

'Ragpickers' of Mumbai use entrepreneurship to find meaning, study shows

April 11 2023



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It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it—with pride and hope.

Research on "dirty work" has focused on the fundamental challenge of

finding positive meaning in work that is stigmatized because others perceive it as physically, socially or morally degrading.

However, for many people engaged in dirty work, this challenge extends well beyond making meaning of their work as their lives are stereotyped by facets including class, race or gender, and the work may be intractable—difficult, if not impossible, for a person to avoid doing it.

A new study from the University of Notre Dame considers meaning-making in the face of difficult dirty work by examining the "ragpickers" in Mumbai, India. These members of the lowest caste in Indian society live in the slums and dig through trash for food and necessities. And yet, they manage to embrace hope, destiny and survival.

"Intersectionality in Intractable Dirty Work: How Mumbai Ragpickers Make Meaning of Their Work and Lives" was published in the *Academy of Management Journal* from Dean Shepherd, the Ray and Milann Siegfried Professor of Entrepreneurship at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business.

"There are mountains of garbage outside the cities, and they pick through them to find materials that can be recycled for money," says Shepherd, who specializes in entrepreneurship under adversity. "So it actually has quite an effective function, and it also allows these people to earn an income."

The team conducted interviews with 46 ragpickers and 15 of their customers. These included 10 sorters who bought the garbage and sold it to other businesses and five middle managers who oversaw the remanufacturing of recycled materials. Further, they interviewed 12 nongovernmental organization workers involved in improving the welfare of those living in slums.

The team wanted to understand the mindset of ragpickers and how they live and care for their families. They discovered two contradictory notions that allowed them to not just survive, but also feel reasonably happy.

"The first one is a sense that they are powerless to change the situation," Shepherd said. "They may say, 'It's been this way forever. I can never get out. I don't blame myself for a situation I don't have the power to change.' But they also recognize some positivity. They know that because of their hard work their families are able to survive."

The study states, "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."

Shepherd was recognized in 2017 as the world's leading scholar in entrepreneurial research. He believes entrepreneurship often can provide a chance to survive.

"In other studies, we have asked entrepreneurs in the slums what they hope to achieve for themselves by creating their [business](#), and the answer often is 'nothing.' They are doing it for the next generation, so their kids can go to school and be educated. It takes a couple of generations to break poverty."

Interestingly, Shepherd says, the parents don't want to leave the slums. In a sense, they are comfortable. They have their families, social connections and their businesses.

"Normally, when you think about low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, businesses often fail. But in the slums, they actually do really well, mainly because there is a sense of community and strong

word of mouth. There are many reasons why those businesses can thrive."

"Our study shows that even people whose lives are objectively horrible can make [meaning](#) of their situation and be satisfied. We can all learn ways to similarly look at our lives through different lenses."

More information: Dean A. Shepherd et al, Intersectionality in Intractable Dirty Work: How Mumbai Ragpickers Make Meaning of Their Work and Lives, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2019.0125](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2019.0125)

Provided by University of Notre Dame

Citation: 'Ragpickers' of Mumbai use entrepreneurship to find meaning, study shows (2023, April 11) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-ragpickers-mumbai-entrepreneurship.html>

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