

Lecture Notes for *On the Fireline*

by Lisa Wade, PhD

DAY ONE

PHOTO of a forest fire

In 2009, the U.S. saw almost 6 million acres burn.
In California there were 9,159 total wildfires and they burned almost half a million acres.

Desmond makes it quite clear in the introduction that fire is dangerous. This may seem obvious to you and me, but it isn't obvious to the firefighters.

- And when a firefighter died, Desmond noticed that the reaction wasn't sadness and fear.
- He thought this was very strange and so he set out to understand, broadly:

How do firefighters understand risk and death?

NOT, Why do firefighters die? OR When a firefighter dies, whose fault was it? OR How can we keep firefighters from dying?
These are all practical, but not sociological questions...

INSTEAD, he says he "questions the questions of fault."

"questions the questions of fault."

- Why was Lupe there to begin with?
- What motivates firefighters to risk?
- How do firefighters become acclimated to the dangers of their profession?
- How do their host organizations, like the US Forest Service, ensure that they remain in harms way?
- And what can they teach us?

And what can they teach us?

What can they teach us about how high-risk organizations motivate workers to participate in life-threatening activity?

- This last question is about generalizability and is central to sociological inquiry.
 - Sociological studies are always designed to tell us about more than just the thing we are studying. They are designed to tell us something more fundamental about society.

ASK: What other jobs are high risk?

Job	Fatality Rate (out of 100,000)
All occupations	3
Fishing	200

Loggers		62
Pilots	58	
Farmers and ranchers	39	
Roofers		35
Structural metal workers	30	
Refuse collectors/recyclers	25	
Construction	18	
Truck drivers	18	
Industrial machine workers	19	

(Data for 2009 are preliminary. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2010)

ASK: Desmond says that “to study risk is to study power and inequality.” Why?

ASK: Who takes these jobs?

Mostly men

SLIDE with gender and occupational death

Mostly young
 Mostly working class
 Disproportionately of color

So what did the crew Desmond studied look like?

	The Crew	The U.S.
White	38% (n = 4)	70%
Black	0	12%
American Indian	31% (n = 4)	<1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	4%
Hispanic	15% (n = 2)	13%
Other	15% (n = 2)	<1%

Discuss disproportionality.

Decisions to enter fire fighting aren’t just about individual preference. It’s also about the social structure. Desmond writes:

“The reason individuals become firefighters cannot be found solely at Elk River itself, for it is also found in the economic bleakness of American Indian reservations, the land loss taking place in rural America, the inability of small-town communities to carry out economic-development strategies in the face of global demands, and the rising costs of higher education.

And firefighters’ admiration for their craft must be conceptualized as molded (in part) by

a process of adapting to certain socioeconomic structures.”

Charles Moskos, a military sociologist at Northwestern University, says the divorce between the social origins of most US army personnel and the character of the population as a whole is greater than ever. When he attended Princeton as a student in the late 1950s, 400 out of his class of 750 had served in uniform. Last year only nine of Princeton's class of 1,100 had been in the armed services, he says.

This type of disproportionality is true of all of these risky occupations...

Desmond, writes...

“Certain bodies, deemed precious, are protected, while others, deemed expendable, protect.”

And so he wants to answer a bigger question: How does our society get certain people to perform that function for the rest of us?

ASK: How do we benefit, you and I, from the fact that people do these jobs?

Loggers
Fishing
Pilots
Structural metal workers
Miners
Roofers
Construction
Truck drivers
Policemen
Firemen
Security guards
Taxi drivers
The military

Think about how important those jobs are—protection, the getting of goods across the country so we can buy them, the extraction of minerals, wood with which we build our homes and schools, fish that we eat—we benefit from these people risking their lives every day. But most of us don't do it.

METHOD

ASK: How did Desmond collect data?

Watched, wrote down = field notes

Interviews, tape recorded... later transcribed

Looked at official documents from the US Forest Service

Did firefighting.

He's using multiple methods

- Survey
- Discourse analysis
- Interview/Focus groups
- Observation
- Participation

So what kind of method you use depends on what kind of question you are going to ask. Each has its own benefit

Methods

Survey (social patterns, not *why* or *how*, but *what*)

Discourse analysis (institutions, discursive opportunity structure)

Interview/Focus groups (what are individuals' ideas)

Observation (practice, how people do things)

Participation ("carnal embodiment" or "corporeal knowledge")

Desmond thinks the last is especially useful, especially for this project, because firefighting is so dangerous. He writes:

"The visceral experience of risk-taking transcends linguistic expression: It is unutterable, ephemeral, known only *deep down*."

THEORY

ASK: Desmond explains that, prior to his book, the predominant sociological theory of risk is based on the gender theory we learned at the beginning of class. How would that theory explain this phenomena?

EXPLAIN

Doing gender

Androcentrism

Doing masculinity = doing risk

ASK: What kind of risky things do men do to avoid appearing like a sissy or a fag?

Binge drinking

Drunk driving

Seat belts

Helmets of all sorts

Physically destructive sports

Existing theory suggests that men do risk because it's a way to prove their masculinity... something they need to do in order to avoid being targeted as sissy or gay, but also something that brings rewards in an androcentric society.

And Elk River IS a masculine space.

Though, as gender theory would predict, the men will accept women IF they can perform masculinity.

CHAPTER ONE: COUNTRY MASCULINITY

Desmond finds that gender is only one of the things shaping these men's identities.

ASK: What is the most meaningful distinction to the firefighters in this book?

“country boys” versus “city boys”

So this is a difference and a hierarchy—city versus country—that we haven't really talked about so far.

ASK: What are some of the characteristics of city boys or country boys that they talk about? How are city vs country boys socially constructed? What are some transcendent and non-transcendent symbols?

Country	City
Outdoor	indoor
Pickup	Buick

Not afraid to eat beans out of a can (afraid to eat beans out of a can)

Desmond says:

“The ideal-typical city boy is a fickle, materialistic, hip, stuck-up, manicured and waxed, over-educated, rich, sweater-wearing, vain, gay or ‘gay-looking,’ urban-dwelling ‘metrosexual’ sissy who shaves his chest and does not know the last thing about the outdoors.”

ASK: Do the firefighters draw on any other binaries in order to denigrate city boys?

Feminine:

Gay: homosexuals, pretty boys = intersectionality

Kris is quoted saying to Desmond:

“There's nothing wrong with being a city boy. Like *you*, there's nothing wrong with being in the city. You're a pretty boy, you can't help it. You get hit on by guys all the time, you just like that. You like the attention. *That's* what a city boy is. They just love the attention of being hit on by other guys, I mean, regardless if they are homosexual or not, you know...”

So you can imagine men *doing* “city” or “country,” just like people do race or gender or class?

ASK: Is it that simple? City versus country?

No, because the City is broken up into the suburban and the urban

“If the suburbs are weak, wealthy, and vain, then the inner city is dirty, dangerous, and poor... The inner city is associated with crime, danger, and vice; the suburbs with money, fashion, and manners. The inner city is too dangerous; the suburbs, too safe. The country resembles the inner city in that it is gritty and the weak-willed cannot survive, but it is unlike the inner city in that it is a place of security and wholesomeness. In its security it resembles the suburbs, but the country is unlike the suburbs in that it is rough...”

So in their minds, the discursive opportunity structure breaks down like this:

Middle/upper class + city = suburbia (boring)
Poor/working class + city = inner city (bad)
Middle/upper class + country = ??? (invisible)
Poor/working class + country = the country boy ♥

ASK: How did most of the crewmembers become firefighters?

Most crewmembers were recruited either informally through interpersonal network ties or formally through high-school presentations by Thurman.

So most of the firefighters are, before they get there, country boys.

So a country boy is a specific kind of man.

ASK: What kind of cultural capital does a country boy bring?

- Do you know where the best fishing spots are?
- Do you know where to find wild turkey at the right time of the season?
- Do you know where to gather the best firewood for the winter?
- Do you know how to tie a slipknot?
- Do you know the difference between four-low and four-high?
- Do you know how to drive an ATV?
- Can you weld?
- Can you tell the difference between poison ivy and sumac?
- Do you know how to pick up a snake?
- Can you hike fast without wasting all your energy?
- Do you know how to sleep in the woods without a tent?
- Do you know what a cotter pin is?

Desmond calls this “country competence.”

- It’s a type of cultural capital that is well-suited to country life and so, when you grow up a good country boy with a good country dad, these are the things you learn about.
- One of the reasons Vince didn’t get promoted after so many summers fighting fires is that he was disadvantaged.
- His dad didn’t pass on all these knowledges, he didn’t know what a cotter pin was, he didn’t have the cultural capital.

- These knowledges are valuable to these men on more than just a practical level.

Remarking that people tend to value what is attainable to them, Desmond describes the “chain saw incident.”

This is Bryan who knows how to use a chain saw and goddamn it nobody better say otherwise

PHOTO OF BRYAN

Desmond says:

“The men at Elk River value their ‘human capital,’ country competence, over economic capital [that’s suburbia] and city competence [that’s the inner city]. This is why, although [some men] ...might *own* some land... my crewmembers *know* the land, and as such, they feel that they have more rights to the Wannokee forest than some millionaire developer. They, country boys, belong at Elk River, and they feel it belongs to them.”

CHAPTER TWO: THE SANCTUARY OF THE FOREST

This competence is not JUST about the skills necessary to fight a fire. This is a clue for Desmond, suggesting that the reason that these men come to Elk River to fight fire is only partly about the fire itself.

And when he asks about why the men come back summer after summer, they talk about both the firefighting and the “downtime.”

The men describe it as freedom. One says:

“Well, in the forest there is less emphasis on society’s standards about how you act around others and how you interact around others.

“Around here, I don’t have to worry about if my clothes are acceptable... You get away with wearing pants over and over and over again. You get to drive around the woods. Whatever you want to listen to you get to listen to... There’s less of society’s rules out here, I would say... So, you really get to do what you want to do. It’s not like you’re constricted... You feel freer. I do feel freer.”

ASK: Does Desmond agree that life at Elk River is freer than life in town?

No, he says, “it is highly structured by the codes of country masculinity.”

In other words, there are lots of rules.

He says:

“If Elk River were truly a utopian space of freedom, I would have the liberty to keep a clean room, to drink scotch instead of Keystone Light, or to eat tofu stir-fry without facing ridicule... at Elk River, one is ‘required’ to curse, to dress sloppily, to trash his room, to drink beer, and to wrestle.”

ASK: So why does it feel free to the crewmembers?

The rules are ones with which they are familiar and they feel as though they belong.

Here Desmond uses a word that Bourdieu uses: Habitus.

Desmond describes it as:

“...the presence of social and organizational structures in individuals’ bodies in the form of durable and generative dispositions, which guide individuals’ thoughts and behaviors. As embodied history, as internalized and forgotten socialization, the habitus is the source of one’s practical sense.”

Here’s the definition we’re going to us:

Habitus: Our body and its knowledges, as it is shaped by a lifetime of physical repetition.

Firefighters don’t actually see enough fire to get a specific firefighting habitus, so they mold one out of their more general country boy habitus.

ASK: So where do they get it?

- Football
- Learning to drive on a pickup
- Chopping parents and grandparents wood as a kid
- Having been in the woods a lot, knowing how it sounds, it smells, and what would be a strange sound or smell.
- Being used to getting dirty
- Practicing manipulating nature.

The general habitus that they bring conforms to the specific habitus that is required and enforced.

- The general habitus is the country boy habitus
- The specific habitus is the wildland firefighting habitus

PHOTO Digging Line

ASK: Anyone ever did anything that at first felt awkward and later felt natural?

- Driving a car
- A sport
- Etc

These are specific examples of your body, not just your mind, coming to know something.

Consider this from a famous scholar, Merleau-Ponty talking about how his body knows how to type:

“I can type and to that extent ‘I know’ where the various letters are on the keyboard. I do not have to find the letters one by one... My fingers just move in the direction of the

correct keys. Indeed, when I am in full flow, I seem actually to be thinking with my fingers in the respect that I do not know in advance of typing exactly what I will say.”

He continues:

“It is not just that I do not need to think about where the keys are, however. The break with reflective thought is more severe than this. I could not *give* a reflective, discourse account of the keyboard layout. I do not ‘know’ where the keys are [in my conscious mind] and to make any half decent attempt at guessing I have to imagine I am typing and watch where my fingers head for when I come to the appropriate letter.”

So the body knows how to do things. And it knows, also, how to use tools. The keyboard is one example, the car another.

He writes:

“When I drive I ‘know without knowing’ where the various controls of the car are and how and when to use them... My experience of driving involves more than a practical mastery... however.”

“Not only do I incorporate the internal space of the car, such that pushing the brakes becomes as ‘natural’ a way of stopping to me as halting in my stride, but I incorporate the external space of the car; its power, velocity, and acceleration... I feel its size and speed as surely as that of my own body... I do not think *about* the car. I think *as* the car, *from the point of view of the car*... The car has been incorporated within my corporeal schema and thereby has become an extension of my body...”

The keyboard and the car... these are two that are familiar to us... but all of our bodies have different competencies. These competencies are our habitus.

Our habitus is part of our embodied cultural capital, remember, the things that we know how to do.

For the firefighters, their bodies KNOW stuff that other people’s bodies don’t know... and this makes them feel comfortable as a fire fighter in ways that other people would not.

Desmond grew up as a country boy and he confirms this when he remembers his first season as a fire fighter:

“When my country masculine habitus encountered itself in the postures, movements, rhythms, gestures, and orientations of my crewmembers, it recognized something familiar, something known deep-down, and, accordingly, it synchronized with other manifestations of itself, creating a chemistry of sorts that coordinated action.”

That’s “fit.”

Fit: When your habitus is well-suited to a social context.

That's a general habitus that that prepares you for a specific habitus.

More generally, Desmond says:

“If some individuals take to certain professions better than others—if some seem to be ‘naturals’ at soldiering or are ‘born to be police officers’—it is because they bring to the organization a general habitus that transforms into a specific habitus with little friction, while others possess a general habitus that is at odds with the fundamental structures and practices of the organization.”

So the firefighters feel free:

“...because they are so well-adjusted to the rules of Elk River... that they fail to feel the weight of regulation or the burden of discipline... it is a sensation produced not by the absence of rules but by an abundance of rules, cultural rules governing everyday forms of conduct that are deeply familiar to and taken for granted by my crewmembers.”

Remember our Christmas reading and the Weirding the Normal paper? That was this same exercise, taking something that was so taken for granted and familiar that it was invisible and making it visible, exposing the rules. For these firefighters, the rules of being at Elk River are like the rules for standing in line or shaking hands – invisible, natural.

So one of the first clues for Desmond that the choice to risk wasn't just about thrill-seeking or the need to prove masculinity by engaging in dangerous acts was this idea of *comfort* and *freedom* that was a result of the country boy habitus.

He says that Elk River:

“...functions as a country-masculine sanctuary, and *this* is the primary enticement—not economic incentives, status, the lure of fire, or the stimulation of action—that draws crewmembers back summer after summer.”

DAY TWO

QUIZ: In the chapter called *A Joke Between Brothers*, Desmond discusses the way the firefighters trade cruel jokes, often about sexually abusing girlfriends, mothers, sisters, and wives, as a way to bond. Sociologists have called this “permitted disrespect,” “abusive derision,” and “aggressive interchange.” What do the firefighters call it?

CHAPTER THREE: A JOKE BETWEEN BROTHERS

Desmond says:

This chapter is about processes of ‘informal’ socialization; it is about how crewmembers discipline each other and how they uphold the standards of the Forest Service through seemingly innocent everyday practices.

Note: Desmond alternates between calling the US Forest Service an organization and an institution. For our purposes, there is no difference.

ASK: Does informal socialization by crewmembers who discipline each other sound like an idea we’ve used in this class?

Policing, policing with “shit talk.”

ASK: How does a person win at shit talk?

It should hurt

It should be witty

It should be fast

It should be eloquent

And NO EMOTION should be shown, including physical attacks.

Joking about gang raping Vince’s wife.

ASK: Do any of you sometimes find yourself in contexts where shit talk happens?

Maybe to this degree, maybe to a lesser degree, but similarly?

ASK: What does Desmond think is the function of “shit talk”?

1. Bond because can cross lines and know still friends

Also bonding with women as the object:

2. Discipline crewmembers to be competent firefighters - To avoid a heckler’s tease... crewmembers refined every skill related to fighting fire.

Desmond says:

“All supervise all. Every crewmember becomes an overseer by diligently inspecting others, searching out slippages, mistakes, and imperfections, and correcting them through public and critical teasing practices.”

3. created a hierarchy – it divides crewmembers hierarchically and allows some to assert their dominance over others

So powerful that Vince went running when he shouldn't have and tolerated excruciating pain and risked having shin splints for life.

CHAPTER FOUR: REAL FIREFIGHTERS DRIVE GREEN ENGINES

Desmond says he wants to look at the “organization common sense” of the US Forest Service. This, in our language, is the institutional logic.

Desmond talks about the “unquestioned assumptions,” and we talk about the institutionalized ideologies.

This chapter talks about something we haven't really discussed – the way in which *individuals become embedded in institutions* and how that contributes to institutional inertia.

Desmond argues that individuals internalize the logic of the US Fire Service and then participate in its symbolic struggles.

ASK: What are his examples?

He talks about:

- ...the contests between environmentalists and the US forest service
- ...and the contests between the structural and wildland firefighters.

These align with the country city boy binary.

ASK: What's wrong with environmentalists?

ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALIST BILLBOARD

Environmentalists are city boys.

Firefighters think they know better than environmentalists because they are country boys and they know the country.

Pinecones that only open up if there is a fire.

The need to thin the forest for healthier trees

ASK: What's wrong with structural firefighters?

Structural firefighters are city boys, too.

Structural firefighting as easier, cleaner, and quicker.

The structural firefighter is the lesser firefighter, and more, he is the lesser man since he, like the environmentalist, is a city boy.

BLANK SLIDE

Notice that Desmond does not take a position on whether the environmentalists or fire fighters are right, but instead tries to exploit this contest for some insight.

He finds that the firefighters *take on the institutional position*.

- That is, they identify with the US Forest Service. The US Forest Service is them and they are the US Forest Service.
- They identify with the US Forest Service like they might a religion or a family... not like an employer.

ASK: Let's think for a minute about an institution we are embedded in... Do you, as students embedded in the institution of higher education, invest in the very things that benefit and perpetuate the institution itself?

In higher education

Grades

A degree mattering

In Oxy specifically

Oxy sports

Mission statement, making Oxy a better school

Clubs and activities aimed at creating a particular social atmosphere

Activism aimed at the school itself

Recent activism around discriminatory behavior on campus

This is "who we are":

SLIDE OF OXY PROPAGANDA

You will be an Oxy alum. Not just an alum. And that matters to many of you very much. Not just because of the prestige of the institution, but because you *identify* with this school... it is becoming part of your identity.

- Maybe you will even give money to the school when you're an alumni.
Continuing to invest in both the continued prestige of the institution, and your own connection to it.
- Maybe you will hope that your children go here? Because you are an "oxy family"?

So the firefighters are invested with the US Forest Service in the same way that some people invest in Oxy:

- A religion or family might have your best interests in mind, but an employer like the US Forest Service does not necessarily.
- In this case, the US Forest Service *needs* people to be willing to die.
- And for what?

For a job that pays \$10 an hour and leaves you unemployed 9 months of the year.¹

The US Forest Service is USING or EXPLOITING notions of country masculinity and the antagonistic binaries that the identity depends upon... to fill low paid, insecure, high risk positions in its institution.

If the firefighters can feel like they're the right men to fight wildfires because only the best, most true, most authentic kind of men can do so... then the US Fire Service, and all of us, win.

CHAPTER FIVE: LEARNING AND BURNING

And this socialization into the forest service *runs deep*.

Let's turn to talking about the 10 and 18: the *Ten Standard Fire Orders* and the *Eighteen Situations that Shout 'Watch Out.'*

Bosses and trainers force firefighters to memorize them. They are forced to repeat them on cue. They are tested on them. If they don't know them, they receive policing from other crewmembers.

They 10 and 18 are glorified, like the ten commandments, revered as life-and-death ultimatums.

And the US Forest Service **defines firefighting competence** as “successful and responsible execution of *The Ten and Eighteen* and ‘deviance’ as the failure to follow these rules.”

THE 10

THE 18

ASK: What does Desmond say is wrong with the 10 and 18?

Impossible to follow them perfectly all the time. In fact, he says not only that you can't follow them all the time, but that it's “impossible to fight a wildfire without violating at least one...”

Need endless clarification.

He says:

“For example, if firefighters wished to follow the fifth <i>Order</i> —‘Ensure instructions are given and understood’—as accurately as possible, they would need to create more rules to satisfy the questions generated by this <i>Order</i> . What are instructions? Do they come from supervisors or crewmembers? Do we need to acquire them for each activity? If

¹ <http://www.wildlandfire.com/docs/faq.htm#what2>

not, when are instructions necessary and when are they superfluous? How will we know they are understood?"

So one can *always* find that a person violated them.

So the US Forest Service is telling the firefighters that if they follow the 10 and 18, they will be safe. But it's *impossible* to perfectly follow the 10 and 18.

This is kind of like the advice you get about how to get good grades.

ASK: What kind of advice do you get about how to get good grades?

If you're invested in this you try, but it's impossible to follow all those rules all the time.

Sometimes you have competing commitments

Or there is not enough time in the day.

Emotional traumas.

Or you get contradictory advice.

And even if you could do all the things they say to do, it's no *guarantee* that you'll get an A, just as there's no guarantee that a firefighter won't get killed.

When we come back, we're going to talk about the amazing thing that the 10 and 18 enable the US Forest Service, and the firefighters who identify with it, to do...

DAY THREE

CHAPTER SIX: TAKING THE WILD OUT OF WILDFIRE

Desmond does a discourse analysis of the 10 and 18 to try to find out what logic infuses the US Forest service.

Remember a discourse analysis is an analysis of text.

It is essentially reading between the lines or reaching “through the text” (Desmond from Dorothy Smith). It is an attempt to determine what is assumed by the writer or implicit in the text itself.

ASK: What ideology or, what Desmond sometimes calls a principle, is institutionalized in the US Forest Service?

personal accountability and individual responsibility – *individualism!*

We should think and act from the point of view of...

Individualism: ...only or primarily ourselves.

Collectivism: ...only or primarily the group.

ASK: What evidence does he offer for this claim?

- So one of the things he points out is that there is a YOU in front of each 10. And his instructor tells him that explicitly.
 - YOU need to fight fire aggressively.
 - YOU should initiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior.
 - YOU must retain control at all times.
- He also notes that fighting a fire alone is not against the rules.
- And he offers some orders or watch outs that could have been included but are not like:
 - ‘Never go into a fire alone,’
 - ‘Be aware of your crewmembers’ actions and whereabouts on a fire,’
 - ‘Do not separate from your fire-buddy,’

It’s not that no one else is out there, but that you are responsible for yourself completely and only for yourself.

ASK: If following the 10 and 18 defines competent fire fighting, and each individual is fully responsible for himself, then when a firefighter is injured or dies, what is the logical conclusion about the cause of the incident?

Quote:

If a firefighter falters, it is his own mistake. If he is injured, this is due to his lapse of judgment. If he dies, it is because he departed from a rational right decision.

And, remember that Desmond says that firefighters *always* break the rules because they're impossible to follow perfectly.

If the rules are the very definition of perfect firefighting...

...but it is impossible to follow them perfectly all the time...

...then the US Forest Service can always blame the individual for their on death.

Always, a perfect arrangement.

SWITCH TO SCARY PICTURE

ASK: So, with this in mind, how do the firefighters think about their own risk?

They don't think they are risking!

They deny the danger of fire:

Desmond's *evidence* includes:

1. Firefighters saying as much.

He writes:

“Cause, personally,” George begins, looking me in the eye, “I don’t consider my life in danger. I think that the people I work with and with the knowledge I know, my life isn’t in danger. . . . If you know, as a firefighter, how to act on a fire, how to approach it, this and that, I mean you’re, yeah, fire can hurt you. But if you know, if you can soak up the stuff that has been taught to you, it’s *not* a dangerous job.”

One firefighter:

“My gut aches when I think of the lives that could have been spared, the injuries or close calls which could have been avoided, had these... Orders been routinely and regularly addressed prior to and during every fire assignment!”

2. Also he notes that “The thought of dying on the fireline is so distant from firefighters’ imaginations that they find the idea comedic.”

3. And they deny that they are heroes... since they do not believe that they take risks. They will, however, happily use it to trick women into liking them.

Also notice that one of the 18 Situations that Shout ‘Watch Out’ is not “Holy crap there’s a fire!!!”

So, Desmond concludes, they put their lives at risk simply because they do not perceive their choice as risky. It’s not risky because:

“...firefighters believe that they can rely upon their knowledge to steer clear of the deadly flames.”

He calls this an illusion of self-determinacy. Which is not, Desmond says, straight up denial of the risk of fire, but...

The firefighters' illusion of self-determinacy: A collective commitment to the idea that country competence is sufficient to avoid danger while fighting a fire.

This is an *ideological* commitment. They are committed to this ideology of country competence that is based in these gender, race, and place binaries...
...and includes individualism: it is *man* against nature, not *men* against nature.

Country competence isn't real, but they believe in it and it organizes both their thoughts and their actions, and the institution is organized according to the notion of country competence and individualism, too.

ASK: Was there any resistance to the notion that fire wasn't risky... or was it completely hegemonic?

When Desmond pushes, he can get the crewmembers to admit that it's impossible to follow the 10 and 18... and sometimes they can be reflective about that.

Other times, people are willing to admit that maybe fire is dangerous... usually in a whisper.

He quotes Peter:

"But sometimes I think, actually *more* than sometimes, I think, hey, sometimes shit just happens. Shit can just fucking *happen*, man, and that's what scares me. They teach us all this stuff, and what if you *do* have your communications in place? What if you *do* have all this shit in place? What if shit *just fucking goes nuts*? And that scares me. ...sometimes shit happens, period. I really try to pay attention on fires. . . . But, who knows, that son of a bitch, it's Mother Nature, that son of a bitch can do anything. . . . I don't know. I believe in God, and I think that there's a time for everybody."

And he quotes George:

"Yeah. I mean people, in dealing with fire, in something so wild and with the gasses that it gives off and all that, injuries are very common, and people are gonna lose their lives dealing with something so extreme. But it's something that, you know going into it something can happen. You know that you're dealing with something that breathes on its own and it's gonna do what it's gonna do, and you know, you're basically putting your life in danger when you're going into a fire."

ASK: Why do you think firefighters have a difficult time thinking about fire as dangerous?

1. Too scary.

Quote

“If they did not believe that fire was controllable, that harm was preventable, that the dead were ineffectual, then crewmembers found themselves staring into an abyss of disorder.”

2. The discursive opportunity structure, Desmond says the “thought categories” of the US Forest Service.

He says:

“...firefighters had little ability to understand their job outside of the languages offered to them by the US Forest Service.”

3. It would reveal their incompetence and call into question their fit in the organization.
Imagine the kind of policing a crewmember would get if he started voicing his fear of fire!

ASK: Do we have an illusion of determinacy regarding anything? Is there anything dangerous that we do routinely that we feel relatively safe about doing?

Me breaking my leg, for sure.

ASK: What are the 10 and 18 for driving? (FUN)

TRICK QUESTION: Does Desmond think that they *should* be scared?

No, Desmond doesn't care if they accurately measure their risk or not. That that's not his purpose because it's not a sociological question.

ASK: The sociological question is what?

How are firefighters' risk perceptions formed?

What is risk to firefighters?

What is the source of this perception?

So Desmond argues that the wildland firefighters are nothing like the “danger-lusting heroes who laugh in the face of death” that other sociologists have found.

He doesn't deny that such riskers exist and that they take risks because of a masculine imperative to show that they are willing to risk their bodies...

But this isn't what he found.

His risk-takers – the firefighters – however, are engaging in risk because of their masculinity... but it's a different kind of masculinity.

One based in common sense and wits.

A masculinity that has a great deal of competence and knows its limits.

Desmond writes:

“...my crewmembers are much more than confident on the fireline. They are comfortable.”

PHOTO OF COMFY CREWMEMBER

They look *down* upon crewmembers who are aggressive and thoughtless.

And he makes a really interesting observation: That part of the reason women firefighters are looked down upon is because they feel the need to DO masculinity to prove themselves and, because they less culturally competence about what kind of masculinity is required, *they do the wrong kind of masculinity*. They are often “too ballsy.”

Remember how subtle the training has been for these men and how even men who grew up beside men like the firefighters sometimes didn't quite get the right cultural capital, the right competence, the right habitus.

Vince, right, whose Dad was a jerk and didn't really raise him with care. You can image how being a daughter would mean that you wouldn't *quite* get the right cultural capital.

And you just wouldn't *quite* fit in.

This translates into all kinds of work.

Becoming a lawyer, a child care worker, a therapist... all occupations have a habitus and we are all fit – more, less, or significantly less – into these various occupations.

And if we decide to cross class, race, gender, space, or other boundaries as we grow and change over our lives, we all have to adjust to the intricacies of new cultural contexts...
...with our mannerisms, our bodies, our voices, our languages, and in ways we don't even have names for.

Many people can fight fires, but only some feel at home doing so.

...those fire fighters whose habitus neatly matches the firefighting habitus find themselves a part of the US Forest Service, deeply identified and embedded...
...deeply committed to the ideology espoused by the US Forest Service itself...
that you are responsible for your own life out there... and if you know what you're doing, you'll be okay... and if you don't, you have only yourself to blame.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE BEAVER CREEK FIRE

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE INCOMPETENT DEAD

And... of course... people do die.

In chapters seven and eight, Desmond asks how the Forest Service reacts when the illusion of determinacy faces its biggest challenges. I want us to focus on the second chapter about the death of Rick Lupe.

Desmond talks about two eulogies, the internal eulogy that circulates amongst the people involved with the Forest Service, and the external eulogy that circulates amongst everyone else.

Let's start with the internal eulogy.

Desmond divides the process of the internal eulogy into four parts: investigation, dissemination, generalization, and reproduction.

Investigation: The first thing that happens every time a firefighter dies is a fact-finding mission that is called a “factual report” in which “a team of professionals examine the factors that led to the fatality.”

Even the guidelines for the writing of the “factual report” state:

“Environmental causes *occasionally* are the cause of an accident. A lightning strike is the classic example. When this occurs, *look for human errors* that may have exposed the employee to the environmental hazard.”

Dissemination: “...conclusions about the cause of the death in question are reduced to people causes, and a message of individual fault is widely circulated throughout wildland firefighter organizations”

Inevitably, Desmond argues, these factual reports end up as

“fault finding missions,” not “fact finding missions.”

And that is how his boss, Mr. Crasser, could have announced that Lupe did something wrong before ever seeing the report. The dead ALWAYS did something wrong.

Desmond says:

“Mr. Crasser had been around long enough to know how and when to preside over the ritual of the internal eulogy. He knew that all dead firefighters, in one way or another, were incompetent firefighters and, ultimately, were responsible for their own burns.”

Desmond calls the blaming of the dead a “ritual” that people at all levels of the US Forest Service engage in.

He offers the following interchange from the crew after they're informed that Lupe died:

“That sucks,” J.J. said.

“Someone fucked up,” Donald responded, immediately. “I’ll tell you what happened: Someone fucked up. That’s what Thurman will say. Someone fucked up.”

Heads nodded.

Craig Neilson, the Fire Prevention Officer, added, “Their communications might have been fucked. . . . The fire was under them and burned up.”

“They probably weren’t paying attention,” Donald said.

“Were they informed on the current weather conditions?” Craig wondered out loud.

“They’re probably stupid. Probably weren’t talking to their crew,” Peter guessed.

“Yep. They’re fuckin’ stupid, not talking to anyone. They should’ve known better than to build a helispot on top of the fire,” said Donald.

Heads continued to nod. Then Paul raised his brow and asked loudly, “Hey, Diego, what you got over there?”

“Nothing,” Diego answered quickly with a mischievous smile. He was holding something underneath the table.

“What is it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“A Playboy?”

This is an amazing illustration of what Desmond is arguing. In this instance, at least, there is a really profound denigration of the men who died. Without no information, they simply decide, as a group that “They’re fuckin’ stupid.”

It’s important that Desmond tells us that “None of the crewmembers ever read the reports.”

Instead, it’s part of their training to learn to blame the dead.

They do it reflexively because it’s become part of who they are.

Generalization and reproduction: “Universal claims about the incompetence of the dead are advanced in training materials” like the 10 and 18 and “the organization’s elite reinforce the internal eulogy of the Forest Service.”

And this, Desmond claims, is how firefighters’ understanding of risk is formed.

It’s not a predictable, natural, psychological reaction... it’s a relationship to risk that is carefully cultivated by the US Forest Service.

Okay, so let’s move to the external eulogy...

ASK: How did the external eulogy contrast to the internal?

Arizona governor lowered all American flags for a week

American flag draped over his casket

Fort Apache tribe declared a 30 day mourning period

The Bureau of Indian Affairs set up a donation fund for Lupe’s wife and children

500 people attended the funeral

He was firefighter of the year

Recognized by Congress
Citizens of a city in Arizona dedicated a life sized bronze statue, the money for which was raised by a boy scout

The plaque:

PLAQUE

The language in the *Arizona Republic* article:

Title:

“Firefighting Warrior Led Crew that Saved Pinetop, Show Low.”

Text:

Suddenly, there was a flare-up that surrounded him with fire. Rick had trained for this moment a thousand times. He attempted to deploy his fire shelter, but turbulent winds blew away the shelter. Rick went into the dirt face down, sticking his nose into the ground to protect his lungs from the hot air and flames, but when the firestorm passed, Rick had severe burns over 30 percent of his back, legs and arms.

Rick is a fighter, and he knew what to do. The battle wasn’t over. He pulled himself up and walked out of the woods about a half-mile and found help. The medical helicopters took over, transporting this warrior to Whiteriver Hospital and then to Maricopa Burn Center. That was five weeks and two days ago . . . but the battle ended at 8:50 a.m. on Thursday. The firefighting family lost a brother and a son.

ASK: Do a discourse analysis of this story. How is this eulogy different from the internal eulogy?

According to the external eulogy:

He was competent:

He was “one of our nation’s greatest firefighters” (the plaque)

He “led” the crew (in the title)

He had “trained for this moment a thousand times”

He “knew what to do.”

But fire is dangerous.

“Suddenly, there was a flare-up”

“turbulent winds blew away the shelter”

And so he was a “hero” and a “warrior” (with, by the way, a worthy opponent).

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The two eulogies correspond to two kinds of masculinities:

External eulogy: symbolic honor and masculine sacrifice, convictions linked to ideas of nationalism and heroism

Internal eulogy: ideas of American individualism, autonomy, and self-reliance...

One thing I want you to notice is how complicated masculinity has become in Desmond's study.

Our discussions of gender and race and class have been super over-simplified. In an introductory course, I'm just trying to get the ideas out there.

But good sociology is able to find a balance between generalization and particularization.