

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE OTHER SIDE: HOPE AMIDST PILES OF GARBAGE

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This study explores the psychosocial well-being of scavengers working at the Pakusari Landfill in Jember, focusing on emotional, social, and existential dimensions that cannot be fully understood solely through economic indicators or physical health conditions. This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through interviews and semi-participatory observations with four informants, consisting of scavengers and a waste collector. The findings identified six main themes: (1) Hope within Limitations, illustrating how scavengers sustain their life aspirations despite harsh working conditions; (2) Psychological Resilience and Adaptation, reflecting their ability to cope with risks and challenges; (3) Risk Normalization, describing how hazardous working conditions are internalized as routine; (4) Meaningfulness of Work, showing how scavengers perceive their work as a meaningful contribution; (5) Economic Dependence, revealing structural constraints that limit social mobility; and (6) Social Solidarity, highlighting the importance of informal support networks in maintaining well-being. These findings affirm that psychosocial well-being in marginalized environments is shaped not only by external factors but also by subjective narratives constructed by individuals. The study emphasizes the need for more holistic policy interventions that consider the lived experiences and narratives of scavengers within a broader social context.

Keywords: hope, psychosocial well-being, scavengers, reality.

INTRODUCTION

The psychosocial well-being of scavengers working in extreme environments such as the Pakusari Landfill cannot be understood solely through economic indicators or physical health. Daily struggles for survival, uncertainty about the future, lack of prospects for a better life, low income, and inconsistent earnings can negatively affect the psychological well-being of scavengers (Chokhandre & Kashyap, 2017). In psychology, well-being is a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional, social, and existential dimensions. According to Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Theory, individuals are considered to be in a state of well-being when they possess

autonomy, life purpose, personal growth, and positive relationships with others (Villarosa & Ganotice, 2018). Psychological well-being does not imply an absence of pressure, but rather the ability to maintain happiness despite experiencing stress (Ryff, 2014; Christianto et al., 2021).

In this context, scavengers often demonstrate unique forms of psychological adaptation—they continue to maintain work motivation despite harsh working environments, indicating that the dimensions of purpose in life and environmental mastery can still develop even outside formal employment systems (Misuraca et al., 2024; Michel et al., 2022; Soeharso & Utami, 2020). However, this interpretation requires critical

examination. Such conditions may not necessarily reflect genuine well-being, but rather forms of survival coping or learned helplessness, as described in Seligman's helplessness theory (Dudnyk, 2021; Egeci & Özgün, 2019). When individuals continuously face structural limitations without access to adequate resources, they tend to internalize these constraints as "normality," thereby constructing narratives of hope within situations that in fact perpetuate structural inequality (Díaz-Soto & Borbón, 2024; Brink, 2021; Dunbar, 2021).

On the other hand, Hope Theory developed by Snyder emphasizes the importance of agency (belief in one's ability to achieve goals) and pathways (strategies or routes to achieve them). Many scavengers place their hopes in the daily routine of collecting and selling waste, which they perceive as a path toward a better life. This hope reflects agency thinking within a limited context, where individuals still retain goals despite minimal strategic options (pathways) (Duncan et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021). Thus, hope in this context functions not merely as an illusion but also as a psychological strategy to preserve meaning and life continuity (Sum et al., 2023; Park et al., 2024; Feldman et al., 2022).

Although scavenging is objectively filled with risks and structural constraints, individuals often construct personal meaning that enables them to endure and even feel a sense of "competence." From the perspective of positive psychology and narrative constructionism, subjective meaning derived from daily experience can serve as a source of resilience and psychosocial well-being. In the absence of external support from the state or formal systems, scavengers construct bottom-up meaning (bottom-up meaning-making)—interpreting informal labor as meaningful contributions to their families or communities, despite their marginalized environment (Lizarralde et al., 2024; Enqvist et al., 2019). Within this framework, well-being is not solely determined by external intervention but also by psychological narratives actively constructed by individuals to create a sense of control, identity, and life purpose (Feldman et al., 2022; Duncan et al., 2022).

Therefore, the study of scavengers at the Pakusari Landfill is not only about understanding working conditions, but also about examining how hope, psychological resilience, and social adaptation emerge within marginalized spaces often neglected in policymaking. Positioning psychological theory within this social context opens a critical discussion on inequality, resilience, and the right to well-being.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is an approach used to describe the fundamental structure of lived experiences and translate them into textual expressions of their essence (Dowling, 2007; Caelli, 2001; Rahmanawati et al., 2022). Qualitative data tend to be open-ended without predetermined responses, whereas quantitative data typically consist of closed or structured responses (Creswell, 2021). Data collection techniques in this study included interviews and semi-participant observation. Semi-participant observation was conducted by directly visiting the Pakusari Landfill in Jember and observing the scavengers as they collected waste.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of four individuals interviewed: one waste collector (pengepul) and three waste scavengers. Participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique, in which the researcher requests identified participants to recommend other individuals who meet the research criteria (Creswell, 2021). In this study, the researcher was accompanied by a staff member from the Environmental Office of Jember Regency assigned at the Pakusari Landfill, who assisted in identifying and recommending potential participants.

This staff member accompanied the researcher in selecting scavengers who possessed adequate communication abilities. The researcher conducted direct observation and took field notes

on scavenger behavior and activities at the landfill, including documentation of collected data. Interviews were conducted by approaching scavengers as they sorted collected waste in small huts where they rested. The interview questions were qualitative in nature, allowing participants to freely share their experiences. The researcher requested permission to record the interviews and take important notes from participant narratives. In addition, one waste collector who purchases waste from scavengers was interviewed as a supporting informant.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Hope Sustained Within Limitations

This theme illustrates how scavengers at the Pakusari Landfill sustain hope for life despite harsh working conditions and the absence of structural support. Their hope does not always manifest in the form of concrete long-term plans, but rather emerges through daily survival narratives. Although access to alternative pathways is highly limited, elements of agency thinking persist in the form of simple verbal expressions of expectations—such as the desire to continue working, the intention to remain productive, or aspirations for modest life improvements. As articulated in Snyder's Hope Theory, both agency and pathways are fundamental components in how individuals construct their future orientation. In the context of scavengers, hope functions more as a psychological mechanism to maintain perseverance rather than a manifestation of strategic planning. The excerpts below illustrate expressions of hope grounded in persistence and acceptance of their current conditions:

“Yes, if I do not work here, I still have some activities at home.” (Mr. K)

“Yes, working here.” (Mrs. I)

“Yes, there is (hope).” (Mr. D)

“Well, regarding work, wherever one goes they still have to work. So I will just stay here.” (Mr. M)

*“So your plan is still to stay working here?” –
“Yes.” (Mr. M)*

Theme 2: Psychological Resilience and Adaptation in an Extreme Work Environment

This theme refers to how scavengers demonstrate psychological resilience and behavioral adaptation to endure the extreme and hazardous working environment at the landfill. Based on Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Theory, dimensions such as environmental mastery and purpose in life are reflected in their narratives even under suboptimal circumstances. Scavengers perceive their daily work routines as necessary responsibilities that provide a sense of structure and purpose in life. The ability to continue working despite fatigue, injury, or physical discomfort reveals elements of emotional endurance that function as adaptive mechanisms.

Scavengers' adjustment to prolonged hardship does not necessarily indicate the presence of subjective well-being, but rather a pragmatic form of survival resilience developed under prolonged economic instability. The following quotations reflect this adaptive endurance:

“Yes, it is exhausting.” (Mr. K)

“If I fall, I just get back up on my own. I am used to it.” (Mrs. I)

“If I feel afraid, it is because I do not have money.” (Mr. K)

“I just sleep, and then it goes away.” (Mr. D)

“It's better working here, I don't have to go anywhere. I am already too tired to move around.” (Mr. M)

“If I get sick, my wife gets angry if I still go to work.” (Mr. D)

“If I cannot fall asleep, I just let it be.” (Mrs. I)

Theme 3: Normalization of Risk and Lack of Structural Protection

This theme highlights how scavengers normalize occupational hazards as part of their

daily lives due to the absence of formal protection, regulation, or occupational safety mechanisms. Exposure to injuries, contamination, and extreme weather is perceived as routine. This acceptance is not rooted in awareness of occupational safety, but develops as a coping mechanism in response to structural neglect. In line with Seligman's concept of learned helplessness, continuous exposure to uncontrollable risks results in passive acceptance rather than resistance or demand for structural solutions.

Scavengers internalize dangers such as cuts from glass, falls from garbage trucks, infections, and musculoskeletal pain as inherent aspects of their occupation. The following statements reflect implicit adaptation to hazardous work conditions:

"We do not use protective equipment here."
(Mrs. I)

"I am immune now; I have been working here for 10 years." (Mr. K)

"If I fall, I just get back up by myself. I am used to it." (Mrs. I)

"If I feel fear, it is only because I have no money." (Mr. K)

"Yes, I do feel afraid, but I still believe I must continue searching (for recyclables)." (Mr. D)

"Yes, sometimes I get cut by pieces of broken glass." (Mr. M)

Theme 4: Meaningfulness of Work as a Source of Identity and Self-Worth

This theme reveals how scavengers at the Pakusari Landfill construct personal meaning from their work, which strengthens their sense of identity and dignity. Although scavenging is often socially stigmatized and categorized as low-status labor, the participants interpret their work as morally meaningful and socially valuable. They emphasize values such as self-reliance, dignity of labor, and fulfilling family obligations. Within the framework of narrative construction, work becomes a symbolic affirmation of existence, independence, and contribution to society.

For scavengers, work is not only a means of economic survival but also a marker of moral legitimacy and a source of pride. The excerpts below illustrate how they attribute positive meaning to their work:

"It is better here. It is not difficult to earn money here. If you work in farming, you have to wait four months for the harvest, but here you can earn money in three days." (Mrs. I)

"Working here is more convenient; I don't have to go anywhere anymore. I am already tired of moving from one place to another. So I will just stay here. Even if it is little, it is halal." (Mr. M)

"People praise me so I will not move from here." (Mrs. I)

"Everyone here works. My husband works here, and one of my children also works here." (Mrs. I)

Theme 5: Economic Dependence and Limited Social Mobility

This theme highlights the economic constraints faced by scavengers that limit their ability to pursue alternative livelihoods. Although some participants express the desire to change professions, these wishes often remain aspirational and are not supported by access to resources or structural opportunities. Short-term economic pressures force scavengers to remain in informal labor environments, resulting in economic dependency and occupational stagnation.

This condition reflects structural immobility, where individuals are trapped in a cycle of poverty despite aspirations for improvement. Expressions of uncertainty about the future and vague plans indicate constrained agency shaped by systemic inequalities:

"Do you already have preparations?" – "Yes." – "So if everything is ready, do you plan to move from here?" – "Yes, if I don't work here, I have something to do at home." (Mr. K)

"If this place is closed, then I will find another plan." (Mrs. I)

“I don’t know yet.” (Mrs. I)

“I am still not sure.” (Mr. D)

“It’s still just a wish.” (Mr. D)

“My hope is just to buy what I need, whatever that may be.” (Mr. M)

Theme 6: Social Solidarity and Informal Support in Marginalized Settings

This theme describes the existence of informal social networks that function as mechanisms of survival among scavengers. In the absence of institutional support, scavengers rely on family members, fellow workers, and sympathetic individuals for social and emotional assistance. Acts of mutual help—such as loaning money, sharing meals, working collectively, and receiving periodic assistance—serve as informal safety nets that uphold social cohesion within the landfill community. This social solidarity reflects the formation of a sense of community and collective resilience that compensates for structural exclusion:

“People from the office give us things so that we do not leave our work here.” (Mrs. I)

“Yes, every year.” – “What do they usually give?” – “Packages of basic food supplies.” (Mrs. I)

“Every Friday they bring rice, people come.” (Mrs. I)

“Yes, we ride bicycles together. If we live here, we stay near the entrance.” (Mrs. I)

“Everyone here works; my husband works here, one of my children works here too.” (Mrs. I)

Tabel 1. Themes and Supporting Quotations

No	Theme	Brief Definition	Supporting Quotations
1	Hope within Limitations	Hope sustained despite the absence of concrete planning, reflecting agency within structural constraints.	“Yes, working here.” (Mrs. I); “If there is no money.” (Mrs. I); “It is still just a wish.” (Mr. D); “I will just stay here.” (Mr. M)
2	Psychological Resilience and Adaptation	Adaptive emotional responses to extreme working conditions.	“If I cannot sleep, I just let it be.” (Mrs. I); “At first, I often felt weak.” (Mr. K); “I sleep only at night.” (Mr. D); “I just wait, if I can sleep later I take medicine.” (Mr. M)
3	Risk Normalization	Acceptance of occupational hazards as part of daily life.	“I am immune now.” (Mr. K); “If I fall, I get back up.” (Mrs. I); “Sometimes I get cut by broken glass.” (Mr. M); “Boots are too heavy.” (Mrs. I)
4	Meaningfulness of Work	Work is perceived as morally valuable and dignified.	“It is better here.” (Mrs. I); “Everyone works here.” (Mrs. I); “Even if it is little, it is halal.” (Mr. M); “People praise me.” (Mrs. I)
5	Economic Dependence	Structural limitations restrict access to other work opportunities.	“It is still just a wish.” (Mr. D); “Not yet.” (Mr. D); “I don’t know.” (Mrs. I); “I will just stay here.” (Mr. M)
6	Social Solidarity	Informal support networks	“Everyone works here.” (Mrs. I); “Everyone sustain survival. year – basic

No	Theme	Brief Definition	Supporting Quotations
		necessities.” (Mrs. I); “We borrow from the collector.” (Mrs. I); “We gather.” (Mr. M)	

DISCUSSION

The scavengers at the Pakusari Landfill cannot be understood merely through economic or physical dimensions, as emphasized by Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Theory. The six emergent themes—Hope within Limitations, Psychological Resilience and Adaptation, Risk Normalization, Meaningfulness of Work, Economic Dependence, and Social Solidarity—demonstrate how well-being is shaped by the dynamic interplay between social structures and individual psychological constructions (Joseph, 2019; Baker et al., 2020).

First, Hope within Limitations reflects the persistence of agency thinking as proposed in Hope Theory, which suggests that individuals continue to envision future possibilities even within constrained environments. Although the hope expressed by scavengers tends to be minimal and lacks concrete planning, it functions as a psychological mechanism to maintain motivation and continuity of life (Holbrook et al., 2024; McCarty, 2024). Hope, in this context, acts more as a narrative resource than a strategic behavioral orientation.

Second, Psychological Resilience and Adaptation emerges from persistent exposure to adverse working conditions. Scavengers reinterpret hardship as a routine part of life and demonstrate emotional endurance that enables them to continue working despite exhaustion, pain, or loss of sleep. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing how individuals in marginalized labor sectors develop adaptive responses to maintain psychological stability in the absence of systemic protection (Mudage et al., 2024; Baker et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this resilience may reflect adaptive survival rather than genuine well-being.

Third, Risk Normalization indicates how prolonged exposure to occupational hazards and structural neglect leads to the internalization of insecurity as normalcy. According to Seligman's learned helplessness framework, individuals who repeatedly encounter uncontrollable adverse conditions may cease to perceive structural injustice as changeable and instead adopt passive acceptance (Cai et al., 2024). In this study, scavengers considered injuries, infections, physical strain, and weather exposure as unavoidable components of work.

Fourth, Meaningfulness of Work demonstrates that scavengers construct a sense of dignity through labor despite social stigma. Their narratives reflect a bottom-up construction of meaning that serves to maintain self-respect and moral legitimacy. Work is perceived not only as economic activity but also as a moral obligation tied to family responsibility and social belonging. This aligns with Joseph's (2019) analysis of informal labor as a source of identity within marginalized economies.

Fifth, Economic Dependence illustrates how structural constraints limit social mobility. Although participants expressed the desire to switch occupations, their aspirations were not supported by access to economic capital, training opportunities, or social mobility mechanisms. This condition reflects structural inequality that traps individuals within informal labor cycles and reproduces generational poverty (Brink, 2021).

Sixth, Social Solidarity highlights the importance of informal social networks in sustaining psychosocial well-being in marginalized contexts. In the absence of state support or formal labor protections, scavengers rely on social cohesion, mutual aid, and emotional support within their community. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the role of community resilience and social capital in sustaining marginalized populations (Sandra et al., 2024; Enqvist et al., 2019).

Overall, the results of this study affirm that psychosocial well-being in marginalized

environments cannot be interpreted solely as the absence of suffering. Rather, it reflects the capacity of individuals and communities to construct meaning, mobilize hope, and cultivate adaptive strategies despite structural constraints. Policy interventions must therefore adopt a holistic approach that integrates subjective narratives and lived experiences, rather than focusing solely on physical, economic, or infrastructural aspects.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the psychosocial well-being of scavengers at the Pakusari Landfill in Jember, which cannot be adequately explained solely through economic indicators or physical health conditions. Through a phenomenological approach, this study identified six major themes that reflect the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and subjective interpretations constructed by scavengers in response to their harsh working environment and lack of structural support.

First, the theme of Hope within Limitations shows that despite difficult circumstances, scavengers maintain hope as a psychological resource for survival. Second, Psychological Resilience and Adaptation highlights their ability to cope with stress and sustain daily routines despite physical exhaustion and emotional strain.

Third, the theme of Risk Normalization demonstrates how scavengers internalize hazardous working conditions as ordinary, reflecting patterns of learned helplessness. Fourth, Meaningfulness of Work reveals that scavengers construct positive meaning from their labor, which strengthens their sense of dignity, identity, and purpose in life.

Fifth, Economic Dependence reflects structural constraints that limit social mobility and hinder efforts to escape informal labor conditions. Finally, Social Solidarity emphasizes the importance of informal support networks and communal relationships as key resources for sustaining psychosocial well-being in marginalized environments.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that the psychosocial well-being of scavengers is shaped by a complex interaction between external structural forces and subjective psychological narratives. The study recommends the development of holistic policy interventions that recognize the lived realities of scavengers, combining economic support with social and psychological empowerment programs. A deeper understanding of hope, resilience, and community solidarity among scavengers can serve as a foundation for designing inclusive policies that uphold human dignity and social justice.

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