

WHEN PRESTIGE FEELS DIRTY: PRESTIGE ROLE TAINT AS A HIDDEN WORK DEMAND

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ABSTRACT

Prestigious occupations demonstrate a status-stigma paradox where society glorifies them while their day-to-day tasks expose workers to Prestige-Role Taint (PRT), an internal “am I good enough” feeling that must be concealed. Drawing from the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, we introduce the concept of prestige-role taint in prestigious occupations and examine how it impacts employee well-being and organizational outcomes. Using a three-wave longitudinal study design (n = 503), we empirically test a model where psychological capital mediates the effect of PRT as Dirty work (DW) on Well-Being (WB) and moderated by Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) and Social Support (SS). Findings highlight the critical role of relational and psychological resources in mitigating taint-induced stress. This research extends dirty work literature, offering actionable insights for fostering resilience and well-being in elite professional environments.

Keywords: Prestige Role Taint (PRT), dirty work (DW), prestigious occupations, well-being, Job Demand Resource (JD-R), psychological capital (PsyCap)

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INTRODUCTION

Prestigious professions such as surgery and corporate law exemplify a “status stigma paradox” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014) where society glorifies them while their relentless demands generate a prestige-role taint (PRT), an internal “Am I good enough?” refrain that must be concealed. By theorizing and testing Prestige-Role Taint (PRT), as the mechanism that converts prestigious role ideals into a resource-draining demands. Polished résumés do not guarantee polished souls. Surgeons, investment bankers, and tech founders routinely confess to a quiet sense of ‘being contaminated’ by the very work that wins them awards. We call this prestige-role taint (PRT).

Prestige -role taint is an elite professional’s internalized sense of deficiency or contamination that stems from chronic overwork, strained personal relationships, and the tacit expectation to display invulnerability. The taint is “hidden” because public prestige masks private depletion, making open acknowledgment risky. The construct applies when (a) the occupation commands high social status, (b) excessive demands are structurally normalized (e.g., 80-hour weeks in corporate law; on-call rotations in cardiac surgery), and (c) seeking mental-health support is implicitly stigmatized (Shanafelt et al., 2016). Although PRT is privately felt, the standards it invokes are socially prescribed moral yardsticks; therefore, we locate it squarely in the social–moral branch of dirty-work taint rather than proposing a separate fourth category.

Prestige-Role Taint (PRT) aligns with the social–moral category of dirty work as it originates from socially determined ideals of invulnerability and relentless dedication. However, unlike traditional forms of taint which are often publicly visible or socially assigned, PRT is an internalized, self-directed moral contamination that prestigious professionals hardly reveal. Because disclosure threatens hard-won status, the stigma is managed through concealment, not social distancing. This introduces a novel internal variant of dirty work, one where the worker is not marginalized by others but is instead silently eroded by societal ideals they must perform. By showing how invisible emotional contamination arises in these prestigious and praised roles, PRT extends dirty-work paradigm to domains previously assumed to be exempt from stigma. It

challenges the notion that prestige shields against taint thus revealing that prestige can paradoxically intensify self-directed stigma. We position Prestige-Role Taint (PRT) as a social-moral sub-type: the taint arises when professionals privately condemn themselves for failing to reach society's heroic role ideals (e.g., constant availability, flawless decision-making). Although PRT is felt inwardly, its yardsticks are socially prescribed moral standards, aligning it with the existing social-moral domain rather than constituting a new taint dimension.

PRT is not competence doubt (impostor syndrome); not burnout ; not guilt over or unethical acts (dirty cognition) (Bande, Fernández-Fernández, & Varela Neira, 2020); and not trauma after a moral transgression (moral injury) (Litz et al., 2009). While research on prestigious occupations has usually highlighted their social importance, it is evident that the hidden psychological worries linked with such roles also impose substantial risks on organizational sustainability. Professionals in prestigious occupations face challenges like chronic internalized stigma , identity strain and emotional isolation which manifest as deterioration in performance, engagement, and leadership capacity and these outcomes are directly relevant to organizational effectiveness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Duffy et al., 2022). Despite the perceived glamour of high-status roles, professionals working in prestigious occupations often suffer from an internalized stigma known as “self-taint” that originates from persistent psychological and moral challenges (Huey & Broll, 2015).

Dirty-work scholarship defines taint as any indicator that symbolically “dirties” the worker like physical grime, moral suspicion, or social marginality (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner, 2010). We extend that logic inward by arguing that when prestige professionals must display untiring competence yet secretly feel depleted, the “dirt” becomes invisible emotional contamination which is a distressing sense that one's mind is unclean or inadequate (Hewlin, Dumas, & Burnett, 2021) (an internal refrain of “ am I good enough”).

Recognizing this covert form of taint brings dirty-work paradigm into elite domains where stigma is internally experienced yet socially denied, illuminating how high status can coexist with an unseen, self-directed taint that erodes personal resources and well-being. Such outcomes weaken an organization's talent pool thus compromising operational continuity and increasing leadership replacement costs issues having direct implications for performance, reputation, and profitability (Siambi, 2022).

Addressing these multifaceted issues is imperative for both individual and organizational well-being. Here. It is important to understand the phenomenon of “Dirty Work” which is defined as “work that is morally, physically or socially stigmatized” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and has been traditionally categorized into three categories of Physically tainted (e.g., sanitation workers, morticians), socially tainted (e.g., prison guards, debt collectors) and morally tainted occupations like exotic dancers. (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Although dirty work is typically associated with stigmatized, lower-status roles, it also exists in prestigious occupations where employees deal with moral, emotional, and psychological challenges despite having high-status roles. While extensive research has examined occupational taint in traditionally stigmatized roles (e.g., sanitation or healthcare aides), the phenomenon of prestige role taint in prestigious occupations remains largely unexplored (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). PRT resides in the social–moral branch of dirty-work taint because the role ideals it invokes (infallibility, perpetual self-sacrifice) are socially prescribed moral standards. The taint is therefore rooted in collective expectations, not private skill deficits. What renders PRT novel is its psychological locus: the worker internalizes these moral yardsticks and self-evaluates against them, producing a private sense of “dirtiness” even in the absence of external scorn. Thus, PRT extends—but does not expand—the social–moral category by highlighting an internalized variant of social valuation.

RESEARCH GAP AND MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCAP

This study addresses a critical gap by investigating how dirty work impacts employees' well-being in prestigious occupations and explores how resources such as social support and leadership dynamics (LMX) buffer the detrimental or negative effects inflicted by stressors in prestigious occupations. Lack of such support can cause these highly competent professionals to experience burnout or emotional exhaustion (Shanafelt et al., 2016). The research highlights the importance of psychological resources (e.g., resilience, self-efficacy) as mechanisms that may possibly mediate the impact of dirty work on wellbeing, thus helping professionals cope with the demands of their prestigious but challenging roles (Soral et al., 2022). Our research uses JD-R to understand better how demands and resources interact with each other in the paradigm of prestigious occupations where perceptions of taint and social expectations are complex.

JD-R framework describes dirty work as a job demand that threatens well-being by draining psychological resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However, previous research

indicates that PsyCap in the form of psychological resources is regarded as a protective mediator that regenerates these resources and mitigates the negative impact of dirty work on well-being (Sabot & Hicks, 2020; Waldman, Javidan, & Varella, 2019). However, for the purposes of this study, JD-R's structural and contextual specificity better aligns with the unique challenges posed by high-status yet psychologically demanding occupations. Our study hypothesizes that higher levels of Psy-Cap will result in improved management of self-taint and well-being thus making it a crucial factor in preserving psychological health in high-stakes roles.

THEORITICAL CONTRIBUTION AND MODELING

By incorporating the concept of Prestige-Role taint as dirty work, this study extends the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It also contributes to stigma management communication (Meisenbach, 2010) by elucidating how internalized taint influences well-being. These theoretical advancements provide a deeper understanding of how prestigious occupations manage unique stressors and resource dynamics.

This study offers several important theoretical and practical contributions to comprehending the employee wellbeing in prestigious occupations.

Firstly, by extending dirty-work theory to an internal social–moral taint called Prestige-Role Taint (PRT) that afflicts elite roles. By demonstrating that taint can be privately felt yet socially prescribed, we move dirty-work scholarship beyond low-status occupations.

Secondly, by refining the JD-R framework by showing that PsyCap mediates the PRT → well-being path and that access to job resources (LMX, social support) is bounded by reputational concerns. This reveals hidden limits to the buffering effect traditionally attributed to workplace resources.

Thirdly , by providing an intervention roadmap—combining PsyCap enhancement with leadership- and family-friendly supports—to sustain employee well-being in prestige-driven, high-pressure environments. These guidelines translate the model into actionable practices for HR and leadership development.

Building upon these theoretical underpinnings, the subsequent sections examine the existing literature on dirty work, psychological capital, social support, and leadership dynamics.

By integrating insights from JD-R theory and expanding its application to prestigious occupational settings, this research aims to illuminate the hidden psychological challenges faced by high-status professionals and identify pathways for enhancing their well-being and resilience.

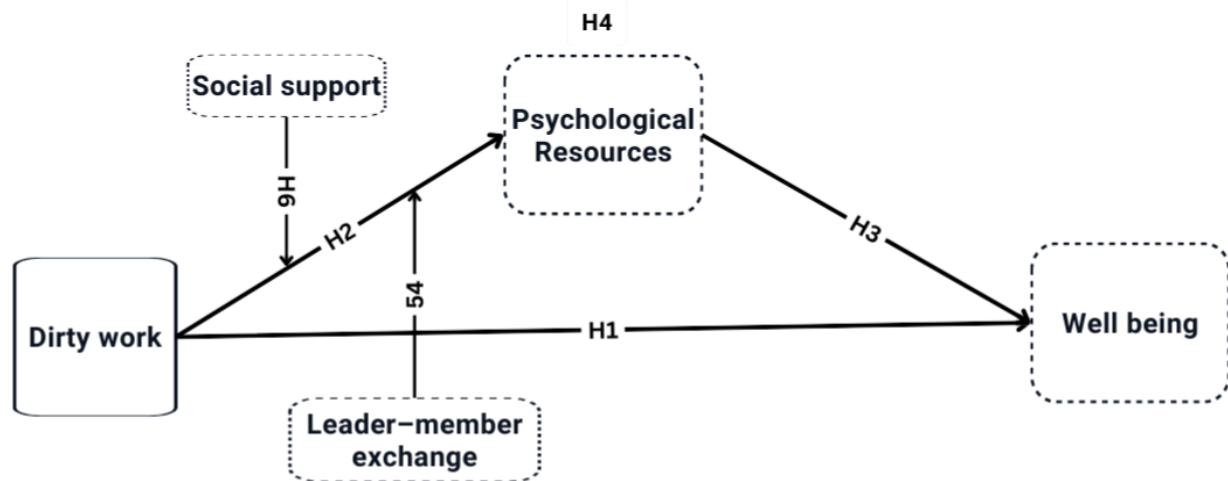


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

RESEARCH QUESTION AND SCOPE

"To investigate how the Prestige-Role Taint in prestigious occupations affects employee well-being, and to explore the moderating roles of social support and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), along with the mediating role of psychological resources, within the framework of the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) theory."

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research employed a three-wave longitudinal design, collecting data at three distinct time points—T1, T2, and T3 that are spaced approximately four weeks apart. A one-month cadence reflects Dormann and Griffin's (2015) 'optimal lag' calculus which is long enough for attitudinal change yet short enough to limit recall and history threats. Such a design is especially valuable for testing mediation and moderation effects because it facilitates **temporal separation** among key constructs (Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; Podsakoff et al., 2023)). In doing so, it helps reduce common method variance (CMV), as respondents are less likely to rely on a single cognitive frame when completing all measures at once (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Context/Setting

Data were gathered from **high-status professionals** employed in multiple **prestigious occupational sectors**, such as Engineer, Psychologist, CEO, Architect, Director/Producer, Pilot, Teacher, IT Professional, Scientist, Accounts/Finance, Law and Legal Service, Media Professional academic via **self report survey**. These professionals were selected due to their roles having high status and the distinctive blend of occupational demands and social expectations that align with the theoretical focus of our study about dirty work and well-being. Participants were enlisted through professional and personal networks targeting professionals in these fields

Measures

All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 5 strongly disagree to 7 5 strongly agree). The survey was administered in English as this is the official language at the Pakistani workplace (Soomro et al., 2022).

Wellbeing at work: 6 items scale, example I am satisfied with my work responsibilities (Zheng et al., 2015)

Leader member exchange: 7 items scale, How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader (Graen et al., 1995) .

Psychological resources: 24 item scale, In general, I can easily step over the more stressful things at work (Luthans et al., 2007)

Social support: 4 items scale , My supervisor is concerned about the welfare of those under him (Karasek and Theorell, 1990)

Prestige-Role Tiant: 7 items scale , Most people who are not in the same occupations as me have a lot more negative thoughts about us than they actually express (Pinel, 1999)

We adapted Pinel's (1999) stigma-consciousness items by changing the referent from "people like me" to "people in my profession" and embedding elite-role examples in the stem (e.g., "lawyers, surgeons").

Data Analysis Technique

We used **IBM AMOS 29.0** for structural equation modeling (SEM) and **SPSS 27.0** for descriptive statistics and reliability analysis. The analytical procedures included conducting a **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** to assess reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability) and validity (convergent and discriminant validity) of the constructs. **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)** was employed to test hypothesized direct, indirect, and interaction effects. Moderation and mediation testing were conducted using latent interaction terms in AMOS, and indirect effects were evaluated using a bootstrapping approach (5,000 resamples) to evaluate the interaction effects of Leader-Member Exchange and Social Support, as well as the mediating role of Psychological Capital between Dirty Work and Well-Being. The model fit was assessed using indices such as **Comparative Fit Index (CFI)** (> 0.90), **Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)** (< 0.08), and **Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)** (< 0.08), confirming the adequacy of the model fit (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2010).

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