

COMMENTARY

Tainted heroes: The emergence of dirty work during pandemics

David R. Glerum 

The Ohio State University

Corresponding author. Email: glерum.3@osu.edu

“It’s tough to reconcile being both celebrated and villainized” (Fu, 2020). Dr. Chen Fu, a hospitalist at the Langone Medical Center, recounts being commemorated as a hero while at the same time being villainized as a doctor who comes into regular contact with COVID-19. Across the globe, medical professionals, grocery store employees, delivery carriers, and other occupations have faced mounting stigmatization by the public during pandemics, leading to employee mistreatment and even violence. Stone-throwing mobs have chased and harassed medical workers, bystanders have blocked doctors from using public transportation, landlords have evicted the families of medical personnel from their homes, and nurses have even been doused with bleach and blinded as a result of public fears of contamination (Semple, 2020). Many employees had never experienced this type of mistreatment before—as one employee noted, “I am heartbroken. I have never felt afraid to be a nurse until it happened” (Semple, 2020). Paradoxically, the public has inundated these employees with messages that they are “frontline heroes,” whereas these same employees report being ostracized and not receiving adequate support from their organizations.

Pandemics, quite literally, transform occupations that were once devoid of taint into “dirty work.” During a pandemic, employees who interact with patients, customers, or the general public on a daily basis find themselves facing people who are fearful of disease. The experience of taint in occupations is a critical area of study because it can lead to several adverse outcomes including increased turnover, increased workplace deviance or counterproductive work behaviors, negative job attitudes and affective experiences, and heightened strain, as well as a diminished sense of self (Baran et al., 2012; Grandy, 2008; Lopina et al., 2012). In this commentary, I build upon the challenges and opportunities that pandemics present to industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology (Rudolph et al., 2021) by identifying dirty work as a potentially fruitful topic (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). First, I suggest that pandemics create, alter, or highlight occupations’ taint and status as dirty work. Second, I focus on taint development, identity dynamics, and dirty work stickiness as potentially productive areas of research fit for the pandemic environment. Finally, I suggest several practical avenues for coping with dirty work during pandemics, such as employee coping strategies and leaders’ roles in helping employees cope with dirty work.

Pandemics can create occupational taint

One area of opportunity for I-O psychology is to uncover how pandemics can create, alter, or amplify the presence of taint across many occupations. Dirty work refers to “occupations that are viewed by society as physically, socially, or morally tainted” (Ashforth et al., 2007, p. 149). First, physical taint (i.e., being directly associated with death, disease, or waste) may be amplified in janitorial and cleaning occupations that may come into contact with contagious diseases from cleaning door handles, railings, and other surfaces. Second, social taint (i.e., involving regular

contact with stigmatized people) may be found in occupations that come into regular contact with people who may have been infected. For example, new jobs during the COVID-19 era have emerged as a buffer between the public and the virus that might experience higher levels of social taint (e.g., COVID-19 testers, contact tracers, temperature screeners). Third, moral taint (i.e., tasks that are generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue) may be found in occupations that were not previously characterized by this form of taint. For example, although door-to-door sales have been a common method of business development for many organizations, these practices may be seen as morally dubious during pandemics, endangering people in their homes for the sake of gaining new customers. Finally, certain occupations may experience an additional form of taint (emotional taint, or engagement with emotions that are uncomfortable, burdensome, inappropriate, or taboo; McMurray & Ward, 2014), such as doctors who suspend their emotions to make the unthinkable decision about which patients live or die and therapists who shoulder the emotional burden of people who are affected by pandemics.

Beyond examining how pandemics beget taint in occupations, research on how the experience of taint affects dirty workers is an area for opportunity. As some examples, customers and members of the public who are engaging in social distancing may lead dirty workers to feel invisible, servile, or dehumanized (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Schroeder & Fishbach, 2015). On the other hand, dirty workers themselves may begin to see customers and clients as a source of taint, such as one store employee who exclaimed, “Customers were climbing all over me and I wanted a hazmat suit” (Mull, 2020). The dynamic interaction between dirty workers and customers along with their attitudes toward the pandemic (such as how seriously they take it) can provide greater insight into “how work becomes dirty.”

Taint and identity dynamics during pandemics

I-O psychologists can also find opportunity within the study of taint development and identity dynamics in dirty work (Kreiner et al., 2006). Pandemics present an unprecedented opportunity to examine how occupations themselves change in their degrees of taint. As mentioned earlier, employees in occupations that were once revered may now find themselves coping with taint. On the other hand, employees in common, low-status occupations may now find themselves to be the subject of public scrutiny and even veneration, as grocery store workers became “frontline heroes” overnight. The ambivalent experience of competing identities—of being celebrated as a hero yet villainized as a dirty worker—is an opportunity for I-O psychologists to determine how this kind of mixed messaging affects employees in occupations who fulfill such vital roles for society.

Furthermore, how dirty workers navigate their changing identities during pandemics is a promising area for research, instrumental in understanding potential ways of providing assistance, support, and proper coping mechanisms to people working in these occupations. New dirty workers may engage in processes to distance themselves from the occupation and accept society’s justifications of the occupation’s taint, or they may identify more with the occupation and engage in defense tactics (Kreiner et al., 2006).

Once a pandemic is over, the study of former dirty workers is also a worthwhile avenue for research. For example, certain occupations with physical or moral taint experienced during the pandemic may lead to continued prejudice and stigmatization—even after the pandemic is over (i.e., the stickiness of dirty work; Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). This stickiness may prove to be a useful avenue of research on long-term coping strategies following a pandemic.

Coping with dirty work during pandemics

The emergence of dirty work in pandemics presents an opportunity for research and practice to uncover how we can successfully address changing occupations, identities, and the nefarious

symptoms of dirty work. First, studying how employees cope with dirty work during pandemics can help identify effective and maladaptive coping strategies. Prior research, for instance, has uncovered many maladaptive strategies to cope with dirty work, including disengagement, denial, blaming oneself and others, substance abuse, and social weighting (e.g., condemning the condemners—supporting the supporters; Bosmans et al., 2016; Lopina et al., 2012). On the other hand, more adaptive strategies have included directly countering outsiders' perceptions of taint and focusing on the positive, nonstigmatized aspects of the work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bosmans et al., 2016).

Second, uncovering the role managers and leaders play in addressing dirty work during pandemics is critically important, as many employees feel their organizations are doing nothing to assist or protect them in their newly hazardous occupations. Management could play an active role in helping employees adjust to the new circumstances through collective sensemaking, training them on how to handle problematic clients and members of the public, and desensitizing them to the taint surrounding their occupations (Ashforth et al., 2017). Furthermore, management could provide social validation, encouragement, and organizational support; negotiate boundaries between public-facing spaces and areas where employees can recover; and institute health and safety policies that protect both employees and customers from the dangers of the pandemic (Ashforth et al., 2017).

Leaders that are put in this position may wish to express their gratefulness and appreciation for employees who put themselves at risk—more importantly, they should try to put their words into action by providing the support and resources employees need to do their jobs safely and effectively. Employees who see their leaders communicating that they care but doing nothing about it may see their actions solely as lip-service. Research on authentic and servant leadership would be very helpful to clarify how leaders should provide support and assistance to dirty workers.

In some cases, when pandemics last a long time or are indefinite, essential occupations may become typecast as involving dirty work. This may pose several difficulties for managers to attract, select, and retain talent and create massive talent shortages in critical job areas. In these instances, managers need to put in the work to provide the support employees need to safely do their jobs, dispel public misperceptions about the safety of the work, foster accurate perceptions of the job, or perhaps provide “realistic stigma previews” for applicants (Ashforth et al., 2017).

During pandemics, employees may feel stripped of their autonomy—that they have no say or agency in avoiding the threat of disease—and may feel as if their organization is more focused on the customers, public, or generating business than on the well-being of the employees. I-O psychologists can study how leaders can provide a safe and protective work environment for both employees and customers, how the organization can help bring a sense of autonomy back into their lives, and how the organization can buffer the adverse effects of occupational taint and its negative consequences. Answering these research questions may be heavily informed by the literature on behavioral ethics in organizations, organizational justice, and moral psychology. Ethical issues abound in the study of dirty work during pandemics, including defining the ethical responsibilities organizations have to their employees and establishing the rights of employees engaged in dirty work. Furthermore, dirty workers and the public they interact with may experience a cocktail of moral emotions during pandemics, including contempt and disgust for those not wearing masks or refusing to wash their hands or, alternatively, anger and reactance toward people telling them to wear masks and wash their hands. An understanding of these and other ethical issues has great potential to shed light on the nature of dirty work during pandemics and what can be done about it.

Conclusion

Rudolph et al. (2021) outline a number of topics within the field of I-O psychology for which pandemics pose both challenges and opportunities. In this commentary, I have outlined dirty work during pandemics as a fruitful topic for I-O psychology research and practice to explore.

First, the field can benefit from an understanding of how occupations are transformed by pandemics, with many occupations rapidly becoming physically, socially, morally, and emotionally tainted. Second, there is an opportunity for researchers to understand how pandemics can create dirty work, how occupations become tainted as a result of pandemics, and how the employees who occupy those positions are affected. Finally, pandemics provide an opportunity for I-O psychologists to advise public policy, inform leaders and employees on effective coping strategies, and provide practical interventions to combat the deleterious effects of dirty work created by pandemics. Through our work, we can do our part to help those engaged in dirty work to be supported and celebrated for their contributions, not villainized.

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