

## **Managing Tainted Work: Shaping Employees' Fit Perceptions in Stigmatized Occupations**

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“Dirty work” occupations – those which are regarded as physically, socially, and/or morally tainted (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951) – pose particular challenges to workers and their managers. These challenges stem from both the off-putting nature and the taint associated with the tasks. For instance, how might a manager introduce a novice veterinary clinic worker to the grisly reality of euthanizing healthy animals? How might a manager enhance the problematic self-esteem of a veteran exotic dancer? How might a manager disabuse a new debt collector of his negative stereotypes of clients? Despite the importance of such questions, research has been surprisingly quiet about how managers help workers address the unique challenges of dirty work.

Both conceptual and empirical research has focused almost exclusively on the nature of dirty work as perceived and experienced by the *workers*. Further, research has tended to focus on one occupation at a time, such as nurses (Mills & Schejbal, 2007), animal shelter employees (Lopina et al., 2012), zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), veterinarians (Sanders, 2010), and casino employees (Lai et al., 2013). (An exception to this, Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate (2007) studied multiple occupations, but their focus was on the managers' own struggles rather than on the management of others.) Although this research has generated rich descriptions and insights about various occupations, it has only begun to coalesce into overarching theory about the management of dirty work (Simpson et al., 2012). This led us to ask, what are the roles of a manager who must lead those engaged in dirty work? We found, through a qualitative study,

that concerns of worker congruence permeated the managerial process in dirty work occupations. Thus, the purpose of this study became to reveal, through a managerial lens, the *process of managing* dirty work to enhance individuals' "congruence with their work environment" – their sense of person-environment (P-E) fit (Vogel & Feldman, 2009: 68). Based on our data, we developed a model of how managers help their employees perceive a greater fit with their stigmatized work during three key adjustment phases: recruitment/selection, socialization, and ongoing management (cf. Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010).

Addressing these issues is important for several reasons. First, despite gains in our understanding of the nature of dirty work jobs, the dearth of systematic study of the management of such jobs has created a shortfall for both theory and practice. Knowing how *workers* experience dirty work does not directly address the best management practices. Hence, we need to understand management processes that help workers adjust in the broad array of dirty work jobs. Second, given that virtually all jobs have some element of stigma (Hughes, 1951; Kreiner et al., 2006), knowing how to manage stigma in its varying forms can have broad applicability, informing the management of those stigmatized elements. Third, other mainstream management literatures (e.g., P-E fit, recruitment, socialization) can be enriched by understanding how a dirty work context might provide important boundary conditions. Fourth, our lens of focusing on congruence offers an agentic, dynamic perspective that can speak beyond the dirty work context in explaining how managers can enhance workers' perceptions of fit.

Surprisingly little is known about how adaptation processes occur specifically with regard to dirty work. While numerous studies have provided insight into occupation-specific ways in which individual P-E fit is facilitated – such as Myers' (2005) study of assimilation into a fire department and Sutton's (1991) investigation of the training of bill collectors – no study to

our knowledge has: (1) examined these processes in multiple dirty work occupations simultaneously; or (2) focused explicitly on the perceptions of those often most responsible for the adjustment of dirty workers – their managers. We therefore developed the following three research questions:

*RQ1: Given the unique challenges of dirty work, how do managers recruit and select workers to promote a good fit between the workers and the work environment?*

*RQ2: How do managers help socialize newcomers into dirty work to promote a good fit between the workers and the work environment?*

*RQ3: How do managers negotiate the ongoing managerial roles for dirty work after recruitment/selection and socialization to promote a good fit between the workers and the work environment?*

We conducted hour-long interviews with 54 managers across a sample of 18 dirty work occupations – physically tainted (e.g., animal control), socially tainted (e.g., corrections), and morally tainted (e.g., exotic entertainment). We used a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006), and will elaborate on that in our presentation. Our findings indicate that managers work to foster perceptions of congruence to help individuals adjust to their dirty work and its accompanying environment. Specifically, we focus on three sets of managerial practices that correspond to individuals’ growing experience in the occupation: recruitment/selection, socialization, and ongoing management roles. These phases and their accompanying tactics are illustrated in our model, Figure 1.

First, **recruitment/selection** involves overcoming individuals’ aversion to dirty work. Specifically, we documented two recurring themes of congruence work during recruitment and selection: (1) selecting individuals with an affinity for the work; and (2) providing a realistic “stigma preview.” A vivid example of the latter was provided by a manager of animal control officers, who told us:

Part of the interview process, the second interview, is to come and witness a euthanasia from start to finish... Because before we didn't do that, ... like if I hired you and said, "OK, you start on Monday." You get here and... there's 25 dead dogs lined out there and you think, "Oh, I can't do this," even though in your mind initially you said, "Yeah, I can do that..." They're seeing the worst part of the job... as far as mental stress. Something that nobody is going to have any experience with that ever in their life other than taking the animal to the vet and the vet doing it.

Second, **socialization** involves the key congruence challenge of helping newcomers adjust to (become comfortable and proficient with) the stigma and associated tasks that may be viewed as distasteful by individuals and (where relevant) clients alike, even if the newcomers "intellectually" accept the work. In particular, our data suggest that newcomers may enter with a stereotyped sense of the occupation that inhibits their learning and adjustment; newcomers may have a stereotyped sense of their clients that inhibits effective interaction; newcomers may have a difficult time interacting with outsiders because of their occupation's stigma; and newcomers need to adjust to the tasks that give rise to stigma in the first place. Thus, we focus on four managerial practices emerging from our data that attempt to address each of these challenges, respectively: (1) using targeted divestiture; (2) developing perspective-taking; (3) helping newcomers manage relationships; and (4) balancing habituation vs. immersion. An example of the latter tactic is voiced by an abortion clinic manager:

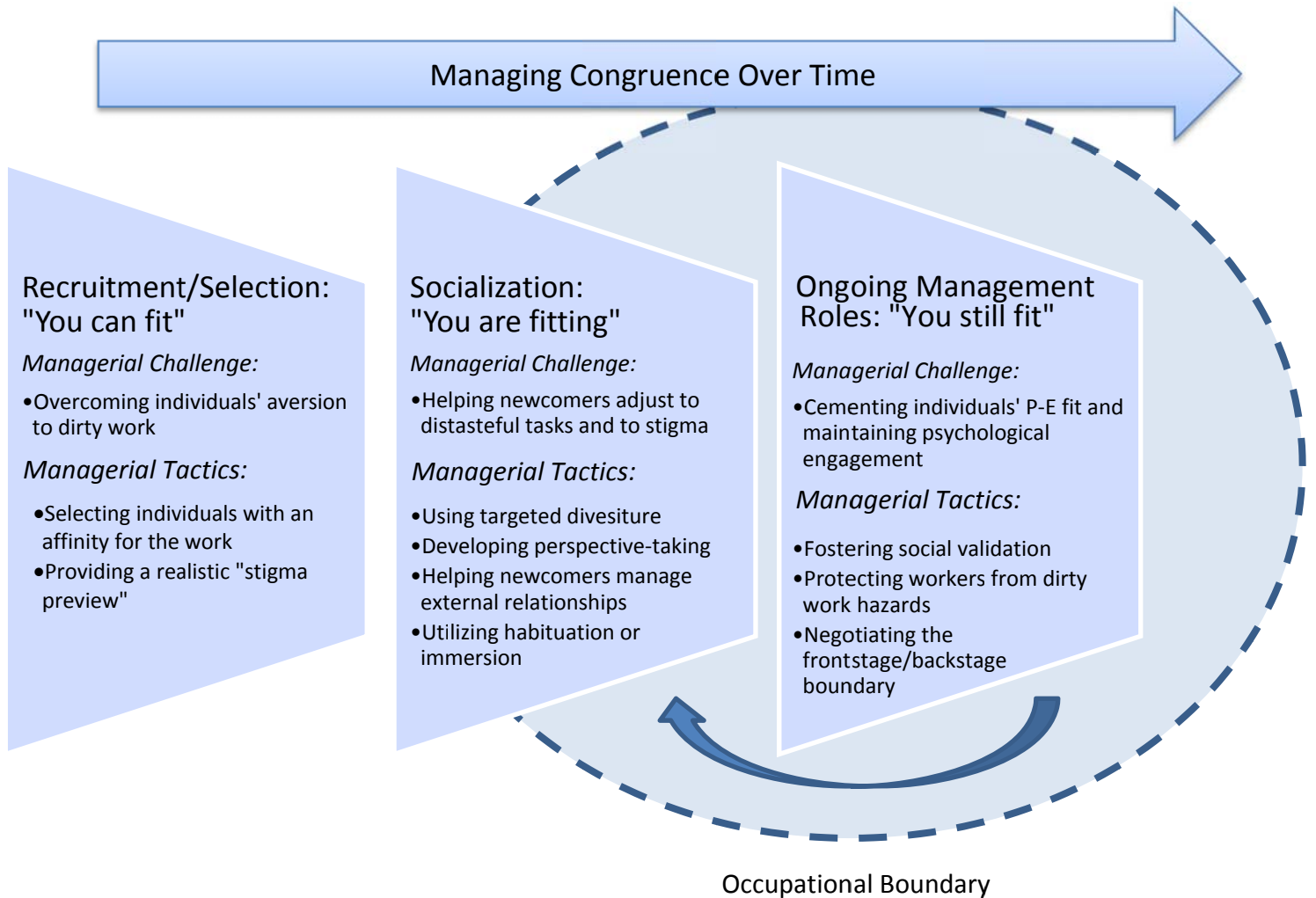
Usually on the first day, kind of take them around... introduce them to the people when nothing is going on, tell them what occurs in each room... Generally, their first orientation is just kind of dealing with patients, and not dealing with the abortion issue other than at arm's length. They, finally, they may get worked into areas that are more or less confronted with those issues... There is one surgery room that we designate for the patients who are further pregnant. And the people who work in that room know that I will hit the ceiling... if they take a new person in there within the first two weeks... I don't want somebody to say, "Hey, come on in," and turn into *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

Third, **ongoing management roles** are ones that extend *beyond* the recruitment and socialization phases. These roles often began to surface during those earlier phases but primarily pertain to ongoing issues for those in dirty work. The key managerial challenge here is to solidify

the P-E fit fostered during recruitment/selection and socialization and maintain individuals' engagement in the tainted tasks. We found three broad ongoing roles regarding managerial congruence work: (1) fostering social validation; (2) protecting the workers from dirty work hazards; and (3) negotiating the frontstage/backstage boundary. A manager of a drag queen cabaret provided a provocative example of social validation. He told us, "Everybody who gets, like, in this business has a 'drag Mom' or, you know, a mentor; somebody who they look up to." He went on to explain the intricate relationships that are created by different "families" within the cabaret community, becoming tightly-knit subgroups over many years. More senior drag queens would adopt newcomers into their families, mentor them, and shepherd them through the often-murky world of drag cabaret. Further, these families provided a sense of identity and social validation to the entertainers, who had often been disowned by their biological families because of their lifestyle and occupational choices. Clearly, members of very few non-stigmatized occupations would refer to their mentors as "Mom" or "Dad," illustrating the powerful social connections formed in these subcultures.

In sum, in spite of the upswing in dirty work research during the past decade, most studies have examined only one occupation at a time and have focused almost exclusively on the vantage point of the *workers* and/or the occupational level resources available to them. Our study moves the literature forward by examining the process of managing dirty work from a *managerial* vantage point. This is important as it provides a "missing link" in our understanding of how dirty work jobs are managed to enhance P-E fit. During our presentation at the Academy meeting, we will provide further insights into each of our main findings through additional examples and quotes from our data on the major tactics found in our study.

**Figure 1: Managing Congruence in Stigmatized Occupations**



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