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**“There’s always got to be a villain”:  
The police as ‘dirty’ key workers and the effects on occupational prestige**

**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has afforded the opportunity for key workers in some traditionally ‘dirty’ occupations to experience elevated levels of prestige. Although public perceptions of certain key workers have evolved in this way not all occupations have benefitted from comparable narratives. Using data from 18 police officer interviews, we theorise that the police are constructed as the ‘villains’ of the pandemic, tasked with the ‘dirtier’ responsibilities of enforcing rules that transgress societal order (as opposed to ‘heroes’ performing the more prestigious functions such as saving lives).

For this reason, they have not benefitted from the same esteem markers awarded to other key workers, which in turn has had a detrimental effect on their morale.

Gratitude, especially experienced via public markers of esteem symbolic of the pandemic, was salient in participants negotiating their ‘dirt’ and occupational prestige.

**Keywords:** police, ‘dirty’ work, occupational prestige, taint, pandemic.

*“...doctors, firefighters etcetera, everything they do is looked [at as] helping people. They’re saving someone’s life or bringing someone out of a burning building. You look at a lot of videos of police or actions of the police and we’re wrestling people to the ground or striking people or doing things that aren’t seen as good or nice, but things you class as a necessary evil” (Harrison).*

**Introduction**

In this paper, we explore how ‘dirty’ workers sensemake their experiences vis-à-vis occupational prestige in the transient context of COVID-19. We ask, how do these workers navigate the ‘dirt’ and occupational prestige of their occupation as these very notions are evolving and changing? The COVID-19 pandemic is an especially salient time in which to explore ‘dirty’ work and occupational prestige because the lockdowns in the United Kingdom (UK) have radically transformed public perceptions of public servants. It has been noted that many ‘dirty’ occupations that have been previously stigmatised have benefited from a heightened sense of occupational prestige in their efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic (De Camargo and Whiley 2020; Mejia *et al.* 2021). Police occupational culture has been discussed in depth in the literature and has explored the occupational ‘lens’ it has on its workers (Chan, 1997; Cockcroft, 2012; Reiner, 2010). This serves to highlight some prestigious benefits of the social and physical environment and omits or minimizes others that may lessen its perceived social standing (De Camargo, 2019). Sustained public intrigue in the job allows officers to maintain ‘relatively high

occupational esteem and pride' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413) because often the exciting parts of policing are relished in tales of crime-fighting (Innes, 2003) and glamourised in the media. Being a front-line worker during the pandemic is an interesting time to explore theories of 'dirty' work and occupational prestige because, despite also serving the pandemic as key workers, the police did not always benefit from a heightened sense of status – all the while, watching their peers in other so-called 'dirty' occupations rise in the public's esteem.

In the UK, the relationship between the public and the police has always been historically, tainted by disdain, mistrust, and contempt (Kiely and Peek 2001). Anti-police public sentiment is also noted in the United States (US) (Jackson *et al.* 2020) and France (Restelli 2020). Although, the UK police have attempted to project law and order and have offered the public 'idealised impressions' in line with these expectations (Mawby 2014), the profession has often been marred by tensions in the media (Mawby 2010) and accusations of institutional racism (Yesufu 2013), sexism (Brown *et al.* 2019), and corruption (Holmes 2020). Consequently, the profession has struggled to solidify itself as a prestigious job despite encompassing several highly regarded elements. For instance, a YouGov (2015) poll reports that 63% of over 14,000 UK respondents 'would not like to' be a police officer compared with only 29% that would. Furthermore, policing is a fundamentally nuanced occupation in terms of 'dirt' and occupational prestige because there are many layers of conflicting narratives in their image. For example, although the police are essentially doing a job for the good of society, they have to spoil a lot of people's 'fun' in order to do it (e.g., issuing arrest warrants, breaking up parties that are too lively etc.). The police can be perceived as heroic (Terpstra and Salet 2020), and caring in some instances (Seldridges *et al.* 2020), but recognised as 'brutal' (Peeples 2020), 'terrifying' (Smith and Robinson 2019), and 'uncompassionate' (Selfridges *et al.* 2020) in others. Rivera and Tracey (2014, p. 206) therefore argued that policing was about negotiating shifting layers of taint, where the job is 'looked down upon in one context and exalted in another'.

Policing in a pandemic is especially complex given the volatility in police-public relations, the detrimental effects on officer wellbeing, and the myriad of bureaucratic challenges, both inter and intra-organisation, that comes with managing a crisis (Laufs and Waseem 2020). The pandemic has brought new challenges and struggles to the way that policing is performed and subsequently perceived by the public. The transmissible

nature of coronavirus has led to the undertaking of enhanced protective practices (De Camargo 2021a) and understandably, police officer anxiety regarding COVID-19 is high, and these feelings are shared by their families (De Camargo 2021b). Although reporting practices differ and we are yet to see the true number of police deaths from COVID-19 for some time, the pandemic has been responsible for more officer deaths in the line of duty than any other cause combined in 2020 (Hider 2020). The tabloids and social media have further played a role in the escalation of the UK public's anti-police sentiment, for example, by highlighting trending Twitter hashtags such as #PoliceStateUK, #Authoritarianism, and #1984, and spotlighting ill-thought-out incidents such as arresting a 97-year-old retired nurse (BBC 2020a) and prohibiting the sale of Easter eggs (BBC 2020b). This coupled with the already precarious position of the policing profession in the UK makes for an especially salient context in which to explore 'dirty' work and occupational prestige.

Given how 'dirty' work is marginalised and stigmatised (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) and how occupational prestige is coveted and desirable (Goldthorpe and Hope 1972), it is not surprising that research has begun to connect how 'dirty' work and occupational prestige theories can inform each other (e.g., Baran *et al.* 2016; Berkelaar *et al.* 2012; De Camargo 2019). Although the fusing of these two theories appears complementary, it is nevertheless relatively underexplored in the policing extant literature. Our intent here is to weave together these complementary theories to understand how they interplay in the sensemaking of police 'dirty' workers vis-à-vis their lived experiences during the COVID-19 crisis, which brings about a new way to examine the temporary 'stickiness' of dirt (Bergman and Chalkley 2007).

### **'Dirt' and occupational prestige**

Hughes (1962) first discussed 'dirty' work in reference to occupations and the responsibilities of the workers within these jobs that are perceived to be objectionable to other people. He argued that to sustain the efficacious operation of society, 'dirty' workers must handle the distasteful parts for others to consider themselves 'clean' (Hughes 1962). Many scholars have considered ways in which an occupation can be considered stigmatised: through physical, social, moral (Hughes 1962, Goffman 1963, Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, Kreiner *et al.* 2006), and emotional taint (McMurray and Ward 2014, Rivera 2015). Others have already argued how all of these categorisations

encourage police officers to be cemented as 'dirty' workers and discuss the effects on esteem and sense of self (e.g., Huey and Broll 2015). Since the introduction of the 'dirty' work concept in the 1950s, research has rapidly developed theoretical frameworks (i.e., Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, 2014; Bergman and Chalkley 2007; Grandy 2008; McMurray and Ward 2014), and more recently, scholars have begun to apply this lens to the profession of policing (see De Camargo 2019). Policing is an especially nuanced occupation in which to explore 'dirt' and occupational prestige. Similar to 'dirt', occupational prestige is based on society's 'collective perceptions' of social judgements (Zhou 2005, p. 92). Much like 'dirty' work encompasses tasks that are perceived to be tainted and shunned (Rabelo and Mahalingam 2019), prestigious work represents duties that are based on respected cultural values and goodness (Goldthorpe and Hope 1972). Occupational prestige depends on the division of labour and reflects that society's priorities because different occupations are allocated different resources, privileges, and power (Treiman 1977). Being a 'dirty' worker and having occupational prestige can be understood in opposition to one another; dirt is offending matter out of place that must be shunned because it goes against society's preferred order (Douglas 1966) while prestige is legitimacy and appropriateness rooted in social recognition (Zhou 2005). Taint is seen as symbolic of social practices that separate the 'clean us' from the 'dirty them' with 'dirty' work being performed by those at the lower echelons of society (Hughes 1962). In essence, while 'dirty' work taints, prestigious work glorifies, yet both types of work depend on how society perceives 'dirt' and prestige and how it chooses to divide labour amongst those who are 'dirty' and those who are esteemed. Indeed, our understandings of 'dirt' and prestige are infused with and inseparable from sociocultural context (Ashforth and Kreiner 2014). Both dirt and prestige are in the eye of the beholder - who is also beholden to a specific time and place in culture (Douglas 1966). For instance, investment bankers enjoyed a privileged position before the global financial crisis eroded their status (Stanley et al. 2014) and, conversely, refuse collectors experienced a temporary rise in prestige during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK (e.g., the #StreetSmiles campaign when the public decorated their bins as a tribute). Similarly, perceptions of the police are different globally, particularly between democratic societies (e.g., UK) and countries with authoritarian regimes (e.g., China) (Wu 2010).

In our context, the profession of policing is precarious (Branch 2020) and infused with several sources of stigma (Bullock and Garland 2018; Kilgallon 2019) and stigma-by-association (i.e., courtesy stigma) (Goffman 1963). For instance, police have to deal with people that members of society deem 'bad' - that is, 'dirty' and tainted. By being third-party agents between the clean us and the 'dirty' others, 'dirty' workers contain those deemed deplorable and in doing so, embody the stigma (McMurray and Ward, 2014). "As if dirt were contagious" (Ashforth and Kreiner 2014, p.83), the associated taint is symbolically transferred to the individual performing the role (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) and to the organisations where they work (Grandy and Mavin 2011). This then reduces the occupational prestige of the profession (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Scott (2006) noted how identity is constructed in relation to other people - it is dependent on these interactions and negotiated in daily encounters. Performances are displayed but they also need to be accepted by others. Police might see their work as helping society but if the public scorns this interpretation and views them as enemies, then officers need to manage and negotiate that identity via further sensemaking and future performances. Henry (2020) points out that there are three sources of interactions between police and society: everyday street policing vis-à-vis maintaining law and order, behind-the-scenes crime intelligence analysis, and fragmented extensions to the profession such as security services. Each of these provide salient grounds for stigma and othering. Certainly, the conflicting tensions in occupational identity have been noted, with several push/pull factors that converge when police negotiate the 'dirt' and prestige of their role, for example, how border patrol officers take pride in their protective task while also having moral doubts (Rivera and Tracy 2014), how private security officers reframe their purpose as meaningful to manage public scorn (Lofstrand *et al.* 2016), and how criminal investigators refute the glamorised narratives presented in film even though this might be what attracted them to the job in the first place (Huey and Broll 2015). We note how impression management of stigma is important for police officers because, in order to fulfil their job role, they need to mask their 'dirt' and taint. There are also quite traumatic components to the police role. Some of the 'dirty' work is macabre and reprehensible, such as investigating crimes against children (Roach *et al.* 2017) and digital sex crime (Dale *et al.* 2019). Certainly, a hardening of personality becomes a sort of mental uniform (Miller 2007) that officers must adorn to protect themselves. Desensitisation to 'dirt' (e.g.,

death, horror etc.) is a necessary part of acclimatising because 'dirty' police workers, after all, 'cannot afford to remain too squeamish' (Jervis 2001, p. 88). The additional challenges presented by the pandemic has caused concerns for officer well-being; the vice-chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW), Che Donald, has promised that 'work was underway to ensure officers can access support, amid fears of significant mental-health related absences after the coronavirus outbreak' (The Independent, April 2020).

### **The media: Who is 'dirty' and who is prestigious?**

Since the beginning of the pandemic, key workers have enjoyed endless coverage in the media, including on social media, reputable news networks, and the tabloids. Media plays an important role in influencing society's perceptions. Potter and Wetherall (1984, p.21) argue that the media are not 'neutrally describing events' but are, instead, actively 'constructing a version of events'. The media engages in storytelling (Ryan *et al.* 2004), and consuming these stories provides us with frames or 'schemata of interpretation' (Goffman 1974, p.21) that contribute to the construction of our social reality (Hallahan 1999) and understandings thereof. Media stories, therefore, 'provide[s] meaning to an unfolding strip of events' (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, p.143). These sensemaking tools may be even more necessary during a pandemic because people are afraid and may turn to (apparently) authoritative sources to help make sense of the confusion around them. Hence, the way in which key workers and their roles are presented in the media affects the way that society (and workers) think about themselves, their dirt and occupational prestige, and much more besides.

The way in which events are framed by the media and perceived by the public are important (Vasterman *et al.* 2005). For example, research shows that being subjected to repeated news stories makes them appear more believable irrespective of the truthfulness of their contents (Brashier *et al.* 2020). In this way, repeated negative media coverage can exasperate already tense sentiments. Highlighting how police use drones to spy on hikers and dog walkers does little to foster trust nor prestige. Obviously, anti-police coverage is not entirely new - in the UK, the police have always had a somewhat troubled relationship with the media. Indeed, as many as 81% of police officers believe that the media treats them unfairly (Gramlich and Parker 2017). These anti-police sentiments are rooted historically in several factors, such as police

corruption, abuse of power, and discriminatory treatment against ethnic minority groups, and all contribute to the complex police/public relationship. Certainly, the police are responsible for some of this bad press and the anti-police protests of 2020 were rooted in very real horrors - there are absolutely unacceptable events that have occurred in the US (e.g., George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile) and the UK (e.g., Ian Tomlinson, Harry Stanley, Christopher Alder). Understandably, public sentiments towards the police become significantly worse after these events and are then communicated via social media. For example, on Twitter negative tweets about the police peaked after the high-profile murder of Freddie Gray while in police custody (Oglesby-Neal *et al.* 2019).

During a pandemic, the police must facilitate adherence to restrictive measures such as stay-at-home orders and crowd dispersal. Public support is vital for legitimacy (Miller *et al.* 2003), but the relationship between the police and the public influences how likely citizens are to abide by or resist these rules (Reicher and Stott 2020). Social recognition is also fundamental to occupational prestige (Zhou 2005). Police have attempted to bridge this divide between themselves and the public, most notably by introducing liaison teams to facilitate communication at the Notting Hill Carnival (Kilgallon 2019) and participating in BBC documentaries such as *The Met* (BBC 2015). Nevertheless, allegations of severe police misconduct have had a significant and lasting impact on public opinion (Weitzer 2002). Indeed, the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, which (rightly) sparked Black Lives Matter protests in America and quickly spilled over to the rest of the world, further magnified the anti-police sentiment bubbling under the surface in the UK. This chain of events, coupled with reports of officers abusing their new powers surrounding the UK lockdown (e.g., BBC 2020b), did little to enhance public sentiment towards the police.

## **Methods**

To explore how police negotiate their 'dirty' work and occupational prestige in a dynamic context, especially when they can see workers in other traditionally 'dirty' occupations rising in the public's esteem, a qualitative in-depth interview-based study was designed. Due to the proactive nature of this research vis-à-vis responding to the COVID-19 crisis, participants were recruited on Twitter through purposive convenience sampling. Although participants do not represent the views of all UK police officers,



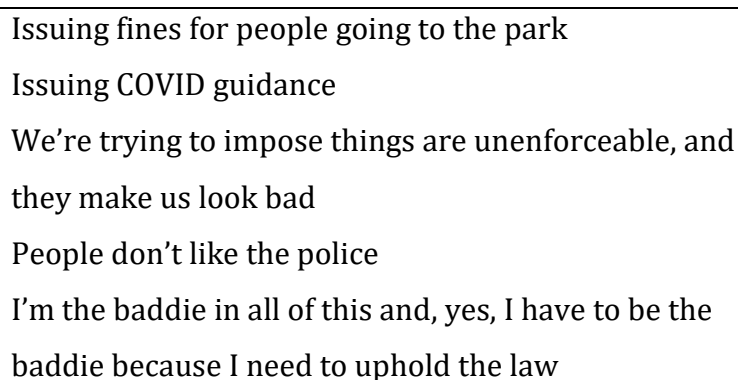
convenience sampling via Twitter allows researchers to reach respondents quickly to investigate events as they unfold in real-life (Sibona et al. 2020) and is used as a tool for knowledge sharing in an official capacity (Crump 2011). The police are a difficult population to access, particularly without familiar prior connections, and Twitter was chosen due to its potential to access a diverse range of participants, network connections, and is generally used as a platform for 'widespread conversation and the sharing of ideas' (Forgie *et al.* 2013, p. 8). Officers were recruited via a call for participants on Twitter asking for volunteers and a form of digital snowballing took place (O'Connor *et al.* 2014) which resulted in 131 retweets, 45,380 impressions, and 2768 total engagements. Around a third of these officers did not identify themselves as working for any police force in their biographies, although positive identities were established<sup>1</sup> upon sending a participant information sheet, consent form, data management plan and project summary through to a requested official police email address before participation was officially agreed. Their accounts are not intended to be representative of overall officer experience in any particular force, or of the UK police in general; after all, the value of the interviews lie in how officers personally make sense of events (Bullock and Garland 2020).

Interviews took place over Zoom between May and June 2020, resulting in over 20 hours of semi-structured interview data recorded with Zoom's recording function. Interviewing in this way encourages participants where there are time and place limitations (in this case, social distancing and lockdown restrictions), and as all of the interviews took place either in the participant's homes (14 out of 18), or in a work office (4 out of 18), this provided convenient conditions (Janghorban et al. 2014). However, despite the benefits of digital interviewing, necessity of access to a high-speed internet, familiarity with online communication, and having digital literacy can affect the nature of the interview (Deakin and Wakefield 2013). Fortunately, all interviews were conducted without problems, and interviewing participants in their homes (with views of kitchen, living rooms, personal belongings and the like) afforded an unusual level of intimacy and informality.

Of the 18 officers, 11 were male, 7 were female, and they ranged from 22-54 years of age (average 35 years). Sixteen officers were married or in a relationship and 15 lived

with their partner (1 lived with parents, 2 were single and lived alone), and 11 officers lived with children/stepchildren. The officers' experience ranged between 2 and 25 years (average 10 years), and the following roles were identified; 15 police constables/response/ special/authorised firearms officer, and 3 sergeants/custody sergeants from 11 different forces: Metropolitan Police, Norfolk, Lancashire, Durham, Thames Valley, West Mercia, Cumbria, West Midlands, Sussex, Yorkshire, and Suffolk. Respondents self-identified as white British (n = 16), white Irish (n = 1), and Latin American (n = 1)

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions designed to facilitate rapport and allow participants to open up and share their lived experiences as well as how they sensemade these experiences. The resulting interview data were transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed through nVivo software. Clarke and Braun (2018) described thematic analysis as the process of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data, and within this process immersion with the data was conducted by reading and familiarising with the transcriptions and producing initial observations. Initial themes (codes) were generated pertinent to the research aims and applied systematically using nVivo across the whole data set. We applied each step as specified by Clarke and Braun (2018) in an iterative and collaborative manner, reviewing and discussing the themes. First, we began by reading the transcripts and then we made notes and highlighted units of meanings (see figure 1).



Issuing fines for people going to the park  
Issuing COVID guidance  
We're trying to impose things are unenforceable, and they make us look bad  
People don't like the police  
I'm the baddie in all of this and, yes, I have to be the baddie because I need to uphold the law

Figure 1. Highlighting units of meaning

Similarities were noted and grouped (see figure 2), for instance how accounts of being the 'bad' other resonated amongst participants and how these were contrasted against the 'good' that heroic key workers performers.

Police as the 'bad guys', the 'common enemy' (read 'dirty' and stigmatised):

- The police are fining people and being the 'bad' guy – we're wrestling people to the ground, striking people
- Police doing things that aren't seen as good or nice
- Necessary evil

Key workers as the 'good', the esteemed and prestigious:

- They are 'saving' people and being the good guy – doctors are saving someone's life, firefighters are bringing someone out of a burning building

Figure 2. Grouping similarities across data

Following discussions between the two authors, themes began to emerge. Discussions resulted in an iterative process of toing-and-froing between the data and emergent themes to authentically convey participants' accounts, for example, we noted how participants were expressing rejection at the same time as praising other key workers, and how these conflicting emotions were being experienced. Themes were re-categorised, re-labelled, and re-interpreted to achieve meaning, for instance, the theme of the uniform emerged was a salient point of embodiment, but the data was not sufficient to develop inferences on the broader phenomena and we merged this smaller theme with the more robust first theme of 'feeling excluded' (figure 3).

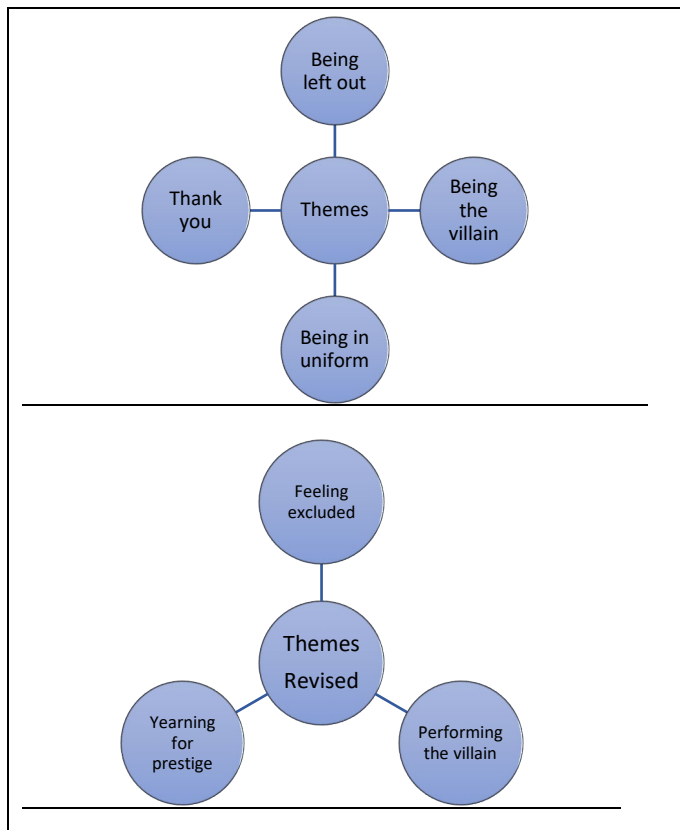


Figure 3. Refining themes

Through this iterative process, the ways in which police officers sensemade their lived experiences of their work became apparent; and of course, pseudonyms have been used for interview extracts. In the sections that follow, officer narratives provide a candid and detailed insight into their lived experiences of policing the pandemic. Three main themes eventually emerged from the data: feeling excluded, performing the villain, and yearning for prestige.

## Findings

Participants' sensemaking of the 'dirt' and occupational prestige of their work was marked by several sources of stigma associated with their work as police officers, and these were largely perceived as by-products of the media. Participants attributed heroic narratives to the identities of key workers that were perceived as prestigious (e.g., saving lives) while pointing out they were in the tainted position of doing the 'dirty' work of the pandemic (e.g., enforcing the lockdown). This extended to the privileges associated with public gratitude that was circulated by the media, including by reputable news sources, social media, and the tabloids. In the following sections, we

present the three emergent themes and, throughout, seek to demonstrate how participants sensemake and negotiate notions of 'dirt' and occupational prestige.

### **Feeling excluded: "But I'm a Key Worker Too..."**

This theme captures how participants were cognizant of being excluded out of the key worker narrative in the media. Many recalled specific instances of coverage and how they noticed the omission, and the effect that this had on their identity – namely, othering. Participants were reticent to blame the public directly or to devalue the contributions of other key workers, rather, they assigned responsibility to the media and the government narratives. For example, Phil was acutely aware that 'whenever keyworkers come up [in the media], police officers aren't mentioned'. Similarly, Frank recounted:

The BBC did something with all key workers in it, I watched it all the way through and I was almost drawn to tears at the end of it because I thought, I'm going to work every day and there's not a mention on [the tribute]. The fire are on there, the NHS are on there, all the other key workers are on there, why weren't the police on there? And that's something that's gone out to the nation on prime-time television, that's not a help for us you know.

Similarly, Alice remembered being left out of a train radio tribute:

There are times when I'm driving home from work, it was a long shift, I was tired, and I think it was a Southern Rail radio advert had come on and it said, "We'd like to thank all key workers", and then they listed a load of key workers and guess who was missed off: the police. And I was like, "well thanks for that". I've just busted by arse for ten hours.

These omissions and feelings of exclusion were almost certainly hurtful and demoralising. For example, Arthur described the rejection as 'insulting' and 'horrible', and contemplated, 'if we're not gonna be considered keyworkers, we should stay at home and see what happens'. Andrew complained that, 'it takes the mick a little bit', Frank was 'almost drawn to tears', and the sting is heartfelt in Alice's account too. Overall, it 'left a really sour taste in a lot of people's mouths' (Dennis). Despite these raw declarations, participants simultaneously tried to brush it off with bravado. For

instance, John affirmed that, 'you know that you're gonna upset people' and Alice dismissed the slight as, 'it's just things like that'. Phil even seemed resigned to the inevitability of being othered by declaring that 'nothing will ever change, there is nothing that will ever change'. Despite participants' attempts at downplaying their distress, their comments nevertheless illustrate just how hurtful it can be to be excluded from the key worker narrative during a time of crisis when it holds such a prestigious and privileged status. What is further important, is the legitimacy that results from public recognition – after all, police *are* key workers objectively and regardless of media tributes, yet public acknowledgement and validation was imperative.

Furthermore, this apparent rejection also resulted in some real-life effects, such as being excluded from certain privileges that were awarded to other (more prestigious) key workers. Participants noted that they were not included in the 'key worker only' shopping hour at the supermarkets nor were they regularly invited to skip the queues. They also believed that they were not eligible for the new discounts and fee reductions, although the police have always been eligible for various discounts via the 'Blue Light' card, although the additional discounts were not highlighted at the start. This in itself is an interesting finding and shows the role that the media plays in constructing our social worlds. By abstaining from veraciously communicating about the Blue Light card, the media influenced participants' perceptions of their status as key workers, resulting in participants believing that they were more excluded than perhaps they were in reality. It is this belief that influenced participants' sensemaking of how 'dirty' they were and how little prestige they were awarded. For instance, Brendan expressed this stigma by questioning, 'well what about us? We're shift workers, we still have to work, why are we queuing?' and longed for greater inclusivity, 'the fire service, the NHS, the key public services, we should all be on a par with each other'. John further explained that public perceptions were so fixed, that even when supermarket staff did occasionally invite police to go to the front of the queue, other shoppers would jeer:

*whether it be discounts, jumping the queue, I can tell you now, there's been incidents in the North East where cops have been going in [supermarkets] in uniform and the staff have said "here, come on, come to the front", and the queue have booed them.*

Yet, participants did not blame members of the public. Their ire was mostly directed at the media (reputable news sources, social media, and the tabloids), and government institutions. For example, Sarah alluded to the broader institutional

discourse, 'the rhetoric that's coming out of the Home Office', and Phil summarised, 'it's a whole culture of negativity towards the police'. He explained that:

you can have the most heroic acts caught on camera like you know London Bridge, something happened where a police officer died in the most selfless and heroic way and you maybe get an outpouring from the public saying, "God, amazing, this is what these people do", and it will be written off within a month because the media controls everything.

Similarly, Rachel sensemade that, 'we're so at the whim of the media' and 'how the media is portraying us that day' and Alice confirmed that they are getting a 'bashing in the media'. These negative examples of media coverage concerning the police can be contrasted with the positive media coverage about other key workers. Whereas participants could see other key workers being acknowledged and awarded prestige by the media, they, on the contrary, were on the receiving end of a 'bashing'. In the theme below, we theorise that the reason for this is because the police were performing the 'dirtier' work amongst key workers.

### **Performing the villain: Doing the 'dirtier' work of the pandemic**

A strong narrative of police performing a particularly unpleasant function within the broader key worker remit emerged (i.e., restricting people, reprimanding them, issuing fines etc.). It was, however, an ambiguous role and instructions lacked clarity; at times, police were in the awkward position of attempting to enforce the 'unenforceable', which made them appear even more objectionable in the eyes of the public. These unpleasant but necessary tasks of ensuring that the public adhered to national restrictions (i.e., the 'dirtier' work, 'the necessary evil') were contrasted with the esteemed functions of other heroic (read prestigious) key workers, for example, doctors and firefighters who were helping the public and saving them (instead of punishing them and 'ruining the fun'). In particular, participants blamed the media, accusing them of amplifying the 'anti-police narrative' (Alice).

Irrespective of the pandemic, policing is an occupation that involves crowd control. Yet, participants were acutely aware that policing the lockdown had *further* tainted their occupational prestige and made an already 'dirty' role even 'dirtier'. For example, Bernard qualified that public perceptions had 'gotten worse actually' since the lockdown; he explained that 'there's always got to be a villain and it always seems to be that we'll fit that bill'. Similarly, Frank noted that, 'I'm the baddie in all of this and, yes, I

have to be the baddie because I need to uphold the law' and Dennis pointed out that 'with the police, we're *still* the common enemy, aren't we? In a lot of people's eyes unfortunately'. The positioning of police as 'the baddie', 'the villain', and the 'common enemy' was contrasted with other, more prestigious, key workers who were described as 'heroes'. For example, Sarah admitted, 'the people who work in the NHS *are* heroes' but 'we haven't got that key worker status, we haven't got that hero status'. She further likened heroic key workers as working in at-risk 'war zones' and drew on the discourse of 'us' versus 'them':

I'm not decrying anyone's role [...] I've got friends who are medical staff who are working COVID-19 wards, and they are heroes in my eyes, because they are going into the war zone as I look at it, and the people who are working in shops, you know, really putting themselves out there at risk. They're brilliant, and I don't decry that, but it's like why is this emerging them and us scenario, what's the reason? What's the purpose?

These opposing narratives were further precipitated through antithetical imagery associated with performing good versus evil. For instance, Harrison sensemade:

The majority of people we deal with are not the part of society who you want to deal with [...] unfortunately you know doctors, firefighters etcetera, everything they do is looked [at as] helping people. They're saving someone's life or bringing someone out of a burning building. You look at a lot of videos of police or actions of the police and we're wrestling people to the ground or striking people or doing things that aren't seen as good or nice, but things you class as a necessary evil.

In this explanatory account, imagery of a firefighter saving a citizen from a burning building is put in contrast to the imagery of a police officer wrestling someone to the ground – a stark dichotomy of good versus evil and prestigious versus 'dirty'. We can see further similarities between these two images and how nurses are constructed as angels in white attire while the police are painted to be devils in black gear, the former caring and helping, the latter punishing and harming, and ensuring that members of the public adhere to national restrictions. Overall, participants' contact with individual citizens were often clouded in negativity because police were 'telling them they can't do something' (Bernard).

Part of the problem is that the general public has limited contact with the police on a daily basis. They therefore have to rely on media accounts as a source of information about the profession. For example, Bernard noted that,



most people don't have that much interaction with us on a daily basis, we deal with a tiny percentage of the population time and time again, so your average Mr and Mrs Smith don't really have any dealing with us, they only see stuff on the news, and when it's negative, they haven't got anything to counteract against it.

Within this context, Phil reproached the media for regularly berating the police and focussing on the unpleasantness of their (necessary yet 'evil') function in the pandemic:

in the media you're being vilified the whole time, like the fact the Daily Mail are putting [articles] up asking "have you ever been dealt with by an officer who's been over-zealous when issuing COVID guidance or fines?" And it's just, you cannot win.

This sentiment of resigned fatality was shared amongst participants who explained that they were not responsible for the rules; they were simply following instructions even when doing so further tainted them:

The police are getting a bashing in the media because we're issuing fines for people going to the park, well that's what we've been told to do (Alice).

'It's not our fault is it? It's the government that aren't clear - they're causing the situation, that we're trying to impose things that are unenforceable, and they make us look bad' (James).

Participants explained how their position in the hierarchy of occupations was further tainted by the tasks that they were assigned to do during the pandemic (i.e., police the lockdown). These unpleasant 'dirtier' jobs ensured that participants' interactions with members of the public were largely limited to negative encounters where they were restricting and prohibiting. In contrast, participants attributed heroic functions to other key worker occupations and explained how instead of 'necessary evils', those key workers were helping and saving lives. The media further amplified these contrasting narratives by broadcasting tributes to some key workers but not others, and even went as far as 'bashing' the police. Yet, participants yearned for greater inclusivity and comparable prestige. In the theme below, we explore the nuances of receiving and not receiving public gratitude on notions of 'dirt' and occupational prestige.

### **Yearning for prestige: Receiving public gratitude**

Gratitude, especially communicated via public markers of esteem associated with the pandemic, had an enormous influence on participants negotiating their 'dirt' and occupational prestige. Again, participants tried to minimise the effect that this had

on their morale, yet at the same time, emotively recollected moments when they too received these symbolic markers of prestige during the pandemic in the UK, such as the now iconic clap initiative, jumping queues, discounts, and key worker only shopping hours.

Although the shared narrative amongst participants was a sense that ‘the public will always dislike us’ (Alice), that they ‘don’t join the cops to be popular’ (John), and other similar expressions of bravado, when probed during the interview, many nevertheless confessed to longing for gratitude. For example, Brendan questioned, ‘what about us?’, James affirmed, ‘we’re here as well’, and Frank contemplated on how ‘it would be nice to have a little bit of thanks for [upholding the law]’. Dorothy confessed that:

when you feel you’re being unfairly treated, doing an important role [...] that can get demoralising. It can fray your patience somewhat [...] so it can be difficult. It can certainly get you down a little bit...

Similarly, Alice explained that:

It’s ‘let’s clap the NHS’. We felt very like, well hang on a minute, do people not realise the risk that we’re almost at the same risk as the NHS. Apart from the fact that we don’t work on the Covid ward, but I’ve spoken to paramedics and they’ve not been as busy, and they’ve loved it. So actually, the demand has been less on them, but yet they’ve been getting a clap. We felt a bit like hang on a minute, we’re here.

Some participants had “a few more smiles and a few more nods than [they] used to receive” (Alice) since the pandemic started. At times, local shops and members of the public would deliver ‘stuff’ (Harrison) to the police stations such as ‘sweets, treats, cards’ (Kate). Yet, the markers of gratitude that were the most memorable, were those signs of esteem *specifically* associated with the pandemic. For example, Alice used the word ‘fortunate’ to describe herself for being on duty on a Thursday evening because, at the time, this was the day for the clap initiative. She vividly remembered how:

people actually took the time to **really clap** and say thank you to us and **cheer and whoop** just because we were driving down the street.

Similarly, Harrison recounted proudly how “a few people drive past and clap at us”. For those who have participated in or witnessed the Thursday evening clap initiative in the UK, embodied actions such as clapping, loudly cheering, and enthusiastically whooping – even the banging of pots and pans, were symbolic phenomena associated with the public’s heartfelt gratitude towards (some) key workers during the pandemic. Indeed, it

was not just any sign of gratitude that most resounded with participants, but it was specifically those that were associated with a rise in esteem for hero key workers, most notably the clapping but also ‘discounts, [and] jumping queues’ (John). Indeed, jumping the queue was a poignant point of contention. It was a very real expression of symbolic occupational prestige. For example, Kate shared how, ‘I’ve been stood in queues and NHS have turned up in their uniform and gone in’ and ‘I queued up for ages to get in, and she went straight in shopping, she had her NHS badge hanging round her neck, all suited up’. Similarly, Arthur complained how, ‘we’ve been made to queue up in supermarkets and stuff while we’re on duty, trying to get something to eat, and then you see paramedics rock up and they’re invited straight in’. Participants were frustrated at being denied this marker of esteem; ‘why are we queuing?’ asked Brendan. It was therefore especially memorable when some participants were granted this, and other precise markers of esteem awarded to hero key workers. Indeed, perceived poor substitutes such as ‘a photocopied letter from Priti Patel [Home Secretary] thanking us’ (John) only reinforced the chasm between our ‘villains’ and the ‘heroes’.

## **Summary**

Participants admired other key workers as ‘heroes’ but at the same time felt excluded from this heroic key worker narrative. Instead, they felt they were made to perform the ‘villain’ role by ‘enforcing the unenforceable’. The very public and visible rise in occupational prestige of some key workers really brought to light just how disliked (and ‘dirty’) participants felt – especially in comparison. There was a definite sense of being left behind and of being unfairly treated given that they too were actively engaged in the national efforts against the pandemic. The critical differentiating factor, however, was that ‘hero’ key workers, whose occupational prestige rose, were deemed to be saving lives whereas police, whose ‘dirt’ became even more tainted, were performing the more unpleasant function of policing the lockdown. Hence, while ‘hero’ key workers went up in the ranks of occupational prestige, the police further dropped in the hierarchies of ‘dirt’. Within this context, what was most salient and meaningful for police, were those markers of esteem that were awarded by the public and the media to key workers – precisely those that they were exempt from such as clapping, cheering, whooping, jumping queues and so forth. Indeed, (the few) expressions of gratitude symbolic of the pandemic were cherished and coveted.

## Discussion

Within our society, some occupations perform the 'dirty' work that are necessary for survival but that are degrading to our sensibilities (Hughes 1962). 'Dirt' threatens the preferred order of a good society, but it is not fixed. 'Dirt' is socially constructed (Grandy 2008) and sticky (Bergman and Chalkley 2007) – taint can expand or shrink. We theorise that the tumultuous context of the COVID-19 pandemic has (temporarily) changed public perceptions of what is and is not valued work to uphold order in society, and thereby altering notions of 'dirt' and occupational prestige. Some occupations have experienced a heightened esteem (De Camargo and Whiley 2020; Mejia *et al.* 2021), but others have dropped further in the tiers of 'dirt'.

Although policing has historically been perceived as 'dirty' work in countries such as the UK with a high level of anti-police sentiment (e.g., Dick 2005; Huey and Broll 2015; De Camargo 2019), the pandemic has further amplified their taint because, through no fault of their own, the police have been tasked with the 'dirtier' job of policing the lockdown. This less prestigious function includes, but is not limited to, fining members of the public for breaking lockdown rules, dispersing people from promenading in the parks, and breaking up social gatherings – all of which were prohibited activities in the UK. Enforcing these new rules in the highly emotive context of the pandemic can be construed as especially 'dirty' because 'dirt' implies transgressing the ideal order of a 'good' society (Dick 2005). By preventing the public from undertaking previously acceptable (read 'good') activities, police were transgressing the return to (so-called) 'good normality'. 'Dirt' goes against societal order (Douglas 1966) while prestige is rooted in societal acceptance (Zhou 2005). Punishing and prohibiting can therefore be understood as 'dirtier' than helping and saving, and contrasted against each other, policing becomes 'dirtier' while saving lives becomes even more prestigious. We can see these tensions between the 'good old way of life' and the 'bad new restrictive rules' enacted in the violent anti-lockdown demonstrations held in several countries, such as Austria, Germany, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Canada, the US, and of course the UK (Al Jazeera 2020).

Within this already highly volatile situation characterised by public resistance to stay-at-home orders and community tensions (Stogner *et al.* 2020, p. 724), police were expected to uphold laws that were at times 'unenforceable' or ambiguous – yet enforce

them they must. Officers were cognizant of this tension too and found themselves in situations where they had to perform the appropriate 'enforcing' identity while not genuinely believing in some of the rules that they were enforcing *and also* fielding disbelief from members of the public as well. Despite their individual reservations ('[the government] make us look bad' (James)), they nevertheless had to impose these restrictions and perform the correct and necessary role. Key workers who were portrayed as performing the more celebrated functions of the pandemic (e.g., saving lives) were then more publicly esteemed and rewarded by gratitude. Indeed, recognition is fundamental to occupational prestige (Zhou 2005). It did not matter that police *were* key workers, but it mattered that they were not recognized as such. Certainly, the police have had to develop a strong sense of internal solidarity with their peers to protect their identity and conceal the undesirable (Caveney et al. 2019) and contend with multiple identities that compete for legitimacy (Sillince and Brown 2009). Doing so has enabled officers to support each other's (stigmatised) performance, yet value-laden reactions from the public do shape how a person's identity is constructed (Goffman 1963) and this is dependent on the interaction between the self and others (Scott 2016). How the public perceives occupational groups is important for their prestige (Roberg *et al.* 2002); it is not sufficient to think of oneself as heroic; being recognised as heroic by members of the public is crucial in constructing a heroic identity, but deference cannot be taken or seized – it must be given willingly (Ridgeway 2001). Hence, government rhetoric to follow the rules did little to alleviate the 'dirt' inherent in policing said rules. In this way, it is the precise function of the police in the pandemic and the public perceptions thereof, that place them at a somewhat unique disadvantage and influence their stigma, taint, and occupational prestige.

The media play an influential role in bestowing occupational prestige – or withholding it; they inform public perceptions and actively construct the worth of occupations. For example, media reports have condemned previously prestigious banking to 'dirty' work (Stanley et al., 2014) and legitimised so-called 'dirty' exotic dancing (Grandy and Mavin, 2011). Ryan et al. (2004) note how the media engage in storytelling, and in our data, we see how the media influences the sensemaking of police - it is these stigmatising schemata of interpretation (Goffman 1974) – often rooted in real negative encounters necessary to policing a lockdown (e.g., prohibiting, dispersing, deterring etc.), that inform how police negotiate their occupational 'dirt' and prestige.

This is especially so when other frames of reference glorify hero key workers and accentuate the divide between taint and prestige. Importantly, the police are not the only occupational group to have received the brunt of the disparagement from the media; teachers too have been framed as ‘villains’ (TES 2020) - as ‘dirtier’ than other key workers. They were even deemed *unpatriotic* in some reports (The Guardian 2020), as ‘villains that passed on the opportunity to be heroes’ (Asbury and Kim preprint, p.9). In our data we also saw some references to this; Harrison observed how, “now they’re on to teachers, so teachers are the worst thing in the world now”.

In this way, social media, reputable networks, and tabloids provide a snapshot of the expressiveness of a community as it experiences events; sharing these emotional responses publicly have become part of our collective responses to crises (Bruns *et al.* 2010). In doing so, the media both reflects the sentiments of society and construct them too. Indeed, identity is not formed in isolation but is dependent on and influenced by interactions with others (Scott 2006). It requires daily negotiations, which are unfortunately performed under the influence of stigmatising schemata of interpretation.

Given how the police perceive an absence of media and public recognition as key workers worthy of appreciation, officers are excluded from the morale boosts that may help to mitigate the psychological stressors of policing a long-lasting global pandemic, precisely because they are ‘dirty [key] workers’ (Hughes 1962). Although we can see how officers attempt to sensemake the media disparagement via their stoic ‘mental uniform’ (Miller 2007), their hurt is nevertheless palpable in their accounts (e.g., ‘...can get demoralising [...] can fray your patience somewhat [...] can be difficult. It can certainly get you down a little bit’ (Dorothy). The discussion of ‘gratitude’ is an important one in these contexts, especially because expressions of social support and recognition help individuals working in jobs regularly exposed to trauma deal with events effectively (Rooney and McNicholas 2020). Public recognition is also fundamental to occupational prestige (Zhou 2005). Of course, police are more than only their occupational identity, but Kreiner *et al.* (2006, p.620) point out how it is *occupational* stigma specifically that is especially “damaging”. Yet, police officers were awarded little of the esteem markers awarded to other more prestigious key workers (e.g., clapping, jumping queues). Nor do they qualify to receive the COVID-19 vaccine as a priority front-line worker in the UK and it may be worth considering the significance of this in the light of their status as presumed ‘dirty’ workers. Equally, the confusion

about the congestion charge was prominent at the time of this research. Initially, police officers were not part of the key workers who were exempt from paying and after much campaigning, did receive some waivers, although, these were clouded in much ambiguous criteria that did not provide a blanket waiver, and of course by this stage, the damage to morale had already been done. Indeed, the *absence* of gratitude represents ‘a group of frontline professionals whose heroism not only remains unsung, but whose contribution is perhaps taken for granted’ (Rooney and McNicholas 2020, p. 5).

We propose that gratitude can form a type of ‘status shield’ that can help to mitigate taint in ‘dirty’ work. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) point out that social validation is important for ‘dirty’ workers to derive meaning; indeed, it is ‘our natural desire to be justified at work’ (Roberts 2004, p.67). Cooley’s (1902) well-established psychosocial theory of the ‘looking glass self’ considers how an individual’s judgement of themselves is developed through the perceptions of others and Hochschild (1983, p. 163) describes how a high level of occupational prestige can be enabled by the presence of a ‘status shield’ that can protect workers from the negative opinions of others. We highlighted evidence in our data to demonstrate how the police deemed themselves ‘fortunate enough’ to receive gratitude (especially via the same esteem markers associated with the pandemic), and looked to previous studies that have explored media expressions of gratitude in the aftermath of disasters such as the 2011 Alabama tornado which killed 64 people and caused \$2.4 bn of damage, and the Sandy Hook elementary school shootings in 2012 which resulted in 20 schoolchildren and 6 teachers dead (Glasgow *et al.* 2016). Other studies have also explored the depressive symptoms of police officers following 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, which killed 1200 people and caused \$180 bn in damage (McCanlie *et al.* 2018). Experiencing gratitude during such events can contribute to personal growth, resilience, and healing (Linley and Joseph 2004), can be a buffer against stress (O’Connell and Killeen-Byrt 2018), and can function as a protective shield via cognitive reappraisal (Isreal-Cohen *et al.* 2014). Indeed, Macaskill (2012) reported that gratitude, hope, and self-forgiveness were associated with greater levels of happiness and helped to mitigate feelings of depression following these types of events.

Wellness programs are crucial for performance effectiveness in law enforcement (Boone 2020), yet the effects of protective factors are still under-researched. Although

there is much scholarship into the risk factors that cause psychosocial morbidities in law enforcement (e.g., Demau *et al.* 2020, Kaur *et al.* 2013), the effects of receiving *and not receiving* gratitude during crises is less well understood. Indeed, most of the positive psychology research in this area has focused on the beneficial effects of *expressing* gratitude; our contribution here is different because our findings indicate the importance of *receiving* gratitude from others (i.e., the difference between I-am-grateful and they-are-thankful). Further research is needed to better understand the role of gratitude as a 'status shield' in 'dirty' work and constructions of taint as well as occupational prestige.

## **Conclusion**

Our theorising in this paper is framed and limited by our sociocultural context here, in the UK and other similar settings where public sentiment towards the police is already quite frayed (e.g., US, France), but may not resonate with dissimilar countries where there is a high-level of public trust in the police (e.g., Switzerland) (Staubli 2017). Terpstra and Salet (2020, p. 18) specify how attributions of heroism are 'dependent on historical, cultural and situational circumstances', and the same is true of 'dirt' whereby 'dirtiness' is a social construction 'imputed by people' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, p.415). In our data, we see evidence that some key workers are constructed as (prestigious) heroes while the police are performing the (dirty) role of villains of the pandemic. In this way, while other key workers managed to shed the 'stickiness' of their 'dirt' (albeit perhaps just temporarily), police have further dropped in prestige within the hierarchy of stigma. This sits well with previous theorising around how media accounts have glorified some key 'dirty' workers but not others in the UK (De Camargo and Whiley 2020) and in the US (Mejia *et al.* 2021). We theorise that it is the function that occupations play in the pandemic that determine their worth – those tasked with the unpleasant responsibility of policing the pandemic (e.g., prohibiting, fining, preventing a return to so-called 'normality') are perceived to be 'dirtier' while those who perform the lifesaving duties in the pandemic are perceived to be more prestigious. One of the key contributors to constructions of 'dirty' work and occupational prestige was gratitude – or lack thereof. Indeed, not receiving public gratitude had a great effect on police officers' morale. We conclude that the media plays a critical role in these



constructions and show that public gratitude (as emphasised by the media) may form part of an important 'status shield' for 'dirtier' workers.

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