Where there is dirt, there is system

Rachel Riddell

1University of Birmingham

October 05, 2022

Abstract

American anthropologist Mary Douglas coined the phrase “Where there is dirt, there is system.” This phrase is considered in the context of diverse case studies: the Dalits of India, the condition of anorexia, and food taboos among the Orang Asli community of Malaysia. The paper argues that underlying diverse societies is a need to achieve system and structure by distinguishing between the acceptable and the unacceptable as related to matters of health and taboo.

Keywords: food taboos, Dalit, India, caste, anorexia, contamination, Orang Asli, Malaysia

1. Introduction

“Where there is dirt, there is system.” (Douglas 1966, 35) This phrase was used by American Anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* in the 1960s, but has long become a prominent theory in our understanding of culture today. The title of her book already gives us a hint into what this phrase might mean. Douglas argues that in order to make the path of living simple to us, we are consciously and unconsciously presented with a set of symbolic categories by our culture to try and keep us from falling into dangerous and potentially harmful situations (Douglas 1966). In line with a structuralist perspective of culture, her theory promotes the idea further expanded on by anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss that elements of culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to underlying systems or structures of thought (Lévi-Strauss 1966). These categories help us differentiate between the clean and the unclean; the safe and the harmful. The “dirt” in this phrase falls under the category of the unclean, and so to avoid this, we, as humans, create systems to regulate our living conditions and try to preserve our health.

In the subsequent paragraphs, we will attempt to discuss the importance of this phrase, and just how prevalent it is in our everyday life. We will look at three ethnographic examples – ranging from the ordinary to the extreme - in the hope of further understanding this concept and how we work as humans in our various societies.
Firstly, we will attempt to further understand this phrase by looking at the case of a people group in India known as the Dalits, or ‘Untouchables’. It could be argued that historically the whole social structure of India lies on a very un-subtle foundation of the relationship between dirt and system, which involves something known as the caste system. Devised over 3000 years ago, the caste system divided the majority of the Indian people into four groups, or four social classes. A fifth group, the Dalits, were born below the caste system. Sentenced to carry out the most menial of jobs in society, this group was long shunned and ostracised by the rest of the population (i.e. the other castes). This was even recognised by the Indian government, as the social structure was clearly outlined in the foundational text of Hinduism (the national religion), the *Bhagavad Gita* (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2014). Although the caste system is ‘officially’ dissolved today due to the Indian Constitution of 1950, elements of caste structure still remain, particularly in terms of job structure and discrimination against the Dalits (Jones & Ryan 2007). The jobs carried out by Dalits typically involved those to do with dead matter or decomposition, such as disposing of dead bodies and dead animals, cleaning of human waste systems by hand (e.g. sewerage), and other jobs, such as butchering (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2014). The significance of Hinduism in the nation comes into play in two main ways here. First, the concept of reincarnation in Hinduism is key; the Dalits were seen as having misbehaved in a previous life, so their birth into such a group was divine punishment for their actions. Second, working with the dead was seen to be spiritually contaminating, therefore accounting for the Dalits being deemed untouchable by the castes (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2014). Major branches of Hinduism also deem a vegetarian diet as ideal, so any jobs involving killing of animals or disposing of their remains clearly contradict the values that many hold dear (Narayanan, 2007).

One other point that should be noted is the fact that Dalits also generally had the darkest skin colour out of any sect in India (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2014). It could be argued that this not only allows for easier systemisation, but their skin colour even symbolises the colour of the dirt they had to work with. Essentially, India had (and still has, to some extent) a very specific system of society (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2014). The Dalits represent the way that the other castes avoid the dirt. As they are often shunned, this suggests the accuracy of Douglas’ idea even more: human society will do anything to avoid the ‘dirt’ in this life, even if it means ostracism and cruelty towards others.

Secondly, we will consider an extreme example of the habits that some humans undertake to avoid contamination; that is those individuals who suffer from anorexia. Popular culture encourages us to view eating disorders as being driven by personal and societal ideas of appearance, and the individual expectations that arise from these pressures (Warin 2003). However in a study done by American Anthropologist Megan Warin, we are able to see that the factors driving people to suffer from anorexia are more in line with Douglas’ ideas of dirt and system that one might think. Warin argues that anorexia is not so much about fear of a certain appearance or fear of fat, as it is about a fear of contamination by food (Warin 2003). A key similarity in participants’ thoughts was the association of food with waste, and the unwillingness for food to cross the internal vs. external bodily boundary. Eating was seen as dirty, while not eating was seen as clean. Many participants described feeling impregnated after eating food, and the hatred that arose from this feeling of being ‘dirty’ (Warin 2003). While anorexia is obviously a horrific mental illness, it is interesting to note the systems that sufferers put into place to avoid the ‘impregnation’ that was caused by eating, and the ways that these affected their subsequent thought lives. The systems were largely about avoidance: avoidance of eating in front of others (for fear of seeming ‘dirty’), avoidance of social situations (these often involve the consumption of food) and even the avoidance of smelling and touching food. These last two systems are key in the maintenance of the illness - sufferers often become paranoid that either smelling or touching food will result in breaking the bodily boundaries, leading to contamination of the body by extra calories (Warin 2003).

Although it could be argued that the illness is somewhat irrational in terms of what we know about food scientifically, the phobias caused by the thought processes of the individuals involved are attempts to create system in the sea of ‘dirt’ that food is perceived to be (Warin 2003). If this is born from an innate desire...
to remain uncontaminated and pure, there is little doubt about the seriousness of the illness; it becomes very clear why the illness is so hard to overcome. Indeed, psychologists argue that once someone develops the illness, it is something they have to be careful of for a lifetime, as it can easily relapse as a response to external stress (Warin 2003). It could even be argued that in a broader sense, anorexia is a system to avoid and cope with the anomalies of life.

Finally, we will look at what Mary Douglas herself has to say in her book, *Purity and Danger* (1966). Although the ideas in anorexia are extreme, the idea of certain types of food being anomalies can actually be seen in broader society, too. In this paragraph we will look at the idea that dirt creates system in our consumption of food, and contributes to the development of food taboos over various cultures (Douglas 1966).

Firstly, we consider food taboos seen in various religious laws. A general rule in religious food law is that any food classified as unfit for consumption will probably not fit into the culturally perceived natural order (Douglas 1966). For instance, in Judaism, the pig is seen as an anomaly as it has cloven hooves but does not “chew the cud”, unlike other animals with such hooves. Another such law is that fish can only be eaten if they have fins and scales, not one or the other. These rules are put into place because pigs do not fit into this perceived order, and fish that do not have fins and scales are seen as unusual (Douglas 1966). Pigs also consume mud and excretion, making them more prone to disease, which further contributes to the stereotype of uncleanliness (Harris 1985).

Another interesting study in terms of food taboos involves the practices of a particular community in West Malaysia, known as the Orang Asli. Strict rules about the consumption of certain foods are followed by different people of different ages: children and pregnant women are only allowed to consume small animals, while adult men can consume larger animals (Meyer-Rochow 2009). Although the taboos could have been devised as a method of resource partitioning, there are also beliefs behind these taboos of a different nature: different genders and age groups eat different animals according to their spiritual strength. For instance, when a boy becomes a man, he is allowed to graduate from eating small animals with smaller spirits to eating large animals with larger, stronger spirits. This is to avoid spiritual contamination by the food consumed, in order to ensure spiritual wellbeing of the consumer (Meyer-Rochow 2009).

Essentially, in Douglas’ eyes, food taboos are a system devised in order to avoid foods that may cause physical or spiritual harm to the human in question (Douglas 1966). The ‘dirt’ that comes from food crossing the bodily boundary needs to be monitored; these taboo systems are in place to do that.

In considering the three case studies discussed above, a key of feature is striking: different forces are at work for shaping the criteria that define ‘dirt’.

In the case of the Dalits, the forces are largely of a sociological nature; society around them is shaped to avoid the dirt. Factors of inclusion and exclusion are involved, which allow the majority of the Indian population to turn a blind eye to the abominations of society. The abominations are not the Dalits per se; they are the rituals the Dalits have to carry out in their jobs, in turn implicating the reputation of the people themselves.

In terms of the victims of anorexia, the seduction of their illness is to avoid the dirt; the primary driving force behind the illness is a system to be able to do this. It is interesting that although rarely spoken about, the illness often develops from an innate desire within the individual, suggesting that it is natural for humans to try and avoid the anomalies, for fear of contamination or possible harm. I’m sure that Lévi-Strauss would agree with this explanation. The forces driving anorexia are largely psychological, and stem from the inner desires of the sufferers involved.

Finally, the development of food taboos can often be attributed to health driven factors; such as avoiding abnormal types of food that may cause harm to the consumer. Taboos are the system surrounding the foods seen as ‘dirt’. While many arguments have been attributed to the development of taboos, it is clear that Douglas’ explanation can be applied to some cases at least.
No matter the situation, Douglas’ statement seems very relevant. There always seems to be a system to avoid the dirt.

References


tsituation>.