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Negotiating adversity with humour: A case study of wildland firefighter women

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Abstract

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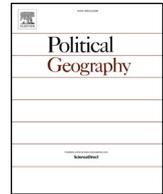
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines humour as an emergent theme within a long-term study of the gendered terrain of wildfire management. It analyses a set of semi-structured interviews that the study utilised to facilitate in-depth conversations with firefighter women about everyday gender relations, politics and practices within the New South Wales National Parks and Wildfire Service, Australia. The narrative analysis unpacks the dual function of humour as an explanatory tool during interviews, and as an everyday practice to negotiate adversity within the patriarchal stronghold of wildland firefighting. The study shows: a) how humour masks widespread occurrences of gender discrimination, and b) that the use of humour to negotiate gendered relations in everyday practices, and to describe embodied gendered identities, makes a difference for firefighter women's experiences of normative workplace culture. The paper concludes that humour enables flexibility and personal disclosure, which opens up strategies for managing, upholding, resisting, and living within and against asymmetric gendered power relations.

Introduction

What can humour do to unsettle privilege, invert established hierarchies, and challenge the taken-for-granted? Dodds and Kirby (2013, p. 49) pose this thought-provoking question as a challenge to the otherwise socially powerful ways that humour can be boundary heightening and uphold hegemonic power relations. It is an important question to ask, as the paradoxical nature of humour enables laughter and 'unlaughter' (as in not laughing when it might be expected (Billig, 2005)) to play a formative role in the learning and teaching processes that underpin social discipline.

Cultural understandings of humour build on three key philosophical theories: laughter as power (or domination) in superiority theory, the shock or surprise element of humour underpinning incongruity theory, and the psychological and relationship (dis)enabling effects emphasised in relief theory (for a comprehensive review of these theories see Ridanpaa (2014), Dodds and Kirby (2013), Billig (2005)). The scrutiny these three theories have received for centuries highlights three paradoxes that underpin the social and disciplinary functions of humour: i) humour is both universal and particular in that all societies display humour but not all people find the same things funny; ii) humour is social and anti-social in that it can both forge social bonds and exclude via mockery; and iii) humour is simultaneously mysterious and understandable (Billig, 2005, p. 176). In this way, "Beyond revealing

cultural processes, humour has subversive potential in that it can weaken the dominant ideology by meticulously representing its absurdities and, in so doing, exposing them to ridicule" (Gillooly, 1991 in Downe, 1999, p. 68). Humour can – for better or for worse – change the course of a conversation, shift expectations and relationships, and laughter can coincide with the laughter of others even though it may not correspond with the original purpose, object or effect of that laughter (Macpherson, 2008).

This paper uses cultural understandings of the socially powerful effects of humour to examine how wildland firefighter women in Australia use humour as an explanatory tool during interviews, and as an everyday practice to negotiate adversity within the continuous patriarchal stronghold of wildland firefighting. It draws on interviews from a long-term research project into gendered dimensions of living and working with wildfire (Eriksen, 2014), within which humour was an emergent theme. The paper positions humour as both an effective and affective way to express how gender arrangements within firefighting agencies are reproduced socially (not biologically) via powerful organisational structures that shape individual and collective action (Connell, 2008). Specifically, it examines how humour is used to negotiate, challenge or uphold male privilege and masculine norms masked by patriarchy within wildland firefighting (Desmond, 2007; Eriksen, 2014; Pacholok, 2013), and disaster management more broadly (Childs, Morris, & Ingham, 2004; Enarson & Pease, 2016).

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A growing body of work examining metropolitan fire departments (Baigent, 2016; Childs, 2006; Ericson & Mellström, 2016; Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008; Wright, 2008), wildfire management (Desmond, 2007; Enarson, 1984; Eriksen, 2014; Pacholok, 2009; Reimer, 2017) and volunteer firefighters (Ainsworth, Batty, & Burchielli, 2014; Yarnal, Dowler, & Hutchinson, 2004) alike, argues that the privileged subject of the firefighter is cast by discourses of predominantly white masculinities, which position men on the frontlines of fire as heroic, physically strong, and rational. The associated everyday narrative and performance of a place-based firefighting masculinity trade on ageism, sexism and homophobia, which disputes the worth of women and other types of male firefighters (Eriksen & Waitt, 2016; Eriksen, Waitt, & Wilkinson, 2016). It can also result in contesting masculinities between structural and wildland firefighters, which manifests as, for example, crude and demeaning jokes about ‘the other’ (Pacholok, 2013).

Only three studies of the reviewed firefighting literature explicitly analyse the role of humour in the everyday working lives of firefighters, and all focused on male structural firefighters. Humour is shown to be one of several coping responses to stress employed by these male firefighters during on-duty incidents (Young, Partington, Wetherell, St Clair Gibson, & Partington, 2014). It is a conscious desensitising coping strategy associated with hardiness and the ability to stay focused and positive (Moran & Colless, 1995). In particular, Thurnell-Read and Parker (2008) found humour to be a medium through which hegemonic masculine ideals could be both articulated and policed, and certain masculine values reinforced and protected.

This paper extends existing knowledge by focusing on wildland firefighter women in the context of humour, patriarchy, gender discrimination, embodied identities, and everyday gendered relations in the workplace. It thus extends the growth in research focusing on workplace humour in the context of gender-, ethnic- and sexual identity in male-dominated professions. Such studies demonstrate that humour can play a role in: creating cultural cohesion and negotiating ethnic and racial tensions around migrants in the construction industry (Wise, 2016), troubling gendered workplace norms and managing emotions, for example, by dissociating from feelings of distress through laughter (Gayadeen & Phillips, 2016; Holmes & Schnurr, 2005; Rowe & Regehr, 2010), and in leadership through its ability to mediate, reinforce and overcome social boundaries (Nixon & Chandler, 2011; Wood, Beckmann, & Rossiter, 2011). However, these studies also demonstrate how humour can uphold white male heterosexual privilege by, for example, belittling or excluding co-workers on the grounds of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, as in the case of female civil engineers working in the construction industry (Watts, 2007).

In this paper, I unpack the flexible qualities of humour, laughter and unlaughter to simultaneously include and exclude. The study also reveals how humour facilitates personal disclosure. The study thus extends recent feminist geopolitical research, which opens up ways of being and knowing that are embodied and emotive (rather than objectively removed). Such research challenges dominant discursive regulatory fictions that pretend men do not have a gender, white people do not have a race, and heterosexual people do not have a sexuality, and are characterised by a male-focused and masculinist ways of thinking and writing (Brickell, 2012; Dixon & Jones, 2015; Dowler & Sharp, 2001). By deconstructing taken for granted truths, “feminist geopolitics is foremost about ‘reconstructing’ new and more just worlds ... that are inclusive of all bodies but particularly those populations on the margins, especially, but not limited to women” (Clark, 2017, p. 2). My work engages with the embodied tension in which feminist scholarship dwells, which challenges the structural and cultural factors that disregard women’s bodies and limit women’s voices.

The following sections show how humour is used to negotiate the socially defined hegemonic masculinity that is built in to the concept of fire management or organisational rationality without even being named as gender (Connell, 2008; Eriksen, 2014). To contextualise the study, I first provide an outline of the research methodology. I then

demonstrate how firefighter women negotiate adversity with humour in the context of patriarchy and gender discrimination, gendered relations in everyday practices, and embodied gendered identities. This reveals how flexibility and personal disclosure together open up strategies for managing, upholding, resisting, and living within and against the rigid structures and asymmetric power relations that are symbolic of patriarchal institutions, such as fire services.

Methodology

The paper focuses on the experiences and use of humour in interviews and within interview narratives. Specifically, it considers New South Wales (NSW) National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) employees’ use of verbal, embodied and affective devices typically associated with humour (laughter, joking, sarcasm) when discussing and reflecting upon their experiences as wildland firefighters. It is important to note that humour was not the primary focus of the study; rather it emerged as a noticeable theme during analysis. Furthermore, while interviews were conducted with both women and men, this paper focuses explicitly on women’s experiences to heed the feminist call (discussed above) to pay attention to women’s voices and bodies (see Eriksen and Waitt (2016) for a related analysis of the use of humour by men in the broader context of firefighting masculinity).

The NPWS manages more than 850 national parks and reserves in NSW, covering more than 7 million hectares of land. As part of its charter, the NPWS is responsible for managing fire on all land it controls. During July–August 2011 and August 2013, I interviewed 19 female and eight male NPWS employees who, at the time, performed wildland firefighting duties as an essential part of their everyday roles as regional officers, project managers, rangers, field officers, and administrative personnel. Roles and responsibilities during firefighting operations differ from everyday operational structures and are instead determined by firefighter training and experience, which enables all employees to perform a range of firefighting tasks regards of everyday positions.

Participants ranged in age from late 20s to late 50s. Two participants identified as Aboriginal Australians and 25 as Caucasian. The length of service of most participants ranged from 8 to 18 years, while one participant was a recent recruit and three had been in the service for more than 25 years. All participants volunteered to participate after the NSW NPWS Head Office extended invitations via e-mail. To ease any potential discomfort or concern relating to discussing workplace issues or emotionally charged stories, I conducted all interviews in person at a location of the participants’ choosing. Participants included employees with and without gender equity concerns in their workplace.

The interview schedule explored participants’ gendered sense of self through their workplace-based practices and conversations. To explore changes in gender politics and policies in the workplace, I structured the interviews around two themes: i) why participants chose a career in wildland firefighting, and ii) how participants negotiate everyday gender relations, traditions and identities. My attributes as a female academic with national and international wildfire research experience, a rural upbringing, and basic firefighting training, may have influenced the particular stories told by participants depending on shared knowledge, cultural differences, and trust. I adopted a semi-structured interview approach, which sought to encourage and enable conversations that explore in-depth topics of concern to participants and themes that emerged during the discussion. This methodological approach acknowledges that, “Storytelling interprets the world and experience in it. Narratives are storied ways of knowing and communicating [that] do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit [but] require interpretation when used as data” (Riessman, 2006, p. 186). I concede that there could be multiple interpretations of the interview narratives. Likewise, the 27 participants are not a representative sample of all employees of the NPWS. Rather, the study upholds the principles of qualitative research, which acknowledges that as part of dynamic

interviews, participants and researchers co-construct one of a number of possible perceived versions of the lived experience and practices through a process of anecdotes, synthesis of events, and recall of stories.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo v.11, the transcripts were systematically coded using both a priori themes, such as training and task delegation, and emerging themes, such as self-confidence, sexism and humour (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Because the research did not include observations of humour unfolding in situ in the workplace but relied on participants' descriptions and experiences, an awareness of the difference between the production and consumption of humour informed the data analysis.

Specific references to jokes, humour and laughter were identified in participants' stories of 'doing' gender in wildland firefighting. This includes examples where 'humorous' anecdotes were told but were not accompanied by laughter, as well as when participants' recounted being the victim of distasteful jokes. Humour was also identified through auditory clues such as laughter and the speakers' tone of voice. When analysing the interview audio and transcripts, close attention was paid to the ways humour or laughter were present or absent in the narratives, and the narration thereof, and my interpretation of what purposes this might serve. This includes an awareness that laughter may at times have no discernible reason "being simply a muscular reflex with no clear conscious cause" (Macpherson, 2008, p. 1084), or it may be a response to the developing relationship of trust between interviewer and interviewee (Gouin, 2004). I therefore paid attention to humour derived from interactions between the interviewer and interviewee versus the humour described by participants with regards to their everyday gendered interactions and identities on the fireline, in the workplace, and at home. This analysis produced rich insight into laughter and humour as an everyday "bodily act in which the affectual nature of social structures and the discursive nature of human emotions become revealed and established simultaneously" (Ridanpaa, 2014, p. 706).

Negotiating adversity with humour

Negotiating patriarchy and gender discrimination

The firefighting uniform provides a case of an essential work item that demonstrates the fine line between latent and blatant gender discrimination in many of the stories told during the interviews. Humour and laughter play a central role in how women (and men) variously perform, react to, and negotiate discriminatory acts. One female firefighter, for example, used wry humour as a tool to process the frustration felt towards unequal working conditions created and maintained by men in the head office, who exclude women by deprioritising the need to provide uniforms that fit female firefighters:

My uniform is all right but I'm relatively kind of tall and, you know, more boy like than some of these women that have bigger hips. But they've equally got a problem with men who have massive potbellies, there's quite a lot actually in National Parks like that. So I was saying to Sarah,¹ "Well, if they could accommodate the belly that would also work for pregnant women if they wanted", because they're pretty much, these guys, like four or five months pregnant [laughter]. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2013)

This example is one of many female firefighters told of how they share private jokes with each other about men to vent their frustration, and to foster solidarity and social cohesion with fellow women, in an effort to uphold their ongoing struggles to address important occupational health and safety issues. The safety implications of having to

fight fires in ill-fitting uniforms, which one participant described as "the size of a small tent", are self-evident. Not prioritising the cut and available sizes of uniforms for women is an example of how the needs of women are often viewed as "special needs" and "problematic additions to the universalised needs of men", rather than a right in an equal opportunity workplace (Fordham, 2004, p. 178; see also; Eriksen, 2014). The type of available uniforms (in addition to sizes) is also important as it impacts on female firefighters' overall sense of workplace wellbeing. Not having an appropriate uniform can lead to other forms of "just joking" types of harassment by men, when women go about everyday practices, such as urinating while out on the fireline, as the following quote illustrates:

When I first started firefighting we had uniforms—overalls—and I don't know how many times the helicopter circled me doing a pee in the bush because it was 'funny', you know? You'd learn not to look up. You'd leave your helmet on and look down because then they didn't know who it was, other than it was a girl. The agency addressed that; they actually went, "We need to give them pants" and when the uniforms came out they said, "females, as a priority, get pants" because they had to stage it over a few years. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2013)

The use of humour to harass, e.g. men having a laugh at the expense of women as a consequence of impractical uniforms, demonstrates the ways that male discipline and practice in traditional male-dominated environments, such as firefighting, continues to manifest in discriminatory behaviour unless specific strategies for managing gendered power relations are implemented at an institutional level. In this particular case, the gradual introduction of two-piece uniforms in female sizes was a concerted effort by the organisation to unsettle discriminating patriarchal workplace practices in tandem with a range of other measures, such as banning alienating male practices like pornographic magazines in fire trucks and nude calendars on warehouse and office walls, and the advertisement of female-identified positions (Eriksen et al., 2016). Yet because the cultural change resulting from such structural changes is often frustratingly slow and a seemingly constant work in progress, flexibility is important both of gendered power relations and of the strategies for managing, upholding, resisting, and living within and against these relations. Humour enables and assists flexibility by virtue of its own flexible functions (as described in the introduction).

Part of what humour and laughter accomplish in both the act of narrating, and the acts described within the above quotes, is the surfacing and exposure of inconsistencies, paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions between workplace culture and organisational policies (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). It thus provides a useful analytical lens for understanding the challenges, and the latent and blatant discriminatory behaviours and attitudes, many women face when striving to gain recognition for their firefighting competencies. As explored further below, it shows how everyday behavioural norms can essentialise particular traits (e.g., joking culture) as being central to male identity without questioning the hostility and damaging effects this may have on women, and how women create humorous spaces to negotiate the feeling of being discriminated against.

During interviews I encountered narratives of the use of humour and teasing by male firefighters as a way of 'othering' female colleagues to confer outsider status – a behavioural trait also observed in the construction industry (Watts, 2007). In a particularly demeaning case, male firefighters drew on the symbolic power of the firefighter uniform and sexually explicit imagery to belittle and provoke a female colleague:

I was the Planning Officer with the Rural Fire Service and I was one of four professional women in the service at that time and I knew these men. I opened the door, I was there to help them do planning, and they had this big, you know, those big posters of a woman, big breasty woman with a fireman's hat on, holding a hose. Big breasts tumbling out of a bikini top

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

and she had fire boots and little bikini pants on and they had put a big sign over it saying, “Welcome to our new Planning Officer”. They were standing on either side of this poster going, “hah, hah, hah” giggling at me like two little schoolboys. I looked at them and I thought, oh I either acknowledge this and say to them “That’s unacceptable”, or I just ignore it. I ignored it. I just walked past them and said, “Come on, let’s have a cup of tea”. All I felt like doing was to go over to the poster and rip it up and say to them, “You immature imbeciles”. (Female Ranger, August 2011)

This example demonstrates both how humour can assist exclusionary behaviour and how humour is part of a broader pattern of gender discrimination – a known problem in the wildland firefighting profession (AFE, 2016). Studies of male-dominated industries (Kimmel, 2010; Reimer, 2017; Watts, 2007) link this type of behaviour with fear of rejection: “Some men, feeling threatened by the increased (though still minority) participation of women in the industry, use humour to resist engaging with women on a professional level to ensure that men continue to benefit from the ‘patriarchal dividend’” (Watts, 2007, p. 263). ‘Patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 2005) refers to the benefits men get from the everyday normative subordination of both women and men who do not live up to the ideals of the symbolic imagery of physically strong, heterosexual, outdoorsy men as *real* firefighters (Eriksen & Waitt, 2016). While insulting, women’s reaction to such ‘humour’ can abate the intent of the insult to uphold patriarchy – at times through counter laughter or, in the above case, through unlaughter. Like women in the construction industry, female firefighters responded to “this kind of humour, which personally denies them professional credibility” (Watts, 2007, p. 263) with emotions that ranged from indifference to anger. In the above quote, the refusal to accommodate the intended insult, gave this female firefighter an opportunity to take the moral high ground, and, as discussed separately by another participant, outperform the men in question by “becoming more competent than them”. It thus provided an opportunity to use humour as a site to resist and refuse patriarchal belittling and discriminating behaviour.

The case of the essential firefighting uniform highlights how in addition to the outright discrimination experienced in the example of the insinuating sexualised poster, it is the habituated patriarchal practices of many male colleagues – often in the guise of practical jokes – which continually remind women how their gender is a source of discrimination. The flexible ways firefighter women diminish this source of discrimination through humour is explored further below in the context of how gendered relations are negotiated as part of everyday practices.

Negotiating gendered relations in everyday practices

During the interviews, female firefighters described how they draw on the ‘affiliative qualities’ of humour (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) as a means to fit in, in an attempt to break down patriarchal boundaries, and to dissolve tension by building group cohesion, bonding and trust with male colleagues.

Being honest about your own limitations I think is really important and the ability to laugh at yourself and laugh at the silly things that you do. I often joke that, you know, I don’t want to touch something because I’ll get dirty fingers. That tends to, I mean, I do a lot of reverse sexism with the boys because I’ve gone through the whole system with them and it’s just a way of diffusing tension. So I joke a fair bit like that. (Female Ranger, August 2011)

Over time, as this female firefighter has “gone through the whole system” predominantly with men, sarcastic humour has proven effective in diffusing tension. However, while playing on conventional ideas of a firefighting masculinity fashioned by grits and guts might assist female firefighters to fit into a traditionally male work environment, the use of sarcastic or reverse sexism easily also feeds biological

reductionism, which upholds patriarchy (Eriksen & Waitt, 2016). Studies have shown how female firefighters known to appropriate models of masculinity in their leadership style (e.g., by being pushy, abrupt and assertive), or who train exclusively for strength to counter perceived weakness of female bodies, are complicit with the hegemonic masculinity of the organisational culture (Eriksen et al., 2016; Reimer, 2017). The unintentional side effect of the humorous use of reverse sexism can reproduce and reify gendered power hierarchies, which position women as both physically weaker and more emotional than men.

While humour does not always provide a soluble way to manage patriarchy, its flexibility does function as an effective tool for living within and against gendered power relations. As the following quote as well as the quote about potbellies demonstrate, humour is used effectively by firefighter women to test relationships and negotiate gendered tensions. When laughing together with other women, it can simultaneously create a sense of solidarity and safety while performing everyday practices. In the quote below, a female ranger reflects on a rare occasion when she was able to work with another woman on the fireline. When interrogating the nature of their laughter that day, she became aware of her own gendered identity and the self-discipline she uses in an attempt to fit in with a dominant firefighting masculinity that positions femininity as weaker than masculinity (see also Eriksen et al., 2016; Pacholok, 2013):

[Interviewer] You were saying the other day you had the opportunity to actually talk to Sophie when you were out there. Is it different when there’s another woman around?

[Female Ranger] Yes and no ‘cos [sic] I was also embarrassed, ‘cos we giggled a bit and she made me kind of lose my guard. Then I was trying to regroup and, you know, get my – yeah I didn’t want to stand out as being the female or the giggly friends. I was being kind of sarcastic about it. I was going “Go away Sophie”. She’s a lot more relaxed as she’s been fighting fires for a long time with males and so I was busy trying to do my stuff. It would put me off having other females there I think, ‘cos it would be different. [Interviewer] What, you would be more relaxed? [Female Ranger] Yeah and let down [my guard] and not concentrate as much and yeah, it would be worse for my firefighting abilities, yep. ‘Cos the whole thing is quite humorous, you know, all these male egos and all this stuff happening, it can be quite funny, so you tend to laugh. Laughing’s not good all the time if you’re trying to be serious. Of course when the fire gets serious you don’t do all that stuff, so just when you’re standing around waiting for things to happen. [Interviewer] What specifically do you think it is you do – what does the guard consist of? [Female Ranger] Not smiling so much and not laughing, you know, trying to be a bit more serious and really listen when they’re talking about things and how to do things. (Female Ranger, August 2011)

Self-surveillance in the form of ‘appropriate’ behaviour and identity, which clearly aligns with the performance of a firefighting masculinity, was a noticeable trait among the female firefighters in this study. In the above quote, the female ranger portrays “giggling” as an undesirable effeminate characteristic, although male firefighters clearly “giggle” too, as the example about the sexually demeaning poster demonstrates. Self-surveillance, can be oppressive when it prevents women and men from being open about their thoughts and abilities as equal members on a firefighting crew. However, self-surveillance when linked with laughter can also enable reflection and greater understanding of masculine-associated behaviour on the fireline, as the following quote illustrates:

We have that edge of danger and excitement that we like. But it’s a real, you know, as soon as there’s a fire call, you feel the adrenalin pumping. You get that chainsaw in your hand, and you think, “woohoo, here we go”. You just feel strong and empowered. It sort of gives you an idea of how men feel, you know, “I’m the bloke. I’m the man”. As soon as I turn on that chainsaw, I go ‘vrooom’ [saw noise]. I’ve got all this power. You can feel the testosterone surging and it’s quite exciting. Then I also laugh

at myself then because it pumps me up so much and I can understand how the men get all pumped up when fires are going. It's quite hilarious [laughter]. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2011)

This ability to reflect inward and better relate to others through the process of laughing at oneself reveals how joking about gendered tensions in the workplace can both hide and reveal the truth. Indeed, this study agrees with the argument that “what often makes a joke more successful are the truths it reveals” (Hernann, 2016, p. 68). By joking about the empowerment and exhilaration of working a chainsaw, this female firefighter observes a physiologically driven psychological change in herself that enables her to relate better to what she otherwise sees as the “hilarious testosterone surging” everyday practices of male colleagues. It points to the ability of humour to aid personal disclosure, discussed further below in the context of the uneasy tension between the inherent dangers of firefighting in the context of pregnancy and motherhood.

Negotiating embodied gendered identities

The following two quotes demonstrate how humour enabled personal disclosure during the interviews to talk about difficult personal and embodied matters in these women's intertwined lives as firefighters and mothers. They reveal a heightened sense of responsibility and mortality with motherhood. They also show how joking enables these firefighter women to talk about serious issues, which are often considered taboo due to the societal judgements female firefighters face in terms of gaining equal rights during pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work policies (Eriksen, 2014; Evans, 2015).

I have worked with a woman crew leader here and I felt, in a way, that it was a bit unfair. She had to do all the chain sawing. At that stage, I didn't have a chainsaw ticket because the requirement for chainsaw training came in place when I was pregnant and I didn't want to do that training while I was pregnant. The thought of, you know, giving myself a caesarean would have been just a little bit too gross. The thought of an accident to me, I just thought, “Oh no, I couldn't bear the paperwork” [laughter]. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2011)

Cynical types of humour like that displayed in the above quote, together with ‘black humour’ or ‘gallows humour’, are well known coping strategies used by both female and male personnel in ‘high risk’ occupations, such as the emergency services (Rowe & Regehr, 2010; Scott, 2007). It affirms the argument that “we often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us” (Critchley, 2002, pp. 56–57). This type of laughter was common during interviews:

I worry more about my sons since our last lot of deaths [in the Service]. My husband was involved in [the recovery efforts after] the most recent accident. And I always feel worried for myself. Not so much as a personal thing but my kids won't have a mother potentially. I mean, I can't think of any better way to die – doing something that you love, rather than dribbling in a nursing home. But the downside of having kids is you morally feel like you have to be there [laughter]. So that's tricky. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2011)

While male firefighters who are fathers may equally worry about leaving their children behind due to a fatal accident at work, the fear of mothers is embodied in having grown the child inside their body. In giving birth, the child becomes an extension of the mother's body. Furthermore, children are dependent on their mother for breast feeding, which assists the development of their immune system and vital growth during infancy. The fear of dying at work is therefore a very embodied concern for mothers.

While cynical humour and laughter enables these firefighter women to talk about, and relate to the embodied identities of their gender, this type of humour has also been posited in the literature as “a way of

coping without actually acting to change oppressive situations” (Gouin, 2004, p. 40). An example of this form of negative coping was provided by a female firefighter (below) who used direct sarcasm to joke about her inability, so far, to change the everyday gendered practices at home and at work with a husband who also works as a wildland firefighter. It is ironic that it is the embodied relationship between children and mothers that often initially establishes a culture of gender discrimination at home, which inhibits women in the longer term to uphold their equal right to work.

My husband, his life has hardly changed. You know, if the kids are sick I stay at home, not him. So I still know my place as a woman, in the work and the family [laughter]. (Snr. Female Ranger, August 2011)

While humour provides the flexibility that enables female firefighters to speak about inequitable aspects of their lives, it also shows how laughter can indicate a degree of powerlessness (Macpherson, 2008). The above quotes highlight how humour can cushion the narration of the harsh reality of the ongoing challenges female firefighters face. They speak to the uneven vulnerabilities that exist in this line of work. Wildland firefighting is dangerous for all bodies, but there are a host of very embodied concerns that women in particular face as mothers-to-be and mothers that are revealed through the use of humour.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the use of humour by wildland firefighter women to negotiate adversity in the form of patriarchy, gender discrimination, gendered relations in everyday practices, and embodied gendered identities. In so doing, the paper informs established theory on the flexibility of humour in power relations by demonstrating how humour facilitates personal disclosure among a minority group – women in the male-dominated field of firefighting. These personal disclosures are significant in that they provide novel insights into gendered behaviour and practices in wildland firefighting – a growing area of interest in the field of geography.

By using established knowledge in humour studies, the paper unpacks a novel case study to inform political aspects of emergency management and disaster geographies. The paper demonstrates how the flexibility of humour assists firefighter women to engage with and digest experiences and feelings, which are embodied and deeply personal and thus layered in emotions and gendered power relations. For example, embodied understandings of the intertwined lives of women as firefighters and mothers provides insights into how strong society-wide gendered norms about motherhood still impact the working lives of female firefighters. Such embodied understandings point to the value of potential future research into the production and consumption of humour. The use of gallows humour in these examples also raises the question for future research whether cynical humour is gendered.

The paper opens up little-known aspects of how patriarchy continues to influence gendered relations and everyday practices in modern-day firefighting. It points to the significance of flexibility in everyday strategies for managing, upholding, resisting, and living within and against these gendered power relations. Because humour enables and assists flexibility by virtue of its own flexible functions, it has the ability to uphold patriarchal structures and simultaneously aid the often frustratingly slow advances in cultural change over time. This speaks to the potential value of recent attempts at theorising the political concept of refusal (see [Cultural Anthropology special issue 31.3, 2016](#)), where refusal is not another word for resistance but a concept with generative, social, affiliative, hopeful, as well as strategic, wilful and exclusive powers that disallow hegemony the prerogative to always set the terms under which their authority will be contested. It is an area of work that would benefit from future in-depth inquiry in the context of gendered dimensions of traditionally male professions, such as firefighting.

By analysing narratives about the essential firefighter uniform, the

paper demonstrates how humour can trouble gendered workplace norms by unmasking male privilege and masculine norms built into organisational rationality, and by exposing inconsistencies between workplace culture and organisational policies. Humour can disclose the inconsistencies and absurdities of social norms and inequities, as it possesses the unique ability to give voice to the unspoken, to question the taken-for-granted, and to make the invisible visible in everyday life. In so doing, humour can empower women and men alike by challenging the asymmetric power relations that are an inherent part of patriarchal structures. However, as this paper also demonstrates, humour equally has the power to maintain asymmetric power relations via boundary-heightening humour. The case of the sexually demeaning poster, or the helicopter circling women exposed while urinating, provides examples where jocular aggression is provided with an exit strategy (“just joking”), which masks harassment and exclusive group membership.

In being simultaneously universal and particular, social and anti-social, mysterious and understandable, humour can be innocuous and detrimental as well as empowering and a force for change. The narratives analysed in this paper show that the distinction between these forms of humour can be one of degree, rather than dichotomy (see also Martin et al., 2003). Humour, laughter and unlaughter were used to express and deflect feelings, to diffuse tension and perceptions of danger, to communicate with and across gendered lines that divide or exclude, to mediate, overcome or reinforce exclusionary boundaries, to resist provocative insults, as a means to fit in, to build group cohesion and to foster solidarity, to test relationships, as stress relief, to talk about serious issues, for self-surveillance and reflection that increase understanding of others, to take the moral high ground, or to indicate a degree of powerlessness. For all of these purposes, “The power of humour lies in its flexibility ... it can function as a bouquet, a shield, and a cloak, as well as an incisive weapon in the armoury of the oppressed” (Holmes, 2000, p. 180).

In studying the use of humour to negotiate the gendered terrain of wildland firefighting, this paper has opened up embodied understandings of everyday practices and cultural expectations, which influence the health, safety and efficiency of wildland firefighters. These insights, along with the questions raised in the concluding comments above, could provide a fruitful line of enquiry for future research into the power and politics of humour and gender.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.001>.

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