

Abstract

Indians have traditionally, and, in the recent times, emphasised keeping the environment clean, internally and externally. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, once stated ‘cleanliness is next to Godliness’. Recently, the Indian Prime Minister has launched the ‘Clean India Mission,’ to honor Gandhi on his birth anniversary. For a country that has shown so much outward and historical concern towards cleanliness, it is noteworthy that a high level of stigma is associated with cleaning and those individuals associated with it. The job of cleaning is seen as ‘dirty work’, and, cleaners such as waste pickers are considered stigmatised. In the relevant academic literature, work is considered as dirty if it is physically, socially, or morally tainted; and viewed by others as demeaning. This research seeks to study how waste pickers cope with the stigma associated with their job. **Hence the research question of the present study is: how do waste pickers cope with the stigma associated with their work?**

While public health, popular media and economic perspectives examine the physical and living conditions of the waste pickers, academic literature so far has largely overlooked the coping mechanisms of such workers in this relatively informal sector. The present study attempts to address this gap. It is based on interviews with 40 waste pickers, which included 32 men and 8 women. Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured interview protocol across 8 locations in Delhi. This enabled the comprehension of experience of waste pickers. Based on a qualitative analysis of the interviews, it was observed that interactions and socialization among waste pickers were limited to their own community and the data revealed two emergent categories of coping mechanisms. First was ‘Occupational Acceptance’ which implied that waste pickers had accepted their status as it was. This included mechanisms of cognitive reframing, cognitive dulling, learnt helplessness, and managing dissonance. The second category that emerged was ‘Creation of Mental Fences’. This allowed the waste pickers to

isolate themselves from ‘others’ as well as ensured protection of the community. The mechanisms included selective socialization, reproaching others, and avoidance. The present study thus contributes to the ongoing dialogue of dirty work wherein most of the literature pertains to the western world and contributions in this study have come from the context of the Indian waste pickers. Finally, limitations of this study are discussed, and possible ideas of future research are discussed.