

Moral imagination as a key to overcoming work-related stigmas

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Moral imagination is an essential faculty for workers who must overcome the stigmas of ethical conflicts and social rejection associated with certain types of jobs, according to a study carried out at the Universidad Carlos III of Madrid.

There are some jobs ("dirty work", in Anglo-Saxon terminology) that, because of their characteristics, produce a certain amount of [social rejection](#) towards the people who perform them, due to the fact that they are subjected to moral conflicts and ethical decisions related to performing those duties. "Paradoxically, these occupations are very necessary from a social perspective, as in the case of a police officer who hesitates before using force at a given moment, or an aide working with [psychiatric patients](#) who faces the dilemma of whether or not to use drugs with the patients, for example", comments the author of the study, Esther Roca Batllori, of the Department of Business Administration. She is doing research on how to help these "dirty [workers](#)" overcome the stigmas associated with their professions that make it more difficult for them to carry out their duties; these workers often feel a lack of motivation, which results in a high rate of [absenteeism](#) and staff turnover.

The article, which was recently published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, proposes that one of the keys to solving this situation lies in "moral imagination". In general terms, this is defined as an ability that allows the individuals to make better decisions in contexts and situations characterized by conflicts that are moral in nature. "Moral imagination

turns out to be a great help when one is facing these morally ambiguous decision-making processes, because it offers greater moral perception, critical capacity and individual moral conscience", the researcher states. "This greater consciousness that the moral imagination provides - she continues – in turn, makes overcoming the social stigma easier ", she concludes.

Finally, the study analyzes how organizations with "dirty workers" can foment and create conditions that allow moral imagination to develop. To this end, companies can adopt measures such as "the use of narratives, which favor contact among different workers and stimulate moral inclusion, or designs of work stations that revolve around the worker's autonomy and critical capacity ", explains Professor Roca. From a more general perspective, these measures would be integrated into a company culture whose nucleus would be a commitment to the worker's individual values and critical thought, and that prioritizes ethical aspects over others.

The concept of moral imagination has been widely developed in the field of business management as well as in the field of philosophy. "I found it interesting to think about how this concept, initially a theoretical one, could be applied to an area that is so practical, like work", comments Esther Roca, who has received support for her research from the Ministry of Science and Innovation and the Fundación Ramón Areces (Ramón Areces Foundation).

More information: The Exercise of Moral Imagination in Stigmatized Work Groups, Roca, Esther, JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ETHICS 96 (1): 135-147 SEP 2010. ISSN: 0167-4544

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