**Ben-Gurion University of the Negev**

The Kreitman School of Advanced Graduate Studies

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

**Approved PhD Research Proposal of the Thesis:**

**An Ethnography of waste disposal in Israel: masculinity, ethno-nationalism, labor relations and environment**

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**Subject and Goal of the Research**

This research project deals with the spaces of waste collection from the perspectives of waste disposal workers in Israel, primarily Mizrahi and Palestinian men. Its focus is the life stories of municipal waste disposal workers and will include those involved in the chain of waste collection: truck drivers, bin preparers, and disposal workers. Some 8,000 workers are presently employed in waste disposal in Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Similar to other sites around the world, this is a precarious and adverse field of employment (Housman, 1997; Rogers, 2000; Hudson, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2019), which is presently undergoing accelerated processes of privatization and is characterized by indirect employment (Benjamin, 2015). Literature dealing with the sociology of labor relations has included only a limited amount of inquiry into the perspectives of employees. The nature of the waste collection process will be documented using ethnographic research, examining urban spaces in order to uncover the relationship between waste, labor relations and the environment. The goal of the study is the ethnographic documentation of waste disposal workers in Israel from a perspective of intersectionality, which links labor relations, gender, class, and ethnicity.

Three research methods will be used: Participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews and visual documentation, as well as auto-ethnography as a research approach. **Participant observation** will include active participation in the various stages of municipal waste collection within the waste disposal system of the Ramat-Gan Municipality, the primary research field. Preliminary data indicates that there are approximately 30 trucks and 45 drivers who work in varying collection routes throughout the city. There are additionally, dozens of waste disposal workers, some permanent employees and others temporary. The research will include **interviews** with approximately 30 employees of the municipal waste disposal system, who are divided into ten teams. Additionally, the study will employ **visual documentation** of waste disposal activities in the field. Furthermore, the research project will employ the auto-ethnographic approach. Ellis (2011) describes auto-ethnography as an approach that aspires to describe and analyze personal experience methodically, in order to understand cultural experiences. This is an approach that challenges canonical research methodology and the representation of others, by treating the research as a political and explicitly social action. I find this approach valuable, because the reflexive dimensions of this study will make describing its process and dealing with life histories significant not only for the waste disposal workers, but also for myself, a researcher sharing a background with similar characteristics. These research methods will enable a multi-dimensional analysis of the rich and complex world of waste disposal workers in Israel, and of the social and environmental structures within which they operate.

**Scientific background**

Much can be learned about a society from what it throws away and how it deals with the waste it generates (Doron and Avieli, 2015). Current research literature on the reciprocal relations between human society and the various methods of collecting and disposing of waste around the world is diverse (Evans, 2011; Moore, 2012; Nagle, 2013; Furniss, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2017). The pioneers of the sociocultural study of waste were Michael Thompson (1979) and Martin O’Brien (1991). At the beginning of the 21st century, research began to focus on the study of waste disposal as a site of employment and on the implications of neo-liberal economics for this low wage and adverse work (Hakan et.al, 2006). In Israel, research on the relationship between waste and society is still in its infancy. Studies carried out in Israel in recent years have examined legal and planning policy for setting waste disposal sites in Israel, and have discussed issues of social justice, in other words, who is harmed as a result of the physical location of waste disposal sites and what are the ensuing implications (Rosen-Zvi, 2007). Research by Doron Lavie and Uri Regev (2009) focused on economics by studying the landfill levy in Israel and its effects.

The study of waste in its environmental context (Fried, 2017) distinguishes between trash, waste, and garbage. Waste is generated out of trash and can be identified with specific categories, such as household waste, while garbage is the leftovers from the sorting of waste in the environmental context, where it has lower value (Fried, 2017). Mary Douglas dealt extensively with the socio-cultural contexts of waste and defined it as contingent upon cultural and spatial context (Douglas, 1966). This general survey of the literature examining waste suggests that there has yet to be research on the people involved in the labor of waste disposal, and even less so on how this arena shapes masculine identities in ethno-nationalist contexts. Thus, the proposed research project will address a gap in theory and research.

1. **The perspective of waste disposal workers**

The working experiences of people employed in municipal waste disposal was first documented by Studs Terkel (1974). Studies by additional researchers, such as Edward Walsh (1975), Wilbur Rich (1996), Burelle and Monterrat (1985), Stuart Perry (1998), Robin Nagle (2013), as well as the work of Peter Hamilton, Tom Redman, and Robert McMurray (2017), added crucial additional depths to the research literature on this subject. There is scant research literature on the perspectives of waste disposal workers in Israel. Talia Fried’s research (2014, 2017) focusses on the policies of solid waste disposal in Israel, but some of it is devoted to describing the world of these workers. Her study is helpful in that it presents social analysis along several identity axes. It is relevant to the present research, which likewise proposes an analysis of non-hegemonic locations along axes of non-hegemonic masculinity; of Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel, labor migrants and Mizrahi men.

**The Sociology of employment**

The term “commodification of labor power” originates in the early industrial revolution in Europe, when laborers sold their labor like goods (Benjamin, 2007). Thomas Humphrey Marshall examined social rights, including the right to economic welfare and workers’ protections in Britain, in his essay “Citizenship and Social Class” (Marshall, 1964). The protection of workers’ dignity and liberty, and the duty of the state and employers to ensure these rights, continued to develop over time, including the important insight that the human beings supplying the labor power cannot be overlooked (Ben Israel 1999; Benjamin, 2007). Research literature clearly indicates that individuals hailing from more marginalized identity categories are less protected and their rights are prone to being violated (Radin, 1996). Israel’s waste management and cleaning labor market is considered one in which workers are vulnerable. Indeed, the common denominator among poor heads of households is employment in sectors of the economy where wages are low, including work in sanitation services. These services include dealing with waste and garbage, sewage, and more. These workers often prefer to maintain the little they have, even under precarious and discriminatory working conditions (Talit, 2012, Maor, 2012; Conor-Atias and Liberman, 2017), and having to cope with the visibility of their work, which is often accompanied by shame (Benjamin et al., 2010). Most of those employed through contractors are manual laborers at the bottom of the employment pyramid (Mundlak, 2004; Benjamin, 2006; Goclow and Benjamin, 2006; Rubinstein, 2012; Talit, 2012; Shinar, 2016). In this context, the collection of data about contract workers in Israel is lacking. This has given rise to a need that will be evaluated in the present study, and which will examine the meaning of work in the margins, using intersectionality as a framework. The research will contribute to the literature on work in the margins in general, and specifically to the structure of work in waste disposal.

**C. Intersectionality in marginal spaces**

Most waste disposal and garbage collection workers in Israel are men. Masculinity encapsulates multiple dimensions of identity (Willis, 1977) and relations of power create and reproduce distinctions between different groups of men (Hirsch, 2017). As argued by Sasson-Levy and Misgav (2017), the sociological investigation of masculinity began at a relatively late stage. This field of study thus adopted an intersectional approach from its beginning, rather than viewing men as a monolithic group. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” to describe identity that is comprised of several axes of oppression, with gender constituting one key axis. There is a dearth of ethnographic studies in Israel dealing with the ways intersectionality of social positions and identities generates masculinity in various social realms of action (Kaplan, 2009; Hirsch, 2017). The proposed research will contribute to existing literature by introducing a discussion of different types of masculinity and will enable an analysis of marginalization and abusive labor relations on the margins of the Israeli labor market.

**The importance of collaboration with the business sector in carrying out the research and expected benefits**

The business entity selected to accompany this research project is Teken Projects, owned and managed by Mr. Asher Asaban. This is a well-established company that has been active in Israel and globally for decades and provides services to government ministries, corporations, local authorities and more. Teken Projects uses the most sophisticated and innovative tools on the market. Asaban’s extensive experience, alongside the company’s diverse technological capabilities, contribute to the company’s prominence in the field of technical consulting, safety consulting, and guidance of municipalities and business entities on a range of subjects, such as garbage trucks, road sweepers and other dedicated machinery.

**Contribution of the business side to the research:**

1. The vast experience, technological infrastructure and accumulated knowledge at Teken Projects will enrich the basic research in terms of technical data on waste removal trucks. Likewise, there will be an emphasis on the connection between the operational aspect and the drivers of these trucks. Information will be collected on behavior in the field, monitoring and supervision of waste collection and removal activities from the formal-institutional perspective, as well as the alternative perspective, i.e., the private contractor infrastructure.
2. It will provide informal employment statistics collected in the field over the years, but which have not been properly documented, in the areas of direct and indirect employment in waste management: by recognized entities, contractors and outsourcing. Sharing data in monitoring and supervision of waste collection and removal activities.
3. Access to these perspectives is significant for the study, since the point of view of waste removal workers in Israel is located not just vis-à-vis various audiences in the public sphere, but also in relation to the municipal authorities that employ, monitor and supervise this activity. The information linked to these activities is not readily available and, therefore, the contribution of the business side will provide an important addition to this research.

**Contribution of the research to the business side**

1. There will be, over time, Collection and refinement of data from the field linked to employment in waste removal and expansion of the possibilities for improving the monitoring systems and, consequently, a contribution to quality of life, protection of the environment and reduction of polluting emissions.
2. The collaboration offers a remarkable opportunity to access the world of waste removal workers and presentation of their varied perspectives from different positions along the waste removal chain. This would include not only information related to prominent routine activities with economic or energy consumption significance, such as loading garbage cans into the compacting truck in the shortest time possible, but may also serve to reveal “blind spots” in their operations and provide the opportunity to identify those spots and develop means of developing systems to make operations more efficient and adaptive.
3. Workers employed indirectly or through contractor agencies participate in work that often lacks supervision, and consequently they are deprived of various social benefits. This research project will contribute to a deeper understanding of contract employment practices and enable the conceptualization and development of innovative means to improve monitoring, assessing the payroll value of these workers in relation to their output and the profits of the contracting agency. It is expected that this research will open up opportunities to consider the workers themselves, and not just the economic benefits to local authorities.

**Innovativeness of this research project**

This study seeks to fill a gap in research on several levels. First, it will contribute to a rich and multidimensional documentation of labor relations on the margins of Israeli society. Second, the research will be carried out from the perspective of those involved in the work – an important perspective that has not been properly documented. And third, this project will employ innovative research methods, beyond the familiar framework known as participatory observation, and will develop this topic through the potential inherent in auto-ethnographic methodologies. The researcher will conduct the ethnography by actively integrating into the municipal waste disposal system, and has already managed to connect with the waste disposal workers and participate in the various stages of their work in several localities in the defined research field, in Ramat Gan and Ramat Hasharon. Establishing trust with these working men is a crucial step in building a rich portrait of labor relations, and preliminary findings from the field confirm this ethnographic aspect. The researcher's position as the daughter of a father who worked as a waste collector will be an integral part of the fieldwork process and the interpretation given to the findings. Finally, beyond the analytical and theoretical contribution of the proposed research, the knowledge produced by this research can potentially produce conclusions that will serve as pragmatic recommendations for reorganizing a precarious and adverse labor market, expanding the scope of environmental research in Israel, and generating significant insights into the nature of urban waste collection overall, and regarding sanitation workers in particular.

**Timetable and milestones**

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| **Subject** | **completed** | **timeframe**  | **Academic: research methods** | **Business: guidance & assistance** |
| Stage 1 fieldwork.Fieldsite: Ramat Gan & Ramat Hasharon | Partially | August – October 2020  | Participant observation and joining existing removal routes | Information and integration in waste removal operations. Office meeting & field meeting |
| Stage 1 fieldwork - continued | No | November 2020 – March 20121 | Observation, auto-ethnography, visual documentation | Learning the monitoring technology in the field and accompanying existing municipal system |
| Mid-way conclusions on joint activity and planning of final stage | No | End of March 2021 | Assembly of research data relevant to business entity, including methodology | Data comparison and technical clarifications of work done so far |
| Start of stage 2 fieldwork  | No | April – May 2021 | In-depth interviews and visual documentation | Waste quantities and municipal reports compared with information monitoring |
| Stage 2 fieldwork | No | July 2021 | Reflexive participant observation | Joint tour of the field from an ethnographic orientation |
| Conclusion of joint activity and exchange of research-business information | No | August 2021 | Preparation of report on collaboration and statement of intent regarding future collaborations on continued research | Preparation of status report on collaboration and statement of intent regarding continued collaboration |