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## Dirty work as seriality

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### Abstract

The literature on dirty work has traditionally zoomed in on workplace studies of occupational groups stigmatized by some parts of society. In this paper the bias is challenged and extended with the aid of Iris Marion Young's appropriation of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *seriality* and an empirical study of workers with non-stigmatized occupations in stigmatized work contexts (arms and pornography). The study shows that the workers have to be constantly ready to deal with work-related dirt in their identity work and to do this without any means of support, development of a language or resistance to the transfer of dirt.

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### Introduction

Work-related dirt and identity work have traditionally been discussed in the literature on dirty work. This body of research has predominately focused on groups of workers that parts of society regard as physically, socially and/or morally discredited (seminal contributions include Hughes, 1951, and Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Contemporary examples from the literature are Ghidina's (1992) study of custodians, Dick's (2005) study of police officers, Tracy and Scott's (2006) study of firefighters and correctional officers, Ashforth et al's (2007) study of managers from 18 different dirty occupations, Drew, Mills and Gassaway's (2007) collection of papers on ten dirty occupations, Grandy's (2008) study of exotic dancers, Tyler's (2011) study of sex shop workers and Baran et al's (2012) study of animal-shelter workers.

There are at least two reasons why research on dirty work is important. One is that dirty work contributes to the understanding of work and working life in general. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 413) argue: "the study of dirty work and how dirty workers attempt to resolve the identity puzzle has much to teach organizational scholars about the negotiation of meaning in the *workplace*" (emphasis added). The other is that dirty workers are an especially vulnerable and exposed category of workers and that "*occupational* stigmas – as compared to other types of stigmas – may be especially damaging to an individual's identity" (Kreiner, Ashforth and Sluss 2006, p. 620, emphasis added). As Grandy (2008, p. 176) states, "the construction and maintenance of positive identities become even more problematic" in dirty work occupations.

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The focus of the dirty work literature has thus predominantly been on the workplace (at work) and at the occupational or work-group level. Mills, Drew and Gassaway report that regardless of whether occupations are high or low in prestige, dirty workers respond “by creating a strong occupational culture” (2007, p. 5). Baran et al argue that dirty workers “face the ongoing chore of identity management as a member of a distinct group (those who conduct dirty work) whose chief differentiating characteristic is an activity that they themselves often perceive as dirty through the lens of their role as members of a larger society” (2012, p. 600). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 419) state that:

Typically, although not always, attributions of dirtiness arise not because of the organizational membership or personal characteristics of individuals, but because of their occupational membership. Thus, it is the occupational group that is directly threatened, and it is as a group that the members typically respond [...]

The occupation or work-group facilitates a sense of belonging or group feeling and “a strong occupational or work-group culture provides the social resources needed to selectively attend to outsiders and to selectively engage in social comparisons” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 425). This group membership is highly salient for workers’ identity work. Identity work is therefore viewed as a collective effort that may or may not lead to collective solutions and as something that takes place within supposedly organized and unified settings. The occupation or the work-group is thus the key source of stigmatization. Although this makes identity work difficult it also constructs a social buffer, which allows the dirty worker to develop ways of coping with dirt.

However, assuming that dirty workers only exist as a category when they are at work, that they belong to a distinctive social category, that they are under evaluative scrutiny as a result and that they are insecure about the category’s social standing may lead to an underestimation of the struggles and complexities of individual identity work. There may also be a danger of excluding workers who suffer from work-related dirt but who do not feel that they belong to a collective of dirty workers.

The aim of this paper is therefore to challenge and extend the view of dirty work as a *workplace* phenomenon and as something that affects distinct *groups* of workers. To achieve this aim we enrol Iris Marion Young’s (1994) appropriation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1960/2004) concept of *seriality*, which offers a more sensitive way of thinking about dirty work. This is illustrated empirically in the paper by means of interviews with people with non-stigmatized occupations in stigmatized work contexts (the Swedish arms and pornography industries).

## Identity work and seriality

In the dirty work literature identity work is perceived as comprising questions such as who I am, with whom or what I identify, who we are and with whom (or what) we identify. Thus, identity has to be *worked* with in social contexts that describe, prescribe and evaluate social identities (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 3). Consequently, identity work is performed when “participants in an interaction aim to simplify and order the social environment by establishing the nature of their relationship to each other” (Bartell & Dutton, 2001, p. 120).

However, a collective group identity (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Kunda, 1992) are often exaggerated, and there seems to be a limited individual and situational sensitivity, even when dirty work scholars make explicit use of the social identity literature (cf. Ashforth & Kreiner 1999; Ashforth et al, 2007; Grandy, 2008; Baran et al, 2012; for an exception, see Dick, 2005). Such views risk missing out on an interaction process in which participants strive to establish a working consensus that regularly breaks down and where no agreement can be reached about a person’s claim being honoured (Goffman, 1959).

From the perspective taken in this paper, identity work is both a struggle and a contested area and implies boundary work between self-identity and different social identities in all areas of life (Albert et al., 2000; Collinson, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Watson & Harris, 1999; Watson, 2008). Hence, in this paper identity work is not primarily treated as a “single-issue campaign” that is dealt with collectively, but rather as “a bunch of problems” to be dealt with in situations that are “sliced into poorly coordinated fragments while our individual lives are cut into a succession of ill-connected episodes” (Bauman, 2004, pp. 12-13). The challenge is thus to abandon a mapping out or plotting of a “cohesive, firmly riveted and solidly constructed identity” (Bauman, 2004, p. 53), the finding of an optimal balance (as in Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006) or the maintenance of consistency (as in Lee & Lin, 2011).

Here, Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of seriality (*la sérialité*) and Iris Marion Young’s appropriation of it is useful. Sartre (1960/2004) develops the concept to address unconscious class membership and claims that even though a lot of structured action occurs in groups, structured action also takes place in series in “less organized and unself-conscious collective unity”

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(Young, 1994, p. 724). Young, who disagrees strongly with parts of Sartre's philosophy that she claims are "sexist" and "male biased" (1994, p. 723), makes use of those parts that she regards as useful for thinking about women as a series.

According to Sartre (1960/2004), seriality, or serially structured action, exists when people are brought together in relation to material objects, products, services (for instance when waiting for a bus or queuing at the post office) or "social practices", such as work tasks related to organized practice (Young, 1994, p. 725). Series, as Sartre (1960/2004) shows, exist in social organizations or ordered units, such as occupations, professions, organizations and industries. But Sartre also points out that series are the opposite of groups. In Young's words:

Though they are in this way a social collective, they do not identify with one another, do not affirm themselves as engaged in a shared enterprise [---]. Such serial activity, according to Sartre, is precisely the obverse of the mutual identification typical of a group. Each goes about his or her own business. But each is also aware of the serialized context of that activity in a social collective whose structure constitutes them within certain limits and constraints. [---] Thus in the series individuals are isolated but not alone. (Young, 1994, p. 725)

Woodly (2014), following Sartre (1960/2004) with regard to the difference between series and groups, observes that "most of the time people who are in serial relation will not recognize that relation as grounds for the formation of a group" (p. 11). The question of when a series becomes a group and vice versa is central to Sartre's (1960/2004) social analysis. For Sartre, this transformation can begin (what he calls *groupe-en-fusion*) when people discover that they share common interests and objective goals (Roumbanis, 2010). When they do not have anything in common, groups revert back into series. However, as Sartre shows, discovering, developing and maintaining mutual engagement and shared interests is a struggle. Established but especially emerging groups can thus revert back to a series. Regarding the emerging group, the critical moment is how the group manages to organize practically (*praxis organisée*; Roumbanis, 2010).

Having outlined the basics of the concept of seriality we now turn to why Young's appropriation of it is useful when thinking about identity work and dirty work. According to Young:

Membership in serial collectives define an individual's being, in a sense – one "is" a farmer, or a commuter, or a radio listener, and so on, together in series with others similarly positioned. But the definition is anonymous, and the unity of the series is amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions. (Young, 1994, p. 726)

From a serial perspective, dirty workers might share particular practices, or in Sartre's (1960/2004) vocabulary, material objects, with prior histories that position them as dirty, although this does not determine how dirt marks their lives. Membership of a category is thereby detached from identity in the sense that people who are members of a series are not necessarily pressed into particular identity frames. Membership may enable and constrain action, but "it does not define the person's identity in the sense of forming his or her individual purposes, projects, and sense of self in relation to others" (Young, 1994, p. 727). In her paper on gender as seriality, Young emphasizes that:

[e]ach person's identity is unique – the history and meaning she makes and develops from her dealings with other people, her communicative interactions through media, and her manner of taking up the particular serialized structures whose prior history position her. No individual woman's identity, then, will escape the markings of gender, but how gender marks her life is her own. (1994, p. 734)

On the same tangent, following Young's appropriation of seriality, Woodly argues that membership of a category says "nothing about what political and social problems people perceive, how they identify or whether they will organize" (2014, p. 16). Focusing on which structures orient diverse individuals subjected to inadequate employment, Woodly also argues that: "The benefit of the concept of seriality is that it begins to illuminate the ways that we can think of the inadequately employed as similarly structurally situated without minimizing the diversity of the group" (2014, p. 9). When targeting how categories are mobilized in welfare discourse, Taylor (1998, p. 339) argues that Young's "account illustrates the general issue of how to understand the way in which we can theorize the nature of social categories as collectivities yet not assume that these automatically generate a set of shared interests which are seen as the basis of identity".

Hence, thinking about dirty workers as a series rather than as an occupational or work-based group could open up for a more sensitive way of thinking about dirty workers by highlighting what previous research is "not in the habit of seeing"

(Woodly, 2014, p. 10). It may also encourage sensitivity to individual identity work related to work-related dirt. An extended definition of dirty workers based on seriality could therefore read: *Dirty workers are people who must always be ready to deal with work-related dirt in their identity work (as individuals in a variety of social contexts), but who may not identify with others suffering from similar stigma transfer, nor share a common enterprise, ideology or cause through which they can find support, develop a language and resist the transfer of dirt.* Illustrating the relevance and usefulness of such a definition, however, requires more than conceptual ideas. It also prompts alternative empirical material compared to previous studies.

## Research method

The cases that have so far dominated the dirty work literature are those in which the occupation is discredited and group feelings are assumed (see the introduction for examples), but where previous conceptualizations have also been criticized for being too limited. For example, Kreiner, Ashforth and Sluss (2006, p. 619) argue that previous efforts “have oversimplified the world of occupational stigmas, which unnecessarily limits our understanding of these diverse vocations, jobs, and occupations” (see also Baran et al, 2012). The breadth (high or low) and depth (high or low) of dirty work occupations also need to be considered more carefully in order to develop “a more inclusive typology of dirty work” (Kreiner et al, 2006: 620). The dirty work literature has so far been limited to occupations where breadth and depth are high and to those that “are socially defined by their strongly stigmatized tasks or work environment” (ibid, p. 621). Workers not addressed in the dirty work literature include those “where tasks are neither routinely nor strongly stigmatized” (ibid, p. 622), which in our view opens up for an alternative set of dirty workers.

In this paper, workers with non-stigmatized occupations in stigmatized work contexts are targeted. As they are defined here, such workers are not part of any top management team (which often is highly visible and therefore more explicitly associated with the stigmatized work context) and do not control core technologies needed for the organization to survive and be competitive. They rather have generic competencies and capabilities and perform tasks that to a great extent render them exchangeable, although the tasks as such are not exchangeable. If the tasks were removed, the organization would achieve very little. Working as an administrator, computer engineer or with sales support is not normally regarded as dirty work, but doing it in a stigmatized work context (in this paper the Swedish arms and pornography industries) means that dirt can be transferred to the worker. If this is the case it becomes something that the person has to deal with.

This paper is thereby situated on the empirical borders of previous research in a study of workers with non-stigmatized occupations in the arms and pornography industries. Both industries can be regarded as stigmatized work contexts in Sweden (where this study was conducted). We know that the respective industries generate ethical debates in Sweden, but dirt is always context-specific and a matter of social negotiation (Bauman, 1989; Douglas, 1966; Goffman, 1963). Later we will show how the workers interviewed in this study articulate how they suffer from a transfer of work-related dirt, particularly *moral* dirt; something that emanates from the person, occupation, organization or line of industry that is ethically questionable (Hughes, 1958). “Moral dirty work”, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014, p. 84) claim, “typically constitutes a graver identity threat” than social and physical dirt. If physical and social dirt are “more necessary than evil”, then moral dirt is “more evil than necessary” (ibid, p. 84).

Access to workers in the arms industry was granted as a result of previous research conducted at a large arms company. Access to porn companies proved much more difficult. They are not always easy to detect and there are no large or medium-sized porn companies in Sweden. Several cold calls to companies identified on the Internet resulted in failure, although two porn companies (both with less than fifteen permanent employees) did eventually provide respondents. A total of ten workers from an arms company and two porn companies were interviewed on two separate occasions, making 20 interviews in all.

At the arms company it was possible to choose people with different functions and a diverse selection was therefore achieved. We interviewed a market communicator [A1], an IT systems administrator [A2], an assembler [A3], a senior communicator [A4] and a senior market manager [A5]. A1 is female and the rest are male. A4 and A5 are closer to the core operations than the other three. For the porn workers there was not the same diversity in terms of roles and tasks, which meant that we did not have the same discretion and had to include the workers we were given access to. At the first porn company we interviewed two women [P1 and P2] working in the office with bookkeeping and sales support. At the second porn company we interviewed two women [P3 and P4] working with bookkeeping, sales support and editorial tasks, and a man [P5] working with purchasing.

These workers were selected and included for analytical rather than empirical reasons. Our aim is not to point out the differences between arms and pornography, but to highlight an amorphous category of workers threatened by work-related dirt that has not been included in previous research on dirty work. This meant that the workers had to fit our definition of

workers with non-stigmatized occupations but working in stigmatized work contexts and provide us with individual narratives of their identity work in terms of work-related dirt.

Among our respondents there seems to be a gender bias – one woman in the arms company and one man in the porn companies – and we wondered how to account for this. Following Young, we argue that a woman “may predict something about the general constraints and expectations she must deal with. But it predicts nothing in particular about who she is, what she does, how she takes up her social positioning” (1994, p. 733). The same argument (we believe Young would accept this claim) is also valid for men, people with different ethnicity, sexuality, religious beliefs or class, as well as dirty workers.

The ten workers were interviewed twice with about a three to six month’s interval between the interviews. The reason for this is that we anticipate that moral dirt is not necessarily discursively addressed by the workers, but more part of their practical consciousness. Managing moral dirt, that is, is something they just do, but perhaps not talk about with others. Hence, a first interview might trigger questions not previously articulated. A second interview some months later therefore serve to follow-up on their reflections, and maybe concrete effects, from our first conversation on how moral dirt influences their identity work. Both the first and second rounds of interviews, with less variation in the first round, averaged about one hour per interview. The places for the interviews were determined by the respondents’ answers to the question “where can we talk?” We anticipated that location mattered and that a meeting place outside work would be more appropriate. As a result the interviews were conducted in a coffee shop, a sushi bar, at the respondent’s home, by telephone and in the corporate lunchroom, although some of the interviews were conducted in the respondent’s office. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Related to the choice of making two sequential interviews, this also helped us address a key challenge on how to act as a reliant, trustworthy partner in a dialogue. Put simply, how we talk to those we meet in the field matters. In the first interview we as researchers anticipated being cast as what Goffman refers to as “normal” and towards whom the workers had to have their “feelers out”. In the second interview we hoped to come across as what Goffman refers to as “wise” and able to empathize with their situation (although not necessarily share their views). As far as we can ascertain these sought after effects were achieved.

Goffman (1961; 1963), that is, was seminal in the design of this research project. Appropriating Goffman’s view on identity work to our study enabled us to conceptually and empirically challenge the boundaries set by the dirty work literature, as addressed in the beginning of this paper. This implies, for example, that our conversations always addressed what Goffman calls “the own”, “the wise” and “the normal”. The own are those who suffer from stigma transfer (e.g. colleagues), the wise are people who do not suffer from stigma transfer, but who are in a position to share secrets and be sympathetic to the situation that the stigmatized person are in (e.g. close friends, family, experts or other people who know the person in question and about his or her stigma; Goffman, 1963, p. 41), and the normal, finally, are those who do not have any special negative connotations to the stigmatized individual (a broad category which, beyond strangers and superficial acquaintances, can also potentially include family and friends).

Inspiration when designing the study was also sought from part of the dirty work literature, particularly Ashforth et al (2007), which also encouraged us to break out from the work-place context and to include life outside of work (even though Ashforth et al address this in their interview guide, they rely do not include this in their published study). The interview guide (see the Appendix) addressed six different themes: before joining the company, you and your job, ‘the own’ and ‘the wise’, social situations, ‘the normal’ and over time.

In our narrative of the interviews we highlight the three most relevant issues relating to the aim of the paper. However, it should be noted that the conducted research underpinning the paper is guided by dialogical conversations from which stories are crafted (Czarniawska, 1997; 1999), rather than the construction of empirical categories (with the aid of computer programs). It also should be noted that we have included stories that seem to counter some of the main stories.

The first issue is based on the observation that was made early on in the interviews that the workers did indeed suffer from a transfer of moral dirt. What was anecdotal and assumed about these work contexts in Sweden before the project was established after the first round of interviews. Here it became clear that the workers face identity threats and are at risk of being labelled as dirty workers. The first empirical section is devoted to this.

The second issue concerns the relation between identity work at work and off work as a workplace and ‘whole life’ phenomenon. This permeated the interview guide and became highly relevant in our conversations with the workers. This issue was based on us first identifying and analysing the sections in the interviews dealing with identity work. The analysis shows that identity work in relation to work-related dirt cannot be confined or limited to the workplace or to the person as a worker, but spills over to off work contexts. This breaking of boundaries was to some extent anticipated, given our view of identity work and the design of the study. We devote the second empirical section to this issue.

The third issue relates to the relation between individuals and collective groups and what emerged as a lack of group-like collectives among the workers. In contrast to previous dirty work research, this issue increased in importance during closer readings of the interviews and of Young's appropriation of seriality. It differs from the other two issues in that it was not foreseen and we had no a priori idea of what to look for in the material. However, once this had been noted we returned to the material and read the interviews more systematically, searching for sections that referred to (a lack of) collective identity work. We devote the third empirical section to this issue.

## Empirically extending dirty work

### The constant risk of being labelled as dirty

Beginning with some of the workers in the arms industry, the following quotes illustrate the interviewees' own thoughts and feelings about the constant risk of being labelled as dirty: "What I believe most [critics] questioned was the export of weapons, that we sell to people who do not have food on the table" and that "By working for this organization you are already from the beginning questioned" [A4], "It is a much more sensitive industry, I believe, compared to many other industries" [A2], "It is a very controversial industry to work for" and "people would rather see peace on earth, and then it is like, they feel perhaps that it is through selling weapons that we support war" and "You are always, not afraid perhaps, but you think about how you present yourself when meeting new people" [A1]. More specific accusations include being a "gun dealer", "perpetrator", "bad parent" [A1], "cold-hearted" and "callous" [A4].

The porn workers declared that: "This is a special industry, you are regularly confronted by prejudices", "It is as if [when they found out where you work] they directly know what kind of person you are" [P1], "I want people to take me for who I am, not for what I am doing. But most often, since this is the industry it is, then I am associated to it in a way I do not want" [P3], "They do not understand that this company is just like any other company, if not more like any other company since we have 'eyes watching' us" [P4], "We do not want to have our name involved with anything related to minors" [the example was sponsoring; P2]. More specific accusations include: being "a very, well, sexual being, very like over-sexual, or stupid, that is, unintelligent", "rich, you have cash" [P1], and a "sex goddess" [P4].

A more contextualized, narrative example comes from P1 and concerns a former colleague whose work involved supplying local stores with the company's products (magazines, DVDs, sex toys etc.). He and his partner wanted to adopt a child, but their application was rejected by the authorities. As this was due to the fact that he worked for a porn company he resigned from his position. This story had a strong impact on P1 and showed her how intimately her work context was connected to who she was as a person and to how vulnerable she was to social prejudices:

*As if we were really bad people. I mean, he was a salesman. He was a salesman! He could just as well have been selling shoelaces. If you work in the tobacco industry, if you work as a salesman, for example [at Nn], are you not allowed to adopt then as well?*

There seems to be a lot at stake here for the workers. Throughout the interviews it became evident that they perceived moral dirt to be a brief social encounter away. Basically, the workers expressed that they were guilty by association. What permeates the stories is an awareness that other people might blur or collapse the boundaries between direct/core involvement and indirect/peripheral involvement in the preservation of arms and pornography, and thereby obscure morally just and morally questionable actions and events. While recognizing that there is moral dirt to physical and social dirt, the workers also provide accounts as to why the transfer of moral dirt needs to be distinguished from physical and social dirt (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). In their narratives, moral dirt come across as an identity threat that the workers want to wish away, but something that "cannot be *thought* away, and even less can it be *done* away with" (Bauman, 2004, p. 77, italics in the original).

### Identity work across boundaries

Even though there is a clear risk of being labelled as dirty due to their involvement with arms or pornography, most workers resisted this label in their conversations with us. A few of them explicitly acknowledge their involvement, such as A2: "We are all part of it, regardless of whether you are a secretary or construct a grenade." However, most workers use different discursive ways to maintain the boundary between them as people and as workers and between work and off work. P1 finds it hard that people think she is knowledgeable about sexual intercourse due to her place of work. She says the following about a conversation with an acquaintance:

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*You can be at the gym [---] and then it comes: "it is like this..." [telling about a personal problem related to sexual intercourse]. Then this thing runs through my head: Why is this person telling me this? Is this person telling me this because I am easy to talk to, or because I work where I work, so she thinks I have some secret, some solution for her. [---] That is probably why I try to call a halt: here is the threshold. Do you want to find an entrance [---] to my company, then you have to take another door. That is why I prefer that people get to know me first. [---] I was the same person now as I was before I started this work.*

Examples of situations where the workers have to manage their identities in terms of work-related dirt varies a lot (e.g. travelling by train and plane, having dinner with friends, collecting the children from preschool, talking to their own children and to their parents, partying at a nightclub, using a mobile phone in a public place, participating in events for non-profit organizations, meeting a neighbour on the stairs and, as in the example above, waiting for a workout session at the gym to begin). In the dirty work literature these are sometimes referred to as stigma management strategies. In different situations the workers enact a wide range of strategies in order to distinguish between who they are, what they do at work and where they work.

Most of the strategies relate to concealing the stigma, but some, as in the above example, relate to when the stigma is or has been revealed. Analytical patterns of the strategies that are used feature strongly in the dirty work literature (cf. Ashforth et al, 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; 2014; Dick, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006) and there is some commonality between how those workers and our workers deal with moral dirt.

Following Meisenbach's (2010) summary, critique and extension of the patterns featured in the dirty work literature (her categories in parentheses), the workers tell us that the dirt exists but does not apply to them, their job or their organization (*avoidance*). A3 claims that: "What matters is what the customer does with it". P2 argues that:

*I punch orders, register new customers, provide customer services and answer questions about invoices. It is like any other office job, making sure that the logistics are working and the postal services. It is about those types of things. What we put in the packages is not so much my concern. They are parcel numbers; numbers and prices for me.*

Another example of avoidance comes from A1, who talks about being cautious in social situations outside of work: "I can tell you a fun thing, when people ask me I say I work with market communication, and then they ask: where do you work? I answer [acronym of the parent company name]. Then they do not want me to discover that they don't know what it is." According to A1, this signalled the end of the discussion.

Even though A1 doesn't actually sell weapons, her friends and her parents are not comfortable about the work context she is in. She says that: "I don't want people associating me with a perpetrator. [---] I'm pretty kind even though I sell weapons". She continues:

*It is a sensitive industry, and I cannot talk in private to my friends. [---] I avoid it because if we discuss it we would risk our friendship, so my friends call me the gun dealer, I don't talk to them about my company or what I work with. And my parents are not too proud.*

P3 illustrates her attempts to draw boundaries between work and off work like this:

*When she [her daughter] went to school, I didn't want her to, I didn't tell her to lie, but I said that you perhaps don't have to talk about mummy's work. [...] I remember one time, the kids had to make study trips to parents' [workplaces] and they came and asked me and I just, I don't know how I talked them out of it, but I did. It was my horror, absolutely.*

In the second interview she reveals that her daughter "really hates what I work with. She really hates it. She tells no one, not even her boyfriend, who she has been with for four years". P1 said that she waited a long time before finally telling her boyfriend that the office she worked in actually belonged to a porn company (and it went well). Another example comes from A2:

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*I told the kids that this is not something that you need to talk specifically about, that I work for [the company's name]. I don't want that, I mean it is easy for me to argue, but not as easy for my kids to argue.*

Avoidance, and asking others (own and wise) to do the same, is the predominant strategy enrolled by our respondents.

However, as individuals they also challenge the public understanding of dirt (*evading of responsibility*), such as when the respondents from the arms company and the porn companies say that their companies are lawful and to some extent morally untouchable (or at least not criminal and therefore acceptable). P2 explains that: "All our films go through [a] review, and then we receive a decision" as to whether they are approvable or not. A5 states that: "We have to follow the existing government rules for export and so on, and in my view that is the guarantee that we do not do anything wrong, not just legally but also morally."

As individuals they also draw attention to valuable ends (*reducing offensiveness*). For example, the respondents in the arms company emphasize that the company defends (good) people and borders rather than attacks (bad) people and unjust borders. Or, as A4 puts it, that "the defence industry is an important branch and a generator of new technology in Sweden". The respondents in the porn companies, on the other hand, stress that many of their products help people to achieve a better sex life. As P1 says:

*If you look at who are the customers are it is really amazing. We have customers from couples to singles and we quite often sell sex toys and stuff that help handicapped people and older people. We had a lady who bought one of these vibrators. She was a widow. [---] She told me that her husband had died some years ago and that for the first time she'd been able to have an orgasm. She [---] wanted to buy a dildo, but couldn't decide which one to choose.*

Individually, they also discredit those who emphasize dirtiness and challenge the applicability of the stigma by discursively revealing the stigma upfront (*accepting*). A1, for example, in a discussion about work with a stranger during a flight eventually decided to reveal where she worked using humour: "Yes, how many [canons] do you want? I was like, here is my business card and then you just let me know when you need some, then I can help you, you know." P2 gives a rather straightforward example of when her neighbour wanted to know where she worked: "Then I said: 'We sell porn'. He went quiet and then I have not heard any more about it since."

The above examples illustrate that: (i) the workers are sensitive to situations, (ii) the situations mainly appear outside of work and (iii) how cautious they are when their primary group is or risks being affected. Consequently, the risk of being accused of moral dirt reaches beyond the particular individual and the workplace to his or her family and friends. Tensions appear when people outside the workplace scrutinize their degree of involvement in arms and pornography, and when the workers attempt to keep the boundary intact between work and off work and between who they are as workers and as people. Stigma management strategies thus constitute a significant part of the identity work when the workers are *off* work.

Being highly aware of the moral dirt, but strongly emphasizing that her organization is not dirty ("because we are very serious and we do not [supply] everything"), P1 concludes that: "It is as if your job equals your identity and you know that this is not the case."

Overall, there are few situations outside work where the workers feel comfortable knowing that where they work is not too much of a problem. Continuing P1's reasoning, a comfortable situation is characterized like this: "When I know that this person knows roughly who I am, then this thing, where I work, can no longer ruin things, in any way. Then this person can no longer change the perception of me, because then this person already knows who I am." This person is invited back stage (Goffman, 1959) where the work-related stigma no longer has to be managed, although this "knowing" argument does not automatically apply to the workers' primary group (a relation that is conceptually thought of as being characterized by 'familiarity'). As highlighted above, some workers reveal that they do not or hardly ever talk to people in their primary group about whether or not working for an arms or porn company is morally justifiable. Some of them do not even know where they work. Overall, the workers' back stages seem to be small places. However, about being at work, and in terms of filling functions and cooperating with colleagues, the workers do not assign too much importance to potential accusations of moral dirt.

### Expecting groups, finding a series

Some of our conversations involved teasing out examples of where the informants talked about moral dirt at work, whether they exchanged stories and shared experiences during the coffee breaks (these breaks are institutionalized at



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Swedish workplaces), whether they and their colleagues (or others) had made any attempt at action related to moral dirt, whether the employer had arranged any training sessions or seminars on how to manage the transfer of moral dirt (“employer branding”), or whether the unions had addressed this issue at all.

The most concrete examples come from P4, P2 and A2, who recall their job interviews. P4 remembers the manager showing her a catalogue with the company’s products in it and asking whether she was comfortable with it. When P2 discovered that she was applying for a job in a porn company she asked whether any children or animals were involved. When the manager said no she accepted the job. A2 recalls the personnel manager asking him whether he had thought about the arms industry and he decided that he had no problem with it. Beyond the job interviews, there seems to be a silent consensus that if you agree to work in the respective industry you also accept the industry itself (The first theme in the interview guide addresses this issue). A5, working closer to the core operations than the others, is clear that if you do not accept the industry you should not work in it.

None of the workers had taken part in any training sessions or seminars on how to manage the transfer of moral dirt. When talking about the role of the company, A1 concluded: “No, I don’t know if I feel that I should get help from the company. [...] It’s more personal, if it [arms] was an ethical problem for me, then I would not work here.” Regarding the question about whether the unions had raised this, A3 said: “Why should they? At least they allow me to be a member!”

When asked whether they talked about problematic or frustrating events connected to the work-related stigma during the coffee-breaks, P4 replied: “No, not to my knowledge”. P3 said that no discussions were held, “because we know that there will be reactions [from people outside work].” A2 could not remember any discussions about working for the arms industry taking place around the coffee table. A4 could not recall issues relating to the arms industry being a topic at all: “Never during my years in the job has this discussion, or talk, occurred.” In a dialogue with us, A1 said:

*Sometimes it surfaces, but it is more that we, we are all aware of what we work with, what industry it is, of course. And then, those who work with accounting, in the personnel department, or in the IT department and such, those I socialize most with, they are not so close to the core business. It might affect them in another way [---], for marketers, closer to the core business, those who develop the products, they might have other types of discussions during their coffee breaks.*

*Researcher: But when you come to work, do you say things like ‘another person turned their back on me and walked away again’?*

*[---] I have talked about it, we have actually talked about it sometimes, but it is not something that occurs regularly. People are like, you hear examples of colleagues who have faced the same response, that people walk away or that they don’t want to reveal where they work [---].*

*Researcher: What I had in mind was that you could think that this might be a ‘help-each-other-situation’, that I deal with it in this way, and then you could [learn] [---].*

*No that has not happened, not that I have experienced anyway.*

However, she later said that: “When I with the help of the company reached this insight [that the company defends rather than creates conflicts; is lawful rather than criminal] it became easier to talk about what I am doing, where I am working.” We asked if she ‘with the help of the company’ meant that she had discussed these matters with colleagues, but the answer was no, never. ‘The help of the company’ implied tacit learning by observing how colleagues used arguments to justify where they worked. This should not be underestimated in terms of the impact on identity work, although in terms of leading to a greater reliance on peers and collective ways of dealing with moral dirt, the case is weak.

Echoing throughout the interviews is that no discussions, no training and no coffee break talk take place. Not only is moral dirt not explicitly discussed and reflected on amongst colleagues, the individual narratives do not assign any weight to managerially led efforts to “unite disparate members to a common cause” (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001, p. 37). Consequently, the collective group-like and unifying nature of workers suffering from moral dirt, as emphasized in the dirty work literature, does not seem to fit the workers in this study.

## Discussion and implications

In the light of Sartre's seriality, situating the empirical material on the borders of previous research and conceptually opening up for a view of identity work as more complex, more of a struggle and less group-based enable us to show that the ways in which dirty workers have been defined in the past exclude those workers whose identity work is strongly affected by work-related moral dirt. The workers in this study reveal that they are aware of this transfer and are weary of it, but would not even qualify as being exposed to an idiosyncratic stigma, i.e. workers suffering from low depth and low breadth stigma (Kreiner et al., 2006). Hence, the approach taken in this paper suggests an extension of both the empirical investigation and conceptualization of dirty work and identity work.

The workers in this study are not as visible as fire fighters, exotic dancers, or even as top managers of porn or large arms companies. This may explain why what happens at work is not necessarily a problem for them in their identity work. Dirt-wise, work seems more like a place to relax, like being back stage among the own (Goffman, 1959; 1963). This brings us to how the workers wish to keep moral dirt at arm's length as a rather distinct phenomenon belonging only to the workplace, but how they fail to practically achieve this (Bauman, 2004). In this context their identity work seems to be a daunting task. Hence, a lot of effort is put into shielding family and friends from what Goffman (1963) refers to as a *courtesy stigma*, or what might also be called a second wave of transfer of moral dirt, as well as trying to control the interaction with strangers. This study shows the importance of family, friends, neighbours and strangers in understanding identity work (regarding family in organization studies, see Clark, 2000; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Haar & Bardoel, 2008) and the transfer of work-related dirt. In many ways family, friends, neighbours and strangers are a constant threat to the boundary between work and off work. The dirty workers in our study perceive this boundary as a struggle, in that they are always at risk of being discredited.

Against this background, the focus of the dirty work literature on the level of occupational groups risks exaggerating the importance of the work task and the workplace. When off work is referred to in this literature it is often broad and vague, and even though the 'whole person' is considered it is still rather limited (see e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Kreiner et al., 2006; Baran et al., 2012). Tyler's study of sex shop workers extends previous research by highlighting "how work identities and practices are played out in *particular* places of work" (2011, p. 1481; emphasis in original), although here the emphasis is still on places of work. Grandy's study of exotic dancers opens up for "life outside of work", but here again she predominantly focuses on life at the club and "work experiences" (2008, p. 183). Ashforth et al, in their study of managers in dirty work occupations, target the workplace and the managers' "sense of a workplace self" (2007, p. 150), at the same time revealing a wider take on identity and identity work in their interview guide (2007, p. 173).

In Ashforth and Kreiner's recent review of previous research on dirty work, they allude to this limitation by stating that dirty workers may hide what they do from family, friends and neighbours in order "to avoid social censure", and that this has an effect on the possibility of "drawing social validation from people outside the occupation" (2014, p. 91). However, as yet this has not been investigated outside the work context.

In order to understand the transfer of work-related moral dirt and identity work on and off work both need to be included. But, even though moral dirt is narrated as problematic because it threatens the workers' identities and complicates their identity work, it would be precipitous to draw the conclusion that such a disharmonious state of affairs is severely damaging the workers. Rather, it highlights the constant threat of (but not the impossibility of) getting the biography together and indicates that solid, non-contested or harmonious biographies may be much more difficult to construct than has previously been accounted for in much of the dirty work literature.

A *first* implication of this study therefore concerns the benefits of *acknowledging the struggle that identity work implies for dirty workers*, not just at work as workers, but also off work as whole persons, and that what they do for a living and where they do it has consequences off work as well. For these workers, the risk of being accused of moral dirt reaches beyond the particular individual and the workplace to his or her family and friends, neighbours and strangers when engaging in social encounters in *all areas of life*. As such, this paper reveals the complexity of dirty work and the risks of a priori drawing boundaries between on/off work in dirty work.

Turning to the relevance and usefulness of the concept of seriality, despite facing threats to their identity the workers show no sign of a group-like collective in which 'us' and 'them' are constructed in order to create a stronger sense of belonging. There are no explicit collective responses to the transfer of moral dirt. Consequently, when exposed to moral dirt, the workers do not provide any examples in which the transfer of moral dirt gives rise to a "greater entitativity (a sense of being a distinct group), a greater reliance on members as social buffers, and a greater use of condemning condemners and organization-level defensive tactics" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014, p. 81), or to "well-developed and widely shared ideologies"

(ibid, p. 85; see also Kreiner et al., 2006; Tyler, 2011). Consequently, at work there is no collective effort, no social buffers and no group-like response.

Rather than exaggerating the workers' situations as exceptional (after all, they did not expect or call for collective responses), we might be critical of dirty work studies that focus on groups and group-like responses. In this study, we have highlighted the potential of developing an understanding of dirty work through the lens of seriality and by departing from and staying with individual biographies on identity work in stigmatized work contexts. Being in a series, the workers are isolated but not alone.

Enrolling seriality also extends previous research on dirty work by triggering *the politics of dirty work*. To some degree all the workers in this study resisted the label 'dirty', but had no shared discourse and did not partake in any collective movement through which this label could be resisted. Thus, the workers in this study have no common interests and there is no sign of Sartre's *groupe-en-fusion*. Sartre (1960/2004) emphasized critical events, such as being confronted by injustice, fear and conflicts of interests, to explain how a series could evolve into a group, although he also acknowledged 'softer' external events (Roumbanis, 2010). The workers in this study have yet to discover that their serial collective is a basis for forming a group (Woodly, 2014), and even though the stigmatization is pronounced and significantly affects their lives, they seem unable at this stage to comprehend that there might be a way of pursuing a more collective identity work. In the interviews it is instead possible to trace a distancing from the group collective, with categories of workers in the respective context suffering more explicitly from a transfer of dirt (porn actors, directors of porn movies, ballistic engineers etc.).

Whether they liked or wanted it or not, social identity in the shape of being associated with a stigmatized work context was also forced on the workers and remained a practical and social problem at the *individual* level. Problems were individualized for the people involved to think about and act on and no support at the collective organizational level (work-group, department or organization) was initiated or expected. The workers revealed that they were largely left to their own devices to craft individual moves and counter-moves in their identity work.

A second implication of this study is that it extends the dirty work literature by highlighting how categories of workers experiencing a transfer of work-related dirt (dirty workers) are able to do this as a *serialized* collective. Seriality, that is, "provides a useful way of thinking" about the individual's relation to collective structures, in that it shows how these structures do "not necessarily define the identity of individuals and do not necessarily name attributes they share with others" (Young, 1994: 732).

## Contributions

Two reasons as to why dirty work studies are relevant are listed in the paper's introduction. With regard to the specific aspect of dirty work, the first contribution of this study is that the workers as a series, being isolated but not alone, suggests that their situation could be more difficult (but not exceptional or impossible) than that for dirty workers suffering from occupational or work-group stigma. The latter category of workers is assumed to have a larger and more organized collective of peers to connect to and are more susceptible to, for example, symbolic measures by top management when exercising resistance. Simply put, they are less alone than the dirty workers in our study. However, on the one hand group belonging ensures support and a stronger sense of belonging, although on the other hand a more explicit and less evasive label (identity marker) of dirty work is attached to the worker.

The second contribution of this study is that it shows that the dirty work literature's focus on occupation and work-groups limits dirty work as a field of inquiry. Occupation or the work-group as a source of physical, social or moral dirt might not be the only thing that makes the work and those doing it dirty. Likewise, occupational or work-group belonging may not be all that important in the dirty workers' identity work. The workers in this study questioned the assumption of occupational or work-group belonging as the key discriminator. We have shown that the way in which dirty workers have been defined in the past excludes those workers stigmatized by work-related dirt; dirt that they have to deal with both practically and socially. Consequently, the workers previously assumed by the dirty work literature to be members of the category of dirty workers (albeit an amorphous category) might be more numerous than previously imagined if we think about dirty workers as a serialized collective as well.

With regard to what dirty work tells us about working life in general, this study shows that negotiating meaning in the workplace is not necessarily a puzzle to solve (where each piece has its determined place in the frame) or a workplace phenomenon. If we conceptually think of dirty workers as a serialized collective and empirically include life off work, the workplace (the office, for instance) can be a place in which to relax. Thus, there is a need to downplay the importance given to identity work at work in favour of localizing the struggle of identity work as also taking place beyond work.

## Future studies

Based on this study we would like to make three suggestions as to how the dirty work literature could be further developed. First, we would like to suggest further studies of workers with non-stigmatized occupations in other stigmatized work contexts, such as (depending of course on the particular social setting) the tobacco, oil, nuclear power, gambling and alcohol industries. The empirical material in this study is also exploratory and limited. Projects in which resources are provided so that more extensive empirical work can be carried out would enable critical and empirically grounded reviews of the ideas set forth in this paper.

Second, we would like to suggest using the conceptual ideas on seriality and identity work outlined here on empirical material previously included in dirty work (that is, occupations such as fire fighters and sex workers). Third, we suggest integrating the emerging literature on *organizational stigma* (see Hudson, 2008; Jensen & Sandström, 2015) when searching for other sources of stigmatized work contexts. Approaching the topic of this paper with the help of this literature could be a beneficial way of developing the dirty work genre further.

## Appendix – Themes (and examples of questions) used in the first round of interviews

### *Before joining the company*

How did you start to work for the company?

What did you think about this industry before you decided to work in it?

Did any of your friends / family react to the news?

Who was important to you when you made your decision?

Did the company test you in any way? Did you receive any advice from them?

### *You and your job*

Which parts of your job do you like best/worst? Why?

How much of you is your job? Is it something you do or something you are?

Does it vary from occasion to occasion? Has it changed over time?

Are you yourself on the job?

Have you ever had any doubts about working for this industry?

### *'The own' and 'the wise'*

What do your friends and family think and say about your work? How do you talk to them about your work?

Do you talk about the dirt associated with your work at work? If so, when do you do this?

When thinking about others working at the company, do you think that your job is worse or better than theirs? Similarly, comparing your own job with those of friends or family members, do you think that your job is worse or better than theirs?

What would you say to new employees about people's notions of "gun dealers"/ "porn sellers"?

Have you told your children about your work, and if so, how did they react?

Do you meet in your occupation / profession (beyond the organization)?

Are you a member of a union? Does it actualize these issues in any way?

### *Social situations*

Do you worry about what others think about your job?

Can you give examples of when it feels difficult to talk about your job and situations where you felt uncomfortable?

Has your choice of work had any adverse consequences? Have you or people in your close circle lost friends due to your place of work?

Do you sometimes think that "I do not want to make a scene", or the opposite "let's throw in a torch"?

Have you thought, after a situation, that "I should have said this instead"?

Do you think about how you dress etc., in order not to reveal where you work?

About risk assessing the situation, "somebody is going to ask me about my job so I had better..."

### *'The normal'*

How do you think people in general view the company / industry? Why do you think that?

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Is there a stereotype of a person who works in this industry / for your company? Do you compare yourself with this stereotype?

Do you think that some other professions are worse?

For example, if you were at a social gathering (not job related) and a stranger asked what you were working with, what would you say to them?

For example, if someone asked, “why do we need your company”, what would you answer?

For example, if you were at a social gathering (not job related) and someone complained about your business, what would you say to him / her / them?

### Over time

Have your thoughts / opinions about the industry changed over time?

Are there things that bothered you at the beginning, but do not bother you now? If so, please describe these. Or vice versa, things that did not bother you at the beginning, but that do so now? What caused these changes?

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