**“Cleaners? Why Should I Care?”**

by Hiroki James Lee

**Analysis and Research Question**

Despite donning noticeable articles of clothing, cleaners are typically passed without any acknowledgment. Through society’s neglect of their presence, we essentially render them “invisible.” The group of students I observed simply possessed no desire to provide the most basic greetings. From talking with a few NTU cleaners, I realised how desensitised these “victims” have become towards experiencing such emotional neglect. Moreover, the absence of amenities for rest also reflects a lack of physical appreciation. Given the physical demands and long hours of cleaning, one expects there would be proper resting spaces for cleaners. However, we instead find cleaners creating pseudo-rest spaces for themselves. It is telling, how under-appreciated these cleaners are— that even their basic physical needs such as rest spaces, are not cared for. The present duality of the lack of appreciation cleaners experience, both physically and emotionally, begs the question, why is there such a lack of appreciation for cleaners in Singapore?

Rabelo, V. C., & Mahalingam, R. (2019). “They really don’t want to see us”: How cleaners experience invisible “dirty” work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 113*, 103–114.

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**Abstract**

1 Many people want to feel valued and included but being invisible may undermine one's sense of belonging and meaningful engagement. Some employees may face chronic invisibility due to job stigma (e.g., ‘dirty’ work), overnight shifts, and/or spatial separation from coworkers and customers. We examine how people make sense of feeling invisible at work: what people experience when they are not seen or are treated as though they cannot be seen.... To examine how people experience invisibility, we conducted an inductive phenomenological analysis. Data included open-ended questions from a survey of 199 university building cleaners and in-depth conversations with a subset of 12 cleaners. Three major themes emerged: how cleaners experienced invisibility, what invisibility feels like, and why they were rendered invisible. …

**Introduction**

2 …[T]here are some employees who are chronically ignored because of their occupational context, whether a result of stigma (e.g., customers' failure to make eye contact), organizational practices (e.g., overnight shifts), and/or sociospatial mechanisms (e.g., segregation of work from public; [Hatton, 2017](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209#bb0175)). Further, invisibility may be common in, if not characteristic of, occupations that are low-status and stigmatized ([Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis, & Höpful, 2012](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209#bb0305)).

3 One such example is building cleaners, who work in nearly every brick-and-mortar organization yet frequently are hidden from the people for whom they clean. As [Herod and Aguiar (2006)](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209#bb0180) describe, “cleaners remain largely invisible in the landscape—most of us know when somewhere has not been cleaned but few of us, we suspect, stop to think much about the laboring processes which go into maintaining spaces as clean” (p. 427). What does it feel like to perform work that is ubiquitous yet concealed?

Research context: building cleaning as invisible ‘dirty’ work

4 …As mentioned, building cleaning involves invisible work; indeed, some scholars assert that “invisibility is a fundamental characteristic of cleaning work” ([Abasabanye, Bailly, & Devetter, in press](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209" \l "bb0005)). That is, invisibility becomes part-and-parcel of building cleaning, given the way that this occupation is structured and managed. Thus, building cleaning is invisible for several reasons, including sociocultural, spatial, and temporal mechanisms ([Hatton, 2017](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209#bb0175); [Hood, 1988](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209#bb0195)).

5 First, sociocultural ideologies, such as perceptions of ‘dirty’ work, render this occupation invisible. Building cleaning involves at least two types of ‘dirt’: physical (cleaners work in noxious conditions and are associated with the trash and bodily fluids they clean); and social (cleaners are subservient in their customer relations, organizations, and broader society).…

6 Second, spatial and temporal mechanisms conceal building cleaning (and cleaners) from the customers they serve. Building cleaners often work alone and late at night or early in the morning, making them physically and socially isolated from coworkers and customers.…

**Results**

Invisibility at work

7 The most common type of invisibility that participants described was embedded in interpersonal interactions. We interpret these experiences as interpersonal invisibility, or invisibility at work. Participants often felt invisible when interacting with their customers—namely, students and faculty on campus. Paradoxically, participants felt most invisible when they could be seen by others but were treated as though they could not be seen. One participant described “not being noticed when entering a room…[no] simple ‘hello’ or ‘thank you’.” Their usage of the word ‘simple’ suggests how customers can, in the cleaner's view, rather easily cease rendering the cleaner invisible—yet for some reason this is not an accessible, feasible, or desirable response. One cleaner described her greatest heartache at work as “how people can pass you by as if you're invisible as you work.” The verb ‘can’ implies that when customers are able to interact with cleaners, they often do not. […]

Invisibility of work

8 Cleaners also described how their social and vocational context rendered their labor invisible. We interpret these experiences as invisibility of work, or non-recognition of labor and the occupation itself. First, for cleaners to do their jobs is to render their labor invisible. Cleaning work involves the removal of dirt and bacteria, by nature an invisible task. Thus, many customers fail to notice cleaners' labor until it is not done at all (e.g., they arrive to work and see an overflowing trash bin). Further, many cleaners are assigned to shifts that extend late into the night or early in the morning, thereby minimizing their opportunities for interactions with others, whether coworkers or customers. Thus, these working conditions predispose workers to invisibility.…

Class injury

9 When discussing experiences of invisibility, participants most frequently described interactions with customers—namely, students and faculty. The most common attribution, particularly from White participants, involved class injury and differences. Many cleaners perceived students and faculty to be entitled and dismissive. One cleaner complained about “ignorant people who don't acknowledge your presence because they think you're beneath them.”…

**Theoretical contributions**

10…By focusing on invisibility as a phenomenon, we also identified a central paradox: workers most often felt invisible when they were in fact visible. People experienced invisibility when they saw customers notice them, but subsequently ignore or ‘unsee’ them. These experiences reflect the duality of (in)visibility: noticing (visibility) is a prerequisite for non-recognition (invisibility). Participants also experienced invisibility when their work was hidden (e.g., night shifts) or ignored (e.g., customers disregarding a caution sign and walking across a freshly waxed floor).…

**Conclusions**

11 To conclude, we find that cleaning labor is rendered invisible, with cleaners consistently unable to be seen (or treated as though they're unable to be seen—“They really don't want to see us”). Treating others as though they are invisible can send the message that marginalized groups are not worthy of human interaction, appreciation, or respect. As [Suchman (1995)](https://www.sciencedirect.com.remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/science/article/pii/S0001879118301209" \l "bb0310) states, “the further removed we are from the work of others, the more simplified, often stereotyped, our view of their work becomes” (p. 59). We found that invisibility helps to explain—and perpetuate—such “removal” for people in invisible ‘dirty’ work. Thus, invisibility is an intersubjective, socially constructed behavior that reflects and reifies boundaries, including class divides. Regardless of how invisibility is experienced, appraised, or attributed, we believe that managerial practices and social interactions can be improved to increase the dignity and well-being of invisible workers, especially those in devalued occupations.