

## PERCEPTIONS OF STIGMA: THE CASE OF PAID DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SLOVENIA

*Abstract.* In this article the author investigates paid domestic work in Slovenia to obtain information on domestic workers' perceptions of their work. Cleaning up after other people is usually considered dirty work with a stigma attached to it. Given this, we draw on in-depth interviews with paid domestic workers to examine how they deal with society's negative perceptions and potential individual strategies for coping with a stigmatised social identity. On the basis of previous research on paid domestic work it was assumed that employment relationships are arranged in such a way (because of the location, domesticity, informal management – all in a relatively traditional and constraining gendered order) that those employed as domestic workers do feel stigma, but we also assume (based on many studies on dirty work) that housecleaners share a relatively high level of self-respect and pride with other dirty workers. The results show that stigma intrudes into the social interactions between paid domestic workers and their employers, leading housecleaners to seek different strategies to cope with it. At the same time, respondents' descriptions of their work and work relations reveal positive aspects of the job and thus shed light on the complexity of cleaners' work and their employment relationships within the confines of the private domestic space.

**Keywords:** dirty work, paid domestic work, stigma management, women's work

### Introduction

The category of dirty work and the theme of dignity and pride at work have attracted the attention of many researchers (for an overview, see Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; also see Drew et al., 2007 and Strangleman,

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2006) who contributed important concepts of dirty work and insights into the lives of the people who perform it. While institutional service work has been the subject of much occupational stigma research, less research has focused on private domestic work. This article examines private household labour which also belongs to the category of dirty work (see Anderson, 2000). We draw on research conducted in Slovenia, with the focus of attention being housecleaners' perceptions of dirty work, their response to the stigma attached to cleaning and stigma management techniques.

The phenomenon of the revival of paid domestic work in European societies (Cancedda, 2001) has also been noted in Slovenia. A survey of ads published between 1989 and 2000 in *Salomonov Oglasnik*, the biggest advertising magazine in Slovenia (Šadl, 2006), showed an increase in the supply of domestic helpers. It also revealed that the most sought after domestic service in Slovenia was housecleaning and ironing. The number of women who found jobs on the black market rose particularly after 1996 as a consequence of job-shedding in the textile and shoe industries. After losing their regular jobs due to the restructuring, rationalisation and privatisation taking place during the 1990s, many women turned to the informal economy. However, the lack of statistical data and public opinion surveys and the fact that housecleaning jobs are largely unregistered make it impossible to accurately assess how widespread they are. However, recent research data indicate there is strong demand for paid reproductive work (Hrženjak, 2007) and show that household help is mainly hired by women with a high or university education. The emergence of well-paid professional women as well as social polarisation in Slovenia have probably been the two main drivers of the demand for domestic work in Slovenia (Šadl, 2006). It is important to stress that class polarisation in Slovenia is connected to intersecting ethnic stratification and inequalities. In this context, we can consider nationality and ethnic marginalisation "as the practical mastery (or lack of mastery) of culturally defined norms and assumptions considered valid within a given national context" (Luthar, 2014: 90) Drawing on G. Hage, Luthar talks of "practical nationality" functioning as a type of cultural capital in the Slovenian context (2014: 90). Practical nationality "can be understood as the sum of accumulated nationally sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions (national culture) adopted by individuals and groups, as well as characteristics (national types and national character) within a national field: looks, accent, demeanour, taste, nationally valued social and cultural preferences and behaviours etc." (Hage, 2000: 53) and it is unequally distributed across the nation. By analysing empirical data on cultural preferences (tastes), competencies and practices in the field of culture and everyday life of a representative sample of the population of Slovenia's two largest cities (Ljubljana and Maribor), we can see that ethncal

stratification, especially at the bottom of the occupational class hierarchy, reinforces and strengthens cultural and class differences (Luthar, 2014: 91).

In Slovenia, paid housecleaning is usually performed by women of a non-Slovenian origin who ethnically belong to the nations constituting the former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnians.<sup>1</sup> For Bourdieu, domination occurs not only in the economic and political realms but is also reproduced through symbolic (and epistemic) violence. In the dominant national and sexist ideology, which is also reflected in media discourses, the notion of cleaner and its cultural meaning is personified by members of 'different' cultural groups. In media representations, particularly in TV comedies, cleaners are highly stereotyped; they usually come from Bosnia and have Bosnian names, which implies that cleaning as dirty work is unsuitable for Slovenian women. Since the early 1990s, cleaning ladies have been portrayed as an inferior group of 'them' – 'Southerners', identifiable by their bad teeth and low-paying jobs. "Fata in the popular series *Dober dan* is one such example. Fata is uneducated, ugly, underpaid, terribly dressed, has bad teeth and speaks poor Slovenian" (Gorup, 2013: 118). This not only draws an ideological division between us and them (in the sense of national and gender differences: dirty work is 'their' work and it is women's work) but also potentially affects real-life practices within the sphere of domestic service. Hrženjak (2010) argues that, as 'new' female migrants have been coming more recently from Bosnia, Bosnian women continue to perform the most dirty work (cleaning tasks), while native Slovenian women maintain 'nurturant' jobs (child care).

### Theoretical background

'Dirt' is understood as something physical, but it is also frequently used in its metaphorical sense to denote activities, ideas and selves that appear unbecoming, dubious or indecent when viewed from the dominant cultural perspective. Douglas (1966) defined dirt as a principal means to arrange cultures: categorising something or someone as dirty lies at the foundation of the establishment of order, within both the world of ideas and the material world. Dirt needs to be excluded to maintain order and is perceived as a threat to the order from which it is excluded. It is something that is out of place, thereby violating the culturally specific sense of world order. Dirt therefore implies a condemnation, and an association with dirt has many socio-cultural and political implications. Dirtiness, as an opposite of purity,

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<sup>1</sup> *The majority of these in Slovenia's population are economic immigrants who arrived after World War II and especially in the 1970s. After the foundation of the independent Slovenia in 1991 and the war-accompanied disintegration of Yugoslavia, most ex-Yugoslav immigrants decided to stay in Slovenia and became Slovenian citizens.*

frequently appears in the context of suspect qualities that “justify social ranking of race, class, and gender” (Palmer, 1989: 140).

Applying ideas about dirt and cleanliness developed by Western discourses to the sphere of work, we see that work involving contact with dirt is by definition positioned on the border between what is socially defined as valuable and what is considered inferior. The concept of dirty work was introduced in 1958 by Hughes to denote professions or tasks that are physically, socially or morally tainted. In his later works, Hughes showed that society mandated certain groups to perform dirty work, but then stigmatised them (see Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). This ‘moral division of labour’ is the basis for social categorisations and ideological distinctions between us and them, the higher and the lower, the good and the bad, inside and outside. The belief that contact with dirt is contagious means that the persons doing dirty work “personify the dirty work such that they become, literally, ‘dirty workers’” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 420, 423, 431) include contemporary domestic workers in the groups of dirty workers.

While studying domestic work in various cultural and national contexts, Srinivas (1995) established that it occupies the lower rungs of the occupational hierarchy, explaining it with three factors: the association of domestic worker with women as a socially inferior gender, the non-recognition of special or distinct skills needed to perform such jobs, and the fact that it “involves cleaning which is influenced by the ideas of pollution and purity” (1995: 270). Or, as Anderson (2000: 142) notes: “domestic work, paid or unpaid, is dishonorable work because it is constructed as dirty and is associated with the body, with physicality”. Women, as cultural cleaning agents, run the risk of becoming ‘dirty bodies’ by virtue of their direct contact with dirt (McHugh, 1999: 183). However, women belonging to the upper social class have been largely shielded from dirt: dirty tasks involved in domestic work are usually transferred to women of other races and socio-economic groups. Gregson and Lowe (1994: 110–111, 234) documented the revival of paid domestic work in two-career households in Great Britain and established that it was mainly cleaning that was delegated to working class women as paid domestic workers. Today, with unpaid domestic work being increasingly relegated to the global labour market, cleaning is perceived as a ‘lower’ kind of work reserved for the ‘lower’ kind of people (Ehrenreich, 2000: 70).

Housecleaning involves contact with garbage, refuse, bodily excretions, germs and dust. It is therefore physically dirty work, but it can also be viewed as dirty in the social sense of the word. The primary source of humiliation accompanying traditional paid domestic work is the servility embedded in the master-servant relationship. Although the disappearance

of the pre-modern aspects of this work and the establishment of more rationalised, contractual work arrangements create room for an improvement in domestic workers' status and reputation (Bickman Mendez, 1998), they are still frequently depersonalised and symbolically degraded. Persons who clean are stigmatised and denied human qualities.

Goffman (1986: 3) defines stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that demotes "the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one". Stigmatisation is not brought about by attribute per se but by relationship: stigma is a relationship of devaluation in which one individual is disqualified from full social acceptance. A certain trait produces a stigma through an interaction process in which the social identity of a stigmatised person or social groups becomes a spoiled identity in the eyes of normals. As a result, a discreditable attribute leads people to avoid someone who has that discrediting property.

The construction of stigmatised people through stereotyping symbolically reinforces borders, creating a distance between different subjects. By transferring dirty domestic tasks such as cleaning to women belonging to ethnically and gender marginalised groups, the home becomes a meeting place of various classes, cultural and ethnic groups. If we adhere to Douglas (1996), employers resort to stigmatising cleaners in an attempt to symbolically protect themselves from the threat of mixing with dirty workers and being contaminated through close contacts with them.

On the individual level, stigmatised people are either aware of the stigma and its consequences, or consciously refuse to recognise it. The internalisation of stigmatised representations is not inevitable, but sensitivity to the social norms developed by every member of society leads stigmatised people to appropriate it to a certain degree. Attributed identity and self-identity are usually in an interactive relationship and influence each other. Therefore, for the paid domestic worker "shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess ..." (Goffman, 1986: 7).

We will also employ the concept of stigma (taint) management strategies as formulated by Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) model. Transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatised occupation (reframing), adjusting the standards by which work is assessed as dirty or not (recalibrating) and overlooking the stigmatised features of the work (refocusing) are three techniques identified by authors as aspects of taint management. Ashforth and Kreiner also address various practices (such as social weighting and condemning the condemners) that typically complement these techniques and moderate the impact of stigma on dirty workers.

## Research questions and methodology

This article is concerned with the ways, if any, in which the stigmatisation of housecleaners manifests itself in social relations within the context of paid household work, the strategies housecleaners use to handle the stigma and its impact on their thinking, behaviour and personal struggle. Since identity is shaped interactively, the messages attributing inferior qualities to persons who perform cleaning jobs may have a negative impact on their self-image. On the other hand, stigmatisation may also trigger resistance tactics and lead stigmatised persons to re-evaluate their work and their own value. Accordingly, our research questions are as follows:

1. How does the stigma of dirty work manifest itself, if at all, in the context of private household work?
2. Which approaches to handling stigma are reported by housecleaners?

The research we undertook to answer the research questions was based on information directly sought from paid domestic workers. The objective of our research was to explore the employment relationships of paid domestic workers, types of interpersonal interactions, personal views, interpretations, emotions and strategies. Qualitative data were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews that allowed the interviewer to follow a set of predetermined questions, obtain a set of comparable data, and access more detailed information on relevant themes. Our interview protocol included general questions about activities before taking the job as a domestic worker, working conditions, job flexibility, autonomy and satisfaction etc., but we were also flexible enough to identify new aspects and develop discussions on the issues we focus on most – that is, the relationship with the female employer and other members of the family and the challenges domestic workers face in communicating with these individuals, spatial/social distance, coping strategies etc.

We used a snowball sampling technique to identify our participants, whereby the initial participant suggested other possible participants and so on (Patton, 1990: 182). In 2005 we interviewed 15 women from urban and rural regions of Slovenia, but since not all of the interviews were suitable for the present research focus (there was some diversity in interviewing depth), some were excluded from the analyses. The research was done within the period of one year. Our sample included unemployed women, low-paid working-class women, and younger retired women. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and confidentiality of the conversation and data. The interviews were personal – held privately in a familiar environment in the participants' homes – but the results were handled anonymously. Accordingly, we gave each interviewee a pseudonym (Jasna,

Tamara, Fadila, Suada, Jolanda, Mojca, Azra, Vesna, Jana, Dora, Anica). Fadila, Suada, Azra and Tamara were of a non-Slovenian ethnic origin. Fadila (5 years as a domestic worker) was a 53-year-old widow from Bosnia, had two children (aged 30 and 24), had finished primary education and migrated to Slovenia in 1973 to join her husband who was then already working here. Suada (5 years as a domestic worker) was aged 38 and married, had two children (aged 16 and 14), had finished secondary education, came from Bosnia with her family in 1992 when the Bosnian war (1992-1995) began, stayed in Slovenia for a year, then left for Germany and returned to Slovenia seven years later. She could not get a job because employers did not want to deal with the mess created by bureaucracy, and she also could not obtain Slovenian citizenship. Azra (6 years as a domestic worker) was aged 31 and married, had one child (aged 8), had finished secondary education, was born in Germany and two years later her family left for Bosnia, while at age 17 she migrated to Slovenia because her partner was here. Tamara (27 years as a domestic worker) was aged 55 and a married mother of two (aged 32 and 30), was born in Croatia and came to Slovenia in 1975 to join her husband. She said she did not need to work as her husband earned enough to support the family (he owned his own building company), but she did not want to stay at home all the time. All of the other interviewees were Slovenians. Jasna (6 months as a domestic worker) was a 30-year-old mother of two and was employed as a cleaning woman in an elementary school. Her husband had been employed as a manual worker at a Slovenian leather-processing company before he lost his job. In answer to a question about education, she answered: "I have no education" (probably primary education). Jolanda (no data on the number of years in the domestic work) was a 29-year-old mother of two (aged 11 and 6) and had finished secondary school. She was married to a manual worker who was employed in the iron industry, but his earnings were not enough to provide for the family. Before she started working as a domestic worker she had been employed through public works programmes as an elderly care worker (she provided care for eight immobile elderly in their own homes). Mojca (3 months as a domestic worker) was a 46-year-old married mother of two, had finished secondary education and was studying (at the time of the interview) for an undergraduate degree. Her husband worked as a transport driver, but the money she earned herself - through paid domestic work - enabled her to pay for her study-related costs. Vesna (1.5 years as a domestic worker) a 53-year-old widowed mother of two (aged 33 and 28), had finished primary school. She was employed at a furniture company (as a manual worker) which was later closed due to bankruptcy. After her husband died, she received a widow's pension (which does not cover her living costs). Jana (no data on the number of years in paid domestic work) was a 40-year-old married

mother of one (age 20) and was employed, but had recently lost her job due to downsizing in the company. Her husband's salary was insufficient to meet the family's basic needs. Anica (2–3 years as a domestic worker) was a 45-year-old who had finished secondary education. She was the sole financial support for her child (aged 20). Although she was employed full-time in an office, her salary did not allow her to make ends meet. Dora (5–7 years as a domestic worker) was a 60-year-old working as a cleaning mother of three who had finished primary education. She had a regular job in a kindergarten where she was lady. Due to her low salary and alcoholic husband who had spent all the money on alcohol, Dora also found a job as a domestic worker.

All of the interviewees lived at home and worked in several households, performing their tasks once a week or a few times a month. Although they had been hired primarily as cleaners, some of them also did tidying up, washing and ironing, prepared food, and took care of children or older people. They had been working as domestic workers for various lengths of time, from a few months to 27 years. Based on our conversations during the interviews, I believe one can safely say that most of their employers were families with a favourable economic status, or women positioned near to or on top of the occupational and/or educational pyramid.

All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. We listened to the audio recordings several times and read and reread the interviews more than three times each. To analyse the data, we used a content and thematic analysis that describes and interprets the participants' views. By employing traditional qualitative analysis techniques we established coding categories<sup>2</sup> (we linked units of data or codes to form themes) that “serve as a way of breaking down the data so that they can be looked at systematically and considered” (Weis, 2000: 189). After the interviews were coded for overarching categories, critical discourse analysis was used to identify discursive elements within coding segments, e.g. meanings related to work and relationship experiences and problems. In so doing, we provide some findings about the ways in which domestic workers perceive their work, the stigma of cleaning and its potential impact on them. Because this article draws on only a very small data set, the generalisability of the results is uncertain.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of coding categories included the following: financial rewards of paid domestic work, job flexibility and autonomy, female employers as kind or cold, a lack of appreciation, overbearing supervision, inhumane treatment, the perceptions of class differences, paid domestic work as a servile job, domestic workers' self-idealisation, accepting stigma, rejecting stigma, reframing, supporting other women, condemning female employers, positive aspects of the job, emotional support, familisation.

### Working for normals<sup>3</sup>: personal and interpersonal faces of stigma

The transfer of 'dirty cleaning' to economically weaker women is an expression of social class segregation and widening income inequality, but it also establishes a difference between one's own and an external group and between their relative social statuses (see Bickman Mendez, 1998: 116; also see Meagher, 2003: 146). One of our respondents described the process in this way:

*Adults pretend that we're equal, but I know they think they are something more than we are. Those who have so much money think that we without money are inferior to them. The same as XX [the employer], she doesn't say anything, but I know what she thinks – that I'm not like her. (Jasna, 30)*

Or, as Goffman (1986: 5) notes:

*We believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. ... We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class.*

It is also obvious from the above quotation is that stigmatisation does not operate on the discursive level ('she doesn't say anything, but'), but persists on the level of routine and habitualised practical consciousness. It is expressed through the tone of voice, gestures, feelings of discomfort, distancing and exclusion. Although rejection is transposed to the level of non-reflexive behaviour and speech, expressed indirectly and in a more concealed form, many of our interviewees do perceive it:

*She doesn't lower herself to my level. She asks how I do, but that's not it. I'd say she's not actually interested. She is too high above it. (Jasna, 30)*

The workers' claims about their employers keeping a distance apparently contradict their accounts of their employers' friendliness. However, when describing her employer Fadila said she was friendly, but her attitude and coldness annoyed her. Jasna was even more annoyed by her employer's friendliness, because she openly doubted her sincerity:

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<sup>3</sup> According to Goffman (1986), 'normals' are those individuals who do not bear the stigma.

*She is practically always friendly. When she came to me to ask if I'd do the housecleaning for her she was like ... respectful. You know how they are, they pretend to be friendly. God knows what they actually think. (Jasna, 30)*

Tamara thought that, by being friendly, her employer was concealing her authority:

*She wrote a note asking me to do another thing. She didn't write 'do it' but said please do it. And when someone writes 'please, do it' I know that I must do it. (Tamara, 55)*

The word “please” can be understood as the most basic form of social etiquette, just like an unconscious habit or a cultural competence connected to the education of the employers, but it does not sound natural to Tamara – she wondered whether it seemed manipulative. The employer’s friendliness could be an indicator of personal closeness but in our respondent’s view it could also be used to exercise power over another, thus emphasising rather than reducing the distance between the two women. In this case, friendliness functions as a bluff or symbolic shield concealing either the employer’s authority or their fear, uneasiness and uncertainty about their relationship with a stigmatised person. This uneasiness could also come to light through employers’ avoidance of interactions that might compel them to focus their attention on housecleaners. Some employers were represented as kind, but as people who tended to minimise personal interactions with their housecleaners and who showed little interest in concerns outside their jobs.

*Sometimes some of them say: sit down, have a coffee or tea, let's talk a little. Some of them don't, they just put tea on the table, here it is, and go off. (Tamara, 55)*

The undertone of this respondent’s account reveals insensitivity to the worker’s personal dignity and its devaluation, as if it were unimportant (“here it is, and go off”): the housecleaner is not a person. In addition, some respondents felt that employers demonstrate their keeping of distance when leaving the room in which the housecleaner is working.

*If I worked on the lower floor, she'd withdraw to the room upstairs. She'd say: 'I'll go so that I'm not in your way'. (Fadila, 53)*

Although her employer explained her withdrawal, saying she did not want to “disturb her while working”, Fadila did not believe she was sincere

and motivated by respect for the housecleaner's work. Such behaviour could indeed be viewed as driven by the need to draw symbolic borders between us and them, those clean and those dirty. But employment relationships are, in fact, multilayered; by withdrawing from the room, employers could also show respect for the housecleaner's work or protect at least some of the worker's dignity.

A similar fear of dirt also emerged when Fadila's employer denied her request to put her drink in the fridge; we can interpret her refusal as expressing the fear of dirt and of the stigma adhering to dirty workers and their things, including their shoes and clothes<sup>4</sup> (many of our interviewees were allocated a special place for storing their clothes while working).<sup>5</sup>

Inherent to stigmatisation is the superiority-inferiority relationship which destroys dignity. Housecleaners are frequently confronted with what they consider humiliating requests.

*She sent me out three times when it was raining to clean plastic tables and chairs, and she gave me her friend's boots; that time ... I ... pitied myself a little. I mean, you can see that it's raining and it's cold, and you ... give me the hose. I now have to be, so to say, somebody's servant or what. (Suada, 38)*

*I don't like it when somebody's there because I have to clean faster. And it seems to me that they are supervising me. (Jasna, 30)*

Supervision, the non-expression of respect and an unwillingness to acknowledge well-done work could be categorised as subtle forms of stigmatisation. Even when satisfied with the cleaners' work, employers do not express their satisfaction, or do so only indirectly; sometimes they communicate their satisfaction to others rather than to the workers themselves.

*I: Do they ever praise you?*

*No ... I mean, some of them don't. They don't show it, they are like that, do not say anything, but things like 'You'll keep working for us, won't you'. But they don't say anything about good or bad. (Fadila, 53)*

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<sup>4</sup> This does not mean the employers consider cleaning women inherently dirty; on the contrary, they have to be clean and maintain high hygienic standards; what disturbs them is the symbolic mixing endangering social differentiation.

<sup>5</sup> Having space to store one's belongings at work could be seen as a positive thing in the case of other groups of workers, while the peculiar and complex relationships between domestic cleaners and their employers within a privatised work setting of the home construct meaning in different ways – in our respondents' view personal space for storing clothes is understood as the outcome of stigma. I thank my reviewer for this point.

*Telling me that I'm hardworking, no, not that. But, if they talk to somebody, if I'm in the house then I hear them praising me. (Tamara, 55)*

Paid housecleaning is a special kind of employment because the work takes place in the employer's private home. It is also the place where children are brought up. What children learn surprisingly fast is, as Ehrenreich (2000: 69) established, that some people are less worthy than others. The fact that the difference between normal and stigmatised people is perceived by children testifies to the ubiquity, deep roots and intensity of the stigma attached to cleaning. Stigmatisation sometimes takes on a very aggressive form, as evident in the example below.

*Her daughters kept an eye on me, noted the time of my arrival and then informed their parents; they annoyed me shamelessly. When I had everything finished, they'd turn everything upside down, spit, crumble noodles, sometimes I even got hit with a stick on my back. The girl once came to me, put her arms on her hips and said: 'You're our servant and you'll do what we tell you to do'. On another day I was preparing lunch, peeling potatoes, and she hit me in the head with a boiled potato. Whenever I told the employer about it, she just told them to apologise, and what they said was: 'Mum, apologising to a servant, where have you seen it' ... They wrote that I had mad cow disease and pig disease, and then 'ha, ha, ha, you'll regret it one day'. (Jolanda, 29)*

The girls also sent her to fetch pizza and kicked a bucket of water over. The employer's response was lukewarm. Such humiliating and bossy behaviour expresses the belief that a stigmatised person is 'not quite human.' Azra also reported disparagement on the part of children ("I asked her daughter to shut out the dog while I cleaned but she refused to do it"), which is symptomatically related to the stigmatising mental images of dirty workers.<sup>6</sup>

In the perception of the interviewees, their work is dirty not because it involves physical tasks but because they clean dirt *for others*, those who can afford it because of their better economic circumstances. This kind of work becomes problematic when workers clean for those who esteem themselves highly, considering cleaning too lowly to do it themselves.

*I'd say that people who afford themselves a housecleaner have a high opinion of themselves. For example, two families could do the cleaning*

<sup>6</sup> *But, in my view, such behaviour is exceptional and unusual; it reveals the lack of cultural capital available within the dysfunctional family life. Children are taught to behave appropriately towards paid domestic workers hired by the family and they learn early on that it is not appropriate to be (overly) superior. We thank our reviewer for this point.*

*on their own, because none is so ... they could clean themselves, but they can afford to pay for it. (Fadila, 53)*

*My work is too lowly for her to do it herself. She has too much money to do that ... they don't need to do it so somebody else does it for them. They can afford it. (Jasna, 30)*

These viewpoints correspond with the critical arguments against paid domestic work (see Meagher, 2003: 146–147) according to which physically able adults should do domestic work themselves as part of their private relationships of home and family. Seen this way, the delegation of dirty work to domestic workers is inherently humiliating. The expectation that others will do work which one finds boring or repulsive (dirty) rests on the assumption of the existence of inferior social groups ‘qualified’ to do such jobs. The work of a cleaner is therefore *servile*; it destroys the dignity of the person forced to ‘serve’ in order to survive economically. Jasna, also employed as a cleaner in an elementary school, expressed this by distinguishing between cleaning at school and cleaning others’ private households. School cleaning is a “job”, she “simply cleans the corridors there”, while when cleaning in a private house she “serves”. Compared to cleaning jobs in the public sector, housecleaning is more socially tainted work.

### Rejecting the stigma

Jasna’s account<sup>7</sup> shows that the social stigmatisation of housecleaners creates room for the development of a negative identity. Jasna showed that she was aware of the stigma attached to her work, describing it as “lowly” and “less valued”. For her, it is the low status of this work that leads wealthy people to avoid it, she said they have enough money to pay others to do the work instead of them. She stated that her employer “does not lower herself to my level”. She feels particularly ill at ease when being handed the payment for her work (“As if I were inferior”). Less well-to-do people are, in her opinion, regarded as inferior: “Sometimes I think that it’s actually true”. Jasna is not only aware of a stigma, it seems that she also accepts it. On the other hand, stigma also triggers mechanisms employed to resist it, oppose it or even transform stigmatising representations and practices.

We found that for the majority of respondents the income generated by cleaning others’ homes is not a stigmatised aspect of their work, quite the

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<sup>7</sup> I found Jasna’s account at the extreme end of feeling stigma. Her voice is thus not representative of all or majority sentiments. An interesting issue concerns the factors that influence who do or not internalise negative perceptions. Here, I assume that an individual’s personality and attitude play a large part.

contrary. They said they are happy in their jobs. This does not mean, however, that they are unaware that others have stereotypes of them, but they do not believe or internalise them. As a result, our interviewees expressed relatively high respect for their work and offered a positive self-image.

Certain respondents reported that they did not experience any tensions arising from the relationship between the normal and the stigmatised. Dora and Anica described their working life as normal, problem-free, not associated with physical or psychological burdens either at their workplace or in private life. They described their employers as respectful people who treated them decently, praised their work and paid it well. The ability to support their families, or to offer 'something more' to their children, is linked with self-respect or the self-confidence noticeable in Dora and Anica.

*My work has in no way affected my personal life. On the contrary, I'm more satisfied because I can afford something more for my daughters. My work at others' houses takes place in a relaxed atmosphere.*  
(Dora, 60)

*I feel normal, unburdened. I'm a single mother and my son is a student. This work is necessary to enable us to have normal life, so it's not a special burden for me.* (Anica, 45)

The respondents' accounts reveal many positive, non-stigmatised aspects of their job: earnings, good working conditions, participation in organising working time, autonomy in work or self-organisation, the possibility of negotiating the level of payment, emotional support for the employer, seeing oneself as an important person or efficient worker. Anica, for example, stressed the autonomy at work as one of the rewards; she did not perceive or experience bad sides of her work.

*I: What do you not like about your work?*  
*I haven't experienced it yet. I know what I have to do and I know that I'll be suitably rewarded for my work. I organise the work as I wish.*  
(Anica, 45)

Tamara told us she could always choose for whom she was going to work, or for whom she would clean, what she would clean and in which working conditions. Mojca sees her work as an opportunity to become familiar with a new environment, meet new people and learn about different habits and lifestyles ("I get to know people and their habits and that broadens my horizons."). The example below reveals that the flexibility typical of this type of employment is a great advantage over other jobs.

*Childcare is my great problem, but with this job I can organise my working time, that is, in the morning when the child is at school. (Azra, 31)*

We also found that reframing and social weighting are utilised on a regular basis.

### **Reframing**

Some interviewees rejected the idea that their work was humiliating, shameful and servile. Mojca established that the cleaning work was “really less appreciated” and “not well paid”, but her perspective on it was different – for her, it was work just like any other, equally honourable and not at all inferior.

*I see it in the way that all work is honourable. I don't feel inferior at all because I clean. I even feel good because I'm ready to do that sort of work. (Mojca, 46)*

For Mojca, her willingness to do “that sort of work” (the expression implies that cleaning is labelled as dirty work) is a positive experience; it is a sign of moral superiority in the sense ‘I’m not a passive victim with a spoiled identity’, but a ‘proud person with moral qualities doing honourable work’. She likes her cleaning job: “I’d be glad to work as a cleaner until I retire”. Tamara is aware of the stigma attached to cleaning (“some women say: I won’t work, I won’t break my back for others”), but emphasises that she does not feel repulsion or shame. Suada and Fadila felt the same.

*I don't mind doing anything. I'm not ashamed of doing it. (Tamara, 55)*

*I'm ready for anything ... a bathroom, a toilet, all that, all, all, and I cannot say 'I won't' or 'I can't'. (Suada, 38)*

*I don't feel repulsion towards anything. (Fadila, 53)*

The pride emanating from the undertones of these statements also reveals itself as dignity. Jolanda terminated her employment contract because, like Azra, she did not want to give in to her employer’s humiliating attitude. These narratives indicate that decisions to leave were made in part as statements of resistance to the dehumanising as domestic workers.

*Then I decided that I couldn't go on like that, that the money I got was not worth it. I told the employer why I wanted to quit, I was sorry because*

*I needed the money, but I said to myself that it was not worthy of such humiliation. (Jolanda, 29)*

*I told him that no money they could offer would be enough to buy my pride. I'm not their servant. He snapped, telling me to go back and find work in Bosnia. (Azra, 31, 6 years as a domestic worker)*

The respondents also talked about their work as a special mission, which testifies to their reinterpretation and rejection of dominant value judgments. In their opinion, the purpose and sense of their work is 'offering assistance' to others, not serving them. Mojca emphasised several times that she "helps them a lot". What society and some interviewees see as dirty tasks and/or a servile relationship is 'help to another woman' for Tamara.

*Nowadays women are too burdened by work and I think it's wise to find help in such cases. You go somewhere to help somebody, even if the money is not good. You do a favour to that person. (Tamara, 55)*

Destigmatisation extends to a worker's inner self. In order to emphasise what they believe is their true self, our interviewees described themselves using socially desirable worker qualities: zeal, diligence, fastidiousness, motivation, honesty and responsibility, feelings of obligation towards work and their employers:

*I'm the sort of person who exerts themselves. I work intensely because that makes me satisfied. I do plenty and I do everything right. Even if I'm alone in the house, I don't have a rest. (Vesna, 53)*

*I decided to take this work because I think that I can do it well, because I'm fastidious, and I want the employer to be maximally satisfied as well. I'm hard-working and honest. I put much effort into it, I'm really active and finish a lot of things. (Mojca, 46)*

*I don't like it when I overlook something because I really try hard to do my work as it should be done. (Azra, 31)*

*I always have one prejudice, [I worry] if she [the employer] is going to be satisfied, so I try even harder than at home. I'm too good and I spoil my customers. (Tamara, 55)*

Positive self-representations evident from their assessments of professional and moral qualities are a kind of defensive behaviour helping stigmatised persons to maintain the sense of their own value.

The employer or family members and domestic workers frequently develop personal relationships, and one of the main forms of intimate personal links is familisation (Anderson, 2000; Gregson and Lowe, 1994). One way to handle the stigma that comes with the devalued types of work, to disprove servility and develop the feeling of one's own value (the feeling of 'being a person' rather than 'being a servant'), is to establish quasi-familial relationships. This strategy was also evident in our interviewees' accounts. When describing the relationship with their employers, they frequently used family rhetoric and explicitly or implicitly defined themselves as belonging to the family for which they work.

*I feel at home and I work as I do at home. I go there as if it were my home. I've already become a bit attached to these people. They are so attached to me that they look forward to those two days a week when I come. (Fadila, 53)*

Some of them talked about the friendship between themselves and their employers.

*I get on excellently with XX [the employer]. At one stage we knew each other only superficially, but now we are real friends ... She is truly my friend. (Jana, 40)*

Quasi-familial relations and friendship are one of the main sources of satisfaction for the majority of our interviewees. Azra is on such good terms with some of her employers that she feels like she is "one of their relatives". Domestic work also requires social and communication skills without which it would be impossible to understand and satisfy the psychological needs and expectations of employers. Workers' care for their employers, then, involves a great deal of emotional work (Hochschild, 1983). Mojca explained:

*I see their wishes. They like it when I do something well. To make them pleased with my work and behaviour, I take care not to burden them and not to be in their way. (Mojca, 46)*

Jasna is "more careful" when she sees that her employer is in low spirits, so she "tries to disturb her as little as possible and finish her work as soon as possible lest something be "wrong". Tamara is a confidant and counsellor of the two families she works for. The employers confide their troubles in her, usually family-related ones, and talk about these issues *as women do*.

*It is, how to say, a friendly sort of relationship. As they say: one woman complaining to another woman, to relieve herself. Sometimes when I arrive there I listen for an hour because they wait to hear my opinion. ... I'm actually so close to my customers that I can advise them. (Tamara, 55)*

*I try to unburden her, help her, cheer her up a bit, and usually she accepts it straight away and her mood gets better ... so step by step her bad mood goes away. (Mojca, 46)*

*If I see that she is in a bad mood, I try to cheer her up. A cup of coffee, a cigarette, and everything falls into place. (Jana, 40)*

Our interviewees do not see themselves as 'cleaners only', they conceive of themselves as personalities and as equal to their employers with whom they engage in intimate conversations. Faced with an environment that excludes stigmatised workers, denies them full humanity and forces them to doubt their capabilities, our respondents strive to prove that they are not only normal but also human in the most profound sense of the word: that they are capable of empathy, understanding and care for fellow humans. They offer emotional support to their employers and their families. Although these gestures of kindness go beyond their work duties, they see them as a vital part of the identity of a good worker, friend or 'family member'. By providing support they feel in control ("they wait to hear my opinion" - Terezija) and independent. In other words, such support is a means for striking the right balance in their relationships with their employers.

### *Social weighting practices: condemning the condemner*

The desire for social affirmation leads stigmatised people to try to reconcile non-stigmatised people's negative perceptions and their own wishes for self-respect. One harmonisation technique is to attack the legitimacy of the existing social or symbolic organisation. In our interviews, this manifested itself as the invalidation/discrediting of the character and social role of the female employers whose negative perceptions of cleaning constantly threaten the workers' effort to maintain their own identity. Fadila, for example, displayed doubt concerning the character of her employer, describing her as "a bit strange".

*Her attitude ... she seems to be a special type of character. She has that cold attitude. (Fadila, 53)*

Our interviewees condemned their employers' departure from the female role. In their view, the deviation from what is seen as expected manifests itself primarily within the context of motherhood. Jasna expressed doubts about the role and goals working female employers strive towards. Although not lacking in material means, in her view the children in the families for which she worked suffered; they were always alone or in the care of other people.

*They've got the money and can afford that. But the children suffer. Although they have a lot of toys and everything. They get everything, but they are always alone or someone else cares for them. XX [the employer] has a babysitter in the morning. (Jasna, 30)*

Jana designated the women who perform the highest ranking jobs and are not primarily dedicated to their family as "career women" for whom work is more important than their family.

*Yeah, you have to keep your job, so sometimes you have to be late. And sometimes you don't have anybody to care for the children. But if she is a career woman, then it's different. To fight for the highest position, to be the best, that's not okay, putting the family in the last place. And that's not because it's necessary, but because her job is so important for her. But it shouldn't be that way. (Jana, 40)*

Jolanda is also critical of such career women. She approves of domestic help or childminders only in the case of illness. It is their jobs that are the source of role conflict and resulting excessive workload, and women themselves are responsible for this: they are too ambitious in the workplace and insufficiently ambitious at home as mothers:

*If you are sick, you have to hire somebody. But as long as women are healthy, it seems to me that they can do it on their own. Even if they're very busy, one can always find time. But women who build their careers, they take on too much work. (Jolanda, 29)*

Doubts about fulfilment of the mother role and the problem of over-worked mothers who do not play their primary role are also evident from the view below on the inadequate circumstances in which children are raised.

*The girls were completely spoiled. Their mother was very busy at work and spent little time with them, so when she came home she let them do everything they wanted. (Jolanda, 29)*

The children are therefore deprived of a mother who should be there for them more often to provide care and education. Jolanda told us that she reported to her employer each instance of the children's rude behaviour, but did not take measures to prevent it apart from asking her daughters to apologise. In Jolanda's opinion, she avoided punishing them because she had a guilty conscience about spending so little time with them. She was a doctor and spent most of the day at work.

The respondents, themselves stigmatised, stigmatise their employers by constructing them as poor mothers and career women. The women employers deviate from the normal (traditional) criteria of femininity as regards both the household work they perform and the mother care and education they provide to their children. Jolanda resolutely stated that she herself would never hire domestic help and that she could do everything on her own because she could not "endure someone else" [working instead of her]. Suada and Azra were also adamant in rejecting the possibility of hiring domestic help even if they could afford it financially. Their statements convey their normality and fulfilling of conventional expectations regarding women's primary roles and functions within the privacy of the home.

## Conclusion

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It is widely acknowledged that a stigma of dirtiness is attached to (paid) domestic work (see, for example, Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Many domestic workers are ashamed of their work and well aware of the low status and stigma accompanying paid domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). In Slovenia, this work, especially cleaning, is also stigmatised, for example in media portrayals of cleaning ladies of non-Slovenian origin. This study examined the perceptions and experiences of stigma among paid domestic workers in Slovenia to obtain some further insights into the problem. One of the main findings is the presence of complexities and differences between the cleaners' experiences and interpretations of the nature of their relationship with employers.

We established that the respondents experience the effects of stigma in many ways, from openly aggressive behaviour and abusive speech to more subtle mechanisms of keeping a distance and excluding housecleaners from normal interactions: housecleaners are devaluated, ridiculed, labelled as servants, denied respect and acknowledgement, and supervised. The threat to identity and psychological harm could only be observed with Jasna, who accepted the stigma she actually experienced, while other respondents strived to positively frame the value of cleaning work and reinforce the sense of their own value. We also found that the narratives of our respondents revealed two techniques were used in the process of stigma

management. Reframing is a process in which workers actively change the meaning of dirty work. An important role in this transformation is played by the concept of assistance (our interviewees help overburdened mothers – their female employers, so their work acquires the quality of a special mission), the creation of ideal self-representations and the playing of a therapeutic role in interactions with the employers – these not only change the meaning of the work but also broaden it: in addition to physical dimensions the work also includes emotional ones. The stigmatising of the people who stigmatise is a technique used by stigmatised people to express their doubt about normals. Our respondents had doubts about the character of their employers and about the role and goals for which working employers/mothers strive. By adopting traditional views on the role of women, which is expressed as a resolute denial of the possibility that they themselves would hire domestic help, and by pitying their employers who are deprived of certain kinds of experience, stigmatised people normalise themselves, or achieve the (false) feeling of superiority over normals.

It becomes apparent from reading the respondents' accounts that the experience of stigma is not common to all the respondents. We found that many of them conceive of themselves as equal to their employer and, like Dora and Anica, feel that they have a "normal" job. Some of them stressed that they are proud of themselves and satisfied with their work because it enables them to help other women (with physical and emotional work), financially support their families, combine work and family (childcare), and meet interesting people. They also expressed the importance of feeling needed and appreciated by the employer's family. Our research, much like other studies of dirty work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Drew et al., 2007; also see Strangleman, 2006), showed that domestic workers, although marked by their occupation, maintain a relatively high level of self-respect and pride.

When asked about their relationship with their employers, the respondents' answers revealed different experiences and interpretations. In many cases, mixed feelings were detected on the workers' side. For example, some respondents were offended by employers leaving the room they were working in, whereas others felt intimidated by them remaining in the room. Female employers were described as kind, but also (or at the same time) as cold and distant – some respondents complained about coldness, others about friendliness. Respondents stated that they had been respectfully treated by their employers – some of them even perceived that they were treated as a 'member of the family' – but also that they had been treated like a servant. It becomes apparent that these relations, although underscored by power relations, involve complex dimensions. Our empirical evidence showed the often meaningful relationships between domestic workers and their employers

(for example, becoming 'real friends', belonging to a family). We also found that the respondents' descriptions of their work, which included providing advice on personal issues and management of the employer's mood, deviate from the typical description of skillless "dirty work".

Although the issues of power, economic and psychological exploitation (as the basis for stigma) are fundamental to understanding these relations within the privatised environment of the home, we cannot leave out other (positive) aspects of relationships, like communication, emotional support, equality, mutual respect, friendship, and supportiveness, that are – often intertwined with power dimensions – equally important and equally real.

With regard to the accounts of many respondents who presented their views in positive terms rather than in a negative or complaining manner, we need to emphasise (besides the already mentioned individual's personality and attitude) the relatively weak tradition of employer-domestic worker relations (paid domestic work as a type of work had all but disappeared in the framework of the previous socialist system) and the small ritual differentiation between status groups in Slovenia (Luthar, 2014). In trying to determine why the majority of respondents conceive of themselves 'as equal to their employers' and feel respected and valued in their job, it is impossible to ignore the fairly egalitarian nature of Slovenian society. Slovenia is one of the more 'egalitarian' countries. Egalitarian ideology played an important role within socialism and prevented considerable income differences. Having left behind the socialist system, inequalities in Slovenia have not risen significantly, especially when compared to many other transition countries. Inequality remained stable and low in the last period, more precisely from 1991 to 2008 (Malnar, 2011). From the mid-1990s to 2002, there was increasing recognition of the importance of equality in Slovenia and so a high level of egalitarianism is not surprising. In 1998 "its proportion of egalitarian attitudes was the second highest among all of the twenty-three European countries and the highest among nine Eastern European countries" (Hafner-Fink, 2006: 138, 140). The fact that many respondents conceive of themselves as equal and reject the negative stereotypes that they may face in the context of paid housecleaning work could be explained by the egalitarian consciousness of the Slovenian population. Employers may also feel embarrassed and uncomfortable about hiring domestic workers. An awareness of the considerable control they have over the quality of a worker's life can lead to guilt anxieties, which according to Bott (2005) must somehow be dealt with: the employer presents herself as a positive force, a kind and good woman, someone who refuses to take the worker's dignity away. Therefore, it would have been interesting to further develop how different factors (social structure, ideology or value system, personality) influence the perceptions and experiences of paid domestic workers in Slovenia.

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