

Dirty Work: A Study of Societal Perceptions and Personal Experiences in the Construction of Social Identity¹

Damla YELEK²

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Abstract

This study, examining the physical, social, and moral dimensions of dirty work, bases its theoretical foundation on Social Identity Theory, which asserts that individuals' self-perceptions are shaped through group membership, and aims to explain the impact of dirty work on social identity. It investigated how individuals stigmatized by their work make sense of their social identities and how societal perceptions shape identity formation through qualitative in-depth interviews. Findings revealed participants regarded their work as valuable, yet widespread prejudices persisted. This situation compels individuals into a dilemma between occupational identity and stigmatization, complicating their construction of positive social identity.

Keywords: Social Identity; Dirty Work; Stigmatization.

JEL Code: J71, J79, Z13

1. Introduction

Societies classify occupations³ not only according to their position in the production process, their functional contributions, or their roles within the economic structure, but also through social status, prestige, and symbolic value. Within this socially constructed hierarchy, some occupations are regarded as honorable, prestigious, and respectable, whereas others are labeled as “dirty.” The concept of “dirty work,” introduced by Everett C. Hughes (1951), was developed

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² Res. Asst. Dr., Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Türkiye, damlayelek@mu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3143-8350>

³ In this study, the distinctions between the concepts of work and occupation are not discussed in detail in order to avoid diverting attention from the main focus of the study and to preserve the fluency of the text. As a result, these concepts are used interchangeably in certain instances. However, this choice does not imply that the theoretical significance of these concepts is overlooked; rather, it reflects the necessity of adopting a practical approach within the scope of the study.

to describe occupations perceived by society as degrading, demeaning, or of questionable legitimacy. This concept was later systematized by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) within a framework that encompasses occupations stigmatized along three principal dimensions: physical, social, and moral. Jobs that involve physically strenuous and hazardous conditions, that are socially devalued and discredited, or that are morally regarded as dubious are considered forms of “dirty work.” Although dirty work often plays a vital role in maintaining social order, it is commonly perceived as lacking respectability, remaining invisible, receiving little recognition, and being generally avoided.

Dirty work is stigmatized not only because of the ways in which it is performed and the various characteristics inherent in the work itself, but also because of the meanings society attaches to it. This leads dirty work to be positioned at the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Since dirty work is, by its very nature, perceived by society as repellent, disreputable, and controversial, the individuals who perform it are also identified with this “dirtiness” and must confront the stigma attached to their occupations. While Hughes (1962) argues that the taint associated with dirty work may “spill over” onto those who perform it, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 413) emphasize that the direct association established between such work and workers gives rise to social exclusion and status loss. As a result, individuals engaged in dirty work are deprived of social acceptance and pushed into a lower position within the social structure. This, in turn, has significant implications for their social identities.

For individuals engaged in dirty work, the process of constructing and maintaining a social identity generates significant tension due to the negative judgments society attaches to their occupations. In this context, dirty work functions as a factor that shapes, reproduces, transforms, and at times threatens social identity. Accordingly, dirty work ceases to be merely an economic activity or field of employment and becomes a powerful ground for identity construction that shapes individuals’ self-perceptions, sense of belonging, and social identities.

This study focuses on the construction of social identity among individuals employed in work that is characterized as “dirty” because it is regarded by society as “stigmatized,” “dangerous,” “degrading,” “demeaning,” or “inappropriate.” It aims to explain the impact of dirty work on social identity. At the center of the study are questions concerning how individuals engaged in dirty work position themselves within society, through which means they construct and preserve their identities, and what kinds of meanings they attribute to their occupations. In addition, the study examines how experiences such as stigmatization, exclusion, and humiliation associated with dirty work affect individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their occupations, as well as their relationships with the outside world. Within this framework, dirty work is considered not only as a domain that undermines individuals’ social identities, but also as one that compels them to reconstruct and make sense of those identities. The study seeks to understand the practices through which individuals situated within this field of tension construct

social identity and to make visible the distance between the search for personal meaning and societal perceptions.

2. Dirty Work: Conceptual Framework, Definition, Classification, and Social Nature

Hughes (1951) first used the term ‘dirty work’ in relation to tasks and occupations that are likely to be viewed as degrading. It is to do with jobs that are perceived as dirty, dangerous and demeaning and also those that people do not view as honorable or prestigious (Berkelaar et al., 2012, p. 93). Dirty work also is defined as including disreputable, disgusting and filthy occupations (Batista and Codo, 2017, p. 73). The notion of dirty work was used by Emerson and Pollner (1976) to describe jobs that are considered shameful and undesirable. Ashforth and Kreiner (2014, p. 82) define dirty work as work that is found repulsive, degrading and immoral by a significant portion of society in turn. At the same time, dirty work is often defined as work that others would rather not do – and in many cases, not even know about – and that most people would not choose to do if they had the option (Swanson, 2005, p. 93).

The notion of dirty work began to crystallize in the notes Hughes made in his notebook after a talk with an architect about the attitude and behaviour of German soldiers in the Second World War and in Hughes’ later reference to these notes in a university lecture. Hughes then elaborated the ideas he had presented in that lecture into a published article in *Social Problems*. In his article, Hughes argued that the social advance of Jews was seen as a threat by much of society, but kept in the background when it came to acting on it. He argued that society delegates its dirty work to a certain group, as in the extermination of the Jews. He also claimed that society later stigmatizes those who do such work and creates complex mechanisms to keep knowledge of these acts out of consciousness or deny them altogether (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p. 413; Swanson, 2005, pp. 95-96; Batista and Codo, 2017, p. 773).

Hughes’ idea is, in some way or other, about work that is imperfect, unpalatable or undesirable. Hughes dealt with dirty work in terms of its emergence, nature and consequences but he did not explicitly define what he meant by dirt or taint. Instead, he chose to exemplify the concept with examples of specific types of work (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p.1125). He focused on explaining how dirty work is stigmatized and in what ways it is perceived as degrading or flawed.

In the beginning, dirty work was defined as work that involved getting your hands dirty, staining your clothes, or wetting your shoes. It also included low-status work that involved contact with undesirable substances, contact with unpleasant odors, and contact with garbage, waste, feces and the like (Höpfl, 2012, pp. 21). Early research can thus be said to have focused on dirty work from a material and bodily angle, emphasizing types of work that directly elicit disgust and are perceivable through the senses. This is consistent with the fact that society mostly defines dirt by its materiality (Simpson et al., 2012, p. 3). But the scope of dirty

work has, over time, broadened to encompass not only jobs that are physically demanding and/or undesirable but also jobs that are perceived as socially degrading and contrary to the general moral standards of society (Berkelaar et al., 2012, pp. 95–96). Thus, it can be argued that during its conceptual development the meaning of dirty work became broader, covering social and moral aspects and not only material dirt, but also socially undesirable and unacceptable types of work.

Dirty work is characterized by the presence of one or more undesirable features, qualities or forms of taint in the work. From a general point of view, a lot of jobs can, in some aspects, have some of the characteristics of dirty work and therefore can be similar to it. Many jobs are potentially subject to being seen as dirty but they cannot, in most instances, be defined as dirty work. A job is dirty or tainted to the extent that it is seen as dangerous, disgusting, shameful, immoral, undesirable, and/or degrading. A particular form of work is defined as “dirty” if it contains one or more of these taints and is then categorized on the basis of the type of taint it contains. Building on Hughes’s work on dirty work, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 414) identified three basic types of taint and distinguished dirty work in terms of physical, social, and moral dimensions⁴: work that is “physically disgusting,” a “symbol of social degradation,” and “contrary to moral values.”

‘Physically dirty work’ is a term for jobs that involve working directly with dirt or hazardous conditions. Physically dirty work encompasses, among others, jobs such as garbage collectors (Perry, 1998; Batista and Codo, 2017), funeral workers and undertakers (Thompson, 1991), waste collectors, wastewater cleaners, gravediggers, farmers, miners (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), animal caretakers, veterinarians (Sanders, 2010), and butchers (Ackroyd, 1990). Importantly, some roles in public service, such as soldiers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and

⁴ Although studies on dirty work have generally focused on occupations marked by physical, social, and moral taint, which are widely recognized as the three fundamental dimensions of dirty work, recent scholarship has drawn attention to an additional dimension. Referred to as emotionally dirty work, this dimension relates dirty work to the nature of emotional taint, focuses on the management of emotions characterized as difficult, negative, and/or inappropriate, and suggests that providing support to individuals experiencing emotional distress may also be considered within the scope of dirty work (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p. 1123). Emphasizing that work involving individuals who are grieving, isolated, suicidal, or subjected to abuse has been insufficiently conceptualized in the dirty work literature, McMurray and Ward sought to classify such forms of taint. Their study argues that treating emotion management merely as a by-product or consequence of dirty work is inadequate, contends that forms of taint may exist beyond the established threefold classification, and highlights emotional taint as a source of stigma in its own right.

The emergence of new dimensions alongside the growing body of research on dirty work is not surprising. Indeed, this may be regarded as a positive development insofar as it contributes to the continued discussion and refinement of the concept. However, it has been observed that the types of work considered within McMurray and Ward’s dimension of emotionally dirty work can readily be addressed within the three dimensions of dirty work discussed above, and thus no need has been identified to establish a distinct category for them. Accordingly, this study adheres to the three fundamental dimensions identified by Ashforth and Kreiner and traditionally accepted in the literature.

firefighters (Tracy and Scott, 2006), are also identified in the classification of physically dirty work.

The concept of socially dirty work is discussed in terms of two main features or types of taint. The first is that such work involves direct contact with people stigmatized by society. Some jobs are seen as dirty because they involve contact with stigmatized people, such as correctional officer (Tracy and Scott, 2006), police officer (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), social worker (Stacey, 2005), nursing home worker (Stannard, 1973; Jervis, 2001), and psychiatric hospital worker (Emerson and Pollner, 1976). A second basic form of taint associated with socially dirty work is that these jobs are viewed as degrading, demeaning, or humiliating. In other words, work considered socially dirty means activities that may be seen as shameful in the way they are done. Also, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 415) note that another feature that can make a job socially dirty is the development of a relation with others that resembles that of a “servant” or “slave.” These jobs include cleaning work, shoe shining, doorman duties, driving, domestic service, and the like.

Morally dirty work means work that society does not see as ethical, is perceived to have little value to society and the workers are often perceived as “sinful”. Occupations that fall into the moral dimension include exotic dancers (Thompson et al., 2003; Bradley, 2007), sex workers, casino managers, loan sharks, psychics, tattoo artists (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), and paparazzi (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014).

Two important points emerge in the classification of dirty work. First, dirty work is not confined to low-prestige occupations which are not socially approved and respected. It is worth noting that some jobs that society considers high status are also dirty work today. Particularly, many socially dirty occupations are prestigious and respected as they deal with stigmatized individuals or groups. Some of them appear to be public service in the eyes of the society or not dirty work at all. This can be explained through societal perceptions, but it does not change the fact that these occupations are taken up in dirty work literature.

Another important issue to be addressed in relation to dirty work is that of similarities and overlaps between its various dimensions. For example, some jobs that are dirty in the sense that they are socially demeaning, as in the cases of doormen and cleaners, share some characteristics with work that is physically dirty. This is important to show that some occupations may simultaneously embody features associated with different dimensions of dirty work. Dirty works may sometimes be located at a single dimension according to one specific form of taint but may also be assessed over several dimensions because of overlapping forms of taint. Not to be ignored in this respect is the fact that the boundaries between the physical, social and moral dimensions of dirty work are permeable and that one single occupation might be considered under more than one dimension.

To call a job dirty is not just to describe its repulsive or demanding qualities. Rather, such definitions go beyond identifying certain characteristics of the work

itself and the symbolic meanings society attaches to the work and to those who do it. Therefore, to define dirty work is not only to describe the objective features of an occupation, but also to understand the stigmatization of such work through societal perceptions. But because of the nature of these jobs, their unique characteristics and society's propensity to ignore them, it is particularly difficult to define dirty work, to describe it in concrete terms and to delineate its boundaries.

The meanings attributed to dirty work may vary between societies, cultures and historical times. This variation, plus the propensity for dirty work to move around in response to social variables, makes it difficult to define the concept in a static and universal way. Whether an occupation is socially defined as "dirty" or "clean" depends on changes in social norms, cultural values, and moral judgments over time. At the same time, the context in which dirty work is judged is closely connected to the meanings society gives to the ideas of "dirt" and "cleanliness," and to how it marks one off from the other.

Dirty work can involve occupational groups that are quite different from each other in terms of how they are performed, the income they provide, or the status they confer. This is an important part of the diversity that makes it difficult to draw the lines around dirty work. It also suggests that the unifying element of dirty works is not their structural characteristics, but the negative attitude that society develops towards them. What dirty works have in common is not the work itself, but the reaction it evokes in society: the question, "How can you do that?" (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p. 415). reflects the emotional and social perception of these jobs. In this regard, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) emphasize that the defining feature of dirty work is not the nature or context of the job, but rather the internal and social reactions that such occupations elicit in people.

The basic common characteristic of dirty work is, on the one hand, the instinctive reaction of disgust it elicits in society, and on the other hand, it creates both individual and social consequences by creating the basis for exclusionary and demeaning attitudes towards those who perform it. People not only react to dirty work with disgust but also tend to make it taboo and to detach themselves from the work itself and from the people who do it. Society then denies and stigmatizes those groups to which it delegated the dirty work (Hughes, 1962, pp. 7–8). In this sense dirty work is not only a collection of tasks that are perceived as physically, socially or morally devalued. It also results in the categorisation of those who perform such tasks as 'dirty' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p. 413). The way that dirty work is stigmatized by the perception that those who do it are flawed or inferior. The process of stigmatization can take different forms depending on the type of work, the degree of perceived dirtiness, the prestige of the occupation, and society's judgments about that work. Such perceptions of those performing dirty work lead to their exclusion from social acceptance and the destruction of their respectability (Scandella, 2010, p. 23). In addition to the stigmatization of dirty work, another important aspect of the dirty work is its tendency to become invisible. This invisibility is directly linked to people's avoidance of thinking about dirty work,

their habit of keeping their distance from it, and even their habit of rejecting or denying the realities associated with such work.

The idea of dirty work is not only related to the nature of the occupation itself. It is also connected to the ways in which such work is viewed and valued by society. The nature of dirty work involves both the material and non-material difficulties of work, and the social meanings attached to work. In this sense, dirty work is central to processes of social non-acceptance and exclusion, affecting not only the perception of the work itself but also the social positions of those who carry it out. It is therefore necessary, to understand the nature of dirty work, to go beyond the concrete conditions of it, to have a wider view.

3. Dirty Work: A Social Identity Theory Perspective

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is concerned with group membership, group processes and intergroup relations. It suggests that people develop their self-concepts based on the social groups they belong to. Social identity theory is defined as ‘a non-reductionist account of the relationship between the collective self and the social group’ (Hogg and Williams, 2000, p. 81). Social identity theory is concerned with the social dimensions of the self and the extent to which individuals define themselves in relation to others and to social groups. Social identity places the individual in a social position, and emerges as a consequence of one’s ties and identification with social groups. In other words, theorists claim, social identity is constructed by the individual’s identification with group membership.

We have to think about the relationship between individual identity and the self in order to understand the concept of social identity. The definitions of social identity suggest a fundamental difference from individual identity. Social identity is not formed on the basis of the personal characteristics of individuals but on the basis of their perception of themselves as members of a social group and their integration of the properties of that group into their own identity. The theory gives a group-oriented, not individual-centered view in defining the individual through group membership and group identity; it emphasizes that group memberships affect self-perception and that there is a distinction between the collective self and the individual self (Brewer and Gardner, 1996, p. 83). In this regard, the concept of depersonalization⁵ is emphasized, that is, belonging to a group creates a collective self, which creates a differentiation of “us” and “them” (Hogg et al., 2004, p. 251). Hence the argument that identity is more than individual, it acquires a social dimension through its focus on a sense of “we”.

⁵ Depersonalization refers to the grounding of social identity in group membership and the foregrounding of group characteristics rather than individual attributes. This concept denotes only a shift in the dimension of identity and does not carry a negative meaning. The predominance of either individuality or sociality does not imply the complete disappearance of the other; rather, depersonalization is used here to describe a situation in which social identity becomes prominent while individual identity recedes into the background (Demirtaş, 2003, p. 131; Ündür and Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2016, pp. 40–41).

Social identity theory is based on several assumptions (Turner, 1987, p. 30; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, p. 40; Hogg and Abrams, 1998, p. 318; Karasawa, 1991, p. 293):

- People define themselves, classify themselves and evaluate themselves according to the social group they belong. They identify with the group through this process, and so construct their social identity.

The first assumption of the theory is strongly tied to the idea of social categorization which is described as “a system that creates and defines the individual’s place in society” (Turner, 1975, p. 7). In the theory, social categorization is considered as one of the building blocks. It is a way to organize and systematize the social environment. It helps people to know where they are in the social world, to whom they belong in terms of their social group, and how to describe themselves. The process of social categorization involves identifying the category to which one belongs and understanding who one is. Social identity can thus be defined as the process through which people become aware of their membership in a social group and use the characteristics of that group to define themselves (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, pp. 15–16; Turner, 1975, p. 7; Trepte and Loy, 2017, p. 3).

- Individuals compare the standing of their own group with that of other groups in the social environment. The status of the group they belong to is defined by social comparisons with other groups.

This assumption is important to the notion of social comparison in the theory and is based on the premise that groups cannot exist in isolation. In fact, every group exists amongst other groups in society and it is the presence of other groups around that gives a group its meaning (Turner, 1975, p. 7). Individuals evaluate the group to which they belong and compare their group with other groups in the formation of social identity as part of the social comparison process.

- People strive to achieve positive self-esteem and to maintain and enhance it. People make efforts to do this.

Social identity theory states that individuals judge themselves through social categorization and judge the value of their membership group through social comparison. With these two processes, the individual aims to increase his own value and the value of the group he belongs to (Meşe, 1999, s. 22). In other words, humans are driven to develop and sustain a good social identity. The basic motivation for social categorization and social comparison is to find out the social prestige of the self and the group and, related to this, the need for high self-esteem and a positive social identity.

- Membership in social groups is directly related to positive or negative value connotations. Therefore, the social identity of an individual may be positive

or negative depending on the position and characteristics of the group to which he or she belongs.

Individuals tend to construct and perceive their social identities positively, so they tend to stay in groups that contribute positively to their social identities and enhance their self-esteem. But social groups are not equal in status; indeed, in some cases the differences in status between groups may be too great to ignore. In some cases, the low status and limited perceived value of one's own group can also lead to diminished respectability, making it more difficult for the individual to achieve a positive social identity. When a positive social identity is threatened, individuals may react in different ways, such as leaving the group or trying to change the group's position.

The assumptions of the theory show that social identity is not only affected by individual perceptions but also by social evaluations and components of group belonging. Therefore, social identity is created in the interaction between individual processes of self-positioning and self-valuation and the perceptions of society of the groups to which they belong, the status assigned to these groups and the cultural meanings attributed to them.

Occupations are here an important element of group belonging and play a decisive role in the social position of individuals, their sense of self-worth and social identity. Thus, one can argue that people develop their social identities through their occupations, incorporate their occupations into their self-concepts, and tend to develop a positive social identity by taking on the positive components associated with those occupations. Simultaneously, social identity is constructed by reciprocal interaction, which is based on the value that society attaches to occupations. In this phase, social acceptance of an occupation is especially important. Occupations that are held in respect and prestige in society provide people with a head start in constructing a positive social identity.

Within this framework it becomes particularly important to ask which strategies individuals use in devalued, stigmatized and dirty occupations to construct their social identities and which individual or social factors influence this process. In the fieldwork part of the study, the interviews with representatives of the groups which do not present positive features and occupy a low social position i.e. participants involved in dirty work show how this process goes on and what peculiar difficulties there are in building a social identity.

4. Aim, Scope and Method

Based on the assumption that occupations have a decisive influence on the construction and interpretation of social identity, this study aims to understand the processes through which individuals engaged in dirty work construct their social identities. Accordingly, it seeks to grasp the worlds of meaning of these individuals and to explain how they form and evaluate their social identities, as well as how they make sense of societal perceptions.

At its heart the study is an attempt to understand human behavior, experiences and perceptions. In this sense, the study adopts a flexible, contextual and holistic perspective that allows for a better understanding of the complexity of human nature, rather than pre-planned, limited and rigid research methods. Hence, a qualitative research method was chosen due to its emphasis on individuals' subjective experiences and societal perceptions.

The literature on the research topic shows that few studies directly address the relationship between dirty work and social identity. This gap called for exploratory and descriptive approaches in the development of assumptions of the present study. Therefore, the research used Buffon's approach⁶. This approach allows the researcher to be open to unexpected phenomena that may emerge in the process, and to establish intuitive patterns, rather than defining the boundaries of the research with rigid lines from the beginning (Becker, 2021, pp. 315–316). Thus the study was built on a core set of assumptions and, rather than generating many highly detailed assumptions, a flexible design was preferred. Thus the boundaries of the research were not rigidly demarcated and the research process itself could play a formative role. The main assumptions put forward in this direction are:

- The process by which individuals construct their social identities is influenced by their occupations.
- People in dirty works have difficulty constructing a positive social identity.
- Individuals involved in high-prestige dirty work find it easier to develop a positive social identity than individuals involved in low-prestige dirty work.
- There are strong, widely held negative views in society about dirty work and the people who do it.

According to the basic assumptions, the selection of occupational groups included in the scope of the research was made in such a way as to allow for a multidimensional assessment of the impact of dirty work on the formation of social identity. In this context, the occupations to be included in the study were determined with the help of tables prepared on the basis of the classifications found in the dirty work literature, and different occupational groups were selected for physically, socially and morally dirty work.

⁶ In contrast to the Linnaean perspective, which proposes the use of a fully structured classification chart into which researchers can enter the information they obtain and assumes that studies are completed once the blanks in this chart are filled, Buffon argues that the very process of constructing the classification chart should itself be regarded as a fundamental activity. He further maintains that this process of construction should be understood as an ongoing endeavor that is never fully completed (Becker, 2021, pp. 46–47).

Table 1: Physically Dirty Work

Low-Prestige	High-Prestige
Garbage collectors (Perry, 1998; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Batista and Codo, 2017)	Firefighters (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Tracy and Scott, 2006)
Waste collectors / Recycling workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Batista and Codo, 2017)	Physicians (Simpson et al., 2012; Olvera, 2017)
Funeral workers / Gravediggers (Thompson, 1991; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014)	Nurses (Jervis, 2001; Swanson, 2005)
Wastewater cleaners / Sewer workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	Veterinarians (Sanders, 2010)
Farmers / Agricultural workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	Dentists (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Sever and Özdemir, 2022)
Miners (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	Soldiers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)
Workshop workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	
Animal caretakers (Sanders, 2010)	
Butchers / Slaughterhouse workers (Ackroyd, 1990; Press, 2023)	
Construction workers (Sever and Özdemir, 2022)	
Hairdressers / Barbers (Sever and Özdemir, 2022)	
Auto mechanics (Bowles and Dant, 2002)	
Oil production facility workers (Press, 2023)	

Table 2: Socially Dirty Work

Low-Prestige	High-Prestige
Cleaners (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	Correctional officers / Prison guards (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Tracy and Scott, 2006; Press, 2023)
Patient / Elderly care workers (Stannard, 1973; Jervis, 2001)	Social workers (Stacey, 2005)
Nursing home employees (Stannard, 1973; Jervis, 2001)	Police officers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Dick, 2005)
Doormen / Janitors (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	Mental health counselors working in psychiatric hospitals (Emerson and Pollner, 1976; Press, 2023)
Domestic workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	
Drivers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014)	
Customer complaint handlers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	
Shoe shiners (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)	

Table 3: Morally Dirty Work

Sex workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014)
Exotic dancers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Thompson et al., 2003; Bradley, 2007)
Paparazzi (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014)
Fortune tellers / Psychics (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)
Tattoo artists (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)
Casino workers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)
Loan sharks (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999)
Real estate agents (Sever and Özdemir, 2022)
Contractors (Sever and Özdemir, 2022)
Car dealers (Sever and Özdemir, 2022)

The selection of occupations was done according to a distinction based on prestige⁷, in order to make possible comparisons within the dimensions of dirty work and to verify if the perception of an occupation held by society creates differences in the construction of social identity. Thus, for each of the physical and social dimensions of dirty work, two occupational groups were selected, one low-prestige and one high-prestige, resulting in a total of four occupational groups. The study was limited to a single occupational group within this dimension because morally dirty work does not allow a prestige-based distinction⁸. In this framework, funeral workers (corpse washers and funeral transport drivers), as a low-prestige occupational group, were selected from the group of physically dirty occupations; emergency medicine physicians were selected from the group of high-prestige occupations. For socially dirty work, cleaning workers and social workers were included as low- and high-prestige occupational groups, respectively. The morally dirty work was given to exotic dancers, belly dancers and zennes.

The main reasons for choosing the occupational groups included in the study were that they are perceived by society as dirty, tainted and stigmatized and hence are classified under the category of “dirty work” and that these occupational groups were also considered particularly relevant because they make the physical, social and moral dimensions of dirty work visible and provide striking examples in this respect. In addition, the literature review showed that sources on these occupational groups are scarce and some of them have received little or no attention in academic research. The examination of these occupations in the present study is therefore both necessary and original.

This study has applied the interview technique because it enables the observation of details, the opportunity of getting additional explanations and the achievement of the aim of the research. Thus, the research allows to analyze the relationship between social identity and dirty work in detail through the experiences of the participants. The method of semi-structured interview form was used and the research questions were prepared in general terms beforehand in view of the theoretical and conceptual framework to avoid deviation from the research problem. But that does not mean that the questions were fixed and unchangeably determined or confined.

The interview form was intended to include open-ended questions and was divided into three parts. The first section asked questions to gather demographic information. These data were found to be influential in the process of social identity

⁷ It should be noted that both the classification of dirty work according to its dimensions and the distinctions made on the basis of prestige were grounded in the existing literature. At the same time, the societal perception of occupations is directly linked to cultural context, and a given occupation may be perceived as carrying different levels of prestige across different cultures.

⁸ Although contractors and car dealers, which are included among morally dirty occupations, are classified as high-prestige jobs in the study by Sever and Özdemir (2022, p. 105), no prestige-based classification was made for morally dirty work in the present study. This decision was based on the exploratory nature of the aforementioned study and the fact that such a distinction is not established in the foundational literature on the subject.

formation and were also used to enable comparisons among participants. The second part asked questions to identify the features of the work that make it dirty. The questions in this section were not asked in the same way of all occupational groups, but rather, taking advantage of the semi-structured nature of the interview form, they were adapted according to the nature of the work and occupational differences, and new questions were added where necessary. The third section contained questions about the relationship between social identity and dirty work. First, the tendency for individuals in dirty work occupations to define themselves as a group based on their jobs was examined, and in this context, assumptions of social identity theory were tested with a series of questions. This section had questions on how the individual assess their social status/position, if they perceive their work as valuable or meaningful and how they perceive the way their work is perceived by the society. This aspect of the research is therefore of particular importance in enabling the collection of detailed data on the subject, as it carries “depth of opinion” (Goode and Hatt, 1973, p. 237) and directly seeks answers to the research questions.

In the preparation of the interview form attention was paid to the content and scope of the questions. Each question was intended to relate to a component of the assumptions of the study, taking special care to make sure that the questions were consistent with the aims of the study. In addition, attention was paid to the interrelations of the questions; they were arranged in groups by content and the ordering of the questions within the form was done with great care. The form was kept as orderly and concise as possible in order to avoid participants’ fatigue and, more importantly, superficial responses due to boredom. At the same time, the scope of the form was not narrowed. To conduct the study within ethical limits, the interview form was submitted to the Ethics Committee of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University prior to the field research. The data collection was initiated after it was confirmed that this research did not pose any ethical concern.

Pilot interviews were conducted to test the interview form before the field research. Four participants were interviewed, two physicians in emergency medicine, one social worker and one cleaning worker. Pilot interviews are of particular importance in studies such as the present one where the literature on the subject is sparse and previous research is still scarce. The feedback received helped to make the form stronger from a technical point of view and improved the overall flow of the interview process . The interviews were not part of the main research process.

Interviews were conducted individually and face to face and audio recordings were made with the consent of the participants. Within the scope of the research, 24 participants⁹ were reached and selected by considering the three main dimensions of dirty work and the distinction based on prestige. Participants ages

⁹ To protect the participants’ identities, their real names were withheld and a numbering system was used. The numbering of participants was arranged according to the dates and order in which the interviews were conducted.

ranged from 26 to 55 years, and education levels ranged from primary school to post graduate levels. Interviews were held between February and July 2024.

Table 4: Participants' Demographic Information

	Occupation	Dirty Work Dimension	Age	Gender	Educational Status	Marital Status	Interview Date
K1	Social Worker	Socially Dirty Work (High Prestige)	35	Female	Master's Degree	Single	February 2024
K2	Social Worker	Socially Dirty Work (High Prestige)	27	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Single	February 2024
K3	Social Worker	Socially Dirty Work (High Prestige)	30	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Single	February 2024
K4	Cleaning Worker	Socially Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	42	Female	High School (Open Education)	Married	February 2024
K5	Funeral Worker (Corpse Washer)	Physically Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	48	Female	Primary School	Married	February 2024
K6	Social Worker	Socially Dirty Work (High Prestige)	31	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Single	February 2024
K7	Cleaning Worker	Socially Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	54	Female	Middle School	Married	March 2024
K8	Social Worker	Socially Dirty Work (High Prestige)	45	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Married	March 2024
K9	Funeral Worker (Corpse Washer)	Physically Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	52	Male	Associate Degree	Married	March 2024
K10	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	30	Female	Medical School	Married	March 2024
K11	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	32	Male	Medical School	Single	March 2024
K12	Cleaning Worker	Socially Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	39	Female	Primary School	Single	April 2024
K13	Cleaning Worker	Socially Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	40	Female	Primary School	Married	April 2024
K14	Funeral Worker (Driver)	Physically Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	29	Male	High School	Single	April 2024
K15	Funeral Worker (Driver)	Physically Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	43	Male	Primary School	Married	April 2024
K16	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	26	Female	Medical School	Single	May 2024
K17	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	31	Female	Medical School	Single	May 2024
K18	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	44	Male	Medical School	Married	May 2024
K19	Emergency Medicine Physician	Physically Dirty Work (High Prestige)	46	Male	Medical School	Married	May 2024
K20	Funeral Worker (Corpse Washer)	Physically Dirty Work (Low Prestige)	47	Female	Primary School	Married	June 2024
K21	Exotic Dancer (<i>Zenne</i>)	Morally Dirty Work	55	Male	Primary School	Single	June 2024
K22	Exotic Dancer (<i>Zenne</i>)	Morally Dirty Work	35	Male	High School	Single	June 2024
K23	Exotic Dancer (Belly Dancer)	Morally Dirty Work	35	Female	Associate Degree	Single	July 2024
K24	Exotic Dancer (Belly Dancer)	Morally Dirty Work	43	Female	Primary School	Single	July 2024

The decision to conclude the research was made on the grounds that the study had reached a point of saturation. However, the inclusion of five different

occupational groups in the study, each with its own distinctive conditions, made it difficult to determine when the research should be brought to an end. In the questions forming the second section of the interview form, which aimed to understand the occupations and identify their characteristics, different responses were obtained due to the distinct nature of each occupation. As a result, repetition on this issue was encountered less frequently across occupational groups. However, the research was concluded when participants' responses to the questions on social identity in the third section of the interview form were found to be highly similar, and in some cases nearly identical, regardless of occupational group. The decision to end the research was made at the point when it became evident that responses concerning social identity—the central focus of the study—had begun to recur and that the data obtained no longer contributed to the quality or diversity of the research. The data collected in the study were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The interview data were organized according to themes¹⁰ and supported through direct quotations from participants.

5. Findings

The study first addressed employees' experiences of entering dirty work and the features that cause the occupations included in the research to be classified as dirty. The identified features were then compared to the ones already found in the literature. Then the relationship of dirty work to social identity was studied in detail. The specific problems of the workers were analyzed.

5.1. Getting Down and Dirty

The most general perception of dirty work is that, due to certain characteristics of these jobs, individuals would prefer to avoid them and would not want to be employed in such occupations. Dirty work is regarded as work that the rest of society is unwilling to perform because of the negative meanings attached to it, cultural and social norms, and the difficulties inherent in the work itself. This, in turn, raises the question of how and why individuals engaged in dirty work enter these occupations. Including workers' experiences of entering dirty work in the study makes an important contribution to understanding the reasons, motivations, and social dynamics underlying individuals' orientation toward such occupations. Moreover, allowing workers to evaluate this process through their own narratives is considered to provide a better understanding of the role of dirty work in the construction of social identity.

The findings of the field research reveal that while some individuals accept employment in dirty work due to economic necessities or limited job opportunities, others are drawn to such occupations by evaluating the nature of the work or the contribution it provides in positive terms.

“I was separated from my husband; my daughter came back,
and she came back with my grandchild. I live in a rented house and

¹⁰ No qualitative data analysis software was used in the process of identifying and organizing the themes; the entire process was carried out manually.

I have just rented a new place so I have a heavy burden. (...) I had to start cleaning, what else could I do? “Well, at least we have our health” (P12, 39, Female, Cleaning Worker)

I’ve always been working. I was a cleaner in all those jobs. I don't even know how I started. We didn't get to choose jobs, we took whatever work we could find. We did not have the opportunity to study.” (P4, 42, Female, Cleaning Worker)

“I always wanted to be a physician. In fact I was not admitted to begin with and enrolled in another department, industrial engineering, but I left that. I tried again. I was admitted to medical school. I finished medical school. “I went into medicine of my own accord.” (P11, 32, Male, Emergency Medicine Physician)

“And when I was selecting my university courses, social work was always my first choice. I studied it. “I learned to love the field while studying, but I also saw that the field is not valued much in Türkiye.” (P2, 27, Female, Social Worker)

The data from the participants indicate that the entry into physically and socially dirty work is influenced by two common tendencies. Findings are structured around two pathways: being compelled into dirty work by necessity and voluntarily choosing the occupation. What is interesting is the manner in which these two tendencies combine in the physical and social dimensions of dirty work depending on the prestige of the occupation. For example, funeral workers and cleaning workers work in low-prestige occupations. The workers took up their job because they needed the money or they had limited educational opportunities, regardless of whether the work is considered physically or socially dirty. In contrast, we found that emergency medicine physicians and social workers, both high-prestige positions, had voluntarily entered their fields. The data obtained for this dimension could not be assessed in terms of this tendency, because prestige differences could not be dealt with in morally dirty work. The observation revealed that the exotic dancers, in the moral dimension, had willingly gone into their work despite the prevailing societal perceptions and prejudices.

“My life is dance, I love it very much. (...) That is why it was something already in me. I started with pleasure, with passion. I worked in wedding halls for a while and then I continued in a professional way.” (P21, 55, Male, Zenne)

Choosing an occupation voluntarily contributes to positive social identity formation by enhancing individuals’ sense of belonging to their occupation, job satisfaction and self-esteem. On the other hand, work done out of necessity was linked to negative outcomes for people’s self-esteem and social identities.

5.2. Identifying the Characteristics That Render Work Dirty

The research identified the factors that lead the occupations under examination to be characterized as dirty in terms of their physical, social and moral

dimensions. Participants' statements provide concrete examples of the conditions and occupational practices that explain why these occupations are included in classifications of dirty work.

5.2.1. Physically Dirty Work

Funeral workers are included in the study among physically dirty work, and they said that they come into direct contact with dirt as they wash the deceased. This contact was said to be more intense, particularly when washing bodies that had been left for a while or bodies that had been dismembered.

“Just as living people may be well cared for or neglected, the deceased may also be in a well-kept or neglected condition. For example, if the person had been bedridden for a long time and was not properly cared for by their relatives, or if the death occurred in a traffic accident... A person brought in after a traffic accident does not arrive looking like an ordinary person; sometimes the body is dismembered. There may be cuts on the body, with blood flowing continuously. For instance, the hand may be hanging from the arm—not completely severed, but brought in placed beside the body... And, please excuse me, when the deceased is washed, the body relaxes. When that relaxation occurs, bodily waste may be discharged.” (P5, 48, Female, Corpse Washer)

“Sometimes the bodies can be in really bad shape. For example, we wash bodies that come from autopsy. We wash bodies that are three or four days dead. They don't wash them in the autopsy; they put them in a body bag and send them to us to wash. The person could have been cut open from head to toe and sewn back up but there's always blood leaking from those sutures and it fills half the body bag. Such situations really affect a person... We put two or three masks on top of each other so we don't smell it. 'It is really difficult to breathe until the body is washed.' (P9, 52, Male, Corpse Washer)

Funeral workers said they often start work without knowing the cause of death and emphasized the job was a risk to their own health. The participants emphasized that it is a hard job, with health hazards, and that the nature of the work itself does not allow for the complete elimination of such risks.

You do not know the condition of the body that you are going to. The person could have died of any illness, even an infection. In particular, in forensic cases contact with blood and body fluids is unavoidable. Whatever we do to protect ourselves, it is something that can't be totally avoided in our work.” (P15, 43, Male, Funeral Transport Driver)

Another occupational group considered within the scope of physically dirty work is emergency medicine physicians. Although this profession is regarded as prestigious and respectable in society, the nature of the work and its daily practices

clearly reflect the characteristics of physically dirty work. The need for close contact with patients, intervention in traumatic cases, and direct exposure to dirt under demanding working conditions all support this assessment. The physicians interviewed stated that they are frequently exposed to substances such as blood, bodily fluids, and medical waste, and that they encounter what they described as “disturbing situations,” particularly in cases involving patients with inadequate self-care. The expression “we have become accustomed to it,” which was frequently voiced during the interviews, indicates that physical dirt has become routinized for emergency medicine physicians and reflects the demanding conditions of the profession.

We are directly involved in the very core of the work. Urinary catheters are inserted by physicians. In patients with poor self-care this procedure can be very dirty. If large bore vascular access is required we access through the groin. We do rectal exams. We are living in an area where the population is relatively older. Of course the GI systems of older patients are not the same as younger patients and many of them are already in bed. We also administer enemas to our patients. Sometimes we have to undress the patient completely, look at the whole body. We are in direct physical contact with them, they have very poor hygiene or any kind of wound. “We’ve had so many patients vomiting so hard that it sprayed on us. Vomiting is now commonplace for us.” (P10, 30, Female, Emergency Medicine Physician)

“Blood gets on us, urine gets on us. Recently, a patient was brought in (...) and while we were performing CPR, everything became contaminated; we were completely covered in feces. That was really awful. Urine can get on us; there have been times when a patient’s blood splashed into my eye. Especially when intoxicated patients come in with cuts, blood splatters onto us as they move their arms, or when there is an air leak in the lungs or traumatic bleeding, it may suddenly gush out while we are inserting the tube and spill onto us. There is always a certain amount of bloodstain or vomit on my slippers, so we have become used to it.” (P16, 26, Female, Emergency Medicine Physician)

Another profession that demonstrates the dangerousness of physical dirty work is emergency medicine. Emergency medicine exposes physicians to health threats. Participants reported that minor accidents such as needlestick injuries can cause major health problems and that there are a number of hard-to-treat diseases that they are at risk of acquiring. They also mentioned that due to their profession they are exposed to hazardous medical waste.

Funeral workers and emergency medicine physicians were selected in the context of physically dirty work because they have direct and tangible contact with dirt. The interviews showed that both occupations have features which place them clearly in the category of physically dirty work. At the same time, the differential

prestige loses significance in this dimension, since both occupational groups are exposed to dirt directly. The results indicate that the prestige of medicine does not prevent it from being considered physically “dirty”, but that this attributed prestige often contributes to making the difficulties of the profession invisible.

5.2.2. Socially Dirty Work

The data obtained from the field research clearly show that the work done by the cleaning workers included in the study within the scope of socially dirty work is considered socially tainted by the society and that those working in this line of work have humiliating effects. Specifically, those involved in cleaning private homes report having experienced condescending and degrading behaviour from all their clients. They were said to be regarded as inferior, to be treated without respect, and, in many cases, to have their dignity ignored, being seen only as service providers.

“Last year I went cleaning a house. As soon as I went through the door she said, ‘Why did you put your jacket there?’ ‘Have you had your breakfast?’ she asks.’ but you should have heard her voice. When lunchtime came, she said, ‘Oh, what are you going to eat now?’ I didn’t want anything. I cleaned that house that day, but I never went back to it. They behave in such a humiliating way.” (P13, 40, Female, Cleaning Worker)

Another factor that renders work socially dirty is working with stigmatized groups. Social work, which requires close contact with disadvantaged and socially excluded individuals, is perceived as socially dirty in this respect. The participant data indicate that negative perceptions and stigma are also transferred onto social workers, thereby leading the profession to be overlooked and devalued.

“We never get appreciated, I mean... () We are a group which is always played down, ignored and neglected. This is also somewhat related to the field we work in and the people we work with.” (P1, 35, woman, social worker)

It was concluded that work with stigmatized groups is often unnoticed or ignored by society and social work is a prestigious profession but lacks adequate social respect. The statements of the participants show the underestimation of the importance of the profession, the incomplete understanding of its professional character, and the intense exposure of social workers to the social dimension of taint. It is particularly revealing of the contagious nature of taint that social workers—who are central to the provision of social welfare—are directly classified as dirty workers.

“They don’t even act like we’re here. I mean, they say, ‘What do you even do as a social worker?’ ‘You ask two questions, write a couple of lines in a report and then present yourself as if you have actually done something.’ (...) We are taken so lightly and made to feel so invisible.” (P8, 45, Female, Social Worker)

The field research data reveal that cleaning workers and social workers are subjected to social devaluation and humiliation, and may therefore be evaluated within the category of socially dirty work. The findings further show that both occupational groups come into contact with both physical and social taint¹¹, indicating that their work involves a dual burden. This is an important finding, as it demonstrates that dirty work extends beyond the classifications established in the literature, does not lend itself to rigid distinctions, and involves multiple characteristics that often overlap and intertwine.

5.2.3. Morally Dirty Work

Interviews conducted with exotic dancers, who fall within the category of morally dirty work—defined as work regarded by society as flawed and inconsistent with prevailing moral values—revealed that these dancers are exposed to social prejudices and criticism. This, in turn, results in both the work itself and those who perform it being denied acceptance by a large segment of society.

“Many people have said, ‘What is it, really—put on some makeup, shake your hips, throw yourself onto the stage in those costumes? Is that a job? ‘That’s easy to do.’” (Female, P24, 43, Belly Dancer)

Interviews revealed a strong sense that exotic dancing is morally tainted; dancers reported that all aspects of their work were subject to criticism. The clothes they wear on stage are a frequently mocked one, with participants saying society often sees them as disturbing or inappropriate.

“They start with the costume right from the start. The belt part of the outfit is just a little wide. The top is already embroidered with stones, but the bottom is all tulle. For instance, that some people are bothered by tulle. (...)” (P23, 35, Female, Belly Dancer)

The findings suggest that the criticisms of the work are concentrated on the physical appearance and that the use of tulle, in particular, is seen as a sign of immorality or impropriety. The taint associated with the work is characterized by physical appearance and society’s perception of dance and dancers is largely shaped around sexuality which leads to objectification. So the occupation is considered to be directly associated with the category of morally dirty work. This perception relegates the artistic dimension of dance to the background and contributes to the

¹¹ Cleaning workers come into contact with household dirt, filth, and harmful chemicals found in cleaning products, while also undertaking tasks that are “inherently dangerous,” such as cleaning windows on upper floors. Social workers, in turn, face situations such as the threat of physical violence and the risk of exposure to infectious diseases while carrying out their duties. These elements indicate that both occupations also possess characteristics associated with physically dirty work.

devaluation of the profession, as it is clear that some people do not even think of oriental dance as a profession.

5.3. Dirty Work and Social Identity: A Meaning of the Determinative Role

Discussions on social identity show that people define themselves through the roles they assign status and value to and that occupations are a fundamental reference point in this process. It is also known that the meanings society attaches to occupations shape social identity . In this framework, the field research concentrated on group belonging, the search for meaning and value in dirty work and the perception of such work by society.

5.3.1. Belonging to a Group

From the perspective of social identity, the group is the fundamental social structure that affects individuals' perceptions of identity. Within their groups, individuals attempt to construct a positive identity for themselves and to attain a valued position in the social hierarchy. Groups give people common values and norms, a sense of belonging and help to develop a "we" consciousness that goes beyond the individual. Thus, a strong sense of group belonging has positive effects on both the social value perceptions and the social identities of individuals.

The findings of the field research indicate that the social identities of the participants are largely shaped by their occupations and that they identify with groups according to their occupations. But there were clear differences in the way they attached themselves to these occupational groups. The prestige and the organizational structure of their work was a significant factor in this respect. A stronger sense of group belonging was found among participants working in teams, such as social workers and emergency medicine physicians. On the other hand, workers in more individually performed forms of work (e.g., funeral workers, cleaning workers, exotic dancers) appeared to have less group belonging. Although the degree of identification with their group varied among the participants, they all identified as members of an occupation based group, evidenced by their repeated use of the term "we" in the interviews.

5.3.2. Self-Esteem and the Search for Value

Society tends to see dirty work as low-status, devalued work, which can put workers on the lower rungs of the social ladder and diminish their self-esteem. But instead of internalizing this perception, some workers assess their jobs as socially important and beneficial (Simpson and Simpson, 1959; Gold, 1964; Meara, 1974; Emerson and Pollner, 1976; Hong and Duff, 1977; Perry, 1978; McIntyre, 1987; Heinsler, Kleinman, and Stenross, 1990; Thompson, 1991; Wacquant, 1995).

To illuminate this dilemma, participants were asked during the interviews whether they considered their work valuable and were invited to elaborate on which aspects of their work they focused on to build a positive sense of self. The study

found that participants felt that it was necessary to preserve their self-esteem and gain a sense of value through their occupations and that they considered their work to be very important.

“This is a different kind of work, a job not everyone can do. Dealing with dead people is a whole different ballgame. (...)” (P20, 47, Female, Corpse Washer)

“I think we do work that is both very valuable and very risky. We’re trained to recognize and diagnose very serious diseases and, in doing so, we help ensure that patients get the treatment they need. (...)” (P11, 32, Male, Emergency Medicine Physician)

“If a house is dirty there is nothing you can do. You can't cook, you can't do anything. Even morale goes down in a person. The longer you sit in that environment, the more lethargic you become. “Cleanliness and order is the foundation of everything.” (P13, 40, Female, Cleaning Worker)

“Working in this field, being involved in art, it naturally gives you self-confidence, you are doing something that not everyone can do.” (P22, 35, Male, Zenne)

This clearly shows that the participants value themselves through their occupations. For example, funeral workers and exotic dancers regard their work as something that not everyone can do, emergency medicine physicians and social workers emphasize their contribution to the well-being of people, and cleaning workers emphasize the positive physical and psychological consequences of cleanliness for individuals.

It was found that those who do dirty work want to enhance their social identities and change the way that society views them by focusing on the positive aspects of their jobs. The findings suggest that workers seek to counteract negative social perceptions by highlighting the benefits and meanings that their work provides to themselves and others.

5.3.3. Understanding Social Perceptions

Occupational social identity is created through the interaction of personal internal evaluation and social judgment. Here, the social identities of dirty workers are formed by not only their self-esteem and the importance they ascribe to their jobs but also how society views them. Field research was used to explore society's perceptions of people who do dirty work and to assess the impact of these perceptions on their social identities.

The interviews showed that all of the jobs studied, regardless of their classification within dirty work or differences in prestige, were subject to negative societal perceptions. The experiences of the participants show that there is a widespread lack of respect for dirty work in society, the work is often invisibleised

and employees are subjected to prejudice and distrust. The experiences of participants who experienced negative attitudes, including exclusion, belittlement, humiliation and even disgust, because of their occupations, clearly demonstrate the powerful and decisive influence of societal perceptions on social identity.

The data indicate that people who do dirty work run the risk of being considered disreputable, both in their work and in their personal character, and that they do not receive enough respect from society. This makes it difficult for them to obtain a respectable status and results in the depreciation of their occupations.

“I don’t think the profession has any respectability in society. When I was a kid, doctors were respected. (...) Now everyone gets this ‘you do your job’ mentality. Because now people are looking at doctors like... I mean like their servants.” Some people who end up in hospital speak in such a way that... (...).” (P11, 32, Male, Emergency Medicine Physician)

This result points to the absence of social respect as one of the primary barriers faced by individuals engaged in dirty work in the process of constructing their social identities.

The field research produced important findings about people who are involved in dirty work being ignored by society. Invisibility is both cause and consequence of negative perceptions of dirty work. Society’s tendency to disassociate itself from dirty work creates and perpetuates the perception that dirty work is valueless.

‘I don’t think society sees us at all. These are not the groups that society wants to deal with. They should be like living in a glass bubble, with no contact with us and us with no contact with them. Leave it to the social services. “Society doesn’t really see our profession as so important, because society tends to think, ‘Let them exist within society, but not be too visible.’” (P3, 30, Female, Social Worker)

And sometimes it happens: I am working and the woman of the house takes a fruit juice or some other drink from the refrigerator, opens it and drinks it without ever turning to ask whether I would like one too. It's like my being doesn't matter. It's just fruit juice, after all, but it's hot and you're working. (...).” (P7, 54, Female, Cleaner)

"For example, the patient bypasses the emergency physician the minute they come in. Let's say that the patient has a very serious major fracture of a bone. “The shock is treated first, then the fracture is diagnosed, you treat the bleeding and so on...(...) In fact, you are the one keeping that patient alive at the first place, but the person they call ‘the doctor’ is the orthopedist; that is when they say, ‘The doctor has arrived.’” (P17, 31, Female, Emergency Medicine Physician)

Interviews showed that people in dirty work are invisible, both physically and socially. This invisibility also limits the development of knowledge, understanding and empathy about this work, and so compounds the problems of those who do it.

The research data show that people doing dirty work face strong social prejudice and distrust. It was seen that this situation resulted in the labelling of workers by society, the reinforcement of negative judgements, and the devaluation of their occupations.

“The first time I went to clean a family’s house, (...) they left a quarter gold coin on the bedside table. It was only partly visible as if it had been hidden or forgotten. It was as if they were testing the waters to see if the cleaning lady would take it. (...) That really hurt me, that they thought I could do something like that...” (P7, 54, f, Cleaning Worker)

The quotation is a clear reflection of the suspicions of honesty and trustworthiness attached to the occupation. Not only is cleaning work physically demanding, it is also a field where there is a constant struggle for trust and respectability. Another participant talked about the mistrust they experience and the anxiety it causes.

“I am always very afraid that something is missing in a house where I work. We are always the first ones to be suspected. There are a ton of those incidents. Then try to justify yourself after.” (P13, 40, Female, Cleaning Worker)

“We are always the first ones people suspect,” the participant’s statement reveals the stigma associated with the occupation and its workers with remarkable clarity. This experience demonstrates that workers face not only the challenge of such accusations but also the task of proving their innocence and defending their reputation.

And dirty work people are subject to exclusion that undermines their sense of belonging and increases their sense of isolation, the study found. The more visible forms of exclusion are society’s distant attitude to these people, avoidance of interaction with them and disregard for their presence. This situation negatively influences social acceptance processes.

How can I say this... When people see our car, they seem to tense up, even their faces change. People always say that death has a cold face but we also see the cold face of the living. ‘There’s nothing you can do.’ (P14, 29, Male, Funeral Transport Driver)

Equally significant was the statement by another participant that exclusion was felt not only from society but also from colleagues and employers:

Even our work-mates look at us strangely. They could also be dancers, for example, but they dance in a different way. It is hard. You are oppressed by the owners of the places where you work, especially if you do not meet a decent person. Very hard." (P23, 35, F, Belly Dancer)

These statements are examples of the complicated exclusion undergone by those who perform dirty work who are alienated not only from their wider environments but also from their own professional environments.

The study data indicate that people who perform dirty work are frequently criticized for the dirty work they do, for its specific characteristics, and because it is seen as valueless.

This is my work, I have to keep myself alive. And I say, if you know so much then give me my bread, pay my rent, support me. What am I supposed to do, go hungry? "There are many inappropriate things done in our country, (...) but for some reason, people criticize me because I am a man doing oriental dance." (P21, 55, Male, Zenne)

Such criticisms are frequently degrading and painful, and indicate a very insufficient comprehension of the difficulties of the work. Another important finding to note is that people in dirty work are exposed to degradation directly.

Sometimes they go so far that they say things ... I cannot even repeat now, they humiliate you. Sometimes they say things about my physical appearance, sometimes about me being a woman, sometimes they say things like, 'How many years have you even been a doctor? What do You know?' (...) I've been a doctor for six years and I feel completely exhausted." (P10, 30, female, Emergency Medicine Physician)

"We are not a recognized group; the importance, seriousness and risks of the work we do are never recognized. ... In the eyes of society... It's like, 'Who are you? Such a thing? What do you do now? You was some social thing, right? 'A social services person at best. It is very painful, very serious.'" (P8, 45, Female, Social Worker)

The findings are interesting because they show that society belittles not only the work that is done, but also the professional titles themselves. The data indicate that dirty work is devalued and humiliating at the occupational and personal level for those who do it. It was also noted that such attitudes can sometimes be so intense that they elicit expressions of disgust.

"When you're washing the dead, people are like, 'Ugh, is that even a profession? What kind of thing is that? Ugh. Dealing with a dead body? 'I couldn't do that.' As if it were a vile thing, a horrible

thing, as if washing dead people was a bad thing. (...)" (P5, 48, Female, Corpse Washer)

Yet another aspect of social stigma takes the form of deriding or ridiculing persons who do the dirty work. Such behaviors were seen as indicative of the denigration of both the task itself and the individual who performs it, thus threatening social identity.

It's our job, we've accepted it by now, but sometimes people go a little too far. The first thing that comes out of anybody's mouth is, 'Don't you hear sounds coming from the back? We drive a funeral vehicle.' or 'Doesn't it go?' and then laughs. "I Sometimes I just can't take no more." (P14, 29, Male, Funeral Transport Driver)

Friends sometimes call us nicknames. They call us 'corpse handlers' or 'coffin men'." (P15, 43, Male, Funeral Transport Driver)

In conclusion, the research findings suggest that dirty workers encounter more difficulties in the construction of social identity than other occupational groups. Participants reported that society negatively perceives their occupations, regardless of whether their work is tainted physically, socially, or morally, or regardless of the prestige of their work. Besides, they emphasized that these negative perceptions are more wearing than the physical and psychological conditions that form the difficulties of the work itself. This indicates that those who work in dirty work have to deal with social stigma, as well as the strenuous conditions of their work. These occupations are stigmatized, and are viewed as worthless and unimportant, which has a detrimental effect on workers' self-esteem and social identities.

6. Conclusion

Social Identity Theory demonstrates that individuals construct their self-concepts not only through their personal characteristics, but also through the social groups to which they belong; therefore, group memberships play a decisive role in shaping individuals' perceptions of respectability, belonging, and self-worth. Occupations, in this regard, constitute an important source of group affiliation through which individuals position themselves within the social structure. Drawing on this theoretical framework, the present study examined the social identity construction processes of individuals employed in work characterized by society as physically, socially, or morally "dirty." It aimed to reveal how this process is shaped by the nature of the work, the meanings attributed to occupations, differences in prestige, and societal perceptions.

The findings indicate that the processes through which individuals enter dirty work vary according to the prestige level of the occupation. Individuals employed in low-prestige physically and socially dirty work were found to have

entered these occupations largely due to economic necessity, limited educational opportunities, and a lack of alternative employment options. By contrast, participants working in relatively high-prestige occupations, such as emergency medicine physicians and social workers, had mostly chosen their professions consciously and willingly. Exotic dancers, who fall within the category of morally dirty work, were found to have entered their occupations with willingness and passion despite prevailing societal prejudices. These findings show that entry into dirty work is not a uniform process; rather, necessity, occupational desire, the search for personal meaning, and broader social conditions operate together in shaping occupational choices.

The characteristics that lead the occupations examined in this study to be classified as dirty work were concretely confirmed through participants' narratives. Funeral workers and emergency medicine physicians clearly exhibit the features of physically dirty work due to their direct contact with bodies, blood, bodily waste, illness, and death. Cleaning workers and social workers, on the other hand, encounter social taint through experiences of belittlement, humiliation, and discrediting, while also being exposed to physical risks arising from the nature of their work. In the case of exotic dancers, moral judgments directed at the occupation, criticisms constructed through bodily appearance, and the evaluation of dance primarily through the lens of sexuality make the perception of moral taint particularly visible. These findings demonstrate that the dimensions of dirty work are not separated by rigid boundaries; rather, physical, social, and moral taint may overlap and become intertwined across many occupations. The study also reveals that the high prestige of an occupation does not eliminate its dirty work characteristics; instead, in some cases, prestige may contribute to rendering the difficulties of the occupation less visible to society.

The findings concerning social identity indicate that the great majority of participants define themselves substantially through their occupations and identify, to varying degrees, with their occupational groups. Group belonging emerged more strongly in professions where teamwork is central, such as social work and emergency medicine. By contrast, this sense of belonging appeared more limited in occupations carried out more individually, such as cleaning work, funeral services, and exotic dancing. Nevertheless, the fact that all participants made use of the expression "we" during the interviews points to the existence of an occupation-based group consciousness. In this respect, the study shows that social identity in dirty work is shaped not only by external stigmatization, but also by occupational belonging and shared experiences.

The findings further reveal that individuals engaged in dirty work emphasize the valuable, necessary, and meaningful aspects of their occupations in order to construct a positive social identity. Participants stated that their work cannot be performed by everyone, that it is indispensable for the functioning of society, and that it contributes directly to people's health, lives, or everyday order. These accounts indicate that individuals seek to preserve their self-esteem and attribute value to themselves through their occupations despite negative societal evaluations. However, this internal process of meaning-making often turns into a tense identity

experience in the face of adverse societal perceptions. The fact that participants regard their work as important, necessary, and valuable while society simultaneously devalues it constitutes the central dilemma of social identity construction in dirty work.

The field research demonstrates that the factor most intensely challenging the social identities of individuals engaged in dirty work is often not the physical, emotional, or technical difficulty of the work itself, but rather the negative societal perceptions surrounding it. Participants reported encountering a lack of respect, invisibility, distrust, exclusion, ridicule, belittlement, humiliation, and disgust. These experiences show that taint does not remain merely an attribute attached to the occupation; it is transferred onto the individuals who perform the work, leading their character, trustworthiness, and social worth to be questioned. In other words, the stigmatization process first targets the work and then extends to the worker, thereby restricting individuals' opportunities to construct a positive social identity, develop a sense of belonging, and gain social acceptance.

Within this framework, the study makes visible the core assumptions of Social Identity Theory—namely, the pursuit of a positive identity, group belonging, and social evaluation—within the context of dirty work. The findings show that membership in occupational groups to which negative value is attached can directly threaten individuals' social identities. At the same time, individuals attempt to respond to this threat by reinterpreting their occupations, attributing value to the work they perform, and preserving their sense of group belonging. Dirty work, therefore, should not be understood merely as a field of occupations defined by particular tasks and working conditions; it also constitutes a distinctive social arena in which hierarchies of value, processes of stigmatization, and struggles over identity become concentrated.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the social identity construction processes of individuals engaged in dirty work are shaped not only by the nature of their occupations, but also by the meanings society attributes to these occupations and to those who perform them. The lack of social acceptance undermines workers' needs for respectability, self-worth, belonging, and visibility, rendering individuals engaged in dirty work vulnerable at both occupational and personal levels. For this reason, it is insufficient to regard dirty work merely as work that “must be done but is not desired to be seen.” The indispensable role of these occupations in sustaining social life should be made visible, stigmatizing and devaluing attitudes toward workers should be critically questioned, and their occupational respectability should be strengthened. Such an approach would contribute not only to improving the working conditions of individuals engaged in dirty work, but also to reinforcing their social identities and positions within society.

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