

Embodying emotional dirty work: A messy text of patrolling the border

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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

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Hello everyone, and welcome back to Why It Works! As the winter season chugs along, I continue to be dazzled by the beautiful, fanciful *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!* As a story about three girls a. Today let's explore how *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!* both illustrates and embodies the true nature of storytelling! Nick Creamer. January 27, 2020 8:00am PST (1/27/20). *Embodying emotional dirty work: A messy text of patrolling the border*. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 9(3), 201–222. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#). Sanders, T. (2005). *Emotional dimensions of dirty work: Men's encounter with taint in the butcher trade*. *International Journal of Work, Organisation and Emotion*, 4(2), 195–212. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#). Slutskaya, N., Simpson, R., Hughes, J., Simpson, A., & Uygur, S. (2016). *Masculinity and class in the context of dirty work*. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 23(2), 165–182. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#). Soni-Sinha, U., & Yates, C. (2013).