

## *“You feel dirty a lot of the time”: Policing ‘dirty work’, contamination and purification rituals.*

Following the controversial adoption of spit hoods by some UK police forces, and most recently by the London Metropolitan Police in February 2019, this paper contributes to and extends debates on physical and symbolic contamination by drawing on established considerations of ‘dirty work’. The paper argues that, for police officers, cleansing rituals are personal and subjective. As a relatively high prestige occupation, police officers occupy a unique position in that they are protected by a status shield. Reflections from this ethnographic study suggest that the police uniform can be used as a vehicle for contamination and staff employ purification rituals and methods of taint management.

Keywords: policing; contamination; dirty work; purification rituals; spit hoods.

### Introduction

Cullen et al. (1983) described the ‘paradox in policing’ where officers do not believe that physical injury occurs frequently in police work but nevertheless accept that it is a dangerous job, in other, more nuanced, ways. Perceptions of danger are important in shaping policing occupational culture and the emphasis on risk and threat is used to transform everyday working practices into a ‘craft’ of identifying potential danger and contamination hazards (Crank, 1998, p. 110). An amount of fear and danger may be useful in policing because not only does it serve to make the work more enriching and interesting (Jermier et al. 1989), but also because it forces officers to take undertake (anticipatory) purification rituals to avoid contamination from the clientele that the police interact with on a daily basis. Front-line police officers are at high risk of crime; there were 26,000 assaults on UK officers in 2017-18 (Home Office, 2018a). Officers are also at high risk of contamination as ‘dirty workers’, both physically and symbolically. Although the risk of disease transference is low, the feelings of antipathy raise concern for officer well-being and provides justification for officers to be anticipatory in taint management. The argument for contamination prevention is supported by reference to the death of British PC Christopher Wilson who died in 1977 after contracting a fatal illness after being spat on at a football match. In another case, Ukrainian officer Arina

Koltsova died in 2016 after contracting tuberculosis when arresting an infected suspect (NPCC, 2017). Therefore the use of contamination prevention methods are high on police officer agendas within their 'dirty work'.

Within the academic literature, contamination has typically been discussed in symbolic terms as 'disorder' or 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966, p. 2) and contained in these considerations, there exists a 'close relationship between ideas about the body social and the body physical' (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988, p. 28). Rituals that are used to cleanse or purify after contamination have been largely ignored in the literature and Oring (1979, p. 16) argued that these omissions are due to the 'negative attitude our culture holds towards... faeces, urine, sperm, ear wax, mucus, spittle, sweat and dandruff [which] are all regarded as dirty and defiling... We tend to avoid these substances when produced by others and conceal those of our own making'. These more commonplace attitudes concentrate on physical contamination and are what most people associate with dirty work.

Hughes (1951) first invoked the phrase 'dirty work' to refer to occupations, and the responsibilities within these occupations, that are perceived to be repulsive or demeaning by other members of society. He argued that in order to sustain the effective functioning of society, 'dirty workers' must handle the unpleasant aspects of their role for others to continue to consider themselves 'clean' (Hughes, 1962, p. 9). Police officers are deemed as dirty workers as they often deal with individuals that wider society disassociates with; 'the greater their social distance from us, the more we leave in the hands of [the police], a sort of mandate by default to deal with them on our behalf' (Hughes, 1962, p. 9). While dirty work may be a routine part of policing, it lacks personal

dignity (Ericson, 1982) and can 'spill-over' into the personal lives of officers (Crawley, 2004, p. 227).

Goffman (1963) and Hughes (1951) both considered three ways in which an occupation can be considered stigmatised: through physical, social or moral taints. While neither Goffman nor Hughes proposed precise definitions of these pollutions, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) later elaborated on these categories: physical taint is where occupations are directly associated with dirty or dangerous conditions or involvement with tangibly offensive things such as waste products or death; social taint refers to an occupation where workers have regular contact with people who are stigmatised or in servile positions; and moral taint occurs when an occupation is of debatable morality (see also Kreiner et al., 2006). Using these categorisations, it is clear, that on some level, police officers, by the very nature of their occupation, can be affected by a combination of all three, thus cementing their job as 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1951, p. 319). The problem is that workers then become 'stigmatised' and are considered 'dirty workers' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415).

This paper focuses on the physical and symbolic aspects of contamination in order to extend the conceptualisation of pollution. It argues that police officers, while protected somewhat by a status shield, are affected by different types of contamination, and that symbolic and physical characteristics can be equally polluting. Furthermore, the police uniform can be used involuntarily as a vehicle for contamination, and purification rituals are used by officers in personal and subjective ways. By drawing on fieldwork carried out as part of an ethnographic study, this paper focuses on four broad areas: 'dirty work', occupational prestige, cleansing rituals, and the recent introduction of spit hoods as

another method of taint management. For the purpose of this paper, dirty work encompasses both symbolic and physical contamination. Within the latter, this can be anything from dealing with dead bodies to the transference of contaminants through individuals.

### Methodology

The data presented in this paper is drawn from an ethnography conducted in 2014, that examined the practical and symbolic properties of the police uniform. Within one UK police force, anonymised in this paper as *BlueCorp*, the cooperation of three neighbourhood policing teams was obtained; one was predominantly urban and the other two had largely rural populations. The research framework was designed to explore issues of officer perceptions of police clothing. Non-participant observations were undertaken with fourteen Police Constables (PCs), as part of a wider study, in a northern police force over a period of four months in 2014. The PCs were made up of 11 men (one BME) and three women. Numbers have replaced names for all participants. This paper draws directly on the fieldnotes, conversations and observations recorded throughout the study as a foundation on which to theorise about dirty work and cleansing rituals. Although the sample is not intended to be representative, it provides valuable insights into the subjective understandings of a range of participants. Ethnography is useful for this because, as Rivera and Tracy (2014, p. 202) argues, experiences of dirty work and the feelings that they invoke, are developed through the 'rich and embodied narratives of the scene'.

Although several 'dirty work' aspects of policing have been discussed in the literature, exploring ethnographic accounts of the police role as being physically and symbolically

contaminating with an additional lens of clothing adds a further layer to this important discussion. While my research was ethnographic, and I accompanied police officers on day-to-day jobs, I was 'protected' by my researcher (and possibly student and female) status, and I did not witness any of the truly macabre and dirty aspects of policing because the public are rarely allowed to view these scenes (Drew & Hulvey, 2007). Therefore, the discussions around contamination are mainly second-hand accounts and it is through these personal recollections, I noted the authentic accounts and constructions of contamination through the officer's gaze that may be misconstrued or missed completely, should I have observed them myself without clarification. I did however, on the occasions detailed later in this paper, witness officer cleansing rituals and gathered officers' recollections and dirty work understandings 'in-the-moment', and similarly experienced elements of 'dirty work' myself. This paper characterises an important contribution to developing greater insights into how police officers both understand their (dirty) work and attempt to combat contamination with purification rituals and taint management.

Work is only deemed 'dirty' through the subjective opinion of others and 'is essentially a matter of perspective, not empirics' (Dick, 2005, p. 1368). 'Dirt' is socially constructed and dependant on subjective individual standards; afterall Drew, Mills and Gassaway (2007) entitled their book *'Dirty work: The Social Construction of Taint'*. Perceptions of symbolic contamination are individually constructed and dealt with as such through personal cleansing rituals. Disgust is rooted in fear of contamination and Twigg (2000, p. 395) argues that 'taste is the core sensation, mouth the core location and rejection via spitting... the core actions'. Although a near-universal revulsion for physical dirt should make it immune to social constructions (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014), it seems that some physical contaminants, such as spittle, are so unpleasant it is unanimously perceived as

repulsive (Sandvoll, Grov, Kristoffersen & Hauge, 2015). Some aspects of taint management have overwhelming public support, with 90% of 1200 voters in a Twitter poll voting in favour of using spit hoods (Halliday, 2017) which are placed over an offender's head to help minimise the risk of contamination from communicable diseases (NPCC, 2017; Police Federation, 2019). Public support of police action is important for officer's psychological well-being (Roberg, Kuykendall & Novak, 2002), and workers of tainted occupations also use various stigma buffers, such as occupational prestige, which is discussed next.

### Occupational Prestige

Police occupational culture has been discussed in depth in the literature and has explored how its reductive and selective nature forces an occupational 'lens' on its workers (Chan, 1997; Reiner, 2010; Cockcroft, 2012). This serves to highlight some prestigious benefits of the social and physical environment and omits or minimises others that may lessen its perceived social standing. For example, as part of their job, police officers sometimes deal with gruesome crimes and crime scenes. Dealing with death and macabre events have been described as *'not a very nice part of the job'* (PC3), but when members of the public ask about cases with morbid intrigue, it allows officers to maintain 'relatively high occupational esteem and pride' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p. 413). There appears to be an enthrallment with the macabre and an officer revealed that *"people love to ask about it"* (PC2). The exciting parts of policing are relished in tales of crime-fighting (Innes, 2003) and glamourised in the media because 'people are just fascinated by the seedy side of life [and the] lurid details of crime' (Huey & Broll, 2015, p. 237). Television series such as *The Shield* and *The Wire* in the US and *Luther* and *Line of Duty* in the UK amongst many others encourage this image, but Bayley (1994) argues that contrary to popular belief,

most police work is actually boring and mundane. Docu-series such as *'24 Hours in Police Custody'* illuminate the more authentic and violent police interactions, which demonstrate the 'dirty' and less glamorous side of front-line police work.

Henry (1963) suggested that police officers are dehumanised in the process of their career and antipathy declines with frequent exposure to cadaverous scenes. Learning to live with gruesome forms of contamination is 'an unspoken but crucial job requirement... Dirty workers, after all, cannot afford to remain too squeamish' (Jervis, 2011, p. 88). As Innes (2003, p. 264) notes:

In responding to murders, [the police] are confronted with scenes that contain the after-effects of extreme brutality, rage, and sometimes, for the want of a better word, evil. Death is a messy business, with blood and other bodily excretions part of the ways and means of homicide.

According to Steinross and Kleinman (1989, p. 449), there are different types of dirty working; some which will be 'bearable', and others that will be 'alienating', and in order to ensure the type of work is manageable there are two conditions: 'organisation shields provided by the organisation, and status shields provided by prestige'. Hochschild ([1983] 2012, p. 163) coined the term 'status shield' to describe how occupational status serves to protect individuals from the negative perceptions of others. Occupational prestige is a combination of status, income, education, power, and quality of work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). The exploration of prestige and its ability to protect against dirty work is particularly interesting when examining the police because well-established perceptions may be key to enabling (or disabling) the status shield. This can limit the effects by cultivating a professional character that people associate with authority (Steinross & Kleinman, 1989). The consideration that a status shield protects the police from various forms of contamination is contested – it is difficult to ascertain whether

short periods of intense contamination (dealing with a death or a spitting incident for example) is buffered by prestige. This may be based not only on personal perception of occupational prestige, but *public* perception of occupations. A worker's status depends upon the occupational position in relation to other professions as much as the individual's position in the occupation (Hughes, 1970). Also useful in this context is Cooley's (1902) well-established social-psychological theory of the looking-glass-self, which considers how a person's sense of self is developed through interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others. Furthermore, Krau and Ziv (1990) suggested that the public's perception of an occupation plays an influential role in affecting a worker's perception of their job and subsequently impacts retention. A Danish study ('Svalastoga, Prestige, Class and Mobility 1959', cited in Swanton & Wilson, 1974, p. 95) ranked 'policemen' 52<sup>nd</sup> out of 75 occupations. Chief constables, on the other hand, were ranked 15<sup>th</sup>. Niederhoffer (1969) attributed this to the fact that respondents have the tendency to interpret an entire occupation based on its most junior members. A longitudinal study in 1994 ranked policemen at 48<sup>th</sup> (out of 76) in 1964 and 69<sup>th</sup> in 1989 (Nakao & Treas, 1994). Prestige scores are unreliable and difficult to obtain (Tracy & Scott, 2006) which goes some way to explain why more recent studies are scarce but a recent YouGov poll found that 63% of over 14000 UK respondents 'would not like to [be a police officer] for a living' (compared to 29% that would (YouGov, 2015).

Elements of dirty work are expected by officers because their daily tasks require skills and knowledge that involve frequent confrontations with stigmatised individuals and crime scenes. Bittner (1967) contended that while the police seem to revere the ability to deal effectively with undesirable members of society, it is still a tainted occupation because officers are 'viewed as the fire it takes to fight fire' (1970, p. 8). Consequently,



although being a police officer may hold occupational status and prestige, it is still seen publicly as dirty work. In order to combat this, some officers undertake 'purification rituals' (Douglas, 1966).

### *Purification Rituals and Symbolic Contamination*

The various forms of contamination discussed by Hughes (1951) and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) are similarly embedded within the police occupation; and it can be argued that police clothing can be used as an involuntary vehicle for taint. Police culture and the symbolic power it holds is entrenched in the uniform and bodily image of the police (Young, 1992). It has been suggested that law-enforcement uniforms are physical and symbolic protective shields (Crawley, 2004) and most uniforms 'combine the practical and symbolic' (Steele, 1989, p. 66). Similarly, the nursing profession has a virtuousness that allows its workers to summon their quasi-religious status symbolised in the habit-like uniform to manage dirty work (Littlewood, 1991). Twigg (2000, p. 403) argued that careworkers on the other hand, who do not tend to wear uniforms, have 'little or no symbolic protection against the polluting nature of their work'. The possibility of contamination is 'of the utmost relevance to policemen, who regard the violation of body territory as tantamount to insurgency' (Holdaway, 1983, p. 46). Therefore, the avoidance of pollution 'becomes immediate and critical when violation endangers the physical and symbolic space of, and around, the physical self' (Holdaway, 1983, p. 46). Douglas (1966) suggested that the boundaries between work and home need to be clearly defined and certain procedures need to be followed in order to limit the negative effects of pollution. The excerpts in this section demonstrate officers' attempts to purify perceived contamination.

Comparing prison officers and police officers may be helpful because they are the only blue-collar working-class occupational groups in the criminal justice system and they experience diverse forms of contamination. Personal perceptions of occupational prestige differ as well and it has been documented that some prison officers view themselves as the 'scum of law enforcement' (Tracy and Scott, 2006, p. 7). Crawley (2004, pp. 40-1) gives a useful analogy:

Police officers deal with the acute illnesses of the body politic. When their services are called upon, emergency treatment is required, namely, the removal of the offender (the illness) from the streets (the social body). Prison officers deal with more chronic problems.

Crawley (2004) discovered that prison officers are meticulous in their efforts to avoid contamination from the workplace as it damages the 'purity of the home' and the maintenance of boundaries is essential to avoid the 'polluting effects of symbolic contact with "profane" individuals' (Crawley, 2004, pp. 235, 245). She argued that wearing a uniform is 'psychological protection' for prison officers and found that their most important purification ritual was 'the immediate removal of the uniform' as its suspected contamination intruded on the symbolic space of the body (Crawley, 2004, pp. 140, 245). Encroachments on the space surrounding the 'self' and the body, is sacred and 'is not to be profaned' (Holdaway, 1983, p. 46); people, places, situations, all the things that encompass dirty work, threaten the purity of the police body. The following scenario, drawn from my fieldnotes, may suffice to illustrate this kind of contamination;

*We had a follow-up call to a domestic dispute and it was the 'worst council estate' on PC6's patch. The high-rise flats were disgusting, decrepit and stank of decay, stale cigarettes and booze. I didn't even want the jacket I had on to touch the inside of the lift and I wrapped it tightly around me to avoid touching the walls. I stood in something gooey leaving the lift and I felt temporarily nauseated. PC6 saw the look on my face, laughed heartily and said he 'often feels the same way'. Before we got to the door of the address he turned to me and whispered 'entering these places make me feel filthy even if I don't have to touch the people or anything.*

Some of these flats are disgusting, and so are the people, and you leave feeling somehow infected by their blatant disregard for basic hygiene’.

*(Fieldnotes Excerpt: March, 2014)*

Goffman (2001, p. 154) contended that the ‘body’ in ethnography is an important way to obtain data because you “subject yourself, your own body to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals”. Solidarity within the police has been widely documented and it seems that shared experiences fosters strong occupational cultures (Trice & Beyer, 1993) and cement this camaraderie, even for temporary observers. These experiences bolster commonality and exacerbates the sense of difference and separation from wider society. Exposure to more of these events may have helped develop depth of personal experience particularly with relation to my ‘body’ in ethnography (Goffman, 2001), but the encounter with PC6 encouraged researcher mindfulness when considering symbolic contamination within officer dirty work.

Nursing aides in Jervis’ study (2001, p. 89) found themselves ‘deeply affected by their intensive contacts with clientele and their bodily substances’. While the uniform may offer some physical protection (Crawley, 2004), it does not protect the wearer from *feeling* contaminated and officers undertake various personal purification rituals to avoid symbolic pollution. Police officers often deal with people who are physically dirty, defecating, vomiting, and/or expectorating on themselves or the others and officers are often seen wearing protective items such as gloves (Gassaway, 2007). Twigg (2000) claimed that healthcare workers also use gloves as a symbolic and physical distancing procedure when touching clients. Similar to the controversy around contamination and the recent roll-out of spit-hoods, gloves have been used in relation to people with HIV; in 1989 police officers in New York were advised by senior officers to put on gloves to deal

with gay demonstrators at a rally against the Catholic Church, out of a 'misguided fear' of contamination (Sindelar, 2012). While the risk of physical contamination is high in policing, the actual transference rate of illness and disease is low, and thus wearing gloves serves to evoke feelings that clientele are subhuman (Twigg, 2000). In *BlueCorp* surgical gloves were made available in all vehicles and in offices. Hand sanitiser however, was bought at officers' discretion and I noted use in unusual situations:

*We were called to hotel where two drunken men had been arguing. I was told to wait outside but the reception was all glass so I could see what was going on. PC5 and PC4 spoke to the man at reception, who pointed to the two men in question who were sat on the floor. It seems they had stopped rowing. Both officers spoke briefly to them and came back out to the car. As soon as they got back in, PC5 got out his hand sanitiser, used it, and then gave it to PC4 to use. I asked them why they were using it (as I had not seen them touch anything inside). PC5 said, 'Erm, I dunno, just force of habit really. Cleans you up after a job and gets us ready for the next one' [laughs], PC4 nods in agreement.*

*(Fieldnotes Excerpt: March, 2014)*

It is pertinent to consider that there may be the possibility of alternative (and subconscious) choices and explanations. For example, the use of surgical gloves and sanitiser may be recommended by senior officers as a health and safety requirement or by the influence of evidential good practice. The cleansing rituals could also be stylised personal habits or simply copying colleagues. Nevertheless, this purification ritual indicates that each and every job has the potential to be symbolically and physically contaminating and by using the sanitiser it cleansed the officers ready for the next part of their dirty work. Similarly, Rubenstein (1973, p. 316) found that officers 'may wash up several times' during busy shifts, notwithstanding physical contact 'because many of the people [they] stop are filthy'. Likewise, Loftus (2007, pp. 322-3) noted that officer's disapproval of 'lower working-class predicaments... appears to be bound up with notions of cleanliness, dirt and "respectability"';

the police emphasis on dirt and disease also manifested itself in a directly physical aspect of police procedure: namely, through putting on surgical gloves before touching those poor and dispossessed groups.

Fear of pollution may result in discrimination against certain social classes if they are suspected to be a potential contaminant (Flavin, 1998), particularly as it is a 'well-established fact' that contaminants are 'more prevalent among the offending population' (Geoghegan, 2016a, p. 1). Goffman (1971, p. 69) discussed the Indian caste system and argued that the 'potency of contamination' depended on the social distance between castes and pointed out the 'ranking person' is at the 'centre of a personal space' and the other is a 'source of contamination', much like how the police inhabit their occupational space using the 'us' (police) versus 'them' (public) mentality (see Kappeler, Sluder & Alpert, 2015). The body, it seems, is an ideal vehicle for contagion; 'including the hands, as something that can touch and through this defile the sheath or possessions of another' (Goffman, 1971, p. 69). As well as protecting the hands, spraying perfume on his uniform was employed by PC8;

*We have to go visit this guy a lot [points out the house], only because he rings the police literally every few days about something or another, I think he's just lonely so we pop in and see how he is, but his house is disgusting. Like seriously horrendous. He's in his sixties and there's dog poo on the floor, his poo on the couch, I just don't understand how people live like that. And I've definitely been in worse houses as well, makes me feel filthy. I always have aftershave with me so I can spray my collar about ten times and just hold that up to my nose when I go in. I stopped using my best [Hugo] Boss aftershave after a while, I was going through something like one a week! [laughs] It's also 'cause then I can just smell me later and not them.*

Cresswell (1996, p. 38) argued that dirt causes disgust because it appears where it should not, 'on the kitchen floor or under the bed', and in this particular case, on the couch as well. Using his own aftershave allowed PC8 to temporarily obstruct the contaminating

smell of the polluted house. Similarly, Loftus (2007, p. 319 – original emphasis) also noted that ‘for the police, clothes, bodily comportment, articulation and *smell* (actual or imagined) all betrayed the class origins of “scrotes”’. ‘Bodily excreta’, according to Goffman (1971, pp. 71-2), particularly odour, ‘cannot be cut off once it violates and may linger in a confined place after the agency has gone’, as demonstrated by PC8.

In nursing, where staff have high-intensity dirty work, toileting constitutes a major part of nursing assistants’ routines and occupational discourse. Many aides find toileting disgusting and take precautions to make it less revolting (Gubrium, 1975). These provisions include carefully handling stool, avoiding prolonged eye contact with it, and attempting to mask its odour. One aide, for instance, revealed to Gubrium (1975, p. 139) that she ‘perfumed [her] tits so that when [she] had to step over to clean, [she] smel[t] the perfume and not the BM (bowel movements)’. Much like PC8, Jervis (2001, p. 89) found that nursing assistants came to ‘embody’ residents’ effluence. A nurse in Jervis’ study admitted that ‘she sometimes noticed, while riding the bus, that she smelled like “piss”’; hence, even after leaving work, nursing assistants risk bringing pollution home with them’. Indeed, the symbolic pollution of work can be so distinct that an observer in Henry’s study (1963, p. 410) *felt* unclean simply by witnessing an incontinent resident and ‘[she] left the division feeling completely depressed and contaminated’. Similarly, firefighters expressed disdain for certain ‘classes’ of clients. In Tracy and Scott’s (2006, p. 16) study on firefighters, one interviewee admitted that they call some clientele ‘shitbums, because they shit all over themselves and call us. Then we have to take care of them’. Tracy and Scott (2006, p. 16) argue that this is particularly hard for workers of high prestige occupations because it goes against the public image of bravery; ‘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'. This can be similarly attributed to the masculine culture and public image of policing as well.

These studies demonstrate the experiences of contamination and purification rituals that take place in a homogenous way to policing – perhaps a variance is that medical professionals enter their career *expecting* high intensity and continuous contamination, and it seemed to surprise police officers that this was a part of the job that they '*weren't warned about*' (PC5). Also, the police dealing with macabre scenes are in contrast to nurses as the former see the 'aftermath' and have no emotional connection to the deceased, whereas nurses may see the departed not as a body 'but as the person they looked after' (Crawley, 2004, p. 157).

Another ritual of purification is the removal of the uniform. As clothing can be used as a vehicle for contamination, 'immediate removal of the uniform' was necessary for the prison officers in Crawley's study, a ritual described by officers as a 'cleansing process' (Crawley, 2004, p. 245). Likewise, extracts from the officers in my fieldwork deemed the separation of contaminated clothes from the sanctity of home imperative:

*I never step inside my front door unless I've taken my boots off, they just get left on the porch. Some of these people's carpets, they really are horrid.*  
(PC11)

*I don't mind going home in my top, but I don't ever take my boots home with me or my jacket, I get changed into trainers or whatever.*  
(PC9)

*Everything stays at work. We've got lockers. I sometimes leave my vest on because that's been covered by my [stab] vest so that's alright.*  
(PC13)

Cleansing processes were personal and subjective; some officers were satisfied with taking their clothes home, while others never allowed the most polluted items to leave the workplace. For PC11, the purity of the home can remain intact if his boots stayed outside; whilst his porch may be geographically part of his home territory, it is external and therefore secure. Other officers insisted that work clothes stayed at work, in lockers, where the contamination could be contained. Reflecting on the fieldwork and data collected, it seems that only some aspects of the police uniform have the potential to be contaminated, or rather *more* contaminated, than others. Undergarments that have been covered by exterior protection, such as the stab vest and/ or high-visibility jacket, allowed any contamination to remain on these items, symbolically and physically protecting the garments underneath. This was acceptable for some officers, but not for others, who established that even work underclothes were tainted. Others insisted they showered as soon as they finished work, or immediately when they returned home:

*I always, always, always have a shower when I get in. You just feel really dirty.*  
(PC11)

*I try not to touch anything when I'm in houses but even if I don't, you feel like you've got a film of muck on you when you come out. I have a shower as soon as I can back to the station after a shift, I don't even wait 'til I get home because it's too long to wait.*  
(PC8)

### Use of Spit-Hoods

The most recent addition to taint management discussions are the introduction of spit hoods (also known as spit guards or contamination hoods). Made of a lightweight mesh, these hoods are instruments of restraint, which when placed over a person's head, help minimise the risk of contamination from communicable diseases (NPCC, 2017; Police Federation, 2019). It also helps to curtail the injuries associated with a suspect biting or



spitting, and although it cannot prevent the physical biting injury, it can reduce the transfer of bodily fluids. Previous devices have been considered which involved the police officers themselves wearing goggles/masks but were found to be ineffective as it offered no protection from biting or contamination into open wounds, or contamination onto the officer's person (NPCC, 2017). It must not be underestimated that aside from the obvious health implications the transfer of pollution in whatever form is a distasteful experience in itself:

‘There is also the easily-overlooked reality that being spat at is deeply unpleasant and also risks transmission of less serious but still unpleasant elements, such as bacterial infections, variations of the flu, and other viruses. Those considering the policy and application of spit guards must be under no illusion that being spat at is a real-world and deeply unpleasant experience.’

(Geoghegan, 2016a, p. 2)

The use of spit hoods was approved by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in 2007, but its roll-out has been patchy and gradual and only 32 of 43 forces currently use them (Gyford, 2018) and the reception has been the subject of heated debate within policing circles and the media. The use of the hoods has been described as ‘degrading’ (Davenport, 2019), ‘cruel and dangerous’ (Sheerin, 2017), ‘primitive’, ‘[used to] inspire fear and anguish’ (Geoghegan, 2016a, p. 9) and are ‘reminiscent of hoods used at Guantanamo Bay’ (Dodd, 2016; see also Hales, 2016). Cressida Dick, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, condemned the preference for a positive public perception over officer well-being. Speaking at a Police Federation conference in May 2018, she said to applause, ‘I cannot understand why any chief constable would put public perception before protecting police officers. I think it is plainly ridiculous’. Similarly, the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, believes that negative public perception should not affect chief constables’ duties to protect their officers (Gyford, 2018). A publicly available online

PowerPoint presentation from Norfolk and Suffolk Police details the considerations of using spit guards but in acknowledgement of negative public perception, advises officers to 'remove [suspects wearing spit hoods] from public view ASAP' (and highlights this in red). It is likely that a good proportion of the public have not heard of spit hoods or know what they are for until at least fairly recently (if at all) and thus initial reactions 'are likely to be instinctive and ill-informed', and this unfamiliarity with the mechanism can cause their use to be far more traumatic for recipients than needs to be (Hales, 2016).

In February 2019, Scotland Yard announced the London roll-out of spit guards after much 'careful consultation'. A Metropolitan Police Federation study suggested that 95% of officers supported the regularly carrying of the hoods and '3% [of officers] were spat at every day' (Dearden, 2019). Although there is 'no reliable information' on spitting incidents, other forces have provided figures 'often to justify' the decision to use spit hoods (Joyce & Maverick, 2018, p. 146) since public support is important for officers' psychological well-being (Roberg, Kuykendall & Novak, 2002).

Although symbolic contamination can be damaging to officer well-being and result in work 'spill-over', some physical contamination risks are much more dangerous. HIV/AIDS for example poses a unique threat in the sense that officers do not know whether they have been infected for up to six months when enough time has elapsed for the microbes to be detected (Flavin, 1998). Unlike other forms of contamination that can be purified or managed, officers can remain healthy for a decade or more and then show infection symptoms. Although this is one of the worst examples of contamination threats, HIV is generally incurable and can cause prejudice and discrimination against the officer (Flavin, 1998). There has only been one known case of cured HIV, known as the 'Berlin Patient', a.k.a. Timothy Brown in 2008 (Avert, 2019) but recent vaccine trials have shown

promising results. There are now 'very effective treatments' for HIV leading to a long and healthy life (NHS, 2019) which may result in a decline in stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes, although this remains to be seen.

The likelihood of danger from serious illnesses (HIV, TB or Hepatitis C for example), is low, but odd cases do exist and these 'war-stories' of pollution and disgust can exacerbate the potential danger. It is documented that offenders have been known to 'arm themselves' with their illness in order to pose a danger to officers. Geoghegan (2016a, p. 6) argues that "individuals can and do choose to use their own illness (e.g. HCV, TB, HIV, etc.) as a weapon against police officers and will even self-harm to provide a source of contaminated blood with which to spit" Despite the low transfer rate, there are serious side effects of treatment from spitting incidents such as 'vomiting, sleep issues, severe diarrhoea, weight loss, fatigue, weakness, underperforming kidneys and general feelings of ill-health. This consequently impacts through lost working hours and has a massive impact on the officers undergoing treatment and their families' (Metropolitan Police, 2018; see also Geoghegan, 2016a). Anti-viral treatment may also be required for their immediate family and friends (*Police*, 2017). The Police Federation (2019) argues that the uncertainty of infection can have an unprecedented impact on their mental well-being. These heightened levels of fear can compromise an officer's job and have been associated with emotional fatigue, stress and anxiety (Jermier et al. 1989).

## Discussion

Dirty work, contamination and purification rituals may be similar across many occupations, of which this paper has considered nursing aides and prison officers in these contexts. However, it can be postulated that status shields and prestige are wrapped up

in notions of class and perceived differences between worker and 'clientele'. After all, Hughes (1962) argued that the police deal with people who others want to keep a social distance from and Loftus (2007) reasoned that 'scrotes' and the lower-working class are natural contaminants. It is difficult for police officers to maintain the separation between 'clean us' and 'dirty them' through a spectrum of clean and dirty typologies (Young, 1991), and lines are often blurred. As Tracy and Scott (2006, p. 32) argue, 'employees feel "clean", when the work's "filth" can be pinned on another', and contamination is most successfully redirected when 'blaming one that is perceived as low-class, criminally inclined, and socially marginal'. Police officers reside in a distinct occupational world; a combination of their exposure to danger, authoritarian position, and the pressures they feel to prove themselves efficient are unique to the rank-and-file officer (Skolnick, 1975). Additionally, their social world is relatively large as they deal with not only stigmatised individuals but law-abiding members of the public, which reinforces their status shield and goes some way to buffer the effects of symbolic contamination.

While officers may employ certain cleansing techniques during work, officers insisted that taking a shower after a shift was of '*vital importance*' (PC3) which suggests that contamination is more than uniform deep as removal does not always help combat the effects. *BlueCorp* recommends that 'any uniform or clothing [that] is contaminated with blood or bodily fluid...' should be washed with detergent to 'at least 80 degrees', 'dry cleaned', or 'incinerated as clinical waste' (*BlueCorp*, 2010, p. 13). Similarly, Jervis (2001, p. 89) remembers when working as an aide, 'being instructed to bathe and launder [her] uniform as soon as [she] arrived home in order to protect family members from illnesses'. Such procedures clearly indicate purification rituals and offer support to Douglas' (1966, p. 35) assertion about dirt conceptions; 'if we abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from

our notion of dirty, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place'. Considering the different cleansing processes that officers choose, it is perhaps best to consider sanitisation habits as a web of tangled impurities and purifications, which are at the discretion and subjective perception of the individual officers. As evidenced by the fieldwork at *BlueCorp*, contamination is not just a physical problem, it is also symbolic.

Clothes and the bodies that wear them can be understood as contamination vehicles through which officers were seen to manage dirty work in different ways and through various purification rituals. Officers are often in contact with discredited and stigmatised groups and go through various decontamination procedures to rid themselves of physical and symbolic pollution. These include the use of cleansing apparatus such as hand sanitiser, surgical gloves and showering, and the removal of all or parts of the uniform which are prohibited from entering their 'clean' homes and 'sacred' lives (see Holdaway, 1983; Crawley, 2004). Even the more 'obvious' taint management apparatus such as spit hoods, are often anticipatory prevention: 'It is a preventative measure – in the finest traditions of policing. It is a no-brainer to the informed person – in the same way as washing your hands and wearing medical gloves are' (Geoghegan, 2016b).

Considering the breadth and depth of perceived contamination and 'dirtiness' is vital. According to Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss (2006, p. 621), breadth refers to 'core, distinctive, and possibly enduring characteristics that typify the line of work', i.e. the proportion of work that is dirty. Depth on the other hand, 'refers to the intensity of the dirtiness and the extent to which a worker is directly involved in the dirt'. Therefore, it may be that the more frequent exposure to dirty work results in possibly *less* symbolic

contamination due to desensitisation, or maybe less time spent with those situations, but again this is hard to quantify.

It is important to consider how different roles within the police can affect breadth, depth, intensity and status shields. Police occupational culture in the literature and indeed the dirty work that is associated with it, tends to depict the police as that of one segment – uniformed patrol – such as the police constables in this study. But civilian staff (including PCSOs) make up around 37% of employees of the 43 forces in England and Wales (Home Office, 2018b). Although this paper details qualitative data from PCs, it cannot be ignored that other roles experience varying levels of dirty work within the rank-and-file. PCSOs for example, as a non-confrontational, non-response role, would be an interesting area for future research because although they rarely attend macabre scenes or deal with violent and abusive individuals, they regularly seek to build relationships with the public and thus the dirty work may be high-breadth but low-depth (Kreiner et al., 2006). This does not dismiss the fact that they can still be exposed to serious physical contaminants through spitting for example.

Similarly, detectives for example arguably experience the highest-intensity dirty work but for short periods and therefore their dirty work may be high-depth but low-breadth as they spend most of their time *'preparing masses of paperwork for the courts'* (D2). Although this type of work is deemed one of the 'dirtiest', they do not often deal with physical contamination, perceptions of occupational prestige are higher because the public hold detectives in higher esteem than uniformed officers (Rubenstein, 2001). This gulf in perceptions of prestige are also widened by the public imagery of detectives as 'glamorous crime-fighters' (Innes, 2003, p. 21) and it is not just public perception that

enables a status shield. Being a detective is considered a prestigious position within policing circles 'commanding immediate respect and authority' (Huey & Broll, 2015, p. 243) and this would also be a welcome area for future analysis. In their study on detectives, Heinsler, Kreiner, and Stenross (1990, p. 236) noted that the time-consuming mundane clerical tasks are seen as a form of dirty work and called upon their glamourised image from the media 'to redefine these tasks as important'. The redefining and recalibrating of different job parts results in more positive and prestigious features of the work being prioritised over more polluting features, such as dealing with dead bodies. The refocusing on parts of the job that are not stigmatised helps workers to ignore these elements. Tracy and Scott (2006, p. 10) claimed that crime scene investigators for example, may 'gloat about their high pay and non-traditional work schedules'. By adjusting meanings of dirty work and placing lower value on the contaminating features of the job and neutralising and reframing of negative events into positive ones, this allows officers to minimise problematic elements. Consequently, these experiences of contamination become reduced in symbolic importance.

### Conclusion

For occupations that undertake 'dirty work', contamination is a complicated concept. There are no clear-cut distinctions between physical and symbolic contamination; they are often embedded in each other and the lines between them are inherently vague and many occupations, of which police officers are a prime example, are tainted on many levels. It can be concluded that contamination *does* happen, to some degree, to every officer through the nature of dirty work, though this is also differentiated by varying levels of prestige, roles and personal constructions of pollution. This paper has argued that perceptions of contamination are personal and subjective and therefore cannot be

generalised (or wholly avoided). This paper set out to explore how purification rituals are used by officers in their experiences of the various forms of contamination and I highlighted some of the meanings officers attach to their dirty work.

This paper offers considerations of how dirty work and contamination in its various forms is perceived by the police. This in turn gives empirical weight to previous research that highlighted the significance of occupational beliefs and ideas in how the management of such work is negotiated. With regard to the theoretical contributions of Hughes (1951) and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), the ethnographic data reported in this paper reinforces the conceptualisation of dirty work and contamination as a social construction that is subjective and personal to individual officers. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) emphasised similarities amongst dirty occupations and suggested that further research could explore how occupational prestige influences the use of various taint management practices. This paper sought to explore police officer's purification rituals and experiences of contamination but to understand this as multi-layered taint further research is needed to look at the dirty work constructions of different roles within these organisations.

The findings extend Crawley's (2004) notable research that feelings of cleanliness were not just about the removal of the uniform, nor is it always about *physical* contamination. Bergman and Chalkley (2007) argue that the stigma of dirty work is 'sticky' in that it often persists even after leaving the workplace, whether temporarily (commuting home) or permanently (leaving the job). The symbolic aspect of contamination is arguably more powerful as it inadvertently seeps into parts of officers' personal lives, particularly when considering the sustained unknown risk of serious diseases, from spitting for example. These potential contaminants 'spill-over' into the personal lives of officers (Crawley,



2004) and the vital separation of work and home, of which officers speak, becomes a blur, contaminating each other in the process. The use of the uniform in this way is particularly interesting when considering that some other policing roles do not have the separation between 'work' clothes and 'home' clothes. Detectives for example do not wear a standard police uniform and therefore decontamination of these items is more complex.

The theoretical application of Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) elaborated conceptions of contamination was central to identifying officers social constructed meanings of pollution and dirty work. While there were some universal understandings of dirt (the physical aspect of it being the most obvious and easily understood), the cleansing rituals and avoidance techniques undertaken by officers were also personal and subjective. This indicates that contamination cannot be quantified nor avoided in the sense that officers would ideally know 'what to look out for'. This is based upon perceptions of dirt and cleanliness and what it takes to rid themselves individually of pollution, so they 'feel' clean. Officers often referenced dealing with contamination as being linked with perceptions of lower social class and this has been documented in other studies (Goffman, 1971; Rubenstein, 1973; Flavin, 1998; Loftus, 2007; Geoghegan, 2016a) and more recently in spit hood discussions. These judgemental practices, though experienced myself during fieldwork, are damaging to the occupational culture and can cause anticipatory feelings of dirtiness and dirty work based on perceived social class. These conclusions have to be interpreted cautiously, because as conjecture, it supports controversial findings that better educated people tend to rank the police lower than lesser educated persons (Gourley, 1953) and therefore affects the status shield. Designating clientele as having lesser social standing can allow for heightened feelings of

occupational prestige and 'allows employees to feel superior', as one of the way taint is managed is blaming the source of the contamination (Tracy and Scott, 2006, p. 32).

All the purification rituals detailed in this paper demonstrate that all officers are contaminated differently, and is also dependant on many variables; role, length of service and subjective experiences of different 'jobs', gendered expectations of reactions, age, personality types, etcetera, and are therefore worthy of further study. Other studies claim that men's privileged status guards them from having to perform emotional labour as habitually as women which results in higher job satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983). Cottingham, Erickson and Diefendorff (2015, p. 377) called this a 'status bonus' and would be worthy of further analysis in the context of dirty work, particularly as gender remains a 'present absence' (Trethewey, Scott & Legreco, 2006). As discussed earlier, the ideas of 'dirt' and 'dirty work' are socially constructed and heavily dependent on local and contemporary norms, historical and cultural contexts (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). These variables would also be a useful area for further analysis as well as international comparisons of what constitutes 'dirty work'. The literature so far has demonstrated similar international findings that refer to law-enforcement dirty work from the US (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014, Kreiner et al., 2006, Drew, Mills & Gassaway, 2007), Australia (Bove & Pervan, 2013) and Canada (Huey & Broll, 2013). Additionally, there have been similar international controversial consultations around spit hoods in New Zealand and Australia. Research about how different policing roles counter physical and symbolic contamination might also help better understand how these workers cope with the framing of prestige within constructions of dirty work. Given the specificities of my sample, future research is needed to explore results across other law enforcement and security industries in an increasingly pluralised landscape.

Since undertaking dirty work reduces the social standing of occupations; working as a police officer is noteworthy as it is viewed as a 'relatively high prestige' job (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 416). By insisting on the dramatic symbolism of their profession, the police are guaranteed short-term occupational prestige (Jermier, 1979), and in this sense, they *do* hold a 'status shield' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 163). This goes some way to mitigate the effects of symbolic and physical taint but to what level this 'shield' protects them from contamination remains to be seen. After all, it is intriguing to researchers to understand what dirty work 'feels' like... 'how does it feel to negotiate shifting layers of taint, your job looked down upon in one context, and exalted in another?' (Rivera & Tracy, 2014, p. 206). These shifting perceptions and experiences with dirty work can affect the wellbeing of officers and their families. Although it has been heavily documented that police officers have one of the most stressful occupations which make them particularly vulnerable to psychological complications, this is still an under-researched area (Deshênes, Desjardins & Dussault, 2018). If public perceptions are important to levels of occupational prestige (Roberg, Kuykendall & Novak, 2002), there needs to more information disseminated to the public about taint management and preventative methods for officer well-being, particularly around the use of spit hoods for example.

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