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A Review of Research on Dirty Work: Definitions, Perceptions, and Coping Strategies in Stigmatized Occupations

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Abstract: This paper provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on "dirty work," a term used to describe occupations that are stigmatized due to their physical, social, or moral characteristics. The concept, first introduced by Hughes in 1951, refers to jobs that are often perceived as socially undesirable or degrading, such as those in funeral services, waste management, or domestic work. The review synthesizes key findings from both theoretical and empirical studies, highlighting the complex ways in which these jobs are perceived by society, their practitioners, and clients. The article categorizes the research into several key themes: the definition and characteristics of dirty work, the perception of non-decent occupations, the sources and consequences of occupational stigma, and the coping strategies used by workers to manage the stigma associated with their roles. The review also explores the multidimensional measurement of dirty work, examining both unidimensional and multidimensional scales used to assess the perceived "dirtiness" of various professions. Furthermore, the paper identifies the psychological and social impacts of engaging in dirty work, focusing on issues such as identity formation, emotional labor, and the impact of occupational stigma on workers' mental health. Finally, it discusses strategies employed by workers to manage their social image and self-worth, including distancing behaviors, information management, and reframing the value of their work. This review highlights the need for further research to deepen our understanding of dirty work's role in contemporary society, emphasizing the importance of integrating both individual and collective perspectives to explore the full complexity of these stigmatized occupations.

Keywords: Dirty Work; Stigmatized Professions; Coping Strategies; Perception of Non-decent Work.

1. Introduction

Labor has no distinctions of high or low, noble or humble; every profession is honorable. However, as long as there is a division of labor in society, there will be hard, exhausting, dirty, and low-status jobs. These jobs are stigmatized as "non-decent" work (dirty work) due to their violation of the public's standard of "cleanliness" [1]. The concept of non-decent work is used to describe occupations that are devalued, despised, and unpopular in society, such as funeral services, food delivery, and waste management. These jobs often face the dilemma of labor shortages in the market, and workers in these fields are marginalized and deprived of the attention and respect they deserve due to the "stigma" attached to these jobs [2].

In 1951, American sociologist Hughes [3] first introduced the concept of "non-decent" work, referring to jobs assigned to employees that are physically unpleasant, socially undervalued, or contradict our more heroic moral ideas. However, most of the research conducted to date has focused on Western contexts. In contrast, research in domestic settings is still in its early stages and mainly focuses on expanding the local concept of non-decent work, the impact of non-decent work perceptions, the formation mechanisms of contradictory occupational identity, and the sources and consequences of occupational stigma associated with non-decent work. Practice shows that the existence of non-decent work is indispensable to socio-economic development [4]. In-depth research on non-decent work not only helps uncover the roots of inequality and social exclusion but is also crucial for designing effective policy interventions to improve work quality, promote economic justice, and foster social integration. By thoroughly exploring the concept and impact of non-decent work, we can better understand the complexity of the contemporary labor market and its impact on individual well-being.

The following review will discuss the definition, classification, characteristics of non-decent work, and related research on non-decent work.

2. Non-decent Work

2.1. Definition of Non-decent Work

Non-decent work (dirty work) refers to jobs that are stigmatized by society due to their involvement with physical filth, social stigma, or moral controversy. After Hughes introduced this concept, Emerson and Pollner (1976) further defined it as “jobs deemed non-decent by society that bring pressure, shame, or status degradation to the practitioners” [5]. In reality, "non-decent" is not an inherent characteristic of the job itself but rather a subjective perception by society and individuals [6]. When workers believe that a task or environment undermines their dignity, they may perceive the job as non-decent [7].

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) proposed a more comprehensive theoretical framework, classifying non-decent work into three dimensions: physical non-decent (involving material filth), social non-decent (involving contact with stigmatized groups or damage to self-esteem), and moral non-decent (violating secular morals) [8]. Later, researchers added the concept of emotional non-decent work, which refers to ongoing emotional labor pressures arising from

organizational demands or occupational norms, such as customer service workers needing to always maintain a positive attitude [9–11].

Kreiner et al. (2006) further expanded the definition, noting that all professions could involve elements of non-decent work, varying only in degree and manifestation, thus allowing scholars to more broadly capture stigmatized work groups and non-decent phenomena within their professions [12].

2.2. Classification Dimensions of Non-decent Work

Three Dimensions: Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) [8] classified non-decent work into physical “dirty” work, social “dirty” work, and moral “dirty” work based on the characteristics of "non-decent" work. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as many “non-decent” jobs simultaneously exhibit multiple layers of non-decent characteristics.

Four Dimensions: Kreiner et al. (2006), based on the breadth (the proportion of non-decent tasks in the work) and depth (the degree and direct involvement in non-decent tasks), classified non-decent work into four categories: pervasive stigma, diluted stigma, compartmentalized stigma, and idiosyncratic stigma. Pervasive stigma refers to jobs that are almost entirely made up of non-decent tasks, while diluted stigma refers to jobs where non-decent tasks are few and have a minor impact. Compartmentalized stigma refers to jobs where non-decent tasks are clearly separated from decent tasks, and idiosyncratic stigma refers to jobs where non-decent tasks only affect a few people. Research typically focuses on the first three types due to their more significant effects on practitioners [6].

Additionally, Zhang Guang-lei et al. (2020) classified non-decent work perception into surface-level (contact with unpleasant substances or harmful environments) and deep-level (violating social morals), further subdividing them into contact, non-contact, and mixed models. These classifications provide a multidimensional perspective on understanding the complexity of non-decent work [13].

Six Dimensions: Ashforth et al. (2007) found that the impact of non-decent work on practitioners varies depending on the prestige of the profession. Occupational prestige can be an important distinguishing factor for non-decent work. Therefore, they added a prestige dimension to their three-dimensional classification model, categorizing non-decent work into six types based on the “non-decent characteristics (physical, social, and moral non-decent) × occupational prestige (high and low)” standard [14]. These categories include high-prestige physical "dirty" work, high-prestige social "dirty" work, high-prestige moral "dirty" work, low-prestige physical "dirty" work, low-prestige social "dirty" work, and low-prestige moral "dirty" work.

3. Measurement of Non-decent Work

In terms of research methods, existing research on "non-decent" work has primarily focused on theoretical analysis, with empirical research growing rapidly in recent years. Empirical research mainly uses qualitative methods such as interviews and narratives, with quantitative research as a supplement. Based on the dimensionality of measurement tools, non-decent work measurement can be divided into two categories: unidimensional and multidimensional.

3.1. Unidimensional

3.1.1. Subjective Evaluation of “Non-decent” Degree

This method is primarily used to measure the public’s overall perception of the "non-decent" nature of work and rank different professions by their degree of non-decentness. For example, in an empirical study, Ashforth et al. (2007) selected 30 professions (such as construction workers, taxi drivers, social workers) and asked 647 MBA students to rate each profession's “non-decent” degree according to the definition of non-decent work. The results showed that the degree of moral non-decent work was significantly higher than that of physical and social non-decent work [14]. Baran et al. (2016) also used this method to assess the “non-decent” degree of 44 professions, finding that workers in slaughterhouses, prison guards, and domestic workers had significantly higher scores than the social average [15].

3.1.2. Occupational Stigma-Based Measurement of Non-decent Work

“Non-decent” work is essentially a context-dependent occupational stigma, and many studies have measured it from the perspective of stigma perception. The Occupational Stigma Consciousness Scale (SCQ) developed by Pinel and Paulin (2005) has high reliability and validity and has been widely applied in related studies [16]. For example, Shantz and Booth (2014) used this scale to study the stigma awareness of call center workers, designing items such as “negative public views of call center workers” [17]. Additionally, Li et al. (2007) developed a 5-item stigma perception scale in their study of HIV/AIDS care workers, covering items such as “discrimination due to the job” [18].

3.2. Multidimensional Non-decent Work Measurement

3.2.1. Three-Dimensional Measurement Scale Based on Ashforth and Kreiner (1999)

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) proposed a classification theory for non-decent work but did not develop an operational scale. To address this gap, Lai (2010) developed an 18-item three-dimensional (physical, social, and moral) “non-decent” work scale (PWDS) based on their classification theory. For example, physical non-decent work measurement items include “I worry that this job offers little protection for my life” and “My work environment is harmful to my health.” The scale shows good validity but is context-specific to the Macau casino industry, limiting its generalizability [8].

Schaubroeck et al. (2018) reduced Lai’s scale to 12 items, applying it to multiple occupational sectors (e.g., accountants, administrative assistants), and found that non-decent work experience was significantly related to turnover intention. However, Ji XinYi (2020) did not find a significant correlation between non-decent work experience and turnover intention using the reduced version, indicating the need for further investigation into the scale’s applicability.

3.2.2. Two-Dimensional Non-decent Work Measurement Scale Based on Kreiner et al. (2006)

Kreiner et al. (2006) used the breadth (extent of non-decent tasks) and depth (frequency and direct involvement in non-decent tasks) as two key indicators for measuring non-decent work. For example, Baran et al. (2012) studied the impact of non-decent tasks such as euthanizing animals on turnover rates in animal shelters, assessing whether workers were involved in such tasks and their frequency [19].

Blight (2014) used a similar method to assess non-decent

tasks (such as assisting elderly people with toilet use or bathing) and found that the experience of these tasks was related to turnover intention. However, due to limited literature, current measurement tools mainly focus on specific professions, and their reliability and validity still need verification [20].

Wang Guomeng et al. (2023) [21] developed a localized non-decent work perception questionnaire (PDWQ) based on social cognition theory, cognitive-affective system theory, and emotional event theory. The scale includes 18 items covering dirty awareness, emotional experience, and behavioral tendencies. This scale not only validates previous literature but also adds the dimension of "overall perception of dirty work" [8], [6], [9], [22]. The emotional experience dimension directly reflects work pride, negative emotions, and emotional coping, making the scale more comprehensive in capturing the dirty work characteristics. However, the scale has not yet been widely empirically tested.

4. The Impact of Non-decent Work on Workers

4.1. The Impact of Non-decent Work on Workers' Cognitive Level

4.1.1. Negative Emotions of Workers

Numerous studies have found that non-decent work can trigger negative emotional reactions, such as disgust and shame, among workers [6], [28], including jobs like garbage collection, physical care, and crime punishment [29–31]. Disgust and shame are common negative emotions among workers in non-decent occupations. These negative emotions stem not only from the workers' own emotional reactions but also from the internalized stigma of their occupation. According to research on identity threats, various forms of social stigma behind non-decent work lead to negative emotional experiences for workers [32].

Psychological studies show that in human societies characterized by "non-touching culture," the bodily fluids, excretions, and other contaminants involved in caregiving, as well as close physical contact with patients, and even contact with death, can trigger both public and workers' "animal instinct" disgust [20]. Perez et al. (2010) found that, despite the actual social contributions of criminal evidence collection, workers in this field experience highly complex emotions, especially when required to view explicit material. They often experience disgust, discomfort, and shame due to anxiety over themselves and their families [33]. Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) focused on university janitors and explored the consequences of the invisibility of non-decent work on their welfare and well-being. Due to the stigma attached to non-decent jobs, such as cleaning, workers often encounter factual invisibility and a lack of recognition or acknowledgment by clients. This results in emotional experiences of anger, compliance, ambivalence, and relief. Class-based harm, client indifference, and the spatial-temporal structure of the job are reasons why non-decent work becomes invisible [34].

4.1.2. Workers' Perception of Occupational Stigma

1. **Occupational stigma** refers to the untrustworthy attribute assigned to individuals or groups performing certain occupational roles [16]. Occupational stigma is socially constructed and stems from the mainstream societal belief that decency equals goodness, and non-decent equals bad [35], [36]. When workers engage in non-decent jobs, occupational stigma attaches to them, stripping them of certain social interaction qualifications, leading to identity devaluation and other negative social consequences [37], [8]. This process is called "stigmatization." The three forms of non-decent work—physical, social, and moral—correspond to the physical, social, and moral stigma that non-decent workers face.

Although occupational stigma is closely related to non-decent work, the two are essentially different: first, from a definitional perspective, non-decent work is defined by the characteristics of the work itself, while occupational stigma is defined by the stereotypical perceptions of external social groups; second, causally, non-decent work necessarily involves occupational stigma, but having occupational stigma does not necessarily mean the work is non-decent. As mentioned earlier, all work contains some degree of "non-decent" elements [12], meaning that all work may carry occupational stigma.

2. The sources of occupational stigma are similar to non-decent work and can be categorized into macro (socio-cultural, government policies), meso (media influence), and micro (public, workers themselves, and job attributes).

3. Characteristics:

- **Visibility** refers to the extent to which a non-decent worker's occupational stigma can be hidden or disguised in social interactions;
- **Controllability** refers to the extent to which the worker is perceived as responsible for causing, owning, or maintaining occupational stigma;
- **Centrality** refers to how closely the stigmatized attribute or practice relates to the core identity of the non-decent worker;
- **Destructiveness** refers to the extent to which occupational stigma damages social interactions and/or causes the worker to be seen as a threat by others in society.

4.2. The Behavioral Impact of Non-decent Work on Workers

Facing the stigma of non-decent work, workers not only experience a range of negative emotions but also exhibit low job performance, high turnover behavior, and high social alienation and retaliatory behavior [42].

Non-decent work is closely related to workers' low job performance, high turnover rates, and withdrawal behaviors [43]. A large body of empirical research shows that non-decent work is positively correlated with workers' intention to leave their job and negatively correlated with their willingness to recommend their job to others [44]–[46]. For example, Wildes (2005) found that in the restaurant industry, due to the "non-decent" stigma associated with food service work, restaurant workers often viewed the job as a temporary stop in their career. High levels of occupational stigma awareness significantly decreased employees' intentions to stay at their job and also lowered their willingness to recommend the job to friends or their own children [47]. Pinel and Paulin (2005) found that workers, especially female employees, who are in a state of long-term occupational stigmatization, feel disrespected and show heightened sensitivity to disrespect. This sensitivity to occupational stigma predicts their turnover intentions, which could eventually lead to actual exit behaviors.

Burnout as a defensive stress response is commonly experienced by non-decent workers, especially those in "people-related" jobs, such as nursing and social work [48].

Studies on social workers and police officers have shown that non-decent work itself can lead to negative work behaviors and mental and physical health issues, such as burnout, cardiovascular diseases, and post-traumatic stress disorders. For law enforcement officers, non-decent tasks (such as violent arrests, tense and dangerous confrontations with criminals, being on-site, or constantly reviewing images or videos related to crime) are significant drivers of their desire to escape from the job [49]. Research indicates that many law enforcement officers experience high levels of negative emotions (including self-blame, fear, emotional exhaustion, and hyper-vigilance) and high burnout symptoms (such as physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion) [33]. For example, litigation lawyers must manage clients' emotions while maintaining emotional distance from the emotional aspects of cases to remain objective. Under these conflicting circumstances, Gunby and Carline (2020) [50] noted that lawyers tend to adopt a strategy of "managed indifference," presenting a long-term professional indifference and a neutral stance where emotions are not involved.

High levels of occupational stigma awareness can also lead non-decent workers to develop self-defeating social withdrawal mechanisms. Non-decent workers often feel misunderstood, unrecognized, despised, and disrespected, causing them to be extremely cautious in social interactions. This persistent vigilance towards the public's attitudes makes them anxious and fearful of social engagement, further restricting their normal social activities [51]. Research data indicates that occupational stigma leads abortion doctors to experience interpersonal harassment, marginalization in the healthcare system, and a loss of social status, making them wary of relationships and leading to self-isolation [52]. Additionally, some studies suggest that the stigmatization of jobs, marginalized identities, and non-decent work environments make non-decent workers more vulnerable to workplace bullying, emotional abuse, and harassment, which further intensifies the suffering caused by working in stigmatized occupations [53].

5. Strategies for Managing "Dirty Work" Stigma

Stigma management strategies refer to the series of responses that workers in dirty jobs adopt in order to alleviate the negative impact of occupational stigma. Through these strategies, workers attempt to manage the attribution and consequences of the stigma associated with their occupations. Existing stigma management strategies can generally be divided into two categories: individual strategies and collective strategies. The former seeks to improve the individual's status without altering the hierarchical relationship between two social groups, while the latter attempts to elevate the status of the in-group by changing the actual hierarchical relationships between groups to achieve positive social recognition. From a hierarchical perspective, these strategies are mainly categorized into two levels: cognitive strategies and behavioral strategies. Based on a review of the literature, this article classifies the strategies for managing occupational stigma into four types according to the objects and levels of change.

5.1. Individual-Level Strategies

5.1.1. Behavioral Strategies

Individual behavioral strategies primarily involve workers distancing themselves from negative occupational groups to avoid damage to their self-image, diverting the audience's attention, or taking proactive actions to alter others' negative evaluations of their profession. Common examples include individual mobility, information management, and confronting or avoiding external perceptions or behaviors.

In this study, individual mobility refers to the way in which workers in dirty jobs distance themselves from the "dirty" elements of their work, tasks, or situations as a means of protecting their positive self-awareness. Specific forms of individual mobility include resignation, avoidance, and blaming or distancing oneself from clients/employers. For example, doctors may delegate obviously dirty tasks, such as wound cleaning and postoperative care, to nurses in order to avoid direct contact with contaminants [54]. In addition, dirty job workers may adopt strategies of blaming or distancing from clients/employers, which may include blaming the clients/employers for being primarily responsible for the stigma or separating themselves from clients/employers to avoid exposure to the dirty work environment.

Information management strategies involve dirty job workers actively managing or disclosing information about their occupational stigma to increase their social acceptance in interactions [55], [56]. This includes two main forms: information concealment and disclosure. Concealing or disclosing information is an important strategy for managing occupational stigma. The reasons are as follows: (1) Unlike people with obvious stigma, dirty job workers can conceal their occupational stigma to alleviate tense interpersonal relationships and avoid discrimination, but concealing the stigma also creates significant psychological pressure and negative emotions such as shame and anxiety; (2) Disclosing stigma-related information has dual effects. On the one hand, disclosing this information may lead to social depreciation; on the other hand, it may provide emotional and cognitive support that helps workers cope with occupational stigma. The complexity of the information management process is influenced by personal, organizational, and situational factors [56].

Confronting or avoiding external perceptions or behaviors refers to dirty job workers actively challenging occupational stigma and attempting to change others' perceptions or behaviors. This is manifested in emphasizing the value of their profession, rebutting others' opinions, and displaying humor. For example, domestic workers might directly refuse disrespectful behavior from employers to maintain their sense of dignity [57]. Ashforth et al. (2007) found that dirty job workers use humor to combat public stigma, as humor is a relatively non-threatening way that encourages workers to view problematic tasks with levity. At the same time, self-deprecating jokes and communication strategies can make individuals more likely to avoid public scorn and be treated positively by others.

5.1.2. Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies for individuals refer to how workers in dirty jobs reconstruct their personal perceptions to reduce the negative effects of occupational stigma. Common types include personalization, acceptance, and emotional labor.

Personalization strategies involve workers shifting their focus from their occupational identity to their individual identity. Although they may still engage in dirty jobs, they no longer view themselves as part of the occupational group but as unique individuals. Personalization strategies manifest as devaluation and disidentification. For example, Schaubroeck

et al. (2018) found that when individuals experience high levels of occupational stigma perception, it leads to inconsistent professional role identity, highlighting the separation between the self and the occupational group, thus maintaining a positive self-perception. In contrast, acceptance strategies involve accepting negative occupational identities as authentic self-representations, a passive coping strategy that includes accepting one's limitations and tolerating external stigma. While acceptance can temporarily protect self-awareness, its prolonged use may be harmful [57].

Emotional labor strategies refer to the use or manipulation of emotions by dirty job workers to counter the negative effects of occupational stigma [9],[13]. This strategy focuses on transforming negative emotions related to occupational stigma into positive emotions. For example, meat inspectors express indifference, boredom, or even pride, rather than love, sympathy, or frustration, to resist the negative emotions associated with large-scale poultry slaughter [20].

5.2. Collective-Level Strategies

5.2.1. Behavioral Strategies

Collective behavioral strategies refer to how workers in dirty jobs engage in group competition to enhance their occupational status and protect their self-esteem from stigma-related threats. Two common approaches are social competition and realistic competition.

Social competition and realistic competition are both collective strategies because group members elevate their in-group's status to improve their individual status—either by competing for positive evaluations of their in-group (social competition) or by competing for resources that benefit their in-group (realistic competition). Additionally, these strategies are highly behavioral in nature, as they involve active competition between groups. Ashforth et al. (2007) provide an example of social competition, observing that managers in dirty jobs emphasize the value of their occupation and act contrary to occupational stereotypes to alter others' perceptions of the profession.

5.2.2. Cognitive Strategies

Collective cognitive strategies involve challenging the validity of occupational stigma to improve occupational evaluations. Two common approaches are reconstructing occupational ideologies and social weighting.

The strategy of reconstructing occupational ideologies reinterprets and redefines what the occupation entails and why it is important [8], [58]. This strategy seeks to improve the personal self-esteem of dirty job workers by altering how their occupational group is evaluated. Three approaches include reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing. First, reframing involves injecting positive values into the work or rejecting its negative values to normalize the stigma. For example, garbage collectors may claim that their work supports recycling to counter occupational stigma [59]. Second, recalibrating refers to adjusting the implicit standards by which stigma attributes are evaluated. For instance, hospital janitors may see their work as crucial to patient recovery [8]. Third, refocusing involves shifting attention to the non-stigmatized aspects of the occupation. For example, corrections officers might derive satisfaction from their salary, retirement benefits, and flexible working hours [60]. Reconstructing occupational ideologies often leads to positive outcomes, such as improved self-perception [61] and increased occupational pride [62].

Social weighting involves differentiating between various types of outsiders and focusing on social or group comparisons to resist stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). By redefining or altering the elements of the comparison context, dirty job workers seek positive distinctiveness for their occupational group. For example, workers might distinguish between supporters and critics, praising supporters while condemning critics. Another option is selective social comparison, comparing their current situation to other members of their group or their own past circumstances. Phung et al. (2020) found that Uber drivers distinguished themselves from taxi drivers by highlighting the advanced technology used by Uber. Although downward social comparison can protect the fragile self-esteem of dirty job workers, strategies like stigma transfer can exacerbate the stratification of occupational stigma [63]. Additionally, Bosmans et al. (2016) identified three additional social weighting strategies among domestic workers: in-group preference, out-group preference, and stigma internalization. In-group preference involves favoring interactions with in-group members and seeking positive distinctiveness for the in-group to protect individual self-esteem. Out-group preference refers to a preference for interacting with out-group members and enhancing the status of the out-group, which may result in negative self-perceptions. Stigma internalization involves accepting and internalizing the low social value assigned to their work by society, which is considered a maladaptive coping strategy. Clarke and Ravenswood (2019) examined the impact of dirty work stigma on occupational identity among elder care workers—an increasingly important yet stigmatized profession. They explored how these workers seek to justify their occupational choices and foster a positive, authentic occupational identity. Their study found that elder care workers shaped their occupational identity through social processes, exploration and experience, and status mediation [64].

5.3. The Special Role of Third Parties

A meta-analysis by Galazka et al. (2023) [65] introduced a previously overlooked perspective: the role of clients in dirty work and their potential contribution to the worker's acknowledged work experience, either positively or negatively.

Client Distance and Contact: The article discusses how the physical and psychological distance between clients and dirty work can either intensify or alleviate the stigma felt by workers. For instance, clients may psychologically distance themselves from dirty jobs if they do not directly interact with them. This distancing can exacerbate the stigmatization of dirty work.

Clients' Attitudes and Behavior Towards Dirty Work: Clients' attitudes and behavior significantly affect workers' self-perception and occupational identity. For example, the respect and recognition from clients can enhance workers' occupational pride, while clients' contempt and devaluation can worsen workers' professional stigma.

Client-Worker Interaction: The interactions between clients and workers shape workers' perceptions of their jobs and experiences. These interactions can be direct, such as face-to-face encounters with cleaners, or indirect, through social media or public discourse, influencing the public image of workers' occupations.

Social Influence of Clients: As members of society, clients' views and behaviors can influence the broader public's perception of dirty work, thereby affecting the social status

and professional stigma of the entire occupational group.

Zhang et al. (2023) [66] conducted empirical research that confirmed that receiving positive feedback from clients, such as gratitude, can mitigate the negative impacts of perceived dirty work. Despite the stigmatization and low social value typically associated with dirty jobs, positive feedback from clients can change workers' perception of their social worth and significantly increase their sense of job meaning. This phenomenon remains true even in highly stigmatized professions. The study further explored, through relational identity theory, how client feedback shapes employees' self-concept and how workers construct a positive self-image through interactions with clients. This is crucial for understanding identity construction in dirty work contexts.

6. Critique and Outlook

Although the theoretical foundation of dirty work has developed, there are still some fragmented issues. Early research, such as Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) classification of dirty work and proposed management strategies, laid the groundwork. However, research on dirty work has now shifted from purely descriptive studies to more complex theoretical constructions. These theories, however, need to be integrated with new social psychology and organizational behavior theories to form a more comprehensive theoretical framework. For example, integrating occupational psychology and social psychology theories to explore the impact of dirty work on individual identity, self-esteem, and commitment [68]. Nevertheless, further theoretical innovation is needed to explain the deeper impacts of dirty work on individual and organizational behavior.

In addition, although there has been significant progress in scale development and empirical research in the field of dirty work in recent years, the research methods in this field could still be diversified. The findings of dirty work research also need to be better translated into practical policies and organizational practices to improve workers' working conditions and professional image. A key direction for future research is to explore how these theoretical findings can be practically applied. For example, research indicates that appropriate organizational support and positive client feedback can significantly improve job satisfaction and identity recognition for employees engaged in dirty work [15].

Outlook: Considering the cultural sensitivity of dirty work, future research could focus more on comparative studies across cultural contexts. This would help to understand how different social and cultural backgrounds influence the cognition and impact of dirty work. Current research heavily relies on cross-sectional data, so future studies could conduct longitudinal research to track the long-term effects of dirty work on workers, particularly in terms of career development, life satisfaction, and mental health. Building on existing theories and empirical research, further exploration is needed on how policy and organizational interventions can improve the conditions of dirty work, enhance workers' professional dignity, and improve their quality of life. Additionally, the impact of technological development on dirty work could be explored: as technological advancements, particularly automation and artificial intelligence, continue to progress, future research could examine how these changes redefine dirty work and how they affect both the nature of the work and the workers themselves.

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