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# I would prefer not to: a qualitative investigation of adolescents' perceptions of dirty work in Switzerland

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**Abstract**
Defined as occupations, tasks, or roles perceived as disgusting or degrading, dirty work results from perceptions of a broad array of actors in society. This study aimed at identifying descriptors adolescents in Switzerland associate with dirty work. The originality of this study stems from investigating dirty work on the basis of adolescents' perceptions, which represent an outsider group receptive to social norms, and thus informative of social stigmatizations. Responses of 225 adolescents to an open-ended question were analyzed using a consensual qualitative research-modified approach. Participants associated dirty work with adverse working conditions, adverse employment conditions, negative social images, and negative well-being outcomes.

**Keywords** Dirty work · Decent work · Occupational aspirations · Consensual qualitative research-modified (CQR-M)

**Résumé**
Défini comme des occupations, des tâches ou des rôles perçus comme dégoûtants ou dégradants, le travail sale résulte des perceptions d'un large éventail d'acteurs de la société. Cette étude visait à identifier les descripteurs que les adolescents en Suisse associent au travail sale. L'originalité de cette étude provient de l'investigation du travail sale basée sur les perceptions des adolescents, qui représentent un groupe extérieur réceptif aux normes sociales, et donc informatif des stigmatisations sociales. Les réponses de 225 adolescents à une question ouverte ont été analysées en utilisant

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une approche de recherche qualitative consensuelle modifiée. Les participants ont associé le travail sale à des conditions de travail défavorables, des conditions d'emploi défavorables, des images sociales négatives et des résultats de bien-être négatifs.

**Zusammenfassung**
Definiert als Berufe, Aufgaben oder Rollen, die als ekelhaft oder erniedrigend wahrgenommen werden, resultiert Schmutzarbeit aus den Wahrnehmungen einer breiten Palette von Akteuren in der Gesellschaft. Diese Studie zielte darauf ab, Beschreibungen zu identifizieren, die Jugendliche in der Schweiz mit Schmutzarbeit verbinden. Die Originalität dieser Studie ergibt sich aus der Untersuchung von Schmutzarbeit auf der Grundlage der Wahrnehmungen von Jugendlichen, die eine Außenseitergruppe darstellen, die für soziale Normen empfänglich ist und somit Aufschluss über soziale Stigmatisierungen gibt. Die Antworten von 225 Jugendlichen auf eine offene Frage wurden mit einem modifizierten Ansatz der konsensualen qualitativen Forschung analysiert. Die Teilnehmer verbanden Schmutzarbeit mit ungünstigen Arbeitsbedingungen, ungünstigen Beschäftigungsbedingungen, negativen sozialen Bildern und negativen Auswirkungen auf das Wohlbefinden.

**Resumen**
Definido como ocupaciones, tareas o roles percibidos como repugnantes o degradantes, el trabajo sucio resulta de las percepciones de una amplia gama de actores en la sociedad. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo identificar los descriptores que los adolescentes en Suiza asocian con el trabajo sucio. La originalidad de este estudio radica en investigar el trabajo sucio basado en las percepciones de los adolescentes, que representan un grupo externo receptivo a las normas sociales, y por lo tanto informativo de las estigmatizaciones sociales. Las respuestas de 225 adolescentes a una pregunta abierta se analizaron utilizando un enfoque de investigación cualitativa consensuada modificado. Los participantes asociaron el trabajo sucio con condiciones de trabajo adversas, condiciones de empleo adversas, imágenes sociales negativas y resultados negativos para el bienestar.

## Introduction

In recent decades, labor markets in post-industrial societies have undergone significant changes such as accelerating technological advances, globalization, and increasing alternative employment arrangements (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). These changes produced ambivalent implications such as creating new job opportunities for highly qualified workers (Arntz et al., 2016), but also inducing more unpredictable and precarious careers (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). In this fast-changing context, studying the experience of adolescents approaching entry into the world of work is crucial. In fact, school-to-work transitions represent particularly challenging transitions for adolescents, affecting their future career development (Masdonati et al., 2022a, 2022b). Constructing positive work-related identities is among the

most critical developmental tasks enabling them to negotiate this passage successfully (Ng & Feldman, 2007).

Switzerland provides various educational possibilities that facilitate adolescents' integration into the labor market (Basler & Kriesi, 2019). However, some career options may still suffer from negative social evaluations (Abrassart & Wolter, 2020). These negative social evaluations are often considered in the literature under the lens of the concept of dirty work, defined as "tasks, occupations, and/or roles that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading" (Simpson & Simpson, 2018, p. 1). Indeed, dirty work often induces what the literature refers to as occupational stigma (Kreiner et al., 2022), which constitutes its core experience and is defined as "a discrediting social evaluation that devalues an individual or group" due to their affiliation to a tainted organizational context (i.e., dirty occupation or industry) (Kreiner et al., 2022, p. 95). Since adolescents experience a transition toward adulthood that is marked by intense identity construction and internalization of social norms (Arnett, 2007), understanding adolescents' perception of phenomena such as dirty work is of interest. The occupational stigma brought by the latter might be one of the difficulties that can impede adolescents from choosing several career options (Billett, 2020). However, studies on the perceptions of young people about "good" or "bad" work used predominantly the notion of decent work (San Antonio et al., 2022), and research on youth perceptions of dirty work is lacking. This is an issue because dirty work may evoke additional characteristics of "bad" work for adolescents, such as eliciting a negative social reputation that indecent work may not address.

Furthermore, studying adolescents' perceptions is particularly important in contexts such as Switzerland. Adolescents already make career decisions at 15 years old (Basler & Kriesi, 2019), during a period when their identities are still in formation (Masdonati et al., 2022a, 2022b), which can lead to choosing occupations on the basis of social status or prestige rather than personal interests (Abrassart & Wolter, 2020). Moreover, studies of dirty work have dominantly relied on the experiences of insiders (i.e., the "dirty workers" themselves) (Mejia et al., 2021). More in-depth investigations of outsiders' perceptions are thus needed because they may largely contribute to the social stigmatization of dirty work (Kreiner et al., 2006, 2022).

Following the previously described elements, our main research goal consists of identifying shared descriptors that adolescents living in Switzerland associate with dirty work. This objective contributes to the literature on the school-to-work transition by taking a new perspective on adolescents' career anticipations and projects: rather than investigating what they would like to attain and achieve, the focus is put here on the type of work they would like to avoid. We posit indeed that their description of "bad" or "dirty" work may be quite informative of their career needs and goals. Moreover, this study also adopts an original stance by questioning outsiders' perceptions of dirty work, more specifically those of adolescents: such a perspective is scarce and underrepresented in existing studies. We argue that, since youth transitioning to adulthood are particularly receptive to prevalent social norms (Arnett, 2007), their descriptions and perceptions could complement our current understanding of dirty work.

## Perceptions of decent work among young workers

The most recent efforts investigating youth evaluations of "good" or "bad" work are provided by studies using the notion of decent work (San Antonio et al., 2022). The notion originated from International Labour Organization (ILO)'s efforts to define humane working conditions (ILO, 1999). According to the ILO, decent work results from access to productive and quality employment that provides rights at work, social protection, and access to social dialog (ILO, 2013). Subsequently, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016) proposed a psychological adaptation of ILO's notion of decent work to highlight its potential to fulfill the three core human needs of survival and power, social connection, and self-determination. Used as a psychological concept, decent work in the PWT is conceived as work that offers safe working conditions, adequate rest, organizational values that complement familial or social values, adequate compensation, and access to healthcare (Duffy et al., 2016).

Studies interrogating work-bound youth on decent work highlighted a diverse array of descriptors of resources and opportunities associated with this notion. Accordingly, some studies emphasized the importance of material and financial descriptors such as physically and financially safe working conditions (Aisenson et al., 2022) and stable and secured employment (Ribeiro et al., 2016). Other studies also point to social descriptors, such as social support and quality relationships at work (Cohen-Scali et al., 2022), or positive social views and valorization of one's work (Autin et al., 2018; Kazimna et al., 2020; Masdonati et al., 2022a, 2022b). Finally, authors also highlighted self-directed descriptors referring to personal and professional growth, such as opportunities for career progression and skills improvement (Cohen-Scali et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2022), or performing work that provides stimulation and enables autonomy (Autin et al., 2018; Masdonati et al., 2022a, 2022b).

All of the aforementioned characteristics generally correspond to the components of decent work and thus provide a conceptualization of "good" or "bad" work. However, this notion only partially answers this question, as some characteristics shared by the young workers interrogated, such as doing work that is undervalued by others, are not part of the components initially proposed in the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). Consequently, interrogating adolescents on their perceptions of decent, or rather, indecent work, may not evoke staining aspects of unappealing work contexts (e.g., bad reputation, contact with dirt) that dirty work refers to explicitly.

## Dirty work descriptors

Hughes first proposed the concept of dirty work to refer to tasks and professional roles commonly perceived as "physically disgusting," "a symbol of degradation," or "something that wounds one's dignity" (Hughes, 1958, p. 28), thus hindering the maintenance of a respectable image (Hughes, 1951). Building on Douglas

(1966), Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) extended Hughes's conceptualization by determining that the degrading or disgusting nature of dirty work stems from defying prevalent norms that associate clean with good and dirt with bad. These norms are socially constructed, meaning that they are shaped by their sociocultural contexts and rooted in historical periods (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). Yet, all occupations considered dirty work share the fact that they expose workers to stigmatization to some degree (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). This stigmatization is provoked by common descriptors of dirty occupations, namely the presence of physically (e.g., association with garbage or death), socially (e.g., servile roles), or morally (e.g., sinful activity, use of deceptive methods) tainted work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Unfortunately, by overemphasizing the symbolic descriptors of dirty work (i.e., physical, social, moral taint) and its symbolic dimension, this research stream missed other crucial and common implications, such as physical demands, deleterious working conditions, or workers' recurrent social attributes (Simpson et al., 2012b). Another research stream focused on the more embodied/material dimension of dirty work, and greater research attention was allocated to tangible difficulties that could stain both workers' sense of self and their bodies (Simpson & Simpson, 2018). On the basis of characteristics such as gender, cultural origin, and socioeconomic status, certain groups were also acknowledged as overrepresented in dirty work and therefore seen as "naturally" suitable for it (Simpson et al., 2012a, p. 7). From this research stream, three additional descriptors are associated with dirty work, namely, the undermining work practices and the visible presence of dirt (e.g., transporting and cleaning heavy or dirty objects), and the "embodied suitability" of certain groups seen as appropriate for dirty work (e.g., migrants) (Simpson & Simpson, 2018, p. 4).

Overall, both streams of research (i.e., symbolic and embodied/material) focused primarily on workers' experiences and left outsiders' perceptions scarcely studied despite their role in the stigmatization process (Kreiner et al., 2022). In fact, using Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) differentiate between insiders' experiences (e.g., workers) and devalued outsiders' perceptions (e.g., the general population). On the one hand, insiders use coping strategies to counteract the stigmatization (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). On the other hand, outsiders can either propagate discrediting views or provide moral support to insiders (Zhang et al., 2023). To our knowledge, three previous studies used outsiders in their sample (see Table 1), however, none explicitly challenged their participants to share their own interpretations of what constitutes dirty work.

## Swiss-context specificities affecting adolescents' perceptions of work

Switzerland is known for its tracked educational system that is tightly linked to the labor market needs (Eichhorst et al., 2015). From 12 years old, adolescents are allocated to different educational tracks depending on their academic performance (Basler & Kriesi, 2019). In such a context, adolescents' perceptions of

**Table 1** Dirty work research using outsiders

| Authors (publication year) | Aims | Sample characteristics | Type of data collected |
|---|---|---|---|
| Berkelaar et al. (2012) | Examining children's meaning of work | 200 Chinese urban children | Focus groups and interviews |
| Mejia et al. (2021) | Identifying insiders/outsiders' coping strategies regarding essential service workers in pandemic times | 46 news sources in the USA | Televised and written news sources |
| Valtorta et al. (2019) | Demonstrating the association between dehumanization images and types of occupational taint | 126 Italian university undergraduates | Online questionnaire |

work are of interest since research showed that educational attainment is internalized as a major vector of social status improvement (Abrassart & Wolter, 2020). In the process of selecting an educational or professional track to follow, some avenues suffer from poorer social recognition than others and often illustrate shared sociocultural preferences (Duemmler et al., 2020). This is the case for vocational and educational training (VET) curriculums that have generally lower educational requirements (Basler & Kriesi, 2019): most pupils pursue dual VET programs in Switzerland (i.e., VET combining school and workplace training) (Kriesi et al., 2022), yet vocational tracks are perceived as less prestigious than other educational pathways (Abrassart & Wolter, 2020). In fact, literature shows that dirty work tends to be associated with low-skilled and low-prestige occupations (Simpson & Simpson, 2018). In Switzerland's case, its labor market is characterized by low levels of youth unemployment, even within European countries (Kriesi et al., 2022). However, the demand for highly qualified personnel with university degrees has significantly increased from the 2000s onward, leading, for example, to restrictive migration policies preferring highly qualified migrants (Murphy & Oesch, 2018). As a result, dirty work may be further stigmatized as a default option when no other viable alternative is available (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a).

Considering these specificities, adolescents in Switzerland may associate dirty work with poor working conditions and limited career progression performed by workers with lower volition and educational attainment. More importantly, they represent an original and interesting population to explore the concept of dirty work. Indeed, they are required to make career choices early in their educational paths using their perceptions of work, which are known to affect career choices (Zammitti et al., 2020) and contribute to stigmatizing certain occupations (Duemmler et al., 2020).

## Aims of the present study

The present study aims at identifying shared descriptors adolescents in the Swiss context associate with the concept of dirty work. Therefore, our main research question consists of investigating how adolescents in Switzerland perceive dirty work to collect young outsiders' own interpretations of this concept. Subsequently, this study also aims to compare and complement the existing conceptualizations of indecent and dirty work with our participants' responses.

## Method

To address our aims, a qualitative design represents the best-suited methodological approach. Within the decent work literature, several authors expressed the need for investigations that complement researchers' and political institutions' definitions of decent work with individuals' own interpretations (Masdonati et al., 2019; Massoudi

et al., 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2022). We argue that research on dirty work would benefit from similar investigations, hence requiring qualitative designs that allow for the collection of subjective and context-specific meanings of existing constructs (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016).

More specifically, we implemented a qualitative survey methodology using one open-ended question and adopted a consensual qualitative research-modified approach for the analysis (CQR-M; Spangler et al., 2012). Indeed, open-ended questions allow for collecting a wide range of perceptions about sensitive and identity-threatening topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Shah et al., 2022). Adapted from consensual qualitative methods used with interview data, CQR-M is a bottom-up approach to data analysis with the intention of exploring and identifying unexpected understandings from large samples of brief qualitative data (Spangler et al., 2012). The relevance and appropriateness of this approach stem from the reliability of the analysis, which favors consensus among coders, limiting individual biases and helping interpret potentially vague responses (Spangler et al., 2012).

## Participants

This study was conducted among adolescents living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and recruitment was carried out by undergraduate university students in psychology as part of a methodology course. Students recruited eight participants registered in Swiss secondary schools with distinct characteristics in terms of gender and age. The age range of adolescence was delimited from 12 years old to 21 years old by combining the World Health Organization (WHO)'s definition (i.e., 10–19; 2015), with the attendance period of Swiss secondary education (i.e., usually 12–21 years old; Wolter et al., 2023). Furthermore, recruitment of large samples is recommended for CQR-M approaches (Spangler et al., 2012). Previous studies recruited 22–547 participants (Hill, 2012). More recent efforts ranged from 84–407 ($M$ = 217.25, $SD$ = 144.40) (see Dunn et al., 2022; Gregor et al., 2022; Serralta et al., 2020, and Shah et al., 2022). For the present study, 311 were recruited for sufficient sample diversity and accounting for attrition or incomplete responses.

## Procedure

Adolescents' responses were collected through an online Qualtrics questionnaire containing an open-ended question in French. To understand the diversity of our respondents' provenance and socioeconomic status, demographic data were collected on participants' age, gender, nationality, geographic areas where they attend school, current educational attainment, and level of education and occupation of both parents.

### Open-ended question

Braun and Clarke's (2013) recommendations were followed to adapt open-ended questions to the participants, aiming for a short, unambiguous, and non-leading or judgmental formulation that was understandable for our targeted young population. Hence, the first and third authors created one open-ended question with prior instructions to provide an overview of the conceptual definition of dirty work that participants could use to share their own perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Building on the framework of Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), dirty work was presented as a notion that group occupations perceived by society as difficult to sustain due to physical, social, and moral taint (i.e., hard, unrewarding, and not recommendable). Our open-ended question was presented as follows: In our society, some people do work that can be considered "dirty work." By "dirty work," we mean occupations about which people may wonder, "How do these people do this job and keep up?" These are occupations that have a poor image: most people see them as hard to do, unrewarding, or not recommendable. Could you describe what "dirty work" means to you?

### Coding team

The coding team consisted of the first and second authors, respectively doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in vocational and organizational psychology with previous experience in CQR methods. The third author assumed the role of the auditor and is an associate professor in vocational and organizational psychology. Auditors are usually not required in CQR-M, however, Spangler and colleagues (2012) suggested including this role in case the coding team wished to ensure the quality of the coding and to limit potential biases or coding discrepancies by seeking feedback. Regarding potential biases, all three authors were formerly active in work identifiable as "dirty," which contributed to their interest in this theme, but potentially influenced their interpretations in the direction of well-being concerns.

### Data analysis

Following Spangler and colleagues' (2012) recommendations, the first and second authors reviewed 30 responses separately to produce lists of domains, which were then collectively edited. Afterward, the list was applied to responses from a different set of 30 responses and edited accordingly. At this stage, the auditor provided initial feedback on the congruence between the responses and the identified domains. The first hundred responses were then coded, and each discrepancy was discussed between the coders until they reached a consensus. The auditor's help was sought in cases of ambiguous responses. Finally, all responses were coded, and the remaining incongruences were solved. Following the coding process, a table of frequencies was produced, and all the authors participated in reorganizing or merging the rarest categories.

### Paradigmatic position and trustworthiness

Our study can be qualified as following a postpositivist paradigmatic position according to Ponterotto's classification (2005): while recognizing the meanings of each participant, our aim consists of identifying a common reality among our sample. In addition, the research team did not conduct data collection, and a single standardized question was used for all participants. Moreover, our analysis followed validity approaches (i.e., seeking consensus) and logically related steps congruent with this paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The trustworthiness was ensured by addressing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability listed by Morrow (2005). Credibility was ensured using collective analysis sessions to make biases and interpretations of data explicit. Transferability was achieved by providing information on the research context (i.e., Switzerland), the qualifications and biases of the researchers involved, and the data collection procedure. Dependability and confirmability were addressed by recognizing that our interpretations are subjective and context specific in nature, in addition to using multiple coders, an auditor, and consensual agreements in each analysis step.

## Results

### Sample demographic characteristics

The sample included 311 participants (see Table 2). From the total responses, 225 were considered valid (72.3%) and 86 were deemed invalid (27.7%) due to blank responses, unwillingness, or inability to respond (e.g., "I don't know"; $n = 43$, 13.8%), ambiguous responses (e.g., "Boring"; $n = 9$, 2.9%), and responses questioning the legitimacy of the concept itself (e.g., "We need diversity for a complete world. There is no dirty work"; $n = 6$, 1.9%). Responses only mentioning an occupation without any elaboration (e.g., "garbage collectors"; $n = 28$, 9%) were also discarded, as it is impossible to conclude the specific reasons for it being considered dirty (e.g., is a garbage collector dirty due to bad smell, negative reputation, or physical effort?) from an occupational title.

The 225 participants with valid responses had an average age of 16.07 years old (SD 1.87), with 121 participants (53.8%) identifying as a girl, 101 (44.9%) as a boy, and 3 (1.3%) as other. At the time of measurement, 81 participants (36%) were completing lower-secondary school, 130 (57.8%) were enrolled in upper-secondary school, and 14 (6.2%) did not mention their school level. In terms of nationality, 113 participants (50.2%) were Swiss nationals, 81 (36%) were binational (Swiss and others), 30 (13.3%) held a foreign nationality, and one participant reported not knowing. Concerning the highest education level attained by participants' mothers, 116 (51.6%) achieved a tertiary level (e.g., academic, or applied universities), 70 (31.1%) attained a secondary level (e.g., high school or apprenticeship), and 15 (6.7%) reported a mandatory level of education or no education at all. Concerning participants' fathers, 121 (53.8%) achieved a tertiary level, 63 (28%) attained a secondary

**Table 2** Sample demographic characteristics

| | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 121 | 53.8 |
| Male | 101 | 44.9 |
| Other | 3 | 1.3 |
| Nationality | | |
| Swiss | 113 | 50.2 |
| Swiss and foreign | 81 | 36 |
| Foreign | 30 | 13.3 |
| Don't know | 1 | 0.4 |
| School level | | |
| Lower-secondary | 81 | 36 |
| Upper-secondary | 130 | 57.8 |
| Other or blank | 14 | 6.2 |
| Mothers' education level | | |
| Tertiary | 116 | 51.6 |
| Secondary | 70 | 31.1 |
| Mandatory or none | 15 | 6.7 |
| Other | 24 | 10.7 |
| Fathers' education level | | |
| Tertiary | 121 | 53.8 |
| Secondary | 63 | 28 |
| Mandatory or none | 17 | 7.6 |
| Other | 24 | 10.7 |

$N = 225$. Participants were on average 16.07 years old (SD 1.87)

level, and 17 (7.6%) reported a mandatory level of education or no education at all. In addition, 24 participants (10.7%) selected the "other" option for their mothers and fathers.

## Dirty work descriptors

Our analysis led to the identification of eight categories, which were further grouped into four major descriptors of dirty work (see Table 3): (a) adverse working conditions in terms of psychosocial conditions and job content, (b) adverse employment conditions in terms of wage and duration, (c) negative occupation-oriented or person-oriented social image, and (d) negative eudaimonic or hedonic well-being outcomes. Two additional categories were identified in the first round of analysis, comprising less than 1% of the corpus of data. The first category, labeled "security," referred to physical risks and health issues in the workplace, and was therefore included in "psychosocial conditions." The second category, labeled "perspectives," pointed to the lack of opportunities for achievement, and was merged into the eudaimonic category.

**Table 3** Dirty work descriptors

| Descriptors and categories | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Adverse working conditions | | |
| Psychosocial conditions | 107 | 47.6 |
| Job content | 37 | 16.4 |
| Adverse employment conditions | | |
| Wage | 70 | 31.1 |
| Duration | 25 | 11.1 |
| Negative social image | | |
| Occupation-oriented | 57 | 25.3 |
| Person-oriented | 27 | 12 |
| Negative well-being outcomes | | |
| Eudaimonic | 60 | 26.7 |
| Hedonic | 45 | 19,6 |

$N = 225$. Percentages refer to the proportion of the participants who endorsed the category in their responses

In the first domain, participants described dirty work on the basis of the intrinsic working conditions it offered and the actual characteristics of the workplace, particularly the psychosocial conditions (47.6%) and the job content (16.4%). Psychosocial conditions referred to the (im)balance between the intense job demands faced by workers and the insufficient or inadequate resources available at work. In this category, dirty work was described as exhausting, demanding significant physical and psychological efforts, "a difficult job that requires a lot of investment, especially physical I would say, but perhaps also a little mental," leading to health risks: "[a job] that puts health at risk because of uninteresting physical work." In addition to these responses referring to overload, other participants characterized dirty work as devoid of sufficient stimulation, diversity, or skill requirements: "a job where there is mostly routine, there is no innovation and requiring little intellectual capacity." Finally, some participants emphasized the lack of social support in dirty work: "a job where people are not respected, and where boss–employee and employee–employee relations are not good."

Job content refers to disgusting tasks or disreputable duties that are inherently part of dirty work. For instance, some participants mentioned specific activities such as cleaning or garbage collecting that impose regular contact with physical dirt, including "cleaning toilets or floors for example […]." Two participants referred to the morally questionable nature of tasks such as "selling tobacco." Dirty work was also designated through repetitive, "doing the same thing all day long," or stationary tasks, "someone who does not move from his place and always stays on his computer." More broadly, dirty work meant undignified or unwanted tasks: "the boring tasks that nobody wants to do and that they give to you." Furthermore, the job content category contained designations of unfavorable or adverse working environments, with mentions of both secluded indoor environments, "staying locked up for 10 hours in front of a screen," and hostile outdoor environments: "work in all weather conditions […] (snow, wind…)."

The second domain was labeled "employment conditions" to refer to extrinsic characteristics of work, such as wage (31.1%) and duration (11.1%), mentioned by participants. The first category specifically invoked economic compensation, which was regarded as either insufficient, "these dirty jobs are often poorly paid," inadequate compared with the efforts demanded, "it's a job where you work a lot but don't earn much money," or unfair: "a job that doesn't pay enough to live." The second category derived from responses describing dirty work as requiring long working hours, "a time-consuming job," or imposing overwhelming and unsociable work schedules: "a job that starts very early in the day, […], ends late in the day, full-time."

The third domain derived from responses highlighting the issue of the negative social image in relation to dirty work. We understood negative social image as negative shared evaluations and judgments about an occupation (occupation-oriented) or those who perform it (person-oriented). A substantial portion of responses (25.3%) underlined an occupation-oriented negative social image, describing dirty work as occupations insufficiently recognized or valued, "for me a dirty work is a job that has been denigrated and degraded by society and popular culture," considered repulsive and undesirable, "a dirty work is a job that is perceived as disgusting," or meant to be avoided, "the kind of job you warn your kids about, telling them to work at school so they don't end up in it." One participant went as far as to describe dirty work as a reprehensible or objectionable job: "a job that is a bit illegal, but it still exists." However, some participants referred to jobs that are essential or useful, albeit unacknowledged: "a job […] negatively perceived by people, but just as necessary as any other job."

A total of 12% of participants mentioned a person-oriented negative social image, referring to the self-directed implications workers endure due to the stigmatization of their work. In this category, dirty work represents undervalued occupations people hide or avoid talking about, "like a garbage man, you don't want to tell people that you clean their garbage, it's not rewarding," that induces public humiliation, "working in slaughterhouses, some people are there because they have to, but many people insult them when they are just doing their job," or even dehumanization that was also linked to morally tainted work for one participant: "A job where women are reduced to the status of products to satisfy vicious desires." Furthermore, regarding the impact of the negative social image on workers, some responses referred to emotional reactions such as shame and self-depreciation: "a job that a person would not be proud to do, […], and would therefore be ashamed of it." Others pointed to prejudice against the identity characteristics of those expected to perform dirty work (e.g., minorities, precarious populations, or interns): "People think that it's usually persons with fewer financial means who do this job."

The last descriptor referred to either eudaimonic or hedonic well-being outcomes. Eudaimonic well-being describes opportunities for self-realization and meaningfulness at work, whereas hedonic well-being relates to a state of pleasure versus displeasure. Responses describing dirty work as mainly impairing eudaimonic well-being (26.7%) mentioned disinterest, lack of motivation, or little meaningfulness to be extracted from work: "[a job] which consists in doing the same thing every day without any personal goal, a goal in which we are really invested and which we care

about." Participants also described feelings of powerlessness or entrapment due to limited alternatives, "climbing in this job is either impossible or not much better," and a lack of fulfillment, "a job […] from which I get no mental, physical or spiritual satisfaction, the retribution of the work is only financial." The participants also suggested threats to hedonic well-being (20%), with dirty work described as leading to a state of displeasure, "a job that you don't like, that you don't take pleasure in doing it"; boredom, "it's a boring job for the person doing it"; or discomfort, "jobs that are not pleasant to do."

## Discussion

The present study aimed at identifying shared descriptors adolescents living in Switzerland associate with dirty work. Another objective consisted of comparing our findings with existing conceptualizations of dirty and indecent work. Our analysis allowed us to identify four main descriptors of dirty work. The first descriptor (i.e., adverse working conditions) pictures the work contents and the psychosocial environments in which it is performed. The second descriptor (i.e., adverse employment conditions) refers to the material conditions and the contractual arrangements that regulate the work. The third descriptor (i.e., negative social image) illustrates the vision of dirty work as a socially devalued activity left for underserved or vulnerable groups of workers. Finally, the fourth descriptor (i.e., negative well-being outcomes) goes beyond the features and characteristics of dirty work to describe the threat or harm it may inflict on those who perform it.

In comparison with previous literature, symbolic, embodied/material, and indecent work descriptors were found in participant's responses. Concerning the symbolic descriptors, responses from our participants reported exposure to danger or contact with dirt (i.e., physical taint), and having to serve others or performing trivial and low-skill tasks (i.e., social taint). In terms of embodied/material descriptors, adolescents mentioned, for example, the disposal of garbage (i.e., visible presence of dirt), cleaning tasks (i.e., undermining work practices), or people with fewer financial means (i.e., embodied suitability). Regarding the association between indecent and dirty work, all components were found except for health coverage, which is not relevant in Switzerland (Masdonati et al., 2019). Responses highlighted, for example, health risks at work (i.e., unsafe working conditions), long working hours (i.e., insufficient free time or rest), working only for financial reasons (i.e., no complementary values), or insufficient pay (i.e., inadequate compensation). From this comparison, our findings highlight the relevance of using both decent and dirty work as complementary concepts to study adolescents' career needs and goals: one represents a desirable type of work to attain, and the other brings together the ones to be avoided.

On the basis of these results, we can highlight several interesting and intriguing findings. First, moral taint was almost absent from adolescents' responses. Second, having indecent work components in our results may indicate the need for a career dimension to dirty work research. Finally, responses describing dirty work as devoid of meaning, and thus endangering eudaimonic well-being, appear to contrast, if not

disagree, with workers' viewpoints in the existing literature. These elements are discussed in the following subsections.

### Moral taint is almost absent from adolescents' responses

Moral taint refers to sinful work or occupations involving unethical methods (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). This type of taint was only partially mentioned by four participants, which is surprising since morally tainted work was proposed as "dirtier" and more stigmatizing in the eyes of beholders (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). Different interpretations can be formulated regarding this result. First, globalized societies are marked by a decrease in the influence of social norms and traditional institutions on people's perception of morality (Bauman, 2000). In such a context, traditionally sinful activities (e.g., sex work) may become less stigmatized, leading to more ambiguous or less identifiable forms of morally tainted work that our young participants did not recognize (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). Moreover, sinful work may occur in inaccessible social spaces for adolescents (e.g., erotic dancing clubs) (Ashforth et al., 2007). Finally, one could assume that modern companies deploy important efforts in terms of corporate communication and marketing to hide unethical or questionable methods and maintain a respectable public image (e.g., greenwashing) (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). Therefore, morally tainted work can become even more blurry and less present in common social discourses addressing younger populations, and thus be discarded by our respondents.

### Dirty work may have a career dimension

Our participants associated dirty work with a lack of decent work due to recurrent exposure to hazardous work contexts, insufficient wages to maintain one's livelihood, lack of meaningfulness at work, exploitative working conditions, or discriminatory employment practices. These aspects have also been highlighted in studies on the workers' personal experiences. Indeed, dirty work is perceived as a threat to sustained employability due to increased workload, fragmented work schedules, and poor job quality (Baran et al., 2016); experiences of physical and psychological abuse (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022); or limited opportunities for career advancement, prolonged exposure to injury-prone work, and permanent risk of job loss (Abasabanye et al., 2018).

By bringing together these elements, a career dimension may complement the symbolic and embodied/material dimensions of dirty work. This proposition stems from the observation that dirty work may not only affect workers' identities (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) or their bodies (Simpson & Simpson, 2018), but also their career paths. Indeed, "dirty careers" may be characterized by specific features such as frequent physical injuries (Hughes et al., 2017), overexposure to indecent work (Blustein et al., 2023), or reduced employability due to the "stickiness" of their "dirty worker" reputation to other employers (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007, pp. 251–252). Hence, studies adopting a career focus could highlight new crucial

implications such as the relationship between dirty and precarious work (Cubrich & Tengesdal, 2021).

### For adolescents, dirty work equates to meaningless work

Our results show that outsiders' perspectives of dirty work may differ from insiders' experiences regarding the meaningfulness found in dirty work. Indeed, the eudaimonic category identified in our study stresses the lack of opportunities for growth and meaningfulness as an inherent characteristic of dirty work. However, former studies have investigated and demonstrated multiple strategies deployed by workers to find and construct meaning, despite experiencing adverse working conditions (Sharma et al., 2022; Stacey, 2005). Thus, it appears that, in the eyes of workers themselves, work can be dirty yet meaningful (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013), whereas our participants seem to view dirty work and meaningful work as opposites, believing that work becomes partly dirty when it lacks meaning or serves an inferior purpose (e.g., serving others).

This result could be explained by the role of meaningfulness in differentiating between decent and indecent work. Indeed, it appears that a "good" job for adolescents in favorable economic contexts is one that provides crucial extrinsic conditions (e.g., salary) but also nourishes the self and provides personal meaning (Cohen-Scali et al., 2022; Masdonati et al., 2022a, 2022b). It could also stem from the individualist norm that characterizes societies such as Switzerland, where the formation of individual occupational goals and aspirations is overemphasized (Basler & Kriesi, 2019). This observation may differ in socioeconomic contexts marked by high unemployment and informal work, where adolescents may put a stronger emphasis on getting any employment that guarantees stable and continuous revenue (Ribeiro et al., 2016).

### Limitations, future directions, and implications for practice

Concerning limitations, the heterogeneity of our sample does not exclude the possibility of having participants "close" to dirty work. Participants could have occasional (e.g., part-time jobs), relational (e.g., family members), or geographic (e.g., living in a manufacturing neighborhood or a fishing town) proximity with dirty work (Arnett, 2014; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). Some participants may also be engaged in VET involving dirty work to some extent, potentially leading to defensive strategies in their responses. Another limitation stems from recruiting participants exclusively in the French part of Switzerland that could report different views from other regions of the country. Finally, our open-ended question encourages adolescents to focus on occupations that could deter them from considering immoral activities as occupations.

Future studies could explore the perspectives of other outsider actors, such as people formerly involved in dirty work. Our findings could also be compared with perceptions in countries with distinct socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., high prevalence of unemployment and informal work). In terms of implications for practice,

our results could provide career counselors with specific descriptors adolescents mobilize when evaluating distinct career options. Career counselors could then use this knowledge to help adolescents seek consistent information about meaningful work opportunities despite their poor social reputation. Moreover, our findings may justify additional support for young workers transitioning from school to so-called dirty work according to the descriptors found.

## Conclusions

The present study aimed at identifying shared descriptors adolescents in Switzerland associate with dirty work. Results reveal additional aspects to our current knowledge of dirty work, namely the absence of moral taint in participants' responses, the potential presence of a career dimension, and the meaninglessness attached to the work contents and activities. Overall, findings also indicate that the notions of decent and dirty work are complementary and relevant to understanding what makes work (un)appealing for adolescents. This observation could be particularly relevant for comparing perceptions of work in adolescents evolving in distinct socioeconomic contexts.

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### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.



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