Dirty Work and the HR Profession

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the discussion on ‘dirty work’ from the occupational level of analysis to the task level. This approach highlights the social construction mechanisms involved in dirty work and provides insight to the importance of the management of taint. An example of human resource professionals is used to reveal how some roles are more highly stigmatised than others.

Keywords: Human resource management, perception, personnel psychology, socialisation

The concept of ‘dirty work’ has been in existence for 50 years using Hughes’ (1958) original components of physical, social, and moral taint but it has only recently received limited attention (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner 1999; Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss 2006; Tracy & Scott 2006). Society disowns dirty work, seeing it as necessary but repugnant, and stigmatises those who undertake this work (Hughes 1958). There is a dearth of research on stigmatisation in organisational and work settings (Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach 2008). Typically ‘dirty work’ has been examined in the context of ‘dirty occupations’ such as coal miners and abattoir workers (Ackroyd 2007). It has been acknowledged, however, that many jobs can have elements which are ‘dirty’ (Kreiner et al. 2006).

The aim of this paper is to develop the existing theoretical frameworks of dirty work to include the level of task as well as that of occupation. The occupations of human resource professional (HRP) or line manager would not be considered ordinarily as ‘dirty work’ but certain tasks within these occupations may be considered dirty, such as dismissing employees. The present paper applies the concept of dirty work to the dismissal of employees and, in so doing, examines the concept of ‘dirty’ work as one task within a multiple-task occupation. The dismissal of employees has been termed colloquially as dirty work (Dick 2005; Marks & De Meuse 2005) and is a task that commonly involves a line manager and/or a human resource professional in some capacity (e.g., Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2005).
DIRTY WORK

A Definition of Dirty Work

Dirty work was described by Hughes (1958) as work that is physically, socially, or morally tainted. More recently Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) provided specific descriptions and criteria for each of the three dimensions of physical, social, and moral taint. Physical taint occurs where the occupation involves either: i) garbage or death (e.g., janitor, exterminator, butcher, funeral director); or ii) where tasks are thought to be performed under noxious or dangerous conditions (e.g., soldier, miner, fire-fighter, farmhand). Social taint occurs with either: i) regular contact with people from groups that are perceived to be stigmatised (e.g., social worker, police detective, public defender); or ii) a servile relationship with others (e.g., shoe shiner, maid, chauffeur). Finally, moral taint occurs where either: i) the occupation is perceived to be sinful or dubious (e.g., adult-industry worker, sex worker, pawnbroker, casino manager); or ii) the worker uses methods that are deceptive, confrontational, intrusive, or defy the norms of civility (e.g., debt collector, tabloid reporter, private investigator) (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

Dirty for Whom?

The concept of dirty work is socially constructed and is based on the perceptions of individuals and society in general. The concept is based therefore not on objective standards; rather an individual, in forming their own conceptualisation of what he/she considers to be physically, socially or morally ‘dirty’, is influenced by societal perceptions and their own level of repugnance at undertaking a particular work duty. The individual may have awareness that such work is essential for the effective functioning of society (‘somebody has got to do it’) but this awareness does not necessarily alter their view of such work as being dirty (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

The social significance of work has been discussed (e.g., Tracy & Scott 2006), particularly in the context of occupational prestige, social identity, and self-esteem. Little attention has been paid, however, to the social construction of ‘dirty’, especially in variegated occupations where only some of the tasks that are undertaken could be considered to be tainted. This social construction is important
as it affects not only society’s perception of the task (and the worker’s profession) but it influences also the worker’s own evaluation of tasks – which we argue is an interactive process.

The Breadth and Depth of Dirty Work

Additional typologies of dirty work have emerged, perhaps because the three notions of taint (i.e., physical, social and moral) need extension to capture adequately the concept of dirty work. Kreiner et al. (2006) conceptualised a 2x2 matrix representing the dimensions of the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of dirt to determine the extent of occupational stigma, recognising that all jobs may contain some ‘dirty’ component. ‘Breadth refers to the proportion of work that is dirty or to the centrality of the dirt to the occupational identity – the core, distinctive, and possibly enduring characteristics that typify the line of work’ (Kreiner et al. 2006: 621). Occupations may then be characterised as having a high or low breadth of dirt. ‘Depth’ is described as ‘the intensity of dirtiness and the extent to which a worker is directly involved in the dirt’ (Kreiner et al. 2006: 621). Occupations may then be characterised as having a high or low depth of dirt. The resulting 2x2 matrix yields the following four categories for occupations: i) Pervasive stigma (high breadth and high depth) (e.g., embalmers, debt collectors); ii) Compartmentalised stigma (low breadth and high depth) (e.g., public relations officers); iii) Diluted stigma (high breadth and low depth) (e.g., auto mechanics, bartenders); and, iv) Idiosyncratic stigma (low breadth and low depth) (includes practically all other occupations not included in the other three categories) (Kreiner et al. 2006).

Social Identity and Occupational Prestige

One of the major tenets of social identity theory is the individual’s protection of self-esteem, as people generally wish to portray themselves in a positive light (Tajfel & Turner 1979; 1986). This self-concept extends to the group level which includes occupational category. Self-categorisation into social groups enables individuals to reduce the uncertainty about, and to enhance, their social identity (Chattopadhyay, George & Lawrence 2004; Haslam, Powell & Turner 2000; Turner 1982).

Those within dirty occupations have been shown to be sensitive when portraying their profession to others. In a study on gynecology nurses (Bolton 2005), some of the nurses would tell an
audience of strangers only that they are a ‘nurse’ or a ‘nurse in women’s health’ rather than a
gynecology nurse, thereby distancing themselves from dirty work. A distinction can be made,
however, between the ‘front region’ (e.g., audience of strangers, in public) where individuals are
relatively cautious and the ‘back region’ (e.g., with colleagues, at home) where they are more open
(Dick 2005). This example demonstrates the social construction of a work role (Ashforth, Kreiner &
Fugate 2000). Interpersonal dynamics may communicate to the ‘dirty worker’ the depth of dirt that is
perceived by the observer. Similarly, work colleagues may also influence the social construction of
the work role. Workers therefore respond to social construction and social processes (Sluss &
Ashforth 2007). It has been suggested that people who have undertaken dirty work may find it
difficult to gain employment in ‘cleaner’ occupations or roles, with dirty work possibly leading to
further stigmatisation, prejudice, and harassment (Bergman & Chalkley 2007). Hence dirty work can
be ‘sticky’ in career terms if the prejudice of others limits the worker’s ability to switch to a ‘clean’
occupation.

Dirty work has also been discussed in the context of occupational prestige (e.g., Ashforth &
Kreiner 1999). Researchers have attempted for several years to assign occupational prestige by
ranking occupations (e.g., Zhou 2005). It is noteworthy that some occupational groups are apparently
able to access prestige and status, even though objectively their work may be considered to be
physically, morally, or socially tainted (e.g., surgeon, dentist) whereas some other tainted work is not
considered to be prestigious (e.g., butcher, debt collector). Occupational prestige is linked to factors
such as earnings and accessibility of the profession (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

Overcoming Taint: Taint Management

There are several ways in which employees in dirty work may attempt to overcome the physical,
social, and moral taint. For example, it has been suggested that such employees can reframe,
recalibrate, or refocus (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999), identify/dis-identify with the stigmatised
occupational group (Kreiner et al. 2006), depersonalise (Tracy & Scott 2006), or have an emotional
attachment to their work (Kidder 2006).
Reframing occurs where the worker transforms the meaning attached to their work by either focusing on a positive value (e.g., funeral director assists people dealing with grief) or by neutralising the negative value of the work (e.g., butcher fulfils people’s demand for meat; Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Recalibrating occurs where the worker adjusts the standards by which the magnitude or valence of the dirty work is judged (e.g., cleaners in hospitals suggest that the hospital would not be able to function in their absence; Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Refocusing occurs where the worker shifts the centre of attention from the stigmatised features of the job to the non-stigmatised features or focuses on redeeming qualities (e.g., garbage collectors focus on the good pay and the flexible hours; Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Depersonalisation occurs where the worker distances himself/herself from clients (e.g., nurses attempt to distance themselves physically when caring for clients, exotic dancers play a role for the client whilst maintaining a vigilant boundary; Tracy & Scott 2006). Emotional attachment occurs where the worker forms a sense of belonging to the work or learns to enjoy or love the work despite the ‘dirt’ (e.g., bike messengers enjoying being outdoors; Kidder 2006).

It has been suggested that physical taint is easiest to manage, followed by social taint, whilst moral taint is considered to be the most difficult to manage (Tracy & Scott 2006). Physical taint may be managed by workers distancing themselves physically from the source of taint and dealing with disgust through humor (e.g., Ackroyd 2007). Social taint is difficult to manage because it involves working with people or clients who often have the ability to make the job difficult for the worker. Moral taint is the most difficult to manage as the worker cannot affect general attitudes of society with respect to the moral integrity and image of morally tainted occupations (Tracy & Scott 2006).

The literature has demonstrated therefore that the definition of dirty work is affected by the nature of the work itself, the perception of the worker and the ensuing dynamics of social identity and self-categorisation, and issues of prestige which incorporate the perceptions and social constructions of the wider community. The concept of dirty work will now be applied to the task of the dismissal of employees.
DIRTY WORK AND THE DISMISSAL OF EMPLOYEES

The dismissal of employees has been termed as dirty work. For instance, Dick (2005) mentioned ‘sacking’ people, or giving them bad news, as a morally dubious task and an exemplar of dirty work. Similarly, Marks and De Meuse (2005) considered ‘laying people off’ in downsizing initiatives as dirty work. We begin the application of the dirty work concept to the task of dismissing employees by discussing the extent to which this task can be considered as physically, socially, or morally tainted, applying Kreiner et al.’s (2006) matrix of the breadth and depth of dirt. We also incorporate the taint management process for the actors (line managers or HRPs) undertaking this task.

In terms of physical taint, dismissing employees may, in some circumstances, be considered as a ‘dangerous condition’. To illustrate, research on workplace violence in the United States has found an association between layoffs and physical attacks on the person who informed the individual (Denenberg & Braverman 1999).

In terms of social taint, a portion of the work of a line manager or HRP may involve dismissing employees who are not performing to required standards (e.g., via the organisation’s performance appraisal process) which may be considered as constituting ‘regular contact with people from a group that is stigmatised’.

In terms of moral taint, dismissing employees may be considered as ‘sinful’ if one thinks of the undertaking of this task as being responsible for depriving an employee and their dependants of income, and for the subsequent hardships (e.g., defaulting on mortgage repayments). Dismissal may also be considered as ‘confrontational’. To illustrate, requiring an employee to prove that their performance has been satisfactory, or requiring an employee to defend themselves against allegations of inappropriate conduct, necessitates that the line manager or HRP raises these sensitive issues with the employee.

Employing the breadth x depth dirty work matrix (Kreiner et al. 2006), the occupation of line manager or HRP may be categorised as having ‘low breadth’, as many of the tasks undertaken by individuals in these occupations would not be classified as dirty work. For example, HRPs and line managers regularly deal with issues relating to strategy, remuneration, and training and development, which are generally not associated with taint. These occupations may be categorised also as having a
‘high depth’ of taint, in that the degree of taint is considerable and entails direct involvement with the
dirt (as is the case in dismissing employees). It would seem, therefore, that line managers and HR
staff may generally be considered as occupations where the actors have ‘compartmentalised stigma’ –
that is, involvement in a minority of tasks that are strongly stigmatised.

**Overcoming Taint in the Dismissal of Employees**

Assuming that dismissing employees is dirty work, it is likely that those who must undertake this task
would attempt to overcome the taint associated with this task. Their efforts to do so would include
measures to justify their actions to themselves and to others.

The line manager could ‘reframe’ by focusing on the increase in productivity arising from the
dismissal. If the line manager is wholly task-oriented the perception of ‘dirt’ may be mitigated by an
understanding that satisfactory performance of employees is needed if the organisation is to achieve
goals (i.e., organisational alignment). Alternatively, the line manager could ‘recalibrate’ by
suggesting that the organisation would not be able to function effectively without their role in the
dismissal. High employee-centered line managers may find neither of these arguments persuasive as
a reason to become involved in the dismissal, instead wishing to distance themselves from the
situation in order to retain their perceived ‘caring’ standing with employees and avoiding self-identity
dissonance. Hence reframing may be more accessible to task-focused managers than to employee-
focused managers. Refocusing may be an option for both these types of managers when considering
the positive effect of dismissal on the remaining employees’ performance. All types of line managers
will be affected by their implicit leadership ideas which may hold that ‘good leaders’ participate in
firing situations or, alternatively, that they avoid these to keep their ‘clean’ image (e.g., Sanders &
Schyns 2006). Finally, line managers specifically may dis-identify or opt for a ‘blame the system’
approach, suggesting that HR, as part of the organisational management ‘system’, should undertake
the dismissal task as ‘their’ policies have created the situation.

Let us turn now to situations in which the dismissal is undertaken by HRPs. Some HRPs work
as a ‘Business Partner’ alongside line managers in the business units of organisations. The HRPs, like
line managers, may reframe by focusing on the increase in productivity arising from a dismissal, or
recalibrate by suggesting that the organisation would not be able to function effectively without the role of the HRP in the dismissal. However, it is possible that HRPs not operating in a Business Partner role will have a greater ability to avoid the taint given the growing trend for them to disengage from transactional tasks (e.g., discipline and individual reward) whilst focusing increasingly on their strategic role (e.g., staffing implications of company merger) (Ulrich & Brockbank 2005). Although HRPs may concur that they have been part of a policy design leading to the dismissal of employees, they may well argue that the line manager is responsible for the transactional tasks (including dismissing employees) arising from strategic HR policy (Whittaker & Marchington 2003) and the HR role is only required as a presence to check that the policy is implemented correctly, rather than any direct involvement with individuals. We interpret this scenario as demonstrating HRPs attempting to reframe or refocus their role firmly away from transactional tasks – and particularly those that are ‘dirty’.

Given that dirty work is a social construct, we must consider the perspective of the observer. The degree of taint that the line manager or HRP is assigned by others may be influenced by the ‘visibility’ of the composition of tasks that they undertake in the organisation. Although both line managers and HRPs perform many tasks, employees observe directly the line manager’s panoply of tasks, unlike their view of the HRP – whose tasks other than their involvement in the dismissal interview may well be invisible to employees. We suggest that visibility dynamics might be the source of the social construction of HRPs as ‘dirty’ in some circumstances, even though the breadth of dirty work for HR professionals may be low. This social construction of being ‘dirty’ may be less prevalent in situations where HRPs perform as Business Partners – since employees would have some knowledge of their other tasks – than in the case of the generalist HRP arriving from a central office. We suggest stigmatisation will be particularly high where an HRP from the central office ‘specialises’ in dismissal and discipline tasks.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper has extended the existing theoretical frameworks of dirty work to include the level of task as well as that of occupation. To demonstrate, the dirty work framework has been applied to the task
of dismissing employees – a task that is performed most commonly by managers or HRPs and that may be considered physically, socially and morally tainted. Specifically, Kreiner et al.’s (2006) matrix identified that many occupations are variegated, containing only some ‘dirty’ components and thereby invited attention to be paid to the ‘task’ level of analysis rather than the traditional occupation level or the organisation level (e.g., Hudson 2008). Hence this paper focuses on a setting that is less ‘dirty’ than those that have been studied previously (Ackroyd 2007; Duffy 2007; Kreiner et al. 2006).

Dirty Work and Human Resource Staff

The role of an HRP is complex and multi-faceted. The profession has developed such that Specialist HR careers exist in, for example, strategy, training, reward, and recruitment, while Generalist HRPs move between these roles. Evidence from UK HR practitioners (e.g., Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2005) would point to HR being involved in most instances of dismissal – situations that we have shown to be potentially physically, socially, or morally tainted or ‘dirty’.

While the task of dismissing employees can potentially be considered tainted, what those involved consider ‘tainted’ or ‘dirty’ in terms of physical, social, and moral taint will vary between individuals. Taint management at the individual level is often about seeking justification. If the manager (line or HR) believes that the dismissal is justified, or their actions are in alignment with accepted organisational goals, then justification is likely to mitigate the judgment of dirt. Recent trends within HR have taken the profession from its welfare and employee-centric focus to that of meeting organisational needs, and strategic activity (e.g., Ulrich & Brockbank 2005). Given this professional evolution, the taint connected to the task of dismissing employees may be manageable if the professional considers the task to be in alignment with organisational goals and strategy.

How do those beyond the managers involved see the situation? We have identified three possible groups (line managers, Business Partner HR and other HRPs) as being judged potentially differently by others in the organisation. We outlined that the level of visibility of the range of tasks undertaken by such managers is crucial to how others see them and subsequently judge their level of taint in dismissal situations. If an HRP is seen only at times of dismissal, then they risk being labeled
as a dirty worker by others who never see the less tainted aspects of the role, irrespective of the justification for any particular dismissal.

This leads us to raise the issue that taint management may need to be taken seriously by those within the HR profession even though HRPs themselves may label dismissal situations as being of only low taint. The dynamics suggested here highlight a need for HR to be visible in non-dirty work situations to ensure that they are not assigned a pervasive level of stigma by observers. If this were to occur the stigma would originate in the task and then contaminate the rest of the occupation in the eyes of the observers. In the unfortunate situation where taint became adhered to the HR profession, this social construction could infect others’ judgment of wider aspects of HRPs’ work, such as their contribution to strategy or policy formation. There is also the possibility of ‘stigma by association’ (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan 2008), with friends or colleagues of those involved in the dismissal situations being stigmatised also. The dynamics pinpoint a risk that although HRPs may classify themselves as having ‘compartmentalised stigma’ they may be perceived by observers (including other employees) as having a far more serious ‘pervasive stigma’.

**Implications, Future Directions and Conclusions**

Although the dismissal of employees has been the focus of this paper, the role of managers and HR staff may entail other tasks that could also be considered as dirty. For example, dealing with discipline (e.g., accusations of bullying or sexual harassment), workplace accidents or illegitimate absenteeism would appear to be particularly prone to being regarded as dirty work, potentially qualifying as either physically, socially or morally tainted in terms of Hughes’ (1958) framework. Even within HR roles, far more exploration could be done in analysis of dirt and tasks.

We have argued that line managers and HRPs are occupations belonging generally to the ‘compartmentalised stigma’ category: that is, involvement in a minority of tasks that are strongly stigmatised, such as dismissing employees. In the case of HRPs, however, the visibility of the tasks that they perform may lead to a different categorisation by others. In contrast, the social construction of line managers’ dirty work is at less risk from distortion than in the case of HRPs. If the ‘visibility’ factor has a significant influence on the social construction and categorisation of the work performed
by HRPs, this perhaps should be considered as a key issue in taint management strategies and warrants being a factor for examination in future research.

Virtually all occupations are associated with some form of dirty work some of the time (Kreiner et al. 2006). An approach similar to that taken in this paper could be applied, for example, to the public relations professional who limits damage in a difficult situation, the internal auditor checking anomalies, and the health and safety adviser imposing risk-limiting use of facilities. It is important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the taint associated with specific tasks may become generalised into a broader occupational label, so that those professionals can manage both the perceptions of those who label them ‘dirty’ and the social construction of their occupation.

REFERENCES


