Dissecting the iconic image of the male firefighter this article offers an understanding of how housing preferences and instrumental use are componential to the professional identity of retired firefighters. Drawing on an ethnographic account at a fire station in Luleå, a small town in the Northern parts of Sweden, the intention is to show how retired firefighters performed masculinity, not through embodied viability, but through housing preferences and instrumental use. Distancing themselves from the residential areas and the instrumental management of their professional heirs, the retired firefighters were thus able to retain their status, despite the fact that they were no longer active as firefighters. Exploring the masculine enactments of the retired firefighters, this article seeks to highlight the dynamic of change within the fire service. In doing so, the intention is to provide a deeper understanding of the temporary constructions of masculine values and ideals that pervade this organization.

Keywords: firefighting, masculine enactments, generation, instrumental use, housing preferences, Sweden

The profession of firefighting is commonly referred to as hard labor, that is, jobs that are presumed to involve physical danger. The physical requirements for firefighters are also most often the reason for why the profession is considered inappropriate for women (Crawley, Foley & Shehan, 2008, p. 65, 120). In the study Real Heat: Gender and Race in the Urban Fire Service (1997), Carol Chetkovich concludes that the professional fire service “has been predominantly white and entirely male for most of its history” (Chetkovich, 1997, p. 8). Dave Baigent, too, argues that “the
work of firefighting is extremely masculinised” (2005, p. 45), to the extent that the accomplishment of effective firefighting is synonymous with the achievement of masculinity (p. 47). Saying this, recent studies have identified more multifaceted means of identification within the fire service, which sometimes appear over-ride the traditional expectations of firefighters. Put differently, the masculine values and ideals that pervade the fire service tend to transcend the requirements for physical strength (see for comparison Ericson, 2011; Olofsson, 2012; Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2011). By this, professional identities based on other values and qualities erupt, such as emotional strength, social skills, care and a collective understanding of risk and responsibility. While the fire service is commonly seen as the archetype for male bastions, this does not equate to mere enactments of hardcore masculinities. This is especially evident with regards to age. Dissecting the iconic image of the male firefighter this article offers an understanding of how housing preferences and instrumental use are componential to the professional identity of retired firefighters. Drawing on an ethnographic account at a fire station in Luleå, a small town in the Northern parts of Sweden, the intention is to show how retired firefighters, the referred to “veterans”1 of the fire brigade, performed masculinity, not through embodied viability, but through housing preferences and instrumental use. Distancing themselves from the residential areas and the instrumental management of their professional heirs, the retired firefighters were thus able to retain their status, despite the fact that they were no longer active as firefighters. The indication is that masculine enactments within the fire service do not solely hinge on an embodied viability. Instead, the stories told by my informants revealed alternative identity constructions of the profession of firefighting. As argued elsewhere, the previous exercises of the retired firefighters were seen as constitutive to the image of what represents a firefighter (Olofsson, 2011, p. 15). In this particular case, housing preferences and instrumental use worked in tandem with, and contributed to fashioning differences in the masculine enactments of the profession of a firefighter, much due to my informants’ endorsement of their own distinctiveness.

**Objective**

The Swedish fire service has recently been subjected to extensive academic scrutiny (see for comparison Ericson, 2004, 2011; Glans & Rother, 2007; Mellström, 2008, 2010; Olofsson, 2009, 2011, 2012). Focus has been, for instance, on the ways in which constructions of masculinity within the profession of firefighting are related to specific forms of community among men (Ericson, 2011, p. 175). Out of the five thousand firefighters who are employed full-time in Sweden, around one hundred are women (Fler kvinnliga brandmän—Men det går långsamt, 2011), which implies a male domination, not only numerically, but also through the ways in which firefighting activities are coded masculine. The female absence then, is intimately linked to male bonding as well as construction of particular masculinities (Ericson, 2004, p. 157). While these accounts are crucial to critical understandings of the con-

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1 Upon retiring from the profession as a fire fighter in Luleå, or actually from the age of fifty, it is possible to join the local community of retired fire fighters. Referred to as “the veterans of the fire brigade,” the accumulation serves to encourage (and reinforce) the comradeship. During my fieldwork, the community had around one hundred members, although the vast majority were absent from the weekly gatherings.
structions of masculinity within the profession of firefighting, they are restricted to active firefighters. Hence, they tend to overlook the temporary constructions of masculinity.

Drawing on previous studies, my central contention is that scrutiny of older and/or retired firefighters highlights the dynamic of change within the fire service, and thereby provides a deeper understanding of the temporary constructions of masculine values and ideals that pervade this organization. Although recent voices within masculinity studies have emphasized the gendered implications of aging, especially in conjunction with masculinity (see for comparison Sandberg, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2006; Thompson, ed., 1994) it is notable that older men largely remain ignored in scholarship on aging as well as on masculinity (Spector-Mersel, p. 76). Seeking to remedy parts of this disregard, the current objective is to (a) investigate the ways in which masculine enactments among the retired firefighters in Luleå were part and parcel of housing preferences and instrumental use, and (b) show how these factors worked in tandem with generational differences. As the retired firefighters refuted the residential areas as well as the new technologies and methods used by the members of the current fire brigade as a means of distinguishing their own more authentic identity as real old school firefighters, they were able to endorse their own distinctiveness in relation to their professional heirs. This in turn amplified generational differences between the firefighters, reinforced the solidarity amongst the veterans of the fire brigade and in turn influenced the practices of coding this specific profession masculine.

In their study of one UK fire station, Thomas Thurnell-Read and Andrew Parker identify significant changes within the contemporary British fire service. Alongside the importance of physical proficiency Thurnell-Read and Parker show that the fire service personnel constructed specific identities based on a range of seemingly non-masculine values and qualities (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008, p. 133). Drawing on the work of Thurnell-Read and Parker, I note that masculine performances among firefighters do not always coincide with the activities of young viable bodies. Older and/or retired firefighters can (and do) indeed perform masculinity though they might fail to meet the physical requirements. Drawing on the work of Chetkovich, “veterans do not complain about those older men who are in poor physical condition” (Chetkovich, 1997, p. 160). The indication is that older firefighters have “paid their dues” (Chetkovich, p. 160), and by this professional identities based on other values and qualities than physical viability erupt.

**METHODS AND MATERIAL**

From the autumn of 2008 until the late spring of 2009, I observed the weekly gatherings of approximately ten retired firefighters in the town of Luleå, Sweden. All of my informants were men and I estimate that the average age was between seventy and seventy-five years. The meetings were held in the basement of the fire station of Luleå, where my informants repaired old trucks and fire engines and arranged previously wielded instruments on shelves. Thereafter these items were prepared for the computerized record keeping exercise. Although they were retired the permission to reside in the venue clearly contributed to fortifying their identity as firefighters, something that will be discussed below. For now, it is notable that sharing premises with the firefighters presently on duty fostered an organizational intimacy, which specifically served to reinforce the connection...
between the different generations of firefighters. The younger firefighters could for example show up in the basement of the fire station during the coffee breaks, have a cup of coffee, jest with the retired firefighters and then leave. Saying this, the spatial intimacy did not exclude dividing practices. Whereas my informants were directed to the so-called lower floor, their professional heirs occupied the upper floor of the fire station. Anders, one of the oldest members of the veterans continually expressed serious concerns regarding the diminishing spatial settings allotted to the veterans of the fire brigade. Restored fire engines, fire extinguishers, water pumps and oxygen tanks for example, had a large sentimental value and were carefully maintained by the retired firefighters. However, in as much as technologies such as these might serve as reminders of the primary objective of the profession of firefighting (Ericson, 2011, p. 80) they, at least in this particular case, required large storage spaces, and finding sufficient room for the increasing collection of artifacts was becoming somewhat problematic. The topic was frequently debated among my informants and often accompanied by feelings of uneasiness and discontent, possibly due to the fact that the veterans of the fire brigade experienced that they were squeezed out of the premises and forced to adapt to decisions made by the current representatives of the local rescue agency.

As the retired firefighters mainly inhabited the basement of the local fire station, they could conveniently reach the car park in which they pursued many of their undertakings. They also had access to some of the storages in the basement in which they accumulated and maintained the discarded tools and instruments. Most of my informants arrived at the fire station just before eight o’clock in the morning. After introductory greetings and the customary change of clothes they commenced every occasion with drinking coffee. At ten o’clock in the morning, the members interrupted the different activities to once again summit around the large table where they resumed their conversations. No formal agenda was set, which allowed the retired firefighters to come and leave as they wanted to, but I estimate that we spent three to four hours at the fire station on a weekly basis. A total number of thirteen visits were conducted, and after each appointment time was taken to write up the field notes and summarize the past experiences. Doing so helped to formulate subsequent questions and also make explicit recurring themes.

During the coffee breaks, I was welcome to a place around the table, and my informants took turns sharing with me anecdotes from their previous career. Most often, two or more stories run in parallel, which made it difficult to decipher the courses of events. The cheerful atmosphere did little to ease this dilemma. Stories were told and retold, more details were added and particular parts dismissed as my informants engaged in acts of commemoration. My position as an outsider, and more specifically as a young(er) female scholar, spurred detailed accounts: the assembled men took time to explain technical terms and they also engaged in extensive demonstrations of the old fire engines and the collection of equipment, something that for my part resulted in further inquiries. Offering me guided tours in the fire station, Anders repetitively expressed that he was pleased to see that I was interested in what the retired firefighters were doing, but I failed to distinguish whether his satisfaction was because of my position as young(er), a woman, a scholar or (more likely) a combination of the three.

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2 Pseudonyms have been used for all the informants to retain their privacy.
It is interesting that my informants, without much ado, validated my attendance at the weekly gatherings. This might be because I gained access to the field through Anders, a keenly engaged enthusiast within the association. His brief introduction of me as “a researcher from the university” seemed to legitimize the continued observations of the weekly gatherings. At the same time, it said little about the particular objective of my study. The relaxed, almost indifferent, approach regarding my scholarly background, my research interest, and the aim with the observations of the weekly gatherings, was equally evident during the remaining fieldwork, something that is also mentioned by Ericson in his study of three groups of shift workers in Sweden (Ericson, 2011, p. 67).

As my informants engaged in their respective undertakings they made extensive use of the spatial facilities of the basement. In order to get an overview of the different activities I got into the habit of circulating around in the basement. The endeavour was to establish a presence. At the same time, I sought not to disrupt the activities, an ambition that did not work out quite as I had planned. Similar to the coffee breaks, my informants seemed happy to engage in detailed lectures regarding their current endeavours whenever I approached them, subsequently abandoning their work at hand. While the conversations provided rich material, I many times missed the opportunity to observe the work of my informants.

In sum, the venture to establish a presence is preferably seen as a constant oscillation that regards not only the researcher as a professional being but also in terms of a gendered, classed and aged self. In this case, my position as a young(er) female scholar seemed to elicit cordial attempts to educate me: I was younger than all of my informants, and by this, it was presumed that my age equated inexperience; I passed as a woman, and by this, the assumption was that my technical skills were limited; and lastly, being a scholar (regardless of research orientation), my knowledge about the work of firefighters was presumed to be almost non-existent, at best bordering on curiosity. In a similar vein, while my willingness to listen and ask further questions was clearly approved of any active engagement from my side seemed to raise a slight uneasiness among my informants. For example, on one occasion I offered to help two of my informants: Leif and Bjarne, with the task of estimating the width of an axel of an old fire engine. The vehicle was difficult to access, and in order to reach it one had to crush past the clutter in the front. Grabbing the folding ruler as I muddled my way through old instruments and car parts I was met with surprise and, what to me appeared as a slight dismissal. “A hag who uses a folding ruler,” Leif exclaimed, and shook his head. Saying this, my position as a young(er) female scholar many times placed me at the mercy of my informants: I noted that this position came with certain expectations, such as passive observation and a willingness to listen rather than actively participate in what my informants were doing. The latter approach did not seem to suit their understanding of the position as a young(er) female scholar.

**Masculine Enactments, Housing Preferences and Instrumental Use**

I mentioned above that the retired firefighters refuted the residential areas as well as the new technologies and methods used by the members of the current fire brigade as a means of distinguishing their own more authentic identity as real old school firefighters. In doing so, they were able to endorse their own distinctiveness in relation to their professional heirs, something that brought into play, alternative
norms, standards and expectations of firefighting. With Thurnell-Read and Parker, my informants’ “unrestrained skepticism of newly implemented procedures and organisational restructuring highlighted the dynamic of change in the Service and the impact this was having on occupational identity” (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008, p. 132). Saying this, the indication is that a restructuring of the profession of firefighting emanates from organizational modernization and change.

Drawing on the works of Cynthia Cockburn (1983) and Gerd Lindgren (1992; 1999), the following section seeks to elaborate specifically on the crucial relationship between men, masculinity and technological skill, and how this triad is challenged, but also reinforced, in times of organizational change. In addition, it outlines the connection between technological skill and generational discrepancies among and between men active in male dominated working sites. The intention is to increase the understanding of the dynamic of change within the Swedish fire service.

Cynthia Cockburn’s pioneering study *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (1983) investigates the work of compositors in the newspaper industry in London, and more specifically how the profession of a compositor changed as a result of the arrival of computerized composition technology. From being an exclusively male profession, the assignments carried out using the computerized composition technology were coded feminine. This resulted in a surge in female employees as well as a coincidental de-skilling of the profession of a compositor. Cockburn concludes that new technology disrupts gender relations (Cockburn, p. 3), at the same time as she extends her analysis to concern, not only the segregation between men and women, but also the politics of masculinity: “[t]here are large-scale tensions and power struggles among and between men as men” (Cockburn, p. 132f, emphasis in original). My contention so far has been that male-dominated workplaces do not provide homogenous workforces, and Cockburn’s study shows that power struggles among and between the male compositors were evident in, for instance, the distinction between mental and manual work as well as the proximity to technology (Cockburn, p. 138). In this case, the distinction between mental and manual work was also bound up with the proximity to technology, something that added complexity to the relationship between the male compositors. Technology then, confers power to the groups of men who are close to it relative to those men who work with their bare hands (Cockburn, p. 138).

The investigation of Cockburn is central toward a critical understanding of technological shifts and organizational changes. As they bring forth gendered implications of technological development and organizational rearrangements they additionally correspond to a wider academic nomenclature. But while Cockburn engages in the enactments of class, masculinity and gender, she attends less to the concept of generation. Writing about the politics of masculinity within the printing industry, she does mention that historically, entrance to the profession of a printer took place through apprenticeship (Cockburn, 1983, p. 14ff). Cockburn sketches a meticulous account of the pre-capitalist crafts of printing and the relation between the apprentice and the master printer, but does not disclose further the generational discrepancies of the work of a compositor. Hence, while her study shows how the preservation of the system of apprenticeship works excluding toward women, the generational discrepancies between men are not outlined further. In order to understand how generational discrepancies influence the enactment of alternative norms, standards and expectations of firefighting, the works of Gerd Lindgren (1992; 1999) consequently prove useful. Lindgren studies clinical de-
partments, including surgical units, in Sweden. In doing so, she investigates the relations between the clinical staff: chief physicians, doctors, surgeons, nurses and nurse aids, in times of organizational change. Similar to Cockburn, Lindgren specifically attends to the ways in which gender and class is componential to the division of labor, but also subjected to change in times of organizational reformation. Put differently, the attempts to reform the system of medical care works in tandem with the reshuffling of the hierarchical structures of the clinical departments (Lindgren, 1999, p. 9), and these structures must be seen as at once gendered and classed.

Alongside the vertical division between the professional categories of medical staff such as doctors, nurses and nurse aids, Lindgren uses Connell’s notion of homosociality to understand the horizontal division between the members of the same professional category. In doing so, she specifically attends to surgeons. Although the profession of a surgeon is male dominated this does not exclude segregating practices between the members of this professional category. Instead, introduction of new methods such as keyhole surgery techniques cut through the homosocial community of male surgeons and propel generational discrepancies. One of Lindgren’s informants, a senior physician, refers to his younger colleagues in terms of “Nintendo surgeons” (Lindgren, 1999, p. 111). As the junior surgeons’ use of TV monitors and computational means outnumbers other tools such as sets of pliers and scalpels, the skills of the senior surgeons are equally rendered superfluous. Hence, at the same time as technological ability is a means of conveying masculinity, as noted by Thurnell-Read and Parker, it equally serves as a distinguishing factor between men.

In addition to the arrival of keyhole surgery techniques, Lindgren identifies a generational discrepancy when it comes to the doctors’ attitude toward clinical work respective research work. While the members of the older generation were raised to pursue clinical work, their professional heirs adopt a more research-oriented approach, a professional orientation that equally assumes a superior position in relation to the clinical work. These contentious circumstances give rise to a segregated working environment that is based, first and foremost on a generational discrepancy.

Similar to my informants’ housing preferences and instrumental use, the technological change at the surgical units as well as the doctors’ attitude toward clinical work respective research work are important factors to consider because they cut through, and add complexity to homosocial practices in which the men seek “enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex” (Lipman-Blumen, 1976, p. 16). Conforming to the works of Cockburn and Lindgren, the subsequent text offers an extended investigation of the ways in which housing preferences and instrumental use are componential to the professional identity of retired firefighters, and how these norms and ideals contribute to the subsequent exclusion of women. In doing so, the aim is to highlight the dynamic of change within the Swedish fire service.

Housing Relocations

Almost all of my informants had memories from the old fire station in Luleå, and as opposed to the contemporary fire station this building had served both as a workplace and as a site of residence for the, at that time, active workforce. However, as the rescue service in Luleå developed, a larger building was required. The contemporary fire station was inaugurated in 1965 and shortly thereafter, the old
fire station was demolished. Many of the retired firefighters recalled the positive consequences of living in the highly confined quarters of the old fire station, and equally contrasted the physical intimacy with the vast space of the new premises. In doing so it was clear that the move to the new spacious venues was not always approved of as my informants often stressed that it affected the team spirit negatively.

The staircase was one of the ways through which I could gain access to the basement and the meeting-place where the retired firefighters convened every week. Upon walking down the stairs I passed an exhibition case that boasted a 3D model of the old fire station. This model was very detailed and more than once I was cordially instructed by my informants to stop and contemplate the delicate work. On one occasion Anders pointed toward the two miniature benches that were located just outside the entrance, and told me that these seats were popular retreats among the members of the, at that time, active workforce. From this position the firefighters had a great view, not only of the south harbor of Luleå, but also of the town’s female inhabitants. “Since we did not have a TV we simply surveyed the passing women,” Anders laughed whereupon he smilingly conceded that the women did not always approve of this venture: “[they] were sensitive towards these benches, to that extent that they, rather than bypass us, took the long route around the fire station.” Overhearing our conversation, Torgny interposed and contended that he for his part believed that many women intentionally flaunted in front of the old fire station because of the surveying looks.

Saying this, the favorite past times of my informants were componential to the masculine performances of the members of the fire brigade. These activities also served to fortify the profession as a firefighter as inherently male. Inasmuch as the women who passed outside the old fire station were legitimized they were crudely dismissed as dwellers within this building. Consider for instance the written message on one of the signs: Stray dogs and women are prohibited in the sentry.

Equated to stray dogs (leashed dogs must admittedly have been legitimate), women—much approved of as objects to admire from a distance—were at the same time denied entry to the sentry, which in turn reinforced the connection not only between men and firefighting activities, but also between men and the spatial settings of the old fire station. The male bonding activities in which women were disqualified, not only as firefighters, but more importantly as women can thus be seen as a response to the outsiders, something that in turn amplified the team spirit.

Alongside their approval of the benches and in particular the view they provided, my informants often referred to, and demonstrated their support of the physical intimacy offered by the old fire station. Not only did the confined space enable them to quickly reach the trucks in case of fire alarms, the physical intimacy also enabled male bonding and served to fortify particular sites as exclusively male. Excluding practices were further evident as the profession of firefighting precluded marriage up until the early twentieth century. Possible families and spouses were seen as disturbing (nonetheless enticing) elements. Moving to the new fire station in 1956, the initial prescription that outlawed marriage had been disqualified; instead wives and children were welcome to join their working husbands in rooms adjacent to the fire station.

Noteworthy, the housing relocation that took place in 1965 propelled new routines, which jostled with, albeit not defeated the lines of gender segregation. Wives
and children were admittedly allowed to join their husbands in rooms adjacent to the fire station and were also invited to the annual Christmas parties as well as to audit the variety shows that were produced by the members of the fire brigade, but in general the fire station remained a male domain. Female dress codes and behavior, I was told, fell at odds with the spatial design of the fire station. My informants laughingly recalled how their spouses, dressed in gowns as they attended parties and variety shows, had to muddle their way through narrow staircases and construction sites in order to reach the designated venues.

Although contemporary arrangements of the rescue service in Luleå might seem liberated from excluding practices, at least in terms of written decrees, my observations of contemporary arrangements revealed a slightly different picture. For example, the few female co-workers who were employed at the local rescue agency all worked as receptionists. The spatial conditions for their assignments constituted at once a demarcated area: entering the fire station, the reception desk and the glass wall effectively confined the women out of the male activities. Whereas the men occupied the locker rooms, the garage halls, the workshops and the exercise yard, the women were stationed behind the desk of the entrance hall. As the receptionists managed administrative tasks, their spatial seclusion equally contributed to an understanding of where to direct questions concerning organizational matters. During one of the weekly gatherings in the beginning of December the retired firefighters discussed the upcoming annual Christmas party. Unsure of whom to talk to, and where to apply in order to partake in the event, Magnus, one of the youngest informants, received a recommendation to “ask the girls.” Contemplating the information given, not only did he know whom to turn to, the advice to ask the girls did in fact suggest where to go.

**Commitment**

Thus far I have showed that inhabitation of the premises of the old fire station and the common lockout points were componental to the masculine performances of my informants. I have also demonstrated how the move from the old fire station spurred differences as well as refurbishments of these performances. In addition, I note that devotion to the profession of firefighting was crucial to its masculine connotation. My informants repetitively stressed the importance to devote an excessive amount of time to the occupation, something that equally hinged on a physical presence. Whenever leaving the fire station, the members of the fire brigade had to inform their colleagues of where to be reached in case of emergencies. Availability during holidays and weekdays were no exceptions, and especially new recruits were enrolled during these occasions. Commencing his career as a substitute, Torgny for instance, recalled how he was obliged to work on Christmas Eve for seven years in a row. In doing so he nonetheless proved himself reliable, trustworthy and willing to commit to the occupation of firefighting. Asking Anders about the former amount of working hours during one week, he simply shrugged his shoulders: “how would I remember, it was a lot. Perhaps one hundred hours a week.” Anders’ unwitting attitude as well as his unwillingness to make an adequate estimation is interesting as it shows the importance, not only of an unconditional commitment, but also of taking up an indifferent approach toward the amount of working hours.

The willingness to work however interfered with other obligations. Families were simply expected to adjust their agenda to the motley schedule of the local fire
brigade. In addition to the physical presence the occupation of a firefighter required constant preparation and hastiness, which equally affected the life of my informants’ spouses. Torgny conveyed stories of how the wives used to follow in the wake of their men after the latter had received a fire alarm and subsequently were approaching the fire engines. Carrying extra clothes, food and hot beverages, women served as caring assistants.

The troubled border between work and home compelled certain ways of living, and asking the retired firefighters about the changing conditions in their profession, they often lamented the time in which firefighting activities eliminated all other engagements. The ubiquitous readiness and willingness to serve pervaded many of the discussions during the weekly gatherings, although not explicitly pinpointed as such. Rather, the firefighters’ alacrity seemed to be a naturalized trait, simply inhabited and enacted by my informants as well as the members of the current fire brigade, although the latter’s living conditions and additional engagements were assumed to somewhat hamper the occupational commitment. During the joint gatherings I listened to stories regarding interrupted coffee breaks, missed lunches and unprecedented work-shift extensions due to fire alarms, accidents and turnouts. All of these were mundane disturbances that required a committed workforce. As a consequence, inappropriate attendances were sorted out, which served to guarantee the skilful remnants. Simply, “men who [slacked off] disappeared […], they did not return [to the fire brigade in Luleå].” The harsh conditions that my informants depicted might not differ immensely from their professional heirs. Located in the lower floor of the fire station, the retired firefighters could still listen to the announced alarms, which called for the immediate attention of the current members of the workforce.

Inconvenient working hours, willingness to serve and an unconditional engagement in the fire service were not only pivotal means of professional identification, but salient elements in experiences of reciprocal trust. The retired firefighters frequently stressed the importance of reliance and solidarity within the local fire brigade. “The profession of fire fighting is about teamwork, it is about trusting each other. You do not work as a smoke diver without trusting your friend,” Anders asserted and was supported by the others. In order for the mutual reliance to develop, geographical closeness as well as extensive periods of time spent at the local rescue agency, whether on duty or not, were pivotal, but equally subjected to change as the new fire station was inaugurated. As expressed by Torgny, “[at the old fire station] we literary lived on top of each other.” Hence, practices of trust did not only emerge when working together. My informants jokingly pinpointed activities of eating, sleeping, and snoring together as just as important. “We have no secrets,” Anders contended, whereupon Magnus modified the former statement with a knowing smile: “the secrets are [always] revealed.” Saying this, my informants implicitly disclosed lack of privacy, but also the value of mutual respect.

Saying this, devotion and engagement had spatial implications in that occupation of certain sites such as the garage hall, the sentry and the changing room clearly demonstrated readiness and affluence whereas dwelling in other venues spurred contrary connotations. In any case, the new fire station did not constitute a coherent entity. Inhabitation of the lower floor and the upper floor fortified, as also stated previously, generational differences between the retired firefighters and their professional heirs. Moreover, competence seemed to be intimately linked to occupation of certain premises and equally questioned in conjunction to others.
The rest and relaxation (R & R) room for instance, gave rise to vehement discussions among my informants. Magnus claimed this particular space to be used by the workers on-call duty: they did not actually work, he explained, but were available in case of emergencies. Engaged in another discussion, Anders overheard Magnus’s comment whereupon he upheld the room to in fact be used for the commanders of the fire brigade rather than for respite. “There has never been a rest and relaxation room in this building,” he asserted. Magnus replied that surely there had been two rooms in one of the corridors in the new fire station, and that at least one of them was used as an “R & R” room. “I have never sat down there, not during the working hours in any case,” Anders concluded. Hence, the repudiation toward this specific space is equally a dismissal of laziness and unwillingness to work. Taking pride in claiming a foreign association with the “R & R” room, Anders implicitly conveyed himself, as opposed to any possible residents in the R & R room, as a devoted firefighter.

**Technological Revisions**

So far I have demonstrated how adequate occupation of the fire station and its adjacent settings as well as unconditional devotion to the job of a firefighter comprised corner stones in the masculine values and ideals that pervaded the fire service in Luleå. Taking posture from these demonstrations, the following text shows, not only how the use of technologies contributed to these processes, but also how technological revisions impinged on the masculine connotations of the profession of firefighting. For instance, the introduction and deployment of hydraulic drive systems clearly affected the ways in which the ladders were maneuvered. Not only did this hydraulic drive system assume the most physically demanding exercises, it also allowed for remote operations. My informants recalled how they, in the beginning of their career, had to crank up the ladders manually or alternatively harness horses to assist them, something that stood in stark contrast to the hydraulic drive system of the contemporary ladders, and more specifically the turntable ladder truck onto which the ladders were mounted. Although the ladders continuously enabled access to burning buildings the hydraulic drive system spurred alternative exercises, something that brought forth generational discrepancies between the retired firefighters and their occupational heirs.

Elsewhere I have discussed how technological developments did not only include the introduction of new features, but concerned material alterations as well (Olofsson, 2011, p. 17). In this case, the transition from wood to light-alloy metal clearly altered the operation of the ladders. Whereas four men previously were required in order to carry a wooden ladder that measured twelve metres, transportation and rising of the contemporary ladders were, as mentioned above, facilitated by hydraulic steering and also simplified, much due to the reduction in weight. As a result, one person could easily maneuver any of the spare ladders manually.

Other than the reduction in weight, the ladders that were made of light-alloy metal did not catch fire, something that radically improved the number of safe achievements. My informants recalled the impending risks that accompanied the previous arrangements. Similar to contemporary procedures the wooden ladders were most often erected against the facades of the burning buildings, and in order to facilitate safe descents they were also secured with ropes. But due to the immense heat the ropes easily went off, which turned the use of the wooden ladders
into hazardous enterprises. As the escape route was cut off the imprisoned people had to find alternative ways. Anders told me about one of these occasions: the lack of escape routes forced four people on the upper floor of a building to let themselves down using sheets that were tied together.

Saying this, the facilitative functions of contemporary technologies were not always approved of. Inasmuch as the hydraulic steering facilitated safe achievements, its astuteness served to infantilize the members of the contemporary workforce. As shown:

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, does not find the instructions amusing. Instead, he repetitively shakes his head: “the firefighters 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.” (Olofsson, 2011, p. 17)

Hence, routines and standards are not simply passed on from one generation to another, but subjected to continuous modifications. As technological revisions altered the routines and standards of the fire service in Luleå, the contemporary workforce was rendered unqualified. Contemplating Anders’ resignation, the inability to manually crank up a ladder seemed to affect, not only this particular act, but also firefighting activities in general. Little or no attention was directed to the skills that were required in order to operate the hydraulic-driven ladders on the turntable ladder truck. Instead, my informants endorsed the ability to manually crank up the ladders and in turn, the possession of a strong and competent body. But while “the ability to meet the physical challenges of particular types of work is central to the construction of certain occupational identities” (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008, p. 128) I also noted an implicit approval of teamwork among my informants as yet another measure of the masculine prowess within the fire service. As opposed to the contemporary hydraulic maneuver of ladders, previous erection of ladders was by necessity a joint undertaking, something that required cooperative efforts and a synchronized workforce. Drawing on my informants’ historical accounts it is clear that physical strength, but also a collective consciousness were componential to what it meant to be a real firefighter. To manoeuvre the ladders alone and/or assisted by hydraulic steering called to question the professional skills of the contemporary workforce and in turn their aptness as firefighters, something that revealed generational discrepancies between the retired firefighters and their professional heirs.

**Concluding Remarks**

Distinguishing more multifaceted means of identification within the fire service, this article has sought to dissect the iconic image of the male firefighter. As such, it provides “further insight into the complexities of identity construction for male firefighters” (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008, p. 129). I have showed that the masculine enactments among the retired firefighters in Luleå were part and parcel of
housing preferences and instrumental use, and these factors also worked in tandem with generational differences. In this case, the masculine enactments of my informants transcended many of the traditional expectations of firefighters, something that forged additional values and ideals.

Spector-Mersel notes that “[t]he absence of cultural guidelines for being both a “true” man and an aging person constitutes the context within which contemporary older men struggle to build acceptable identities” (Spector-Mersel, 2006, 68). In agreement with Spector-Mersel, this article has provided empirical examples of some of the ways in which these struggles come about. Distancing themselves from the residential areas and the instrumental management of their professional heirs, the veterans of the fire brigade were able to retain their status, despite the fact that they were no longer active as firefighters. At the same time, the diminishing spatial settings allotted to my informants propelled feelings of uneasiness and discontent. While the retired firefighters were directed to the so-called lower floor, their professional heirs occupied the upper floor of the fire station. My informants’ endeavor to build acceptable identities then, was clearly bound up with the allocated space. In a similar vein, their dismissal of contemporary technologies allowed my informants to distinguish their own more authentic identity as real old school firefighters. The differences in techniques then, called into question the professional skills of the contemporary workforce and in turn their aptness as firefighters.

In sum, exploring the masculine enactments of the retired firefighters, this article has sought to highlight the dynamic of change within the fire service. In doing so, the intention has been to provide a deeper understanding of the temporary constructions of masculine values and ideals that pervade this particular organization.

REFERENCES


