“They really don't want to see us”
How cleaners experience invisible ‘dirty’ work

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Most people want to feel valued and included. Some **working conditions** render people invisible. How do people experience workplace invisibility?
Theoretical Framework

Social Valuing

Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2016

‘Dirty’ Work

Hughes, 1957
Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999

Invisible Work

Vlasses, 1997
Hatton, 2017
Social Valuing Theory

“employees actively interpret the meaning of how others treat them at work to gauge a sense of worth”

- Basic human needs: recognition, appreciation, inclusion
- Respectful treatment meets needs for esteem + inclusion
- Acknowledgement + affirmation of presence → outcomes

→ How do people feel when their presence is denoted + devalued?
Social Devaluing?

It may be **difficult** to feel valued when work is: **stigmatized**
Across cultures, people “try to create distance from the pollution of dirt and from those who deal with it.”

Simpson et al., 2012, p. 2
Social Devaluing?

It may be difficult to feel valued when work is:

stigmatized

invisible
Invisible Work  Vlasses, 1997: 1

What is invisible work?
“hidden, unrecognized, unaccounted-for or taken-for-granted”
(based on interviews with nurses)

Why is some work invisible?
how we think about work
● socially
● historically
● epistemologically
Mechanisms of Invisible Work  Hatton, 2017

- **sociocultural mechanisms**
  - embodied work (e.g., aesthetics, emotions)
  - “naturalization” of skill (e.g., care work)

- **sociolegal mechanisms**
  - noneconomic work (no wages)
  - illicit work (e.g., sex work)
  - informal work (e.g., recycling)

- **sociospatial mechanisms**
  - domestic sphere (e.g., home-based work)
  - public sphere (e.g., digital labor)
The Current Study

Although research has examined mechanisms of invisible work, less is known about:

- people’s lived experiences
- how they make sense of the invisible work they perform

How do people experience and interpret invisible ‘dirty’ work?
“Cleaners remain largely invisible in the landscape — most of us know when somewhere has not been cleaned but few of us, we suspect, stop to think much about the laboring processes which go into maintaining spaces as clean.”

Herod & Aguiar, 2006, p. 427
Methodology

How do people in ‘dirty’ work experience invisibility?

Phenomenology

- “seeks to understand what it is like for an individual to experience at first hand the phenomena of the world”
  Griffin & May, 2012, p. 442

- particularly useful and important for understanding phenomena “that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation”
  Sanders, 1982, p. 354
Methodology

How do people in ‘dirty’ work experience invisibility?

Phenomenology
studying the essence of lived experience

- Identify a phenomenon
- Select experts
- Interpret their meaning-making
Method

How do people in ‘dirty’ work experience invisibility?

Data Collection

Open-ended questions from a survey administered to 199 university cleaners

Conversations with 12 cleaners

\( M_{\text{length}} = 2.5 \text{ hours} \)
Method

How do people in ‘dirty’ work experience invisibility?

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

- What are the best aspects of your work?
- What are the worst aspects of your work?
- What has been your greatest heartache?
- What has been your greatest joy?
Findings

How do people in ‘dirty’ work experience invisibility?

Themes
1. Types of invisibility
2. Appraisals of invisibility
3. Mechanisms of invisibility
Theme #1: Types of Invisibility

1. Interpersonal invisibility

- “There but not there”
- “Needed but not looked at”
- “Not being recognized by people in building”
- “Like a shadow”
- “Some students look right through you”
- “Y’all look right past us...like [we] not even there”
Theme #1: Types of Invisibility

1. Interpersonal invisibility

2. Vocational invisibility

- To do one’s job well is to render the labor process (and oneself) invisible.
  - “A lot of time your work, even though you’re doin’ a good job, it’s gonna go unnoticed”

- Institutional practices render cleaners (and their work) invisible.
  - “A lot of time...working alone”
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief

“There's some weird moments where a dude will fart around me, that makes me feel like, ‘Yeah, you really don't care about my opinion at all.’ Then there's a half of me that's laughing about it. When a dude's like coughing up a loogie [mucus], that gets like, ‘Wow, dude, I'm here. You're not even embarrassed that I'm here. I'm that little.’”
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief

“For the most part, it’s safer when you’re around other people”

“Guys still walk in unzip, try and handle their business right in front of her like she's not there.”
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
   “[it] gets you. Like you not even there.” [sic]
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
   “It’s funny how a job can make you feel like you’re not even a person.” [sarcasm]
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust  
   “I mean, it is what it is.”

2. Shame  
   “get used to it after a certain amount of time.”

3. Fear + Anxiety  
   “I feel helpless to change the way people look at custodians. So I keep my thoughts and head down so I won’t be looked at as being a problem.”

4. Sadness

5. Anger

6. Resignation
   “being ignored and given dirty looks almost every day by some lady when I walk by and say ‘hello’ to the point where I just ignored her from then on.”

7. Relief
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief

“Sometimes you just don’t wanna be around nobody.”
**Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility**

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“It’s perfectly fine for me. I kind of just hang out in the background; that’s the way I’ve been my whole life. I sat in the back of the classroom... Nobody talked to me. I never got picked on through high school because of that, but I never associated myself with people. ... I still just want to hang out in the back. ... Introverted, that’s what I am. ... I’m okay with being invisible and independent.”
Theme #2: Appraisals of Invisibility

1. Disgust
2. Shame
3. Fear + Anxiety
4. Sadness
5. Anger
6. Resignation
7. Relief

http://accessdl.state.al.us/AventaCourses/access_courses/psychology_ua-v14/04_unit/04-07/04-07_learn1_text.htm
Theme #3: Mechanisms of Invisibility

1. Class injury
2. Personality differences
3. Absentmindedness + busyness
4. Built environment
5. Shift
Theme #3: Mechanisms of Invisibility

1. Class injury
2. Personality differences
3. Absentmindedness
4. Built environment
5. Shift

“ignorant people who don't acknowledge your presence because they think you're beneath them.”

“They really don't want to see us.”

* illustrates how invisibility is rooted in power dynamics -- when customers can see cleaners, they’d rather not.
Theme #3: Mechanisms of Invisibility

1. Class injury
2. Personality differences
3. Absentmindedness
4. Built environment
5. Shift

“You know, it's all on the person. Or what they day like, you know. Sometimes people don't want to talk 'til they have their coffee. You never know.”
Theme #3: Mechanisms of Invisibility

1. Class injury
2. Personality differences
3. Absentmindedness
4. Built environment
5. Shift

“It depends on the building.”
Theme #3: Mechanisms of Invisibility

1. Class injury
2. Personality differences
3. Absentmindedness
4. Built environment
5. Shift
Summary

Mechanisms
- Class injury
- Personality
- Absentmindedness
- Coworker isolation
- Shift

Types
- Interpersonal
  - Customers
  - Managers
- Vocational
  - Output
  - Spatial

Appraisals
- Disgust
- Shame
- Fear + Anxiety
- Sadness
- Anger
- Resignation
- Relief
Many people want to feel valued + included in their jobs, everyday lives; however, some people are chronically rendered invisible through their work.

Invisibility is not inherent in cleaning work, service work, or ‘dirty’ work.

- Invisibility is socially constructed + imposed.
- People who feel invisible are often made to feel this way, whether by:
  - People (customers, managers, cultural scripts)
  - Context (spatiality, temporality)
Theoretical Contributions

● Construct differentiation:
  ○ Invisibility is distinct from related phenomena (e.g., ostracism; incivility)
  ○ Might be useful to differentiate **protective invisibility** vs. **alienating invisibility**

● Construct elaboration:
  ○ additional **mechanisms of invisible ‘dirty’ work** (e.g., willful disengagement)
  ○ invisibility as a form of **boundary maintenance** (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) and enactment of “**avoidance rules**” (Simpson et al., 2012)
    ■ Clean vs Dirty; Wealthy vs Poor; Respectable vs Unrespectable; etc.

● Invisibility as **performance, emancipatory practice**
  ○ tool to escape the “nightmare of participation” (Kolowratnik & Miessen, 2012)
Practical Implications + Future Directions

- **Occupational health**: How do people cope with invisibility?
- **Habitus**: How and why do customers + managers render cleaners invisible?
- **Person-Job Fit**: realistic preview of invisibility; allow workers to select shift
- **Invisibility of/at work → invisibility in policy?**
  - “… rendering [labor] visible may call into question the grounds on which different forms of work are differentially rewarded, both symbolically and materially.” (Suchman, 1995, p. 58)
  - Justice for Janitors, National Domestic Workers Alliance, etc.
Practical Implications

- **Occupational health**: effect of invisibility + social devaluing
- **Habitus**: How and why do customers + managers render cleaners invisible?
- Invisibility of/at work → **invisibility in policy**?
  - “… rendering [labor] visible may call into question the grounds on which different forms of work are differentially rewarded, both symbolically and materially.” (Suchman, 1995, p. 58)
  - Justice for Janitors, National Domestic Workers Alliance, etc.
Some social groups experience **invisibility** that is **systemic** and **chronic**.

Cleaners are either unable to be seen — or are treated as though they can’t be seen — which **reflects** and **reifies boundaries** between groups.

Rendering people invisible can send the message that they are not worthy of **dignity**, including acknowledgement, appreciation, respect.

Regardless of how individual people appraise invisibility, we can do more to improve the dignity, well-being, and lives of people who perform **invisible work** (especially those involved in stigmatized, ‘dirty’ service roles).
“They really don’t want to see us”: How cleaners experience invisible ‘dirty’ work

Veronica Cardoso Rebelo a, b, Ramaswami Mahalingam b

Abstract

Many people want to feel valued and included but being invisible may undermine one’s sense of belonging and meaningful engagement. Some employees may face chronic invisibility due to job stigma (e.g., ‘dirty’ work), overnight shifts, and/or spatial separation from coworkers and customers. We examine how people make sense of feeling invisible at work: what people experience when they are not seen or are treated as though they cannot be seen. We sought to understand when workers feel invisible, how they make sense of these experiences, and the consequences for their work and well-being. To examine how people experience invisibility, we conducted an inductive phenomenological analysis. Data included open-ended questions from a survey of 199 university building cleaners and in-depth conversations with a subset of 32 cleaners. Three major themes emerged: how cleaners experienced invisibility, what invisibility feels like, and why they were rendered invisible. Cleaners experienced invisibility at work (not being recognized or acknowledged by customers) and invisibility of work (feeling that work is ignored or unappreciated). They varied in how they made sense of invisibility, experiencing anger, resignation, ambivalence, and relief. Cleaners also identified several mechanisms to explain why they were rendered invisible, including class injury, customer absentmindedness, and the spatial and temporal structure of work. We summarize these findings by conceptualizing invisibility as an intersubjective phenomenon that creates and sustains various critical boundaries at work—between worker/client, dirty/clean, repugnant/respectable, undignified/worthy. We conclude with a call for greater research on work that is invisible and ‘dirty’, and the people rendered invisible in the process, to make this work more equitable and dignified.

Keywords

Invisibility; Invisible work; Dirty work; Cleaning occupations; Well-being; Vocational adjustment
“They really don’t want to see us”: How cleaners experience invisible ‘dirty’ work

Verónica Caridad Rabelo

Abstract

Many people want to feel valued and included but being invisible may undermine one’s sense of belonging and meaningful engagement. Some employees may face chronic invisibility due to job stigma (e.g., ‘dirty’ work), overnight shifts, and/or spatial separation from coworkers and customers. We examine how people make sense of feeling invisible at work: what people experience when they are not seen or are treated as though they cannot be seen. We sought to understand when workers feel invisible, how they make sense of these experiences, and the consequences for their work and well-being. To examine how people experience invisibility, we conducted an inductive phenomenological analysis. Data included open-ended questions from a survey of 199 university building cleaners and in-depth conversations with a subset of 12 cleaners. Three major themes emerged: how cleaners experienced invisibility, what invisibility feels like, and why they were rendered invisible. Cleaners experienced invisibility at work (not being recognized or acknowledged by customers) and invisibility of work (feeling that work is ignored or unappreciated). They varied in how they made sense of invisibility, experiencing anger, resignation, ambivalence, and relief. Cleaners also identified several mechanisms to explain why they were rendered invisible, including class injury, customer abandonment and, and the spatial and temporal structure of work. We summarise these findings by conceptualising invisibility as an intersubjective phenomenon that creates and sustains various critical boundaries at work—between worker/client, dirty/clean, repugnant/respectable, undignified/dignified. We conclude with a call for greater research on work that is invisible and ‘dirty’, and the people rendered invisible in the process, to make this work more equitable and dignified.

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