INVITED ARTICLE

Contextualizing dirty work: The neglected role of cultural, historical, and demographic context

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Abstract

Although perceptions of physically, socially, and morally stigmatized occupations – 'dirty work' – are socially constructed, very little attention has been paid to how the context shapes those constructions. We explore the impact of historical trends (when), macro and micro cultures (where), and demographic characteristics (who) on the social construction of dirty work. *Historically*, the rise of hygiene, along with economic and technological development, resulted in greater societal distancing from dirty work, while the rise of liberalism has resulted in greater social acceptance of some morally stigmatized occupations. *Culturally*, masculinity tends to be preferred over femininity as an ideological discourse for dirty work, unless the occupation is female-dominated; members of collectivist cultures are generally better able than members of individualist cultures to combat the collective-level threat that stigma inherently represents; and members of high power-distance cultures tend to view dirty work more negatively than members of low power-distance cultures. *Demographically*, marginalized work tends to devolve to marginalized socioeconomic, gender, and racioethnic categories, creating a pernicious and entrapping recursive loop between 'dirty work' and being labeled as 'dirty people.'

Keywords: dirty work, social construction, history, cultural values, demographics

'I think one of the reasons personally for me that I moved [from social work] to corrections – and I think it was real unconscious – was the conflict [over masculinity]. I think corrections…is a little more macho than like if I worked in a child guidance clinic like I used to.' (A male correctional officer, Williams, 1995: 124)

'Dirty work' refers to occupations that are stigmatized because of associations with problematic *physical* (e.g., garbage, death, danger), *social* (e.g., tainted clients, servile relationships), and/or *moral* (e.g., sinful, confrontational, deceptive) issues (Hughes, 1951, 1958; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis, & Höpfl, 2012). While the diversity of stigmatized occupations is extremely broad – from exterminators to correctional officers, and dentists to exotic dancers – what the occupations share is a 'visceral repugnance' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999: 415) among many members of the public. And while dirty work can have high prestige (e.g., defense attorney, lobbyist), the existence of taint reduces that prestige somewhat, such that, all else equal, dirty work occupations throughout the world are likely to have less prestige than non-dirty work occupations.

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Perceptions of dirt necessarily depend on subjective standards and are thus socially constructed (Goffman, 1963; Douglas, 1966; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Dick, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Simpson, Slutskaya, & Hughes, 2012). Indeed, Drew, Mills, and Gassaway (2007) entitled their book, *Dirty work: The social construction of taint*. As illustrated by the gender dynamics in our opening quotation of a male correctional officer, as the context changes, so too may the perception of what is dirty. Accordingly, it is vitally important to understand how the context affects what is perceived to be 'dirty work.' Johns (2006) defines context 'as situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables' (p. 386; see also Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). In short, context is the situation or environment within which a given entity or phenomenon is embedded, shaping the emergence and enactment of that given quality along with how it is understood.

Following Johns (2006), understanding the role of context requires an account of '*who, what, when, where, and why*' (p. 391, his emphasis). What and why refer to the entity or phenomenon under study (in this case, dirty work) and the rationale for the study (to better understand the role of context). To shed some light on the remaining aspects of context, in subsequent sections we consider the impact of *historical context* (when), *cultural context* (where), and *demographic context* (who). Because there is not much research on how various contexts affect perceptions of (and responses to) dirty work, our discussion will necessarily be somewhat speculative as we extrapolate from existing conceptual and empirical work. We begin by briefly elaborating on the social construction of 'dirty work.'

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF 'DIRTY WORK'

We noted that perceptions of dirt depend on subjective standards and are thus socially constructed. This is particularly true of social and moral dirt because they are *symbolically* rather than physically threatening and, thus, are heavily dependent on local and contemporary norms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). As we will argue, as the historical context, the cultural context, and the demographic context change, so too may the attribution of dirt.

At first blush, it might seem that physical dirt is relatively immune to social construction. The effluent encountered by sewer workers, the dangers of mining, the noxious conditions of 'sweatshops,' and so on tend to arouse near-universal repugnance largely because of the evolutionary benefit that avoidance of such stimuli had upon our species (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). However, physical dirt may be somewhat susceptible to social construction and thus not 'context-free' (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007: 466). For example, corpses and blood tend to be regarded as repellant and even taboo, and occupations associated with them tend to be viewed as physically stigmatized (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). However, as O'Grady (2003) writes, the word 'taboo' has two distinct meetings: '(1) "sacred" or "holy" and (2) "unclean"' (p. 3). Depending on the context, 'taboo' objects such as corpses and blood may be perceived as unclean (e.g., associated with death, wounds, and disease) or sacred (e.g., the relics of saints, a life-saving blood transfusion). As an example of this duality, Sudnow (1967) reports that a hospital's morgue attendant always removed his bloodstained operating gown prior to entering the staff cafeteria, likely because the blood cued thoughts of death; conversely, surgeons often did not remove their bloodstained attire, likely because the blood cued thoughts of heroic life-saving.

Thus, in the pages to follow, we will view social, moral, *and* physical dirty work as socially constructed, although we recognize that the symbolic nature of social and moral dirty work render them especially susceptible to historical, cultural, and demographic contexts. Further, because all forms of dirty work are socially constructed, it is important to note that unanimity across observers is *not* required for an occupation to be socially labeled as 'dirty'; rather, only a 'critical mass' (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007: 154) of observers is required to sustain stereotypes of dirt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As odd as it sounds to a contemporary ear, examples of morally stigmatized occupations once included actor (because they feign authenticity and express and arouse problematic thoughts and feelings; Kohansky, 1984), retailer (because they were thought to be unscrupulous; Welch, 2005), and moneylender (because they charge interest on loans; Hawkes, 2010). Conversely, Falk (2001) notes that, until the ascent of Christianity, prostitution in ancient Greece and Rome was highly regarded, and in ancient India, 'respectable women now and then dedicated a daughter to the role of temple prostitute in a manner resembling the dedication of a son to the priesthood today' (p. 266). As values, beliefs, technologies, and economies evolve around the world, so too do the standards by which dirty work is judged. At least three major historical trends have strongly affected the social construction of dirty work.

Historical trend #1: The rise of hygiene in many nations

The first major historical trend we discuss concerns the widespread increase in attention to hygiene. Cox (2008) describes how cleanliness was a sign of high status for 500 years because it was so difficult to achieve without servants. Swan (2012, quoting Anderson, 2000), for example, notes that in Victorian England domestic workers served 'as a foil to the lady of the house' (p. 187), and that cleanliness to this day remains a cultural code for a classed form of femininity. In short, to secure high status, people were and are motivated to avoid physical dirt in their personal and professional lives (Dick, 2005).

Further, the salience of hygiene increased markedly during the 19th century in the developed world, highlighted by public health campaigns, street cleaning, and the installation of sewers (Vigarello, 1988; Hoy, 1995; Cohen, 2004). A modern legacy of the rising standards in hygiene is societies that are becoming phobic about dirt (Hoy, 1995; Ashenburg, 2007). Indeed, Hoy goes so far as to say that, in the United States, cleanliness morphed from a means of preventing disease to a means of affirming one's identity as an American. Not surprisingly, the increasing salience of hygiene has further increased people's motivation to avoid physical dirt. As a result, occupations in modern society that are associated with such dirt are likely more stigmatizing than ever.

Historical trend #2: Economic and technological development

The second major historical trend affecting the social construction of dirty work is economic and technological development. Development has resulted in a greater reliance on mediating technologies for physically tainted labor, such as garbage trucks and mining equipment, which insulate individuals somewhat from ascriptions of dirtiness. Development has also resulted in the outsourcing of dirty work, particularly noxious and dangerous occupations, to less developed nations. One need only contrast the prevalence of sweatshops in developing economies with the increasingly automated factories in industrialized nations (Moran, 2002). Mediating technologies and outsourcing in developed economies sharpen the contrast between those who still do dirty work and those who do not, exacerbating the clean 'us' versus the dirty 'them' social construction. Conversely, in developing economies, where physical labor is more common and widespread, such labor is likely to be far less stigmatizing. For example, slaughterhouse workers are more likely to be stigmatized in France and Canada than in Cuba and Cambodia.

However, perhaps the greatest impact of economic and technological development on the social construction of dirty work has been increased role specialization, where tasks are bundled into formal jobs and assigned to specialists (e.g., Ritzer, 1996). Consider two illustrations:

- Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes the work lives of elderly villagers in the European Alps that were 'spared by the Industrial Revolution' (p. 145). They work long days performing physically demanding

tasks, such as milking cows and cutting hay, but do not distinguish between their 'work' and 'leisure'; rather, their day is a seamless whole of generally engaging activities. However, their grandchildren, being less traditional, are more inclined to distinguish between 'necessary but unpleasant' (p. 146) work and their leisure pursuits.

- Wen Shanshan[1] (personal communication, June–July, 2012) grew up in a mid-sized city in China, where her schools did not have janitors. Instead, students were responsible for cleaning the classrooms, bathrooms, and grounds. Although not all the students liked to clean, the work was not regarded as particularly degrading. Indeed, the labor was extolled by authorities as 'most glorious,' consistent with a societal advocacy of hard work and treasuring the fruits of one's labor, as well as with the collectivist tendencies in Chinese culture. However, when Shan entered university in Beijing, she found that janitors now did the cleaning. This role specialization provoked a certain amount of guilt (Shouldn't *I* be doing that?), but gradually came to seem normal, as someone *else*'s profession.

And the march of role specialization continues, associated, no doubt, with the increased population density fueled by urbanization. This role specialization leads to an even broader array of occupations that some might more idiosyncratically label as 'dirty work.' To the degree that others can take on the unwanted and/or menial tasks of our lives, we label that work – and the workers who perform it – as 'dirty.' Indeed, Hochschild (2012) discusses various unwanted tasks in private life that are increasingly being outsourced to paid professionals. Examples include graveside visitors, rent-a-Moms, elder care, and home organizers. It is not hard to see how role specialization distances individuals from the dirty work that their forebears routinely performed, creating a symbolic line between those who now handle the dirty tasks and the newly clean. Given that all dirt carries moral overtones (Douglas, 1966), this distancing enables individuals to feel morally superior to 'dirty workers.'

Historical trend #3: The rise of liberalism

The third major historical trend shaping views of dirty work is a widespread rise of liberalism, albeit offset in places and in periods by rises in conservatism. From the dawn of the Enlightenment to current forces for globalization, democratization, increased individual mobility, the spread of secularism, the rise of instantaneous communication and social media, the pervasiveness of pop culture, and so on, traditional values, beliefs, and norms have arguably become more relativistic and accommodating (e.g., Fukuyama, 1992; Roberts & Westad, 2013). The rise in liberalism is associated with recent increases in the social acceptance of many otherwise morally stigmatized occupations, from gambling in Macau (Lai, Chan, & Lam, 2013), to prostitution in Germany (Weitzer, 2012), to marijuana entrepreneurship in the United States (Parloff, 2013). At the same time, the rise in liberalism is associated with an increased salience of human and animal rights, leading to *less* social acceptance of morally stigmatized practices construed as abusing such rights (e.g., child labor, Basu & Tzannatos, 2003; inhumane treatment of livestock, Ackroyd, 2007; sex trafficking, Weitzer, 2007).

A corollary of the erosion of tradition noted above is the growth of personal choice in many areas, including in occupations. This renders low-prestige dirty work doubly stigmatizing as individuals engaged in such occupations are essentially blamed for making 'poor' choices (What is wrong with you that you couldn't find better work?; Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). Occupational ideologies that edify stigmatized work (e.g., housecleaners allow parents to spend more time with their families) often fall on deaf ears outside the occupations. Thus, with the growth in occupational options, it is often assumed that individuals would only engage in low-prestige dirty work if they had left themselves no

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other socially desirable options. This double stigmatizing increases not only the social burden on occupational members but, if internalized, the psychological burden as well (What *is* wrong with me?). Further, in any era of rising economic inequality coupled with high unemployment, the notion of unfettered occupational choice may be more myth than reality for many individuals, leaving them to blame themselves for what are essentially system-level economic forces.

Historical changes within particular occupations

Beyond these three historical trends, a very promising avenue of study is the historical trajectory *within* stigmatized occupations and the industries that house them, such as soldier (van Doorn, 1975), nurse (McMurray, 2012), scrap dealer (Zimring, 2004), and prostitute (Bullough & Bullough, 1987). Adams (2012) provides an excellent example of how differing industries have attempted to manage their stigma over time. He describes the different approaches taken by the cosmetic surgery and tattoo industries during the 20th century to achieve greater respectability in the United States. Both industries, particularly cosmetic surgery, benefited immensely from professionalization and medicalization. In the cosmetic surgery industry, this took the form of establishing industry organizations (including credentialing organizations), affiliating with the mainstream American Medical Association, and standardizing practices. In the tattoo industry, professionalization and medicalization took the form of state regulation of minimal standards and training (in part because of the failure of industry self-regulation), industry efforts to promote sanitary practices, an apprentice-based system of training (albeit non-standardized), and a recasting of 'tattooists' and 'tattoo parlors' as 'tattoo artists' and 'tattoo studios.' The more centralized orientation of the cosmetic surgery industry, coupled with its more effectively medicalized image, also enabled it to develop 'a sophisticated approach to public relations that far surpasses the advances made by the tattoo industry' (p. 158). Additionally, both industries capitalized on external forces, such as the demand for cosmetic surgery on wounded World War I veterans and the development of the electric tattoo gun. Adams' comparative study thus provides a fine-grained illustration of how different occupations/industries may significantly reduce – and perhaps even shed – their stigma over time.

The role of events

History, when viewed through a wide-angle lens, appears to be a relatively smooth succession of trends (e.g., rise of liberalism). However, as Adams' (2012) study illustrates, when viewed through a narrow lens, history is typically revealed to be a bumpier succession of events that reinforce (maintenance), nudge (evolution), or fundamentally change (revolution) trajectories (Sewell, 2005). Recent examples affecting perceptions of dirty work include how the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States significantly bolstered the heroic image of firefighters (Tracy & Scott, 2006), how the 2007–2009 recession fostered the stigmatization of investment bankers (Stanley & Mackenzie-Davey, 2012), and how the recent wake of laudatory 'CSI' TV shows in the United States boosted the social standing of crime scene investigators (Huey & Broll, in press). Events such as these provide highly salient if simplistic cues about 'what the occupation is really about' and may, where relevant, induce outsiders to reconsider their usually stereotypical understandings of the occupation.

What is sorely needed are further historical case analyses that compare and explain the rise and fall of stigma across occupations, organizations, industries, and nations, and across physical, social, and moral forms of taint. Studies of relatively short term changes are inclined to take societal norms as given and focus on the machinations of individuals and groups within this context, whereas studies of longer term changes are more inclined to focus on how and why the norms themselves evolve. Clearly, both kinds of research are needed to provide a rich account of the historical relativity of dirty work.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

With 193 member states in the United Nations, it seems likely that ascriptions of dirt – again, particularly social and moral – vary across nations (although there is very little comparative research of which we are aware). For example, nursing appears to be viewed as physically tainted but essentially noble in many nations. Conversely, Hadley et al. (2007) describe how, because of religious and cultural beliefs associated with gender, nursing in Bangladesh is often regarded as morally dirty. Night shifts, physical contact with strangers, especially males, and physically dirty tasks induce many to view nurses as morally equivalent to sex workers.

To anchor our discussion on cultural context, we draw on Geert Hofstede's (1980, 2001; Hofstede & Bond, 1988) model of cultural classification, which Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson (2006) note has had 'far greater impact' (p. 285) on organizational research than other cultural models. Although cross-cultural research on dirty work is very rare, we argue that three of the five cultural values identified by Hofstede – masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, and power distance – are the most relevant to how occupational members attempt to cope with stigma (the remaining two values are uncertainty avoidance and short-term-long-term orientation).

Masculinity-femininity

We argued elsewhere (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013) that major societal discourses espoused by occupations to legitimate their stigmatized work include masculinity, performing a critical service, self-sacrifice and heroism, achievement and excellence, and attaining rewards. According to Hofstede (2001: 297), 'Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct: Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.' The apparent popularity of masculinity over femininity as a dirty work discourse reflects the bias in general ideological discourses invoked in most nations and organizations (Hofstede et al., 1998; Emrich, Denmark, & Den Hartog, 2004). Tracy and Scott (2006), for instance, argue that one reason firefighters have a better reputation than correctional officers in the United States – despite ostensible similarities in the degree of dirt they confront – is that the former are associated with a masculine discourse of heroism whereas the latter are associated with a feminine discourse of caregiving. Indeed, firefighters and correctional officers alike preferred tasks that could be characterized as masculine (e.g., fighting actual fires vs. providing emergency medical services; overseeing the disciplinary pod of high-security inmates vs. overseeing visitations from the public).

Regarding specific forms of taint, because physically tainted work lends itself more readily to masculine discourses (Tracy & Scott, 2006), such work will likely be more prized in masculine cultures. Conversely, socially tainted work often lends itself to feminine discourses, suggesting such work will be less prized in masculine cultures. As a result, feminine discourses may be used selectively or eschewed altogether in masculine cultures to enhance the status of socially tainted occupations (however, later we note that feminine discourses are most likely to be found in female-dominated occupations). Instead, socially tainted occupations may rely more on the gender-neutral discourse of providing a critical service (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Finally, our reading of the literature on morally tainted occupations suggests less concern with gendered issues and a similar emphasis on the ideology of providing a critical service.

We should add, however, that while masculinity appears to be the default preference in most dirty work ideologies, the cultural value of masculinity-femininity is, after all, variable across cultures. It seems likely, then, that the more that masculinity or femininity is valued in a culture, the more that occupational ideologies will gravitate toward the respective pole. We would thus expect that

occupations such as police officer and used car salesperson would be associated with a more masculine discourse of control and assertiveness in high-masculinity countries such as Japan and Austria, with a more feminine discourse of collaboration and caregiving in high-femininity countries such as Sweden and Norway, and a blended discourse in moderate masculinity-femininity countries such as Brazil and Singapore (cf. Hofstede, 2001).

Individualism-collectivism

'Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty' (Hofstede, 2001: 225). In other words, in individualist cultures, individuals perceive themselves to be separate and distinct from the groups to which they belong, whereas in collectivist cultures, individuals perceive themselves to be extensions of these groups. Thus, individuals in the former put more stock on independence and individuality, whereas individuals in the latter put more stock on interdependence and harmonious relationships.

We noted above that a central discourse for both socially and morally tainted work is providing a critical service. This discourse is also more consistent with the valued interdependence of collectivism, suggesting that such a discourse is likely to be more common in collectivist cultures such as Guatemala and Taiwan (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). Further, because the stigma of dirty work is inherently a *collective*-level rather than an individual-level threat to the self- and social-esteem of occupational members, individuals in collectivist cultures will be more predisposed to engage in collective-level responses to the collective-level threat. Collective-level responses include promulgating a shared occupational ideology (and socializing newcomers to internalize that ideology), acting as social buffers against the derogatory views of outsiders, and facilitating shared defense mechanisms such as the use of gallows humor and advantageous social comparisons. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, a strong occupational culture can buoy the esteem of all members. Conversely, individuals in individualist cultures such as Australia and the United States are likely less able to combat the threat. Specifically, such individuals may rely, by choice or default, on their own devices, particularly *idiosyncratic* beliefs and defense mechanisms (e.g., avoiding outsiders). We would thus expect to see higher variance across individuals in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures regarding their efficacy for combating the threat.

Finally, a study by Bagozzi, Verbeke, and Gavino (2003) provides an intriguing twist on the role of individualism-collectivism. They found that salespersons experiencing shame (albeit for reasons related to individual service delivery rather than their shared occupation) in the relatively individualist Netherlands were more likely to be protective of self and less adaptive in dealing with customers than in the relatively collectivist Philippines. The authors argued that shame is a threat to one's personal identity and self-respect in individualist cultures, prompting avoidance, but is a threat to one's social identity and social respect in collectivist cultures, prompting approach in order to restore social harmony. It would be very interesting to see if the stigma of dirty work operates similarly across individualist and collectivist cultures. We theorize that the shame of low-prestige dirty work may indeed be more acute in individualist cultures because people outside the occupation are more likely to construe the work as an individual failing rather than as self-sacrifice for a social cause.

Indeed, a corollary of individualist cultures is that it is typically assumed that individuals choose occupations based on personal preference, whereas in collectivist cultures, family and other in-group obligations as well as tradition are presumed to hold more sway (cf. Hartung, Fouad, Leong, & Hardin, 2010). Accordingly, entering and remaining in low-prestige dirty work is more likely to be

attributed to the character of the individual in the former cultures, leading to more marked condemnation (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007).

Power distance

Hofstede (2001) defines power distance as 'The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (p. 98). Several societal norms associated with power distance are: 'There should be an order of inequality in this world in which everyone has his/her rightful place; high and low are protected by this order'; 'Hierarchy means existential inequality'; 'Superiors consider subordinates as being of a different kind'; and 'The underdog is to blame' (p. 98).

We noted that dirty work occupations throughout the world are likely to have less prestige than non-dirty work occupations. However, members of high power-distance cultures such as Malaysia and Panama are more likely to expect and accept the implied status hierarchy between dirty and non-dirty occupations, viewing the hierarchy as a natural reflection of the inherent worth of the occupations. Thus, members of such cultures are more likely to have disparaging views of dirty work and those who perform it, and may be less tolerant of efforts to enhance the status and legal rights of dirty work occupations. Conversely, members of low power-distance cultures such as New Zealand and Israel are less likely to accept that individuals performing dirty work are truly 'dirty,' and may be more encouraging of efforts by these individuals to enhance their status and legal rights.

Micro culture relativity: Bounded normalization

Just as social constructions of dirt vary across macro cultures, so do they vary across micro cultures. Indeed, efforts to normalize dirty work – that is, to render it legitimate and unremarkable, at least to insiders (Cahill, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007) – are essentially efforts to carve out a local context within which the work is perceived very differently. Normalization includes such practices as fostering occupational ideologies that provide salutary meaning (e.g., pawnbrokers offer financial relief for downtrodden clients; Tebbutt, 1983), protective social buffers to shield members from the aspersions of others (e.g., the so-called 'thin blue line' that separates police officers from the public; Moskos, 2008), and defense mechanisms to ward off identity threats (e.g., high steel ironworkers mitigate thoughts of danger by carefully testing coworkers; Haas, 1977).

Normalization can focus on various levels of analysis, from the individual to specific teams and networks, to the wider occupational milieu, to organizations and industries. As an example of how truly micro a cultural context can be, Katz (1981) notes that hospital operating rooms employ special rituals and language to help surgical teams 'look dispassionately upon, and touch internal organs and their secretions, blood, pus, and feces' (p. 345). However, when surgeons viewed a film *outside* the normalizing context of the operating room on how to lance and drain pus-filled sores, they reacted as would most people – with obvious disgust, and looked away from the screen.

Generally, the more that a given stigmatized occupation defines an entire organization or industry (e.g., janitors working for a janitorial service agency rather than a building's management), the more that the organization or industry itself is likely to promote normalization (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006). At the same time, individuals in occupations that are not considered 'dirty' tend to become tainted if the organization or industry that employs them is itself stigmatized. For example, a receptionist for a bail bond agency is likely to be tarred with the same brush as the bondsmen themselves (How can you work there?), albeit not as thickly. In such circumstances, members of stigmatized and non-stigmatized occupations alike are apt to partake of the same normalization practices.

The importance of an affirming micro culture is most obvious in the contrast between 'front stage' regions where individuals interact with clients and the public and 'backstage' regions such as

lunchrooms and back offices where individuals can 'step out of character' (Goffman, 1959: 112; Dick, 2005; Ashforth, Kulik, & Tomiuk, 2008). Indeed, it is precisely because of the *contrast* between the front stage and backstage that individuals can temporarily exit their stigmatized role – or at least their potentially problematic interactions with the public – and then be able and willing to re-engage fully in that role when necessary (see also Goffman, 1959; Ashforth et al., 2008). Perhaps the clearest example is funeral homes, where the backstage preparation room is physically separated from the front stage viewing rooms and other areas the public may frequent, and the border is rigorously protected by a lock and 'employees only' sign (Turner & Edgley, 1990). The preparation room looks much like a medical operatory, a far cry from the comfy, home-like trappings in the public areas. However, as a backstage area, morticians are free to drop their somber and dignified demeanor, and engage in 'Joking, singing, the discussion of political issues, and (infrequently) open sexual remarks, racial slurs, complaints about the size of some bodies, profanity, and other rhetoric inconsistent with the frontstage regions' (p. 290). As Turner and Edgley note, such ostensible distancing from the mortician role 'may serve to relax those attending the task and/or convey an atmosphere of "just another job" in what otherwise would be a situation permeated by anxiety' (p. 290).

Micro cultures may also extend to specific locales. Certain kinds of physically tainted work are necessarily tied to certain places, such as soldiers to military bases and fishers to fishing villages. This is particularly true of occupations associated with resource extraction (e.g., loggers, miners, roughnecks [oil]). When the industries associated with such occupations constitute a significant part of the local economy, they are likely to become normalized within the local culture. For instance, a study in North Carolina, United States, found that school districts that were located in counties with high tobacco production were less likely to enact tobacco-free school policies (Goldstein et al., 2003).

Morally tainted work constitutes an interesting case when – owing to its greater threat to the moral order – special zones emerge or are legally created to bound such work (e.g., Seng, 2005; Edwards, 2010). Examples include 'red light' districts for sex work and locales where gambling is legalized (e.g., Las Vegas, Macau). The boundaries encourage workers and clients alike to suspend their moral reservations about the activity *while inside the boundaries* and redefine the activity as normal and desirable (e.g., Tyler, 2011). It is not an exaggeration to say that such boundaries prime a somewhat different self – one that is willing to indulge in activities that might otherwise be eschewed. Thus, activities that may provoke shame and be avoided while one is outside the normalizing boundaries are pursued while one is inside the boundaries. As the long-running advertising slogan for Las Vegas stated, 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.'

Carrying one's stigma across contexts

Bergman and Chalkley (2007) argue that the stigma of dirty work is 'sticky' in that it often persists even after exiting the occupation, whether temporarily (e.g., commuting home) or permanently (e.g., quitting). Because dirty work, especially of the moral variety, is perceived to blemish the very character of those who perform it, exiting the occupation tends not to remove the stain of having performed it. As Curtis and Biran (2001) put it, citing 'the law of contagion,' 'once in contact, always in contact' (p. 22). What this means is that even if a given context is not relevant to the dirty work (e.g., a neighborhood party), mere knowledge that an individual has occupied a dirty work role is often sufficient to impugn the individual in that context. Moreover, observers are often voyeuristically intrigued by repugnant work and ask intrusive questions, further magnifying the social gulf. A homicide investigator remarked, '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' (Huey & Broll, in press: 8). Finally, whereas observers are apt to impugn the character of the individual, the individual is apt to attribute this condemnation to the observers' prejudices, widening the gulf yet

more (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). The upshot is that individuals performing dirty work are often driven to:

- Hide or only selectively disclose their occupation in all contexts irrelevant to that occupation, if possible (e.g., Koken, 2012). Indeed, we interviewed an exterminator who preferred to wear business attire rather than the company uniform because he performed his duties in office buildings and wanted to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963) as 'normal' (Ashforth et al., 2007).
- Rely more on fellow occupational members for a sense of belonging and validation (e.g., Heinsler, Kleinman, & Stenross, 1990; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). In retreating, at least somewhat, to contexts inhabited by fellow occupational members, individuals partially disengage from contexts that might otherwise be socially nourishing.

DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

We noted that cleanliness signified high status for 500 years because it was elusive without servants (Cox, 2008). The echoes of this history resound today as dirty work, at least of low prestige, typically devolves to those of lower status and fewer employment options – a status that is reinforced by typically poor pay (Gills & Piper, 2002; Shipler, 2004). Thus, voluminous research substantiates a large overlap between stigmatized categories of low-prestige dirty work and stigmatized categories of socioeconomic status, racioethnicity, and gender (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Thompson, 2010). The upshot is that the 'doing, or not, of dirty work is divided down lines of class, ethnicity and gender – the most powerful social divides in contemporary life' (Campkin & Cox, 2008: 5).

Socioeconomic status

The historic rise in the salience of hygiene, mentioned above, meant that those who were less able to escape urban squalor – namely, the poor and immigrants – were often stereotyped as dirty people (Cohen, 2004). That stereotype is only reinforced by associations with dirty work (Woollacott, 1980; Cole & Booth, 2007). Indeed, the more a given occupation is performed by 'dirty people' – or otherwise marginalized groups – the more likely that the occupation will be socially constructed by others as dirty work. Thus, there tends to be a recursive loop between perceptions of 'dirty work' and 'dirty people.'

The arbitrariness of this recursive loop is particularly evident when immigrants must leave a nonstigmatized occupation in their homeland for a stigmatized occupation in their new land (e.g., Remennick, 2005; McGregor, 2007). Although they are essentially the same person as before, their immigrant status and occupation mark them as 'dirty people' doing 'dirty work.' A Zimbabwean corporate manager reflected on becoming a care worker after emigrating to the United Kingdom: 'It's very hard moving from a responsible managerial job to low jobs here. If you compare the work, I feel the jobs I have done here have destroyed my self-esteem. I'm destroying the person I know' (McGregor, 2007: 819).

Gender

As noted, masculine discourses tend to be more popular and common in stigmatized occupations than feminine discourses. The exception to this rule is where an occupation is dominated by women. Bolton (2005), for instance, notes the historical association between women, nursing, and an ideology of caring. One nurse remarked, 'generally I feel women make better nurses, we are just naturally more sensitive to the environment, to what people are feeling and how to deal with it' (p. 173).

However, where a feminine discourse prevails, workers tend to be doubly disparaged by the marginalization of their gender and of ideologies tied to notions of femininity (Porter, 1992; Tracy & Scott, 2006). Continuing with our nursing example, the literature on 'caring labor' – employment that involves providing care (e.g., nurses, nannies, domestic workers) – provides a prime example (e.g., Folbre, 1995; England, 2005). Because care is historically associated with families and love, it tends to be devalued in the marketplace. Care workers 'should' view their occupation as a calling and a duty and thus be motivated at least partly through altruism and derive their fulfillment from caring for others. For example, 'No nurses…would feel comfortable complaining that they were required to care "too much" whereas they did feel able to complain about being given too many tasks to carry out' (Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2008: 2031, commenting on James, 1992). Indeed, 'the provision of care has been rationalised to a series of tasks [by organizations] which fails to account for the relational and context specific nature of caring…[W]orkers undertake tasks and form relationships outside what they are renumerated for' (p. 2032). A domestic worker might have to 'steal' time from her physical chores to comfort a lonely client. Not surprisingly, the marginalization of caring labor undermines the prestige and compensation of the associated occupations.

Finally, Simpson, Slutskaya, and Hughes (2012) make the provocative point that 'servile roles may appear to have more servility (e.g., when men perform them) and dangerous jobs may seem more hazardous (e.g., when women undertake them)' (p. 181). That is, perceptions of stigma are exacerbated when individuals enact an occupation in counter-stereotypical ways (servility ≠ masculine, danger ≠ feminine) precisely because the surprising enactment (e.g., men are not 'supposed' to act in a servile manner) underscores the stigma. The exacerbated stigma in turn exacerbates the identity threat to the counter-stereotypical individual. A male nurse remarked of a close friend: 'He said, what do you want to be a nurse for? That's a girl's job – all those bed pans and stuff and clearing up sick, running around after the doctors' (p. 177; see also Williams, 1995). Tying this point to our earlier argument about cultures, this exacerbated identity threat is likely to be particularly strong for counter-stereotypical males in masculine cultures and counter-stereotypical females in feminine cultures. We would expect, then, that the exacerbated identity threat would serve as a deterrent to counter-stereotypical enactment, thereby reinforcing the stereotypes. Conversely, stigmatized work may be rendered less visible – more ground than figure – when a member of the 'correct' gender (and/or, for that matter, the 'correct' socioeconomic status and racioethnicity; Adib & Guerrier, 2003) performs it. The upshot, once again, is a reinforcement of the stereotypes.

Racioethnicity

Dirty work occupations are often dominated by a particular racioethnic group, such as Latino crop pickers in the United States and Filipino domestic workers in various nations. To the extent that the social network of occupational members also draws largely from the same racioethnic group, there is likely to be greater normalization of the taint *within* the group – which only exacerbates the contrast with other racioethnic groups. Individuals both inside and outside of the occupation expect the occupation to be dominated by members of the racioethnic group. Thompson (2010), a white American, remarked on how surprised Latino lettuce pickers – and their employer – were when he chose to become a lettuce picker. Indeed, Thompson subtitled his book, 'A year of doing jobs (most) Americans won't do.' And just as a recursive loop is drawn between 'dirty people' and 'dirty work' based on socioeconomic status, so too is one drawn based on marginalized racioethnic identity.

A self-fulfilling prophecy

Additionally, and not surprisingly, socioeconomic status, gender, and racioethnicity often interact (e.g., Browne & Misra, 2003; Solari, 2006; Duffy, 2007). For instance, Thiel (2007) discusses how

notions of (white) working-class masculinity helped normalize the physical taint of British construction jobs; Mendez (1998) notes how a household service agency targeted their recruitment at 'poor women and women of color who are already socially constructed as being suited to care for and serve the privileged' (p. 127); and Ramirez (2011) explored how conventional notions of Latino machismo were modified by working as immigrant gardeners in the United States.

As alluded to above regarding Thompson's (2010) study of Latino lettuce pickers, the danger of having particular categories of socioeconomic status, gender, and racioethnicity cluster in low-prestige dirty work is that the clustering may come to seem normal and expected to insiders and outsiders alike. And this danger is only abetted by normalizing ideologies that provide explanations for the clustering. Glenn (1992), for example, describes how African American, Mexican American, and Japanese American women were, through discrimination, historically channeled into domestic service: 'Once they were in service, their association with "degraded" labor affirmed their supposed natural inferiority…Thus ideologies of race and gender were created and verified in daily life' (p. 32). Such ideologies are clearly circular: certain categories of socioeconomic status, gender, and racioethnicity are believed to be well-suited to low-prestige dirty work, and their disproportionate clustering in these occupations is then taken as confirmation of their suitability. Circular ideologies are often rooted in dubious essentialist notions of demography, that is, that members of a given social category have a natural and fixed character that differentiates them from members of other categories (e.g., Verkuyten, 2003; Rangel & Keller, 2011), predisposing them to certain forms of work.

Because essentialist explanations justify the status quo, they are usually espoused and enacted by members of the higher status social categories. However, if the explanations are internalized by members of the lower status categories, they reinforce the status quo by fostering 'false consciousness' (i.e., an inability to see how these explanations are shaped by power disparities) and by sapping resistance to them (cf. Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). The effect of this justification of the overlap between demographic characteristics and dirty work is that it becomes a pernicious self-fulfilling prophecy (Jussim, Palumbo, Chatman, Madon, & Smith, 2000).

However, one ideology that challenges this justification – and hence may break the self-fulfilling prophecy – is where occupational members attribute the clustering to *discrimination*, that is, to external coercion. An ideology of being discriminated against may foment both collective activism to change the status quo and individual motivation to pursue careers more aligned with personal desires (Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003; cf. Lalonde & Cameron, 1994).

DISCUSSION

Because dirt is socially constructed, to understand dirty work, we must first understand the context within which it is constructed. Following Johns' (2006) notion of context, we considered the impact of historical (when), cultural (where), and demographic (who) factors. Regarding history, the rise of hygiene and liberalism along with economic and technological development have led to greater societal distancing from dirty work, especially physically tainted tasks. While sparing many individuals the need to perform dirty work, it has left those who do perform it more vulnerable to stigmatization. That said, the rise of liberalism has also led to greater social acceptance of some morally tainted occupations, and technological developments have also helped buffer individuals from actual contact with some forms of physical dirt. A key insight of taking a historical perspective is the temporal relativity of dirt, as illustrated by studies of the rise and fall of stigma in specific occupations over time.

Regarding culture, Hofstede's (1980, 2001) formulation of cultural classifications provided a useful framework. We argued that, following national polls of societal culture, masculinity tends to be preferred over femininity as an ideological discourse in many occupations, organizations, and

industries. This is particularly evident in socially tainted occupations where a seemingly obvious ideology of caregiving is often eschewed – unless the occupation is female-dominated – in favor of an ideology of providing a critical service. Collectivism, as opposed to individualism, is also quite consistent with an ideology of providing a critical service to others; indeed, members of collectivist cultures may espouse self-sacrifice on behalf of the greater good, whereas members of individualist cultures are often burdened by the perceptions of others (and perhaps themselves) that they have personally chosen to engage in work that most people would avoid. Moreover, members of collectivist cultures are generally better positioned to combat the *collective*-level threat to self- and social-esteem that the stigma of dirty work inherently represents. Finally, members of high power-distance cultures are more likely to accept pejorative views of dirty work and be less tolerant of efforts to improve the status and legal rights of dirty work occupations.

We further noted the importance of micro cultures, arguing that the normalization of dirty work – efforts to render it legitimate and unremarkable – is essentially about fostering a bounded context within which the work is perceived quite differently. A supportive micro culture can buffer individuals from the derogatory perceptions of outsiders. Practices include fostering an edifying occupational culture, rigorously demarcating backstage areas where workers can retreat from the public, and utilizing special zones such as red light districts to isolate the dirty work. However, because the taint of dirty work is often 'sticky' (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007), individuals may carry the taint with them when they exit the micro culture.

Regarding demography, there appears to be a recursive loop between low-prestige dirty work and certain categories of socioeconomic status, gender, and racioethnicity. That is, marginalized work tends to devolve to marginalized demographic categories, reinforcing both the association between the two (e.g., domestic work and Filipino women) and questionable essentialist stereotypes of the demographic categories that justify the association as natural (e.g., Filipinos are excellent servants; Pratt, 1997). The association thus becomes a pernicious self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly if members of the marginalized categories internalize the association and accompanying stereotypes. Because this state of affairs favors higher status – and, not coincidentally, higher power – socioeconomic, gender, and racioethnic categories, it tends to take on a normative slant (i.e., not merely *de*scriptive but *pre*scriptive, the way things 'should' be) and becomes quite resistant to change.

Although we have discussed historical, cultural, and demographic contexts in isolation, it is important to recognize that there are undoubtedly complex interactions among these elements. Indeed, it's difficult to provide a reasonably detailed history of any occupation or industry without considering where the occupation/industry is located in a cultural sense and who occupies it in a demographic sense. Intriguing research questions abound. For example, how have historical changes in an occupation's socioeconomic, gender, and racioethnic composition affected the espoused occupational ideologies? How have perceptions of various stigmatized occupations changed over the previous century in high power-distance countries like the Philippines and Mexico compared to lower power-distance countries like Denmark and Costa Rica? What historical factors tend to have the largest impact on social constructions of dirty work in collectivist versus individualist cultures? How have perceptions of 'appropriate' occupations for certain demographic categories changed over time in different countries (cf. Harris & Firestone, 1998)? As with any study of context, to truly understand how context affects perceptions of what is dirty work and how people respond to those perceptions, it is important to simultaneously investigate when, where, *and* who.

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