

‘The Kill Programme’: An Ethnographic Study of the “Dirty Work” of Meat Inspectors in a Slaughterhouse

Abstract

It has been argued that ‘dirty work’ is characterised by strong occupational and workgroup cultures. This literature has mainly focused on direct workers but this article largely attends to indirect ‘dirty’ workers, specifically meat inspectors, through ethnographic research conducted in a UK slaughterhouse. Four arguments are developed; the first is that ‘dirty workers’ may not all display group cohesiveness; indeed, individualization may be more evident depending upon the technology used, internationalisation and employment conditions. Second, there is complexity and diversity within ‘dirty work’ and even single occupations can contain considerable variety, rendering generalizations problematic. Third, we argue that much greater attention needs to be given to the wider contextual issues affecting ‘dirty work’; specifically changing labour markets, itinerant labour, economic conditions and technologies. Finally, we argue that stigmatized work may become more so if it is equated with the low wage economy and/or undercutting conditions of employment through exploiting migrant labour.

Keywords: culture, ‘dirty work’, economics, ethnography, group cohesion, identity, migrant labour, technology.

Introduction

Nearly 25 years ago, in a widely cited account of a slaughterhouse, Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) explored the work of 'slaughtering teams' which had 'a high degree of autonomy from close supervision' (op cit: 5). A highly 'masculine' culture prevailed, where physical strength was celebrated (op cit:8; see also Meara,1974). This culture was considered to have 'little to do with technological factors' (op cit:10) and managerial control was deemed to be relatively unproblematic, largely due to strong self-monitoring workgroups. These findings resonate with earlier studies that identified 'a sense of unity' (Thompson,1983:233) among slaughterhouse workers and group cultures characterised by joking and 'horseplay' (op cit:229).

It seems timely then, to contrast such studies with a contemporary slaughterhouse because technological "developments" in work organization along with globalization have impacted upon such labour processes. Indeed, it has been argued that food production line operatives in the meat packing industry have been 'reduced to fast-moving cogs in the assembly-line' (Ritzer, 2008:154) and Pachirat's (2011) ethnography of a US cattle abattoir described it as a high-throughput factory where work was meticulously controlled and compartmentalized, providing limited scope for employees to work together. Another issue to consider is that the number of agency workers increased in the UK 'from 775,000 to 1.37 million between 1997 and 2007' (Sporton,2013:445). Agency work is concentrated in low paid sectors such as food production (see Scott,2013) and this has coincided with an increase in the number of migrant workers in low paid jobs for which they are often overqualified (ibid; see also Ciupijus,2011), all of which, we argue, can militate against strong workgroup cultures.

Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) and Thompson's (1983) empirical observations regarding group cohesion are supported by Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) theoretical argument concerning

‘dirty work’ hence they posited ‘that the stigma of dirtiness often fosters relatively “strong” occupational and workgroup cultures – that is, widely shared and deeply held systems of values, beliefs and norms’ (op cit: 414). We argue that this risks over-romanticising ‘dirty workers’ especially in the contemporary meat industry where the workforce is often itinerant. Scott (2013), for example, found that in the UK food industry, employers admitted that they had become ‘dependent upon low-status immigrants to fill their marginal ‘secondary labour markets’’ (op cit:46). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) identify ‘some’ exceptions to their rule when workers are isolated, compete with one another or turnover is high but we argue that these ‘exceptions to the rule’ (op cit:420) may be more widespread than they suggest.

Rather than assuming that strong work group cultures prevail, there is a need to remain open-minded about whether such cultures exist. Indeed, we believe that it is equally important to investigate the obstacles to cultural cohesion, which have not been considered in the ‘dirty work’ literature. Hence casualisation has been linked to the increased use of migrant workers who ‘are more exploitable and more self-exploiting than domestic workers’ which ‘reduces the opportunity for collectivism’ (Scott,2013:460). Such work is often ‘precarious’ (Ciupijus,2011:544) and migrant workers are often employed with minimal legal rights and on a ‘casual, often daily basis’ (Sporton,2013:445). As a consequence, ‘agency workers are denied through their discontinuous employment the right to participate in workplace communities, to forge identities’ (op cit:451), which also reflects the ‘long hours’ they work and ‘work-time spent almost exclusively among co-nationals’ (Ciupijus,2011:546). This does not allow allow ‘for language learning and social interactions with British citizens’ or other nationalities.

Although we observed production line workers in the slaughterhouse we visited, our primary focus was on meat inspectors who are responsible for quality control on behalf of the Meat Hygiene Service, an executive branch of the Food Standards Agency (a department of the UK Government's civil service). This group of 'dirty workers' has been entirely overlooked in the literature, perhaps because they are a relatively unknown sub-group within meat production. While the majority (70%) of the meat inspectors in the factory that we researched were employed directly by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), 30% were employed by a private employment agency that had successfully tendered to supply inspectors to the FSA.

This ratio reflects the national split between civil servants and contract workers at the time of the field research. For example, in 2011/12, of 837 meat inspectors surveyed nationally, 167 were contract staff, just under 20%, a proportion rising to just over 25% in 2012/13 (National Audit Office, 2013: 32). Of the agency-employed inspectors in our study, all were veterinary surgeons who gained their qualifications outside the UK (the vast majority were of Spanish origin). Their task was to add to the number of civil servants delivering 'official controls' by inspecting meat and meat production processes at a number of abattoirs. Agency employed inspectors enjoy inferior terms and conditions of employment in comparison to their civil service contemporaries, however, and this is exacerbated because as veterinary surgeons they are 'over-qualified' for abattoir work. Many had entered the meat trade as a result of restrictions in the UK veterinary job market which – in effect – limited their clinical involvement with animals to a narrow remit of tasks (routine testing for bovine tuberculosis, meat inspection, for example). Given the demand for the FSA to cut staff costs (NAO, 2013), it is likely that there will be further shrinkage in the number of civil servants compared to migrant labourers (ibid. 2013, FSA, 2014). Thus, the international composition of the inspection work force seems to be a growing feature of the meat industry.

This article addresses two main research questions; the first is whether all 'dirty work' is characterised by strong occupational and work group cultures. The second is what issues - other than workgroup culture - are significant in the lives of those who do 'dirty work'? The article is organized as follows; the next section discusses the meaning of 'dirty work'. We then present insights from the empirical research and conclude by discussing the main research findings.

Complexity in dirty work

The 'dirty work' label covers a diversity of occupations from those which have explicit connotations of social disapproval such as exotic dancers, phone sex operatives and sex-shop workers (Tyler, 2011; Grandy and Mavin, 2012; Selmi, 2012) to those who are only 'indirectly contaminated' such as those who deal with 'pollutants' in a more physical way: construction workers (Thiel,2007); janitors (Gold,1964); funeral directors (Thompson,1991); supermarket meat cutters (Meara,1974) and gravediggers (Petrillo,1989/1990). By focusing on a neglected group of workers, we argue that it is problematic to consider even a single occupation such as slaughtering as 'dirty' because there are so many different relations within such work. According to Hughes (1958), while 'dirty jobs' are often done by those at the lower end of the wage scale, it is also the case that higher status jobs sometimes attract the label of 'dirty work' by association with stigmatised others: the police (Dick, 2005), for example, due to their links with criminality. This range of roles reflects Hughes's (1958) classic definition of 'dirty work' as tasks that are 'physically, socially or morally' (op cit: 122) tainted. The notion of taint is closely related to 'stigma', which according to Goffman

(1963), refers to 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (op cit:9).

According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) 'the boundaries' between these different taints 'are inherently fuzzy, and many occupations appear to be tainted on multiple dimensions' (op cit: 415). This applies to the meat inspectors and production line workers in the case study to follow. Hence both groups of workers are 'physically' tainted because their work is associated with 'death' (ibid) and, in the case of production line workers, it involves the dismemberment of animals, tasks that require visceral contact with 'pollutants' like blood. Meat inspectors are one step removed from this 'physical' taint but they also handle carcasses and are 'socially' tainted, which is a second-order taint, because their work brings them into regular contact with individuals who are 'stigmatised' (ibid). It could be argued that both groups are 'morally' tainted by the routinized organization of 'killing' and so both jobs are equally 'dirty'. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) make a further distinction between occupations that are depicted as 'dirty'; hence they define some as 'low prestige' (e.g. butcher, miner) whilst others are regarded as 'high prestige' (e.g. funeral director, dentist). Butchery is regarded as 'low prestige' and this is the nearest occupation that they discuss to slaughtering and yet *within* this broad category, there are 'high prestige' (meat inspectors, vets, managers) and 'low prestige' (production line operator, slaughterer) jobs.

More recently, Kreiner et al (2006) have introduced 'the breadth and depth' of 'perceived dirtiness' (op cit: 621) as a further means to distinguish between and analyse 'dirty work'. One could argue that meat inspectors and production line operators share a similar 'breadth' of 'dirtiness', in the sense that both spend almost all of their time involved in work that is 'dirty'. But, perhaps, they can be distinguished in terms of the 'depth' of their association

because meat inspectors are employed to ensure that the killing is carried out to the required standards (indirect involvement) whereas operators are implicated in the doing of killing (direct involvement). It also needs to be recognised, however, that there are different stages *within* the production process of killing that to a greater or lesser extent taints workers. So, for example, packing chickens can be distinguished from slaughtering, which can be differentiated from work that involves removing internal organs. All of these jobs come under the title 'slaughtering', which Kreiner et al (2006) regard as having a 'pervasive stigma' (ibid), but they differ in the degree of 'involvement' and the 'intensity' (ibid) of their association with 'dirty work'.

Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) early analysis stressed the 'similarities' (op cit: 430) between 'dirty workers' whereas their subsequent work (Ashforth et al,2007; Kreiner et al,2006) provided various ways to highlight the differences between them. Yet, as Baran et al (2012) point out, the literature to date has 'not investigated the possibility that within-group variance may exist' (op cit:604). Baran et al's (2012) questionnaire survey of animal shelter workers focused on different 'tasks' *within* this single group of workers. Our insights are distinctive because in exploring meat inspectors we examine differences between this group of 'dirty workers' and another group, front line workers, who work within the same organization. We also consider how those employed in such work differentiate between jobs which supports Hughes's (1970) argument that 'some tasks in any occupation are preferred over others; some are jealously guarded, while others are gladly delegated to those they consider lesser breeds.' (op cit: 149).

One of the significant contributions of this article is that we highlight the need to take into account the 'context' of 'dirty work' (see Tyler, 2011:1486). In doing so, we stress the

importance of technology as this impacts upon the ability of workgroups to forge strong group cultures. Similarly, globalization and the free-movement of labour throughout Europe has created new ‘contextual’ dynamics. Hence itinerant labour impacts on group cultures and impinges upon how ‘dirty workers’ cope ‘with the demeaning aspects of their work’ and ‘maintain their self-esteem’ (Thompson,1983:216).

Research Methods

“Hen-cock” (pseudonym) is one of Britain’s largest food processors and it supplies chicken to food retailers and foodservice distributors in Britain and other parts of Europe. It employs over 7,000 managers, technologists and operatives across the UK and Ireland. Approximately 500 individuals are employed at the factory we visited but the majority of them are frontline operators who are employed through temping agencies and so they are not employed on full-time contracts. UK legislation states that all meat production plants must utilize the services of the Meat Hygiene Service’s meat inspectors, to ensure the quality of the meat produced and sold from the plant (see, FSA, 2014). Inspectors are required to be permanently on-site during the slaughtering process from the point that the chickens enter the factory through to their final packaging ready for distribution and sale. This does not mean that the same individuals must be permanently employed only that inspectors have to be permanently present. These meat inspectors were our primary research informants and so this inevitably renders our findings ‘partial’.

Meat inspectors are not employed by the factories in which they work and instead are employed by the FSA either directly or through temping agencies, which makes negotiating research access difficult and ambiguous. Hence it is not clear whether one should approach

the temping agency, the FSA or the factory (or all of them). In view of this, the second-named author built up informal research access through a personal contact who expressed interest in the concern to understand the lives of those who work in the meat industry. As a key informant, he provided introductions to other meat inspectors, including the manager of an agency that employed the official veterinarians (OV's) and meat inspectors. He was also keen to help with the research.

Our key informant arranged for 16 hours of observational research over three days and this included observations of meat inspections; tours of two factories; close work-shadowing of six inspectors during their shifts and generally hanging around so as to talk to inspectors (and other workers and managers) when time allowed. In addition, interviews were also conducted off site. In total, there was a mix of formal and informal interviews with 20 meat inspectors, one of whom was an area manager within the civil service and all of whom had been inspectors in the factory discussed below. Inspectors are required to visit different sites as required and so some were more familiar with Hen-Cock than others. This reflects that whether they are agency workers or civil servants, they are effectively on call and go to wherever they are needed on a weekly or sometimes daily basis. Six of the interviews were tape-recorded (off site) while 14 took place during the observational phase of the research and were fleeting so notes were written during and after them. In some cases, where informants were keen to be involved in the research, follow-up interviews were conducted and so 7 individuals were interviewed more than once. During 2011, 5 interviews were conducted by telephone for practical and expedient reasons, 6 were conducted at participants' homes, and 14 were conducted during time spent alongside meat inspectors at work. Two final follow-up interviews were conducted with meat inspectors by telephone in May, 2015; both were participants who had been involved in the initial phase of the fieldwork.

Twelve of the inspectors were qualified veterinary surgeons, all of whom were employed on temporary agency contracts and had qualified in non-UK universities. Having travelled to work in the UK from countries such as Spain, Romania and Poland (with overseas qualifications) they found it very difficult to practise veterinary medicine and so gained employment as meat inspectors. Four slaughter-workers employed at various points on the line were also interviewed including the one worker who had the official title of 'slaughterman'. As a condition of the research, there was a promise of confidentiality and so the identity of individuals and the organization has been disguised and anonymised. We have made it impossible to identify any individuals or the organization involved in conducting this research. In view of this, we believe that we have fulfilled the most important ethical criteria, which is that the research poses no risk of harm to any of the research respondents (BSA, 2002).

The research sought to gather first-hand information about social processes in a "naturally occurring way" (Silverman, 1993:111); that is, without heavy reliance upon structured interviews with scripted questions. This type of 'non-traditional' and more open approach towards research has been followed by others interested in 'dirty work' (Dick 2005:1376). Data gathering in the factory was hindered by the need to wear ear protectors. As Thompson (1983) found, 'noise from the machinery' – coupled with the language barriers that were routinely encountered - made talk during work 'virtually impossible' (op cit:24). This meant that it was necessary to focus largely on meat inspectors and yet, as they were followed around, this allowed for contact with and observations of front line workers.

Our research questions and methods prompted us to consider the typical daily routine for meat inspectors, the ways they spoke and the processes and practises they were engaged in. The research involved recording written notes during periods of observation and during interviews and the first stage of the analysis involved reading these notes and identifying key words, issues and possible themes as ideas emerged and connections were made. The second stage amounted to a 'fine-grained, line-by-line analysis' (Emerson et al,1995:160) through reading and re-reading transcribed copies of interview transcripts and once again the concern was to identify key words, issues and possible themes.

The research and analysis involved in stages one and two highlighted an intensely controlled and highly individualized work regime, which struck as different from both the arguments made in the 'dirty work' literature (Ashforth and Kreiner,1999) and the earlier research into slaughterhouses (Ackroyd and Crowdy,1990; Thompson,1983). The contrast created a spark that allowed us to begin translating 'experience....into the intellectual sphere...[whereby one]...gives it form' (Mills,1959:199). We then revisited our field notes and transcribed copies of interviews to try to establish what was different between this literature and the experiences related to us by our research respondents. This was an iterative process that involved shuttling 'back and forth between existing materials' and our 'own research' (op cit:201). Out of this analysis emerged the importance of technology, economics, agency work and the migrant status of the meat inspectors as issues that were significant in the lives of these particular workers.

The presentation of our case study material begins with a 'thick description' of the work processes at the factory discussed below (Geertz, 1993). This is important because it helps the reader to gain an understanding of the nature of the work and the role that meat inspectors

play in relation to it. It allows us to shed new light on the nature of ‘dirty work’: the divisions and differences between different groups of ‘dirty workers’ and why we believe that strong workgroup cultures are not the most significant issues in the lives of either frontline staff or meat inspectors. We did not formally report our findings to individuals who expressed interest in the research but rather engaged in an ongoing dialogue with them. This has helped to clarify matters that were initially unclear and to probe issues about which we needed further clarification.

The Case Study

Hen-cock occupies a large industrial unit on an out-of-town trading estate in the North of England. Arriving at dawn for the start of a morning shift, hundreds of workers can be seen streaming to and from the bus stop. Many head for a crowded changing room where the tiled floor is muddy and the paint on the walls is peeling. The glass-fronted reception area, set at a distance from the staff entrance provides little indication of the nature of the work going on inside. After signing into the visitor’s log and being directed to the meat inspectors’ office, one climbs two flights of steel and glass stairs. This leads to a plush, blue-carpeted corridor, with cream walls, which is where the management offices are located. At the end of this corridor there is an unmarked white door and this is where the meat inspectors are based. The lack of clear marking suggests that these ‘dirty workers’ are held in low esteem (or are stigmatized) by management, something that was hinted at during a chance meeting with an engineering manager: ‘You’re looking for the meat inspectors’ office? We stick them down the end there. They are out of the way then [laughing].’

All of the meat inspectors begin their working day on the third floor of the factory where they change for work. Like the slaughter workers on the production line, their day starts early at 6 a.m.. The meat inspectors' office is dingy and cramped and the only window overlooks a packaging store-room. The office is claustrophobic and smells musty. It is painted a dull yellow and the ceiling has polystyrene squares attached to it. In a corner a small fridge serves as a makeshift table for a kettle and some food. A desk in the middle of the room is stacked with papers and a laptop computer. Wall-mounted shelves are loaded with bulging ring binders and, in one corner, a tangled heap of overalls, boiler-suits, white helmets and other protective gear spills from a grey metal cabinet onto the floor.

On one wall there are posters and notices written by the inspectors that exhort fellow workers to put pressure on the company directors to install adequate rubber boot washing facilities and to provide better office space. Other notices highlight the need to stay safe and wear protective clothing. A large and prominent notice on a laminated card states that meat inspectors should avoid inadvertently working *for* the factory. It reminds them that they must retain their independence. Despite the relative 'high prestige' (Ashforth and Kreiner,1999) of these 'dirty workers', their cost and externality in relation to the factory may help to explain the lack of space and the unpleasant facilities in the meat inspectors' office. Such observations elucidate the perceived inequalities that many of the meat inspectors spoke to us about.

The Production Process

In this section, we explore the organization of work and the type of work that the inspectors are involved in. It highlights the individualizing dynamics of the work and the significance of

technology, as opposed to groups, in the lives of these workers. The organization of work is divided along 'dirty' and 'clean' lines by those who do it and this colloquial differentiation provides insights into the different types of 'dirty work' which are obscured by the slaughtering label.

The Dirty Side

At the 'dirty side', articulated lorries reverse into an enormous warehouse (lairage) and plastic crates of small, white birds are unloaded. The crates are manually stacked onto a conveyor belt which leads to the gas chamber from where the birds emerge after having been gassed with a lethal cocktail of argon and nitrogen which is so potent that they are dead within seconds. In the next work zone, "hangers on" work silently and robotically in red aprons and white wellingtons, shackling or 'hanging on' lifeless chickens onto the moving production line. Neither the chickens nor the hangers on make a sound.

The production system appeared to 'neutralize' the 'stigma' that is associated with such work for it allows for the 'denial of responsibility' whereby 'occupational members' are able to 'assert that they are simply doing their job-that someone or something else is responsible or that no one is responsible' (Ashforth and Kreiner,1999:422) for the killing (see also Pachirat,2011). No emotions are displayed at the 'mild horror of such work' (Meara, 1974:267) and there was no observable reaction to the emergence of the dead birds from the gas chamber. In seeking to ask questions of those hanging chickens on the line, Bobby (Head Meat Inspector) remarked:

They won't speak to you here, they think you're an auditor from [the supermarket] and anyway they can't stop because the birds will be stacking up.

Already, we can observe distinctions between these 'dirty workers' hence the "hangers on" must remain on the line whereas the meat inspectors enjoy a degree of mobility. Moreover, the managers and directors are secluded in the more peaceful and plush surroundings of the top floor. The production line transports the birds from the 'dirty side' of the factory to the 'clean' post-mortem zone where not only the 'meat' but the feathers, feet, head and innards are removed, sorted and packaged for sale. The production process involves relatively little meat handling, cutting or butchery work and instead relies upon a series of machines. The first of which is the "neck cutter"; a sharp automated blade that decapitates the chickens. When this machine is not working, a slaughter-worker is on hand to perform the task manually. This person is a unique 'dirty worker' as he is the only person in the factory that has the official job title of "slaughterman". He described his *raison d'être* as follows:

You don't want the birds coming towards the neck cutter alive, but sometimes things go wrong and...on occasion... it happens. We call them [the live birds] 'red necks' [laughs]. That's why I have to be here.

The importance of technology in the lives of these 'dirty workers' was further illustrated during a conversation with two meat inspectors:

Simon: it should be gas (killing) all the time but they've got backup electrical stun in case. They've had a few problems with the gas, it has to be an exact mix of Argon – 5% – and Nitrogen – 95% - and when the mix changes it automatically stops the line.

So then they'll have to go on to electric stun for a bit while they sort that out. They can run at the same speed whichever. But, for the hangers on, it's a lot easier to do gas kill because the things aren't moving. It can get a bit much.

Bill: See the electric and the gas kills them all, but when you're using electric the hangers on are putting the birds in the shackles alive you see?

The technology of killing is important because if it is not managed correctly the production line stops. If the chickens are killed by gas then their limp bodies are easy to handle and the 'hangers on' can readily hook the birds to the line. But, if the gas is not working, then this makes for a much harder task for this particular group of 'dirty workers' because the birds have to be put into the shackles alive.

It is apparent that it is not just the technology but working with living creatures that can disrupt the production process and this presents problems for both workers and management. Indeed, the work cannot officially start without the presence of a qualified vet in the ante-mortem part of the plant, the space where animals are waiting to enter the system. The birds, kept in plastic cages or 'modules' have to be inspected by a vet (OV) for signs of cruelty, heat stress, death and injury. Once inspected, killed and decapitated, the birds pass over a vast rectangular steel tank where their blood drips and pools before beginning to coagulate. The smell and sight of so much clotting blood is intense as has been noted in the case of a beef processing plant (Thompson,1983:217). There are no workers here and the only sound is the metallic clanking of the production line as it conveys the birds into the 'clean side' of the factory.

The clean side

Although slaughtering may be labelled as ‘dirty work’, subtle distinctions were made in situ by those employed there between the dirty (or ante-mortem) zone and the post-mortem ‘clean side’ of the factory. At the start of the ‘clean side’ is the “scald tank”, where the birds have their feathers removed - they are submerged in hot water (52 degrees) to open their pores. The steamy atmosphere produces a smell that is unsettlingly reminiscent of cooked chicken. Passing into the “plumpers”, the birds are then de-feathered by rotating rubber ‘fingers’. The feathers are collected in a hopper beneath the plumpers, which is just one of several by-products that are sold separately. The de-feathered birds then pass into the next room where they are inspected by the meat inspectors for colour, quality and any other defects. Any blemishes or signs of disease mean that a proportion of these birds will be discarded. This is not regarded as problematic because of the very low unit cost of these “products”.

The speed of the production line means that inspectors view thousands of birds each day. Nevertheless, each inspection that was observed was completed in a careful and thorough way. The inspectors expressed that this intensity of work could only be maintained by taking regular breaks from the line, which distinguishes these ‘dirty workers’ (the meat inspectors) from the production line workers. The birds that pass the inspection are conveyed into the ‘evisceration room’. This comprises a series of machines that systematically remove and gather together internal organs. The chicken and its (now separate) intestines, lungs and heart must be viewed together by the next group of meat inspectors, located in an adjacent room. More birds are removed from the production line at this inspection point; some are unshackled for a closer look (then replaced) while others are simply thrown away or put to one side for a later inspection by a veterinary surgeon (OV).

Following this inspection, the internal organs are picked off the line by a group of approximately twenty workers. Gizzards, hearts, feet and livers are hand trimmed and sorted into large steel bins. In the offal sorting room, the fluorescent lighting is dazzling and the operatives work at steel tables in clinical silence. Curiously, even though this is locally described as the 'clean side', it is one of the few places in the factory where a small amount of chicken blood and other body parts are observable on the floor. When the steel sorting bins are full, they are wheeled into the packing department. The eviscerated birds are inspected again before passing through to a vast chiller where they are suspended from the ceiling several layers deep. They slowly travel a continual loop so that all are moving at once.

The cold chickens then move onto the final part of the process – the trussing station. Here a female group of workers 'dress' the birds ready for packaging. This work involves tucking the wings of the birds under their body and tying the legs together with elastic and inserting them into plastic trays. The experienced fingers of these workers move quickly and the birds soon resemble supermarket products. The trussers are the last group in the production process and, at this point, the birds are graded and weighed. The finished packages are wrapped and labelled and pass through a final inspection before being made ready for despatch.

Overall, our observations of this process suggested that - contrary to Ritzer's (2008) assertions - the process of slaughtering is remarkably clean. There was little evidence of workers being 'covered in blood and forced to stand in pools of blood' (op cit: 154) or of them 'wearing dirty clothes and splashing blood on their chests' as Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990:12) found. If it is the case 'that societies equate cleanliness with goodness and dirtiness

with badness' (Ashforth and Kreiner,1999:416) then it appears that killing on an industrial scale is literally washing away the 'taint' of such work and this may enable those employed in this industry to disassociate themselves from its potential 'stigma' (see Goffman, 1963). Nevertheless, as the above discussion has indicated, there are marked differences between the work of different groups on the production line as well as between these workers and those who are paid to inspect. In short, even single occupations contain a complexity that the singular notion of 'dirty work' risks obscuring.

The Importance of Status, Contracts and Remuneration for 'Dirty Workers'

This section explores issues, which appeared significant for meat inspectors in relation to the experience of being a 'dirty worker' and in terms of understanding the relationships between different 'dirty workers'. These relate to status, employment contracts and remuneration. Despite their association with quality assurance, the meat inspectors felt that their work and its contribution to public health was devalued as the remarks of Bobby (the Head Meat Inspector) indicate:

Sorry the office is such a mess...The factory doesn't really want to spend money on us. They know you've got to be there but they don't want you there. We've had to keep pushing them and pushing them, we're only working off a laptop here. And this is a big company, one of the better ones.

One inspector suggested that - like the birds whose carcasses he is paid to inspect - he is only a cost of production:

Simon: To the meat plant we're just a cost. I mean legally they've got to have us because we're stopping anything bad going into the food chain. So in a way we're doing a good job for them because we're stopping anything that's going to potentially cost the firm a lot more but from their point of view it's just cost. To them we don't do anything. There are no showers either for us. The employees in the dirty end have showers but apparently it's not necessary for workers in the clean end. We haven't got proper changing facilities either...cost cutting.

In emphasising the 'good job' that he does both for the factory and society, Simon ascribed a 'positive value' (Ashforth et al, 2007: 157) to his work. This appeared to be an 'identity-enhancing' technique (Baran et al,2012:598) to compensate for the 'stigma' (Goffman,1963) associated with it. As already noted, there was a stark contrast between the luxurious offices of management and the basic facilities provided for the inspection team (and for the production line workers). The meat inspectors felt stigmatized by this but this stigma seemed to be linked to their status as a 'cost' to the factory and how they were treated by the factory/agency management rather than their association with the 'dirty work' of slaughtering as the comments of Terry indicate:

You're just a number now. Especially with HR now, they don't know us. You used to be able to ring HR obviously if you'd got a personal problem and you could ring them in confidence. It might be different with Bobby [his new manager] now, I'll have to wait and see, but really our first responsibility is to our manager. Before Bobby, the manager was...a twenty four year old lad who hadn't really been in the industry for long. I used to be a manager with Marks and Spencer for a long time and you had to

get people's respect. After all, if you treat people right, normally they give you a bit of respect back. With this lad, he didn't get any respect because he treated us like dirt... spoke down to us.

As already stated, many of the production line workers and meat inspectors are non-UK residents and are employed through agencies on temporary contracts. The status of being a migrant - due to its economic repercussions – also seemed to be a more significant part of meat inspectors' lives than a strong workgroup culture or the taint of this particular type of 'dirty work':

Simon: [FSA employed] Meat inspectors are specialised because they have to qualify to work in red meat and white meat separately. Those who are vets, on the other hand, have just done a single course. And a lot of them are Romanian so it is not a degree that our Royal College [of Veterinary Surgeons] respects here. It's a lot cheaper to employ them... At home they would earn about £400 a month whereas if they work for the meat industry, the agency can pay them three times that and they think they are doing well out of it, but realistically, if it was an English vet, who had trained all those years, they'd want a lot more than that.

According to Government data 1,059,142 chargeable hours of inspection work are predicted for England and Wales (2015/16) and Hen Cock is required to pay the Meat Hygiene Service/FSA £28.80 per inspection hour for this service (Figures for GB from NAO, 2013: 45). We were unable to acquire statistical data on the differential pay rates of FSA meat inspectors versus those employed by agencies. This was discussed with the owner of an agency, who bid for a meat hygiene contract in 2010 and expressed frustration because he

could not obtain this information either. One migrant inspector stated that his hourly pay was £9.00 before tax:

We are all aware of the differences between us [agency workers] and them [civil servants]. We've chatted. It's just something that all agency employees seem to know...The difference between £9 and the charge out rate, whatever it is, is still a huge number...This is how the agencies make their money

It appeared that a degree of stigma was experienced by the above interviewee as he was a qualified vet who had struggled to find employment in the UK. Another inspector cited communication issues, lack of experience and lack of knowledge about UK farming as reasons for such individuals finding it difficult to gain employment in clinical roles which is borne out by nationwide research (Ipsos Mori, 2013). As a result of the difficulty of marketing themselves as vets, many of the migrant meat inspectors reported a sense of being 'trapped' in the meat industry.

Kreiner et al (2006) asserted that 'a stigmatized group' is 'one whose identity or image calls into question the full humanity of its members' (ibid:621) and it appeared that the meat inspectors, particularly those who are migrants, are stigmatized by management. Hence they are poorly paid by comparison to UK vets and meat inspectors; work in a dingy, crowded office, and are denied appropriate facilities such as showers. Simon's comments are indicative of the 'downward occupational mobility' (Ciupijus,2011:544) of migrant meat inspectors for whom it seems that even a veterinary degree is insufficient to elevate their status (Ipsos Mori, 2013)

In some circumstances, a shared sense of professionalism might help to foster ‘a strong occupational group or workgroup culture’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413). At “Hen-cock”, however, the proliferation of agency workers as well as the mixture of nationalities and languages, limited group cohesion both among the meat inspectors and those on the factory floor. It is likely then, that education and economics play a far more important role in maintaining a positive sense of self than a strong workgroup culture. Trevor is the Head Vet at “Hen-cock” and he also owns the agency responsible for supplying vets to the factory. As a manager and an employer, he seemed only too aware of the low status of non-British vets working as meat inspectors in the UK:

A lot of vets who are in practice would speak about abattoir work as the dark side but for us... it’s paid well. I used to work in practice, with small animals. But now I am dealing with much bigger issues of public health and so for me that is very rewarding. It is normal in the US, in Australia and elsewhere for vets to be integral in food production but it is only here, in the UK, that the legacy of the British Empire, created a title of workers known as environmental health officers. But, in other places, Brazil, China and elsewhere it is common that it will be all vets working in those abattoirs not food standards or environmental health officers. So, as a result, my agency has quite a large number of international vets on its books.

According to Trevor, vets working as meat inspectors deal with ‘bigger issues of public health’ and food hygiene than vets in practice. This belief, coupled with his view that it is ‘paid well’, appeared to compensate for it being associated with the ‘dark side’ or, in other words, the stigma that is attached to such work. Nevertheless, the non-UK inspectors that we spoke to sometimes articulated frustration that they had ‘ended up’ in the meat industry

despite their extensive training and expertise (Ipsos Mori, 2013). Overall, these insights indicate that financial rewards, migrant status and temporary employment contracts play a more significant role in these workers' lives than strong workgroup cultures.

The meat inspectors are frequently moved between different factories and this also inhibited the formation of close-knit groups. This is apparent in the following conversation that arose in the meat inspectors' office:

Terry: I'm nervous today, it's like a new job. I've not been here before and by heck I'm nervous. Bobby's got some white wellies for me, is he here yet?

Dave: He's not here. But... [rummaging] he brought some last time, he put them in the locker for you. There's an apron for you in there too.

Norman: Have you done poultry before Terry?

Terry: Oh yes I've done poultry before but not here.

Dave: This is a busy unit to be honest, I can understand you feeling nervous. They are processing at least seven thousand birds a day so it goes very quickly on the line. Like, today, for example *the kill programme* says they should be finishing at half 6 [pm] and the plant staff, sometimes when they finish earlier than that, have to go through to trussing but they don't like doing that. The hangers on sort of hang one on, miss one, hang one on, miss one.

Terry: Well that drags the job out I suppose.

Dave: Yes that's the point because they know they'll have to go into trussing if they get finished before time. So if they slow it down a bit they will finish at their normal time. Whereas if the management say they don't have to go into trussing then you don't get any gaps on the line, it's amazing. Crazy.

The above discussion reveals that the meat inspectors often do not know each other nor do they know who they will be working with on a day-to-day basis. This contributes to their individualization and it reflects both their employment contracts and agency status. The exchange also referred to production line workers resisting 'trussing' by participating in a 'go slow' technique. Although remunerated at the same rate as other operative work, trussing was disliked by the production line workers because it was seen as a female job and, as such, it was ascribed an inferior status. This provides another indication of division and the extent to which 'dirty work' can vary both between and within different groups.

Another example of the individualized and fragmented nature of meat inspectors' work arose during the research when a vet who was due to inspect the chickens before the start of a shift failed to arrive. Rather than contacting the individual at home or on a mobile phone it was necessary to ring the employment agency to account for this absence. This began to cause some concern because the shift could not officially start without a vet being present. Eventually, a different vet named Laura who was from Spain had to be contacted and she arrived somewhat out of breath. As she hurriedly took off her coat before dressing for work the following conversation ensued:

Laura: Which is the situation [sic.]?

Dave: The vet that was supposed to be here has not turned up.

Laura: And the birds?

Dave: They are leaving two modules from each load for you to inspect but they are on load four now....

Laura: With the OV how is he not here? What happened? What happened?

Dave: We can't get hold of him so we don't know.

Laura: Well it is difficult because on my rota I have two days (holds up her first two fingers outwards in a V-shape, which in the UK is a profanity)

Dave: How many [laughter]? [He holds a V-sign up the opposite way as though correcting her]

Although these 'dirty workers' are integral to the production process they are not organized in a way that would enable them to form strong group bonds. Indeed, a 'shared sense of unity' (Thompson,1983:223) seemed to be inhibited in numerous ways. Hence the inspectors are divided - some are OV's whereas others are only qualified to inspect; it is frequently the case that they do not know each other and may never have met before a shift. And since many are agency workers they may only work on a part-time basis or as required. They are also divided by culture and language as the above extract illustrates.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to our understanding of 'dirty work' in several ways. First, we add to current research that highlights the complexity of 'dirty work' by arguing that it varies not only *within* (e.g. Baran et al,2012) but also *between* groups such as production line workers, managers and meat inspectors. We have drawn attention to the organization of work such that the production line generated different work experiences and a colloquial distinction between the 'dirty' and 'clean' side of the factory. Curiously, the work that carried the greatest stigma among the factory workers themselves was 'trussing' and this was at the

'clean' end of the factory. This stigma was linked to the work being predominantly 'female' and such gender dynamics require further research in relation to 'dirty work'. Kreiner et al (2006) referred to 'slaughterhouses' as 'dirty work' (op cit: 621) and yet, as we have seen, this type of work varies considerably and so the label can conceal more than it reveals.

Second, contrary to Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999:413) theoretical argument that 'dirty work' is characterised by a 'strong occupational or workgroup culture' (ibid), which is supported by empirical observations about the 'unity' (Thompson,1983:233) of such workers (see also Ackroyd and Crowdy,1990), it has been argued that such conditions may not always prevail. There are a number of explanations for this that relate to changes in the organization of work and the composition of the workforce. Hence, the technology of slaughtering has become increasingly standardized and individualizing in a way that squeezes out worker or group autonomy. Agency workers are separated from each other by language, ethnicity, work patterns and culture, which inhibits 'entitativity, that is, a perception among individuals that they are grouplike' (Kreiner et al, 2006:626).

Although it was possible to identify limited instances of conflict and resistance that broke through the surface of consent at Hen-cock, such as the 'go slow' in relation to trussing, the workforce was found to be predominantly 'acquiescent' (Inkson, 1977:11). In contrast to Thompson's (1983) study that identified instances of horseplay and sabotage, we generally identified limited resistance, which is consistent with Ackroyd and Crowdy's (1990) findings. Rather than cultural cohesion, however, we have argued that this reflected, at least in part, the international composition of the workforce and their contractual status (Nichols et al, 2004:677). The majority of the workforce came from countries with lower standards of living

than the UK and our research suggests that the meat inspectors considered the ‘effort bargain’ (Baldamus,1967) to be better balanced than if they had been UK workers.

Relatively high wages helped to compensate the inspectors for ‘boring’ work and this is consistent with the ‘financial trap’ that Thompson (1983) argued ensnared workers in a beef processing plant. In this instance, however, it was the migrant workforce and their lower economic expectations rather than an attachment to ‘conspicuous consumption’ (ibid:234) that seemed to be significant. In sum, economics appeared to be more important in terms of establishing ‘positive self definitions’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999:419) for these workers than groupism. At the same time, overseas vets enjoyed relatively less advantageous terms and conditions than their domestic contemporaries and this highlights the need for collective organization to defend living standards and economic dangers *if* the exploitation of itinerant workers results in reduced terms and conditions of employment for domestic workers.

The findings presented in the foregoing analysis provide fresh insights into ‘the intersection of dirty work and identity’ (op cit:429) by suggesting that such workers may not be preoccupied with the ‘stigma’ (Kreiner et al,2006:626) of their work or with finding ‘honour’ (Meara,1974:279) in it, when they are financially recompensed for it. This could also be described as ‘refocusing’ whereby one avoids stigma by taking ‘refuge in the non-task aspects, that is, the extrinsic feature of the work’ (op cit:627). Though exploratory, these findings question generalized assertions such as ‘those who do dirty work’ are ‘highly stressed and dissatisfied workers’ (Baran et al,2012:621). These broad claims are problematic even within single occupations such as sex shop workers, where workers described their ‘love’ for their work (Tyler,2011:1492). They are also questionable when one contrasts our case study findings with other studies (e.g. Thompson,1983; Ackroyd and Crowdy,1990) in

the same occupation because experiences are apt to change over time and vary both within and between groups in ways that are linked to technology, work organization, remuneration and job security, for example.

To conclude, overall, the dynamics around employing cheap, agency, migrant workers to do 'dirty work' illuminates the potentially deleterious consequences of such flexibility for these workers who receive inferior terms and conditions than their UK counterparts. 'Dirty work' may become even dirtier, at least in the public's perception, if it is linked to low pay, poor conditions of employment, domestic unemployment and an "outsider" status. These insights politicise 'dirty work' in a way that is absent in the literature to date and it highlights the pressing need for further research in this area.

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