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Inside the Chicken Factory: An Ethnographic Account of Dirty Work in Meat Processing

This ethnographic study of a slaughterhouse seeks to contribute to the ‘dirty work’ (Hughes, 1951,1958) literature in the following ways. First, ‘dirty work’ has been argued to vary ‘across occupations’ (Kreiner et al, 2006) but we argue that it also varies within them. To illustrate this we consider and contrast the experiences of production line workers with that of meat inspectors and this is important because the latter have been entirely neglected in the literature. Second, it has been argued that dirty workers form strong identities through developing close-knit work-group cultures (see Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). This is seen as the most significant feature of such work and yet, by contrast, we identify different conditions that are also significant including economics, migrant workers and intrinsic product qualities. Finally, in contrast to the culture of consent that has been depicted in slaughterhouses (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1992), we provide some limited evidence of conflict and resistance from our experiences at the chicken factory.

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