

Fighting fire & emotion: a feelings study of BC's wildland firefighters

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Introduction

Wildland firefighters responded to 886,300 hectares of wildfires in BC in 2025, signifying a “new normal” in the industry (“Wildfire Season Summary,” 2025). The present study aims to explore the emotional experiences of BC’s Initial Attack (IA) firefighters as they navigate working in a climate-altered landscape in an occupation known for hypermasculinity and stoicism. Drawing on the sociology of emotions, this study will examine how wildland firefighters interpret, regulate, suppress, or share emotions amidst worsening fire seasons using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and thematic data analysis.

Theory

Hochschild’s (1979) seminal theory argues emotions are subject to management by social rules, which influence what is considered the socially appropriate emotional response to stimuli. Further, feeling rules vary between cultural landscapes, including workplaces, which possess distinct emotional cultures, languages, and expression rules, which affect emotional behaviour. Occupations are a rich site of emotion management analysis, where research can uncover how workers believe they ought to feel and how members of different social strata negotiate feeling rules.

Research Questions

How do BC’s wildland firefighters navigate their emotions in the face of worsening fire seasons and ecological crisis?

How do social positionalities shape wildland firefighters’ experiences of mental health and emotion-management in the workplace?

What forms of organizational change do wildland firefighters identify as necessary to better support collective emotional well-being?

Methodology

The methods selected for this study are interpretive and reflexive, intended to respond to the absence of layered social-emotional analyses of workplace. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling and members of equity-deserving groups were encouraged to participate. Semi-structured interviews were completed with deliberate attention to ethics and participant well-being. Transcriptions will undergo Braun & Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis and will be coded using NVivo software. Upon completion of data analysis, findings will be compiled and shared in a final thesis report. In circulating findings, the transformative potential of data analysis to illuminate the occupational realities of the wildfire emerges.

Conclusion

The present study is an interpretive, action-oriented, qualitative study grounded in the sociology of emotions and motivated by the urgent nature of climate change. By championing the voices of wildland firefighters, this research aims to enrich the sociology of emotions while supporting meaningful organizational change that fosters more equitable and sustainable working conditions.



References

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