



Book Review

Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis & Höpfl (ed): *Dirty Work – Concepts and Identities*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

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This is an important book! I thought to myself, as I happened to discover that it was forthcoming with Palgrave while I was immersed in a review of the concept of dirty work. The concept of dirty work has been around in the literature for more than half a century and “all occupations have dirty work to do,” as Everett Hughes famously stated back in 1951 as he coined the concept in an article on nurse’s work in the *American Journal of Nursing*. Surprisingly, few studies, however, have addressed the concept empirically or analytically. This is exactly what this book does, and that alone makes it a contribution to the literature. Now what kind of contribution is it then?

The anthology contains 13 chapters including an introduction by the four editors that briefly covers the most important conceptual and empirical dimensions of dirty work. The editors highlight that “one aim in the book is to render aspects of dirt and dirty work more visible.” (p. 2). In order to do so, the editors “advocate an approach that takes into account its social and cultural meanings as well as its fluid nature” (p. 2). Moreover, they suggest that the conventional model of physical, social, and moral taint is not sufficient to capture the complex, contingent, and fluid nature and meaning of dirty work (p. 8, 11) and that “occupational boundaries, work practices and the meanings around dirt and cleanliness are accordingly more fluid and subject to reinterpretation and change, rather than being fixed, stable and rooted in a job task or role” (p. 11).

The book covers a diverse empirical area. Melissa Tyler (Chapter 5) takes us into sex shops in Soho, Gina Grandy and Sharon Mavin (Chapter 6) study erotic dancers doing of gender in a UK strip club chain, and Giulia Selmi (Chapter 7) takes us into two erotic call centers in Italy. The three sex contexts are followed by three studies of nursing by Robert McMurray (Chapter 8), Paul White and Alison Pullen (Chapter 9), and Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya, and Jason Hughes (Chapter 10). In Chapter 12, Geraldine Lee-Treweek takes us to study migrants in a light industrial setting in the Northton area through 25 semi-structured interviews. All these contexts are conventionally associated with one and often several types of dirty work. However, a few of the chapters in the book explore areas that are perhaps less obviously dirty. Liz Stanley and Kate Mackenzie-Davey (Chapter 4) explore the case of investment bankers after the financial crises and Elaine Swan (Chapter 11) studies transnational corporate feminism through magazine culture in the 2007 supplement of *Harper’s Bazaar*, a “high-end” woman’s magazine. Finally, Patricia Lewis (Chapter 13) interprets disgust from the narrative of one interview with a female entrepreneur.

Theoretically, all the chapters in the book are written from a social constructivist perspective and most of the contributions are very much inspired by (post)feminism and post-structuralism. A few of the chapters seek to push especially Blake E. Ashforth and



colleagues' highly influential conceptual work on dirty work and taint management further, some theoretically and others mostly empirically. In Chapter 3 on investment bankers, for instance, Liz Stanley and Kate Mackenzie-Davey argue (p. 50) that Ashforth and colleagues' model based mostly on collective taint management by low-status dirty workers cannot be translated into the highly individualized context of London investment bankers during the financial crises. Drawing on Judith Butler's feminist framework and Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection," Melissa Tyler's brilliant study of sales service workers in Soho sex shops seeks to "understand more fully the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that characterizes the way in which most of the people" (p. 83) she "spoke to seem to feel about their work, particularly their place of work" (p. 83) and importantly "their desire not to 'clean up' through the coping strategies outlined by Ashforth and Kreiner and others" (p. 87). And in Robert McMurray's chapter entitled *Embracing Dirt in Nursing Matters*, he "considers how dirt may be used to claim preferred occupational positions" (p. 142) and convincingly demonstrates that dirt "is also a potential source of pride" (p. 142) within nursing with its historically constituted ethics of care. One of the most interesting contributions of the book is the continuous focus on gender and the body in dirty work. Especially gender and sexuality is a recurrent issue in nearly all the chapters. Another noteworthy contribution is the general empirical sensitivity toward the association between class, ethnicity, and dirty work in many of the chapters.

The chapters are generally well written, thought provoking, and successful in demonstrating how dirty work is given meaning and negotiated and handled strategically in a variety of empirical contexts. I especially find the contributions in the middle part of the book on sex workers and nursing strong and thoroughly prepared. On the other hand, I find a few of the chapters exploring more unconventional contexts of dirty work a little less convincing. That is unfortunate, because I sympathize with the ambition to broaden the analytical context, but I think more empirical work is desirable here.

Overall, this is an important book that definitely makes a valuable and much needed contribution to the research on dirty work. Especially the empirical depth of several of the chapters will surely inspire many readers. I hope scholars will also become inspired to elaborate further on the theoretical implications of dirty work in the future.