

Alvarez, W. (2022). *Everyday Dirty Work: Invisibility, Communication, and Immigrant Labor*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press. 180 pp. \$32.95 (paper)

In *Everyday Dirty Work: Invisibility, Communication, and Immigrant Labor*, Wilfredo Alvarez offers an empirically driven, theoretically sophisticated, and touchingly real account of everyday, stigmatizing workplace communication experiences of Latin American immigrant janitors at a U.S. university. Drawing mostly on qualitative interviews with workers, supplemented with recollections of own social, cultural, linguistic, and economic integration into the American society, Alvarez offers plentiful examples of shame thrown upon and experienced by the janitors by virtue of their occupation, race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and language ability. Shame then shapes workers' social identity, which reflects, and feeds into, the macro-level anti-immigrant sentiment within American society. Chapter by chapter, Alvarez reinterprets janitorial narratives about experiences of communicative rudeness and self-silencing across vertical and horizontal social relations of work as demonstrative of a broader system of social oppression, exclusion, and subordination amidst racially prejudicial U.S. societal sentiments.

In other words, individual janitors' stories from the case study contextualize the macro-level argument about stigma. Here, through recourse to Orbe's theory of co-cultural communication, Alvarez shows how race, ethnicity, social class, occupation, immigrant status, and language ability all intersect to create a condition of social marginalization, where non-white communities, who are not fluent in English and occupy jobs perceived as low-skill, struggle with their socio-cultural and economic visibility. The structure of communication, or its lack – as in the case of self-imposed communicative suppression among workers too economically vulnerable to stand up for themselves – is depicted as constitutive of the multi-minority status, to add to a sociological understanding of intersectionality to “highlight how multiple overlapping systems of oppression ‘intersect’ to affect individuals' lived experiences in material ways” (p.11).

On a practical level, Alvarez does an excellent job advocating for marginalized communities of Latin American janitors. The inclusion of both original interview extracts in Spanish and their English translations is a welcome, meaningful nod in the direction of achieving the objective of giving a voice to those unable to speak for themselves. Revealing the practical lack of support with English language training allows for recommendations of addressing this oversight, for example through formal and informal language exchanges. Empowerment also lies in shedding light on the realities of janitors' invisible work through the high level of detail that Alvarez goes into in revealing the communicative dynamics of janitorial lives.

These dynamics are complex and convoluted. Generally, communication with supervisors (mostly non-Latino white) is fraught with strategic power and control, while communication with co-workers (mostly Latin American) serves as a social buffer. However, this is a simplification, as the fascinating insights on the behaviour of Latino supervisors and the use of gossip reveal. Concerning the former, Alvarez shows that, counterintuitively, supervisors of Latin American descent treated other Latin American cleaners “badly” (p.60). This finding calls for further discussion through recourse to roles on the organizational hierarchy, which would add even more nuance to our understanding of intersectionality. Although Alvarez

does not explore this pathway, he acknowledges its urgency calling for further research in this area on page 104. As for the latter, the section on gossip on pages 62-63 is a fascinating window into the limits on co-workers-as-buffers argument in an environment of “toxic, defensive communication climate” (p.63).

A focus on janitorial workers’ communication with their clients (faculty, staff, and students) is a much needed and welcome addition to the discussions around stigmatization. By sharing janitors’ accounts of abusive comments from customers, or their recollections of customers ignoring them altogether, Alvarez adds depth to claims of janitors’ communicative isolation and invisibility. Exploring the communication between individuals in service jobs and their clients is also important from the perspective of dirty work research. As some writers have argued (e.g., Malvini Redden and Scarduzio, 2018), attending to the communicative dimensions of worker-customer interactions is urgent for an enhanced appreciation of how work becomes more or less dirty (or clean).

On this note, for a book with ‘dirty work’ in the title, there is surprisingly little engagement with the dirty work scholarship. The janitorial work examined here is undeniably dirty, as workers’ narratives and some customers’ voices would suggest (see, for example, pages 15 and 75); however, dirty work is only mentioned in passing. It is not unpacked with reference to the scholarship’s unique preoccupation with the negative impact of societal stigmatizing views on workers’ personal identities and how workers then manage this impact through symbolic and material coping techniques. Rather, the book is about everyday communication and its embedded stigma reinforcing mechanisms, unfolding against the backdrop of the perceptions of janitorial work as dirty. Communication researchers will find Alvarez’s account of great interest. The book may also be of value to scholars working in the wider domain of social sciences and humanities, but also to practitioners and leaders in non-profit, academic organisations that aspire to ‘walk the talk’ of inclusivity.

References

Malvini Redden S and Scarduzio JA (2018) A different type of dirty work: Hidden taint, intersectionality, and emotion management in bureaucratic organizations. *Communication Monographs* 85(2): 224–244.