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The Psychology of "Othering" and the Fears of Feminizing the Fire Services Through Gender Inclusiveness

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF “OTHERING” AND THE FEARS OF FEMINIZING THE FIRE SERVICE THROUGH GENDER INCLUSIVENESS

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Editor's Note: In searching for answers for the way things are – you sometimes have to look at things from a different viewpoint. iWomen thought that Dr. Broome has an interesting perspective as he does consider whether we contribute to our (all women in the fire service) own obstacles by not promoting.

The hiring and promotional processes of the fire service and other emergency response groups are inherently based on exclusion. Generally and at least in the beginning stages of selecting candidates for hire or promotion, the objectives of application, resume, written exam, physical tests, etc. are designed to exclude those not meeting a minimum standard. All groups constitute themselves through a concept some social scientists call “othering.” Othering is basically exclusion criteria based on undesirable differences rather than features or characteristics of sameness. What is pertinent is what differences matter, why they matter, and how much so. For example, when we are establishing interpersonal relationships, one might say, “he’s not my type.” This is to say, there is some “difference” or set of differences that is a deal-breaker for pursuing a relationship with that person. In fact, the popular sit-com Seinfeld made much of its comedic content based on conversations about such excluding deal-breakers for break ups or other social rejections (i.e., close-talkers, women with man hands, nose pickers, etc.) (Seinfeld & David, 1990). In the emergency services, there are formal and informal ways in which we “other” people in order to continually define ourselves as a group.

Lived-World of Firemen

Traditionally, police and fire services were established as men’s work and have remained male dominated in power and numbers to this day. Once explicitly and today more implicitly, being a woman was a “difference” that was and is to varying degrees an “othering criterion.” Progress has been made and many women have

Continued on Page 8
The Psychology of Othering –Continued from Front Page

worked very hard to increase the numbers and power of women in the emergency services. However, Chetkovich (1997) says that the gender barrier is formidable for women because they never really can be “one of the guys.” It seems by her observation that this is really not about being included because one is male, but that one is excluded (at least from some things) based on being non-male. When it comes to dangerous or heavy manual labor, men have typically had this as theirs in the divisions of labor while women nurtured children and focused on domestic tasks (Serneau, 2005).

Like many physical challenges humans had in the primitive world, our development and use of technology is usually ahead of our social comportments to its uses. Despite our advanced technology in the emergency services, the “ideal type” (in the Platonic sense) or “exemplar” of big brawny firemen with huge mustaches still lingers today. This image still has an unconscious psychological effect on people inside the fire service as well as the communities we serve. Such a “can-do” rugged individual who can overcome all obstacles to preserve life is exactly what people inside the fire service as well as the communities we serve. The idea is, “who will be my hero and rescue me, if something goes wrong?” Psychological issues.

Psychological Meanings and Symbols
According to Becker (1997), that which we regard as heroic, whether persons or acts, essentially transcend life’s limitations or mortal threats, even if it is in a symbolic way. The human mind is unique in its use of symbols that represent entire ideas and things. Our minds are timeless and eternal in the sense that we can imagine ourselves and things in other places and times than what is immediately present to us. Language and images are our primary systems of symbols and the meanings that we associate to them are as real as the flesh on our bones, metaphorically speaking. Consequently, our hopes, dreams and fears are often as meaningful to us as our actual conditions and we have emotional and psychological responses to them when we are reflecting upon them. What is important here is that we understand that our personal experiences are constituted by meanings (Giorgi, 2009). These personal meanings may or may not correlate with our actual situation. But for the human person, these personal meanings “are” our realities until a paradigm shift through new experiences occurs. Chetkovich (1997) found that there are a number of male firefighters who largely associate their occupational identity to their sense of gender. For them, a woman firefighter’s mere presence can “call into question” their sense of maleness. It is the personal meaning they attach to the career that comes under “attack.”

Moreover, when one’s self-concept comes “under fire,” it is a lived-experience that feels much like a physical attack, except it is regarded by the person as an ontological issue rather than a mere psychological one. It becomes a symbolic death because the fittedness between self-and-world is conceptually disjuncted which is experienced as a loss of self and loss of world (May, 1998). Therefore, an extreme psychological motivation to protect this self-in-the-world relation becomes salient and “vital” for the experiencer.

Calling into Question the Exclusion Criteria
For women in the fire service, there are no easy answers but the progress made thus far is promising. Much of the change that has occurred and must continue is the re-examining of the criteria for one to become a firefighter, to become an officer, and to become a chief. How often do male firefighters qualify their acceptance of women in the fire service with, “...if she can do the job.” What does this really mean, and how is this qualification necessitated when asked about women? Are we talking about the NFPA 1001 Standard, or are we talking about “hacking the rugged blue-collar social milieu?” Some of this comes from the existential anxiety associated with firefighter rescue. The idea is, “who will be my hero and rescue me, if something goes wrong?” Psychologically, this is a “real” concern, but the data clearly shows that LODDs are largely cardiac events and others can be command and communications errors (United States Fire Administration [USFA], 2012). That means physical fitness rather than physical prowess is a salient issue of which has been continually blocked as an exclusion criterion for working as a firefighter. Moreover, the command and communications errors have nothing to do with masculinity and more to do with cognitive and affective issues.
Cooperation Versus Conquering
A few strategies for change can be accomplished but it takes a collective effort. First we need to call into question our “othering” motivations. Being proud to be a man and proud to be a firefighter are mutually exclusive categories in kind and function. Once this ideological step is made, then the male firefighter can work as a diplomat for women in the fire service grounded in this foundation. We must also change the story from one grounded in conflict theory dialectics (haves and have-nots) to one that utilizes participatory and cooperative ways of communicating the issues. There will be the hold-outs that are motivated to preserve their androcentric paradigms about police officers and firefighters. It is not up to any of us to prove them wrong or convince them. This is like trying to force a religious conversion. It is really not about equality of numbers as the fear of quotas claims the gender issues are about. It is really about equity over sameness and treating all firefighters with dignity and respect. I suggest we do not vilify those who are androcentric, but rather tolerate that view to a reasonable degree to foster critical dialogues about its presuppositions. Moreover, we clearly need to challenge the notion that an inclusive emergency services community is a “sissy-fide” oremasculated one.

Conclusion
“Diversity cannot be just a line in a mission statement or a plaque on the wall” (N. Granger Jr., Personal Contact, March 29, 2012). We must recognize that firefighting is changing through technology, education, and societal needs. Women who have or are hesitating to promote or participate in things they would like to do in the emergency services need diplomats to support them. But they might also consider how they might be “othering” themselves out of some important possibilities. If she does not see herself in the captain’s seat or at the chief’s desk, what are her exclusion criteria that she has accepted and why does it self-apply? One of the important possibilities that she may be cutting short is the opportunity for her peers to be led by a really fantastic leader – her.

References:

WORKSITE EXERCISE STUDY
Continued from Pg 3
Practical Applications:
The findings of this study suggest that performing an efficient and practical exercise program while on-duty can lead to improvements in back and core muscular endurance in firefighters. This exercise program may ultimately prove to be beneficial for improving physical performance and reducing risk for low back pain and injury in firefighters. However, further research is needed to assess the long-term benefits of this exercise program in firefighters and its ability to be implemented on a wide-scale throughout fire service. Fortcoming publications in scientific journals will provide additional details on the study methods and findings.

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