How is social inequality maintained in the Global South? Critiquing the concept of dirty work

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Abstract
Extant research on dirty work—occupations involving physical, social, or moral taint, which affect worker identities—has been read primarily through the lens of social identity theory (SIT). There are two notable shortcomings that emerge as a consequence of dirty work being too heavily reliant upon the precepts of SIT, which we seek to remedy in this article: (1) the overemphasis on the symbolic to the detriment of the material has led to false optimism regarding the ability for subjects doing dirty work to exercise agency in constructing their own sense of selves, and (2) the failure to substantively account for the role of identity differences suggests that empirical research on the phenomenon is devoid of proper historical and cultural contextualization. Drawing on a qualitative study on low-caste toilet cleaners in Pakistan, our findings were largely incongruous with the scholarly conceptualization of dirty work that has been propagated to date. We explicate the embedded role of power and context in dirty work, which are not adequately considered using SIT alone. Repudiating the overly romanticized version of the concept, we argue that SIT’s account of dirty work ought to be complemented by status construction theory going forward.

Keywords
agency, caste, dirty work, Global South, inequality, Pakistan, status construction theory, social identity theory, status, stigma

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Introduction

In the field of management and organization studies, research on dirty work has proliferated in the last two decades. Studies on dirty work, which have been read primarily through the theoretical lens of social identity theory (SIT), have gone a long way in explaining how occupations considered physically, socially, or morally dirty affect worker identities (e.g., Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 2014; Blithe and Wolfe, 2017). The corpus of this literature conceptualizes the meaning of dirt as being culturally determined, relying heavily on Mary Douglas’ (1966 [2002]) thesis in *Purity and Danger* in which she described dirt as being “matter out of place”. Arguably, the most noteworthy and provocative contribution from this line of scholarly inquiry finds that workers in stigmatized occupations actively construct positive self-images using myriad discursive strategies through which they reframe their work-related identities in an effort to collectively negate the stigma associated with their occupations (e.g., Dick, 2005; Toubiana and Ruebottom, 2022; Tracy and Scott, 2006).

Notwithstanding the important contributions to scholarship offered by the existing research on dirty work, there are several important shortcomings that emerge when studies foreground their conceptual framing on the tenets of SIT. Two of these shortcomings are the focus of this article. First, Hughes et al. (2017) argue that the overemphasis on the symbolic to the detriment of the material has led to false optimism regarding the ability for dirty workers to exercise agency in constructing their own sense of selves. This suggests that the question of power and inequality have not been sufficiently accounted for by researchers invested in the study of dirty work. Second, though relatedly, Redden and Scarduio (2018) observe that the dirty work literature has not substantively explored the role of identity differences, which makes it critical to better situate the phenomenon in the wider historical and cultural context in which it is located. In taking these two critiques together, we underscore how the ways in which power and inequality function on dirty workers will be idiosyncratic to the context in which they are being operationalized. Indeed, these critiques explain why extant research on dirty work has, to date, offered an overly romanticized reading of dirty workers for their ability to negate stigma by re-framing their work-related activities on their own terms.

In this article, we explicate the embedded roles of power, inequality, and context in dirty work, which are not adequately conceptualized using SIT alone. To remedy this predicament, we argue that SIT’s account of dirty work ought to be deployed alongside the insights that come from status construction theory (SCT). While SIT focuses on group identity and intergroup relations, SCT examines the social legitimacy of status differences and their impact on individual and group behaviors (Ridgeway, 2019). A conceptual framework that employs insights from both SIT and SCT responds to DiTomaso et al.’s (2007) critique of management and organization theory as being overly reliant on SIT and not leveraging the analytical resources proffered by SCT to analyze issues germane to understanding worker subjectivities. We contend that this observation is especially pertinent when studying those who do dirty work.

We conducted a qualitative study involving individuals of low-caste status doing dirty work in Lahore, Pakistan. The study focused on low-caste individuals responsible for cleaning toilets in domestic and non-domestic spaces, such as hospitals, hotels, airports,
and universities. Our study revealed findings that were largely incongruous with the prevailing conceptualization of dirty work and, specifically, the contention that those engaged in dirty work will have access to the agency necessary to re-construct their own sense of self. Among other things, our study illuminated how culturally disenfranchised subjects doing dirty work in this Global South context were denied agency as a result of entrenched local configurations of status hierarchies—the types that are not typically found in the Global North. These status hierarchies determined the nature of social relating and social organization in this context to such an extent that it effectively prohibited those doing dirty work from exercising the agentic resources described in prior studies on the phenomenon conducted in the Global North.

The remainder of this article is presented in five sections. First, we selectively review the extant literature on dirty work and its workers, focusing on the question of agency. Second, we describe the methods of our empirical study. In this section, we also provide germane details about the cultural and the geographical context in which this study was conducted. Third, we present our findings, which we organize thematically around three ideas: (1) taint, categories of difference, and boundaries; (2) the operation of symbolic and material violence; and (3) the limits to workers’ agency. Taking these themes collectively, we question whether the concept of dirty work, as conceived in the Global North, is appropriate for understanding the dynamics of workers doing dirty work in our study’s context—and, perhaps, the Global South more broadly. Fourth, we discuss the contributions and the implications of our study. Finally, in the fifth section, we close the article with some concluding remarks.

**Literature review**

Over 60 years ago, Everett Hughes (1958) conceived the idea of dirty work as labor involving moral, social, or physical taint. In a conceptual article published some 40 years later, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) revisited Hughes’ idea of dirty work through the lens of SIT and, in doing so, reinvigorated research on the phenomenon within the field of management and organization studies. In the years that followed the publication of Ashforth and Kreiner’s watershed article, scholarly research on dirty work flourished in the field. In its simplest definition, dirty work has come to be defined as “tasks, occupations and roles that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading” (Simpson et al., 2012: 1) and marked by some meaningful level of stigmatization (Mahalingam et al., 2019; Toubiana and Ruebottom, 2022). In this section, we review the extant literature on dirty work focusing on cleaning and we consider the role of agency in such contexts.

Before proceeding, it is important to set some definitional parameters related to the concept of agency. Agency is a mainstay concept within social theory, though one that is fraught with multiple and often vague meanings. For this article, we borrow the definition of agency from Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963), who describe it as a:

[T]emporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also orientated toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).
This definition is conceptually resourceful as it adds a layer of analytical precision to the meaning of agency than what is normally afforded by scholars deploying the idea within the discipline of management and organization studies. Specifically, this definition acknowledges the contingent nature of agency, with the individual’s ability to act being a direct function of intersectional historical and current circumstances (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). A historical consideration, in terms of how a subject’s myriad identities determine whether and what forms of agency is accessible to be exercised, is critical as it accounts for social status. Such a conceptualization of agency is especially pertinent in contexts in which denigrated social identities are deeply entrenched and, concomitantly, the scope of agency available to low status subjects is both culturally and materially limited.

Cleaning work and its social regimes

The literature on dirty work argues that tasks that involve grubby, humiliating, or unethical tasks affect worker identities and their sense of personal dignity, for dirty work involves physical, social, and/or moral taint (Hughes, 1951; McMurray and Ward, 2014). Domestic cleaning is classified as dirty work across geographical distances. In the case of South Asia, Sharma (2016) asserts that apart from the physical taint attached to cleaning work, workers must also contend with occupational stigma. In the Middle East, Benjamin et al. (2010) argue that domestic workers must conform to the community’s derogatory gaze. Saldana-Tejeda (2012) observes how domestic worker abuse in Mexico is linked to historical concerns around purity and contamination. In Anderson’s (2000) classical text on domestic work across the Global North, she argues that such work is most often undertaken by members of racialized groups. In order to sustain the institutional assemblages that determine who is relegated to doing dirty work within a particular context, racist stereotypes intersect with issues of citizenship, skin color, and religion to construct some classes of people as more suitable for domestic work than others.

Research into the experiences of trash collectors and public cleaners shows that both occupations are similarly stigmatized (Hughes, 1958; Hughes et al., 2017; Reid, 1991; Zimring, 2004), for work that is physically dirty becomes “a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity” (Hughes, 1958: 49). Dant and Bowles (2003) extend this perspective by revealing how dealing with dirt and slime causes cleaners to be at the very end of the moral hierarchy of the division of labor (Hughes, 1958). Xenophobic narratives often accompany cultural designations concerning such work and, ultimately, enable the intelligibility and the maintenance of this hierarchy (Zimring, 2004).

The extensive literature on domestic work illustrates how the worker’s body is dismissed as rough, disposable, polluted, and, therefore, less than human (Anderson, 2000; Barbosa, 2007; Pinho, 2015; Sharma, 2016). Systematic cultural representations separate workers—both physically and symbolically—from the families that hire them, painting them with a permanent foreignness to ensure as much of a hands-off exchange as possible within the intimacy of the employer’s home (Anderson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Saldana-Tejeda, 2012). Everyday practices of untouchability, such as keeping separate utensils
for workers and not allowing access to employer toilets and other spaces are daily markers of social hierarchies (Pinho, 2015; Ray and Qayum, 2009; Sharma, 2016; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). Food distinction, argues Saldana-Tejeda (2012), is an especially powerful mechanism by which to mark gender, class, and racial differences between workers doing dirty work and the employers (also see Rauf and Prasad, 2020).

The association of dirt and disease with the working class dates back to early 19th-century narratives of London, England (Kennedy-Churnac, 2011). The discourse began appearing in British colonies soon thereafter, where white colonialists sought to separate themselves from the brown natives serving their households (McClintock, 1995). Compounding this discourse, at least in the case of South Asia, the untouchable status of low-caste subjects meant that they could neither use public facilities such as roads, wells, or toilets nor were they permitted to be in close proximity to the food and the drink of members of the upper class (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 2013). Ray and Qayum (2009) describe how even in contemporary India, the caste-conscious urban employer hides behind discourses of health and hygiene when separating the worker from the members of the household for whom the worker serves (Bapuji and Chrispal, 2020).

By invoking worker bodies as being intrinsically filthy, women employers block intimate contact between “dirty” workers not only from members of the household, but also from inanimate objects and spaces (Barbosa, 2007; Pinho, 2015). Toilets, bedrooms, living rooms, sofas, beds, and utensils are off-limits for workers unless it is to clean and tidy them (Barbosa, 2007; Pinho, 2015; Sharma, 2016). They are expected to walk around the house barefoot, avoid talking in the presence of their employers, and speak only when spoken to. The worker becomes the means through which the boundary between purity and pollution is symbolically and materially established and maintained (Barrett, 2009), even as they become its discarded residue (Douglas, 1966 [2002]).

Domestic workers are acutely aware of the community’s derogatory gaze and know that their occupations cleave stigma onto their social positions within the broader community in which they are located (Benjamin et al., 2010; Skeggs, 1997). Moreover, Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) observe that dirty work associated with moral taint poses an even graver identity threat to subjects than that with physical and/or social taint alone. In many cultures of South Asia, women seeking wage employment outside of their homes are proclaimed to be shameless for exposing themselves to the “moral and social opprobrium of the public gaze” (Ray and Qayum, 2009: 115; also see Phadke et al., 2011). Another layer of this form of work that ascribes it moral taint is the sensuous and the erotic portrayal of women cleaners. In her watershed text, Imperial Leather, McClintock (1995) offers compelling evidence to show how 19th-century colonial accounts from Africa paint upper- and middle-class Victorian women as frail madonnas and native women serving their households as manly and lascivious. Similar discourses have been posited in other historical periods and geographical contexts. For instance, Palmer (1989: 144) reports that in Victorian England and America the “likeliest candidates for sexual pleasures of well-to-do men” were domestic workers and prostitutes. Likewise, in her contemporary study of Bolivia, Gill (1994) argues that domestic workers describe sexual abuse as being a ubiquitous threat in their workplaces for male employers expect them to be sexually available as part of their work duties. Sen (2002: x) concludes that such realities are manifest of:
An eroticisation of power, operating within the dynamics of race, class/ caste, which can create unspoken assumptions that men have rights of sexual access to women belonging to sections perceived as “inferior”, such as women of lower classes/ castes or those belonging to other races.

How, then, are privileged spaces to be protected from workers who provide a necessary service but whose very presence is viscerally repugnant? To protect the sanctity of the internal subsystem, Douglas (1966 [2002]: 126–129) contends that outsiders are given involuntary “witchlike” characteristics—that is, if they are not already individuals with a propensity to commit crimes or to spread disease, they have the tendency to turn into them and must, therefore, be feared. Fear of defilement often justifies the use of violence as the means to preserve the subsystem. On this point, Barrett (2009: 29) notes that in the United States, the ritual of lynching served to secure the boundary between blackness and whiteness. Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) similarly argue that caste-based violence maintains the social hegemonies of caste and gender in India. In this article, we explore how cleaning work dirties the workers that perform this necessary task and consider the role that violence plays in configuring and reifying the boundaries between workers and employers.

**Agency in dirty work**

At the crux of the ongoing debates on dirty work in management and organization studies—and, to a lesser extent, sociology—is the question of agency (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Kreiner et al., 2006). Indeed, numerous empirical studies have demonstrated how individuals doing dirty work can exercise agency by engaging with some form of identity work (e.g., Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Thiel, 2007). Through this identity work project, they (re)define their own sense of self in ways that are esteem enhancing (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999).

An early example of agency available to workers doing dirty work is found in Dick’s (2005) study of police officers in England. Categorizing policing as dirty work for it involves the use of coercive authority, Dick (2005: 1383) finds that police officers “succeed in ‘reframing’ the meaning of coercive authority” by claiming that their actions are moral insofar as they are necessary for supporting the existing liberal-democratic social order. In studying a similar population in Canada, Huey and Broll (2015) find that police investigators invoke popular culture and media images of policing to reframe aspects of their jobs that would otherwise be considered dirty work. This reframing ultimately allows police investigators, while being required to do physically dirty tasks, “to feel intellectually and emotionally satisfied with the job” (Huey and Broll, 2015: 244). In a study on American firefighters, Tracy and Scott (2006) report that fulfillment of professional responsibilities in firefighting includes routinely attending to mundane, dirty tasks (e.g., dealing with the indigent). To counteract the dirty work that habitually comes with the job, firefighters make recourse to scripts of “masculinity and sexuality . . . to frame their work as valorous and important” (Tracy and Scott, 2006: 24).

While agency in dirty work has been typically studied in professions that are socially prestigious—or what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 415) refer to as jobs that possess
“occupational prestige”—but which still involve elements that are dirty (e.g., police officers and firefighters (Tracy and Scott, 2006)) some scholars have examined the phenomenon in socially undervalued professions. Studying homecare workers attending to dependent adults in the United States, Stacey (2005: 851) concludes that while the day-to-day responsibilities of the job involve dirty work, workers construct a sense of dignity by emphasizing the autonomy that such work affords as well as by curating narratives that focus on how the work “directly impacts on the wellbeing of their clients”. Similarly, in a qualitative investigation of the experiences of janitorial workers involved with a campaign to unionize in Canada, Soni-Sinha and Yates (2013) illuminate how such workers actively contest connotations of lowliness and dirtiness associated with their profession. They do so by “affirming their dignity through valuing their work and through union membership and participation” (Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013: 748–749). Also studying the Canadian context, Johnston and colleagues (2018) demonstrate how food service employees use digital spaces to offer online reviews of the extraordinary dirty conditions of certain food service employers and, thereby, warn prospective employees of those employers. The authors find that in posting the critical online reviews, food service employees “‘clean’ their own reputation since they construct themselves as outsiders questioning and resisting [those employers]” (Johnston et al., 2018: 292).

The corpus of this literature has shown that while myriad professions—including those that are socially valued as well as those that are socially undervalued—may involve dirty work, individuals across these professions have access to the agency necessary to undertake self-enhancing identity work. Notwithstanding this point, as the above review of the literature suggests, agency as an analytical concept within the extant literature on dirty work has been empirically applied mainly in geographical contexts of the Global North. This is problematic insofar as agency, returning to Emirbayer and Mische’s definition offered above, is geographically and temporally situated. Indeed, agency should not be “treated as a singular and coherent phenomenon without the risk of gross simplification” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010: 220–221). Following this contention, it remains unclear as to the degree to which the social, the political, and the economic institutions customarily found in the Global North enable the exercise of agency among those doing dirty work. Alternatively asked: is it possible for dirty workers in the Global South to enact agency for the purposes of identity self-enhancement given the institutional assemblage of the communities in which they are situated?

Methods

Context

The caste system on the Indian subcontinent is a powerful, socially stratifying institution that intersects with class, culture, ethnicity, religion, and language in complex ways, ultimately culminating in inter-generational social stigmatization (Chrispal et al., 2021). It effectively blocks low-caste groups from access to resources and social mobility (Bapuji and Chrispal, 2020; Chrispal et al., 2021; Kabeer, 2006; Usman, 2011). The caste system’s hierarchies reify inequality in everyday life, so that it can be observed “in regularities of behavior and stable patterns of interaction” (Mair et al., 2016: 2022).
Although the caste system has its religious basis in Hinduism and not in Islam, exclusionary caste practices of purity and pollution remain culturally ingrained in Muslim majority Pakistan (Zulfiqar, 2019; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). Indeed, large swathes of the country are defined by social structures informed by these exclusions, even as there is little tolerance for caste as a social category in the country or for recognizing it for social protections and social policy (Gazdar and Mallah, 2012). Nevertheless, caste boundaries are carefully guarded through mundane social practices—such as endogamy—in order to maintain the distinction of each group (Bhowmik, 1992; Oster and Wilson, 1978). These caste boundaries enable the construction of macro-level social structures that discriminate or exclude based on group membership (Ghurye, 2008; Kabeer, 2006).

The biraderi system in the Pakistani province of Punjab, while similar to the rest of the Indian subcontinent, has its own unique influence on the division of labor and is a key dimension of economic, social, and political interactions (Gazdar and Mallah, 2012; Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007). One significant characteristic of the biraderi system is that it constitutes birth-ascribed occupational categories, the biggest divisions being between high-caste Zamindars (landowners) and low-caste Kammis (service providers) (Usman, 2011). Kammis are relegated to low-status, poorly remunerated occupations such as sharecropping and cleaning. Among the Kammis, the Musalli caste constitutes those individuals whose Dalit—the untouchable Hindu caste—ancestors converted to Islam; they are the ones most often found in cleaning occupations among Muslims (Butt, 2020; Usman, 2011).

While Kammis are mostly Muslim, low-caste Chuhras are primarily Christian (Powel, 2003). Lahore, the capital and largest city in Punjab, is home to a sizable population of Chuhra Christians, who make up the majority of the city’s sanitation workers. Newspaper advertisements for public sector cleaning jobs often boldly state things like, “only Christians need apply” (see Christian Today, 2013). Not surprisingly, according to the city government’s Lahore Waste Management Company, most of its 8000 workers are Christian (Singha, 2015).

In rural Punjab, biraderi ties bind low-caste families to upper-caste families, so that it is not unusual for members of one clan to clean the homes of a particular upper-caste family for generations. However, when moving to urban centers like Lahore, these ties are broken and migrants have to find work on their own (Zulfiqar, 2019). Nonetheless, even in the cities, caste hierarchies continue to determine occupations because of the exclusionary interventions of the state and the market (Ambedkar, 1968 as cited by Mahalingam et al., 2019). The experience of low-caste cleaners in Pakistan is similar to that of janitorial workers in neighboring India, where the cleaning work Dalits are relegated to is socially constructed as dirty work by high-caste elites, who consider themselves as pure and Dalits as polluted and impure (Mahalingam et al., 2019; Varman et al., 2021).

Thus, working with other people’s waste remains a job inexorably linked to caste, class, and religion, for as Butt (2020) argues, separation from and proximity to waste is not just about physical distance in Pakistan but also about being trapped by caste-based identities. Urban Pakistan’s intimacies between waste workers and employers come from both proximity and interdependence, which is fraught with antagonism, hostility, and
harm (Butt, 2020). This is because waste reproduces “separations and distances between persons according to social differences and hierarchies influenced by caste, class and religion as historical categories” (Butt, 2020: 235).

What Butt (2020) and others miss in this analysis is the interaction between caste and gender. Maintaining caste and gender in separate registers of social life bypasses the fact that gender on the Indian subcontinent is interwoven with class, caste, and contextual configurations (Channa, 2013). Lower-caste women encounter caste-based discrimination in the vertical structure of society and gender-based discrimination in the horizontal structure of society (Arya, 2020), making them meaningfully disenfranchised socially, politically, and economically (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007). Sangari (1993) contends that patriarchies function in and through relations of production. Lower-caste women workers are simultaneously subjected to the patriarchal practices of their own class and caste-based exploitation of their labor by the upper castes, for as Rege et al. (2013: 36) argue, “[c]ategories of labor are never neutral but constituted historically through social and political categories like caste and gender”.

Gender within a caste-based society is structured so that masculinities are defined by the degree of control men exercise over women in their own caste as well as those of other castes (Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 1991; Sangari, 1993). Women are targets for domestic violence as well as sexual abuse by high-caste men, for as Stallybrass and White (1986: 5) argue, “a nexus of power and desire regularly occur at the ideological construction of the low Other”.

Data and analysis

Taking a critical interpretive approach (Deetz, 1982; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we conducted in-depth interviews with 91 women and men who do cleaning work in domestic and non-domestic spaces in the city of Lahore. Domestic workers are a broad category of workers that service a household as cleaners, nannies, cooks, gardeners, or drivers. Our primary criterion for selecting research participants doing domestic work was that the scope of their work needed to specifically entail cleaning toilets. One of the authors leveraged her network to identify participants who meet this criterion. The same criterion was applied for cleaners working in non-domestic spaces, with participants being recruited during visits to gyms, hotels, airports, hospitals, universities, and other non-domestic settings. We sampled purposively, with the aim of ascertaining roughly an equal number of domestic and non-domestic cleaners.

Of our research participants, 93% are women, which mirrors the fact that toilet cleaning work is overwhelmingly performed by women in Pakistan. All of the men are non-domestic cleaners, but there are also several women in the non-domestic group. Among the participants, more than half are Muslim, which in part reflects the fact that Pakistan is a Muslim majority country. Given the concentration of low-caste Christian workers in cleaning jobs, it was not surprising that nearly 40% of the cleaners we interviewed are Christian.

Half of our participants report being first generation migrants, while the rest were born in the city where the interview was conducted. Participants of the latter group also report having roots in rural towns or villages across the Punjab. Research participants
range between the ages of 16 to 55. Half of them have never attended school; the most school attended by a participant is seventh grade. About half of the research participants named their caste, and except for two all are from the low castes of Bhatti, Shergil, and Sheikh.

There is a wide range in the wages reported by the research participants because of the variance in the amount of work being done, the numbers of hours spent at the workplace, and, in the case of domestic workers, whether they are a live-in or part-time worker. The least that a participant earns is 1500 rupees (US$14) per month from a single employer and the most is 14,000 rupees (US$130) per month from a single employer. Domestic cleaners earn less than non-domestic cleaners. The highest total monthly income reported by a domestic worker is 15,000 rupees (US$140) per month but this comes from working with three separate households. The minimum wage in Punjab at the time the interviews were conducted was 12,000 rupees (US$112) per month.

While conducting interviews, we were conscious of our own positionality, particularly because the interviewers were from the socioeconomic class that usually pays others to tend to their cleaning, including toilets. This made it critical for us to be attentive to, as well as accountable for, how we occupied positions of power in the wider cultural context. For the authors, being self-reflexive meant being mindful of foregrounding the research participants’ own voices during the analysis and the writing components of this study (Bloom and Sawin, 2009; Prasad, 2019; Skeggs, 2004).

The interviews were conducted after the participants were assured of anonymity, had given their informed consent, and understood that they could choose not to respond to a question and could terminate the interview at their will. In exercising this provision, several research participants chose not to name their caste. Interviewers were guided to look for verbal and non-verbal cues for respondent discomfort, such as passivity, silence, and lack of eye-contact (Keith-Spiegel, 1983). Respondents were asked for consent after being given a detailed description of the research, and several aspects of vulnerability had been discussed to avoid harm (Gibson et al., 2013). The interviews took place on a subsequent day after informed consent was ascertained to allow participants time to change their mind. We felt this was necessary, given the vulnerable spaces occupied by members of this group. There were two teenagers among the interviewees, and they were given the same assurances and their consent was received in the same way as the older participants, for after meeting them we felt that they were “mature minors”; that is, adolescents with decision-making capacity (Spriggs, 2010). Given that both were migrant live-in workers, their employers had primary responsibility for them, and we asked the employers for permission to conduct the interviews.

In fact, all employers were expressly asked before each interview to protect the workers from problems of retaliation or punitive consequences that they could encounter later. We took this precautionary step because past research on domestic work, which includes an ethnography and employer interviews, showed that employers can fire their workers on pretexts such as hiding or sharing information with others (Zulfiqar, 2019). In case either the employer or the employee expressed verbal or non-verbal reluctance, the individual was not pursued for an interview. Finally, to maintain anonymity, in this study we use pseudonyms and disguise worker identities as much as reasonably possible.
Interviews were conducted in a private space and transcribed from Punjabi or Urdu to English. The interviews were designed in a life history format (Essers and Benschop, 2009; Segarra and Prasad, 2020). An interview guide was used to explore workers’ experiences; how they were shaped by their gender, class, religion, and caste; and how their experiences affected their sense of self. Since we were specifically interested in learning about notions of physical, social, and moral taint as well as the role of social identity and status beliefs, the interview guide included questions on employer habits and expectations with respect to purity and pollution, and the worker’s reaction to these habits and expectations. The findings were triangulated with various secondary sources, such as newspaper accounts of violence and abuse of cleaners in urban Pakistan.

For the analysis, we initially developed coding categories based on the dirty work literature as well as the transnational scholarship on the social regimes of cleaning work. These included, on the one hand, evidence of physical, social, and moral taint and, on the other, the establishment of boundaries in work arrangements. From these first-order categories, we arrived at second-order categories, including how taint interacts with the social identities of gender, class, caste, and religion. This was informed by the literature on caste in general, and by the biraderi system in particular. At this point, we became interested in trying to understand how boundaries between employers and employees are constructed and maintained and, based on our iterative readings of the transcripts, we found ourselves organically developing coding categories for symbolic, physical, and sexual violence. The last coding category we developed dealt with worker agency, since this is a key theme in the extant literature on dirty work and SIT.

The entire process was iterative, involving significant back and forth between past scholarship and our data. In the following section, we present the findings of our study using these categories.

Findings
This study sought to answer two research questions. First, what is the role of social identities and culturally embedded status beliefs in shaping cleaning work arrangements in Pakistan? And, second, what forms of agency are available to workers doing dirty work in the face of entrenched status hierarchies? The findings are structured around the themes that emerged from the data analysis, including: (1) taint, categories of difference, and boundaries; (2) symbolic and material violence; and (3) the limits to workers’ agency.

Taint, categories of difference, and boundaries
A major outcome of the inequalities built into the biraderi system in Pakistan, which is present alongside the lack of state support for marginalized populations, is that children are often initiated into their parents’ occupations. Many women participants began this work in their teens or earlier, first accompanying their mothers to work and, subsequently, taking up independent cleaning jobs. Some were pulled out of school early to help their families financially, while others were sent from their villages to the city to work in other people’s homes to earn and send money back to the family. Several men also report dropping out of school to take up cleaning jobs when their families lost the
main breadwinner, usually the father, to death, abandonment, disability, or drugs. They lament that had they received an education, they would have jobs with better pay and more dignity—though two participants remark that this work is still more respectable than begging on the streets.

Across the different categories of toilet cleaners, there appeared general consensus that cleaning toilets is not an occupation that people move into by choice. It is originally believed to be a temporary job, which they hope they would eventually leave and move on to something less culturally stigmatized. This is articulated by Faisal, who used to clean toilets at a factory in Lahore and is now doing the same work at a private university: “I am doing cleaning because I am forced by circumstances. Yes, because cleaning is not actually a profession. One should engage in work that is respectable so that people meet and greet him properly.”

For domestic workers, cleaning other people’s waste is a necessary part of the daily chores, which include tending to their employers’ homes, washing dirty dishes and clothes, and caring for the employers’ children. Most women participants describe cleaning toilets as the most detested part of their work. Razina, a single woman who works as a cleaner in two homes, explains that she only began this work after her father’s death. When he was alive, he stopped her from taking up cleaning jobs, rhetorically asking her: “Why should you clean other people’s toilets? Would your madam agree to cleaning our toilet even if we were to pay her to do it in gold?” Razina’s father’s question points to both the stigma and the structural inequality inherent in toilet cleaning arrangements.

Muslim workers explain that cleaning toilets makes them “paleeth”; that is, ritually impure so that they feel unable to pray during work hours. They further elaborate that the work is corporeally polluting and that prayer requires purity. While “paleeth” connotes physical impurity, it also encapsulates a moral dimension as the Muslim prayer must be performed at fixed times during the day and not meeting this obligation makes one religiously deficient.

Social taint is also very much a part of this occupation. Kareema shares that she and her husband both work as cleaners and their children are taunted in school for being the offspring of cleaners. Nasira, a middle-aged woman, states:

I haven’t told anyone outside of my immediate family that I do a cleaning job. In our family women stay at home, even if it means they have to go hungry. There are some things you don’t tell relatives. We tell them we don’t work though we do because we have no choice but to; we are helpless because otherwise the expenses can’t be met. If someone sees me, I feel a lot of shame.

In addition to experiencing severe occupational taint, our participants described how their pre-existing social identities interact with the physical, moral, and social dirt associated with cleaning toilets. Cleaning toilets as part of domestic work arrangements, for instance, involves women employers and employees for the most part, making workplace dynamics highly feminized. While some households hire a man to cook—and the guard, gardener, and driver are always men—house cleaning, dishwashing, laundry, and childcare are tasks relegated to women workers. Participants felt these were women’s chores, for as one worker put it: “It’s a woman’s job not a man’s! Women work inside the home while men work outside. Whether it is someone else’s home or their own, this
remains a woman’s job. She can’t labor outside with other men.” Such internalized feelings come from the patriarchal expectation that removing domestic dirt is the rightful responsibility of women.

This naturalized gendered division of labor is captured by Salma, a woman cleaner at a local cinema, who explains that women are preferred over men for the job because women already know how to clean while men have to be trained for the job as they have never done such work before:

Men find this work new. You have to tell them how everything has to be done—for example, how to wash the basin, how to clean the vanity, how to polish the water tap. Everything has to be explained to the men while women are already trained in most of this work from their own homes.

This point is underscored by Faisal, a university janitor, who provides his perspective as to who must clean the toilet in his own home and why: “Every man is dominant in his household, so I get my wife to clean our toilet. It is her duty to do so.”

Employers understand these patriarchal dynamics and prefer hiring women to do their domestic cleaning (Zulfiqar, 2019). Arshia, a 20-year old, describes how one of her quick-tempered employers would regularly slap her and the other young woman working with her. Once the same employer lost her temper at the driver and tried to hit him with a wooden ladle. The driver held her wrist until she gave up. What is gleaned from this exchange is that even a woman who occupies a high caste and class must learn not to cross certain patriarchal lines with her male employee (see Zulfiqar, 2022).

When intersected with religious identity, categories of difference stemming from gender, class, and caste become ever more pronounced. As Radia observes: “I have never seen a Muslim man working as a (domestic) cleaner. Christians do this work. I am a Muslim, my husband will never do it though he will do gardening or security work.” Safiya explains that because cleaning toilets makes a person dirty, it is a job Muslims should not be doing: “The issue with toilets is that if you clean them you have to take a shower and only then can you pray. If there is anyone who can do it, it’s the Christians.” Meena, a Christian cleaner, describes how it feels to have such arguments fall upon her religious group:

I used to do this work in schools, too, and they said that only I would clean the bathrooms and not the other women because they were Muslim. I said “Why? Don’t we pray? Why do I have to wash bathrooms? Am I not human?”

Nevertheless, Meena continued to clean toilets at the school until she moved to a similar job in a domestic setting. In the employer’s kitchen, the symbolics of boundary control become particularly severe, for this is the most sanctified space in the South Asian home (Sharma, 2016). Fatima, another Christian worker, explains how her employer established her untouchable status in this space:

They say, “you’re a Christian” and so they have a separate soap for me. My dishes are separate, and I sit separately. I am not allowed to touch the dough. Once I told my employer that I would wash my hands and then prepare the dough for her, but she said: “No, no! Don’t touch the dough!”
It merits acknowledging that religious identity in and of itself is not a marker of difference, for the same employers will happily entertain foreign visitors, eating and drinking with them, knowing full well that they are non-Muslim. This is in line with Hussain’s (2019) contention that the social construction of caste in Pakistan is posited at the intersection of class and religion.

Muslim workers must also deal with boundaries that cannot be violated. Shagufta was only eight when she started working as an aid for the primary domestic worker of the household. She recalls how after finishing her chores she would ask if she could play with her employer’s children but would be told that she was a bad influence on the children and she should chop vegetables or clean out the closets instead.

Most workers report being asked to sit in separate spaces especially when eating. This could either be on the floor or on a rug—so long as the level at which they sit is lower than that at which family members sit. Laila, a domestic worker, explains:

The thing is, poor people’s place is the floor while the rich people have their chairs. Even when sometimes we have to talk to them, we sit on the floor and talk to them politely so that they don’t get angry or are offended.

Many acquiesce to the rituals of segregation as part of the deference required of a low-caste service provider (Javid, 2012; Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007). One woman said that she was so used to sitting on the floor that when a new employer asked her to sit on the sofa, she could not do it because it invoked too much anxiety. Discussions around food tread along a similar current, as Shaheen, a young woman participant recalls:

The food we were given was yesterday’s. We were live-ins but for part-time workers there is no food. If there are leftovers they would give them to you. If you do extra work that was not part of your job, in a good mood sometimes they would give you food and used clothes.

Others, like Laila, insist that they work all day in their employer’s home but do not even get a drink of water. While all of these markers represent separateness, the question remains: how do employers enforce the boundaries they establish between themselves and their employees? It materializes through the everyday rituals of symbolic and physical violence, which function as palpable reminders of the cultural demarcation between the workers and the people who employ them.

The everydayness of symbolic and material violence

Apart from the nature of the work itself, most toilet cleaners explain that it is the humiliation they must endure that makes them dislike their occupations. Nearly all participants report being shouted at, at some point by an employer. An older domestic worker admits that when she feels either tired or overwhelmed, she avoids some of her chores; but this avoidance nearly always ends up in her being subjected to loud scolding. Another says that she feels her work keeps increasing and new chores are added to her workday without a corresponding increase in wages. However, she endures this inequity in silence for she hates being shouted at. Reshma explains: “It is an everyday problem. They don’t curse but they talk angrily and the tone in which they speak is sometimes worse than cursing.”
Participants also openly spoke about physical violence. Many admit to being beaten, especially when they were younger, but also explain that their families would not let them leave their employers for they needed their wages. Tehseen explains: “As a kid, I have been scolded and beaten up many times. But we had to stay. What else could we do? It was a need for us as the family couldn’t have survived without our wages.”

Rehana recalls a day when her employer was especially angry with her and broke three squeegees, one after the other, while beating her. When, after numerous beatings, Rehana ran away from her employer’s home, her mother made her return and she was beaten again for having run away. Shireen, a young woman of about 20, describes her beatings in the following way:

The woman I worked for had three sons. They would lie and complain about me to their mother. She would scold me and beat me up. My mother had taken a loan from her so she wouldn’t let me give up the job. When I went home, I showed my hands and feet to my sister-in-law, which were bruised with the sticks that the woman had used to beat me with, who then told my brother. That was when my family finally came to bring me back home.

Other participants recount similar events. Neha recalls: “One of my nieces worked for a woman, whose brother had become furious with my niece for eloping with a boy. He tried to hang my niece from the ceiling fan with a wire around her neck.” Rasheeda explains how young migrant girls are particularly susceptible to experiencing violence from their employers: “Where I used to work, she [the employer] used to hit the girls who came from very far away and she wouldn’t let them go home. They would cry but she would not relent.” Sughran, who lives in a one-room quarter on the estate of the family for whom she works, shared the following account:

One day the man whose family I worked for was making rotis [bread] in the tandoor [brick oven]. He asked my son to take them out once they were ready, for he had to go away for a bit. My son burned the rotis because he was too scared to take them out of the hot oven. When he came back and saw the burned rotis, he heated the iron rod he used for the oven and hit my son with it. My son came home crying.

Physical violence is often accompanied by another kind of violence—accusations of theft. This was a recurrent theme in the interviews, and it did not appear to matter whether the space was domestic or public. Rehana explains that in the homes of the rich, employers carelessly leave their jewelry or cash lying about and if anything goes missing, or is temporarily misplaced, it is the workers that clean these intimate spaces who are blamed. As she explains: “In the kothis [mansions], where the women have a lot of jewelry and other things, they often ditch us on salary day, accusing us of having stolen from them and tell us, ‘this went missing and that went missing’. ” Kausar’s account matches that of Rehana’s: “Yes, the first to be accused are the servants. Because we are the ones in their homes, so naturally the blame falls upon us.”

Participants who clean airports, hotels, private clubs, gymnasiums, and universities have had similar experiences. Faisal, who cleans toilets on a private university campus, explains: “If a student blames me of stealing something, then, whether or not I am guilty, my salary and job are gone. I’m afraid of this, this is the worst thing that can happen to me.” Fahim, another university janitor, recalls his colleague’s experience:
Once, one of my fellows found a wallet and he submitted it to the security office. When the student got his wallet back, he said it had 10,000 rupees in it that is no longer there. The janitor insisted it was empty when he found it, but the student accused him of taking his money. If he had stolen it, why would he have returned an empty wallet? He would have thrown it away. The student slapped the worker. The university didn’t take action against the student, instead they suspended the janitor and deducted his salary.

Shamim, a woman janitor who cleans the same university’s women’s hostels, further adds:

We never leave without getting checked [at the security office] because the girls often complain that they have lost this or that or accuse us of taking their food. God knows we bring our own food. If we find something in the bathrooms, we give it to security.

There is also a prevalent fear of sexual harassment, especially in younger women workers. Alina, a young domestic worker, describes how she would lock herself up in one of her employer’s rooms whenever she found herself alone with the men workers in the house because of the advances they would make toward her. She was afraid to tell her woman employer as she feared she would not be believed or would be blamed for attracting the men’s attention. Rashida, another young woman, states that before she got married her employer’s husband and sons would attempt to seduce her.

Some express that their women employers blame them for any attention their husbands pay them. This point is captured by Farah, a young woman, who describes a situation where one of her employers was physically violent with her and, subsequently, accused her of trying to seduce her husband:

My employer blamed me for creating a rift between her husband and herself. Her husband used to tell her not to treat me badly. She accused me of brainwashing her husband into supporting me. I would tell her that her husband was a married man and a lot older than I. I never crossed a line with him. But she would accuse me of ruining her marriage. I think it was her own fault. She shouldn’t have been beating me in front of him.

These accounts depict the everydayness of violence that cleaners must negotiate as they go about their work. Each form of violence has a material and a symbolic element layered into it. Beatings, for instance, are felt both materially and symbolically through the physical hurt and the humiliation they engender, while accusations of theft or seduction come attached with material consequences such as dismissal or beatings even if they appear at first to be only expressions of symbolic violence.

**Autonomy and occupational choice**

About half the participants report being first-generation migrants from rural Punjab. They moved to Lahore to escape the clutches of the biraderi system. Shamim explains that she had previously worked in two of the smaller cities of Punjab but ended up moving to Lahore to earn better wages. Nonetheless, not everyone arrived in the city by choice. Sumaira, a 14-year-old who works as a live-in domestic worker, shares the following story:
When I was nine, my family told me that I was going to Lahore to visit my cousin. But they left me at my cousin’s, who then dropped me to the house where I was supposed to work. I did not know that I would have to work and live with these people night and day. I was very scared.

Rashda also moved to the city when she was nine. She explains that she had come eagerly because the city was full of sights and sounds exciting to a young village girl, but she did not enjoy the work and wanted to return home after a couple of months. She was persuaded to stay by her aunt who had arranged for her to work with a family in Lahore. Now 20, she reflects on her journey into adulthood and concludes that the city is a place where people neither know nor care about each other. However, when compared with the village where her family of landless peasants work as sharecroppers—which she describes as hard and poorly remunerated work—she reasons that stigmatized though domestic cleaning is, it is physically easier than working in the fields. This suggests that the availability for research participants to change jobs is based on a false sense of autonomy.

Women workers with children stress that they do not want their children going into this line of work and one of them shares that she bears her daughter’s household expenses, even paying for her grandchildren’s school fees, so that her daughter will not have to work as a cleaner. These participants state that if they have a choice, their daughters would be teachers, seamstresses, or beauticians—virtually anything but cleaners. Others whose daughters are working in the same position as they are, rationalize that owing to poverty they were unable to educate their children or teach them a skill.

Switching between domestic cleaning jobs may appear to be easier than cleaning jobs in the non-domestic sector. For instance, Saira explains that she left a domestic cleaning job because of the inhuman way she felt she was being treated, including having to eat her employer’s stale food, and was soon able to find work as a cleaner in another home. Of course, this was only possible because she was older and independent, as compared with several younger workers who report being placed at their employer’s home by family members. Women like Laila, who works without pay as a domestic worker in exchange for a place for her and her family to live, also feel they have no choice but to stay with their abusive employers:

They talk to us like we are their servants. Sahib shouts at us, asking “where have you kept this and where have you kept that?” Sometimes they are so furious that I forget where I have kept their things. I want to leave this place, run away, and look for work where the employers will treat us well. But we cannot do that as we are forced by poverty, and we also cannot be certain about the kind of employers we will find.

Moreover, since most cleaners have verbal contracts, as in the case of domestic service—or are otherwise hired on contract, as in the non-domestic sector—the threat of being fired is always present. Faisal explains how he lost his cleaning job at the factory:

An officer from another department asked me to clean his toilet. I was busy in my own department so I didn’t do what he asked me to do. I was fired. The officer was very influential in the factory and my supervisors didn’t listen to me.
Faisal’s account shows that losing your job could simply be the result of not doing extra work for someone in authority because you are too preoccupied with your own assigned tasks, even when the person asking you to do the extra work is not your supervisor. The fear of being fired on a pretext is ever present for cleaners working on contract. Sumaira, a middle-aged woman who works as a janitor at a local university, explains:

My husband died last year and I took nine days off from work. They cut my pay, a thousand rupees for every day that I was absent. My monthly pay check is 14,000 rupees, and the month my husband died I only got five. My supervisor said he couldn’t do anything and I know that if I complained to anyone else I would be fired. Once a janitor tried to approach the higher ups and he was fired for that. Now no one dares to complain about anything.

Another limit to agency is the tacit acceptance of violence within worker communities because it is so institutionalized and pervasive. Churches in some low-caste/class communities in Lahore run workshops in patience building, which Fatima describes as follows:

In our church, we received classes on patience and perseverance for an entire year. Father told us to be patient, to tolerate everything, and to control our anger. We learned to bear everything, regardless of how other people treat us. Often, we face a lot of disrespect and come to the verge of tears. Sometimes we even begin to cry, but still we bear it all.

On the other hand, Meena expresses her displeasure with the circumstances in which she finds herself, even while admitting that she does not have a choice but to put up with these indignities:

I often wonder, am I diseased? But I don’t have a choice. If I am hungry, I have to eat but my plate, glass, cup, and spoon—everything—is separated from the rest. We eat and drink better than Muslims and live in a good environment. It is wrong to make someone feel this way.

While Meena affirms her sense of self-worth by comparing herself to Muslims, she laments that she is unable to change either her condition or the stigma with which she has to contend. Having to put up with humiliation, abusive behavior, and violence at the workplace is a consistent theme across participants, who explain that they have to acquiesce to everything in silence because the alternative is to go without financially meeting their families’ basic needs. As Laila points out: “Whatever we earn is spent on food, shelter, clothes, and shoes, and even these basics we cover with great difficulty.”

Discussion

In this article, we revisit the concept of dirty work through an empirical analysis of toilet cleaning work arrangements in Pakistan. We situate our study within the institution of biraderi, which while being analogous to the caste system in other places on the Indian subcontinent, has its own unique characteristics, including occupational demarcations, kinship, class, and religious distinctions. In interrogating dirty work, our study contends that it is critical to uncover the embedded role of power and inequality as well as the historical and the cultural context in which they operate.
Management theorists have relied extensively on SIT to analyze the stigma of dirty work. In the words of Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 413):

The stigma of dirty work fosters development of a strong occupational or workgroup culture, which fosters (1) ideological reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing and (2) selective social comparisons and differential weighting of outsiders’ views. These defense mechanisms transform the meaning of “dirt” and moderate the impact of social perceptions of dirtiness.

Our study finds that toilet cleaners do not fit the idea of workers carving positive self-images to counter occupational stigma (Ashforth and Kriener, 1999, 2014). We contend that in the context we studied, entrenched status hierarchies, shaped as they are by the biraderi system, ensure that toilet cleaners, by virtue of their caste, class, gender, and religion, lack the agentic resources required to redefine their identities in ways that might be considered self-affirming. These boundaries are systematically reified by everyday rituals of violence and abuse. Our study leads us to be wary of applying de-contextualized versions of management theories emerging from the Global North (Prasad, 2009) because, as the biraderi’s reproduction of status hierarchies through cleaning work arrangements and its concomitant influence on worker identities illuminate, dirty work conjures localized manifestations of power and inequality. In the remainder of this section, we discuss three key ideas that question the conceptual framing of dirty work in the current management and organizational studies literature.

Moving beyond social identities in dirty work

SIT predicts that people categorize themselves into groups based on their social identities, amplifying similarities with in-group members and differences with out-group members (Simpson et al., 2012; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). While our study confirms that this is indeed the case with cleaning work relations in Pakistan, it moves beyond SIT to explicate how the biraderi system relies on stringent segregation between the toilet’s users and its cleaners. This can be seen in the rituals of eating, sitting, cleaning, and even play. These impervious boundaries protect members of the elite from workers with out-group identities, who provide a necessary service but whose presence is otherwise relegated in privileged spaces. Their identities are based on class, caste, gender, and religious differences, as defined by the biraderi, and which, concomitantly, determine economic, social, and political outcomes (Gazdar and Mallah, 2012; Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007). At the intersection of these categories of difference, the most degraded Other is the low-class Christian cleaning woman, for the historical memory of her untouchable status as a low-caste Hindu refuses erasure.

Given our findings in this study, we prefer complementing SIT with status construction theory (SCT) in order to understand toilet cleaning as dirty work from the vantage point of Pakistan. SCT explores the social histories of widely held status beliefs (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006), which can help to explain why oppressive discriminatory structures are so culturally embedded. Through the SCT lens, we can see that the normalization of untouchability as well as its subsequent internalization, occurs among the high status and the low status when members of both groups have been socialized to
believe that domestic boundaries are immutable, unproblematic, and “natural” (Ridgeway et al., 1998). This comes out most clearly when a domestic worker reveals that her church teaches her to bear the humiliation and the abuse at work with patience and tolerance. This is consistent with Berger and colleagues’ (2002) contention that social structures emerge as the corollary of the mutual acceptance of an encounter—however inequitable, though, the encounter may be.

The findings further demonstrate that there is a close nexus between the workers’ low-status identities and their dirty work occupations. This nexus functions to only deepen subjects’ experiences with vulnerability and social marginalization. This can be understood by SCT’s proposition that pre-existing status beliefs—in this case, the politics of caste, class, gender, and religious identity—play a key role in the emergence of newer status characteristics (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006); put another way, the expectation that individuals with low-status identities are ideally suited to perform cleaning jobs.

Nevertheless, we fully recognize that our findings cannot be completely understood using the lens of SCT alone, for we show that the elite do not leave the acceptance of hierarchy and role differentiation that comes from the status differentials between themselves and their workers to chance. Instead, abuse, violence, and harassment are used to continually govern hierarchies by cementing domestic and non-domestic boundaries.

**Using violence to secure boundaries**

We juxtapose our findings on violence against the fact that in Pakistan, caste as a category of social marginalization remains unacknowledged, which itself is a form of violence levelled against low-caste groups. It opens the door to unchecked discrimination and abuse, while offering no protections to a disenfranchised minority.

Our participants describe, in painful detail, how violence is used as a strategic marker for difference when the toilet cleaner’s presence is repulsive but must be tolerated in elite spaces. As Douglas (1966 [2002]) argues, “the pollution [becomes] a doubly wicked object of reprobation, first because he crossed the line and second because he endangered others” (as cited in Varman et al., 2021: 648). This is reminiscent of the politics of fear and violence that Jagannathan et al. (2022) and Prasad (2020) highlight in their studies of state brutality against Muslims in contemporary India.

Our study documents accounts of employers slapping, torturing, and bruising workers. To further keep them in line, they are routinely accused of moral crimes, including stealing and seduction. They can be fired on the spot when it seems that they have overstepped a boundary, such as delaying to clean a private toilet on an executive’s request. We contend that there is material and symbolic violence in each of these acts. While Barrett (2009), Douglas (1966 [2002]), and Varman and colleagues (2021), as well as others have argued that violence is used to protect the purity of privilege, our interpretation of the findings suggests that the elite themselves have dirt on their hands as they flout all norms of decency in order to keep workers doing dirty work in a subservient place.

While violence appears to be a feature of cleaning arrangements in both domestic and non-domestic spaces, gender does seem to matter when it comes to domestic cleaning, since the domestic realm in the Global South is a feminized space usually managed by a
female employer. Here, the employer can abuse and torture women workers but has to keep herself in check when it comes to interacting with men workers, as evidenced by Arshia’s account. When young women workers complain of sexual harassment, women employers either ignore or blame the victim, signaling that the despised Other cannot have expectations of solidarity (Fernando and Prasad, 2019). The violence becomes most acute when it comes to Christian cleaners, the most disenfranchised religious group given their low-caste identity; their low-caste renders them ritually impure both to Muslim employers and Muslim cleaners.

We turn now to worker agency to show that by ignoring context and overemphasizing the symbolic while negating the material, the dirty work literature has propagated false optimism about workers’ ability to (re)negotiate socially determined identities and stigma (Hughes et al., 2017).

**Power and the limits to agency**

Brewer (2001) argues that individuals engage in social action to forge a positive social image of their group, most often through self-definitions that help situate themselves within their context. In our study, we find scant evidence of this phenomenon. There is Meena, our Christian participant, who comments that Christians eat and drink better than Muslims, demonstrating her resentment against the caste-based notions of “social deviance” being levelled against her (Davis, 1984); though, in the same breath, she mentions her helplessness in the situation. In short, we cannot support the idea that toilet cleaners systematically produce the sort of esteem-enhancing social narratives that research on dirty work in Global North contexts has found to date (Lukas, 2011). For the most part, toilet cleaners in our study do not show occupational pride; in fact, their continual hope is to get a better, more culturally recognized job that does not involve cleaning toilets. They desire a new profession even while recognizing the lack of labor market opportunities available to them.

Juxtaposing the low-class, Christian woman against Ashforth and Kriener’s (1999, 2014) contention that workers find ways to overcome stigma, we argue that the sociohistorical status of certain groups of individuals is so stubbornly salient that it is not possible to erase it through self-narratives. When the local church teaches silent forbearance there remains little confusion or possibility of disruption of the power hierarchies inherent in prevailing systems of social stratification, and the stigma and violence associated with maintaining them.

While migration offers the possibility of escaping the biraderi determined rural occupational demarcations, and some women cleaners are satisfied that they were able to give up sharecropping by leaving their villages, the biraderi proves to possess an omnipresent influence by placing limits to occupational mobility in the city. In migrating, the Muslim women in our study swap working on other people’s agricultural lands for cleaning other people’s toilets, a work considered fit for the lowest-class Christians. Their only solace is that while they may clean toilets for a living, their men would never have to clean them, differentiating Muslim men from the Christian men who undertake such work. In fact, the patriarchal dynamics of the task are such that even men who clean toilets for a living claim that they would never do this job in their own homes.
SCT proposes that acts of resistance can disrupt the emergence of status beliefs (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006). This study provides a few instances of workers quitting their job after being given stale food to eat, of avoiding work when tired, and, in the case of a few younger women, running away after being repeatedly beaten. At the same time, we learn that parents who have taken loans from wealthy, high-status families, which their daughters must then work to satisfy, force them to return to violent employers. Overall, the acts of resistance are few, feeble, and far between, and certainly not enough to disrupt the powerful status beliefs and occupational stigma that they come up against.

This study questions the idea of agency in the SIT-informed dirty work literature and calls for interrogating and recasting this framework idiosyncratically by uncovering the embedded role of power and sociohistorical context. As mentioned above, one way of doing this is to use institutional theories of caste such as that proposed by Mahalingam et al. (2019). Mahalingam and colleagues argue that the discursive construction of janitorial work as dirty work erodes the dignity of Dalit janitors in India; compounding the fact that the social relations of caste reproduce cultures of obedience among this population. Another seminal work is offered by Mair et al. (2016), who study inequality as a grand challenge in institutional theory through the lens of caste, arguing that it defines a set of norms, rules, and beliefs that shape categories of exclusion and social processes—for higher castes in India take extreme care through complex prohibitions on sharing food, water, and other forms of social interactions. These studies provide compelling evidence to suggest that the ongoing preoccupation among management scholars on finding agency in even the darkest of contexts is not just misplaced but it is also dangerous.

Agency, we argue, is geographically and temporally situated (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010), for its contingent nature is a function of both the historical and the current circumstances of individuals (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In our case, the biraderi system produces social inequalities by naturalizing the intersecting boundaries of caste, class, religion, gender, and occupation. It then reinforces them through myriad material and symbolic forms of violence. This ensures that workers performing the dirty work of cleaning toilets do not have the agentic resources required to clean their reputations or affirm their dignity by recasting their identity in the self-asserting ways that workers in Global North contexts have reportedly been able to do (Johnston et al., 2018; Soni-Sinha and Yates, 2013; Tracy and Scott, 2006).

**Concluding remarks**

For much too long, management ideas, concepts, and theories developed in the Global North have been offered as if they are devoid of geographical and cultural context. This has led management knowledge to be tacitly predicated on the assumption that it holds universal applicability. Subverting this assumption, this study revisits the concept of dirty work to illuminate why management ideas that are bereft of proper contextualization lose relevance when applied to unique contexts, especially in regions of the Global South. In this article, we theorize the pivotal impact of the biraderi determined caste system on work arrangements in in Pakistan’s Punjab province—its origins, its endurance, and its implications on particular forms of work and workers. We hope that this will catalyze more explorations on systems of inequality (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015) and the caste context (Mair et al., 2016) in the field of management and organizational studies.
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