



Dirty work, dirty worker? Stigmatisation and coping strategies among domestic workers



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ABSTRACT

Domestic work can be perceived to be 'dirty work' in several ways: it is associated with dirt handling, low occupational prestige, and domestic workers have a servile relationship to their clients/employers. This stigma may negatively affect domestic workers' sense of self, and thus coping strategies appear to be critical. In this article, we explore the coping strategies that moderate the relation between the stigma of dirty work and domestic workers' sense of self, based on the analyses of 43 interviews with domestic workers in Belgium. By using a social stress approach in which stigma is considered a stressor, our results reveal a range of maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies that contribute to a negative or a more positive sense of self. Four main categories of coping strategies are discussed: confronting or countering perceptions and behaviours, occupational ideologies, social weighting and defensive tactics. The first two categories are adaptive coping strategies; the last two can be adaptive or maladaptive. We also reveal that workers used adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies simultaneously, leading to mixed implications for their sense of self.

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1. Introduction

Everett Hughes (1951) introduced the concept of 'dirty work' to refer to tasks and occupations that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading. People who perform dirty work tend to become stigmatised, as society projects the negative characteristics associated with their occupation on them, depicting them as 'dirty workers' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951).

A compelling example is domestic work. Domestic work is physically and socially tainted (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951). Physical taint relates to the enduring and pervasive contacts with garbage, waste and dirt typical to cleaning work. Social taint refers to the servile relationship to clients or employers (Rollins, 1987; Sales & Santana, 2003). Moreover, domestic work is perceived as unskilled labour that everyone is able to do (Browne & Misra, 2003; EU-OSHA, 2009), and it used to be associated with non-productive unpaid labour in the home (Messing, 1998). These characteristics proper to 'low occupational prestige', a composite of status, power, quality of work, education and income (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Zock, 2005), can also be considered a form of social taint. Taint can lead to the stigmatisation of domestic workers (EU-OSHA, 2009; Messing, 1998). It paves the way for treating domestic workers with disrespect,

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which can range from ignoring them to openly deceptive behaviour (EU-OSHA, 2009; Gamperiene, Nygård, Sandanger, Waersted, & Bruusgaard, 2006; Messing, 1998).

Workers rely on outsiders' views when forming their (occupational) identity. Therefore, stigmatisation associated with dirty work may negatively affect domestic workers' sense of self (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), i.e. one's self-image or identity that refers to the superordinate view of ourselves, including our self-esteem, personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, social roles and relationships (Christiansen, 1999). By contrast, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue that the stigma of dirty work can be countered through coping strategies, acting as defensive mechanisms, used by members of 'tainted occupations' in order to create a more positive sense of self.

In this study we perform a series of in-depth interviews to explore the coping strategies used by domestic workers in Belgium to deal with the stigmatisation that arises as a consequence of physically and socially tainted work characteristics. In addition, we investigate how stigma is related to the development of a negative or a more positive (occupational) sense of self, depending on the coping strategies employed.

This study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, we study coping strategies within social stress theory, which describes the explanatory pathway from stressful work experiences (stigma) to mental well-being (Boyd, Lewin, & Sager, 2009; Miller & Major, 2000; Thoits, 1995). A particular strength is that this theory allows us to integrate insights from social identity theory with system justification theory, by which both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies are taken into account. Secondly, though previous studies described how domestic workers cope with loneliness, deprivation, oppression and racism (Cohen, 1991; Rollins, 1987), how they cope with the tainted aspects of domestic work has not been studied yet. Studying coping strategies that deal with stigma is important because they are critical to workers' sense of self (Miller & Major, 2000; Thoits, 1995), and consequently to their mental well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009).

2. How dirty workers deal with stigmatisation

It is a plausible assumption that the stigma associated with domestic work will lead to strain, and consequently to poorer mental well-being. However, the evidence of poorer mental well-being among individuals from stigmatised, as compared to non-stigmatised groups, is inconsistent (Miller & Major, 2000; Verhaeghe, Bracke, & Bruynooghe, 2008). This may be related to individual differences regarding the coping strategies employed within the stigmatised group (Miller & Major, 2000). Coping strategies are behavioural and/or cognitive endeavours that play a role in managing demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding one's ability to adapt (Thoits, 1995). They can be either problem-focused, i.e. directed at taking action to alter the stressor in such a way as to manage the situation (e.g. actively confronting employers with their stigmatising behaviour), or emotion-focused, which is directed at regulating and reducing emotional distress (e.g. distancing from one's role as a domestic worker) (Boyd et al., 2009; Thoits, 1995). Moreover, coping strategies can be adaptive, i.e. diminishing or countering stigma, and fostering a more positive sense of self, or maladaptive, i.e. maintaining or increasing stigma, and fostering a negative sense of self (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005). The kind of coping strategies used to deal with stigma will have different consequences for workers' sense of self, and consequently for their mental well-being. Consequently, two scenarios, related to different kinds of coping strategies may be identified.

In the first, *positive, scenario* individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem through identification with their own group (in-group), relative to comparison groups (out-groups). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in this scenario, intergroup comparisons lead the in-group to perceive itself as more favourable to other groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). 'Us' versus 'them' distinctions boost the in-group's perceived superiority and enhance its members' self-esteem, sense of worth, mental health and well-being (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Occupational groups that provide their members with feelings of stability, meaning, purpose and direction, will thus generally bring about positive effects (Haslam et al., 2009). In this regard, low-status groups, such as domestic workers, tend to exaggerate the in-group's value to compensate their threatened identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Drawing on social identity theory, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) demonstrate how taint is managed among dirty workers. They present a range of coping strategies fostering a more positive sense of self, such as making favourable social comparisons or countering outsiders' negative perceptions (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). These strategies are consistent with social identity theory and can be interpreted as adaptive coping strategies.

In the second, *negative, scenario*, based on system justification theory (Jost & Elsbach, 2001) it is argued that membership of low-status or stigmatised groups may threaten a positive sense of self. In this scenario, tainted or low-status groups tend to accept, internalise and promulgate their own inferior position relative to others in society. Members of inferior groups engage in a justification of the status quo, at the expense of individual and collective self-esteem. Accordingly, the ideas of the dominant tend to become the ideas of the dominated (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Elsbach, 2001). Coping strategies interpreted from this perspective are expected to foster a negative sense of self, and can be considered as maladaptive coping strategies.

In reality, social identity and system justification processes can operate simultaneously (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006). Such a simultaneous functioning of two seemingly contradictory processes can be interpreted within the broader framework of social stress theory (Thoits, 1995). Social stress theory considers people to be active agents who attempt to manage the stressors they are exposed to, regardless of whether this is done in positive or negative manner (Miller & Major, 2000). In that regard, coping strategies can moderate the relation between the stigma of dirty work (the stressor) and dirty workers' sense of self in different senses. One can imagine a situation where an individual deals with stigma in a positive way by actively countering the stigma, which is an adaptive coping strategy in line with the social identity theory. However, an individual may also deal with stigma in a negative way by internalising it, which is a maladaptive coping strategy in line with the system justification theory. Approached from a social stress perspective, individuals can use adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies simultaneously in response to the stigma of dirty work, with mixed implications for their sense of self (Haslam et al., 2009; Miller & Major, 2000).

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