

**‘I don’t find it sexy at all’: Criminal investigators’ views of media glamorization of police
‘dirty work’**

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Abstract

Public fascination with criminal detection has led to a plethora of images of investigational work in the media and to a radical reworking of public perceptions of the nature of the police investigator's role and of the occupation's dirty work elements. In this paper, we draw upon in-depth interviews with 31 Canadian police investigators to explore how they perceive the physically dirty elements of their job, and their views related to the public treatment of those same elements as glamorous and exciting in the mass media. The investigators interviewed described how the daily realities of their work differ from the highly sanitized images presented in the media, although several noted that these portrayals led them to a career in policing. However, these investigators also explained that soon after entering the field they realized there is nothing glamorous or sexy about criminal investigation. Through a discussion of the contrasts between media portrayals of the physically dirty aspects of their jobs and police investigators' occupational realities, what is revealed is a far more complex portrait of police investigational work and what it is about this work that investigators themselves find to be exciting, satisfying, and challenging.

Keywords: policing; criminal investigation; media; dirty work

**‘I don’t find it sexy at all’:
Criminal investigators’ views of media glamorization of police ‘dirty work’**

A beautiful blonde woman stands in front of a whiteboard, searching for some meaning in the items posted on it; a felt marker is gripped tightly in her hand. On the board are a series of photos, a timeline, and some handwritten notes. Her co-worker, an attractive man with a neatly trimmed beard, leans lightly against a desk. He too is intently focussed on the board. Of the board’s contents, none is more arresting than a photo of the deceased female, with her eyes closed, mouth open, and the raised red edges of a pathologist’s Y-incision contrasting with the greenish cast of her skin and the steel of the autopsy table. As visually interesting as this image may be, it is hardly unique. Variations of it – of the police investigator surveying a landscape of clues – play out across televisions and movie screens hundreds, if not thousands, of times a day.

Public fascination with criminal detection has led not only to a plethora of images of investigational work, but to a radical reworking of public perceptions of the nature of the police investigator’s occupational role and its dirty work elements. As criminologists, many of us face this recasting whenever we enter a classroom and students bombard us with questions about how to become a CSI¹ (a crime scene investigator) or a criminal profiler. One of the authors has noted that after several weeks of lectures discussing some of the harsher realities of what police investigational work entails – that is, the ‘dirty work’ elements of policing – students’ enthusiasm for entering the field of criminal investigation begins to noticeably dim.

What television shows and movies fail to portray and/or to adequately capture is the fact that many of the tasks associated with criminal investigation are, indeed, forms of ‘dirty work.’ Specifically, ‘dirty work’ refers to those occupational activities that are necessary for the orderly

¹ In Canada, positions in forensic identification units are typically held by uniformed police officers.

functioning of society, but are generally viewed as being physically disgusting, socially tainted, or morally degrading (Hughes 1958). Within the policing research literature, it has long been recognized that the nature of police work – which brings police officers into routine contact with criminals and other morally suspect people, and places them in highly noxious situations in which they will have to deal with blood, bile, and human and other debris – is inherently ‘dirty’ (Bittner 1970, Heinsler et al. 1990, Dick 2005, Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss 2006, Drew and Hulvey 2007, Gassaway 2007). Although the public may find the highly sanitized versions of police work they see on television as ‘glamorous’, one sex crimes investigator said to us of her job, ‘I don’t find it sexy at all.’

In this paper, we draw on in-depth qualitative interviews with 31 Canadian police investigators to reveal their perceptions of mass media representations of their work and the extent to which glamorous images of police investigations contrast with their occupational realities. In particular, we focus on the physically ‘dirty’ aspects of these investigators’ jobs and the emotional, physical, and health impacts that investigators’ occupational realities have on the individual. What is evident is that, for study participants, the most interesting and challenging elements of their work are those rarely, if ever, depicted in television or in movies.

Dirty work and the dirty side of policing

The ‘dirty work’ concept was first conceived by sociologist Everett Hughes (1958) to refer to those tasks associated with an occupation that contain elements that may be physically, socially, or morally repugnant to outsiders. According to Hughes, occupational tasks may be dirty in different ways; for example, the task ‘may be simply physically disgusting [or] it may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity’ (p. 49). In reference to those who take on such tasks, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 416) suggest that ‘although people may

applaud certain dirty work as noble (e.g., counselling the terminally ill), they generally remain psychologically and behaviourally distanced from that work and those who do it, glad that it is someone else.’ Outsiders are typically glad that someone else is assuming such tasks because the tasks are seen to be not only revolting, but also as ‘polluting’ (Douglas 1966).

Examples of physically polluting sources that many people seek to avoid include filth, debris, or bodily waste associated with such things as excrement, sweat, semen, blood, refuse, disease, and death and decay (Dick 2005). Despite widespread avoidance, several occupations require practitioners to perform tasks in which they must handle or dispose of such pollutants, including funeral home personnel, slaughterhouse workers, exterminators, and nurses (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Likewise, jobs that are physically demanding or place individuals in dangerous or otherwise undesirable conditions – such as miners and sweatshop factory workers – are also frequently deemed to be forms of dirty work or as having dirty work elements (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999).

In contrast to physically polluting dirty work, contamination by social dirt occurs when workers routinely come into contact with individuals who hold stigmatized identities, such as drug addicts, sex trade workers, and ex-convicts. In other words, contamination comes by way of members of groups that have elsewhere been referred to as ‘social junk’ (Spitzer 1975). Through such contact, certain occupations carry what Goffman (1963) terms ‘courtesy stigma,’ a form of stigma by association. According to Goffman, courtesy stigmas are often based on relationships with family or friends, but can also occur in occupational settings in which workers routinely come into contact with those who are perceived to be social outcasts or otherwise tainted.

Another form of dirty work comes with a moral stigma. Occupations in which individuals engage in practices seen to be taboo, sinful and/or morally suspect are those to which moral

stigma attaches. These occupations typically include professions associated with sex (e.g., sex trade workers, exotic dancers, escorts), but moral stigmas are also attached to occupations in other dubious fields, including gambling (e.g., casino workers), money lending (e.g., pawnbrokers), and occupations associated with violence (e.g., bouncers, prize fighters). Dick (2005) argues that morally problematic forms of dirty work can also occur within white collar, corporate environments where individuals might be tasked with laying off workers or dismantling companies.

Alongside the occupations discussed above, Bittner (1970) recognized policing as a tainted occupation and articulated the view that the police represent the arm of society deployed to do its dirty work. According to Bittner (1970, p. 15) the police are ‘posted on the perimeters of order and justice in the hope that their presence will deter the forces of darkness and chaos, because they are meant to spare the rest of the people direct confrontations with the dreadful, perverse, lurid, and dangerous.’ The police are further socially tainted by the fact that their unique mandate necessarily requires individual officers to become the ‘fire it takes to fight the fire’ (Bittner 1970, p. 15). Since the 1970s, other scholars have examined specific jobs within the police occupational subculture, identifying many other dirty elements. For example, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggest that police detectives are among those workers who are socially tainted as a result of their frequent contact with others who are stigmatized (see also Kreiner et al. 2006, Drew and Hulvey 2007).

In his study of the criminal investigation of homicide, Martin Innes (2003) touches on an interesting paradox that has yet to be fully examined within the literature. Although police detective work is inherently ‘dirty’ in each of the ways enumerated by Hughes (1958), it is

perhaps 'dirtiest' in the physical sense, particularly in relation to police work at crime scenes. As Innes (2003, p. 264) notes,

in responding to murders, detectives are confronted with scenes that contain the after-effects of extreme brutality, rage, and sometimes, for the want of a better word, evil. Death is a messy business, with blood and other bodily excretions part of the ways and means of homicide. Such products of the crime are frequently amplified by the more basic biological processes associated with death. Often, by the time that a corpse is discovered, decomposition has started.

It is certainly the case that officers in forensic identification units spend much of their time searching for and analyzing material that many people would find objectionable, such as blood, saliva, perspiration, semen, urine, flakes of skin, flesh, bone, and body parts (Gassaway 2007). However, exposure to physical taint is not limited to forensic investigators. As Gassaway (2007) explains, even general patrol officers routinely find themselves in physically dirty situations. For example, patrol officers often stop individuals who are drunk or high and who may have urinated or vomited on themselves. In such situations, the officer must still perform their regular duties, including searching such individuals and transporting them to jail in the officer's patrol car, thereby coming into direct contact with physically tainted others. Drew and Hulvey (2007, pp. 169-170) similarly explain that 'police officers often have to deal with offenders...who are physically dirty, smelling of alcohol, vomiting, defecating, or spitting in their patrol cars or on the officers themselves.' To reduce their exposure to physical taint, officers often wear rubber gloves or even full body suits when at crime scenes and interacting with suspects (Gassaway 2007). Gassaway (2007) also found that humour, language, and other coping mechanisms permit crime scene investigators to distance themselves from the harsher realities of their work.

Routinely confronted with such things that would frighten or disgust many people, police investigation should be amongst those occupations perceived to be physically dirty and otherwise

tainted, and thus subject to some form of social stigma. However, within the public imaginary, the detective has instead become 'a glamorous crime-fighter engaged in the identification and chase of dangerous and malevolent criminals,' and thus a hero who generates fascination and admiration (Innes 2003, p. 21). Maguire (2003, p. 365) further notes that in recent times, 'criminal investigation has been a subject of enduring interest to the general public, and a considerable mythology has grown up around it.' Maguire goes on to suggest that much of this mythology is related to the 'glamour' of apprehending criminals. The paradox elucidated by Innes and Maguire animates the present discussion. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore how police investigators perceive the physically dirty elements of their job, and their views related to the public treatment of those same elements as glamorous and exciting on television programs such as *CSI*.

Method of inquiry

This paper is informed by data drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with 31 Canadian police investigators for a study of police perceptions of mass media images of criminal investigation work. The core concerns of this study were twofold. The first goal was to determine to what extent media portrayals of police investigative work cohere with actual police roles and functions, which permits us to develop a better understanding of police views of their fictional counterparts. The second goal was to examine whether police investigators perceive media products as having an influence on public expectations in relation to their investigative role and work duties. The interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions related to the above research questions. For the purposes of this paper we draw on responses to interview questions posed in relation to the first research question. Among questions posed to interviewees were variations of the following:

1. In what ways, if any, do mass media portrayals of police investigators and investigations match the reality of your work?
2. In what ways do mass media portrayals of police investigators and investigations not match the reality of your work?
3. The public perception of your job, based on TV and movies, is that it is very glamorous and exciting. How do such perceptions align with your own experiences?
4. What are your views of the public's apparent fascination with criminal investigation?

To answer these and other questions, approval to conduct interviews with police personnel was sought from municipal, regional and provincial police agencies in two Canadian provinces: British Columbia and Ontario. Seven police agencies representing two major Canadian cities and several medium-sized communities agreed to participate. Once approval was secured, one of the authors conducted interviews with police investigators from the following units: homicide, major crimes, sexual assault, property crimes, and forensic identification (see Table 1). Interviews typically ranged from one to two hours, with an average interview length of one and a half hours. Each interview was digitally recorded and manually transcribed.

****Insert Table 1 about here****

As the study from which this paper is drawn was exploratory in nature, we opted to code and interpret the data utilizing Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory method. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using open coding. In particular, we followed Glaser's (1978) concept-indicator model, looking first for key concepts and then for words and phrases that functioned as indicators of that concept. For example, to code for 'dirty work,' we looked for words and phrases such as 'gross,' 'filthy,' 'smelly,' 'stink,' and other related terms. To code for 'mental and emotional effects' linked to investigational work, we searched for words and phrases

such as ‘stressful,’ ‘draining,’ ‘high pressure,’ ‘depressing,’ and ‘sad.’ Once this initial coding was complete, we returned to the transcripts and recoded them using a focused approach aimed at drawing connections between concepts and sub-concepts. To ensure inter-coder reliability, transcripts were re-read and independently re-coded by a research assistant.

Investigative work as ‘dirty work’

*[pointing] ‘I got dirt on my knees. I got powder on my shirt.’
-Forensic identification officer*

In discussing how they differ from their fictional counterparts, police officers interviewed for this study spoke extensively about the glamorization of their work in mass media products. When describing key differences between their real and fictional selves, the majority spoke of the emotionally and physically taxing aspects of their job. In relation to the latter, the officers frequently referred to the physically dirty elements of working crime scenes, which are often depicted on television programs through aestheticized imagery.

Of the various unpleasant elements of crime scene work, the most commonly referenced by our participants was the smell of corpses. For example, in discussing his distaste for the sanitized images of death found in popular crime programs, a homicide investigator noted that the reality was far different: ‘go to a murder scene. The smell is not pleasant. It’s pretty gross.’ A veteran homicide investigator from another agency spoke of how vividly his memories of certain crime scenes are tied to memories of the smell at those scenes:

I look at videos of old murder scenes. We started to videotape murder scenes about twenty years ago. There’s one in particular, it’s about 21 years ago now...I looked at it about five years ago for something. I could smell the scene from the video because it was so horrendous...That’s the reality of our job sometimes: the smell of old corpses.

One forensic identification officer suggested that, in the interests of accuracy, TV shows should

be broadcast in ‘smell-o-vision.’ To illustrate the unpleasant nature of much of his work, the officer described a recent case he had worked on, noting that ‘we’re just dealing with a fellow we just pulled out of the river. And he’s been in there for months, six to 18 months.’ He paused briefly before presenting an invitation that was graciously refused: ‘If you’re interested, I’ll show you. We’ve got his clothing, the remnants of his clothing in our cabinets down here to dry, and I’m told they really stink.’ A veteran forensic identification officer at another police agency was frustrated by the idea that anyone would find the dirty work elements of his job glamorous. As he explained,

there is nothing sexy about what we do. What is sexy about going to a scene where the woman has been missing for two weeks and you know she is dead but you just don’t where you are going to find her? So you get to an underground place and you open the door and you are sixty meters away and the patrolmen say, “We think we have a body in there.” You step through and you recognize that smell and you go, “yes, we have a body in here.” This body has been in a box in a hot underground decomposing. What the hell is sexy about that?

Aside from having to deal with the smell of death, investigators referenced other aspects of crime scene work that make their jobs alternatively dirty, hot, sweaty, and uncomfortable. One forensic identification officer noted that one of his tasks might entail ‘going through people’s garbage.’ Indeed, in many situations victims are found outside, and a police investigator may spend hours ‘combing over an outdoor scene where you’re seizing fifteen cigarette butts and ten empty beer cans.’ As a homicide investigator explained of such situations, ‘there just is no glamour to it.’

Police investigators also spoke of how, *contra* the glamorous image of their immaculately coiffed, groomed, and clothed television counterparts, they were often physically dirty. A homicide investigator pointed out that, unlike his television counterparts, he does not always look his best while at work. This investigator elaborated, explaining that ‘usually it’s raining, or

it's dark or it's cold' and 'you may not really want to be there because someone's dead, [and] it's a serious, sad situation.' Investigators also noted that they looked nothing like their attractive, well-pressed fictional counterparts because the nature of their work often leads to sleep deprivation and unhealthy meals eaten on the run. When asked how he would de-glamorize portrayals of homicide work, one investigator responded,

if you could depict sleep deprivation on television. The reality is that we go to our latest murder scene. We got paged out about midnight. So, I've just gone to bed after a full day of working. I'm paged out at midnight and didn't go home again until four o'clock the next day. Really, by the end of it, I'd been up for 42 hours or more. Forty-six. I don't know what it was...I was all bagged.

Another investigator laughed when asked about how his job is depicted on television. This officer explained that 'it's 16 hour days, if you're lucky. At the beginning of a case there's stress, pressure, long hours away from family. There's really absolutely nothing sexy about it and at the end of that 17 hour day, the last thing you have is flowing hair and a nicely pressed shirt.'

Among the effects of those long days is that 'you eat a lot of hamburgers and your health goes for a crap.' Similarly a major crimes investigator spoke of 'being exhausted and eating cold pizza out of a box.'

Being covered in grime is particularly an issue for forensic identification personnel, as a result of dusting for fingerprints or crawling around a crime scene. One forensic identification officer described his usual look while processing a crime scene as 'covered in blood and fingerprint powders and having to wear a mask because of all the chemicals that we use.'

Another identification officer advised that she cut her hair because the fingerprint powders they work with made dealing with long hair too difficult. As if to further illustrate this point, after conducting this interview, two officers returning from a crime scene entered the office with raccoon-like visages, their faces liberally coated in black powder. Accordingly, when one

forensic identification officer was asked about public perceptions of his job as exciting and glamorous, he referenced the regularity with which he is covered in muck and sees objects and processes that might otherwise provoke revulsion. This officer explained that his job is not glamorous ‘when I’m covered in black soot, mud, or blood or when you’ve got maggots crawling all over things.’

Several forensic identification officers also spoke of the discomfort they experience in having to wear protective gear (known as masks and ‘bunny suits’) at crime scenes. The bunny suit, which one investigator described as being ‘made out of some weird plastic,’ was regularly described as ‘sweaty.’ One officer explained that when he wears a bunny suit he is ‘usually perspiring heavily,’ especially as he would be ‘contorting myself into odd positions trying to examine things that are always in impossible places.’ The protective masks that forensic identification personnel wear when working with dangerous chemicals were similarly described as sweaty and uncomfortable. Moreover, the masks sometimes interfere with documenting crime scenes because ‘you can’t take pictures because your camera fogs up.’

The police mystique

*‘There’s nothing glamorous about our job.’
- Forensic identification officer*

While it is the case that dirty workers, generally speaking, are often ‘aware of how their activities and tasks are viewed by the wider public’ (Bolton 2005, p. 169), to the extent that public fascination with criminal investigation plays out across both pages and screens, it would be virtually impossible for investigators to remain unaware of how their work is viewed by outsiders. Many police investigators interviewed related stories, comments, and queries they received on and off the job from members of the public. The crux of these stories was that the public is not only curious about investigational work, but sees it as both fascinating and

glamorous. Of particular interest to members of the public were the ‘dirty’ elements of criminal investigation, which most officers attributed to positive images of forensic investigation portrayed in television programs. For example, the head of a major crimes unit noted,

A: Just in talking with people generally, they’re like, “How do I get to do that?” It seems to me that when they’re talking about *CSI*, they’re talking about the forensic aspect of it, not just the detective. I know one thing – whenever I tell people I’m in plainclothes work, they go, “You mean you’re like a detective?” And they get all excited about that. I completely understand their view of what it is that I do. It’s totally from TV.

Q: [laughs] You’re “like a detective?”

A: [sarcastically] Yeah, I’m almost as cool as the guys on TV.

Conversely, a homicide investigator believed that public interest in his job is part of a more general fascination that many people have with the darker elements of his work – that is, with the objects, sights, sounds, and experiences that most people will never be exposed to. As this investigator explained, ‘When I go to parties...I try to avoid talking about what I do. And once people find out what I do, everybody wants to ask me questions...People are just fascinated by the seedy side of life. Lurid details of crime.’ Still another investigator thought that the news media’s reporting of major cases also plays a role in shaping public perceptions that their work is both exciting and glamorous: ‘I think they think our job is more exciting than probably it can be, or is usually. They get to see the two or three minutes of excitement in the media.’ He then added, ‘They don’t see the seven days or seven weeks or even seven months that follow...we are dealing with tons of paperwork and following up for months on end.’

When police investigators were asked if they understood why members of the public might be fascinated with media images of their work, including the glorification of even its more dirty elements in media products, they unanimously agreed they could understand the mystique

attached to the role of detective. Interestingly, some officers readily acknowledged that similar glamorized perceptions of criminal investigation work had influenced their desire to pursue a policing career. For example, one homicide investigator admitted that ‘I went into policing 15 years ago with the whole idea of “man, I’d sure like to be a homicide detective someday.”’ When another homicide investigator was asked if he understands the public’s fascination with his profession he replied, ‘I do. I think it’s the same thing that drove me to be one...there’s something about that public image of it which is, call it prestigious, call it glamorous or whatever. That’s driven mostly by media, because the reality is different than what you think it’s going to be like.’ One major crimes investigator, himself a former homicide detective, said, that not only is it the public that is fascinated with his occupational role, but it is considered a prestigious position within policing circles, commanding immediate respect and authority:

Q: So, obviously you understand the fascination with the detective role. The public does have that fascination...

A: Yeah. The public do, and even our own people within policing do. When I walk into a room and it’s “Oh the big dog is here” [laughs].

Much in the same way, a senior forensic identification officer noted that younger police members are often attracted to positions in the forensic identification section because they ‘think it’s glamorous and cool.’ However, he noted, ‘that wears off on them. They start to realize that this is a job. It’s not just fun.’

Reframing ‘dirty work’: What makes detective work satisfying?

*‘You have to be a very driven person, very goal oriented. Because your satisfaction doesn’t come often or easily, but when you get it, it’s great’
-Sex crimes investigator*

In their study of police detectives and campus police officers, Heinsler et al. (1990) noted that some of the tasks undertaken by detectives – such as the rather mundane clerical tasks that

consume a significant portion of police investigators' working hours – could easily have been seen by the officers as a form of dirty work (see also Ericson 1981). Rather than allow themselves to feel devalued as a result of having to engage in work that might have been perceived as socially beneath them, Heinsler et al. (1990, p. 236) reported that 'the detectives called upon their more glamorous media images to construct a valued core identity that rendered mundane tasks significant, not menial. They saw themselves as Sherlock Holmesian "students of crime" and used this identity to redefine repetitive tasks as important.' In the present study, police investigators similarly engaged in a reframing of their work that allowed them to feel intellectually and emotionally satisfied with the job. However, whereas the detectives in the Heinsler et al. study reframed their clerical tasks so that they could be perceived as useful to maintaining a core identity of the detective as a glamorous figure, the police investigators in the present study reframed the dirty work elements of their job that are publicly glamorized – that is, the officers in this study reframed the forensic aspects of the work. In doing so, they moved themselves away from what one homicide investigator termed the 'false perception' of investigative work maintained by the mass media, towards what most saw as a more interesting and complex occupational role that allowed them to develop new skills and challenge existing abilities.

In responding to the media image of the police investigator crouched over a corpse searching for clues, one homicide investigator said of his work, 'It's a good job. It's an interesting job. Fiction is fiction. I think the job's actually way more interesting than they show on TV, but not for the same reasons that they show.' When asked what it was about investigative work that made it so interesting for him personally, he replied that he enjoys being able to 'deal with a lot of legal complexities,' which he saw as interesting intellectual puzzles that challenged

him. Such legal complexities, he noted, ‘don’t lend themselves’ to the format of a typical TV program.

Other officers similarly cited the ability to stretch one’s intellect and skills during an investigation as a key satisfaction of the job, especially during long periods of performing the tedious, routine tasks that are required during and after an investigation. One of these officers, a major crimes investigator, discussed the intellectual stimulation he derives from the process of conducting suspect interviews:

A: When you get the guy and you see that we have arrested the guy before and he never gives us anything ... The mind game starts there and that’s where the challenge starts.

Q: Is that the fun part of the job?

A: Oh, no doubt about it.

Later in the same interview, he said,

I would think most good investigators enjoy sitting down with the bad guy. And I’ve seen it with my guys or even myself, when we sit down in there, even if we have been working for 20 hours and we’re tired, you sit in the interview room. Then you come out of there, “Guys, how long have I been in there?” “Four hours!” “What?” Like, it’s unbelievable how much fun you’re having and how much time goes by!

A sex crimes investigator in another agency explained that although her job is ‘far from glamorous,’ she regularly has ‘the opportunity to stretch yourself a bit more.’ As an example, she cited the fact she had just completed a three hour file review with Crown prosecutors for a child abuse case, and she was proud of the meticulousness with which she had put the file together. Even still, she recognized the work was often ‘painstaking and even boring at times,’ but she further explained, ‘it’s a good feeling to work hard, be consistent, pay attention to detail and build a case that’s going to bring that person in.’

While some investigators emphasized the intellectual satisfaction they receive from their work, others spoke of emotional benefits they had experienced on the job. For instance, one major crimes investigator with 16 years' experience, which included having worked on a number of high-profile cases, said when describing a current case,

No matter how that matter turns out, I'm very proud for all the work that I did on that and for all the people who poured their blood, sweat and tears into that, personally and professionally. As much as you won't end up looking like a rock star to that many people, you do take satisfaction in a number of things.

One of the things from which he derives satisfaction is, 'when somebody says thank-you. When a family member does.' Similarly, a sex crimes investigator explained that 'it's very gratifying when you are able to support the families.' For some officers, however, job satisfaction comes both from intrinsic rewards and from being recognized by other officers. A major crimes investigator reported being satisfied when 'you know you've made a difference' and when 'your peers recognize you for superior your skill set or something like that.'

Concluding remarks

Public fascination with crime and criminal investigation has been spurred by countless television programs and movies depicting police work as fast-paced and highly glamorous. Policing occupational realities, however, differ markedly from these sanitized, made for prime time portrayals and, as a result, public perceptions of the police investigator are highly fictitious. One the most noteworthy ways in which public perceptions differ from reality has to do with the 'dirty work' (Hughes 1958) elements of the police investigator's job. By virtue of the stigmatized characters that police investigators have regular contact with (e.g., sex trade workers, those who engage in violence), policing may be considered a socially and morally tainted occupation (Bittner 1970, Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, Dick 2005, Kreiner et al. 2006; Drew and Hulvey 2007). However, criminal investigative work is perhaps 'dirtiest' in the physical sense.

In contrast to the glamorous and highly sanitized images portrayed in the mass media, forensic investigators spend much of their time searching for and analysing material that others would find objectionable (Gassaway 2007). Indeed, the investigators who participated in our study spoke at length of the frequency with which they must comb through bodily fluids, trash, and other debris when searching for evidence. Further, their work is often conducted in physical discomfort and/or in taxing emotional circumstances.

Given the dirty work elements of their occupation, police officers should be regarded as socially, morally, and physically tainted and, therefore, be subjected to stigma. Instead, glamorized versions of police investigative work are regularly presented in the mass media, and the public has become fascinated with the same dirty elements of the profession. Police investigators are aware of how their work is perceived, and some acknowledge sharing a similar fascination with investigational work before they became investigators themselves. Realizing that the work is often far from the glamorous images portrayed, the investigators in this study found alternate ways in which to derive satisfaction from their jobs. In this sense, our findings are in line with the work of Heinsler et al. (1990), who similarly noted that detectives in their study often undertake work they find distasteful, but find ways in which to retain some sense of satisfaction with the work. However, in the Heinsler study detectives found clerical tasks to be unexciting and thus drew upon the glamorous images of their profession portrayed in the media to reframe clerical duties. Although the investigators included in our study also reframed their work in order to derive occupational satisfaction, they did so by employing a qualitatively different process: they embraced the challenges they found in what would be perceived by the public, and by Heinsler et al's detectives, as being tedious and mundane. For example, investigators described the pride they take in untangling legal complexities related to search

warrants, meticulously preparing case files, helping victims' families – aspects of their profession typically ignored by the media. Further, rather than forming an identity of the police investigator as a glamorous figure, these investigators retained a keen awareness of the often trying and, indeed, sometimes horrific nature of the dirty work elements of their job. Indeed, they recognized nothing about themselves or their work in the depictions of police work portrayed by their fictional counterparts.

Notwithstanding these findings, two limitations to this study should be noted. First, interviews were conducted with officers from large and medium-sized Canadian cities. It is possible that these urban regions differ from other cities and towns in Canada and elsewhere. Second, most of those interviewed were senior officers with several years of experience. It is possible that experience is an important mediating factor in how one reframes media portrayals of his or her profession and of how one manages the dirty work aspects of his or her job. It is hoped that future research will examine how demographic changes in police forces might impact perceptions and attitudes toward media images of investigational work.

Although others have studied the socially and morally dirty elements of policing, and have hinted at the physically dirty features, police accounts of their job as physically dirty have thus far remained unexplored. As Drew and Hulvey (2007) explain, the public rarely hears about the physically dirty occupational realities for police officers. Indeed, though Drew and Hulvey examined police dirty work, they themselves did not witness any of the physically dirty aspects of policing because the public is rarely allowed to view these scenes. Similarly, little is known about how the police reconcile their occupational realities with the glamorous and sanitized versions of policing presented in the mass media. Thus, this study represents a small contribution to developing greater insight into how this occupational group both understands their work and

attempts to balance often contradictory 'outsider' perceptions of that work with their own lived realities.

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Table 1. Interview participants.

Unit	<i>n</i>
Forensic identification	11
Homicide	9
Major crimes	7
Sexual assault	3
Property crimes	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>31</i>