



# Tainted status in dirty work: Immigrant Experiences in South Africa's Informal Sector



## Authors:

Charles Cobbinah<sup>1</sup>   
Willie Chinyamurindi<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Applied Management Ethics and Leadership, Faculty of Management and Commerce, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Willie Chinyamurindi,  
wchinyamurindi@ufh.ac.za

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**Orientation:** The informal sector is argued as an important context of work for African immigrants in South Africa. More research is needed to understand this important context of work.

**Research purpose:** The study explores how immigrants make sense of their work experience as informed by the taint associated with dirty work in the South African informal sector.

**Motivation for the study:** Strategies need to be in place to assist those in challenging work contexts, such as dirty work.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study used a qualitative research approach, relying on interviews with 27 immigrants working within the informal sector in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

**Main findings:** Three key narratives emerged: (1) immigrants experienced stigma linked to the taint of dirty work in the informal sector; (2) this stigma led to mental strain; and (3) immigrants responded with agentic, proactive behaviours to cope.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Targeted support interventions are needed to reduce the stigma of dirty work. Advocacy and educational campaigns can help reframe such work as essential to societal well-being and local economies.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study amplifies the often-overlooked voices of workers in informal, stigmatised labour. It offers new insights into how occupational taint is experienced, resisted, and negotiated in South Africa's informal economy, enriching Global South perspectives.

**Keywords:** immigrants; dirty work; self-identity; social buffers; narrative; stigma; informal sector.

## Introduction

There is a noted growing popularity of work classified as dirty work. Such work has emerged as a growing area of empirical interest internationally (Miner, 2019; Roitenberg, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023) and also in developing countries such as South Africa (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019). Dirty work is classified as (1) work that is unpleasant or involves working in a dangerous situation; (2) work where a person comes into regular contact with stigmatised people; or (3) work where an individual deals with acts classified as sinful or of a dubious virtue (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Hughes, 1958; Van Vuuren et al., 2012). Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) classify dirty work as labour that is framed as dirty through culture and socialisation.

Dirty work can serve as a positive utility to society. Work in such areas is often seen to be necessary for societal effectiveness (Hughes, 1958). Despite this, dirty work is usually accompanied by stigma-related attributes (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014; Hughes, 1958; Leary, 2007). These stigma-related attributes are often negative (Hughes et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). For some, dirt symbolises social degradation and the ensuing stigma (Ashforth et al., 2017). The ensuing stigma can be problematic and affect not just the experience of work but also the perception of societal standing (Ashforth et al., 2017; Hughes, 1958; Simpson et al., 2016). Strategies need to be in place to help manage stigma experienced, especially within dirty work (Ashforth et al., 2017; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023).

Calls are being made for the need to explore varying aspects of dirty work (Miner, 2019; Roitenberg, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023), including identity formation that happens not only as influenced by the

individual but also by the socio-cultural milieu (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019). Further, there is also a need to explore and understand how individuals deal with the taint aspects that are manifest in dirty work (Muchineripi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Such taint has been classified by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) as consisting of physical, social and moral taint (Harrison & Nurmohamed, 2023; Simpson & Simpson, 2018).

In developing nations like South Africa, such studies focused on dirty work remain scant despite the noted popularity of individuals entering dirty work jobs such as hairdressing, plumbing, rubble removal and carpentry (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Muchineripi et al., 2022). Calls exist in the literature for more nuanced studies that position dirty work not on the periphery but as a possible feature that could form a core part of an individual's career work (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Yu, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). This research is located within an effort to understand such ideals, including the issue of stigma within dirty work amongst immigrants, as argued in the literature as a need (Harrison & Nurmohamed, 2023).

Based on all the presented literature, some gaps can be flagged considering this issue of stigma. Firstly, calls exist in the literature for a more nuanced understanding of dirty work, including stigma and its effect on the individual experience of work (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Yu, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Secondly, the need for such studies is heightened, especially within a South African context. The observation from the empirical studies is that dirty work is entered into by immigrants not by choice but out of necessity to earn a living (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019). The role of dirty work becomes essential in such contexts, given the challenges around the lack of absorption of individuals into the formal sector because of high unemployment (Muchineripi et al., 2022; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019).

Stigma remains an area of interest amongst scholars with reference to work in general and with specific emphasis on dirty work (Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Simpson et al., 2016). Within an African context, Cobbinah and Chinyamurindi (2018) noted that stigma within dirty work, including the role of social buffers, remains an area that has received scant focus (Simpson & Simpson, 2018). A study of this nature can be a helpful basis for interventions and strategies that can be proposed to address the challenges of those individuals engaged in dirty work (Muchineripi et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). Informed by the presented background, the following research question is proposed: *How do immigrants who are tainted (by their status as non-South African citizens) make sense of or experience their work, which also happens to be dirty?*

## Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how immigrants make sense of their work experience, as informed by the taint that accompanies dirty work in the South African informal sector.

The objectives were:

- To explore the experiences of immigrants working within the informal sector of dirty work and the taint that accompanies it.
- To explore the responses of immigrants working within the informal sector of dirty work and the taint that accompanies it.
- To make recommendations that inform the theory, policy and practitioner audience in connection with the experience and response of immigrants working within the informal sector of dirty work and the taint that accompanies it.

## Literature review

### Theoretical underpinning

Two theories are given focus in this study. Firstly, attention is given to intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectional theory can be useful to understand the role of constraints in society and how these may impede upon individual career development and progression (Gouws, 2017). At the core of these constraints and their influence are the roles of gender, race and social class (Collins, 2015). The role of these attributes as interacting factors potentially imposes a layer of complexity on the lived experience of the individual (Bright et al., 2016). Secondly, consideration is the vocational anticipatory socialisation (VAS) theory (Myers et al., 2011). The VAS assists in providing a frame of understanding around how socially embedded prevailing beliefs can influence individual experiences of work. Noteworthy from this is an understanding of how the individual frames a response to such beliefs (Myers et al., 2011). How such experiences of work and prevailing societal beliefs affect individual self-concept forms a key tenet of social identity theory (Turner, 1975).

### Dirty work in South Africa

There is a noted increase in the number of African immigrants moving to South Africa (Harry et al., 2019). Most of these immigrants choose to work within the informal sector (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018) because of high entry barriers within the formal sector (Chimucheka et al., 2019). Further, African immigrants are often perceived as less valuable than South African residents (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015; Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). African immigrants usually turn to the informal sector, serving as entrepreneurs (Fatoki & Patswawairi, 2012). Some critique this contribution as being merely survivalist in nature (Muchineripi et al., 2019), yet it has an essential personal contribution (Chimucheka et al., 2019; Muchineripi et al., 2022).

Dirty work in South Africa is often viewed as reserved for unskilled and uneducated people (Broussard, 2017). Dirty work is usually attractive in South Africa within the informal sector (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019). The informal sector is deemed an essential feeder to the formal sector (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Studies note that African immigrants' transition experience in the informal sector is tough because of a lack of finances and challenges in adjusting to a new environment (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Fatoki & Patswawairi, 2012). A great

source of this challenge often emanates from the environment, particularly in dealing with residents (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015), who are usually a source of stigma (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). This often leads African immigrants working within the dirty work sector to depend on their social networks to assist in dealing with the challenges they face (Chimucheka et al., 2019).

### The experience of dirty work

There is an acknowledgement that individuals engaged in dirty work experience stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Ashforth et al., 2007; Hughes, 1958). Such stigma is noted to be enduring (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), with the potential to cause harm to the individual (Ashforth et al., 2017; Slutskaya et al., 2018). Ultimately, those who stay in dirty work jobs are believed to continually face negative attributes and require support to handle such stigma (Bliethe & Wolfe, 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). Conversely, there is a need to challenge such negative attributes to help the individual frame a positive perception of dirty work (Eds. Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012). Given the importance of dirty work, especially within developing nations such as South Africa, such efforts are needed (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2019).

With the need to understand how stigma occurs, its role in the experience and context of work becomes important (Berkelaar et al., 2012). At play here could also be a sense of identity that informs how an individual not only understands their role and contribution to work but also their life in general (Harrison & Nurmohamed, 2023; Nicholls & Rice, 2017). Further, stigma within dirty work may play a dual role, which is both positive and negative (Slutskaya et al., 2018). Strategies are needed on how to manage such stigma, as argued within Goffman's (1963) theory on social stigma (Simpson & Simpson, 2018). This gives focus on the need to understand coping strategies with dirty work stigma.

### Coping with dirty work stigma

Some strategies are proposed for coping with the stigma of dirty work. Coping strategies are responses at an individual, organisational and community level used to manage aspects related to stigma (Yang, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). A range of strategies can be used as coping mechanisms. Inzlicht and Schmader (Eds., 2012) note the role of grouping as a potential coping mechanism for the challenges faced by those engaged in dirty work. For African immigrants, a stigma-related event may not be perceived as stressful if the stigmatised person has the adaptive resources to cope with the potential stressor (Zhang et al., 2023). One such way to cope could be relying on group affiliation and using this to cope with stigma (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Some adaptive resources are psychological, behavioural, economic, educational or social (Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Simpson et al., 2016).

In Ashforth et al.'s (2007) view regarding social resources, dirty workers can address stigma threats by relying on social

buffers that may provide social support to insulate them against societal derogations. Thus, social buffers may contribute, create and provide a safe environment for minimising or coping with stigma threats and impact (Simpson et al., 2016). Such a situation may create a heavy reliance on others' validation to affirm the social worth of a dirty worker's identity (Bosmans et al., 2016; Maynard-Moody & Mushene, 2003).

Maynard and Mushene (2003) argue that social validation is highly problematic for immigrants in many dirty work occupations. An explanation for this could be the absence of positive validation from social buffers, which may cause those in stigmatised occupations to have contradictory ideas about their work and businesses (Kreiner et al., 2006). This denial may lead to the use of defensive tactics (Ashforth et al., 2007). Hence, while positive social validation from social buffers may lead to approval, negative validation may make dirty workers feel a sense of guilt, shame and low self-esteem (Hardy & Thomas, 2015; Petriglieri, 2011; Simpson et al., 2016).

Various general stigma-coping strategies have been identified for dirty workers (Simpson et al., 2016), often resulting in both positive and negative responses to stigma. Also, dirty work negativity can be neutralised by drawing on occupational ideologies that include 'reframing', whereby work is infused with positive values, and 'refocusing', which involves an emphasis on the non-stigmatised aspects of the job (Ashforth et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2017). This international experience thus far offers valuable insight (Zhang et al., 2023). It might be interesting to ascertain from an African experience whether these presented experiences and the theorising are similar.

## Research design

### Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. This approach was based on the ideals espoused in phenomenology and aimed at understanding subjective lived experiences (Cohen et al., 2011). The researchers relied on narrative inquiry to not only understand but also explore the experience of stigma within dirty work. Further, the aim was to understand the response to the experience of stigma within dirty work amongst immigrants operating within the informal sector.

### Research strategy

An in-depth semi-structured interview strategy was used to collect data. An interview schedule with open-ended questions was developed for the interviews (see Appendix 1 for a list of questions). The schedule was piloted with three African immigrants with similar characteristics to those of the participants and was further reviewed by experts in the validation process. Probing was done using questions such as 'Why or why not?' and 'Can you please explain more?', as suggested in the literature (Cohen et al., 2011). This process

generated narratives based on participant stories and probing, allowing participants to reflect deeply on their lived experiences regarding dirty work and the processes that accompany such experiences (Chinyamurindi, 2016a; Lyons et al., 2012). After the ethical clearance certificate had been obtained from the university's Ethics Committee, consent forms and letters were issued to the participants explaining their rights and responsibilities in participating in the research (Miles et al., 2014).

### Research participants and sampling methods

A total of 27 African immigrant adults (8 females and 19 males) were the participants. At the time of the study, the participants' average age was 40 years (the age range was between 33 years and 55 years), and all resided in East London in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Table 1 presents participants' demographic characteristics and briefly describes their occupation and number of years in South Africa.

The study was carried out in East London, a coastal city deemed favourable by immigrants, away from cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town, often viewed as congested. Challenges exist in obtaining reliable statistics on the number of African immigrants in South Africa (Harry et al., 2019). By observation, most African immigrants in South Africa are found in the most economically active cities and towns.

A convenience sampling approach was used to select participants for the study. An area of East London was chosen for its popularity in attracting informal sector businesses in

East London. Upon selecting this area, individuals working in informal sector businesses classified as dirty work were then approached to take part in the study.

The key informants used two main criteria to recruit the participants. Firstly, participants had to have started a dirty work business since their entry into South Africa. A categorisation for this research was used, of dirty work, as informed by the literature (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Kreiner et al., 2006). This includes work that involves taint (moral and social) and any form of physical taint. Secondly, participants in the study had to work full-time as dirty workers. These inclusion and exclusion criteria were deemed relevant for reliable information gathering (Creswell, 2012). The first author conducted face-to-face interviews at the workplaces where the African immigrants were based (e.g. hair salon and carpentry workshop). Using such places for data collection allowed for the opportunity to see African immigrants as they engaged in their work duties. The interviews were conducted from April 2017 to August 2017 and lasted a maximum of 63 minutes each and a minimum of 40 minutes. No incentive was given to participate in the research. Data transcription for each interview was done within three days of the interviews. When the researchers were convinced of data saturation, whereby no new information existed, data collection was stopped.

### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Because of the narrative inquiry used in this research, researcher reflexivity was necessary to enhance

**TABLE 1:** Study participants.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Country of origin	Highest qualification	Number of years in South Africa	Home country career	Current job within dirty work
Akosua	Ghana	National Diploma	7	Sports Administrator	Hairdresser
Alfred	Zimbabwe	School leaving certificate	11	Unemployed	Carpenter
Alice	Zambia	School leaving certificate	18	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Amon	Zimbabwe	Undergraduate Degree	11	Chef	Tree feller
Bless	Nigeria	Undergraduate Degree	8	Unemployed	Hairdresser
Chanda	Zambia	School leaving certificate	8	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Daniel	Ghana	School leaving certificate	10	Masonry	Masonry
Diana	Zambia	School leaving certificate	14	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Doe	Ghana	National Diploma	13	Car Salesman	Vulcaniser
Edem	Ghana	Advanced National Diploma	4	Secretary	Masonry
Gabriel	Ghana	School leaving certificate	17	Store Salesman	Hairdresser
Isaac	Ghana	School leaving certificate	9	Store Manager	Vulcaniser
Jefta	Malawi	School leaving certificate	13	General Hand	Masonry
Joe	Zimbabwe	Advanced National Diploma	11	Carpenter	Carpentry
Jolyn	Malawi	School leaving certificate	12	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Joseph	Mozambique	School leaving certificate	5	Unemployed	Carpentry
Kennit	Ghana	Undergraduate degree	12	Teacher	Car wash attendant
Katana	Mozambique	School leaving certificate	18	Unemployed	Rubble remover
Mohammed	Nigeria	Advanced National Diploma	4	Seaman	Plumber
Patricia	Ghana	School leaving certificate	8	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Prince	Ghana	School leaving certificate	15	Carpenter	Carpentry
Rose	Ghana	School leaving certificate	15	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Seko	Ghana	School leaving certificate	12	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Shan	Zimbabwe	Advanced National Diploma	8	Soccer Player	Rubble remover
Silan	Cameroon	School leaving certificate	15	Carpenter	Carpentry
Thomas	Ghana	Undergraduate degree	12	Hairdresser	Hairdresser
Victoria	Ghana	Undergraduate degree	8	Trader	Hairdresser

trustworthiness (Lyons et al., 2012) and acknowledge the role researchers can play within the data collection process (Malterud, 2001). The literature guided the researchers in ensuring reflexivity (Malterud, 2001). Firstly, a reflexive journal was kept for the duration of the research process. Keeping the journal helped in planning the research and gathering some thoughts, especially around the participants' views being expressed. Secondly, and related to the first point, when participants learned that our study was for research purposes, they appeared to open up more. The thinking here appeared to assume that the African immigrants had found a mouthpiece to air their concerns through participation in the research. Finally, given all these issues, concerns around the trustworthiness of data arose, given the biases (primarily unintended) that the researchers brought into the data collection process.

### Data analysis

To better manage and analyse the data, completed transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo Version 11 software (Woods et al., 2016). The data analysis was a joint effort between the two authors of this article. A data analysis procedure based on three levels of meaning-making was adopted and used (Chinyamurindi, 2016b; Harry et al., 2017; Lilgendahl et al., 2013).

Level 1 was performed by re-reading each interview transcript and listening to audio recordings. This process helped to understand and identify 'markers' from each participant's story to answer the research question (Lilgendahl et al., 2013). In Level 2, participants' responses were classified into meaningful categories. Quotes based on perceptions, their effects and strategies in managing dirty work stigma consistent across the narrated stories were identified (Chinyamurindi, 2016b). Level 3 helped researchers to analyse the content of the gathered narrative accounts and themes. This means of analysis allowed cross-case comparison in understanding participants' sense-making around their lived experiences of stigma (Harry et al., 2017; Toolis & Hammack, 2015).

The process of coding was a joint effort between the two authors of this article. The first author coded the data independently and then generated codes and subsequent narratives from this process. Thereafter, the second author repeated the same process independently. A meeting was then held to compare the codes and subsequent narratives. This process allowed for consensus-seeking around the process of data analysis. The study also addressed the question of ensuring data integrity when working with interviews and narratives using prescribed guidelines from previous research (Chinyamurindi, 2016a). Data were collected over a reasonable period to avoid fatigue for the researchers. To ensure that all the data were recorded, the interviews were audio-recorded. After the interviews, each audio recording was transcribed within 24 hours of the interview being conducted.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Institutional Faculty Research Ethics Committee (No.REC-270710-028-RA Level 01). A range of strategies was taken to ensure ethical principles were adhered to for this study. Firstly, the research team applied for ethical clearance from the participating university, where the researchers are based, the University of Fort Hare. Secondly, the research team ensured that all participants in the study had to give informed consent and were informed of their rights to participate in the study. Thirdly, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants in the study. Fourthly, all interviews were conducted with permission from the participants in areas they deemed to be safe and conducive.

### Results

Drawing from the narrative analysis of the data, three main narrative findings emerged. Firstly, immigrants narrated experiencing aspects of stigma, especially working within the taint that accompanies dirty work in the informal sector. Secondly, as a result of the experienced stigma, the ensuing mental strain resulted. Thirdly, in responding to the stigma and mental strain, immigrants working within the dirty work context exercised agentic proactive behaviours. These findings are presented next.

#### Narrative 1: Dirty work taint and the experience of high stigmatisation

This narrative theme explores how dirty work taint is perceived and experienced by African migrants and immigrants working in the informal sector. A significant portion of the study's participants (85%) reported that their work was associated with negative social judgements, largely shaped by the physical and symbolic attributes of their occupations, seen as dirty, demeaning and socially unacceptable.

Participants shared how these perceptions are not only externally imposed by community members and customers but are also internalised, shaping their day-to-day experiences, social interactions and sense of self-worth.

Shan (33 years old, from Zimbabwe), who worked in rubble removal, described how societal perceptions of his work impacted both his occupational identity and social status:

'In this job, we deal with unwanted and dirty things, so people are ashamed of being seen carrying rubbish and stinking stuff, so that is why some of the people here don't respect this job and so they don't respect us also in this job ... They see this work as dirty, filthy, risky work that you don't get much (money), yet you can get sick, and no one will compensate you ... Because of this, if you are a foreigner doing it on your own, they judge you, undermine you, and look at you as some human who is not good enough. That is why you do this job like you do not have skills and education ... they don't value you, and some laugh and pass ugly comments, so there are bad perceptions around the work we do.' (Shan, 33 years old, Zimbabwe)

Shan's account reveals the symbolic degradation associated with dirty work, where tasks involving waste or sanitation are considered not only physically unclean but also morally and socially inferior. The stigma is compounded for immigrants like Shan, who are perceived as lacking skills or legitimacy, further reinforcing exclusionary attitudes and practices.

Mohammed (44 years old, from Nigeria), a plumber, highlighted how cultural taboos and health-related fears contribute to the marginalisation of certain types of labour:

'Some guys even refuse to unblock drains because it is against their culture as a man to work with such unclean stuff, so to them, it is abnormal, and also they do not want to get infections, but I do it anyway.' (Mohammed, 44 years old, Nigeria)

Mohammed's experience illustrates how cultural norms around cleanliness, masculinity and health intersect with occupational roles to exacerbate the dirty work taint. The choice to engage in such work, despite its taboo nature, is not only economically motivated but also reflects a resistance to normative constraints, even as it opens workers up to further stigmatisation.

Across these narratives, participants expressed that dirty work in the informal sector is widely viewed as inferior, unpleasant and unskilled, which leads to workers being undervalued, ridiculed or socially excluded. For many, the foreign status of the worker adds a layer of xenophobic sentiment, reinforcing the perception that such jobs are only fit for outsiders or those without better options. The participant accounts underscore how dirty work taint is both a symbolic and material reality, shaping how work is perceived, how workers are treated and how they come to view themselves.

As presented in Box 1, additional participant quotations provide further insight into how these negative perceptions manifest and influence the daily work experience.

## Narrative 2: Stigmatisation from dirty work taint, resulting in mental strain

Narrative finding two revealed how experiences of stigmatisation deeply impacted the psychological well-being of migrant and immigrant workers engaged in dirty work within the informal sector. Participants consistently reported that negative societal attitudes toward their work led to mental strain, diminished self-worth and in some cases, thoughts of abandoning their trades altogether.

Amon (38 years old, from Zimbabwe), previously employed as a chef before migrating, shared the internal turmoil and social judgement he faced in his current occupation as a tree feller and cartage worker:

'Customers and friends comment negatively about my job, and it upsets me; it brings me down. At first, I was thinking of stopping and trying another business, but when I looked around, there was nothing proper to do than this job ... so I felt bad about myself because some people said a whole lot of bad things.

### BOX 1: Narrative finding one additional quotes.

'... most people view this work as a difficult, risky, and stressful job. In this business, you can stay for some days without getting to work. Also, we use dangerous machines, and we improvise staff to work in bad conditions, so they think we are crazy and do not value our lives. That type of negative outlook characterises the work we do.' (Alfred, Carpenter, Zimbabwe)

'... guys here hate to work as masons. Some complain about feeling physical pains after lifting blocks, cement, and other things. So it is challenging work ... Being in dirty clothing and always being dirty and working in the open places all make you receive a bad feeling around you, and being a foreigner makes you even get singled out.' (Jefta, Mason, Malawi)

'When I started, one customer referred to me as "madman" because I chose to fix a wheel by lying on dusty floor, wearing dirty clothes, and being dirty. So people feel like the job is tedious and demeaning and that there is no pride in this job; it is a sort of disgrace in a way that they will not do ...' (Doe, Vulcaniser, Ghana)

'Many do not think the salon is a work to make a decent living and be proud of. There is a stigma, and people would not like their children doing this work. They say it is strenuous as you stand mostly ... the vapour and the scent from chemicals they say are dangerous to their health ... so even those who are not educated do not like this salon business but want office jobs.' (Victoria, hairdresser, Ghana)

People are like, you do this job, and you are always dirty and smelling; how much will you get out. Why wouldn't you look for something proper to do? I just felt bad ... So some people choose to be saved from all the bad comments, and they stop.' (Amon, 38 years old, Zimbabwe)

Amon's narrative illustrates how social devaluation of the occupation leads to self-doubt and emotional fatigue. The juxtaposition between his past professional identity and the stigma of his current work fuels a crisis of identity and purpose, which is a recurring theme among participants.

Similarly, Isaac (43 years old, from Ghana), who transitioned from a store manager in Ghana to a vulcaniser in South Africa, explained how public perception framed his work as shameful or criminal:

'Doing this job is like you have committed a crime, but this is just a work of which you become clean after washing yourself, but people think about you according to the work you do. So, when you tell them you are a vulcaniser, fixing tyres, they look at you as if maybe you are uneducated or insane ... I felt bad and sad and had a quitting feeling those days I started. You are busy providing good services to the people, but they discriminate against you because you are not in better work. Even when you go to a shop to buy food in working gear, people avoid you as if you are contagious or you carry disease, so that is it in this business ... Even some customers have a different attitude towards you.' (Isaac, 43 years old, Ghana)

Isaac's experience reflects the symbolic contamination associated with dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), where physical appearance and occupational role invite prejudiced assumptions about one's intelligence, character or social value. This leads to a form of social exclusion that has tangible psychological effects.

Jolyn (37 years old, from Ghana), who works in a hair salon, offered insight into how dirty work stigma intersects with gendered expectations and xenophobic undertones:

'I used to be angry about myself and ashamed of this work when clients and workers from here made me feel that I was not good for anything else in life, and that is why I chose this salon business. When people disrespect me because of my job, it upsets me a lot. People ask you silly questions and show somebody language that

tells it all; you know us as ladies. These things make me feel inferior and small in their eyes ... I promise you, initially, I found it difficult when I heard all sorts of unpleasant comments about the salon and us foreigners ... For during the xenophobia attack, we were accused of preventing them from having jobs, yet they say our job is dirty work.' (Jolyn, 37 years old, Ghana)

Jolyn's testimony highlights how intersectional stigma – based on occupation, nationality and gender – exacerbates feelings of inferiority and isolation. The contradiction between being blamed for taking jobs while also being ridiculed for doing 'undesirable' work reveals the paradox of immigrant taint in dirty work.

Joseph (37 years old, from Mozambique) reinforced the mental toll of occupying this stigmatised space, particularly under the gaze of both poverty and foreigner status:

'In the beginning, I was not happy about my work because I woke up in the morning to go to do work that feeds my family, often at my own expense. There is a lot of attribution that my being a foreigner makes me available for any work. In essence, I am looked down upon because of my work. So, I always have to deal with dual challenges first, such as how I am treated because of my work. Second, having to deal with the mental agony that comes with the stigma that comes with my work.' (Joseph, 37 years old, Mozambique)

Joseph's statement reveals how occupational stigma and xenophobia compound, creating a dual burden of external judgement and internalised distress. His reflection shows the complex emotional labour involved in maintaining dignity while navigating daily indignities.

Participants in this study consistently highlighted the mental strain linked to the social devaluation of their work. These accounts confirm that dirty work stigma is not only externally imposed but also internally absorbed, undermining positive identity formation and contributing to anxiety, sadness and feelings of worthlessness.

Box 2 presents additional participant quotations that deepen and support this narrative finding.

### **Narrative 3: The role of agentic proactive behaviours in countering stigmatisation and mental strain in dirty work taint**

Participants narrated the enactment of agentic proactive behaviours as critical in managing both the external stigma imposed by society and the internal mental strain associated with performing dirty work. These behaviours included emotional regulation, self-presentation and identity-reframing strategies to challenge stereotypes and reassert their dignity.

Patricia (43 years old, from Ghana), a passionate professional in the hair business, illustrated how she actively manages her response to perceived disrespect by customers:

'Some customers' behaviour towards me sometimes tells me that I am stupid just because I am giving service and that they are paying me, so they are better than me, and I am not important.

#### **BOX 2: Narrative finding two additional quotes.**

'I am a human being, so sometimes I get upset and feel bad, especially if some of my workers or customers undermine me and make unfortunate comments about me and my job. This plays out in your head all day long and is continually creating mental challenges.' (Seko, hairdresser, Ghana)

'I used to feel discouraged and upset and try to defend myself, but I realised they are my customers and friends, so I need to accept whatever they do or say. Sometimes, it pains me when even teenagers look down on me because I am a foreigner and do their hair. It is like I should play maid to them and pamper them ... so I have no respect for doing this job. I carry these pictures with me in my mind, and I go on with my life.' (Akosua, hairdresser, Ghana)

'I do not bother anymore. I will say that in the initial days, I was not taking ugly comments lightly because they made me think that I was useless. I think a job like this needs support, not discouragement, but people do not think so. I am called names and seen as a useless guy who has nothing else to do in this world than a full-time rubble business guy. So there is no respect for me at all.' (Katana, rubble removal, Mozambique)

'I almost stopped because there were many negative comments and discouraging words from friends and even customers. It hurt well because of the job; I am seen as an inferior, uneducated, and disabled person. It was sad, but that is the nature of being in a female-dominated career. You end up living with feelings of inferiority.' (Gabriel, hairdresser, Ghana)

As a woman, I get offended sometimes, but I know the customer is right, so I control myself. I do not take any offence. I understand that this job is for those who are less fortunate; even in my country, it is like that. I try to show my customers that I am actually an intelligent person with a fully functional brain. This level of engagement has assisted in me getting a level of respect through showing customers that I am actually an intelligent person.' (Patricia, 43 years old, Ghana)

Patricia's response reflects a dual strategy: emotional self-regulation and cognitive reframing. Instead of retaliating or internalising the stigma, she makes a conscious effort to project competence and intelligence, reclaiming agency and respect in a work context often perceived as low status.

Daniel (40 years old, from Ghana) similarly described an intentional and educative approach to navigating the emotional toll of taint:

'I exercise patience and control my temper. This also involves trying by all means to ignore the actions and behaviours and any bad attitude that can come as part of my experience of work. I used to get upset over minor comments and behaviours because of this job. However, I tried to educate myself first by exercising restraint. Further, I also got into the habit of telling my story to those I consider to be customers at my work. I always tell these customers where I come from and where I want to go with my career. I find this as a more helpful response than attacking people who are attacking you.' (Daniel, 40 years old, Ghana)

Daniel's approach is a form of proactive storytelling, a technique that not only humanises him to his clients but also allows him to rewrite the narrative of his work identity in a more empowered light. Through sharing his journey and aspirations, he reframes his work as a temporary step in a longer developmental trajectory, rather than a final, degraded status.

Kennit (41 years old, from Ghana) reinforced the theme of self-education and peer support as coping mechanisms in the face of early disillusionment:

'I used to get angry, you know, as [an] educated person in this business, but these comments and perceptions meted out to me here in South Africa hurt. My first week in business was strenuous. I was on the verge of quitting. The problem comes when I go home and lie down on a bed and reflect on those

realities. I even planned to go back home ... But I realised I was not real to myself because doing this job comes with challenges. So I found comfort from the fellow I learned this job from who focuses on the job ... I learned how to calmly educate those with bad perceptions and focus on my work. I joked with such comments, and I completely ignored some unspoken actions. That was how I was able to cope; otherwise, I would have stopped from week one.' (Kennit, 41 years old, Ghana)

Kennit's narrative shows how emotional labour and peer mentorship serve as critical buffers against mental strain. By choosing not to internalise negative perceptions and instead finding solidarity and support from a mentor, he was able to recenter his focus on the craft of his work. His humour and selective disengagement reflect sophisticated coping strategies that prevent burnout and identity erosion.

The presented narratives underscore the agentic and resilient responses adopted by workers engaged in tainted occupations. Through emotional regulation, proactive self-presentation and peer-supported coping, they resist the internalisation of stigma and reclaim professional dignity.

Box 3 further elaborates on these strategies through additional participant quotations.

From the narrative quotes in Box 3, there is evidence of the enactment of agentic proactive behaviours to counter stigmatisation and respond to mental strain in dirty work, primarily within the informal sector.

## Discussion

The study explored how immigrants make sense of their work experience, informed by the taint that accompanies dirty work in the South African informal sector. The findings attest to the role that the social context plays in shaping the experience of work (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Lilgendahl et al., 2013). In this study, the role of stigmatisation and mental strain impacted the experience of working in the informal sector and within dirty work. The experience of mental strain confirms previous work that attributed the existence of such strain coupled with stigmatisation (Bliethe & Wolfe, 2017). Stigma existed as a limiting factor to those engaged in dirty work (Hughes et al., 2017). In essence, this social experience intensifies the psychological strain (Bliethe & Wolfe, 2017).

### BOX 3: Narrative finding three additional quotes.

'I am a degree holder, but I am in this salon, but they make me feel stupid when they behave, speak, and show my attitude. It is not good. The best response for me is found in my role to take action and educate those around me about my work. I do this calmly and speak nicely and calmly to those who give me an attitude. I try to educate all around me to challenge the stigma that comes with my work.' (Bless, hairdresser, Nigeria)

'It is difficult to have positive self-esteem in this informal carpentry because no one will regard you. That is why I focused on making it bigger than what others think and say about me in this work. I remained committed to this work no matter what, so stigma and perceptions I ignored ... I do not take them to heart because this is the only job I know.' (Joe, carpenter, Zimbabwe)

'I correct some, and I leave others by ignoring them as if I never heard or noted. That is my way of avoiding spending time and energy debating something that has come to stay. In Zambia, there is a stigma about work, so why should I worry about disrespectful attitudes and behaviour towards me because of the work I do?' (Alice, hairdresser, Zambia)

The agentic behaviours illustrated in this study serve as a response to this experience of stigma. In essence, the agentic behaviours found were a way of managing a somewhat difficult condition of being a migrant working within dirty work (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). The idea of controlling the experience of working within the informal sector and engaging in the dirty work sector is crucial (Muchineripi et al., 2022). Immigrants do not have any other alternative to choose from because of their immigration status. Proposing suggestions for managing such difficult circumstances becomes crucial, especially with work that has high stigma (Hughes et al., 2017).

One key contribution of the study lies in highlighting how intersectionality, the overlapping effects of race, gender, legal status and socio-economic position, potentially shape the meaning and experience of dirty work for immigrant workers. While Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) allude to intersectional dynamics, this study extends that work by showing how this can happen in a non-vocational setting. The study shows, in an informal context, how multiple social identities intersect to produce unique forms of marginalisation and coping. The study's contribution is thus potentially original in extending dirty work literature through an intersectional lens within an informal sector work setting.

Regarding the effects of stigma in creating mental strain, the African immigrants noted that this was affecting their psychological well-being. The effort, especially for those engaged in dirty work, is to find ways of managing mental strain. This has been a clarion call from the foundational literature (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2017; Hughes, 1958) and is emerging within contemporary society (Hughes et al., 2017). The participants of the study narrated their work to be unpleasant and accompanied by the experience of stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Hughes, 1958; Van Vuuren et al., 2012).

Although mentioned as a theoretical lens for this study, future research could develop the ideals espoused in the vocational anticipatory socialisation theory. This theory, as illustrated in the findings of this study, may provide a useful lens for understanding how prior expectations, cultural narratives and early socialisation experiences potentially shape how immigrant workers enter and interpret their dirty work roles. Future research could develop this thread further to show how immigrants' early vocational socialisation affects their interpretation and management of stigma in informal or marginal work.

In the third key finding, the study contributes to the literature by showing how stigma in dirty work can be actively managed through proactive, agentic strategies (Ashforth et al., 2017; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). These strategies are particularly salient in contexts marked by deep social inequality and exclusion, such as those experienced by African immigrants in South Africa. Taken together, this study offers a novel contribution to the dirty work literature by foregrounding intersectionality and agency as central themes.

## Practical implications

Based on the research findings, the study holds important implications. Firstly, understanding the issues identified in this research can be a valuable precursor to support activities that may assist dirty workers, albeit with their challenges (Cobbinah & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Secondly, the findings can also assist career counsellors in developing interventions that help in the career development of immigrants and dirty workers. The aspect of the mental strain that comes with dirty work can be helpful in informing targeted responses to assist those engaged in dirty work. Thirdly, given the popularity of dirty work among African immigrants, this study's findings can be helpful in advising on the post-settlement processes immigrants go through (Muchineripi et al., 2022).

A central insight emerging from the findings of this study is around the importance of intersectionality in understanding how stigma is not only experienced but also managed in dirty work. While existing scholarships are mostly framed within Global North countries, this study gives a Global South perspective. Through the findings of this study, notions from the Global North as an occupation are challenged. The findings of this study magnify dirty work as part of a context of informality that is complexly mediated through the experience of immigration status, gender, class and race. This intersectional framing, as illustrated by the findings of this study, shows stigma to be linked to the job, who is doing the job and under what conditions. The response by the immigrants to these conditions shows how agency operates at the intersection of multiple social disadvantages (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023).

To this end, this research places value on the need to understand dirty work within a Global South lens and the need to take intersectionality as a crucial aspect of this understanding. This study's originality lies in centring those complexities and highlighting how the management of stigma in dirty work is shaped not only by occupation but by broader structures of inequality and identity. These insights have the potential to reshape theoretical understandings of dirty work and contribute to more contextually grounded global perspectives.

## Limitations and future research

This study presents certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings are context-specific, derived from a purposive-convenience sample of 27 African immigrants engaged in dirty work within the informal sector of East London, South Africa. As such, caution must be exercised when generalising these findings beyond the specific geographic, cultural and occupational settings. Further, given the sensitive nature of the study, we acknowledge the inherent power dynamics that are associated with research of this kind.

However, consistent with Barnard's (2020) argument that Africa's extreme conditions often offer deeper insights into

globally relevant phenomena, the experiences documented in this study, particularly those concerning stigma, mental strain and agentic responses, may resonate across other under-researched and informal work contexts in the Global South. This could be an angle for future research to be explored. Further, dirty work and migration are indeed ubiquitous across developing economies, and while this study is grounded in a specific locale, the underlying mechanisms of stigma management and identity negotiation may well be transferable to similar socio-economic environments.

Secondly, the focus on informal sector occupations with relatively low prestige excludes other forms of dirty work in both informal and formal sectors. Future research could expand the scope to include diverse occupations and regional contexts to deepen understanding of stigma dynamics and coping strategies. Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of participants' lived experiences but does not capture the evolution of these experiences over time. Longitudinal research could provide greater insight into how stigma is internalised or resisted, and how coping strategies adapt over time. Additionally, future research could incorporate comparative designs. Ultimately, this study affirms Barnard's (2020) call for African scholars to trust the value of what they see in their contexts. When underpinned by rigorous methods and rich contextual description, such research contributes both to local relevance and to the enrichment of global scholarship. Future research could also focus on one sector of the dirty work context, which will help account for the many context variations present in this study.

## Conclusion

The study offers a way of understanding the experience and resolution of the complexity that accompanies the experience of working in dirty work, especially in the informal sector. Though these experiences and responses are varied, a shared experience that links this complexity is the role of stigmatisation and mental strain. Notably, the exercising of agentic proactive behaviours is crucial to counter both the stigmatisation and mental strain of dirty work. Through such behaviours, those engaged in dirty work can potentially live more fulfilling lives while engaged in their vocation.

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## Authors' contributions

C.C. and W.C. contributed equally to the conceptualisation, writing and editing of the manuscript and share first authorship. All authors contributed to the article, discussed the results and approved the final version for submission and publication.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, W.C. upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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Appendix 1 starts on the next page →

## Appendix 1

### Semi-structured interview prompts

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What type of experiences (positive and negative) have you experienced working within the dirty work sector?
3. Please could you expand on these positive or negative experiences through examples?
4. How have these positive or negative experiences influenced your experience of work and your small business?
5. What strategies and techniques have you used to manage the positive or negative experiences that you have faced?
6. How successful have these strategies and techniques been?