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

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## 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 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.

Most people are motivated to feel valued and included in social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2016). How, then, do people feel when they exist on the periphery of social and organizational life? At one point or another, employees may feel that their contributions go unappreciated. However, there are some employees who are chronically ignored because of their occupational context, whether a result of stigma (e.g., customers' failure to make eye contact), organizational practices (e.g., overnight shifts), and/or sociospatial mechanisms (e.g., segregation of work from public; Hatton, 2017). Further, invisibility may be common in, if not characteristic of, occupations that are low-status and stigmatized (Simpson, Slutskaia, Lewis, & Höpfl, 2012). One such example is building cleaners, who work in nearly every brick-and-mortar organization yet frequently are hidden from the people for whom they clean. As Herod and Aguiar (2006) describe, “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

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processes which go into maintaining spaces as clean” (p. 427). What does it feel like to perform work that is ubiquitous yet concealed?

In this paper, 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 argue that invisibility is imposed and normalized through social interactions, intergroup processes, and dominant ideologies that are often implicit (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000; Foucault, 1979, 1980). As a result, certain occupations (and workers) are rendered invisible systematically due to implicit organizational practices that remain unexamined. Given the importance of feeling recognized and included, chronic invisibility may undermine well-being, especially among marginalized workers in stigmatized occupations. To address this possibility, we sought to understand when workers feel invisible, how they make sense of these experiences, and the consequences of invisibility for people's work and well-being. Thus, the central question guiding this paper is: *How do people experience invisibility?*

Examining how people experience invisibility and invisible work offers several contributions to research, theory, and practice related to work and well-being. First, we provide empirical evidence for recent theories of invisible work (Hatton, 2017; Lollar, 2015). For example, Hatton (2017) theorized three mechanisms of invisible work. We extend this work by providing empirical evidence for how workers make sense of invisibility and its mechanisms. Thus, our study also heeds calls for more research on how employees experience stigma and subtle or ambiguous behaviors at work (e.g., Bosmans et al., 2016; Sguera, Bagozzi, Huy, Boss, & Boss, 2016). Second, we extend theoretical work on invisibility by identifying additional mechanisms of invisible work. Third, we examine how invisibility might reflect (and reify) divides between ‘respectable’ and ‘dirty’ work, shedding light on how the mechanisms of invisibility in the workplace may contribute to stigma and inequality. Finally, we help paint a more holistic portrait of organizational life by focusing on communities that have remained invisible in research, as well as broader society. Listening to employees in stigmatized and invisible work (and who themselves may hold marginalized identities) can inform efforts to reduce disparities in vocational adjustment as well as enhance their sense of belonging and meaning at work (Bosmans et al., 2016).

This paper is organized as follows. First, we summarize relevant scholarship related to invisibility, ‘dirty’ work, and vocational adjustment. Second, we describe the research context—building cleaning in the U.S. We then describe study design and findings, concluding with a broader discussion of theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future research directions.

## 1. Invisible work

There are several ways work can be invisible. Work can be invisible when dominant ideologies fail to recognize certain tasks, roles, or occupations as ‘real’ work. For example, Daniels (1987) examined how women's work is rendered invisible when it involves emotions, housework, and/or volunteer work. Based on research with nurses, Vlasses (1997) described “invisible” work as that which “may or may not be visible but is not recognized ... hidden, unrecognized, unaccounted-for or taken-for-granted” (p. 1). Vlasses uses quotation marks around invisible in order to emphasize that “invisibility has been created by the social, historical and epistemologic [sic] constraints that influence how we think about work” (p. 1).

Building on this research, Hatton (2017) identified three mechanisms of invisible work. First, work is invisible when ideologies naturalize work. For example, many cultures expect women to be caring and view nurturance as an inherent trait, so women who perform caretaking work (e.g., childcare or eldercare) may not be viewed as ‘real’ workers, especially when they work in people's homes. Second, work is invisible when it falls outside sociolegal standards of work (e.g., sex work, street performing). Third, work is invisible when it is spatially distant (e.g., virtual work). Together, this framework helps explain why some work is rendered invisible. Less is known about how employees who perform invisible work make sense of their experiences.

Organizational and occupational contexts might shape how people make sense of invisibility. For example, people may perceive greater invisibility when they work the night shift (Hood, 1988) or feel separated from coworkers (Bentein, Garcia, Guerrero, & Herrbach, 2017). Research has found that workplace isolation is positively associated with perceived stigmatization and emotional exhaustion (Bentein et al., 2017), and negatively associated with perceived respect and organizational identification (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012). However, there may be unexplored benefits of feeling invisible. For example, some people may actively seek invisible work, finding comfort and safety in this context. To examine this possibility, we refrain from pathologizing invisibility (e.g., framing it as an aspect of workplace mistreatment), and instead focus on how workers interpret invisibility more broadly—specifically, in the context of invisible work that is also ‘dirty’.

## 2. ‘Dirty’ work

In this study, we also analyze how the occupational context of low-status ‘dirty’<sup>1</sup> work shapes (and is shaped by) invisibility. ‘Dirty’ work includes vocations and job tasks that are widely regarded as “physically, socially or morally beneath the dignity of the profession” (Hughes, 1958, p. 122). At least three types of ‘dirt’ stigmatize work and workers: physical, when the work involves trash, bodily fluids, death, and/or dangerous conditions; social, when the work requires contact with stigmatized communities (i.e., “courtesy stigma”) or servile roles; and moral, when the work violates social, ethical, and/or religious norms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963b; Hughes, 1958). When work involves literal or figurative dirt, the dirt ‘stains’ those who are connected with the ‘dirty’ work. Such ‘stains’ result in stigma, whereby “society projects the negative qualities associated with dirt onto them so that

<sup>1</sup> We use quotation marks around ‘dirty’ to emphasize its socially constructed nature. Work is not inherently ‘dirty’, but rather *becomes* dirty as a result of cultural and material devaluing.

they are seen as dirty workers” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 416). Many societies abide by cultural norms that equate cleanliness with goodness, resulting in avoidance of people, objects, and experiences that are perceived as ‘dirty’ (Douglas, 1966). Often people “try to create distance from the pollution of dirt and from those who deal with it” (Simpson et al., 2012, p. 2). Thus, many ‘dirty’ occupations may also constitute invisible work. Sociocultural mechanisms in particular (Hatton, 2017) may explain the connection between ‘dirt’ and invisibility.

Paradoxically, ‘dirty’ work occupations often are regarded as necessary for societal effectiveness, yet also viewed as demeaning, disgusting, and/or undesirable forms of work (Douglas, 1966; Hughes, 1958, 1962). Employees in ‘dirty’ work (unlike those in ‘dignified’ or ‘respectable’ occupations) may face particular challenges with respect to feeling valued, important, and worthwhile (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bickmeier, Lopina, & Rogelberg, 2015; Douglas, 1966). By extension, they also may struggle with vocational adjustment; employees in ‘dirty’ work often are deprived of “intrinsic rewards such as job satisfaction, engagement and opportunity for career advancement” (Simpson et al., 2012, p. 1).

### 3. Vocational adjustment in invisible ‘dirty’ work

Most people have a fundamental need to feel like they belong (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015; Maslow, 1968). People who feel like they belong and matter are more likely to report positive health indicators, including greater self-esteem, lower depression and anxiety, better immune functioning, and more positive affect (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The positive effects of inclusion extend to vocational adjustment (Shore et al., 2011). For example, employees perceiving greater belongingness at work are more likely to engage in helping behaviors (Den Hartog, De Hoogh, & Keegan, 2007) and experience meaning in their work (McClure & Brown, 2008).

Feeling invisible, however, as well as performing ‘dirty’ work, may threaten this basic need for inclusion. Extensive research supports the notion of a “reflected or looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902, p. 184), whereby people look to others to help form their sense of self (Goffman, 1959, 1963a, 1963b). Indeed, several empirical studies have supported the importance of outsiders’ validation and affirmation in order to bolster one’s self-esteem and identity, especially at work (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Dutton et al., 2016; van Vuuren, Teurlings, & Bohlmeijer, 2012). According to the social valuing perspective, employees gauge how others treat them to appraise their sense of worth and importance (Dutton et al., 2016). Interactions with coworkers and customers therefore offer opportunities for valuing and/or devaluing acts (Dutton et al., 2016). When employees feel valued, they also report greater meaning in their work (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

Thus, social recognition is an important resource that many employees value. According to conservation of resources (COR) theory, people are motivated to seek and preserve phenomena of value, and often experience stress when they feel that their resources are lacking or being threatened (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Important resources for people’s well-being include feeling noticed, included, and valued (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dutton et al., 2016). When these resources are denied, as is the case with invisibility and ‘dirty’ work, there could be negative consequences for employees’ well-being. Indeed, extensive evidence suggests that social rejection carries harmful consequences for direct targets as well as bystanders and broader society (for reviews, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hartgerink et al., 2015; Williams, 2007).

The negative effects of rejection may be exacerbated in the context of invisible ‘dirty’ work. COR theory can account for why some employees may negatively appraise invisibility and interpret it as a stressful event. On the other hand, some employees may appraise invisibility more positively, especially if they seek to escape the “nightmare of participation” (Kolowratnik & Miessen, 2012) that permeates modern work. Thus, the question guiding this study remains intentionally broad: *How do workers experience invisibility?*

### 4. Research context: building cleaning as invisible ‘dirty’ work

Given our interest in the lived experience of invisibility, we selected an “extreme” research and theoretical context (Yin, 2013) for the current study: janitors<sup>2</sup> in building cleaning. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018):

Janitors and building cleaners keep many types of buildings clean, orderly, and in good condition. ... Most janitors and building cleaners work indoors, but some work outdoors part of the time, sweeping walkways, mowing lawns, and shoveling snow. They spend most of the day walking, standing, or bending while cleaning. Sometimes they must move or lift heavy supplies and equipment. As a result, the work may be strenuous on the back, arms, and legs. Some tasks, such as cleaning restrooms and trash areas, can be dirty and unpleasant.

As mentioned, building cleaning involves invisible work; indeed, some scholars assert that “invisibility is a fundamental characteristic of cleaning work” (Abasabanye, Bailly, & Devetter, in press). That is, invisibility becomes part-and-parcel of building cleaning, given the way that this occupation is structured and managed. Thus, building cleaning is invisible for several reasons, including sociocultural, spatial, and temporal mechanisms (Hatton, 2017; Hood, 1988).

First, sociocultural ideologies, such as perceptions of ‘dirty’ work, render this occupation invisible. Building cleaning involves at least two types of ‘dirt’: physical (cleaners work in noxious conditions and are associated with the trash and bodily fluids they clean); and social (cleaners are subservient in their customer relations, organizations, and broader society). Additionally, cleaning involves

<sup>2</sup> Although the Bureau of Labor Statistics uses the term ‘janitor’, most of our participants preferred the term ‘custodian’ or ‘building cleaner’, so we defer to their language.

tasks that are historically and culturally associated with women, whose labor in general is often naturalized, thankless, undervalued, and therefore rendered invisible (e.g., Fletcher, 1999; Simpson & Lewis, 2005).

Second, spatial and temporal mechanisms conceal building cleaning (and cleaners) from the customers they serve. Building cleaners often work alone and late at night or early in the morning, making them physically and socially isolated from coworkers and customers. Further, power dynamics may reduce the likelihood and quality of interactions between cleaners and customers in the event they do cross paths. For example, Messing (1998) observed how hospital cleaners felt invisible when doctors excluded them (e.g., not inviting them to social events) and when customers disregarded their presence (e.g., throwing trash on the ground next to cleaners). In a similar vein, Brody (2006) views invisibility as an “illusion” (p. 544) wherein cleaners are “manipulated so as to be largely invisible to the consuming middle-class public” (p. 542).

Taken together, building cleaning is often hidden from view via institutional practices as well as rendered invisible by occupational outsiders who either cannot or do not acknowledge cleaners. Thus, building cleaning is an important and valuable context for understanding when, how, and why workers experience and make sense of invisibility.

## 5. Method

The overarching research question guiding this study is: *How do employees experience invisibility?* Using an inductive approach, we discovered how employees encounter invisibility and make sense of these experiences.

### 5.1. Epistemology and methodology

This study examines the *lived experience* of invisibility: the ways that people perceive and describe invisibility emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially. Our methodology is guided by our beliefs that invisibility is difficult to observe, and that people vary widely in the meanings they ascribe to invisibility. Given our interest in employees' experiences and interpretations of invisibility, we draw from *phenomenology*, “the studies of essences...the conscious experience of how a person relates to the lived world that she or he inhabits” (Orbe, 2000, p. 605; see also Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Griffin and May (2012) describe phenomenology as a field of philosophy “which seeks to understand what it is like for an individual to experience at first hand the phenomena of the world” (p. 442).

Phenomenology is particularly useful and important for understanding phenomena “that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation” (Sanders, 1982, p. 354), such as invisibility. Phenomenological research designs include three steps: choosing a phenomenon to investigate, collecting data, and conducting phenomenological data analysis (Sanders, 1982). Our phenomenon of interest is the lived experience of invisibility (step 1), so we collected data from building cleaners, who are experts given their involvement in invisible work (step 2). Finally, we interpreted detailed narratives from a subset of building cleaners (step 3). For more information about phenomenology in organizational research, see Sanders (1982) and Gill (2014).

Our epistemology and methodology also draw from feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), which reject the notion of objectivity and instead acknowledge the ways that power and social location shape the way knowledge is created, shared, and legitimized. Standpoint theorists also assert that people who have been marginalized are uniquely (and, often, best) situated to generate theory. We combine these methods to emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality and the ways that lived experiences are shaped by people's social location and relationships to power.

### 5.2. Procedure

We first surveyed 199 building cleaners across sixteen workgroups at a large public Midwestern university. Cleaners completed the survey during work hours and were not individually compensated for their participation. We provided refreshments at each survey administration and a \$10 USD prize to every tenth participant to submit a survey. All 199 cleaners who elected to participate provided complete data. The survey contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. We interpreted participants' responses to open-ended questions: *What are the best aspects of your work? What are the worst aspects of your work? What has been your greatest heartache in your job? What has been your greatest joy at work?*

Given the importance of the richness of people's lived experiences to phenomenology, we felt that one-on-one conversations with participants were important for supplementing our inductive analysis. We invited all survey participants to participate in follow-up conversations (outside of work hours) in exchange for \$50 USD. About half of participants were interested ( $n = 111$ ). We selected a random sample of fifteen cleaners (of whom twelve agreed) to participate in semi-structured conversations with the first author ( $M_{\text{length}} = 130$  min). Conversations were organic and free-flowing with the exception of some structured questions designed to capture an abbreviated life history, identify significant workplace experiences, and collect more details in response to spontaneous discussions of invisibility (which occurred in all conversations). All conversations were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed.

### 5.3. Participants

The survey sample included 108 men, 77 women, and 14 participants who did not report their gender. On average, participants were 43 years old ( $SD_{\text{years}} = 12.5$ ), with ages ranging from 19 to 67. Forty-one participants (20.6%) did not report their age. Approximately 25% of custodians were aged 19–30; 25% were aged 31–45; 25% were aged 46–51; and the remaining 25% were aged

52 and older. Tenure in one's current position ranged from two weeks to 52 years ( $M_{\text{years}} = 9.33$ ,  $SD_{\text{years}} = 9.27$ ). With respect to race/ethnicity, participants identified as Native American ( $n = 8$ ), Asian or Asian American ( $n = 13$ ), Latina/o ( $n = 18$ ), Black ( $n = 49$ ), and/or White ( $n = 97$ ); 24 participants did not share their race/ethnicity. Most cleaners ( $n = 155$ ; 78%) were born in the U.S., and 28 (14%) were born in another country (sixteen did not report their birth country). The demographics of the interview subsample were similar to the characteristics of our full sample and the larger community.

#### 5.4. Data analysis

According to Griffin and May (2012), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an inductive technique that generates theory by centering the experiences of “knowers” (p. 448; for more information about IPA, see Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is important when studying marginalized groups, given its attention to people “whose voice[s] may otherwise be suppressed by the prevailing assumptions that others may make about them” (IPA; Griffin & May, 2012, p. 448). As Smith (2004) states, one outcome of IPA is a better understanding of “both the important generic themes in the analysis, but also about the life world of the particular participants who have told their stories” (p. 42).

To conduct our IPA, we entered survey and interview data into Dedoose, a web-based program that facilitates mixed-methods research. We conducted open coding to identify all text excerpts that described experiences of invisibility, then triangulated open-ended survey data with interview data. While seeking to retain and privilege participants' own words and experiences, we identified general themes to help interpret their experiences: types of invisibility experiences; appraisals of invisibility; and mechanisms of invisibility. The specific codes, on the other hand, were informed by participants' lived experiences. Across these steps, we distinguished between direct quotes from participants and our interpretations of their experiences. At times, we made slight edits to participants' stories for clarity.

## 6. Results

Below we describe the three themes that guided our analysis of participants' experiences: types of invisibility experiences; appraisals of invisibility; and mechanisms of these experiences.

### 6.1. Types of invisibility experiences

Several themes emerged in our analyses. The first theme pertained to the types of invisibility that participants described experiencing: invisibility *at work* and *of work*.

#### 6.1.1. Invisibility at work

The most common type of invisibility that participants described was embedded in interpersonal interactions. We interpret these experiences as interpersonal invisibility, or *invisibility at work*. Participants often felt invisible when interacting with their customers—namely, students and faculty on campus. Paradoxically, participants felt most invisible when they *could* be seen by others but were treated as though they could not be seen. One participant described “not being noticed when entering a room...[no] simple ‘hello’ or ‘thank you’.” Their usage of the word ‘simple’ suggests how customers can, in the cleaner's view, rather easily cease rendering the cleaner invisible—yet for some reason this is not an accessible, feasible, or desirable response. One cleaner described her greatest heartache at work as “how people can pass you by as if you're invisible as you work.” The verb ‘can’ implies that when customers are able to interact with cleaners, they often do not. Another cleaner described feeling “needed but not looked at.” This suggests how cleaners feel that their customers sometimes recognize the importance and necessity of their work yet refuse to acknowledge the people performing this work. Together, these responses suggest how cleaners are *rendered* invisible—that is, made to feel invisible when they can be seen.

Although many cleaners work alone and overnight, the frequency of social interactions with coworkers and/or customers varied depending on the shift and building context. Even some workers assigned to the night shift had opportunities to interact with customers, especially in buildings with greater foot traffic in the evening hours (e.g., libraries, student centers, some research facilities). At times customers rendered cleaners' labor invisible in these interactions. Other participants felt invisible when they initiated social interactions with customers and were subsequently ignored. One participant described one of the worst aspects of her work as when “you say ‘good morning’ and they [customers] look right thru you” [sic]. Similarly, another cleaner responded, “when you say hello or greet someone they will ignore you.” Someone else's worst part of job was “when people don't acknowledge us.” A few survey participants identified one of the worst parts of their job as “not being recognized by people in building.”

Non-recognition took on several meanings for participants, including not being greeted, called by name, or appreciated. For example, one participant felt invisible because “occupants don't show appreciation for our work or acknowledge us.” Another cleaner directly addressed the first author—a student at the time of data collection—and shared that “y'all [students] look right past us ... Like [we] not even there,” again emphasizing the role of customers in further rendering custodians ‘unseen’ in what is already invisible work. One cleaner described feeling hurt when “doing a good job and no one notices,” but did not specify if ‘one’ refers to customers, coworkers, and/or managers.

Although participants were hired by the organization directly (i.e., not subcontracted), one cleaner described invisibility as follows: “how are we really not considered to be staff, students or faculty. So who are we??” For this cleaner, invisibility was experienced as alienation from the organization. This quote also suggests how invisibility may affect other social processes at work,

including identity formation and organizational identification.

Several participants used metaphors to make sense of invisibility at work, such as feeling “like a shadow”, a ghost (e.g., customers “look right through you”), or as a non-human. This imagery shows how cleaners experience invisibility as ghostliness and dehumanization. Together, participants' interpretations reveal the multiple meanings of invisibility, including customers' failure to: ask for, learn, and remember cleaners' names; initiate or return cleaners' eye contact or greetings; or express appreciation and gratitude for cleaners' work. Cleaners often felt that customers pretended they didn't exist and went out of their way to avoid social interactions. By and large, participants experienced invisibility when they were not acknowledged, greeted, or thanked, and thereby denied recognition.

### 6.1.2. Invisibility of work

Cleaners also described how their social and vocational context rendered their labor invisible. We interpret these experiences as *invisibility of work*, or non-recognition of labor and the occupation itself. First, for cleaners to do their jobs is to render their labor invisible. Cleaning work involves the removal of dirt and bacteria, by nature an invisible task. Thus, many customers fail to notice cleaners' labor until it is not done at all (e.g., they arrive to work and see an overflowing trash bin). Further, many cleaners are assigned to shifts that extend late into the night or early in the morning, thereby minimizing their opportunities for interactions with others, whether coworkers or customers. Thus, these working conditions predispose workers to invisibility.

One person described how cleaning “work [is] not recognized.” Other cleaners described not receiving credit or acknowledgement for their work from managers. Another shared experience was the tendency for customers to treat custodians' work as if it were invisible—for example, ignoring ‘Caution’ signs and treading through freshly mopped or waxed floors. As another custodian described,

Oh, [students] definitely get in my way. They don't really care what I'm doing. You know, I'll be trying to mop the floor... They'll see that, and they'll just go use it anyway. It's like, “All right. I guess I'll wait another 5 minutes.” Little stuff like that.

Such disregard for custodians' work carries a number of consequences, including elevating the risk of an occupational hazard (for customers and cleaners alike), ruining custodians' hard work, and possibly intensifying their workload or putting cleaners at risk for disciplinary action.

The invisibility that characterizes some vocations, including cleaning and overnight work, is a potential chronic threat to people's needs for self-worth, recognition, and meaningful existence. As one participant described, “A lot of time your work, even though you're doin' a good job, it's gonna go unnoticed,” due to customers' absentmindedness, or their absence, given the prevalence of night shifts in this vocational context.

## 6.2. Appraisals of invisibility

The next theme includes participants' descriptions, and our interpretations, of what it feels like to be invisible at work. Here we explore the affective and cognitive aspects of experiencing invisibility.

### 6.2.1. Shame

Some participants felt ashamed when they were rendered invisible. Shame is an emotion typically experienced in response to a perceived moral transgression, and may be common among people who perform ‘dirty’ work (e.g., Rivera & Tracy, 2014). One cleaner felt “like they want to shoo me away” when customers failed to initiate or return eye contact. He went on to describe additional ways that the vocational context of ‘dirty’ work shaped some recurring episodes of invisibility (and ensuing shame):

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.” At the same time, guys are in the stalls next to each other and taking a dump and they're talking so maybe it's just [that] they're kids. ... “I'm right here,” I screamed one time. I'm thinking in my head, “Why are you doing this? I'm right here, like I'm invisible.”

This participant first acknowledges a social norm in his cultural context—that certain bodily emissions (e.g., flatulence, defecation) are reserved for private spaces. He feels invisible when others perform these bodily emissions in his presence. The lack of embarrassment among the customers of his ‘dirty’ work make him feel “little.” He also attributes this behavior to a lack of maturity, describing his customer (adults) as “kids.” In recounting this experience, he described varied emotions, including amusement (“laughing about it”), astonishment (“Wow, dude, I'm here”), and shame (“you really don't care about my opinion at all”). To make sense of this experience, the cleaner pretends to make himself more visible using imagined dialogue with his customer (“I'm here”), or actually makes himself more visible (“I'm right here”, I screamed one time”). This experience suggests how invisibility appears to be part-and-parcel of the stigma associated with ‘dirty’ work, and can sometimes elicit feelings of shame; in turn, shame and ‘dirt’ help to further reify and naturalize invisibility.

### 6.2.2. Fear and anxiety

Other employees—primarily women—associated invisibility with appraisals of fear and anxiety. One custodian recounted how his supervisor, a woman, felt uncomfortable because “guys still walk in [the bathroom], unzip [their pants], try and handle their business [i.e., urinate] right in front of her like she's not there.” In many organizations, exposing one's genitals would be viewed as sexual

harassment; yet this same behavior appears more normalized in the vocational context of building cleaning, despite the ways this form of invisibility can spark feelings of discomfort and violation.

Another participant experienced invisibility as a lack of comfort or safety. She asserted that “for the most part, it’s safer when you’re in and around other people.” She also described how she would encourage younger women custodians to work in more populated areas. Another woman shared this sentiment, often feeling discomfort and unease when working alone and overnight (as was often the case). This participant, a Black woman, also sometimes encountered homeless people seeking shelter in the academic building she cleaned, putting her in the challenging of position of wanting to feel safe while also not wanting to displace the people seeking shelter (and avoiding involving law enforcement, in the interest of all parties involved). For these participants, they interpreted invisibility as not being around other people, or as being around people who made them feel unsafe; in turn, invisibility was associated with feelings of discomfort, fear, and/or anxiety.

### 6.2.3. Sadness

Some cleaners felt sad when they experienced and made sense of invisibility. One cleaner shared how feeling invisible “gets [to] you. Like you not even there” [sic]. Another participant used sarcasm to describe the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effect of invisibility: “It’s funny how a job can make you feel like you’re not even a person.” To temper the pain that some participants experienced in response to feeling invisible, they took actions to render themselves more invisible. One 33-year-old White man complained about “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.”

### 6.2.4. Resignation

Other participants described ‘making peace’ with invisibility—accepting it as a feature of their job, without necessarily enjoying it. As one cleaner shared,

I do love the headphones part ... When I walk through a bunch of students here... I don't see them looking at me. They kind of see through me, which is actually okay. It's fine. Especially when I have my headphones in, I think that they understand that I don't want to talk to them as much as they don't want to talk to me but it's nice getting compliments like, “Hey, you do a great job here,” and, “Hey, I’ve never seen a building so maintained before,” stuff like that.

This participant expressed his appreciation for being able to wear headphones while working, serving the dual purpose of providing entertainment during otherwise tedious work as well as creating a barrier between himself and customers. When interacting with students (or attempting to), this participant usually felt invisible (“I don’t see them looking at me. They kind of see through me...”). Although he laments not receiving more appreciation and recognition for his work, he finds some comfort in at least being able to acknowledge the mutual aversion. This participant feels that customers’ aversion stems from snobbery and classism, whereas his aversion stems from a desire to avoid such behaviors (and, by extension, the people ignoring him). This same participant went on to share how he coped with feeling invisible at work:

Yeah, lately the less that I say to people about anything, the better I’m doing. I mean, heck, even lately, nobody knows this but I’ve kind of put on like a, ‘I’m sad’ face... I don’t want people to hate me. But like a, ‘I’m sad, don’t mess with me, I’m having a bad day’ kind of face and it’s totally not true. That’s actually my way of making myself even more invisible.

Similar to the headphones, the “sad face” the participant puts on is both reflection and reification of the class-based divides he experiences between him and the customers, primarily wealthy students. He thus enacts emotional labor (in the form of sadness and avoidance) in efforts to create further distance from those who try to relegate him to the margins.

A few employees did the exact opposite, taking actions to make themselves ‘seen’. Some of these employees would try to gain the attention of customers who ignored their greetings. Others went out of their way to craft connections with customers who appeared to take interest in their work and lives. This was especially the case when cleaners were responsible for cleaning a single building (vs. multiple buildings or a rotating schedule). Some cleaners maintained connections with customers even after being assigned to clean another area in the organization.

### 6.2.5. Acceptance and relief

Conversely, there were times when cleaners favorably experienced the invisible nature of cleaning work, especially when contrasted with the surveillance and micro-management common among many supervisors. For one employee, “The less I see of [supervisors], makes me feel like there’s less that’s wrong.” Another participant appreciated how “a lot of times you are working alone, meaning someone is not hovering over you all day.”

Other employees seemed to welcome the invisibility often experienced in cleaning work and did not appraise non-recognition as stressful. For example, several employees stated that the best aspect of their work was working independently and in quiet conditions. One participant enjoyed being able “to engage in conversations with others or choose not to,” and another appreciated how they could go their whole shift without talking to anyone. These appraisals largely depended on contextual factors, including building environment (e.g., amount of foot traffic), shift, and supervisor (e.g., level of micro-management). Several people enjoyed being able to listen to music or motivational talk radio while they worked. A few employees described struggling with debilitating anxiety and PTSD; their vocational choice helped temper negative thoughts and feelings associated with interacting with others.

For other employees, invisibility was met with acceptance; participants described feeling “okay with being invisible and independent” and shared that they “do get used to it after a certain amount of time.” One woman reported that invisibility “helped me

understand the concept of humility.” Another woman shared, “I don't care what anyone thinks of me. The quality of my work is what matters.” Others were more ambivalent about their experiences with invisibility. One woman shared, “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.”

Some employees assigned to the night shift reported feeling isolated. As mentioned, this isolation manifested feelings of fear (and actual risk for violence) among some women. One White man in his 20s described feeling isolated as follows:

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, looked cool. Nobody talked to me. I never got picked on through high school because of that but I never associated myself with other people. Now that I'm actually comfortable in social situations, I still just want to hang out in the back. ... Introverted, that's what I am. ... I'm okay with being invisible and independent.

For this cleaner, invisibility was experienced as the lack of mistreatment; just as his introversion enabled him to “never [g]et picked on”, so his invisibility protects him from potentially uncomfortable or upsetting interactions with customers. He also connected his appraisal of invisibility to his personality traits (e.g., introverted, independent), perhaps resisting the invisibility imposed on him. Similarly, another participant shared, “Sometimes you just don't wanna be around nobody.” Thus, some aspects of personality—including independence and introversion—may attenuate the negative impact of invisibility on vocational adjustment.

Finally, a subset of employees described how invisibility helped to promote vocational adjustment. For some participants, anticipating chronic invisibility at work shaped their vocational choices. Even among employees who did not enjoy or benefit from feeling invisible, anticipating invisibility provided realistic expectations about their vocation. It is possible that anticipating mistreatment may help attenuate its negative impact, especially in stigmatized occupations. One participant who cleaned a professional school described invisibility as something he expected when entering the vocation. Another participant stated, “I mean, I wasn't expecting any amount of respect, or gratitude, or anything like that.” Similarly, another participant stated: “I think a lot of [students] probably look down on me a little bit, you know? I'm a custodian. It kind of goes with the job, I guess.” He went on to say:

I notice that people treat me a little different, but since I'm a little bit more on the friendly side, and I'm a White, adult male, I get a certain amount of respect for that, which is kind of weird. Yeah, I definitely get looks sometimes. Or, people will see that I'm a janitor, you know? I'll have to talk to them, and they don't seem really like they want to talk.

This participant concluded by saying “I mean, it is what it is,” suggesting some amount of resignation or tempered acceptance of invisibility at/of work. He also acknowledges how his social location has shaped his experiences; for example, as a White man, he felt he received more recognition than his coworkers, including his supervisor, a Black woman.

### 6.3. Mechanisms of invisibility

Finally, we wanted to examine the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate invisibility of janitorial labor. Some participants' responses enabled us to identify several mechanisms that might explain why and how they have been rendered invisible at work.

#### 6.3.1. Class injury

When discussing experiences of invisibility, participants most frequently described interactions with customers—namely, students and faculty. The most common attribution, particularly from White participants, involved class injury and differences. Many cleaners perceived students and faculty to be entitled and dismissive. One cleaner complained about “ignorant people who don't acknowledge your presence because they think you're beneath them.” Some participants compared their experiences of invisibility to those of other marginalized groups who also experience social exclusion, whether due to their occupational status (e.g., food service personnel) or stigmatized identity (e.g., homeless people).

As stated by one cleaner, “Some people don't even want to see us while working [but] I am just as good or better than some of the people who don't want to see us while we work.” Similarly, a cleaner lamented feeling treated as though she were “there but not there. They [customers] really don't want to see us.” These quotes reveal two important aspects of invisibility. First, and paradoxically, invisibility requires visibility; one first notices someone else before rendering them invisible (“there but not there”). Second, the quotes reveal a key factor that may motivate people to treat cleaners as though they are invisible: discomfort from and/or disinterest in cross-class interactions. Stating that others “don't want to see us” emphasizes the accountability that cleaners desired from customers, who intentionally choose to ‘unsee’ cleaners. Consistent with these attributions, a number of participants explicitly mentioned customers' wealth and sense of entitlement as explanations for their invisible treatment of cleaners.

#### 6.3.2. Situational context

Other cleaners suggested that the reasons for invisibility might depend on the situational context. Several participants suggested that invisibility is a byproduct of customers' personalities, including busyness or absentmindedness. One cleaner stated: “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.” According to a White man in his 20s,

... they just overlook you. I mean so, they just don't really think much of you. They don't know go out of their way to say, “hi” or “bye” or say anything to you. They just kinda see you workin' or whatever. Or they might see you one place and they might go the other direction if they do see you. Or you know – you do get that, you do get that. Like I said, but it goes back. It depends on the building, it depends on the people. Like I said, I can't sit here and say that's every person.

This participant views the likelihood of encountering invisibility at work depends on the building environment and the types of people he encounters. In the conversation with the lead author, he also implies that the people most likely to treat him as though he's invisible are students and faculty, rather than lower-status staff (e.g., administrative assistants, food service personnel), coworkers, or supervisors. Although not all building occupants treat him (and his work) as though they're invisible, it was still a relatively common experience that shaped his vocational experience. Other participants shared his perspective, suggesting that their work environment – including shift, building layout, and foot traffic patterns – shaped their exposure to (and attributions for) invisibility from customers.

## 7. Discussion

Service workers consistently rank appreciation for work and favorable interpersonal relations as some of their most desired job characteristics (van Quaquebeke, Zenker, & Eckloff, 2009), yet participation in invisible ‘dirty’ work may deny employees systematically of appreciation and favorable treatment. Recognition may be denied continually in work that is deemed ‘dirty’ and rendered invisible, contexts wherein employees are physically and/or socially sequestered from coworkers as well as the customers they serve. Together, this context—the nexus of ‘dirty’ work, service work, and invisible work—may present unique experiences of stress and resistance not yet considered in the vocational psychology literature. Our results shed light on how and why people experience workplace invisibility. By focusing on employees at the margins of organizational life and research, and by centering the social context and lived experiences of low-status workers, we hope to illuminate sources of stress, health, and resistance that may be missing from dominant paradigms.

The narratives that cleaners shared illustrate the diverse ways that people make sense of invisibility in ‘dirty’ work. Their interpretations may also stem from the different ways invisibility was *imposed* on them, whether culturally, spatially, and/or temporally. The narratives illustrated when cleaners feel invisible—namely when customers ignore their presence or work. Second, we examined how cleaners feel when they experience invisibility. People's social location and their situational context shaped how they appraised invisibility, whether with shame, sadness, anger, helplessness, ambivalence, or relief. Finally, we identified why cleaners felt others rendered them, and their work, invisible. Their narratives revealed several mechanisms, including cultural (e.g., customers' perceptions of ‘dirty’ work; discomfort with cross-class interactions), spatial (e.g., isolation from coworkers), and temporal (e.g., night shift). Our findings suggest that a confluence of institutional practices and social representations of ‘dirty’ work operate synergistically to produce, sustain, and reify various kinds of invisibilities. In this way, invisibility is an intersubjective phenomenon characterized by shared meanings.

### 7.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study offers several contributions to further invisibility research and theory. First, we provide empirical evidence for, and extensions of, organizational theories of invisibility. For example, we build on work by Hatton (2017) by examining how people negotiate and make sense of invisibility. By focusing on invisibility as a phenomenon, we also identified a central paradox: workers most often felt invisible when they were in fact visible. People experienced invisibility when they saw customers notice them, but subsequently ignore or ‘unsee’ them. These experiences reflect the duality of (in)visibility: noticing (visibility) is a prerequisite for non-recognition (invisibility). Participants also experienced invisibility when their work was hidden (e.g., night shifts) or ignored (e.g., customers disregarding a caution sign and walking across a freshly waxed floor). This second subtheme demonstrates how when customers could see—but chose to ignore—cleaners' labor, cleaners themselves felt invisible. We therefore argue that intersubjectivity - the dynamic interplay between work, social interaction, and embodied work identities - is a critical element of invisibility. Research on invisibility therefore ought to foreground the willful disengagement of customers and identify the mechanisms that naturalize such practices. In that spirit, by foregrounding intersubjectivity, our research makes an important theoretical contribution in furthering our understanding of invisibility as part-and-parcel of ‘dirty’ work and boundary maintenance.

Second, our findings show how invisibility may differentially affect vocational adjustment as a function of workers' interpretations. For employees who felt upset when customers failed to notice or appreciate their work, invisibility might feel like social devaluing (Dutton et al., 2016) and “interfere with the satisfaction of seeing the results of their work” (Ghidina, 1992, p. 81). When employees felt hypervisible – whether scrutinized by supervisors or objectified in the community surrounding the organization – they seemed to feel more dispassionately about, and accepting of, invisibility. Several employees ‘embraced’ invisibility as a form of resistance, whether eschewing interactions with rude, entitled customers or escaping the “nightmare of participation” (Kolowratnik & Miessen, 2012) that many managers mandate. Some participants engaged in strategic invisibility (Lollar, 2015), such as wearing headphones or lowering one's gaze, to avoid interpersonal interactions or mitigate the pain of being ignored. Other participants enacted behaviors to make themselves more available, accessible, and seen—to seek, demand, and claim recognition and appreciation that was not easily or consistently bestowed. Together, these findings illustrate the complex ways that invisibility affects vocational adjustment and well-being, including belonging, meaning, safety, and satisfaction at work.

Our findings also show how invisibility reflects, and may reinforce, power dynamics in organizations and broader society. As Simpson et al. (2012) describe, “avoidance rules mean that occupations which deal with polluting, physical dirt are carried out by members of lower classes who are separated spatially and socially from other groups” (p. 3). Our findings suggest that invisibility may be a manifestation, as well as a cause, of such “avoidance rules” that permeate ‘dirty’ work. For example, people with greater class privilege, socioeconomic power, and organizational status (e.g., facilities managers; institutional administrators) render workers (and their work) invisible by assigning people to work alone and overnight, separated from coworkers and customers. In this way, invisibility is engineered and normalized through organizational practices. Cleaners' narratives also revealed how power relations may

in part produce invisibility. Several cleaners mentioned the ways that class divides, as manifested by customers' entitlement and sense of superiority, explain why customers render workers invisible. Our findings show how customers are a key group of stakeholders that may set and reinforce class-based “avoidance rules.” Some workers felt relieved by their isolation, given the ways it helped them avoid the consequences of abuses of power (e.g., micromanagement from supervisors; surveillance from racist/xenophobic community members). Thus, invisibility may function as both a cause and consequence of boundary maintenance (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) in organizations and broader society.

## 7.2. Limitations and future directions

This study combined two types of qualitative data from a convenience sample. Our survey was administered in English at a single time point, so our sample systematically excludes certain employees, including those with prolonged illness/disabilities and/or those who feel more comfortable communicating in languages other than English. More inclusive research practices, such as providing surveys and interview opportunities in multiple languages, will provide a fuller understanding of how workers experience invisibility in different cultural contexts. In the U.S. (and many colonial contexts), members of marginalized groups disproportionately perform ‘dirty’ work—including women, people of color, immigrants, and the intersections of these groups (e.g., Duffy, 2007; Simpson et al., 2012). More research is needed to understand how invisibility and dirty work are tied to race, gender, and class.

Second, we do not know the frequency of invisibility in cleaning work, much less other vocational contexts. It can be challenging to design survey and interview questions that capture acts of omission (i.e., absence of recognition or cultural representation; Fryberg & Eason, 2017). In our study, a participant's failure to discuss invisibility does not necessarily indicate that this phenomenon is not salient to them; rather, they simply chose not to mention it, for any number of reasons.<sup>3</sup> Thus, future studies could incorporate additional (and perhaps subtler) measures of invisibility in a range of occupations (both invisible work and visible work).

Third, our study focuses on invisibility as experienced by members of a marginalized group (i.e., cleaners). Future research could examine invisibility from the perspective of ‘offenders’, who—intentionally or not—may be complicit in undermining the dignity and working conditions of cleaners. For example, are customers aware of the ways they render cleaners (and their work) invisible? Could any interventions with customers alleviate workers' pain stemming from negative appraisals of invisibility? Further, incorporating the perspectives of ‘perceivers’ and ‘receivers’ could disentangle how appraisals of and attributions for invisibility may affect the coping process. For example, if employees perceive that others are rendering them invisible because of absent-mindedness vs. class injury, how do these attributions shape appraisals? This question awaits future research.

Our focus on a single occupation heeds calls for research sensitive to occupational context, but also presents limitations about generalizability. Given our emergent theory of invisibility as both reflection/reification of boundary maintenance (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), we would expect our findings to generalize to other contexts marked by stigma and/or low social regard. More research is needed to better understand how people's social location (e.g., race, gender, disability) shapes how they experience invisibility. For instance, some employees in invisible work may have encountered invisibility in other domains (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008), which could affect how they notice, appraise, and make sense of workplace invisibility. Our results might also extend to the experiences of employees who experience marginality absent occupational stigma. For instance, growing research indicates the paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility that women of color experience in professional sectors (Arifeen & Syed, 2016; Briscoe, 2009; McCluney & Rabelo, in press; Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, in press). Building this work, future research could use an intersectional lens (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) to examine connections among in/visibility, marginality, and well-being.

Despite these limitations, our study provides valuable insights about the relationship between invisibility and ‘dirty’ work which will shape future research on invisibility in other domains. Future work also could examine additional consequences of invisibility for organizational behavior and vocational adjustment, including voice behaviors, organizational citizenship behavior, and turnover/retention. Invisibility might also affect occupational health and workplace relationships. For example, when employees are isolated from their coworkers and managers (whether virtually, temporally, or spatially), how might this affect disclosure of workplace injuries or job demands? Further, what is the long-term effect of experiencing workplace invisibility? For example, employees may experience stress, dissatisfaction, and low self-worth when they negatively appraise invisibility.

Future research could also examine when, why, and how workers experience different types of invisibility. Our research suggests that there are at least two kinds of invisibilities that people who perform ‘dirty’ work face: *self-protecting invisibility* and *alienating invisibility*. For some of our participants, invisibility seemed self-protective against strain associated with scrutiny from supervisors and stigma from customers. More research is needed to better understand when, and for whom, invisibility is experienced as self-protective, and how self-protective invisibility affects person-organization fit. By contrast, *alienating invisibility* may be culturally situated. For example, in a study of janitors in India, suffering was magnified among janitors from Dalit caste groups (previously treated as “untouchables”; Mahalingam, Jagannatham, & Selvaraj, in press). Such intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) casts Dalit janitors as “ungreivable” subjects due to the naturalization of their suffering and invisibility. More research is needed to understand how social location, micro-practices (e.g., interpersonal interactions), and macro processes (e.g., institutional practices, organizational structures) shape when, why, and how people experience workplace alienation and belonging.

<sup>3</sup> We thank a reviewer for making this point.

## 8. Conclusions

To conclude, we find that cleaning labor is rendered invisible, with cleaners consistently unable to be seen (or treated as though they're unable to be seen—"They really don't want to see us"). Treating others as though they are invisible can send the message that marginalized groups are not worthy of human interaction, appreciation, or respect. As Suchman (1995) states, "the further removed we are from the work of others, the more simplified, often stereotyped, our view of their work becomes" (p. 59). We found that invisibility helps to explain—and perpetuate—such "removal" for people in invisible 'dirty' work. Thus, invisibility is an inter-subjective, socially constructed behavior that reflects and reifies boundaries, including class divides. Regardless of how invisibility is experienced, appraised, or attributed, we believe that managerial practices and social interactions can be improved to increase the dignity and well-being of invisible workers, especially those in devalued occupations.

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