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# **Can dirty work be satisfying? A mixed method study of workers doing dirty jobs**

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## **Abstract**

It has been argued in this journal that sociologists can make an important contribution to the understanding of why workers report feeling satisfied with their work, particularly where job quality is poor (Brown et al., 2012). Utilising a mixed method approach, this article explores how employees derive satisfaction from dirty work. The term dirty work refers to tasks and occupations that are perceived as disgusting, distasteful or degrading. The research was conducted among workers specialising in the cleaning of abandoned social or public housing apartments in high crime areas in the UK and the USA. The study identifies a number of different mechanisms through which workers are able to make work both more satisfying and establish a sense of self-worth from the tasks they perform, even though dirt and physical taint are central to the job.

## **Keywords**

Dirty work, social relationships, task variety, work group autonomy, work satisfaction.

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## Introduction

Originally developed by the American sociologist Everett Hughes (1951, 1958) the term ‘dirty work’ refers to tasks and occupations that are distasteful, disgusting or demeaning. Hughes (1951:319) argued that dirty jobs or tasks carry a stigma or taint and, consequently, the people who perform such jobs are also stigmatised. Workers come to be seen to ‘personify’ the dirty work so much so that they become ‘literally, “dirty workers”’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413). Jobs, however, may be ‘dirty’ in different ways. Hughes (1958: 122) and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999; 2013) differentiate dirty work according to its physical, social and moral taint. Physical taint arises when members of an occupation have direct contact with dirty or toxic substances, such as grime, effluent, waste matter, bodily fluids, (e.g. garbage collectors, sanitation workers) or perform their tasks under dangerous or noxious conditions (e.g. slaughtermen, construction workers). By contrast, social taint occurs when members of an occupation have frequent contact with stigmatised people (e.g. AIDS workers, prison guards) or where workers occupy a subservient role (e.g. hotel room attendants, janitors). Finally, moral taint arises when workers perform tasks that are regarded as sinful or dubious and are thus considered to flout social norms (e.g. exotic dancers, prostitutes) or norms of civility (e.g. bill collectors, telemarketers). Jobs and occupations, of course, can be tainted on multiple dimensions such that the boundaries between the physical, social and moral dimensions of taint may be blurred.

Stigmatisation is a characteristic of dirty work. Workers employed in dirty jobs are faced with negative stereotypes of the work they do and who they are. Physical taint, in particular, appears to be closely associated with attributions of low occupational prestige. Jobs that involve physical dirt are often designated as low status and low skilled, and are seen to be carried out by groups who are deemed to be potentially inferior and less socially valuable

(Dick, 2005). There is evidence to indicate that workers are aware of the stigma that is attached to their jobs and that negative evaluations of their work can erode self-esteem and provoke a loss of self-confidence (Bergman and Chalkley, 2007; Gold, 1952; Henson, 1996; Kraus, 2010). Dirty workers consequently are confronted with the challenging task of establishing a sense of self-worth and dignity within their tainted jobs.

In the context of increased academic interest in the study of job satisfaction, particularly why workers may express satisfaction with jobs that could be construed as poor quality (Hebson et al., 2015; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005; Rose, 2003, 2005), the purpose of this article is to understand how employees make dirty work satisfying and meaningful in the face of the potentially detrimental effects of stigmatization. In doing this, we seek to respond to the call in this journal for a greater ‘understanding of *why* workers report feeling satisfied (or dissatisfied) with their jobs’ (Brown et al., 2012: 1007). It has been noted that satisfaction is not simply a function of the objective properties of the job (Kalleberg, 1977). It can also be shaped by the ways in which workers actively craft their jobs and by the meanings that they attach to their work activities (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Workers are not passive recipients of their environments (Braverman, 1974; Hodson, 1991). They seek to exercise some form of control over the nature and purpose of their jobs and to establish a positive context within which to work. Such responses can involve attempts to redesign job boundaries and secure discretion over the timing, pace and variety of work in order to obtain greater satisfaction and fulfilment from the work (Rosso et al., 2010). Satisfaction at work can also be co-constructed and occupational insiders, such as co-workers, can help to improve the daily experiences of work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2013).

In locating the study of worker satisfaction/dissatisfaction in the context of dirty work, we also seek to contribute to a better understanding of the way in which situational factors can affect job satisfaction. All too often psychological research on the attitudes of workers has downplayed the importance of context by variously controlling away or removing any consideration of a person's occupation, the precise nature of their tasks or the physical locations in which people work (Johns, 2017). However, the social and occupational context can influence people's attitudes to work, including the extent of their satisfaction with their job and the nature of the factors that determine such satisfaction (Kalleberg, 1977). A consideration of the physical, social and task attributes of the job as well as the situational influences surrounding the work serves as a useful counterpoint to the cognitive and dispositional focus of much of the research on job satisfaction (Judge and Klinger, 2008:401). Our study of dirty manual work, with its distinctive contextual attributes of physical dirt, taint and stigma, enables us to focus on the salient situational features of the work that can shape job satisfaction.

The study adopts a mixed method approach and seeks to draw upon both quantitative and qualitative research. Dirty work studies have almost exclusively used qualitative methodologies with the result that many issues have not been explored through the collection of survey data in field settings (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2013:130). By utilising both survey data and interview and observational material, as recommended by Brown et al. (2012), we hope to more clearly understand how dirty workers derive satisfaction from their work. The research was conducted among workers specialising in the cleaning and securing of abandoned, dilapidated public housing apartments in sites in both the UK and the USA. Dirt and physical taint were central to the job.

## **Can workers derive satisfaction from dirty work?**

Although dirty workers are said to internalise stigmas attached to their jobs, a number of studies reveal that some employees not only manage to maintain a positive self-image but even feel proud of their occupation. In their ethnography of English slaughtermen, Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) note that workers gain esteem through activities that emphasise strength and masculinity. Meat cutters (Meara, 1974) and morticians (Thompson, 1991) are also found to exhibit pride, satisfaction and identification with their jobs while garbage handlers report enjoyment from working outdoors and the day-to-day variety of their encounters including the ‘underside of life’ (Perry, 1998: 112-113). In exploring the question of how workers attain and maintain dignity and self-respect at work, Hodson (1991; 2001) identifies several different mechanisms through which individuals can make work more satisfying. These mechanisms include reframing the character of the job and providing it with an independent meaning, securing autonomy over the work tasks, establishing strong and meaningful co-worker relationships and creating opportunities for task variety (Hodson, 2001). We draw on these different mechanisms to understand how dirty workers respond to the distinctive challenges of their jobs and seek ways of obtaining satisfaction from their work. Within this context it is important to note that the question of satisfaction cannot be fully understood without attention to the variety of meanings that employees impute to their work (Kalleberg, 1977).

### *Reframing the meaning of work*

The construction of autonomous meaning systems at work can act to enhance feelings of self-respect and job satisfaction (Hodson, 2001). It is suggested that dirty workers develop strategies to deal with taint and to give meaning to their work. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 421) argue that individuals enact ‘systems of beliefs that provide a means for interpreting and

understanding what the occupation does and why it matters' to overcome stigma and to develop and maintain a positive social identity. One of the principal techniques of combatting attributions of dirtiness is through reframing the meaning of the work by emphasising the positive nature of the means (how the work is done) or the ends (the purpose) of the job (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2013). Reframing enables the stigmatized properties of the work to be overlooked or downplayed.

By infusing the stigma with a positive value, a dirty worker can focus on the occupational activity and its admirable qualities. Butchers may, for example, emphasise the need for stamina and strength as the means of doing their job and highlight their ability to endure the physical demands of the job (Simpson et al., 2014) while firefighters may frame their work in terms of its dangers and the possible need for acts of heroism (Tracy and Scott, 2006). Similarly, construction workers are said to identify with the rigours and physical challenges of their jobs (Hodson, 2001). The pursuit of an independent meaning to work can contribute to a feeling of job pride and enhance the sense of personal fulfilment and job satisfaction of those who perform dirty work.

### *Autonomy*

Job autonomy involves opportunities for employees or teams to make choices about the methods they use to do their work, the order in which they complete their tasks, and the criteria used to evaluate when something has been done well (Hodson, 2001: 121). Job settings that enable employees to play an active role in shaping their own work practices and procedures have been found to be more meaningful and intrinsically satisfying (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Autonomy provides employees with the scope to alter the design of jobs and the social environment in which they work.

It has been observed that some types of dirty workers, such as street cleaners and refuse collectors, have little job autonomy. Slutskaya et al. (2016:166) argue that work deemed suitable for less skilled employees frequently involves close supervision. However, such experiences are not universal. Stacey (2005) found that low-wage home-care workers often had control over their labour and exercised discretion over the timing and completion of their tasks. This autonomy was not only associated with greater job satisfaction but was also judged by the workers to be an important source of dignity in an occupation that was viewed as dirty and undervalued by the public. Where individuals have the latitude to solve problems and to make judgements about the conduct of their work they are more likely to be positive about their job roles (Simpson et al., 2014).

There is evidence to believe that work now requires greater cooperation with others to effectively complete job tasks and that cooperative behaviours are increasingly a feature of jobs regardless of occupational complexity (Wegman et al., 2018: 369). In low status occupations it can often be the work group that exerts a pivotal role in allocating and managing daily work activities. The workgroup may find better ways than individuals to protect and expand job autonomy and resist subordination to managerial demands for tighter supervision (Hodson, 2001). We therefore distinguish between individual and group-level autonomy (Langfred, 2005) and expect that both types of autonomy will be positively associated with work satisfaction.

### *Co-worker relationships*

Co-workers can act as a collective resource that individuals draw upon to enhance the satisfaction of their work. Strong co-worker relationships can assist workers to cope more effectively with their jobs and with the identity threat that stigma represents. Workgroups can



shield their members from the negative evaluations of ‘outsiders’. Stigmatised workers are said to feel better about themselves when they are around similarly stigmatised individuals (Frable et al., 1998). Hodson (2001: 47) also points out that relations with co-workers constitute an important domain for the realisation of dignity at work. Informal ties and social connections between individual workers and cooperative relations among groups of workers can offer a solidaristic defence against negative judgements and social assaults on their work by outsiders.

Co-worker relations, additionally, can serve to affirm group identities. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue that co-workers can be a source of both ‘instrumental’ and ‘affective’ support. Co-worker support can be instrumental and involve behaviour that directly helps individuals with the day-to-day demands of their work. Supportive relations can also have an affective aspect and help affirm ‘positive self images’ of workers in environments that can frequently be hostile and abusive (Hodson, 2001:201).

### *Job variety*

Like many other types of work, dirty jobs can be routinised and repetitive (Hodson, 1991). Others, however, may be more challenging and offer opportunities for task variety and latitude for independent decision-making. Where dirty jobs involve a range of tasks and require a variety of skills, employees may find the work more motivating and satisfying (Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005; Meara, 1974). It has been suggested that dirty workers actively seek to overcome the stigma of their jobs by focusing on certain redeeming qualities or enjoyable features of the work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Satisfaction may therefore be obtained from working on a job requiring a variety of different skills across a variety of different activities (Stacey, 2005). By shifting attention away from the tainted properties of

the job to those features that are enjoyable and meaningful employees can minimise the less pleasant and stigmatised characteristics of their work. We would therefore expect that greater task variety is related to higher levels of satisfaction with dirty work.

## **Method**

### *Context*

The research study was carried out in an organisation that specialised in the protection, cleaning and management of vacant properties in the UK and the USA. The company provided a method for securing vacant properties that consisted of modular sized window guards, steel doors and adjustable steel sheeting which were fitted externally over property openings. The company's biggest customers were government-owned or public housing services and most of the worksites were abandoned public or social housing apartments in high crime areas. Many units contained filthy, discarded property. Drug paraphernalia, weapons, human excrement, rodent and bug infestations, and sometimes even dead bodies would be present in the abandoned units. Workers might also encounter squatters and trespassers during their daily activities and require a police presence due to potential violence stemming from both evicted tenants and neighbours.

In respect of the nature of tasks, the units had to be cleared and cleaned before work could commence on securing them. At each job site the workers were required to move through a sequence of tasks: securing the property with steel door and window covers, clearing previous tenant and squatter possessions, washing graffiti from walls, cleaning carpet stains and scrubbing sinks and toilets. Certain sites also required attention in the garden space with cleaning and clearing of debris and landscape waste. The work context was thus one where

‘dirt ... [was] central to the image and identity of the occupation’ (Kreiner et al., 2006: 620) and was high in both the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of dirty work.

[See Appendix One: Photographs of Work Sites]

### *Sample*

The collection of data took both a quantitative and qualitative form. Surveys were distributed to a total of 424 employees (317 employees in the UK and to 107 employees in the USA). Depots in each country allocated a break during working hours to complete the questionnaire. Employees were provided with a questionnaire, an information sheet on the purpose of the study and an envelope in which to return the survey. A total of 233 completed surveys were received (155 from the UK and 78 from the USA) which represented an overall response rate of 55 per cent (49 per cent in the UK and 73 per cent in the USA). The average age of the respondents was 31.51 years ( $SD = 8.95$ ) and the average tenure with the organisation was 2.78 years ( $SD = 2.65$ ). Although extrinsic rewards are not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that pay levels were low and closely tracked the minimum wage in both the UK and USA. All the respondents were male, which tends to be a common characteristic of samples in studies of physically dirty work (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Meara, 1974; Perry, 1998). In respect of the broader labour market context the men had occupied a variety of roles immediately prior to their employment in this kind of work, including fitters, construction workers, drivers, factory workers, coffin makers and military personnel.

In addition to the survey data, the study obtained qualitative information through a series of semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation at work sites in both countries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 employees and focused on the nature and

character of the work, job satisfaction, including enjoyable and challenging features of the job, forms of work autonomy and co-worker relationships. Many of the interviews took a conversational form and were carried out on-site as employees worked on the job. All interviews and conversations were transcribed, and texts analysed to elicit key themes, including the meanings and feelings evoked by the activity of dirty work (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Given that the ‘voices’ of male manual workers are ‘rarely heard’ (Slutskaya et al. 2016: 171), the interview and conversational data allowed valuable insights into male workers’ own accounts and representations of their work experiences. These interviews and conversations were accompanied by over 90 hours of observation of the work and of the housing estates and apartment buildings, which provided an opportunity to explore group interactions and the setting and location of the work in detail. This type of observational data enabled a better understanding of the day to day practices of dirty manual work, including the sights, sounds and smell of the work. The research data were collected over a three-year period up to 2014.

The adoption of a mixed method is beneficial in several respects. Mixed method research enables triangulation, including convergence and corroboration of results and complementarity, namely the ability to clarify, enhance or illustrate the results from one method with the results from the other method (Gibson, 2017). We adopt a sequential procedure in which we seek to elaborate on and expand the findings of one method with another method. Following Barley et al. (2011: 896) ‘when our quantitative analysis pointed to relationships between variables, we turned to interview and observational data to deepen our understanding of these relationships.’ Our mixed method research is reported sequentially with quantitative analysis of the factors influencing employees’ perceptions of work satisfaction followed by detailed examination of interview and observational data.

### *Measures*

All data, except for the demographic variables, were collected using a 5-point Likert scale where 1= *strongly disagree* and 5= *strongly agree*. *Work satisfaction* was a three-item scale which measured perceptions of satisfaction and pride in the work. The items included ‘I like doing the things I do at work’ and ‘I feel a sense of pride in doing my job’ (Spector, 1997) (Alpha =.78)

*Reframing* is a technique used to change the meaning of the work by emphasising the positive attributes of either the means (how the work is done) or the ends (the purpose) of the job (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). In pretesting the reframing items in the questionnaire, we found that the workers framed their work in terms of certain positive qualities: the need for stamina and strength to manage the dangers they faced, and the skills and abilities they required to endure the physical demands of the job. We utilised four items to ascertain perceptions about the positive attributes that workers placed on their skills and capabilities to carry out the physical demands (means) of the job. Sample items included: ‘I handle unsafe situations very well’ and ‘I have the right skills and abilities for doing this [dirty] job’. The measure demonstrated construct validity, as indicated by exploratory factor analysis, and had a high reliability (Alpha=.83).

*Autonomy* provides opportunities to make choices about how to execute tasks. We measured *individual autonomy* by a three-item scale from Breugh (1989) (e.g. ‘I am free to choose the method(s) to use in carrying out my work’, Alpha=.87) and *group autonomy* through a two-item scale from Langfred (2005) (e.g. ‘My work group is allowed to decide how to go about getting the job done’, Alpha=.74). The extent to which workers experienced positive *co-*

*worker relationships* is measured with two items ‘I enjoy my co-workers’ and ‘I like the people I work with’ (Spector, 1997) (Alpha=.89).

*Job variety* has been identified in some studies as an attribute that allows workers to actively overcome the taint of dirty work (Meara, 1974; Stacey, 2005). Dirty work can therefore be experienced differently according to how varied are an individual’s tasks and daily activities. We measured the extent to which individuals believed that their dirty jobs provided them with variety and utilised two items: ‘I have the opportunity to do a number of different things’ and ‘My job has variety’ (Price and Mueller, 1986) (Alpha =.79). Two control variables were used in the study: age (age=years) and tenure (tenure=years). Research shows that both age and tenure can be associated with satisfying work (Spector, 1997). Differences in work location were also controlled for in the analysis (not shown).

## **Findings**

Information on the descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities and correlations between the variables is presented in Table 1. The findings show that the employees regard their work as satisfying ( $M=3.87$ ) with almost two-thirds of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement ‘this job is very meaningful to me’; around three-quarters – 74 per cent – agreeing with the statement ‘I feel a sense of pride in doing my work’ and 80 per cent agreeing with the statement ‘I like doing the things I do at work’. In Table 1 it can be seen that reframing ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ), individual autonomy ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ), group autonomy ( $r=.42$ ,  $p<.01$ ), co-worker relationships ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and job variety ( $r=.56$ ,  $p<.01$ ) are significantly positively related to work satisfaction. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 2 and display the standardised beta coefficients.

[TABLES 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE]

*Reframing the meaning of work*

The findings indicate that employees who reframed the work in terms of its positive attributes and identified in particular with the physical challenges of the job were likely to experience work satisfaction ( $\beta = .182, p < .01$ ). Our qualitative data provide support for the importance of this technique in rendering the dirty work less objectionable and more satisfying. In our interviews with the employees many revealed a pride in their ability to cope with the demands of the job and to deal with the unsafe work environment. Reframing the job enabled workers to identify with its physical requirements and the ever-present sense of danger. Not infrequently, workers had to confront and remove squatters from the vacant properties before they could commence cleaning. One worker from Chicago said:

‘I grew up in a project. Yeah there are a lot of bad people walking around so you need to keep an eye out. People try to intimidate you going into empty apartments but you just have to do your job and not act scared’.

Another worker emphasised the need for a certain fearlessness:

‘I think I can deal with gangs and rough stuff better than some guys because I know what’s up with them. You do have to be careful though. I carry a metal stick in my tool kit just in case’.

An employee from England boasted:

‘I’ve confronted a lot of people on worksites but I’m a pretty big fellow and no one will take me on ... I’m not scared of squatters and I will go confront them and get them out of the properties we are supposed to be securing’.

The dangerous nature of the work was used as an attribute to boost the occupational prestige of the job. Workers spoke of a pride in developing a 'skill' of assertiveness and confidence in situations that could potentially be violent. A depot manager noted that many of his workers enjoyed 'the potential danger' of the job as it made them 'feel tough and invincible'. He stated that workers were often reluctant to become supervisors because they still wanted to be 'out on the streets. They want the excitement and job satisfaction that comes with being out on site'.

Employees emphasised that they possessed unique abilities and greater fortitude than workers in other occupations. Many talked positively about the physical requirements necessary to meet the demands of the job. The installers/fitters discussed the heavy weight of the settle doors and windows and said that a person needed to be physically strong and fit to handle the work. Work was often framed in terms of admirable qualities, such as strength and endurance. A worker from England asserted: 'I know I can handle this job when a lot of people would be too weak or lazy to come in here and do the hard work'. Similarly, another employee spoke about the demands of the job: 'Placing the steel doors is very heavy, hard work...An older or out-of-shape man would probably have difficulty doing this job.'

Workers sought to boost their identity and give their job a positive value by highlighting what made them uniquely qualified and skilled to do this type of physically challenging and dangerous work.

### *Autonomy*

Autonomy was examined at both the individual and group-level due to the increasing salience of cooperative behaviours and team working in many occupations, including low status jobs. Interestingly, the findings suggested that group-level autonomy ( $\beta = .189, p < .05$ ), not



individual autonomy, was positively associated with work satisfaction. We found that many of the workers liked the fact that the job sites provided a distinct feeling of autonomy, but that frequently such feelings were expressed in relation to the exercise of team autonomy.

Workers enjoyed having their own team van assigned to them and not having a supervisor 'looking over their shoulder all day'. The nature of the work called for a degree of practical autonomy because of the wide geographical distribution of job sites. There were time limits set on particular jobs but beyond that on-site workers could work out among their teammates how the project would be completed. This feeling of group autonomy was viewed as a desirable feature of the job. According to one employee: 'This job offers us a lot of autonomy. Most days I feel like my own boss'. The work teams were provided with the necessary window guards, steel doors and industrial cleaning products but were able to exercise the agency to evaluate and divide the work tasks among themselves.

### *Co-worker relationships*

The regression analysis provides statistical evidence that those employees who enjoyed their relationship with their co-workers experienced greater work satisfaction ( $\beta=.157$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In the field study we found that co-worker satisfaction was related to the context in which the work was carried out. Workers both trusted and relied upon each other to get the job done safely. Team members appeared to play an important role in 'looking after each other' in the face of possible harassment and bodily harm. As one worker said: 'I would never go to a job alone. You need a couple of guys keeping an eye on the people in those areas'. Another worker recalled:

'We had three guys walk in a house when two of us were upstairs cleaning. We had no way out and they were harassing us and sizing up what they could get from us. They were ....looking to stir up some problems. The job was big enough that there

was another crew nearby, so we just got them over to us right away. We all look out for each other’.

A worker observed:

‘A lot of these places are drug dens. We’ve had bricks thrown at us and I’ve been shot at once. I’ve had one dangerous situation on the job when a man came up on me when I was walking to the truck. He was holding a knife real obvious and wanted me to unlock the truck I guess so he could steal stuff. I was lucky because another guy from the team came out and scared him off’.

The strong social relationships built up on the job extended beyond the work environment. Employees often spoke about socialising with each other outside of work and referred frequently to their co-workers as friends. At one depot, for example, employees regularly went bowling together. An employee commented: ‘I enjoy every minute with ... my colleagues’.

### *Job variety*

Although dealing with dirt and grime were prominent features of the job those employees who appraised the work in terms of its variety found dirty work more satisfying. In the regression analysis, job variety was associated with work satisfaction ( $\beta=.398$ ,  $p<.01$ ). This finding is mirrored in our qualitative field research, especially in the way in which workers emphasised the enjoyment they found in the variety of jobs and tasks they performed.

Although the daily assignments had similar components, there was variation in the locations and in the specific requirements of each job. An employee (from the US) remarked:

‘I like the fact that every day it’s usually a different job site which gives it some variety. It’s all the same overall kind of work but some days it’s a walk-up house. Other days it’s a CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] high rise’.

Another employee (from England) said: ‘I enjoy different tasks .... and I’m not afraid to put my mind and hands into different jobs’. There was also variety in the day-to-day experiences of the employees. A (US) worker reported that in addition to the work of cleaning and securing the vacant properties he found the ‘gross discoveries’ and ‘seeing criminal activity first hand ..... exhilarating’.

## **Discussion**

It has been argued in this journal that insufficient attention has been given to the question of why workers report satisfaction with their jobs (Brown et al. 2012: 1012). Our research seeks to understand how employees derive satisfaction from dirty work. A variety of studies have examined the nature and character of dirty work and how individuals seek to manage the taint and stigma associated with their jobs. However, to our knowledge, there has been no mixed method research, combining survey data and qualitative evidence from interviews and observations, on the factors that shape the way in which dirty workers experience satisfaction from their jobs. Such an approach is important because it enables us to consider more fully the issue of situational context, including people’s occupations, the precise nature of their tasks and the physical location of work. Drawing on the work of Hodson (2001) we propose that there are a number of different ways in which workers can make their jobs more satisfying and establish a sense of occupational self-worth and self-respect. These include reframing the nature of the work, work autonomy, supportive and solidaristic co-worker relationships and job variety.

The dirty workers in our study reported relatively high levels of work satisfaction. Indeed, almost three quarters of the workers felt a sense of pride in doing their work. We found that one of the most important devices used by employees to achieve satisfaction was through

reframing the work in terms of its unique physical requirements and potential for danger. It was noted earlier that it was not uncommon for criminal acts of robbery or physical assault to be perpetrated against the employees. Illegal squatters would often take up temporary residence in the units before they could be secured and employees were often physically threatened on the work sites. This threat of violence fostered an occupational subculture of cohesiveness and self-sufficiency which was underpinned by a shared familiarity with danger (Fitzpatrick, 1980). The dangerous nature of the job also conferred a certain honour on the work (Jermier et al., 1989; Meara, 1974). Individuals were evaluated in terms of their ability to negotiate danger which was, in turn, reflected in the values of the group. The work was portrayed as a test of strength and endurance with employees referring to the stamina required to do the job and to meet its many challenges. Workers felt pride in possessing what they regarded as greater fortitude than individuals in other (less dirty) occupations. This finding is consistent with the argument that ideologies for physically tainted work are more likely to draw on discourses of masculinity and heroism (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2013). Such discourses are believed to be an expression of resistance to the physical taint and attributions of low occupational prestige that characterise ‘physically’ dirty work (Dick, 2005). Indeed, Slutskaya et al. (2016:179) argue that physical effort and endurance in dirty, manual work may be a form of ‘oppositional personal power’ despite these workers’ relative weakness in the labour market.

There was also a sense of pride that came from jobs that were seen by employees as socially worthwhile. Workers saw themselves performing a service to the community. Many of them revealed a pride in ‘cleaning up the neighbourhood’. Their work involved removing dirt and grime (and often squatters) from abandoned properties and leaving the buildings clean, secure and ready for new tenants. Not unlike the low-wage home care workers in Stacey’s (2005)

study, the employees drew meaning from their ability to perform dirty tasks that others would not want to do, knowing that their work would improve the well-being of others. The dirty aspects of the job were therefore reframed in such a way that the work was associated with a larger purpose and more uplifting values (Hamilton, 2007).

Studies identify the importance of autonomy as both a source of purposefulness and satisfaction as well as a necessary component of working with dignity (Hodson, 2001).

Employees draw greater meaning from work when they can exercise some responsibility over the details of the work practices used to complete day-to-day tasks (Rosso et al. 2010). It provides employees with the scope to alter the design of jobs and the social environment in which they work. The creation of opportunities for group autonomy in the organisation of work can also shield workers from the stressful effects of their jobs.

Jobs considered suitable for less skilled workers often entail close supervision. Findings suggest that workers in some physically dirty jobs, such as refuse collection and street cleaning, exercise little autonomy in their work (Slutskaia et al., 2016:179). Such features of the dirty work context are not necessarily universal however. Consistent with Stacey's study of low-wage care workers, we found that dirty workers perceived relatively high levels of individual and work group autonomy. Nevertheless, only work group autonomy played a significant role in determining satisfaction with dirty work. Our field research found that workers could shape the methods and techniques they used to meet their production goals. Employees were usually assigned to teams of four people who were normally required to secure one or two locations each day. Workers were left to their own devices while on the job and teams were largely unsupervised on the site. Teams were required to meet standards for the cleaning and clearing of the properties and for the installation of steel guards within the

allocated time assigned to the job. Supervision by the depot manager took the form of a single visit to ensure that the job had been completed to a satisfactory standard thereby providing an opportunity for functional autonomy. Management maintained control over the labour process but workers could use their own judgement and exercise their will 'over such things as their work pace, the particular tasks they do and the order in which they do that work' (Friedman, 1977: 45-6). In this sense our findings are consistent with other studies of dirty work which find that job satisfaction is enhanced by local job autonomy and some control over work scheduling (Hood, 1988).

Co-worker relationships were critical to worker dignity as well as being an important source of work satisfaction. The work required teamwork and co-workers played a vital role in keeping each other safe. Team members were the primary source of protection against physical violence. Moreover, interpersonal relationships were strong off-the-job. Through socialising and developing strong friendships with their fellow workers, employees helped to shield themselves from negative stereotyping and outside judgements of their job (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). The work group provided social support and acted as a buffer against the stigma associated with the dirty work. In addition, the work group reinforced a self-estimated sentiment that the work was defensible and justifiable in terms of its larger purpose of cleaning up dirty neighbourhoods and removing unwanted squatters. Furthermore, relationships with co-workers influence the meaning of work, particularly where they provide opportunities for employees to express valued identities at work (Rosso et al. 2010). Solidaristic co-worker relationships help affirm 'positive self-images' particularly in environments that are seen to be hostile and abusive (Hodson, 2001). Our study thus suggests that consideration of group processes is a vital element of future job satisfaction research, especially the exercise of work group autonomy and support.

Finally, the quantitative analysis found that job variety was related to work satisfaction. Our research thus points to some similarities between dirty manual workers and other occupational groups. Opportunities to carry out different tasks and activities were associated with greater satisfaction with work. Varying job tasks often provide new challenges and a sense of meaningfulness at work as they augment employees' abilities and skills. When workers use a variety of skills it can modify the meaning of work and enhance perceptions of competence by providing evidence of a degree of individual mastery over the tasks. Such perceptions can promote satisfaction with the nature of the work itself (Spector, 1997). The workers in our study performed a wide range of tasks from securing the property with steel door and window covers to clearing previous tenant and squatter possessions, washing graffiti from walls and scrubbing sinks and toilets. Certain sites also required attention to the garden space with cleaning, clearing and disposal of debris and landscape waste thereby allowing some workers to widen their range of skills. Task variety has been identified as a source of satisfaction in a variety of dirty work occupations. In Perry's (1998) study of garbage workers, for example, task variety is cited as one of the most captivating aspects of the job. The unconventional nature of many dirty jobs can result in less repetitiveness, greater variety and a more congenial work climate.

## **Conclusion**

This study advances our understanding of an important sociological question, namely *why* workers report satisfaction from jobs that could be construed as poor quality. Dirty work can encompass a wide array of jobs and occupations which may be tainted in different ways. We explore work that is physically tainted through its association with grime and waste and is characterized by working conditions that are both dangerous and noxious. By identifying the different mechanisms through which job satisfaction can be derived from ostensibly poor-

quality jobs, the research extends our knowledge of how workers make sense of, and experience, their work activities. More generally, the study demonstrates the importance of situational factors and the work context in shaping job satisfaction. It shows that workers are not passive recipients of their environment. They actively seek to mould the relational and job context in ways that offer greater satisfaction from the work. A strong sense of camaraderie and social interaction both on work assignments and beyond work brings distinct rewards in the form of friendships and on-the-job support. Reframing the work in terms of its physical demands and inherent danger helps to recast the activities in a more positive light and enhances feelings of self-respect. Moreover, the emphasis on strength and masculinity can be expressive of opposition and resistance to the taint and low prestige nature of dirty manual work. At the same time, the relatively loose monitoring system enables workers to exert some degree of autonomy and control over the scheduling and performance of tasks. Finally, the variety of tasks and activities assists workers by infusing the work with a greater purpose and meaning. These workplace experiences and creative initiatives forged by the employees helps to make dirty manual work more satisfying and rewarding.



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**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations<sup>a</sup>**

| Variables                        | Items | Mean  | <i>SD</i> | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7   |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| 1. Work satisfaction             | 3     | 3.87  | .72       | (.78) |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 2. Reframing the meaning of work | 4     | 4.20  | .53       | .39   | (.83) |       |       |       |       |     |
| 3. Individual autonomy           | 3     | 3.71  | .82       | .36   | .32   | (.87) |       |       |       |     |
| 4. Group autonomy                | 2     | 3.62  | .81       | .42   | .21   | .57   | (.74) |       |       |     |
| 5. Co-worker relationships       | 2     | 4.18  | .63       | .39   | .29   | .31   | .31   | (.89) |       |     |
| 6. Task variety                  | 2     | 3.87  | .81       | .56   | .30   | .39   | .35   | .30   | (.79) |     |
| 7. Age                           | 1     | 31.54 | 9.10      | .00   | .05   | -.05  | -.15  | -.01  | .08   |     |
| 8. Tenure                        | 1     | 2.79  | 2.67      | .00   | -.01  | -.01  | -.20  | -.03  | .00   | .46 |

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 191; reliabilities are reported along the diagonal. Correlations above [.14] are significant at *p* < .05, two-tailed test. Correlations above [.19] are significant at *p* < .01, two-tailed test.

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Regression Analysis for Work Satisfaction<sup>a</sup>**

|                                | <b>Work Satisfaction<br/>β (SE)</b> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Reframing the meaning of work  | .182 (.082)**                       |
| Individual autonomy            | -.032 (.063)                        |
| Group autonomy                 | .189 (.057)*                        |
| Co-worker relationships        | .157 (.070)*                        |
| Task variety                   | .398 (.056)**                       |
| <i>Controls:</i>               |                                     |
| Age                            | -.017 (.005)                        |
| Tenure                         | .092 (.017)                         |
| <i>F</i>                       | 18.733**                            |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>          | .452**                              |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> | .427**                              |

<sup>a</sup>n=191; Standardised beta coefficients are reported; standard errors in parentheses. Model includes a statistical control for work location.

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01 (two-tailed test)

## APPENDIX ONE: PHOTOGRAPHS OF WORK SITES



