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Book Review: *Dirty Work. The Social Construction of Taint*
by Shirley K. Drew, Melanie Mills and Bob M. Gassaway. Baylor
University Press, 2007, 272 pp.

The book edited by Shirley K. Drew, Melanie B. Mills and Bob M. Gassaway is a collection of articles concerning the ambiguities inherent in the concept of a “dirty work”. Usually regarded as stigmatized, the “dirty” occupations are sometimes related to low prestige and very often to hard, unpleasant tasks and activities. Yet they are necessary to guarantee an appropriate standard of life, to which we have become accustomed. This is why it is essential to learn more about everyday work of people who are doing for us and instead of us these dirty tasks.

The main focus of the book is on how people working in particular occupations construct and reconstruct the understanding of their jobs and its value, especially if it is a dirty work. The term “*dirty work*”, introduced in 1951 by E. Hughes, refers to tasks and occupations that are likely to be regarded as disgusting or degrading. Although these kinds of work have to be done, the society stigmatizes people who do it, which is why the dirty work is connected with physical, social and moral taint (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). The physical taint appears in case of job connected with dirt, garbage, death, bodily fluids and dangerous conditions. The social taint appears when a job requires from employee a servile relationship to others or regular contact with stigmatized people; and the moral taint occurs when the occupation is generally regarded as sinful or of doubtful morality. These categories of taint are not exclusive; therefore, the “dirtiness” is rather a social construction than an objective feature of the work. The employees in order to manage taint connected with their work construct several taint-management strategies. Applying these strategies to everyday practices and interactions help to reframe dirty tasks as valuable and to concentrate on positive aspects of the job.

The book is a good example of application of “*dirty work*” conception to the ethnographic research conducted in various fields. The book is divided into three main parts: “Taint Management Ethnographies”, “Case Studies” and “Conclusions”.

The first part (chapters 1 to 7) focuses on the results of ethnographic studies in different research areas. In the first chapter, „Doing Justice”, Shirley K. Drew introduces the reader to the world of everyday activities of lawyers and judges working in the criminal justice system in southeast Kansas. During the eight months of participant observation, “hanging around” in courthouse, analyzing documents

(court documents, newspaper articles) and conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the counsels for the defense, public prosecutors and the judges, the Author collected a detailed data, which allows her to present a quite different picture of legal professions than the one known from popular media broadcasts. Describing courtroom proceedings, interactions between judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors the Author emphasizes the existence of social and moral taint connected with these occupations (dealing with murderers, drug users and child abusers). What is of great value for a reader not familiar with occupational culture of legal professions, is description of rituals (observed in language, nonverbal behaviors, and dress code), storytelling, humour (inside and outside of the courtroom) and everyday conversations between members of this community, which allow them to manage taint associated with their occupation.

Second chapter, entitled “Dirty Work and Discipline behind Bars”, written by Sarah J. Tracy and Clifton Scott presents daily work of correctional officers in prison. What is worth mention is that this particular perspective is different to most of social studies concerning rather prisoners than prison guards, whose work is often disregarded.

According to the Authors, everyday duties of the prison officers fall into the category of dirty work. This work is physically dirty due to unfriendly environment (constant threat of violence, in some cases even death threats), engagement in materially dirty and disgusting activities, such as cleaning up after the inmates, conducting strip search, managing the inmates who try to hurt themselves and rape or assault other inmates. Also relationships with people who are already stigmatized can cause a social taint. Moreover, the prison guards are sometimes regarded by outsiders as similar to the prisoners (contagion effect), which is considered as a moral taint. On the one hand, the officers are often described as deviants, malicious, brutal or stupid; on the other hand they are also labeled as babysitters and “glorified maids” who make inmates lives too easy. To examine closely misunderstandings surrounding the “dirty work” of prison officers, the Authors present organizational practices and interactions associated with the correctional work and taint management techniques used by the officers (reframing, recalibrating, refocusing, distancing, differentiation, and blaming the client).

For some readers it could be surprising, that the next chapter, “Riding Fire Trucks and Ambulances with America’s Heroes” by Clifton Scott and Sarah J. Tracy, related to the firefighters, was published in this book. Firefighting is one the most respected jobs and it is unusual to regard this work as a “dirty” one. Regardless of good salaries, public trust and esteem connected with this occupation, firefighters have to manage tainted tasks, clients and material filth in their everyday experience. They work in dangerous conditions, have to deal with death, mutilated bodies and bodily fluids, and respond to false alarms and “shitbums”, that often evoke physical taint. Analyzing ways in which firefighters construct and sustain preferred interpretations and meanings of their work, the Authors present the taint management strategies, such as selective social comparisons, refocusing by celebrating manliness and dominant sexuality.

“Without Trucks We’d Be Naked, Hungry and Homeless” – this mantra of truck drivers became a title of a chapter written by Melanie Mills. In contrast to firefighting, this occupation does not have a high social status and people who work as truck drivers often find themselves misunderstood, unappreciated, and defamed by general public. They are physically tainted because their job is associated with dirt, grease and dangerous conditions and the social taint, they have to manage day by

day, arise from a low prestige of this occupation. Moreover, the truckers also have to deal with a moral taint as they are suspected of dubious behavior (breaking the rules on the road, using drugs and alcohol, prostitution). This is clearly seen in the most popular images of truck drivers widely portrayed in a popular media, also described in this article: trucker as rebel, white knight, brute monster, concrete sailor, "American cowboy", "King of the Road", and a professional/small businessman. Identifying with a chosen image truckers pursue a strategy to manage their taint. The Authors also mention procedures of identity management and the process of creating professional culture through sharing the "war" stories during the truck stops and learning the rules of CB conversations.

The next chapter, "Bitching about Secretarial "Dirty Work" written by Patty Sotirin concerns the secretarial work "dirtiness" as a results of its specific character and its social perception. Public opinion often diminishes the value of secretarial work, which is regarded as trivial, although necessary. Secretaries are even called office servants and treated as invisible. In fact, they are in a servile position in relation to anyone who makes a legitimate demand on their service. Moreover, they are often regarded as morally suspected, because of the lies or half-truths they are telling in order to avoid unwanted visitors and save the boss's time or cover up his mistakes. Sometimes they are even perceived as lovers of their bosses. To deal with the taint connected with their work, they elaborated a specific form of office talk - *secretarial bitching*. Unfortunately, the bitching carries its own social stigma and that is why secretaries fail to effectively reclaim dignity of their work using this method.

The chapter entitled "Bedpans, Blood, and Bile. Doing the Dirty Work in Nursing" is written by Melanie Mills and Amy Schejbal. Most of us would accept the status of "dirty work" given to this occupation. Nursing is physically tainted due to close contact with bodily fluids, functions as well as accompanying stench and possible personal danger. Nurses "see people at their worst" (p. 119) and the Authors present some examples of disgusting, terrifying and even dangerous tasks, which nurses complete every day. This occupation is also socially tainted because of the servile nature of this work, either in relation to the patients or doctors and administrators. What is more, the social skills of nurses have not always been highly valued since nursing has traditionally been considered as a feminine job, and that is why it has lower prestige and salaries than, for example, doctors. This occupation is also morally tainted because of depictions of nurses in the pornographic films, which results in sexual proposals from doctors and patients. The Authors also described the taint management strategies observed in this environment, such as using humour in everyday interactions and constructing a social support system, which allows developing a strong organizational culture and helps to deal with the difficulties of this job.

In this chapter the Authors begin with a brief history of nursing and social development of this occupation. They consider the role of technology and changes in the public perception of personal responsibility for health management and health care. The role of professional spaces (physical, psychological, online, and third spaces) and material artifacts (tools, dress, gloves, masks, texts and language, titles) in the social construction of definition to be a nurse is considered as well. Unfortunately, the Authors fail to examine in detail methodological aspects of their research, especially the one they call "research as a mode of friendship".

The last chapter in this part of the book written by Stephanie Poole Martinez is „Crack Pipes and T Cells. Use of Taint Management by HIV/AIDS/Addiction Caregivers". This chapter is based on a yearlong participant observation at Alexian

Brothers Saulus Place as a volunteer, twenty-five hours of conversation and fourteen open-ended ethnographic interviews with employees of this institution. Undoubtedly, the employees of the residential transitional environments for people living with HIV/AIDS and addiction are doing the dirty work connected with physical, social and moral taint. They establish relationships with stigmatized people (due to living with HIV/AIDS, for being addicts, homeless and living in poverty), who are often regarded as deserving condemnation or violent treatment. That is why the employees apply specific taint management strategies to promote a positive occupational identity. The Author describes such strategies as reframing (e.g. working in this institution as paying back for the things the worker had done in the past), recalibrating (“I am saving people’s lives by working at Saulus Place”) and refocusing (e.g. on fundraising – transforming their “dirty work” into “good work”) and additional one, which is using of dark/silly work-related humor within the community.

The three subsequent chapters of the book present a characteristic of American administration of justice focusing on the activity of the police, which is the crime scene investigators working on crime scene as well as the occupation of forensic pathologist. All these professions are classified into the category of “dirty work” due to the character of activity and peculiarity of situations in which these duties are carried out, thus direct contact with a dirty (blooded, reeking and hideous looking) things, objects and the socially marginalized people (offenders, criminals, druggists, prostitutes and homeless) or the inspection the scenes of cruelty, violence as well as crime scenes.

Chapter eight, entitled “Good Cops, Dirty Crimes”, by Bob M. Gassway, shows the world of crime scene investigators and how these technically skilled specialists in police department cope with physical, social and moral taint. The article is based on a two-years ethnographic studies on crime scene investigators, during which the Author participated in more than two dozen death scenes, saw an autopsy and spent a lot of time observing the work of crime scene investigators in the Criminalistics Unit of the Albuquerque Police Department. Under the impressive titles of some paragraphs, such as “The Dirty”, “Smelly Crime Scene”, “Dead on the Trash Heap”, “Disposing of the Body” the Author gave vivid accounts of frightful facts, e.g. searching the wreckages of the human body, blooded objects or pictures of victims of a crime. It follows that the taint is caused not only by the direct presence in a crime scene but also by the contact with objects of crime, photos from the place of crime or blood samples, even, if they were found in the laboratory conditions. One also should not overlook the fact that informal behaviors and rituals exhibited during crime scene investigations and the role of informal language, euphemistic formulations and phrases as well as the specificity of humor of the crime scene investigators, are equally important. Finally, the Author shows methods of taint management, which may have a physical (e.g. protective clothes), social (the consciousness of socially useful work) and moral (e.g. humor, joke) aspect.

Chapter nine “Cops, Crimes, and Community Policing” (by Shirley K. Drew and Mendy Hulvey) link to the previous one, describing the work of the Pittsburgh Police Department (PPD), where Authors carried out ethnographic studies directly participating in the service activity of a policeman. Showing the history of Pittsburgh and its Police Department, the Authors go beyond the social image presented by media and deliver contradictory, but empirically grounded picture of the police. Searching for a positive social image the Pittsburgh Police introduced a public strategy called “Community Policing”, based on active participation in the life of local community and direct contact with its members as well as pleasant, careful and polite

bearing. In the opposition to this, the “Professional Policing” style based on hard rules and a focus on enforcement the law. Pursuing public strategy of “Community Policing”, the police created positive social identity. However, regardless of police efforts, this occupation will be always perceived as dirty, because it is connected with such circumstances as: solving crimes, contact with socially marginalized groups or individuals, presence in crime scenes. The Authors describe strategies adopted to cope with physical, social and moral dirt, taking also into account the role of humor as a interactional tool for managing taint in a policeman work.

In the tenth chapter, entitled “The Death Doctors”, readers are introduced to the world of forensic science. In an attempt to answer the question of how the forensic pathologist manages everyday contact with dead bodies, the Author carefully examines the secrets of his/her work, in which the most important is to resolve two fundamental problems: *What was the cause of death?* and *What was the manner of death?* Vivid descriptions of autopsy allows the reader to feel like participating in the event, showing the difficulty of this work, which results from permanent and direct contact with the carcasses (often in poor condition) and risk of disease infection. This socially useful occupation, which allows identifying of criminals or preventing from spreading of dangerous diseases, requires excellent qualifications, but becomes a source of ennoblement for the person who does it.

The two last chapters are integral part of the book, joining previous articles together in a logical and coherent way. In eleventh chapter the ethnography itself is described as a dirty work. This part of the book presents the reader with a compilation of discussion between the Authors of included articles focusing on specific features of ethnographic studies. What is essential is that ethnography involves physical presence and a direct contact with persons in investigated social setting. Those places are often inhabited by socially marginalized people (homeless, disabled etc.), but the physical presence therein is only one reason of the ethnographer’s tainted work. The moral dilemma concerning the ethical responsibility for conducting study, concealment of true identity of the researcher or disclosure of any information about the private life of the observed people also contribute to the taint ascribed to ethnographer’s work (Humphreys 1970). Another reason is marginalization of qualitative research in the academic field. Despite the fact that ethnographical studies are based on elaborated rules and methodological principles, the information negating the true science of these is often presented. According to Authors, it seems necessary to elaborate some strategy helping ethnographers to cope with the problem of dirty work. The researchers need to strike a balance between data presenting examined fragment of the reality and ethical principles, implied in a concern for other people.

In the last, twelfth chapter, the reader will find a summary of the book with detailed explanation of methodological issues connected with conducting ethnographic studies, and the reasons that led researchers to use this particular (sometimes time- and labor-consuming) method. The the Authors emphasize the advantages of ethnography for in-depth examination of people’s lives, especially in regard to the problem of dirty work and dirty occupations. As they argue, we need to bear in mind that dirty work, although ungrateful and with many physical, social, moral and psychical difficulties, is socially useful and often a necessary condition for the existence and preservation of the social order.

The book “Dirty Work” is considerably interesting, reflective study on life experience of people, who perform useful work, but often are socially stigmatized. Its strong points are clearly presented categories of dirty work with detailed descriptions

and reasons of taint of particular occupations as well as methods and strategies of protection against the physical, social and moral taint. This book is a valuable source of information regarding the usefulness of ethnographic methods as well as its position in present social sciences. For a careful reader, this book may become an unusually fascinating and stimulating lecture, provoking to a deeper reflection over the problems of stigmatized professions and application of ethnographic methods in research practice.

Although "Dirty Work" edited by Shirley K. Drew, Melanie B. Mills and Bob M. Gassaway is an obligatory reading for every researcher interested in the problems of work and occupations, it can also be interesting for lawyers, correctional officers, fire fighters, truckers, secretaries, nurses, and everyone, whose work involves an element of dirtiness.

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