

Why we should think before we judge "dirty" professions

Written by

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Some professions might be considered "dirty" by outsiders but many of them are necessary for society to function

Throughout human history, certain professions have been considered "dirty work". These are those which run contrary to accepted moral or social norms, as well as those considered physically dirty. In modern society, this includes a wide and diverse spectrum of professions from investment bankers to estate agents, used car salespeople and many more.

We are conditioned to be biased against those who work in these "immoral" professions and so, even when we know very little about them, we stigmatise them.

This has psychological consequences for these workers, who risk internalising the stigma, making it necessary for them to adopt certain defensive mechanisms to protect their self-esteem. Work is, after all, more than just a way to make money – it is often one of the main ways we define ourselves.

Lifting stigmas could serve a wider societal function

Research has shown two basic tactics used by people in these lines of work. The first is social comparison: to position themselves against others in the same tainted field. This might be a hierarchy within a professional field, with certain types of workers considering themselves better than others. A bank loan adviser compared to a payday loan provider, for example. Or it might be to say an individual or firm is more sincere than their peers.

The second is "reframing" or restating the purpose for which the work exists. For example, a salesperson may restate the purpose of their subgroup as serving and helping customers. A hedge fund manager may claim that her activities help to maintain market efficiency. One of the principal ways of doing this is "social proofing" – referring to previous successes or the positive testimonies of previous clients.

Judgement from outside

These tactics have been shown to be effective in helping to preserve the self-esteem of workers. This, however, leads us to question if these tactics help to change how others think of them.

Researchers from Ruhr-University of Bochum and I set out to answer this in three studies, using salespeople as our subjects. Overall, we found that while reframing through social proofing is effective in counteracting some of the effects of stigmatisation, social comparisons only serve to reinforce the stigma.

The first study was conducted in the fashion retail industry over the course of a year, during which time nearly 130,000 transactions were made. We saw that sales volume was notably higher among salespeople who leaned more on social proofing than social comparison, indicating that the former is more effective in building trust between the consumer and salesperson.

Work is one of the main ways we define ourselves

The second study, which also surveyed the perception of consumers related to the perceived immorality of salespeople, was conducted across a wide range of industries. Here, we found that when salespeople employ social comparisons,

customers' perceptions of salespeople's immorality actually increased – the opposite to the intended effect. Social proofing, on the other hand, decreased the perception of immorality.

The third study was conducted online, with participants choosing whether to complete a hypothetical purchase based on scripts that either leaned on social comparison or social proofing.

This once again confirmed the positive relationship between social proofing and successful sales, and the negative relationship with social comparisons. This test also confirmed that the greater the initial level of stigma, the more significant the positive or negative effect of employing either tactic.

Society needs dirty workers

Tactics of social proofing and social comparison may boost the self-affirmation of those who carry out dirty work. The effect on others is more complex, however.

It may be effective to point to past successes and the testimonies of previous clients. Making the claim that they are somehow different or less immoral than peers or competitors accentuates the initial impression of dirty workers' immorality, however. Conversely statements of confidence from others could make a significant positive impression.

Our paper shows how these workers can go some way to counterbalancing the effects of stigmatisation. The jobs may be "dirty", but like their historical antecedents like tanners and gong farmers, society needs many of them to function. Lifting stigmas, therefore, could serve a wider societal, as well as individual, function.

This article is based on findings from "[The Catch-22 of Countering a Moral Occupational Stigma in Employee-Customer Interactions](#)" by [Sven Mikolon](#) (Imperial Business School), [Sascha Alavi](#) (Ruhr-University of Bochum) and [Anika Reynders](#) (Ruhr-University of Bochum).

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Dr. Sven Mikolon is Associate Professor of Marketing at Imperial Business School. In his research, Sven bridges organisational psychology with strategic marketing. Specifically, he examines the influence of cognitive and motivational biases on key marketing outcomes, such as frontline workers' job performance and wellbeing.

Read [Sven's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

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