Doing 'dirty work': Stigma and esteem in the private security industry

European Journal of Criminology (ISSN: 1477-3708)

Citation for the published paper:
Hansen Löfstrand, C. ; Loftus, B. ; Loader, I. (2016) "Doing 'dirty work': Stigma and esteem in the private security industry". European Journal of Criminology, vol. 13(3), pp. 97-314.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1477370815615624

Article accepted [September 13, 2015] for publication in European Journal of Criminology

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Abstract

This article draws upon two different ethnographic studies – one based in Sweden, the other in the United Kingdom – to explore how private security officers working in an ambiguous and stigmatized industry construct and repair their self-esteem. While the concept of 'dirty work' (Hughes 1951) has been applied to public police officers, an examination of private security officers *as* dirty workers remains undeveloped. Along with describing instances of taint designation and management, we find that the occupational culture of security officers enhances self-esteem by infusing security work with a sense of purpose. As members of a tainted occupation, security officers employ a range of strategies to deflect scorn and reframe their work as important and necessary.

Key words: Private security, dirty work, stigma, esteem, legitimacy

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Introduction

In this article we draw upon two different ethnographic studies in Sweden and the United Kingdom to explore how private security officers working in an ambiguous, low prestige and stigmatized industry construct and repair their self-esteem. While the concept of 'dirty work' (Hughes 1951) has been applied to public police officers (Waddington 1999; Dick 2005), an examination of private security officers as dirty workers remains undeveloped. Moreover, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) have subsequently extended the concept and show how certain occupational environments are littered with physical, social and moral taint. For us, private security work can be understood as 'dirty' in three senses. It is *physically* dirty since officers have occasionally to deal with the 'hands-on' touching of people, objects, bodily fluids, and the like. It is *socially* dirty because security officers are required to manage stigmatised people, and need to behave in a servile manner to both employers and customers. Finally, security work can be

considered *morally* dirty to the extent that the broader industry is viewed by external audiences as tainted and disreputable (Thumala *et al* 2011; White 2010). Our aim is to understand how the stigma attached to the role is reconciled within the occupational culture of security officers.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining the broader social field of private security, with particular reference to the reputational problems currently afflicting the industry. We then present a more detailed explanation of our theoretical framework, which conceives private security as dirty work. Following a description of the two ethnographic studies – one based in the UK, the other in Sweden – we outline and discuss the key themes cutting across our respective research projects. Along with describing instances of taint designation and management, we find that the occupational culture is constituted by a shared set of norms and values that enhance occupational self-esteem by infusing security work with a sense of meaningfulness, thereby justifying the work and its purposes. As members of a tainted occupation, security officers employed a range of strategies to deflect scorn and reframe their work as important and necessary.

Private Security as Dirty Work

It is now a cliché to say that policing and security provision has undergone significant transformation. In nearly all advanced democratic countries across the globe, state-centred systems of security provision are increasingly giving way to more de-centred, pluralistic systems in which public police forces work within an enforcement apparatus comprising numerous state and private agencies (Johnston and Shearing 2003; Brodeur 2010: ch. 7). The economy of private providers of policing has also expanded dramatically. Private security now operates across areas as diverse as the leisure industry, shopping centres, industrial parks and local neighbourhoods. Under some conditions it can even be the dominant form of visible frontline policing, viewed as

having the potential to make a significant contribution to local crime prevention and community safety (Crawford *et al* 2005).

Yet, while the private security industry is often presented as an increasingly dominant fixture of societies, recent work by Thumala *et al* (2011 reveals it to be an industry also beset with insecurities about its authenticity and status (see also Loader *et al* 2014).). For while the industry is expanding in its scope, and enjoying a measure of acceptance, it continues to be dogged by reputational problems (ibid.: see also White 2010). Elements of this tainted image relate to the high turnover of low-skilled and low-paid personnel and depictions of criminal and violent security personnel (Hobbs *et al* 2003; Brookes 2007). Although Sweden has been regarded as a forerunner in terms of both the quality and regulation of the security industry (De Waard 1999; van Steden and Sarré 2007; Button 2007a), Swedish companies have also had to account for their reputation (Berntsson 2011; Hansen Löfstrand 2013). Moreover, the private security industry operates in a context in which the average member of the public retains a strong expectation that policing and security ought to be delivered by the state (White 2010). Private police, much more so than the public police, have always been collectively resisted by those populations they are charged with governing (Johnson 1992).

The concept of 'dirty work' was originally invoked by Hughes (1951: 319) to refer to the types of occupations in which employees are assigned to carry out work tasks that are physically disgusting, degrading or which 'run counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions'. In a later publication, Hughes defined dirty work in terms of a threefold typology consisting of work responsibilities perceived as physically, socially or morally tainted (Hughes 1958: 122). He pointed out that society delegates its dirty work to some occupations while at the same time stigmatizing the tasks performed. Members of a tainted occupation thus come to personify the dirty work that they carry out. As far back as the 1970s Becker (1974) suggested that private security employees

have been co-opted to do the dirty work in society, and of the police. Yet, a detailed exploration of the work of private security officers *as* dirty workers remains undeveloped. One could argue that in an increasingly diverse policing landscape, the public police no longer have the monopoly on the ability to use force against citizens. Although the kind of powers and authority of private security officers varies between socio-political and geographical contexts, private security officers retain the ability and authority to use force against citizens (Devroe and Terpstra 2015). This key feature is likely to contribute to the stigma attached to security work to the same extent that the ability to use force makes public police work tainted (Bittner 1970; Huey and Broll 2013) – possibly more so given the private nature of any violence inflicted.

In order to explore further the notion of private security as dirty work we make use of the analysis of Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). They developed Hughes' concept of dirty work as physically, socially and morally dirty by offering criteria for each form of taint. According to them, *physical taint* 'occurs where an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death and effluent' or 'is thought to be performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions' (ibid.: 415). Hence, when private security officers need to deal with physically dirty matter or people, or vomit and other body fluids, or are involved in hazardous, dangerous and/or violent situations, they are (physically) tainted. Secondly, *social taint* 'occurs where an occupation involves regular contact with people or groups that are themselves regarded as stigmatized' or 'where the worker appears to have a servile relationship to others' (ibid: 415). In terms of security officers, recurring social interactions with either members of stigmatized or marginalized populations (the homeless, drug-users, known offenders), or people in relation to whom security officers are subordinate and servile (employers, customers and, to some extent, the police) brings social taint. Finally, *moral taint* 'occurs where an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue' or 'where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility' (ibid.). For us, moral taint occurs when

security officers are judged by external audiences as untrustworthy or, as we shall see, where they internalize doubt about the legitimacy of their own work.

Yet, even in the face of the dirty work stigma, workers depicted by people as dirty 'tend to have relatively high occupational esteem' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 418). Furthermore, while the dirty work stigma undermines the occupatonal *status*, it 'simultaneously facilitates the development of strong occupational *cultures*' (ibid: 420; emphasis added). In line with this, we view the occupational culture as providing the apparatus for security officers engaged in dirty, low prestige tasks to construct a positive reframing of their work as important and necessary. Alongside the taint designations by external audiences, and doubts about self-worth within the broader security industry, security officers find ways to take pride in their work. The culture of private security officers is constituted by shared set of norms and assumptions that boost the occupational self-esteem by infusing work with a sense of value. It is a collective resource to be drawn upon, providing answers to the question of why the occupation matters, and thereby justifying the work and its purposes. Through the occupational culture, security work comes to be positively valued despite its wider societal reputation.

The Two Studies

The first project, led by Loader and Loftus, was an ethnographic study of the occupational culture of private security officers in the wake of recent initiatives to professionalize the industry in the UK. Research participants worked for contract security companies, as opposed to being 'in-house' employees. The first site, 'Fantastical Shopping', was a large shopping centre situated within a major English city, and officers stationed here worked for what we shall call Protector Security Company. The second site, 'Entertainment Studios', was a television company located within the same English city. Participating officers in this location were contracted to Vigilant

Security Company.[1] The methodology incorporated an analysis of several key documents relating to the professionalization agenda, as well as the promotional literature of the two security companies. But the research mainly comprised direct observation of security officers as they went about their ordinary duties. Through our contact with the Chief Executives of the contract security companies, we gained access to two different fieldwork settings. Fantastical Shopping was a large retail complex with over 250 shops, 50 bars and restaurants, several cinema screens, car parking facilities, and a range of 'back of house' locations. The duties undertaken by security officers at Protector Security Company spanned a broad spectrum, including static guarding, patrolling and responding to emergencies, control room duties, and intelligence gathering and analysis. In contrast, the second research setting - Entertainment Studios - was a television company and access for (unauthorised) members of the public was largely restricted. The site comprised a number of studios which were used for live and pre-recorded programmes, as well as offices, warehouses, and dressing and mail rooms. The duties undertaken by security officers of Vigilant Security Company, included entrance checks, audience vetting, guarding and patrolling spaces, and operating security systems. Finally, a series of group discussions and interviews were conducted with a sample of security officers, representatives from the security companies and those working within the wider industry.

The second ethnographic study is based on research within the framework of two different research projects.[2] When conducting fieldwork within both projects, Hansen Loftstrand carried out participant observations of the culture and practices of security officers in order to examine the delivery of policing in Sweden. The fieldwork was completed during a period when stakeholders increasingly present industry actors as 'professional' and as complementing the work of the police. Through establishing contacts with the Chief Executive of a Swedish security

[1] In order to protect the anonymity of personnel who participated in the study, all the names of the research sites, officers and security companies in this article have been changed.

[2] Details deleted for anonymous peer review.

company, 'Adapt Security Company', two different sub-studies were conducted: (i) security officers carrying out night-time patrols by car and by foot and responding to alarms over the city, serving both private and public customers (*väktare*), (ii) security officers responsible for reception work and for patrolling and securing the lobby and immediate vicinity of the police headquarters (*skyddsvakter*). After gaining access to another multinational security company, 'Secure Solutions Company', a third sub-study was completed: (iii) security officers responsible for patrolling a homeless shelter, including its immediate vicinity, and manning the reception desk in the lobby (*väktare*). The security officers working at the shelter were charged with the task of maintaining order at the place and making decisions about entry into and exit from the shelter.

Seeking Self-Esteem in a Tainted Occupation

We now draw upon ethnographic data derived from these two studies in order to understand how private security officers working at the coalface of an ambiguous and stigmatised industry become 'dirty workers', as well as how they seek and secure their self-legitimacy. Five overarching themes are germane for our discussion: (i) *doubts about worth* – this concerns the realization among security officers that they are involved in perpetuating illusions of security and safety. (ii) *being looked down on* – referring to the stigmatizing caricatures of security officers deserving of others' contempt and scorn (iii) *confronting and dealing with illegality and immorality* – examining how security officers respond to recurring social interactions with members of stigmatized populations (iv) *servile relationships* – highlighting the way in which security officers are forced into submissive relationships which are demeaning. (v) *re-claiming worth among co-workers* – emphasizing internal strategies used to boost self-esteem and solidarity. By providing a selection of exerpts from our fieldwork to illustrate these themes, our aim is to provide a situated account of how ongoing reputational and legitimacy problems afflicting the private security industry are realised in the lived experiences of security workers.

Doubts about Worth

Salient in our research was the concern with what could be described as an important dimension of the moral taint inherent in the business - most notably, the fact that they, as security officers, are commonly not serving (or protecting) the public. Instead, officers described their principal task as protecting the property of clients, and the paying customer. While some security officers drew similarities between their job and the role of police officers, others mainly discussed the obvious difference that, as private security personnel, they are not first and foremost servants of the public good. This was often framed as a disappointing difference; a realization that, once reached, eroded feelings of pride. The basic characteristic of this outlook can be summarized by the commonly used phrase 'I've been bought', as the following excerpt from Sweden demonstrates:

> When patrolling with Agnes and discussing the security job, she emphasises what she describes as a big difference between working as a police officer and a security officer. As a security officer, Agnes explains, her attitude when approached by the public asking her to intervene in some situation, is that it is not her responsibility; 'I've been bought, I am only doing the job that the customer has paid for', she says several times during the night. She seems to feel awkward about it. (Adapt Security)

Officers are often instructed to 'look the other way' by company management. At Fantastical Shopping, for instance, security officers would often observe drug deals taking place across the road from the mall, but were given orders not to intervene as it was not happening on their territory. This tempered feelings of social worth and one's ability to make a difference. The job demands that officers attend to the specific duties that the customer is paying for, and colleagues and managers may explicitly instruct individual officers to decline requests from the public or turn a blind eye to signs of suspicious behavior or criminal activities. It is important for officers not to attend to businesses expecting to 'free-ride' on the patrolling services purchased by others.

Another closely related and disheartening realization among security officers is that they or their employers cannot deliver the thing - security – that they are offering for sale to their customers. They may, as one security officer put it, be 'selling an illusion'. Of course, nobody in the business of selling security can guarantee to actually prevent damage or loss of property in the first place. At best, security officers can react to a crime already committed and prevent further damage to property. The service being delivered has an inescapably intangible quality (Loader *et al* 2014) – a fact about the industry that was understood as fraudulent by some officers. Erik put it like this:

[Adapt Security] deceives customers when the company sells the service 'responding to burglar alarms'. It's not a question of arresting burglars. You are only to see to it that the damage already made does not become worse.

The over-selling Erik worries about consists of promising more than can in reality be delivered. For many, being unable to provide what the customers (think they) are paying for feels worrisome. A common trait among many security officers is to do more than what is required of them in order to live up to customer - and their own - expectations. An allied perception is that the security industry is morally dubious because what is being sold is the illusion of safety. This line of reasoning also reflects a critical discourse of the selling of security as a morally troubling activity (Neocleous and Rigakos 2011; Loader *et al* 2014). The phrases recounted to us by officers in the two studies reveal their disquiet about security/safety as a commodity that can be bought and sold, rather than a publicly available good accessible by all members of society.

Being Looked Down On

The security officers in both countries, and at the different sites studied, unanimously talked about the difficulties involved in being on the receiving end of negative stereotyping and contempt from the public. Officers recurrently experienced a lack of understanding about who,

or what, they are and what kind of tasks they should carry out as professional security workers. Many shared experiences of having been mistaken as parking attendants and information points. In recounting such experiences, officers often included their own polite responses to such requests, but it was clear that they felt besmirched. Consider the following extract from Fantastical Shopping:

A lady approaches Hussain as she is looking for ladies wear, 'European fashions' in particular, and asks him where she could find such a shop. […] Another lady approaches him and poses a question - one that a plethora of officers have told me they are often faced with – 'Are you security or information services'? Hussain, like most of his colleagues, smiled and replies in the stipulated manner, 'how can I help you Madam'?

Security officers in both studies expressed disappointment that the general image of them is a far cry from the self-image that they themselves are trying to achieve, and this exacerbates feelings of worthlessness and degradation. In the Swedish study, one officer complained about being routinely mistaken for a tour guide or a parking attendant. Yet, security officers may sometimes succeed in attempts to ignore or cope with what could be viewed as degrading behavior by reframing it as a consequence of public ignorance about what security work entails. As the next excerpt from Entertainment Studios shows, this also becomes a way of coping with rude and obnoxious behaviour:

The officers stress that they are unfairly picked upon by the public and hear this phrase most frequently: 'You are a job's worth'. Milo explains, 'That's what they say, you are a job's worth'! There was once a lady trying to come in without being booked. I said, 'I am sorry Madam, but you are not booked'. I told her to park somewhere else and go in through the main reception. She was saying that she had a broken leg and could not walk. Then she phones somebody upstairs. She came out of the car screaming. I have never seen anyone with a broken leg walking so fast (he mimics a brisk walk). She turns to me and says: 'What

do you do all day? You just press buttons'! Yes I press buttons, but at the same time, I do things that you do not see and do not realise. I do not just press buttons!

Security work is depicted by these external audiences as low-skilled and trivial, a job that does not require any qualifications and is therefore suitable for unintelligent people. Stigmatizing caricatures of security officers as failed cops - and even janitors - were also present in both studies, reinforcing perceptions of security work (and its workers) as tainted, and needed to be continuously managed. While many officers held personal aspirations in terms of social status and prestige, they also doubted that patrolling officers are worthy of the social status claimed or aspired. The security officers at both sites in the UK study complained about the contempt expressed to them by specific audiences, namely their in-house security counterparts. In Fantastical Shopping, officers working for Protector Security Company were acutely aware of the in-house security views of themselves as the 'real' security workers and of contract security workers as 'lepers', as one officer put it. What is more, officers at Entertainment Studios felt that even their mere presence was a nuisance to other people working in the building, such as the news readers and administration staff. In Fantastical Shopping, the widespread use of cameras to surveil the behavior of the officers themselves (see also Rigakos 2002) can be further understood as a symptom of the moral taint associated with the security industry, and its workers.

Security officers soon learn that sections of the public are hostile towards their role. Security officers in the Swedish study report incidents where they have not only been threatened, but have had objects thrown at them, the tyres of their cars slashed, and their car windows smashed. The taint inherent in private security work may be connected to the broader activity of policing since routine policing activities – whether under public or private auspices – involves the spatial displacement of excluded people (Lister *et al* 2008; Neocleous and Rigakos 2011). In the following excerpt, Bekir is sharing his experiences of an incident when drug-users, having

occupied a closed-down factory building under the threat of physical displacement, resorted to physical violence. The excerpt not only illustrates a situation when both social and physical taint occurs, but also when the demarcation in society between the excluded and included is laid bare:

A long time ago, Bekir worked as a *väktare* and regularly patrolled a closed down factory. The building was abandoned, partly torn down and inhabited by junkies, he tells me. All of a sudden, someone threw a sofa that crashed onto the floor only a few meteres away from where he was. A colleague of his who patrolled the building was hit by a dart arrow in his back – 'had it been a knife he wouldn't have survived'. Bekir says that when the police checked out the building, they did not enter unless there were three of them, and they were always armed. Bekir says it was absurd to have to patrol the building unarmed, except for the baton, which he complained about to the staff management. He told them he refuses to patrol there alone.

In both studies, security officers often discussed the need to protect themselves from assaults, suggesting that management should take such threats seriously by not letting security workers work alone, and provide the use of protective equipment such as vests. Hence, security work is not only morally and socially tainted, but also physically dirty. It is work regularly performed under what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 415) describe as noxious conditions.

Confronting and Dealing with Illegality and Immorality

Security officers in both studies were expected to deal routinely with illegal and/or immoral behaviour. Indeed, we would suggest that dealing with members of stigmatized and marginalized groups is an aspect of the security occupation that is peculiarly tainting. It is physically tainting to the extent that it involves an element of danger, as well as dealing with bodily fluids and the threat of contagious diseases. In the Swedish study, some categories of people were seen as particularly untrustworthy and potentially dangerous. This included sex-buyers, prostitutes, junkies and young, drunken men. Patrolling public or semi-public buildings frequently involved dealing practically with problems related to prostitution, as well as substance and alcohol abuse.

Managing prostitution invoked feelings of danger, disgust and fascination, as evident in the following excerpt:

One 'security object' included in their patrols [*väktare* at Adapt Security] was a large public garage located in a part of the city well known for prostitutes and sex-buyers. Women selling sex commonly used the garage to seek warmth and as a place to take the sex-buyers. The officers' job was to lock all entrances and exits of the parking garage at midnight and ensure it was empty of people. This entailed patrolling the garage - its floors and staircases – by car and by foot. Agnes told me about an occasion where she caught a prostitute and her customer in the middle of a sex act, and later when she was leaving the garage by car, the man/customer drove his car in front of hers almost forcing her off the driveway and crashing into her. She was convinced that his menacing behavior was used to scare her into not reporting him to the police.

Officers explained that they do not intervene when witnessing such incidents; the objective was to merely move on people occupying the building. Some female security officers were afraid to patrol this site alone, while others simply felt disgusted by the human debris (such as used condoms) they routinely encountered.

Security officers in the UK study were also on the look out for people they considered to be deviant and problematic. Information about 'known' criminals was often disseminated to the security team by local police officers, and acted as an important source of information for security officers about *who* to be alert to and *how* to best manage such individuals. There was also a visual aspect to this since photographs of those individuals were pinned up around the briefing room. The following excerpt provides an illustration of the types of people officers from Fantastical Shopping needed to be aware of in their daily rounds:

In the briefing room are photographs of men and women with a previous crime history. As I scan the wall, I see; (Photograph 1) White Male, with a conviction for rape. (Photograph 2) Black Male, recently

released from prison and has previous offenses for sexual assaults. (Photograph 3) Black Male, known as a violent shoplifter (ID is sought). (Photograph 4) White Female, drugs offences. 'HIV positive' is written in bold.

During the daily briefs, different categories of offenders were also discussed. Individuals varied in relation to whether they were a high risk or a low risk. Bodily fluids, such as blood, are flagged up as hazardous. Female offenders are viewed as particularly troublesome and defiling:

In the briefing Tony goes through the recent set of images giving pieces of information about the person. Most of the images are of female offenders. Tony starts with the 'low risk' ones before moving onto those deemed 'high risk'. Pointing to one image he explains, 'This one is local. She lives in the borough and is a drug user. She is known to be abusive to police and security - she spits on them'. Holding up another he says, 'This one has mental health problems. She puts her hands down her knickers (underwear), has a rummage around and then sticks her hands up at you. Nobody wants to touch her'.

To deal with threats of assaults and the fear of catching infectious diseases, security officers try to avoid touching the person in question. If they do find themselves in a situation where they have to intervene physically they take precautionary actions, such as wearing gloves.

As part of the Swedish research, security officers patrolling a homeless shelter and staffing the reception of the shelter were studied. The shelter functioned as a last resort solution for those homeless clients who had been expelled from other temporary housing accommodation services. Shelter residents could access the shelter even under the influence or alcohol or drugs, although they were to abstain from alcohol and drug use once inside. However, the security officers regularly received informal reports from the building maintenance staff about trashed rooms, faeces, and drugs paraphernalia being spread all over the rooms. The security team also witnessed drug dealing and, on a daily basis, managed many alcohol and drug-related incidents. In

defending the shelter territory and upholding its social order, as well as adhering to the customers' wants and wishes, the security officers acknowledged the need to push the limits of the powers conferred to them as *väktare*. For instance, security officers were often called upon to assist with ejection - removing persons by force - and this exacerbates the physical taint element of their work. Whereas contract security workers in shopping malls are preoccupied with the physical displacement of tainting people, as well as keeping the territory clean and attractive to customers, security officers at the shelter found themselves contained in an area where they had no choice but to *co-exist* with the homeless substance abusers that their (mall) counterparts were busy 'chasing'. Consider this next extract:

> Jim explains that many of those people that he 'hunts down' in his regular job at the shopping mall, also live here at the homeless shelter, where Jim today is temporarily filling in for a colleague. [...] Later, Jim notices a yellow bucket that somebody has temporarily placed behind the reception desk. It's marked with a logo indicating hazardous waste. Jim puts on his gloves, opens the small container and pours out the content on the floor. He explains that he finds it interesting to learn what the addicts he is chasing around at the mall are taking because a few of them live here. We can see syringes, sterile needles and pills. (Secure Solutions Company)

A common taint management technique – which Jim alludes to in the above example – is to develop contempt against those policed, who come to be depicted by the officer as 'deserving' targets (see also Waddington 1999). An array of strategies was also employed in an attempt to reframe the shelter residents' negative perceptions of the security occupation. For one officer, this involved removing the obvious symbols of security – such as the black gloves, the baton and handcuffs. Another way to gain shelter residents' trust was to protect them from other violent residents. Yet, other members of the security team managed taint by *refraining* from intervening in violent situations at all as it involved touching the shelter clients. Several officers obsessively used hand disinfectant and wore gloves to manage the physical taint, the biggest fear of which was

catching a disease such as HIV or Hepatitis B. Throughout both studies, dealing practically and symbolically with those depicted as problematic or defiling tended to invoke feelings of frustration since officers essentially lacked the authority and power enjoyed by the public police to cope with such people.

Servile Relationships

As we have seen, recurring social interactions with members of stigmatized populations brings social taint, but so too does interactions with people to whom security officers are subordinate and servile. Employers, customers, clients and, to some extent, the police assign dirty work tasks to security officers - while at the same time stigmatizing the work performed by them. As noted by Button (2007b: 133), security officers need to juggle relationships with many 'masters', each with different agendas, and striving to please them all constitutes a real challenge. This has been exacerbated further by the onset of professionalization agendas which has required security officers to become 'customer-oriented' and 'service-minded'. On-the-ground, these managerial imperatives are translated into facial expressions such as smiling or, during interactions, being polite and softly spoken. As expressed by one security officer at Entertainment Studios 'you need to smile 24/7 and you don't always feel like it, especially when you're working for the next 12 hours'. It became clear that officers often felt compelled into a servile relationship with the various people they needed to please, and they could at times experience this as demeaning. This next extract from Fantastical Shopping illustrates both the intensity within which customer service is inscribed in the contemporary security profile, as well as the simmering resentment this generates among many officers:

In the staff room the officers are discussing the 'Mall Achievers of the Month', that is officers who have been 'mystery shopped' and were found to live up to the standards of excellence with regards to customer service. They explain to me that excellence in customer service is defined in the following terms: officers

are expected to be helpful at all times, by giving proper directions and accurate information to enquiring customers, and concluding each encounter in a prescribed manner - mainly by means of using the following two phrases (which are also highlighted in bold on the board of achievers): 'Is there anything else I can help you with today Sir/Madam' and 'Have a nice day'. At this point Milo mutters sarcastically, 'Yes, when someone spits on you, you now have to offer them tea and cake'.

For some officers, the centrality of customer service eroded their expectations of what the job of security entailed - or should entail. Upon joining, many imagined security work to be exciting, with action-oriented events such as catching shoplifters and ejecting troublemakers. Yet, most newcomers were assigned to low status work which did not require much of the security officer, such as sitting on a chair at a static site or, in the Swedish case, guarding a hole in the ground. Officers especially bemoaned the contradictions involved in balancing security priorities with a customer oriented mandate. In Fantastical Shopping, officers' imperative was to encourage public access and foster consumption, while presenting the image of a place that was safe and orderly (Wakefield 2003). At the same time, however, the client discouraged ostentatious displays of security because it undermined perceptions of safety and was therefore 'bad for business'. Officers subsequently developed a muted way of approaching confrontational encounters.

One of the key elements of the servile relationship is being treated *as* dirt and put in one's place. In both research studies, we noted the way in which security officers were made to feel inadequate by their superiors. Contract security workers essentially have two sets of superiors: the management of the client and of the security company. In the following excerpt from the homeless shelter, the client manager reprimands and instructs the officer. The incident also illustrates the conflict between the contradictory wishes and demands of the client and the actual power and authority of the ordinary Swedish security officer (*väktare*) as stipulated in the Act governing security companies:

The manager of the municipal staff working in the shelter building comes down to the reception. She questions the fact that the security officers working the reception desk let clients intoxicated by alcohol or drugs clients inside. The staff manager leaves after the security officer has promised that he and his colleagues will better themselves. Adam tells me her reprimand makes him sad, and that they get contradictory instructions from the customer: 'On one hand, check this person extra carefully, check all bags and coats but, on the other hand, this and that person feels offended by your surveillance, you may not stop him and check his bags'. Adam tells me he tries to explain to the customer that as *väktare* they do not have the authority and power to frisk people, 'well, no', the customer then responds, 'but you can ask them to show you the content of their bags and jackets and if they refuse, you should ask one of the municipal staff to come down and decide whether he can go up or not'. Adam concludes that the balancing act is difficult: 'They may use alcohol and drugs and they may enter and go up to their rooms while intoxicated, but if hell breaks loose up on the floors, we will have to take the beating for it'. Adam now starts writing a short report to his co-workers about the reprimand, but gets interrupted by an intoxicated man who wants to talk. He listens politely and engages in conversation.

In Entertainment Studios, officers were threatened with a financial punishment by the managers of the security company if they failed to turn up for work ten minutes earlier than when their shift actually started. It was likewise noted that security officers were fined if they accidentally took home with them the arm bands which they were required to wear marking them out as security staff. Since security officers are required to behave in a prescribed manner, their ability to think and act independently was curtailed, resulting in feelings of frustration and degradation. This is evident in the next extract:

Kigali recalled an incident where a guy did not have a pass, but nevertheless wanted to access the building; I wouldn't let him, but he said that he was late for a meeting and that the security officers from the main gate had sent him here. I said, 'Why didn't you tell me earlier', and I let him in. Apparently he was a

watchdog. I was disciplined for this and got a warning in my file. They (management) came down on me and asked, 'Why did you let him in'? I said, 'He told me he had a meeting and I used my discretion'. They said, 'Do not use your discretion. Just follow the rules'. (Entertainment Studios)

In the Swedish study, security officers working at the reception desk of the police headquarters were often treated like dirt by lawyers who approach the counter to collect the preliminary police investigations concerning their clients:

Two lawyers enter the building and approach the reception counter. When Bojan (as stipulated in his instructions) asks them to show not only their personal identification cards, but also their lawyer ID-cards, they make fun of his request, by sighing and indicating that they think his request is silly. One of them claims that it is perfectly okay to show one's personal identification card and that there isn't such a thing as an official attorney-ID. […] Bojan says, 'They are always like that. You know, they are lawyers, they think 'Are you, young guard, going to lecture me'? Bojan says to me, 'They're trying to break me down. They do not understand'. (Adapt Security)

In the capacity of *skyddsvakter*, the security officers at the police headquarters have considerable authority and power (they may frisk and detain people) and, as such, belonged to the prestigious 'protecting group' of the security company. They had all accrued much experience of security work and took great pride in their job. However, working at the police headquarters meant that their ability to make use of their legal powers were heavily curtailed since they were instructed by the manager of in-house security team *not* to use their creativity and act autonomously in case of emergencies or identified risks, but instead to alert a police patrol. In combination with experiences of being mocked, this left the security officers working the police headquarters feeling degraded and frustrated.

Reclaiming Worth among Co-workers

Up to now, we have discussed the ways security workers experience challenges to their self-worth and reaffirm morale in the face of negative external evaluations of their job. There are, however, additional internal strategies – put to use by officers only among themselves – which are essential for building self-esteem and solidarity. To deal with their feelings of occupational inferiority, officers sought to reaffirm their self-esteem in a number of ways. Many constructed narratives about how they 'ended up' in security work, and this usually involved being made redundant from other low-paid, low-status occupations – such as factories and building sites. In order to find a semblance of self-worth, officers would frequently boast about aspects of their personal lives, such as personal wealth (a rich family and a big house 'back home') or other material prestige (a profitable property development business on the side). Officers also discussed their long-term aspirations, some of which included advancement within the security industry - the pinnacle of which was to one day own a security company. For the most part, however, officers dreamt of a life after security. In both studies, officers tended to emphasize that they were not defined by their job as a security officer. Security work is merely a way of funding the other interests they have, such as martial arts and animal breeding as noted in the Swedish case.

Another way officers managed taint was to emphasize educational achievements. Even if these achievements have little to do with the security work they are employed to perform, merely highlighting the fact served to reassemble self-esteem among co-workers. This is evident in the following extract from Entertainment Studios:

I ask Richard how he got into the security industry, especially given his degree in politics. He hesitates and replies, 'Well, when you have children and a mortgage to pay, you get stuck here. It is a thankless job. People look down on you, especially in retail security. You get a lot of abuse as a security officer. But we have a thick skin'. […] Later, Milo brings up the issue again: 'I do not understand why people say that

security officers are thick. There was an article in the *News of the World* saying we are stupid. Why would they say that? We have accountants working here and students'.

Unsuccessful attempts to reject degradations have negative effects on the self-esteem and social status. However, this can be counteracted by the kind of taint management techniques provided by the broader occupational culture. Although *individuals* might be in doubt about the worth of the job, their *group* culture provides vindication of why the (tainted) occupation really matters (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). For those officers who find themselves 'stuck' in the security job, attempts are made to reclaim and repair status by emphasizing that the work requires intellectual capacity. Officers established a link between aspects of their own job and those of higher-prestige occupations. Once again, this tendency was borne out in both of the ethnographies:

Tyrone and Bill have previously stressed that the Intelligence Officer post is rather 'unique'. They explain that, 'Not many security companies have people like us in this post'. (Fantastical Shopping)

'To belong to the protecting group of the company is a step up in the career ladder, many colleagues in the company wants to work here', says Mohammad, who describes the job of a *skyddsvakt* at the police headquarters as 'a job that requires intelligence'. He adds, 'There are so many laws and regulations, we have a lot of authority and power, but the trick is to know when to do what. I don't know how to say this without sounding stupid, but there are many who have worked as *väktare* for fifteen years and are still not eligible'. (Adapt Security, the Police Headquarters)

Another way of finding self-worth in a job with low social value was to view patrons and clients as akin to children in respect of whom security officers need to exercise paternal oversight. This way of viewing their work infuses individual officers with a sense of importance and responsibility, something captured in the next two extracts:

I ask Federico why they call the patrols 'Papa' on the radio. He replies, 'I do not know really. Back home I call my father Papa. Maybe it is because we are like Papas: we take care of the building and the people in it. We make sure everything is fine'. (Entertainment Studios)

Abdal explains his overall approach in relation to the homeless clients at the shelter: 'I usually joke with them all the time, but I notice when it's serious, when they are in a bad mood or something. I never look down on these people. I respect everyone as long as they respect me. You wear the uniform and you feel like a father. They behave like kids'. (Adapt Security)

We also encountered security officers who likened their job, or aspects of their job, to the police occupation as a way of rebuilding their spirits and reclaiming status. But we should note that importance was also placed on *not* being like the police. In the Swedish research, some security officers working at the shelter distanced themselves from the crime control mandate of the police by deciding not to report the illegal behavior of clients to the police. Not 'squealing' was an important element in developing trust among officers and the clients.

Expressions of humour among security workers was a key internal strategy used to counteract feelings of isolation and inferiority. Humour and its association with instilling solidarity are well known aspects of the occupational culture of public police officers, arising as they adapt to the peculiar and occasionally distressing demands of the police vocation (Loftus 2009). In a similar vein, private security officers displayed a strong sense of togetherness and bravado which stemmed from the need to manage the pressures of the job and its surrounding negative environment. Many extracts from the different fieldwork sites across the two studies demonstrate this, but the following aptly makes our point:

Barzan says that the best thing about work is the sense of community among the patrolling officers, when one is not just an employee, but one of the group. While waiting at the office during the day shift, I notice the playful, male jargon, and some practical jokes. Barzan changed settings on Bojan's computer keyboard. Another officer put a weight at the back of Barzan's jacket. (Adapt Security)

The humour drawn from shared experiences helped to glue security officers together, with customers and managers most often being on the receiving end of jokes. We found that humour provided comfort and created a bond between officers who frequently found themselves in unpleasant and unpredictable situations. By normalising a tainting situation through banter and wittiness, a stressful encounter was made more manageable, thereby repairing internal legitimacy.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to understand how private security officers working in an ambiguous, low prestige and stigmatised industry construct and repair their self-identity. While the concept of dirty work, initially invoked by Hughes (1951), has been applied to the public police, a detailed exploration of the work of private security officers as dirty workers remains undeveloped. This is surprising given that private police increasingly behave like the public police and operate in a variety of public and semi-public locations. We have shown that aspects of the environment in which security officers work are littered with physical, social and moral taint (ibid.: see also Ashforth and Kramer 1999). What we find is that the stigma attached to the security role becomes reconciled through the informal occupational culture of security officers. This comprises a shared set of norms and beliefs that enhance the occupational self-esteem by infusing the work with a sense of meaning and value, thereby justifying the work and its purposes. As members of a tainted occupation, security officers employed a range of strategies to deflect scorn and construct a positive reframing of their work as important and necessary. To a large extent, this reframing and recalibrating is successful.

In these respects, our direct observations of security officers at work have provided something that remains for the most part absent from the burgeoning literature on private security – namely, a situated account of how ongoing reputational and legitimacy problems afflicting the private security industry are realised and experienced on-the-ground. It is striking that the unease that has been found among high-ranking stakeholders within the industry (Thumala *et al* 2011) resonanate powerfully among 'shop-floor' security officers. The moral taint that attaches to the security business plays out in the everyday working lives of security officers who are practically aware that their role is not to serve (or even protect) the public and that they provide a product that is, in the end, intangible. This is often the source of much frustration – with some officers even adopting something resembling a critical normative stance towards the industry. These pressures and frustrations have been exacerbated by the advent of the professionalization agenda – whose demands for front-stage politeness and customer-focus can sometimes further demean the officers who are required to maintain it.

The wider question this prompts is how one can best respond to the stigmatization and frustration experienced by those who deliver 'security' across an increasing range of societal locations. The dominant focus of both external regulatory strategies and internal claims to professionalization has been to treat security officers as recalcitrant objects to be acted upon and brought into line – or if that fails to be ejected from the industry (Prenzler and Sarra 2014). There is undoubtedly some value in proceeding in this manner. But we wonder whether our research underscores the unrealised potential of an alternative approach (Marks and Sklansy 2011) – one that would seek to learn from the occupational experiences and cultural norms of security officers and harness them within a regulatory schema which seeks to align the industry more closely with the public interest (Loader and White 2016).

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