"HOW CAN YOU DO IT?": DIRTY WORK AND THE CHALLENGE OF CONSTRUCTING A POSITIVE IDENTITY

BLAKE E. ASHFORTH
GLEN E. KREINER
Arizona State University

The identity literature suggests that the stigma of “dirty work” threatens the ability of occupational members to construct an esteem-enhancing social identity. However, research indicates much the opposite, creating a puzzle we attempt to answer. We argue that the stigma of dirty work fosters development of a strong occupational or workgroup culture, which fosters (1) ideological reframing, recalibrating, and relfocusing and (2) selective social comparisons and differential weighting of outsiders’ views. These defense mechanisms transform the meaning of “dirty” and moderate the impact of social perceptions of dirtiness.

I have this question lots of times: “How can I take it?” They ask if I’m calm when I bury people. If you stop and think, a funeral is one of the natural things in the world . . . I enjoy it very much, especially in summer (a gravedigger, quoted in Terkel, 1975: 661).

Oil field trash and damn proud of it (from a T-shirt worn by workers on an oil rig, courtesy of Roger Mayer, personal communication).

Everett Hughes (1951) invoked the term dirty work to refer to tasks and occupations that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading. Hughes (1962) observed that society delegates dirty work to groups who act as agents on society’s behalf, and that society then stigmatizes these groups, effectively disowning and disavowing the work it has mandated. As we will argue, group members are seen to personify the dirty work such that they become, literally, “dirty workers.”

This phenomenon raises a provocative issue for organizational behavior. As we discuss later, identity research indicates that people typically seek to see themselves in a positive light, and this positive sense of self is largely grounded in socially important and salient roles—including occupations—and how those roles are perceived by others. Thus, given the stigma of dirty work, it seems likely that dirty workers would have a very difficult time constructing a positive sense of self, at least in the workplace. However, abundant qualitative research from a wide variety of occupations indicates that people performing dirty work tend to retain relatively high occupational esteem and pride (e.g., Emerson & Pollner, 1976; Gold, 1964; Heinsler, Kleinman, & Stenross, 1990; Hong & Duff, 1977; McIntyre, 1987; Meara, 1974; Perry, 1978; Simpson & Simpson, 1959; Thompson, 1991; Wacquant, 1995). This creates a puzzling research question that we attempt to answer:

How do members of dirty work occupations seek and secure social affirmation for what they do when society tends to deny them affirmation?

Unfortunately, just as dirty work has been marginalized in society, so too has it been neglected in the organizational literature. But the study of dirty work and how dirty workers attempt to resolve the identity puzzle has much to teach organizational scholars about the negotiation of meaning in the workplace. As Hughes concludes in a retrospective commentary on occupational research, “If a certain problem turned up in one occupation, it was nearly certain to turn up in all” (1970: 149). It is precisely because the need for edifying meaning and identity is often so raw in stigmatized occupations that we can learn a great deal about the social construction of meaning from the experiences of dirty workers.

We thank Mel Fugate, Mike Pratt, AMR Consulting Editor Marlena Fiol and three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. We presented an earlier version of this article at the 1998 meeting of the Academy of Management in San Diego.
Our discussion focuses primarily on the occupation or workgroup level of analysis rather than the individual or organization level, because the stigma of dirty work is typically a group-level issue. We examine how members of dirty work occupations (particularly of low prestige) collectively attempt to secure positive meaning in the face of pervasive stigmas. Thus, we focus on mechanisms that appear to be shared by members of a given occupation rather than on idiosyncratic mechanisms. We argue that the stigma of dirtiness often fosters relatively “strong” occupational and workgroup cultures—that is, widely shared and deeply held systems of values, beliefs, and norms (Trice & Beyer, 1993)—with attendant ideologies and “social weighting practices” (i.e., selective social comparisons and differential weighting of outsiders’ views). These ideologies and practices serve to protect the occupation/workgroup members from the identity threat that the stigma represents; thus, we can view them as a collective resource that members draw upon, enact, and affirm through their daily actions to enhance the meaningfulness of their work (Beyer, 1981). We argue that the outcome of this process is work role identification, where the dirty workers define themselves at least partly in terms of the occupation.

We should note that culture, ideology, and social weighting practices are group-level constructs in the sense that they are external to any one person—“institutionalized,” as Zucker (1977) puts it. Work role identification is an individual-level construct in that a definition of self in terms of the work role necessarily implicates the person. We recognize that individuals likely differ in their propensity to avail themselves of the collective resources and to identify with their work role (Glynn, 1998). However, for the sake of parsimony, we restrict our discussion to the modal responses of dirty workers, and we refer to dirty workers collectively. We briefly discuss the potential role of individual differences later in the article.

The discussion is divided into seven sections. In the first, “The Nature of Dirty Work,” we examine the construct of dirty work in more detail. Second, in “The Challenge of Constructing an Esteem-Enhancing Identity” we articulate the potential difficulty that dirty workers have in securing a positive occupational self. Third, in “Dirty Work and Strong Cultures” we argue that the stigma of dirty work often helps foster a widely shared and deeply held occupational or workgroup culture. Fourth, in “Securing and Sustaining a Positive Social Identity: The Meaning of Dirt” we discuss how occupational ideologies reframe, recalibrate, and refocus the meaning of dirty work. Fifth, in “Securing and Sustaining a Positive Social Identity: The Social Salience of Dirt” we focus on practices that moderate the impact of stigma. Sixth, in “The Meaning and Salience of Dirty Work over Time” we examine the socialization of dirty workers and speculate that many ultimately become somewhat ambivalent about their work. Finally, in the seventh section—the “Discussion”—we offer implications for research and practice.

THE NATURE OF DIRTY WORK

In this section we explore the meaning and social significance of dirty work.

Defining Dirty Work

Physical, social, and moral taint. In Hughes’ original formulation, work could be “dirty” in one of several ways:

- It may be simply physically disgusting. It may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity. Finally, it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions (1951: 319).

Hughes subsequently defined dirty work more succinctly as tasks that are “physically, socially or morally” (1958: 122) tainted but did not elaborate upon these terms. Later researchers who invoked the dirty work concept seldom defined it explicitly, but their applications generally were consistent with this seminal notion of physical, social, or moral taint.

Consistent with Hughes and with subsequent research on dirty work, we assume that the

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1 However, it is important to note that meaningful work is not necessarily satisfying work, although the two tend to be correlated (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Dirty workers may come to view their work as inherently significant and honorable and yet remain dissatisfied with various job facets. Indeed, as we will argue, the attribution of meaningfulness may at times depend on perceiving aspects of work as unpleasant (e.g., doing dirty work indicates toughness and self-sacrifice).
physical, social, and moral dimensions exhaust the domain of sources of taint. However, to enhance the conceptual rigor of Hughes’ classification of dirty work, we offer two criteria for each of the three forms of taint. We derived these criteria inductively from our reading of a diverse array of research on dirty work and occupational stereotypes.

Physical taint occurs where an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death, effluent, and so on (e.g., butcher, janitor, chimney sweep, exterminator, funeral director, proctologist) or is thought to be performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions (e.g., miner, soldier, farmhand, sweatshop worker, firefighter, dentist). Social taint occurs where an occupation involves regular contact with people or groups that are themselves regarded as stigmatized (what Page [1984] refers to as a “courtesy stigma”: e.g., prison guard, AIDS worker, police detective, psychiatric ward attendant, public defender, social worker) or where the worker appears to have a servile relationship to others (e.g., shoe shiner, customer complaints clerk, butler, maid). Moral taint occurs where an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue (e.g., exotic dancer, pawnbroker, tattoo artist, psychic, casino manager) or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility (e.g., bill collector, tabloid reporter, telemarketer, private investigator, police interrogator).

Of course, the boundaries between the physical, social, and moral dimensions are inherently fuzzy, and many occupations appear to be tainted on multiple dimensions. Examples include hospice workers (physical and social), prostitutes (physical and moral), bounty hunters (social and moral), and executioners (physical, social, and moral).

There are two important provisos to this typology. First, “dirtiness” is a social construction: it is not inherent in the work itself or the workers but is imputed by people, based on necessarily subjective standards of cleanliness and purity (cf., Ball, 1970). We reserve the terms taint, dirtiness, stigma, and so forth for widespread (i.e., societal) social constructions. Second, the common denominator among tainted jobs is not so much their specific attributes but the visceral repugnance of people to them. Indeed, it is precisely because the occupations of, say, butcher and funeral director or prison guard and social worker evoke the same reaction—despite their obvious differences in job design and context—that the construct of dirty work is so intriguing. People ask funeral directors, “How can you do it?” just as surely as they do butchers.

**Occupational prestige.** While most people’s implicit schema of occupations would not combine butchers and funeral directors or prison guards and social workers, a dimension that cuts across the three forms of taint and draws on common schemas is that of occupational prestige. This concept has a long history in the sociological literature as a composite of status, power, quality of work, education, and income (Treiman, 1977). Prestige scores capture societal perceptions of the differential evaluations or rankings of occupations (Dunkerley, 1975) and have been found to be highly reliable across respondents, locales, and time (Fossom & Moore, 1975; Sawinski & Domanski, 1991). This perceptual basis makes occupational prestige particularly appropriate for our classification scheme, in that it represents enduring and deeply embedded social perceptions of various types of work and, thereby, likely affects the social construction of occupations.

Crossing the three forms of taint with two levels of occupational prestige (relatively low and relatively high) produces the $3 \times 2$ classification scheme of dirty work occupations in Figure 1. Of course, because taint reduces prestige, these dimensions are not independent, and most dirty work occupations have relatively low prestige. Although those in both high- and low-prestige occupations are faced with the challenge of constructing an esteem-enhancing identity, our analysis will focus primarily on relatively low-prestige occupations; their lack of a “status shield” (Stenross & Kleinman, 1989) to buffer incumbents from the social assaults of others makes the challenge doubly difficult. Further, because we are attempting to construct a general model of how dirty workers respond to stigma, we emphasize similarities rather than differences between responses to the three forms of taint. We believe, however, that the $3 \times 2$ classification scheme provides a useful means of outlining the wide scope and variety of dirty work occupations. Later, we briefly consider differences in identity dynamics among the three forms of taint.
FIGURE 1
Classifying Dirty Work Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Taint</th>
<th>Occupational Prestige</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Garbage, death, effluent, etc.</td>
<td>• Butcher (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Noxious conditions</td>
<td>• Miner (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>• Prison guard (guard) (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Regular contact with stigmatized others</td>
<td>• Social worker (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Servile relationship</td>
<td>• Shoe shine (shiner) (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>• NA (^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sinful or dubious virtue</td>
<td>• Exotic dancer (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, etc., methods</td>
<td>• Bill collector (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Police interrogator (police) (48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{c}\) Cell entries are illustrative—not exhaustive. Occupational prestige scores are derived from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC, 1969). Scores range from a low of 9 (boothblack) to a high of 82 (physician). The occupational names shown in parentheses are the actual names used by NORC.

\(^{c}\) A servile relationship is likely to severely reduce the status element of prestige.

The Social Significance of Dirt

Douglas's (1966) conceptual work on purity and pollution helps explain the sociological significance of physical, social, and moral taint. Based on a review of ethnographic research on the cultures of a variety of industrialized and nonindustrialized nations, Douglas argues that societies equate cleanliness with goodness and dirtiness with badness, such that cleanliness and dirtiness assume moral overtones. In this respect, physical and social taint also carry some of the stigma of moral taint. Because dirt threatens the sanctity of cleanliness, it is cast as taboo, and societies strive to separate what is clean from what is dirty.

Consequently, people who must deal with pollution—who perform dirty work—tend to become "stigmatized"—that is, society projects the negative qualities associated with dirt onto them so that they are seen as dirty workers. Hughes (1962) argues further that it is precisely because dirty workers handle the distasteful tasks that are necessary for the effective functioning of society that others can continue to regard themselves as clean and, therefore, superior. Attributing dirtiness to others effectively devalues them and enables one to ignore a necessary and otherwise unavoidable aspect of one's role set (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995).

We emphasize that dirty work frequently is not viewed by societies as unimportant or trivial. The stigma comes from the view of the work as distasteful if not disgusting, as necessary but polluting—thus, according to Douglas (1966), as threatening to the moral order. Although people may applaud certain dirty work as noble (e.g., counseling the terminally ill), they generally remain psychologically and behaviorally distanced from that work and those who do it, glad that it is someone else. In short, the taint affects people's relationship with the dirty workers, even while they may applaud the workers.²

THE CHALLENGE OF CONSTRUCTING AN ESTEEM-ENHANCING IDENTITY

In this section we argue that people seek esteem-enhancing or positive self-definitions, including occupational identity, but that the stigma of dirty work renders this goal problematic for dirty workers. Nonetheless, research suggests that dirty workers do not tend to suffer from low occupational esteem, creating a puzzle that we attempt to answer later.

² Some scholars have applied the term dirty work to a variety of socially undesirable activities, including unethical or substandard performance (e.g., Stannard, 1973); to tasks that appear to be trivial, tedious, or unnecessary (e.g., Henson, 1995); and to tasks that seem to be unrewarded, unappreciated, or beneath one's claimed status (e.g., Davis, 1982). However, these applications do not preserve the seminal notion that dirty work is both necessary and polluting and, thereby, that the work threatens to brand the workers themselves as polluted.
Self-Definition and Social Validation

Research on identity indicates that individuals need a relatively secure and stable sense of self-definition—of who they are—within a given situation to function effectively (Erez & Earley, 1993; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). According to social identity theory, self-definitions are an amalgam of the idiosyncratic attributes (e.g., assertive, ambitious) and social identities (e.g., gender, occupation) that are most relevant (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Self-definitions are important because they help situate individuals in the context and, thereby, suggest what to do, think, and even feel (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Wiley & Alexander, 1987). A fundamental tenet of social identity theory that is critical to this article is that individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem through their social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; cf., Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Individuals, in short, have a strong desire to view their self-definitions in positive terms.

Identity theorists further argue that self-definitions and their inherent value are at least partly grounded in the perceptions of others (Felson, 1992; Weigert, Teitge, & Teitge, 1986). Through social interaction and the internalization of collective values, meanings, and standards, individuals come to see themselves somewhat through the eyes of others and construct more or less stable self-definitions and a sense of self-esteem. Thus, social validation sharpens and strengthens self-definitions and self-esteem.

Occupational Identity and the Stigma of Dirty Work

A major component of self-definition is the occupational identity—that is, the set of central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that typify the line of work (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; cf., Albert & Whetten, 1985). Because organizations tend to be structured around occupational specialties, organization members are largely known by their occupations and come to situate themselves in terms of their occupations (Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Pipefitters for Exxon likely will have a much different perspective of the workplace and their role within it than will PR managers, and they likely will be regarded by others in much different ways. Outside the organization, ice-breaking rituals often institutionalize the exchange of occupational information: in meeting a stranger, we often ask what she or he does, and we expect to be asked the same question. Thus, job titles serve as prominent identity badges. The robustness of occupational prestige rankings attests to the salience and importance that society ascribes to occupational identities.

With regard to dirty work occupations, the stigma attached to such occupations makes social validation highly problematic. First, dirty workers, prior to entering their occupations, are exposed to the same socializing influences as other members of society (e.g., disparaging remarks about dirty workers, negative depictions of dirty work in movies and sitcoms). Thus, absent any interpersonal influences to the contrary, dirty workers may have internalized the same stereotypes of their eventual line of work. Once in the occupation, they can exercise some control over what media they are exposed to, but the influence of popular culture remains essentially ubiquitous and inescapable (Cullen, 1996).

Second, like any occupation, their work tends to bring them into regular contact with others, particularly coworkers and clients. In the absence of clear and concerted attempts by management and other power holders to negate common stereotypes of dirty work, coworkers are likely to import these stereotypes and act accordingly. As noted, the perceived taint of the dirty work is apt to be projected onto the workers so that they are seen to personify dirt. The stigma may be communicated directly through putdowns, reduced deference and respect, and demeaning questions ("How can you do it?") and more subtly through discrimination and avoidance. Sudnow (1967) describes how hospital employees viewed the morgue attendant as symbolizing death and so tended to avoid him; when they did interact, these employees often asked intrusive questions about the morgue attendant's work so that he was constantly reminded of his association with death.

Similar dynamics may occur outside the organization since dirty workers often have little power over clients or members of the public. Moreover, workers lacking a status shield to hide behind must cope with implicit assaults on their character and worth. Henslin (1974) describes how taxi passengers sometimes act as though the cabbie were not present (e.g., by having an intimate conversation).
Thus, it is not surprising that a great deal of qualitative research indicates that people performing dirty work tend to be acutely aware of the stigma that attends their work (Davis, 1984; Gold, 1964; Levin & Arluke, 1987; McIntyre, 1987; Ouellet, 1994; Palmer, 1978; Perry, 1978; Petrillo, 1989–90; Rollins, 1985; Stephens, 1974; Thompson, 1991; Thompson & Harred, 1992). Given the importance of social validation to a positive sense of self, it seems likely that the salience or conspicuousness of social perceptions of dirtiness would undermine individuals’ attempts to identify with their work role—that is, to willingly define themselves at least partly on the basis of the occupational identity. Thus, our first proposition is as follows:

Proposition 1: The greater the salience of social perceptions of dirtiness to the dirty workers, the weaker the identification of dirty workers with their work role will be.

A Puzzle

Proposition 1 suggests that dirty workers should have a difficult time securing an esteem-enhancing self-definition in the workplace. However, as noted earlier, abundant qualitative research indicates that such workers tend to have relatively high occupational esteem. They generally do not appear to suffer from existential doubt, anomie, or angst (although, as we argue later, they may remain somewhat ambivalent). For example, Jacobs (1981) found that two-thirds of his sample of prison guards strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that “people are more sympathetic to inmates than to correctional officers,” and yet when asked how they felt about telling people what their occupation was, almost half described themselves as very proud or somewhat proud, and only 5 percent reported being “embarrassed.” Returning to the research question from the introduction, the real issue for dirty workers, then, is not so much “How can they do the work?” but “How do they retain a positive self-definition in the face of social assaults on the work they do?” Or, to paraphrase Davis (1984), how are they able to see themselves as good people doing dirty work or, better yet, good people doing good work?

The model depicted in Figure 2 summarizes our response to this provocative question. In the remainder of the article we explore the model in detail, suggesting a set of testable propositions.

FIGURE 2

The Impact of the Salience of Social Perceptions of Dirtiness on Work Role Identification: An Occupational/Workgroup Level of Analysis

- Salience of social perceptions of dirtiness
- Strength of occupational/workgroup culture
- Social weighting:
  - Condemning condemners
  - Supporting supporters
  - Selective social comparisons
- Work role identification of dirty workers
- Occupational/workgroup ideologies:
  - Reframing
  - Recalibrating
  - Refocusing
- P2 (+)
- P1 (-)
- P6
- P5 (+)
- P4 (+)
- P3 (+)
- P7 (+)
- P8 (+)
DIRTY WORK AND STRONG CULTURES

In this section we argue that the dirty work stigma facilitates the development of strong occupational or workgroup cultures; in the next we describe how strong cultures, in turn, facilitate esteem-enhancing social identities.

The Central Role of Occupational and Workgroup Cultures

Because a stigma can severely damage workers' status and, thus, their credibility and performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Katz, 1981), management and other powerholders are more likely to attempt to negate common stereotypes of dirty work the more central or critical that work is to the organization's identity and mission. However, given the well-known difficulty of changing entrenched beliefs, and given that managers—as people—are likely to subscribe to those same beliefs, the perceived need to "resocialize" organizational members is apt to drop rapidly the more peripheral the dirty work is thought to be. Indeed, management and other organizational members may actively deny their dependence on dirty workers.

Thus, we contend that the answer to the question of how dirty workers retain positive self-definitions is to be found less often at the organizational or individual level of analysis than at the occupational or workgroup level. Typically, although not always, attributions of dirtiness arise not because of the organizational membership or personal characteristics of individuals but because of their occupational membership. Thus, it is the occupational group that is directly threatened, and it is as a group that the members typically respond (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Emergence of Strong Cultures

It is precisely because of the salience of the dirty work stigma that strong cultures tend to coalesce around the occupation as a whole and/or individual workgroups. First, the occupational title and the negative attributions that people attach to it make the occupation, per se, salient. The putdowns, intrusive questions, and so on are predicated on perceptions of what the occupation entails, thereby cuing the occupational identity. Thus, the negative interactions are lodged not merely at the interpersonal level (between individuals) but at the intergroup level (between role occupants, with the individual personifying the occupation; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995).

Second, as noted, the stigma of dirty work frustrates the desire for social validation, therefore constituting a threat to the desire for self-esteem. As research on group formation indicates, the perception of a shared threat helps foster cohesion (Cohen, 1970; Forsyth, 1990), particularly when the threat has an antagonistic quality, as in the case of such dirty workers as repossessors and abortion workers (Korn, 1996). People sharing a common social category and social pressures come to regard themselves as "in the same boat"—as sharing a common fate.

Third, as the individuals begin to coalesce into a group, they come to view the world in terms of "us versus them" (Freud, 1951). They begin to articulate their occupational or workgroup identity; the attributes that differentiate "us" from "them" (Pratt, 1998). In short, group members draw a psychological boundary around the group, thus exacerbating the sense of difference and separation—if not isolation—from others. Arluke (1991) discusses how the rise of the animal rights movement induced animal researchers to articulate the rationales for their research, thereby making their occupation more salient to themselves and underscoring the boundary that divided them from outsiders.

This process through which subcultures (i.e., distinctive and localized occupational/workgroup cultures embedded within the overall organizational culture; Trice & Beyer, 1993) are formed is more likely to be realized under certain conditions identified in the group formation and culture literatures. These conditions include the use of collective socialization, high task interdependencies and physical proximity between individuals, clear physical boundaries and isolation, and group longevity. For example, workers isolated in logging camps and oil fields and miners based in company towns are noted for the strength, if not the militancy, of their subcultures (Lynch, 1987; Moodie & Ndatshe, 1994), and neophyte construction workers undergo active haz ing as a means of simultaneously exalting the conditions that make their work dirty (e.g., poor weather, rats) and testing their ability to surmount those conditions (Riemer, 1979).
Other factors more specific to certain types of dirty work may further promote subcultures. Inherent danger (e.g., soldier, prison guard) adds to the sense of threat and separateness; unconventional work hours or habits (e.g., firefighters' night shifts, the frequent travel of exotic dancers) inhibit the development of relationships outside work; a reliance on kin-based recruitment (as in funeral directing and commercial fishing) increases the insularity of the occupational community; and demographic clustering (e.g., female maids, young bouncers, minority farmers) facilitates interaction (Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

Indeed, subcultures and the sense of distance from the rest of society may be so strong that individuals come to socialize largely with coworkers (Trice, 1993). For example, Mulcahy (1995) notes how police internal affairs officers, mandated to investigate allegations of police misconduct, are reviled by other officers for their perceived breach of the solidarity norm. Internal affairs officers respond, in part, by withdrawing from the social life of their departments.

In summary, while the stigma of dirty work undermines the status of certain occupations, it simultaneously facilitates the development of strong occupational cultures.

Exceptions to the Rule

Given the strong social pressures for group formation in dirty work occupations, a weak subculture is likely to exist only if one or more factors actively inhibit group formation. The most prevalent inhibitors in dirty work are likely to be physical isolation, high turnover, and interpersonal competition for rewards. First, organizations may hire only one member of an occupation or may distribute members geographically or temporarily such that they lack ongoing contact with their peers (e.g., janitor, security guard, hospital morgue attendant), members may work more or less independently (e.g., parole officer, private investigator, domestic worker), or they may be self-employed (e.g., funeral director, prostitute, tattoo artist). Even in these circumstances, however, occupational members often seek out other members for both instrumental and expressive social support (e.g., Cohen, 1991; Delacoste & Alexander, 1987). A funeral director states:

A lot of people ask us how we can stand to be in this business... They act like we must be strange or something. When we go to the conventions and meet with all of the other people there who are just like us... I feel normal again (Thompson, 1991: 420).

As Trice notes, various "communication interlocks" (e.g., conferences, newsletters, and media reports) transcend the need for frequent personal contact (1993: 143).

Second, given the relatively low prestige of most dirty work occupations, turnover may be high, thus inhibiting group formation. Turnover is likely to be particularly high in occupations that have minimal barriers to entry, such as education and experience, and that are viewed as lacking in upward mobility and intrinsic or extrinsic rewards (e.g., exterminator, bill collector, dogcatcher).

Third, the occupational reward structure (e.g., pay, promotions) may pit members against one another, thus undermining their trust and cohesion (e.g., used car salesperson, manual laborer, taxi driver). For example, Gold (1964) describes how the possibility of "building stealing" kept apartment janitors from fully trusting each other. Once again, however, even in these various circumstances, occupational members often succeed in forging strong subcultures (e.g., Hayano, 1977; Henslin, 1974), although their attitudes toward their peers may remain ambivalent.

This discussion suggests the following proposition:

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\text{Proposition 2a: The greater the salience of social perceptions of dirtiness, the stronger the culture of the relevant occupation or workgroup will be.}
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\[
\text{Proposition 2b: However, the culture of the relevant occupation or workgroup may be weakened to the extent that individuals are physically isolated, turnover is high, and the reward structure encourages competition between individuals.}
\]

SECURING AND SUSTAINING A POSITIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY: THE MEANING OF DIRT

In this section we argue that individuals often recast their dirty work in more positive terms,
through occupational ideologies that confer es-
esteem-enhancing meaning and, as we argue in
the next section, through practices that moder-
ate the impact of stigma. Because these collec-
tive defense mechanisms must counter wide-
spread social perceptions of dirtiness, they are
more likely to emerge from strong occupational
or workgroup cultures. Put differently, strong
subcultures provide the social resources needed
to counteract the influence of the wider culture
in which the occupation or workgroup is embed-

Occupational Ideologies

Organizational life is often equivocal—that is,
open to multiple and perhaps conflicting inter-
pretations (Welck, 1995). Through the actions
and interpretations of individuals, systems of
belief or ideologies emerge to help make sense
of—or impose order on—this equivocality.
Dressel and Petersen define an occupational
ideology as “a coherent perspective . . . that de-
tails the nature of the relationship between the
occupation and its members with other types of
work as well as with the larger society” (1982:
401). Occupational ideologies, then, are systems
of beliefs that provide a means for interpreting
and understanding what the occupation does
and why it matters.

However, given members’ desire for self-
esteeem, ideologies tend to be at least somewhat
self-serving. Nonetheless, as a particular ideol-
y is enacted, it becomes shared among mem-
bers, thus fostering confidence in its validity.
Consensus, in short, creates conviction (Hardin
& Higgins, 1996). The result is that groups often
can sustain beliefs that individuals cannot.

Accordingly, groups often amplify the ten-
dency of individuals to construct self-serving
beliefs (e.g., McClure, 1991). Whereas an ideol-
y that implicitly disparages the group (“We perform
dirty work because we have limited job
options”) provides a very tenuous basis for iden-
tification, an ideology that edifies the group
(“We perform dirty work because we’re tough”)
provides a rallying point. In this way dirty work
ideologies attempt to justify the work in the
sense meant by Scott and Lyman: they “assert
its positive value in the face of a claim to the
contrary” (1968: 51). The collective desire to think
well of the group appears to provide a kind of
social license to foster edifying justifications
that outsiders would tend to question.

The common purpose of the three ideological
techniques discussed below—refiguring, recal-
ibrating, and refocusing—is to transform the
meaning of the stigmatized work by simulta-
neously negating or devaluing negative attribu-
tions and creating or revaluing positive ones. In
so doing, the techniques may justify the occupa-
tion and render it more palatable and perhaps
even attractive to insiders and outsiders alike,
helping persuade dirty workers to identify with
their work role. However, almost by definition,
the lower the prestige of an occupation, the less
likely that its ideology (or ideologies) will be
known and accepted by outsiders (Berger, 1964).
Thus, one can generally view dirty work ideolo-
gies as beliefs that dirty workers primarily tell
each other and receptive outsiders (e.g., family
and friends) and, thus, that have their greatest
impact on internal rather than external legiti-
macy.

Reframing. This technique involves trans-
forming the meaning attached to a stigmatized
occupation. There are at least two forms of re-
framing. The first is infusing, where the stigma
is imbued with positive value, thus transforming
it into a badge of honor. Perhaps the most com-
mon justification for dirty work is to describe
the occupational mission—the espoused purpose
for which the work was created—in value-laden
terms. Public defenders assert they are protect-
ing the constitutional rights of all citizens to a
fair trial—not helping rapists and drug dealers
beat the system (McIntyre, 1987); exotic dancers
and prostitutes claim they are providing a ther-
apeutic and educational service, rather than
selling their bodies (Miller, 1978; Thompson &
Harred, 1992); and funeral directors state they
are helping relatives and friends of the de-
ceased deal with grief, rather than processing
dead bodies and profiting from their work
(Thompson, 1991). The “dirty particulars” are
wrapped in more abstract and uplifting values
associated with the larger purpose. Indeed,
there is no occupation that cannot be described
in fairly grand, value-laden terms. Note that,
given the equivocality of meaning, both the val-
ue-laden and the suffused constructions in the
above examples are defensible (e.g., funeral di-
rectors do help people deal with grief and do
profit from their work), and each construction is
preferred by some segment of society.
A related form of infusing is to couch the occupational tasks in edifying ways. If the mission refers to occupational ends, the tasks refer to occupational means. Construction workers interpret their manual labor as reflecting traditional notions of masculinity (Riemer, 1979), boxers liken their work to that of craftsmen and performing artists (Wacquant, 1995), and supermarket meatcutters take pride in their dexterity with knives and their ability to tolerate cold rooms (Meara, 1974). Given that ends are less immediate and proximal than means, it is often difficult for the ends of work to remain continuously salient. Thus, the more distal the ends, the more prevalent the reframing of means.

The second form of reframing is neutralizing, where the negative value of the stigma is negated. The literature on deviance includes various "neutralization techniques" (e.g., Hong & Duff, 1977; Levi, 1981; Sykes & Matza, 1957), three of which are most relevant here. In "denial of responsibility," occupational members assert that they are simply doing their job—that someone or something else is responsible or that no one is responsible (i.e., system imperatives demand that the role be performed). Thus, bill collectors rationalize that angry debtors are upset at their plight—not at the particular collector (Sutton, 1991)—and meatpackers assert that they are merely fulfilling society's demand for meat (Lesy, 1987).

Two other techniques—"denial of injury" and "denial of victim"—are most relevant where work is morally tainted by perceived exploitation. In denial of injury, occupational members maintain that no harm was actually done. Hong and Duff describe the guilt felt by a novice taxicab driver at leading her customers on by playing along with their romantic interests. A veteran taxi-driver told her, "They [the customers] know about it. They are not that foolish" (1977: 334)—that is, the customers were also playing along as part of the "game." In denial of victim, members argue that the "exploited" either desire or deserve their fate. Tabloid reporters maintain that celebrities want publicity and their claims to the contrary are often a calculated means of heightening the public's curiosity about them and, thus, encouraging publicity (Levin & Arluk, 1987), and pimps believe that women seek security, are willing to exchange their bodies for that security, and desire and need to be protected and controlled by men (Ritzer & Walczak, 1988).

Neutralizing and infusing are complementary in that a given stigma can be both negated and transformed. Indeed, because an ideology, like any theory, attempts to resolve equivocality and simplify complexity in a manner that people can accept, multiple ideologies are often necessary to address multiple questions and multiple individuals. Thus, strong occupational and workgroup cultures often contain multiple and somewhat loosely coupled, if not contradictory, justifications (Fine, 1996; Ritzer & Walczak, 1988).

Recalibrating. This technique refers to adjusting the implicit standards that are invoked to assess the magnitude (how much) and/or valence (how good) of a given dirty work attribute. Adjusting the perceptual and evaluative standards can make an undesired and ostensibly large aspect seem smaller and less significant and a desired but small aspect seem larger and more significant. If less is expected, more is found.

Palmer (1978) describes how dogcatchers took tasks that would appear to an outsider to be universally dirty and arrayed them in a value hierarchy. For example, calls regarding possible rabies and bites were valued more positively, whereas calls regarding strays were valued negatively. The differentiation created value. Moreover, dirty workers are inclined to retell and relive positively valued experiences, thus giving periodic boosts to their occupational esteem (e.g., Kinkade & Katovich, 1997; Santino, 1990). Accordingly, dirty workers may sincerely perceive positive attributes and derive personal fulfillment from tasks that many others consider repugnant.

Similarly, in what one may phrase the "for want of a nail" argument, seemingly minor activities that are unappreciated in the organization may be seen by dirty workers as highly significant. Hospital orderlies remark that key medical procedures could not be performed if the orderlies did not transport patients around the hospital (Reed, 1989); racetrack "backstretch" workers maintain that horses would not be fit to race if not for the workers' menial tasks (Rose-

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3 "For the want of a nail the shoe was lost, for the want of a shoe the horse was lost, for the want of a horse the man was lost, for the want of a man the battle was lost" from "The Horshoe Nail," Grimm's Fairy Tales.
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it is not likely to be as strongly associated with identification as either reframing or recalibrating, and it has its largest impact when neither of these ideological techniques are tenable. However, refocusing can also augment these techniques by shifting attention away from residual stigmas that have not been reframed or recalibrated effectively.

This discussion suggests the following summary propositions:

**Proposition 3**: The stronger the culture of the dirty work occupation or workgroup, the greater the use of ideological reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing will be.

**Proposition 4a**: The greater the use of ideological reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing, the stronger the identification of dirty workers with their work role will be.

**Proposition 4b**: Reframing will be most strongly associated with identification, followed by recalibrating and then refocusing.

## Securing and Sustaining a Positive Social Identity: The Social Salience of Dirt

In this section we focus on practices that moderate the impact of the salience of social perceptions of dirtiness on work role identification. These practices typically complement the ideological techniques discussed above and, like the ideological techniques, are fostered by strong occupational and workgroup cultures.

### Social Weighting

Because dirtiness is socially constructed, "outsiders" (e.g., other organizational members, clients, family, neighbors) constitute an ongoing threat to the oppositional identity work inherent in dirty work subcultures. Whereas dirty workers may have internalized their occupation’s ideologies, outsiders, preoccupied with stereotypes of dirt, usually have not. Thus, dirty workers often are concerned about their relationships with outsiders, and these relationships are often a major theme of dirty work subcultures (Ghidina, 1992).

**Differentiation of outsiders: condemning the condemners.** Given the desire for social affirmation, dirty workers need to reconcile outsiders’ derogatory perceptions with their own desire for self-esteem. One way is to "condemn the condemners" (Sykes & Matza, 1957), to impugn the motives, character, knowledge, or authority—in short, the legitimacy—of critical outsiders as moral arbiters. Condemning the condemners thus enables dirty workers to dismiss the condemners’ perceptions. Gold (1964) found that janitors labeled particularly “bad” tenants as ignorant, nutty, or nervous and therefore did not get concerned with negative interactions; Rollins (1985) found that domestic workers often believed that their more affluent employers were lonely and unfulfilled and, therefore, worse off than the domestics and in no position to pass judgment. Thompson and Harred quote a topless dancer:

> They will come in here on Saturday nights, get drunk, and play “grab ass,” and then go to church on Sunday and condemn what we do. In general, I think we’re a lot more honest than they are (1992: 306).

In the absence of obvious taint, members of nonstigmatized occupations likely assume respect. But for dirty workers, particularly those from low-prestige occupations, respect—and, thus, social validity—typically are problematic, fostering a heightened sensitivity to potential signs of disrespect. Thus, dirty workers tend to be wary in their dealings with outsiders and may perceive slights where none were intended (e.g., Dutton et al., 1996; Rollins, 1985). This sensitivity predisposes dirty workers to condemn outsiders so that relations between dirty workers and outsiders often polarize over time.

**Differentiation of outsiders: supporting the supporters.** Just as dirty workers often come to condemn their condemners, they come to place more credence in those outsiders (if any) who provide a positive view of their work. Indeed, Heinsler et al. (1990) found that police detectives preferred to interact with criminals rather than victims, because a criminal could appreciate the detectives’ legwork in apprehending him or her, and the very presence of a criminal validated the detectives’ espoused identity as a crimefighter. However, it seems likely that dirty workers would, if possible, gravitate toward supportive outsiders of high status as well as high

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saliency (e.g., through regular interaction or personal relationships) because they offer the greatest promise of social validation (e.g., Trice, 1993).

In the absence of supportive outsiders, dirty workers are likely to psychologically and socially withdraw to the safer confines of their occupational cohort and to look more exclusively to it for affirmation. However, in further disconnecting with society, the cohort becomes more likely to adopt values and beliefs that are out of step with, or that deliberately defy, those of the society that "rejected" them (Lemert, 1967). Thus, a group of male construction workers may flaunt norms of civility and verbally harass female passersby, precisely because the workers believe they are held in contempt by outsiders. In turn, the negative responses of the passersby complete the circle.

**Selective social comparisons.** Social comparison theory indicates that the desires for self-esteem and self-knowledge are fulfilled partly by subjectively assessing ambiguous attributes through comparisons with similar and salient others (Wood, 1989). Downward social comparisons are associated with self-esteem, providing protection for a vulnerable ego (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991), whereas upward social comparisons are associated with self-knowledge, providing benchmarks for motivational or aspirational purposes (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991). Social comparison theory indicates that downward comparisons are likely when the focal actors are experiencing threat (Forsyth, 1990; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991). Given the ongoing threat of a pervasive stigma, dirty workers, therefore, are likely to favor downward comparisons (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Social comparisons occur between and within groups. Between groups, members of dirty work occupations are motivated to draw comparisons against salient occupational groups that they consider to be somewhat similar in prestige but disadvantaged in some way. Such groups are sufficiently similar that the comparison is informative, yet sufficiently "inferior" to gratify the desire for self-esteem. However, given the low prestige of many dirty work occupations, it might appear difficult to locate salient groups that are downwind. Nonetheless, research on the "social creativity postulate" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) indicates that groups are quite facile at "finding or creating new comparison dimen-
sions on which they are superior to [an] outgroup, or reinterpreting extant comparisons in a manner more flattering to the in-group" (Hinkle & Brown, 1990: 54; e.g., Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). Thus, dirty workers often resort to reference groups and comparison criteria that would appear to outsiders to be spurious or trivial. Ouellet (1994) describes how truckers tend to disparage the regimented tasks of factory workers, despite the truckers being closely monitored by tachographs (and, more recently, satellite tracking) and subjected to numerous regulations, as well as the mechanical parameters of their vehicles.

Between-group comparisons are typically supplemented by within-group comparisons, including subgroup and interpersonal comparisons (Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997). Given our group-level focus, we restrict our attention to subgroup comparisons. Subgroup comparisons tend to be popular among members of dirty work occupations because they hold the stigma constant, thereby facilitating contrasts on other, more socially valued, attributes (perhaps allowing their subgroup to become "a big fish in a little pond"). Just as intergroup comparisons tend to focus on referents that are similar and preferably somewhat socially inferior, so too do subgroup comparisons. Thus, call girls feel superior to streetwalkers (Bryan, 1965), veteran fishers disparage newcomers (Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998), and slaves who did household chores felt superior to ones who did fieldwork (Mellon, 1990). However, the more salient the subgroup differences, the more likely that the occupational or workgroup culture will fragment and diverge along subgroup lines.

We view the three forms of social weighting—condemning condemners, supporting supporters, and selective social comparing—as complementary. Indeed, there may be interactive synergies among these mechanisms. For example, research on identity and intergroup dynamics suggests that having supporters (an ingroup) facilitates the labeling and condemnation of condemners (the outgroup) and that selective social comparisons may further polarize views of supporters and condemners (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In sum, a strong occupational or workgroup culture provides the social resources needed to selectively attend to outsiders and to selectively engage in social comparisons. Selective atten-
tion and comparisons enable dirty workers to place more weight on social referents that affirm the workers' value and less weight on referents that do not, thereby moderating the impact of the social salience of dirtiness on work role identification, as well as directly enhancing identification. This discussion suggests the following propositions:

Proposition 5: The stronger the culture of the dirty work occupation or workgroup, the greater the use of social weighting will be (via differentiation of outsiders through condemning condemners and supporting supporters, and via selective social comparisons).

Proposition 6: Social weighting moderates the association between the salience of social perceptions of dirtiness and work role identification, such that the association is weakened by the use of social weighting.

Proposition 7: Social weighting is directly and positively associated with work role identification (by focusing on favorable social referents and comparisons).

Ideologies and Social Weighting

Finally, the ideological techniques of reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing are likely to both reinforce and be reinforced by social weighting. Dirty work ideologies typically externalize or attribute the dirty work stigma to the ignorance or malevolence of outsiders and foster stereotypic characterizations of both detractors and supporters. Note, then, that an individual dirty worker may not need to have personal or direct experience with given outsiders to condemn/support them. Similarly, by placing less credence in the views of condemners and more in the views of supporters, social weighting serves to bolster dirty work ideologies. A frequent result of this reciprocal relationship between ideology and social weighting is that dirty workers may become more detached from mainstream society and, thus, further marginalized. In sum:

Proposition 8: There is a reciprocal, positive relationship between the use of the ideological techniques and social weighting.4

THE MEANING AND SALIENCE OF DIRTY WORK OVER TIME

In this section we briefly examine the dynamics from the previous two sections regarding the meaning and salience of dirty work in the broader temporal context of work adjustment. We speculate that, despite concerted attempts to secure a positive social identity, many dirty workers ultimately adopt a somewhat ambivalent stance toward their work.

Socialization to Dirty Work

The socialization literature indicates that the act of entering any new work setting is inherently upending, as newcomers are confronted with novelty, ambiguity, and perhaps disconfirmed expectations (Louis, 1980). These discontinuities provoke sensemaking, as the newcomers endeavor to understand their jobs and work context and to form positive social identities. This need for sensemaking is particularly acute for newcomers to dirty work occupations, because they must confront and reconcile themselves to the disparaged aspects of the work (Levi, 1981). As members of society, newcomers likely import stereotypic expectations but lack the subcultural armor to cope with the stereotypes and the dirty particulars of the work. Novice exterminators must actively search for cockroaches, mice, and other pests they would ordinarily avoid; new dentists must become comfortable with routinely inflicting pain and discomfort on others; and bill collectors must learn to actively intimidate people over the telephone. In addition, newcomers must also contend with the negative views that others hold toward the occupation and its practitioners. Although social weighting helps moderate the impact of stigma over time, occupational ideolo-

4 However, for a given incident involving an identity threat (e.g., an insult from a client), the ideological techniques and social weighting may be used in a more compensatory manner. That is, the threat may be adequately countered by a single tactic (e.g., disparaging the client).
gies are needed to provide esteem-enhancing interpretations of the stigma.

A good example of the socialization of newcomers can be found in Hong and Duff’s (1977) study of taxi-dancers. Job interviews conveyed the impression to prospective dancers that the work was easy and fun. However, novice taxi-dancers soon learned that the job involved lending off unwanted sexual advances and that many customers were older and of different ethnic backgrounds. Veteran hostesses and management attempted to actively neutralize the negative connotations and infuse the work with value (e.g., taxi-dancers are helping lonely men). By the end of the third week, newcomers were able to offer these same justifications (likely self-consciously) when responding to questions about their work. As the newcomers gradually accepted the ideology, they became less likely to verbalize it when talking about their work and more likely to say simply that they liked the job and that it was, indeed, easy and fun.

Thus, ideology serves as an important bridge for the transition from outsider to insider, providing alternative and edifying interpretations for the problematic features of work. This bridging is facilitated by the well-known tools of symbolic management (Trice, 1983; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Occupational stories—many apocryphal—convey the “appropriate” attitude and behavior toward clients, management, and other salient outsiders. For example, Pullman porters exchange stories about rude passengers that help clarify the bounds of deference (Santino, 1990). Rites of passage signal acceptance into a special fraternity. Newcomers in fishing and high-steel iron work are assigned derogatory nicknames and low-status tasks, and they are verbally and perhaps physically harassed until they have proven their mettle to the veterans (Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998; Haas, 1972). Uniforms, titles, physical artifacts, and jargon signify and cue occupational identities. Reed (1989) describes how the presence of a catheter kit and his hospital orderly uniform helped define the act of handling a patient’s penis as a medical rather than erotic act. However, such occupational trappings may be adopted with some ambivalence, because they also cue the derogatory stereotypes retained by outsiders. Finally, euphemisms, rituals, and taboos help regulate emotion and facilitate smooth performance. Funeral directors lessen the salience of death by referring to corpses as “the loved one” or by name, viewing rooms as the “sunset room” or “eternal slumber room,” and cemeteries as “final resting places” (Pine, 1975; Thompson, 1991). Prostitutes offer various sexual services but regard lip kissing as taboo because it connotes emotional involvement (Trice, 1983).

Once an occupational ideology is fully internalized and the impact of stigma salience is moderated through social weighting, dirty workers may more or less mindlessly enact their roles (Ashforth & Fried, 1988). At that point, it is likely that only occasional discontinuities will precipitate a need for further identity repair. A particularly abusive client, a newcomer who is not yet comfortable in the role and makes awkward comments, a sudden job opportunity, or a neighbor who asks intrusive questions may trigger new rounds of sensemaking and cause occupational members to question their involvement in the role.

Work Role Identification and Ambivalence

As we have argued, a compelling occupational ideology (particularly one based on re-framing [infusing] and recalibrating), coupled with social weighting, can recast dirty work in more ennobling terms and bestow a positive identity on those who perform it. Accordingly, dirty workers are more likely to identify with the work role. Further, the greater the proportion of members that identify with the work role, the more the ideology becomes socially affirmed, thus fostering a virtuous circle.

Indeed, dirty work occupations may actually elicit higher identification and collective esteem than many other occupations, precisely because the stigma may foster a strong culture with robust protective techniques for warding off the social threat and enhancing self-image. Further, the strong culture may reify the stigma as a salient external cause for whatever personal misfortunes are encountered by members (“People don’t like me because I work in a slaughterhouse”), thus exonerating members from personal blame (Crocker & Major, 1989). The culture may effectively “inoculate” members against the slings and arrows of misfortune.

However, we do not wish to overstate the strength of identification across the membership of any given dirty work occupation. Given
Proposition 1, it seems likely that most members will retain some ambivalence about their jobs, because they remain part of the larger culture with its stigmatizing views and they have ongoing contact with people outside their occupation. The opposing poles of ambivalence—approach and avoidance—are likely to be most evident at different times.

The distinction in the stress literature between chronic and acute stressors provides a useful analogy (Eden, 1990). A chronic stressor is a source of stress that is constantly present (e.g., a manager’s responsibility for the welfare of others), whereas an acute stressor is a source that temporarily flares into prominence (e.g., an impending deadline). Similarly, social perceptions of dirtiness are chronically salient—as noted, qualitative research consistently indicates that dirty workers are very aware of their occupation’s stigma—creating an ongoing threat to work role identification (Proposition 1). The occupational or workgroup defense mechanisms (i.e., ideological techniques and social weighting) arise to help keep this threat at bay (Propositions 2–8). However, specific incidents or circumstances may render social perceptions acutely salient, temporarily overwhelming the defense mechanisms. For example, ideological reframing and social weighting may help public defenders cope with the chronic stigma of assisting people charged with felonies, yet hostile comments and invasive questions at a party may cause them to feel temporarily embarrassed and ashamed. Thus, depending on the mix of chronic and acute threats from social perceptions of dirtiness, and on the utilization and efficacy of defense mechanisms, dirty workers are apt to fluctuate somewhat in the degree of work role identification they feel.

Thus, our final proposition is as follows:

Proposition 9: Given the negative association posited in Proposition 1 (between salience and identification) and the sequence of positive associations posited in Propositions 2–8 (involving culture, ideology, social weighting, and identification), most dirty workers will be somewhat ambivalent about their work role; specifically, at those times when social perceptions are acutely salient, work role identification will be lower (via Prop-

**DISCUSSION**

Work is said to be dirty if society perceives it to be physically, socially, or morally tainted (Hughes, 1951, 1958). The construct of dirt has tremendous social significance because society draws a sharp distinction between purity and pollution, viewing people who perform dirty work as dirty or polluted themselves (Douglas, 1966). This stigma creates a challenge for dirty workers because they, like all people, rely somewhat on others for validation but are likely to be denied that validation by society. This is particularly true of dirty workers from relatively low-prestige occupations. Nonetheless, dirty workers often appear able to create and maintain a positive work role identity.

The reason, we have argued, is that the dirty work stigma makes the work role per se salient, and the threat embodied in the stigma fosters strong cohesion and the emergence of an occupational or workgroup culture to help counter the threat. The stronger the threat, the stronger the culture, and the more the perceptions of “us versus them” are reinforced. A strong culture provides the social resources to reframe, recalibrate, and refocus the meaning of dirty work—that is, to foster ennobling ideologies.

Dirty work ideologies often glorify precisely those aspects of the work that are most stigmatized: less onerous work would have required lesser people. The transformation of meaning is often supplemented with practices that moderate the impact of the salience of dirtiness by altering the relative social weights placed on detractors and supporters and by enabling selective social comparisons. Through these mechanisms, dirty workers, thus, are more likely to embrace the work role, although most retain some ambivalence and may fluctuate between higher and lower identification as social perceptions of dirtiness become more or less salient.

**Theoretical Contributions**

This article offers at least two major theoretical contributions. First, it provides the most rig-
orous articulation of the nature and types of dirty work since Hughes introduced the term to scholars nearly 50 years ago. Numerous researchers have used the construct in idiosyncratic ways, often without explanation, such that it has come to signify different things to different scholars (see footnote 2). We have argued that dirty work is seen as necessary but tainted, that three forms of taint—physical, social, and moral—exhaust the domain of dirty work, and that each form of taint can be operationalized by two criteria. As illustrated by the diverse examples throughout the article, the construct of dirty work is relevant to many occupations.

Second, the article offers an analysis of how occupational or workgroup members deal with the attribution of taint. What makes the seminal notion of taint intriguing is that it severely threatens the social validation processes that typically sustain any social identity, including the occupational or workgroup identity, as esteem enhancing. Our analysis illustrates the creative ways in which ideologies can be used to reframe, recalibrate, and refocus taint and in which social weighting can be used to selectively attend to referents that offer more flattering views and comparisons. As such, the article extends theory on identity, ideology, and social comparison processes into a realm of work where both the social esteem and self-esteem of the workers is highly problematic.

Further, although our analysis has focused on how members of dirty work occupations deal with taint, it has important implications for "taint management" across all occupations—indeed, all organizations. The management of taint transcends dirty work occupations, because all occupations and organizations face at least occasional threats to their identity-making and identity-sustaining activities. Our analysis demonstrates the self-serving nature of identity construction that may, to some extent, undergird all occupations and organizations.

Future Research

Research is clearly needed to assess our major arguments and to specify more precisely the processes underlying the intersection of dirty work and identity. Issues that warrant particular attention include the following. What are the specific processes through which societal perceptions of dirtiness are transmitted? Through what mechanisms does threat cause disparate individuals to coalesce into a cohesive group? How do certain ideologies emerge and become dominant? How does a group select specific reference groups for social comparison purposes? To what degree does work role identification fluctuate over time as societal perceptions, occupational/workgroup ideologies, and social weighting become differentially salient? And, more generally, to what extent are social perceptions of dirtiness culturally and temporally bounded? As one reviewer put it, perhaps societal concerns with dirt reflect a modern and primarily Western sensibility.

Our arguments can also be extended in at least four promising directions.

Dysfunctions of dirty work cultures. We have argued that a major function of dirty work cultures is to externalize threat and, thus, preserve the collective esteem of the dirty workers. However, these dynamics may also spawn several dysfunctional consequences. For example, relying on in-group members and similar out-groups for social comparisons may limit members' career aspirations, induce the group to accept an unnecessarily punitive status quo, and foster intergroup conflict (Crocker & Major, 1989). Collins (1992) found that a strong and defensive shopfloor culture caused shop workers to resist involvement with management and, thus, cede control of the workplace and perpetuate the workers' low prestige. What trade-offs are involved in the formation of strong cultures, self-serving ideologies, and social comparisons, and what positive and negative consequences attend both very low and very high work role identification?

External legitimacy. We also have argued that because of the low prestige of many dirty work occupations, dirty work ideologies have a far greater impact on internal legitimacy than external. However, because the implicit purpose of the ideologies is to provide esteem-enhancing meaning to occupational or workgroup members, the ideologies may foster a collective sense of relative deprivation, injustice, and resentment among the members (Crosby, 1984a). Contrary to the inward response described in the previous paragraph, this collective resentment may lead the group to agitate for substantive change in the stigmatizing conditions of work, as well as in rewards and prestige. More-
over, groups of dirty workers—like other collectives—may espouse socially desirable values and beliefs as an impression management tactic directed at external audiences.

Thus, an interesting issue for future research is the processes and conditions under which ideologies foster concerted action and external legitimacy, rather than passivity and insularity, such as Reid’s (1991) analysis of the mobilization of Paris sewer workers and Cahill’s (1995) account of how the espoused ideologies of funeral directors have evolved from handling the dead to ministering to the living. Further, under what conditions do dirty workers internalize an ideology rather than dismiss it as a cynical public relations ploy? How do occupational stereotypes form and change over time so that dirty work becomes clean and clean becomes dirty?

**Individual differences.** In focusing on the group level, we have not discussed the role of the individual. Sociological models and methodologies have informed much of the research on dirty work such that modal adjustment patterns are reported at the expense of idiosyncratic patterns. However, we suspect that there is marked variability in adjustment patterns across individuals. To what extent are these patterns associated with certain individual differences? For example, individuals low in self-esteem and high in field dependence may be particularly vulnerable to the stigma of dirty work, and young and inexperienced workers may find it easier to rationalize their involvement in dirty work (e.g., a stopgap job, building experience).

There is also a great deal of psychological literature on the coping and defense mechanisms utilized by individuals to ward off threats to valued identities (e.g., Breekwell, 1966; Goffman, 1963; McClure, 1991; Steele, 1988). For example, garbage collectors have been known to conceal their occupation from neighbors (Saunders, 1981), and members of groups that are discriminated against often believe that they have not been wronged personally (Crosby, 1984b). We speculate that such individual responses tend to supplement the occupational and workgroup responses, coping with any residual or idiosyncratic threats that are not addressed (or may even be caused) by the collective responses. To what extent do particular coping mechanisms at the individual level covary with those at the group level, and by what means might individual responses become institutionalized over time as collective responses?

Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the role of job choice in the model. To what extent do individuals freely choose to enter dirty work occupations? What individual differences predict voluntary versus involuntary entry? And what impact does perceived choice have on the adjustment process?

**Differentiating between the forms of taint and between low- and high-prestige occupations.** As noted, the boundaries between the physical, social, and moral dimensions of dirty work are inherently fuzzy. While we have focused on the similarities among these dimensions, a promising area for future research is the differences and their implications for stigma management. How does the form of primary taint affect the choice of ideologies and targets for social weighting, and how might the forms of taint interact to affect stigma management? For example, rather than viewing all dirty work as a "necessary evil," large segments of society may view occupations with a moral taint as more "evil" than "necessary" and occupations with a physical or social taint as more "necessary" than "evil." Thus, oppositional identity work may be more difficult for occupations with a moral taint. Further, moral taint may spill over into social taint, because occupations that are morally stigmatized tend to interact with other similarly stigmatized groups.

Also, our focus on mainly low-prestige dirty work occupations raises the question of how adequately the model in Figure 2 accounts for the experiences of members of high-prestige occupations. Because prestige is associated with a status shield, the salience of social perceptions may be reduced. Thus, the model may unfold in a more muted form. Further, given that education and job complexity contribute to prestige, many dirty workers in high-prestige occupations undergo extensive socialization under the auspices of professional associations (Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Thus, occupational cultures, ideologies, and social weighting practices tend to be well institutionalized such that newcomers tend to be better prepared to cope with stigma.
Practical Implications

Given the socially constructed nature of "dirt," the major implication for managers is that they should attempt to counter societal perceptions of dirtiness through the practices of symbolic management (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Pfeffer, 1981). As noted, symbolic management involves the use of stories and myths, distinctive language and metaphors, traditions and rituals, physical setting, rewards and status symbols, and so on to shape the interpretation of given jobs by organizational members.

A good example is Salzinger’s (1991) study of two cooperatives specializing in domestic worker placement. In one co-op, the founders defined domestic work as stopgap employment, and they provided no training and little job-related communication. In contrast, the other co-op defined domestic work in professional terms, offered training, set standards for employers as well as workers, and held frequent meetings where workers discussed their experiences and concerns in a supportive atmosphere. The result was that members of the first co-op came to regard domestic work as unimportant, whereas members of the second regarded it as an inherently skilled occupation deserving of respect, fair treatment, and decent pay. The nature of the domestic work itself was relatively constant across the two co-ops; it was the social construction of that work in the context of potent symbols that conferred meaning and created the vast difference in social identity.

Such practices legitimate and institutionalize at the organizational level what would otherwise be practiced, by default, at the occupational or workgroup level. Moreover, as we have seen, dirty work occupations/workgroups may, in the absence of symbolic management, attempt to foster ideologies and social weighting that use the organization and its subgroups as a foil, thereby further marginalizing the dirty workers within the organization.

In sum, the greater the salience of dirtiness, the greater the threat to a positive sense of workplace self and the more likely that a strong occupational or workgroup culture will emerge to combat that threat. The more that dirty work defines the work role, the more that incumbents will attempt to redefine the dirty work.

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**Blake E. Ashforth** is a professor of management at Arizona State University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. His research interests include identity and identification, socialization and newcomer work adjustment, the dysfunctions of organizational structures and processes, and the links between individual-, group-, and organization-level phenomena.

**Glen E. Kreiner** is a doctoral student at Arizona State University. His current research interests include the management of “dirty work,” the process of daily role transitions, the normalization of workplace emotions, and the identification and psychological contracts of contingent/temporary workers.

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