ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Challenging the 'dirty worker'—'clean client' dichotomy: Conceptualizing worker-client relations in dirty work

Anna Milena Galazka ⓘ | James Wallace ⓘ

Lecturer in Management, Employment and Organisation, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff, UK

Correspondence
Anna Milena Galazka, Lecturer in Management, Employment and Organisation, Cardiff Business School, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK
Email: galazkaa@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

Dirty work research has long analytically prioritized focusing on the people who do dirty work, largely sidestepping who the clients of dirty work are and what contribution they can make to workers' experience of the job as more or less dirty. We address these oversights through a systematic review and analysis of 65 articles, theorizing the role played by clients within dirty work. Firstly, we propose a three-fold categorization of dirty work clients based on their temporal-spatial proximity to the work and explain how clients can be a source of stigma through communicative and corporeal interactions with workers. Secondly, we collate existing discussions that mention worker-client relations into a conceptual framework of clients' contributions to dirty work through considering several feedback loops between clients' and workers' behaviours and discourses. In doing so, we examine the ways in which clients can both reinforce and alleviate workers' experience of dirty work stigma.

INTRODUCTION

'Personally, I believe that if we, as a society benefit from any occupation, then that occupation should be valued, you know, I really—I benefit from the people who collect my garbage and who do all sorts of things for me, and their job should be as valued as, I don't know, a doctor'. (Clarke & Ravenswood, 2019, p. 88)

The sociological term 'dirty work' refers to work perceived as physically unglamorous, socially degrading or morally dubious (Hughes, 1958, pp. 49−50). It is used to understand workers' experience of jobs that society deems undesirable yet often necessary, such as funeral ser-

vices (Batista & Codo, 2018), abattoir work (Hamilton & McCabe, 2016; McCabe & Hamilton, 2015) or waste collection (Hamilton et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2017). Physical, social and moral job taints are seen as a source of stigma, which transfers onto workers' identity, creating a 'dirty worker' (Dick, 2005; Grandy & Mavin, 2012; Hamilton & McCabe, 2016; Stacey, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006). In bringing the concept into organization and management studies, Ashforth and Kreiner asserted that whilst members of society benefit from and applaud certain types of dirty work, for example, caring for the terminally ill—they generally see it as disgusting or morally threatening. For this reason, they often 'remain *psychologically and behaviorally distanced from that work and those who do it*, glad that it is someone else' (1999, p. 416, emphasis added). Yet, as the opening quote from Clarke and Ravenswood (2019) suggests, there are reasons for believing that clients can

relate positively to dirty workers. From this we may suppose that clients' distancing from and/or relating to dirty work influences both societal perception of those that carry out dirty work, and dirty workers' own experience of work.

Interestingly, many dirty work scholars seem to have accepted clients' purported 'distancing' from dirty work, thereby sidestepping the clients' intricate role in the construction of the work as less or more dirty. Most research has used an inward-facing perspective and focussed on how workers themselves cognitively cope with the negative implications of stigma on their self-concept. Within their 'inner circle of vetted people' (Ashforth et al., 2007, p. 160), workers have been shown to discursively 'transform the meaning of 'dirt' and moderate the impact of social perceptions of dirtiness' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 413) through three discursive techniques of 'reframing', 'recalibrating' and 'refocusing' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) to achieve 'a cognitive shift in the positive meaning' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013, p. 130). However, whilst extant research demonstrates that the mitigation of stigma often occurs within insular occupational cultures, the processes by which certain types of work become designated as 'dirty' happens outside of this. Crucially, Ashforth and Kreiner stressed that what accords work a 'dirty' status is other people's visceral reactions:

> First, 'dirtiness' is a social construction: it is … imputed by people, based on necessarily subjective standards of cleanliness and purity (cf. Ball, 1970) … Second, the common denominator among tainted jobs is … visceral repugnance of people to them … (1999, p. 415).

Thus, dirty workers' occupational experiences and resulting self-concepts may involve a fundamental relationality with those outside of these occupational cultures because 'stigmatisation comes from external others' (Bentein et al., 2017, p. 1623). This relationality can broadly be understood at a societal level, as seen in a special issue of the journal *Work, Employment and Society* (Adamson & Roper, 2019), which consolidates the potential of dirty work scholarship to conceptualize how societal designation of jobs as good and bad influences workers' experience of doing dirty tasks and how it impacts workers' self-concept.

This relationality may also be viewed more directly on a dyadic level (see Mikolon et al., 2021), as relations with the people who delegate dirty tasks to workers and ultimately benefit from their activities. Generally, people benefit from dirty workers because they no longer have to deal with the dirt themselves (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Moreover, beneficiaries' attitudes and behaviours can influence workers, either reinforcing the stigma of dirty jobs, or alleviating it

(Mikolon et al., 2021). For example, in the case of passengers' behaviour causing taxi drivers to ask them to leave the car—the customers' disrespect matters for the 'construction of work as "dirty" or otherwise' (Cassell & Bishop, 2014, p. 254). Providing social services to undocumented migrants gives professionals meaning, while embedding their work in the blurry realm of illegality (Olvera, 2017). Patrons' expectations of emotional performances by judges and Transportation Security Officers communicatively co-construct the jobs' emotional taints (Malvini Redden & Scarduzio, 2018). Therefore, an opportunity for dirty work scholarship lies in 'broadening the analytical lens from the workers, to view the worker-client relationship as a whole' (Neal, 2018, p. 132) because dirty work clients 'may themselves contribute to threats and charges of dirty work, and thus future research could pursue a more multi-actor, multi-account perspective' (Chow & Calvard, 2021, pp. 225–226). The inclusion of customers, recipients, beneficiaries, or—as we refer to them in this paper—*clients* in the study of dirty workers' dealings with taint can help researchers appreciate the complexity and intricacy of the relational realm of dirty work and understand the interactive and context-sensitive nature of self-image and stigma management strategies in two important ways.

Firstly, it can help researchers appreciate the diversity of the 'client category', given the myriad of jobs that have been described as dirty. In consultancy research, the diversity of client groups has received conceptual attention (Schein, 1997), yet similar investigations have not unfolded in the dirty work literature. Seemingly, a dirty work client can be a relatively passive recipient, as in home aid care worker relations (Stacey, 2005); or an active participant, as in (some forms of) sex work (Neal, 2018). Clients may also take on either a superordinate role within the work interaction, such as the homeowner in domestic labour (Sadl, 2014) or garden work (Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009; Ramirez, 2011) or be in a subordinate position to the dirty worker, for example in certain medical interactions (Williamson et al., 2014). Prior research (Mikolon et al., 2021) shows that—especially in the case of dirty workers in client-facing occupations, whose job performance involves the clients and heavily depends on their approval—some well-known coping techniques can inadvertently intensify workers' experience of stigma. Therefore, by knowing who the clients of dirty work are and the extent of their involvement in work, researchers may anticipate how effective different forms of the stigma management tactics are likely to be (Mikolon et al., 2021).

Secondly, the inclusion of clients in studies of dirty work may result in hearing the accounts of more appreciative clients. Such accounts may help reposition some jobs as important, beneficial, and valuable regardless of the professional status of an occupation (Clarke & Ravenswood,

2019, p. 88), providing external validation for workers' self-image. Moreover, people's willingness to work in dirty jobs may be increased by how they interpret clients' discourses about the work. For example, Manchha et al. (2022) observed that the increased recruitment of healthcare staff in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic may have been connected to perceptive shifts of healthcare workers in the society—from dirty work to frontline-heroes, almost overnight. Including a relational understanding of dirty work may also serve to illustrate how it is that the behaviour of clients may actually make the work physically dangerous (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021). In this manner, it may be possible to cause clients to change their hazard-causing behaviours towards the workers, leading to improvements in workers' physical well-being. Therefore, studies of interactions between dirty workers and clients can provide greater insight into how work becomes dirty (Glerum, 2021) and, potentially, the understandings they generate can then serve to alter the degree of taint that clients ascribe to dirty jobs (Mikolon et al., 2021).

In recognition of the potential theoretical advances and practical gains of moving away from studying workers' inward-facing cognitive stigma management tactics alone, to their analysis in the context of workers' interactions with their clients (Chow & Calvard, 2021; Malvini Redden & Scarduzio, 2018; Mikolon et al., 2021; Neal, 2018), this article reviews the current portrayal of worker-client relations in the dirty work literature. Denscombe suggests that where previous research highlights 'what needs to be known' (2014, p. 181), systematic reviews are a suitable way of investigating these gaps. Therefore, we systematically studied pertinent literature in management and organization studies, sociology, psychology and healthcare. To establish how worker-client relations are conceptualized in the dirty work literature we were guided by two research questions: 'Who are the clients in dirty work?' and 'What are the contributions of clients in workers' experience of dirty work?'. In the next section we explain how we conducted our systematic literature review. In the subsequent section we formulate answers to our research questions and formulate a model to illustrate our conceptualization of worker-client relationality. We then discuss our findings, highlight directions for future research, and reflect on the limitations of the systematic review process in terms of theorizing dirty work. Finally, we conclude by summarizing our contributions to dirty work research.

METHODOLOGY

To reduce the risk of research bias associated with purely narrative literature reviews, in our systematic review (Tranfield et al., 2003) we followed the steps outlined by Alexander et al. (2014), clearly delineating the criteria for identifying, evaluating and selecting dirty work studies for the analysis.

The first step involved a methodical literature search. Having consulted a subject librarian, we defined and recorded the search protocol, established search strings, and refined inclusion and exclusion criteria. We restricted our search to English language publications—our working language—and looked for the presence of the term 'dirty work' in the abstract. The period for the review was 1 January 1999 to 30 June 2022. Although earlier studies of dirty work exist (several of which helped contextualize our review, for example Gold (1952), Emerson and Pollner (1976) and Strong (1980)), 1999 marked the emergence of a larger body of dirty work research. We performed our search within management and organization studies, as well as sociology, psychology and healthcare using five literature databases (Web of Science, Business Source Complete, CINAHL via EBSCO, Sociological Abstracts via Proquest, APA PsycInfo), which returned 539 items. These references were put into the referencing software Zotero. The removal of 258 duplicates left us with 281 records, which we exported into Microsoft Excel.

The first screening criterion was looking for journal articles reporting empirical research. This decision was underpinned by Edling and Rydgren's (2016) argument that theorizing in social science is best driven by research that seeks to answer empirical questions rather than by methodological and theoretical interests. Guided by scholars who argued that the role of the client in dirty work research needed theorisation (Chow & Calvard, 2021; Mikolon et al., 2021), we felt that empirical research published in academic journals was, therefore, most suitable. Thus, we removed 19 dissertations, nine books or book chapters, six book reviews, 46 non-empirical journal articles (literature reviews, introductions to special issues, and conceptual papers) and three other publications (call for book review, newspaper article, and call to enter a competition). The remaining 198 articles were then assessed for eligibility (Page et al., 2021) in the full text review, using two further exclusion criteria.

The application of the second exclusion criterion—semantic relevance—removed articles which did not use dirty work as a key analytical lens. Using the third exclusion criterion—the articles' relevance to worker-client relations—involved removing articles that either made no mention of the word 'client' (or its synonyms, see Appendix 1), or mentioned clients in passing but without considering their contribution into workers' experience of dirty work. In case of doubt, the articles were re-read by both authors and discussed to reach a consensus (Anne-Marie et al., 2017). This left us with 65 relevant papers (marked with an asterisk in a reference list). Figure 1 shows the detailed
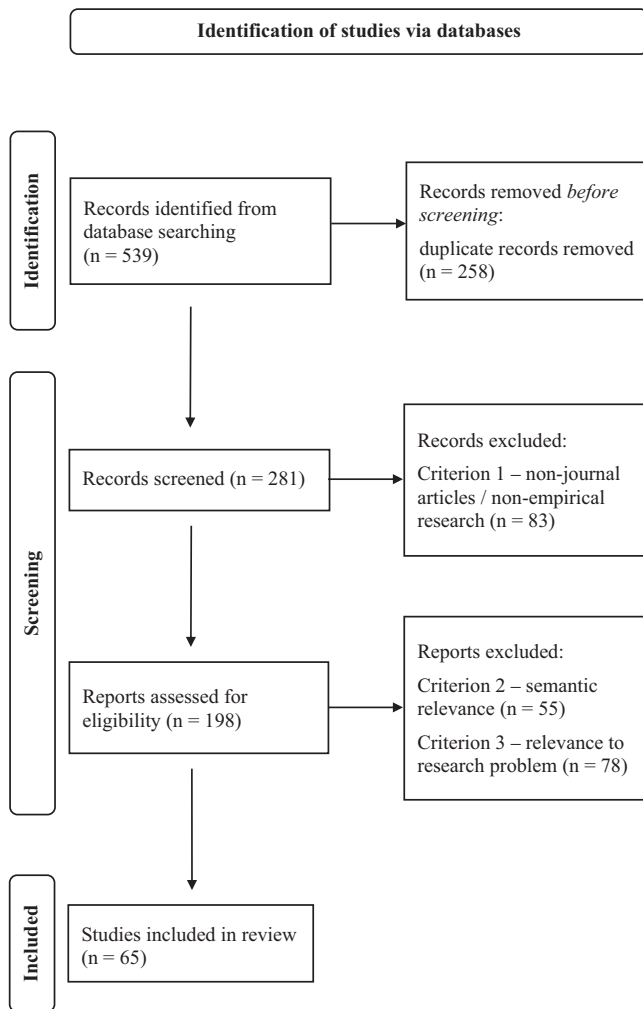
Identification of studies via databases

FIGURE 1 Flowchart of the systematic search process.

flowchart of the screening process.

Following others (Brown, 2015), the articles were analysed systematically to organize their reported empirical findings into patterns (Denscombe, 2014). First, the articles were read by both authors, with extensive notes taken in Excel. Regular discussions helped the authors organize their notes into sets of findings through a thematic inductive analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). We started by categorizing passages of text that referred to clients, first using in vivo codes or our own terms, and then grouping them into the themes that emerged from iterating between the data and the dirty work literature. The process led to the three-fold categorization of the dirty work client, the delineation of communicative and corporeal dirty relationality between workers and clients, and the conceptualization of the worker-client relations with a focus on clients' contribution to workers' experience of dirty work. Inspired by other scholars working with systematic reviews (Mosonyi et al., 2020; Mountford & Cai, 2022), we recorded our data

in Appendix 2, which lists the themes identified and their source articles.

WORKER-CLIENT RELATIONS: A MISSING PUZZLE IN DIRTY WORK RESEARCH

We start by outlining the likely reasons for the oversight of worker-client relations noted by scholars (see Malvini Redden & Scarduzio, 2018; Mikolon et al., 2021; Neal, 2018). From the 143 articles that remained after the application of exclusion criteria 1 and 2, we excluded 78 for lack of attention to worker-client relations (criterion 3). In the remaining 65 articles, many paid only some analytical attention to the clients. For example, even in the case of ethnographic healthcare studies, where patients are inevitably involved in data generation, the findings focus almost solely on the workers' perspective (see, e.g. Twigg, 2000) and on workers' (inner) worlds. Explaining the reasons for this oversight necessitated making explicit the dominant assumptions about researching dirty work, which emerged by also reading the publications we excluded.

One reason for the under-exploration of worker-client relations is that dirty work has mostly been studied on an occupational level. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and Ashforth et al. (2007) set the tone for much ensuing research that centred around the identity work of members of dirty occupations and their social construction of work meanings, seldom including clients in these deliberations because of their supposed disavowal and denial of social affirmation to workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). For example, Ashforth et al. (2007) had not asked workers about their relations with their clients when studying their strategies for normalizing dirty work (p. 162). Instead, and connected with the social identity theory (SIT) that has dominated the field (see, Makkawy & Scott, 2017; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022), most focus has been on workers' membership of a collective that provides individuals with intrinsic values that help them develop a conception of the self (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Baran et al., 2012; Bosmans et al., 2016; Lai & Lam, 2012). As observed by Baran et al. (2012), belonging to a distinct social group, such as a work organization, influences how people think of themselves at work (i.e. their occupational identity), which, in turn, becomes part of who they think they are (i.e. their social identity). As such, most scholars have formulated dirty work research in terms of understanding how undesirable tasks threaten workers' identity, as well as how workers seek to respond by discursively enhancing their self-image (Wolkowitz, 2007), often utilizing their membership of occupational cultures when formulating

coping strategies. In short, dirty work scholarship has been driven by a tendency to study the *worker*, and not necessarily the *work*, thereby implicitly relegating the role played by the client to the background. Thus, the dominance of SIT within dirty work literature offers one possible explanation to the apparent oversight of worker-client relations (even despite the recent theoretical expansion of SIT[1]). However, in excluding clients from analysis, the literature also symbolically cleanses them of the dirt, meaning it is the worker who comes to bear the stigma of dirty work. Thus, in focusing attention on one side of the worker-client relation, dirty work research is somewhat implicated in discursively reproducing the tainted status of the worker (Mikolon et al., 2021), a process we refer to as the 'politics of dirty work research'.

In addition, recent work suggests that there are limitations to the power of inward-facing SIT-based theoretical explanations (Mikolon et al., 2021; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). Firstly, in some dirty jobs the degree of stigma that workers experience is a function of the extent of their contact with the client. For example, in sex work, 'evaluations of relative stigma are made based on … the proximity of the sex worker's body to the client' (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022, p. 527). Similarly, Ward's (2021) study of the organization of abortion work showed that proximity to the patients' bodies and their traumatic stories, which varied among clinicians by virtue of their medical roles and their agency, influenced the degree of physical, moral and emotional taint they were prepared or expected to experience. Secondly, SIT overlooks that clients may also get tainted in the process of benefitting from the work. For example, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014b) claim that in morally dirty work clients, too, become stained by the service, ashamed of the dirty patronage of blemished individuals. We are reminded, here, of Neal's (2018) understanding of the 'dirty customer', signifying the extent to which the client must be considered an inherent part of the analysis of the relationship between workers, their work and the moral systems that define what society sees as good/acceptable or bad/unacceptable. If dirty clients perceive the work as morally bad or unacceptable, they are likely to withhold any positive judgements, inadvertently intensifying workers' experience of stigma and reinforcing taint. Considering worker-client dynamics can therefore provide fascinating insights into the processes of stigmatisation. On the contrary, neglecting them runs the risk of a solipsistic blind spot, excluding understanding of how

clients' experience may go some way to explain that of workers. Additionally, a consideration of the worker-client relationship will begin to redress an unintended consequence of much of the current literature: that through making the worker dirty we keep the client clean. To this end, we argue for a conceptualisation of the client within the performance of dirty work.

CATEGORIES OF DIRTY WORK CLIENTS

Empirical attention to worker-client relations may, in some instances, be hampered by the heterogeneity of the 'dirty work client' category. One challenge here relates to the changeable status that workers can discursively accord to their clients. For example, Zulfiqar and Prasad (2022) point to cleaners in Pakistan referring to their 'employers', while Sadl (2014) writes about household members interchangeably named by cleaners as 'employers' and 'clients'. Specifying the position of the client in the work relation captures their hierarchical distance to the worker and the temporal-spatial proximity between the two groups of actors. In contrast, the lack of clarity in this regard may partially explain under-theorization of worker-client relations in dirty work. To encourage future investigation in this area, in this section we synthesize the depiction of clients in the dirty work scholarship and delineate three client categories, offering definitions and examples for each.

Occluded clients

The first category of dirty work clients relates to how the client may be hidden, or *occluded*, from dirty work relations. Sometimes the time that passes between the workers doing the work and the clients receiving and/or benefiting from it is long and there are many intermediary actors involved. This temporal and spatial distance between worker and client may lead to the disengagement of the beneficiaries of the work from its performance, so that neither workers, nor clients, think of beneficiaries as clients.

Dirty workers often contain the dirt of their work, meaning clients might not even be aware of the work until its underperformance disturbs the functioning of the community. The work of sanitation workers and street cleaners offers relevant examples (Deguchi & Chie, 2020; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Mahalingam & Selvaraj, 2022; McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021; Mendonca et al., 2022). We, as members of the public, generate waste and dispose of it daily in public spaces, while street cleaners remove it—often without a way of identifying who the waste came from. However, we do not consciously

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[1] Scholars have integrated SIT with cognitive dissonance theories (Lai et al. 2013), conservation of resources theory (Baran et al., 2012), system justification theory (Kreiner et al., 2006), social stress approach (Bosmans et al., 2016) and expectancy-confirmation framework (Mikolon et al., 2021).

appreciate the work done for us until our pavements over-flowing with waste (Deguchi & Chie, 2020) or a flood wreaks havoc in our neighbourhood (Mahalingam et al., 2019). Similarly, when we go to hospital or visit friends or relatives being hospitalized, we may not be aware of the work of hospital guards who protect hospital spaces. In Johnston and Hodge's (2014) study, hospital guards are shown to act on nurses' orders, for example to restrain psychiatric patients who misbehave and cause danger to staff and, by extension, to other patients and visitors. Therefore, guards do something *for* the nurses by doing it *to* the patients (cf. Emerson and Pollner, 1976). Therefore, we may become aware of the work of the guards when the order of the hospital is disturbed.

Another example of occluded clients emerges in the context of abattoir work; in fact, our search returned three empirical studies of slaughterhouse work (Baran et al., 2016; Ben-Yonatan, 2022; McCabe & Hamilton, 2015), but we excluded them because of their empirical neglect of worker-client relations. As Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) observed, most of us would agree there is something morally wrong about the killing of innocent animals. Many people eat meat, but very few would want to participate in the process of 'getting the animal onto our plates'. In commercial meat production long supply chains may absorb this process–vets that certify the quality of the meat, organizations that buy and package it up, delivery companies who supply meat to shops, and even delivery drivers who supply it to our homes. We may see ourselves as clients of butchers or meat counters in supermarkets, but not of abattoir workers. Moreover, workers also do not necessarily see the end beneficiaries as their clients, instead referring to meat-eaters as 'the public' (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990). They know they play a crucial role is supplying meat for consumption in households, but they do not know *which* households specifically.

In these examples, the client of dirty work appears absent from the worker-client relation (and therefore frequently excluded from literature examining this work). Clients can be occluded from the relationship through temporal and physical distance that creates a sense of anonymity in their relationality to the workers. This anonymity is further reinforced through good execution of the work that then shows in the correct functioning of society. Indeed, it might be argued that the effective performance of this work is actually predicated on the occlusion of its beneficiary.

Removed clients

Often the beneficiaries of dirty work are visibly present in the working relationship, yet still minimally engaged in, or *removed* from, the performance of work. Removed clients can be seen in the work of refuse collectors and domestic or office cleaners (Hughes et al., 2017; McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021; Mendonca et al., 2022; Sadl, 2014; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). The distinction between occluded and removed clients is, perhaps, clearest when comparing the work of street cleaners and refuse collectors. The labour of these workers may share a degree of commonality; however, the street cleaner is responsible for removing the dirt generated by the *anonymous public* from *public space*, while the refuse collector commonly removes the dirt from *private space* of specific households. The client of the refuse collector is, therefore, more easily identifiable as the owner of the property, and would therefore be considered removed—rather than occluded—from the performance of the work. Another example of this type of dirty work is the security industry, where workers' activities may be focused on protecting clients' properties and therefore keeping the clients away from dirt (Hansen Löfstrand et al., 2016) even though the clients are not always physically at the property. Yet another one is morticians (Batista & Codo, 2018); here, the literature refers to dirty work clients as family members of the deceased, with morticians performing most of the physically demanding parts of their jobs without the family's involvement, at the same time considering the emotional needs of the bereaved. In the instances of dirty work featuring removed clients the basis of the worker-client relationship is the abnegation of dirt by the latter and its acceptance by the former.

Immediate clients

Finally, many types of dirty work involve direct interpersonal interactions with clients (face-to-face or online) on which the very work depends. The distinction between removed and *immediate* clients is visible in the example of morticians and funeral directors (Batista & Codo, 2018). Morticians prepare the deceased for burial and do not meet the bereaved; here, clients are removed. Funeral directors (Jordan et al., 2019), by contrast, encounter the bereaved in-person because the key role of the work involves conducting the funeral in the presence of the family, meaning the same clients may become immediate. It is common that customer service jobs feature immediate clients. Examples here include customers in retail and hospitality settings, like buyers or browsers in fashion stores (Mikolon et al., 2021) or sex shops (Tyler, 2011); diners in fast food restaurants (Woodhall-Melnik, 2018); or holidaymakers and cruise guests, who benefit from the fun organized by holiday reps and ship personnel (Guerrier & Adib, 2003; Harris & Pressey, 2021). Frequently, in the case of these jobs, the immediacy of the client is signalled by

the focus on customer service, as in the work of bankers (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022), consultants (Bouwmeester et al., 2021), hairdressers (Harness, 2022), or homeless shelter personnel (Torelli & Puddephatt, 2021). *Immediate* clients are clients who are involved in the performance of dirty work.

The research we have reviewed shows that this final category of clients may also include people intimately involved in the conduct of the work: care recipients in community eldercare programs (Flensborg Jensen, 2017; Hansen, 2016; Chia, 2020; Stacey, 2005; Yu, 2018); clients of prostitutes or other types of sex workers (Neal, 2018; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022; Wolfe et al., 2018); patients in medical care settings (Godin, 2000; Roitenberg, 2020; Solimeo et al., 2017; Ward, 2021; Williamson et al., 2014), prisoners being re-socialized (Mikkelsen, 2021) and family members cared for within their families (Brittain & Shaw, 2007). It is not intuitive to call the recipients of such care 'clients', nor the people who do care work as 'dirty'. However, the literature has clearly referred to patients as clients, and carers as dirty workers, especially when the work involves older persons requiring domiciliary care (Stacey, 2005; Wibberley, 2013); care in residential homes (Twigg, 2000); proximity to bodily fluids (Bolton, 2005); coercive actions towards patients (Morriss, 2016). This pattern also extends to medical situations where patients do not fit within the doctors' medical schema, thus challenging the status of a professional (Rexvid et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2014; see also Emmerson and Pollner, 1972; Strong, 1980). In such settings, *immediate clients* are implicated in the co-construction of dirt. Without these clients, there would be no dirty work to perform.

DIRTY RELATIONALITY: CLIENTS AS A SOURCE OF DIRT AND STIGMA

In the case of immediate clients, it is the clients' physical bodies and social behaviours which are the essence of dirty work. Most research has explained stigmatisation from immediate clients mainly with a focus on courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963)—a mark of disgrace that the ever-watchful public associate with a person who works in proximity to populations outside of the societal norm (e.g., Ostaszkiewicz et al., 2016; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tyler, 2011). What has received less explicit analytical attention is the specific relational mechanisms of dirty interaction for the transfer of (courtesy) stigma; for example, in situations where clients' actions—whether by choice or circumstance—are their starting position vis-à-vis the worker. What we call here 'dirty relationality' is emergent within the space of immediate client-facing interactions. The literature shows that this 'dirty' kind of

interaction can be corporeal, as in the case of care work (Ostaszkiewicz et al., 2016; Stacey, 2005; Twigg, 2000) or sex work (Mavin & Grandy, 2013); or communicative—either face-to-face and technologically mediated—as in the case of bank work (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022), consultancy services (Bouwmeester et al., 2021), sex crime investigators (Spencer et al., 2019), or the Samaritans (McMurray & Ward, 2014). Indeed, in some cases it may be both communicative and corporeal, as in the case of holiday reps who care for holiday makers minds and bodies (Guerrier & Adib, 2003), or sex shop customers marked by their 'consumption stigma' (Tyler, 2011). The distinguishing feature here is workers' visceral emotion of disgust (Twigg, 2000) towards clients' bodily excretions or behaviours. Workers may wish to conceal disgust on professional or emotional grounds but may find it difficult to do (Ostaszkiewicz et al., 2016).

Communicative dirty interactions

Dirty relationality can emerge from contact with clients, whose proximity to illegal or immoral behaviour, or unrealistic expectations, may provoke negative feelings within the worker. One example comes from McMurray and Ward's (2014) study of Samaritans volunteers, who felt anger as a result of callers' confessions to thinking about or having committed illegal and morally repulsive acts of paedophilia. Another one is from Spencer et al. (2019), who focus on the work of sex crime investigators. Whilst those charged with investigating crimes routinely feel sickened at having to interact with the perpetrators of these crimes, shockingly they also sometimes direct negative feelings towards the victims (i.e. those who are ostensibly their clients). This manifests in displaying cynicism which 'has the effect of making some victims harder to "believe"' (Spencer et al., 2019, p. 157). Here we can simultaneously see both the desire to conceal negative emotions felt towards the client as well as the difficulty in doing so.

Corporeal dirty interactions

Regarding dirty relationality which results from interaction with clients' bodies, several studies support Torelli and Puddephatt's (2021) observation that workers in some dirty work occupations deal with matter that is literally dirty—'people, vomit and unpleasant odours' (p. 318). As they explain, caseworkers in homeless shelters:

> '… assist clients who need help with bathing, duties that involve contact with bodily fluids

… doing laundry, emptying locker cabinets full of garbage, performing first aid and CPR, and cleaning …' (p. 318)

Research suggests that, in their dirty work with the clients, many workers experience a pre-discursive, universal fear of contamination from coming into close physical contact with other people's bodies and bodily excretions, which is the essence of physically tainted jobs. As observed by Twigg (2000, p. 395), '[a]t its core, disgust relates to other people. Our capacity for self-pollution is limited; and it is other people's dirt that is of most concern'. Settings where other people's dirt may be the source of stigma include work around the 'dirty bodies' of care recipients (Hansen, 2016; Ostaszkiewicz et al., 2016; Stacey, 2005; Twigg, 2000; Yu, 2018) or the bodies and bodily excretions of sex workers' clients (Wolfe et al., 2018). To distance themselves from such dirty bodies, workers use material artefacts, like gloves or aprons, which also serve as marks of professionalism (Frost et al., 2021). The physical separation offered by these artefacts provides further symbolic separation from the stigma that the bodily dirt might represent to the workers.

CLIENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO WORKERS' EXPERIENCE OF DIRTY WORK

As the above sections showed, we, as the public, are all clients of dirty workers, wittingly or unwittingly, at various stages of our lives, and, as such, we may be the source of the stigma that makes the work dirty. However, we might be unaware of it, especially when dirty work consists of keeping us away from dirt. Our awareness of our client status is nonetheless important for workers' experience of the job (see Schein, 1997); it can shape how we perceive the occupation and act towards the workers (e.g. Mikolon et al., 2021), and how the workers then respond to manage their job experience (e.g. Frost et al., 2021). This reciprocity happens via feedback loops. Below, we detail several feedback loops that we identified, revealing the significance of clients' contribution into workers' experience of dirty jobs. The loops are mapped onto a framework presented in Figure 2, and the patterns and their directionality discussed in the sections that follow.

Clients' distancing: Relational shaping of dirty work experience

Starting with the bottom part of Figure 2 ('Clients' distancing' and 'Workers' distancing' boxes), in building a sociological repository of dirty jobs, the literature has mostly painted a picture of clients' distancing from the workers. This client distancing comes from, or feeds back to the workers on, society's stigmatizing perceptions of the work and is understood to reinforce hierarchical differences, intensify the declining work status, and reinforce the sense of stigma for the workers (Ashforth et al., 2017; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a,b). Crucially, such external negativities are 'not received in a passive and uncritical manner' by the workers (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021, p. 159). Our ensuing synthesis of the literature reveals three main themes that capture how clients can fuel workers' experience of stigma through distancing: direct rudeness, devaluing perceptions and indifference *(arrow pointing from 'Clients' distancing' towards 'Workers' distancing')*. We also show that these attitudes and behaviours cause workers to feed back to clients' distancing by seeking to protect their self-concept through symbolically moving themselves away from the clients *(arrow pointing from 'Workers' distancing' towards 'Clients' distancing')*. They do so in two ways: by setting professional boundaries to take their personal selves away from the threat, and by engaging in subversive misbehaviour towards the clients to address the distorted balance of power. Below we show how extant literature captures workers' use of one of both types of distancing mechanisms in response to all modes of clients' distancing.

Clients' direct rudeness

The theme of clients' rudeness is visible in workers' reports of clients denying them their dignity through their actions; that is, in workers' recollections of what clients actually said or did to them. Accounts of customers' arrogance, verbal abuse, or mortifying and unrealistic requests emerge from studies of immediate client-facing jobs, such as banking work (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022) or cruise tourism (Harris & Pressey, 2021). Here, the 'customer is always right' mentality underpinning much of the service industry puts workers in the subservient position to the customer, 'dirtying' the job further through unrealistic emotional demands. The management of these demands is sometimes constrained by the managerial expectation of fulfilling all customer needs. Meeting this obligation may come at a personal cost of identity conflict to the worker, for example through belittling oneself to please the customer (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022) or seeking to impress the client through always being available for them in a way that some workers describe as 'whorish' (Bouwmeester et al., 2021, pp. 421, 432). The extreme 'client first' mentality (Bouwmeester et al., 2021, pp. 421, 430) challenges the status shield of even the most prestigious occupations through accentuating the servitude-related work features
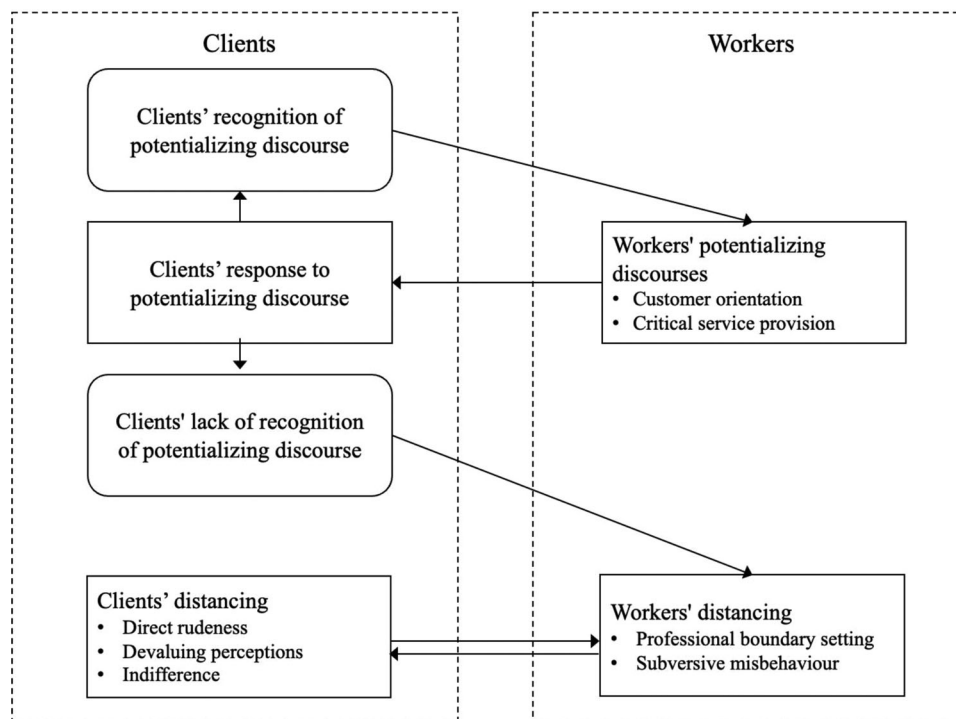
FIGURE 2   Clients' contribution to workers' experience of dirty work.

and stripping workers of authority in relation to overly demanding immediate clients (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022).

Such rudeness is also visible in the actions of removed and occluded clients, who are implicated in the symbolic re-construction of the work as dirty (Bosmans et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2019; Sadl, 2014). Hamilton et al. (2019, p. 894) show that the public held their noses away from street cleaners and called them 'thickies' and 'daft lads', denying workers their dignity through ascriptions of social taint to already physically demanding and unpleasant work. Zulfiqar and Prasad (2022) documented extreme cases of clients' verbal abuse, infantilizing and patronizing instructions, orders to eat stale food, or instances of sexual harassment and physical violence. In Sadl's (2014, p. 915) study of domestic cleaners, homeowners' children called cleaners 'servants', hitting them, or ostentatiously dropping items on the floor to intensify the physical taint of the work. The homeowners themselves retained the façade of cool friendliness, but the friendliness functioned 'as a bluff or symbolic shield', masking their 'authority, their fears, uneasiness and uncertainty about their relationship with a stigmatised person' (Sadl, 2014, p. 913).

One mechanism that enables workers to cope with rude clients is turning inward to their occupational resources to set professional boundaries. In spa tourism, workers wore uniforms to mark their professionalism, which protected their identity as health workers as opposed to sex workers (Frost et al., 2021). This enabled them to contain their

subservience to customers within the professional boundaries, while separating their personal self from the client. Holiday reps knew they were expected to be 'fun-loving', so they sought to strategically persuade holiday makers to see them as human rather than 'robots in a uniform' (Guerrier & Adib, 2003, p. 1412); but when clients complained, holiday reps took themselves out of the relationship by reverting to viewing it as an instrumental economic transaction. In studies of cleaning, workers were reported to pride themselves on their unique skills to deal with other people's dirt, especially that which the clients themselves could not cope with (Hamilton et al., 2019; Sadl, 2014). Here, the social withdrawal under professional boundary setting operates through the mechanism of reformulating and othering the client ('who, after all, is really dirty: "us" or "them?"' (Hughes et al., 2017, p. 115)).

Another coping technique when dealing with rude clients involves engaging in subversive misbehaviour at work vis-à-vis the client. Here, the literature has documented instances of workers punishing clients through overcharging them for services (Harris & Pressey, 2021), inflicting gentle pain during massages, or laughing at the customers in the backstage of the service interaction (Frost et al., 2021). Depersonalizing the interaction for immediate relief reduces the spillage of the taint onto workers' self-identities (Frost et al., 2021), while deception enables workers to regain a source of power and authority over an unsuspecting abusive client (Harris & Pressey, 2021).

Clients' devaluing perceptions

Clients can also play an indirect role in the workers' negative experiences of the job when workers suspect that clients perceive their work as problematic, resulting in the worker internalizing a feeling of inferiority (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021; van Vlijmen, 2019). This is illustrated Filteau's (2015) study, where attention is given to how itinerant energy workers relate to the residents living near the shale gas reserve they are working on. Whilst the residents are in relative physical proximity to the workers, they nevertheless remain occluded as clients because their use of the products from the refinement of hydrocarbon gas places them at several removes from the extraction work itself. Here, prominence is given to the stigma that workers 'perceive [residents] ascribe to their occupations and project onto them' (p. 1157, emphasis added); accompanied by the belief that residents believe workers to be 'oil-field trash' (p. 1157). In other words, workers' experience of stigma is derived from how they *suppose* residents to feel about them, which is conceptualized at the level of subjective social identity. Another example comes from Rivera's (2014) study of U.S. border patrol officers. Here, workers are shown to navigate the public perception regarding the enforcement of national borders as 'the big bad law enforcement' (p. 210). Clients' devaluing perceptions tend not to be described with reference to actual interactions with clients, but rather with a focus on workers internalizing societal discourses about their jobs. Crucially, this internalization is not passive or uncritical, but reflects workers' ability to process and rationalize public responses to the job. Through situating these criticisms as an inherent part of the professional job, workers can carry on with a sense of dignity and at a distance from others' negative perception (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021).

Clients' indifference

Finally, clients can contribute to workers' sense of stigma through their inactions; for example, through ignoring them. In a study of male strippers, Scull (2015) recounted that it was inattention from customers (as opposed to their inappropriate or unwanted attention) that contributed most significantly to the thinning of workers' self-concept, leading to what Scull (2015, p. 897) referred to as a 'loss of mattering'. Similarly, research into cleaning work shows that workers feel devalued when clients do not greet them in the corridor, look away from them in the street, or exclude them from the organizational consultation processes (Hamilton et al., 2019; McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2021; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; van Vlijmen, 2019). In Rabelo and Mahalingam's study, feeling socially invisi-

ble sparked cleaners' discomfort and violation, especially when people urinated in front of them:

> 'In many organizations, exposing one's genitals would be viewed as sexual harassment; yet this same behavior appears more normalized in the vocational context of building cleaning'. (2019, pp. 108−109)

For most workers, invisibility was met with sadness and resignation, and processed via emotional and physical distancing from the clients. One cleaner in Rabelo and Mahalingam's (2019) study described the material techniques used to regain power in relation to the customer— wearing headphones to create a barrier between the customers and displaying sadness to discourage clients from initiating any contact with him. Although the use of headphones and deliberate dramatization of negative emotional labour through 'pulling' sad faces are unlikely to affect the quality of the cleaning work performed, these behaviours could be interpreted as the opposite of professionalism at work and therefore may represent a form of subversive misbehaviour.

Workers' potentializing discourses: Reimagining worker-client relations

Our reading of the literature has shown that sometimes in addition to distancing from clients, workers may seek the opposite—positive discursive connections with clients (top part of Figure 2 related to potentializing discourses). What we have termed 'potentializing discourses' in our review are the discourses of customer service and critical service provision, which are based on a relating mechanism towards the beneficiaries of dirty work that gives workers a feeling of mattering to their clients (see Scull, 2015), and an enhanced self-concept as a result *(arrow pointing from 'Workers potentializing discourses' towards 'Clients' response to potentializing discourse')*. Therefore, potentializing discourses can positively reimagine worker-client relations. This, however, depends on the clients' ability and willingness to appreciate the potentializing perspective *(arrows pointing from 'Clients' response to potentializing discourse' towards 'Clients' (lack of) recognition of potentializing discourse')*. Where clients recognize the potentializing discourses, this has a positive effect on workers, further encouraging workers' use of the potentializing approach *(arrow connecting 'Clients' recognition of potentializing discourse' to 'Workers' potentializing discourses')*, but lack of this recognition may demoralize workers, causing them to seek relational distancing from clients *(arrow connecting 'Clients' lack of recognition of potentializing discourse'*

to 'Workers' distancing'). Below, we discuss each potentializing discourse separately, after which we examine what clients' recognition or lack of recognition may mean for workers' experience.

Customer service orientation

Assuming a customer service orientation can help workers manage the stigma which clients represent (Ashforth et al., 2017). Firstly, approaching clients as customers can make workers feel more comfortable about such interactions (i.e. change their perception of themselves). For example, male strippers in Scull's (2015) study enhanced their self-concept while dancing for their customers because they enjoyed the positive attention from women who appreciated their mastery and viewed them as 'sex symbols' (p. 896). Pride from providing services to high-profile clients, as well as workers' association with their prestigious organizations, can even alleviate some the dirtiness of the job for the workers (Mendonca et al., 2022). Secondly, customer service orientation can also help workers change how they view the clients. For example, carers in homeless shelters referred to users via the professional language of 'clients' or 'guests' to humanize them, thus reframing the work as noble (Torelli & Puddephatt, 2021). Thirdly, customer service orientation can potentially even change clients' perceptions of workers by confuting their stigmatizing criticisms. For example, exterminators can surprise clients (who assume they know very little) with how much they actually know (Ashforth et al., 2017). In one striking excerpt from Ashforth et al., a manager describes the customer service classes given to firefighters:

> '… when you go to the store for your groceries at night and Molly's walking into the store with her little son, hold the door. You're wearing a uniform that's representing you and your department. It's a whole big customer service thing …'. (2017, p. 1265)

Here we can again clearly see a process whereby workers who are affected by stigma from clients can mitigate it by hypothetically developing a form of worker-client relationality premised on the customer service skills towards the client, thus making sense of the indirect relationship that they have with the beneficiary of their work.

Critical service provision

Often, workers seek affirmation from their client relations through appealing to the provision of critical service—

a discourse for dirty work legitimation premised on the notion that certain jobs serve a higher-order purpose, the meeting of which lets the society function properly (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013, 2014b). Ashforth and Kreiner (2014b) argue that critical service ideology is most associated with socially and morally tainted jobs. Some emotionally tainted jobs could also fall under this label, but given that McMurray and Ward added emotional taint to the dirty work categorization only in 2014, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014b) did not have this vocabulary while working on their propositions. In this regard, the literature documents workers in socially (and emotionally) tainted jobs seeking affirmation from extolling their critical service provision. For example, Muslim healthcare professionals look after morally stigmatized patients with HIV/AIDS. Even though they were ostracized by religious groups for supposedly encouraging 'prostitution and sexual misconduct' by caring for patients (Bachleda & El Menzhi, 2018, p. 775), doctors were reminding the public of God's love for all in order to counter societal criticisms of their patients. Those teaching hair and beauty within further education derived most satisfaction from providing pastoral care to underperforming students, which could turn the lives of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds around by improving their social skills or helping them secure employment (Harness, 2022). Another example are prison guards finding meaning in rehabilitation work carried out with inmates (Mikkelsen, 2021). In Olvera's (2017) study of social service professionals working with undocumented migrant workers, the 'good people doing good things for good people' mentality enabled workers manage the stigma of illegality through emphasizing the value of helping the excluded in need.

Interestingly (contra Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b), appeals to critical service provision are also used by workers in some physically tainted jobs, which are crucial for clients' physical and psychological health and well-being. Through tapping into the 'good worker' discourse, workers derive value from knowing that without them cleaning the toilets their clients would be sick (Mendonca et al., 2022). Similarly, garbage collectors in Hamilton et al.'s (2019) study reframed their work activities as practices of care, centred on improving the environment and people's lives; as well as caring for vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly living alone without anyone to check on them. Bosmans et al. (2016) highlighted how domestic cleaners felt pride for being able to help their clients in their role as cleaning professionals, or by going beyond their role and acting as a sympathetic listener to disabled and vulnerable clients (see also Sadl, 2014). In a study of mortuary staff (Woodthorpe & Komaromy, 2013), the discourse of critical service was enacted in reframing the work with deceased individuals and for bereaved family

members as 'patient care' and 'bereavement services'. Workers took pride in making the patients look dignified and being empathetic towards grieving family members through not reacting to abusive behaviour, all the while compassionately imagining themselves in the role of a parent, sibling, or child.

Clients' response to potentializing discourses

The dirty work literature has so far said little on how workers' potentializing discourses are received by clients (for an exception, see Mikolon et al., 2021). Our review of the literature has, however, enabled us to suggest ways in which clients' recognition of potentializing discourses may help alleviate workers' sense of stigma; as well as how the lack of recognition can reinforce the negativity of dirty work and fuel relational distancing.

Importance of clients' (lack of) recognition of customer service orientation

Surprisingly little has been said regarding the significance of clients' recognition of workers' customer service skills. What has been said is often mentioned in passing, with its positive significance for workers' self-concept needing to be inferred by the reader, rather than clearly asserted by the authors. For example, Harris and Pressey's (2021) research into cruise tourism quotes customers saying how 'marvellous', 'attentive' and 'kind' the staff were. Another example comes from Neal's (2018) analysis of the respectful, compassionate discourses of sex tourists in Thailand, who morally approve of 'caring' (p. 139) sex workers. In both these examples, such unquestionable affirmations are not discussed through the lens of workers' management of self-concept, as is common in dirty work literature. There are a few studies that allude to the positive influence of clients' recognition of customer service on the worker; however, the stigma alleviating potential is often suggested by descriptions of empirical events, rather than theorized. One example comes from Tracy and Scott's study of firefighters, who are trained to provide the best customer service to 'Mrs Smith':

> 'a decidedly feminine client typically portrayed as helpless, innocent, fragile, and in serious need (and therefore very much appreciative) of firefighters' expert service'. (2006, p. 16)

One positive consequence of such training could then be a positive shift in firefighters' self-concept from an avowal from a customer treated like the said 'Mrs. Smith'. Another example comes from cleaners' reports of demand for their repeat service, which suggest client satisfaction with the job well done as a stigma alleviating mechanism (Sadl, 2014). Finally, a prominent exception that offers direct evidence of the importance of clients' service perception comes from a study of sales staff interactions with their customers (Mikolon et al., 2021). Here, the authors show that clients may, in fact, perceive workers' behaviour as immoral when they use downward social comparisons. In place of recognition of customer service, workers are discredited, with their stigma experience intensified. This can fuel the distancing described above.

Importance of clients' (lack of) recognition of critical service provision

Only some dirty workers can argue that they provide the customer with critical service that meets a higher-order purpose. Without the possibility of recourse to this potentializing discourse, workers may be left feeling devalued in their interactions with clients. For example, Tyler's (2011) study of sex shop work showed how the moral taint associated with some customers' behaviours (e.g. using toys in the shop) spills over the workers' perception of their job and the self, making them feel degraded and face romantic rejection in personal lives. Similarly, in a study by Ference (2016), negative societal representations of matatu drivers as people who break traffic laws (often under pressure from the passengers) meant drivers' access to basic life amenities, like housing, was curtailed because of the bad reputation for how they made their living. What these two jobs have in common is the lack of 'a "necessity shield", a sort of protection against stigmatization threats based on the assertion that their jobs are necessary for society' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b, p. 84). In such instances, neither the workers, nor the clients see the service as necessary and critical to a higher purpose (see also Woodhall-Melnik, 2018).

In other cases, workers could, potentially, bolster the legitimacy of their job using the critical service ideology, but clients' under-appreciation of its higher-order purpose may deny them this affirmation. For example, U.S. border patrol agents work with undocumented immigrants and narcotic smugglers (a marginalized demographic) to keep the local community safe. However, the agents saw their work as 'thankless' and felt that the public perceived their professional emotional neutrality as uncaring (Rivera, 2015, p. 210). Oil field workers also highlighted the critical service they provide, showing how residents depend upon their work: '[residents] don't realize how much petroleum is used in everyday stuff' (Filteau, 2015, p. 1159). Therefore, the work is critical to sustain a certain standard of living,

even if clients might not see it. Another example comes from Tracy and Scott's (2016) analysis of firefighters tainted by an indigent population who call them, not for their expert public service, but for their ability to respond to health care needs. Here, the clients fail to acknowledge the higher-order purpose towards firefighters' critical service; their difficult behaviour is outside the norm of what firefighters could expect. This challenges the status of the professional and degrades workers' experiences of their jobs, with workers seeking to relegate the 'dirty work' of looking after clients to other people beyond the boundaries of their occupation, such as medical workers and homeless shelters (see also Shaw, 2004; Williamson et al., 2014; Torelli & Puddephatt, 2021).

Finally, in settings where clients and workers agree that the job is necessary and provides a critical service, workers experience the alleviation of stigma and the bolstering of their legitimacy. We observed instances of mutual recognition of critical service ideology in van Vlijmen's (2019) study, where a cleaner reported a boss of the client company saying:

> 'If you do not clean this place, I cannot welcome our customers here … What he was saying was … that we need each other'. (p. 287)

Interestingly, recognition of the critical service can generate relational positivity between the two groups. The public can create emotional conditions of gratitude for the garbage collectors to help them find value in their work (Hamilton et al., 2019). One highly contemporary example comes from Deguchi and Chie's (2020) analysis of Japanese sanitation workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those normally seen as 'lower than a snake's belly' (Hamilton et al., 2019), in a global health emergency were accorded the status of critical workers and received public appreciation, manifested in people waving at them in the street and leaving them thank you notes or gifts. This example shows that the wider social context matters (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a) for clients' ability to appreciate the critical service from some dirty work on which they rely.

Ashforth and Kreiner (2014b) argue the critical service ideology provides a richer ground for identity management in socially and morally tainted jobs, something less obviously available to those working with physical taint. However, our review of the literature provides evidence to show that some physically dirty jobs can indeed be seen as 'critical'; Deguchi and Chie's (2020) sanitation workers are a prime example in this context. In other words, critical service orientation is not a question of type of taint, but of clients' appraisal of the work's criticality.

WORKER-CLIENT RELATIONS IN DIRTY WORK: WHERE ARE WE NOW, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The propensity to focus on the *worker* rather than the *work* as a relational process has meant that scholars have long under-appreciated clients' contribution to workers' experience of work and stigma. Consequently, dirty work research is implicated in the reproduction of the tainted status of the dirty worker—something we have referred to as the politics of dirty work research. This tendency is demonstrative of the assumption of 'sameness' in most scholarly conceptions of the dynamics between 'dirty worker' and 'clean client'. Through our review of 65 dirty work studies, we problematized this dominant dichotomy by developing the typology of clients; explaining ways in which clients can be a source of stigma; and conceptualizing a framework that specifies several feedback loops which shed explanatory light on how workers' experience of dirty work is a relational process shaped within the interaction between workers and clients.

In reviewing the literature on worker-client relations, we identified a range of actors on an empirical level who fall into the client category (Appendix 1). By analysing various clients through the lens of their temporal-spatial proximity to the work, we showed that clients in dirty work are not homogenous, and built a typology of occluded, removed and immediate clients. The categorization introduces a new level of theoretical nuance in studying actors in dirty work. Thus, in addition to studying physically, socially, emotionally, and morally tainted workers, we propose research into occluded, removed and immediate clients, or even studying the relational configurations across the various categories and their implications for the experience of stigma.

Our thematic analysis also proposes the communicative and corporeal mechanisms through which clients can be a source of stigma in work settings where the emergence of dirt is tied to the in-person (face-to-face or technologically mediated) interaction between the worker and the client, and an experience of disgust (Twigg, 2000) towards the client's bodies or behaviours. Thus far the literature has not theorised the stigma transfer mechanisms beyond noting the occurrence of courtesy stigma (Bachleda & El Menzhi, 2018; Olvera, 2017; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tyler, 2011), and empirically unpacking the physical and social taints of such jobs. Even less is known concerning whether occluded and removed clients are also bearers of stigma which can transfer onto the workers, and how this might occur.

Our review makes a significant contribution in the direction of studying 'reciprocal links between [workers] and

[clients]' responses' (Mikolon et al., 2021, p. 1733) for theoretical advancements in understanding dirty work. To this end, clients have an important role to play in workers' experience of the job and its stigma. For example, how we dispose of our waste can change the level of perceived dirtiness for those who cope with it. Waste placed into designated containers may be literally dirty, but is what workers normally expect. In contrast, improperly filled bins (for example, mismatched recycling, or misplaced sharps or excrement) expose workers to non-standard dangers, intensifying the stigmatising experience of 'dirt' (Hughes et al., 2017); while rude verbal remarks aggravate the unpleasantness of the job (Hamilton et al., 2019). On the contrary, a 'thank you' note left on the bin, of the kind seen during the pandemic, can make waste collectors feel valued (Deguchi & Chie, 2020) because it reaffirms to them the critical service they provide. Of course, time will show whether the status increase of frontline dirty workers will emerge as a 'silver lining' of the pandemic (Debus et al., 2021). Through an analysis of empirical regularities, we captured dirty work experience feedback loops in the framework we presented in Figure 2 to show how clients' distancing, well recognized in the literature (e.g. Glerum, 2021), may cause the workers to respond with further social distancing. The framework also shows how workers' relating to clients through potentializing discourses may cause clients to either affirm the workers, where potentializing discourses are acknowledged; or deny them the affirmation, fuelling further distancing where the discourses are not recognised.

Future research

We have shown that context matters for clients' appreciation of dirty work. If the context is shaped by a crisis, for example natural disasters (Mahalingam et al., 2019) or public health emergencies (Deguchi & Chie, 2020), then it may prompt societal re-evaluation of the fundamental importance of some dirty jobs. This is evidence that workers' experience of work is a co-construction process that involves clients (Malvini Redden & Scarduzio, 2018). However, it is not yet clear why in a crisis some clients will continue to berate the workers, while others are kind to them. The one way we will find the answer to this is through studying worker-client relations, paying attention to the wider context of their interaction.

Our framework may spur more research into the feedback loops between workers and clients. While there is some appraisal of workers' enactment and clients' appreciation of the discourse of critical service provision within the literature, there is less evidence of clients' appraisal of

workers' customer service orientation. This relative inattention can be partially explained by the fact that clients may only notice the dissatisfying absence of customer service orientation, and then further berate the workers. Moreover, it is not yet clear how workers respond when clients do not recognise their potentializing discourses. Might distancing be the workers' response in such situations?

Another important area for future research relates to the limits to workers' agency in dealing with dirty work. In this paper we have explored the importance of professional boundary setting as one coping mechanism through which workers reduce the effect of dirt on their personal self. We have also identified instances where—when such professional boundaries are not respected by clients—workers can seek work elsewhere (Sadl, 2014). However, the use of departure as a coping mechanism is not available to all, as is evidenced in studies of dirty work clients' stigmatizing references to the workers' position in the caste-system in the Global South (Mahalingam et al., 2019; Mendonca et al., 2022; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). Our review supports this contention, suggesting that the analytical priority afforded to the dirty worker does not provide a full enough account of situations where structural power imbalances mean that the worker is in a subordinate position to the client; a position from which they cannot escape using symbolic identity management techniques. Therefore, we join Zulfiqar and Prasad (2022) in calling for more dirty work research into workers' (and clients') agency in systems of inequality—something particularly important in seeking to understand dirty work in the Global South. Further to this, we invite scholars to explore theoretical alternatives to SIT, which may offer greater explanatory power when considering actors' positionality within social power structures.

Limitations

The decision to review the literature systematically inevitably had its limitations. We agree with Alvesson and Sandberg (2020) that our focus on the fields of management and organisation studies, sociology, psychology and healthcare and the temporal bound of 1999–2022 were necessarily arbitrary because 'most of what we study has no clear or absolute boundaries' (p. 1292). For example, we are aware of dirty work publications in other fields, such as political science (e.g. Mastracci, 2021), excluded from this review. Moreover, by using the search term 'dirty work', we excluded potentially meaningful publications that allude to the dirty worker-client dynamics, but do not use the dirty work label. Phenomenological nursing publications

are exemplar here (Lindahl et al., 2008, 2010). In addition, by reviewing only empirical articles, we may have overlooked other publications that contained hints as to why our focal topic may have been relatively understudied. Finally, exclusion criterion three—relating to the presence of the client within the research account—removed literature which provided a key context to our research questions. To remedy this limitation, we drew on theoretically salient literature excluded under criterion three in order to develop an assumption-based explanation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020) for why worker-client relations had been under-studied. This explanation is presented in the section which contextualizes worker-client relations as the 'missing puzzle' in dirty work research.

CONCLUSION

Through the first systematic review of worker-client relations in dirty work, this paper has made several contributions to the field of dirty work. Firstly, it has located an explanation for the relative neglect of worker-client relations in the politics of dirty work research that analytically prioritize workers over the study of work and clients. Secondly, it has clarified who the clients of dirty work are, developing a categorization of occluded, removed and immediate clients based on their temporal-spatial proximity to the work. Third, it has conceptualized both how clients can be a source of stigma through their communicative and corporeal interactions, and how clients can either reinforce or alleviate workers' experience of stigma. By unpacking the feedback loops of mutual distancing between workers and clients we provide an insight into the mechanism of social withdrawal in the relational context. We have also shown how workers use client-centred potentializing discourses of customer orientation and critical service provision to imbue their work with meaning, and how clients' appreciation of these discourses can enhance the effectiveness of these potentializing discourses.

ORCID

Anna Milena Galazka https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4376-1980
James Wallace https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7330-0114

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