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## Intersectionality in Intractable Dirty Work: How Mumbai Ragpickers Make Meaning of Their Work and Lives

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**Intersectionality in Intractable Dirty Work:  
How Mumbai Ragpickers Make Meaning of their Work and Lives\***

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## ABSTRACT

Recent dirty work research has begun to explore intersectionality, attending to how meaning is made at the intersection of multiple sources of taint. This research has shown that individuals often construct both positive and negative meanings, which can be challenging to manage because the meanings people construct require a certain coherence to provide a foundation for action. This challenge is intensified when dirty work is intractable—when it is difficult, if not impossible, for a person to avoid doing this work. Our study of meaning making in the face of intractable dirty work examines ragpickers in Mumbai, India, who handle and dispose of garbage, and are further tainted by belonging to the lowest caste in Indian society, and living in slums. These ragpickers constructed both an overarching sense of helplessness rooted in the intractability of their situation, and a set of positive meanings—survival, destiny, and hope—rooted in specific facets of their lives and enacted through distinct temporal frames. By holding and combining these disparate meanings, they achieved “functional ambivalence”—the simultaneous experience of opposing orientations toward their work and lives that facilitated both acceptance and a sense of agency, and enabled them to carry on in their lives.

## INTRODUCTION

Research on dirty work has highlighted the fundamental challenge of constructing positive meaning out of work that is stigmatized because others perceive it as physically, socially, or morally degrading (Ashforth et al., 2007; Hughes, 1962; Hughes et al., 2017). For many people engaged in dirty work, however, this challenge extends well beyond making meaning of their work as their lives are characterized by multiple intersecting sources of taint, such as their class, race, and/or gender. Drawing on intersectionality scholarship (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991), recent dirty work research has begun to reflect this reality. This new stream of research has explored various sources of stigma experienced as intersecting bundles that shape people's meaning making and the consequences of those meaning-making efforts (Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Slutskaya et al., 2016; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013).

While traditional dirty work scholarship has focused on the benefits of constructing positive meanings, research bringing an intersectional lens to dirty work has shown that individuals facing multiple intersecting sources of taint often produce both positive and negative meanings (Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013), and that these negative meanings can impose immediate and long-term costs. Research exploring the intersection of dirty work with class and gender, for instance, has found that refuse collectors and street cleaners use masculinity to enhance their self-esteem and resist class subordination, but in appealing to traditional notions of working-class masculinity, they also reinforce class as a marker of a devalued identity (Collinson, 1992; Skeggs, 1997; Slutskaya et al., 2016). Living with and managing such different, potentially conflicting meanings is a key issue for dirty work research because the meanings people construct provide “a critical resource that allow(s) individuals to

accomplish work and negotiate their day-to-day lives” (Maitlis, 2005: 23), but these meanings require a certain coherence to provide a foundation for action (McAdams, 2006; Weick, 1993).

The challenge of managing the positive and negative meanings that arise from intersectionality in dirty work is intensified when this work is intractable—when it is difficult, if not impossible, for a person to avoid engaging in it. While some people enter dirty work by choice, for many others, it is an inevitable and enduring facet of their lives. Extreme cases of intractable dirty work are often those in which the path into this work stems from long-term membership in a community: such paths are common in contexts such as mining towns (e.g., Lucas, 2011), immigrant communities with a tradition of domestic service (e.g., Cole & Booth, 2007), and criminal communities (Cappellaro, Compagni & Vaara, 2020), where families and the broader community regularly induct children into the dirty work of their parents. In contexts like these, managing the meanings of intersectionality in dirty work represents a persistent challenge in that workers feel helpless to change the structural determinants of the intractability. The above leads us to ask: How do people engaged in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint make and manage meanings of their work and lives?

The people we studied and who inspired this paper are ragpickers and garbage removers in Mumbai, India. This group does the dirty work of handling and disposing of garbage and is further tainted by belonging to the lowest caste in Indian society (Bayly, 2001; Rao, 2009) and living in slums (Gaskell, 1990; Lund, 1996; Murray, 1990). This intersection of multiple sources of taint makes the case of Mumbai ragpickers an extreme one (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2002), from which we can learn about making meaning in conditions of intractable dirty work. Our study’s data come from interviews and observations: we interviewed 73 individuals, including 46

ragpickers and garbage removers living and working in slums.<sup>1</sup> We also observed ragpickers at work and in their homes.

By talking with and observing ragpickers in Mumbai, we gained considerable insight into how people make meaning of their work and lives in the context of intractable, intersecting sources of taint. In brief, we found that the Mumbai ragpickers engaged in meaning making about three central intersecting sources of taint: their work, their caste, and the place they live. This meaning making involved both the construction of an overarching sense of helplessness rooted in the intractability of their situation and a set of positive meanings—survival, destiny, and hope—rooted in specific facets of their lives and enacted through distinct temporal frames. The ragpickers were unable to reframe their exceptionally oppressive situation as only positive. Instead, they held negative and positive meanings simultaneously, combining them in a way that enabled them to carry on.

Our study's main contribution is rooted in the embodied wisdom of a group of individuals whose voices are rarely heard in our scholarly community. These workers' experiences show the constructive potential of combining negative and positive meanings to ground and empower individuals engaged in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint. The ragpickers combined a sense of helplessness with survival, destiny, and hope to achieve “functional ambivalence”—the simultaneous experience of opposing orientations toward their work and lives that facilitated their ability to carry on. An important feature of functional ambivalence is that it enables both the acceptance of external forces and a sense of agency, which sustain each other. Identifying functional ambivalence as an outcome of

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<sup>1</sup> We also interviewed 15 buyers of trash as customers of the ragpickers to understand how they perceived the dirty workers as well as 12 people working for non-governmental organizations to understand the challenges ragpickers and trash removers face.

meaning making contributes to traditional and intersectional research on dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2020; Slutskaya et al., 2016).

While previous research in these traditions has emphasized the tension between people's positive and negative meanings of their work and lives, we show that the relationship between negative and positive meanings can be constructive and empowering.

Two further contributions stem from our primary contribution. First, we extend research on intersectionality in dirty work (Duffy, 2007; Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016; Johnston & Hodge, 2014; Slutskaya, et al., 2016; Tracy & Scott, 2006) by highlighting the potential for people engaged in intractable dirty work to experience intersecting sources of taint both as tightly coupled and as separate dimensions, thus creating diverse opportunities for meaning making. Focusing on and responding to separate sources and distinct combinations of taint enables people to avoid becoming overwhelmed by an unyielding amalgam of taint. Second, we identify the process, which we describe as multi-focal meaning making, through which people engaged in intractable dirty work construct a functionally ambivalent constellation of meanings. By showing how adopting a global focus may result in the construction of negative meanings and how adopting a specific focus accompanied by a specific temporal frame may result in the construction of certain positive meanings, our study unpacks the process through which individuals can make a constellation of positive and negative meanings that co-exist and support each other.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In this section, we examine existing research that informs our study of how people engaged in intractable dirty work make and manage the meanings of intersecting sources of taint. We begin by reviewing research on dirty work, including more recent research drawing on

intersectionality as a key concept. We then consider the limitations of this research in the face of intractable dirty work.

### **Dirty Work**

Dirt, in its most general sense, refers to “matter out of place” and “disorder”; objects and tasks are thus not inherently dirty but are perceived as dirty in the context of a system within which they disrupt a sense of order and cleanliness (Douglas, 1966). Therefore, dirty work refers to jobs, tasks, and occupations perceived to be degrading—physically, socially, or morally (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes et al., 2017). Work that is physically tainted involves garbage, effluence, or highly noxious conditions; work that is socially tainted involves interactions with stigmatized others or is servile; and work that is morally tainted involves tasks that are sinful, deceptive, or intrusive or otherwise defy norms of civility (Ashforth et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2017; Kreiner et al., 2006).

People engaged in dirty work are stigmatized (Hughes, 1962) and are thus motivated to manage their taint through strong occupational or workgroup cultures (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Simpson et al., 2012) and to recast the meaning of their dirty work as one that is more positive. For instance, butchers reframe their work as “cutting down” carcasses and being skilled in working with knives (Simpson et al., 2014), aged-care workers recalibrate their work as the capacity to make a difference in people’s lives when they enter the latter stages of life (Clarke & Ravenswood, 2019), and doctors working with HIV/AIDS patients refocus their attention on the intellectual challenge of their work (Bachleda & El Menzhi, 2018). Dirty workers also use social weighting to enhance their self-esteem, including selectively attending to outsiders, selecting others for social comparison, and using social resources as a buffer (Ashforth et al., 2007; Hamilton, Redman & McMurray, 2019; Stacey, 2011). For example, garbage collectors contrast



themselves with the unemployed, workers stuck on machines all day, and those working in stinking factories (Hamilton et al., 2019). A key finding in dirty work research has been the ability of workers faced with occupational taint to respond by constructing positive meanings that reflect social accomplishment (Dick & Cassell, 2004; Karreman & Alvesson, 2001), dignity (Hamilton et al., 2019; Lucas, 2011), and inner determination (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004) in a self-serving way to enhance their self-esteem (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007).

### **Intersectionality in Dirty Work**

An important turn in the study of dirty work has been the integration of intersectionality, which highlights how sources of stigma and oppression, such as race and gender, shape social life as intersecting bundles rather than discrete attributes (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). Initially focused on the intersection of gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), research on intersectionality has expanded to explore a wide range of intersecting sources of oppression, including sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, and age (Collins, 2019). Recent research on the intersectionality of dirty work has explored intersecting sources of taint that include gender (Johnston & Hodge, 2014; Tracy & Scott, 2006), race (Duffy, 2007), class (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016; Slutskaya, et al., 2016), nationality (Cruz, 2015), and sexual orientation (Tilcsik, Anteby & Knight, 2015). Together, this literature highlights how dirty work is experienced and managed at the intersection of multiple sources of taint.

Research exploring the intersection of gender and occupational stigma has shown that doing dirty work affects men and women differently and prompts different responses (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016; Johnston & Hodge, 2014). Soni-Sinha and Yates (2013: 737), for instance, show how cleaners' experiences of work were shaped both by the taint associated with their work and the "gender division of labour": both men and women cleaners suffered from the construction of

their work as “dirty,” but the cleaners’ understanding of their work was also explicitly gendered, with a distinction made between “light” women’s work and “heavy” men’s work. In turn, this distinction led to women being paid between \$1 and \$2 less per hour than men.

Social class is also important in understanding dirty work because the people who do such work often come from lower social classes (Dick, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). Indeed, some people are understood as born to engage in dirty work (Searle-Chatterjee, 1979). Moreover, dirty work often reproduces class affiliations. For example, the intersection of class and dirty work generates a difficult paradox—what van Vuuren et al. (2012) call the “ungrateful tradeoff”: individuals’ social class requires them to perform dirty work, but doing so further stigmatizes them (Slutskaya et al., 2016).

Another significant source of taint for intersectionality in dirty work is place. Place is related to dirty work because the locations where work is done and where workers live are often linked to sources of taint such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Simpson, Hughes & Slutskaya, 2016). For instance, Tyler’s (2011) study of sex shop workers in Soho, London, shows how place was both a source of taint and the basis for these workers’ feelings of attraction and repulsion toward what they do. These mixed emotions were rooted in the sex shop workers’ constructions of their place of work and the work itself as inspiring and exciting as well as degrading and, at times, shameful.

Across the research on intersectionality in dirty work, an important finding has been the mix of positive and negative meanings people create as they deal with intersecting sources of taint. This research has demonstrated individuals’ ability to cope with their situations. It has also shown that such coping can come at a high cost—reproducing sources of inequality and undermining workers’ ability to escape these conditions. Refuse collectors and street cleaners

who appealed to notions of working-class masculinity to enhance their self-esteem, for example, reinforced class as a marker of devaluation (Slutskaya et al., 2016; see also Collinson, 1992; Skeggs, 1997). Similarly, janitors' union participation helped them build positive identities despite their supervisors' constructions of them as dirty and lowly, but those positive identities reproduced gender inequalities because the union did not attend to gender-based inequities in pay (Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013). While these studies have focused on the negative effects of coping that may be outside of workers' awareness, Mavin and Grandy (2013) show how those engaged in dirty work can be cognizant of the negative meanings they inadvertently create: the exotic dancers studied who "did gender well" constructed their work as simultaneously empowering and oppressive—a source of economic freedom but one that made it difficult to move to alternative employment.

### **Intractable Dirty Work**

Both traditional research on dirty work and research on intersectionality in dirty work have tended to focus on situations in which engaging in such work involves at least a degree of "choice," in some cases electing to work, for example, as an embalmer (Kreiner et al., 2006) or homecare worker (Stacey, 2005) or taking on a temporary dirty work job as a means to an end (Mavin & Grandy 2013). Largely missing, however, has been intractable dirty work, which, in its most entrenched form, arises from community and family membership such that people take on dirty work not as an individual choice but as part of a structurally determined life course and a cultural legacy (e.g., Cappellaro et al., 2020; Lucas, 2011; Thiel, 2007). In such a context, the occupations, social classes, and living conditions of dirty work reproduce the occupations, classes, and living conditions for specific families and communities (Anderson & Anderson,

2000; Vogt, 2020). Such conditions can make it extraordinarily difficult for these dirty workers to escape their tainted work and lives.

Intractable dirty work also creates extra challenges for meaning making. Research on intersectionality in dirty work has shown how both positive and negative meanings emerge from dirty workers' coping and that dirty workers may also attend to these complex combinations of meaning. Holding conflicting meanings of one's work and life can be challenging, however: potentially impeding the construction of a coherent sense of self (McAdams, 2006) and consequently interfering with action (Weick, 1993). Achieving coherence may be especially important when the sources of those conflicting meanings are ongoing and enduring, as is the case for people engaged in intractable dirty work. While holding conflicting meanings may be tenable when a person believes the focal situation is temporary (Park, 2010, 2016), intractable dirty work does not offer that relief and may thus demand novel coping mechanisms (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001). Although existing scholarship tells us little about how people engaged in intractable dirty work might hold both positive and negative meanings, traditional research on dirty work and research on intersectionality in dirty work have emphasized people's capacity to respond creatively to stigma. Therefore, we expect workers' responses to their intractable dirty work to include managing the complex sets of meanings that arise as they cope with their situation. Thus, our focus is on how people engaged in intractable dirty work make and manage the complex sets of positive and negative meanings that arise as they cope with the intersecting sources of taint in their work and lives.

## METHODS

### Research Context and Sample

To theorize on how people cope with intractable dirty work, we draw on an extreme case (Yin, 2002): ragpickers working and living in the slums of Mumbai, India. We focused on slums in and around Mumbai because one of the authors grew up nearby and thus has considerable knowledge of the local context, has connections in the area, and speaks the local language (Hindi), all critical for a nuanced understanding of our participants' experiences. India has the second-largest population in the world and generates 62 million tons of waste annually. Waste generation is a national problem, with 90% of India lacking an adequate waste-disposal system and municipal bodies only managing to collect 75%–80% of the waste generated. The waste-management system's inefficiency leaves room for self-employed ragpickers to collect, sort, and segregate the waste before trading it for money. While the exact number of ragpickers is difficult to determine, estimates suggest between 1.5 million and 4 million ragpickers are working in India (Bose & Bhattacharya, 2017). Exploring the case of ragpickers in Mumbai allowed us to examine the experiences of those who work and live at the intersection of three extreme but related sources of stigma: doing stigmatized, physically demanding dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999); living in slums (Gaskell, 1990; Lund, 1996; Murray, 1990); and being born to the lowest caste (Akerlof, 1976; Jaspal, 2011; Pinel, 1999).

Ragpicking involves picking waste from open drains and bins, carrying sacks and collecting waste from households, riding tricycles to collect more waste by traveling long distances, and dealing in scrap. Working as a ragpicker pays so poorly that ragpickers have few choices but to live in urban slums—environments characterized by “insecure residential status, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding, and inadequate access to safe water, sanitation,

and other infrastructure” (UN-Habitat, 2015: 1). The living conditions in slums are objectively adverse. Occupants are likely to have “chronic non-communicable and communicable diseases like hypertension, diabetes, intentional and unintentional injuries, tuberculosis, rheumatic heart disease, and HIV infection” (Riley et al., 2007: 3). Moreover, many ragpickers belong to the lowest caste and thus face occupational, social, and economic segregation (Akerlof, 1976).

### **Data Collection**

The regular harassment and exploitation that ragpickers experience, including from police and municipal workers whom they need to bribe, leaves ragpickers distrustful of outsiders. To build trusting relationships with the ragpickers so they would be comfortable sharing their experiences with us, we worked closely with six non-governmental organizations (NGOs): (1) Children of God Foundation, (2) Aakar Mumbai, (3) Stree Mukti Sanghatana, (4) Support, (5) Sampurna Earth, and (6) Force. These NGOs have considerable experience working with ragpickers, providing them general education, training on how to collect garbage safely, and medical support. The support of these trusted NGOs provided us with important contextual background information as well as helped us identify appropriate participants and how to collect rich information from them. Following the suggestions from these NGO representatives, the Indian co-author worked with local professionals to conduct the ragpicker interviews. We typically also had an NGO representative present during these interviews.<sup>2</sup>

Our primary source of data was semi-structured interviews with ragpickers (n = 46; one interview for each ragpicker). We focused on interviews for three main reasons. First, we were

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<sup>2</sup> Although the presence of NGO workers could have induced some form of social desirability in the workers’ responses, this did not seem to be the case because (1) the NGO workers were familiar with the nature of the dirty work, tainted class, and tainted neighborhood; (2) the meanings the workers attached to their dirty work and tainted lives appeared relatively entrenched; and (3) there was little, if any, difference between interviews with NGO workers present or absent and those with spouses present or absent.

interested in how ragpickers construct meaning about their work (consistent with many studies on dirty work, including Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Second, the population of ragpickers is mostly semi-literate or illiterate, so there is little self-generated documentation describing their experiences of work. Finally, as discussed above, because people living and working in slums tend to distrust outsiders, our informants told us that interviews, rather than extended observations, were the only feasible way to collect data and, even then, only after extensive trust-building efforts. Specifically, we interviewed 15 workers who collected scrap from slums, 15 workers who collected scrap from residents outside slums, and 16 workers who collected garbage for the municipal authority (the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation [BMC]). Although many ragpickers are children, we did not interview children because they were particularly wary of outsiders, it is questionable whether their consent to take part in our study would represent “informed consent,” and it was difficult to find their parents to obtain their consent.

For additional information about how outsiders perceive the dirty work and the workers who perform it, we also interviewed 15 individuals working in the industry who were customers of ragpickers. These customers included ten sorters who bought garbage from ragpickers and sold it to other businesses and five middle managers who oversaw the re-manufacturing of recycled materials. Further, we interviewed 12 NGO workers involved in improving the welfare of individuals living in slums to offer more contextual information.

Interviews with the ragpickers occurred in the slums, often at their worksites or homes, while interviews with the industry customers occurred in their offices. Three interviews with the NGO workers were over the phone; all others were in person at their offices. Interviews were carried out in the participants’ local language and then translated into English, except four

interviews with NGO representatives conducted in English. We recorded and transcribed all interviews, which were on average 25 minutes long. We conducted the interviews in December 2016 through to February 2017.

Interviews with the ragpickers followed a similar structure, reflecting two main aims: understanding the conditions under which they worked and lived and understanding how they made sense of those conditions. Thus, we asked about the nature of the work, including what garbage they collected, where they collected it, how it was processed, and who they passed it on to; their background and motives for choosing this line of work, including their family history and size, what they did previously, and whether they considered alternative forms of work; any social stigmas or other problems, including whether the work affected how they thought about themselves, what others thought of them, and whether they had faced any physical health problems arising from their work; financial aspects of their business, including how much they earned; their aspirations, including how long they planned to continue as ragpickers and what the future looked like for them; and their living arrangements, including where they lived and for how long, the condition of their dwelling, and any other issues tied to where they lived. Table 1 describes the demographics and other descriptive details of the ragpickers involved in this study.

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Insert Table 1

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We supplemented and triangulated these data with field notes based on observations. These observations occurred before, during, and after each interview, at the ragpickers' work or their homes. Whenever possible, we formulated some of the questions to the ragpickers based on their spouses, children, and other family members we observed when conducting the interviews. This approach provided the opportunity to explore some issues more deeply by asking family-oriented questions, such as which school the children attended and whether the children helped



their parents in the work. It also often allowed us to confirm the ragpickers' responses to interview questions, such as those concerning their health, based on their spouses' reactions (often non-verbal) to the interviewees' responses. Within 24 hours of each observation, we recorded field notes describing the interviewer's impressions of the person, situation, interpersonal interaction, and other contextual factors. These field notes of ragpicker observations before, during, and after the interviews amounted to 50 pages of single-spaced text.

Our final data source was a set of secondary sources, including considerable web-based material available from Indian media coverage describing ragpickers' lives and challenges. This web-based material included articles from well-known newspapers, such as the *Hindustan Times* and *The Hindu*, as well as blogs and activist reports about ragpickers. We limited our search to the last 10 years (2009–2019) to capture current conditions. We reviewed online documentary videos, such as *Waste* by Parasher Baruah (2012) and others, to understand ragpickers' lives and struggles, which complemented and extended our interview and observational data. Also, we triangulated our findings with printed materials from NGOs and government documentation.

### **Data Analysis**

To develop a rich picture of how the ragpickers' made meaning of their dirty work, we used an inductive social constructivist approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) focused on surfacing the ragpickers' experiences of multiple sources of taint, their responses to those experiences, and the meanings they constructed of their work and lives. A challenge in all research on intersectionality is showing how multiple sources of taint intersect without either reducing the sources to interacting "variables" or presenting intersectionality as simply a complicated entanglement (Nash, 2008). Our approach allowed us to explore the significance of different sources of taint and to show how they intersect and with what effect.

Moving back and forth between the data and our emerging theoretical arguments (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013; Locke, 2001; Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006), we analyzed the data. We started by open coding the statements made by the ragpickers we interviewed, as Locke (2001) suggests, to gain an understanding of how they made meaning of their lives (see also Pratt et al., 2006), and from these statements, we formed first-order codes that captured what seemed to be most salient in their understanding of their work and situation. After initially coding all the statements, we went back through the data to ensure that all coding assignments were appropriate. After completing the first round of coding, we changed some initial assignments because we discovered that some statements coded early in the process were a better match with first-order codes introduced later. For example, we started with a general first-order code of “savings,” but as we coded further, we found that we needed to capture the implications of the workers’ minimal savings. Therefore, we created new first-order codes of “send savings to village (where family lives),” “lack of money to start a business,” and “need to be paid weekly.” We largely used the ragpickers’ language to label the first-order codes, but we sometimes made changes to these labels to be more inclusive of newly coded statements. These codes were predominantly explanations of why the ragpickers did the work and descriptions of what the work provided them, their families, and others.

Next, we integrated the first-order codes into higher-order categories. As we began building categories from the first-order codes, the overarching picture became more abstract (see Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, when coding expressions about how individuals understood their work as supporting their immediate and extended families, we grouped the first-order codes of “can manage household expenses,” “family has a shelter as a result of this work,” and “send savings to village (where family lives)” into the second-order

code “sustenance for family.” We also grouped the first order-codes directly concerned with immediate financial concerns—“paid daily to manage daily expenses,” “always money to be earned,” and “can secure loans for rag sorters for daily shortfalls”—into the second-order theme of “cash flow.” Further, we grouped first-order codes relating to one set of reasons the ragpickers did this work—“inherited or given the position from father,” “business handed down to child,” and “other members from similar castes do the same work”—into the second-order theme of “inherited position.” These second-order codes represent categories of themes.

We then further combined themes that fit together into aggregate dimensions to form a coherent picture. This coherent picture contained the four main meanings—survival, destiny, hope, and helplessness—that emerged from the ragpickers’ efforts to make meaning of their dirty work. To determine how the themes fit together, we iterated between brainstorming ideas, going back to the data and first-order codes, and sometimes delving into the literature. In this process, we noted how many of the themes were benefits derived from the ragpickers’ work and situation and how these themes linked in the ragpickers’ statements to their own and their families’ survival and to hopes for their children’s futures. Themes concerned with why the ragpickers did the work were often rooted in the notion of destiny. A further set of themes had a more negative valence, capturing the many ways the ragpickers felt helpless. As we worked with these aggregate themes, we noticed that the ragpickers used different temporal horizons (present, past, or future) when talking about specific positively valenced themes, but that their descriptions of their helplessness had a more global and enduring quality. We memoed this observation about the focus (specific or global) and temporal frame (present, past, or future) that were inherent in ragpickers’ meaning making and coded the statements for focus and temporal frame.

The final stage of analysis involved abstracting up from our findings to identify theoretical dimensions that fit the data well and reflected our emerging theoretical understanding (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gioia et al., 2013). In this process, we sought to explain how the ragpickers managed the combination of positive and negative meanings and theorized the concept of “functional ambivalence” as supporting them in this process. In coding and inductively constructing the model, we used an insider/outsider approach (Louis & Bartunek, 1992). We had one insider who was a native from India and another insider responsible for coding. During the initial stages of coding, the insider would ask the cultural insider for information about the meaning of specific terms. After coding, the data insider created a rudimentary model, discussed it with the cultural insider, and changed the model. These insiders then presented the coding, preliminary tables, and preliminary models to the outsiders on the research team—an expert in meaning-making, an expert on entrepreneurs, and an expert on organization theory. These outsiders questioned the insiders about their findings, offered alternative explanations, and thus requested the data insider to back into data and recode. Therefore, the insiders of culture and data checked each other, and the insiders and outsiders checked each other.

## **FINDINGS**

Our analysis led to four broad sets of findings. First, we found that the ragpickers experienced multiple intersecting sources of taint. Second, we found that they constructed an overarching negative meaning of their work and lives as a situation they were helpless to change. Third, by focusing on certain facets of their situation and adopting specific temporal frames, the ragpickers made three positive meanings: that their work enabled their survival, that it was their destiny, and that it allowed hope for a better future for their children. Fourth, we found that the

ragpickers held these negative and positive meanings simultaneously, interwoven in their descriptions of their work and lives.

### **The Intersectional Taint of Ragpickers**

The ragpickers described their lives as embedded in multiple interdependent sources of taint (see Table 2). Because of our focal interest in dirty work, we begin with the ragpickers' characterizations of their work as dirty in terms of being onerous, dangerous, and physically repugnant. We then show how the caste in which they were born and the slums in which they lived intersected with their work to create an intractable situation.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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**Work as dirty.** Every ragpicker described the nature of his or her work tasks as dirty in terms of the ongoing onerous conditions of the work (e.g., unpleasantness), the potential negative physical consequences of the work (e.g., danger), and the repugnance of the work to others (e.g., stigma). For example, Amitodana described the strong foul smell he often encountered when performing his work: "There is high-density dry garbage, wet garbage, and totally dry garbage. The smell comes from totally dry garbage. We are instructed to put on a mask. Sometimes our hand gets cut in the wet garbage; then we put some medicines [on it]." The job's low financial rewards meant that most ragpickers worked long hours, which exacerbated the onerous working conditions. Indeed, all the workers described how they worked between 14 and 16 hours per day. Many of the workers described having to travel long distances to collect scrap (e.g., Jalal, Chand, Esh Kunti, Field notes), which was necessitated by an increase in the number of ragpickers in urban areas. Because the workers lacked safety equipment, they were exposed to the possibility of serious injuries. Jalal, for example, "showed us an old handkerchief that he uses for covering

his mouth and nose while working in the dirty areas. He felt safe holding this cloth and thought that it protected his health. It was also the only protection he could afford” (Jalal, Field notes).

There were also social costs associated with engaging in dirty work. Amish reflected, “No one actually praises us. Our image is always down.” Similarly, Srijan described people’s reactions to him when he was removing their garbage:

While taking that material, if the walls are scratched, they swear at us. We feel bad. Now we are also humans like them. Now I am helping them. For some small thing, they swear at us ... I feel bad that God has done this. But I cannot do anything about it.

Similarly, one NGO worker with extensive experience working with ragpickers told us,

It is common, after working in these inhuman conditions for several years, that they become immune to the unhealthy stink and fumes. But this takes a toll on their bodies and mind; you can feel that they are not able to operate in society or take on other jobs.

Their work was thus dirty both physically and socially. Indeed, these workers were “regularly exposed to cuts, infection, respiratory diseases and tuberculosis apart from poverty, humiliation, harassment, and sexual abuse on the streets” (India Spend, 2017).

**Social class as tainted.** An intersecting source of taint for the ragpickers was their caste position. The ragpickers used various terms to describe their position in society, but a commonly used term was *Dalit*, or “untouchable.” While *Dalit* refers to something that is “ground down” or “broken to pieces” in the local language (Rao, 2009), it is also used to refer to the lowest caste in Indian society. Although being from the untouchable caste is a generalized source of taint for all members, it intersected with occupational taint for the ragpickers: the dirtiness of ragpicking was amplified and shaped by the ragpickers’ membership in the lowest caste. This intersection began with who was likely to work as a ragpicker: as an NGO employee described the situation, “Most people who work in this profession come from villages and belong to a scheduled caste or other backward caste. They are more willing to take on this dirty work” (Worker, Children of God

NGO). Caste and work were thus not independent sources of taint but were entangled in the ragpickers' family histories.

The ragpickers' descriptions of the intersectional taint associated with their caste and work were echoed by others, including an NGO employee, who told us that "politicians and other leaders talk a lot about growth and progress in India, but the reality is that ragpickers from the lower caste are still mistreated and seen as untouchables. The possibility for their acceptance in society is very limited." A newspaper article echoed this sentiment, in which a public health physician argued that in "India this kind of work is quite different from that of other countries. There is no dignity of labour and certain castes and communities are deliberately kept to do this kind of work. I would call it a form of caste-based slavery" (The News Minute, 2017).

The way caste membership shaped the experience of ragpicking as dirty work was rooted in the division between the castes of those who worked as ragpickers and those who produced the garbage. For the ragpickers, going through the garbage of people from higher castes reinforced and amplified their occupational stigma daily: embedded in the day-to-day practices of ragpicking were physical, tangible reminders of who they were in relation to those whose garbage they were dealing with. Patanjali reflected on how those from a higher caste treated him:

When we work, the citizens nearby us frown upon our job. They don't realize that we do this for their benefit ... Now as there is Swachta Abhiyaan [a national campaign to clean India], we can see some citizens cleaning the area. If this work is done by citizens volunteering, they are appreciated. But the same work done by us is not looked upon favorably. So, it feels bad that we don't get any appreciation for our noble work.

Thus, the intersectionality in their dirty work was rooted in the ragpickers' day-to-day experiences of caste and occupation. Although the ragpickers were from the "untouchable social class," they had to touch the higher castes' garbage every day.

**Place as dirty.** The third intersecting source of taint that came up in the interviews was the place in which the ragpickers lived. All the ragpickers who participated in our study lived in and around the slums of Mumbai. They described their homes in the following ways: “There is a foul smell in the gutter there. There are mosquitos” (Jalal); “[My dwelling is] in a slum. It’s on a footpath” (Jagad); “[The area surrounding my dwelling] is very unclean. We don’t have any other options. We are forced to stay there” (Srijan). When we asked Rati about her home, she simply responded, “It is in a slum,” as if this fully answered the question with no more information necessary. While most of the ragpickers described their homes as clean, they were small and over-crowded. As recorded in our field notes,

After the interview [with Kunti], we were allowed to see the hut [she lived in]. It was a very small room with a cooking place in one corner; a wooden rack; some posters; a statue of gods; and a *charpai* (Hindi word for a traditional woven bed), which was used as a place to sit and sleep. This family had around five members with three kids. It was difficult to imagine how everyone would cram into this small room at night.

The ragpickers lived in small dwellings located in the dirtiest, smelliest, most vulnerable parts of Mumbai.

The places where the ragpickers lived intersected with their occupation and caste in tangible ways. Living in a slum meant that anyone from outside the slum or not from the lowest caste avoided the ragpickers’ homes and their social class, just as they avoided doing the ragpickers’ work. The ragpickers were, therefore, isolated by their occupation, caste, and neighborhood. They rarely saw people from higher castes working as they did or living where they did—an ongoing reminder to the ragpickers that they did not belong in the rest of society. Santosh told us that he worked mainly in the slums and only ventured outside of them when invited to do so; even then, it was only to do a job and then return:

My work is to roam the slums with a gunny bag and collect boxes, bottles, plastic, steel and give it to the scrap dealer ... Yes, [I collect] 90% [of the garbage] from the slums.



Some people in the buildings [outside the slums] also call us [when] there is garbage in their house ... to come and collect it. So, I go over there also ...if they call us.

The ragpickers' living in slums also intersected with their occupation in material ways that affected their health. Unlike the garbage collectors in developed Western economies who have been studied in dirty work research (Hughes et al., 2017; Slutskaya et al., 2016), the ragpickers did not return from their work to clean, safe homes with proper sanitation and security. The following discussion with Jagad reflects the living conditions of many ragpickers:

*Interviewer: What is the condition of your house?*

I don't have any house.

*So where do you stay?*

On the footpath.

*Do you live on a road?*

Yes ... During the nights when the shops shut down, we sleep below the shades.

*Do you face problems by not having a secure home to stay in?*

Yes, absolutely.

*How long have you been living like this?*

Almost 20 years.

In summary, the work and lives of the ragpickers were substantially shaped by taint related to their work, caste, and place and by experiencing life at the intersection of these three sources of taint.

### **Making Meaning with a Global Focus: The Construction of Helplessness**

Our second set of findings concerns how the ragpickers responded to the intersectional taint of their intractable situation. We found that the ragpickers adopted a global focus that led them to construct their situation as one in which they were *helpless*—both to avoid dirty work and to escape it (see Table 3). The ragpickers often said they were helpless to resist the forces that led them to their occupation, pointing especially to their backgrounds and lack of financial resources. Rati, for example, responded to our question of why he does this work by saying, “We do not have an option. We have to work for our lives. To stay alive, we have to. If we call it dirty, then what will we eat?”

Highlighting the seeming inevitability of entering this occupation for the ragpickers, a ragpicker customer described how “many [ragpickers] start at a young age with this line of work and continue to do it for a long time unless they get sick or have other health problems.” Those who previously did other kinds of work often felt forced into ragpicking when their circumstances changed. For example, Esh explained that he turned to ragpicking from tailoring when his eyesight worsened. While ragpicking was not passed down to Esh from the previous generation, he did inherit poverty and membership in the lowest class in society, and therefore a limited capacity to absorb adverse events. He believed he had no choice but to start and continue the dirty work of ragpicking.

The ragpickers also explained how they felt helpless to move from ragpicking to alternative work. Ragpicking, they argued, created a vicious cycle in which all other work options became infeasible. They explained that the nature of ragpicking was such that it did not generate experience or skills that would be useful for other occupations. Indeed, the experience the ragpickers had gained in this business was not transferable to other businesses, which created a sort of experience trap, as Mithil explained:

What work will I do now? I am growing old now. I cannot learn anything new now. I know about this business, so I can work and have my daily needs met ... For any new business, I will need to invest money, which I cannot get, so I cannot do anything new and will continue with this.

Moreover, because they felt they had no control over the price of the materials they collected, they made only enough money for their families to survive and for their children to go to school, leaving them with nothing to invest in their own business, skills, or education. The feeling of helplessness was made explicit by Esh, who reflected on his limited options: “For thinking further [about other options], a man should have some money with him. If not, then how

can I do another business ... So, there is no money, so what could I think of? So, I push my cart only.”

The ragpickers’ construction of their situation as one in which they were helpless was tied to an inability to take action that could have prevented them from starting in this work or continuing in it. Their backgrounds, lack of education and other skills, and lack of financial resources led them to see themselves as having no other options. Once in this work, it was difficult to escape or even shift the terms on which it happened. They could not, for example, influence the price of what they sold through bargaining or haggling. As one ragpicker (Santosh) explained, “No, I cannot negotiate. When the rate is 10 Rs. Then I cannot negotiate for 11 Rs.” Saving money was very difficult, making it nearly impossible to obtain an education or develop new skills through other work experiences. The ragpickers thus saw themselves as helpless to take action other than doing this work.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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### **Making Meaning with Specific Foci and Temporal Frames: The Construction of Positive Meanings**

Our third set of findings shows that although the ragpickers constructed their global situation as one in which they were in an enduring state of helplessness, they also constructed positive meanings by focusing on specific facets of their work and lives that were associated with distinct temporal frames. While research on intersectionality has emphasized how sources of stigma and oppression combine (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991), we found that the ragpickers made distinctive meanings of different sources (and combinations of sources) of taint. When the ragpickers focused on their work, they adopted a present orientation, constructing their dirty work in terms of *survival*; when they focused on the intersection of their caste and work,

they adopted a past orientation, constructing their dirty work as part of their *destiny*; and when they focused on the intersection of their work and place, they adopted a future orientation, constructing their dirty work in terms of *hope*. Each meaning was associated with a set of actions that the ragpickers took to cope with their dirty work and lives.

**A present orientation: Ragpicking as survival.** The ragpickers often focused on the present when talking about their work, constructing their work as enabling day-to-day survival for themselves and their families (see Table 4 for illustrative data). While their work provided cash for immediate needs, the process was hand to mouth. Each day, the ragpickers bought the food they needed to survive with the money they had earned that day. Indeed, the lack of space inside and around their homes meant they had to sell all they collected each day; if they tried to store garbage in front of their dwellings for more than a day, their neighbors would complain (Field notes). With little chance to save, daily cash flow was critically important. However, rather than dwelling on the precariousness of their situation, the ragpickers described the benefits of daily payment. Kaumari, for example, explained, “There is money in collecting garbage, [so] everyday expenses are taken care of.” Similarly, Shreya highlighted the importance of the immediate cash flow generated by her self-employment: “Our livelihood is in this work. Only then can we fill our stomachs. Work; earn in the day; and then get the flour, oil, rice, tomato, onion, etc.; and then cook food.”

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Insert Table 4 about here

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Despite the ragpickers’ overarching feelings of helplessness, focusing on the daily income they made (using a present temporal frame) allowed them to construct their work as a means of survival for their families and themselves—a positive, enabling meaning. After we visited Chand, we noticed “a sense of pride when talking with ragpickers about their profession.

It felt that having some control over the ability to earn meant a lot for them compared to being a general daily labor worker” (Field notes). When we asked Acarya, a ragpicker who worked with the BMC, about whether there were benefits from doing the work, he told us, “The benefit for me is that I get my salary, my children can go to school, and my household expenses are met. That’s my benefit.” Although the financial rewards barely covered most of the ragpickers’ living expenses and the costs of their children’s education, they were consistently described as a critical and immediate work benefit.

The construction of ragpicking as survival was not only an interpretive process; it also included concrete actions to ensure survival in the present, such as selling each day’s collection for cash and using this money immediately for food and other necessities. As Kalyani explained, “My husband goes to work and earns money, and when he gets back, he gives it [the money] to me, and then we make food.” Some of the ragpickers had experienced working in other kinds of business for employers who did not pay their wages on time. As Gandhik shared, “Earlier I used to work with furniture, and I had to work for the whole week and ask for the salary. I used to not get it on time, so I left that ...This business [ragpicking] ensures me and my children’s survival.” Gandhik thus left one job and took up ragpicking because it meant he could more reliably support his family. Through these actions, the ragpickers gained some autonomy and reasonable cash flow and thus constructed their occupation as a means of sustaining themselves day to day and ensuring their families’ survival.

**A past orientation: The intersection of ragpicking and caste as destiny.** When the ragpickers focused on their caste, they used a past-oriented temporal frame to make meaning of their work and lives. Invoking the past, particularly the distant past, the ragpickers constructed their situation as a matter of destiny—rooted in their history, particularly in their families and

caste (see Table 5). Destiny led to the work, and the work reinforced their sense of destiny. Some of the ragpickers who worked for the municipal authority, for example, inherited their positions from their fathers. This practice of inherited positions was detailed in the municipal authority's human resources manual, in which it was referred to as a "preferential treatment" (PT) case: after the death of an employee, one of the employee's heirs could be employed by the organization depending on the heir's qualifications. Some of the ragpickers described inheriting a position as an honor (Raja, Amish, Srijan, Daksh, and Pramod). Others described these inherited positions as an obligation: "I didn't want my father's job taken away, and my brother would not have been able to stick to this job—he was not trustworthy. So, Father gave me this job. I did not ask for it. My parents gave it to me" (Esh). In either case, the ragpickers constructed these jobs as fulfilling their destiny.

The idea of ragpicking as destiny was also rooted in the historical construction of families and communities as embedded in their caste. As a news article described, "Families are involved in this process of garbage disposal. Generations pass by in this practice and for many, this is a lineage and tradition that is only passed down" (India England News, 2017). In this sense, the work had a historically rooted sense of purpose for those who did it. Awareness and understanding of ragpicking as an occupation were passed among members of the same caste, especially as they moved from small villages to the city and met with others from their same region, village, and—most importantly—caste. Esh told us, "We have been doing this job since the very beginning." When asked what he meant by "beginning," he elaborated, "It is not only me that does this work. Our entire community is known for doing this kind of work for generations." Similarly, Srijan (Ragpicker/BMC worker) noted, "My forefathers did this work, my father, and even my mother did the same job." By looking back on their personal and cultural

histories and drawing on their embeddedness in their families and caste, the ragpickers thus constructed destiny as an important meaning of their work and lives.

The construction of destiny as a meaning of ragpicking involved enacting history in important ways. For those with a PT case, enacting history included taking up municipal positions after a parent had retired or died. This was not simply a passive process as it could mean doing temporary part-time work until stepping into the inherited position. As our field notes described Bana, for example, “He used to do odd jobs like hiring people for housekeeping work before joining BMC.” This active process also involved the sharing of knowhow and other information among ragpickers from the same community. Indeed, as a BMC ragpicker (Amitodana) observed, “Because they are working here before us—their father, grandfather, and other relations were also in this work—they have the complete knowledge of who and from where the garbage is thrown.” Thus the ragpickers constructed destiny through the actions and understandings of many of those in this community.

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Insert Table 5 about here

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**A future orientation: The intersection of ragpicking and place as hope.** The ragpickers constructed the meaning of their work and place through a future-oriented frame, experiencing ragpicking as offering hope (see Table 6). Engaging in anticipatory hope, the ragpickers described their work as a way for their children to escape the dirty work and dirty place. A critical element in this was the ragpickers’ intention to educate their children, which was related to place in two ways. First, some believed that the places where they worked and lived were not where their children could live well and receive a good education; these ragpickers were willing to separate geographically from their children. For example, one ragpicker (Bheru) contrasted his future with that of his children, sharing the following: “My kids

are studying in the village, so I have to send [money] there. If the kids are educated, then their future will be good. What future will I do for myself now?"

Second, many of the ragpickers hoped that their children's education would provide them the foundation to secure a good job, marry well, break the cycle of poverty, and—critically—get out of the slums. While the ragpickers saw themselves as helpless to escape living in a slum and working as ragpickers, they described the possibility of a future in which their children had that opportunity. When we ask Jagad whether he wanted his children to follow in his footsteps, he told us, "No, I don't want them to enter this field. I am not educated. But I want my children to be educated." Similarly, Mohan expressed pride in the fact that his children were going to school and doing well in their studies; his children's education was an important element fueling his hope that their lives could be different from his. Also, some of the ragpickers explained that educating their children to obtain more prestigious work might mitigate the harsh demands of their living conditions. Srijan, for example, expressed hope that one day he might benefit from his children's education: "If our children do good work in the future, then maybe they will be able to support us when we are old."

The ragpickers' construction of hope was more than wishful thinking: they took practical actions to provide opportunities for their children and prevent them from doing the same work as they did. Educating their children was a key form of action in this regard. For instance, Srijan noted, "For the future, I am giving my children a good education in Pune." Similarly, Bheru shared, "This is all that I have [ragpicking]. I just don't want my children to do this; they are studying and getting good marks, so there is still hope. Now the time is not of Hindi or Marathi or Gujarati now, so they are studying in English." Another way in which the ragpickers enacted their hope through concrete actions was to celebrate their children's academic successes. In a



visit to a Daksh's home, "we noticed many awards on a wall, and [Daksh's wife] explained that this was from the school as her daughter is very good in studies, and hopefully, she will get married into a good family" (Field notes). The ragpickers also worked actively to keep their children away from ragpicking. Indeed, a newspaper article quoted one ragpicker as stating, "Once when I was sick, I brought my son along to help me with my work. But that was the last time I brought him. I don't want him to continue this"; she went on to report that her son was now in college (The News Minute, 2017). Thus, the ragpickers created hope by moving their children toward education and away from the slums and dirty work.

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Insert Table 6 about here

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### **Holding Negative and Positive Meanings Together in Intractable Dirty Work**

Our fourth main set of findings concerned how the ragpickers simultaneously held the negative meaning (helplessness) and the positive meanings (survival, destiny, hope) they constructed of their work and lives (see Table 7). When the ragpickers appraised their situation with a global focus, they believed that they were helpless to make real change. In contrast, when they focused on specific facets in combination with distinct temporal frames, they constructed positive meanings of their intractable situation. Despite the obvious tension between the ragpickers' sense of helplessness and the positive meanings they constructed, we found that the ragpickers could hold and even valuably combine these meanings simultaneously. Indeed, we noticed how the negative and positive meanings they generated in this complex process reinforced rather than undermined each other to move the ragpickers away from feelings of despair and enable them to carry on.

This reinforcement was evident, for example, in the creative and constructive ways the ragpickers combined the disparate meanings of helplessness and survival. Gandhik, for instance,

combined helplessness and survival when he explained, “If I had have been rich, I would have not done this work of scrap dealing. I am compelled to do it. This work ensures myself and my children’s survival.” Similarly, Rati explained how her work provided little more than what was needed for her family to survive: “No savings. I use all that money to get groceries, cook at home, and take children to the doctor if they are unwell. . . . [If] they need a pencil or something else, I have to give it to them.”

The same integration of negative and positive meanings was used in combining helplessness and destiny to avoid despair and carry on with their work and lives. Raja, for example, explained his entry into garbage collecting:

From our ancestors, for generations, have been doing this work [garbage collection]. My dad did service in Mahanagar Palika for 50 years, and then after he retired, I started working as a PT case in 2004 . . . It was like, because of no education, I was not getting a job anywhere. This was an ancestral PT case, and it should not go waste, so I took the job here.

Similarly, Ahmed saw his situation as an inheritance that he could not escape: “I have inherited poverty, so it will take maybe one or two generations in getting away from it no matter how hard I try.” While the ragpickers saw themselves as helpless to change their work or situation, they also understood this as a matter of destiny.

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Insert Table 7 about here

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Helplessness and hope were also deeply connected in how the ragpickers made sense of their dirty work. Being stuck in demeaning work seemed to make the hope for their children’s futures more intense and important for the ragpickers. For example, when asked about whether he thought about his future, Amish responded, “No [I do not have any other work in mind], now this is my life. But I will educate my children. It is my dream. I don’t want to see my children

like this.” Ragpickers combined helplessness and hope to provide additional strength of meaning in their dirty work.

The ragpickers sometimes combined negative and positive meanings in more complex ways. At times, for example, helplessness was integrated with both survival and hope. In Din’s explanation for why he engaged in ragpicking, survival and hope encompassed the energizing meanings that kept him going. Still, both were grounded in a core sense of helplessness, which helped explain why he did not do something different:

I have to do something for survival and for the children’s education. I have to do something if I have not studied. I have to provide them education. Keeping all this in mind, I came over here [to live and work in the slums of Mumbai]. I have not studied. What else can an illiterate person do? You will go into this business [of ragpicking].

Similarly, Jagad explained how he felt helpless to change his own life but was hopeful that he could change his children’s lives:

*Interviewer: Do you want to continue this job, or do you want to switch to something else?*

I will continue with this work only . . . I earn around 5,000 to 6,000 rupees. With this amount, I try to educate my kids, satisfy the basic needs, and also save something.

*As you said, were you planning to run your own shop?*

Yes, but it was not possible. It has been 20 years just thinking about doing it.

*So, you will continue with this work?*

Yes, I will earn and educate my children.

Ayush (ragpicker BMC) constructed the meaning of his work and life primarily in terms of helplessness and destiny as well as hope for his children:

Can I tell you a truth? I also want to live big, have a big house, live like a king. All our grand- and great-grandparents have been doing this [garbage collection] only, and I have also done this. But I don’t want my son to take over this one. I want him to be educated, and I will either make him a businessman, or I have my cousin in another city; I will send my son there.

Similarly, Pramod, a BMC ragpicker, used destiny, survival, and helplessness to make meaning of his dirty work:

My father was working here [garbage collection], so after his retirement, I came here. My father retired, so I had to take up the job in his place.

*Interviewer: Why do this work?*

Where else will I get a job.

*What are the benefits of this work?*

Benefit means what has been going on since our father's and grandfather's time. We have to take care of the family—one brother, two sisters, a wife, children and a mother.

Thus, while adopting a global focus led the ragpickers to construct their work and lives in terms of helplessness, their use of specific foci and distinct temporal frames allowed them to generate positive meanings—meanings associated with survival, destiny, and hope. These positive meanings prevented helplessness from becoming an overriding and paralyzing experience. At the same time, each of these positive meanings was sharpened in the context of the ragpickers' understanding of themselves as helpless to make global changes to their lives.

## **A MODEL OF MULTI-FOCAL MEANING MAKING IN INTRACTABLE DIRTY WORK**

This section draws on our findings to present a model of multi-focal meaning making in intractable dirty work (see Figure 1). The model unfolds from left to right, beginning with intersecting sources of taint that create opportunities for meaning making. It then progresses through multi-focal meaning making that involves two important elements—the scope of focus along with a particular temporal frame. The model concludes with the emergence of “functional ambivalence,” a self-reinforcing combination of positive and negative meanings that provides a basis for workers to carry on in their work and lives. Although our empirical focus has been on the meaning making of Mumbai ragpickers, we abstract from these particular observations to offer a general model of how individuals engaging in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint make meaning of their work and lives. Below, we discuss how each phase of the model shapes this process and then, in the discussion section, explore how the model contributes to existing research.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### **Opportunities for Meaning Making about Intersecting Sources of Taint**

Our model begins with a set of intersecting sources of taint. In our study of ragpickers, the sources of taint were work, caste, and living conditions, but they could potentially include a wide range of other sources of taint, such as gender, race, religion, and ethnicity. We observed people who experienced their lives as a tightly coupled intersection—working as ragpickers of a certain caste living in a certain place—and found they also experienced different dimensions of their dirty work and lives both separately and in partial combinations. We suggest that this partial separability of different dimensions of dirty work and tainted lives provides an opportunity for meaning making: focusing on and responding to different sources of taint separately may, we argue, allow people to draw on specific foci and temporal frames rather than become overwhelmed by what might seem like an unyielding amalgamation of tainted dimensions of work and life.

An important question raised by the potential, but not inevitable, separability of different dimensions of work and life concerns how and when people engaged in intractable dirty work achieve this separation and create opportunities for meaning making. We argue that using intersecting dimensions of work and life as opportunities for meaning making is embedded in broader meaning making processes that translate the “brute aboriginal flux of lived experience” (Chia, 2000: 517) into differentiable, identifiable events and streams of life (Weick et al, 2005). Indeed, Whiteman and Cooper (2011: 892) show that a person’s ability to disambiguate facets of their environment depends on their ability “to bracket and interpret local” features and processes. This ability to isolate, identify, and attend to specific lived-experience dimensions arises from skill (Weick et al., 2005) and social position (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010; Strike & Rerup, 2016).

Our study extends these ideas by suggesting the importance of intersectionality in attending to specific dimensions of work and life and constructing them as opportunities for meaning making. Like other forms of embeddedness (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010; Strike & Rerup, 2016; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), intersecting sources of work and life allow individuals to notice and discern specific features of their environment. Our study examines a group whose intersectionality is distinctively deep—their work as ragpickers, their social status in the form of caste, and their living conditions in slums. Like the embeddedness of a Cree trapper in subarctic Canada (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), the ragpickers' intractable work and life connected them to their social environments in ways that facilitate noticing, attending to, and isolating distinct streams of what might otherwise be an overwhelming flux of lived experience. We thus argue that the specific streams of experience that become available as opportunities for meaning making are those with significant meaning for these people's communities. In our study, occupation, caste, and living place were all significant for the Mumbai ragpickers, which made those streams of experience available to ragpickers as opportunities for meaning making.

### **Multi-Focal Meaning Making**

The second part of our model describes how people, having attended to specific streams of the lived experience of intersectionality in dirty work, make meaning of both their global situation and specific dimensions of their work and lives—a process we refer to as multi-focal meaning making. In our study, the ragpickers engaged in multi-focal meaning making and produced different kinds of meanings. When they adopted a global focus, the ragpickers constructed their work and lives in terms of helplessness to overcome the intractability of their situation. In contrast, when they focused on specific dimensions of their work and lives, this seemed to allow them to construct positive, enabling meanings. What is notable about this

process is that the ragpickers, having noticed and attended to different streams of experience, were able to keep those streams separate.

We see this multi-focal approach (i.e., a combination of a specific scope and temporal frame) as important for meaning making for two reasons. First, we argue that bringing a particular focus (of scope and temporal frame) to one's situation allows people to identify different dimensions of the situation and maintain them as separate and distinctive. For instance, in the case of the ragpickers, narrating caste in terms of the past (destiny) and work in terms of the present (survival) separated what appeared to be tightly tied facets of their day-to-day lives. Second, separating one's lived experience into distinct dimensions may facilitate constructing positive meanings about one's work and life. Specifically, when people make global attributions, and these attributions are negative and stable, they are more likely to feel helpless, especially if they also attribute the cause of their helplessness to factors external to themselves (Seligman, 1992; Weiner, 1986). In contrast, when, for example, the ragpickers focused specifically on their work and living conditions and interpreted them through a future-oriented frame, they constructed a sense of hope—a set of “imaginings of what might be possible” (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013: 966). Our general argument is that focusing on specific dimensions of work and life in conjunction with specific temporal frames facilitates the maintenance of distinct dimensions for constructing positive, enabling meanings in the context of intractable dirty work.

### **Holding Functional Ambivalence**

In the final part of our model, we highlight the relationship between the positive and negative meanings produced through multi-focal meaning making. We suggest two mechanisms—acceptance and agency—through which the positive and negative meanings of functional ambivalence support each other and allow people engaged in intractable dirty work to

carry on. Ambivalence describes “simultaneously positive and negative orientations,” including cognitions and/or emotions “toward an object” (Ashforth et al., 2014: 1454). We describe ragpickers as holding “functional ambivalence” when they simultaneously experience opposing orientations toward their work and lives (ambivalence) that facilitates their ability to carry on (functional).

Experiencing functional ambivalence is, we argue, grounded in the complexity of participating in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint. Facing conditions in which “the joint presence of opposing tendencies has a functional survival value,” the optimal response may be the “ambivalent alternation of expressions of each rather than the consistent expression of an intermediate motivational state” (Campbell, 1965: 305, quoted in Weick, 2020). Thus, functional ambivalence provides a constructive response to complex situations wherein “comprehensive assessments of the situation can be cognitively overpowering, while simplified examinations can be cognitively deceiving” (Guarana & Hernandez, 2015: 51). Namely, functional ambivalence integrates comprehensive assessments (helplessness in the case of the ragpickers) and simplified assessments (survival, destiny, hope) in a way that facilitates more flexible thought and action (Rothman et al., 2016).

A significant feature of functional ambivalence in the context of intractable dirty work is that the negative and positive meanings provide a functional basis for carrying on and mutually support rather than undermine each other. It is thus important to examine the mechanisms through which these sets of meanings accomplish these dual functions. We argue that the ragpickers’ helplessness, experienced by them as the global meaning of their work and lives, was functional in that it allowed a level of acceptance of structurally determined conditions that were beyond their ability to overturn or even significantly transform. Research from across a wide



range of areas (Berlin, 2005; Carson & Langer, 2006; Viane et al., 2003) has suggested that without this degree of acceptance, such individuals' work and lives might be marked by continuous frustration. Moreover, accepting such intractable conditions provides a foundation for a set of positive meanings that arise from unpacking those conditions into distinct dimensions and engender a sense of agency. In line with research showing the power of making positive meaning of facets of a potentially overwhelming situation (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Park, 2010), we suggest that the agency that stems from the positive meanings held in functional ambivalence thus animates such individuals' work and lives and is compatible with their feelings of helplessness. Rather than repel each other, the acceptance and agency that flow from functional ambivalence support and constrain each other such that acceptance does not lead to passivity and agency does not lead to frustration.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our aim in this paper has been to explore how people engaged in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint make and manage meanings of their work and lives. Drawing on a study of ragpickers in Mumbai, we have shown that this process involves a combination of constructing opportunities for meaning making from intersecting sources of taint, engaging in multi-focal meaning making that links specific sources and combinations of taint to temporal frames, and holding functional ambivalence that joins positive and negative meanings as a self-reinforcing constellation that supports people doing intractable dirty work to carry on with their lives. We now discuss the paper's main contributions, suggest directions for future research, summarize the study's key limitations, and provide some concluding thoughts.

## **Contributions**

Our study contributes to the dirty work literature in three main ways. First, by elevating the experience of people who have largely been invisible in management and organizational research (Chrispal, Bapuji, & Zietsma, 2020), we show the constructive potential of combining negative and positive meanings to ground and empower individuals engaged in intractable dirty work. Making and holding both negative and positive meanings, the ragpickers achieved functional ambivalence toward their work and lives. This functional ambivalence underpinned their ability to accept their desperate circumstances, construct meanings, and engage in actions they imbued with agency.

Identifying functional ambivalence as an outcome of meaning making under these conditions contributes to traditional and intersectional research on dirty work that has emphasized the tension between the positive and negative meanings people make of their work and lives (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2020; Slutskaya et al., 2016). These streams of research initially emphasized how the construction of positive meanings allows individuals to cope with their experiences of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007), but more recently, they have revealed some of the costs of these coping mechanisms, thereby highlighting the tensions between the positive and negative meanings people generate (Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013). In contrast to these more polarized accounts, our study points to the constructive potential of combinations of negative and positive meanings.

Although ambivalence has traditionally been conceived of as a weakened attitudinal state likely to constrain action (Conner & Sparks, 2002), more recent writing has pointed to its potentially positive effects (Guarana & Hernandez, 2015; Rothman et al., 2016). Consistent with

this research, we argue that functional ambivalence helps people hold multiple strong and conflicting meanings that drive and direct action more forcefully and consistently than would some weakened compromise position. In our study, the ragpickers' functional ambivalence and the mechanisms of acceptance and agency that sustained it provide a distinctive and novel understanding the ways individuals cope with the demands and costs of intractable dirty work.

Our second main contribution is to the literature on intersectionality in dirty work, which has focused on the intersection of sources of taint to produce distinctive forms of oppression beyond that suggested by an "additive" formula of sources of taint (Crenshaw, 1991; e.g., Duffy, 2007; Slutskaya, et al., 2016; Tilcsik et al., 2015; Tracy & Scott, 2006). We found a somewhat more complex relationship between sources of taint than is suggested either in the traditional research on dirty work or in the intersectionality literature. Namely, we found that people from a tainted caste who were doing dirty work and living in a tainted place experienced themselves both as living at a tightly coupled intersection of sources of taint and responding discretely to different dimensions of the taint. Our study thus extends research on intersectionality in dirty work by showing that while the intersection of dimensions of taint in the context of dirty work produces distinctive forms of oppression and resistance, workers can experience these dimensions of taint separately as well as jointly. This extension is significant because it suggests a more complex and agentic relationship between people's meaning making and the sources of taint they experience than has been previously suggested.

Our findings also point to the paradoxical conditions under which this agency may flourish: living as part of a community of dirty workers ties together sources of taint, including occupation, class, and living conditions, yet we argue that it is this long-term individual and familial embeddedness in such a context that provides people with the cultural knowledge that

allows them to construct opportunities for making meaning from specific strands of their existence. Focusing on and responding to separate sources and combinations of taint allows people to draw on specific discursive and material resources rather than become overwhelmed by what might seem like an unyielding amalgam of taint.

Our third main contribution to the dirty work literature is identifying a process—multi-focal meaning making—through which people engaged in intractable dirty work at the intersection of multiple sources of taint can achieve functional ambivalence. Identifying this process adds to the traditional research on dirty work and research on intersectionality in dirty work by showing, in contrast to both, the potential for people performing dirty work to engage in multiple streams of meaning making. This meaning making combines a focus on specific facets of experience with distinct temporal frames to maintain the separation between streams of meaning making, and combines negative and positive meanings to enable individuals to carry on with their dirty work and tainted lives. By showing this multi-focal process, our study adds to research on meaning making in dirty work that has identified important tactics for constructing positive meaning (Ashford & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Dick, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2019; Stacey, 2011).

Furthermore, our model builds on research on intersectional taint by showing how the meanings individuals make depend on the scope of focus they bring to their situations and how positive, enabling meanings depend upon pairing a specific focus with a frame that highlights the distinctiveness of a particular dimension of taint. Therefore, our model responds to intersectionality researchers' call to explain "the processes and mechanisms by which subjects mobilize (or choose not to mobilize) particular aspects" of their situations (Nash, 2008: 11) and extends traditional dirty work research by moving beyond general tactics of refocusing and

reframing to show how individual workers simultaneously generate and use multiple meanings of their dirty work and lives.

### **Future Research Directions**

Building on these contributions, we suggest two directions for future dirty work research. The first is for researchers to broaden the lenses they adopt to study coping. Research on dirty work has tended to highlight defensive mechanisms that are relatively narrow. For example, the cognitive and rhetorical strategies noted in the literature tend to be self-serving, esteem enhancing, and grounded in the culture of an occupation or workgroup (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Selmi, 2012). In contrast, the positive meanings the ragpickers constructed were uniformly broader than their self-interest or image: survival reflected a concern for family, destiny reflected a connection to ancestors and community, and hope was rooted in their children's futures. These broader connections suggest the importance for scholars to attend to the embeddedness and relationality of dirty work, such as with findings that the social construction of the working self is intertwined with the social construction of families, communities, and occupational groups (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). We suggest that future research on dirty work adopt an expanded view, both theoretically and methodologically, that accounts for the complex embeddedness of dirty work in a social context (e.g., workers' social and familial ties) and in both the past and future.

Second, an important question emerging from our study concerns the longer-term consequences of coping with intersectionality in intractable dirty work—namely, whether the constellation of survival, destiny, hope, and helplessness might leave dirty workers “locked in” to their current circumstances in ways that some alternative set of meanings might not. With the ragpickers pinning their hopes for change on their children's future lives and describing

themselves as fulfilling their destiny and enabling their families' survival, there seemed to be little room for them to contemplate different lives for themselves. This lock in seemed to emanate not only from their sense of helplessness but also from their construction of ragpicking as survival, destiny, and hope, which shifted the ragpickers' sense of agency to their families, ancestors, and children, respectively. Exploring this potential dynamic is beyond our data. Still, it represents an important issue for future research, which could be addressed by examining populations with greater variance in their work and lives and following them over time. Taking dirty work research in this direction could begin to surface the impact of meaning making on sources of taint, along with the reverse relationship.

### **Limitations**

As with all research rooted in extreme cases, we must be careful when transferring our findings to other contexts. We note that qualitative studies like this one do not strive for statistical generalizability but offer what Pratt and colleagues (2006) refer to as naturalistic generalizability—recognizing similarity with other cases without statistical inference (Stake, 1995). The case of Mumbai ragpickers represents an extreme case of intersectionality in intractable dirty work: these people's occupation, caste, and living conditions were tightly coupled. This extreme intractability likely shaped our findings, perhaps especially the significance of helplessness as a global meaning and its relationship to the specific positive meanings constructed by the ragpickers. Thus, an open question is what differences might be encountered when studying less intractable dirty work. At the same time, many forms of dirty work are associated with a degree of intractability, especially those tied to a specific geographic community (e.g., Lucas, 2011) or familial legacy (Cappellaro et al., 2020). Therefore, coping witnessed in other contexts may involve variations of what we documented here.

A second limitation stems from our focus on the common experiences and responses among ragpickers; we thus did not examine differences between them. Scholars could design future research to explore such differences. For example, we did not include children in our sample even though many children work as ragpickers. It may be that children construct different meanings of dirty work or other sources of taint. Our sample also included only seven women; consequently, we could not systematically examine potential gender differences. Research on intersectionality in dirty work would benefit from attending to age and gender, both of which are likely to shape the meanings a person makes of his or her occupation, caste, living conditions, family, and community.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we examined how people engaged in intractable dirty work transformed intersecting sources of taint into opportunities for meaning making, engaged in multi-focal meaning making that translated those opportunities into positive and negative meanings, and held those meanings together in a state of functional ambivalence. To do so, we listened to and observed Mumbai ragpickers who constructed their work and lives as meaningful while engaging in stigmatized, physically demanding work; occupying the lowest caste in Indian society; and living in slums. Along with the specific contributions this study makes to the literatures on dirty work and intersectionality, we believe its significance stems from showing how people doing immensely challenging, potentially degrading work are able to generate streams of meaning that provide a way for them to carry on, care for the immediate needs of their families, and chart a different future for their children.

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**Table 1: Interviewed Ragpickers (names changed to protect anonymity)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Respondent information</b>	<b>Work experience</b>
<b>Ragpickers collecting scrap from residents</b>		
Ahmed	<b>Age:</b> 46 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs various businesses; <b>Work experience:</b> 12 yrs scrap shop
Vibhu	<b>Age:</b> 49 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 10 yrs as scrap worker; <b>Work experience:</b> 25 yrs card drawer
Ananda	<b>Age:</b> 22 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Graduate; <b>Family:</b> Father, mother, wife & kids. <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 3 Yrs scrap shop
Arjuna	<b>Age:</b> 40 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 15 yrs working with father; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs scrap shop
Bheru	<b>Age:</b> 39 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 5 yrs in family business; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs scrap shop
Chand	<b>Age:</b> 28 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 5 yrs with family scrap shop <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs scrap shop
Chandrama	<b>Age:</b> 24 Yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Father; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 2 yrs mechanic; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs cart drawer
Ayyar	<b>Age:</b> 39 Yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Undergraduate; <b>Family:</b> Father, mother, wife & kids. <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 2 yrs electrician; <b>Work experience:</b> 18 yrs scrap shop
Din	<b>Age:</b> 45 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Uneducated; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Farming; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs cart drawer
Jain	<b>Age:</b> 34 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 10 Yrs in various businesses; <b>Work experience:</b> 14 yrs cart drawer
Maruf	<b>Age:</b> 35 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 18 yrs scrap shop
Esh	<b>Age:</b> 50 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 25 yrs tailor; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs cart drawer
Santosh	<b>Age:</b> 60 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Uneducated; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 15 yrs local sweet shop; <b>Work experience:</b> 32 yrs cart drawer
Mohan	<b>Age:</b> 46 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Father, mother, wife & kids. <b>Native region:</b> Rajasthan	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs family business; <b>Work experience:</b> 22 yrs scrap shop
Srijan	<b>Age:</b> 37 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Mother, wife & kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 2 yrs mechanic; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs cart drawer

<b>Ragpickers collecting scrap from slum areas</b>		
Haddish	<b>Age:</b> 53 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 8 yrs handicraft; <b>Work experience:</b> 20 yrs scrapping
Aman	<b>Age:</b> 31 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Framing; <b>Work experience:</b> 9 yrs scrapping
Gandhik	<b>Age:</b> 32 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs helper in furniture shop; <b>Work experience:</b> 12 yrs scrapping
Mithil	<b>Age:</b> 45 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 18 yrs scrapping
Bhima	<b>Age:</b> 37 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Husband and in-laws. <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Farming; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs scrapping
Chettur	<b>Age:</b> 24 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Alone; <b>Native region:</b> Maharashtra	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 8 yrs scrapping
Jalal	<b>Age:</b> 20 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade; <b>Native region:</b> Karnataka	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs laborer; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs scrapping
Kalyani	<b>Age:</b> 24 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Husband and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Karnataka	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs scrapping
Katyayana	<b>Age:</b> 25 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Husband; <b>Native region:</b> Telangana	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs scrapping
Kaumari	<b>Age:</b> 24 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> Uneducated; <b>Family:</b> Husband and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Maharashtra	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs tailor; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs scrapping
Kunti	<b>Age:</b> 25 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Husband and in-laws. <b>Native region:</b> Karnataka	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Farming; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs scrapping
Rati	<b>Age:</b> 30 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Husband and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs scrapping
Shreya	<b>Age:</b> 30 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> Uneducated; <b>Family:</b> Husband and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Maharashtra	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 12 yrs scrapping
Omesh	<b>Age:</b> 30 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Female; <b>Education:</b> Uneducated; <b>Family:</b> Husband & kids; <b>Native region:</b> Karnataka	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 1 year as civil contractor; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs scrapping
Jagad	<b>Age:</b> 40 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 20 yrs scrapping
<b>Ragpickers removing garbage and collecting scrap (i.e., government-employed [BMC])</b>		
Ayush	<b>Age:</b> 42 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife & Kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Real estate; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs BMC supervisor



Acarya	<b>Age:</b> 37 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Father, mother, wife and kids. <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Clerk; <b>Work experience:</b> 7 yrs BMC worker
Amish	<b>Age:</b> 32 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 12 yrs BMC worker
Amitodana	<b>Age:</b> 35 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 11 yrs BMC supervisor
Bana	<b>Age:</b> 35 yrs; <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Mother, wife & kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 2 yrs BMC supervisor
Bhavabhuti	<b>Age:</b> 43 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs a housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 15 yrs BMC worker
Daksh	<b>Age:</b> 44 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 2 yrs peon; <b>Work experience:</b> 20 yrs BMC worker
Aadi	<b>Age:</b> 32 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs BMC supervisor
Karam	<b>Age:</b> 41 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> Graduate; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 7 yrs hotel administrator; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs BMC worker
Nakshatra	<b>Age:</b> 46 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> None; <b>Work experience:</b> 26 yrs BMC supervisor
Patanjali	<b>Age:</b> 37 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> marketing services; <b>Work experience:</b> 5 yrs BMC worker
Pramod	<b>Age:</b> 53 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Uttar Pradesh	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 13 yrs BMC worker
Raja	<b>Age:</b> 44 yrs; <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> 5 yrs taxi driver; <b>Work experience:</b> 13 yrs BMC worker
Ranjan	<b>Age:</b> 52 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife & Kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs wall painter; <b>Work experience:</b> 20 yrs BMC worker
Rura	<b>Age:</b> 45 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Many yrs housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 17 yrs BMC worker
Srijan	<b>Age:</b> 48 yrs. <b>Gender:</b> Male; <b>Education:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade; <b>Family:</b> Wife and kids; <b>Native region:</b> Mumbai	<b>Prior Experience:</b> Housekeeping services; <b>Work experience:</b> 10 yrs BMC worker

**Table 2: Illustrative Data – Intersecting Sources of Taint**

<b>Dirty Work</b>
<p>“It stinks. I don’t know what is in there. Maybe potty and all sorts of garbage. It stinks, and it affects our body and mind. We also tie a handkerchief on our nose and mouth while picking up the garbage. But we can’t avoid it; it is our work, and we have to do it. At times, it [our work] is totally impossible without a small drink. ... We are not able to work without a small drink” (Amish, Ragpicker).</p>
<p>“Also, at times, there are dead dogs, rats. There are many things in the garbage. ... We have been given masks to use, but most people don’t use them. We have to get habituated to it. ... When everything is mixed, it makes it all dirty” (Bana, Ragpicker BMC).</p>
<p>“In fact, we are prone to illnesses like cold, asthma, etc. We do not have any advantage if we are going to live for 60 years. We will live 10 years less; our life span has decreased [from doing this work]” (Nakshatra, Ragpicker BMC).</p>
<p>“The worker has to take care of himself, as in that garbage, there might be glass or hospital needles, and many other things can be there which are harmful to us. Because if any needle hurts him, there are chances of getting illness or infection. For precaution, Mahanagar Palika has given us equipment like hand gloves, masks, gumboots, and so on” (Raja, Ragpicker).</p>
<p>“We pay extra to those ragpickers that bring us clean garbage. But the majority bring us smelly and bad shape garbage. It is a hassle for us to sort their dirty garbage. Recently we added a new area for handing and sorting the dirty garbage. It is located a bit away from our shop so we can get rid of the smell” (Ragpicker Customer)</p>
<p>“Many of them take drugs and drink a lot of alcohol; maybe this is needed for doing the job they do. I try to tell them to stay away from these habits, but they don’t listen” (Ragpicker Customer)</p>
<p>“We met with the ragpicker close to train tracks, which is considered a good spot for finding plastic bottles and other higher-paying garbage. But clearly, along with these newly thrown plastic bottles, we also saw and smelled many years old garbage, which made walking in this area almost impossible” (Field notes Pramod, Ragpicker BMC)</p>
<p>“Women in this trade are usually going to municipality operated dump sites for collecting garbage as walking around in slum areas can be dangerous for them. We have witnessed numerous reports of sexual abuse and molestation for these unprotected individuals” (Stree Mukti Sanghatana, NGO)</p>
<p>Waste-pickers suffer from occupation-related musculoskeletal problems, respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments. They also face regular harassment and extortion from both the police and the municipal authorities. No social security benefits are available to workers in this sector” (WIEGO, 2019).</p>
<p>“During segregation [of the waste], we often come in contact with hazardous materials, including soiled clothes, needles, broken glass, sanitary waste, and batteries. In fact, much of the hazardous waste is in the form of medicine bottles, insecticide spray bottles, toilet cleaners, and injections. This mixed waste segregation subjects us to several health issues like fever and skin rashes” (Down to Earth, 2017).</p>

### **Tainted Class**

“People living in our society have a different perspective on us. The fact that ... our work ... is beneficial to society is not understood by the citizens, and they frown upon our work. When similar work was done by our Prime Minister, everyone applauded him for his initiative ... but no one does that for us” (Patanjali, Ragpicker).

“Everyone living here is equally poor, but still we are seen as different and the lowest of the workers. We also earn money from hard work like others, but we don’t get any respect” (Gandhik, Ragpicker).

“Everyone sees us as “dirty” and taunt us because of our caste and work. My children are not allowed to play with the kids of another caste. This is very hurtful, and we can’t do anything about it” (Omesh, Ragpicker).

“Politicians and other leaders talk a lot about growth and progress in India, but the reality is that rag packers from lower caste are still mistreated and seen as untouchables. The possibility for their acceptance in society is very limited” (Sampurna Earth, NGO)

“During the interview, we heard a group of individuals cursing (in Hindi) a child ragpicker. He did not even react to them as if this was a common occurrence” (Field notes: Omesh)

“In the slum, people get categorized quickly, and if you do dirty work, you are considered as the lowest working class, and everyone looks down at you. They are mistreated and discriminated by other poor people” (Children of God Foundation, NGO).

Another report from WIEGO titled, Integrating Waste Pickers into Municipal Solid Waste Management in Pune, India, goes on to provide the data associated with this job in the Pune area. According to the report, almost all the waste pickers in Pune hail from Scheduled Castes and 90% of these waste pickers are women. (The News Minute, 2017).

“Nearly all rag-pickers come from the lowest caste, Dalits. Formerly known as “untouchables,” their ancestors were responsible for carrying away animal carcasses and making leather goods. (Hindu tradition designates low-status jobs as those that put workers in close proximity to death.)” (Next City, 2014).

A garbage collector in India’s capital, Begum, is one of 300,000 little-seen workers who perform a vital role for the city: rifling through the detritus of modern life, recycling anything of worth, and carefully disposing of the rest. More than 95% of New Delhi has no formal system of house-to-house garbage collection, so it falls to the city’s ragpickers, one of India’s poorest and most marginalized groups, to provide this basic service for fellow citizens” (Live Mint, 2007).

### **Dirty Place**

“We don’t have any papers or proof for our hut. We can be asked by anyone to leave at any time. This is a constant fear in which we have to live” (Mithil, Ragpicker).

“Yes, I have a sewing machine. I will work on that, but the municipality people can confiscate it. ... They confiscate it. This is the reason I don’t do sewing work and prefer collecting garbage” (Kaumari, Ragpicker).

“What to do? The government has to think about us” (Pramod, Ragpicker BMC)

**“Interviewer:** You have your house there? **Shreya:** No, we just live in a hut there.

**Interviewer:** Where is it? **Shreya:** Here below the bridge. ... We sweep and wash the place every day, but it is dirty. ... We get [water] from others tap from nearby.

“Live in a slum ... it is dirty ... there is no roof on the house. There is a road above, and we live below the bridge” (Shreya, Ragpicker).

It is not good for living. There are mosquitoes, and it is not good. I don't feel like staying there. There is nothing great that we have. ... It is a hut” (Chettur, Ragpicker).

“The colony, built on forest land, has no concrete houses—landowners will not allow any permanent construction. Only a third of the households had a ration card. There is no personal or public toilet in the colony, and no electric meters have been installed” (Hindustan Times, 2017).

“The ragpickers showed a higher prevalence of low hemoglobin, high circulating eosinophil and monocyte counts, unhealthy gums, frequent diarrhea, and dermatitis when compared with controls. Their sputum showed an abundance of alveolar macrophages, siderophages, and inflammatory cells, and a very high frequency of squamous metaplasia and dysplasia of bronchial epithelial cells, suggesting inflammation and cellular changes in the airways” (Ranjan et al., 2004).

**Table 3: Illustrative Data – Ragpicking and Helplessness**

<b>Little Money</b>
<p><b>Interviewer: How much do you manage to earn from this in a month?</b> There is no calculation per month. <b>But approximately how much will it be according to you?</b> Around 200-250. <b>I am taking about per month, so per month it comes to 6000.</b> Yes. When the rains are there, then we don't get anything at that time. <b>Do you get more during the festivals?</b> We close it during the festivals. <b>What do you do with the money that you get, do you save it?</b> Yes, if I don't save it then how will the household expenses be taken care of" (Haddish, Ragpicker)</p> <p>"There is no scope to save money, I have to feed 5 people with that income. Neither my daughter nor my son earn, and nor does my wife, my elder daughter has been married off. Hence I am unable to save" (Srijan, Ragpicker BMC)</p> <p>"No savings. All the money goes to groceries, cook at home, take children to the doctor if they are unwell. My children go to school. If they need pencils or something else I have to give it to them" (Rati, Ragpicker)</p> <p>"We use this money in room rent, children school expenses, and totally in family expenses" (Srijan, Ragpicker)</p> <p>"He earns Rs. 7,000 on a monthly basis and there are times he gets 500 to 1000 on daily basis during certain occasions" (Chakravarti, Ragpicker, field notes)</p>
<b>Few Career Alternatives</b>
<p>"Yes we shall continue with this job ...we do not get government jobs easily in Mumbai." (Din, Ragpicker )</p> <p>"What can I do, besides this? I will continue doing this if it is a smaller business I can make that big. Besides that I cannot do anything else" (Arjuna, Ragpicker).</p> <p>"What to do. I have no option but to do it. ... What else? I am not educated, right. So no one will even appoint me as a peon. Will anyone appoint me? I do not even know English. I know but very little. ... What to do? I do not have any other talent in me" (Pramod, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>"Realistically speaking, with respect to the generation that is involved in these forms of slavery, it is almost impossible to get out of it. Young people and children from these communities should not engage in these occupations. A large amount of the focus should be on preventing the next generation from doing the same work. Only then can the communities break out of the cycle" (The News Minute, 2017).</p> <p><b>Interviewer: So for how many years you were you a tailor?</b> For 25 years. <b>So why did you begin this work?</b> I was not able to see, my eyes are weak that is why I started this [collecting garbage on a cart]" (Esh, Ragpicker).</p>
<b>Little Market Power</b>
<p>"I say [ask the dealers for higher prices for the scrap], but then they say 'you wish. If you have to give then give or else don't give'. The rates have decreased, but what can we do?"</p>

[The buyers say] ‘if we will get from above [higher prices] then we will be able to give to you’” (Kalyani, Ragpicker)

“Sometimes I get Rs. 50 per day, sometimes Rs. 100. [The prices] have all become very cheap now. ... I don’t know why has it become cheap. ... how will we know all of that? If they say that rates are less now, we have to sell as we have to run our house too. If they say it is Rs. 10/- per kg. We have to sell it, we have no option. We cannot sit back at home” (Rati, Ragpicker).

No [we do not haggle over price]. It is according to the market rate. We do not bargain much, they also should earn and we too” (Daksh, Ragpicker)

“No, I cannot negotiate. When the rate is 10 Rs. Then I cannot negotiate for 11 Rs.” (Santosh, Ragpicker)

“Who sells waste, paper and household materials, garbage; they decide [the price]. Waste goes for Rs.5, scrap goes for Rs.10. If ours will be sold at Rs.11, we are getting one rupee; we picked up. Sometimes two rupees” (Din, Ragpicker)

#### **Minimal Support Network**

“I work alone, there is no partner” (Haddish, Ragpicker)

“No, there is no [toilet] facility available there, there is no facility provided by government. The water is dropping everywhere in the house. It is like that because we do not have much money to repair it” (Esh, Ragpicker)

**Interviewer: You don’t save anything. So what about your future?** What to do? The government has to think about us” (Srijan, Ragpicker BMC)

“There is no help from the government. It should help but it does not do anything because the government has nothing to do with them [the ragpickers]”. (NGO)

#### **Experience Trap**

“No, I don’t like the work I do but I have no other option as I have got used to this sort of work” (Rekha, Ragpicker)

“I can tell in one glance how much I will gain out of this. And how much the scrap cost” (Din, Ragpicker)

**Interviewer: Now you are doing this work since 10 years, for how many more years you will do this work?** We are going to spend all our life here. **You will do this work only?** Yes. **Didn’t you ever think of doing some other work?** No. **Why so?** We get benefit from collecting garbage, so we do that only” (Sumati, Ragpicker)

**Interviewer: Do you like the work that you are doing?** Yes, it is good. **Can you tell me why you like it?** There is always money in it. I am not that educated to do a job somewhere. So for me this is good, there is no tension. I work as I want. **Would you like to do anything else other than this?** No, this is good for me. **Have thought about want do in the future?** Nothing like that” (Gandhik, Ragpicker)

“It is now our habit to collect the garbage. We don’t have to look for any other thing and we get money every day” (Kalyani, Ragpicker)

**Table 4: Illustrative data – Raggicking as Survival**

<b>Cash Flow</b>
<p>“My husband goes to work and earns money, and when he gets back, he gives it [the money] to me, and then we make food” (Kalyani, Raggicker).</p> <p>“I know about this business so I can work and have my daily needs met” (Mithil, Raggicker).</p> <p>“Raggicking is unpredictable, so they sometimes need money otherwise they have no food to cook for their children” (Raggicker Customer)</p> <p>“The sand work [a business in which payment is not daily] is not affordable to us. In this work [raggicking], we get the money by the end of the day for spending” (Sumati, Raggicker)</p> <p>“Earlier I used to work with furniture, and I had to work for the whole week and ask for the salary. I used to not get it on time, so I left that” (Gandhik, Raggicker)</p> <p>“If I take up a job [other than raggicking], what will happen to my children if I am not paid on time” (Bhima, Raggicker)</p>
<b>Sustenance for Family</b>
<p>“If I had been rich, I would not have done this work of scrap-dealing. I am compelled to do it. This business ensures me and my children’s survival” (Gandhik, Raggicker).</p> <p>“They [the family] can only survive if I work. I cannot find any other work. When I have children, I have to do something” (Bhima, Raggicker).</p> <p>“Now I am married, after getting married I was at home for one year and started collecting garbage from second year onwards because of the financial condition in our house. We are able to survive only by collecting garbage” (Kaumari, Raggicker).</p> <p>“I have to do this to suffice my needs and my children’s needs” (Jagad, Raggicker)</p> <p>“Yes, since my family depends on it [his raggicking work]. There is no tension in my life because of it” (Ayush, Raggicker BMC)</p> <p>[Do you like your work?] Sir, it is my job. My family and I live on it. Who would like to put their hand in the garbage? I have to earn. ... You have to do it. There is no option of liking or not. A job is a job” (Acarya, Raggicker BMC)</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> What do you do with that money? <b>Jalal:</b> Buy groceries for the house. Buy something new. <b>Interviewer:</b> Do you save the money? <b>Jalal:</b> No. (Jalal, Raggicker)</p> <p>“If there is no money left, the children need food. We can manage ourselves, we can sleep hungry for one day, but the children need it” (Kaumari, Raggicker)</p>

**Table 5: Illustrative Data – Ragpicking as Destiny**

<b>Inherited Position</b>
<p>“My father retired, so I had to take up the job at his place [of work].” (Pramod, Ragpicker BMC)</p> <p>“I am a schedule caste, so in that, the father’s job is passed on to the son” (Amjad, Ragpicker).</p> <p>“We had ancestral- PT case, like my grandmother (mother’s mother), used to work, so eventually I got a job. <b>Interviewer: So everyone in your family has worked in BMC?</b> Yes. (Bhavabhuti, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“My father used to work here. After his death, I took up this job. I was his only son. ... A PT case. Earlier, he was in the sweeping department, and hence even I got the job in the same department. If I was more educated, then I could have got a supervisor’s position” (Srijan, Ragpicker BMC)</p> <p>“He used to do odd jobs like hiring people for housekeeping work before joining BMC. He is working with BMC for two years now. He secured the job in BMC on a PT case basis” (NGO worker).</p> <p>“... due to a PT case, I got a government servant job. My father said don’t leave this job, my younger brother was 10, 12 years of age, and I was about 18, 19 years old, so I had to take up this job” (Ayyar, Ragpicker BMC)</p>
<b>Historical Sense of Purpose</b>
<p>“Most ragpickers come from the same community, which means that when someone new comes from their village, it is easier for that person to take on this job” (Ragpicker Customer).</p> <p>Benefit [of ragpicking work] means what has been going on since our father’s and our grandfather's time. We have to take care of the family, one brother, two sisters, wife, children, and mother. (Pramod, Ragpicker BMC)</p> <p>“I am a schedule caste, so in that, the father’s job is passed on to the son” (Ayush, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“... they also know the timing—when the garbage is thrown, they then come to collect it. Because they are working here before us—their father, grand-father, and other relations were also in this work—they have the complete knowledge of who and from where the garbage is thrown (Amitodana, Ragpicker BMC).</p>



**Table 6: Illustrative data – Ragpicking as “Hope”**

<b>To Educate their Children</b>
<p>“Yes, I do have [children]. ... They are at home in U.P. [Uttar Pradesh]. My father and children are there in Parle. I have five children; three sons and two daughters are there. Mother is not here; she is at home [in the village]. She is doing farming. ... We think they [the children] should study. We don’t have to spend money on their studies. The government is giving money. ... If my son is studying well, they give money to him. ... They should not come in this business because of all this, to pick up the garbage, wander with hand cart” (Jain, Ragpicker).</p> <p>“For the future, I am giving my children a good education in Pune. ... If our children do good work in the future, then maybe they will be able to support us when we are old. ... The money that I am saving in the bank, I am using it for my children” (Srijan, Ragpicker).</p> <p>“My daughter has completed her 12<sup>th</sup> standard. She is doing a course in Mehendi” (Ranjan, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“Aditi shares that even when the family was in a hand-to-mouth situation while she was a ragpicker, she never intended that her children should get into the ragpicking business. She always wanted her children to get educated and stay away from the work that she did. She never wanted her children to face the hardships that she faced” (NGO)</p>
<b>For Children to have a Good Job</b>
<p>“We are doing what best we can do for them. The rest of it is their fate whatever they end up doing, be an engineer or a doctor. Whatever you want to become” (Bhayabhuti, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“Yes but she [daughter] has to enter as a sweeper only. Then they will see if she is educated and give her a job as a peon and then as a clerk. We have to show her the line because you cannot go directly [to a good job]”. (Aadi, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“I am not so educated. ... I have given them education, and one of my sons is studying mass media. I am not going to bring them [his sons] in this business line. One of my sons is working in the bank” (Mohan, scrap shop).</p> <p>“Earlier there was a time when their [ragpickers’] children were not getting educated but now you can see that the children of a sweeper can become successful. Some are teachers” (Ayush, Ragpicker BMC).</p>

**Table 7: Illustrative Data –Helplessness and Survival, Destiny and Hope**

<b>Helplessness and Survival</b>
<p>“[We like this work because] we do not have any other business to do. We can’t do anything else. I am illiterate. Nobody will hire me. It is good. ... Children are surviving due to this. I like this [work]. And I don’t like this. But for survival, I have to do. I have to do” (Din, Ragpicker)</p> <p>“Sir, it is my job. My family and I live on it. Who would like to put their hand in garbage? I have to earn” (Acarya, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“I have to do this work. Pick scrap and fill my stomach. I like to do this work. I have been doing this for a long time and I cannot do any other work now. ... Yes it is good work that we are doing. We do not have an option. We have to work for our lives, to stay alive we have to. If we call it dirty, then what will we eat. This is what we think” (Rati, Ragpicker).</p>
<b>Helplessness and Destiny</b>
<p>“See, everyone feels that they should do something else, but it is destiny. Yes, for the time being I am happy.” (Din, Ragpicker).</p> <p>“If we die our family members get the job in the government immediately. As a sweeper, those who sweep get this opportunity, otherwise no where will they give jobs to my family members like in hospitals [will not give my family members jobs]. ... Only sweepers have this opportunity that a son can work in place of his father” (Dvivedi, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“I did not get any other work and my father was already into this. I had to take over from him [after he died]” (Amish, Ragpicker BMC).</p>
<b>Helplessness and Hope</b>
<p>“I just want my children to be educated and right now. ... As a father I will educate them, if they wish too. And being in this field, I feel like serving the society ... but because of a lack of money nothing [i.e., change] can happen. We can do something only if we have money. In dreams I see that I have an apartment in a building and my daughter has a high level of education. I do not want a car but at least should have a bike or a cycle, but the fact is that we are living in a slum area” (Raja, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“This work is enough for me. I am satisfied with it. I have to also look after my health. If I keep running here and there while working, it is not good. A permanent job is not available anywhere. I am now trying for my child.” (Ayush, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“I am not very educated, so I won’t get any other job. There is a good future here. ... Education is required everywhere. ... Now this is my life, but I will educate my children. It is my dream; I don’t want to see my children like this” (Amish, Ragpicker BMC).</p> <p>“Now I am illiterate. Then what else [other than garbage collection] can I do. I have to do something. I don’t like doing this, but I am helpless. I have to do it. I am illiterate so I have to do this work. But what I have done, my children should not do, so I am doing this work and making them study. If I was literate, then I could do anything. It all depends on destiny” (Santosh, Ragpicker).</p>

**Figure 1: A Model of Multi-Focal Meaning-Making in Intractable Dirty Work**



