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Beyond the Symbolic: A Relational Approach to Dirty Work through a Study of Refuse Collectors and Street Cleaners

Jason Hughes, University of Leicester; Ruth Simpson, Brunel University, London; Natasha Slutskaya, Brunel University, London; Alex Simpson, University of Brighton; Kahryn Hughes, University of Leeds.

Abstract

Drawing on a relational approach and based on an ethnographic study of street cleaners and refuse collectors, we redress a tendency towards an over-emphasis on the discursive by exploring the co-constitution of the material and symbolic dynamics of dirt. We show how esteem-enhancing strategies that draw on the symbolic can be both supported and undermined by the physicality of dirt, and how relations of power are rooted in subordinating material conditions. Through employing Hardy and Thomas's (2015) taxonomy of objects, practice, bodies and space, we develop a fuller understanding of how the symbolic and material are fundamentally entwined within dirty work, and suggest that a neglect of the latter might foster a false optimism regarding worker experiences.

Keywords: Dirt; dirty work; relational ontology; taint

Introduction[i]

This paper explores how dirt is experienced and managed by members of two occupational groups who deal with its dispersal: street cleaners and refuse collectors (including recycling tip workers). Drawing upon a UK-based ethnographic study, we seek to overcome a tendency in current accounts to focus on the cultural significance of dirt as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966) and on stigma and discursive strategies to counter taint (e.g. Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Kreiner et al., 2006) to the detriment of an appreciation of its more material and embodied dimensions. Following a more general 'turn' away from 'a symbolic slant so strong that it barely nods to the material' (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 25), we adopt a 'relational' approach which avoids dichotomising the material and the discursive (Barad, 2003, 2007; Mauthner, 2015; Putnam, 2015).

In the context of dirty work, a relational conceptualisation recognises that 'dirt' is not simply a discursive abstraction but has a materiality that is not reducible to the symbolic product of particular interactions. Dirt marks physical bodies, shapes lived experiences through meanings around taint and in other ways generates interdependencies – inducing tensions and contradictions. Drawing on this conceptualisation, we contribute to the literature on dirty work through incorporating and applying Hardy and Thomas's (2015) four dimensions of materiality (objects, practices, bodies and space) in order to explore the often complex entanglement of the material and the symbolic in how such work is encountered. We argue that neglect of this relationship in the context of dirty work is to overlook a key aspect of worker experience – in particular how esteem-enhancing strategies that draw on the moral and symbolic can be both supported and undermined by the materiality of dirt, and how relations of power are rooted in subordinating material conditions. Further, we suggest that an overemphasis on the discursive and the ideological in current accounts privileges positive constructions around such work, fostering a 'false optimism' regarding worker experiences.

Dirt and Dirty Work

Recognition of both the material and the symbolic facets of dirt was highlighted by Hughes (1958) in his early analysis of dirty work as being at once physically disgusting, counter to moral conceptions,

and/or a symbol of social degradation. However, a dominant strand since Hughes's work has been towards a variant of social constructionism in which emphasis has been placed on dirt as a discursive entity – one that is understood to shift in form and definition according to the perspective of the beholder. In this respect, Mary Douglas's (1966) conceptualisation of dirt as 'matter out of place' and as 'disorder' within a system of cultural and moral norms has proven particularly influential. Indeed, Ashforth and Kreiner's paradigmatic work in the field (1999, 2014; Ashforth et al., 2007) can be understood as an extension of Hughes's work through the constructivist lens of Douglas. Accordingly, building on Hughes, Ashforth and Kreiner delineate three forms of taint based on different occupations or roles: physical taint namely, occupations associated with dirt or danger (e.g. refuse collectors, miners); social taint namely, occupations involving regular contact with people from stigmatised groups or where the job is seen as servile to others (e.g. prison officers, domestic workers); and moral taint namely, occupations regarded as sinful or of dubious virtue (e.g. debt collectors, sex workers) – the latter two capturing largely, though not exclusively, the ideological aspects of dirt. Here, the concept of physical taint goes some way in acknowledging an association with dirt or danger. However, the materiality of dirt is retired within this category through an emphasis on its socially constructed character – where, reflective of Douglas's constructivism, it is understood as not 'inherent to the work itself but imputed by people based on subjective standards of cleanliness and purity' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 415). Further, although the potential for occupations to be tainted on more than one dimension is recognised, the three forms of taint are tied largely to descriptors of occupations or roles with a focus on differences between them (e.g. Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014) rather than on how they might be simultaneously entwined.

Thus, with a focus on symbolic repositioning, Ashforth et al. (2007) point to how the negativity of dirty work can be 'neutralised' by drawing discursively on occupational ideologies that include 'reframing', whereby the work is infused with positive value (e.g. presented as a badge of honour or mission) and 're-focusing' which involves emphasis upon the non-stigmatised aspects of the job. Accordingly, Tracy and Scott (2006) have explored how firefighters mobilise discourses around masculine heterosexuality to reframe their work in preferred terms. Stacey (2006) has demonstrated

how home carers re-focus upon the importance of time spent on interactions with clients, de-emphasising the physical taint associated with bodily care. Similarly, Dick (2005) explored how discursive strategies enable police officers to give meaning to their work in esteem-enhancing ways. Taken together, the literature has matured around an understanding of dirt as a cultural and social 'frame', rather more than as a physical and material phenomenon, with responses to dirt construed as primarily ideological in form (Dant and Bowles, 2003).

There are, of course, some important exceptions to this tendency to prioritise the discursive in the dirty work literature. This includes work that has sought to correct the 'symbolic slant' discussed above through a focus on the material, notably Dant and Bowles's (2003) analysis of car repair work (the practical problems of oil and grease). Other research has explored the 'intimate messy contact' involved in different forms of 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2002), where the body comprises the immediate site of labour, including a range of studies focusing on the significance of the cleanliness, continence, orderliness and health of bodies in care work (e.g. Anderson, 2000; Twigg, 2004). As we have argued elsewhere (Simpson, Hughes and Slutskaya, 2016), in key cases, this renewed interest in the material may ultimately be at the expense of the discursive, with the 'analytical pendulum' swinging first one way and then the other. Such analytical oscillation arguably is expressive of a more general conceptual problem: how to contain the material and the discursive within a unified scheme without according primacy to either. It is in this respect that a relational approach offers considerable utility.

A Relational Approach to Socio-Materiality

The extensive interest in the discursive in much of the foundational dirty work literature follows a more general trend within organisational research which, as Phillips and Oswick (2012) have argued, has emerged partly in response to the early domination of positivist approaches which focused almost exclusively on 'concrete and material aspects of work-related experiences' (2012: 465). This has tended to reinforce an 'isolationist' agenda, impelling a choice between the material and the discursive, hindering the possibility of uncovering primarily physical aspects and constraints of

organisations and how these are experienced (Philips and Oswick, 2012). The challenge for contemporary organisational scholarship, then, is to 'bring the material back in' without negating the discursive. As Putnam (2015) has argued, such an undertaking can be achieved through rethinking the isolationist agenda, namely by replacing a Hegelian dialectical choice of either the material or the discursive with a Bakhtinian model of dialectics which allow for both–and (2015: 707). An exemplar in this respect is Karen Barad's radically relational agential realism, which involves a concerted attempt not simply to 'make matter matter', but to posit a model of how the material and the discursive are fundamentally co-constitutive (Mauthner, 2015: 325).

Barad rejects the idea of the material and the discursive as ontologically distinct entities which then 'interact' with one another. Instead, she proposes, they both form part of an indeterminate world which is intra-active, not interacting as such. In this way, the material and the discursive are not separate domains which stand in relation to one another, albeit that they come together and combine in certain ways, rather, they are facets of the same whole. It is in this key respect that Barad's approach is radically relational: 'phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting "components". The notion of intra-action [stands] … in contrast to the usual "interaction", which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata' (Barad, 2003: 815 emphasis in the original). For Barad, then, it is through the intra-action of the material and discursive components of phenomena that their characteristics are made determinate in a co-constitutive sense.

Barad's conceptualisation of the material and discursive as co-constitutive parts of a whole permits a view of the material as simultaneously discursive and, vice versa, the discursive as simultaneously material. Indeed, such an orientation has, more recently, been employed to revisit the concept of discourse itself. Hardy and Thomas (2015), writing in answer to the charge that 'discursive approaches' in organisation studies have altogether neglected the material through a 'descent into discourse' (2015: 680), advance the argument that – particularly as it has been developed in the seminal work of Foucault – the concept of 'discourse' itself has never simply been reducible to the 'symbolic' or 'discursive'. Rather, we might understand discourse through a 'materialist' reading as

'forming and functioning at the interface of the linguistic and material worlds' (2015: 681). While there are some differences between Hardy and Thomas's notion of discursive and material 'interfacing' and Barad's conception of their 'intra-action' (for a discussion, see Simpson, Hughes and Slutskaya, 2016), the core relational emphasis on processes of co-constitution remains.

Particularly useful in respect of this focus is Hardy and Thomas's examination of four key aspects of materiality which serve to show how the material and discursive are 'inextricably entwined' (Hardy and Thomas, 2015: 680) – a taxonomy that readily lends itself to empirical application. Firstly, they point to the body as a source and agent of experience, comprised of immediate perceptions, feelings and reactions rather than just the basis of reflective engagement. An embodied being is thus necessarily actively involved with, and inseparable from, its surrounding world. Secondly, they refer to practices as structures of action that shape how bodies are involved, how objects are used, and how subjects act and are acted upon. Here the body ceaselessly performs the activities of centring, appropriating, and projecting – in effect building the world of experience that transpires through practice. Thirdly, the materiality of objects is highlighted including the close interactions between individuals, ideas, objects, and artefacts. Finally, space is recognised as a determining mechanism that shapes working experiences, communicates and reinforces social hierarchies (Brody, 2006; Hardy and Thomas, 2015). Spaces accordingly constitute part of the material basis for social relations.

In the discussion that follows, we extend Hardy and Thomas's (2015) four-part taxonomy to experiences of dirt in order to combine a simultaneous appreciation of the material and the discursive. Our core aim is to present a more nuanced account of dirty work, highlighting how an over-emphasis on discursive strategies might distract attention from significant material conditions and their action as potential constraints on processes of perceptual reordering (e.g. reframing and refocusing). Accordingly, our research was guided by two interrelated research questions: how are the physical and discursive dimensions of dirt experienced by men in our study? In what ways do the material and the symbolic intertwine in understanding experiences of dirty work?

Context and Method

Street cleaning and refuse collection, which involve the collection and disposal of different forms of 'waste' and the subservient tasks of 'cleaning up after others' (Powell and Watson, 2006), were explored as potential contexts within which to examine the material and symbolic dimensions of dirt. Despite a common occupational location and a shared early start to the day (generally between 6–7am), work practices between the two jobs vary. Refuse collection involves a number of key roles. These include the 'pullers' who retrieve black refuse sacks (or recycling bins) from alleyways and front gardens and place them in piles by the side of the road. The 'loaders' then throw the bags into the trucks, which are emptied twice a day into the dump. The trucks are driven by 'bankers', skilled drivers who normally head the team and who must be able to manoeuvre in the narrow suburban streets. Tip workers, in small teams of two or three, follow no particular routine but sort rubbish as and when it arrives into different categories for recycling or for deep pit burial. These team-based work practices engender a strong occupational culture based on banter and camaraderie – providing some defence against assaults on identity (from the public; from the low-status character of the work). Such sub-cultural resources are less available to street cleaners who typically work on their own. Each street cleaner interviewed worked with a barrow and broom and carried a pager so that the location and progress of all workers could be monitored and mapped – a control process often resented by the workers concerned.

The research took place in and around London, UK and followed university and BSA ethical guidelines at every stage. A process of direct sampling was adopted through telephone and email contact with councils and contractors in this area. One council and two contractors agreed to take part, and a date was set when the research team (comprising one man and one woman) could come on-site, work alongside the participants where appropriate (as was possible for refuse collection), and conduct the interviews 'on-the-job'. While there was a concern that this 'top-down' method might lead to a lack of disclosure on the part of participants, with our presence viewed as part of management surveillance, the presence of the research team generated considerable interest and interviews were often seen as a welcome break from the routines of the day.

The research employed a two-tiered ethnographic approach: firstly, participant and non-participant observation (with refuse collectors and street cleaners respectively) and, secondly, semi-structured interviews. The observational fieldwork involved two members of the research team spending several days working alongside refuse collectors, taking full part in day-to-day activities. One member conducted interviews while the other made up the 'lost body' by filling in for the crew on the street. Participant observation allowed direct experience of the materiality of dirt (the smell on a hot day; the touch of waste matter; the feelings of aversion) as well as the physical demands of collecting refuse from, routinely, 1,600 houses in a day – allowing a fuller articulation of habitual and mundane practices that might otherwise go unexplored. One researcher then accompanied the street cleaners on their daily rounds, observing and talking to men about their work routines. Field note 'jottings' were taken during breaks and full field notes written up at the end of each working day.

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted (13 street cleaners, 8 refuse collectors/recycling workers). All participants were male (reflecting the overwhelmingly male composition of the occupational groups), white, and had been born in the UK. Most had left school at 16 – some older workers as young as 14 – with no formal qualifications or only a few GCSEs. Work histories were diverse, with men holding a variety of jobs within their locality (e.g. haulage, warehouse work, factory work) working and living close to where they grew up. Reflective of the wide-scale contracting out of UK public cleaning services since the late 1980s, the majority worked on a permanent basis for a contractor or were agency workers on temporary contracts. All were aged between 18–64, though the age range was skewed towards the older category with most aged 40–55.

Interviews took place in situ – in the yard, on the street, in collection trucks – covering key themes relating to: work history; opportunities/job choice; family work experience; work practices; enjoyable aspects of the job; dissatisfaction; and work challenges. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subject to detailed thematic analysis using qualitative analysis software – involving searches across the data set to find repeated configurations of meaning. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) notion

of 'theoretical' coding, where analysis is driven by research questions, major categories were drawn up and then broken down into inter-locking concepts that captured the 'essence' of the overarching category. For example, 'touch' 'feel' 'smell' 'stains' 'unacceptable waste' helped to make up the overarching category 'encounters with dirt'. The relationship or patterns between categories led to more generalised themes including: misplaced waste and disruption as major facets of dirt; the material limits to perceptual reordering; the physical basis of social devaluation.

Interviewer reflexivity and awareness of power dynamics were important in acknowledging how occupational distance (e.g. from the manual/non-manual divide inherent in our respective positions) and gender difference influenced data collection and analysis. Through 'active listening' and an acute awareness of the potential significance of our own privileged occupational position, we sought a sympathetic dialogue where, in a more general context, male working class voices are rarely heard (Slutskaya et al., 2016). As Alcoff (1991) points out, the positionality of the speaker, in speaking for others, and material practices are key in representations of meaning – potentially reinforcing the privileged voice. These material practices are also embodied. In this respect, we were novices in both knowledge and physical competence, helping to place us as researchers in a disadvantaged position in terms of authority and expertise, and potentially minimising any constraint on the part of the workers as they showed us 'the ropes'. Further, as Arendell (1997) has argued of the implications of gender difference in interview situations (three quarters of the interviews were conducted by a female researcher), men can experience less reservation disclosing private thoughts to women who are often seen as more sympathetic. Taken together, fieldwork helped to break down potential barriers as workers appreciated our willingness to 'roll up our sleeves' and as participation afforded men opportunities to display a higher order level of competence.

Based on this fieldwork, and following Hardy and Thomas's (2015) four part taxonomy (bodies, objects, practice, space), we consider below how the material and the symbolic intertwine, firstly in relation to the material physicality of the work and the extent of its bodily accommodation; secondly in relation to the perceptual reordering of dirt, including how this is rooted in objects and practices;

thirdly, in relation to the role of materiality in both supporting and undermining positive ideological constructions of the work; and finally, in how relations of power are rooted in the spatial locale through face-to-face encounters that often position the workers as disruptive and as 'out of place'.

Material Physicality and its Accommodation

The corporeal physicality of the work became evident from our first day working with the refuse team. It was pleasantly hot and dry, with a light early morning breeze as we set off with our crew. It was not long, however, before the dust kicked up and became almost unbearable as we followed the truck. We could taste the dust – it got into our throats and we could feel it on our clothes and skin. The smell was particularly intrusive: not simply in a corporeally invasive manner – though for seasoned workers this had become less noticeable over time – but simultaneously as a symbolic source of social distance 'we go past, especially kids, and they hold their noses'. The need to deal with disgusting matter was routine. As refuse collector Matt pointed out: 'leftover lasagne, dirty shitty nappies, dog do, cat litter, stale cigarette butts, ash – *it goes all down you, you know, you've got to wear these clothes all day, you stink to heaven…'.* Few participants wore protective clothing which proved to be hot and clumsy, providing little defence against the smell that penetrated nevertheless. Squeamishly, we elected to wear rubber gloves but they were heavy in the heat and slipped off the plastic refuse sacks, making the task more difficult. This highlights, as Dant and Bowles (2003) found in the context of car repair work, how the practicalities of the work can underpin the option to wear protective clothing and hence create a barrier between dirt and the skin. Further, as we found, the practices of dirt's removal place a considerable stress on the body. Thus, 'wheelie' bins introduced on some collection rounds to prevent back injuries through lifting heavy weights led reportedly to repetitive strain ('it kills the wrists*'*) as workers moved up to 700 bins in a day; the recurrent action of sweeping can strain the upper body, particularly in autumn when leaves clog up the streets:

> *when all the leaves are coming down and it's been raining and you're shovelling, it makes*
> *your arms ache 'cause you're shovelling and shovellin*g all the time (Ed, street cleaner)

Nearly all participants complained of extreme levels of tiredness at the end of the day. Not surprisingly given our 'beginner' status, the effort of lifting hundreds of bags and the monotony of the work exhausted us. It was with great relief that we left the team in the early afternoon so as not to slow down their work. Our aching muscles got considerably worse by the end of the second day.

The above brief account highlights some of the material and corporeal dimensions of dirt and its removal as well as how, as Meara (1974) found in the context of meat-cutters' ability over time to withstand the cold, the experience of the work itself can transform the character of encounters with the material. In this respect, as novices, we struggled with the demands on our bodies and with the smell and touch of refuse matter. However, even among veteran refuse workers, there were limits to processes of de-sensitisation and corporeal accommodation set by practical and material constraints: the physical limits of bodies, the persistence of residual feelings of disgust towards certain smells and forms of dirty matter. This material 'persistence' of dirt also bounded the degree of its perceptual re-ordering and discursive reframing, discussed further below.

Perceptual Reordering of Dirt

While waste and debris frequently took viscerally repugnant forms, such matter was not always seen by workers as inherently 'dirty'. 'Dirtiness' was typically attributed to misplaced or unacceptable waste, as well as to the (orderly or disruptive) manner of its return. Refuse and waste that lay within the boundaries of what could be accepted as normal could be integrated into notions of an essential service and the necessities of work routines, and were rarely a source of disgust. As one refuse collector commented:

> They ['the public'] *think it's dirty. But it's a job, you know. Somebody's got to do it*. (Stan, refuse collector)

It is specifically in relation to this 'normalised' domain that dirt was characteristically identified. This could relate quite literally to misplaced waste. A particular issue for recycling workers, where each

area of their site contains a designated type of waste material, arose when rogue matter 'polluted' particular containers. Equally, street-based litter bins could be filled, inappropriately, with bags of household rubbish:

I can explain to them that you know if you put wood in the cardboard you're going to pollute four ton of cardboard that then won't get recycled like, and it's taken a lot of people a lot of time and trouble to do that, and one person can pollute the whole bin. (Les, recycling worker).

In a similar manner, refuse collectors expressed disgust over material left for collection which transgressed boundaries of normality and acceptability, such as sharp objects or excrement. Such material had to be dealt with notwithstanding since all rubbish has to be cleared – with the cleanliness of streets post-collection being routinely checked by management as one of several indices of worker performance.

And we're supposed to take it [excrement] *and the same with cat, dogs, you name it, it's put* out and we have to take it so you know it can be disgusting. I mean, on a nice sunny day like this, you know, you can talk with the lads, you have a crack and you get on with the job, beautiful. And then obviously I mean… (Phil, refuse collector).

Perceptual reordering and social definitions of dirt were thus grounded in material conditions, partly dependent upon the character of the matter involved, where both the material and symbolic facets of dirt were involved in its co-constitution. For example, as referred to above, despite repeated encounters with reviled matter, and accordingly some level of desensitisation, some forms of waste persistently elicited disgust. There were clear material limits to the extent to which excrement could be reframed. However, other forms of waste were more contextually contingent (e.g. wood in the recycling box) – positioned as outside the boundaries of practical acceptability and, hence, seen as 'polluting'. Dirt was also characteristically perceived, through practice, in the manner and immediacy

of its return. While refuse collectors could enjoy an element of satisfaction in relation to task completion (waste would not need to be disposed of for another week), for street cleaners dirt could immediately reassemble – the careless dropping of litter, spit or snot after a street had already been swept. This was commonly the basis for a perceptual reordering of what constituted a 'dirty person':

> They [the public] spit *everywhere and blow with their noses, and that's supposed to be* against the law but the police just look at them... (Pete, street cleaner)

> *There's so many dirty people about it's unbelievable. Sometimes you can walk up a road,* *you've cleaned that road, an*d then they go and cut a hedge and leave it all over the pavement *and I've just cleaned it.* (Ron, street cleaner)

As the street cleaner explains, 'they', the public, are often 'dirty' in a conventional sense: they publicly expel mucous, dirtying the streets. However, 'dirty people' were also conceived of as those who leave leaf cuttings on a recently cleaned road. The implication is that they are 'dirty' not simply through the character of the matter they expose and expel, but through actions of disruption to the flow of work. As was often the case, the public might significantly impede (for example, through using cheap plastic sacks) the process of the ordering and collection of refuse. Several bags split on the rounds in which we participated and the waste matter emptied onto the streets. Brushes, shovels and other equipment were rarely provided so that spilled contents – for example decaying food, maggots, cat litter – had to be picked up by hand.

> People are cheapskate [...] they overfill it with the junk, the rubbish goes everywhere [and] we get the blame. (Matt, refuse collector)

The reformulation of dirt here can be seen in part to involve a degree of identity work and symbolic management (who, after all, is really dirty: 'us' or 'them'?) but also to be rooted in a sensitivity towards actions and behaviours that impeded the practicalities of refuse collection work: adding

refuse to a street that has already been cleared, incorrectly sorting recycling waste, and otherwise disrupting the sequencing of disposal. In such ways, dirt was understood and recognised in different places and through new guises (e.g. leaf cuttings), and as consisting simultaneously both in and of its material and symbolic return (litter that is dropped on a recently cleaned street). Disposal was part of a continuous cycle of dispersal and reassembly that could follow a more or less orderly (and hence 'clean') sequence and rhythm. Dirt, in this sense, is material disorder and disruption: both matter out of place, in the form of disordered objects, and through disruption to practices, matter out of 'pace'. Equally, however, dirt is not simply the violation of a cultural system: it has a materiality that sets limits to its reframing and perceptual reordering – highlighting, again, its simultaneous co-constitution.

Ideological Strategies to Manage Taint

The perceptual reordering of dirt was accordingly grounded in the character of matter to be disposed of as well as in the disruptions to work practices and routines – practices that can form the basis for ideological strategies to manage taint. In this respect, materiality in the form of objects and practices combine with bodily effort and fatigue both to support and undermine attempts to create positive meaning. In terms of the former, in a process of 'reframing' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), moral value was emphasised through participants' ability to create order out of the disorder of dirt. These discursive strategies were predicated upon the material practices of task completion ('with me I would *do the job and I wouldn't finish till it was done properly'*). Here, proximity to dirt could be partially redeemed, and moral value restored, through bodily effort and participation in the routines of restoring cleanliness. This allowed participants to underline the work's usefulness and importance.

> *…this is a job that's got to be done, you know, it's an essential s*ervice. (Jim, street cleaner)

> 'you *turn and see when it's dirty and when you've finished it and see how it looks... looki*ng
> *round you say, 'I done that'* (Ron, Street cleaner)

Value was placed on the willingness to tackle any type of work in the name of providing an essential service and 'doing a job well' – resources that were underpinned by material practices. At the same time, the material could undermine attempts to reposition the work positively. Through a process of 'refocusing' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), refuse collector Phil (quoted in the previous sub-section) referred to the positive, non-stigmatised attributes of being outside on a 'nice sunny day', of enjoying a pleasant camaraderie ('having a crack') with colleagues. However, this was undermined by encounters with disgusting matter – demonstrating again how symbolic reattribution is bounded by material experiences (e.g. of dealing with obstinately repugnant waste). Likewise, the physical dangers of hidden sharp objects (one refuse collector showed us a permanent scar from a bagged piece of glass) presented material obstacles that would persist in spite of any attempts at discursive reframing. Further, as we observed, the development and maintenance of strong occupational cultures based on companionship and shared humour which, as Collinson (1992) found, can help to deal with monotonous work, was undermined by tiredness and fatigue as embodied experiences. Our field notes highlight the energy and exuberance displayed by one refuse collection team at the start of the day: 'the atmosphere was cheerful – full of high spirits and with plenty of banter between workers. Between the three of us there was never a moment of silence'. However, this gradually died down as tiredness set in. The onset of fatigue as a corporeal limit, as well as the pressure to complete the work before the end of the shift, interfered with the maintenance of a group culture based on banter and camaraderie.

The material and symbolic aspects of dirt can therefore be seen in how perceptual reordering and ideological strategies to manage taint are both supported and constrained by material experience: how embodied work practices based on creating order can be a source of pride, while the materiality of dirt (the touch, the smell) and bodily fatigue can potentially undermine attempts at positive reframing.

Bodies and Space: Lived Experience of Devaluation

Today we found ourselves in some newly built suburbs – both areas were quiet, residential and noticeably affluent. The houses were big and set a long way back from the street. Front gardens were

fenced with perfectly trimmed bushes, neatly shaped fruit trees and well-arranged geraniums. One middle-aged man working in his garden – grey hair, fit and slightly tanned – watched us carefully as *we approached, making me feel slightly uncomfortable. 'I am making sure you don't steal apples'* – he explained (Field notes, refuse collection)

As Hardy and Thomas (2015) outline, the body is positioned at a nexus of 'complex relations of discourse and power', interacting with space and place to produce particular meanings, behaviours and practices. Proximity to dirt contains significant potential for negative evaluations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) – exacerbated, potentially, by the middle class location in which our study took place. Here, as the field notes above indicate, refuse collectors were seen as disruptive and as 'out of place' in a simultaneously material and discursive sense: their bodies visible in class-locating bright yellow uniforms of the manual worker, 'out of sync' with the cultural order of a suburban neighbourhood. Repeatedly, participants emphasised the distancing effect the association with dirt had on their interactions within the locale. As one refuse collector commented of members of the public: '*They'll* say, *"Oh low life", you know, try to degrade you'*. Similarly, a recycling worker referred to how a woman 'clicked her fingers' in a command for attention; a refuse collector recounted how a driver 'nudged' his leg in an extreme display of impatience – a moral as well as physical transgression through the demonstrable disrespect. In fact, refuse collectors were routinely vilified as disruptive to everyday routines and obstructing, through the intrusion of the refuse truck, residents' ability to travel without delay through the streets. As we observed, drivers were often rude and impatient, mounting pavements and putting the safety of the refuse collection crew at risk.

We get a hell of a lot of abuse out there from the public, but we're there doing a job and that's all I say to my guys*... without you, you know, they'd be soon on the phone if you wasn't taking their rubbish away… There are a lot of people out there that think, oh you're only the dustman, you know, you're not worth the ground I walk on sort of thing*. (Bill, refuse collector)

As the above suggests, attempts to draw positive meaning from a doing a public service can be undermined by face-to-face encounters based on disrespect. Consistent with Meara's (1974) account of meat-cutters' problematic relations with customers who are seen to disrupt the smooth pace of work, both street cleaners and refuse collectors censure those who make the work more difficult. Street cleaners must routinely deal with litter dropped on a just-cleaned street, or cars that park over piles of swept rubbish and debris, scattering and disrupting the orderly removal of dirt.

> *They see you and they see you've got a pile of rubbish, they can see it but they walk through it* and drag it all up the road or sometimes you leave rubbish on the kerb, quite a big pile of rubbish and a car come along and park on top of it and he will look at you or she will look at you knowing that they done it. (Steve, street cleaner).

The material and symbolic dimensions of subordination are evident firstly, through disruption to the process of bringing order to dirt, and secondly, through the deliberate intention ('they can see it') and the 'look' which re-asserts an unspoken power differential – attributing to the worker a subservient subject-positioning and conveying an absence of respect. Such examples reiterate the fundamental entanglement of the material and the symbolic: how social degradation was experienced both discursively and physically. Marked as potentially dangerous and disorderly in the quiet suburban streets, men were subject to face-to-face encounters that imbued a profound lack of social worth, characterised by verbal abuse, physical 'nudges', being carefully watched, being ignored.

In terms of the latter, it was rare for workers to be given any recognition or acknowledgement in the street. People hurried past, unseeing, and there was little eye contact or early morning greetings. This invisibility is illustrated in the following exchange with a street cleaner who referred to his being routinely ignored by a local resident and prominent MP:

> *Some people look down to you a bit, yeah. I mean we've got the local MP up there* [name] he just looks through me [laughs].

What do you mean?

He just sort of like just looks at me and just walks past, you know, *don't matter that I'm there*.

(Geoff, street cleaner)

Eye contact as embodied engagement can function as an acknowledgement of one's presence, while its denial can indicate exclusion and devaluation – captured in the sentiment and pathos of '[it] *don't matter that I'm there'*. Men often struggled with norms of deference demanded by employers in these problematic encounters with the public where anger and frustration ('getting verbal') must be contained. As street cleaner Ron commented, of dropped litter on a freshly swept street, '*you daren't say anything... I just let it go and just pick it up, nothing said'*.

Those undertaking dirty, manual work can therefore be seen as bodies 'out of place' indicating that space is pivotal to positioning workers within a set of social relations (e.g. as disruptive; as disorderly). These relations imbue face-to-face encounters with profound implications for the lived experience of work – highlighting Hardy and Thomas's (2015) focus on the entanglement of bodies and space in processes of material and discursive co-constitution. As Tyler (2011) has argued, place and locality have a role to play in shaping the construction, perception, and the experience of dirty work, offering resources that can both intensify and mitigate taint. As we have shown, these encounters have the potential to undermine any positive ideological constructions offered by the locale – such as pride in a job well-done – in that strategies of normalisation are threatened by the lived/material conditions of the work; verbal abuse; lack of social acknowledgement; suspicious watchfulnesss; and/or disruptions to work practices that men must accept without protest.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to move 'beyond the symbolic' through adopting a relational approach which foregrounds the co-constitution of the material and discursive in dirty work. Founded in the new materialist impetus developed by writers such as Barad (2003, 2007), we have employed Hardy

and Thomas's (2015) typology of materiality to explore empirically the fundamental entanglement of the material and discursive in dirty work.

Accordingly, we have argued that the co-constitution of the discursive and material can be seen in how dirt and taint are managed – involving a negotiation between circumscribing material and moral relations (as one street cleaner commented, capturing these twin dimensions: '*you've got to have a* thick skin to be out in all weath*ers…and a very thick skin to deal with the public*'). Ideological strategies are underpinned by embodied practices rooted in material conditions – conditions that can both support and undermine their effectiveness in creating moral worth. As others have found (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Slutskaya et al., 2016), refuse collectors and street-cleaners mobilise embodied capacities of hard work and effort to reframe dirt's attributions and to recapture a valued sense of self – where moral value is afforded to work practices based on dirt's removal. However, the material can also undermine attempts at discursive reframing with fatigue and the smell and touch of disgusting waste matter – notwithstanding process of accommodation – curtailing occupational ideologies based on camaraderie and the pleasures of working outside. Bodily exhaustion and the enduring repulsion felt towards some forms of waste (excrement, rotting food) can destabilise and disrupt attempts positively to reframe its significance.

Relatedly, we have sought to demonstrate that the co-constitution of material and the discursive are fundamental to the perceptual reordering of dirt – a process dependent upon both the character of the (waste) matter involved and the practical material exigencies of its removal. 'Dirt' has physical presence: it is experienced close up through the materiality of smells and touch. At the same time, some forms of waste are integrated into (and normalised) as part of work's routines, with others positioned as dirty, outside the boundaries of acceptability: spilled contents from cheap bags; leaves that are dropped on a recently cleaned street. Dirt inevitably reassembles, and perceptions of violation and disorder are influenced partly by the timing and manner of its return. Here, dirtiness is repositioned onto those who disrupt work practices, transgressing occupational norms of appropriate 'waste producing' behaviour. Dirt is accordingly also disorder and disruption to the rhythm of its

disposal: not just matter out of place (Douglas, 1966) but also, people or objects out of pace. Therefore, processes of perceptual re-ordering are bounded by the material dynamics of different forms of matter and are entangled with the practicalities and practices of waste disposal.

The capacity for the material both to support and undermine in a co-constitutive sense symbolic meaning-making is also evident in the way dirt positions individuals within a set of social relations, experienced in both moral terms (e.g. through disrespect) and more directly materially through physical disruptions to the rhythm of its removal. Here, we highlight how space is implicated in these relations – how as a form of social ordering (Hardy and Thomas, 2015) it can create and sustain inequalities of power (Massey, 2005). In our study, space is positioned in contradictory ways. A sense of civic pride in maintaining cleanliness is set against embedded social hierarchies which see workers as 'out of place' within middle class domains. As Reay (2007) suggests, urban space can become a source of 'blame and shame' where, within middle class imaginaries, marginalised or tainted groups threaten the security of the normative order (stealing apples from front gardens). Thus, symbolic investments in the locale through notions of 'doing a job well' can be fractured by face-to-face encounters that strongly signal a lack of worth as well as through deliberate physical disruptions to the practices of dirt's removal – suggesting that social power relations are revealed in practice and matter (dropped litter on a just cleaned street).

Ultimately, in attempting to move beyond the symbolic, we have endeavoured to counter a social constructionist tendency (e.g. Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Dick, 2005) in which the symbolic and discursive aspects of dirt have come to eclipse its material contingency in recent accounts. Despite the significance of reformulation and (re)attribution concerning what constitutes dirt, we argue that dirt is more than a symbolic category: it is simultaneously material and discursive, realised in objects, space and embodied practices. Accordingly, we present an alternative to Dick's assertion that 'Dirt, whether physical or moral, is essentially a matter of perspective, not empirics' (2005: 1368). Dirty workers do not simply wash off negating discourse at the end of the working day.

The neglect of the co-constitution of the material and the symbolic in dirty work serves to overlook a key aspect of worker experience – in particular how the moral and symbolic can be threatened by the materiality of dirt, and how relations of power are rooted in, and take root in, subordinating material conditions. Emphasis on esteem-enhancing strategies – how workers discursively and ideologically seek to derive dignity and pride – may well mask the often problematic qualities and experiences of the material in this context, leading to an under-estimation of their significance. As we have shown, there are limits to how far certain material facets of dirt (the smells, the fatigue, disgust, subordinating encounters and disruptions to the material practices involved) can be positively reframed. Accordingly, a neglect of the co-constitution of the material and discursive – here in relation to how material and practical dynamics may serve as limits to discursive reframing – might support a distorted and over-optimistic view of such work. The focus on positive outcomes and on ideologies that position the work in preferred terms, common in social constructionist accounts, effectively downplays how the lived experience of the material – often painfully encountered in this context – disrupts positive framing, and how symbolic attributions are accordingly undermined. In exploring the reframing and reordering of dirt as we have done in this paper, our core aim is not to replace a one-sided socially constructivist emphasis with an equally one-sided materially reductionist one. Rather, our intention has been to move towards a model that permits an engagement with the profound entanglement of the material and discursive since, as we have endeavoured to demonstrate, both components are fundamental to understanding experiences of dirty work.

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[i] A documentary video accompanies this article. It can be found here:
https://youtu.be/vAVASpt52bg