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# Embodying emotional dirty work: a messy text of patrolling the border

Embodying  
emotional  
dirty work

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – “Dirty work” is an embodied, emotional activity, and may best be expressed through narrative thick description. The purpose of this paper is to employ creative analytic techniques through a “messy text” for better understanding the tacit knowledge and emotionality of dirty work and dirty research. The vignettes, based upon ethnographic fieldwork with US Border Patrol agents, viscerally reveal the embodied emotions of dirty work and doing dirty research.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research draws on a two and a half year ethnography of the US Border Patrol in which the first author engaged in participant observation, shadowing, and interviews. Based upon the iterative data analysis and narrative writing techniques using verbatim quotations and field data, the essay provides a series of vignettes that explore the multi-faceted feelings of dirty work.

**Findings** – Tacit knowledge about dirty work is unmasked and known through experiences of the body as well as emotional reactions to the scene. A table listing the emotions that emerged in these stories supplements the narrative text. The analysis shows how communication about emotions provides a sense-making tool that, in turn, elucidates both the challenges and the potential highlights of doing dirty work. In particular, findings suggest that emotional ambiguity the “moral emotions” of guilt and shame may serve as sense-making tools that can help in ethical decision making and a re-framing of challenging situations.

**Originality/value** – A field immersion alongside dirty workers, coupled with a creative writing approach, provides access to the fleeting, embodied, and fragmented nature of tacit knowledge – answering the questions of what dirty work feels like. The essay provides a behind the scenes exploration of US Border Patrol agents – a profession that is alternately stigmatized or hidden from public view. Finally, the piece provides a self-reflexive account of the messy realities of conducting “dirty research” in a way that is open ended and embodied.

**Keywords** Sensemaking, Tacit knowledge, Emotion, Dirty work, Border patrol, Messy text

**Paper type** Research paper

I peered through the glass at the agents and detained immigrants in the largest Border Patrol processing center in the nation. The “processing center” is housed within a border station, behind heavy locked doors. The room was full, with desks huddled in the center and empty juice boxes spilling out of the trash cans. Undocumented immigrants sat on benches lining the walls as agents worked to book, fingerprint, and identify each of the immigrants in their custody. The shapes on the other side of the

The authors would like to acknowledge the participants in this research, whose stories pave the way for greater understanding of dirty work and tacit knowledge.



glass wobbled and refused to adhere to straight lines, like the blurriness I see when looking through someone else's glasses.

Through the glass, she saw me. She looked me directly in the eye just before reaching her arms up to her mother. Her pink coat hung loosely, a couple of sizes too big for her little body.

She was so small inside the cluttered room. My stomach tightened, and dropped down into my womb. It had been six years since I breast fed my son, yet the unmistakable tingling sensation of motherhood pricked my chest, and I heaved a silent sigh.

The agent who agreed to allow me to shadow him was talking. "We learn questioning techniques at the Academy." I glanced over to him, struggling to blink back my tears and appear attentive.

"Yeah?" I reached into my purse for my notebook, leaving a smudge of sweat where my palm had rested on the metal counter. "What do you learn at the Academy?" I asked.

"When we interrogate immigrants, we just keep coming back and ask question after question after question if we think they're lying. Eventually, they'll break. I mean, I know it sounds bad, but they will. They'll break."

I nodded and looked back at where the little girl had been standing. Why would she need to be "broken?" But they had disappeared from view.

An agent slammed a door, and I jumped. Nervous laughter trickled from my lips before I silenced it, embarrassed by my emotional body. My agent escort pointed over my shoulder, nodding a stoic understanding. I turned to see the little girl cuddling up against her mommy in a cell labeled "Women and Minors." Somehow the agent recognized my interest in a child who seemed so out of place amongst the sweaty men, cold concrete, and the bureaucratic stacks of paper.

Through two panes of glass, she looked up at me again.

And she smiled.

### **Feeling dirty work: introduction**

What does dirty work feel like?

What does researching dirty work – doing "dirty research" – feel like?

In this essay, we ask and answer these research questions via a qualitative study and writing a "messy text" (Marcus, 1994) of US Border Patrol agents. Messy texts acknowledge that writing is not a mirror but a way to frame the scene. Messy texts are open-ended, fractured, and emotional. They centralize writers' experiences as pivotal to the knowledge produced.

As illustrated within, dirty work feels confusing, lonely, and courageous. It feels ambivalent, constrained by regulations and job descriptions that do not always seem to make sense given contradictory circumstances, contexts, and communities. And, as a researcher alongside dirty workers, it feels nerve-racking to watch something that is usually hidden from public view. Of course, this is just the shorthand. Feelings of dirty work do not come in a neat bulleted list, but rather through the rich and embodied narratives of the scene.

The Border Patrol – the largest federal law enforcement agency in the USA (US Department of Justice, 2012) – is doing a significant aspect of the nation's "dirty work." Dirty work refers to work that is deemed "tainted" because it contradicts the noble or heroic characteristics of what society views as "good" or "proper" labor (Hughes, 1962). Work can be considered "dirty" in three different ways (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)

including: first, when it involves physical labor – such as cleaning filth or using your body in physical labor; second, when it involves socially stigmatized work – such as interacting with stigmatized groups or serving a more wealthy “master”; or third, when the job requires moral ambiguity – such as using coercive force or “selling” your body for a profit (Grandy and Mavin, 2014). Although many occupations may be tainted and, at the same time, appreciated by the public (e.g. firefighters, Tracy and Scott, 2006), it is the negative or ambiguous associations with different aspects of “taint” that often challenge workers’ identities and their ability to enjoy fulfillment in their work.

Research has documented a range of law enforcement occupations associated with dirty work, including police officers (Dick, 2005; Drew and Hulvey, 2007; Gassaway, 2007; Roca, 2010), fire fighters (Tracy *et al.*, 2006; Tracy and Scott, 2006), correctional officers (Crawley, 2004; Tracy, 2004a, 2005), and military personnel (Casper and Moore, 2011; Kurashina, 2005). Law enforcement are dirty workers because they put their bodies in physical danger or serve others as “first responders,” work closely with stigmatized populations such as criminals or homeless, and employ morally questionable techniques such as coercion or force.

Border Patrol agents are also dirty workers. They experience physical taint when laboring in harsh environments or putting their bodies in physical danger (Heisler *et al.*, 2013), or tending to the wounded as first responders. Agents are socially tainted when working with stigmatized populations such as undocumented immigrants or criminals. Morally, agents are tainted as they seek to capture and deport undocumented immigrants with the use of coercion and force. Indeed, one could argue that Border Patrol agents face complex moral and social taint because of the milieu of multiple “publics” who simultaneously herald Border Patrol work as patriotic, brave, and masculine, while others critique it as immoral, abusive, and feminine. Such contradictions in ones’ work leads to increased difficulty in managing taint (Grandy and Mavin, 2014). Furthermore, because agents’ profession is centrally defined by working with undocumented immigrants coupled with the significant proportion of their work duties associated with physically, socially, and morally dubious work, Border Patrol officers can be classified as high-breadth, high-depth dirty workers (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006).

The public knows very little about the experiences of Border Patrol agents. Across a variety of disciplines, few in-depth scholarly studies examine the Border Patrol (for an exception, see Maril, 2004). Border Patrol agents’ ability to manage dirty work is complicated by people’s ignorance about their actual job duties coupled with the fact that people may think they have an understanding of border work, given popular media depictions in television shows such as “Homeland Security, USA” or “Border Wars.” “Reality” television shows like these often sensationalize law enforcement aspects of agents’ work, while silencing the complex human, embodied, and emotional aspects of the job. What’s more, the news media often sends mixed messages, with some stories heralding the work of the Patrol as heroic and necessary (e.g. Santos, 2013) and other stories highlighting agents’ abuse of power (e.g. Frey, 2012; Planas, 2012) and the seeming futility of agents’ work (e.g. Associated Press, 2012; Shapiro, 2012). These examples provide snapshots of a story that, if told in descriptive narrative, has the potential to provide depth and richness to the dirty work literature – as we elucidate next.

### **Messy texts, dirty work and ambiguous emotions: rationale and literature review**

Much past research on dirty work has drawn from self-reports gathered through surveys and interviews (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Such work has been foundationally helpful

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in classifying types of taint and stigma and delineating various identity management strategies employees use to negotiate that taint. However, these studies are less equipped to describe dirty work as an embodied, emotional activity. Certainly, some dirty work research has drawn from qualitative field data (e.g. Tracy and Scott, 2006; Drew *et al.*, 2007; Grandy and Mavin, 2014). The current study builds upon this research, showing how a creative writing style can add depth to understandings of dirty work. We therefore answer the call for ethnographic studies that examine “social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of communities and with analysis of wider structures” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 3).

Qualitative and ethnographic researchers have argued that to write emotionally, we must experiment with the format of our writing (Denzin, 1997) and use creatively written texts (Caulley, 2008; Goodall, 2008; Tracy, 2010). Indeed, “how we are expected to write affects what we can write about” (Richardson, 2000, p. 927). Alternative writing formats, such as “messy texts” (Marcus, 1994) present research in creative and engaging ways, reflecting the complexities of everyday life in its very presentation (Bochner, 2000).

Messy texts, written after long-term participant observation and in-depth interviewing, also have unique value in elucidating participants’ embodied and emotional experiences as a site of tacit knowledge. Polanyi (1966) coined the phrase tacit knowledge to describe the knowledge we cannot express discursively; in short, we know more than we can say. Tacit knowledge is embodied because it encompasses “ineffable truths” that are difficult to put into words “partly because they are between meanings and actions” (Altheide and Johnson, 1994, p. 491). Words and language texts are not the primary tenants of everyday life, but rather, they serve as symbols for what cannot be expressed (Schutz, 1967). Therefore, tacit knowledge “transcends the immediate surface of speech, texts, or discursive materials” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). The use of messy texts in representation of data is key for accessing such knowledge.

Among other knowledge, embodied research and a messy text approach are well poised to identify the emotions involved in negotiating stigma as an everyday practice, and to viscerally understand the highs and lows of dirty work. What’s more, Rorty (1989) makes the case that social and messy texts are imperative for promoting compassion and persuading readers to feel the sufferings of others. Such an approach illuminates why dirty work is simultaneously stressful and rewarding and, in turn, may help researchers and practitioners better conceptualize how dirty work might be made more manageable and pleasant for workers. Exploring tacit knowledge through embodied research and messy texts also has the potential for accessing the experience of emotional ambivalence – something that may be common among dirty workers, yet is a state that most people cannot, on demand, recall through self-report (Fong, 2006). Furthermore, a messy text may help us elucidate the moral emotions of guilt, shame, and empathy.

Guilt, or “regret over wrong-doing” (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 667) arises when an individual “feels that he or she has violated some expectation or norm” (Van Kleef *et al.*, 2006). For dirty workers, the violation of social norms is connected to the overall moral ambiguity of dirty work (Hughes, 1962) as well as moral taint specifically. Guilt is different than shame, because shame focusses on the individual disgrace, rather than generalized, social impact of wrong-doing (Eisenberg, 2000). Past dirty work research has focussed more on shame than guilt. For example, strippers feel shame about the profession (Grandy and Mavin, 2014) and correctional officers feel embarrassed or ashamed to be the “scum of law enforcement” (Tracy and Scott, 2006, p. 7).

The discussion of shame within dirty work research focusses on face-saving techniques that draw attention away from the worker as a “dirty” person themselves (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999).

Research suggests that “guilt is a moral and adaptive emotion [whereas] shame may represent the darker side of moral effect” (Tangney, 1995, p. 1132). Indeed, because guilt is associated with responsibility over the wrong-doing, it is “linked to empathetic reactions and attempts to apologize or make restitution” (Trevino *et al.*, 2006, p. 964). Empathy is a “response that stems from the [...] comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition” and reflects the understanding of what the other person is feeling or is expected to feel (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1994, p. 671). Both guilt and empathy draw attention away from the worker themselves, and place the focus on the “other” or client, and how restitution or repair can be made. In this study, we are able to see how guilt intermingles with empathy as Border Patrol agents work with undocumented immigrants.

In addition to accessing feelings of ambivalence, shame, and guilt, another strength of a qualitative approach and creative representations of data is accessing the tacit knowledge residing within the researcher herself, as the human instrument (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, these emotions cannot be taught, but must be felt and experienced to be understood. Ethnographic field work is an “embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180). In particular, Goffman (2001) asserts that the body in participant observation is an important way to gain “data” because you “subject yourself, your own body [...] to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals” (p. 154). Similarly, ethnographic fieldwork as well as in-depth formal interviews, call on the researcher to be attentive to the participants, sharing emotional reactions and experiences. Furthermore, past researchers have made the convincing case that ethnography is quite often “risky” (Stewart *et al.*, 2009) – dangerous physically, with ambiguous legitimacy, and consistent uncertainty. In this way, ethnographic research, itself, may be an academic version of “dirty work.”

In this piece, our embodied and emotional knowledge is foundational for understanding both the process of conducting dirty research and what it feels like to do dirty work as a US Border Patrol agent. The key is not just to “capture the [participants’] voice, but to elucidate the experience that is implicated by [them] in the context of their activities as they perform them and as they are understood [by] the ethnographer” (Altheide and Johnson, 1994, p. 491). The researcher, by putting her body and emotions into the scene and stories of the dirty worker, participates in the tacit knowledge of doing dirty work. The messy text, through its rich description and dialog, reveals the emotionality of dirty work experienced in everyday life.

### **Dirty research: methods and analysis**

This research draws on data collected during Kendra’s (the first author) two and a half year ethnographic research with the US Border Patrol. The initial goals of the research were to understand agents’ identities at work, and how broader social discourses impacted agents’ experiences of work and self. As a self-described immigration activist, Kendra was also interested in the contested space of what the Border Patrol described as “immigration enforcement.” The study focussed on rich narratives that emerged in the scene and took seriously the notion of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) – or the notion that writing is fundamentally

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a method for knowing. As such, Kendra did not “write up” her data as much as she “wrote into and through” (Poulos, 2012, p. 197) the issues emerging in the field.

Kendra traveled to Border Patrol offices, visited with agents, and “shadowed” agents in their work across four states – California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. She informally interviewed more than 88 agents, conducted formal audio-recorded interviews with 25 participants, and engaged in participant-observation fieldwork at 21 stations, offices, training facilities, or meeting sites. Together this resulted in 165 research hours, with approximately 40 of those hours in formal recorded interviews.

Sarah (the second author) helped conceptualize the study, served as a sounding board and guide for the project at large, and co-authored this essay. As Kendra conducted the field research, she sought feedback from Sarah, an expert in both dirty work and qualitative research methods. Among other things, Sarah worked with Kendra to create a second in-depth interview guide that focussed on the intersections of emotion and dirty work taint. As the research progressed, Kendra was surprised by the complexity and emotionality of her own experiences observing and interacting with agents, and Sarah encouraged her to cultivate creative writing as a method for showing, and not just telling, these emotions.

For this piece, we draw on field notes from participant observations, interview transcripts, and Kendra’s personal journal entries. The names of all participants have been changed, and locations are kept deliberately vague in order to protect the identities of participants. The data were analyzed using an iterative approach that moved alternately between data collection, review of relevant literature, and analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The authors developed analytic memos (Charmaz, 2001) that explicated findings as well as guided additional data collection. Kendra also continued writing through the analysis, creating vignettes of poignant scenes. After these phases of reading, observing, writing, and coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we developed a codebook that included categories such as compassion, anger, confusion, and fear. In subsequent secondary cycle coding cycles (Tracy, 2013), we examined and made a list of emotions that emerged from the data and further developed exemplars that most vividly portrayed the range of emotions felt in Border Patrol dirty work.

Exemplars are significant and multi-faceted examples that serve as “rhetorical device[s] which may help the readers to enter into the author’s argument” (Atkinson, 1990, p. 91). These exemplars were developed by translating verbatim quotations and “snapshots” of field notes and journal entries into the messy text narratives that make up the heart of this essay. Some texts also include small portions added by the authors to explain, elaborate, or clarify lingo used by agents. At the beginning of each vignette, a footnote indicates the origin of each narrative – be it field notes, interview transcripts, or a combination. Sarah helped in the data analysis and writing. However, these are stories of the first author, Kendra, who viscerally encountered the emotions of dirty work in the field. As such, they are presented in her first person voice.

### **Embodied dirty work: stories of emotion and taint**

What does dirty work feel like? How does it feel to negotiate shifting layers of taint, your job looked down upon in one context, and exalted in another? How do Agents know when to be courageous or to enact compassion? And how does it feel to embody these emotions when the expression of emotion itself is stigmatized? In the sections that follow, we utilize a series of embodied “messy” stories to explore both what dirty work feels like as well as what it feels like to research dirty work.

*The game: danger, dust, and physical taint[1]*

As we tumbled up the steep gravel grade, my insides jumped and quivered, exacerbating my anxiety. Even with the air conditioning blasting, I felt lukewarm beads of sweat congregating on my forehead until the vehicle finally rumbled to a stop.

“You wanna get out?” Agent Scott asked.

“Sure,” I replied. The door slammed behind me, and I turned to see Scott stepping from behind the rear bumper. His hand rested only briefly on the hilt before he flipped the clip that held his gun in place.

I caught my breath.

Shivering in the heat, my eyes followed the oddly slithering contours of the border fence.

I didn’t ask Agent Scott why he might need the gun. On our way up the hill he told me that this neighborhood was one of the most dangerous areas along the border. He explained that the other Border Patrol vehicles on this hill were called “War Wagons,” with heavy metal plates instead of side and rear windows and bulletproof glass for the windshield.

Somewhere along the bumpy truck ride, I had forgotten the danger, swallowed it down along with the intermittent nausea. I felt naively comforted just to be sheltered within the Border Patrol truck. But now I remembered the news stories about agents being shot by narcotics smugglers. I remembered the waiver I signed releasing the Patrol from responsibility for my physical safety. My body exposed to the searing heat, dust in my lungs, and a Border Patrol agent before me with his hand on his gun, and the terror gust over me like hot oven air.

He turned and walked around the satellite towers and cameras used to help monitor and watch the border. I followed behind and watched as he rounded the corner and withdrew the shiny black gun from its resting place.

He didn’t aim it – just held it in his hand, gently pointing it toward the sandy ground. The ease with which his fingers grasped the weapon belied the fact that we might need its protection. Scott wore a bullet-proof-vest beneath his green shirt. I wore a delicate blouse patterned with tiny red flowers and edged in lace. I felt silly, flimsy, weak, and out of place.

Agent Scott gazed intently up at a second story window in a large partially constructed house on the Mexican side of the border fence. The stoic gray bricks formed unfinished walls, with a steel frame skeleton jutting up toward the sky where the building stopped short.

“They’re watching us,” he said motioning with his left hand. I looked up and squinted into the sunlight. Two small figures peered from the window. A glint of light revealed the metallic reflection off some kind of rifle pointed our direction.

They were watching us, ready with a gun if they wanted to use it.

“They put scouts up there, to see where we are.” Scott said. By “we,” I knew he meant the Border Patrol. But I was standing next to this man in green. They could see me too.

“They’re always watching us, watching them, watching us.” He laughed, but I couldn’t even force my face to smile. I pictured my son at home, and wondered why research would ever be a reason to put my life in danger. I felt like a cowardly imposter – playing the naïve observer who really wanted to run away. Being there wasn’t my job, it was my choice. I wondered if Scott felt like he had a choice.

“It’s a little game we play I guess,” he added, kicking the dirt with his boot.

I looked up at the window. I watched them watching us.

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Before I began my research with the Patrol, I knew agents physically worked in dangerous conditions. I recognized that the desert was vast and inhospitable and that the threats of heat and dehydration, not to mention snakes or scorpions, were imminent. I was also aware that agents faced the threat of assault. I knew these things because I had prepared myself as best I could by reading Border Patrol recruitment material and websites, and from watching news clips of agents on TV. But I could not really know what it felt like to work in these conditions until I physically put my body “on the line” next to an agent. I didn’t understand the exhaustion and isolation that accompanies the heat and dust in the desert until I walked alongside an agent on patrol. There was no way to fully comprehend the vulnerability my body would feel – the terror that sent my heart racing – until I stood next to an agent with gun in hand and watched armed men on the other side of the fence watching me.

Despite the intense training that agents receive, there is no “training” that prepares them for the feeling of putting their bodies in physical danger, just as there was no training for me as a researcher. Instead, this knowledge is learned through tacit understandings gained by experience and sense making (Tracy *et al.*, 2006). Formal training and socialization of employees by the organization may train agents how to complete tasks, but the emotion rules and feelings associated with the work are much more likely to be learned “on the job” in conjunction with real-world experience and co-worker feedback (Scott and Myers, 2005; Seymore and Sandiford, 2005). Therefore, although agents receive training in the use of force and aggression, they may feel unprepared for the actual felt emotions on the job (Rivera, forthcoming).

*Boxes: compartmentalizing feelings of taint[2]*

“When I first took the job” agent Debbie explained, “I would cry sometimes in the bathroom.”

“Not for a long time. But I would feel myself get emotional. I would walk in the bathroom, I’d boo-hoo for a couple of minutes, and then I would go ‘Whew, okay.’ And then I would walk out and carry on with business.”

Debbie smoothed her hair back into its tight bun. “So I think part of it is that I had to tell myself that it was okay to feel stuff. It just can’t affect what I’m being charged with doing. And sometimes the men are feeling the same things, and me expressing it makes it, like, okay or not as bad for them to be feeling it too.”

“But I think the big thing is finding how you individually need to compartmentalize it. What boxes you need to use and what fits into each box. You put everything into its box.”

Debbie fished a protein bar out of her backpack and leaned back in her seat. “Like this one time, I was working on the side of a mountain. I had apprehended three guys and they had obviously been walking for a long time exposed out in the desert. So after I made the apprehension, I sat them down and told them to drink water because I was worried. I felt like I just needed to hesitate, to make sure that they were okay. I had them rest next to a rotted out old oak tree. But the tree was full of Africanized bees.”

“One of the guys, as soon as there were bees, pulled his shirt up over his head and started screaming, ‘Soy alérgico!’ ‘I’m allergic,’ in Spanish, and then I realized I was really stuck because now I’ve got these three guys, and technically they’re already in my custody, so there are rules in terms of how I deal with them. Now we’re running down this steep hillside, and I don’t want anybody to break their legs and fall down the

side of the mountain. On the other hand, we're all being stung by bees, now one guy is allergic."

Debbie laughed as she crumpled up the wrapper of the protein bar. It wasn't funny, really, but we both laughed anyway.

"So all of a sudden I have these decisions to make." She continued. "And I'm thinking [...] 'It's not exactly the same job stressors as working in a secretarial position.' Because now all of a sudden I'm their nurse and I'm their arresting agent and I'm trying to be a human about it all at the same time. Nobody is being noncompliant but there's still a myriad of issues. I still need to look out for my personal security because just because these guys I've apprehended look tired doesn't mean that they're happy to be under arrest. It's just so many things to think about and do all at the same time."

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Throughout my research, agents were confronted with moral decisions about how to enact both their "job duties" and also fulfil their own expectations of what it means to "act like a human." They described feeling tensions between their organizationally prescribed roles and the moral taint ascribed to those roles. For Agent Debbie, dirty work felt like compartmentalizing her emotion into boxes, yet she admitted that her work isn't nearly as tidy as those "boxes" imply. What we see is an attempt by Debbie to buffer dirty work through compartmentalization (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Through buffering, employees "attempt to compartmentalize their emotions in order to prevent them from interfering with daily activities" (Scott and Myers, 2005, p. 73). Workers buffer emotions when they attempt to compartmentalize their emotions in order to prevent them from interfering with daily activities.

However, given that Border Patrol agents are both high breadth and high depth dirty workers, it becomes next to impossible to compartmentalize its pervasive stigma (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006) and the emotional work associated with the various kinds of taint. Instead, agents' emotions spill over in unpredictable ways, and often occur simultaneously. This excerpt illustrates the ambivalence – the simultaneous feeling of disparate emotions (Fong, 2006) – that marks the agents' emotional work. On the one hand, they feel anxious to fulfil their legal mandate. Simultaneously, they feel compassionate toward immigrants. Their feelings and uncertainty about how best to negotiate these complexities live long after the specific events of any specific situation had passed – as may be marked by the "strange" collusion of Debbie's laughter as she describes her crying and discomfort on the job.

*A haunting: understanding social, physical, and moral taint (see footnote 2)*

As one of the highest ranking agents I interviewed, Agent Miguel was now a "desk agent" – no longer on active duty in the field. I wondered if an older agent, so many years removed from line duty along the actual border would experience his job as an agent differently than the younger, active agents I shadowed in the field.

"That day – that day and how I felt after that day – well I went through a little bit of a struggle," he explained. I had asked about a memorable day working at the Patrol. This is the story he shared:

"I was working early, and all of a sudden out of the bushes this kid comes out, and he's coming straight for me. I immediately recognize that he is – well, that he's illegally in the country."

"So right away, he's telling me that he can't wake up his aunt. He's telling me that she's been really sick, and they've been outside all night. He can't wake her up."

“I followed him and we ended up climbing 45 minutes down this ravine. We’re sliding and slipping and crawling and climbing. It’s a very scary situation. Once we get to the bottom, and I looked at his aunt, I immediately recognize that she had passed away.”

“I let the kid know that she was gone and he was um [...] he was just heartbroken.”

“So uh [...] I began the whole rescuing process. Calling all the people that I needed to call and notify you know, emergency services, the coroner, all that kind of stuff, the sheriff.”

“But uh [...] I realized that, in the, in the next few days that uh... that the woman that had passed away, she started to kind of haunt me in a way, in my thoughts, in my mind. I started asking myself, ‘Am I doing the right thing?’ I started having to really rethink my whole situation of why I was there or just really define it. Are we out here for the right reasons? Why are people dying? And why was this throwing me for a loop? I was prepared for this! I’m a law enforcement officer, and this stuff should – well I should be able to process this stuff no problem.”

“But it was a problem.”

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Agent Miguel articulated a feeling I resonated with from my first day shadowing an agent and seeing the smiling face of that little pink-coated girl at the detention center. Dirty work, and dirty research, can result in feelings of guilt and helplessness – even when you’re doing your best, you may not be doing enough. Expressions of guilt or shame are not uncommon among dirty workers, particularly workers who use coercion (such as sex workers or used car salesmen) or who must demand something from the needy (bill collectors or social workers) (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). However, past research has focussed on how dirty workers might try to silence (Hughes, 1962), “manage” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), or “normalize” (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007) their guilty feelings so as to cope with dirty work taint.

Yet something different is being expressed by Agent Miguel in this story. Agent Miguel, like Agent Debbie and other agents, expressed guilt that they weren’t able to do enough in their jobs so as to help others, thus reflecting the moral ambiguity of the social norms. This is unique in that the strain of the job is an emotional extension of empathy and compassion – even though some members of the public would view those emotions as tainted. The tacit knowledge of compassion that comes from being in the field is partially the knowledge that there may not be a clear line between “right” and “wrong.” Dirty work calls into question the morality of humanity. It made me wonder whether I should be helping girls like the one in the little pink coat rather than standing next to the patrollers in green.

*Hands tied: tensions between positive and negative embodied emotions[3]*

Carlos’s supervisor told him to talk to me. And it was clear that Carlos wasn’t happy – he sat back, folded his arms, and stared out the window. When I asked questions, he responded with a grunt or a one-word answer. Within about five minutes, I realized that although he had agreed to participate and had signed the consent form, this interview wasn’t really consensual. As such, I finished it up in short order. To close, I said, “Thank you so much for sharing your time with me, Carlos. One last question: Is there a story you might share with new agents about your experience that you think captures what it means to be a Border Patrol agent?”

Carlos finally unfolded his arms and leaned forward onto the table that separated us.

*“People think so much stuff about the Patrol. Good and bad. The Patrol only reports the best stuff, while everybody on the South side in Mexico blames you, the Agent, ‘cause you won’t let them cross,”* he began. *“But I know the truth.”*

I sat forward, releasing my pen with a thud onto the table. He continued.

*“Here, in our area of responsibility, we have the All American canal. The water looks pretty smooth on the top, but it’s deep, and the current in the canal is strong. And there’s a place between the two Points of Entry, where the road curves around, and it kinda makes a funny looking turn, and there’s a little bridge in there.”*

*“There’s so many accidents. People fall into the water. And die.”* I nodded, but didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to interrupt his thoughts.

*“One time I was there watching for illegals to try and swim the canal, and I could hear the tire ‘eeee’ you know, the sound of squealing tires. And I knew someone was coming fast. All of a sudden they come around the turn. And the sand, the pebbles on the ground, went flying in every direction as she slid out of control. She went straight into the water.”* Carlos clapped his hands together, exhaling loudly.

*“Oh, my heart just went crazy. So I call it in. And I took off my belt, and I said, ‘I have to do something,’ I mean, how could I let her just be there? I grab my tow strap and I kinda put it around my waist, and I tied it to my car, and then I jump. And [...] I go in.”*

*“So by the time I get to the middle – this is the canal – it has a lot of power, a lot of current. So by the time I got to the middle, it just pushes you, like nothing. And I don’t weigh little.”* He smiled slightly, but then continued his story.

*“So it’s a lot of power there. And I’m like ‘Oh man!’ I don’t know why I did it. I went down in the water. And I felt [...] something. And it was the lady. I just don’t believe it. I pull her out with me. And by the time I got to the rocks over there by my truck, she just starts breathing by herself. Spitting up water and all that stuff. And I’m like, ‘Are you okay?’ And she says, ‘Yes.’”*

*And I felt great. In my heart I’m like, “Oh man, this is nice.”*

He paused. I watched in silence, not sure that he was done yet. He wasn’t.

*“She started out being okay. She just was thinking she was somewhere else.”* He stared at the table while he spoke. *“And then, like, twenty or thirty seconds later she started crying loud and yelling”* And, I’m asking, *“What hurts? How can I help you?”*

Carlos shook his head. My chest tightened, but I didn’t know why. After what felt like several minutes of silence, he looked up and locked onto my gaze.

*“My baby!”* His eyes began to fill with tears. I gasped, then covered my mouth involuntarily with my hand.

*“She’s screaming. Screaming! ‘My baby!’”* He whispered, as though yelling the words himself would be too painful. *“Her baby was inside the car. You know, I just couldn’t do anything. And I felt like my hands were tied.”*

*“By that time, Highway Patrol and Sheriffs were there, and everybody was there.”* Carlos was ready to finish his story. But quiet tears streamed down his face. I didn’t dare look away, ignoring my own tears now trickling on my cheeks.

*“We tried going into the water and stuff, but there’s no way. We have to wait for the divers. Two hours later they pulled the car out, and the baby was in the car seat.”*

Suddenly, Carlos let out a sob. *“It made me proud, because I saved her. And at the same time, I mean, I felt bad.”*

His sobbing shook the silence out of the room. The quiet grief had evolved into a full-bodied and overflowing sorrow that seemed to surprise both of us.

Nothing in my field methods course prepared me for this. My feet unsteady, I felt my way around the table to where Carlos's heaving, strong body now shook like a child. I placed my hand on his shoulder and whispered, "*I'm going to do something that isn't very 'Border Patrol.'*" As I sunk into the chair next to him, my arms stretched around him and he fell, weeping, into my shoulder. We cried together until the tears dried up.

"*I'm sorry.*"

"*Please don't say that!*" I said, sitting back. We both wiped the remaining tears, embarrassed or perhaps just staggered by our emotion.

"*Sometimes I think [...]*" he paused, his mouth working to find words for his thoughts. "*It's just [...] there's some times you wish you could do so much more. You know? It's hard. Because your hands are tied. And it's not just one occasion. Many times. Same thing.*"

An hour later, I rumbled down as the agent pointed out places where immigrants and smugglers crossed, places where agents sat and watched. I knew where we were before he actually told me. The All American Canal ran directly in front of where we parked, and there was a narrow bridge, curving sharply over the water.

"You wouldn't believe how many people slide right off that bridge!" the agent reported.

I looked into the water, and like unwanted remnants of a scary movie, I couldn't stop the vision of Carlos pulling the mourning woman from the water while her baby drowned below. I shuddered in horror, wondering why anyone would want to do this job, and again uncertain about what I thought I was doing here studying it.

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Taint is a layered phenomenon. Just like real dirt on your hands when working in the garden, over time, the filth of dirty work makes its way under your nails, sinks into the lines of your finger print, and coats the whole hand. A physically dirty job can feel demeaning and yet rewarding when you put your life on the line for the sake of saving someone else.

Much of dirty work is marked by such ambivalence – a simultaneous push and pull in which workers feel pride in doing something that other people "cannot" do, yet repulsion by the morally questionable aspects of their work (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006; Grandy and Mavin, 2012, 2014). Unfortunately, when that layer of taint is covered over by an additional film of guilt, confusion, or uncertainty, the complexity can become overwhelming – similar to socially and morally tainted high depth, high breadth dirty workers like correctional officers (Tracy and Scott, 2006), exotic dancers (Grandy and Mavin, 2014), and bill collectors (Sutton, 1991).

When researching alongside agents, I often felt the contagion of that taint. In the case of Carlos' stories, I shared his broken heart as we wept over the loss of innocent life. This wasn't what I expected when I began the study. I would never have guessed that weather toughened, trained warriors would break down in my arms. I doubt they would ever have guessed it either. Such knowledge is difficult to codify in formal agent training or best tips for qualitative practice. We gain this knowledge through the embodiment of standing next to a canal, our eyes still red and aching from mourning a mother's loss and an agent's sense of failure – a loss over the loss.

Sometimes doing dirty work research also results in the researcher feeling like a failure. For instance, merely by using the dirty work label, we as authors have sometimes felt as though we are further stigmatizing employee groups. Furthermore, we have felt conflicted in our writing when traditional writing journal formats have exacerbated the ability to narrate the deep complexity and emotion of dirty work (Tracy, 2004b, 2012).

Of course, it's not all about sadness. There's pride in saving a woman, feelings of bravery when acting despite fear, and doing work that others could not or would not do. What does dirty work feel like? Sometimes it feels overwhelming and hopeful at the same time. Proud and ashamed. Happy and sad. It feels conflicted and ambivalent. And, due to the complex mix of messages agents receive from the media and outsiders, this makes it next to impossible for agents' to manage a single target responsible for (re)creating the stigma in their work.

*Pig-loving bitch: negotiating taint with the public[4]*

"You hungry?" Agent Rafael asked me as the Border Patrol SUV rumbled off the gravel road and onto the blacktop.

"Yeah, I could go for a snack," I replied.

We stopped at a convenience store inside town. I slipped down from the passenger seat and slammed the door, just in time to see two women emerging from the store. They glanced at Agent Rafael, but he brushed past them to open the door for me. As he stood there waiting, one of the women looked me up and down contorting her face into a disgusted snarl. As the door closed behind us, I heard her mutter, "Pig-loving bitch."

What? Was she talking to me? Pangs of anger and embarrassment instantly enveloped me. Shaken, I looked to Rafael, but he was focussed on the food bar. I guess he hadn't heard her – or maybe just didn't care?

I grabbed a water bottle from the refrigerator, paid, then waited for Rafael by the door. I wondered what others thought about me – a short white woman in slacks, boots, and a blue blouse jumping out of the passenger's side of a Border Patrol truck with a tall Latino agent in his green uniform. Why might I be riding alongside this agent? Did they think I was his girlfriend? A prostitute? The woman looked at me as though I was dressed inappropriately, or as though I was dirty – like I physically grossed her out.

Back in the truck, I waited quietly for him to finish his lunch before asking, "*Have you ever had someone say something negative to you about being an Agent?*"

"Yeah," he laughed. "*It happens all the time!*" He gulped down his soda. "Did something happen back at the store?"

I didn't want to talk to him about it. I blushed, unwilling to repeat and therefore somehow make more real the woman's comment. It occurred to me that even without the sexual innuendo, maybe I was his "bitch," just by hanging out with him and telling his story.

"*How do you respond to those situations?*" I asked, ignoring his question.

"*I just – well, when I get flipped off, I get angry.*" He laughed. "*But you know, you have to be in control of your emotions. So I get angry but, you know, I gotta be in control and realize that that's their right is to be able to express their thoughts and their feelings. Not everybody's gonna agree with me a hundred percent of the time.*"

We stopped at a traffic light, and he looked at me. "*However, I still do uh [...] get angry when I'm flipped off. I get angry when I get cussed at, but I control it.*"

*Yeah. When family tells me stuff, I understand they're concerned. Sometimes, other people that are Hispanic will try to make me feel guilty for being Mexican and working for the Border Patrol. They insinuate that I'm a traitor, that I get my own people. 'How can you do that? Aren't you Mexican?' they ask."*

*"And how do you respond to those kinds of things?" I inquired. I wondered what I could have possibly said in response to the pig-bitch comment.*

*"I usually say, 'Yeah, I'm Mexican.' But sometimes I get frustrated because I know where they're going. A lot of the Mexicans say things like, 'We should be here for one another. We should support one another.' So sometimes I'll respond with sarcasm. I'll say, 'No, I'm Irish. Get in the back of the truck.'" He tossed his head back and laughter filled the cab. "But that's part of the culture in Mexico, you know, to try and negotiate a deal if you're being arrested. Whereas here, which is where I was raised, it's more like, you can't ask for a break or try to bribe 'em."*

I thought about what he was saying. I wondered if the woman, who looked Latino to me, perceived me to be a gender traitor? Or maybe she felt like Rafael was a traitor for being with a White woman? Or maybe she just hates the Patrol?

*"Do you ever a feel like a traitor?" I asked finally.*

*"Yeah, a little bit, sometimes, depending on how they explain it. But I think that what's happened with me is I'm more callous than I was before. Now, I think 'Yes, I get paid to be a traitor. No big deal.' But I don't think I was like that before this job."*

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Dirty work can create a callous on one's identity. Through name-calling and shaming – whether by friends, family, or random people at the convenience store – the moral taint creates a worn-over spot on your character. Building a callous takes discipline, time, and sometimes pain, but there's also a sense of pride in having worked so hard to develop the toughness that comes with it. And, after you're all toughened up, things that used to hurt can instead feel funny and absurd. However, if you keep doing the work, the callous will remain – and, over time, a callous can become a permanent scar. Although this may provide some protection in the short run, becoming tough is a close cousin to becoming depersonalized, and depersonalization is a key component to organizational burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

### **Conclusions and implications**

The preceding narratives depict the feelings of dirty work and of studying dirty work. Additionally, we offer a table (see Table I) listing the emotions that emerged in these stories. In the table, we link the emotions to a particular type of taint – physical, social, or moral – as we observed them in agents' experiences. We also divide them between positively- and negatively-valenced emotions, as reflected by how agents described them. However, as illustrated, many of these emotions emerge simultaneously, suggesting that border patrol work is largely marked by feelings of ambivalence. The preponderance of emotions in the negative category also provides clues as to why their work is so difficult. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that even some of the "positive" emotions still incur taint, depending on the context. For example, "compassion" can feel positive, may be deemed as "servile," and "feminine" (Way and Tracy, 2012) – and therefore socially tainted. What's more, Border Patrol agents incur feelings of guilt when they feel they should be compassionate but organizational structures make it difficult to act that way.

	Positively valenced emotions	Negatively valenced emotions
Physical taint	Toughness	Fear Disgust Exhaustion Weakness/vulnerability Calloused/hardened
Social taint	Compassion	Pity Helplessness Doubt Uncertainty Sadness
Moral taint	Self-righteousness Empathy	Sorry for myself/self-pity Anger Doubt/uncertainty Calloused/hardened
All three (physical, social, and moral)	Pride Courage/bravery Resilience Amusement at absurdity	Irritation Anxiety/overwhelm Guilt Ambivalence

**Table I.**  
What does dirty work feel like? Emotions triggered in dirty work and dirty work research

Our hope is that this table provides a shorthand answer to our research questions, but simultaneously incurs in the reader a feeling of, “well, that list really doesn’t capture the emotion of dirty work.” We would agree with this sentiment; the contrast of what we can know about emotion through messy texts like those in this article versus an organized list such as that in Table I is stark. Single words, especially cut off from context, cannot fully convey the complexity of dirty work experiences or the intricacies of our emotions. In what follows, we elucidate several key implications of this analysis.

*Embodiment and sense making*

The exemplars of dirty work at the Border Patrol reveal the complex messiness of dirty work as an embodied and emotional endeavor, learned over time as tacit knowledge. As an embodiment activity, acquiring tacit knowledge requires that it is acted first. As Weick (2001) asks, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” (p. 189). We would elaborate, “How can I know what I *feel* until I see what I *do*?” This analysis shows how organizational members access tacit knowledge through chaotic, inventive, embodied activity (Weick, 1995). Likewise, what we as researchers can know about dirty (field)work also emerges in improvisational and surprising ways. Employees and field researchers alike know what they think when they hear what they say, and how they feel when they experience work in context.

This retrospective sense making is important to consider as it elucidates how bodies are not just a way to absorb and make sense of data, nor just a way to (re)present it. Rather, embodied and emotional performances fundamentally construct and refract meaning. For example, agents do not know how they will feel about putting their bodies in danger until they stand on the other side of a weapon. Agents – and the researchers by their side – cannot know the complexity of, say, pride mingled with grief, until they embody the process of saving a woman, but losing her child, or having to tell a young man that his aunt has passed away. Similarly, we come to understand stigma and self-righteousness through the hot anger that instantly emerges after being targeted by a passerby’s insult. The importance of such embodied activity for agents is

that effective socialization includes field experience. The implication for researchers is that ethnography is powerful for accessing the complexity and range of emotional experience.

*The complexity of ambivalence and moral emotions*

The sense-making narratives in this analysis call attention to the complexity of dirty workers' feelings. First, their work is marked by frequent feelings of ambivalence. In this study we see how a single dirty work incident may result in a complex mix of positive and negative emotions – such as pride at apprehending a group of immigrants, mingled with guilt at keeping otherwise “innocent” people from achieving the American Dream. Coping with such complex emotional experiences is extremely challenging – especially when dirty workers, such as patrol agents, work largely alone and are unable to create sense by talking through the incident with like-minded peers (Tracy, 2005). Furthermore, given that emotions are cues for action (Hochschild, 1983), when someone simultaneously feels compassion and anger, this can lead to confusion and paralysis. Indeed, employees who experience their work filled with contradiction and double binds are prone to burnout and dissatisfaction (Tracy, 2004a).

However, ambivalence is not all bad. On the one hand, such a combination many feel overwhelming. On the other hand, we might view the combination as multi-faceted, and like a crystal, beautiful even in its complexity (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). Emotional ambivalence is also linked to more creativity and out of the box thinking (Fong, 2006). When people simultaneously feel polar opposite emotions, they are able to recognize unlikely combinations in their environment. Ambivalence in Border Patrol work may help improve agents' ability to sensitively and creatively deal with undocumented immigrants.

This study also draws attention to moral emotions of shame, guilt, and empathy, and how these can contribute to organizational ethics and decision-making (Eisenberg, 2000; Lurie, 2004; Rivera, forthcoming; Trevino *et al.*, 2006), as well as relieve negative impacts of emotional labor, such as burnout or job dissatisfaction (Miller and Koesten, 2008). Unlike past studies of strippers and correctional officers, few Border Patrol agents indicated shame in their profession on the whole, which is likely the result of the high esteem many in society hold law enforcement officers. However, their stories reveal personal feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and regret. They desired to “do more” for those in need and felt conflicted when required to arrest people who might otherwise be considered “innocent.” In this analysis, we see how guilt emerges in the face of ambivalence and contradiction – for example, when a job requires toughness, but society and personal moral mandates suggest the need for compassion. Such guilt is especially difficult to deal with when actors feel they have little power to rectify the situation.

Similar to ambivalence, though, feelings of guilt may not be all bad. As an outward-facing emotion (Baumeister *et al.*, 1994), guilt encourages reparation of the wrongful behavior and helping others (Tangney, 1995; Trevino *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, even though guilt may be uncomfortable, the feeling is linked to empathy. Together, these emotions can act as a “sign-posts” or “triggers” for workers to understand that something is going wrong and should therefore be changed (Trevino *et al.*, 2006). For Border Patrol agents and other law enforcement officers among whom documented abuses have taken place, their guilt may serve as a key ingredient for developing the moral imagination and practical wisdom (Roca, 2007, 2010) that may, in turn, reduce or moderate negative behaviors.

For example, as discussed by Agent Rafael, his emotions over time triggered moral behaviors; he is able to cope with his guilt so that he can make ethical decisions while on the job, even in the face of public scrutiny. The practical implication is that guilt and its linked emotion of empathy may be “harnessed” in order to help law enforcement officers – as well as other dirty workers – identify and change potentially abusive or hurtful behaviors.

*The implications of careful linguistic attention and text creation*

We as communication scholars paid close attention to words – in terms of our close analysis and textual representation. The challenges of dirty work are evident by teasing out the implications of agents’ use of metaphors. For Agent Sean, the feeling of putting his body in danger was like a “game.” Agent Debbie framed one of her go-to coping mechanisms as placing emotion into “boxes.” Agent Miguel described his lingering emotional confusion as a “haunting,” while Agent Carlos expressed his feelings of helplessness as having his “hands tied.” For Agent Rafael, the long-term emotional toll of dirty work taint was like building a “callous.” These metaphors reveal two key insights.

First, dirty workers create linguistic control over what feel like “messy” or un-natural emotions by talking about their experiences. In traditionally masculine dirty jobs, emotions are unexpected and silenced (Fineman, 2008; Hamman and Putnam, 2008). However, here we see that emotions are present, even if the linguistic expression of them contradicts the embodied experience in the scene. For example, Agent Carlos summed up his story by saying that his “hands are tied.” On its face, this expresses a lack of control over a situation. However, when we examine the action in the scene, we see that he actually exerted courageous, and quick decision-making by calling back-up and jumping into the water to perform a rescue. Similarly, Agent Debbie articulates that to do their job well, agents must compartmentalize emotion by putting it into a box. However, her story of apprehension and bee stings shows that a fundamental part of her work is managing a messy mix of compassion and toughness. There’s nothing wrong with transforming complex emotional experience into tidier linguistic expression. Indeed, one way of coping with negative emotions is through talking and writing about them in order to create order and control (Pennebaker, 1997). That said, we should see such practice for what it is: a coping technique that allows us to function, rather than a representation of the experience in practice. Furthermore, our data imply that rather than seeking control, dirty workers may instead benefit from embracing their emotions and learning to listen to their intuition (Rivera, 2010). In this way, workers may find more reward in the positive emotions they feel, and be able to better process and cope with the negative emotions that are part of their everyday jobs.

Second, the metaphors also serve to normalize and make light of dirty workers’ emotional challenges. Agent Scott frames the experience of being watched through the sight of a gun as a “game.” Agent Rafael has become “callous” to his emotions, particularly those that are uncomfortable, such as guilt or sadness. Such metaphors highlight cleverness, toughness, and invulnerability rather than pain or uncertainty. While focussing on toughness or gamesmanship can help in some aspects of the job, doing so can also be a constraint. Emotions are a key way of interpreting the world, cuing us to important environmental events (Hochschild, 1983). Anxiety and fear can signal danger, and emotions such as guilt or shame may cue that moral codes or practices are askew (Waldron, 2012). When dirty workers toughen their receptiveness to emotions or transform them into something lighter and less significant,

this can impact their ability to tune into important aspects of job – for example, by simplifying aspects of the job that really should be attended to in more complex and nuanced ways (Tracy *et al.*, 2006). Dirty workers may find unexplored avenues of success in learning to embrace, discuss, and celebrate their emotions, rather than attempting to suppress, normalize, or transform them. Future research could continue to explore the role of emotions within the framework of dirty work taint, and expand the typologies of taint to consider the ways that work itself is emotionally tainted.

Another implication of this study and the messy texts offered is providing an avenue for readers to viscerally understand the difficulty of dirty work. Such an understanding may, in turn, trigger dirty work organizational leaders to try to enhance the positive emotions felt in their employees day-to-day work lives – emotions like pride, bravery, and compassion. Research on savoring (Lyubomirsky, 2008) suggests that people find happiness through relishing current activities, looking forward to the future, and reminiscing and telling stories about past good times. If we know that being a dirty worker includes feelings of courage, pride, and compassion, organizations can try to strategically create opportunities for employees to savor the moments in their work-life that are connected to these positive emotions.

In conclusion, let us reflect upon the momentary and fragmented potential of tacit knowledge as expressed through messy texts. The ability for such knowledge to be seen and explored lies in our ability to be reflexive about our minds, emotions, and bodies in action. Because ethnographic research demands high standards of reflexivity (Bochner, 2000; Gonzalez, 2000), fieldwork poses an ideal situation in which to reflect on and learn from tacit knowledge in action. The messy texts here offer a story of dirty work in a way that is resistant to classification, open ended, and therefore, malleable. Doing so provides insight into understanding what dirty work and dirty research feels like – in its fragmented complexity and multi-faceted beauty.

### Notes

1. This story based on field notes. Quotations are drawn from Kendra's field notes and journal recollections from this event.
2. This story is constructed from field notes and transcripts. All of the sections with "quotation marks" represent verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts.
3. This story is constructed from field notes, journals, and transcripts. Because Agent Carlos' interview included Border Patrol jargon, as well as sections with broken English or incomplete sentences, this story pieces together direct quotations with author-provided reconstruction, Agent Carlos' direct quotations are all in bold.
4. This story is constructed from field notes, journals, and transcripts. Kendra began recording the interview once she and the agent were back in the truck. Therefore, to provide additional clarification about what are Agent Rafael's direct words and what the authors added, direct quotations are all in bold.

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