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Sexuality, Masculinity, and Taint Management Among Firefighters and Correctional Officers

Getting Down and Dirty With "America's Heroes" and the "Scum of Law Enforcement"

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Based on qualitative field and interview data, this comparative analysis of dirty work by firefighters and correctional officers demonstrates that taint management and its relative utility is inextricably bound to and embedded within macro-level discourses. While firefighters labor to fulfill expectations as "America's heroes," correctional officers work to squelch images as "professional babysitters" and the "scum of law enforcement." The authors' analysis illustrates how discourses of occupational prestige and masculine heterosexuality allow firefighters to frame their work in preferred, privileged terms while correctional officers struggle to combat taint discursively associated with low-level feminized care work or with brutish, deviant sexuality. This study extends theoretical understandings of identity construction, dirty work, taint management, and organizational performances of masculinity and sexuality. The authors' analysis concludes with limitations, future directions, and practical applications regarding the potentially dysfunctional results of taint management.

Keywords: *identity; dirty work; taint management; gender; masculinity; sexuality; dirty jobs*

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> We're the scum of law enforcement. We're bottom of the barrel.
>
> —Stephanie Jones, Women's Minimum Correctional Officer

> It's almost like you're worshipped.
>
> —Paul Peterson, Plateau City Fire Department[1]

In spite of the inconsistency of the above statements, firefighters and correctional officers have a number of things in common. Both employee groups work with stigmatized populations. Firefighters deal with 911 "frequent flyers" including indigents, the homeless, and the elderly. Correctional officers work with alleged and convicted criminals. As such, firefighters and correctional officers regularly do "dirty work"—tasks that society considers socially, morally, or physically undesirable (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951). However, the occupations have very different reputations. While firefighters successfully labor to sustain their reputation as "America's heroes" and manage dirty work about which few outsiders are aware, correctional officers must work to overcome their reputations as "professional babysitters" and the "scum of law enforcement."

Understanding how employees achieve an esteemed sense of self through their work has been of increasing interest in the field of organizational studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003). Organizations are places where we "come to understand who we are and who we might become" (Trethewey, 1997, p. 281), so discourse not only reflects occupational values but also constitutes workplace selves. Occupational identity, a set of central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that typify a line of work (Albert & Whetten, 1985), is accomplished within a variety of discourses generated by occupational insiders and outsiders. Individuals gravitate toward and turn away from particular jobs depending, in part, on the extent to which they validate a "preferred organizational self" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 169). Crafting a positive sense of self at work is more challenging when one's work is considered "dirty" by societal standards.

The process by which people arrive at justifications of and values for various occupational choices is of practical importance for several reasons. This identity work has been linked to occupational health and safety choices (Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, & Young, 2000; Zoller, 2003), rationalization of fraudulent or unethical acts (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004), group motivation (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004), perceptions of job roles (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), and identification with the organizational culture (Heinsler, Kleinman, & Stenross, 1990). Because the process of "making work matter" may be associated

with these substantial outcomes, we believe researchers need to examine the individual, organizational, and societal factors that shape this process. Extant research on dirty work has focused on individual taint-management practices and how they affect the work-group culture (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Such analyses explore the micropractices of work-group members in a relatively voluntaristic manner, with less-explicit regard for the organizational structures and extraorganizational discourses—such as discourses of masculinity and sexuality—that may ease or exacerbate the management of dirty work.

This comparative analysis of firefighters and correctional officers extends current understandings of dirty work and identity construction by examining how taint management and its relative effectiveness is inextricably bound to and embedded within macro-level discursive formations. Our data illustrate that firefighters surmounted the everyday taint of their work in ways that correctional officers could not. This was not merely because of differences in the day-to-day group duties of the two occupations but, instead, was largely a product of the asymmetrical discursive resources available for managing taint. Specifically, discourses of occupational prestige and masculine heterosexuality allowed firefighters to continually reframe their work in preferred terms whereas correctional officers struggled to combat taint associated with low-level, feminized care work or with brutish, deviant sexuality.

In addition to this primary contribution, our analysis extends conceptions of *dirty work* in several ways. First, the only integrative model of taint management among dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) emphasizes similarities between dirty occupations but suggests that future scholarship should explore how occupational prestige influences the utility of various taint-management practices. Because firefighters and correctional officers are materially and socially dirty but diverge with regard to occupational prestige, a research design that includes both is valuable for examining the impact of status on employees' management of taint. Second, although some studies have analyzed dirty workers (if without this label; e.g., Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Murphy, 2003; Twigg, 2000), they have not explicitly studied how members deflect taint. Last, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggested that another promising area for future research is analyzing how taint management may "spawn several dysfunctional consequences" (p. 429). Similar to identity-seeking endeavors that have ambivalent and contradictory results (Collinson, 2003), the current analysis indicates that taint-management techniques, although perhaps intended to enhance identity, can sometimes have unintended and problematic consequences.

Extending Past Conceptualizations of Dirty work

In the following literature review, we discuss past conceptualizations of *dirty work*, *occupational prestige*, and *taint management*. We suggest that this work could be extended through a critical poststructuralist understanding of identity and gendered notions of organizing.

Dirty Work, Prestige, and Taint Management

The term *dirty work* was coined by Hughes (1951) to refer to job duties that others likely view as disgusting, degrading, or morally insulting.[2] Emerson and Pollner (1976) extended the concept of *dirty work* to include aspects of the job that are shameful, disliked, or serve to challenge the self-image of the worker. Work can be tainted physically, socially, or morally (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). *Physical taint* takes place in jobs associated with dirt, garbage, sewage, death, bodily fluids, or dangerous conditions (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Perry, 1998). As evidenced by the American television series *Dirty Jobs* (McCarthy, 2005), this label is more commonly associated with occupations dominated by men (e.g., gravediggers, farmhands, and butchers). Nonetheless, one could argue that female-dominated occupations, such as home health care workers (Twigg, 2000), are also physically dirty. Employees face *social taint* when their work requires a servile relationship to others, such as maids and domestic workers (Anderson, 2000), or regular contact with people who themselves are stigmatized, such as social workers or correctional officers (Tracy, 2004). Last, *moral taint* occurs when an "occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415), such as pawnbrokers or strippers (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000; Murphy, 2003; Rambo Ronai, 1992).

How do dirty workers deal with taint? Past research suggests three specific taint-management methods. First, employees can engage in *reframing*, which involves "transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 421). Reframing "infuses" or imbues the stigma with a positive value or a "badge of honor," such as when pawnbrokers claim to provide an invaluable service. Reframing also is accomplished through "neutralization," wherein the stigma's negative value is negated, denied, or rationalized. A second technique is *recalibrating*, which refers to "adjusting the implicit standards that are invoked to assess the magnitude (how much) and/or valence (how good) of a given dirty work attribute" (Ashforth & Kreiner, p. 422). For instance, dirty workers exaggerate, retell, and relive positive job attributes and justify how important their tasks are to overall societal

or organizational goal(s). A third taint-management technique is *refocusing*, wherein "attention is shifted from the stigmatized features of the work to the non-stigmatized features" and the employee "actively overlooks the stigmatized properties" (Ashforth & Kreiner, p. 423). For instance, crime scene investigators may gloat about their high pay and nontraditional work schedule. Finally, although not specifically outlined by Ashforth and Kreiner, some studies indicate that dirty workers cope with taint by distancing themselves from clients through what might best be called *depersonalization*. Home health care workers use gloves as a symbolic and physical distancing technique when bathing clients (Twigg, 2000), and strippers depersonalize clients by pretending they are "just playing a role" and maintaining vigilance about boundaries with clients (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000).

An issue that cuts across categorizations of dirty work is occupational prestige, defined as a combination of status, power, quality of work, education, and income (Treiman, 1977; cf. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Prestige is an arena in which firefighters and correctional officers differ. One occupational-prestige survey reports that firefighters rate a 53, while correctional officers rate a 40, with 76 the high and 19 the low (Nakao & Treas, 1994). Occupational-prestige scores are difficult to obtain, and reliable data could not be found to account for differences in prestige levels since the World Trade Center bombings on 9/11. However, given the onslaught of positive-media attention to firefighters (Flynn, 2003; Golway, 2002), their prestige level in 2006 is likely at least equivalent to regular police officers, who rate a 60 (Nakao & Treas, 1994). This would mean that firefighters' status is 20 points (or 36%) higher than correctional officers.

Given the challenges of doing low-prestige work, one might expect dirty workers to have a negative self-image. Past research on this topic is mixed. The majority of research indicates that dirty workers typically maintain reasonably high levels of occupational esteem and pride (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Thompson, 1991; Wacquant, 1995), suggesting that employees often are able to overcome the taint of their work and develop a strong occupational and/or work-group culture. However, we would emphasize that many of the studies that associate dirty work and strong organizational culture and identification are based on research with male dirty workers doing "manly" jobs—work that is associated with traditionally masculine values of "strength, robustness, boldness, stoutness, bravery, and not being womanish" (Cooper, 1995, pp. 146-147). Some workers, as evidenced by studies of college campus security officers (Heinsler et al., 1990) and strippers (Rambo Ronai, 1992), have more difficulty finding an enhanced self-esteem. We would argue that this is connected

to larger discourses, structures, and contexts that asymmetrically enable and constrain identity production at work.

Considering Gender Identity and the Discourses of Dirty Work

Poststructuralist organizational studies theorize and illustrate empirically that workplace selves are constructed in relation to ongoing, multilayered, and fragmented discourses (Collinson, 1992; Deetz, 1992; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). A satisfying sense of self can be elusive and easily threatened and, therefore, must be constantly reaccomplished through everyday talk (Collinson, 2003; Weedon, 1997). Identity construction and management is therefore not an autonomous, individual process but instead mediated by societal expectations and organizational norms. Institutions, including the individuals who constitute them, produce and reproduce meaning systems that place asymmetrical value on preferred identities. Therefore, these identification processes are inextricably bound to macro-level discursive formations (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Trethewey, 1997). The meanings that reaffirm a preferred self are never stable and are usually at least somewhat contested as members appropriate discursive formations in their attempts to fix meaning. Indeed, the search for a preferred, secure identity "can become an obsession that often reproduces rather than resolves the insecurity it seeks to transcend" (Collinson, 1992, p. 20).

Although some past dirty work research has acknowledged that the construction of work roles are "embedded in quite distinctive class, regional, and national cultures" (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990), little attention has been paid to discursive formations that affect the range of taint-management techniques available to individuals. Furthermore, although Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) usefully acknowledged that dirty work is not an objective work feature but a social construction, little sustained attention is paid to the impact of extraorganizational discourses of power on taint management. In other words, social construction is acknowledged, but its politics are undertheorized (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). A poststructuralist viewpoint would suggest that taint management is not only a socially constructed response to stigma originating from outside the organization (society writ large), but that the very concepts of taint, dirt and prestige are intimately connected to powerful social identity categories such as gender and sexuality.

Since identity categories have historically been associated with separate occupational spheres (e.g., men do public work, women do private, supportive work), it seems reasonable to expect that gender, as one of these broader

discourses, would mediate how the taint of dirty work can be navigated. However, gender remains a “present absence” (Trethewey, Scott, & Legreco, 2006) in the theorizing of dirty work. Indeed, while some of the dirty work literature touches upon issues of masculinity and femininity, it does little to account for the way work is constituted as tainted, and how employees navigate dirty work in relation to larger discourses of gender and sexuality. In this analysis, we demonstrate the ways that such discourses can be hegemonic, but at the same time, acknowledge that masculinity is not monolithic (Mumby, 1998). We approach gender as “a complex, fragmentary, ongoing, and contradictory accomplishment that unfolds at the intersection of communication and organizing” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 4).

Occupational prestige may also intersect with discourses of gender to shape how taint is managed. Gendered discourses permeate peoples’ popular understandings of male and female authority and status. Members of some occupations are afforded “status shields” in ways that are unavailable to others. Female flight attendants regularly endure more complaints and belittling comments than do their male counterparts (Hochschild, 1983), and female correctional officers are exposed to more harassment (sexual and otherwise) from inmates than are male officers (Britton, 1997). We would extend this line of reasoning to argue that the discursive formations that define a job’s societal prestige may affect the strength of a status shield to deflect identity threats.

Relatedly, we believe that discourses and practices of sexuality shape the availability of particular taint-management techniques. Sexuality is a delicate, often invisible, issue within the workplace (Collinson & Collinson, 1989). Sexuality is “written-out” of organizational training manuals, rules, policies, and procedures, and considered incompatible with rational productivity (Parkin, 1989). Indeed, “to suggest that sexual relationships routinely shape (and are shaped by) our employment experiences violates values and beliefs that are fundamental to our capitalist culture” (Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999, p. 74). Despite the lack of formal discussion about sex, “male sexual imagery pervades organizational metaphors and language” (Acker, 1990), and analyses of organizations reveal the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, sexual relationships, sexual banter, and sexual rumor (Burrell & Hearn, 1989; Collinson, 1992).

Most researchers examining organizational sexuality do so with regard to domination and harassment (Clair, 1993; Solomon & Williams, 1997) or romantic relationships (Williams et al., 1999). Hearn (1985) goes further, detailing four types of male-sexual behavior—including horseplay, exploiting sexuality (e.g., through pornography), sexual harassment, and mutual sexuality. Unfortunately, little of this work explores the capacity of

sexuality to play a constitutive role in work processes that transcend sexual relationships, domination, or harassment (Gutek, 1985). Organizations may seek to circumscribe or repress it, yet sexuality may aid the production and maintenance of organizational values and identities. Here, through a comparative analysis of firefighters and correctional officers—both occupations that deal with similar forms of taint, and both gendered (masculine) organizations (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2003)—we examine how discourses of sexuality and gender enable and constrain efforts to maintain a preferred identity in the face of navigating dirty work.

Method

This study is the result of two ethnographic projects. The first examined the day-to-day lives of correctional officers for the purposes of understanding the emotional highs and lows of their work. The second project focused upon emotion work and masculinity among firefighters. Halfway through the second project, we began comparing and contrasting our data, and saw interesting possibilities for extending research on dirty work. Specifically, we were struck with the fact that, while members of both occupations worked with stigmatized client populations and dealt with a variety of dirty job tasks, the two groups managed taint through often-similar techniques yet with divergent outcomes. Through the data analysis process, it became clear that comparative empirical study highlighted heretofore underexamined contextual factors that affect taint management.

This project included qualitative data from four organizational sites and two occupations and, therefore, enabled us to examine dirty work from multiple viewpoints and develop theoretical explanations with broader applicability than an exclusive focus on one occupation or organization. Moreover, including the perspectives of two researchers' enhanced accountability and reflexivity; interpretations were questioned and substantiated to an extent not often available to individual researchers (Adler & Adler, 1987). In what follows, we offer specific descriptions of sites, data sources, and interpretive analysis methods.

Occupational Setting 1: Corrections

The first author collected qualitative data from two correctional facilities during the course of 11 months, yielding 722 single-spaced, typewritten pages of raw data. Data sources (171 research hours) included field notes

from shadowing officers in their daily work (80 hours), field notes from participation in training for prison and/or jail volunteers and participant observation in officer training sessions (41 hours), 22 transcribed formal interviews (30 hours), notes from informal "ethnographic interviews" (20 hours), and analysis of 120 pages of organizational-training documents. Data were collected from a state women's minimum-security prison (WM) located in a large metropolitan Rocky Mountain city and a mostly male (92%) county jail called "Nouveau Jail" (NJ) located on the outskirts of this same metropolitan area. Both facilities employed male and female officers, with about two thirds of the employees being male. Similar to Britton's (1997) research in correctional institutions, both facilities featured socialization strategies that assumed a male officer, in spite of a mixed-gender employee base.

Occupational Setting 2: Firefighting

During a period of 2 years, the second author conducted participant observation and semistructured interviews at two municipal fire departments in separate major metropolitan areas of the western United States, Plateau City Fire Department (PCFD) and Bayside Fire Department (BFD). Twenty formal, semistructured interviews were conducted with eight firefighters, eight captains, one deputy chief, and three training administrators (22 hours), yielding 271 single-spaced pages of interview data. In addition, the second author conducted participant observation in six fire stations. During periods of participant observation, he helped with station chores and emergency-response activities, observed training exercises, prepared and ate meals with the crew, and accompanied them on fire and emergency medical service (EMS) calls. Throughout the fieldwork, he conducted numerous ethnographic interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) that were reconstructed in field notes. Periods of participant observation ranged from 2 to 24 hours and generated 131 single-spaced, typewritten pages of field notes representing 99 hours of field observation. Similar to most fire departments throughout the United States, BFD and PCFD employed a firefighter population that was overwhelmingly male.

Data Analysis

An interpretive analysis suggested that internal and external identity threats played a key role in both scenes. The current study's data analysis procedures reflected an iterative process alternating between etic (a priori) and emic (emergent) approaches (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We read and

reread the data sets and culled excerpts pertaining to work group or occupational identity—events and messages that involved enhancement, threat, or esteem management. When extracted, we developed categories associated with taint management. Codes were inspired by Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) model and past research on dirty work, sexuality, and identity construction in organizations. As we coded the data, new taint-management categories also emerged including techniques such as "blaming the stigmatized party" and "using sexuality and masculinity as a status shield." Thus, we utilized a two-level analysis scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that began with etic codes but also relied on a constant-comparative method version (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to detect recurring, emergent, categories.

Findings

We begin with an overview of the dirty work of correctional officers and firefighters. Then, in the heart of the findings, we tease out reasons why firefighters appeared able to combat taint and craft positive meanings for their work through methods unavailable to correctional officers.

Physical and Social Taint

Correctional officer work is dirty on a number of levels. First, much of the job is physically disgusting (Conover, 2000). Officers chaperone inmates to the bathroom (to ensure inmates do not hide contraband on or in their bodies) and conduct inmate "strip outs" after visitation sessions. The work of "caring" is usually associated with women, thus diminishing its perceived organizational value (England & Folbre, 1999) and its relative monetary compensation (Steinberg, 1999). Officers also are responsible for cleaning up the (literal and figurative) messes occasioned by inmates who, for instance, swallow foreign objects, sexually abuse each other, trash their cells, throw food at officers, or play with their feces. Although these types of incidents are not common, they are the fodder for stories that are told and retold and emerged in response to interview questions about the most memorable parts of the job.

Correctional officers also face social taint because their work requires service to stigmatized clients. Societal discourses suggest that inmates are deviant human rubbish (Davis, 1998) and that correctional institutions represent a failure in social functioning. The public has "washed their hands" of criminals, and correctional institutions are hidden, isolated, invisible, and

silent (Foucault, 1977). Referred to as a “contagion effect” (Brodsky, 1982), outsiders sometimes regard officers as being not so different from the population they control.

Some readers may be surprised by the classification of firefighting as dirty work. In the wake of 9/11, popular accounts ascribe the occupation a privileged status associated with skill, heroism, and fearlessness. However, the romantic image of firefighting as superhuman work that involves daily suppression of structure fires is, frankly, misleading. Because of improved construction standards and code enforcement, structure fires are increasingly rare. Moreover, in the 1970s, urban American fire departments began taking over Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and today most metropolitan departments serve the dual functions of EMS and fire suppression (Brunacini, 2002) with EMS operations constituting the lion’s share of daily work.[3]

Previous scholarship has characterized firefighting as an example of a dirty occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415; Kaprow, 1991), and as recently demonstrated by the American television series *Dirty Jobs* (McCarthy, 2005), the tasks that dominate firefighting work provide compelling evidence that the occupation is, indeed, rife with taint. Firefighters expose themselves to physically filthy tasks and work “under particularly dangerous or noxious conditions” (Ashforth & Kreiner, p. 415). Firefighters also encounter death, charred and dismembered bodies, and a variety of bodily fluids. Like members of other medical professions (Hafferty, 1988; Scott & Myers, 2005; Smith & Kleinman, 1989), firefighters regularly examine zones of the body otherwise considered “off limits.”

Firefighters are also tainted socially by “courtesy stigma” (Page, 1984) that results from regular contact with stigmatized clients. Firefighters go through customer service training where they are taught to provide the finest treatment to “Mrs. Smith,” a decidedly feminine client typically portrayed as helpless, innocent, fragile, and in serious need (and therefore very much appreciative) of firefighters’ expert service. However, firefighters’ daily activities do not align with this ideal. A growing indigent population relies almost exclusively on emergency services for their primary health care, and firefighter talk often reflects their disdain for this class of clients. As one explained, “We call ’em [indigent callers] shitbums because they shit all over themselves and call us. Then we have to take care of them.” Indeed, caring for “shitbums” may be the antithesis of the heroism, masculinity, physical and emotional strength, and independence that constitutes the public identity of the firefighter.

Thus, the work of correctional officers and firefighters is physically and socially dirty. However, our data suggested that firefighters appeared much more satisfied with their work than correctional officers. This difference is partially explained by the status ascribed to firefighters and the moral taint associated with correctional officers.

Prestige and Moral Taint

The typical layperson knows little about correctional officers' work. The extant literature—scholarly and popular—provides little in the way of ethnographic research that fleshes out the everyday stories and practices of correctional officers from their point of view (although see Conover, 2000; Tracy, 2004, 2005). In addition, although television shows regularly depict police officers' and lawyers' dramatic and difficult work (*Cops*, *Law and Order*, *CSI*, *NYPD Blue*, *Rescue 911)*, Hollywood largely ignores correctional officers—except when portraying them as cruel (e.g., the HBO series *Oz* and the movie *Shawshank Redemption*). When correctional officers make the nightly news, it is usually because of an escape, riot, hostage crisis, or charge of officer misconduct (e.g., Crawford & Villa, 2004; Crowder, 1999; Foster, 1999; Stratton, 1999). These negative mass-media representations, in addition to the fact that prisons and jails are total institutions absent from public view (Goffman, 1961), provide the ingredients necessary to produce myriad negative perceptions of the correctional job.

Indeed, officers indicated that many of their friends and family members consider them to be different, deviant, and unknown. One officer explained, "I'm sick of people thinking we're all bad, killing people left and right." Another said, "They think that we're part of the punishment, that we're uneducated, big, mean people barking out orders. . . . I've even had people ask me if we *beat* people!" On a series of *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* episodes taped in Arizona's Maricopa County Jail, correctional officers were repeatedly harassed by questions such as: "Who would want this job?" and "Why does someone choose to be in a place where there is this kind of cruelty?" (Maher et al., 2000).

Officers not only felt denigrated by the general public but also, in what appeared to be an even greater insult, felt disparaged by members of other law enforcement occupations. They said: "Police officers don't consider us to even be in their same category," "We're the scum of law enforcement," "We are considered the dregs of the police department," and "Police officers just think we're glorified babysitters." In addition, one officer complained that when officers transported inmates to the hospital, "The nurses and doctors

frown at us and make comments about us, like, 'That's cruel,' because we'll come in with women who are hand-cuffed, belly-chained, their ankles cuffed together." In sum, correctional officers not only encounter physical and social dirt, but also moral taint.

In contrast, firefighters serve an admiring public exposed to idealized images of the occupation. As PCFD Firefighter Dave put it,

> People always say when they are a kid they want to be a fireman.[4] When you're driving down the street in that big, red fire truck, everybody's waving at you. There's not too many occupations or careers . . . where people open their doors to you and thoroughly trust you when you're going into their home. And that right there tells you that people think that firefighters are quite the thing.

Some firefighters expressed awareness that this glorified "worshiped" image was at odds with the actual content of daily tasks. For example, PCFD Firefighter Paul said,

> I think it's more that people see firefighters as almost like heroic icons in a sense. . . . You're driving down the street and you have kids running after you, waving at you . . . but I'm not going to necessarily say it's the job itself.

As these firefighters suggest, the source of their prestige is more iconic than realistic, reified in larger macro discourses more than in everyday micro-practices. Indeed, when Plateau City Firefighter Chaz was asked how she described her job to friends and family, she replied, "I always ask them, have you seen [the TV show] *Third Watch*? That's *not* how it is."

So firefighters face a situation that diverges considerably from that of correctional officers. Although officers must navigate disdainful societal perceptions that they are sadistic purveyors of cruelty, firefighters appreciate a "status shield" (Smith & Kleinman, 1989) that essentially protects them from tainted characterizations of their work. This image allows them to focus on the ways children idolize them, rather than on the everyday dirt in their job. However, it is not just the shield of prestige that protects firefighters or a lack of one that leaves correctional officers vulnerable to taint.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Discursive Management of Taint

Notions of dirt and mess are usually more closely associated with masculinity than femininity. Little boys are made of snips, snails, and puppy dog tails, while little girls are sugar, spice, and everything nice (Howard &

Albritton, 2001). Indeed, the dirty work literature (e.g., see the review in Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) as well as popular representations of dirty jobs (McCarthy, 2005) focus much more on men and male occupations (e.g., garbage collectors, grave diggers, firefighters) than women and female jobs (scholarly studies of sex workers are the most common of female dirty workers). This might suggest that masculine work is most dirty and stigmatizing. However, the analysis here indicates that, because of the asymmetrical gendered discursive resources available to manage taint, it is the feminine side of dirty work—the caring and cleanup—that is perhaps most difficult for employees to combat. Firefighters appear able to manage taint more effectively than correctional officers not necessarily because their objective day-to-day work duties are so different but rather because they are able to continually reconstruct their work and image in favored masculine terms.

Danger and Sexuality as Badges of Honor: Masculinity and Taint Management at the Firehouse

One of the most common methods firefighters used to manage taint was to discuss how no one else could ever do their job. This tactic, which Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) call "infusing," allowed firefighters to transform one of the dirtiest parts of their job into an iconic badge of honor by discursively highlighting its danger. A common aphorism was exemplified by Firefighter Chaz, who stated,

> It takes a different type of person who wants to run into a burning building when people are running out, you know. So right there you've got a different mindset. Not many people want to run into a burning building.

The image of running into a burning building was repeatedly intoned in interviews and has become a familiar descriptor of firefighters in post–9/11 media coverage. Firefighting is framed as valorous work achieved by a select few; firefighters do what members of other occupations will not. Of course, this taint management is possible in large part only because firefighters' EMS work is largely absent from the discussion. We never heard firefighters, for instance, proudly say, "It takes a different type of person who wants to clean up and transport a homeless drug addict." Running into a burning building is associated with the assumed manly qualities of physical and emotional strength (Cooper, 1995); care taking, and cleaning up shit in particular, is associated with femininity and mothering.

Indeed, firefighters very rarely spoke about their EMS work and when they did, they spoke of it negatively. Some referred to the ambulance (but not the fire engine) as the “shitbox” or the “shit carrier,” and, in spite of the preponderance of EMS tasks, participants’ talk time was dominated by stories of firefighting. Less than 10% of the emergency calls at BFD and PDFD were about fire and, of these, most were extremely minor (e.g., a smoking light fixture). The second author initially was perplexed about firefighters’ lack of talk about EMS. When asked about it, Firefighter Shane explained, saying,

> Well, we don’t talk about it because EMS just isn’t very fun. It’s not heroic. . . . Firefighting is like riding down a hill on a bicycle really fast, maybe with your hands off the handlebars. The ambulance service is like fixing that bike. It’s okay, but it’s not nearly as much fun.

In this comment, fun is equated with danger and risk. This tendency is framed as just a “natural” part of being a firefighter. As Firefighter Paul explained, “We’ll sit and talk about a really long, complicated EMS call for a minute, but we’ll talk about a little fire, say a dumpster fire, for an hour and a half.” Rather than conceptualizing this practice as “natural,” we would argue that this emphasis on fire serves as an important recalibration technique that aids in maintaining an esteem-enhancing identity.

Relatedly, firefighters in both departments negatively labeled clients who were perceived to have called 911 for illegitimate reasons as “bullshit callers.” Whether callers were labeled “bullshit” had much to do with whether or not the situation affirmed or contradicted firefighters preferred sense of themselves as tough, knowledgeable, masculine saviors. As the following data illustrate, the salience of this issue became particularly evident when the second author accompanied firefighters on two consecutive EMS calls involving clients of dissimilar social class and gender. On the first call, the group was dispatched to the city bus station for a “swollen hand” call. The man also complained of shortness of breath. On the way, one of the firefighters mentioned that the caller would probably be “some guy who just got off the bus and wants to tap into the social welfare system.” Another suggested that the “swollen hand” was probably scabies and quipped, “With scabies, you can pretty much predict that it’s gonna be a crystal meth addict.” Firefighter John went on to say that “shitbums”

> know that if they call 911 and say they have shortness of breath, an ambulance will be sent over. . . . We’ll have to take them to the emergency room, where they’ll be cleaned up and referred to some homeless shelter or some other place that’ll give them a handout.

When the firefighters arrived at the bus station, a man who appeared to be a homeless drug addict told them that he called because he was concerned about the spiders coming out of his hands.

> John asks the man, "Are you on crystal meth?" The patient denies it, and John responds: "Look, dude, you're shaky and a little hyper, and people on crystal meth scratch themselves to death and get wounds just like that. And then they get scabies." Firefighter Tim jumps in, yelling loudly at the patient, "SO TELL US, ARE YOU ON DRUGS?" The patient replies with tears rolling down his face, "I want to go to the hospital!" Tim fires back, "LISTEN! IF YOU'RE GONNA CALL 911 AND SAY YOU HAVE SHORTNESS OF BREATH JUST SO YOU CAN GET A RIDE, I'M NOT TAKING YOU TO THE HOSPITAL!"

The firefighters refused to take the man to the hospital, instead providing treatment on scene. His wound was cleaned and bandaged and, after Tim told the man that he had "the wrong attitude," the firefighters suggested that he walk to a special clinic designed for homeless drug addicts with chronic wounds.

When the patient walked away, Tim turned to the second author and exclaimed sarcastically, "Welcome to Bayside EMS!" The other firefighter interjected, "Yeah, if you want to do drugs, you can do them, and when you feel sad, when you hurt, we'll take great care of you so you can do more drugs." This final comment is extremely telling about the firefighters' irritation and frustration with the situation. Having to take great "care" for clients who "feel sad" are duties that are largely connected to feminine qualities—thus challenging dominant notions of masculinity. Exacerbating this issue, the homeless man does not constitute an identity-enhancing "audience" for which firefighters are best able to perform as America's heroes.

In contrast, the following exemplar illustrates that a similar situation is less "dirty" and less threatening when it can affirm firefighters' status as "men to the rescue." Less than an hour later, the same group was dispatched to a "has fainted" call generated by a woman in her sixties:

> We arrive at an upscale high rise and enter a spacious, expensively decorated, luxury apartment with an ocean view. The patient presents symptoms of lightheadedness, shakiness, and dizziness. She apologizes repeatedly for "all the trouble" because she's starting to feel better. Tim sits down on the couch next to her and hooks her up to a heart monitor. He politely discusses her symptoms and compliments her apartment. I've seen "shitbums" present the same symptoms and not get this kind of bedside manner and medical treatment. After examining the readout from the heart monitor, Tim spends at

least five minutes explaining all of her options and enthusiastically offers transport to the hospital. She declines, saying that she'll just call her doctor tomorrow morning. On the way back to the station, there were no complaints that this was a "bullshit" call.

The disparity in treatment represented in these data is noteworthy. In both cases, clients generated an emergency response for symptoms that were not particularly serious. Both calls could be considered threatening to firefighter identity because they lacked legitimate emergency status and hardly required heroism or serious expertise. However, they engendered two very different responses. The homeless man's call enacted a number of sources of stigma for firefighters—a dirty, low-class client, considered to be morally questionable. The female client, in contrast, embodied the "Mrs. Smith" image that firefighters were trained to valiantly serve. She provided Tim with the proper audience to showcase his expertise through discussion of symptoms and possible solutions. The firefighters were allowed to display this authority in a luxurious setting where even the wealthy needed firefighters to save them. The inequitable treatment provided in the two situations highlights the practical consequences of divergent forms and sources of stigma and asymmetrical discursive resources for its management.

In addition to these daily practices, which drew on and sustained particular notions of masculinity, we also found that firefighters responded to taint by accentuating and celebrating heterosexuality. Sexually charged discussions and self-objectification were relatively common among firefighters. If daily work tasks—primarily EMS work—are at odds with public and collective perceptions of firefighter toughness and heroism, then everyday storytelling can serve to emphasize and refocus attention upon the preferred identity, one invested with masculine notions of heroism and adulation. Indeed, a favorite story of one PCFD battalion chief did just that:

> When we were younger, we used to ride on [the outside rear of the fire truck] . . . you saw more breasts from that position. You would be standing there and all of a sudden [women] would lift their blouses. . . . Riding the tailboard was the best days of my life (laughs). They would pull back to the station sometimes just to follow us. Yeah, we were rock stars, low-budget rock stars.

Sexual horseplay (Hearn, 1985) was also common among firefighters, as illustrated in the following field note:

> Folks are talking, joking, and teasing as they put together dinner. One employee vividly describes how much another likes butter on his biscuits.

> Another claims that Kyle loves mayonnaise on his biscuits. Another says, "Oh yeah, I bet he does like to squirt a little mayonnaise on his biscuits." He mimics a man stroking his penis and ejaculating. Everybody laughs.

If it is through sexuality that one's group identity is invested with masculine notions of strength and bravery, then it makes sense that firefighters would employ this discourse as a resource for affirming identity in the face of insecurity (Collinson, 1992, 2003). By engaging in sexual banter—highlighting male excess and hypermasculine action (ejaculation)—for an appreciative internal audience of peers, firefighters are able to attempt a sense of self that is strong, fun, and in control, even if the majority of their work time is dominated by taking care of and cleaning up shitbums.

Firefighters also enjoy an external audience that applauds their status as sex symbols (e.g., through firefighter pin-up calendars, jokes about "hoses," and sexual connotations about "fire" and "heat"). However, firefighters cannot rest easy on this construction; they also actively work to consistently recreate it. For example, one evening during the second author's observation at BFD, the fire truck was dispatched to a "box call"—a fire call that originates from a street-corner call box and is nearly always a false alarm. Like every box call the second author observed, there was no fire visible when the firefighters arrived on scene, and the truck headed back to the station.

> But when we approach the station, we go right past it. We end up driving around in the [North Town] district, an upscale part of town consisting mainly of bars and restaurants. People are waving at us as they walk down the street, as they dine outside, and even from inside the establishments. Women, in particular, wave at us in a way that feels laced with sexual attraction; they smile broadly and seductively and turn their bodies completely to face the truck. The driver rings the brass bell on the front of the truck as we pass several groups of attractive women and they motion to do it some more. It certainly feels as though we are, in fact, rock stars.

The driver, Rodney, later disclosed to the second author that driving the fire truck around in this fashion was a ritual, one they enact during at least one of the shift's inevitable evening box calls. "Those box calls are a downer, but it's fun to ride through [North Town] and ring the bell. It's like a tradition we have."

This practice serves as an overlapping celebration of masculinity, heterosexuality, and occupational identity. Although "box calls" are an opportunity to enact the least-stigmatized aspect of their occupational identity—because a "real" fire is possible—the activity usually is disappointing because box calls are generally false alarms. However, when members top off these letdowns

with parade-like trips through a high-status district, the potential taint of box calls is warded off and counteracted by an activity that reproduces a more-preferred identity. It is important to note, this ritual relies on the glorified sexual status of firefighters and their employment of this resource in self-objectification. By ringing the bell at attractive women, firefighters not only objectify certain pedestrians, they also rely on their own sexualized status as a resource in performance.

Such performances would not be possible without the status shield of broader discourses that assign value to the occupation at large. Because popular culture portrays firefighters as heroic and sexually provocative, ringing the bell for attractive women meets with a much more welcome response than when, for instance, male construction workers catcall female passersby. Moreover, the bell-ringing ritual would be much more difficult to enact from the vantage of a small ambulance than from the big, red fire truck. This may partially explain why PCFD and BFD firefighters used the big fire truck for EMS calls when their small ambulances would suffice. When asked what they most like about their work, almost all participants discussed their gratification of being seen riding on the fire truck. The truck symbolically reminds the public to treat firefighters in an adoring way, which in turn protects firefighters from the taint of their everyday work. Rituals that highlight preferred identities reconstitute the status shield and provide a fortress against threat.

In summary, firefighters engaged in a variety of "dirty" tasks. The most difficult were those associated with caring, feminized EMS service, especially when firefighters were denied an audience that could affirm a preferred "rock-star" identity. However, larger discourses of masculinity and sexuality allowed firefighters to frame their work as valorous and important. Through continual talk about firefighting, they were able to emphasize heroic masculine work and appreciate a spillover effect that moderated the dirt of lower status feminized duties. Furthermore, they enjoyed a public audience that reaffirmed their prestige, as well as an audience of peers with whom they could engage in sexual banter, storytelling and (non-EMS) shop talk, again upholding a preferred identity and deflecting taint. This situation is in sharp contrast to the constraints correctional officers faced in managing dirty work.

Correctional Officers as "Glorified Maids": Managing Taint Behind Bars

As earlier noted, correctional officers must engage in a number of duties that are physically dirty. The dirtiest and most difficult of these include engaging in strip searches, sometimes with inmates who have not recently

bathed or present nonnormative genitalia (e.g., piercings). Officers manage and clean up after inmates who smear themselves or their cells with excrement, urine, or menstrual blood. Less graphic, but more common, officers regularly engage in a number of routine tasks associated with servility and care. Officers do welfare checks, comfort inmates who have bad dreams, serve food and collect laundry; as NJ Captain Henry McMaster explained, a preponderance of the correctional job is about "getting people toilet paper." Officers said that such activities made them feel like "glorified maids," "babysitters," or "flight attendants." Such labels cast officers as low-status feminized servants to alleged and convicted criminals, a far cry from autonomous, controlling guards.

Correctional officers managed this taint in a variety of ways. First, similar to firefighters, they discussed how no one else could do their job. However, this discursive strategy did not constitute the undeniable badge of honor that it did in the firefighting setting. This becomes more apparent by deconstructing the favorite firefighter adage of, "It takes a different type of person who wants to run into a burning building," a comment that marks the workers as tough, masculine, and heroic. This same taint-management technique is not as easy when the dirtiness of the work is associated with low-status, servile body work, always and already coded with feminine meaning through discourses that transcend the occupational context (Bolton, 2005; Twigg, 2000). Indeed, we never heard correctional officers proudly retort, "It takes a different type of person to peer into a shit-stained asshole searching for contraband."

Second, officers did taint management by emphasizing the job's most dangerous parts as most desirable. For instance, only the most-experienced officers worked the "disciplinary pod" at NJ, which housed male, high-security inmates. Although employees seemed able to transform masculine dirty work (e.g., the danger of "high discipline") into high-status work, this recalibration technique did not work in similar fashion for feminized dirty work; the objectively more complex duty of overseeing "visitation"—which required officers to be servile and polite to visitors and inmates as well as conduct "strip ins" and "strip outs"—was largely devalued. In other words, the efficacy of recalibration as a taint-management method is coupled with the gendered characterizations of various tasks.

It appeared to be institutional policy that at least one of the two officers overseeing the disciplinary pod was male, and for most of the second author's observations, both were male. Given the gendered nature of correctional organizations (Britton, 1997), it is perhaps no surprise that men were assigned to these higher status disciplinary posts. In contrast, visitation posts

were dominated by women. In fact, at WM, two of the three visitation posts, were consistently filled by brand new female officers (the third was held by a female sergeant). We would argue that gendered meanings for dirty work played a pivotal role in the status of each post. When discursive resources allowed participants to recalibrate dirt into a masculine badge of honor (e.g., danger and discipline), taint was easier to deflect than that associated with feminized care and body work. Indeed, the following comment, from a male WM officer, further illustrates,

> [They say] if I was going to work for the [department] for 20 years and it was my choice of working with the men or the women, and 20 years of listening to the women (imitating high voice) "WHY?" You know, complain and complain and moan and scream and yell and everything to me. . . . Or, I get shanked [knifed] one time with the men, and I live, and it never happens again, I'd take the shank.

Through his words and his high, mocking tone of voice, this officer specifically codes threat that is feminine as more undesirable than that which can be organized and framed as masculine.

That masculinity is employed as a discursive resource is also exemplified in the officers' common taint-management strategy of self-deprecating humor. Similar to male blue-collar employees who affirm themselves as "real men" by laughing at highly insulting nicknames (Collinson, 1988, p. 185), male officers framed themselves as tough by putting themselves down in a prideful way. One officer boasted that he was an "asshole every day," and another smiled in a self-satisfied manner when he was introduced as "the most-hated officer." However, we should note that these comments indicate correctional officers had a much less secure grasp on favored notions of heroic masculinity than firefighters. Although being an "asshole" and "the most hated" may in some ways align with favored "toughness," these descriptors also support notions of brutal masculinity, which were disfavored in formal organizational training mandates as well as everyday norms.

Engaging in these nicknames, therefore, had intentional and unintentional effects. It allowed officers to view themselves as tough but paradoxically suggested they were bad people. Unlike Collinson's (1988) shop-floor workers who could exemplify manliness by showing that they could "take" insulting nicknames, correctional officers—because they work with inmates or visitors rather than each other—have no adoring audience of peers that will revere "the most hated officer." Portraying oneself this way appears to be a desperate attempt to clutch onto just one facet of the fragmentary and

ongoing accomplishment of masculinity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). At the end of the day, though, doing so does not achieve the same ends as it does for employees who have more acceptable and heroic images of masculinity (e.g., firefighters) or at least an internal audience to affirm their toughness (e.g., shop-floor workers). This serves as counterpoint to many dirty occupations that tend to foster cohesive work groups that in turn facilitate "esteem-enhancing social identities" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 419) and underscores research that has found that working alone can restrict employees' opportunities to coconstruct a preferred identity (Heinsler et al., 1990; Tracy, 2005).

Given these challenges, one of the most common ways officers engaged in taint management was through distancing themselves from and blaming the most immediately-identifiable source of their taint—the inmate. Such blame appeared to serve two purposes. First, it minimized officers' own role in the stigmatized work. Correctional officers consistently reminded themselves that inmates deserved their imprisoned lot and that the employees were not responsible for problems in the correctional system. One officer said she always thought to herself, "'Yeah what got 'ya in here, huh?' Like we say, they have to work *really hard* to get in here." Second, the technique of blaming the inmate strategically affirmed superiority. Officers sometimes referred to inmates as "scum of the earth," and called some of them, among other things, "stupid," "lazy," "liars," and "fuckin' nuts." Officers also sporadically used cartel metaphors for inmates, as in, "we're going to ship her to [another prison]" and "I like to remind them they are property of the state." Moreover, the first author occasionally observed officers engage in practices that would "inadvertently" punish inmates, such as pretending not to hear inmate requests, physically closing the communication window to their observation booth, and purposefully slamming inmate cell doors when delivering food or laundry. Officers often engaged in this distancing work when performing servile endeavors, when they were forced to act like "glorified maids."

Exacerbating efforts at taint management, officers faced constraints in using larger discourses or micropractices of sexuality as resources through which to deflect taint. In contrast to firefighters, sexuality was not something to celebrate but rather something to repress, harness, and eliminate. Of course, repression of sexuality does not equate with nonexistence; countless rules and regulations about sex reveal that sexuality is precocious, active, and ever present (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, sexuality imbued and pervaded the job. Officers gave continual pat-downs and strip searches, and watched over inmates to ensure they did not engage in sexual activity. In the

course of being "charged" with regulating inmate sexuality, officers became familiar with inmate genitalia and were made to be audience members for inmates who decided to engage in exhibitionist activity, including flashing and masturbation.

In contrast to firefighters, however, everyday correctional officer talk highlighted sexuality as crazy, dangerous and out-of-control. Meanwhile, training sessions warned that inmates were "game players" who used sex to "set up" and "suck in" officers. As such, sexuality in the correctional atmosphere was associated with weakness, threat, and deviance; officers learned that the only appropriate way to deal with it was through repression. While the first author observed officers engaging in intermittent sexual horseplay, such as joking with or teasing each other (Hearn, 1985), there was no evidence that officers were able to use sexuality performances to manage taint. This serves as an interesting counterpoint to firefighters, highlighting the key role of larger discourses for mediating the availability and impact of taint-management practices. Firefighters could rely on discourses of morality, prestige, and heroism to normalize sexuality and employ it as a resource. In contrast, correctional officers had to navigate societal perceptions that they were sexed-up brutes. Officers bemoaned that one of the few times correctional facilities made headlines was when there was some type of sexual misconduct (Crowder, 1999; Foster, 1999; Siegal, 1998), and a male WM officer lamented that some people thought he took the job because the inmates would be like the women in the (salacious) film *Girls in Jail*.

Given the challenges and paradoxical consequences that constrained officers in efforts to deflect taint, one might wonder how some were still able to maintain and sometimes even like the job. Our analysis suggests that the most-effective type of taint management for correctional officers was refocusing and attempting to overlook specific job dimensions entirely. Refocusing requires members to "willfully disattend to features of work that are socially problematic" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 423), concentrating instead on features not inherent to the work itself. A number of officers indicated that the salary, enviable retirement benefits, and flexible work schedule allowed them to refocus on "real interests"—such as running an outside business, spending time with family, or attending graduate school. Although it was less common, some officers also refocused on the job's altruistic features rather than its drudgery and disciplinary tasks. Officers said, for instance, that they liked helping inmates solve problems, being known as a "straight shooter," and serving as a positive role model. In a preshift briefing witnessed by the first author, officers discussed an inmate who had overdosed on a drug he concocted in his cell. One officer solemnly commented,

"If he had been home with no one to care for him, he probably would have died." This comment frames officers as lifesavers and the jail as a safe haven—allowing officers to emphasize the situation's good rather than suggesting they should feel guilty or somehow tainted by the man's near-death experience.

Implications, Conclusion, and Future Directions

In this article, we compared and contrasted two dirty occupations, illustrating the everyday practices that make work dirty. We argue that discourses of gender and sexuality intersect with the efficacy of taint management. In this conclusion, we summarize findings, highlight central contributions, provide practical implications, and suggest limitations and areas for future research.

Summary and Theoretical Contributions

This analysis indicates that meanings for dirty work and members' efforts to manage taint rely on and reproduce asymmetrical discourses of gender and sexuality. In spite of the considerable dirty work faced by both occupations, firefighters appreciate a status shield that rewards and complements traditional notions of masculinity. They are able to focus on danger and heroism and, similar to what Heinsler et al. (1990) found with police detectives, have this positive framing spill over into the rest of their nonpreferred work. Furthermore, firefighters enjoy internal audiences of peers and external audiences that celebrate performances of gallantry and sexuality.

Meanwhile, correctional officers struggle to manage taint that is associated with low-status feminine body and care work, while navigating societal discourses that paint them as cruel, sadistic, and sexually dangerous. Correctional work is hidden, condemned, and morally tainted. Officers are "babysitters" and "scum"—according not only to "ignorant outsiders" but also to fellow law enforcement employees. These "insults from insiders" are extremely damaging and at least as salient as threats from outsiders who ask, "How can you do it?" Furthermore, officers face challenges in managing taint in their everyday practice. Correctional officers primarily work alone, which inhibits the collective construction of a preferred identity. Furthermore, sexuality, though pervasive, is repressed and associated with weakness and

deviancy; as such, it does not serve as a resource but rather an impediment to the deflection of taint. To manage these threats, officers distance themselves from the work, blame the inmates and/or refocus on more pleasant, oftentimes peripheral, perks of the job.

Taking into account this analysis, the differences in taint management reported in the dirty work literature are clarified. Indeed, a review of past research in light of our findings suggests that gender is a key discursive resource (albeit an asymmetrical one) in efforts to manage taint across a variety of jobs. For example, Ackroyd and Crowdy's (1990) ethnography of English slaughtermen indicates that (male) employees found greatest esteem through activities that emphasized dominance, strength, and differentiation from women and homosexuals. The highest status task was "sticking" the animal—the job that ultimately killed the beast and spilled pools of blood. The slaughtermen left work wearing their "bloodstained overall with some pride," refusing to abide by the British law that they shower and change out of soiled clothes (Ackroyd & Crowdy, p. 8). In contrast, other research (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Twigg, 2000) shows no evidence that domestic workers or care workers wear the dirt associated with their jobs (e.g., dust, scum, shit, pee, vomit, mucus) as a badge of honor. Instead, similar to correctional officers, they actively seek to separate themselves from it. Is this because the runny nose of an elderly patient is so much more disgusting than the blood of a recently slaughtered cow? No. The argument presented here would suggest that the latter is constructed as a badge of honor and the former a marker of lower status because of the gendered discursive resources available to manage taint.

These findings also suggest that performances of sexuality may function as process and product of identity work in general (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) and taint management specifically. For example, media appropriate and sustain images of firefighter sexual prowess, and firefighters engage in specific sexual performances that maintain and reinforce this image. Together, discursive formations and micropractices construct a powerful status shield that protects firefighters from work tasks that threaten a masculine, tough, heroic identity. The rules, regulations, and taboos about sexuality within the correctional environment do not afford officers the same opportunity to use sexuality for taint management. Furthermore, correctional officer work is solitary, which prevents sexually charged horseplay with like-minded peers. Finally, officers lack the symbolic tools that bolster firefighters' occupational identity: correctional officers have no big red truck, no bell, no hose, no adoring audience, and they rarely are asked to march in parades.

Although sexuality can be exploitative in correctional institutions (Britton, 2003) and firehouses (Women in the Fire Service, 1996), our data indicate that sexuality may also serve as a resource for activities other than harassment or conquest. As such, this analysis extends Hearn's (1985) typology of male sexuality in organizational settings to include everyday performances that play a role in constructing workgroup and occupational identity. Although we do not argue that such behaviors are categorically unproblematic, our data suggest that taint management is an explicitly communicative form of male sexuality that may result in personal affirmation, which in turn may ease the difficulty of dirty work.

However, the performance of sexuality demonstrates one of several ways that taint management can have unintended, potentially dysfunctional, consequences. The current study illustrates several other paradoxical consequences of taint management. First, employing badges of traditional masculinity and normative heterosexuality in the process of taint management can sustain a hegemonic "old boys club" organizational culture that inhibits women's participation. Second, when members recalibrate danger and risk as the most celebrated part of work, this may enable unnecessary risk taking in service of a preferred identity. Indeed, future research could fruitfully explore the connection between organizational risk taking, gender, and occupational-identity management. Third, although superiority humor, depersonalization, and blaming the client may serve as immediate relief from the taint emanating from stigmatizing clients, it paradoxically serves to further taint the employee in the long run. If client stigma does indeed rub off through "contagion effect" (Brodsky, 1982), then denigrating the population with whom one works most closely ironically lowers one's own position. Last, blaming the client can result in less-than-ideal client care, an issue to which we return to in the practical implications.

In addition to the aforementioned primary contributions, the current analysis broadens extant understandings of past dirty work and sexuality in several ways. First, we might consider how our findings align with the taint-management strategies outlined by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). Members from both occupations bemoaned problems with the organizational "system" and did work to negate and neutralize their role through the self-talk of, "Don't blame me, I just work here." We also found evidence of refocusing, although occupational members diverged in their use of the technique, with correctional officers doing much more to refocus on external, tangential parts of the jobs.

In addition, the data suggest that members from both occupations used the taint-management techniques of "infusing" and "recalibrating" to transform dirty tasks associated with masculinity (e.g., those associated with risk,

security, and discipline) into more positive badges of honor.[5] In contrast, these techniques were not commonly used to deflect taint associated with caring and service. Members found it more challenging to transform the work of caring for shitbums or sick inmates into high-status activity than they did to recalibrate high-danger tasks. In cases where taint was associated with entities that discourses define as low status and feminine in nature, members appeared to do taint management by distancing themselves and “blaming the stigmatized party”—a taint-management technique that is not specified in Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) model.

In some ways, blaming the dirty client served as a way to neutralize employees’ role in the “system,” in that it helped them deflect blame for its problems. However, blaming the stigmatized party goes beyond doing work of neutralization; it allows employees to feel superior to and gain distance from the taint. Just as employees feel most masculine when they can make others feel most feminine (Alvesson, 1998, p. 995), employees can feel most “clean” when the work’s “filth” can be pinned on another. This practice appears to be bound to the ways clients affirm or threaten a preferred identity. Employees cannot just blame any client; taint is most effectively deflected by blaming one that is perceived as low-class, criminally inclined, and socially marginal. Firefighters were much more patient and professional, for instance, with wealthy, female clients that could uphold their status as America’s heroes than they were with “shitbums.”

Our analysis also suggests that different sources of taint—physical, social, and moral—vary in their resistance to employees’ taint-management strategies. Physical taint appears to be easiest to manage. Members are able to reframe their jobs’ physically dangerous aspects into badges of honor, and seem adept at dealing with disgust through humor and self-deprecating talk. The analysis presented here indicates that social taint, emanating from stigmatized clients, is more difficult to manage—perhaps, in part, because just joking about clients cannot make them go away. Gravediggers or crime scene investigators can literally distance themselves from their work’s physical muck with the fairly steadfast assurance that it will not follow them. However, social service employees such as correctional officers and firefighters must work with “dirt” that has human agency; clients have a brain, a mouth, and body and, thus, can follow, talk back, and refuse to be compliant. Embodied forms of taint are particularly difficult to manage when occupational members do not possess a status shield, as in the case of correctional officers.

Achieving distance from moral taint appears to be most difficult to manage, especially when employees work in solitude and are not provided frequent avenues for coconstructing elaborate explanations about how they are

worthy in spite of public denigration. One of the defining differences between firefighter and correctional officer work is that officers must deal with a societal structure that questions the value and morality of their job. Unlike social taint, which can be dealt with through blaming the client, there is no clearly definable entity to focus blame when a job is stigmatized morally.

Practical Implications

Practitioners would do well to keep in mind the potential opportunities and obstacles dirty workers face in managing taint. Identity work allows employees to "achieve feelings of a coherent and strong self, necessary for coping with work tasks" (Alvesson, 1998, p. 990). In other words, doing taint management is not just about allowing the employee to feel good; rather, it has material consequences for work quality—especially when clients are at stake. One way or another, if a dirty worker remains in a particular occupation, he or she will find a way to feel good in that job. If employees must navigate discourses that question the viability of their work, and/or experience obstacles in managing taint through transforming dirty work into a badge of honor, it is likely they will find blaming the client to be an efficacious route in affirming their identity. However, as earlier noted, blaming the client can have dysfunctional consequences and, in lifesaving service positions, this orientation could literally mean the difference between life and death. If firefighters, for instance, do not respond seriously to a call because they are busy blaming the "stupid, shitbum caller," the client's condition could be worsened. If correctional officers depersonalize inmates and develop an "us-them" attitude, these approaches can reduce opportunities for inmate rehabilitation and change and, in the worst of circumstances, may lead to abuse or serious lack of care taking.

In short, the current analysis suggests that, especially when larger discourses frame certain occupations or tasks as morally questionable, servile, or low in status, the workplace needs to make up for the identity needs of its employees through alternate means. Although certainly no one single approach is appropriate, organizations should consider internal communication strategies that provide a discursive infrastructure for taint management (e.g., award ceremonies, internal newsletters, employees of the month). In addition, perhaps organizations should in some cases encourage dirty workers to think of their work as "just a job" that allows them external "goodies" such as good pay, early retirement, and flexible hours. Likewise, it may be in organizations' best interests to encourage collective

reframing of the most-stigmatizing elements of employees' work and provide opportunities for employees to perform aspects of a high-status preferred identity. Certainly, performances of sexuality can have hegemonic consequences; however, this is not categorically the case. Organizational leaders should also recognize that performances of sexuality might allow employees to feel better about their work, engage in less client bashing and, ultimately, facilitate organizational processes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study is limited in several ways that suggest directions for future research. First, although our data indicate that performances of sexuality can support taint management, we add a disclaimer about research presence. Likely, employees were more wary of engaging in sexually explicit talk and performance around two participant-observer researchers. We took pains to make the participants feel comfortable (e.g., by continually assuring them that we wanted to tell their story from their points of view and that we were not "management spies") and remained on scene for extended periods. Nevertheless, we cannot precisely gauge how our presence affected participants' sexuality performances. Given the salience of such taint-management performances, we anticipate additional research by people holding "insider" status or playing longer term roles can further clarify the range of sexual performances and how they may enable and constrain taint management and other organizational outcomes.

In the quest to compare and contrast correctional officers and firefighters, we also glossed over individual differences among employees within each profession. Certainly, some employees in each scene felt more tainted than others. Future research could examine whether some employees are presocialized to better manage dirty work than others. A longitudinal study could trace employees' learning curve for taint-management skills. Moreover, additional comparative studies, like the one conducted here, could further fine-tune conceptual frameworks of dirty work and taint management. This analysis suggested ways to enact, modify, refine, and broaden Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) framework. We hope that future studies, perhaps comparing white-collar and blue-collar dirty work or male and female dirty workers, for instance, would build on, refine, and enhance understandings of employee identity work.

In conclusion, the current study's most-important contribution is illustrating ways in which dirty work and taint management are not merely occupational, work-level issues but rather how they intersect with broad

discursive structures. In other words, taint management does not happen in a vacuum. The taint-management processes that employees use vary according to ongoing and ever-changing discourses of power that constitute the meaning of a job and the identities of its workers.

Notes

1. Here and throughout, the names of organizations and participants are pseudonyms.

2. Dirty work is similar to Goffman's (1963) stigma, which refers to the perception of individuals, who possess attributes such as physical deformities and blemishes of character, that fall short of societal expectations. Dirty work can certainly lead to stigma, but if employees engage in taint management, they might protect their identity from the stigma associated with the job.

3. While this study primarily concerns professionals that provide these dual fire suppression/EMS services, we refer to them as simply "firefighters" for the sake of simplicity and because this is the occupational label they most often apply to themselves.

4. Here and throughout, we leave intact participants' grammar and gendered word usage. Participants' use of "fireman/men" rather than the formally espoused departmental preference of "firefighters" indicates the ongoing gendered nature of the occupation.

5. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) conceptualize "infusing" as one type of "reframing" and differentiate "reframing," "recalibrating," and "refocusing." In our analysis, however, we were continually struck by the overlapping nature of these techniques in practice.

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