

It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it

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How do we perceive the jobs other people do? Are there "dirty" or morally tainted jobs and how do we reconcile the fact that many of the people doing such job provide an invaluable and often essential service regardless of our perceptions of the jobs as physically, socially or ethically tainted?

By definition a job might have what sociologists refer to as a "physical taint" if it involves waste products or death, occupations such as refuse collection, janitor, pest exterminator, butcher and abattoir worker, veterinary technician, mortuary worker, funeral director. It might be considered tainted if the person regularly comes into contact with noxious substance or dangerous situations, thus miners, soldiers, farm laborers, firefighters also do "dirty" jobs.

Social taint is used to label jobs in which the people doing the jobs come into regular contact with other people or groups that are themselves stigmatized in some way, so police detectives, criminal lawyers, social workers. Other jobs with social taint might include those jobs that require a level of servility in the relationship with the employer butler, maid, chauffeur, waiting staff, for example.

Finally, there are various ancient jobs that come with a perceived moral taint where the occupation is considered in some way "sinful" or dubious, sex workers, pornographers, casino managers, pawnbrokers and loan sharks might fall into this category. Occupations that involve deceptive, confrontational, intrusive or other actions that breach the norms of civility are also morally tainted and could include bailiffs and

debt collectors, tabloid reporters, private investigators, spies and perhaps even tax collectors.

The whole concept of a given occupation being somehow tainted, or dirty, is a wholly artificial social construct, of course. Although the morality, or rather immorality, of certain ancient and modern occupations is deeply entrenched in our collective psyche and in some instances transcends cultural boundaries in our perception. It is very difficult to picture a culture throughout history where prostitution has not been stigmatized and gamblers and non-gamblers alike have never had positive views on bookmakers.

Nevertheless, Nikola Djurkovic of Swinburne University of Technology in Hawthorn, and Darcy McCormack of the Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy, both in Victoria, Australia and their colleague Charlotte Rayner of the University of Portsmouth, UK, have carried out an analysis of a wide range of occupations where the "tainted" aspects of the job represents only a small part of the job as a whole. They point out that such "variegated" jobs have not been widely studied by sociologists and business studies researchers, but a better understanding of how many different "tainted" [jobs](#) might be perceived in a more positive way – as providing useful and often essential services – could improve society's approach to employment as a whole. Such studies as theirs open up discussion and provide a way to remove the stigma associated with many occupations and give those who carry out such "tainted" tasks a greater respect for the roles they play in society regardless of how their [occupations](#) might make the moral compass of some individuals twitch erratically.

More information: Rayner, C., Djurkovic, N. and McCormack, D. (2014) "Who are you calling 'dirty'? Actors' and observers' perceptions of dirty work and implications for taint management," *Int. J. Work Organisation and Emotion*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp.209–222.

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