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Looking over your shoulder: Embodied responses to contamination in the emotional dirty work of prison officers

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Abstract

Fear of contamination is central to our thinking about 'dirty work', that is, tasks and occupations that carry a stigma owing to being perceived as having degrading, disgusting, or immoral qualities. However, most existing literature focuses on the symbolic dimension of taint – particularly, dirty workers' cognitive, ideological tactics to counter taint. Although contamination has more material consequences, the processes through which it is experienced and contained in dirty work have not yet been well explicated. Drawing on an ethnographic study of work in two Danish prisons, this article offers an opportunity to see behind the walls and gain insight into the extreme emotional dirty work of prison officers as they face burdensome emotional encounters with manipulative and intimidating inmates. As society's agent in the containment of inmates' emotional dirt, officers, as emotional labourers, risk contamination if they give in to inmates' pressure and manipulation and do them illicit favours. I use embodied phenomenology as an original and fertile approach to deepen the understanding of how contamination occurs in emotional dirty work and the bodily responses that workers engage in to resist it. Drawing on these findings, I extend our understanding of emotional dirty work.

Keywords

contamination, dirty work, embodied phenomenology, emotions, ethnography, prison officers

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Introduction

Contamination is inevitably implicated in our thinking about 'dirty work', that is, work and occupations that are regarded as undesirable because they evoke some sense of repugnance (Hughes, 1951, 1958). A dominant strand in the literature has focused on the symbolic dimension of contamination by examining how *taint* is managed by workers. The taint of dirty work speaks to the visceral repugnance of outsiders to the work of an occupation (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Indeed, the dirty work literature has largely matured around Douglas's (1966) social constructionist lens, which focuses on the symbolic nature of dirt, which she sees as 'matter out of place' (p. 35) that 'exists in the eye of the beholder' (p. 2) and 'offends against order' (p. 45). To tackle dirty objects, problems or people, society assigns the handling of dirt to certain groups and occupations, who by sheer association become 'dirty workers' (Hughes, 1958, 1962), tainted in the eyes of others. Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) seminal work builds on Douglas's constructivist lens to delineate three forms of occupational taint in dirty work: physical, social, and moral taint. Recent contributions have added a fourth dimension of emotional taint (McMurray and Ward, 2014).

The significant imprint of Douglas's (1966) conception of dirt and contamination on past research has recently been criticised for focusing exclusively on the symbolic dimension, specifically, workers' cognitive, ideological tactics to counter occupational taint (Simpson and Simpson, 2018; Simpson et al., 2016). This tendency to prioritise the discursive has privileged positive constructions of dirty work to the extent that current research is at risk of fostering a false optimism regarding worker experiences (Hughes et al., 2017). At the same time, this overemphasis on taint management has left workers' lived experiences of working close to that which contaminates largely unexplained. What kind of material work practices do workers set up to avoid contamination, and which bodily demands are required to resist it? I build on this criticism by examining how contamination in emotional dirty work is experienced and responded to by workers.

To address this question, I conducted an ethnographic study comprising fieldwork and interviews with 22 prison officers in two Danish prisons whose daily work involved interacting with and responding to incarcerated inmates. Past research has classified the work of prison officers as a core-stigma, low-prestige dirty occupation because they come into contact with all three original forms of dirt (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Tracy and Scott, 2007). As I show in this article, they also come into contact with the fourth form of emotional dirt (McMurray and Ward, 2014), because they work with the burdensome and unwanted feelings, emotions, and behaviours of inmates who are deemed problematic and dirty by society. The concept of emotional dirty work is currently undertheorised, but it holds much potential for moving beyond the symbolic dimension and providing further insight into the material, embodied aspects of dirty work. This is possible because officers' work impacts on them in ways that reveal subtle dynamics around the risk of contamination.

My analysis engages an embodied phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) to explore the impact on officers who, as society's agents in the containment of inmates' emotional dirt, become positioned at the receiving end of what they see as inmates' manipulations and intimidations. From this position, officers risk

contamination if they give in to the pressure from inmates and do them illicit favours – that is, if they 'get turned'. My contribution is intended to complement recent work by Hughes et al. (2017) and McMurray and Ward (2014), by presenting a phenomenological account of workers' experiences of managing the burdensome emotions and deviant behaviour of others and how such extreme emotional dirty work may impact them. To develop my argument, I first provide an overview of the literature on dirty work and contamination, and my embodied phenomenological approach. I then describe the methods, and proceed by presenting the key findings, ending by discussing the article's contribution to scholarship on dirty work.

Theory

Not only symbolic: Contamination as a material dimension of emotional dirty work

Douglas (1966) views dirt not as an objective feature but as a social construction defined by its context in terms of whether it poses a threat to the preferred, morally imbued orders of organised systems of society. Society, therefore, draws boundaries that separate the pure from the impure, emphasising dirt's delineating practice (Hughes, 1962). It is the fear of contamination that propels society to assign its handling of dirt to an agent, that is, certain occupations and groups (Hughes, 1958, 1962). Owing to their work being close to what is deemed dirty, these groups become 'dirty workers', disowned for the work they have been mandated to do and subjected to the view of being a blemished character (Hughes, 1962).

This symbolic process of identity contamination has been further explored by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), who combine Douglas's (1966) notion of dirt with Hughes's (1951, 1958, 1962) foundational discussion of dirty work to delineate the widely used tripartite classification of occupational taint: physical (e.g. refuse collectors and undertakers), social (e.g. prison officers and mental health workers), and moral taint (e.g. debt collectors and exotic dancers). Feeling devalued for their work effort, dirty workers engage in ideological strategies of reframing, recalibrating, or refocusing to counter taint and construct a positive identity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 2013; Ashforth et al., 2007). This focus on ideological strategies has been formative in the development of the literature.

The emphasis on the symbolic dimension of taint management has two important implications for my theorising here. First, taint and contamination are used interchangeably in the literature, but an examination of their etymological meaning reveals that they do not mean the same thing. Taint has developed from the old French word *teint*, which means 'stain', 'dye', and 'colour', and from the Latin word *tingere*, which similarly means 'to dye' and 'to tinge' (Online Etymology Dictionary). Contamination, however, as developed from the Latin word *contaminare*, means 'to defile', 'to corrupt', 'to deteriorate by mingling', and 'to bring into contact'. Whereas contamination describes a *physical and material* manifestation of a permanent trace when entities are brought into contact with each other – for example, the transmission of disease (Höpfl, 2012) – taint means to stain someone or something, and thereby describes a more *symbolic* process

where others' attribution of an undesired quality or association marks one's character (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006).

Second, physical and material contamination processes have been overlooked in the literature, which appears to be grounded in a tendency to prioritise the symbolic facets of dirty work. The tendency to prioritise the study of workers' cognitive, ideological tactics of taint management has neglected appreciating more material and embodied aspects of dirty work, and how material work practices and bodily demands may undermine positive, ideological constructions of work (Simpson et al., 2016). This emphasis on the discursive has been criticised for privileging positive constructions of workers' experiences of dirty work such that current research is at risk of fostering a false optimism (Hughes et al., 2017). For example, only a few studies have made the emotional dimension of dirty work a central concern (see Rivera, 2015; Slutskaya et al., 2012 for exceptions), although focus on emotions would acknowledge the bodily experience of undertaking dirty work, which potentially could disrupt any positive reframing of the work and add a richer understanding of it. One example is Tracy's (2005) study of prison officers' emotional labour in which societal discourse stigmatising inmates as the 'scum of earth' made it difficult for officers to muster up the emotions associated with the norms of rehabilitative ideology and, therefore, constrained their ability to construct a positive work identity.

Given that engagement in ideological strategies is an *after the fact* sort of coping with taint (Simpson et al., 2016), an opportunity arises to develop our theorising of how contamination is experienced and encountered by dirty workers, not only symbolically as taint management, but materially, physically, and emotionally. Tracy effectively demonstrated how contamination processes between agents (prison officers) and dirt (inmates) may work: when officers perform emotional labour and serve inmates in respectful and nurturing, that is, 'rehabilitative' ways, they feel that they themselves become dirty, as 'scum serving scum' (Tracy, 2005: 272). Building on Tracy's work, I show another side of contamination between agent and dirt, which in prison work may occur when officers face and manage the burdensome emotions of inmates – that is, when they perform emotional dirty work.

McMurray and Ward (2014) added a fourth dimension of emotional taint to Ashforth and Kreiner's tripartite classification by defining emotional dirty work as the handling of 'expressed feelings that threaten the solidarity, self-conception or preferred orders of a given individual or community' (p. 1134). Within this framework, emotions that are deemed disruptive, burdensome, or out-of-place are positioned as emotional dirt. In their study of the Samaritans' work of supporting anonymous callers in distress, workers, on behalf of society, engaged in emotional dirty work by performing emotional labour of listening empathetically to callers in a non-judgemental manner. Emotional labour is a form of work where workers induce or suppress feelings to produce a particular emotional state in others (Hochschild, 1983).

McMurray and Ward's (2014) concept of emotional dirty work has only sporadically been picked up by the literature and to date remains under-theorised. Only a few other studies have demonstrated other or similar forms of emotional dirty work: Sanders' (2010) study of veterinary technicians' handling of clients' intense sorrow following the distressing task of pet euthanasia is one example; Rivera's (2015) study of border patrol

agents' emotional labour with stigmatised undocumented immigrants, is another, and Fraher's (2017) study of pilots' charade of safety in a system that has become increasingly risky is yet a third.

Despite these different forms, extending the application of emotional dirty work is generative for gaining insight into the material, embodied aspects of dirty work simply because we cannot assume that the work with the burdensome and unwanted feelings, emotions, and behaviours of others will not impact on workers. For example, the Samaritans' emotional labour with self-confessed paedophiles required concealment of their own emotions of disgust and anger triggered by this work. Such service interactions must therefore be viewed as both emotional and relational, which call attention to what could be understood as the transmission of affect between interactants. In a similar example, the emotional work of English rape barristers included putting great effort into making the burdensome emotion and affect of their clients visible during court practices to produce a 'visceral response' in juror members that would move them (Gunby and Carline, 2020).

Both examples demonstrate the physical contaminating impact of clients' emotional accounts and can be further explained by Brennan's notion of 'transmission of affect' (2004), which accentuates how feelings and sensations emerge from bodies and are transmitted to others. Brennan defines it as 'the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another' (2004: 3). From this perspective, it becomes visible that emotions can be transmitted and contaminate others. However, analyses of workers' experiences of how it feels to work with others' potentially contaminating emotions are relatively absent in the literature. To add a richer understanding of workers' emotions and embodiment in emotional dirty work, I use an embodied phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

A phenomenological approach to understanding workers' embodied responses to contamination

Once neglected in organisation and management studies (Shilling, 1993; Wolkowitz, 2002), bodies and embodiment at work have developed into an attractive area of study within the past decade (Mik-Meyer et al., 2018; Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). One central area of 'body work' (Gimlin, 2007; Wolkowitz, 2006) concerns the performance of emotion work to ideologies of the performing self (Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2003). Recent interest in re-embodying organisation and management studies goes beyond a focus on emotion work and is part of an ontological turn towards the being of the world rather than a preoccupation with how it is known (e.g. Hardy and Thomas, 2015; Mumby, 2011). Here, embodiment is defined more broadly than emotion, as 'bodily sensations, felt experiences, emotions and sensory knowing situated in lived experience' (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012: 64).

The embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) has been influential in articulating the relationship between perception, body, and how we make sense of the world. Challenging the mechanistic Cartesian mind–body dualism, Merleau-Ponty describes our body as our way of experiencing and belonging to the world – our being-in-the-world. He writes: 'But I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather I am it'

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 173), and continues: 'the sensible [. . .] is a certain way of being in the world [. . .] seized and acted upon by our body' (1962: 246). Perception is an embodied experience that occurs in-the-world rather than an 'inner' representation of an 'outer' world. It consists in bodily sensations that are meaningful because the body is, at the same time, both a sensible and sentient being. We thereby come to know the world not through our intellect but through our bodily experience of sensing emotions and meanings in people's facial expressions, gestures, and the rhythm of action. Even if we do not understand these intellectually, we understand them intuitively through pre-reflective sense-experience of sight, sound, and touch.

Perception is based in acquired cultural habit-based behaviour. The perceiving body is not, however, a passive receiver of messages, Merleau-Ponty argues; it is an actively experiencing and interpreting body that is practically engaged with its environment:

> The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a specific environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94)

By applying acquired perceptual schemas, the body makes what it senses immediately meaningful. Through his rethinking of perception, Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasises the relational intertwining of body and consciousness. He operates with a notion of concrete intersubjectivity, where our thoughts, feelings, and actions join us to a shared social world with others, which constitutes a contingent order, reproduced through embodied action, and sustained through power relations.

When studying workers' embodied responses to contamination, it is important to focus on the embodied, sensory dimension of their work practices and the ways they carry out their occupational role. The accomplishment of many work tasks demands habituated skilled bodily action that is often taken for granted by the worker. Merleau-Ponty operates with the concept of 'corporeal schema', referring to 'an incorporated bodily know-how and practical sense; a perspectival grasp upon the world from the "point of view" of the body' (Crossley, 2001: 123). Workers, therefore, have not only a cognitive understanding of their work but also a corporeal one, which is developed by the bodily practical engagement in everyday, habitual work practices. Merleau-Ponty's view on affect and emotions touches upon a similar concern, in that he sees emotions not as inner states but as forms of conduct whose meaning is discerned in relation to context:

> Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or forms of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1971: 52–53)

Touching briefly on how the bodies of prison officers have been studied in past research, numerous studies have shown that they are overburdened and experience intense job-related psychological stress, with widespread burnout and high rates of PTSD symptoms as long-term consequences (e.g. Andersen et al., 2019; Cheek and Miller, 1983; Kinman et al., 2016). The distress of prison officers emanates from primarily the perceived dangerousness of the job, high emotional demands and stressful interactions

with inmates, and exposure to threats and violence (Andersen et al., 2017; Boudoukha et al., 2011). These accounts highlight the need to explore how prison officers, as emotional dirty workers, cope with the effects of handling the burdensome emotions of others, not only as symbolic processes of taint management, but also as material, embodied processes involved in undertaking work close to that which contaminates. In this sense, the current work responds to Barley and Kunda's call that the field of dirty work should engage more with 'what people actually do' (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 90). The resulting challenge can be summarised in the research question: How is contamination in emotional dirty work experienced and responded to by workers?

Methods

Research context

The Danish Prison Service comprises 14 state prisons, of which six are closed prisons and eight are open prisons where security is less strict. In addition to the 14 state prisons, the prison service also comprises 40 local detention centres. Approximately 3950 inmates are currently serving their prison sentences and detention centres, of which about 170 are female, with 2100 prison officers working to oversee their imprisonment (Kriminalforsorgen, 2020). The prison population rate of Denmark is 63 per 100,000 of the national population (Walmsley, 2018). For comparison, the prison population rates of the UK and US are 140 and 655, respectively.

I conducted fieldwork in two Danish correctional facilities: an open male prison and a closed male prison. The open prison houses about 160 inmates and comprises self-contained common wings and special rehabilitation units for addiction treatment. Open prisons are intended for prisoners who can be trusted in open conditions, and security is therefore lower. The prison premises are surrounded by a barbed wire fence. The closed prison houses about 280 inmates and comprises self-contained common wings and special security units for violent inmates and gang-affiliated inmates. Closed prisons are for repeat offenders, inmates with long prison sentences, and inmates who are considered dangerous. Inmates are placed in units based on their security level. Security is generally high, but special security units are categorised as maximum security owing to the violent behaviour of inmates incarcerated there. Inmates' movement around the prison is restricted and can only happen with officer escort. The prison premises are surrounded by a tall brick wall and barbed wire fences as secure perimeters. Although inmate populations at the two prisons differ, with a predominance of gang-affiliated, violent, and lifer inmates at the closed prison, inmates at the open prison also present many challenges to officers because of the many addicts and fraudsters. Together, they constitute an extreme case of the emotional dirty work of prison officers. Inmates in Danish prisons wear their own clothes, shop for and prepare their own meals, work 37 hours a week at prison worksites, and have the opportunity to have visits once a month.

Data collection

I obtained access by going through the Danish Prison Service. Although past research has emphasised that gaining access to study prisons can be difficult (DiIulio, 1987),

gaining access went smoothly. The only requirements were that I presented a project description and a list of prisons to visit, and underwent a criminal background check. Upon gaining access at the institutional level, I was put into contact with union representatives at the two prisons, who negotiated access to the individual wings.

At both prisons, fieldwork comprised observation of prison officers' work practices by engaging in ethnographic shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) at self-contained common wings and in the open prison, additionally at a rehabilitation unit. Defined as a mobile and nonparticipant observation technique, shadowing provides substantial insight into the actual content of work activities (Mintzberg, 1970, cited in Czarniawska, 2007), as it allows the following of an informant as s/he does her or his job. Through shadowing, it becomes possible to witness first-hand *what* workers are doing while also giving attention to how work may impact them. I therefore shadowed different officers during day, evening, and night shifts and engaged in ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with officers. The purpose of following officers was to get as close to them as possible to study the physical aspects and embodied nature of their work (Barley and Kunda, 2001), and additionally observe them in both frontstage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) work situations. I observed a mix of simple and 'unexcited' work routines, as described by officers themselves, as well as more action-packed work episodes. Whereas the former comprised the escorting of inmates, doing rounds, locking and unlocking doors, preparing paperwork, talking over the phone, handing out medicine, and talking to colleagues and inmates, the latter included cell searches, officers' abrupt responses to the sudden ringing of the alarm bell, and emotional encounters with inmates, specifically the handling of irate inmates and inmates' subtle attempts of manipulating and intimidating staff. In total, I spent more than 140 hours observing officers' everyday work at the two prisons. During shifts, I jotted down only a few notes, and wrote up the full field notes immediately after each shift.

Observations were augmented by individual, semi-structured interviews with 22 prison officers, ten from the open prison and 12 from the closed prison, coming from all units of the two prisons. Interviews included questions about officers' perceptions of work, including specifying their emotions in different work situations. I began each interview by asking the officers to identify concrete work tasks that they deemed important. I then asked them to describe examples of work situations that triggered negative or positive emotions, specifying which parts of the work were experienced as stressful. Moreover, after observing episodes of emotional encounters between officers and inmates, I would discuss the incident with the officer in question to try to access their immediate experience and emotions. The combination of interviewing and ethnographic shadowing allowed me to go beyond officers' representations of work and gain further insight into a more contextualised account of how it feels to work as a prison officer.

All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. About 95% of officers were Caucasian, which underlines the enduring white dominance of correctional staff in Danish prisons. About half were male, and all participating officers were fully-fledged officers with a minimum of five years of work experience. I obtained informed consent from all direct participants, that is, the prison officers at the start of each interview and shadowing session. To protect their anonymity, all names are pseudonyms: male officers have been given pseudonyms with 'a' as the first

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name of officer	Age	Gender	Length of service	Prison type	Unit
Svendsen	30–39	Female	5+	Closed	Common wing
Jakobsen	30–39	Male	10+	Closed	Common wing
Jensen	40–49	Female	15+	Closed	Common wing
Henriksen	40–49	Female	5+	Closed	Common wing
Axelsen	30–39	Male	5+	Closed	Common wing
Andersen	40–49	Male	10+	Closed	Special security
Pedersen	30–39	Female	10+	Closed	Special security
Madsen	30–39	Male	5+	Closed	Special security
Kristensen	30–39	Female	5+	Closed	Special security
Clausen	40–49	Male	10+	Closed	Special security
Frederiksen	40–49	Female	10+	Closed	Special security
Lassen	30–39	Male	10+	Closed	Special security
Finsen	40–49	Female	10+	Open	Common wing
Kaspersen	30–39	Male	10+	Open	Common wing
Pallesen	40–49	Male	10+	Open	Common wing
Jeppesen	40–49	Female	10+	Open	Common wing
Iversen	30–39	Female	10+	Open	Common wing
Nielsen	40–49	Female	5+	Open	Special rehabilitation
Christiansen	40–49	Female	10+	Open	Special rehabilitation
Carlsen	50–59	Male	25+	Open	Special rehabilitation
Ibsen	40–49	Female	15+	Open	Special rehabilitation
Hansen	40–49	Male	20+	Open	Special rehabilitation

vowel in their name (e.g. Officer Axelsen or Officer Pallesen) and female officers have been given pseudonyms with the letter ‘e’ or ‘i’ as the first vowel (e.g. Officer Svendsen or Officer Finsen). Officers who were only observed and interviewed informally have the letter ‘o’ as the first vowel in their pseudonym names (e.g. Officer Gormsen). To protect the indirect participants of this study (that is, the inmates), all inmates have been given a pseudonym first name only. Furthermore, identifying details of individual officers and inmates have been removed or changed to preserve their anonymity. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. The fieldwork was conducted in Danish; I translated all quotations from interviews and naturally occurring talk during the fieldwork into English, whilst carefully preserving the naturalistic expressions of participants.

Data analysis

I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the interview data. Throughout the analysis I moved iteratively between data analysis and theoretical ideas (Charmaz, 2006). I inductively coded all the interview transcripts by finding and grouping related statements into first-order codes and tentatively group-related codes into second-order categories. For example, statements such as ‘we mustn’t be asleep on this

job', 'we keep an eye out for anything suspicious', 'we read situations to sense if something's building up' kept recurring in relation to how officers were 'always alert' on the job because a core demand is to maintain order, often necessitating that they perform 'emotional labour with irate inmates'. These codes coalesced as the features of the broader second-order category of 'keeping the emotional dirt of inmates under control'. During this phase, I consulted previous work about emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2003; Tracy, 2005) and emotional dirty work (McMurray and Ward, 2014; Sanders, 2010).

Close observation of taken-for-granted practices and routines in prison officers' work, however, revealed dynamics that were hidden beneath the structure of dominant discourse (cf. Barley and Kunda, 2001). For example, most officers regarded the inmates as deviant, but they were also aware of the 'deviant stigma' attached to themselves owing to their work-related interaction with contaminating convicted criminals. However, through engagement in the ethnographic fieldwork, a discrepancy emerged between how officers at the two prisons related to the contaminants of the job, that is, the inmates. This discrepancy led me to focus on officers' lived experiences of contamination to understand their unfiltered experiences of work that would not have been visible in the interview data alone.

An example of unfiltered disruptive emotions that arose one day at the closed prison was during the intake procedure of Mike, a new, young inmate at the wing. Officer Clausen learned that Mike used to play elite-level sports but had to give up his career owing to an injury. Instead, he began experimenting with drugs, which drove him into crime and his now fourth imprisonment. Listening to Mike's story, I felt overwhelmed with sadness for the way this young man was spending his youth in and out of prison. Upon return to the guard booth, I sensed that Officer Clausen also had become sad from the encounter, as he said, shaking his head: 'He's the same age as my son. He damn well shouldn't waste his life in this place'. Officers commonly say about inmates that 'they've bought the ticket to this place themselves', and 'I don't feel sorry for them, they've made their choice'. However, in the encounter with Mike, the disruptive emotion of sadness for an inmate became visible in Officer Clausen – an emotion he would commonly suppress by discursively positioning inmates as getting what they asked for. It was only by being attentive to my own sensory experiences (Pink, 2015) that I could invite such embodied forms of knowledge into the research process and through that gain further insights into how prison officers felt at work.

My immersion in this emotionally charged setting allowed the physical experiencing of some of the emotional strains of prison officers' work and a better understanding of their embodied responses, and from this, I could make the bodily dimension of work at prisons more explicit. I therefore looked into different literatures on the body at work and found the embodied phenomenology put forward by Merleau-Ponty (1962) particularly relevant to this case. To understand officers' unfiltered experiences of contamination in work, I had to focus on their patterns of bodily action, including speech and bodily reactions such as facial expressions and voice. In Table 2, I display an overview of the analytical process by presenting the data structure with illustrative verbatim quotations and observations for the key themes of the findings.

Table 2. Data structure and illustrative verbatim quotations and observations for key themes.

Exemplary quotes and observations from data	First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate theme
Quote: We mustn't be asleep on this job. We might not always be super busy, but we are always vigilant in one way or another (Officer Jakobsen). **Shadowing:** Officer Svendsen spends a lot of time checking inmates' moods on the wing so that she can deal with critical situations before they evolve into prison disturbances. She small talks to inmates on the wing, notices how often inmates look over at the guard room, and senses the wing atmosphere.	Always alert	Keeping inmates' emotional dirt and deviant behaviour under control	The brutal emotional dirty work of prison officers
Quote: When an inmate is angry and shouting it helps to say 'listen, I want to talk to you, but you need to calm down. I can't understand what you're saying if you don't lower your voice'. When we show them that we want to listen and hear what the problem is, they often run out of steam (Officer Svendsen). **Shadowing:** We hear Amir's angry shouting before he and Officer Jensen enter the wing. As they enter the wing, Amir is yelling at Officer Jensen: 'This fucking shit system is worse than a dictatorship – it should be burned down'. Officer Jensen's face is transfixed in a stone face as she exchanges a fleeting glance with Officer Jakobsen. Her posture looks tired as she escorts Amir to his cell and shuts the door, saying that he needs to cool down. She retreats to the guardroom while Officer Jakobsen takes a deep breath and walks over to Amir's cell and enters.	Emotional labour with irate inmates		
Quote: Threats can be explicit like when an inmate gets worked up about something and threatens us or our families with assault. Or they can be very subtle like when an inmate, in passing one of us, says the name of our kids' school or kindergarten, showing that he has personal knowledge of us (Officer Madsen). **Shadowing:** Officer Jakobsen escorts a group of six inmates around the prison worksites. None of the inmates adhere to the rules of not talking to the other inmates in the worksites and they keep making fun of Officer Jakobsen, saying that he's old and too slow. Officer Jakobsen appears uncomfortable by the situation.	Emotional encounters with manipulative and confrontational inmates	Facing the risk of contamination from inmates	
Quote: We definitely experience mental and emotional effects of working this job mainly because the clientele has become very rough in recent years. I've seen many colleagues react to this pressure by breaking down (Officer Henriksen). **Shadowing:** After talking on the phone with the police about giving evidence in court because of inmate threats, Officer Jakobsen sighs deeply and says 'It wears you down when you've got to meet up in court again and again to witness against inmates who've threatened you'. He murmurs, 'Those battles with inmates are extremely draining. I don't want it to affect my family but whether you like it or not it will wear you down'.	Bodily impacts of the work		
Quote: It all comes down to whether you've got a strong enough psyche to resist the pressure from inmates because that's tough on all of us (Officer Axelsen). **Shadowing:** Officer Thomsen smells cigarette smoke on the wing's common area where smoking is not allowed. She confronts a group of inmates but is shouted at by one of the inmates for wrongly accusing him of rule violation. She decides to leave the matter but after cell doors are locked, she finds cigarette buds. 'So they were smoking', she says clearly annoyed. 'They shouldn't have gotten away with that'.	Remaining tough and impenetrable		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Exemplary quotes and observations from data	First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate theme
Quote: We never shake hands with new inmates at the wing (Officer Andersen). **Shadowing:** Officer Jensen escorts a group of seven inmates back from the prison grocery store. On reaching the cell block, she sends the inmates up in the elevator without her and notifies Officer Thomsen via walkie talking that the inmates are approaching the wing. She then says, 'I don't ride in the elevator when there's seven of them – it gets too close in there'.	Keeping physical distance to inmates	Maintaining strict physical and social boundaries for inmates	Embodied responses of shielding against inmates to remain uncontaminated
Quote: It simply gives new energy, the laughs we have together and the practical jokes we do. Our daily work takes place in one big negative world so of course we need something positive in between all the crap, otherwise, we cannot survive in this (Officer Frederiksen). **Shadowing:** Officer Olsen humorously entertains a loud-laughing night shift team of six officers with his very graphic description of how he had witnessed a doctor pulling out a mobile phone from an inmate's bottom. The phone had been stuck in there for four days, leading the inmate to complain about heavy stomach pains. In another episode, Officer Ottosen makes fun of a dyslexic inmate, who thinks the internet search engine Google is called 'gnuggle'.	Laughter and humour are used to maintain social distance to inmates		
Quote: There's always four of us when we open up to a violent inmate, and we stand in different places. Two of us opens the door, a third one is ready to press the alarm if anything happens, and a fourth officer is ready to step in with a pepper spray (Officer Pedersen). **Shadowing:** After a cell search with dogs, an inmate is furious because one of the dogs walked on his bedding. He complains and wants the officers to wash it. As the conversation between him and an officer go up in volume, Officer Clausen steps out from the guard room to makes himself visible to the inmate, which puts an end to the quarrel.	Sharing the handling of difficult inmates	The double-edged sword of everyday solidarity	
Quote: We talk to each other in the officer group whenever we feel squeezed by the inmates. It's within this group that we secure our emotional surplus and energy, find support and solace, and relieve our hearts from unease. We trust that what we say to each other doesn't go any further (Officer Axelsen). **Quote:** In some units, I would never say if I felt bad after a difficult incident with inmates. I wouldn't talk about it with colleagues (Officer Lassen).	Support and control in the officer group		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Exemplary quotes and observations from data	First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate theme
Quote: The inmates use us, sometimes entirely, by drawing on our life experiences. They want to talk to us; they want our guidance in life (Officer Nielsen). **Shadowing:** Every day at noon and dinner time at the rehabilitation unit, officers and inmates eat together in the wing kitchen a meal that inmates have prepared. Officers will eat whatever the inmates serve as a way of showing trust in the quality of the food and respect for the effort that had gone into preparing the meal.	Interacting and talking with an inmate	Establishing positive connections with inmates	Embodied responses of transforming inmates
Quote: Most of the young minority offenders are good boys, also those who try to dominate everybody around them. If we just talk to them and try to understand their behaviour, we can establish connections (Officer Finsen). **Shadowing:** Steve reveals to Officer Nielsen that he's in a gang and that he wants to get out because the gang is at war with a rival gang. Officer Nielsen listens to him and asks if he's aware that getting out means replacing his entire circle of friends. Steve is aware of this and knows it will be difficult. If they suspect he rats on them, they will kill him. However, he's certain he will die if he doesn't get out.	Listening to inmates' talk and expressing care		
Quote: When we form positive relations with an inmate, he will behave and help us maintain order. This is the essence of dynamic security (Officer Christensen). **Shadowing:** Frank has had a big conflict with Officer Carlsen and Officer Poulsen because they discovered and took his smartphone, which is classified as contraband. They also took the sim card on which Frank claimed to have stored pictures and videos of a deceased friend. During the conflict, inmate Nick intervenes and tries to reason with both Frank and the officers.	Inmates help maintain order on the wing		
Quote: A couple of times I have met inmates where we have had so much fun that I'm sure we would have been good friends outside if I hadn't met them in here first (Officer Pallesen). **Shadowing:** An inmate whistles at Officer Ibsen as she crosses the lawn. She yells: 'Behave yourself' at him. He whistles at her again. She now raises her voice and shouts angrily back at him: 'I don't want to hear that. Stop it right now and behave yourself'.	Professional distance	Not too close	

Next, I present my findings. I organise the findings section around the three main analytical themes of how prison officers experience the emotional dirty work with inmates, and the two major embodied responses that officers engage in, to counter contamination.

Findings

The emotional dirty work of prison officers

The lion's share of prison officers' work is to ensure that life in prison proceeds in a secure and orderly manner. They must ensure that inmates do not escape and that critical situations do not turn into violence. Many inmates are frustrated and angry because of their confinement: 'Every time we open a cell door, we tune in to where the inmate is mentally and emotionally. It's our job to calm them down if they're angry or aggressive' (Officer Andersen). Officers are always alert and ready to deal with irate inmates so that their anger and despair do not develop into aggression and abusive behaviour. To defuse critical situations, officers perform emotional labour by small talking with inmates and listening to their concerns. When officers deal with inmates' emotions of anger, aggression and despair, they engage in emotional dirty work. The potential danger of these emotions classifies them as inmates' emotional dirt because they are a constant threat to order and security in the prison. The emotional dirt of inmates is therefore of primary concern to officers.

A burdensome side of prison officers' emotional dirty work is the emotional encounters with confrontational inmates where officers must guard themselves not to get 'sucked in' by what they perceive to be inmates' manipulation. Officers experienced this to be particularly taxing: 'It's tiring with those prisoners who constantly try to argue and manipulate us to get what they want. For us, that's tough duty' (Officer Axelsen). A subtle attempt of manipulation occurred one afternoon at the open prison, where Sebastian claimed that 1000 DKK (150 euros) had disappeared from his prison account:

> Standing in the doorway to the guardroom, Sebastian appears cross as he complains that he never received the 1000 DKK that were withdrawn from his prison account last week. 'I see that the money is withdrawn but I didn't do it. And I bloody hell don't have the cash now, so where the fuck is it?' Officer Carlsen responds by explaining in a calm voice that Accounting is looking into it. Sebastian goes on and on about the money while Officer Carlsen looks at him and listens patiently to his concerns, maintaining a neutral face and a calm bodily appearance. This is, however, lost on Sebastian, who is getting more and more upset. Now visibly angry, he says in a sharp voice, 'But the guard, what's his name, who was here last Thursday. Can't you call him and ask what happened?' 'Certainly not!' Officer Carlsen responds abruptly in a raised firm voice, maintaining his neutral face. 'I'm not going to call anybody. We're going to let Accounting do their job and figure out who signed for that withdrawal'. Sebastian, now fuming, leaves the guardroom and shouts 'FUCK! I HATE THIS FUCKING FAGGOT SYSTEM!'

The volatility of Officer Carlsen's mood and bodily expression alerts us to the layered interpretation of the seemingly innocent request of calling the colleague. He later explained: 'He's trying to pit me against my colleague. We sense it. It's their way of

getting what they want'. Officer Carlsen's corporeal schema and attunement to his own body allowed him to hear more than what was said. He controlled his anger from being manipulated by channelling it into expressing a very adamant attitude, not showing any signs of being emotionally affected by Sebastian's anger. He knew, however, he had to watch himself not to get entrapped in Sebastian's manipulation. Giving in to Sebastian would look as if he blamed his colleague for taking the money. This would create trouble in the officer group and could make him vulnerable to inmates. However, rejecting Sebastian could also lead to trouble if Sebastian's anger took hold of him. We return to this emotional encounter later.

In the closed prison, officers frequently experienced that inmate manipulation took more explicit forms of threats and intimidations: 'In some units, there's always a bad atmosphere and many threats against us. Explicit threats and covert ones, and sometimes assaults' (Officer Madsen). Officers had developed solid perceptual schemas of gang inmates as 'masters of controlling people', as Officer Andersen expressed it, because they tried to intimidate and pressure officers into sidestepping the rules and doing them illicit favours:

> Say yes to them once and they'll keep on harassing you until you say yes again and before you know it, they have taken a mile and your work is much more difficult. But what's worse is that this puts you at odds with your colleagues who begin to question if you can be trusted. (Officer Frederiksen)

Caving in to inmates' pressure was dangerous because officers risked being ostracised by their colleagues: 'You don't want to be popular with the inmates because that immediately raises the suspicion of colleagues, who think "hmm, I wonder if he's carrying contraband"' (Officer Lassen). However, not giving them what they wanted was also dangerous.

Some officers had experienced that taking a firm stand against aggressive inmates had led to having the whole gang on their back, both inside and outside the prison: 'A couple of years ago, I was on one of the gang's death list and every time I heard a loud noise from a vehicle, I simply [his body freezes up in a stiff posture for a second]' (Officer Clausen). The spill-over of inmate threats on-duty is a common experience for many officers as these dark aspects of work carry over into their private off-duty lives. Officer Clausen was referring to the trend among gang members to drive large vehicles, when he explains how the sheer sound from a vehicle engine would remind his body of its constant subjection to the threat of assault. He expresses the episode through his kinaesthetic response of freezing up his body, showing that his bodily emotions of fear and anxiety made him feel paralysed. The episode testifies to the heavy toll that being at the receiving end of inmates' aggressions has on officers' bodies. Officer Lassen said: 'We see colleagues breaking down because working in here is extremely tough. They appear very negative but clearly, they're not well.'

When officers are subjected to such aggression, they face a dilemma:

> Officer Jakobsen is on the phone with the police about giving evidence in court because of inmate threats. It is the third time he is going to court over threats from the same inmate. He

> appears anxious at the outlook of yet another court case with this aggressive inmate and speaks in an almost desperate tone of voice: 'But, but, but can't you see that if I continue to testify against him, he will continue to make threats against me and it will turn into a vicious spiral?' He sighs heavily and shakes his head as he pleads the police to get someone else who was present the last time the inmate threatened him in court to give evidence so that he does not have to do it. He is clearly distressed but manages to keep a grip on himself, saying unwaveringly: 'Yes, it's to avoid the vicious spiral, not because I'm afraid to do it'.

Officers must remain tough and impenetrable to inmates' threats. That is why Officer Jakobsen emphasised that the problem was the evolving spiral and not that he was afraid of giving testimony in court, and why Officer Clausen, simultaneously with expressing his kinaesthetic response of paralysis, also emphasised that 'the only thing to do was to show up for work every day' to reassert that he was able to withstand the gang inmates' pressure. Both examples demonstrate a complex picture of prison officers' emotional dirty work: not only must they handle inmates' emotional dirt, which is often expressed in manipulative and aggressive behaviour against officers, but they must also control and suppress their own negative emotions of fear, anxiety, and exhaustion so that they appear emotionally robust and able to handle out-of-control inmates. Officer Frederiksen explained: 'We regularly see officers who succumb to the pressure from inmates. We constantly have to look over our shoulder and that's a gigantic pressure. But either you can do this job, or you can't.'

Prison officers engage in an extreme form of emotional dirty work when they handle emotional encounters with aggressive and manipulative inmates who try to fight the system. A particularly dangerous side to this emotional dirty work is the risk of contamination that officers face if they fall for inmate manipulation and begin to do them illicit favours by, for example, sidestepping rules or carrying items of contraband. These dirty behaviours are signs of contamination as officers transgress the boundary from 'pure' to 'dirty' and 'get turned'. It was therefore crucially important for officers to convince themselves and each other that they were in control of their own bodily emotions of fear, anxiety, and exhaustion and could resist the pressure from inmates – that they were uncontaminated. Remaining 'pure' despite the salient threat of contamination from inmates, however, required a particular embodied response.

Shielding against inmates: Officers' embodied responses to avoid contamination

Perceiving inmates as highly contaminating, officers at the closed prison maintained strict physical boundaries. Every wing had a glassed-in observation booth, where officers would gather, chat, and do their paperwork when not out on the wing. Access to the booth was through a locked glass door that inmates had to knock on before interacting with officers. If they were deemed too needy in terms of officer contact, officers would say, 'I think that your 10-Trip Card is used up by now'. Officers were aware that too much interaction with inmates triggered the suspicion of fellow officers and risked contamination if they got sucked in by inmates. Physical contact was therefore avoided by adhering to strict bodily rules when interacting with inmates.

Officers never touched the inmates, except when using force, never accepted any items from them, always kept them at a distance, and never turned their backs on them, always walking behind them during escort. For example, Officer Thomsen smiled sheepishly when she shared how she was heavily scolded by a colleague for accepting a meal from an inmate. Since inmates in Danish prisons shop for and cook their own meals, Officer Thomsen saw the meal as a kind gesture from the inmate. Her colleague, however, interpreted it as an act of manipulation, against which she did not guard herself by accepting the meal. In another story, Officer Jensen shared how she felt shocked when a lifer suddenly touched her during escort:

> We're coming back from the medical unit, small talking about his health. Suddenly he turns around and grabs my shoulder, looks me straight in the eyes and says, 'you should know that I'm a real man'. [Her body gives a jerk, and she loudly exclaims] UGH! I hate it when they touch me! But it was also rather funny because I know that he needs Viagra every time his girlfriend comes to visit because of his long-term drug abuse.

The incident was indeed disturbing. Officer Jensen's body reacted because the touch was a violation of rules that dictate appropriate boundaries between staff and inmates. Her perceptual schemas of inmates formed her belief that the lifer's touch was a strategy to manipulate her into psychologically diminishing the social distance between them so that she would befriend him and begin to do him favours. To relieve the bodily shock, Officer Jensen often laughed with fellow officers about the lifer's Viagra use. The laughing worked to overcome the psychologically threatening incident and maintain social distancing by constructing inmates as inferior or, as in this case, for example, as less of a man.

Protection against contamination in the emotional dirty work with inmates comprised a critical pattern of bodily actions: officers' literal enactment of having each other's backs by way of always working close to each other. Frequently sharing details about specific situations with inmates, officers would tell each other how these situations were dealt with. If conversation between officer and inmate increased in volume, a fellow officer would make him- or herself visible to the inmate. Officers called these actions of providing backing their 'everyday solidarity':

> We all know that we're dealing with a clientele that always tries to deceive us for their personal gain. That's just everyday life in here so we always stand together. The only solid safety we have in here is each other. This feeling of everyday solidarity is very unique. (Officer Svendsen)

A deeply ingrained corporeal schema for practising everyday solidarity in special security was to share the handling of aggressive inmates: 'Never be alone with a gang inmate. Ever. He'll always try to squeeze you to do him favours' (Officer Andersen). Officer Clausen elaborated:

> We're always at least two officers walking the wing together side by side. This is because we're dealing with extremely intimidating prisoners who notice the slightest insecurities from us. So, we've got each other's backs and we are each other's witness of what's been said. They tell many, many lies, and make up promises that they say we made and then they have their lawyers to help them. So, we always need to be there together to resist their manipulations.

Officers worked in close proximity, which served as a protective buffer that allowed them to develop a mental distance that kept them from getting entrapped in inmates' manipulations. Officers' enactment of solidarity created strong group boundaries that worked as a physical, mental, and emotional shield against contaminants.

The emotional dirty work of being at the receiving end of inmates' manipulations and aggressions meant that officers felt the need to release the emotional toll and bodily impacts of this dark side of work. This happened primarily backstage (Goffman, 1959) in the social sphere of the guardroom where only officers were present. For example, one night during dinner, Officer Jakobsen shared honestly how he felt ambiguous about his officer role:

> My dilemma is that I hate the prisoners, yet I'm expected to engage with them. But the prisoners in here are of the worst kind – they're the scum of earth. We're talking rapists, child molesters, murderers, and *I* am to engage with those kinds of people?

Given that a core task of prison officers is to motivate inmates to become law-abiding citizens, this statement seemed controversial. His fellow officers, however, supported him. Officer Jensen, for example, later said: 'I know exactly where he's coming from. Some of them take up so much space and energy'. In this backstage space, out of sight to inmates and free from managers, officers shared their emotions of cynicism and antipathy towards inmates, whom they saw as malignant and always trying to deceive them.

Whereas cynicism and antipathy towards inmates were accepted emotions, fear, anxiety, and exhaustion were deemed more troublesome. Whenever these emotions were shared, they were done so primarily so that they would be contained, because not containing them would make the officer feeling them more vulnerable to inmate manipulation and essentially not trustworthy. Officer Madsen added: 'You always think about how much emotion you share because you want to show that you can take it'. An officer who cannot 'take it' is dangerous because officers rely on each other for safety. Officers therefore occasionally discussed fellow officers who did not appear able to 'take it': 'He just sits in the guard room and watches TV, waiting for time to pass', Officer Mortensen said one afternoon, referring to whether a fellow officer was fit for the job in special security. 'He doesn't have what it takes to do the job in that kind of unit', Officer Andersen agreed. Backstage talks were a critical means of coping with the pain arising from the emotional dirty work with inmates and through that solidify strict social boundaries against them, and they were also means for evaluating who could stomach the pressure from inmates. Officers, therefore, had to demonstrate that they could stand the pressure. By showing that inmates and officers were of totally different breeds, they could secure a preferred sense of 'pure' and robust self.

Transforming contaminants: Officers' focus on inmate rehabilitation

The corporeal schemas of shielding against contaminants in the closed prison were remarkably different from the boundary management practices I observed in the open prison. Here, officers' emotional dirty work involved trying to expel the emotional dirt of inmates by trying to transform them, so that they would cease their disruptive

behaviour and become law-abiding. Their transformative responses occurred first and foremost through the formation of positive connections with the inmates:

> Officer Gormsen shows me around the open prison. As we bump into several inmates, she greets them with big smiles and hugs: 'How have you been?' 'How did it go with . . .?' What happened to . . .?' With all of them, it's like she's bumping into an old friend. She says, 'interacting with the inmates is what I like best in the job'.

Officers' perceptual schemas formed their interpretation of inmates' disruptive emotions and deviant behaviour as the outcomes of horrible upbringings marked by violence, neglect, and abuse. Many officers therefore engaged in a nurturing and sometimes counselling role to help the inmates change by interacting with them, showing respect and care. In some units, the touching of inmates' bodies through hugs was perceived as a natural element of rehabilitation.

For example, I observed Officer Nielsen sitting beside drug addict and repeat offender John in his cell, listening with sad eyes to his devastating story about his parents, who had taught him to inject himself with heroin when he was only a young boy. While being attuned to John's body and emotions, she was also attuned to her own sadness: 'Sad fates like John's story make me miserable', she later confessed. The engagement with inmates' troubled pasts, however, required a particular bodily response where the officers would suppress their own feelings to attune themselves to the emotions of the inmates by meeting them 'wherever they are':

> Most of my work is about engaging with the prisoners, supporting them and providing care. They've experienced so much frustration in their lives with the meanest and ugliest abuse. You've got no idea. So, we talk about why they did what they did. Why they stabbed or killed the girlfriend. And they really like that we meet them in *that* place and talk, without judgement. (Officer Ibsen)

Meeting inmates 'in *that* place' was the officers' way of embracing the emotional dirt that had brought them into trouble. Like the Samaritans (McMurray and Ward, 2014), officers performed emotional labour by listening without judgement to the burdensome and out of place emotions of distressed inmates. This was deemed essential if inmates were to move on from their deviant behaviour and become 'clean' members of society. As officers listened, more human aspects of the inmates became visible. Officer Iversen said about Charlie, a drug dealer, serving time for drug trafficking: 'Yes, he's a drug dealer but he's still a good person'. Many officers perceived their effort of engaging with inmates as central to rehabilitation.

Officers' efforts in forming positive connections with inmates also helped them maintain order. Returning to the critical situation between Sebastian and Officer Carlsen, Sebastian was angry because he was not getting what he wanted. However, to prevent the situation from escalating into violence, fellow inmate Matt followed Sebastian around as he fumingly oscillated between the guardroom and the common area of the wing. Matt tried to calm Sebastian down by explaining in a calm voice that the matter was being taken care of. During Matt's time in prison, the wing officers had built good relations

with him, and his interference managed to contain the situation. The officers perceived Matt's problem-solving behaviours as a sign of his transformation: 'Matt has become very good with the young inmates when they flip over something' (Officer Poulsen).

Officers engaged in emotional dirty work when they supported inmates in distress, and were very aware that 'getting too close' could lead to their being manipulated. Female officers, especially, knew that they had to balance sympathy for inmates with distance to ensure that inmates did not develop feelings for them:

> It's extremely stressful and genuinely uncomfortable when an inmate gets too fond of you because . . . Not that I can't say no to them . . . [Sighs deeply] but you don't want your colleagues to get the wrong impression. We've seen colleagues getting romantically involved with inmates and you certainly don't want to be bracketed with those people. (Officer Jeppesen)

Female officers were aware not to trigger the suspicion of fellow officers that they had become too involved with inmates, because that was a clear sign that they had 'been turned'. Male officers showed the same awareness when they said that they remained emotionally detached from inmates they really liked to not risk their relationship with fellow officers.

One officer shared how she was excluded from the officer group when she did not manage to suppress her escalating sadness following her failed resuscitation of a young inmate who died from heart failure:

> I got no backing whatsoever. No one asked how I felt or tried to understand why I had all these emotions. For six months, I went to work every day in a really bad state. My body was shaking when I entered the prison gate. I felt terrible. (Officer Finsen)

Feeling inappropriate emotions, such as too much sympathy or sadness for inmates, officers risked being ostracised by fellow officers because these emotions made them vulnerable to inmate manipulation and contamination.

Figure 1 illustrates the embodied responses to contamination in emotional dirty work. When workers engage in burdensome encounters to handle the expressed dirty emotions and deviant behaviour of clients, they risk contamination if they give in to clients' pressure and manipulation. To avoid contamination, they must control and suppress their own dirty emotions. They therefore engage in embodied responses of shielding against clients or transforming them, while adhering to the dominant emotional norms of the occupational group.

Discussion

I began this article by discussing how most scholarship on dirty work emphasises the symbolic aspects of dirty work over its material and embodied dimensions. I pointed out that emphasis on the discursive, particularly workers' cognitive, ideological tactics to counter taint has privileged optimistic accounts of dirty work that may overlook key aspects of worker experience (Hughes et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2016). In contrast, this research approached dirty work with an embodied phenomenological lens (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) to pay attention to some of the challenges that such work poses for those

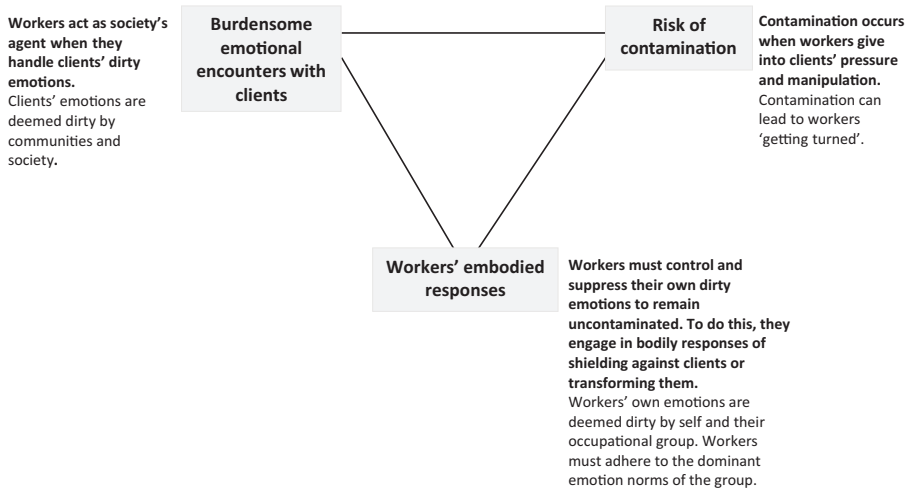

Figure 1. Embodied responses to contamination in emotional dirty work.

who must perform it 'before' it becomes subjected to reframing. Specifically, this study focused on how workers experience and respond to contamination in emotional dirty work. The findings reveal how prison officers, when faced with difficult emotional encounters with inmates, risk contamination if they fall for inmate manipulation and begin to give illicit favours to inmates. Workers respond to this risk by shielding against contaminants or trying to transform them. My findings suggest two theoretical contributions. First, I extend our knowledge about what constitutes emotional dirty work and how contamination occurs in this kind of work. Second, I extend the dirty work literature by explaining how insights into workers' embodied responses at work provide a more nuanced account of worker experiences.

Contamination in a brutal form of emotional dirty work

This research contributes to our understanding of what emotional dirty work is and its pitfalls. Existing research on the nature of emotional dirty work (McMurray and Ward, 2014; Rivera, 2015; Sanders, 2010) defines it as jobs that require the engagement with the expressed feelings of others – for example, clients and callers – that are deemed difficult, burdensome or taboo because they threaten the solidarity, self-conception or preferred order of a given individual or community. In short, it is work that requires handling emotions perceived to be dirty by society. Central to emotional dirty work is the performance of emotional labour, that is, the inducement or suppression of feelings to produce a particular emotional state in others. Consistent with prior research, I found that to prevent prison disturbances, prison officers regularly engage in emotional dirty work when they deal with inmates' emotional dirt of anger, aggression, and despair. Officers do this work to guarantee, on behalf of society, that inmates stand for their crimes and remain incarcerated in an orderly manner.

This study, however, goes further by demonstrating and accounting for what I term a particularly brutal form of emotional dirty work: the work of dealing with the aggressive and manipulative behaviour of clients – in this case, difficult inmates – who try to resist and fight the system by conning, intimidating, and threatening staff. To act as society's agent in the containment of clients' emotional dirt, workers must withstand clients' manipulative behaviour, intimidations, and threats. However, being positioned at the receiving end of clients' manipulations and aggressions, workers become very vulnerable to clients' pressure. Extending the application of emotional dirty work to a security context was generative for gaining insight into this particularly brutal form. Importantly, this extension made subtle dynamics around contamination visible, which may occur if workers give in to clients' pressure. The occurrence of contamination in dirty work has not yet been well explicated.

Although taint and contamination are used interchangeably in much of the dirty work literature, I found it useful to distinguish between them. Being a symbolic process where others attribute undesired qualities that mark one's character, taint (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) differs from contamination in that the latter is more physical and material in its manifestation, with its ability to leave a permanent trace and turn people and objects into something else (Höpfl, 2012). My analyses showed that being positioned at the receiving end of inmates' manipulations and aggressions, prison officers risk contamination if they give in to inmates' pressure and begin to do them illicit favours, that is, if they 'get turned'. 'Getting turned' in the world of prison work has tremendous consequences for whom the 'turned' officer will become a criminal just like the inmate.

To develop a richer understanding of these detrimental processes, Brennan's (2004) conceptualisation of 'transmission of affect' can illuminate how the energies and emotions of one can cross over into another. The transmission of affect concerns both enhancing and depressing energies from emotions. Brennan emphasises that those who want to rid themselves of negative affect, such as anger, shame, fear, and feelings of worthlessness, can transmit them to another. This way, unwanted feelings and sensations can become another man or woman's burden as they end up carrying what others cannot bear to feel. Brennan specifies that affect is not transmitted on a one-to-one basis, but as energy: the aggression of one can become the anxiety of another. The emotional dirt of clients can thereby transmit into workers, who then come to feel anxious or sad for clients. These emotions can, however, be very dangerous for workers to feel because they make them vulnerable to clients' manipulation and pressure. Workers' own emotions are dirty if they are deemed troublesome, inappropriate, or forbidden by self or the occupational group with which workers identify themselves. In the case of prison officers, contamination could occur if officers felt fear, anxiety, and sadness for inmates. To remain uncontaminated requires a particular bodily response, where workers must demonstrate emotional resilience by suppressing and containing their own dirty emotions.

Emotional dirty workers are therefore engaged in 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2002) because a significant part of their work revolves around bodies – both the bodies of clients and of workers – as the immediate site of labour. Their work is as much about suppressing and controlling their own dirty emotions as it is about managing the dirty emotions and deviant behaviour of clients. The corporeal dimension of emotional dirty work thereby intertwines with the social and moral discourses of that particular

occupation. Although emotions are seen to have biological roots by being experienced through our bodies in response to situations, they are often overwritten by particular dominant discourses that privilege certain forms of emotional expression over others (Fineman, 2008). For example, toughness may be privileged over fear and sadness. This particular emotional dynamic resembles what we know as feeling rules and emotion management in organisations (Hochschild, 1990; Mikkelsen and Wåhlin, 2020; Putnam and Mumby, 1993), that is, those rules that govern how we should feel in a given situation. By explaining how these processes are linked to contamination, this study extends the theoretical framework on emotional dirty work.

Embodied responses to contamination in emotional dirty work

My work extends not only our understanding of how contamination occurs in emotional dirty work, but also central aspects of how workers avoid it, not as cognitive, ideological *after the fact* sort of coping, but as in-the-moment bodily engagements in everyday work practices (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). To contain their own dirty emotions and avoid contamination, workers may shield against contaminants by establishing physical boundaries against them through architecture, keeping interactions to a minimum, and not touching them. Shielding is done to protect workers from the emotional dirt of contaminants so that they do not develop emotions of, for example, fear and anxiety, as these emotions make them vulnerable to clients' pressure. Workers may also establish alternative boundaries by trying to expel the emotional dirt of contaminants through forming positive connections, increased interaction, and giving hugs so that contaminants will be transformed and become 'clean'. Transforming responses require that workers balance potential warm feeling for clients such as sympathy and sadness with distance to ensure that they are not manipulated.

The data revealed that officers' body work of avoiding contamination was not an individual endeavour but deeply intertwined with the collective organising of the officer group. Officers shared the handling of difficult inmates and formed critical holding environments within the group (Kahn, 2001) to contain the dirty emotions engendered by work. However, the group also worked as a measure of control between officers as they would be mindful of how much emotional distress they would display to each other to avoid triggering the suspicion of fellow officers that they had given in to inmates' pressure and had 'been turned'. Tracy (2005) similarly showed that prison officers are expected to perform dominant emotional norms of toughness and suspiciousness. Particularly, suspicion served as a method of control not only for inmates but also for fellow officers by ridiculing former 'fallen officers' who had gotten 'sucked in' by inmates. The embodied phenomenological approach in this study made suspicion visible, not as an 'inner' reality of prison officers, but as a form of conduct (Merleau-Ponty, 1971) that exercised control. This was visible when officers discussed whether fellow officers could stomach the pressure, refrained from sharing how they really felt, and were excluded for expressing inappropriate emotions for inmates.

This finding deepens our understanding of the role that group cultures play in dirty work occupations. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue that strong occupational cultures coalesce in dirty work occupations because of the salience of dirty work stigma, where

team-based work practices based on camaraderie and humour defend against identity threats. My findings add to this by suggesting that strong occupational cultures are a particularly critical source of support for handling the dark aspects of dirty jobs. However, prevailing emotional norms to suppress weak emotions and appear tough and impenetrable may manifest as the control of each other's dirty emotions engendered by work. In the work of prison officers, this control most likely occurred to protect officers from contamination. These group dynamics, however, amplified rather than ameliorated the psychological pressure on officers. Not only did they have to look over their shoulders because of pressure from inmates, but they also had to watch themselves around fellow officers to not trigger the suspicion that they had 'been turned', as this would lead to their ostracism from the group, which would make them even more vulnerable to inmates' pressure and manipulation.

My attention to the material work practices and bodily demands involved in working with the contaminating emotions of others yielded new insights into how it feels to be engaged in emotional dirty work. Most research on dirty work has tended to emphasise workers' perceptual, ideological reordering of dirt (e.g. reframing) (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007), but it has recently been criticised for fostering false optimism (Hughes et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2016). The current research extends theorising on dirty work with more nuanced insights of worker experiences.

Such insights were made possible by my own embodied immersion in the two settings, where close observation of taken-for-granted work practices (cf. Barley and Kunda, 2001) and patterns of everyday, bodily actions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) allowed scrutiny of workers' physical and even visceral aspects of working with inmates. These were expressed by officers through the bodily reactions of freezing and jerking, facial expressions of neutrality and sheepishness, voices of anger and desperation, forms of conduct that reflected suspicion, fear, and sadness, and the contrasting physical movements pattern of shielding against inmates or transforming them in the two settings. Given the high levels of burnout and stress in prison officers (e.g. Andersen et al., 2017; Kinman et al., 2016), this phenomenological investigation of the 'body/work nexus' (Gimlin, 2007; Wolkowitz, 2006) provides insight into the heavy toll that emotional dirty work has on officers' bodies. Future research into how everyday bodily engagement in emotional dirty work impacts the mental health of workers is needed to further validate this proposition.

Implications for practice

This Danish case is certainly not unique, and has broader implications for informing ongoing battles against health risks in human service personnel in other settings where they are required to engage with the burdensome and unwanted emotions of others. For example, the emotionally draining interactions with psychiatric patients who frequently try to deceive and manipulate staff equally require that staff guard themselves so that they are not contaminated by the madness of patients (Dunbar and Sias, 2015; Hyde and Thomas, 2002; Willshire, 1999). Several recommendations can be deduced for how to bolster emotional resilience in workers to help them tackle manipulative and aggressive clients. A critical first recommendation is developing processes that encourage staff to

become aware of the emotional norms and control that influence their own behaviours and those of others. This awareness must recognise that triggers of collective emotion norms are usually organisational rather than individually motivated (Tracy, 2005). With this awareness, organisations might develop and implement supervised coping groups to provide frequent and more professional emotional support for workers. Another recommendation is to help trainees deal with the emotional dirt and deviant behaviour of aggressive clients, particularly how to spot and respond to manipulative and intimidating behaviour. An emotional curriculum that teaches the risk of contamination should therefore be part of training and professional development to foster emotional resilience as a valued organising principle of human service work.

Conclusion

The main contribution of this work is to approach dirty work with an embodied phenomenological lens to reveal how workers experience and respond to contamination. This allowed me to move beyond the symbolic facets of dirty work and complement previous, predominantly positive constructions of dirty work with a more nuanced account of worker experiences. My account explicates that workers who engage in brutal emotional dirty work risk contamination if they give in to clients' pressure and manipulation. To avoid contamination, workers must control and suppress their own dirty emotions. To do this, they engage in embodied responses of shielding against clients or transforming them, while adhering to the dominant emotional norms of the occupational group. As I conclude, I encourage future research to examine dirty workers' emotions and bodily responses *at* work, and not only their expressed feelings *about* work, to further uncover insights into the otherwise less attended embodied dimension of dirty work.

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