Article

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
2025, Vol. 54(6) 757–787

DOI: 10.1177/08912416251372455
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce
Sage

"More Money, More Problems": Poverty, Recognition, and the Reframing of Success in Iran

Manata Hashemi[1]

Abstract

This article examines how stigmatized service workers in Iran make claims to belonging and worth amid heightened structural insecurity. I highlight how workers use evaluative schema or "success narrative frames" revolving around interpretations of wealth, the rich, and success to counter their disadvantage and articulate new imaginings of success. I demonstrate how these discursive strategies minimize the importance of material wealth as the barometer of a meaningful life. Instead, workers' framings emphasize quality of life and benevolence, which serves as the basis of moral and/or aesthetic distinctions from the wealthy. Appeals to both dimensions lead workers to elevate their status and code culturally embedded competencies to indicate their success. In doing so, however, they paradoxically reproduce hierarchy and evaluation. These findings suggest how alternate framings of success can foster subjective well-being while also reifying boundaries and distrust.

Keywords

poverty, inequality, narrative frames, recognition, Iran

[1]University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

Corresponding Author:
Manata Hashemi, Department of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma, 719 Elm Avenue, Norman, OK 73019-0390, USA.
Email: hashemi@ou.edu

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an emerging body of sociological studies examining how recognition and dignity are extended among marginalized groups in the global North, in contexts characterized by increasing precarity. Yet how the poor assert self-worth and seek recognition has yet to be fully explored, especially in countries of the global South where precarious work and living have long been normalized (Munck 2013: 752). Particularly, we know little about how occupational stigma and (low) class standing shape the scripts of the self that the working poor use to claim cultural membership and de-privilege quantitative measures of well-being that are today increasingly becoming a fantasy for many living in both the global North and South.

This is especially of concern as there have been massive global spikes in inequality and economic decline in the contemporary era that have sparked a worldwide rise in mobilizations for recognition and social justice among some of the most disenfranchised (Chenoweth 2020; Lamont 2023). While these claims-making practices become most visible during moments of collective protest, the economically deprived also engage in daily, subtler struggles against distributive inequities, securing symbolic gains that strengthen their sense of belonging. Recent ethnographic work in Turkey and Uruguay, for example, suggests how embodied expressions of respectability and virtue among marginalized doormen, and the drawing of symbolic boundaries by squatters, respectively, help mitigate stigma and stabilize precarity (Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017; Bayurgil 2022), revealing recognition processes beyond loud collective mobilizations. However, more research is needed to show how recognition processes link with class dynamics, amplifying or mitigating the social distance between classes, especially in global contexts marked by prolonged socioeconomic and political precarity.

Iran offers a strategic case study. One of the most-sanctioned countries in the world, it has recently faced intensified "maximum pressure" sanctions that have deepened an already precarious economic environment. Many have been subsequently pushed into the mushrooming low-status minimum wage employment sector (Financial Tribune 2023a). In these roles, sustained exchanges with middle- and upper-income groups often heighten stigma, exposing workers to reproach and emotional assault (Hashemi 2018). Meanwhile, as the Islamic Republic itself increasingly embraces (neo) liberalizing policies, the state no longer considers the downtrodden, poor worker as its backbone as it had in the early revolutionary years, but rather those who possess the educational and technical skills to develop the nation (Morgana 2020). As success becomes increasingly equated with wealth and consumption, this has "paved the way for social dichotomies such as classy and

luxurious versus poor, cheap, or provincial-kitsch" – words applied both to consumer products and also to individuals and groups who can neither produce wealth nor be global consumers (Morgana 2020: 340). In this climate, where the glamorization of success and luxury cohabits with sanctions and worsening economic conditions, understanding how workers who are perceived to be "backward," "unclean," and "*dehati*" (provincial/villager) articulate their privilege and assert cultural membership reveals how devalued "others" quietly contest and reshape social hierarchies.

Building on in-depth interviews with stigmatized service workers in three Iranian provinces, this article argues that some workers use what I call *success narrative frames* to counter perceptions of inferiority and assert moral worth. Drawing on the sociological literature on framing (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004; Goffman 1974; Small 2004; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 2018), I define narrative frames as the way people articulate and understand certain social phenomena, shaping both their self-perceptions and motivations (Gonzales et al. 2022; Hughes 2018). Success narrative frames, in turn, are the interpretive schema by which some workers make sense of wealth, the economically privileged, and the good life. These frames help workers create a positive "sense of personhood" (Sherman 2007: 204) that counters the stigma or as Goffman (1963: 3) notes, "deeply discrediting" feature, linked to their low social status.

Drawing from a moral code defined by the "person of integrity" cultural ethic in Iran, these workers build on moral values associated with this code of conduct to create alternative understandings of cultural membership beyond one's socioeconomic worth. They do this by first critiquing affluence, suggesting that it brings more harm than good. Second, workers use this framing to question the moral entitlements of upper-income groups based on workers' perceptions of the latter's lack of benevolence and inability to enjoy life. These critiques allow workers to divert symbolic resources away from class dominants, ultimately hardening social boundaries by asserting their own moral advantages. In doing so, they begin deconstructing the classed social order, claiming their rightful place alongside – but often above – people typically considered "winners" in Iran's current economic environment.

It is beyond the scope of this article to determine whether the frames held among the select group of workers I interviewed permeate other groups in Iranian society and through different moments in the country's history. However, the findings presented here prompt consideration of how framings of success in settings marked by repression, the normalization of crisis, and structural insecurity can serve to foster subjective well-being while also reifying social boundaries and distrust.

Recognition and Poverty

Broadly, recognition is the process through which individuals and groups are affirmed as worthy and afforded cultural membership (Honneth 2014; Lamont 2018; see also Taylor 1995). In their debate on the topic, Fraser and Honneth (2004) expanded the intersectional nature of inequality by emphasizing the linkages between recognition and distributive justice, the latter entwined with claims to dignity and worth (see also Sayer 2005).

Mobilizing Honneth and Fraser (2003) and bringing the study of recognition beyond social and political philosophy into the sociology of inequality, Lamont (2018) stresses the need to reduce "recognition gaps" or "disparities of cultural membership between groups" (Lamont 2018: 423). These disparities have accelerated in recent decades globally due to growing income inequality and precarious employment (Bayurgil 2022; Machado-Borges 2015; Pearce 2011). In these conditions, cultural membership often belongs to the middle and upper classes, who claim status through consumption, while the poor become the "collateral casualties of consumerism" (Bauman 2007).

Lamont (2018) emphasizes how economic marginalization fuels misrecognition that amplifies inequality (see also Schweiger 2020; Sayer 2005). However, systematic empirical analyses of how the *poor* use narrative framings to lay claim to recognition and worth remain largely unaddressed in the current sociological literature on recognition. Recent sociological work, for instance, has examined discursive responses to ethno-racial stigma (Lamont et al. 2018), evolving historical narratives of stigmatized groups in the United States (those with HIV/AIDS, African Americans, and those labeled as obese) and their consequences for destigmatizing processes (Clair et al. 2016), and how the disability community leverages established frames to lay claim to social and economic resources (Foster et al. 2023). These studies, however, pay less attention to poverty as a mediating factor.

Alternatively, the broader sociological study of poverty and inequality in the Global North has extensively documented how stigmatized lower-class groups engage in open struggles for dignity through diverse strategies: following the self-presentation rules of the "code of the street" (Anderson 1999), creating and disseminating drill music that capitalizes on their stigmatized identities (Stuart 2020), manipulating their bodies to emulate monеyed others and establish visibility (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008), downplaying the importance of traditional indicators of status like higher education (Simons et al. 2018), or performing social mobility to assert a middle-class identity (Ray 2017). The "dignity of work" literature further examines how formal, low-status workers attempt to contest their marginality by valorizing

their labor and sometimes deflecting stigma onto others like the unemployed or racially sidelined (see, for instance, Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Hodson 2001; Cobb Sennett 1972; Thiel 2007). As Newman (1999) argues, these "moral defenses" allow the working poor to underscore their identities as members of the gainfully employed workforce, warding off stigma and asserting their respectability and conformity to mainstream values.

However, comparatively less attention has been paid in all of these studies to how narrative frames, "lay morality" (Sayer 2005), and "intersubjective meaning-making" (Lamont et al. 2014) or what Lamont et al. (2014) term "cultural processes" sustain moral differences *between* groups and reproduce social inequality while simultaneously mitigating misrecognition (but see, e.g., Jarness and Flemmen 2019; Purser 2009; Sherman 2009). As Yu (2016) has argued, studies of how workers construct dignity in the workplace have also focused less on how these workers draw on moral frames and valued social roles to assert recognition and belonging, instead predominately highlighting workplace-based strategies to assert a sense of self-worth. As Hashemi (2019) has elaborated, in their dominant focus on formal institutions in the Global North, these latter studies further do not consider how recognition claims operate among informal laborers or precariously employed workers who predominate in countries of the Global South (but see Hammer and Ness 2021).

Empirical studies in the Global South are only beginning to answer these questions. Research by Millar (2018) in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, shows how impoverished garbage reclaimers define the good life in ways that go beyond a narrow focus on the "economic, pragmatic, or compensatory" to reveal profound desires for caring, self-transformation, and enjoyment (p. 11). In Cairo, Mittermaier (2019) finds that some poor service workers articulate "poverty as a pious virtue" (p. 119) implicitly framing wealth as a "burden and a trial" (p. 112) and conceiving of the act of giving as indicative of one's value in this world. In southeastern Brazil, Machado-Borges (2015) documents how unskilled workers (e.g., waste pickers, cleaners, and sanitation workers) don uniforms to assert honesty, discipline, and respectable visibility in public interactions marked by mistrust. Building on Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts"—the subtle, offstage resistances deployed by the poor to critique the power of the dominant—Pun shows how Chinese women factory workers deploy embodied forms of resistance—including gossip, laughter, and screams—to resist patriarchy and capitalist authority (Pun 2005: 156). These "ordinary weapons" serve as self-help strategies to protect workers' interests in the face of oppression (Scott 1985: xvi). Similarly, Husain (2024) finds that stigmatized, working-class frontline women in Pakistan (i.e., policewomen, airline attendants, and health workers) navigate workplace

stigma and claim dignity through discursive and performative strategies that both challenge and reinforce gender norms.

In presenting how marginalized workers respond to exclusion, this body of scholarship enables us to understand "precarity as part of the broader process of dispossession" (Munck 2013: 757) that simultaneously facilitates the creation of "alternative imaginations of work, rights, and life" (Lee and Kofman 2012: 388) that can mitigate hardship. These studies, however, do not explicitly engage with how recognition claims can shape sociality in developmental contexts marked by prolonged material and social inequality (Ehsani and Keshavarzian 2018). In particular, while they highlight the various strategies marginalized groups deploy to assert belonging and a sense of self-worth in the midst of oppression, they do not assess how these strategies can also heighten class acrimony. In the rest of this article, I focus on stigmatized working poor men and women in Iran to examine how they reconfigure dominant understandings of what it means to "win" in Iran today.

Background

While the Islamic Republic has historically exalted the poor and espoused a social justice platform, after the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the state embarked on a developmental drive that emphasized market competition, production, and consumerism. The state's developmental policies came to value and promote middle-class living standards – built on the mantra of "produce and consume" – to shape the Republic and integrate Iran into the global market economy; newspapers and official discourse touted the idea of success belonging to workers who worked hard, had "impressive career growth," and the entrepreneurial and technical skills to boost domestic production – not to those who were undereducated and struggling to survive on less than minimum wage (Morgana 2020: 340).

State discourses of the money-oriented "winner" further began to transform social relations on the ground, as the winning individual and his lifestyle were demarcated as *ba kelas* (classy) while the poor were often typecast as *dehati* (villager) and *bi kelas* (unrefined) (Elling and Rezakhani 2015). An achievement-oriented culture took shape that not only discursively excluded those unable to become successful producers and consumers but also actively stigmatized them (Morgana 2020). As Iran's economy has steadily declined in the face of maximum pressure sanctions (Fardoust 2020), more people have had to turn to low-paid, low-status work to make ends meet (Financial Tribune 2023a), singling out an even wider swath of the population as "losers."

Nevertheless, while wealth has increasingly become a stand-in for one's social status today, a particular historical code of "existential ethics" also circulates in Iran – that of the *javanmard* or "man of integrity" (Adelkhah 2000). This century's old ethical code of conduct in pre-Islamic and Islamic history has helped shape collective identity and national belonging as well as define individual subjectivities (Rahimi 2018). In Iran, the practices attached to this "ethic of 'gentlemanly' behavior" (Olszewska 2013: 19) have adapted to shifting sociopolitical circumstances over the decades.

In the prerevolutionary period, the man of integrity displayed courage and self-sacrifice, and was devoted to the vulnerable and oppressed; after the revolution, the *javanmard* was also concerned with "the rule of law and good citizenship, suggesting the expansion of state sovereignty into once-private realms" (Olszewska 2013: 19). In the schooling system, students are taught the importance of following the model of the pahlavan or "moral exemplar who is just, fair, self-abnegating and kind to the weak" rather than the "mere champion" or *qahraman* (Chehabi 1995: 48). The modern-day man of integrity is thus a moral, "social being," one who's committed to others in public and simultaneously respectable in private (Adelkhah 2000). Today, as Adelkhah (2000) notes, this ethic further encourages self-reflexivity – in part expressed through "care for oneself" and "attention to one's appearance," which further shape sociality (p. 155).

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic, which Adelkhah (2000) terms the "Republic of the *javanmard* (46)," has built on the values associated with the *javanmardi* ethic to develop virtuous citizens, preserve the Islamic character of the nation, and advance the country (Adelkhah 2000; Hashemi 2020a). The hardworking, generous, humble, and self-sacrificial person embodies the ideal citizen of Iran (see also Sadeghi 2009), a chivalrous individual who concerned with both self-preservation and self-reflexivity as well as the well-being of his family and community (Rahimi 2018). Underscoring moral qualities that everyone should have, the modern *javanmardi* ethic in this sense has become more gender inclusive to also encompass women who are increasingly visible in public life as social beings (Olszewska 2013; see also Shahrokni 2020). Expanding the vocabulary of the good, modern citizen beyond the "winning" individual who is the "backbone of production" and the nation (Khamenei 2023) to include the virtuous social being who both gives to others and pursues self-improvement, the state views individual morality and material success as mutually inclusive.

But material success has eluded members of the working poor. In turn, as I found, some implicitly mobilize the cultural toolkits at their disposal – in this case, the values associated with being a "person of integrity" – to uphold their moral principles as a sign of their worth and to counter dominant

material definitions of what it means to "win" in Iran today (see also Hashemi 2018). They create an alternative success metric that revolves around moral competencies that many claim only they – or a select few admired others – possess. Rather than explicitly reference *javanmardi* by name, these workers instead underscore practices of humility, autonomy, and compassion associated with the modern-day "person of integrity." If we haven't succeeded economically, their statements suggest, then at least we have these moral qualities. These counternarratives of worth place stress on "being" (e.g., being self-sufficient, virtuous, and generous) and stand in opposition to standards of success held in regard by members of middle- and upper-income groups in Iran that elevate material advantage ("having") above all else (Lamont 2019; see also Hashemi 2019).

Fieldwork and Research Methodology

The data from this study are part of a larger ongoing ethnographic project that I started in 2017 examining the experiences and sense-making strategies of stigmatized service workers in various cities across Iran. Between 2017 and 2022, I conducted interviews and ethnographic observations in the cities of Sari, Babol, Khorramabad, and Semnan. Before this study, I had conducted participant observation fieldwork in Iran over the course of twelve years, which facilitated rapport and trust with various community members and provided me with the entrée I needed for this project. My ethnographic observations in Iran over the years also highlighted the significance of values circulating among various communities, including diligence, responsibility, and virtuosity. These values underlie some people's pursuit of status recognition, informing their aspirations and motivations for action. These observations provided further validity to the interview findings and helped elucidate the main themes of this study.

For this article, I draw on twenty-four open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted with low-wage service workers earning at or below the minimum wage at the time of the interview. The interviews took place between 2017 and 2019 and again from 2021 to 2022 in the cities of Sari and Babol in Mazandaran Province (north), Garmsar in Semnan Province (north-central), and Khorramabad in Lorestan Province (west). In moving beyond the tendency in contemporary studies of Iran to solely highlight the capital city of Tehran, this article demonstrates how people from a broader cross-section of the country respond to shifting material and social dynamics. Increasing rural migration to provincial cities over the past decade (World Bank 2023), driven by growing rural poverty, makes Iran's provinces particularly noteworthy to examine. I selected Mazandaran, Semnan, and Lorestan because they capture

the regional diversity found across Iran. Mazandaran, one of the northern most provinces, is one of the country's wealthiest regions whose economy relies heavily on agriculture though recent water shortages have limited the amount of water needed for agricultural and household use (Financial Tribune 2023b). In contrast, the western province of Lorestan in the Zagros mountains is among Iran's most disadvantaged provinces. Historically home to fertile plains that have lent themselves to pastoral nomadism and agriculture, Lorestan's agricultural sector has also suffered from water shortages. It has been one of the "hardest hit" provinces by climate-induced internal migration (Rokna 2019), with the highest out-migration rate (10.41 percent) in the country between 2011 and 2016 (Mahmoudian and Mahmoudiani 2018). Semnan lies economically between Lorestan and Mazandaran (World Bank 2023). Located across the Alborz Mountains in the north and bordered by the Kavir Desert in the south, Semnan's varied climate has led to the development of agriculture, industrial manufacturing, and mining as the mainstays of its economy. While poverty has nearly doubled in the province in recent years (World Bank 2023), in 2023, Semnan had the lowest unemployment rate (6.4 percent) in Iran (Financial Tribune 2023c). These provinces thus offer a compelling comparative axis for examining how varying social geographies and structural conditions shape workers' perceptions. Notably, however, despite these regional differences, my interlocutors articulated strikingly similar success narrative frames, suggesting that local socioeconomic variations do not necessarily translate into divergent frameworks for evaluating self and society. Rather, the shared scripts workers draw on may reflect broader cultural currents and national dynamics that inform wide-ranging social changes.

With the exception of one participant I initially approached myself, I recruited the respondents for this study through local contacts during participant observation fieldwork. These local contacts – both men and women – had long-standing ties in the cities where the research took place. Most were employers who facilitated my entrée to the restaurant, assisted living facility, and homes where I met with my interlocuters. In one case, a long-time resident of a neighborhood frequented by waste pickers served as a valuable point of connection. In another instance, an acquaintance of my interlocuter introduced us. These contacts vouched for my trustworthiness among study participants, which produced greater rapport and facilitated the research partnership (Weiss 1994).

Given that most of these contacts were employers, I was mindful that participants might have perceived pressure to be interviewed or feared potential negative repercussions if they opted out. To address this, I ensured that workers were aware that their participation was completely voluntary and that they would face no consequences if they chose not to participate. After our interviews, many

subsequently expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate and even described the interview process as cathartic.

This article recounts the experiences of thirteen women and eleven men ranging in age from twenty-three to seventy-eight years. All my respondents, apart from one who was retired, were working at the time of our interview. The majority of my respondents were in their thirties and forties; three were in their twenties and one was in his seventies. However, despite these variations, nearly all my respondents deployed similar success narrative frames. In instances where this was not the case, I highlight them in my findings.

Most men (seven) worked as waste pickers while three were janitors and one an assisted living facility aide. The women's jobs were more varied in scope: two of the women were employed as domestic workers, two worked as janitors in a restaurant while one worked as a janitor in a hotel, four as assisted living facility aides, three were employed as prep cooks, and one worked as a waiter. While these jobs are vital for the economy, they have varying degrees of physical and moral "taint" due to their differing intensity of association with garbage and waste (physical) and/or servility to others (moral) (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). All the jobs, however, are held in low regard by the more privileged due to their low occupational prestige (see also Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Indeed, descriptions of character assassinations, willful disregard of their presence by members of the public, and feelings of inferiority in front of middle- and upper- income people peppered many service workers' narratives of their daily working lives and subjectivities. The highly visible nature of their "dirty work" (Hughes 1958) also places some workers – like the waste pickers I came to know – at risk of outright criminalization as they are often scapegoated for thefts by the public.

All participants were ethnically Iranian and Muslim though there were variations in educational background: the majority had either an elementary or middle school education while some were high school dropouts. Only four of my interlocuters had high school diplomas and none had a postsecondary degree.

Many respondents, due in part to their limited educational backgrounds, were resigned to the likelihood that their jobs would not improve (see also Sallaz 2017). Waste pickers, many of whom had started as day laborers, turned to waste reclaiming in hopes of better and more stable pay – an assumption that was quickly upended when international sanctions and the devaluation of the Iranian rial over the course of my fieldwork reduced the value of recyclable materials.

Although I was not able to follow-up with all respondents and fully trace their "navigation strategies" (Sallaz 2017), participant observation across several years offered insight. For example, all of the women I interviewed in

this sample who worked at the restaurant I frequented eventually quit – likely a testament to both the high turnover common in the restaurant service industry and the spousal or familial support they had that could buffer them through bouts of unemployment. This particular restaurant, as well, had high staff turnover, driven in large part by tensions between workers and management, suggesting that decisions to leave were shaped more by individual dissatisfaction and less by gender dynamics (contra Sallaz 2017). I could not confirm if the living facility aides I interviewed remained in their positions, though their employer claimed most had, citing a workplace culture of "family" he cultivated. One hospital janitor I knew stayed on, despite being sidelined and disrespected by higher-ups, motivated by the insurance and benefits tied to his formal contract. Likewise, the retiree I interviewed had remained with the same company for over two decades, likely due to both his formal employment status and self-reported positive relations with management.

My interviews lasted approximately thirty to one hundred minutes and occurred during breaks in my interlocuters' workdays. The interviews were conducted at a location of the respondent's own choice: they were mostly conducted in either my own home or respondents' workplaces. The interviews covered various topics, including respondents' definitions of success, their views of others and themselves, and their aspirations. Assuring participants that their identities would be completely anonymized helped me to secure their consent. I have used pseudonyms and occasionally changed identifying details to further protect their confidentiality.

All interviews were conducted in Persian, recorded, translated, and transcribed into English. I coded and analyzed the interview transcripts using ATLAS.ti. The analytical themes that emerged from these codes, namely (1) workers' suspicions of wealth, (2) their disparagement of the rich, and (3) their self-perceptions of success led me to identify counternarratives of success among workers which I came to term "success narrative frames." I found no discernable differences in these findings in terms of gender. However, the limited sample size of this study makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions for the wider population.

The quotes I use represent broader patterns in the data and are among the most evocative. While the small number of men and women interviewed for this study is certainly not representative of the entire working poor population in Iran, their responses illuminate some of the effects of long-standing socioeconomic instability on people's adaptive strategies and reflect broader patterns I have found in my ongoing fieldwork.

Throughout the interviews, I was acutely aware that even though I shared the same Iranian background as my respondents, my socioeconomic class reflected that of those individuals that my respondents often critiqued. This

proved to be the most challenging aspect of the interviews, as I did not want participants to feel that I, like many of those whom they encounter daily, regarded them with pity or scorn. By being upfront with my positionality as a researcher, I was able to signal my professionalism (see also Chubin 2020). Simultaneously, I did not want to give the impression that I was "showing off" (a complaint that many of my respondents had of middle- and upper-income groups). I therefore dressed (and acted) quite modestly (see also Chubin 2020), placing my interlocuters at ease and ensuring that I was not there to judge or evaluate them. As a woman, strategically managing my appearance – by wearing modest clothing (and often the hijab) and minimal makeup, especially in front of male interlocuters – allowed me to convey restraint and signal respectability, an important consideration given the more conservative leanings of many of the men I interviewed (see also Mazzei and O'Brien 2009). This gender-sensitive approach further enabled me to quickly establish rapport during our interviews.

My insider status – as an Iranian born in Iran, fluent in Persian without a discernable foreign accent, and well-versed in Iranian customs – was crucial in gaining access to sites and attuning to cultural cues such as gestures, phrases, and implied meanings that might elude an outsider. Yet, at the same time, I was simultaneously an outsider, having been largely raised and educated abroad and from a different urban milieu and class background than my interlocuters. This hybridity meant that I could not claim an "authentic insider's perspective" (Narayan 1993: 672) and, at times, I felt like a "cultural alien" (Oriola and Haggerty 2012). I did not always immediately grasp taken-for-granted references, which made me vigilant in asking follow-up questions and taking detailed fieldnotes after each interview to capture subtle, but vital details of these interactions (see also Andrews and Shahrokni 2014).

Despite these differences, I was able to create a trusting research partnership by fully listening and being respectful (Weiss 1994), conveying my empathy for their struggles as respondents opened up during the interviews. Despite personal questions that included inquiries about their economic situation, work, and feelings of exclusion, participants disclosed intimate details of their lives. I found that, ultimately, my status as a socioeconomic and community "outsider" coupled with my professional status made it easier for respondents to reveal their intimate worries and experiences, without concern that word would get around in the tightknit communities in which they worked and lived. My professional background and outsider status also elicited a certain respect from interlocuters that made them more willing to speak to me in the first place. To further place my interviewees at ease and deploy an "expert-as-informant protocol" (Gonzales et al. 2022: 1285; Dexter 2006), I used their narratives as a cue to guide the questions I asked throughout the interviews.

Findings: Success Narrative Frames

I find that across the provinces of Mazandaran, Semnan, and Lorestan, socially subordinated men and women who are marginalized by virtue of their occupation and class "accomplish status" (Oselin and Barber 2019) by using "class-based discursive symbolism" (Thiel 2007: 227). In their narrative framings, class acrimony – visible in their distrust of material wealth and those who hold it – ultimately enables workers to claim symbolic capital (i.e., moral worth) that make them feel not only "morally righteous [to the former] by association" (Oselin and Barber 2019: 219) but also successful. This section examines how this process incrementally unfolds, depicting how suspicions of wealth form the basis of evaluative judgments of the rich that lead workers to see themselves and their lives as better (i.e., displaying "person of integrity" qualities), ultimately coding *javanmardi* characteristics such as caretaking, virtue, and self-sufficiency as constitutive of their own success.

"More Money, More Problems"

One common success narrative frame that many workers use to counter their subordinate status and legitimize their worth is to disparage the lives of some of their employers, clients, and better-off acquaintances. In doing so, they reveal a profound distrust of material wealth while heightening the importance of values including life enjoyment, compassion, and morality – values they assert are essential in maintaining one's sense of self.

Ronak is a forty-two-year-old domestic laborer in the city of Khorramabad. For the past fifteen years, she has worked for the same upper-class family, tending to the family's ailing grandfather while shouldering heavy housework that has taken a toll on her body. She struggles to make ends meet, using her limited salary to care for her household and help her elderly parents who can no longer work. As she sees it, she "wants to live comfortably, not be sick, not have stress, not have anyone be upset [with me]." Ronak is adamant, though, that these do not come from having more money, but having "a life":

> Some say, so and so is a doctor; look at his life; it's better than mine! But my work has led me to know everyone. I used to work at a doctor's house. He's famous. He's a surgeon and his wife is also a doctor. I told them, "I feel sorry for you." I said, "You don't have a life. You don't have fun; you don't even sit and talk with each other. You don't even have time to drink tea together. I said, what kind of money-making is this? I never want to be like you."

Ronak's assertion of wealth as a burden that sacrifices one's ability to take pleasure in life highlights the anxieties in some people's perceptions of

wealth and their contempt for the lifestyles of rich others. In using the term "I feel sorry for you," Ronak implicitly situates herself above her employer, indicating that her life – perhaps economically inferior to doctors – is socially and emotionally richer. As Ronak stated, "There's money-making" in the surgeon's life, but no life-making. In Ronak's view, material wealth creates a life of misery where one must consistently work long hours to achieve a lifestyle that they can never truly enjoy.

Like Ronak, most workers I interviewed expressed ambivalence about economic success. Money, they admitted, is necessary to meet one's needs in life, but they are not, according to a young waste picker named Saber, "after being in the upper class." One respondent – a janitor in his late thirties – explicitly stated how he did want to become wealthy. Still, even he didn't hesitate to criticize rich people who he felt didn't help others, looked at people like him "from above," or didn't know how to live life. For most, though, the goal wasn't class climbing at all. As some emphasized, "money isn't everything." Rather, they desired just enough to meet their needs. Having "too much," some said, creates liabilities. "The more money you have, the more problems," asserted Mojdeh, an aide at an assisted living facility in Semnan. "You have more worries." Sara, a restaurant cook, went further in emphasizing wealth's more harmful side when I asked her if she ever wanted to be in a position where she was the boss:

> I'm afraid I'll lose myself. You know how it is. If someone doesn't have money and gets to some place, some people lose themselves. I want to be at the level that I am. What if something happens to me [if I have a lot of money]?

There is a distinct suspicion of upward mobility ("What if something happens to me?") that motivates Sara's desire to stay in place even though she articulated later in the interview how many people in Iran today are economically "unfortunate." Sara's misgivings speak to a broader concern among some workers that money creates more trouble than it is worth. To move up the ladder, Sara insists, would be to renounce her true self.

More interestingly, Sara's comments allude to a notion of generational wealth as opposed to newly made wealth. Sara cautions how economic success for a poor person results in a loss of self, suggesting, as other respondents did, that the positive aspects of wealth are the purview of those who already have the capital reserves and subsequent dispositions to know how to oversee their money. In this sense, it is not simply one's class position (Friedman 2013), but the duration of one's embeddedness within that position that shapes how one might respond to wealth (Bourdieu 1997, 1984). In critiquing the consequences of upward mobility, Sara thus implicitly creates a divide between the elite,

suggesting that some, namely, those who are "old money" are entitled to the trappings of wealth because they have the know-how to manage moral self-preservation. In contrast, others, like the "new rich" who start out poor "lose" themselves when faced with the temptations of abundance. This latter outcome, Sara believes, might happen to her if she is faced with the same mobility prospects.[1]

Other workers echoed Sara's assertions, reporting more broadly that money can change someone (regardless of their background), causing them to forget their past and/or become pretentious and uncaring. In these instances, workers also allude to their own experiences with the more privileged who ignore or criticize them or who, according to thirty-six-year-old Sia, a waste picker in Khorramabad, "bother people" by "making noises" in the evenings just to show off. Sia relayed some of these sentiments as he spoke to me of his struggles to provide for his family of four with the meager income he makes through reclaiming. Describing how people insult him due to his line of work, Sia stated resolutely that "wealth brings more bad than good. You become more enticed by the devil; you become worse morally." This is why, he explained, "You have to judge to see if you can control yourself." Admitting that money is important, he was nonetheless wary of material advancement, intuiting that it requires self-discipline, so people do not "[see] themselves as higher than others."

A preoccupation with the negative – and at times, sinister – impacts of wealth speaks to the internal tensions that exist as workers like Sara and Sia struggle to reconcile their present economic circumstances with their deep normative commitments to values of humility and compassion – values they feel material prosperity can compromise. Workers' evaluations of certain members of the upper class serve as cautionary tales of the corrupting influence of money or the mutually exclusive nature of wealth and understanding. As such, they conclude that real poverty is associated with a lack of cultural competence ("making noises") or moral bankruptcy rather than pecuniary disadvantage. In both instances, the wealthy individual offers little effectiveness to society. As Nahid, a forty-year-old nursing home aide in Khorramabad soberly recounted, "[some wealthy people] have [money] but they don't use it, neither for themselves nor for others." These people, she concluded, are poorer than those who are "really needy."

An emphasis on the uselessness of some upper-class members, in turn, defies normative perceptions of wealth. As Bauman (2007) notes, it is the stigmatized poor that are often seen by the public as those "without a role, making no useful contribution to the lives of the rest, and in principle without redemption" (p. 30). In this view, today's poor cannot gain the cultural membership that comes naturally to those "winning" individuals with means in

Iran. Alternatively, by appealing to the latter's moral poverty, inability to properly use wealth, or lack of cultural proficiency, some workers question the benefit of greater prosperity ("more money, more problems") while drawing attention to "moral and existential questions of what it means to live well" (Millar 2018: 11). In the next section, I detail how workers use these critiques of wealth to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and the rich, distancing themselves from the latter by claiming symbolic resources such as happiness or cultural capital that are often assumed to only come with higher class standing.

Claiming Moral Worth

Negative framings of wealth formed the basis of moral distinctions my respondents used to assert their own moral worth. Using "hierarchical symbolism" (Thiel 2007: 244), workers explicitly frame *themselves* above members of the middle- and upper-classes in terms of both their quality of life (which also encompasses care for oneself) and benevolence (see also Hashemi 2018, 2019). Narrative appeals to both dimensions enable workers to implicitly affirm their own worth as moral, social beings, while refracting aspects of the stigma that they face onto those who condemn them. In doing so, they create an alternative hierarchy of worth based on moral logics rather than class-based distinctions (Gonzales et al. 2022; Hashemi 2018; Sherman 2007).

First, as suggested by Ronak's comments in the previous section, some workers draw from their observations of the wealthy to emphasize their own quality of life and their capacity to live better than well-heeled others, recreating an "us versus them" dichotomy. Here, a wariness of having excess money is not mutually exclusive from their desire to live well. In these instances, workers emphasize how they only want enough to meet their needs.

Nahid, for example, described how wealth, rather than defined by abundance, is instead demarcated by a person's ability to enjoy life with the money one has

> A wealthy person is wealthy when they can make use of their money. Like, now me, for example. With the money I make – maybe others are making three times more than me – but sorry, I'm using the money I make, I'm having fun. I'm trying to live with this [money] in the best way. For example, I'm meeting my child's needs with the money I'm making. But you'll see someone who has money who doesn't dress in one chic polished outfit. In my opinion, putting money in the bank is useless.

For Nahid, spending money is a means by which she can "have fun" and points to "forms of living and relationality" (Millar 2018: 92). Spending is a

mechanism by which Nahid can secure her position as a provider and "work out how to live well within a fragile social world" (Millar 2018: 109). In her narrative, Nahid challenges the exclusionary dominant frame surrounding wealth – that it is solely linked to money – by countering that people are only wealthy when they spend their money to benefit all (including themselves), thereby implicitly positioning *herself* at the same level as the typically "wealthy." But Nahid goes further to situate herself as better and more successful than the rich by stating that unlike those who just "put money in the bank," she uses her income to provide for herself and her children "in the best way." Paradoxically, saving money by "putting it in the bank" indicates one's failure and ineffectiveness.

Nahid's framing of wealth further underscores the importance of appearances in living the good life and shapes how she presents herself in public (as someone who is "chic" and "polished"). Here, morality is deeply entangled with aesthetic concerns: those who have the money, but do not dress in a nice outfit are not just seen as lacking style, but they are also morally suspect for hoarding rather than using their wealth. As Jarness and Flemmen (2019) note, "moral and aesthetic deficiencies are thus seen as two sides of the same coin and thus work together to reinforce the distaste of others" (p. 180).

Like Nahid, others explicitly mentioned how attending to one's appearances, despite one's material disadvantage, is key to being dignified. Turning normative assumptions on their head, they went on to describe how this value of self-reflexivity was lost on some of their better-off counterparts. Ahmad, for instance, who had his hair styled with gel and wore two distinct silver and turquoise rings on the day I met him, elaborated how *he* takes care of his appearance in contrast to higher status others:

> When I go to the waste depot, I have a set of clothes for changing. My work clothes are separate. My house clothes, for when I come and go, are separate . . . A human's reputation is with his appearance in my opinion . . . Three or four years ago, I would go to work [looking] so nice that a woman [I bought recyclables from] asked me, "Are these your work clothes?" I said "yes," and she said, "No way. [My husband] is an office employee [but] he's sloppy, he doesn't wear nice clothes." Whatever job, if a person wants to care of himself, he will. If not, there's no difference between a waste picker, an engineer, or a laborer.

Pointing out that some in a higher socioeconomic position do not tend to their appearances like he does, Ahmad's comment reveals how economic standing does not dictate one's reputation within their community. How a person takes care of themselves determines the respect and recognition they receive. "Life," he said, "is like this. You must know what to do." As Ahmed's narrative suggests, his meticulous attention to his public presentation

indicates his adherence to the modern-day "person of integrity" ethic: unlike some of the privileged folks around him, *he* possesses both the ability to care for himself and knowledge of "what to do" in life. Having a dignified life and gaining membership in society, both Ahmed and Nahid's comments suggest, is not limited to those with money, but those who have cultural proficiency and know how to live life like they do.

In calling out the moral code of rich people, Nahid and Ahmad are also making a claim about themselves: *internal* characteristics like self-respect, propriety, and self-care are shown in their continual *outward* display, amplifying the dominant logic in Iran that links a person's worth to their appearances (see also Hashemi 2020a). So even as Nahid and Ahmad emphasize the importance of (interior) moral values, living out those values still traps them in the dominant culture of externality. Nahid and Ahmad prioritize people's relational ethics over material wealth, and yet inadvertently place value on their outward display, reflecting a contradiction in the moral calculus of their self-presentation.

Embedded in this framing, too, is a tacit legitimization of class hierarchy (Sherman 2007). Dress becomes a form of embodied cultural capital that, according to Ahmad, differentiates the engineer from the waste picker and the laborer. An engineer, Ahmad suggests, is *supposed* to dress well. Likewise, Nahid's appraisals hinge on the assumption that a person with money *should* dress in a "chic" and "polished" way. Without these visible cues, everyone would collapse into sameness, erasing the aesthetic distinctions that structure inequality (Bourdieu 1984). Therefore, even as Ahmad and others display their own know-how in living life, they still expect the rich to perform *their* class position, reinforcing the very hierarchies they critique.

Yet living life is not solely about class performance; it is also measured by one's benevolence – the second axis along which workers socially distance themselves from members of the middle-upper classes. Most of my interviewees either underscored how they would help others if they had a lot of money or described instances of their generosity. In doing so, many of these same workers constructed themselves as superior to perceived arrogant upwardly mobile individuals whom they said exhibited little concern for the welfare of others (Hashemi 2018). As Bashir, a waste picker in his forties in Khorramabad, put it:

> [I don't like] the guy who until yesterday was at my level and now that his situation is good, he's snobby. He now feels that he's first, that no one else exists on this earth . . . [There are] people – our neighbors – whose circumstances are so good they don't know how to use their money these days [given all the hardships people are facing]. If I were in their place and had this much money, I would give so much to the poor that God would say "Enough."

Bashir's emphasis on knowing how to use one's wealth – a sentiment expressed by Nahid to describe the necessity of productive circulation and symbolic consumption (Millar 2018) – is employed in this framing to convey the need for altruism.[2] While admitting in the interview that it is difficult for him to save and meet basic needs given rising costs, he highlights how only divine intervention could stop his selfless, chivalrous generosity to others if he did have more money. In doing so, Bashir asserts his moral dominance while critiquing those he knows who fell into sudden prosperity but who, as he stated elsewhere in the interview, "have a chip on their shoulder" and put themselves "first." Bashir's insistence on their snobbery alludes to the fact that his critiques of the more privileged hinge on their active dismissal of those they feel are beneath them. As with Nahid and Ahmad, the focus here is likewise on the externalization of virtue through visible performance – though in this case, it is expressed through acts of giving rather than aesthetic self-fashioning.

In their success narrative frames of the better off, workers like Bashir and Nahid capitalize on the assumed standoffish, tightfisted, or incompetent nature of moneyed others to justify their own dominance while simultaneously defining what it means to visibly live well. Money, they insist, insofar as it does not guarantee that one will not change for the worse, is not the panacea for all problems. While many workers admit that rising costs in Iran have made life difficult, they highlight how they simply want just enough to be self-sufficient. Indeed, many worry about losing their sense of self and empathy towards others if they were to become rich. Representing themselves as morally superior, these men and women appeal to an alternative hierarchy of merit based on moral values like generosity and self-reflexivity (through care of oneself and attention to appearances). In doing so, they counter their economic disadvantage but ultimately legitimize stratification by excluding those *they* consider morally unfit (Sherman 2009).

Redefining Success

In redefining themselves as higher ranking than moneyed elites, workers disrupt narratives that have become more commonplace in Iran over the past two decades that narrowly equate the good life with one's socioeconomic standing. Aspirations for "a simple life," in the words of Saber, devoid of the trappings of wealth like "a foreign car or a convertible," reflect, as Germani (1966: 379–80) demonstrated nearly six decades ago, new, more "psychologically and socially relevant" definitions of mobility that consider the "possibilities actually available" and the meanings people attach to their (circumscribed) realities (pp. 132–3). Workers' devaluation of wealth implicates the prevailing social hierarchy of worth that privileges the economic

"winner" as an exemplar of success. My interviewees overwhelmingly held narrative frames of success as separate from having material wealth and, in turn, most saw themselves as successful.

Challenging the idea that greater economic security leads people to be less concerned with material indicators as a benchmark of success (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Nugin and Onken 2010), most respondents downgraded the importance of money in their definitions of achievement. This indicates that prolonged conditions of economic *insecurity* may also lead some to create, as Germani (1966) argues, alternative ranking systems that provide a "consolation prize" that can act as a "compensatory reward – something instead of nothing in an imperfect world" (pp. 132–3). Among my respondents, these compensatory prizes build on their emphasis on the values of benevolence and quality of life to highlight associated person of integrity virtues such as caretaking, the ability to reach one's (realistic) goals, moral uprightness, resilience, and autonomy. Rather than distinct, these categories often overlap to inform workers' assessments of their lives and place within the broader social order.

Ahmed, for instance, downplayed the possession of money stating that his work simply allowed him to "have something in [his] pocket" so that he could take his family out occasionally and be on his own feet, thereby "at least getting [him] out of shame." So long as people know that he "goes to work in the morning and comes home at night, [they'll say] at least he works, he's not unemployed." Ahmed stressed instead his good paternal relations with his children and his ability to be there and care for his family:

> Some guy is wealthy, but has problems at home with his wife, his children, or internally. What's the money going to do for him? Wealth doesn't bring happiness. Some days, with these two kids I have, I play with them so much I forget I don't have [money] . . . You're successful when you reach your goal. Just the fact that I'm serving my family, I'm successful.

In his framing of the good life, Ahmed notes several intersecting qualities, namely caretaking, reaching one's goals, and being morally upright (i.e., not having problems "internally"). In highlighting his success, Ahmed draws a sharp distinction between himself and the rich person who has presumably failed due to his "problems" and inability to "serve" his family like he does. In a context where economic prosperity is increasingly seen as a fantasy, reaching smaller, more realistic goals like "serving" one's family facilitates particular perceptions of one's place that undermine respondents' assumed subordinate status. Saber, for instance, reported that since he "reached that thing he thought about," he is successful. As he detailed, "I thought about

having a motorcycle, I bought one. I would first go around the streets with a wagon. I'm working, trying, and reaching my goals."

In underscoring their ability to manage their lives, many respondents also stress their grit and resilience in making it independently, reflecting the emphasis on self-sacrifice that defines the modern *javanmard*. Equating autonomy with success, Arezoo, an assisted living facility aide in Semnan, explained how she has been able to work under the most difficult circumstances to "make [her] life" and care for her daughters without relying on others:

> Some women give birth and are at their parents' house for forty days, but not me. I was [working] after my daughter was born. Thank God that I can work and can stand on my own feet. That's success in my opinion.

In her framing of success, Arezoo marks her strength by invoking comparisons with other (more privileged) women who have the luxury of not working and relying on their parents to help raise their children. In describing what success means to her, Nahid similarly reported that when "you live in the right way, overcome hardships with the strength you have, with what you have, you're successful." Distinguishing between a person's material and moral standing, Nahid emphatically stated how in terms of the latter, "maybe I'm at the highest level. For example, in terms of emotions, my relationship with my husband, my place in my family, maybe I'm above everyone else. The highest of high degrees." As stated in the interview, she sees herself as "one hundred percent successful because with what I have I've been able to make my life go round up until now." Deploying a similar narrative frame of success as resilience, Sara stated:

> I feel I'm successful because of [my] energy. Let [money] go. It's not important. Just have enough so your hands aren't extended in front of anyone else. This is, by God, a good thing. Just having a little, thank God, I'm content. I manage my life to have money left over at the end of the month. I'll even have enough to give to someone who needs it.

In defining her view of the good life, Sara – like Nahid – further highlights "person of integrity" qualities besides fortitude including care for others (i.e., giving to those in need) and autonomy (i.e., not extending one's hands in front of others) that both shape her sense of self and the position she perceives she holds.

It should be noted here, however, that a small number of respondents did not see success as distinct from economic advancement or see themselves as

successful even though they revealed pride in their own moral superiority to the more privileged. Similar to other respondents, some defined success as reaching one's goals, but emphasized their failure for being unable to do so. Others, including the retired respondent in his late seventies, held traditional middle-class views of success that emphasized educational and/or financial progress and situated themselves as unfortunate or weak due to their inability to advance.[3] During my conversation with Sia, for example, he shifted from highlighting the dangers of wealth to discussing how one can do "anything with wealth." He told me no one bothers someone who "dresses well, walks well, and rides well." Success, in his view, came from getting ahead both in terms of one's educational and economic status. Aware that he had not reached either, Sia choked back tears, stating that he made a mistake in getting married. Emphasizing his role as the caretaker of his family, Sia felt that his inability to provide for them has led his family to feel shame whenever they saw "someone with his family [who is] happy in all regards, financially [and] appearance-wise. It's like your family feels a lack and it's all your fault." Nevertheless, he concluded "You can't give up. Regardless of whether your financial situation is good or not, you have to make an effort. Sometimes you get lucky."

Sia's views on success highlight the tension between "hopefulness and disillusionment" that can exist as some try to make do with the cards they have been dealt (Mittermaier 2019: 21; see also Hashemi 2020b). Inhabiting a space of the in-between, Sia's narrative demonstrates how certain contradictory scripts (e.g., "wealth brings more bad than good" and one can do "anything with wealth") can sometimes co-exist to yield a sense of disempowerment and subordination (Hashemi 2020b). And yet, as Sia's narrative demonstrates, despite feeling "a sense of failure," he was adamant that by working hard, he could perhaps "get lucky," thus holding out hope for the promise of a better tomorrow.

Socioeconomic transformations in Iran over the past several years have contributed to exacerbating poverty and forcing already marginalized workers to take up publicly visible low-status service work that pushes them further to the peripheries. Aware that they have limited opportunities for economic advancement, most of the men and women I interviewed adapt, in part, by adjusting their expectations of success. To minimize the social distance between themselves and those more economically privileged, workers like Ahmed and Nahid draw relatively flattering comparisons with the latter or, like Arezoo and Sara, focus on constructing positive images of themselves as resilient and capable of achieving goals aligned with their current realities. While few, like Sia, saw themselves as unsuccessful in the moment, they still

prided themselves on their moral fiber and believed that with effort, they could eventually become successful.

While not explicitly citing the *javanmardi* ethic, in constructing these self-images, workers use cultural narratives revolving around the values of the *javanmard* (e.g., self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, care for others, and generosity) to legitimate their worth as good, respectable citizens. However, by positioning themselves as moral beings, these workers are also reformulating what it means to be successful in Iran today. In their refusal to define success in quantitative terms or, at the very least, in their unwillingness to see themselves as "hopeless" (in the words of Bashir), workers leverage the "person of integrity" ethic to elevate themselves as worthy of recognition. Rejecting the normative pecking order, they create hierarchies of status based on competencies that some claim only they possess. The social manifestation of these competencies – seen in, for instance, Ahmed's practice of giving a hand to the weak or Nahid's consumption practices – enable them to shape their relationships with others in the community, assert their interests, and ultimately "enter life's contest" (Adelkhah 2000: 153). In doing so, as Adelkhah (2000) argues, these men and women are "contributing to the formation of a true public space" predicated, in this context, on intersubjective definitions of success (p. 6). These narratives function to create strategies of action by which workers negotiate their roles as consumers, neighbors, workers, and parents, quietly engineering social change in the process (Adelkhah 2000: 6).

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on original qualitative data among some poor stigmatized workers in Iran, this article examined how these workers use success narrative frames to make sense of wealth, the economically privileged, and success to make recognition claims and construct images of themselves that belie commonplace understandings of their worth. Findings revealed how these workers use understandings of the self to challenge culturally dominant perceptions of success and stake their claim as winners (see also Sherman 2007). Notably, many express suspicions about wealth and distance themselves from well-heeled individuals. Implicitly drawing from a cultural code of chivalrous ethics that defines the "person of integrity," they identify the rich as morally lacking and ineffective, thereby enabling them to highlight their own generosity and ability to take pleasure in life. These evaluative judgments and comparisons subsequently shape competencies such as caretaking, altruism, resilience, and self-sufficiency that workers believe comprise true success and are further associated with the ethics of chivalry. Claiming their rightful place alongside – and many times, above – people typically considered

"successful" allows workers to deconstruct the classed social order and undergirds their own claims to status and respect.

As research has shown, during times of greater inequality – such as that in Iran today – people more conspicuously draw boundaries against others to justify their status, boosting their standing and access to resources, including symbolic ones like recognition (Foster et al. 2023). Although the data in this study cannot yield insight into how my interlocuters saw their positions before the Trump-era sanctions and Iran's economic downturn, many cited the worsening economy in their narratives, suggesting that "boundaries adapt to and are made more salient by broad social changes and exogenous shocks" (Foster et al. 2023: 14).

The findings of this study offer several contributions to the emerging literature on recognition struggles. Recognition claims allow stigmatized groups like the working poor to elevate their sense of self by downplaying material wealth as the measure of value. Yet these legitimations are ambivalent, reproducing inequality in the process. This study demonstrates this dual dynamic. Since the success narrative frames of some poor workers in Iran divert socially prized virtues and competencies away from one group (the wealthy) to another (poor service workers) and foster skepticism of the "other," they also operate as pathways that maintain unequal hierarchies of worth. In this way, these frames create micro-stratification systems based, this time, on one's adherence to cultural ethics rather than economic benchmarks (see also Hashemi 2018).

Workers' suspicions around material wealth and those who hold it further suggest how success narrative frames have bearings on individual motivation and behavior. Here, we may ask to what extent these misgivings about affluence can deter strivings toward upward mobility, prompting some to be content with their status quo. Indeed, an emphasis on the dangers of having too much led my interlocuters like Sara to underline their desires to stay in place while actively avoiding behaviors they associate with the snobby or miserly rich. Simultaneously, these alternative framings shape daily interactions and self-presentations, as illustrated in Ahmad's case, boosting public perceptions of workers' worth, reducing stigma, and strengthening opportunities for broader community connections. These counterdiscourses provide "references and a vocabulary" (Adelkhah 2000: 153) which workers can subsequently draw from to define themselves and assert their presence in the social sphere, offsetting the "participatory privileges" (Fraser 1992: 124) of the dominant classes.

As such, success narrative frames prompt us to consider how some are visibly "performing new practices of civic action built around *javanmardi* ethics" (Rahimi 2018: 281). In creating alternate scripts of the self that

implicitly evolve around this ethical tradition, the workers I interviewed are grappling more broadly with what it means to be a good citizen in Iran's current global moment. No longer the successful, individualistic "glamorize[ed] neoliberal subject" who is a well-educated wealth producer (Morgana 2020: 341), the ideal citizen is instead the moral hero who labors to provide for others (Rahimi 2018). In this new definition, the oppressed worker once again becomes a central figure to imagined conceptions of citizenship, defined by their collective humanity and sacrifice for family and community through hard work and struggle. This discursive strategy, in turn, mitigates against my interlocuters' self-isolation and internalization of stigma (Lamont 2018).

However, workers very visible performance of these *javanmardi* ethics also counterintuitively ties *them* to the dominant middle-class framework of public display, suggesting that even the more economically precarious segments of Iranian society now identify with a version of middle-class positionality. Furthermore, even as they draw boundaries against morally suspect privileged others to justify their own status and gain resources like recognition, workers also implicitly accord worth to wealthy individuals who share their values like those who dress well or help others. As Rachel Sherman argues, these views reinforce the "logic of legitimate entitlement" by asserting that there are, in fact, "right ways to inhabit wealth" (Sherman 2017: 232).

These findings thus reveal a complex relationship marked by both critique and cautious recognition. The antagonism and distrust workers hold against those with divergent values can block opportunities for cross-class solidarity that are essential to creating broader movements for social change and that are already at a low in Iran (Olszewska 2013). And yet, the possibility that there can be wealthy people who do behave ethically points to a residual openness to alliance if certain moral expectations are met. This, in turn, suggests, that by performing "displays of accommodating attitudes" toward others, the privileged can justify their own wealth and success as well as gain "a symbolic 'market' for such performances," namely the respect of those located on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum (Jarness and Flemmen 2019: 183). Overall, these patterns invite closer examination of how periods of social upheaval can simultaneously inspire liberatory projects against class domination while maintaining the legitimacy of class inequality more broadly.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Farzan Mahmoudzadeh, Teresa Gonzales, the editors of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on earlier versions of this article. This research was only made possible by the willingness of the hardworking men and women at the heart of this project to share their thoughts and experiences, to whom the author extends her deepest gratitude.

ORCID iD

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

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was made possible by Junior Faculty Fellowships from the Office of the Vice President for Research and the Department of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma, as well as Faculty Research Awards and Faculty Support Grants from the Department of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

Notes

1. In my fieldwork, I heard from more privileged sectors of society (particularly those considered "old money") iterations that the poor do not have the know-how to use wealth like the rich do (see also Hashemi 2019). The fact that Sara is repeating these cultural arguments about the "backwardness" of the poor suggests their hegemonic domination (see also Shildrick and MacDonald 2013).
2. In his study of manual workers in Istanbul, Makofsky (1977) found that some believed that parties were "all out for themselves" (77), suggesting that they believed, as workers like Bashir did, that elites were only concerned about their own welfare and security.
3. This particular respondent came of age under the high stage of the Shah's modernization regime and the subsequent postrevolutionary opening of opportunities, thereby perhaps absorbing middle-class aspirations as a real possibility in a way that has been unavailable to my younger respondents. Therefore, he now sees his failure to reach those aspirations as a personal failure rather than a given reality. Given the small sample size of this study, it is difficult to know the extent to which this perspective is shared across people of his age group.

References

Adelkhah, Fariba. 2000. *Being Modern in Iran*. Columbia University Press.

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. W.W. Norton and Company.

Andrews, Abigail, and Nazanin Shahrokni. 2014. "Patriarchal Accommodations: Women's Mobility and Policies of Gender Difference from Urban Iran to Migrant Mexico." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43, no. 2: 148–75.

Álvarez-Rivadulla, María José. 2017. "The Weakness of Symbolic Boundaries: Handling Exclusion Among Montevido's Squatters." *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 2: 251–65.

Ashforth, Blake, and Glen Kreiner. 1999. "'How Can You Do it?' Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity." *The Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3: 413–34.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. "The Collateral Casualties of Consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7, no. 1: 25–56.

Bayurgil, Ladin. 2022. "Fired and Evicted: Istanbul Doorkeepers' Strategies of Navigating Employment and Housing Precarity." *Social Problems* 69, no. 4: 1092–108.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2017. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, Amanda Lewis, and David Embrick. 2004. "'I Did Not Get that Job Because of a Black Man. . .': The Story Lines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism." *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4: 555–81.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Routledge.

Chehabi, Houchang. 1995. "Sport and Politics in Iran: The Legend of Gholamreza Takhti." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 12, no. 3: 48–60.

Chenoweth, Erica. 2020. "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3: 69–84.

Chubin, Fae. 2020. "Glocalizing Women's Empowerment: Contestation and NGO Activism in Iran." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 49, no. 6: 715–44.

Clair, Matthew, Daniel Caitlin, and Michèle Lamont. 2016. "Destigmatization and Health: Cultural Constructions and the Long-Term Reduction of Stigma." *Social Science and Medicine* 165: 223–32.

Cobb, Jonathan, and Richard Sennett. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Cambridge University Press.

Dexter, Louis Anthony. 2006. *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*. The European Consortium for Political Research.

Ehsani, Kaveh, and Arang Keshavarzian. 2018. "The Moral Economy of the Iranian Protests." Jacobin. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from https://jacobin.com/2018/01/iranian-protests-revolution-rouhani-ahmadinejad.

Elling, Rasmus Christian, and Khodadad Rezakhani. 2015. "Talking Class in Tehroon." *Middle East Report 277* (Winter), 6–9.

Fardoust, Shahrokh. 2020. "Macroeconomic Impacts of US Sanctions (2017-2019) on Iran." In *Iran Under Sanctions (The SAIS Initiative for Research on Contemporary Iran)*. Johns Hopkins University.

Financial Tribune. 2023a. "Services Claims Bigger Share of Labor Market in Q4: SCI." Retrieved September 19, 2023, from https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/117722/services-claims-bigger-share-of-labor-market-in-q4-sci.

Financial Tribune. 2023b. "Mazandaran's Dam Depletion Continues." Retrieved June 15, 2025, from https://financialtribune.com/articles/energy/118374/mazandaran-dams-depletion-continues.

Financial Tribune. 2023c. "8 Provinces Filed Double-Digit Unemployment in FY 2022-2023." Retrieved June 20, 2025, from https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/118340/8-provinces-filed-double-digit-unemployment-in-fy-2022-23.

Foster, Jordan, David Pettinicchio, Michelle Maroto, Andy Holmes, and Martin Lukk. 2023. "Trading Blame: Drawing Boundaries around the Righteous, Deserving and Vulnerable in Times of Crisis." *Sociology* 0, no. 0: 1–20.

Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Pp. 109–143 in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by C. Calhoun. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Fraser, Nancy, and Axel Honneth. 2004. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Verso.

Friedman, Sam. 2013. " 'The Price of the Ticket': Rethinking the Experience of Social Mobility." *Sociology* 48, no. 2: 352–68.

Germani, Gino. 1966. "Social and Political Consequences of Mobility." Pp. 364–395 in *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development*, edited by Smelser Neil, and S.M. Lipset. Aldine.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Penguin.

Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harvard University Press.

Gonzales, Teresa, Elizabeth Thissell Elizabeth, and Soumitra Thorat. 2022. "The Stories We Tell: Colorblind Racism, Classblindness, and Narrative Framing in the Rural Midwest." *Rural Sociology* 87, no. 4: 1274–1301.

Hammer, Anita, and Immanuel Ness. 2021. "Informal and Precarious Work: Insights from the Global South." *Journal of Labor and Society* 24, no. 1: 1–15.

Hashemi, Manata. 2018. "Tarnished work: Dignity and labour in Iran." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 5: 741–56.

Hashemi, Manata. 2019. "Embedded Enclaves: Cultural Mimicry and Urban Social Exclusion in Iran." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43, no. 5: 914–29.

Hashemi, Manata. 2020a. *Coming of Age in Iran: Poverty and the Struggle for Dignity*. New York University Press.

Hashemi, Manata. 2020b. "Dignity in the Time of Precarity." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52: 345–48.

Hodson, Randy. 2001. *Dignity at Work*. Cambridge University Press.

Honneth, Axel. 2014. *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. Polity Press.

Hughes, Everett. 1958. *Men and their Work*. The Free Press of Glencoe.

Hughes, Richard. 2018. *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning*. University of Illinois Press.

Husain, Fauzia. 2024. *Stigma Matrix: Gender, Globalization, and the Agency of Pakistan's Frontline Women*. Stanford University Press.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge University Press.

James, Scott. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press.

Jarness, Vegard, and Magne Paalgard Flemmen. 2019. "A Struggle on Two Fronts: Boundary Drawing in the Lower Region of the Social Space and the Symbolic Market for 'Down-to-Earthness.'" *The British Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 1: 166–89.

Khamenei, Ali. 2023."Production the backbone of the country's economy, and workers the backbone of production." Retrieved September 20, 2023. (https://english.khamenei.ir/news/9745/Production-the-backbone-of-the-country-s-economy-and-workers).

Lamont, Michèle, Beljean Stefan, and Clair Matthew. 2014. "What is Missing? Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Inequality." *Socioeconomic Review* 12, 573–76.

Lamont, Michèle. 2018. "Addressing Recognition Gaps: Destigmatization and the Reduction of Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 3: 419–44.

Lamont, Michèle, Silva Graziella Moraes, Jessica Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrachi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis. 2018. *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil and Israel*. Princeton University Press.

Lamont, Michèle. 2019. "From 'Having' to 'Being': Self-Worth and the Current Crisis of American Society." *The British Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 3: 660–707.

Lamont, Michele. 2023. *Seeing Others: How to Redefine Worth in a Divided World*. Atria/One Signal Publishers.

Lee, Ching Kwan, and Yelizvetta Kofman. 2012. "The Politics of Precarity: Views Beyond the United States." *Work and Occupations* 39, no. 4: 747–62.

Machado-Borges, Thais. 2015. " 'Have You Ever Seen a Thief Wearing a Uniform?!' Struggling for Dignity in Urban Southeastern Brazil." *Ethnography* 16, no. 2: 207–22.

Makofsky, David. 1977. "In the Factories: The Development of Class Consciousness Among Manual Workers in Istanbul." *Urban Life* 6, no. 1: 69–96.

Mahmoudian, Hossein, and Serajeddin Mahmoudiani. 2018. "Internal Migration and Urbanization in Iran: With Emphasis on the Period of 2011-2016." UNFPA. Retrieved June 16, 2025, from https://iran.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/layout_-_report_on_internal_migration-v.01-en_1.pdf.

Mazzei, Julie, and Emily O'Brien. 2009. "You Got It, So When Do You Flaunt It? Building Rapport, Intersectionality, and the Strategic Deployment of Gender in the Field." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38, no. 3: 358–83.

Millar, Kathleen. 2018. *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump*. Duke University Press.

Mittermaier, Amira. 2019. *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. University of California Press.

Morgana, Stella. 2020. " 'Produce and Consume' in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, 340–44.

Munck, Ronaldo. 2013. "The Precariat: a view from the South." *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5: 747–62.

Narayan, Kirin. 1993. "How 'Native' Is a Native Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3: 671–86.

Newman, Katherine S. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. Knopf.

Nugin, Raili, and Eva-Clarita Onken. 2010. "Defining Success in a Changing Society: Self-Evaluation and Social Reflections of a Coming Elite in the Baltic States." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 4: 449–71.

Olszewska, Zuzanna. 2013. "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspirations and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran." *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 6: 841–62.

Oriola, Temitope, and Kevin D. Haggerty. 2012. "The Ambivalent Insider/Outsider Status of Academic 'Homecomers': Observations on Identity and Field Research in the Nigerian Delta." *Sociology* 46, no. 3: 540–8.

Oselin, Sharon, and Kristen Barber. 2019. "Status Manuvering among Marginalized Men." *Gender and Society* 33, no. 2, 201–23.

Pearce, Nick. 2011. "Beyond Social Mobility." *Public Policy Research* 18, 3–9.

Pun, Ngai. 2005. *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*. Duke University Press.

Purser, Gretchen. 2009. "The Dignity of Job-Seeking Men: Boundary Work among Immigrant Day Laborers." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 8, no. 1: 117–39.

Rahimi, Babak. 2018. "Digital Javanmardi: Chivalric Ethics and Imagined Iran on the Internet." In Javanmardi: *The Ethics and Practice of Persianate Perfection*, edited by L. Ridgeon, 281–96. Gingko Press.

Ray, Ranita. 2017. *The Making of a Teenage Service Class: Poverty and Mobility in an American City*. University of California Press.

Rokna 2019. "مهاجرت های اقلیمی در ایران 10 برابر شد" [Climate Migrations in Iran Increased Tenfold]. Retrieved June 27, 2025, from https://www.rokna.net/بخش-اجتماعی-542823/95-مهاجرت-های-اقلیمی-در-ایران-برابر-شد-جمعیت-تهران-به-میلیون-نفر-رسید.

Sadeghi, Fatemeh. 2009. "Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic's 'Culture of Modesty'." *Middle East Report* 250: 50–5.

Sallaz, Jeffrey J. 2017. "Exit Tales: How Precarious Workers Navigate Bad Jobs." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 46, no. 5: 573–99.

Sanchez-Jankowski, Martín. 2008. *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods*. University of California Press.

Sayer, Andrew. 2005. "Class, Moral Worth and Recognition." *Sociology* 39, no. 5: 947–63.

Schweiger, Gottfried. 2020. "Recognition and Poverty: An Introduction." In *Poverty, Inequality, and the Critical Theory of Recognition*, edited by Gottfried Schweiger. Springer.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.

Shahrokni, Nazanin. 2020. *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran*. University of California Press.

Sherman, Jennifer. 2009. *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*. University of Minnesota Press.
Sherman, Rachel. 2007. *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*. University of California Press.
Sherman, Rachel. 2017. *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. Princeton University Press.
Shildrick, Tracy, and Robert MacDonald. 2013. "Poverty Talk: How People Experiencing Poverty Deny their Poverty and Why they Blame 'The Poor'." *The Sociological Review* 61: 285–303.
Simons, Audrey M. W., Inge Houkes, Annemarie Koster, Daniëlle A. I. Groffen, and Hans Bosma. 2018. "The Silent Burden of Stigmatisation: A Qualitative Study Among Dutch People with a Low Socioeconomic Position." *BMC Public Health* 18, no. 1: 443.
Small, Mario. 2004. *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. University of Chicago Press.
Snow, David, Rens Vliegenthart, and Pauline Ketelaars. 2018. "The Framing Perspective on Social Movements: Its Conceptual Roots and Architecture." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Kriesi Hanspeter, and Holly J. McCammon. Wiley.
Snow, David, and Robert Benford. 1992. "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest." In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Aldon D. Morris, and Carol McClurg Mueller. Yale University Press.
Stuart, Forrest. 2020. "Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy." Princeton University Press.
Taylor, Charles. 1995. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Philosophical Arguments*, edited by Charles Taylor. Harvard University Press.
Thiel, Darren. 2007. "Class in Construction: London Building Workers, Dirty Work and Physical Cultures." *The British Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 2: 227–51.
World Bank. 2023. *Iran Poverty Diagnostic: Poverty and Shared Prosperity*. The World Bank.
Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. Free Press.
Yu, Kyoung-Hee. 2016. "Immigrant Workers' Responses to Stigmatized Work: Constructing Dignity through Moral Reasoning." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 58, no. 5: 571–88.

Author Biography

Manata Hashemi is the Farzaneh Family Associate Professor of Iranian Studies in the Department of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma.