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Introducing Dirty Work, Concepts and Identities

Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya, Patricia Lewis and Heather Höpfl

Introduction

This edited book sets out a research agenda for the study of dirty work – generally defined as tasks, occupations and roles that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Through the different occupational settings presented, it explores the identities, meanings, relations and spaces of dirty work and how the boundaries between ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ are negotiated and defined. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) have argued, dirty work has been a neglected area within Organisation Studies, with theory and research failing to reflect changes in the nature of and demand for such work. This neglect is surprising given, within the context of the UK and elsewhere, the increase in the demand for ‘dirty’ work – including paid caring (Anderson, 2000), domestic work and low-level service (Noon and Blyton, 2007) and night-time work driven by the 24-hour economy (Hobbs, 2003) – as well as for areas of work performed by migrant labour.

One reason for this neglect might be that forms of dirty work are seen as ‘out of step’ with notions of modern ‘clean’ work (Bolton, 2007). ‘Good work’ not only signifies the absence of proximity to dirt, but routinely offers intrinsic rewards such as job satisfaction, engagement and opportunity for career advancement. As Bolton (2007) points out, while there is concern among policy makers about widening divisions in the labour market, they continue to propose a narrow vision of clean, high-skilled and ‘better’ work. Such work is not, however, open to all – and some people fail to gain access to the opportunities and benefits that are conveyed. Conditions in the West have undoubtedly improved,
with few people working in unsafe or hazardous environments (though these persist in many parts of the world). However, the availability of 'good work' is still limited and many people end up in jobs that may be characterised by poor pay, limited opportunities for advancement and unsavoury working conditions. In fact, as suggested above, such work may have become more readily available as the better-off 'outsource' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003) personal services they do not want to do themselves—from domestic cleaning to childcare. 'Bad work' therefore is unlikely to disappear—though it may well take new forms.

Another reason for the neglect of dirty work may pertain to its largely invisible status. Dirty work can be seen to be invisible on several counts. Firstly, we try to create distance from the pollution of dirt and from those who deal with it. From this perspective, cleanliness is about establishing boundaries, separating the pure from the contaminated and imposing a system on an 'inherently untidy experience' (Douglas, 1966: 85). Thus, we seek to withdraw from whatever bears traces of contamination and impurity. Secondly, work involving dirt or defined as 'dirty' is often undertaken by those at the lower levels of the hierarchy (Hughes, 1958), that is those at the margins of society. Such work can be spatially absent—undertaken in private homes (care workers, domestic cleaners) or temporally concealed (night-time work or work involving unsocial hours). Finally, work involving dirt may be visible (street cleaners, refuse collectors, vegetable pickers) but 'unseen', partly because it fails to conform to notions of modern 'clean value added work' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009), as referred to above. Such work (and the workers) may therefore be characterised as having low cultural priority—overlooked in policy discourses and only coming into view under unusual circumstances, such as the plight of migrant cockle pickers who were drowned in Morecambe in 2004.

**Conceptualising dirty work**

One aim in this book is to render aspects of dirt and dirty work more visible. In doing so, we advocate an approach that takes into account its social and cultural meanings as well as its 'fluid' nature—how meanings may alter with different contextual conditions and how these conditions may be implicated in the way the work is experienced. We argue, along the lines of Dick (2005), that this orientation has been underplayed, allowing further potential, in the context of work and organisations, to uncover dirt's social, political and cultural aspects. These aspects may include how dirty workers are 'othered'; the
significance of intersections with social divisions based on gender, race
and class; and also how ‘staining’ is experienced. This suggests a need
to go beyond the nature of the tasks and roles that make up what we
perceive to be dirty work to include these broader implications.

Dirt as material and moral

From a largely anthropological perspective, early conceptualisations
of dirt focussed on meanings associated with the physicality of con-
tamination and pollution, for example from muck, slime and bodily
fluids (Douglas, 1966). This foregrounds the materiality around dirt
which relates to bodily sensations such as smell, touch, stickiness and
slime that lead to feelings of repulsion and disgust (Dant and Bowles,
2003). Following Douglas (1966), a further orientation has been more
symbolic – founded on perceptions of dirt and pollution as ‘matter out
of place’, that is as arising when there are violations of cultural norms
or of the social order.

Cleanliness and dirt are therefore not just material matters but can
have social and moral significance, triggering with respect to dirt a
desire to avoid or remove it and stigmatising those who are involved
in it. In terms of the former, not all dirt is seen as equally polluting.
Earth for example, while dirty, has meanings associated with life-giving
properties, while bodily fluids represent a form of contamination that is
more extreme (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990). With reference to the lat-
ter, as Dick (2005) points out, avoidance rules mean that occupations
which deal with polluting, physical dirt are carried out by members
of lower classes who are separated spatially and socially from other
groups (e.g. ‘untouchables’ of the Hindu class system). Where higher-
status occupations deal with dirt (e.g. doctors whose jobs involve aspects
of intimate care), avoidance rules operate so that much of the work is
delegated to those lower in the hierarchy such as hospital orderlies.

In this respect, as McClintock (1995) illustrates, discourses related to
dirt and hygiene were one of the earliest to combine and condense
the notion of class. She demonstrates how hands reveal one's class by
expressing one's relation to labour. Historically, clean, smooth hands
covered by gloves were the indication of 'good breeding' and financial
standing (one could afford to buy the labour of others) so that middle-
class women went to great lengths to clean their hands to remove
staining, so disguising their work and erasing its evidence. In a more
contemporary context, Skeggs (2004) argues that dirt and disorder serve
as signifiers of class and as moral evaluations by which the working class
are coded. Dirt is therefore tied up with a moral and social order and a set
of norms that may shift over time and under different circumstances – linked to meanings around disease, staining and depravity and triggering public policies (e.g. public health regulations) to eradicate and contain it.

**Physical, social and moral taint**

The ability of meanings around dirt to capture both the material and the moral was highlighted by Hughes’ (1951, 1958) foundational analysis of dirty work as being physically disgusting, a symbol of social degradation and/or counter to moral conceptions. As he argues, dirty work of some kind can be found in all occupations – if only because at some point the worker is likely to have to do something that undermines a sense of personal dignity or because the work involves some contact with a stigmatised group.

Building on Hughes’ (1958) early conceptualisation, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), from a social psychological perspective, categorise dirty work under three main headings. These include physical taint, namely occupations associated with dirt or performed under dangerous conditions (e.g. refuse collectors, miners); social taint, namely occupations involving regular contact with people from stigmatised groups or where the job is seen as involving being servile to others (e.g. prison officers, domestic workers); and moral taint, namely occupations regarded as sinful or of dubious virtue (e.g. debt collectors, prostitutes).

More recently, Kreiner et al. (2006) have, from a similar perspective, made reference to the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of perceived dirtiness. Breadth refers to the proportion of the work that is dirty or the centrality of dirt to the occupational identity (a physician may occasionally deal with dead bodies, but a mortician always does so). Depth captures the intensity of dirtiness and the extent to which a worker is directly involved. For example, police officers deal mainly with criminals (high intensity), while security guards mostly deal with the public (low intensity). Some occupations may have high breadth and depth because of a single dimension (e.g. the moral taint of prostitutes, the physical taint of sewage workers). By contrast, other occupations may be low on both dimensions. This classification therefore captures a wider group of occupations or roles beyond the ‘extreme’ cases identified by Ashforth and Kreiner above.

**Social and cultural processes of dirty work**

The above typology has provided a sound starting point for the categorisation and identification of such work and has been foundational in
framing and developing the field. However, while Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) position dirty work in social constructionist terms (e.g. highlighting the significance of attitudes of ‘visceral repugnance’ on the part of others towards such work), it has been argued that they nevertheless undertheorise the influence of social and cultural processes and their power dynamics (Dick, 2005; Tracy and Scott, 2006). Accepting the socially constructed nature of dirty work implies a need to recognise that meanings attached to such work may vary across occupations and may be dependent on those who are seen to embody such work and that norms of ‘acceptability’ may be temporally and culturally bounded, that is varying from group to group, at different points in time and across geographical/international space. For example, technology can lead to a rearrangement of job typologies so that previously rejected occupations become newly ‘acceptable’ to some groups. In this respect, Witz (1992) has described how a revised form of radiography emerged out of new technology in the 1920s and 1930s so that the profession became less tainted as ‘female’ and more acceptable to men. Some tasks and roles may be avoided by indigenous workers as undesirable but are taken up by migrant groups (see Lee-Treweek, this volume). These norms, however, may change with economic circumstances; for example, men made redundant in the de-industrialisation of the 1980s and 1990s considered ‘feminised’ service and caring roles, previously avoided as incongruent with traditional gender norms (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2003). Similarly, as Liz Stanley shows in this volume, the taint attributed to investment bankers did not predate their entry but emerged and intensified throughout the financial crisis. Other work in this volume explores the cultural meanings attached to dirt and purity in different contexts and how individuals negotiate the clean/dirty divide, highlighting experiences of abjection, emotions of fear and disgust and practices that relate to staining. This demonstrates the need to recognise the significance of different social and cultural processes that are involved in the meanings attached to dirt as well as to how dirty work is encountered and experienced.

Dirty work as gendered, classed and raced

As Tracy and Scott (2006) argue, concepts of taint, dirt and prestige are intimately connected to powerful social identity categories such as gender, race, class and nationality. However, these aspects are rarely explicit in the literature – perhaps because dirty work tends to be drawn on traditionally gendered, ‘raced’ or classed lines so that these are hidden within taken-for-granted assumptions and values. In this
respect, the gendered nature of dirty work is partly manifest in the way such work often conforms to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Service and care, for example, have strong associations with the embodied dispositions of women, while other forms of dirty work (e.g. heavy manual labour, work involving risk or danger) are traditionally the domain of men. A body of work has accordingly explored the experiences of women as care workers or domestic helps (Anderson, 2000; Jervis, 2001) and as sex workers (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Grandy, 2008). Other research has considered the physical taint of male mechanics (Dant and Bowles, 2003), male slaughtermen and butchers (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Meara, 1974; Slutskaya et al., 2009) and male firefighters (Tracy and Scott, 2006). However, with some exceptions (e.g. Bolton, 2005; Tracy and Scott, 2006), gender and the significance of broader gendered discourses remain peripheral to understandings of dirty work – implicit rather than explicit to the analysis – and relatively marginal in terms of how it is seen to be experienced.

These social divisions are complicated – both reinforced and undermined – by class, race and migrancy. As we have seen, dirty work is often undertaken by lower classes, both men and women, remaining invisible to those higher up the hierarchy. Race and nationality can add a further category of disadvantage and another layer to the hierarchical arrangement of such work. In the context of domestic service and pointing to the disproportionately high employment of racial-ethnic women, Duffy (2007) has shown that the gender typing of such work is not race-neutral. Black and migrant women have been found to be disproportionately employed in private, domestic cleaning, that is within the home. Migrant men, however, are often found within institutional cleaning, where, as Anderson (2000) argues, they are effectively ‘de-gendered’ by race and citizenship. These groupings accordingly challenge the gendered status quo, as migrant men, for example, take up work (such as institutional cleaning and food preparation) previously designated as female. Further, as Lee-Treweek (2010) notes, migrant men and women are often ‘morally’ tainted through perceptions that they are taking away jobs from indigenous workers, while at the same time enduring the physical taint of low-level and physically dirty jobs. The often low and marginal status of dirty work, the ‘moral overtones’ and stigma associated with such work and the desire by many to avoid or remove it, suggest that gender, race, class and migrancy are all implicated in work practices and workers’ experiences.
The embodied nature of dirty work

The last section indicated some of the ways in which bodies are integral to how dirty work is understood. At a basic level, some forms of work involve bodily encounters, as in the sex industry, or extreme physical effort. Following our earlier discussion, some skills and attributes may be devalued depending on who practises and embodies them. Thus, with reference to levels of servility and deference captured by Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) ‘social taint’ mentioned earlier, women are seen to ‘naturally’ deliver service in the workplace (Lewis and Simpson, 2007) i.e. certain attributes are perceived to be essentially feminine and hence devalued and invisible (Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Williams, 2003). Women’s bodies are thus marked by servility and deemed appropriate for deferential displays. When men undertake service and caring roles, their untainted and authoritative bodies are out of place so that the work is re-valued and given new meaning (Pullen and Simpson, 2007). This complicates and disrupts the meanings attached to forms of dirty work when undertaken by bodies that are otherwise seen as untainted, unmarked and ‘clean’.

Therefore, hierarchies are not only evident within the binary of ‘clean’ versus ‘dirty’ work but are manifest in the embodied characteristics and perceived dispositions of the worker. Cleanliness and dirt are accordingly inscribed onto particular bodies, affording them different levels of value. Elaine Swan, in this volume, points to how cleanliness and associated meanings of morality are commonly associated with ‘whiteness’ and with the white, middle-class body. Black and working-class bodies are marked as ‘unclean’ and routinely carry dirt’s stigma.

A further embodied dimension relates to staining and the marking of the body through dirt. As Sheena Vachhani illustrates in this volume, staining through proximity to dirt is written on the body, leaving its mark through disorder and rendering dirt visible. Heather Höpfl highlights how to be contaminated is to be infected, polluted or dirtied in some way – often through touch as in a disease communicated from one body to another. Staining from physical taint can have affirmative effects. As Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) and Slutskaya et al. (2009) show, while looking at the butcher trade, men can present marks made by blood and offal as a badge of honour and symbol of masculine endurance, mobilising feelings of disgust. These feelings, routinely aroused in connection to forms of taint, are also visceral, embodied experiences. Therefore while all forms of work have an embodied dimension – in the effort involved as well as in its pleasures and...
pains – dirty work may have particular bodily significance. Dirt not only represents and reproduces classed, raced and gendered divisions – divisions that are written on the body – but can also be spread through bodily contamination and be productive of body-marking stains. Further, dirt is productive of feelings (e.g. abhorrence, disgust) that are corporeally experienced.

These aspects indicate a complicated terrain in terms of how such work can be understood and experienced. In this respect, the typology of physical, social and moral taint has provided a sound basis for conceptualising such work and has been foundational in terms of shaping and developing the field. However, it may not sufficiently capture the diverse, contingent and fluid nature of occupational meanings or how contemporary implications and significances emerge. From a shared starting point that acknowledges the significance of social and cultural factors in understandings of such work, the chapters in this book go some way to test the boundaries of these definitional constructs and to incorporate at a deeper level other (e.g. social, cultural and corporeal) implications.

Dirty work and identity
As we have seen, dirt symbolises a contravention of social order – a transgression of particular boundaries – triggering a desire to avoid or remove it and stigmatising those who are involved in it. As Goffman (1963) has argued, dirt has potential to produce stigmatising conditions so that individuals are ‘tainted’ and disqualified from full social acceptance. In other words, society projects the negative qualities associated with dirt onto dirty workers, making identity management problematic (Bolton, 2005; Dick, 2005; Newman, 1999; Rollins, 1985; Stacey, 2005) and offering few status shields to challenge the identity imposed (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hochschild, 1983). This raises issues about how people manage job-related stigma (Bolton, 2005; Rollins, 1985) and how social validation is negotiated in order to, for example, create dignity at work (Bolton, 2007; Stacey, 2005).

Social identity theory and dirty work
This suggests a need to understand the processes underlying the intersection of dirty work and identity. Research indicates that people are acutely aware of the stigma attached to their work (Bolton, 2005; Rollins, 1985) and that this can make social validation problematic. Individuals may engage in normalising practices and processes
(Ashforth et al., 2007), thereby rendering the disruptive and problematic elements of the job seemingly ordinary. Through defensive tactics, such as ‘gallows humour’ or condemning those likely to judge the work negatively, individuals can actively counter the taint and render it less salient. Other work (e.g. Stacey, 2005) suggests that people can draw pride and satisfaction from their (dirty) work and that the nature of the work (e.g. unsocial hours which limit contact with outsiders) can facilitate the development of strong occupational and workgroup cultures.

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) draw on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985) to consider how taint is managed. They see identity as fairly stable, grounded in group membership and in the perceptions of others and oriented towards positive distinctiveness. In general terms, these perceptions constitute an ongoing threat to identity so, as they argue, there is often a preoccupation with outsiders and how the work is perceived. One strategy is accordingly to ‘condemn the condemners’ so that their views can be dismissed. Thus, as Rollins (1985) found, domestic cleaners often describe their employers as lonely and unfulfilled – this perceived deficiency serving to partially discount the servile, abject nature of the work.

A further strategy, in line with social identity’s focus on the need to shape a positive identity, is to recast the work in affirmative terms. Some research, for example, has highlighted how demonstrating mastery of the dirtiest aspects of the job can be a source of value. Thus, care workers can find a source of distinctiveness, pride and moral authority in the ability to undertake work that others would be too ‘squeamish’ to perform (Stacey, 2005). As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue, individuals can recast their dirty work in affirmative terms through occupational ideologies (e.g. around fortitude and toughness) that highlight group cohesion, articulating occupational identity in terms of ‘us and them’ and focussing on the specific demands of the job. This can be done by ‘reframing’ the meaning of dirty work by infusing it with positive value (e.g. seeing such work as a badge of honour or a mission); ‘recalibrating’, that is adjusting the perceptual and evaluative standards used to assess the work and thereby minimising the ‘dirty work’ component (e.g. hospital cleaners may introduce notions of patient care as integral to the work); and ‘refocusing’ through the shifting of attention away from the stigmatised to the non-stigmatised features of the job (e.g. refuse collectors may focus on the benefits of flexible hours and social solidarity). Overall, as Kreiner et al. (2006) point out, occupational stigmas may be particularly damaging to an individual’s identity.
Individuals accordingly engage in a diverse set of cognitive, affective and behavioural coping strategies to deal with stigma at work.

## The socially constructed nature of dirty work identity

As we have seen, while Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) position dirty work in social constructionist terms, it has been argued that they may have undertheorised the influence of social and cultural processes and their power dynamics (Dick, 2005; Tracy and Scott, 2006). The social and identity characteristics of the worker are accordingly given less priority in their accounts. The significance of these social dimensions, discussed above, was given some preliminary recognition by Hughes (1958), seen as foundational for conceptualisations of such work, in his assertion of the importance of social status for how dirty work is managed and experienced. Thus, dirty work undertaken by those of a higher standing (e.g. bodily care performed by doctors) can be ‘integrated into the whole’ – rendered less salient by being absorbed into the prestige-bearing role of the person who does it. For these well-positioned individuals, contact with dirt can be mitigated by other, more positive and socially privileged aspects of identity.

This suggests that identity management is likely to be dependent on the individual's ability to mobilise social and cultural resources to support (or resist) a particular sense of self. This indicates a view of identity that, rather than being relatively stable as in social identity theory, is fragile, emergent and ongoing (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Pullen and Linstead, 2005), produced in interaction and through discourse. From this social constructionist perspective, identity is relational, processual and a ‘doing’ that highlights its fragmented, multiple and emergent nature. Thus, as Dick (2005) argues, the choice of strategy suggested by Kreiner et al. (2006) – for example reframing, recalibration, refo-cussing – can be context-specific and result in part from a hegemonic, discursive struggle among meanings as individuals negotiate subjectivity. Some individuals or groups may be able to mobilise resources to better manage the associated taint – for example by being able to draw on other, ‘cleaner’, aspects of the job and/or turn the work into a test of endurance or ‘badge of honour’. Thus from Dick (2005), police officers were able to reconstruct occupational identity by bringing meanings of coercive authority into line with ideals of a liberal democratic society. They were therefore able to absolve themselves of personal responsibility for the use of force. Similarly, as Tracy and Scott (2006) found, firefighters could draw on discourses of masculine heterosexuality to reframe their work in preferred terms. From Bolton’s (2005) study of gynaecology nurses, women were able to draw on essentialised notions
of femininity as ‘unique carers’ to give value to their work and to create distance from men. This highlights the power of some groups to draw on and to mobilise privileged ‘frames’ in these ideological ‘reconstructions’, resisting the stain imposed, as well as drawing attention to the instability and contingency of the meanings conveyed.

This orientation also lends itself to an exploration of how categories of difference intersect in the management of taint – how proximity to dirt may impress differentially on identities and how gender, race, class and migrancy are likely to be implicated in workers’ experiences. This helps us to explore how men and women manage the tainted nature of their work and how these negotiations are influenced by gender, class and race; how bodies are partly made through and marked by meanings around taint; the specific challenges that particular identity groups face; the meanings that individuals draw on to manage the dirty work component of their jobs; and how they position themselves in relation to other groups.

In summary, from this broad starting point, chapters in this book help surface the complexity, fluidity and contingency of dirty work – how occupational boundaries, work practices and the meanings around dirt and cleanliness are accordingly more fluid and subject to re-interpretation and change, rather than being fixed, stable and rooted in a job task or role. Through specific research sites and by drawing on innovative theoretical insights, the chapters explore different ways of conceptualising dirty work, the meanings afforded to cleanliness and dirt, how individuals manage and construct the ‘clean/dirty’ divide as well as how dirty workers negotiate taint in the management of identity.

Chapter summaries

In Chapter 2, ‘Dirty Work and Acts of Contamination’, Heather Höpfl looks at contamination as a form of disordered ‘otherness’ and practice that transgresses boundaries between the clean and the dirty. Drawing partly on Kristeva’s (1982) work as inspiration, she examines the fear of contamination and the embodied dimensions of cleanliness and dirt within aspects of work performance. Using Diderot’s comparison between dramatic performances and prostitution – both involving the promise of intimacy while withholding parts of oneself – she explores the dirty nature of specific performances within a work role. As she points out, actors offer themselves in embodied performances that are regulated and ordered by organisational scripts and performance metrics – the latter regarded as having purity and worth based on
authority and legitimacy. Through this regulation, the organisation designates what is ‘proper’ and ‘clean’ as well as what is ‘dirty’, dangerous and disordered. Here, she draws on Canetti’s ‘sting’, which attaches to a command and causes repressed anger against authority, to explore some responses to being cast as ‘other’ and as ‘dirty’. Through these powerful examples, she highlights how the performance requirements of organisational life can produce actors who are ‘humiliated, debased and under-valued’ and how the sting can, as an embodied response and deliberate act of contamination, take a physical form.

In Chapter 3, ‘Stains, Staining and the Ethics of Dirty Work’, Sheena Vachhani explores the theoretical potential of stains and staining as a productive way of conceptualising dirty work. Here she brings together analyses of the physical and ethical that invoke the material and symbolic relations involved. As she argues, on the one hand we seek to eradicate stains as disorder or ‘corruption’ from our bodies – a visible marker of dirt that arouses disgust; on the other hand, stains can be productive of knowledge and identity, as in the process of medical diagnosis and research and engagement with professional caring roles. The chapter engages in wider debates in feminist ethics – in particular a corporeal ethics concerning the sense of responsibility towards those who are displaced, marked or excluded as a result of physical, social or moral taint. By showing how stains and staining are both about exposure and vulnerability, presencing but also making absent, the chapter invites a new level of recognition of an other, other bodies and other stains. This generosity, she argues, can emerge through an understanding of the specificity of lived bodies that does not privilege a prescriptive ethics but is able to reflect on the social injustices perpetuated by moral order, maps of respectability and relations of classification. This underpins a more inclusive theory of staining that troubles the clean/dirty divide.

In Chapter 4, ‘From High Flyer to Crook – How Can We Understand the Stigmatisation of Investment Bankers during the Financial Crisis?’, Liz Stanley seeks to extend the models and typologies of dirty work by drawing attention to the importance of subject positions and positioning in the exploration of the dynamics and processes of stigmatisation, taint attribution and stigma management strategies. The chapter questions the existing taxonomy of tactics, suggesting that it adopts a relatively stable view of identity, favours the experiences of low-prestige workers and focusses on established taint, which is associated with stigmatised tasks. Here, Liz Stanley explores a high-status occupation such as investment banking that has been newly stigmatised – presenting the case for a more dynamic conceptualisation
of taint. By shifting focus onto a more specific analysis of how well-established occupational groups, in situations of nascent taint, respond to identity threats, the chapter presents the case that the challenge of normalising and countering taint is a complex, messy and fluid identity project. Given the evolving and emergent nature of taint in this context, she argues for a focus on the processes of stigmatisation that can surface the confusion, contradiction and ambiguity in individuals’ responses to a newly experienced form of taint, as boundaries of appropriateness are contested and redrawn. In this respect, she promotes the theoretical and analytical lens of subject positioning to prompt an exploration of how moral taint is constructed and conveyed.

In Chapter 5, ‘“Glamour Girls, Macho Men and Everything in Between”: Un/doing Gender and Dirty Work in Soho’s Sex Shops’, Melissa Tyler explores sales-service work in sex shops. Falling between research which focusses on sex workers and the more recent work on sexualised labour in sales-service work, the sex shop is an underresearched commercial entity. Her consideration of the experience of men and women who work in Soho’s sex shops begins by drawing on Hughes’ (1951) notion of dirty work, exploring the way in which the physical, social and moral taint of this sales occupation is managed. The physical taint of the job is associated with the intimacy inherent in selling sex products to and discussing them with customers, while the social taint is connected to the stigma that such work prompts, leading some of the respondents to conceal their occupation from family and friends. The close association between sex shops, sex work and stigmatised people means that working in such an establishment also carries a strong moral taint. Conventionally, considerations of ‘dirty work’ which are explored through Hughes’ (1951) framework focus on how the taint associated with an occupation is managed, that is on how individuals deal with the repugnance that this type of work provokes. However, Tyler goes further and argues that for sales-service workers in sex shops the situation is more complex than just managing taint. Rather she suggests that there is a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the various taints attached to this type of work on the part of most of her respondents. On this basis she argues, drawing on the work of Kristeva (1982), that sales-service work in sex shops is better understood as abject labour, as this allows us to consider what it is about ‘dirt’ that attracts as well as disgusts the respondents in her study. Framing sales-service work in sex shops as abject labour allows us to not only consider the coping strategies of those involved in it, but also to understand the appeal that attaches to such work.
In Chapter 6, ‘Doing Gender in Dirty Work: Exotic Dancers’ Construction of Self-enhancing Identities’, Gina Grandy and Sharon Mavin examine another underresearched form of work, that of exotic dancing. This occupation has tended to be subsumed within the broader category of sex workers, with the particular characteristics and issues of this form of work being concealed. In response to a recent call for research specific to this employment, Grandy and Mavin explore how dancers construct a favourable identity within a context where significant physical, social and moral taint attaches to the labour. Through their analysis they identify a number of positive and negative identity roles which exotic dancers construct. The positive identity roles constructed include those of the empowered, the temp, the good girl, the professional and the artist, while the negative ones include those of the lifer, the dirty dancer and the competitor. These identity roles are connected to issues of freedom, that is to control over their own work situations, the longevity of their dancing career and their behaviour in regards to nudity and drinking while working as a dancer. Two aspects of these identity roles and the characteristics that attach to them are notable. First, Grandy and Mavin emphasise that these identity roles are fluid and that it is possible that an individual can enact multiple, overlapping and contradictory identity roles. Second, those women who take up positive identity roles as a means of managing the taint attached to their occupation, do so through a process of othering individuals who are associated with the negative identity roles. This helps to establish distance from the stigma attached to exotic dancing as dirty work, while also enabling a favourable positioning within the complex, gendered sex and sex-industry status hierarchies.

In Chapter 7, ‘Dirty Talks and Gender Cleanliness: An Account of Identity Management Practices in Phone Sex Work’, Giulia Selmi explores the ways in which identity is managed by female phone-sex operators. Through her Italian study, she highlights the specific gender dirtiness of the work (e.g. through the ‘whore stigma’) as well as how gender is drawn on in the management of taint. Through the narratives of the women concerned, she highlights how women respond to the symbolic conception of commercial sex as a form of deviance or immorality and how they resist being so framed. Here, women draw on the commercial aspects of the interaction, aligning themselves with other call operators and downplaying the sexual element. Some women present themselves as caregivers, offering a unique service in this respect. Others position their male clients as deficient and as having violated norms of gender appropriateness – thereby allowing space
for self-constructions that mobilise conventional norms of acceptable femininity. Through these practices and processes, she highlights how women respond to the symbolic conception of commercial sex as a form of female immorality by casting the work in socially acceptable terms. This ‘identity cleansing’ is deeply gendered and, as she argues, involves the strategic use of, as well as distancing from, symbolic elements of the whore stigma.

In Chapter 8, ‘Embracing Dirt in Nursing Matters’, Robert McMurray explores how constructions of nursing work have changed in relation to notions of dirt by tracing a shift from Nightingale’s concern with sanitation to the development of Advanced Nurse Practitioners (ANPs) who claim jurisdiction as diagnosticians. In the former case the dirty work of nursing speaks of vital daily work with messy bodies, messier practices and unwanted populations. In claiming dirt and its management as part of nursing practice, the core of ‘women’s work’, an occupational identity can be supported around possession of sanitary knowledge that demands recognition. The chapter considers the manner in which ANPs resist this positioning, by staking a claim to the medical knowledge that characterises professional status. Yet in making such claims – in challenging the livelihoods of doctors and the presumptive exclusivity that is at the heart of gendered notions of a profession – they themselves are rendered as ‘dirt’. In Douglas’s terms, they are seen as ‘matter out of place’. In tracing this change, the chapter considers the potential for positive and negative meanings to be activated in relation to nursing’s association with dirt. In doing so, it highlights the socially constructed nature of dirt, its multiplicity and historical contingency and how it is mobilised to support a particular occupational identity.

In Chapter 9, ‘Dispersing of Dirt: Inscribing Bodies and Polluting Organisation’, Paul White and Alison Pullen draw on the processes and practices of intensive care to explore the significance of the body as present and absent, invaded, pierced and managed through technologies of life support. Within the space of the ceremonial ordering of clinical work, they utilise notions of cleanliness and sterility as illusive ‘matter in place’ to highlight principles of organising as well as of dirt dispersal. Here, they discuss the cultural implications of the dispersal of dirt as an act of forgetting and deferment that leads to its eventual return. Through a series of evocative photographic and other images, they demonstrate how the (integrated techno-) body is made knowable and read – amenable to organisational manipulation and interpretation – and how the critically ill body is punctured, interpreted, manipulated, cleansed and spatially managed through technology. Further, they show how bodies are rendered legible through the ceremonial
order of clinical work and how they are rendered visible via leakages as fleshy, carnal and unsanitised while also contained within technologies of intensive care. The body is shown to be an extension of technology and technology itself as it is transformed as a techno-body. Through this example, the authors make visible how the body of the critically ill is incorporated into the broader circuit of material, social and spatial relations as well as how any breach in this order amplifies dirt.

In Chapter 10, ‘Gendering and Embodying Dirty Work: Men Managing Taint in the Context of Nursing Care’, Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya and Jason Hughes explore the gendered nature of dirty work and how dirty workers manage taint. Through an Australia-based study of 16 male nurses, they draw attention to the gendered and embodied dimensions of dirty work and argue that notions of ‘suitability’ underpin understandings of such work. In particular, they show how men draw on gender as an active strategy to manage taint. With regard to physical taint, male nurses frame their work-based abilities in explicitly ‘masculine’ terms (e.g. around fortitude and endurance) as special qualities. However, in managing the moral taint associated with the sexualisation of men’s touch in nursing care, they work to create distance from gender and masculinity, drawing instead on (more gender-neutral) norms of professionalism. Gender is thus drawn on in an active strategy to reframe meanings around such work. At the same time, men’s bodies are seen as out of place in a nursing role, and the authors show how notions of embodied ‘suitability’ can underpin perceptions of dirt, ‘disorder’ and taint.

Much of the research on dirty work has focussed on individuals located at the lower end of the occupational spectrum, exploring the means by which they recast their work in positive terms by managing the taint and stigma attaching to it. In Chapter 11 entitled ‘Cleaning up? Transnational Corporate Femininity and Dirty Work in Magazine Culture’, Elaine Swan builds on this research by focussing on a group of elite workers, namely career women, who have been underrepresented and underresearched in the contemporary dirty-work literature. Focussing on a 2007 supplement of the magazine Harper’s Bazaar, entitled ‘Bazaar at Work’, she explores how the magazine issue contributes to the creation and maintenance of an elite by acting as a tool for middle-class career women to draw upon. A key theme of the supplement is the management of time, with women being identified as a group of workers who face particular temporal problems due to the cultural expectation that they will take responsibility for family and domestic issues. The solution to time pressures is presented as lying in the adoption of
appropriate strategies to enable the successful achievement and management of work/life balance. The contracting out of household chores, what can be referred to as ‘dirty work’, is vital to the achievement of the sought-after ‘balance’, with the service of other (non-elite) women being central in securing this. Through the imagery and text of such a supplement, she argues that a new version of femininity labelled ‘transnational corporate femininity’ is being constructed. Developing this notion, she argues that central to the achievement of this version of femininity is the cultural resource of cleanliness which is secured through the domestic labour of others, enabling elite career women to maintain a distance from any taint that attaches to domesticity. What emerges clearly from the analysis is that there is no ‘pan femininity’ across all women, rather the outsourcing of ‘dirty work’ as a strategy for career success contributes to the enforcement of hierarchical relations between femininities.

In Chapter 12, ‘Managing “Dirty” Migrant Identities: Migrant Labour and the Neutralisation of Dirty Work Through Moral Group Identity’, Geraldine Lee-Treweek explores how dirt and taint are managed among Polish migrant workers and how the work culture focusses inwards to manage dirty meanings. Building on UK-based ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter demonstrates how the work group appropriates ways of understanding and being and the moral values and cultural traditions they inherit as a form of resistance to negative meanings attached to their work. The chapter highlights the fact that though migrant workers are physically mobile they often find themselves ‘stuck’ in the old forms of self-definition and self-differentiation. Having very limited resources to redeem both the ‘dirtiness’ of their work and the precariousness of their newly occupied positions, they adhere to the ideas of ‘traditional’ Polishness, a good ‘Polish worker’ and ‘proper’ feminine behaviour. The lack of means to positively ‘make the self’ or perhaps (given the possibilities opened up by migration) to ‘remake the self’ in the workplace also reveals itself in the elements of racism, workplace bullying and intolerance to difference and alternative ways of living. By focussing on how identity is managed from within the group, as pre-migration identities are invested with worth to become a source of group membership, Lee-Treweek shows how despite geographical mobility, the relationship between past and present identity becomes non-fluid and definitive.

In Chapter 13, ‘Post-feminism and Entrepreneurship: Interpreting Disgust in a Female Entrepreneurial Narrative’, Patricia Lewis explores expressions of disgust within one businesswoman’s narrative and considers the broader social phenomenon that such expressions represent. A central focus of a number of studies of dirty work is to explore how
jobs designated as ‘dirty work’ taint the individuals who perform them, while also considering how those who do dirty work manage any associated stigma. In contrast in this chapter, Lewis considers the reactions and responses to those individuals whose presence in a particular job is perceived to taint an occupation which would not conventionally be labelled ‘dirty work’, while also exploring how these individuals and their perceived stigma is ‘managed’. In particular she considers how women business owners who are deemed to be inappropriately feminine are rendered ‘disgusting’ as a means of establishing distance from them and reducing the impact of their perceived ‘taint’ on the entrepreneurial activities of other women. It is argued that disgust is an emotion which has been underresearched but which acts to establish divisions and distinctions between different types of individuals in general and businesswomen in particular. However, she further argues that these expressions of disgust are not only about establishing boundaries between individuals but are also a manifestation of what Gill (2007) refers to as a post-feminist sensibility which acts to prevent individual women from understanding their business experiences as connected to wider structural and cultural constraints.
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