

# **Abracadabra, Making the Visible Less Visible: Reducing the Effects of Stigma Through Invisible Work**

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*Dirty work involves tasks that are considered disgusting or degrading. Individuals engaged in dirty work are often stigmatized, and this stigma may negatively affect the workers' job-related attitudes. Although dirty work is often cast in a negative light, we explore an aspect of jobs that might lessen the detrimental effects of performing dirty work: invisibility. Using a sample of 329 working adults, we investigate the impact of invisibility on job satisfaction and occupational identification of marginalized dirty workers. Results indicate that performing dirty work, and being marginalized, each negatively impact job-related attitudes. In dirty occupations, relationships were weaker for employees reporting higher levels of invisibility with invisible employees reporting higher levels of occupational identification than their more visible counterparts. These findings shed new light on developing positive workplace experiences by suggesting that invisibility may be the key to reducing the stigmas associated with dirty work. Theoretical implications, directions for future research, and practical implications are discussed.*

*Keywords: dirty work, invisibility, job satisfaction, occupational identification, marginalized workers*

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is a growing body of work that focuses on (in)visibility in the workplace. Much of this work frames invisibility as a source of disadvantage that denies individuals recognition (Hatton, 2017; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). However, some have suggested that certain individuals (e.g., marginalized individuals) may desire, and even seek out a more literal form of invisibility in their jobs (Otis & Zhao, 2016; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). For example, faculty of color may use strategic invisibility as a means to avoid further stigmatization (Lollar, 2015; Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019). For the purpose of this paper, invisibility refers more directly to actually not being seen, or the perception of not being seen or ignored in the workplace. Laying low or remaining out of sight (i.e., being invisible) is a strategy some employees use to improve well-being. Although there may be other situations in which being invisible is desirable, empirical investigations of invisibility in the workplace are scarce.

Thus, there is a need for research that examines when invisibility might be beneficial (Buchanan & Settles, 2019). We look at one possible job situation where being invisible might be beneficial: dirty work.

Dirty work encompasses occupations that are considered disgusting or degrading as well as those characterized as being physically, socially, and/or morally tainted (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951, 1958). Employees of dirty occupations (i.e., dirty workers) become stigmatized through their association with dirt (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Much of the dirty work literature focuses on how individuals in dirty occupations experience and cope with the stigmas associated with dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2017; Bentein, Garcia, Guerrero, & Herrbach, 2017; Bosmans, Mousaid, De Cuyper, Hardonk, Louckx, & Vanroelen, 2016). Many of the coping strategies are dependent on strong group cultures and/or close-knit groups (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). For example, group membership (ingroup vs. outgroup) might impact an employee's ability to cope with occupational stigmas. Group membership is often based on attributes related to visible diversity such as race, ethnicity, or gender (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Chattopadhyay, George, & Lawrence, 2004). For some, being a member of the outgroup may result in perceptions of marginalization which can augment the stigmas derived from performing dirty work.

Although dirty work is often cast in a negative light, we explore an aspect of jobs that might lessen the detrimental effects of performing dirty work: invisibility. There is some existing evidence which highlights the negative impact invisible dirty work can have on employees (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Despite such evidence, we suggest that invisibility may be beneficial and even desirable to individuals performing dirty work.

We include an examination of perceived marginalization in this study. As we mentioned previously, being a member of an outgroup can result in perceptions of marginalization, which in turn can exacerbate stigmas related to dirty work. In addition, the performance of dirty work itself can result in perceptions of marginalization. So, the impact of perceived marginalization may be both related to being a member of an outgroup but also because of the dirty work itself.

Occupational identity denotes a sense of who a person is, and what they want to become, based on their occupational experience (Kielhofner, 2002). The totality of one's occupational experiences and environmental context help create an occupational identity that is used in part to define one's self. Occupational identity has been shown to contribute to more positive identities when the occupation is viewed with approval from society (Christiansen, 2004) and that occupational identity can influence one's potential to experience a more meaningful life (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Similarly, one's perceptions are influenced by job satisfaction, "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). Despite the plethora of research pertaining to organizational identity and job satisfaction, little has been done to investigate the phenomena in the context of invisible dirty work.

The goal of this study is to explore how employee perceptions of invisibility impact their perceptions of dirt. In particular, we seek to understand if being invisible improves certain job-related attitudes (occupational identification and job satisfaction) of dirty workers. Additionally, we examine the impact of perceived marginalization on occupational identity and job satisfaction in dirty jobs as well as the possibility that dirty work moderates these relationships. By investigating the effects of invisibility on the attitudes of dirty workers, our research offers several important contributions to the literature. First, we argue that some individuals desire to become and remain invisible to overcome the stigmas associated with being marginalized as well as performing dirty work. By investigating the relation between feeling invisible and performing dirty work, we develop a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the cognitive state of employees performing invisible dirty work. Second, we contribute to a better understanding of how situational factors can affect occupational identification and job satisfaction. Such knowledge increases our ability to create positive workplace experiences for employees who are often marginalized, including dirty workers and invisible workers. Finally, this study answers the call by scholars for research which tests the effects of the social environment on dirty workers (Bentein et al., 2017).

## SHOULDERING THE BURDEN OF STIGMA

### Dirty Work

Dirty work refers to jobs that are considered disgusting or degrading. As such, individuals with dirty jobs become stigmatized (Hughes, 1951) through one or more forms of taint: physical, social, and moral (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958). Physically tainted occupations are performed under “noxious or dangerous” conditions or involve working directly with dirty material (e.g., housekeeping, waste disposal). Socially tainted occupations are those that involve contact with stigmatized populations or occupations viewed as service relationships (e.g., social worker, corrections officer). Morally tainted occupations are those that society considers “sinful or dubious”. This includes occupations which use deceptive or intrusive methods to carry out essential tasks (e.g., exotic dancer, debt collector). Occupations are not limited to one form of taint. Therefore, some occupations are dirtier than others due to their association with multiple forms of taint (e.g., pawnbroker, moral and social, prostitute, physical and moral, Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

In the realm of dirty work, the taint associated with one’s job is “projected onto the workers so that they are seen to personify dirt” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 417). Dirty workers, through their association with tainted occupations, are viewed by society as members of a stigmatized outgroup (Devers, Dewitt, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2020). People are aware of the stigmas attached to their dirty jobs and these stigmas can erode one’s self-esteem and self-confidence and be detrimental to one’s positive self-image (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2017; Bentein et al., 2017; Lai, Chan, & Lam, 2013; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Schaubroeck, Lam, Lai, Lennard, Peng, & Chan, 2018). According to identity researchers, individuals strive to achieve a positive identity and they can boost their self-esteem a) through favorable comparisons between salient ingroups and outgroups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Turner, 1985) and b) by distancing themselves from nondesirable outgroups (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010).

Membership in a social category represents an identity which defines one’s attributes in terms of how one should think and behave (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Occupational identity is often referred to as, “who we are” and “what we do” as members of a particular occupation (Ashcraft 2013; Nelson & Irwin, 2014). One’s occupational choice can be a foundational component of one’s identity. Prior research suggests a positive identity is related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, contextual performance, and task performance (Karanika-Murray, Duncan, Pontes, & Griffiths, 2015; Riketta, 2005). However, employees performing dirty work often experience identity threats arising from their occupational membership (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These threats have a detrimental effect on job-related attitudes and performance. Although society may view an individual as being a member of a stigmatized occupation, the negative effects of such a classification will be less apparent if the individual does not perceive the stigma or perceives the stigma to a lesser degree than society in general. Therefore, the strength of any negative effects stemming from working in a dirty occupation will depend on the extent to which an employee perceives dirt as part of their job.

### Experienced Work Dirtiness

Work dirtiness reflects the degree to which employees perceive dirt as a feature of their jobs (Lai et al., 2013). Schaubroeck and Colleagues (2018) suggest that workers experience dirt by “doing tasks or engaging in contexts that offend the dignity of a worker” (p. 1088). Under this conceptualization, dirt can refer to physical, social, or moral dirt, or some combination of these forms of dirt. It should be noted that all jobs contain some level of dirt (Hughes, 1951), but the amount of and intensity of dirt one experiences depends on the nature of the job. Kreiner et al. (2006) suggest that jobs can be categorized based on the perceived breadth and depth of their dirtiness. *Breadth of dirtiness* refers to “the proportion of work that is dirty or to the centrality of the dirt to the occupational identity” whereas *depth of dirtiness* refers “to the intensity of dirtiness and the extent to which a worker is directly involved in the dirt” (Kreiner et al., 2006, p. 621). For example, housekeepers frequently clean toilets, empty waste bins, and handle other dirty or

disgusting items. Therefore, housekeeping is characterized as having a high depth (frequency) and a high breadth (intensity) of dirtiness. On the other hand, a maintenance worker may experience dirt at a frequency equivalent to a housekeeper, but the form of dirt is often less intense (working in high temperatures and around loud noises). Frequently engaging in dirty tasks amplifies the taint and stigma associated with the job (Baran, Rogelberg, Lopina, Allen, Spitzmüller, & Bergman, 2012). Elevated experiences of work dirtiness are likely to create dissonance about one's occupation (Schaubroeck et al., 2018) which results in attempts to distance or disidentify with the occupation (Lai et al., 2013). Further, dirty workers may struggle to feel valued, important, and worthy and are often deprived of "intrinsic rewards such as job satisfaction" (Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis, Höpfl & 2012, p. 1). Scholars suggest that dirty workers are aware of the stigmas derived from their occupational choices (Thompson, 1991; Thompson & Harred, 1992) and negative evaluations of one's work can be harmful to job-related attitudes such as occupational identification and job satisfaction (Baran et al., 2012; Reeve, Rogelberg, Spitzmüller, & DiGiacomo, 2005). Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1:** *a) Physically, b) Socially, and c) Morally dirty work is negatively related to occupational identification.*

**Hypothesis 2:** *a) Physically, b) Socially, and c) Morally dirty work is negatively related to job satisfaction.*

### **Perceived Marginalization**

We draw from research related to perceived marginalization to help explain the impact of marginalization on the relationship between dirty work and job-related attitudes. Such research has been used to discuss the impact of race, ethnicity, and gender on perceptions of ingroups and outgroups (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007). Being a minority often means being relegated to outgroup status (Kanter, 1977; Smith et al., 2019) or being marginalized. Additionally, individuals who are "numerical minorities" in their occupation are often consigned to outgroups and may also experience hypervisibility because they are different from the majority (Kanter, 1977). For example, housekeeping, as an occupation, consists predominantly of females of color. As such, minorities working as housekeepers may be more likely to experience the negative effects associated with being marginalized. Le, Johnson, and Fujimoto (2021) state, "historically marginalized employees often reported negative experiences at work, including discrimination and less supportive work environments" (p. 3). These negative experiences may include incivility, aggression, and exclusion (Issmer & Wagner, 2015; Oyet, Arnold, & Dupree, 2020). Thus, to the extent that an employee perceives they are marginalized, we expect a decrease in their job-related attitudes.

**Hypothesis 3a:** *Perceived marginalization is negatively related to occupational identification.*

**Hypothesis 3b:** *Perceived marginalization is negatively related to job satisfaction.*

### **Invisible Work**

Up to this point it has been argued that the stigmas associated with working in a dirty job and being marginalized hinder both occupational identification and job satisfaction. If stigmatization causes individuals to become less attached to and less satisfied with their jobs, then mitigating stigmatization may reduce or reverse these negative effects. We suggest invisibility as a fruitful aspect in this regard. Invisible work refers to work that is often overlooked, ignored, taken for granted, unappreciated, and/or devalued by others (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017; Poster, Crain, & Cherry, 2016). Invisibility does not necessarily relate to physically seeing someone work. Rather, being invisible may refer to a "social judgment that labels some tasks as not work" or "not understanding that [employees] are performing work" (Poster et al., 2016, p. 6). That is, work may be invisible because it is performed out of the view of others (e.g., behind the scenes or background work) or because other employees ignore the individual performing the work.

Invisibility is a source of disadvantage that spans a wide array of jobs (Hatton, 2017) and affects some groups more than others. For example, members of marginalized groups (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants, working poor) lack legitimacy, authority, and voice as a result of being invisible (Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Employees that perceive they are invisible are less likely to develop relations with others in the work environment, have fewer opportunities to conduct identity enhancing work, and are more likely to feel isolated at work. Indeed, research indicates that feeling invisible is related to several cognitive and affective outcomes including emotional exhaustion, perceived lack of respect, decreased organizational identification, and low job satisfaction (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Winesenfeld, 2012; Bentein et al., 2017; Golden & Veiga, 2005).

Although much of the literature on invisible work has been conducted in the context of dirty work, not everyone considers invisibility as a form of workplace mistreatment. Some scholars suggest that certain individuals desire and seek out invisibility in their jobs (Otis & Zhao, 2016; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) found that some invisible employees enjoyed working independently, working in quiet conditions, and not being micromanaged all day. The effects of being employed in a dirty occupation, along with perceptions of marginalization may result in negative job-related attitudes. Being invisible may shield group members from exposure to continuous reminders that they are stigmatized or working in a stigmatized occupation. Accordingly, employees may use invisibility to avoid being mistreated, stigmatized, or marginalized (Lollar, 2015; Settles et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). For example, members of marginalized groups may prefer to remain invisible as a way to cope with the negative perceptions others hold about them. For these individuals, invisibility acts as a buffer against some of the detrimental effects of stigmatized work. Therefore, we suggest that invisibility moderates the relationships described in Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

***Hypothesis 4:*** *Invisibility moderates the relationship between a) Physically, b) Socially, and c) Morally dirty work and occupational identification such that the relationship is weaker for employees who report high invisibility.*

***Hypothesis 5:*** *Invisibility moderates the relationship between a) Physically, b) Socially, and c) Morally dirty work and job satisfaction such that the relationship is weaker for employees who report high invisibility.*

***Hypothesis 6a:*** *Invisibility moderates the relationship between perceived marginalization and occupational identification such that the relationship is weaker for employees who report high invisibility.*

***Hypothesis 6b:*** *Invisibility moderates the relationship between perceived marginalization and job satisfaction such that the relationship is weaker for employees who report high invisibility.*

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Survey participants were recruited from Prolific, a data collection service similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Prolific allows researchers to screen and recruit individuals from its diverse pool of qualified participants. Participants were offered \$3.50 USD to participate and were told they had to be 18 years of age or older and currently working in the United States. While 379 participants began the survey, 19 were dropped from the survey for failing to finish the survey. After reviewing all responses, an additional 21 participants were removed based on their responses to certain questions. For example, respondents were asked to list their job near the end of the survey, respondents who indicated they were unemployed were removed from the sample. The final usable sample consists of 329 working adults (49% female). More than half of the participants (54.73%) reported working in their current job for more than three years.

## Measures

All items used a 5-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) unless otherwise noted.

### *Experienced Work Dirtiness*

Schaubroeck et al.'s (2018) 12-item experienced work dirtiness measure was used to assess respondents' experiences with dirty work. The measure consists of three 4-item subscales which measure the frequency with which respondents' experience each of the three aspects of dirt while performing their work duties. The coefficient of reliability for each of the three subscales is as follows: physical dirt ( $\alpha = .89$ ), social dirt ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and moral dirt ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Sample items include "I had to work in physically unpleasant surroundings" and "I had to behave like a servant to other people". Respondents indicated the extent to which they experienced dirt associated with their jobs using a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent).

### *Perceived Invisibility*

We are not aware of an existing scale that measures perceptions of work invisibility as most invisibility research has taken a qualitative approach. Although many agree that certain occupations (e.g., housekeeping, maintenance, childcare) are classified as invisible work (Powell & Watson, 2006; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Star & Strauss, 1999; Warhurst, 2016; Wingfield & Skeete, 2016), we sought to quantify the extent to which an individual perceives they are invisible at work. We reviewed the literature on workplace invisibility to identify potential items to assess perceived invisibility. A total of six items were selected to measure employee perceptions of being invisible at work. Sample items include "I perform many of my job functions out-of-sight from other people." and "I feel invisible when I am at work". The 6-item measure demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### *Occupational Identification*

Four items from the Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ, Cheney, 1982) were used to measure occupational identification. Items were modified to reflect one's occupation as the target of identification rather than the organization. "I identify closely with my occupation" and "I am a proud member of this occupation" are sample items ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### *Perceived Marginalization*

Four items from Issmer and Wagner (2015) were used to assess respondent perceptions of being marginalized ( $\alpha = .87$ ). The items reflect the extent to which an individual perceives society labels/considers them to be powerless or meaningless. A sample item is "For people like me, leading a normal life is made difficult".

### *Job Satisfaction*

The 3-item job satisfaction subscale of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979), was used to measure job satisfaction ( $\alpha = .86$ ). "All in all, I am satisfied with my job" is a sample item.

### *Controls*

#### *Occupational Prestige*

Occupational prestige ratings reflect societal perceptions of occupations in terms of status, power, quality of work, education, and income (Treiman, 1977). High prestige jobs provide a status shield which helps protect employees from some of the stigmas inherent with a given occupation (Ashforth et al., 2007). Thus, the stigmas associated with dirt should have a greater impact on employees working in low prestige jobs. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Survey (2018) occupational prestige ratings were included for all occupations reported in our sample. Occupational prestige ratings range from

16 (e.g., parking lot attendants and dining room/cafeteria attendants) to 80 (e.g., physicians and surgeons) with higher scores reflecting more prestigious occupations.

#### *Visible Diversity*

There are at least two reasons to include visible diversity as a control variable in this study. First, visibly diverse individuals may experience hypervisibility which increases the likelihood of being marginalized or being placed in an “outgroup” by those of the “ingroup” or majority (Kanter, 1977). Being placed in the outgroup is likely to affect occupational identification, job satisfaction, and perceived marginalization. Second, perceptions of dirt are socially constructed and subject to contextual influence. Demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnicity are thought to influence the social construction of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Therefore, visible diversity was measured using demographic characteristics of gender, race, and ethnicity.

## **RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are shown in Table 1. Of the two controls, only prestige score demonstrated significant relations to any of the main study variables. Parsimonious models are preferred in structural equation modeling (SEM; Williams, Vandenberg, & Edwards, 2009). Therefore, visible diversity was not included in subsequent analyses. SEM was used to test the hypothesized model (Figure 1). Job satisfaction and organizational identification were allowed to correlate as prior research indicates a moderate relation between the two variables (Ricketta, 2005). The hypothesized model demonstrated acceptable fit, ( $\chi^2 = 767.16$ ,  $df = 378$ ,  $p < .01$ , comparative fit index [CFI] = .92, root mean squared error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06, and standardized root mean residual [SRMR] = .05; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999). An alternative model which combined the three dimensions of dirt (physical, social, moral) into a single factor was compared to the full model. The alternative model did not improve fit ( $\chi^2 = 1408.58$ ,  $df = 641.12$ , CFI = .79, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .08,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 641.12$ ,  $\Delta df = 13$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS**

Variables	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Physical Dirt	2.70	0.98	(.89)									
2. Social Dirt	2.92	0.93	0.57**	(.82)								
3. Moral Dirt	2.47	0.70	0.38**	0.57**	(.85)							
4. Perceived Marginalization	2.20	1.13	0.17**	0.16*	0.18**	(.87)						
5. Perceived Invisibility	3.08	1.16	0.01**	-0.06	-0.02	-0.07	(.88)					
6. Occupational Identification	3.38	1.01	-0.06	-0.34**	-0.28**	-0.25**	0.20**	(.81)				
7. Job Satisfaction	3.67	1.08	-0.05	-0.24**	-0.16*	-0.29**	0.25**	0.65**	(.86)			
8. Prestige Score	47.76	22.03	-0.20**	-0.18**	-0.08	-0.11*	0.06	0.12*	0.10	(-)		
9. Race	3.58	1.03	0.01	-0.03	-0.05	0.00	-0.01	-0.03	0.10	-0.08	(-)	
10. Ethnicity	0.10	0.30	0.03	0.06	0.05	-0.03	-0.06	0.11	0.01	-0.05	-0.01	(-)
11. Gender	0.50	0.50	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.06	-0.01	0.09	-0.08	0.01	0.08	0.04

Note: N = 329. Gender was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Race was coded as 0 = American Indian or Alaska Native, 1 = Asian, 2 = Black or African American, 3 = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 4 = White, 5 = Other. Ethnicity was coded as 0 = Not Hispanic or Latino, 1 = Hispanic or Latino.

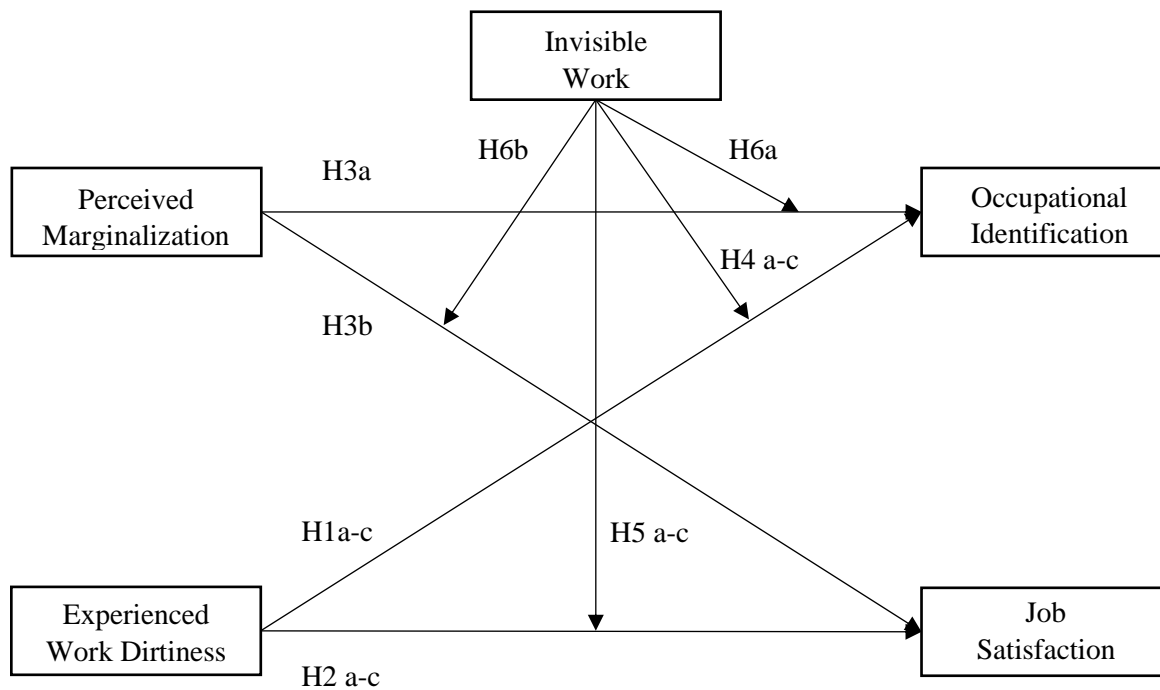
\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$



To test our hypotheses, we regressed occupational identification and job satisfaction on experienced work dirtiness, perceived marginalization, perceived invisibility, the interaction between experienced work dirtiness and perceived invisibility, and the interaction between perceived marginalization and perceived invisibility. The interacting variables were mean centered before computing the interaction term. We used SEM to compute the regressions as this allowed us to model relationships with the two dependent variables simultaneously. Results are presented in Table 2. As seen in Table 2, physical, social, and moral dirt were significantly related to occupational identification ( $b = 0.23, p < .01, b = -0.37, p < .01, b = -0.21, p < .05$ ). Physical and social dirt were significantly related to job satisfaction ( $b = 0.16, p < .05, b = -0.27, p < .01$ ) but moral dirt was not ( $b = -0.06, p = .54$ ). However, the relationships between physical dirt and both occupational identification and job satisfaction were not in the predicted directions. Therefore, Hypothesis 1b, 1c and 2b each received support. Hypothesis 1a, 2a, and 2c were not supported. Hypothesis 3a and 3b each receive support as perceived marginalization had a significant main effect on both occupational identification ( $b = -0.16, p < .01$ ) and job satisfaction ( $b = -0.25, p < .01$ ).

**FIGURE 1  
HYPOTHESIZED MODEL**



Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted that invisibility would moderate the relationships between experienced work dirtiness and both occupational identification and job satisfaction such that the relationships would be weaker for employees who report high invisibility. The direct effect of physical dirt, social dirt, and invisibility on occupational identification were qualified by significant interaction effects ( $b = -0.12, p < .05, b = 0.13, p < .05$ ). The results of the significant interactions were plotted for high and low values of invisibility (plus or minus 1 *SD* from the mean; see Figure 2). Results of simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) showed physical dirt was positively related to occupational identification for both low invisibility ( $b = .27, SE = 0.08, t = 3.26, p < .01, 95\%$  confidence interval (CI) = [.11, .44]) and high invisibility ( $b = 0.19, SE = 0.08, t = 2.45, p < .01, 95\%$  CI = [.04, .35]). Although the relationship is stronger under high invisibility, we predicted physical dirt would be negatively related to occupational identification. Social dirt was negatively related to occupational identification for both low invisibility ( $b = -0.45, SE = 0.09, t = -5.23, p < .01, 95\%$  CI = [-.62, -.28]) and high invisibility ( $b = -0.29, SE = 0.10, t = -2.88, p < .01$ ,

95% CI = [-.48, -.10]). This relationship is weaker for employees reporting high invisibility. Taken together, results indicate that Hypothesis 4b is supported while Hypothesis 4a and 4c were not supported. Hypothesis 5 is not supported as the interaction effect between dirt and invisibility was not significantly related to job satisfaction for any of the three forms of dirt (i.e., physical, social, moral).

**TABLE 2**  
**RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSES USING STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING**

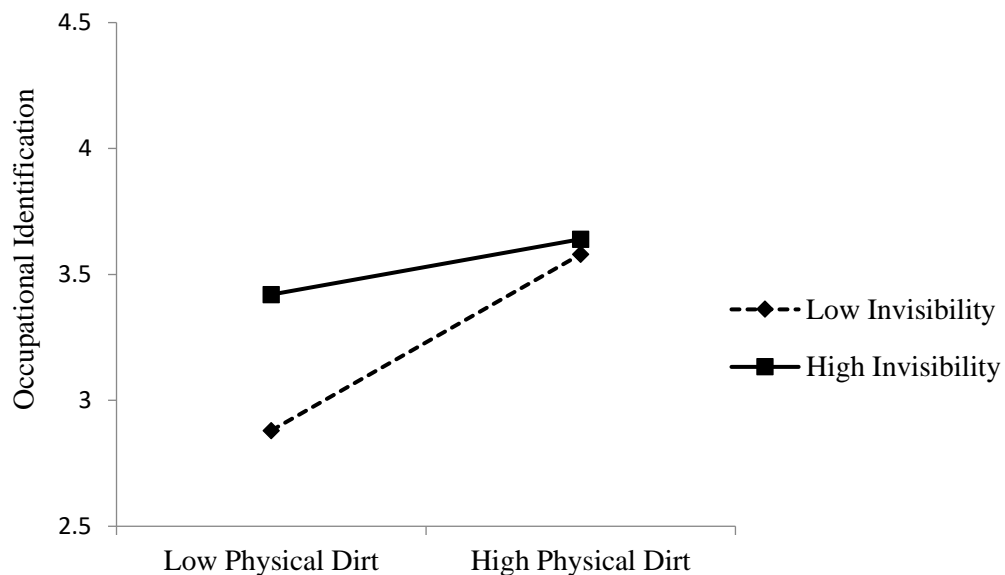
	Occupational Identification		Job Satisfaction	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Physical Dirt	0.23**	0.06	0.16*	0.07
Social Dirt	-0.37**	0.07	-0.27**	0.08
Moral Dirt	-0.21*	0.09	-0.06	0.10
Marginalization	-0.16**	0.05	-0.25**	0.05
Invisibility	0.15**	0.04	0.21**	0.05
Physical Dirt x Invisibility	-0.12*	0.06	0.02	0.07
Social Dirt x Invisibility	0.13*	0.07	0.07	0.08
Moral Dirt x Invisibility	0.00	0.07	0.06	0.08
Marginalization x Invisibility	0.11**	0.04	0.10*	0.05
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.25		.21	

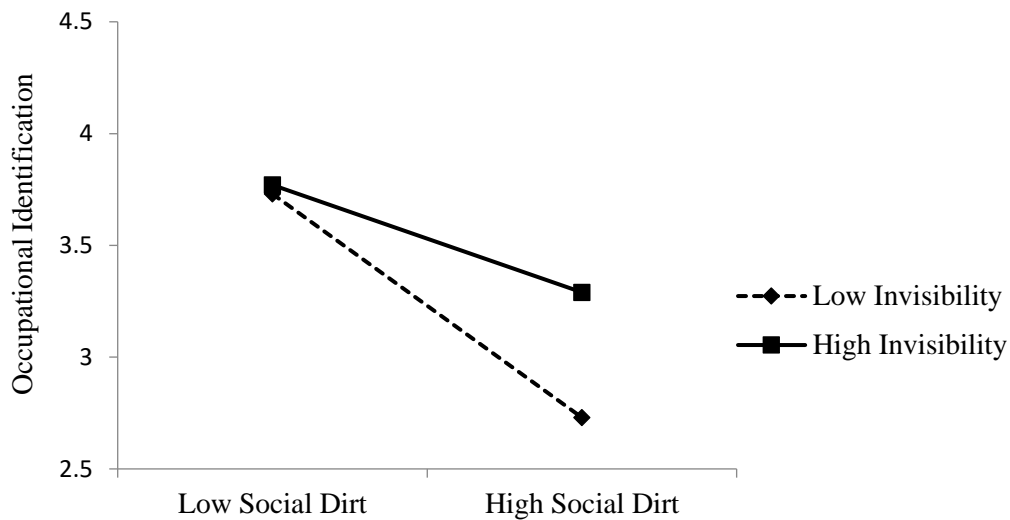
Note: N = 339.

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

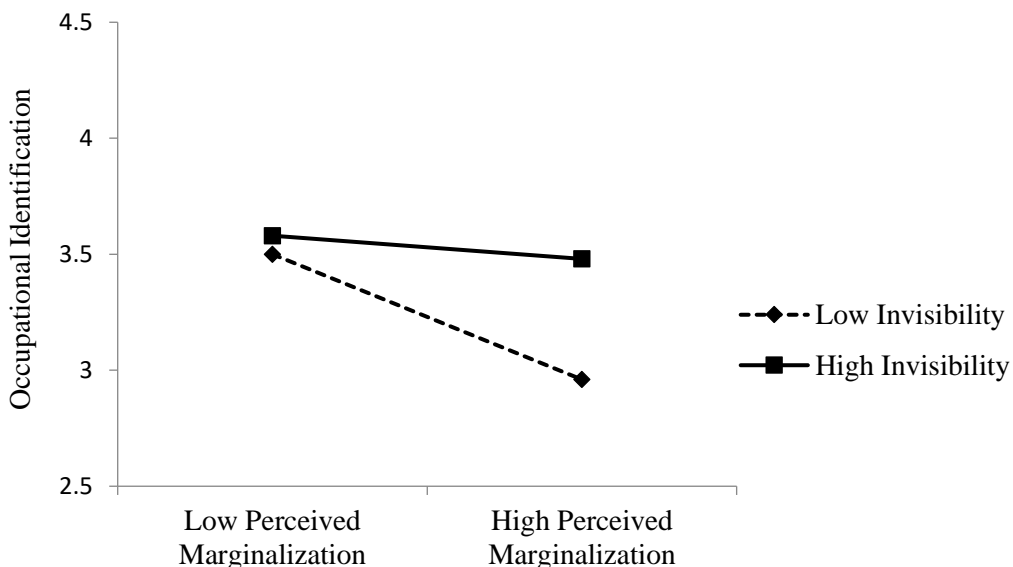
**FIGURE 2**  
**PLOTS OF THE EXPERIENCED WORK DIRTINESS X INVISIBILITY INTERACTIONS**

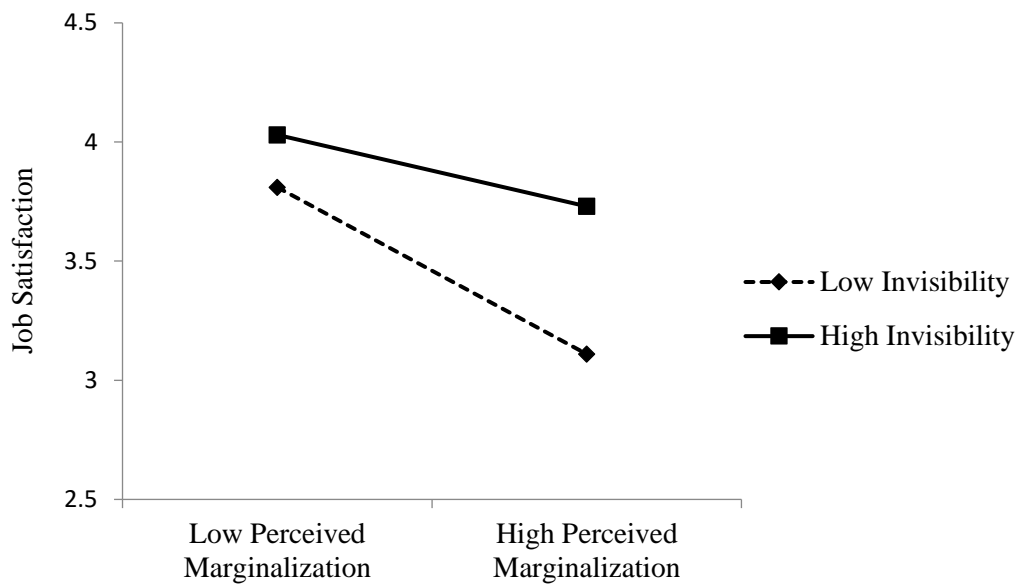




Hypothesis 6a and 6b predicted that invisibility would moderate the relationships between perceived marginalization and both occupational identification and job satisfaction such that the relationships would be weaker under high invisibility. The direct effects of marginalization and invisibility on both occupational identification ( $b = 0.11, p < .01$ ) and job satisfaction ( $b = 0.10, p < .05$ ) were qualified by significant interaction effects. The results of the interactions were plotted for high and low values of invisibility (plus or minus 1 *SD* from the mean; see Figure 3). Perceived marginalization was negatively related to occupational identification under both low invisibility ( $b = -0.26, SE = 0.06, t = -4.54, p < .01, 95\% CI = [-.38, -.15]$ ) and high invisibility ( $b = -0.09, SE = 0.06, t = -2.48, p < .05, 95\% CI = [-.19, -.01]$ ). Perceived marginalization was negatively related to job satisfaction under both low invisibility ( $b = -0.32, SE = 0.06, t = -5.10, p < .01, 95\% CI = [-.45, -.20]$ ) and high invisibility ( $b = -0.15, SE = 0.07, t = -2.41, p < .05, 95\% CI = [-.29, -.03]$ ). The relationships between perceived marginalization and both occupational identification and job satisfaction were significantly weaker for employees reporting high invisibility. Thus, Hypothesis 6a and 6b each received support.

**FIGURE 3**  
**PLOTS OF THE PERCEIVED MARGINALIZATION X INVISIBILITY INTERACTIONS**





## DISCUSSION

Our findings support the notion that working in dirty jobs is detrimental to one’s occupational identification and job satisfaction. Results suggest that social dirt is negatively related to occupational identification and job satisfaction whereas moral dirt is negatively related to occupational identification. Further, we found that being marginalized decreases occupational identification and job satisfaction. We found some support for our proposition that employees working in dirty jobs, especially those who perceived they are marginalized, prefer to be invisible. Invisible employees working in socially dirty occupations reported higher levels of occupational identification than their more visible counterparts. Thus, it appears that invisibility protects these employees from being further stigmatized.

While we predicted that physical dirt would be negatively related to occupational identification and job satisfaction, our findings paint a different picture. Unexpectedly, physical dirt was positively related to both occupational identification and job satisfaction. Further, the positive relation between physical dirt and occupational identification was stronger for employees reporting low invisibility. It may be that workers take pride in performing physically dirty work. There is some evidence which suggests that dirty workers experience pride by reframing their job in terms of “its unique physical requirements and potential for dangers” (Deery, Kolar, & Walsh, 2019, p. 12). Our results support the notion that, in some cases, physical dirt may lead to an increase in things such as pride in one’s ability to meet the requirements to perform such work (Deery et al., 2019; Simpson, Hughes, Slutskaya, & Balta, 2014; Slutskaya, Simpson, Hughes, Simpson, & Uygur, 2016). That is, for some, performing physically dirty tasks is considered a badge of honor.

As mentioned previously, social and moral dirt were negatively related to occupational identification and job satisfaction. One explanation for these findings may be that the social and moral aspects of dirty work may seem less favorable to workers. Employees may recognize that socially and morally dirty aspects work are less demanding forms dirty work that do not require the same physical and mental strength, stamina or intestinal fortitude that is needed to endure physically dirty work. Physically demanding dirty work may cause employees to feel a sense of pride because they know that they are among the few who are willing and capable of performing physically dirty work skillfully and effectively.

## **Theoretical Implications**

The core theoretical question this paper addresses is how to reduce the negative effects of stigmatization stemming from being marginalized and performing dirty work. Our study makes two contributions to the dirty work and invisibility literatures. First, our findings provide an empirical test of invisibility's role in shaping employee job-related attitudes. Specifically, it appears as though invisibility provides a buffering effect against the stigmas facing marginalized and dirty workers. This finding contributes to a better understanding of how situational factors can affect both occupational identification and job satisfaction of dirty workers. Such knowledge increases our ability to create positive workplace experiences for employees who are often marginalized (e.g., dirty workers and invisible workers).

Second, we distinguish between physical, social, and moral dirt, whereas much of the existing research on work dirtiness does not make this distinction (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). By distinguishing between different forms of dirt we are able to provide a more fine-grained view of the effects of dirty work on job-related attitudes. For example, reports on the relation between dirty work and job satisfaction are mixed with some reporting a negative relation (Baran et al., 2012; Reeve et al., 2005) and others reporting a positive relationship (Bosmans et al., 2016; Deery et al., 2019). The mixed findings may be a function of how researchers operationalize dirty work (three factor vs. one factor). As seen in this study, social dirt was negatively related to job satisfaction whereas physical dirt was positively related to job satisfaction. Relatedly, the relationship between dirt and employee outcomes may be curvilinear, which would suggest there is an optimal level of dirt. In the context of the present study, an increase in physical dirt would decrease job satisfaction up to a certain point, after which, further increases in physical dirt would increase job satisfaction. This would echo the idea that performing physically dirty tasks is considered a badge of honor (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Deery et al., 2019).

Our finding that physical dirty work is positively related to occupational identity makes an important contribution to the identity literature. This finding suggests that there is more to occupational identity than just prestige or job titles. Employees performing physical dirty work do not generally enjoy prestige or fancy titles, yet they still identify with their occupations. It is possible that physical dirty workers have created a strong culture, as suggested by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), which enables them to have stronger and more positive occupational identities. Perhaps workers in socially and morally dirty jobs have not created these strong cultures which can improve their occupational identities and job satisfaction.

## **Practical Implications**

From a practical standpoint, our results have significant implications for how organizations and managers view employees and design jobs, particularly when employees face increased risk of being stigmatized due to their job. Sadly, many of these dirty jobs will not likely experience the socialization and training needed to reframe perceptions because they are on the lower end of the spectrum of occupational roles. Therefore, it is imperative that managers be aware that the individuals performing dirty jobs face a barrage of negative stimuli, which generally does not relate to positive outcomes. This is exacerbated for members of marginalized groups (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants, working poor). Organizations and managers can help to create positive workplace experiences through work-based interventions such as increasing invisibility for certain employees.

Alternatively, for employees performing physical dirty work, creative ways of celebrating the physical demands of the work may help to increase both organizational identification and job satisfaction. Building on the internal pride physical dirty workers have for their trade, managers may be able to improve workplace perceptions by making note of some of the less favorable aspects of the job. Efforts made by management that highlight the group of physical dirty workers and their ability to handle the dirty aspects of their work may be appreciated and increase in-group cohesion.

More broadly, our findings have implications for marginalized workers that operate in the spectrum of social and moral dirty work. These marginalized workers appear to have more negative perceptions because of their marginalized status. However, our evidence suggests that the occupational identification and job satisfaction of marginalized dirty workers improves when they also report higher levels of invisibility. One

is now faced with the question, is it better to attempt to increase the degree of invisibility dirty workers feel in hopes of decreasing the negative impact of stigmas or, should management do the opposite?

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Regarding limitations, there are several issues that we would like to highlight. First, this is a cross-sectional study. Therefore, making causal inferences on the relationship between work dirtiness, perceived marginalization, occupational disidentification, and job satisfaction might be problematic. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study means all data are self-reported and collected at the same point in time. This approach raises the concern of common method variance, which might inflate the relationships observed in the study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Second, we operationalized invisibility as either performing tasks that were not easily seen by others or being ignored by others in the workplace. Invisibility may also refer to workers who are overlooked, taken for granted, unappreciated, and/or devalued by others (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017; Poster et al., 2016). The second conceptualization of invisibility is likely to be perceived as being more negative than the conceptualization used in this study. Performing work out of sight from others is not the same as being overlooked, taken for granted unappreciated, or devalued. Perceived invisibility stemming from such feelings may worsen the stigmas associated with dirty work. Further research is needed in this area to determine if there are times when such forms of invisibility result in positive impacts on job-related attitudes.

Third, we did not identify the source of perceived marginalization. There may be many factors that contribute to feeling marginalized. For example, in our study, perceptions of being marginalized may result from being invisible at work, being visibly diverse (race, gender, ethnicity), and/or performing dirty work. Additionally, certain individuals (e.g., “numerical minorities”) may experience hypervisibility because they are different from the majority (Kanter, 1977). For example, nursing, as an occupation, consists predominantly of females. Male nurses may feel excluded from the ingroup as they are marginal to the female majority (Simpson & Lewis, 2005). As such, male nurses may be more likely to experience hypervisibility in the workplace which may result in male nurses being scrutinized or marginalized. Alternatively, a female groundskeeper would likely experience high visibility in a male dominated occupation and thus feel marginalized. This raises the question of whether marginalized employees could experience more positive job-related attitudes, like physically dirty workers, if efforts were directed at recognizing and highlighting some of the dirty job aspects and skills needed to perform them. Similarly, could their reason of marginalization be turned around and celebrated for being unique to the trade? Future research exploring these questions is needed.

Finally, although multiple variables suggested to influence perceived marginalization, occupational identification, and job satisfaction were included as covariates in this study, there are likely other applicable constructs influencing these variables that were not included in our model. Thus, future research models may benefit from the addition of such variables, to assess the magnitude to which hypothesized relationships exist beyond the effects of other predictors. For example, prior positive or negative experiences working in dirty occupations could influence job-related attitudes. Whereas positive experiences may increase identification, negative experiences may decrease identification with future employment in such contexts.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to elucidate the impact of invisibility on job-related attitudes of marginalized and dirty workers. More specifically, we demonstrated how invisibility influences occupational identification and job satisfaction for marginalized and dirty workers. Our findings suggest that invisibility may be the key to reducing the stigmas associated with dirty work and to increasing both the occupational identification and job satisfaction of dirty workers. In addition, we have offered both theoretical and practical implications of this research along with ideas for future studies.

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