Invisibilised dirty work: The multiple realities of US airline pilots' work

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ABSTRACT
This paper builds upon Heather Höpfl's intellectual contributions in the areas of identity, dirt, and study of the unseen at commercial air carriers, by examining US airline pilots' work over the decade between 2000 and 2010. Challenging assumptions about pilots being an elite group of unemotional professionals, findings here reveal how a once prestigious profession devolved into 'invisibilised dirty work' in the occupational rhetoric of employees. In contrast to dirty work definitions in which the associated taint is static, externally applied, and predates employees' entry into their occupation, this study finds pilots' emotional dirty work involves a changed sense of occupational identity due to industry restructuring and increased managerialism in which employees were forced to perpetuate a charade of safety in a system they believe has become increasingly risky.

Introduction

A common aim in much of Heather Höpfl's research is to make visible that which is unseen, unquestioned, and irrational about the way work is experienced by people in organisations. As Höpfl (1992, 26) observes, "We inhabit a world made up of multiple realities". Exposing these often competing realities in our research can be an example of what Höpfl (2007) calls 'dirty writing'; that is, writing with the deliberate intention to contaminate, undermine, and disturb established norms in order to surface seemingly invisible dirt. "The dirty text", Pullen and Rhodes (2008, 247–8) note, "takes the ghost out of the closet and dances with it so as to celebrate its multiplicity, its defiance of order". This paper embraces this perspective in a study of how US airline pilots discussed their work in response to industry changes over the decade between 2000 and 2010.

The argument here disturbs established norms because pilots are often seen as confident, unemotional, protective father-figures, consummate heroic leaders: calm, mature, fearless individuals who can handle the most onerous and unexpected challenges without panicking (Hopkins 1982, 1998; Ashcraft 2005, 2007; Fraher 2011). Yet, in contrast to this imagery, the airline pilot interviews conducted during this study reflect an image of piloting as "emotional dirty work" in which employees were forced to perpetuate a charade of safety in a system they believe has become increasingly risky. McMurray and Ward (2014, 1134) define "emotional dirt as expressed feelings that threaten the solidarity, self-conception or preferred orders of a given individual or community". For pilots in this study, being pushed to accept unsafe work conditions outside of the public's awareness threatened their sense of professionalism and tainted their self-concept. As Ragins (2008) notes, the emotions associated with concealing an invisible stigmatised identity takes a toll on employees through psychological strain, emotional stress, and other stress-related factors and illnesses; all factors pilots reported here.

Aviation was an area of research interest for Höpfl as well. For instance in the 1990s, Heather authored several papers informed by her consultancy experience at British Airways (see for example, Höpfl, Sheila, and Spencer 1992; Höpfl and Linstead 1993; MacGregor and Höpfl 1993; Höpfl 1994). Similar to the present study, Höpfl's aviation research was conducted during a tumultuous time in airline industry history during which many air carriers struggled to restructure, laying off thousands of employees in the process, while attempting to manage their corporate culture and reputation. For example, Höpfl and Linstead (1993) adopt a dramaturgical framework to study the manipulation of airline employees' emotions during management development workshops held by British Airways. Citing examples of "corporate evangelism", Höpfl and Linstead (1993, 88) note senior managers' conversion techniques required airline employees to actively suspend disbelief and ignore workplace contradictions or risk posing a threat to the corporate definition of reality. To accomplish this, the study found, employees must internally carry the conflicting versions of reality and manage the associated emotions. This process, Höpfl and Linstead (1993, 92) observe, presents an interesting research opportunity "to consider the costs to corporate actors of carrying their roles in support of organizational action, reflecting on what happens when people find their roles 'unbearable'".

Another of Höpfl's novel aviation industry insights was identification of the subtle ways in which linear engineering paradigms often influenced airline corporate culture, the construction of meaning, and the manner in which workplace issues were perceived and addressed in pursuit of a coherent rational rhetoric underpinned by the assumed security of quantification. For example, Höpfl (1994) notes how "in the pursuit of corporate consensus, organizations seek to 'colonize' the non-rational, corporate culture functions to conceal discrepancies and to gloss over the dysfunctional" (50). In pursuit of this line of inquiry, Höpfl joined management studies pioneers such as Weick (1987) and Roberts (1989) in originating a critical line of reasoning that would eventually lead to establishment of a new field of study called High Reliability Organizations (HROs). HROs are organisations such as aircraft carriers and nuclear power plants that perform in a near error-free manner despite their complex, unpredictable, and dangerous operating environments. Although these organisations are known for their standardised procedures, checklists, and other routinised processes, HRO studies reveal that these organisations' consistent performance results less often from linear engineering paradigms and more often from organisational mindfulness processes. These processes challenge the unseen, unquestioned, and irrational, just as Höpfl emphasised, as a way to detect and correct errors and adapt to unexpected events before small factors develop into catastrophic failures.

This paper will take up Höpfl's intellectual legacy in these areas through a critical analysis of the US airline industry in the decade between 2000 and 2010. Previous studies have documented that airline pilots share a remarkably strong sense of occupational identity "symbolically and materially nestled in an elite, professional, white male body" (Ashcraft 2007, 16). Widely recognised for their technical, physical, and emotional mastery, pilots often deeply internalise this occupational identity, aspiring to fly – and captain – for a major airline from a young age (Ashcraft 2007; Fraher and Gabriel 2014). Thus, research reveals, the occupational identity of an airline pilot is crafted around a particular image of logical, unemotional, heterosexual, rational, civilised masculinity. "The success of commercial air passenger service has always depended, to an extraordinary degree, on the public's acceptance of this special mystique" (Hopkins 1982, 1). Therefore, there is tremendous pressure, both from within the occupation and outside of it, for pilots to conform to these expectations. Yet, as a result of the drastic changes encountered during a decade of industry restructuring, airline pilot interviews conducted in this study reflect less of an elite, prestigious profession and more of an image of piloting as emotional dirty work.[1]

This article makes three main contributions. First, through an analysis of the occupational rhetoric of US airline pilots, it challenges assumptions about the fixed nature of high-prestige professions and explores ways in which occupational identities can be shaped. Brown (2015, 20) notes investigating identity "encourages sophisticated, nuanced and contextual analyses of people-in-action" yet is also problematic because there is a continuing need to better understand the dynamics of

"identity work" – that is, how identities are constructed and reconstructed by employees in and around organisations. This paper contributes to this construction–reconstruction dialogue.

Second, through introduction of a new theoretical construct called 'invisibilised dirty work', the paper expands previous definitions of dirty work and contributes to our understanding of the processes underlying the intersection of dirty work and identity proposed by Simpson et al. (2012). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggest that what unites all forms of dirty work is a repugnance of outsiders to the occupation's work followed by the inevitable question 'how could you do that?'. However, this is not the case for airline pilots' work; therefore, a new definition is required and invisibilised dirty work is offered here.

> Invisibilized dirty work is defined as occupations that are perceived by outsiders as elite yet nonetheless involve activities that employees believe to be degrading or demeaning to them as professionals, challenging the prestige of their occupational identity.

In contrast to dirty work definitions in which the associated taint is static, externally applied, and predates employees' entry into their occupation, invisibilised dirty work involves an internally developed transformation from an elite profession into devalued work in response to occupational changes, often outside the view of the general public.

Finally, this study adds to our understanding of the repercussions of organisational restructuring for employees and the trauma induced when occupational identity is threatened (Cameron 2001; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Kitay and Wright 2007; Petriglieri 2011; Brown and Coupland 2015). The findings are important because relatively little attention has been paid to conceptualising the dynamic nature of occupational identity among elite professionals in their workplace (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Kitay and Wright 2007) or the process by which employee identity evolves (Ibarra 1999), and few studies have examined what happens in organisations after an identity threatening experience like that encountered by US airline pilots in the decade between 2000 and 2010 (Petriglieri 2011; Brown and Coupland 2015).

The paper is structured as follows. First, the study is situated within the history of the US airline industry and this discussion is followed by a review of the literature discussing dirty work and occupational identity theory. Next the research methods are explained and the study's findings are reported. This is followed by a discussion and conclusion section which includes the identification of areas of further research in the area of invisibilised dirty work.

Literature review

The recent history of US airlines

Pilots' decisions and actions have the potential to directly impact the safety of hundreds of lives, millions of dollars' worth of equipment, and the corporate reputation of billion dollar air carriers every time they take to the skies. Yet, unbeknownst to most people outside the airline industry, one of the fastest areas of occupational change in the USA has been in the commercial piloting profession. Airline bankruptcy and industry restructuring after 11th September 2001 (9/11) resulted in extensive employee layoffs called furloughs, an average 56% pay cut with a corresponding 20% increase in hours worked, and the loss of billions of dollars of employee retirement benefits due to US airlines' pension plan defaults (Fraher 2014). Of the 50,167 pilots employed by the major US airlines in 2000, almost 11,000 (21%) saw their jobs disappear by 2010 and over 20,000 pilots changed uniforms and adopted new work rules in a wave of air carrier mergers and acquisitions (Bureau of Transportation Statistics 2011). I worked for a major airline during this period and like hundreds of my fellow experienced airline pilots, I gave up on the tumultuous industry in order to pursue other forms of employment.

The roots of this period of industry instability can be traced back to the US Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 which aimed to reduce airfares and broaden consumer choice by opening the industry up to

market forces. Yet, rather than increasing competition, the deregulated environment created an oligopoly in which almost 80% of the US aviation industry today is dominated by just four airlines – United, American, Delta, and Southwest – severely limiting pilots' employment options (Drew, July 1, 2015). Once hired by a major airline and established on the labour union's seniority list,[2] an airline career was historically viewed as a job for life, even if employment involved periods of instability and layoff. Today, that image has changed.

As airlines gained power in the deregulated environment, aviation labour unions lost influence and employees were often forced to accept unpopular concessions purportedly to help their airline remain viable (Heppenheimer 1995; Ott and Neidl 1995; Petzinger 1995). In the 1990s, intense competition fuelled by CEOs' expansion aspirations led to the extensive purchase of new planes and record hiring of employees in what would quickly become an unsustainable business model based on flawed 'economies of scale' theories (Fraher 2014; Fraher and Gabriel 2014). Several studies note that by 2000 the global aviation industry was experiencing significant revenue decline and in need of restructuring due to managerial gambles in the 1990s and, as a result, airlines used the terrorist events of 9/11 opportunistically to drive change agendas unions had effectively resisted prior to 2001 (Harvey 2007; Fraher 2014; Taylor and Moore 2015). The cumulative impact of these changes caused a drastic decline in worker quality of life and the stability of pilots' identity. Several studies have investigated the implications of these post-9/11 managerial strategies at European airlines such as Ryanair and British Airways (Blyton et al. 2001; Gittell and Bamber 2010; Harvey and Turnbull 2010; Curley and Royle 2013). Yet, little research has investigated either the emergence of 'low-road' managerialism in American air carriers or its repercussions for US airline pilots.

Dirty work

Sociologist Everett Hughes (1951, 1958, 1962) was perhaps the first to apply the term dirty work in his study of a wide range of jobs and professions. He defined dirty work as occupations that involve activities that are disgusting, degrading, or demeaning, wounding employees' dignity in a way that "goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions" of work (Hughes 1951, 319). Although Hughes' definition remains the most cited in dirty work literature, early studies predominantly focused on low-prestige occupations encountering physical contamination such as dirt, garbage, slime, and pollution. It is important to note that early dirty work models emerged from social psychology theory which presumes that occupational identity is a fixed set of enduring characteristics that allow workers to view themselves and their work in a positive light.

It was not until almost 50 years later that Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) advanced dirty work theory by classifying activities into three more subtle categories of taint or stigma – physical, social, and moral – within two types of occupational levels: low- and high-prestige. This more nuanced framework was helpful because when applied to relatively high-prestige professions such as police, psychiatrists, or casino managers, for example, less visible taints emerged such as the social taint of being in contact with society's outcasts or the moral taint of facilitating others' dubious activities. Another key characteristic of Ashforth and Kreiner's dirty work definitions is that workers are seen in the eyes of others as spoiled, blemished, polluted, or flawed, resulting in the creation of a 'spoiled identity' for group members. Yet, paradoxically, research found that through a complex socialisation process, dirty workers often redefined their work in a positive light thereby increasing their occupational pride and individual self-esteem.

In addition to providing the original definition, Hughes also alerted researchers to the complex organisational dynamics involved in assigning labels to dirty workers and their tasks. For example, Hughes (1958) emphasised, although all jobs have some unsavoury aspects, dirty work involves taboo activities which are routinely delegated to others through a division of labour that downgrades the perceived dirtiness of some tasks in order to upgrade a profession's image. Thus, physicians may handle the same sort of human bodily fluids and faeces as nurses' aides, hospital cleaners, and

morticians in the course of their work. Yet, doctors are unlikely to be labelled as dirty workers because of their high occupational status. As a result, Hughes emphasised, to understand the complexity of dirty work it is important to consider the entire social system from the vantage point of the various actors involved, not just the tasks workers perform.

This is an important element in the invisibilised dirty work debate and Höpfl's dramaturgical framework can be particularly helpful here (Höpfl and Linstead 1993; Höpfl 1994, 2012). Höpfl and Linstead (1993) analysed how British Airways repeatedly appealed to employees' emotions with much fanfare and theatrics as a way to motivate workers and inspire company pride. By offering employees a shared dream, the airline attempted to hardwire a complex network of emotional dependency, tapping into workers' identity. Yet, for some employees, the experience instigated cynicism not bonding as they referred to this "corporate evangelism" as "shared humiliation rather than shared self-esteem" (Höpfl and Linstead 1993, 88).

Research also suggests that dirty workers are acutely aware of the stigma associated with their jobs (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss 2006; Ashforth et al. 2007). However, the repercussions can be surprising. For example, while the taint of dirtiness can undermine the status of certain occupations in the eyes of outsiders, it can simultaneously enhance occupational identity and workgroup cohesion within the group as employees band together against the perception of outside threat or 'shared humiliation', as described above. Outsiders' intrusive questions and unfounded assumptions based on widespread occupational misperceptions further strengthen intragroup bonds creating an 'us versus them' culture that can make dirty work occupational identities more salient for employees. As a result, those in dirty work occupations often report higher identification and collective esteem than workers in many other professions precisely because the stigma fosters a strong subculture that establishes clear boundaries and builds unity (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Therefore, dirty work as a theoretical construct offers significant potential to generate new insights into organisational processes related to the construction of occupational identities.

Höpfl (2012), among others, investigates how the boundaries between clean and dirty – and therefore good and bad – work and workers are demarcated, enforced, and resisted. Studies have examined nurses (Bolton 2005), accountants (Morales and Lambert 2013), police officers (Dick 2005), firefighters and correctional officers (Tracy and Scott 2006), veterinary technicians (Sanders 2010), exotic dancers (Mavin and Grandy 2013), recyclers (Gowan 2009), and sex shop workers (Tyler 2011). Most scholars seem to adopt the dirty work concept as a sense-making heuristic, employing it as a means to examine the ways workers deal with their stigma in three overlapping research areas:

(1) Deflecting or counterbalancing the negative effects of occupational taint (Tracy and Scott 2006; Sanders 2010; Stanley and Mackenzie-Davey 2012; Morales and Lambert 2013);
(2) Normalising occupational taint and reconstructing workers' identities to become more honourable, clean, and good (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Ashforth et al. 2007; Gowan 2009; Sanders 2010; Mavin and Grandy 2013); or
(3) Embracing or celebrating occupational taint (Dick 2005; Gowan 2009; Tyler 2011; Morales and Lambert 2013).

This third less-explored research area utilises a social constructionist perspective, similar to the approach adopted in this airline pilot study, analysing why some jobs and tasks are considered dirty, and others are not, by examining the context in which employees perform them. Results reveal that taint is in the 'eye of the beholder' where one person's taboo is another individual's normal.

For example, Dick (2005) observes that since police officers see their primary purpose as fighting crime, the use of violence and coercive force is not viewed negatively within their work group. Tyler (2011) reports that employees in London's retail sex shops saw their job and their clients' predilections as perfectly ordinary, not strange or perverse. And Gowan (2009) notes ways that homeless 'canners' in San Francisco who scavenged recycling by 'dumpster diving' in trash bins proudly

consider themselves blue-collar workers who help keep the city clean. As a result, dirty work research reveals that the meanings attached to certain tasks and roles within a given profession are neither universal nor monolithic but rather continuously evolving within a social, political, and ideological context.

These findings are important contributions to the dirty worker identity debate, yet few of these studies expanded the dirty work construct beyond the early tripartite classification of work involving physical, social, and moral dirt. In contrast, McMurray and Ward (2014) recently proposed a fourth category called 'emotional dirty work'. Their study of the Samaritans, a UK charity that supports people in distress, found that Samaritans are agents of society's 'emotional dirty work' who view their job, and its associated emotional labour, as a positive, satisfying experience. Yet, outsiders often viewed Samaritans as tainted with an undesirable 'differentness' because they speak to troubled people about taboo feelings and behaviours such as suicide, addiction, or paedophilia. McMurray and Ward (2014, 1133) found that emotional dirt can overlap with social and moral dirt when it threatens preferred order and an individual's self-concept, emphasising "that emotional dirt, as with other forms of dirt, is a matter of perspective, such that the boundary between pure and polluted is far from stable".

Occupational identity construction

Although identity has become a popular theme across a wide range of organisational research (Alvesson 2010; Gioia et al. 2010), when considering 'occupational identity' per se, workplace studies typically focused on ascribed identity characteristics. In most cases, there are visible – gender, age, or skin colour – and invisible – sexual orientation, religion, or able-bodiedness – aspects to these identities. However, recent studies by DeJordy (2008) and Clair, Beatty, and Maclean (2005) observe how less distinct 'invisible social identities' have been left relatively unexplored. In addition, Ragins (2008) notes employees with invisible stigmas constitute a relatively large proportion of the workforce and the stress associated with concealing an invisible stigmatised identity can be devastating. Therefore, this is an area that warrants further examination in organisation study.

Heeding Pratt and Foreman's (2000) call to be clear about what I mean by the term 'identity' in this paper, I adopt Karreman and Alvesson's (2001, 64) definition that identity consists of characteristics which emerge and evolve through a social and interactive co-creation process within a work community and contains "a dynamic, multi-layered set of meaningful elements deployed to orient and position one's being in the world". All interactions have identity effects. As such, occupational identity is constructed, reconstructed, and sustained within a community of workers as they collectively deploy various rhetorical and other devices to make sense of their work context, differentiate themselves from other occupational groups, and support their individual identities (Groce 1989; Fine 1996; Kitay and Wright 2007; Clarke, Brown, and Hailey 2009; Thornborrow and Brown 2009).

In contrast to the traditional social psychology view that occupational identity is based on distinctive and enduring characteristics that are relatively fixed, coherent, and stable (Schein 1978), the analysis adopted here embraces a social constructionist approach. Therefore occupational identities can be seen as dynamic (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000), malleable (Guichard et al. 2012), provisional (Ibarra 1999), and engaging with a wide repertoire of resources as occupational group members develop a shared sense of who they are and how they should respond to workplace challenges (Kitay and Wright 2007). Thus, Ashcraft (2007, 10) notes, "occupational identity is an ongoing rhetorical endeavour" reflected in the narratives of employees.

From this perspective, it becomes clear how organisational reality and work identities are co-constructed as employees' quest for identity intersects, intermingles, and interacts with organisational activity (Karreman and Alvesson 2001). For example, Fine's (1996, 95) study of restaurant employees found that cooks draw on "a large rhetorical 'toolkit'" to develop clusters of images of themselves as professionals, artists, surgeons, handymen, and psychologists in response to a wide range of workplace challenges. Similarly, Kitay and Wright (2007) explore how organisational consultants'

occupational rhetoric reveals multiple competing identities such as professionals, prophets, business-men, and service workers in response to varied contextual settings. And Bunderson and Thompson (2009) note that zookeepers' occupational rhetoric includes images of their job as a personal calling with moral obligations, an identity that gratifies zoo employees with deeply meaningful work, yet also leaves them open to managerial exploitation.

The findings of these studies suggest that worker identity is constituted from bundles of mean-ingful imagery represented in employees' occupational rhetoric. These images allow people to draw upon a variety of identities as a way to address a range of workplace challenges. Yet, we know little about how occupational identities may transform in response to environmental changes such as the airline industry restructuring pilots in this study experienced. Particularly critical to improving our understanding of work, Barley and Kunda (2001, 84) note, "are field studies that examine work practices and relationships *in situ*", as done in the present study.

The ways in which relatively privileged professional groups respond to challenges to their occu-pational identity, especially when threats involve corporate restructuring to the extent described here, has only recently begun to be investigated (Cameron 2001; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006; Kitay and Wright 2007; Brown and Coupland 2015). Employees experiencing workplace change often feel a loss of status, uncertainty about the future, and corre-sponding threats to the identity of their occupational group (Callan et al. 2007). As they attempt to adapt, experienced professionals may experiment with provisional selves, adopt new roles, and evaluate options as ways to guide their identity reconstruction (Ibarra 1999). The goal, research reveals, is to offset the negative repercussions and enhance a positive sense of self (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Dick 2005; Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss 2006; Ashforth et al. 2007; Kitay and Wright 2007; Dutton and Roberts 2010). Yet, few studies evaluate the ways occupational identity can become reconfigured in negative ways, challenging the prestige of a profession, outside of employ-ees' control.

Petriglieri (2011, 644) was one of the first scholars to offer a definition of identity threat, noting it arises from "experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity". Later, Brown and Coupland (2015, 1318) define identity threat as "any discursively con-stituted thought or feeling that challenges one of an individual or group's preferred identity narra-tives". These definitions are helpful in this discussion because they emphasise the ways in which identities become dynamic, mutable, and malleable in employees' discursive practices when workers feel under threat. In the next section, I provide examples of the transformation of airline pilots' occupational identities after they experienced the industry restructuring that occurred between 2000 and 2010. As Petriglieri noted, an identity threat of this magnitude becomes particu-larly problematic for workers because they are unable to interact with the sources of the threat. There is little they can do to help themselves. Therefore, the experience remains unresolved, like an open wound. By examining the meanings embedded in pilots' occupational rhetoric, this study provides examples of the ways occupational identities can evolve when under threat during times of industry change. What is important to note is that pilots do not try to counterbalance the negative effects of this emerging occupational taint, reconfigure their new identity to be more honourable, clean and good, or celebrate the taint; coping strategies other dirty work studies recently reported.

Method

Although my aim in this paper is to build theory about the nature of occupational identity construc-tion by offering a more nuanced model of dirty work for elite professions, the data analysed were not originally collected for this purpose. Rather it was part of a larger research project investigating airline industry safety in the post-9/11 period. The fieldwork was carried out over 11 months between Sep-tember 2010 and July 2011 and included 43 semi-structured interviews with pilot volunteers from US airlines who were either contacted via a labour union forum or subsequently identified via snowball sampling. A wide range of secondary sources, such as Congressional Hearing reports, Government

Accounting Office studies, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) documents, National Transportation Safety Board reports, and books, journal articles, online resources, and newspapers, were also reviewed in order to understand the environmental context within which US airline pilots were working.

Participants

Informants were all US airline captains and co-pilots who ranged in age from 32 to 63 years old, were predominately male (96%), civilian trained (70%), and averaged 23 years of total aviation experience with 13.5 years flying at major commercial airlines and an average of 10,271 flight hours. In sum, they were all established professionals with significant civilian aviation experience and years invested in their airline career. All informants, referred to here by pseudonyms, were eager to participate and answered all questions posed. Interviews ranged from 41 minutes to two hours and three minutes, and were transcribed and coded using NVivo 10, a computerised software program.

Interviews were mainly non-directive. Although an interview guide was used, respondents co-determined the direction and flow of the conversation (Trethewey 2001). Because pilot interviews were intended to contribute to a forthcoming book investigating airline safety (Fraher 2014), not an article on occupational identity, my questions initially focused on operational issues. The nature and extent of pilots' dirty work experience only emerged over time, and quite spontaneously, as informants volunteered other information outside the scope of my initial questioning. Focusing on surprises and unanticipated responses such as these are a good methodological rule, encouraging findings that can offer new insights (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003).

Data analysis

As I repeatedly listened to the recorded interviews and then typed the transcripts and coded the data, I embraced Alvesson and Karreman's (2007, 1265) suggestion to "aim for more creative ways of theorising" and sought to identify points of tension or 'mysteries' to solve with my empirical material. I noticed that pilots were particularly honest, emotional, and reflective in their responses, eager to share their reality. They reported feeling conflicted about how the image of their occupational identity had changed, wavering from anger and resentment to sadness and desperation. These were emotions many informants seemed uncomfortable navigating and, at times, our conversation seemed almost cathartic as informants worked through unsettled feelings about workplace changes and, in some cases, their derailed and devalued aviation careers.

My focus became directed towards understanding meaning from the informants' point of view and the emotion behind their responses helped guide me. Following Stewart and Lucio's (2011, 328) suggestion, I sought "active and conscious worker voices" and their narratives in order to "highlight patterns of collective expressions of what work does to people, their various struggles to make sense of this together with their practical struggles against it". I began to see what Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013, 16) describe as emerging "social construction processes" which required me to "focus more on the means by which organisation members go about constructing and understanding their experience and less on the number and frequency of measurable occurrences". Through this lens the taint of pilots' emotional dirty work first became salient.

Reflexivity

Organisational researchers such as Weick (1999) and Cunliffe (2003), among others, have called for scholars to research reflexively in ways that compellingly demonstrates trustworthiness and reliability by recognising and avoiding potential bias in their rendering of organisational realities. Other studies propose the need for 'ethical' reflexivity as a way for researchers to offer a more critical basis for

constructing meaning, assessing identities, and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions (Collins and Wray-Bliss 2005; Grey and Sinclair 2006; Rhodes 2009). Following this tradition, I share that I am a retired Naval Aviator and former US airline pilot, who embarked on an academic career about 13 years ago and currently work in a UK business school. This resumé allowed me to gain insider access to this hard to reach population and engage with them as a peer, eliciting responses of an honesty and depth that might have been difficult for other researchers. Yet, I am aware that this experience also influences my interpretations. There have been discussions about the challenges and suspicions surrounding personally informed research such as this or what Brewis (2005, 495) calls the "intermingling of personal and professional worlds in academia". Yet, following Brewis, I argue that my personal history does not unfairly prejudice or invalidate the present study's research findings. Instead, I believe it contributes a unique signature that spans the scholar–practitioner divide and produces novel results.

Is airline piloting dirty work? I have been repeatedly told by fellow academics at prestigious conferences and editors of and reviewers for well-regarded journals that piloting is not dirty. In most cases, I am offered the example of a pilot friend or family member who, I am told, would 'never consider their airline job dirty'. At the end of this conversation, I am often offered some epistemological criticism and directed to consider my own orientation to the topic in my role as researcher. Yet, paradoxically, I believe this rejection of this paper's thesis provides additional empirical support for the invisibilised dirty work pilots have been pushed to deal with in the decade between 2000 and 2010. The flying public does not want to know about the increasing industry risks. Therefore, pilots are forced to perpetuate a charade of safety and, I suggest, some of my fellow members of the academy have, albeit perhaps unconsciously, joined in attempting to keep this professional identity change invisible.

As Höpfl and Linstead (1993) note, to accomplish this charade and keep these changes invisible, pilots are forced to internally carry the conflicting versions of reality and manage the associated emotions. In contrast to established images of pilots as calm, unemotional, and fearless individuals, my informants' responses were often emotional, irrational, and paradoxical. However, instead of seeking to harmonise these inconsistencies, I adopted Alvesson's (2010, 195) recommendation to "widen the imagination" and consider connections that may not initially be obvious. Gradually, the concept of a sullied image emerged as common in pilots' rhetoric as they struggled to cope with a nearly unanimous sense that their profession had suffered a drastic decline in prestige. As I further analysed the data, it became clear that changes in pilots' occupational rhetoric were intertwined with changes in their workplace experience and represented coping strategies they employed to manage these changes in their work context (Brown and Starkey 2000). As Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) observed in the medical field, comments about these changes became most evident in informants' occupational rhetoric when employees' ideas about who they were as professionals conflicted with the tasks they were being asked to accomplish in their work. It is important to emphasise that these activities may not necessarily seem 'dirty' to outsiders. However, they felt tainted and demeaning to informants because they conflicted with their identity as safe, professional pilots.

Piloting as invisibilised dirty work

When considering the variety of identities embedded in the occupational rhetoric of the airline pilots interviewed, I adopted Alvesson and Robertson's (2006, 200) view that "identity is a construction that needs to appear credible to the person or group defining itself, but does not have to pass a strict rigorous reality test". Thus, I began by seeking to understand the ways pilots thought about their work and the context within which their identity construction process took place. As Brown and Toyoki (2013, 876) note, identity construction consists of reflexive "mutually constitutive processes by which people strive to shape relatively coherent and distinctive notions of their selves" within the "institutional environment". Through this process, the pilots studied here attempted to cope

with the rapid occupational change they were experiencing as airlines restructured, creating an environment of uncertainty and instability.

A loss of prestige

Pilots readily describe how their work environment – and their attitude towards it – changed between 2000 and 2010. For example, Aaron noted:

> Pre- and post-9/11 were very different. It was longer hours, under lower pay with more draconian work rules. Definitely, more time away from home … Before 9/11, I was always willing to help out the company if they called me and needed a favour. Post-9/11, when I went back [to work from furlough], I was never willing to help out. I felt like I'd been burned by the company, burned by the union. I just wanted to do my job and go home.

Similarly, Jose explained,

> Before 9/11 being an airline pilot was a career. After 9/11, it was just a job. There's a big difference in your frame of mind going to your job versus going to your life long career … I don't have that pride anymore.

In addition to losing pride in the profession, Raj described how the prestige of the piloting profession declined as well:

> The biggest change [over the last decade] is the self-perception of the work done by the employee. [Before 9/11], there was a lot of pride in being an airline pilot. You could tell. Walk down the terminal and a lot of people would look at you admiringly. It was a career that people would aspire to … [Now] you would be hard pressed to find anybody who could with good conscience recommend this career track.

Karen, a furloughed co-pilot, recalled how when she went looking for a new job prospective employers seemed to revel in major airline pilots' struggles:

> [Some employers] wanted you to be very humble … The idea of all these laid off airline pilots wanting to come work for them … [They] were almost happy to see these major airline pilots be brought down a peg … Some of them were just awful to me, and there's no doubt they delighted in it. They really wanted you to be apologetic for your background: 'Oh forgive me Father for I have sinned, I swear I'll never be an airline pilot again!'

Dick (2005) noted in her study of police officers that one of the identity challenges for dirty workers is that they are not always at work or around people who understand the psychological stigma of their experiences. Put differently, Höpfl (2012) observed, dirty work often involves theatrical props and performance of a role in ways that can be psychologically demanding. Yet, the audience cannot appreciate the price this experience exacts: "Only fellow actors understand the sense of abuse which they share" and as a result they "find solace in their own company" Höpfl (2012, 25–30) noted. Similarly, pilots in this study talked about feeling misunderstood and isolated, forced to grapple with their loss of prestige outside of society's awareness. For example Greg explained:

> With family, I can share stuff because they obviously have a little bit more understanding than most people. But if I'm in a social situation, I don't even tell people what I do. All it does is get you worked up when they make the comments that they do – 'Oh, you were overpaid', 'Oh, you get free travel', or 'Oh, you get to stay at wonderful places' – and it's very tough to deal with … Very few people out there have any clue what has gone on [in the piloting profession].

Anthony voiced a similar sense of frustration about society's misperceptions about their purportedly elite profession: "[I] only [talk] with fellow pilots who have been furloughed. You can't talk to anyone else … No one else understands. They don't. They say things that are so stupid … They don't have a clue".

Pilot pushing

In addition to struggling with their loss of prestige and sense of isolation, pilots described feeling "constant turmoil" at work, observing employees were "unhappy", "beat down", and pushed to the

"breaking point". As a result, there was a "mood change" between employees and airline managers in the decade between 2000 and 2010 during which management became "more of big brother", looking over workers' shoulders. Respondents felt this surveillance was "almost punitive and pervaded the whole environment" which "made people even more angry", "stressed", and "distracted". Kevin recalled:

> When I was first at [my airline in 1997] I didn't feel like I was at odds with management. I knew there was a labour versus management perspective, but there always appeared to be an ability to work that out. In the last decade, that doesn't seem to be the case … . [Airline executives] are just ruthless. They don't care about their employees. They are sold out to a buck. It has become a 'me-versus-you' industry.

In response to these changes, many informants reported that they needed to be vigilant about monitoring regulations and protecting their rights, or risk being pressured to do something unsafe, a practice they called 'pilot pushing'. For instance, Jose observed, "When you're being pushed to not call in sick, or being questioned when you call in sick, that's not being safe". Other pilots volunteered ways that pilot pushing involved operational decisions and maintenance practices as well. For example, Aaron explained:

> You had to actually refuse to fly the airplane in order for them to get maintenance out to the plane. They wouldn't come out. They wouldn't let you do anything about it unless you said 'I refuse the airplane'. Basically, it felt like pilot pushing.

Informants resisted 'pilot pushing', they reported, by knowing company work rules, federal aviation regulations, labour union contracts, and even federal legislation. Yet the distinction between legal and illegal was not always clear, as Christopher explained: "There was greater pressure on the pilots to accept aircraft that were not in a good condition to fly: legal to fly? – yes; but safe to fly? – no". Monitoring the ambiguous area between legal and safe was particularly stressful, as Captain Andrew explained,

> There's been times that they've tried to get pilots to do things that were against our contract. Now this is not illegal, because they weren't violating any FAA regulations. But knowingly asking pilots to exceed their contractual requirements [is unsafe].

The repercussions of fighting back against pilot pushing were also problematic. Captain Jimmy was fired after refusing to fly an unsafe airplane:

> [Pilots] were leaving [my airline] left and right, saying they'd just 'sold their soul'. They were doing things I'd never seen them do. I found out real quickly what they were talking about. If you didn't violate an FAR [Federal Aviation Regulation] for [managers] it was like you became a pariah immediately … Once you've done something that's illegal, and they have it on record that you did, now they hold it over your head.

Like Jimmy, fellow Captain Gilles worried how these aviation industry changes escalated risks; a troubling quandary for safety-conscious pilots:

> I'm afraid for some [managers, air safety] is just a distant connection, and if we should have an accident it's just 'Oh my goodness, that's why we have insurance. That's really unfortunate. Don't take it personally. Let's put a flower on their grave and move on'.

Emphasising how alien this type of thinking was to professional pilots, Charles observed: "Maybe those management people have figured out that they can afford to crash one airplane every two years and they don't care because they're not riding on the airplane. Maybe that's what it comes down to".

Declining health

In addition to a decline in prestige and a feeling that they were being pushed to accept unsafe working conditions, many pilots, like Karen, described the toll the changed environment took on their health:

> When I came back [from furlough] I was, to be quite honest, *shocked* at how different the [working] conditions were … .I was shocked. It was the most tired I had been in my professional life … I was sick a lot, I'd have bronchitis. I was just kind of always under the weather.

Similarly, Gilles described how the combined influence of increased flying and outside stressors made it difficult for pilots to function at optimal levels:

> Fatigue has been a huge issue. Pilots are working many, many more hours than they ever used to. Fatigue is just as debilitating as any substance abuse. Your brain can't function well. So that's a big concern … Many people were completely behind the power curve in terms of rest … It just added layer upon layer of stress.

Examples of the repercussions of the fatigue and stress Karen and Gilles mentioned are readily available. For instance, Doug succinctly observed, "I think it's almost a miracle that there wasn't bent metal and dead people at [my airline]". Others, like Henry, offered ready examples of the repercussions:

> Fatigue became a big issue, stress was certainly an issue. Between people getting furloughed, people having trouble paying their bills, there's financial stress. It put a lot of stress on pilots from a lot of different angles … I went through a divorce. I knew other people who did as well. Personal lives took a real beating.

Stress was not just a factor for the furloughed employees. For both downsized pilots and the remaining survivors, financial unpredictability and working with soon-to-be-laid-off employees were frequently mentioned as causes of stress and distraction. Captain Jasper recalled nearly every flight "I was flying with a co-pilot that was being furloughed either that month or the next month. The stress was 'unbelievable'". And "when there's stress on one pilot, there's definitely stress on both'.

Prompted in part by his experience of being airborne on 9/11 and suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, Jasper took time off, went into therapy, and completed a master's degree in counselling. He noted, "I have quite a bit of background in the effects of depression and stress [now]. It was really obvious to me that at least half of the guys I was flying with were clinically depressed". They "were probably at the level where they really shouldn't have been flying". As McMurray and Ward (2014, 1134) note, dealing with 'out of place' emotions – that is, emotions that have no other space for being worked through, heard or managed – is the essence of emotional dirty work.

Survivalism

As a result of the industry changes pilots' experienced, nearly all informants interviewed described a sense of desperation and feeling that they needed to do whatever was required to survive. Many pilots confided that the passion they formerly felt for their airline career was gone. They had no love left for their career and were just going through the motions at work. For example, Jose was fed up with his airline's work environment and initially decided not to return after furlough. But with three children, he explained, he needed the money: "The only reason I would go back is for financial reasons – not for the love of flying". Similarly Graham, another furloughed co-pilot, reported: "If I go back [to fly at my airline] it's not to resume my career or anything, it's just another opportunity for me to go back and make some money".

Other pilots took the future into their own hands, pursuing other employment, as Henry described:

> I decided to take a voluntary furlough because I didn't like the way things were going. I didn't have confidence that the airline was going to survive. Based on the things they were doing and the people who were running the place, it looked to me like [my airline] was in a death spiral.

Images of their industry in a 'death spiral' were particularly disconcerting to pilots because most expected relatively stable employment and a predictable career path up the seniority ladder to captain. For many informants, piloting was a dream they had aspired to for most of their lives (Fraher and Gabriel 2014). Karen described the significance of her pilot identity:

> I knew this was what I wanted to do from the time I was 5 years old … [It's] probably inappropriately important to my identity! … Flying is not only my job but it's also my favourite hobby which I think ties into why it's probably way too much a part of my identity. It's not only what I do for a living but it's what I do for fun.

Similarly, Christopher recalled "I was going to be a [major airline] pilot. It's as simple as that. And I've had that dream probably for 30 years". And Anthony was even more specific in his aspirations: "My dream was to … [become an airline] captain".

The dream of a career in aviation and working as an airline pilot was fundamental to informants' occupational identity. Therefore, for many who were laid off, the lack of access to this identity was particularly devastating. As Karen described it:

> Most pilots are hard wired to be decisive, take action, and gather the facts. We are very methodical people and we get paid to make decisions for a living. To not have the ability to make decisions and control our own destiny in terms of our own career is very unsettling. Realistically, I may never be a captain again.

Discussion

Dirty work research to date has predominantly focused on examining the ways a profession's associated taint is managed in jobs in which the stigma is static, externally applied, and predates employees' entry into their occupation. Although Stanley and Mackenzie-Davey (2012) examined the rhetorical strategies investment bankers used to delegitimise their stigma after the 2008 financial crisis, few other studies have considered how employees in elite occupations experienced their transformation from prestigious profession into dirty work. Particularly lacking are studies of when the stigma is not projected on to workers from outside, as with bankers, but rather developed collectively from within the occupation as the workgroup struggles to cope with identity threat and their new "invisible social identities" (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005, 78). To evaluate this occupational identity shift, this article builds upon Höpfl's work aimed at surfacing that which is unseen and unquestioned, by introducing a new theoretical construct called 'invisibilised dirty work'. 'Invisibilised dirty work' is defined as undertaken within occupations that are perceived by outsiders as elite yet nonetheless involve activities that employees believe to be degrading or demeaning to them as professionals, challenging the prestige of their occupational identity. It differs from traditional dirty work definitions in six significant ways.

First, influential dirty work models have their roots in social identity theory which assume that occupational identity is a relatively fixed set of central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that allow people to see themselves and their work in a positive, dignified light (see for example, Hughes 1951; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). In contrast, invisibilised dirty work adopts a social constructionist perspective which suggests that occupational identity is not static but rather a dynamically unfolding evolutionary process occurring within an ever-changing social, political, and ideological context (Ibarra 1999; Karreman and Alvesson 2001; Dick 2005; Forray 2006).

Second, dirty work studies have identified a range of activities which workers adopt to normalise their stigma and restore their self-esteem. For example dirty workers may employ social buffers, differentiating between sympathetic and critical outsiders, as a way to 'circle the wagons' and form a network of sympathetic supporters (Ashforth et al. 2007). They may also develop complex occupational ideologies such as reframing their taint as a badge of honour, recalibrating the taint to diminish its significance, or refocusing attention away from their stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Through this process, dirty workers ennoble the 'dirty particulars' of their work by characterising it in more positive and productive ways. For example, public defenders claim they protect citizens' constitutional rights, not help criminals go free; prostitutes claim they provide therapeutic services, not sell sex; and funeral directors help people grieve, not profit from others' despair. In contrast, invisibilised dirty workers do not often seek these types of coping mechanisms or try to develop what Ragins (2008, 202) calls "environmental support for disclosure" because this strategy may have additional negative consequences. Instead, as pilots in this study reported, employees with invisible

stigmas often isolate themselves as a way to protect their feelings and insulate themselves from further outsider inquiries. Even disclosure to family members or just the fear of anticipated negative reactions can have negative consequences for some groups, Ragins (2008) reports, and is sufficient to influence disclosure decisions.

Third, dirty work studies typically emphasise the physical, social, and moral nature of occupational taint. In contrast, pilots' invisibilised dirty work involves overlapping emotional and moral taints such as a loss of prestige, reduction in workplace autonomy, and a sense they were being pushed to perpetuate a charade of safety in a system they believe has become increasingly risky. Unlike a social taint which can be deflected by blaming others or a physical taint which can be reframed as an important service to society, it is difficult to resolve the emotional and moral aspects of an invisible stigma. As Petriglieri (2011) noted, if workers are unable to interact with the source of their identity threat, feelings can remain unresolved like an open wound.

Fourth, a central feature in traditional dirty work definitions is that a group's occupational stigma is projected on to the workgroup by society. However, invisibilised dirty work's stigma is internally constructed through group rhetoric, not imparted by external judgment or societal stigma. This is an important distinction leading to the fifth difference: invisibilised dirty work's stigma is not seen by outsiders. And, because these taints are most often hidden from view, the workgroup's sense of societal isolation is further exasperated. Finally, most dirty work research to date has focused on low-prestige occupations with only a passing reference to high status occupations. In contrast, invisibilised dirty work involves high-prestige occupations which suffer a decline in status.

Implications for further research

In terms of further research, much has been written in the news lately about how US companies are faring better than ever in today's flexible capitalism while American workers' wages and benefits, and hence quality of life, continue to decline (Norris, August 9, 2013; Editorial Board, August 31, 2013). As a result, the invisibilised dirty work model has potentially widespread applicability. For example, US health-care analysts estimate that President Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will drastically change the US medical profession (Lowrey and Pear, July 28, 2012). Hospitals are already experiencing the biggest wave of mergers since the 1990s, creating giant medical systems that could one day dominate American health care (Creswell and Abelson, August 12, 2013). And, like the airline pilots studied here, medical mergers could drastically change the employment experience of professionals within it, reducing doctors' autonomy, reallocating tasks, and diminishing the prestige of their formerly elite occupation.

Similarly, a recent study of US Navy SEALs found that as military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, many young SEALs were upset that their missions changed from war-fighting to peace-making. After completing the arduous SEAL training programme, they considered a peace-keeping mission drinking tea in a tent with Afghan elders inappropriate for masculine warriors (Schoultz 2013). Applying the invisibilised dirty work model in this case, it becomes clear how the emotional taint of feminised pacifism was internally constructed through group rhetoric, not imparted by external judgment. Society may believe peace-keeping missions are prestigious, for example, but Navy SEALs apparently do not.

A third avenue for further invisibilised dirty work research might be found by examining Olympians or professional athletes, particularly women, whose careers may seem prestigious. Yet with low salaries, fewer commercial endorsements, and smaller tournament purses, women often struggle to earn enough to support themselves (Seminara, August 31, 2013).

Conclusion

While organisations produce goods and services, they are also settings in which a significant amount of social reality is co-constructed influencing employees' identities. Heather Höpfl's distinguished

legacy of workplace research urges scholars to examine the occupational rhetoric of employees as a way to understand the ways in which their world is made up of multiple, embedded, often competing and sometimes conflicted realities (see, for example, Höpfl 1992, 1994, 2003, 2007, 2012; Höpfl and Linstead 1993). These identity narratives can challenge the prestige of a profession in the eyes of employees. Traditional definitions describe dirty work as involving activities that are disgusting, degrading, or demeaning, and thereby develop an associated physical, social, or moral taint that is static, externally applied, and predates employees' entry into their occupation. In contrast, this study found the emotional taint of pilots' dirty work was internally constructed in response to environmental pressures and involved a change in self-perceptions of occupational prestige, outside of society's awareness. In contrast to other research which found commercial pilots predominantly draw on images of a particular form of unemotional, heterosexual masculinity – commanding, civilised, rational, scientific, technical, and paternal – this study found contemporary airline pilot rhetoric significantly more nuanced and paradoxical.

By analysing the occupational rhetoric of US airline pilots, this article expands the literature investigating occupational identity construction processes in threatening environments and, through development of a new theoretical construct called 'invisibilised dirty work', offers a lens by which to consider emotional dirty work in other professions. Thus, it expands the literature in three theoretical debates, among others: emotional dirty work (McMurray and Ward 2014), identity threats for elite professionals (Petriglieri 2011; Brown and Coupland 2015), and invisible social identities (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005, 78).

By synthesising these bodies of literature and explicitly acknowledging the complex organisational dynamics associated with the creation of invisibilised occupational identities in the workplace, this study: (1) challenges assumptions that occupational identity is based on distinctive and enduring characteristics that are relatively fixed, coherent, and stable; (2) sheds light on the repercussions of organisational restructuring for employees; (3) explores the dynamic processes by which occupational identity transforms in the workplace after threat; (4) provides a new theoretical construct to examine the nuances of dirty work and dirty workers; and (5) contributes to the research movement to 'get back to work' and study actual jobs and frontline workers (Barley and Kunda 2001; Hopkinson 2003; Patriotta 2003), suggesting several areas warranting further research. Results reveal a complex image of how elite employees respond to industry restructuring in one industry, aviation, providing an avenue to consider identity implications for other employee groups.

Notes

1. Analysis based on the same dataset appeared in Fraher (2016).
2. Seniority at most airlines is based on date of hire and the 'seniority list' is used by the airline and labour union as a way to equitably award employee pay, work schedules, job responsibilities such as equipment assignment or ability to upgrade (i.e. when a co-pilot can bid to become captain), and benefits such as vacation or domicile assignment. As a result, a pilot's seniority number is often viewed as a coveted aspect of his or her identity.

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