Original Research Papers

Ethnography

Ethnography
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–21

DOI: 10.1177/14661381211073125
journals.sagepub.com/home/eth
SAGE

Sacrificial heroes: Masculinity, class, and waste picking in Iran

Manata Hashemi
Department of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

Abstract
This article examines how five male waste pickers in Khorramabad, Iran, negotiate the stigmatization and criminalization associated with their work against the backdrop of escalating social inequality. I demonstrate how the men use embodied compliance and discursive narratives of masculine self-sacrifice to position themselves as innocent, sacrificial heroes. In changing the narrative from one of humiliation to valor, the men both amplify the classed and gendered hierarchy while simultaneously critiquing the social order that has led to their marginalization. This gendered identity work arises as a response to both classism and everyday occupational denigration, enabling waste pickers to construct distinct moral selves in Iran's current global moment, but at the expense of disparaging devalued others and creating new forms of inequality.

Keywords
Masculinity, class, stigma, inequality, waste, picking, Iran

Heroism at the margins

On a break from work, Amir sat with me at home on a hot summer afternoon in Khorramabad, Iran, gently caressing the head of his five-year-old son, Mehrad, who was fidgeting impatiently at his side.[1] An arrest 10 years ago left the former bank employee destitute and alone. Recounting with tears behind his eyes:

> Everyone left me like I had the plague. I became all alone. My own family even left me. It was really hard for me. To work so hard and to reach this point. Nothing. It's over. In the job I had before, I had another reputation, I was a bank employee. [With a job like that], you have

Corresponding author:
Manata Hashemi, University of Oklahoma, 729 Elm Avenue, Norman, OK 73019-0390, USA.
Email: hashemi@ou.edu

> another kind of credibility. People interact with you another way. It becomes heavy for you to digest [that you've now reached this point]. It was hard. The looks were hard. The gossip was hard. My only hope is my children's happiness. . . I've sacrificed everything, I've sacrificed my own dignity for my children.

Instability—a hallmark of contemporary economic life in the Islamic Republic of Iran—also defines the livelihoods of one of the most stigmatized social groups in the country: waste pickers. Considered to be among the lowliest and most stigmatized occupations, waste picking—sifting through garbage bins, searching streets, and/or calling out to residents in search of reusable materials that are then sold to various buyers—has largely become a job taken by men like Amir as a last resort.[2] Only a few years ago, in 2015, as some *nun khoshkis*—the local term for waste pickers in Khorramabad—told me, there was sufficient money to be had in the trade to the order of 40,000 tomans per day.[3] Many left their jobs as manual laborers, jobs that were more socially esteemed, but provided inconsistent pay and unpredictable work opportunities that were contingent on the whims of employers, to buy a wheelbarrow and start reclaiming garbage full-time. In 2018, however, with the rise of paralyzing U.S. sanctions and rising inflation, there were days when some nun khoshkis were lucky to get 5000 tomans.[4]

In Iran, highly unequal income distributions between Iran's haves and have nots (Salehi-Isfahani, 2019) have contributed to the increasing marginalization of the working poor. The degradation that Amir feels illustrates the tensions that arise because of this emergent social polarization in Iran, whereby wealth and physical appearances now become stand ins for one's moral worth in the popular imagination (see also Machado-Borges, 2015). Against this backdrop, this article addresses the question of how poor working men like Amir elaborate privilege and assert their identities when they must work in publicly demeaning jobs that serve as "stigma symbols" (Goffman, 1963), as visible signs of their lower-class status.

Since 2017, I have conducted interviews as well as participant observation among men and women in Iran engaged in tainted, "dirty" work in the service economy, work that is "offensive to the senses, personally demeaning, or even morally reprehensible" (Perry, 1978: ix-x), work that often pays less than minimum wage and offers "little hope of significant advancement" (Newman, 1999: xiii). Focusing here on the experiences of five male waste pickers in the city of Khorramabad in Iran's Lorestan province, I consider how some poor men who are negatively judged by their very visible socially degrading work signify themselves as virtuous actors. The accounts of these five men are reflective of similar sentiments expressed by other marginalized individuals engaged in low status work whom I have encountered during my research (see Hashemi, 2018).

While recent research examining how occupation, class, and gender intersect in shaping people's responses to stigmatization is limited overall (Slutskaya et al., 2016), a handful of recent studies on masculinity and class have demonstrated how poor working men mobilize traditional gender norms in the context of class subordination to lay claim to their moral worth (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2019; Purser, 2009; Slutskaya et al., 2016; Thiel, 2007). Advancing this scholarship, this article explores how poor male waste pickers in

Iran elevate themselves in a classist context that devalues and criminalizes individuals—particularly men—associated with "dirt" (Douglas, 1966). As I demonstrate, rather than increase expressions of hypermasculinity that emphasize crime, violence, and social deviance (Rios, 2011), the degradation and criminalization that nun khoshkis face leads them to surrender to the moral order in an effort to assert their respectability. Looking at the men's occupation, class, and gender as intersecting, rather than distinct spheres of influence, provides insight into the reflexive and relational constructions of identity that lie at the heart of their emancipatory projects (Slutskaya et al., 2016)—identity constructions that belie dominant analyses of the link between poverty and acts of subversion (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003; Rios, 2011). Indeed, I argue that despite the degradation and insecurity inherent in their work, nun khoshkis "give their work, and consequently themselves, value" (Hughes, 1958: 46) through embodied accommodations and discursive narratives of innocent heroic self-sacrifice that emphasizes their moral conformity, industry, efficacy, and distinctiveness. In doing so, the men enact the hierarchical order as they reject Iranian society's preoccupation with wealth as a marker of one's social standing and worth.

In examining how nun khoshkis challenge their stigmatized identities, these findings further address two largely overlooked areas in the dignity of work scholarship. A growing body of research has examined how workers employed in socially tarnished occupations use a variety of rhetorical devices to typify themselves and their labor in a positive light (e.g., Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hodson, 2001; Perry, 1978; Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Stacey, 2005; Yu, 2016). These studies have tended to focus on individuals living in the global North employed under formal organizational structures. Such arrangements can presumably give way to the formation of strong subcultures among subordinate workers thereby facilitating "esteem-enhancing social identities" (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 419). However, research has often neglected how tainted, highly individualized work in the unregulated informal economy in global contexts marked by escalating inequality can influence how individuals construct dignity (but see Millar, 2018; Nguyen, 2019; Purser, 2009). Similarly, we know comparatively little about how denigrated working poor groups draw on valued social and moral framings to make recognition claims beyond the workplace (Yu, 2016; but see Lamont, 2000). The cultural consequences of dirty work—namely, how it can lead stigmatized groups to enact and/or critique the social order—remain understudied.

This article develops a more comprehensive framework for examining the lived experiences of degradation by showcasing how informal waste pickers in Khorramabad disrupt the meaning and purpose of their labor. In attempting to challenge marginalization through their everyday acts of civility, emphasis on fortitude and responsibility, and their subordination of women and members of the upper half, nun khoshkis enact their manhood as they reproduce the unequal social order. While the men know that their jobs offer little to no prospect for upward mobility, they reframe the shameful, very visible aspect of their jobs—the touching, sorting, picking up of, and calling out to residents for, recyclable refuse—as a virtuous sacrifice that is imperative to the well-being of others. In casting themselves as ideal, masculine heroes, nun khoshkis practice a politics of

endurance whereby they attempt to "live better with circumstances they cannot change" (Feldman, 2015: 429).

And yet, in making their present lives liveable through their "self-sacrificial endurance" (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 287) and embodied conformity, the men also discursively challenge the broader systemic forces they believe have led to their suffering. They are the heroes in a materialist world that sees them as a threat to the urban fabric and the system of law and order. The strategies that they deploy to feel, as Sennett and Cobb (1972) describe, "socially useful," to feel that they provide "something to others in the society in which [they live]" (266) thus illuminates how some members of the working poor disavow negative stereotypes through critiques of existing institutional arrangements while paradoxically reproducing micro systems of hierarchy. Lending insight into how the social order is constructed at the margins, nun khoshkis' claims to dignity further reveal the possibilities—and limits—for social change not only in Iran, but also in other countries of the global South where protracted economic precarity and the need for status recognition collide.

In the following, I consider how nun khoshkis experience and make sense of their stigmatization, changing the narrative from one of degradation to heroism. First, I examine the historical underpinnings that have created the category of nun khoshki and worked to diminish those who engage in the front lines of today's recycling trade. Second, I consider the men's everyday lived experiences of suffering, highlighting how others (negatively) respond to the nun khoshki's sustenance activities. In doing so, I then turn to the central premise of this article, examining how nun khoshkis perform acts of submission to avert negative attention and make claims to innocence. Beyond embodying compliance, the men also share strategic narratives that assert themselves as sacrificial heroes. In emphasizing the moral "advantages" (Sayer, 2005)—a strong work ethic, sacrificial caregiving, and social responsibility—that define their masculine heroism vis-à-vis disparaged others, the men simultaneously both reproduce and challenge accepted norms of cultural membership.

Methodology

In making these arguments, I relate the narratives of five nun khoshkis between the ages of 28 and 46 living in Khorramabad whom I spoke with in July 2018 as part of a larger ongoing qualitative research study on stigmatized work in Iran. I focused on nun khoshkis whose daily work was concentrated in the vicinity of my own residence in Khorramabad. This particular neighborhood is located in a predominately middle-upper class area of the city and is an exemplar of the type of communities in which nun khoshkis generally experience the most stigmatization.

For the purposes of learning how the men felt about their work and their lives as well as the internalized meanings they attached to their social positions, I conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews that were recorded and later transcribed. My observations of waste picking in Iran as well as of Iran's changing economic landscape from 2008–2019 also constitute the narrative presented here and provide further clarifying details to the men's own stories.

During the interviews, the men knew that they were free to not answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time. Despite the personal nature of my questions regarding their work and subjectivities, however, they felt comfortable disclosing details of their everyday lives, beliefs, hopes, and fears. To facilitate this process, I deployed an approach that situated the men as experts of their own lives and let their narratives guide the interview structure as much as possible (Dexter, 2006).

In speaking with the men, I was acutely aware that notwithstanding our shared cultural background, I was not an insider in terms of my gender and class, thereby potentially exacerbating the power differential already embedded in the interview format. Not only did the men express their sense of exclusion by members of the public who were from a similar socioeconomic background as mine, but some also conveyed deeply gendered perspectives regarding what they perceived to be the proper role of men and women. In these latter instances, rather than share my views by engaging in a frank conversation and thereby implicitly position myself "as knowing more than participants" (Thwaites, 2017: 5; see also Abell et al., 2006), I simply listened, allowing the interview to serve as a platform for the men to express their thoughts freely without fear of judgment. This approach, in turn, helped me to maintain a trusting research partnership (Weiss, 1994). To mitigate any sense of inferiority the men may have felt during the interview and to further convey my genuine compassion for their struggles, I was fully engaged and respectful (Weiss, 1994), openly empathizing with them when they recounted occasions when they were harassed, bullied, or insulted by others. During these and other moments, the interview setting became a cathartic outlet for the men who cried and/or expressed their anxieties as they described their work, disadvantaged histories, and future aspirations.

While many studies of waste picking in the global South tend to focus on mega-cities like Cairo, Rio de Janeiro, and Hanoi (e.g., Medina, 2007; Millar, 2014, 2018; Nguyen, 2019), smaller cities like Khorramabad are increasingly becoming important nodes in the burgeoning global recycling trade. Indeed, waste picking has become one of the most significant sources of (informal) income for those who find themselves progressively sidelined because of rising urbanization and (formal) unemployment (Medina, 2007). Understanding the meanings that nun khoshkis in Khorramabad attach to their labor can thus lend insight into the multitudinous responses to hardship that shape the lived experiences and membership claims of the urban poor in both global centers of power and the peripheries.

Waste picking and its (dis)contents in Iran

Waste picking has become one of the most popular—and maligned—informal jobs in the Islamic Republic today. While the recycling trade has a long history in Iran that predates the 1979 Iranian Revolution, it has only been in more recent years that the industry has largely become transformed into street waste picking. Iran's economic recovery efforts after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) paved the way for the country to become more deeply embedded in the global market economy by the 2000s. Iran's 2006 adoption of the recyclable plastic, PET (polyethylene terephthalate), meant that the plastic—which could then be broken down and shipped to China for computer manufacturing—mostly came to

replace glass in soft drink production, leading to the rise of private recycling factories (Tehran, 2014). Ultimately, "nearly three-quarters of these plants. . . [were] driven out of business by a network of trash collectors" (Tehran, 2014).

The growth of the latter has led to a recycling "mafia" of sorts (Tehran, 2014), where pickers' daily remuneration is contingent on buyers who form part of the US$200 billion global recycling industry (BIR, 2019). This informal web of collectors purchases recyclables from freelance waste pickers and, according to some reports, for a "fraction of their own profit" (Tehran, 2014). To increase their own compensation, waste pickers diversify the materials they collect ranging from plastics to a variety of other in-demand salvageable items including stale bread for use as animal feed, iron scraps, batteries, cardboard, and paper. For many, sifting through municipal trash bins in search of these materials has become a standard part of the job. Publicly sorting through garbage has today become a marker of the waste picker, a sign to others of his supposed uncleanliness and desperation to make ends meet.

It was not always this way. Once upon a time, reclaimers, particularly those residing in provinces like Lorestan where bread is a more plentiful resource than rice, largely limited their efforts to the less stigmatized venture of collecting stale bread (*nun-e khoshk*) from households. As anthropologist Esma'il Bana'i details,[5] households considered bread a blessing and rather than throw out their stale bread, families would give it to the reclaimers or *namaki*s who circumambulated their neighborhoods; the namakis, in turn, would provide the families with another blessing—salt (*namak*)—in exchange. With the onset of the Iran–Iraq War and the rise of plastics manufacturing, coveted plastic items such as sandals and small toys came to replace salt as the preferred medium of exchange (Asgarinia, 2017).

This small-scale business model changed by the 2000s; the removal of bread subsidies and the subsequent rise in the price of bread, while partially offset by cash transfers, nevertheless meant a threat to the daily activities of nun khoshkis who could no longer mainly rely on the large bundles of stale bread they once received from households to make a living (Asgarinia, 2017). In response, nun khoshkis started to diversify their methods; not only did they circulate neighborhoods calling out to residents for a variety of recyclable items alongside stale bread that they could exchange for money, but some eventually came to pick through trash bins scattered throughout the city in search of these goods (Asgarinia, 2017).[6]

Today, inflation, delayed wages, and the rigidity of Iran's formal labor sector has functioned to make life increasingly difficult for those located at the bottom of the social hierarchy, leading to the increased popularity of waste picking. Many of the men I interviewed recounted how they joined the trade because they would not receive regular pay in their previous jobs. In waste picking, their compensation is contingent on the market value of the various goods they collect. This value fluctuates with the ebbs and flows of the economy, which, in 2018, was tied to Iran's increasing international tensions over its nuclear program and the subsequent devaluation of the rial against the dollar. No longer a "small scale activity involving primarily reuse" (Millar, 2014: 37), the recycling trade in Iran, as elsewhere, has been transformed "into an alternative form of urban employment" linked to the global economy (Millar 2014: 37; see also Faulk, 2012; Medina, 2007).

Amid these new circumstances, nun khoshkis have come to occupy the margins of both popular imagination and the city itself, driven by necessity to largely interact with the public's detritus, rather than the public. Informally referred to among some in various parts of the country as *ashghal jam, kon* (trash collectors)—the name in Persian an expression of their collective debasement—nun khoshkis embody the articulated prejudices against the unskilled poor. They constitute the indispensable marginalized, a social group whose work is necessary for the functioning of daily urban life yet is also branded for its very nature. As I detail next, the men's everyday experiences of debasement are shaped not only by the nature of their dirty work, but also by the explicit exclusionary practices of family members, city residents, and authorities.

Everyday suffering and compliance

"Since the age of ten, I've stood on my own two feet," Mehdi told me shortly after we met. After his father's death, Mehdi dropped out of primary school and started reclaiming. Now 28, he still works thirteen-hour days with no savings to show for it. "Every night, I have to give what I make to pay for my mom's expenses." Despite collecting carton boxes, soda bottles, stale bread, and iron scraps on a daily basis, Mehdi's buyers purchase it from him for only 700 tomans. "But then they'll press it and sell it for 4700 tomans. We endure all the hardship for 700 tomans. They take it all," Mehdi exclaimed as he highlighted what he perceived to be the fundamentally exploitative nature of his relationship with buyers and one of the main reasons for his inability to save.

Nevertheless, an awareness of consistently receiving the short end of the stick and feeling powerless to change his circumstances are not the only sources of distress in Mehdi's life. In discussing the daily hardships he faces on the job, Mehdi notes how his days are accentuated with constant exhaustion:

> Other guys [who do this work] make more than I do by working less because they have a vehicle.[7] They can go anywhere, unlike me. I get bothered; I get tired. By God, sometimes I become unconscious because of the heat. . . these days, sometimes I say, "God, that's enough, I can't take it anymore."

Like Mehdi, many of the men highlight the effects waste picking placed on their bodies. For example, Cyrus, a father of two in his late forties, recalled how the wheelbarrow he used to push "put a lot of pressure" on his body. Nun khoshkis also discussed the influence of long work hours on their appearances. Unable to take a day off to take care of himself, Mehdi asked me incredulously, "Would you believe it's been several years since I went to the bazaar? I always wear these clothes," he said as he gestured to his stained, threadbare pants and shirt.

However, feeling shortchanged and enduring physical suffering pales in comparison to the emotional assaults the men face on a regular basis—both from near and far others. "We have people, but we're without people," Mehdi complained as he described his relationship with his family. To be sure, most of the men have both extended and immediate kin who are socioeconomically better off than they are. And yet, the men feel they cannot

rely on these family members for support because they are either struggling financially themselves or they have abandoned the men. Mehdi recalled his relationship with his uncle bitterly:

> My father's brother is in Isfahan and he has the best situation. . . He has a bakery; he has an apartment. My father [when he was alive] put him in Isfahan. He got him a car. Got him a wife. Put him at work in the bakery. But now he doesn't bother to ask whether we're alive or dead. Nothing.

In a context of growing inequality, where one's practices and appearances have increasingly become stand ins for one's moral worth (Machado-Borges, 2015), avoidance of the poor turns into a means by which some high-status group members like Mehdi's uncle attempt to maintain their own privilege. As Hadi, another nun khoshki, concluded, "as poverty increases, we do things like disregard others' rights. We want to advance our own work in whatever way." Social decline, as the men become painfully aware, has led to exclusionary practices even by one's closest relatives to shore up their own rank (Hashemi, 2019).

Avoidance, however, is ironically also punctuated with dependency (Caldeira, 1996). Despite the informal nature of their work, waste pickers like Mehdi and Hadi are vital contributors to the urban fabric. Not only do they reduce the amount of solid waste that enters landfills, thereby enhancing municipalities, but by collecting waste to be recycled, their work also minimizes greenhouse gas emissions while improving overall societal health (Dias, 2016; WIEGO, 2020). And yet, many residents and authorities consistently view waste pickers as morally unclean or dangerous. In turn, as some nun khoshkis told me, they actively engaage in "terrorizing" their character by "making fun" of them or falsely accusing them of stealing or harassing residents. "[Once], a cop started to look through my wheelbarrow and found a car stereo—it was broken—and asked me where I stole it from," Cyrus said with resentment. Although Cyrus had bought it from a customer to recycle later, the officer did not believe him until a few good Samaritans came to Cyrus' defense. "When they [the cops] see someone whose appearance isn't good, they pick on them more," Cyrus concluded. This is because, as Farhad, a 36-year-old nun khoshki and father of two admitted, people think nun khoshkis are not "good people" because of the way they dress. "Those who dress well, ride well, walk well, of course they don't bother them," Cyrus explained.

The surveillance and criminalization that follows, Farhad and Cyrus both intuit, is a classed practice in the context of Khorramabad whereby those who do not look the part of a good citizen are singled out for harassment and unfair treatment. In the eyes of the public, the men's outward, seemingly dirty physical appearances coupled with the publicly dirty nature of their work become equated with their inward character. As Hadi explained, "if I'm a bad person, but my *zaher* [outward appearance] is good, a lot of people just see the *zaher*. They don't care about the *baten* [inside]." Cyrus elaborated further, going so far as to ascribe positive intentions to the criminalization he faces on a regular basis:

> Sometimes at night, I collect carton boxes. But they don't let it. People don't let it. The municipality picks on me. The police, them too. They have a right. There are some who do illegal things. They take people's things. These things cause them [the authorities] to pick on them. They can't just pick on one person. They have to pick on everyone so it can be controlled a bit.

In Cyrus' view, the municipality and police are right to doubt men like him; their scrutinization is justified because the authorities are attempting to "control" vice. While Cyrus' sentiments are unique, they reflect a broader attempt by the men to "hold themselves [rather than others] accountable" for changing public stereotypes (Wilkins, 2012: 62). Recognizing that their appearances place them at greater risk of being singled out for contempt, discrimination, and in some cases, even punishment, nun khoshkis engage in several deferential strategies to deflect negative attention away from themselves and embody virtuousness.

For some, this consists of limiting their work hours to the mornings and evenings so they do not "bother" (in the words of Cyrus) the public during lunch and the afternoon siesta (from approximately 12–4 p.m.). During this time, according to some of the men, residents are more likely to verbally attack them for circumambulating the neighborhoods and loudly calling out for recyclable materials, waking up residents in the process. Others take this practice of self-censorship one step further by attempting to hide their work altogether. "I work in secret," Amir explained. "When there are less people, where it's less crowded." Reasoning that good behavior would further prevent people from "negatively judging" him, Amir would try to keep his head down and "be one with society." Like Amir, Mehdi also attempts to pre-empt being seen as a "bad person" not by hiding his work, but by "humbling" himself in front of neighbors. Similarly, Farhad described how he is "sweet" with others: "I'm good with my neighbors. . . I want to be so good with everyone so that when I come around, [people] say that he's like my brother."

Signaling their value as innocent citizens who, according to Mehdi, "do not go after haram things," the men express a desire to counteract their public image as "uncaring (potential) offenders" (Stuart and Benezra, 2018: 181) by consciously emphasizing and demonstrating their internal goodness. While their strategies to do so were not always successful in eradicating opprobrium, they did exert some influence on perceptions. Farhad, who struggles to make ends meet, described how even though he did not have "anything. . . at least I didn't steal from others." Because of his "good morals," he reported with pride how people liked him: "At night, everyone [neighbors] knocks on my door and says 'tell Farhad to come out and sit with us so we can joke with him.'" Similarly, Mehdi, too, stressed how "everyone [in the neighborhood] likes me."

Adjusting their public presence (e.g., by avoiding certain areas of town) and physically embodying norms of civility (e.g., by humbling themselves, being friendly to others, being honest in their work) enabled the men to ward off stigmatization and implicitly prove their decency through routine acts of accentuated conformism (see also Hashemi, 2015, 2020). Rejecting deviants, they attempt to become "one with society" in order to separate themselves from their public image as criminals and facilitate their cultural membership. In the process, they strategically abide by certain rules of behavior—keeping

to set hours, working in the margins, avoiding confrontation—established by dominant, middle-class society, thereby indirectly reinforcing the position of class "dominants" (Schwalbe et al., 2000) and validating the existing social order.

Narratives of heroic sacrifice

Nun khoshkis' strategies to cope with everyday denigration extend beyond embodying compliance to encompassing discursive strategies that enable them to see themselves and their work in a positive light. The men mobilize these narrative strategies to position themselves as sacrificial heroes. While nun khoshkis do not use the term sacrificial heroes as a self-identity, their descriptions of themselves, their work, and their daily lives emphasize their industriousness, paternalistic caregiving, and social responsibility[8]—all constituents of a heroic masculinity revolving around the figure of the self-denying man who gives of himself in order to give to others. Constructing a heroic, selfless identity steeped in traditional masculine ideals emerges as a response to the intersection of the men's social devaluation as nun khoshkis and their depressed financial state.

For most of the nun khoshkis, their sacrificial heroism involves constructing masculine selves by appealing to the difficult nature of their work. This, in turn, serves to justify their own discipline and resolve. Describing the job, Mehdi emphasized how "separating the cardboard from the plastic from the iron" drives him "crazy" because it is so gruesome. But despite not having 1 day a week to rest, he went on to say:

> I went into this job at ten years old. I'm used to it. . . It's like I lost something [if I don't work]. . . I'm content. I'm one hundred percent content. Just the fact that I endured all this hardship and my hands were in my own pockets, I'm content. I endured a lot of hardship. There were nights when I slept without dinner, but I still say I'm content.

Emphasizing his resilience and ability to endure, Mehdi found pride in his work despite the vulnerabilities that waste picking entailed. The ability to not "give up" and "make an effort" (in the words of Cyrus) in the face of insurmountable odds reflects, as Tracy and Scott (2006) describe, masculine qualities of strength and emotional fortitude. These qualities are further constitutive of the "man of integrity" prized in Iranian culture (Adelkhah, 2000). As some of the men told me, those who "sit at home" (according to Farhad) or who can work but beg instead (according to Mehdi) do not share their diligence (see also Hashemi, 2018). Normative discourses in Iran, encouraged by the state, similarly link individual virtue with one's ability to espouse a strong work ethic, and equate masculinity with the abandonment of laziness (Hashemi, 2020; Kia, 2015). Confronted with challenges to their moral virtue, Mehdi and Farhad's statements reveal how some nun khoshkis draw from the cultural tools at their disposal to reinforce their own position as hardworking men deserving of social inclusion and recognition.

Indeed, while acknowledging their "weak" social position, the men nevertheless pointed out their inherent human equality with others to critique their belittlement. As Amir stated:

> Nobody is lower than anyone else and nobody is higher than anyone else. We're all human. If we think we're all human, that we're all the children of one God, I think no one would feel they're above anyone else.

Similarly, Cyrus emphasized how "those who make fun don't understand [that] not everyone is supposed to be the same." Locating himself as part of a diversified whole that necessitates difference to function properly, Cyrus sees his work as affirmation of his participation in that whole, rather than as indication of his marginalization from it. In acceding there is an inherent order to things where social inequality is a given, Cyrus and Amir implicitly emphasize how they should nevertheless "be seen as morally equal" (Machado-Borges, 2015: 214). Highlighting their intense commitment to work serves as a basis for the men's claims to moral virtuosity and equitable treatment.

In the drive to resist stigmatization, most of the men not only highlight traditional gender-based cultural norms revolving around the strong, zealous man (Kia, 2015). They also assertively emphasize their role as protectors who are willing to sacrifice their own corporeality for their families. As Farhad explained, "I'm prepared to be bothered physically to whatever extent so long as my wife and children are happy. I just say, I don't want to be in debt." Willing to do whatever it takes to safeguard his family's happiness and self-reliance, Farhad relates a domain of heroic sacrifice in which he sees his role as provider as critical in protecting the welfare of the ostensibly weak. Positing women as vulnerable and subject to protection, Mehdi similarly described:

> I'm the caretaker of the family. I started working since childhood to pay for their expenses. So that I don't have to stretch my hands out to any bastard. . . [I was never tempted to leave the job] because of my mother and sisters. No. They need to have a caretaker. They're women, what can they do? It's my responsibility.

Though waste picking provides Mehdi with a fair share of hardship, he adamantly rejects quitting as a possibility since the job serves as the dividing line between securing an honorable life and a shameful one in which he will have to "stretch his hands" to others for help. A strong adherence to a traditional masculine breadwinner role that necessitates sacrificing his own well-being for that of supposedly powerless, subordinate female others imparts Mehdi with a sense of self-worth and dignity. "My head is high," he concluded proudly. "Even if all of Khorramabad is yours, if you don't have your face, nothing. It's useless."

Reinforcing the role of the man as the protector of the family who neglects his own interests, Cyrus asserted:

> If you know that in the future, nothing is going to happen for you, that it's all problems and that your work isn't good, then you have to think of taking care of your family. You're not thinking of yourself. . . You feel you have to sacrifice yourself. . . The father of the family has to take care of the family. . . I hope that even if I haven't reached any place, they can.

Cyrus' repeated verbalization of self-denial suggests that embracing a masculinity centered on "self-sacrificial endurance" (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 287) enables him, like Mehdi, to lay claim to his position as a paternalistic caregiver who himself has the sole capacity to mitigate the hardship of the family unit. Cyrus' statement further implies that while he is aware that "nothing" may happen for him in the future, rescuing the weak (i.e., his wife and children) through his own surrender may give them a fighting chance at a better life.

Finally, the men's narratives of care extend beyond the family to encompass society at large. Indeed, beyond asserting their patriarchal role as family protectors, many of the men make it a point to cite their social contribution as productive, responsible citizens who help maintain the nation's well-being. The men discussed how collecting the city's recyclables is "good for people" and how their job keeps the streets "clean" and the economy running. In describing the best part of his work, Cyrus said:

> You feel like you're doing a service [to] your country, to your nation in terms of economics. These recyclables really help. Spiritually, too, it's really good because you're not wasting God's gifts.

In "refocusing" attention from the stigmatized aspects of the job to its positive dimensions (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), Cyrus embraces a certain enthusiasm or "passion" (Busson and Rivetti, 2014) for waste picking that enables him to better deal with his bleak future prospects in the context of perceived increasing structural insecurity ("in the future, nothing is going to happen"). As Busson and Rivetti (2014) note, such rhetoric can serve as a motif for precarious workers, engendering "socially acceptable narratives about their jobs" (2). Passionate rhetoric about waste picking further serves an instrumental function, justifying the men's claims to innocence and virtue (Busson and Rivetti, 2014): they are the ones "doing a service" and "not wasting God's gifts." Hadi, for instance, has become so habituated to waste picking that he occasionally goes beyond the duties of the job itself to fully embrace its positive features and his role as an environmental steward:

> [The fact] that we clean the streets, I think this is a positive aspect. I've gotten used to it. Sometimes when I'm in the park and see a piece of paper or cigarette butt lying around. . . I'll collect it and throw it in the trash.

As defense mechanisms then, rhetorical strategies that emphasize the nun khoshki's diligence, bodily surrender, and social vigilance subscribe to a model of sacrificial heroism that encompasses admired traditional Iranian masculine ideals of moral virtue, selflessness, chivalry, and zeal (Adelkhah, 2000; Kia, 2015). These discursive techniques are born through an intersectional process that gives rise to how "masculinity is acted out" (Slutskaya et al., 2016: 178). Rather than solely a cognitive response to stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), the men's subscription to culturally dominant masculinity norms is socially constructed (Dick, 2005), taking place as a reflexive response to their own depressed financial state, the particulars of the job itself, and their mistreatment by members of the public. Acutely aware that their constant contact with garbage leads

"people to look at [them] in a really negative way" (in the words of Hadi), the men demarcate a sphere of "masculine distinctiveness" (Slutskaya et al., 2016: 169) that reproduces the gendered order by centering the positive, value-added role their paternalistic sacrifice entails for their families, communities, and the nation at large.

Virtuous distinction and the reorganization of the social order

Thinking of themselves as sacrificial heroes allows nun khoshkis to enact manhood, counteract stigma, and make claims to inclusion. However, it also structures how they view the social world around them. For most of the men I interviewed, asserting *their* heroism and virtue contributes to their reframing of success as a moral rather than necessarily an economic enterprise (Hashemi, 2018; Lamont, 2000). In this view, those who are truly poor are those who simply, according to Amir, "don't have sense." Through such "selective social comparisons" (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), the men deploy, as Lamont (2000) describes, standards revolving around personal integrity that "allow them to emerge on top or at least side by side with others" (14). Facilitating their dissociation from negative stereotypes, narrative strategies revolving around sacrificial heroism contribute to the men's self-distancing from those whom they consider inferior.

While discourses of sacrificial heroism and privilege enable nun khoshkis to assert dignity, they also serve to reorganize the social order. To avoid being typecast as those who "do illegal things," the men emphasize their endurance, self-denial, and paternalism. However, my interviews reveal that this type of "identity work" (Snow and Anderson, 1987) also leads the men to create an Other who is often socioeconomically better off and espouses traits that they vehemently reject: immorality and selfishness (see also Hashemi, 2018). Cyrus, for instance, describes his own virtue in the same breath as he castigates well-off others who do not share his innocence:

> Being poor doesn't have to do with what's in your hands. Just because someone's financial situation isn't good that doesn't make him poor. Sometimes a person comes and his encounter is bad. He insults people. You don't show it, but your conscience is clear. You feel you're better than him because your encounter wasn't bad with anyone. . . If I do good works, ultimately even if people don't speak good behind my back, at least they won't say bad things.

Similarly, Amir noted how the person who "sees himself as better [than others] is really poor. It doesn't depend on money. Thought, sense, character – when you don't have these, you're poorer than the person who sleeps on the street corner. You're nothing even if you have the world." Other nun khoshkis frequently highlight how good relations with others, being fair, and generally being a "good person" are the defining features of wealth. According to Cyrus, when a rich person does "bad things" like bothering others or being "a slacker," "it's better if they remain poor."

Citing a difference between material and spiritual poverty, Cyrus and the others not only signify themselves as spiritually well-off in comparison to some members of the upper half, but in doing so, they also shift focus from the external, consumerist culture that

surrounds them to one's inner moral compass. "You see a guy who because of what he wears, people will say, 'what is this?'" Farhad bemoaned. "I don't accept this. Because of the way he dresses, some think he's not a good person." Rather than leave the men with a sense of deprivation, underconsumption gives rise to a disavowal of Iranian society's preoccupation with purchasing power as a marker of one's value (cf. O'Neill, 2015). Largely cut off from the consumerist market, they create an alternate social order that ranks people by virtue of their morality (see also Hashemi, 2018), laying claim to their own status and privilege in the process.

The men's redrawing of the social hierarchy to place morality at the top of the status order is grounded in their own subordinate position. Believing, as Cyrus pointed out, that "they are oppressed from every angle," they avow a "sense of personal significance and meaning" (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1337) by discrediting wealth as the marker of a person's inner worth. "Maybe someone makes more than I do," Mehdi told me, "but he goes up people's walls to make that extra money. That money is haram. I make less, but I work hard. The other guy is probably doing something else that he's above me." Nevertheless, there are certain members of the well-off that most of the men admire: those who help others and who thus are, in the words of Farhad, "good":

> A rich person is usually someone who has assets and starts a company. . . everyone benefits from him. They're rich, they're good. Not if I have money and just stack it up at home. A rich person who has good morals and helps others, then you can say he's rich. . . Or someone who participates in charitable work. They're rich.

As Lamont (2000) describes, a low status job impels workers "toward valuing behavior that implies respect for the dignity of people in low-status positions" (115). To this end, those above them whom many of the men hold in high regard are individuals who have generosity and "good morals," who recognize, in Amir's words, that "nobody is lower than anyone else." In reasoning that they are all "the children of one God," men like Amir justify their own deservingness to be treated as equals. Sensing the absence of such treatment in their day to day lives, some nun khoshkis turn to highlighting their own ability to help others as proof of their own inherent morality. As Hadi described:

> In these times, someone who's rich is someone who helps others. Someone who's fair. . . There are many [panhandlers] who don't have anyone, especially if they're women. If I have [some money], most of the time, I'll help. I'll say, they must need it. I don't care if they do or not, that's their business.

Inscribing his cultural membership through his own charitable activities and positive encounters with others defines Hadi's own self-perception (see also D'Alisera, 2018). While acknowledging that money is important, Hadi went on to tell me that it is not so important for him to be materially rich that he would violate someone else's rights. Hadi downplays the importance of money, subjugating it to a sense of open-handedness and equity. Simultaneously, by creating an identity for himself as a benevolent citizen unconcerned with the wealth of the world, Hadi reproduces the "masculinist structure"

(Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 2006) that positions women as helpless and in need of protection. In this way, distinguishing themselves from seemingly selfish others allows men like Hadi to not only reclaim dignity, but also the patriarchal authority that their class subordination and public devaluation place into jeopardy.

Such routine embodied assertions of moral worth, in turn, enable the men to redraw the lines of the social ranking system to their favor. In identifying lesser others—those who do not have "thought, sense, character"—nun khoshkis remind themselves (and me) of who they are:[9] hardworking, thoughtful, and socially adept masculine heroes who not only take care of the powerless through the fruits of their sacrifices, but who also have the inner moral virtue and aptitude typically associated with publicly esteemed groups (i.e., those who "have the world"). In denying virtue to members of the latter who do not follow the rules of morality, the men overturn the social hierarchy, positioning themselves above those located higher up on the socioeconomic ladder.

The stigma hierarchy (Grandy, 2008), predicated on the vilification of those below (Hamilton et al., 2019), takes new form as the men largely malign those above for their individualism while implicitly reserving praise for those whose circumstances are similar or even more depressed than their own such as the person "who sleeps on the street corner" (cf. Hamilton et al., 2019). Detaching economic status from one's value as a man, Amir, Hadi, and the others afford themselves the possibility of becoming the real protectors of society. Unable to fully reap the rewards of Iran's developmental turn and cast aside by others as dangerous, public nuisances, the men mobilize and embody cultural scripts revolving around the noble, zealous man to validate themselves as righteous, worthwhile actors. Ironically, in challenging inequality and stigmatization, they end up reproducing it as they imbue their own social position with value at the expense of subordinating women and denigrating economically higher others (Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Slutskaya et al., 2016). The process of cultural production that marks the men's perceived rightful presence as virtuous self-sacrificing heroes is thus born through the "interactive and unequal dynamics of power" (Faier and Rofel, 2014: 364) that pervade their everyday working lives.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how stigmatized working men located at the bottom of Khorramabad's social hierarchy assert worth and enact masculine authority against a national backdrop marked by increased labor precarity and social polarization. Facing criminalization and an endless barrage of public verbal and emotional assaults that make them feel "like failures," Cyrus, Hadi, Mehdi, Amir, and Farhad turn to embodied compliance and publicly admired norms of masculine sacrificial heroism. Extending our understanding of how privilege and disadvantage are co-constituted (Slutskaya et al., 2016: 179), these findings demonstrate how the men's reflexive constructions of gender and identity result from the intersection of their subordinate class position and low occupational status.

Such responses to stigmatization lay bare the limits of the common "counterculture of dignity" (Sennett and Cobb, 1972: 83) analytical frame used to understand the practices of

the poor, and particularly, poor urban men. Rather than necessarily subvert the moral order, men who are among the most marginalized can also display an overwhelming conformity to dominating social practices and values in an effort to validate themselves and challenge their stigmatization. No longer the sole purview of high-status groups, dominant norms of chivalry and virtue further become symbolic resources used by some men in the lowest echelons of society to make claims to privilege in the context of escalating social inequality (Hamilton et al., 2019).

Simultaneously, in mobilizing certain performative accommodations and ideological narratives, culturally specific power relations engender these waste pickers' identities—a social process relatively unexamined by traditional perspectives of dirty work. As this study has demonstrated, signifying their identities as masculine, self-denying heroes is born from the men's acute awareness of their everyday degradation and criminalization as well as their rejection of Iranian society's perceived consumerist obsession with appearances. Thus, even though the men are engaged in highly individualized, informal work, it is the particular social context in which they are embedded—rather than their engagement in what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) describe as a strong workgroup culture—that gives rise to the unique "esteem-enhancing" narratives of masculinity and privilege that they espouse.

In articulating a "morality of personal sacrifice" (Sennett and Cobb, 1972: 121), nun khoshkis create an alternate social order. Attempting to avert public attention away from their poverty and ameliorate the stigma of their jobs, the men emphasize their inner virtue as they castigate others for their immorality. Critiquing the structural conditions that have led to their everyday suffering, the men eschew publicly visible, market-oriented benchmarks of success in favor of an unseen, inner moral aptitude that defines the good Iranian citizen. In a game of heroes and villains, they flip the social hierarchy to come out on top. Such status inversions by disenfranchised groups unsettle ordinary understandings by demonstrating how attempts to recoup self-worth in stigmatized work need not only involve drawing boundaries against lesser or higher others. They can also entail a broader critique of the social order that has led to the empowerment of some at the expense of others—critiques that ultimately contour one's sense of collective identity and national belonging (see also Yu, 2016).

Paradoxically, however, the men's objections "reproduce the market logic of evaluation" (Lamont, 2000: 114), simply replacing one criteria of assessment (wealth) with another (morality). Constructing distinct moral selves enables nun khoshkis to establish new modes of displacement for those whom they perceive to be unworthy of cultural membership, thereby validating the degradation that they are struggling against (see also Wacquant, 1993, 2008). Interestingly, in their daily attempts to embody compliance by keeping to the margins (both figuratively and literally), the men also tacitly accept power relations and class stigma, shifting the burden of responsibility to themselves rather than to higher-standing others who "make fun" of them. As Lamont (2000) suggests, this tension between embracing and dismissing middle-class norms can be attributed to the power that "mainstream definitions of success" hold in the nation (115). While Lamont refers to the American context, dominating ideas in Iran, too, similarly equate privilege

with material wealth, thereby shoring up class "dominants" in the public imagination (Schwalbe et al., 2000).

By shaping the men's reflexive discourses of sacrificial heroism, their denigration further accentuates gender inequality. Emphasizing their strength and endurance not only upholds traditional masculinity norms, but it also goes hand in hand with the men's assertions of patriarchal authority that position them as the sole saviors of professedly weak others. Claiming their own privilege at the expense of women's subordination means that the men reproduce the gendered order in their attempts to come out on top (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

Ultimately, this gendered identity work in Khorramabad cannot be understood apart from the unequal social order that encompasses it. In a context marked by rising inflation, increasing formal unemployment, and escalating income inequality, men engaged in low status work are finding themselves steadily more deprived of the opportunity to shape "powerful, or at least, creditable selves" (Schwalbe et al., 2000 : 426). Denied full cultural membership and relegated to the literal and figurative margins, some invest status in their depressed social rank through voluntary self-sacrifice while simultaneously laying claim to their own distinctiveness vis-à-vis devalued others. Positioning themselves as good citizens "doing a service" to their country and their families, they attempt to assert their positive influence in public urban spaces and the broader social order it encompasses.

Certainly, for the men in this study, believing that one is a person of value, that one is "important to someone" (in the words of Amir) makes life tolerable amid seemingly never-ending hardship. In their avowal that their lives, like those of others, have significance, nun khoshkis are involved in an active process of cultural engineering, extending the bounds of citizenship to not just include, but elevate those who have been cast aside. As social polarization increases in Iran and other countries of the global South, such responses can facilitate subjective well-being by "broadening the criteria by which people can gain cultural membership beyond socioeconomic success" (Lamont, 2018: 427). And yet, in doing so, they can also create micro systems of inequality that inadvertently bolster existing forms of social exclusion, bringing to the fore the ambivalences embedded in people's everyday struggles for recognition.

Acknowledgments

The author is immensely grateful to the men who participated in this study and lent insight into their everyday lives. The author also wishes to thank Cihan Tuğal, Jaleh Jalili, Teresa Gonzales, Shirin Saeidi, Alexander Jabbari, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Ethnography* for their insights and feedback on previous versions of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Department of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma.

ORCID iD

Manata Hashemi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0095-415X

Notes

1. All names and some identifying details have been changed to protect informant confidentiality.
2. All the nun khoshkis that I encountered in Khorramabad were men.
3. This was approximately the equivalent of US$13 in 2015.
4. This was approximately the equivalent of US$0.75 in the summer of 2018.
5. Bana'i as interviewed by Asgarinia (2017).
6. Some argue that a general rise in waste generation as a result of rapid urbanization also contributed to this process (see Esma'il Tarmazdi as interviewed by Asgarinia, 2017).
7. To facilitate their work, nun khoshkis use pickups, motorcycles, or wheelbarrows. Of the five men I interviewed, only one had a motorcycle; the rest used wheelbarrows. While Mehdi described how having a vehicle would simplify his long working days, some other men I have interviewed since (in 2019) told me that after accounting for the cost of gas and repairs, it makes more financial sense to have a wheelbarrow than a motorcycle or pickup truck.
8. Hamilton et al. (2019) also found that garbage workers in England offer "heroic accounts" that include an emphasis on physical prowess, paternalistic caring, and the positive social impact of dirty work. In previous work, I found that other stigmatized service workers (both men and women) in Iran similarly place emphasis on their ability to work hard and provide for others (Hashemi, 2018).
9. Anderson (2003) notes how "who one plays with and what the specific play comes to mean for others," similarly function to as a reminder to others of "who each participant 'thinks he is' and how he conceives of his place" (197).

References

Abell J, Locke A, Condor S, et al. (2006) Trying similarity, doing difference: the role of interviewer self-disclosure in interview talk with young people. *Qualitative Research* 6(2): 221–244.

Adelkhah F (2000) *Being Modern in Iran. Translated by Johnathan Derrick*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Asgarinia F (2017) Hamshahri-ye Ostani. Available at: http://ostani.hamshahrilinks.org/addition/Contents/نمکی-نمکی-ه-ی

Anderson E (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Anderson E (2003) *A Place on the Corner*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ashforth BE and Kreiner GE (1999) "How can you do it?": dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *The Academy of Management Review* 24(3): 413–434.

BIR (Bureau of International Recycling) (2019) The industry. Bureau of International Recycling website. Available at: https://bir.org/industry/

Bourgois P (2003) *Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Busson S and Rivetti P (2014) What's love got to do with it? labour forces and the role of passion in Italian universities. *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* 45(2): 15–37.

Caldeira TPR (1996) Fortified enclaves: the new urban segregation. *Public Culture* 8(2): 303–328.

D'Alisera J (2018) Articulating displacement: Sierra Leonean Muslim dress practice and the aesthetics of negotiation. *Ethnography* 19(3): 396–410.

Dexter LA (2006) *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Dias SM (2016) Waste pickers and cities. *Environment and Urbanization* 28(2): 375–390.

Dick P (2005) Dirty work designations: how police officers account for their use of coercive force. *Human Relations* 58(11): 1363–1390.

Douglas M (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Praeger.

Faier L and Rofel L (2014) Ethnographies of encounter. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43(3): 363–377.

Faulk KA (2012) Stitching curtains, grinding plastic: social and material transformation in Buenos Aires. In: Alexander C and Reno J (eds) *Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformation of Materials, Values and Social Relations*. London: Zed Books.

Goffman E (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Grandy G (2008) Managing spoiled identities: dirty workers' struggles for a favourable sense of self. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 3(3): 176–198.

Hamilton P, Redman T and McMurray R (2019) 'Lower than a snake's belly': discursive constructions of dignity and heroism in low-status garbage work. *Journal of Business Ethics* 156(4): 889–901.

Hashemi M (2015) Waithood and face: morality and mobility among lower-class youth in Iran. *Qualitative Sociology* 38(3): 261–283.

Hashemi M (2018) Tarnished work: dignity and labour in Iran. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47(5): 741–756.

Hashemi M (2019) Embedded enclaves: cultural mimicry and urban social exclusion in Iran. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 3(5): 914–929.

Hashemi M (2020) *Coming of Age in Iran: Poverty and Struggle for Dignity*. New York: New York University Press.

Hodson R (2001) *Dignity at Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hughes E (1958) *Men and Their Work*. London: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Kia M (2015) Moral refinement and manhood in Persian. In: Pernau M and Jordheim H (eds) *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Asia and Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lamont M (2000) *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lamont M (2018) Addressing recognition gaps: destigmatization and the reduction of inequality. *American Sociological Review* 83(3): 419–444.

Machado-Borges T (2015) "Have you ever seen a thief wearing a uniform?!" Struggling for dignity in urban southeastern Brazil. *Ethnography* 16(2): 207–222.

Medina M (2007) *The World's Scavengers: Salvaging for Sustainable Consumption and Production*. New York: AltaMira Press.

Millar KM (2014) The precarious present: wageless labor and disrupted life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1): 32–53.

Millar K (2018) *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Moruzzi N and Sadeghi F (2006) Out of the frying pan, into the fire: young Iranian women today. *Middle East Report* 241: 22–28.

Newman K (1999) *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Vintage Books.

Nguyen MTN (1999) *Waste and Wealth: An Ethnography of Labor, Value, and Morality in a Vietnamese Recycling Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Neill B (2015) Bored stiff: sex and superfluity in a time of crisis. *Public Culture* 27(2): 387–405.

Perry S (1978) *San Francisco Scavengers: Dirty Work and the Pride of Ownership*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Purser G (2009) The dignity of job-seeking men: boundary work among immigrant day laborers. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38(1): 117–139.

Rios V (2011) *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Salehi-Isfahani D (2019) *Iran's Economy 40 Years after the Islamic Revolution*. Washington, DC: Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/14/irans-economy-40-years-after-the-islamic-revolution/

Sayer A (2005) *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schrock D and Schwalbe M (2009) Men, masculinity, and manhood acts. *Annual Review of Sociology* 35: 277–295.

Schwalbe M, Godwin S, Holden D, et al. (2000) Generic processes in the reproduction of inequality: an interactionist analysis. *Social Forces* 79(2): 419–452.

Sennett R and Cobb J (1972) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Slutskaya N, Simpson R, Hughes J, et al. (2016) Masculinity and class in the context of dirty work. *Gender, Work & Organization* 23(2): 165–182.

Snow DA and Anderson L (1987) Identity work among the homeless: the verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology* 92(6): 1336–1371.

Stacey CL (2005) Finding dignity in dirty work: the constraints and rewards of low-wage home care labour. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 27(6): 831–854.

Stuart F and Benezra A (2018) Criminalized masculinities: how policing shapes the construction of gender and sexuality in poor Black communities. *Social Problems* 65(2): 174–190.

Tehran B (2014) Recycling Iranian style. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/mar/28/iran-dirt-gold-mafia-trash-recycling

Thiel D (2007) Class in construction: London building workers, dirty work and physical cultures. *The British Journal of Sociology* 58(2): 227–251.

Thwaites R (2017) Re(examining) the feminist interview: rapport, gender 'matching,' and emotional labour. *Frontiers in Sociology* (18): 1–9.

Tracy S and Scott S (2006) Sexuality, masculinity, and taint management among firefighters and correctional officers: getting down and dirty with "America's heroes" and the "scum of law enforcement". *Management Communication Quarterly* 20(1): 6–38.

Wacquant LJD (1993) Urban outcasts; stigma and division in the Black American ghetto and the French urban periphery. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17(3): 366–383.

Wacquant L (2008) *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Study in Urban Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.

Weiss R (1994) *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press.

WIEGO (2020) Waste pickers. Available at: https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/waste-pickers

Wilkins A (2012) "Not out to start a revolution": race, gender, and emotional restraint among Black university men. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41(1): 34–65.

Yu K-H (2016) Immigrant workers' responses to stigmatized work: constructing dignity through moral reasoning. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 58(5): 571–588.

Author biography

Manata Hashemi is the Farzaneh Family Associate Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Her work focuses on the lived experiences of poverty, inequality, and stigma among Middle Eastern groups. She is the author of *Coming of Age in Iran: Poverty and the Struggle for Dignity* (NYU Press, 2020).