighter that I have ever met comes from rural America. It seems as though Norman Maclean encountered a similar trend. When describing smokejumper crews, the author of *Young Men and Fire* (1992: 26) wrote, 'So basically they had to be young, tough, and in one way or another from the back country.'

Raised in small towns with populations under 10,000, most crewmembers have known each other from kindergarten, were on the football team together, and are familiar with each other's families. Three Native Americans on the crew were raised on reservations. Most are not proud of their hometown per se; rather, they take pride in being from a small town in general, as opposed to a big city. Crewmembers are, in their own words, 'country boys', and the culture of the country – that 'small town way of life' thought to be distinctly different from urban modes of existence – greatly influences how they perceive themselves and how they understand the meaning of manhood (cf. Bell, 1995; Connell, 2006).

Most crewmembers are deeply familiar with the woods they protect. They know where the best fishing spots are and where to find wild turkey at the right time of the season. They know the different vegetation, where to gather the best firewood for the winter, and the hundreds of miles of dirt roads, mapped and uncharted, careening like tributaries through millions of acres of forestland. 'I've always liked being in the woods', reflects Diego, a 20-year-old in his third season. 'I would come here since I was little: camping, hunting, fishing. I've been here forever.' Most of the men at Elk River feel the same way. Their family photo albums are filled with Polaroids of small boys hoisting up stringers of fish or smiling for the camera in Mossy Oak camouflage next to a freshly killed buck deer. To these firefighters, the fact that they can earn a paycheck while 'playing in the woods' seems like a too-beautiful con. This is why most of them pick up odd jobs in the off-season that allow them to work outside, like construction work or furring, and why most fantasize about securing a full-time position with the Forest Service.<sup>7</sup> Crewmembers come from working-class rural America, and they bring with them specific masculine dispositions structured by their working-class and country backgrounds. In other words, they come to the Elk River Fire Station with a *country-masculine habitus*. This *habitus* guides the firefighters' thoughts, tastes, and practices. It provides them with their fundamental sense of self; it structures how they understand the world around them; and it influences how they codify sameness and difference.

The country-masculine *habitus* divides the world into two types of people: indoors people and outdoors people, city people and country people. As 'outdoors people', crewmembers fervently reject any type of indoor work, regularly symbolized by the dull, predictable, sanitary desk. 'I guess I've always been an outdoors person', remarks the 40-year-old



Nicholas, who has fought fire each consecutive summer since he was 18 years old. 'You know, I've never been like an indoor type of guy, a desk or something.' The rejection of 'indoor work' is both a *class demarcation* and a *regional separation*. By rejecting the desk, crewmembers reject middle-class occupations. Although they would enjoy a larger salary, they view the cubical, computer, and necktie that accompany white-collar professions as too large a sacrifice. The desk represents the world of paper work, sycophancy, and middle-class managerial masculinity; whereas the forest represents freedom, wilderness, and working-class masculinity (Collinson, 1992; Willis, 1977). The geographic separation between urban and rural landscapes serves as the foundation for the symbolic separation between indoors and outdoors people.

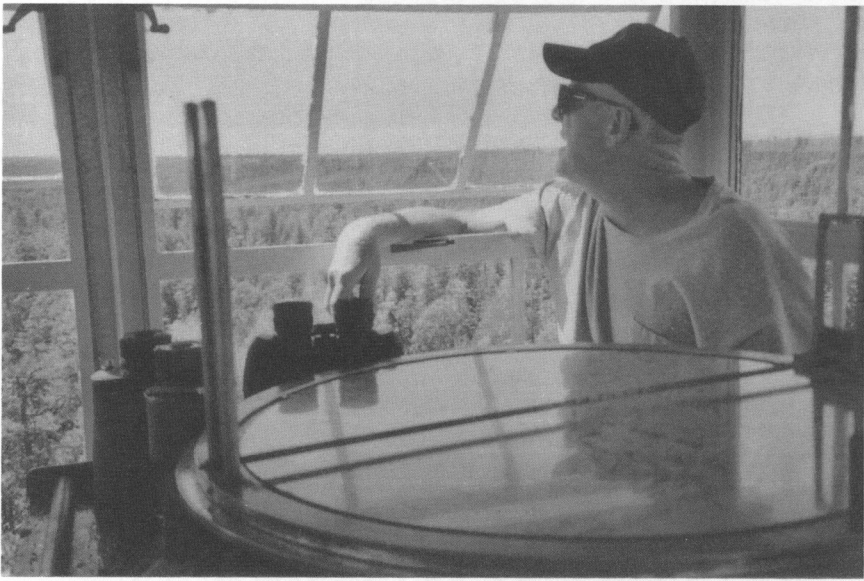
Thus, for the men at Elk River, the division between 'the city' and 'the country' functions as the 'fundamental principle of opposition', as Lévi-Strauss (1966[1962]) would call it, since, more than any other antipodal cultural pairing (e.g. man/woman, white/black, rich/poor), it reinforces a foundational boundary separating known from unknown, familiar from foreign, and pure from polluted. This principle of differentiation orders Elk River by classifying who does and does not belong, and it can be seen at work in the words of Clarence Kraus, the 60-year-old lookout, who believes that 'the Buick crowd' most certainly does not belong in the forest, while the 'pickup crowd' is always welcome.

'You know', Clarence remarks to a gathered crowd of firefighters, who had climbed some hundred aluminum steps up to visit him in his lookout tower, an eight-by-eight foot perch looming 160 feet above the ground. 'I was talkin' to someone here the other day about that new development down there, where that millionaire, Hutchinson or whatever his name is, is buildin' dem fuckin' luxury vacation cabins, and supposedly he is gonna buy more land across the road and build there too. They say ne's gonna dig two lakes on his property and gonna stock 'em with fish ...'

'He is', Steve, a 24-year-old engine operator (a lower-level supervisor in charge of a handful of crewmembers) in his seventh season, interrupts. 'We drove the engine back there the other day and saw them digging two big old holes behind where I guess the cabins are gonna go. And I mean *big* old holes.' Steve stretches his arms out to demonstrate.

Clarence reddens, and his voice grows sharper. 'You know, that's a damn shame. You know what's gonna happen don't-ja? Pretty soon, we're gonna be pavin' these damn roads and all sorts of fuckin' people are gonna be comin' in from Phoenix and from Tucson and wherever. They're gonna be driving their little Buicks up here. Shit, the Buick crowd is gonna replace the pickup crowd if Hutchinson has dem roads paved.'

'What's the difference between the Buick crowd and the pickup crowd?' I ask.



**Figure 1** 'This is a whole 'nother world out here.'

'The pickup crowd is guys like us, people that aren't afraid to eat beans out of a can', Clarence replies.

I wait for more, but Clarence only gives me a 'you-know-what-I-mean' look before turning to glance at the trees below.

A few seconds pass before Clarence turns back to the crew and asks, 'Do you know that the public has no idea about this? This is a whole 'nother world out here. You're good people, you know, people that keep America runnin', who the military draws from. You are middle America right here!'

It would be a crude mistake to reduce the citified Buick drivers to representatives of the upper-middle class. When crewmembers sneer at city folk, like Hutchinson, they criticize a specific style of life that in their eyes differs dramatically from their own, not simply a specific 'class' in the orthodox Marxian sense. The members of the pickup crowd are part of the working class, but they also belong to a specific 'status group', in the Weberian (1946) sense, since they regulate themselves through certain ways of interacting, dressing, consuming, speaking, and eating that set them apart from other members of the working class, specifically those in metropolitan areas. Through the reproduction of a certain lifestyle, the country boy who drives a pickup, chews tobacco, listens to Johnny Cash, hunts, fishes, drinks cheap beer, and lives in the forest during the summer fighting wildfire implicitly and explicitly erects boundaries between himself and city boys.

Although 'the city' functions as the general space of the Other in the minds of crewmembers, the city is not a homogeneous entity. Many types of men live in metropolitan areas, and certainly not all of them fit the mold of 'city boy' as defined by the crewmembers. Who is the city boy? Is he the president of a major corporation, a university professor, a bank teller, or a homeless man? I believe Clarence's loathed Buick can be found parked in the driveway of a nice *suburban* home. The suburbanite drives his shiny new car into the forest, leaving his three-car garage and well-trimmed lawn behind for a weekend in 'the great outdoors'. He looks forward to a comfortable stay in Hutchinson's cabins. But the 'wimpy suburbanite' is not the only city boy who is referenced by the crewmembers at Elk River. The hard and violent *inner-city* dweller also lurks in their representations of the city. If the suburbs are weak, wealthy, and vain, then the inner city is impure, dangerous, and poor.

'In a small town you get to know your neighbors', explains Donald, a 22-year-old firefighter in his fourth season. 'You don't have ambulances and police cars driving by every night. You don't have those problems. . . . But in a big city, you don't know who [your kids are] hanging out with at school. You never meet their families because there is so many kids there. . . . You have to be scared all the time when you're driving in the city because there's always an idiot. There's always an idiot you have to watch out for. There's just so many people. You go to the mall and you'll be walking around. There's gangsters walking by you, and they're just looking for someone to mug or whatever they're going to do. They might even get in a gang fight and you get caught in the middle of it. So, you gotta watch your back really bad there.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the symbolic construction of the country gravitates between two equally rejected conceptions of the city. The inner city is associated with crime, danger, and vice; the suburbs with money, fashion, and manners. The inner city is too dangerous; the suburbs, too safe. The country resembles the inner city in that it is gritty and the weak-willed cannot survive, but it is unlike the inner city in that it is a place of security and wholesomeness. In its security it resembles the suburbs, but the country is unlike the suburbs in that it is rough – this safety cannot be bought; it must be earned.

Crewmembers come to Elk River from similar positions in the social landscape and with a similar vision and division of the world constituted by that social landscape. They come knowing, implicitly or explicitly, that the kind of men who fight wildfire are the kind of men their fathers are, the kind they are, or at least the kind of men they want to be. They belong at Elk River and feel at home here because they concur, mind, body and soul, with a firmly-established corporate sense regarding the beliefs and practices that make up a country-masculine lifestyle. 'Out here', a phrase often invoked by crewmembers, no one considers hunting to be a barbaric

practice. It is simply what men do in the winter. Out here, one would not think to criticize the owner of an oversized truck for its poor fuel-economy. One needs such a truck to get around these parts. Because crewmembers know such things in advance, because they come to Elk River with a preformed country-masculine *habitus*, they gravitate to the world of wildland firefighting not only for the money or the adventure, but also – and more importantly – for the *esprit de corps* that comes with a collectively shared lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> In addition, and more to the point of this article, these country-masculine principles of vision and division align with the principles of vision and division of the US Forest Service, as I shall demonstrate below.

### Country competence

A city boy, or ‘valley rat’ in the words of one crewmember (‘valley’ refers to the Greater Valley Area, which constitutes Phoenix and all its suburbs), could not distinguish poison oak from wild sumac. He is ignorant of all things wild. The men at Elk River, by contrast, see themselves as possessing a specific body of knowledge – a country competence, a woodsy *techné* – which makes them country boys and the lack of which makes other men city boys. Country masculinity is practiced and displayed primarily through country competence. Crewmembers’ practical knowledge of the woods, their embodied outdoorsmanship acquired through a rural upbringing – the way a hand grips an axe, the way a foot mounts a trail – is directly bound up with their core sense of self, their masculinity and identity, for that which is “‘learned by body” is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is’ (Bourdieu, 1990[1980]: 73). This means that an attack on one’s outdoorsmanship translates into a direct attack on one’s masculinity. This is why Bryan, a 22-year-old fourth-season firefighter, did not take it lightly when he heard that George, a 21-year-old third-season firefighter, thought he could run a chainsaw better than him.

It happened on a lazy Wednesday morning. Most of the crew had gathered in the shop to carefully avoid the gaze of the supervisors. Crewmembers spread out through the large warehouse-like shop lined with tools, a free-standing drill, a long wooden countertop, and a cherry-picker used to pull engine blocks. Conversation was slow. George propped himself up against the concrete wall and drifted to sleep, but his nap did not last very long because minutes later Bryan stomped into the shop, marched straight up to George, stopping inches from his face, and in a loud and confrontational voice barked, ‘You think you can run a saw better than me?’

Everyone in the shop turned to observe the event. Bryan’s voice signaled

the commencement of an altercation both in tone and in subject. He was referencing a chainsaw, a crucial tool used in wildland firefighting. Because of its mass, violence, and ability to harm, a saw is wielded only by the strongest, most skilled, and most experienced firefighters. Thus, sawyering skills signal much more than the ability to drop a full grown oak; they represent a skilled firefighter – more, a competent and mature country man. Bryan had advanced a serious challenge in response to a serious challenge supposedly advanced by George.

George blinked. He blinked again. He stared silently up at the large man in front of him. George was at once confused, startled awake, and a bit scared. He slowly peeled his body away from the wall and stuttered, ‘Wha-what?’

Immediately Bryan snapped back, ‘Someone told me that you were saying that you could run a saw better than me. Is that true, *George?*’

Bryan’s shoulders rolled forward, his arms dangled readily at his sides, his legs held a well-balanced position, and his torso pushed itself toward George. Bryan was not kidding around. A casual observer taking in the scene from afar might have guessed that George had made an uncouth remark about Bryan’s sister. But the remark in question was about a chainsaw.

‘Uh, uh, no. No. I never said anything like that’, George denied.

The room remained silent. Crewmembers stared at the immobile Bryan to observe if he was satisfied by George’s refutation.

‘Are you *sure* George? ’Cause somebody told me that you said that.’ Bryan wanted to hear George deny it again.

‘Yeah. I mean, I don’t know who told you that, but I didn’t say nothin’ about that.’

‘Well, do *you* think you can run a saw better than me, George?’

George thought about the question before answering. ‘No. Not *better.*’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah.’

After a few seconds, Bryan turned away from George and marched stone-faced out of the shop and said, ‘That’s what I thought, *George.*’

A week later, the crew responded to a one-acre fire called The Alligator Juniper Fire. I was assigned the task of spotting the sawyer. Bryan made sure to grab the chainsaw first. I hoisted an army-green bag full of chainsaw equipment, such as hatchets and wedges, on my back, and we went to work. We policed the fire in search of trees with the potential to topple and came upon a medium-sized pine seared most of the way up, which, we thought, needed to be dropped.

Bryan stood in the ashes and began to cut into the trunk while I looked on to make sure the tree was stable and would fall in the direction we wanted. He maneuvered the saw in and out of the trunk by making two



front slices forming a pie-cut a quarter of the way into the wood followed by a perfectly straight back cut. Wood chips flew out from behind the saw in a light brown cloud to the familiar high-pitched sound of the chain ferociously whipping around the bar. When the pie-cut began to close in on itself and the tree started to bend, Bryan pulled the saw out and stepped back, staring up at the lowering trunk. The pie-cut narrowed, and the tree tipped to the slow cracking of breaking wood. It hit the blistered ground with a '*slam*' and stirred up a cloud of ash. The cut was picture-perfect, and Bryan knew it. He shut off the saw with a flick of his thumb and, turning to me, bragged, 'And George thought he could run a saw better than me. I said, "George, I've been running a saw since I was 13!"'

Just as working-class men tend to judge the measure of a man through a value system that prioritizes attainable attributes (breadwinning, a hard work ethic, integrity) over ones perceived as unattainable (wealth, education, a powerful career; see Halle, 1984; Lamont, 2000), country boys define masculinity through standards of country competence. The men at Elk River value their 'human capital', country competence, over economic capital and city competence. This is why, although Hutchinson might *own* some land, Clarence and other crewmembers *know* the land, and as such, they feel that they have more rights to the forest than some millionaire developer. They, country boys, belong at Elk River, and they feel it belongs to them.



**Figure 2** 'I've been running a saw since I was 13!'

Knowledge of the country is a practical and specific type of knowledge. If one can gut an elk, string a catfish line, reload .45 bullets, fall a Juniper with a 20-pound chainsaw, or throw a rig into four-low and climb up a rocky hill, then one exhibits country competence. This knowledge not only binds crewmembers together – as Kris observes, ‘I’m not concerned with the similarities between their backgrounds, you know, where they’re from, or their race or their ethnicity. I’m looking at the similarities of, like, their knowledge that pertains to the forest. I’m looking at their similarities for the love for the forest or why they are even out here’ – it also allows those who possess it to adapt to the rigors of wildland firefighting, as well as to the organizational common sense of the US Forest Service, with quickness and aptness.

### Seeing like the US Forest Service

In the previous two sections, I documented the social trajectory that leads crewmembers to the ranks of wildland firefighting and highlighted certain dispositions and skills they bring with them. I now turn my attention to analyzing how these dispositions and skills are transformed into specific dispositions (a wildland firefighting *habitus*) once new recruits commit themselves to the US Forest Service. To begin, I describe how the fundamental opposition separating ‘the country’ from ‘the city’ corresponds to the opposition one immediately encounters upon entering the Forest Service between government-sponsored forestry and environmentalism. This correspondence enables crewmembers to quickly identify with and trust the Forest Service. In the following section, I explain how the skills new recruits bring to their host organization allow them to adapt to the demands of firefighting almost effortlessly. In other words, I demonstrate that wildland firefighting competence must be understood as a specified extension of country competence.

When an organization commands its members to stand inches away from a gigantic and violent wall of flame burning with such blistering torridity that it destroys the very soil beneath its monstrous flames, leaving the land barren for generations, it goes without saying that the organization must obtain from its membership a high degree of trust. How do firefighters come to trust the Forest Service?<sup>10</sup> Though this question cannot be fully satisfied in the remaining pages of this article, nonetheless, I would like to advance an answer, incomplete though it may be, by suggesting that one way firefighters come to trust the Forest Service is by participating in the symbolic struggles of their host organization. Through these struggles, new recruits quickly learn of the organization’s enemies and allies, and, soon enough, they find themselves joining in the fight. They begin to see how the world



looks through the eyes of the organization and start to accept the needs of the organization as their own, what Mary Douglas (1986: 92) calls the ‘pathetic megalomania’ of institutional thinking. Once this occurs, they launch their criticisms and questions outwardly at opponents – that is, other organizations and individuals which their host organization has classified as ‘opponents’ – and rarely turn a doubtful (and treasonous) eye inwardly to inspect their host organization itself.

Here, I focus on one symbolic struggle – the battle against environmental groups – through which crewmembers come to gain a deep understanding of the essence of wildland firefighting and begin to think like the Forest Service.<sup>11</sup> By joining in this symbolic struggle, crewmembers begin to accept the culture of the Forest Service. Through hundreds of everyday practices – some subtle, like a slight roll of the eyes or a crossing of the legs, some bold, like a cutting insult or a brash statement of belief – they tacitly pledge their loyalty to and place their confidence in that organization. And if they accept the classificatory schemes of the Forest Service with little question, it is, in part, because the symbolic binaries pitting environmental groups against the Forest Service align with the symbolic binaries, cultivated within them from childhood, separating city boys from country boys.

A few hours into my first day on the job of the 2003 season, Peter, a 27-year-old engine operator in his seventh season, pulled me aside after the morning briefing and asked, ‘Have you seen that billboard outside of Jameson?’

‘No. What billboard?’ I inquired, remembering the nearby town that was almost burned over during the half-a-million-acre Rodeo-Chediski Fire of 2002.

‘Dude, you have *got* to see this!’ he replied excitedly – and immediately began logging onto the computer in the main office.

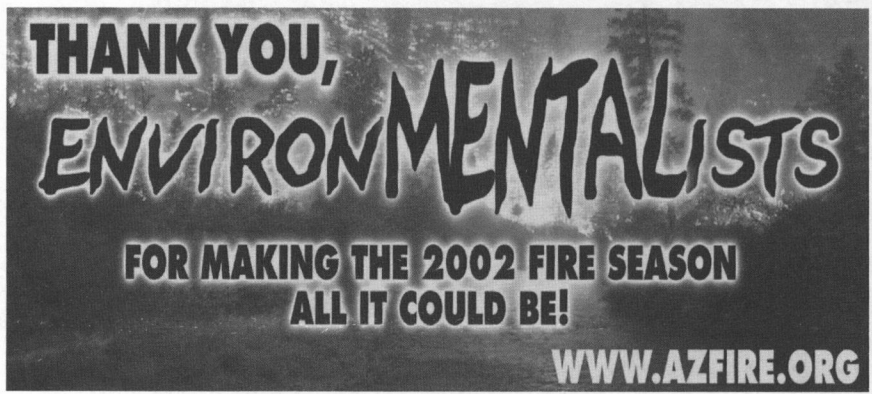
‘Oh man’, Donald added, approaching us, ‘it’s a *cool* billboard.’

Peter pulled up a website displaying a picture of the sign. A full-sized billboard sponsored by a group called ‘AZ F.I.R.E.’ (which I later learned stands for Fighting Irresponsible Radical Environmentalism) displayed the caption, ‘Thank You EnvironMENTALists for Making the 2002 Fire Season All It Could Be!’ against the backdrop of a hillside engulfed by flames.<sup>12</sup>

‘Pretty neat, huh?’ Peter asked, kicking back in the computer chair and allowing me to lean in and get a closer look.

‘Pretty neat’, I echoed.

During the summer of 2002, Arizona glowed red and orange. Nearly half-a-million acres were scorched and over 400 homes were destroyed. Many individuals around the state, including those who formed AZ F.I.R.E., blamed ‘those damn environmentalists’, as they were regularly referred to by crewmembers, for the severity of the fire season.



**Figure 3** Billboard of AZ F.I.R.E. outside town nearly destroyed by Rodeo-Chediski Fire of 2002.

Arguments over where the fault of a devastating fire season lies, how best to manage forests, the politics of logging and thinning, the treatment of endangered species, and hunting and camping rights are all manifestations of a power struggle between independent environmentalist groups (such as the Sierra Club or the Forest Guardians) and governmental organizations such as the US Forest Service. In recent years, the Forest Service has come under hard-hitting criticism advanced by several organizations that identify with the Green movement. While the Forest Service generally advocates thinning overgrown areas, selling timber, and administering prescribed burns, some environmental groups see these tactics as too invasive and vie for a less involved approach to forest management. Some critics of the Forest Service argue that the organization cares more about the timber industry than the betterment of the forest and forested communities; others believe that the Forest Service should 'let the forest handle itself', and, indeed, their efforts have not been without success.<sup>13</sup> Through legislative victories, they have subjected the Forest Service to intense legal pressure and supervision (most powerfully manifest in laws such as the Endangered Species Act), decreasing its ability to thin, burn, and log at will. Some so-called environmentalists argue that the Forest Service destroys wildlife habitats, including those of endangered species, by over-logging and over-burning, while supporters and members of the Forest Service retort that a hands-off approach to forestry will only bring bigger and deadlier forest fires.

When crewmembers commit themselves to the Forest Service each summer, they also commit themselves to this power struggle. To them, 'environmentalist' comes to mean 'opponent of the US Forest Service', and once they recognize the Forest Service as the rightful overseer of the land, they

join in the struggle and caricature environmentalists as misinformed, blindly zealous, and, indeed, 'mental'. For instance, Diego believes that the only thing the environmentalists do is tie the Forest Service's hands behind its back.

'In your expert opinion, do you think we have the ability to control all wildfire?' I asked him once.

'... No, because what we want to do in the fire department area of the Forest Service, they won't let us do because we've got environmentalists, we've got the freakin' timber people, mostly environmentalists', Diego replied, raising his right hand and his voice. 'But they won't let us do, like, Thurman wants to do a burnout [to light a prescribed fire] and some things, they won't let us do it because then we are screwing up the National Forest look or we're destroying the *owl habitat*.'

Diego rolled his eyes and painted the words 'owl habitat' with a thick coat of sarcasm. He was referencing the Spotted Owl, an endangered species now protected by law, which was often contemptuously evoked as the mascot of environmentalist policy. Rex Thurman, the 47-year-old head supervisor of the Elk River Firecrew, regularly referred to the Spotted Owl as 'that goddamn bird'.

'It's pretty scary out there', Thurman, who has fought fire since 1975, barked during a morning briefing. 'We can't go in and burn it because of *that goddamn bird*! I apologize for the language, but we put a *bird* over *personnel*.' By 'pretty scary' he meant that the forest held potential to ignite with force.

Upon entering into the Forest Service, firefighters become entangled in such crosscurrents of discourse, framed by the battle between environmentalism and government-sponsored forestry. Recognizing that environmental policy has real consequences for them on the fireline, crewmembers passionately participate in these struggles. For instance, Peter, like Thurman, believes that less thinning and burning will result in deadlier fires. One day he vented to me:

'What they [the environmentalists] do affects me, affects *everybody* to the very lowest point. What the environmentalists do affects the first-year seasonals. Well, they can't log this, so the first-year firefighters are going to be going into a fire in a dog hair thicket that they can't thin, or can't log or whatever, and that kid's *life is in danger* because they can't thin it. You know? ... There is such a major, *major* problem. There are thickets everywhere. It's thick as shit.

'You've got your people that bitch about "Oh, you're cutting all the trees." But then they're bitching about these big wildfires. So, you can't thin it. So, then you're like, "Well, we can control burn it." But *then* they bitch about the smoke. You know, it's "*cough, cough, cough*"' (covering his mouth with a closed fist).

'You know, it's like *fuck!* What the fuck!' Peter threw his hands in the air in frustration. 'I can't control burn it 'cause of the smoke when we control burn, can't thin it, can't log it, *what the fuck do you want us to do?* Everything is going to burn up. Because if it keeps going like it's going, the Rodeo-Chediski Fire and all the big fires won't be nothing compared with what's to come.'

I asked him: 'So, people have bitched about thinnin' and burnin' to you before?'

Peter grinningly replied, 'Ohhhh, yeah. I was talking to a guy in Scottsdale [a suburb of Phoenix known for its wealth]. This guy named Bob. He's 55 years old. He's got money, but I was talking to him ... and he was asking me stuff, and I said, "I think we need to log it, thin it, burn it. We need to do something or it's just going to keep on getting worse."

"Oh, you can't log it! You can't log it! When they log it, they only want to cut the big trees." Peter erupted, mimicking Bob's nasally voice and frantic gesticulations.

Then he turned into a calm discussant. 'Well that's not true. They don't want the big ones. ... It's like a *garden*. If you don't pull the weeds, you're not going to have good tomatoes or peas or green beans or whatever you're growing because there's only so much water and so much nutrition. Now, if you pull all the weeds, the plants that you do want are going to flourish. They are going to do great.'

Peter nodded and smiled at me, confident in his simile, before imitating Bob again. 'And he's like, "No, no, no. They only want the big trees!"

'And I said, "*Dude!*"' Peter sighed heavily. 'I argued with him for an hour, and I said, "You just need to come up there. You need to come *up there* and spend a day with me."

To Peter, Bob was sorely mistaken. What was needed was a more interventionist, not a hands-off, approach. And the source of Bob's wrongheaded outlook was precisely his lack of country competence and first-hand experience. After all, Bob was a wealthy city boy who needed to 'spend a day' with Peter before forming an opinion about how to manage the forest. Peter reacted with such frustration to the Bobs of the world not only because he was negatively affected by environmentalist policy, but also because he, a country boy, grew tired of having city folks dictate to him his fate and the fate of the country.

Most crewmembers, however, rarely encounter Bobs. Most do not know any environmentalists personally, and if they do meet advocates of anti-interventionist forestry, it is usually in passing moments such as barstool conversations. Nevertheless, all (the word is not an exaggeration) the fire-fighters at Elk River decry meddlesome 'environmentalists', their amorphous enemies, because their fight is not with people but with a specific position within the field of environmental politics, a field where the

symbolic struggle over the best way to do forestry takes place.<sup>14</sup> The fire sector of the Forest Service occupies a certain position in this field while environmental groups, including groups within the Forest Service such as wildlife biologists, occupy an opposing position, and when crewmembers commit themselves to fighting fires for the Forest Service, they enter into this field and join in its struggles, struggles which are as old as the trees themselves. Indeed, since the Bureau of Forestry transformed into the US Forest Service almost a century ago under the command of President Theodore Roosevelt, at a time when American 'progress' speckled the wild landscape not only with steel trestles and steam engines but also with wildfires caused by the sparks flying off the tracks, individuals have fought tooth and nail over how best to handle the wildfire and forestland (Pyne, 2001).

By adopting the enemies of the Forest Service as their own enemies and the problems of the Forest Service as their own problems, crewmembers come to identify with and trust the Forest Service. They begin to understand their world through its categories and classifications and aim their critical energies and doubtful queries not at their host organization but at outside organizations and individuals classified by the Forest Service as deserving of criticism.

Becoming a wildland firefighter involves much more than simply learning how to dig line, back burn, fall dead trees (snags), recognize fire behavior, and interpret weather patterns; it also involves learning how to communicate and think like other wildland firefighters and to like and dislike certain things and individuals which wildland firefighters 'should' like and dislike. New recruits must learn how to answer questions in certain ways and how to make arguments around certain issues. They must quickly form opinions on policies that previously did not concern them and criticize people who previously did not bother them. In short, they must join in the various symbolic battles in which the Forest Service engages, battles over legitimation and classification, one of the most active and charged of which is the fight against environmentalist groups over the right to manage the forest. And if crewmembers have little trouble comprehending the stakes and choosing sides in such a battle, it is because the principles of vision and division at work within the US Forest Service align succinctly with the principles of vision and division of country masculinity. In other words, the dichotomy separating interventionist, government-sponsored forestry and anti-interventionist, community-based forestry is homologous to the symbolic and geographic separation of the city and the country. Thus, though they are not aware of it, crewmembers have been preparing to trust and to accept the common sense of the US Forest Service since childhood; they began developing a disposition that 'fits' within this organization long before they even knew of the organization.

**Firefighting competence**

The culture of the US Forest Service and the act of fighting a wildfire, though interconnected, are two very different things. Just because individuals accept an organization's thinking as their own does not mean that they can effectively execute the tasks the organization demands of them. After all, believing that prescribed burning operations are beneficial to forest management is one thing; standing at the center of a wild inferno consuming thousands of trees standing 70 feet tall, incandescent like gigantic matchsticks, sending out a heat so intense that it could melt a dump truck, is another matter entirely.

How do country boys acclimate themselves to the act of firefighting? How do they acquire the deep-seated, bodily competence that they employ on the fireline? If firefighting is not easy, and if the principal source of firefighting competence is not to be found in training, being but a brief and mnemonic education transmitted through video tapes, experience, since most crewmembers lack extensive exposure to wildfire, or strict obedience to some sterile set of procedures and rules, as ethnomethodologists effectively have argued (Garfinkel, 1967; Zimmerman, 1971),<sup>15</sup> then how are firefighters able to synchronize their actions on the fireline, to work together seamlessly, safely, and efficiently? A significant (albeit limited) part of the answer lies in the fact that country boys come to the Forest Service already acclimated to the tasks of wildland firefighting. Country competence serves as the foundation for wildland firefighting competence. The above vignette regarding the standoff between Bryan and George illustrates this point. Bryan quickly learned how to fall lightning-struck trees because he had been 'running a saw since he was 13'. In fact, Bryan's parents are the proud possessors of a photograph displaying four-year-old Bryan proudly wielding a plastic toy chainsaw next to his father wielding a real one.

I once battled an especially volatile and enormous fire with George and J.J., a 22-year-old in his third season of firefighting, under the guidance of Rex Thurman. We were stationed in a small mountain community that was threatened by the blaze. J.J., George, and I worked side-by-side, quickly coordinating our actions and acclimating to different scenarios. In order to foam down houses using the hose, the three of us separately worked towards the accomplishment of a shared goal: J.J. primed the engine pump, I procured the hose, and George secured the nozzle. These independent (yet corresponding) actions allowed us to get water on the houses as soon as possible. We did not intentionally coordinate each action; we did not formulate a game plan; rather, our actions seemed to coordinate themselves. Part of this process involved offering and accepting each others' suggestions ('let's use a foam nozzle instead of a forester', 'don't use too much water'), which were always delivered in a hasty and forceful manner. If we were



able to understand and act upon these minimal suggestions, changing direction and making adjustments in response to utterances that barely formed sentences, it was because we shared a linguistic *habitus*, one formed in past pressure situations. Growing up, all three of us took orders from a football coach who barked terse commands, as Thurman did, and we orchestrated plays on the gridiron on the basis of pithy phrases ('45 is the Mike', 'shift left', 'watch the draw', 'wing-right, 38 sweep'). We knew the language of firefighting, so to speak, because we shared a linguistic disposition formed (and informed) by a shared country-masculine history. Because we possessed a similar history, we also possessed a common code that allowed us to communicate meaningfully and seamlessly even though we had never been in a situation like the one we faced that night on the fireline.

J.J., George, and I adjusted our bodily movements to one another. When we stood heel-to-heel, using pulaskies to lop up the porch of a house that had caught fire, or dug line close together, or ran and jumped in the fire engine, or threw wood piles away from threatened houses, our bodies harmonized with each other. Again, this was possible because we shared a country-masculine history that predisposed us to such actions. When my country-masculine *habitus* encountered itself in the postures, movements, rhythms, gestures, and orientations of my crewmembers, it recognized something familiar, something known deep down, and, accordingly, it synchronized with other manifestations of itself, creating a chemistry of sorts that coordinated action.

Crewmembers easily found the isolated mountain community, even though they had never been there before, because the roads they navigated to find smoke in the summer were the same ones they drove to find deer in the winter – and most crewmembers had been going hunting with their fathers for as long as they can remember. Since many crewmembers took their driver's license test in the seat of a four-by-four pickup, it was not difficult for them to adjust to driving the engine or the pickup that trails it, called the chase truck. J.J., George, and I knew how to swing a pulaski to destroy a half-burnt porch because we had been chopping our parents' and grandparents' wood since we were children. As young men who were raised in the woods, who, in Diego's words (quoted above), have 'been here forever', we knew how to observe the forest because our eyes had been searching the tips of pines and the trunks of oaks for years. Our ears knew what to listen for; our noses knew what the forest was supposed to smell like. Our footing and balance, posture and hiking style, sense of touch and movement were attuned to the forest, and this heightened sense of awareness, this woodsy know-how inscribed in our histories and in our very bodies, allowed us quickly to adapt to the challenges of the fire.

When J.J., George, and I returned to fire camp after doing battle on the



line, our faces, necks, arms, and legs were caked with a thin crust of dried sweat, ash, dirt, and hardened foam. Our filthy fire shirts and pants bore the evidence of the dirty work of firefighting; globs of mud stuck to our boots; and we smelled of body odor and smoke. But we were used to getting dirty. As children, all three of us were encouraged to muck around in the outdoors, and as teenagers, we further were encouraged to muddy ourselves on the football field. This is not a trivial point, for if one chooses to fight wildfire, one must not mind being coated in dirt, ash, and sweat for days on end. One crewmember returned to Elk River from a 14-day fire stint, where showers were unavailable, with large pus-filled swellings under his armpits that later had to be lanced and drained. The doctor informed him that the swellings were brought on by the thick layer of dirt and ash that had accumulated on his skin and clogged up his pores, drastically hindering his ability to perspire.

Stories like this are not uncommon, for wildland firefighters must function under extremely primitive conditions stripped of many modern amenities such as running water and warm food. As Thurman observed, when reflecting on his early days as a firecrew supervisor, 'It wasn't uncommon to get called all hours of the night, morning, whatever, to head off to an assignment . . . wasn't unusual to get called out at six o'clock, head back, drive all night to an incident, get there, get breakfast, get briefed, and go out on the line. It's those types of things. You work all day out there.



**Figure 4** Firefighters assessing a blaze.

Sleep's minimal. . . . When you get out there, they bed you down right there on the fireline. It's not quality sleep. You get up out of the dirt, these type of things, and it's one of those you still have a job to do on minimal rest and support. It's not like you can go out and sit on no little porcelain toilet. You deal with what's at hand. . . . You get to find out what you're made of. . . . For the most part, if you got four seasons out of an individual you did damn good considering how they were treated, you know, the expectations that are there.'

Far from shying away from such discomforts that affront cleanliness and the ways of civilization, crewmembers embrace them. They take pride in the soot that covers their faces, arms, legs, and even teeth after a full day's work on the fireline, and, more to the point, they have known the taste and feel of dirt ever since they were children.

Most wildland firefighters acquire many of the dispositions and skills necessary to perform their job long before they become employees of the US Forest Service. In the same way, new firefighters who do not come from rural backgrounds and who do not possess a core set of country competences have a very difficult time acclimating to the demands of firefighting. This was the case for Vince. Although he was raised in a small town, Vince, 23, was not brought up the same way many of his crewmembers were. Vince did not grow up with family camping trips or with weekend woodland outings. While most other crewmembers at Elk River were raised by their biological fathers, who introduced them to the Great Outdoors at very young ages, Vince was raised by a stepfather who taught him much about the receiving end of a leather strap and little about the delicate movement of a home-tied fly-lure atop a still lake or the rash action of deer in the rut. Thus, he did not acquire much country competence growing up. Moreover, Vince was not socialized into a masculine sporting culture. Whereas most crewmembers had spent a considerable amount of time in homosocial male environments, Vince's first significant experience in such an environment came when he joined the Forest Service. Accordingly, Vince was not accustomed to masculine styles of communication and joking; he did not possess years of experience working beside other men in a collective setting, nor was he used to taking curt orders from a masculine boss. Vince *grew up* in the country, but he was not *brought up* with a country-masculine upbringing. As a result, he had a much more difficult time acclimating to the demands of firefighting than did his fellow crewmembers.

Although the summer of 2003 marked Vince's seventh season as a wildland firefighter, he did not hold a position of authority as did other crewmembers with comparable years of experience; in fact, many crewmembers with less experience outranked him. If Vince did not occupy a position of authority in line with his years of firefighting experience, it was because he did not assert himself as a confident leader or demonstrate

a significant degree of firefighting competence. This became clear through dozens of everyday practices which took place on and off the fireline, practices which, when taken together, served to separate Vince from other crewmembers, stripping him of firefighting (and masculine) capital. For example, during fires, Vince never grabbed (nor was he ever handed) a pulaski, the lead tool; thus, when digging line, he never directed his crewmembers but always followed behind someone else. Although the most experienced firefighters carry radios during a fire, I never saw Vince carrying one. When we were assigned to sharpen tools, Vince usually sanded the handles, a task understood by crewmembers as easier and less important than taking a file to metal and grinding on the edge of a combi or the blade of a pulaski. Although he was certified to do so, Vince rarely drove the chase truck, and on the rare occasion that he did, he was overly grateful for a turn behind the wheel. In short, Vince did not take to the formal and informal requirements of the job with the same degree of confidence and competence that other crewmembers did.

Whereas most crewmembers came to Elk River with a refined and well-developed set of country-masculine skills, Vince came to the Forest Service with fewer resources to draw upon. Most crewmembers adapted to the everyday practices of wildland firefighting – from digging line to repairing vehicles – easier than did Vince. Thus, although it seems strange that Vince was not well-adjusted to the world of wildland firefighting after seven years of experience, we might now say that he *only* had seven years of experience, whereas other crewmembers, regardless of the number of summers they had been employed by the Forest Service, had lifetimes' worth.

When we attempt to identify the source of firefighters' practical knowledge, when we pursue a genealogical trail leading back through young adulthood, adolescence, and childhood in an effort to put into words the unspoken intuitive competence that allows firefighters, simply, to do what they do, we discover that neither organizational socialization nor direct experience within the organization can lay full claim to the source of this knowledge. While the Forest Service accounts for firefighters' competence through training courses and regulations and firefighters themselves tend to attribute their know-how to their time spent on the fireline, there is a deeper source. There is something in the background, something alive, though invisible, and present in nearly every action of wildland firefighting; this 'something' is the country-masculine *habitus*. Crewmembers' shared history manifests itself in firefighters' very bodies. It is brought to life through their skilful actions, but it usually resides under the surface, acting as the unnoticed bind that holds everything in place. Firefighters are practical actors, who have adapted, *modus operandi*, to the demands of firefighting not through a drastic transformation (after all, training can be described

accurately as meager at best), nor by following ordinances, or even through direct experience fighting fire, but rather, through subtle modifications of already established dispositions and skills. The skills involved in battling a wildfire come to firefighters almost naturally, because firefighters' rural working-class masculine upbringings, *opus operatum*, have already laid the groundwork. 'The machine required can be constructed', Foucault (1977[1975]: 135) once remarked about the 18th-century soldier. But unlike Foucault's cadet, who is molded out of 'formless clay', the wildland firefighter comes to the setting pre-formed, pre-conditioned, and thus, in the root sense, *prepared* – from the Latin *praeparare*, literally meaning 'previously procured' – for the demands and dangers of firefighting.

### Afterword: ethnography of the *habitus*

By tracing the conversion of a general *habitus* to a specific one, I was able to show that the process of becoming a wildland firefighter starts long before one joins a firefighting crew. In fact, the process begins with thousands of experiences specific to working-class rural backgrounds. Through these experiences, crewmembers acquire embodied competences and naturalized ways of apprehending the world that serve them well on the fireline. Moreover, I was able to uncover how the country-masculine *habitus* 'helps to determine what transforms it' (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 149). In other words, I was able to break with current accounts of risk-taking, which would venture to guess that new recruits are seduced into the world of firefighting by promises of *adventure*, by 'the rubato of the life process' of which Simmel (1959[1911]: 258) spoke. By contrast, I was able to demonstrate that crewmembers gravitate 'naturally' to the ranks of firefighting because the country-masculine *habitus* seeks out a universe in which it can recognize itself, an environment in which it can thrive. For the men at Elk River, the decision to fight fire was not a bold leap into a brave new world, but rather, a mild step into familiar territory. Therefore, this article has demonstrated that we must study not only the organization, but the individual (and his history) within the organization, not only the US Forest Service, but the country boy as a member of the Forest Service.

In the same way, if researchers wish to reconstruct the practical logic of executives, Marines, street hustlers, or nurses – in short, if they desire to understand how people become 'experts' in the way that Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) use the term – then they must explore the interface between individuals' general *habitus* and the culture and practices of the office building, the military, the street, or the hospital. Examining the emergence of a specific *habitus* from the configuration of skills and dispositions that constitute the general *habitus* requires much more than simply researching

individuals' personal histories.<sup>16</sup> If this were the case, investigations into the transformation of a *habitus* would be no different than the pursuits of bread-and-butter anthropology, a discipline built upon the examination of kinship patterns and genealogies. What makes a *habitus*-driven approach distinct is its insistence on ferreting out *specific linkages* connecting personal histories with present-day social contexts (such as the linkage between country competence and firefighting competence). It requires rigorously examining the origins of acquired dispositions and skills as well as the precise ways in which they handicap or advantage individuals in various organizational, educational, cultural, social, or political settings.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than view individuals as suspended in a single context within a single timeframe, balancing themselves upon the knife-edge present, ethnography of the *habitus* forces researchers to view individuals ontogenetically: as developing agents and inheritors of a specific social history. To quote Durkheim (1977[1938]: 12):

What we need to understand is not the man of the moment, man as we experience him at a particular point in time, influenced as we are by momentary needs and passions, but rather man in his totality throughout time. To do this we need to cease studying man at a particular moment and instead try to consider him against the background of the whole process of his development.

If the *habitus* is internalized and forgotten history, as Bourdieu (2000) claims, then the aim of ethnography of the *habitus* is to *historicize the habitus* in an effort to externalize that which has been internalized and to bring to mind that which has been forgotten. And because personal histories are constituted by social histories, searching out the social genesis of dispositions and skills can yield insights that go beyond those solely pertaining to individuals' development: it can shed fresh light on the ways in which the social order reproduces itself through everyday micro-level mechanisms. Thus, ethnography that is determined to understand the transformation of a general *habitus* into a specific one presents new and exciting ways to discover the workings of 'specific macro determination in the micro world' (Burawoy, 1991: 279).

By employing the concept of *habitus* in my fieldwork, I was also able to reconstruct the logic of firefighting on its own terms. Instead of reducing crewmembers to rational calculators, who supposedly not only practice the same mode of thinking as the analyst but also possess the same understanding of 'risk' as the analyst who observes their risk-taking, I treated crewmembers as practical actors. This enabled me to avoid the pitfalls of 'scholastic ethnocentrism' that all too often lead ethnographers to 'cancel out the specificity of practical logic' (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]: 51). Adopting an Archimedean stance that shoves the messy data of everyday life into

spick-and-span categories of scholastic thought, the ethnographer guilty of this fallacy presents the social world as she ‘thinks it’ as opposed to how people live within it.<sup>18</sup>

As I mentioned at the outset of this article, when it comes to the sociology of risk-taking, many analysts have fallen victim to scholastic ethnocentrism, reasoning that a single motivational impetus can explain adequately all assortments of hazardous activity. For Goffman (1967), all risk-takers are driven by the need to acquire ‘character’; for Simmel (1959[1911]), adventurers find refuge from the profane aspects of life in ‘alien, untouchable, [and] out of the ordinary’ activities; and, in the same vein, for Lyng (1990), agents who are caged by the boredom and routine of postindustrial ‘normal life’ search for risky avenues to release their spontaneous and creative urges. In each explanation, the scholar passes over the specific logics of the different settings he classifies as ‘risky’, and in so doing enshrouds the context-dependent practical logic of these settings under the context-independent blanket of scholasticism, granting analytical reasoning a privileged position over bodily knowledge. By contrast, in this article I have endeavored to demonstrate that crewmembers in a sense ‘know’ the world of firefighting before they join it. I have sought to show empirically how bodies become disposed to demanding organizations and dangerous contexts without exerting much cognitive energy. Throughout, I have attempted to prioritize the practical logic of firefighting over the analytical logic of social science.

Instead of succumbing to the temptation of judging the concept of *habitus* by the theorist’s gauge, by its philosophical sophistication, I have attempted to *use* the concept of *habitus* and judge its effectiveness by the pragmatist’s ruler, by its practical application. (Indeed, Bourdieu [1979] desired that his concepts be used not in ‘talk’ but in ‘practice’, that they be put to work on the ground, not simply in academic discussions.) When I employed the concept of *habitus* in my fieldwork, I did not find it to be an unhelpful ‘black box’ of a concept that does little to advance our conceptions of action, as many scholars would have it (e.g. King, 2000; van den Berg, 1998). Rather, I found that the concept allowed me to harvest fruitful analytical insights.

With that said, this approach does come with certain disadvantages. First of all, if the analyst attempts to grasp the practical logic of a group of individuals, she must do so by means of socioanalysis, an endeavor that distorts the very practices the analyst wishes to capture. That is, ‘the logic of practice can only be grasped through constructs which destroy it as such’ (Bourdieu, 1990[1980]: 11). This poses a vexing problem for the analyst who is forced to freeze time and who must create a textual existence for action that does not define itself through texts. Like the curious but clumsy child who can explore the shapes and colors of a butterfly only after



rendering it flightless by touching its wings, the ethnographer who analyzes practical logic can do so only by imposing upon it a theoretical logic that simultaneously acts as its clarifier and as its solvent. I have tried to remedy this tension by giving sustained attention to the pace, sound, and dynamics of practice. I have also attempted to interrogate the body of theoretical knowledge that helped me to comprehend such practices, while not allowing the former to trample upon the latter. However, the tension remains unsettled; it has not been overcome in the pages of this article. It remains to be seen if future studies can reach beyond this tension (that between action and science, between fast practice and timeless theory) through the development of new concepts, methods, and approaches to research, or if we will come to discover that this tension is an immutable irony built into the very idea of the logic of practice itself.

Second, an ethnomethodologist might object that casting a searching eye toward the past makes the ethnographer blind to the ongoings of the present. She would refuse to grapple with questions of history and social position because such 'why' questions would distract her attention from 'how' questions. 'If you seek after why people do what they do', she might argue, 'then you are forced to overlook some of the minute and complicated details that inform precisely how people do what they do, how they create and maintain social order, how they structure their interactions and daily lives.' The ethnomethodologist would have a very good point. (After all, Bourdieu, whose experiences as an ethnographer are largely confined to the very beginnings of his career as a soldier-turned-*renegade*-ethnologist in colonized Algeria, never paid much attention to the minutiae of interaction in the tradition of Garfinkel and his followers.) However, it was precisely the why question that I was after. This article has tried to demonstrate that the 'why' informs and enriches our notions of the 'how'. Furthermore, the disadvantage of overlooking details was not enough to persuade me to ignore the 'why' for the 'how'. This was because as a fully participant ethnographer, I was bound to overlook thousands of details while engaged in the heat of action; hence, the very nature of my ethnographic style did not allow me to satisfy the ethnomethodologist's 'how' question. And yet, it is questionable that the ethnographer who does not participate in the interactions and settings she wishes to make sense of, can fully capture the habitual how-ness, the 'incarnate intelligence' (Wacquant, 2004: viii), of practice that resides in the bodies of individuals who have grown familiar and comfortable in the worlds they help to order.

Despite these limitations, Bourdieu's logic of practice does offer much to analysts. If the ethnographer's task is to elucidate the inner-workings of social life and if social life is 'essentially practical', as Karl Marx (1978[1845]: 145) observed, then ethnographers must search out theories, concepts, and methods that can aid them in reconstructing the practical



logic of social life and put them to work in the field. As I have hoped to show here, the method of ethnography of the *habitus* is ideally suited for such a purpose. In my research it has allowed me to account for how firefighters become acclimated to their universe, and it has made it possible for me to avoid the snares of scholastic ethnocentrism. Because the idea of *habitus* rescues our theories of human action from ‘the icy waters of egotistical calculation’, to employ Marx’s phraseology once more – that is, because it privileges the ‘hot logic’ of practicality over the ‘cold logic’ of rationality – this concept can be of great value to ethnographers.

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### Notes

- 1 See United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (1999). Unfortunately, I could not obtain the rates of injuries and fatalities from Forest Service records due to the way the organization classifies its workers.
- 2 Here I am not conflating ‘risk’ as dangerous activity with ‘risk’ as uncertainty (where risk becomes analogous to an error term); rather, I am referencing theorists who apply rational-choice models to explain, for instance, how individuals react to natural disasters (e.g. Slovic et al., 2000) or why individuals assault others (e.g. Hoffmann, 2001).
- 3 To Bourdieu, the foundational reason behind this error is the conflicting temporal existences of the scholar and her subject. The scholar exists in a state of leisure (*skole*). She has the luxury to reason about others, to freeze time, and to assume people have the leisure to reason. On the other hand, the actor is in constant motion. She does not have the time to think about each action, to ascribe it meaning, and to place it in an equation. Bourdieu (1990[1980]: 81) claims that these different temporal outlooks produce ‘the antimony between the time of science and the time of action, which tends to destroy practice by imposing on it the intemporal time of science’.

- 4 A pulaski is a furrowing tool with the head of an axe melded with an adze trenching blade; it usually serves as the lead tool during line construction.
- 5 In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews that lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours with all 14 crewmembers and several US Forest Service supervisors. I also collected official documents such as training materials, fatality reports, press releases, and guidebooks, and recorded copious field notes. In an effort to disguise the specific location of the firecrew, I have camouflaged the proper nouns in this article with pseudonyms.
- 6 In this way, most crewmembers do not differ from many blue-collar workers (or professional, technical, or managerial workers, for that matter) who predominantly use personal contacts when finding out about and landing jobs (Granovetter, 1995[1974]; Marsden and Campbell, 1990).
- 7 Since wildfires primarily dance across the landscape only during the summer months, most wildland firefighters are temporary workers who hold odd jobs or attend college during the off-season.
- 8 Though it is clear that a fear of crime abounds in their construction of the city, no crewmember used racial stereotypes when describing their fears. Further, white and minority crewmembers alike viewed the inner city as a site of violence and vice.
- 9 Of course, there are many young men who grow up in rural working-class America who do not become wildland firefighters. Many crewmembers' peers, who lived down the block, now earn a paycheck repairing cars, stocking shelves, patrolling prison yards, or operating warehouse forklifts. How do these crewmembers differ from their peers? I did not interview crewmembers' peers who occupy positions in other professions in search of this answer, and, accordingly, I cannot address this question with any degree of empirical certainty. However, I can identify three specific characteristics that most crewmembers possess that may set them apart from their peers. Besides sharing a country-masculine upbringing, most crewmembers: 1) had fathers who actively invested in cultivating within them 'country competence', a phrase I explore in the next section; 2) had interpersonal connections to the Forest Service; and 3) developed an infatuation with fire early in life: it is striking that more than one crewmember lit his backyard on fire as a child. Again, to provide these characteristics some sort of causal significance, I would have to widen my sample, interview crewmembers' counterparts in other professions, and determine if firefighters possess certain characteristic that set them apart from their counterparts. But the purpose of this article is not to determine the important forces that cause some working-class rural men to join firecrews and not others; rather, its purpose is to describe some key features that many crewmembers share that help to explain why they *gravitate* towards the universe of wildland firefighting and, more importantly, to show how crewmembers' childhood

and adolescent experiences help them *acclimate* to the demands of wildland firefighting as well as to the organizational common sense of the US Forest Service.

- 10 Traditionally, organizational scholars have focused on how organizations control their workers – through rewards and punishments (Etzioni, 1964), hierarchical structures (Ouchi, 1978), or other methods ('ideology', contractual relationships) – without paying much attention to the question of trust. But, if we ask, 'How does an organization win over its members?', before we ask, 'How does an organization control its members?', then we are forced to hold in abeyance hasty (and often misguided) assumptions about why workers are attracted to and come to identify with a certain organization. For an organization to control its members effectively, as the US Forest Service has been known to do (Kauffman, 1960), and without coercive methods that only stoke the fires of resistance and rebellion, it must secure from its members a high degree of trust and respect. As such, before we can fully understand how an organization controls its workers, we must understand how individuals are socialized, by the organization, into workers.
- 11 To be precise, the Forest Service is far from united on matters of environmental practices and wildlife management; in fact, the organization is fractured by internal disputes between timber advocates, wildlife preservationists, and wildfire specialists, to name but a few groups at odds with one another within the organization. Many crewmembers classify biologists and timber specialists who work for the Forest Service as environmentalists. Hence, the battle between the environmentalists and the Forest Service, at least as it is perceived by my crewmembers, is really a battle between the environmentalists and the *wildfire sector* of the Forest Service.
- 12 The photograph displayed here comes directly from the website of AZ F.I.R.E. (<http://www.azfire.org>) and is used with the organization's permission.
- 13 My purpose here is not to recreate the actual political stances and strategies of various environmental organizations – in fact, many self-described environmentalists hold beliefs about forest management similar to those of firefighters – but to capture crewmembers' opinions on organizations and people whom they label environmental, threatening to the interests of Forest Service firefighters, and wrong. Plainly, the only definition of 'environmentalist' that matters here is the one the firefighters advance. For works that delve deeper into the complicated and nuanced political struggle over how best to manage America's wilderness and natural resources, a task far beyond the scope of this article, see Pyne (1997) and Wright (1982).
- 14 Although placing faith in the need to ignite prescribed burns or to thin overgrown patches of Ponderosas is a sort of prerequisite for becoming a

wildland firefighter – evidence for which is found not only in the fact that all my crewmembers are in agreement regarding these practices, but also in the countless articles, books, and editorials composed by wildland firefighters across the United States advocating such practices (e.g. Pyne, 2003; Sheridan, 2003) – crewmembers do not always see eye-to-eye on other environmental issues, such as the treatment of animals.

- 15 I have demonstrated this elsewhere (Desmond, forthcoming).
- 16 It is also distinct from historically informed ethnography (e.g. Geertz, 1965; Rosaldo, 1979), which places ethnographic data in a historical context but does not necessarily advance a historically minded ethnographic methodology.
- 17 Bourdieu (1962[1958]), Lareau (2002), and Wacquant (2004) have used the concept of *habitus* in their ethnographic pursuits.
- 18 A word of caution: when trying to avoid scholastic ethnocentrism, ethnographers can easily slip too far in the opposite direction and over-stress ‘the native point of view’. Wacquant (1995: 490–1) advances three reasons why this hunt for the native point of view is a fruitless one: first, the native point of view itself might be a chimera, for in reality what is usually found is ‘a range of discrepant, competing, or warring viewpoints’; second, so-called ‘natives’ might not have a so-called ‘view’ at all, since individuals approach their worlds through pre-reflexive stances of ‘ontological complicity’ (on this point, also see Rabinow, 1977); and, third, in the vein of ethnomethodology, if a native point of view does exist, it is questionable that one can discursively recreate it. Moving away from scholastic ethnocentrism does not mean moving towards an ethnography of the native point of view; rather, it means moving towards a social science that indefatigably and ardently seeks to reconstruct the practical nature of human behavior.

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