

Article

## ***The Story of My Face: How Environmental Stewards Perceive Stigmatization (Re)produced By Discourse***

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**Abstract:** *The story of my face* intertwines concepts of social semiotics and discourse analysis to explore how a simple type of printed media (flyer) can generate stigmatization of informal recyclers, known as bidders in Western Canada. Every day, media exposes humans to signifiers (e.g., words, photographs, cartoons) that appear to be trivial but influence how we perceive their meaning. Amongst the signifiers frequently found in the media, the word “scavengers”, has been used to refer to autonomous recyclers. Specific discourse has the potential to promote and perpetuate discrimination against the individuals who deal with selective collection of recyclables and decrease the value of their work. Their work is valuable because it generates income for recyclers, recovers resources and improves overall environmental health. In this context, the present *qualitative* study draws on data collected with bidders during research conducted in the city of Victoria, in British Columbia. First we analyze a dialogue between bidders from a participatory video workshop, to explore their perceptions of the stigma they suffer. Second we use a flyer produced by the local government alerting against scavenging to illustrate how the content (*i.e.*, structural organization [text and images] in which they are embedded work together to mediate stigmatization against recyclers. Third, we analyze videotaped data from a panel discussion with local government, the local community, and bidders on *inclusive waste management*, to uncover different negative perceptions of bidders. In our study we look at the official discourse that marginalizes informal recyclers and creates social injustices. We illustrate how the recyclers perceive stigma and suggest that marginalization

could be overcome by reiterating the image of environmental stewards instead of scavengers.

**Keywords:** social semiotics; discourse analysis; stigmatization; informal recycling; binning

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## Notes

Transcriptions conventions have been used:

- ↓ and ↑ upward and downward in pitch;
- (.) noticeable pause of less than 0.10 seconds;
- [ square brackets in consecutive lines indicate the beginning of overlapping speech.

## 1. Introduction

On the West coast of Canada, informal recyclers term themselves as binners. Therefore binning has become a culturally accepted term for the activity of separating recyclable materials out of the waste stream to collect refund. In fact, binners are environmental stewards because they recover resources that otherwise would be discarded and would often end up at the landfill. Recovering these materials for recycling saves natural resources, energy, and prevents further environmental destruction as a consequence of primary resource extraction. Yet, the binners are frequently associated with filth and are stigmatized and harassed by officials and the general public. In Canada the extent of binning has only recently caught academic attention and hence there is little published literature describing the social stigma these people carry [1,2]. Most of the literature that describes and discusses stigmatization and marginalization of informal recyclers stems from the global South, where large proportions of the population are involved in this activity [3-6]. The issues of marginalization and negative labeling of binners and their activities, represent a contentious social issue. This issue needs to be addressed to overcome the present undervalued and unrecognized potential that binners bring to build more sustainable communities. Worldwide informal recyclers suffer from these negative perceptions that reiterate their social marginalization, and the important task they fulfill in recovering and redirecting materials into the recycling stream is ignored [5,7,8].

In this article we discuss the context of stigmatization through several dialogues that were generated during research with binners from Victoria, Canada. In 2007 a first participatory livelihoods assessment was conducted in Victoria to gain an understanding of the socio-economic determinants that shape binning and to learn about the significance of informal resource recovery. Within this project 9 semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted (2 binners, 2 bottle depot managers, 3 social service workers, 2 government agents from the CRD). The survey was applied to a total of 156 binners in Victoria, with the help of 11 facilitators from the binning community. The research results brought to our attention the severe issues of marginalization and stigmatization the binners suffer from [2].

In 2009, participatory video (PV) was used as a strategy to document and empower the binners. A total of 12 binners from Victoria participated in this research project. They were the ones that had already taken up leadership roles in the previous research project. The PV activities involved a *video training workshop*, *video field days* and a *follow-up video field day* to provide and collect feedback from the binners. All activities were video taped and the data was analyzed and edited for different research and community outreach purposes.

Social Critical Theory [9], Social Semiotics [10,11], and Discourse Analysis [12], expand our theoretical and methodological framework. These theories provide the tools to understand how discourse can (re-)produce stigmatization and marginalization. Based on dialogues extracted from focus group discussions conducted in Victoria we further elaborate these themes in the context of the binning community. Moreover, we present a specific example of how a local official flyer can produce and reproduce stigmatization against the binners. We conclude with an outlook for a better understanding of how discourse influences our perceptions and *situationalities* and how *conscientization* [9] will empower marginalized individuals or groups and contribute to overcome these barriers.

## 2. Binners, the Environmental Stewards

Organized and autonomous binners are environmental stewards, who work with selective collection of recyclable materials, which generates their income and improves overall environmental health [2,5]. Most often however, these individuals live at the margin of society, suffer from prejudice, and are excluded from governmental initiatives to support their activity [3,13,14]. Discrimination increases their vulnerability to be bullied or treated with prejudice by the public, and worldwide it perpetuates economic poverty and social inequality [15]. Recyclers rarely participate in the public debate with policy-makers on their work and role in resource recovery [16]. The recyclers are often homeless, feeding themselves from disposed food and making their living from selling recyclables. In the global South, the recyclers usually recover a large diversity of different metal, plastic, paper and cardboard packaging material, whereas the binners in North America recover mainly plastic and glass bottles from the garbage to collect refund. As mentioned elsewhere, worldwide informal recyclers and binners are frequently treated as waste and have little agency to change these unjust relations. Hence waste needs to be re-conceptualized, valuing the environmental benefits from resource recovery as well as the social advantages from organized and informal recycling, and the opportunity to create healthier communities.

Understanding how discrimination against recyclers is produced and reproduced by the media can inform strategies to change this cruel reality and promote the recyclers' social inclusion. It also opens up opportunities to empower these environmental workers and promote social justice.

## 3. Critical Human Geography, an Analytical Framework

Critical Social Theory in human geography [17] helps understand the social, economic, and political determinants for marginalization and provides an analytical framework through which we can explore different levels of participation and practices to address exclusion and marginalization. Social theory is concerned with revealing and explaining concrete processes of everyday life and is by nature

an interdisciplinary approach. Coming with a human geography perspective the focus is then on spatial patterns and processes, which underlie the structures of daily life from a time—space perspective [18]. The purpose for knowledge generation in geography also has profound educational motivations and as ([19], p. 11) puts it: “*from such an educational perspective Critical Social Theory is a multidisciplinary knowledge base with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge*”.

Within Critical Social Theory, Critical Human Geography also known as the radical approach in geography derived from structural marxism during the 1970s, with David Harvey and Richard Peet as main protagonists [20-23]. This approach drew attention to the power structures that maintain systematic disadvantage and to the emerging collective social movements confronting inequality. Geographers increasingly raised concerns over class relations and their constitution through territory [24]. In doing so, feminist perspectives de-construct the patriarchal division of urban space [25] or the residential segregation based on racism [26] just to mention some of the major themes arising from human geography. Smith, for example, argues for the importance of geographers to become “*engaging not only in a reflective debate about how society is structured, but also in political debates about how, and through what mechanisms, societies should be structured*” ([27], p. 154). Hence in our paper we apply a trans-disciplinary approach bridging educational with geographic concepts.

### *3.1. Social Semiotics and Discourse Analysis: A Tool to Uncover Social Injustices*

One way in which we can understand how printed media in general can generate stigmatization of binners is through the interpretation of signs, more specifically signifiers (e.g., words, photographs, symbols) that appear to be trivial but influence how we perceive their contents [10,28-30].

Bringing the concepts of semiotics to the cultural geography of binners, we can distinguish signifiers such as “scavengers” that have appeared in the North American media and have been used to refer to the binners. These signifiers place the binners into a specific social space [31-33] where they indeed produce and reproduce a reality of social exclusion that does not change. In so doing, such printed materials mediate discrimination against the binners, decreasing the value of their work and not recognizing the contribution they provide to the society (cleaning up the environment and sparing new natural resource extraction), which creates the risk for them to be marginalized.

In conjunction with social semiotics we use discourse analysis [12] as an analytical tool for interpreting the content of flyers, posters, magazines, websites, research reports, and newspapers. Discourse is indeed a central part of our lives, and our interactions with our surroundings are always mediated through some kind of verbal or non-verbal communication. Hence, discourse itself is related to social and visual interactions, including different forms of writing, drawings, photography, and so forth. Based on this premise, discourse in the media becomes an important tool that mediates public understanding about environmental issues. Therefore, analyzing discourse is useful in exploring how the general public perceives its content, contributing to the understanding of how media can generate prejudice against recyclers. In this context, discourse analysis is an approach to the understanding of writing. In other words, it is the study of language (e.g., written texts) in use, in the sense that language cannot be understood apart from the context in which it is used. In the context of our research,

discourse analysis as an analytical tool [34] helps us to understand how discrimination is produced and reproduced by the media.

### 3.2. How a Specific Type of Printed Media (Re)produces Stigmatization

In our discourse analysis we draw from qualitative data extracted from interviews and dialogues video taped since 2008, in the context of the PV research project with binners in Victoria. This participatory video project happened in collaboration with the MOTHER's project and is part of a research initiative, the *Participatory Sustainable Waste Management project*, which focuses on livelihoods issues of informal and organized recyclers in different countries of the world. The participants were trained in video technology, storyboard development, and post-production. They documented their own video, showcasing their experiences and challenges in the street, their constant fight against discrimination and for social inclusion. The process of participatory video (PV) itself was aimed to contribute to the personal empowerment and growth of the recyclers.

Our intention here is not to exhaust our readers with a deep discourse and semiotic analysis. Rather, *The story of my face* highlights the importance of a critical look into media content as well as into binners' own perceptions as a marginalized portion of our society.

## 4. The Story of My Face

The following dialogue happened during the PV workshop with two members of the binning community in Victoria. There were also other participants sitting around a table discussing the video they were about to produce. The subject of their discussion was the identification of possible themes they could explore during the videos, when Mark, one of the binners, said: "*There is a certain stigma attached to people in, ... well anybody who has been binning. ...He must be a druggie, or a panhandler... Must be*" and another binner called Joy concludes: "*or homeless, it is a persona that it is already out there that needs to be broken*".

Mark connects the two nouns *stigma* and *binning* with the verb *to attach*. In so doing he makes available to his listeners that *anybody* that works with binning is stigmatized.

In the overall context of his conversation, it seems that Mark is repeating a sentence that he probably had heard before, that could possibly have been addressed to himself. Additionally, the usage of the modal verb *must* followed by the verb *to be* expresses an opinion about something that is logically very likely to happen. For instance, if Mark is a binner, it is very likely that he is also a drug addicted (*a druggie*) and a panhandler.

At this point, Joy brings in another stereotype attached to binners: being homeless. She not just interrupts Mark's speech, but she also complements his previous sentence. These remarks underline the perception that binners are not just drug addicted and panhandler, but very likely also live on the streets.

When Joy mentions that this characterizes a *persona*, she expresses that such stigmatization is the aspect of someone's character that is presented to, or perceived by others, that is embedded in social interactions ("*it is out there*"). In other words, according to Joy, although she does not articulate its origin, the stigmatization already exists. Joy finalizes this dialogue by claiming that this stigmatization suffered by the binners should come to an end it should *be broken*.

This narrative does not tell only the story of Mark's and Joy's face but rather the story of stigmatization and social injustice suffered by binners in general. This is the story of so many other faces that make their living from collecting recyclable materials out of the garbage bins in urban areas. Most of these faces have become invisible and discriminated against by our society. However, people exist behind these faces and their work actually plays an important role in creating a more sustainable way of living, mediating the recycling of disposable materials. Bidders exist because there is no zero waste resource recovery policy in place in Canada. Consumption driven and unsustainable lifestyles generate increasing amounts of solid waste that need to be appropriately treated [8]. Bidders fulfill a small fraction of redirecting solid waste appropriately. While consumers discard their beverage containers into public bins, into their household waste or dumped in the street or on vacant land, the bidders recover these materials and channel them into the recycling stream. Hence by recovering these resources they perform an environmental stewardship activity. Of course in a sustainable and zero waste conscious society there will not be the need for binning any more. In such a best case scenario, bidders would also have evolved their activity into the multiple options related to resource recovery; from educator to adding value to discarded resources.

#### 4.1. *Bidding an Unlawful Activity?*

The following example of a printed media product (flyer) produced by the city of Victoria and widely circulated in Greater Victoria [35] highlights how stigmatization becomes a pre-conceived idea that shapes our behavior. In August 2009 residents from the Capital Regional District of Greater Victoria (CRD), received a flyer (Figure 1) [35] in their recycling bins and bags, the so called blue boxes and blue bags, sent by the CRD office, who had launched a campaign to raise awareness about scavenging and identity theft. In the flyer one can read the text entitled *Scavenging and Identity Theft—Curbside Recycling*.

The text on the flyer states upfront that whoever takes material out of a blue box is considered a thief. The CRD has strong reasons for arguing in that way, since curbside collection of the recyclable materials has been contracted out to METRO Waste Paper Recovery Inc., whose business depends on the profits made with recycling. The recycling contract is percentage compositions for recyclable materials (plastic bottles, aluminum cans, paper, etc). Less of these materials in the *blue box* means less profit for the recycling business. Therefore the CRD encourages ways to prevent the recyclables from being picked up by bidders. Officially, the recyclables are collected and separated by METRO Waste and, depending on current material prices, might be redirected to the recycling industry. In order to make sure that sufficient resources remain in the *blue box*, the CRD has created a bylaw (#2290), which makes those into thieves who take from the *blue box*, other than the owner or the contractor and if bidders do so they have to pay fines of up to 100.-CAD\$ and all their belongings are confiscated.

With this anti-scavenging campaign the CRD encourages households to “donate” their high value recyclables (cans and plastic bottles) to the *blue box*, knowingly that the number of bidders in town is increasing significantly over the past months. Given the increased size of the population of bidders and homeless people in Victoria, they are receiving more media exposure and their livelihood circumstances have become more noticeable. While in 2006 there were approximately 50 bidders in

the CRD, the number has increased to up to 250 in 2010 [2,36]. A series of polemic questions are currently being discussed in the local press, including the possible closure of the only bottle depot in the downtown area, prohibition of homeless camping on public sites or the closure of the needle exchange facility.

**Figure 1.** Flyer generated by the CRD and distributed in Greater Victoria in 2009. (Reproduced with permission from [35], published by the Capital Regional District).

## Scavenging & Identity Theft - Curbside Recycling

### What is scavenging?

Scavenging means that someone is taking recyclable materials from your blue box or bag without your permission. CRD Bylaw No. 2290 states that no person, except the owner and the CRD recycling collection contractor, shall remove any recyclable materials from a recycling container at the curb prior to its collection.



### Why does the CRD have a bylaw against scavenging from recycling containers?

The CRD has contractual obligations to provide the maximum quantity of materials available to its collection and processing contractors. The theft of materials (such as aluminium cans) may result in loss of revenue from the sale of recyclables and increase program costs.

### Why should I be concerned about scavenging from my recycling containers?

One issue of growing concern is identity theft. Scavengers may take documents with your personal information and use the information without your knowledge or consent. This can pose a serious threat to your privacy.

### How can I protect myself against identity theft?

We recommend that you shred or tear all papers containing personal information prior to recycling. You can also use a permanent dark pen to cover up confidential information. Place shredded paper in a closed or stapled paper bag, cereal box or other non-corrugated box inside your blue bag.

We also recommend that you place your recyclables at the curb as close as possible to the pick-up time of 7:30 a.m. on the morning of your collection day. This reduces the opportunity for scavengers to rummage through your blue boxes and bags.

During a seminar on “inclusive waste management” conducted in 2006 at the University of Victoria, the CRD representative made it clear that the issues related to binning are considered “*primarily social issues*” and “*not so much in terms of waste management*”. Overall, the CRD is not willing to address waste management from an integrated perspective, addressing social and economic issues together with resource recovery. The prevailing official attitude is that waste needs to be treated with technology involving engineering solutions, instead of an integrated perspective taking into consideration the generation of employment, the education towards more sustainable communities, and strategies towards zero waste. During the seminar on inclusive waste management, a CRD official from Victoria expressed: “*From a waste management perspective, beverage containers represent less than 2% of waste stream that come into Hartland landfill. It’s not a big component. It’s not going to help us realize our waste emersion causes, its not going to significantly extend the life of a landfill to get very single number of these bottles out*” [37,38].

The opinion expressed here seems not to recognize the potential for binners to also collect other discarded material, including compostable kitchen waste; or the role of binners as environmental stewards, sustaining selective waste collection and decreasing wastefulness. As one of the binners puts

it: “it’s a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it”. He then continues: “We’re like the ‘plecostomus’ of the aquarium. We’re the ones that keep it clean, but we’re not that pretty”.

The CRD official highlights: “I don’t think these guys want to be doing this for the living. We expect more from society for these folks and get them the jobs that they want and deserve. We would like to see that happen so that nobody has to jump in the dumpster and be chased around by the police” [37]. From this last passage, it is clear that there is an inherent prejudice in judging those that work with waste as less worthy, instead of recognizing the potential to expand on resource recovery.

#### 4.2. Binning Reinforced as a Threat

Taking a closer look at the cartoon embedded in the CRD flyer (Figure 2) [35] we notice three different and yet interrelated events happening. These events work together to produce a connotation that binners are urban animals. In semiotic words connotation involve signifying signs. That is, signs that become the signifier for a second signified.

**Figure 2.** Cartoon extracted from the CRD flyer. (Reproduced with permission from [35], published by the Capital Regional District).



Figure 2 highlights in the forefront a woman with a happy face, owner of her well-protected recyclables, whereas her neighbor is stressfully watching raccoons going through his recyclable materials in the blue box. The representation of two raccoon-like animals suggests binners going through the discarded material. Raccoons are animals that often inhabit urban areas in North American cities and feed from refuse. Another way of seeing this last event is the fact that the man is somehow protected from the raccoons, being placed behind a window, as the animals could represent some kind of danger to him.

In this picture there is also a segment of text that reads: “outsmart even the most meddlesome mischief makers”, which warns the reader about recyclable material thieving from the blue bags. In other words, according to the cartoon (only), one may assume that the CRD is warning the population to protect their recyclable materials from the raccoons, because they may represent danger to the public in general. However, from a semiotic perspective if we read the text embedded in



In this episode, by using the personal pronoun *I* followed by the verb *believe* Mark, one of the bidders in this focus group, introduces the conversation by providing his own perspective about the subject he is about to discuss, which is how the general public may perceive himself as a bidder. He claims that there is a sense of disrespect associated with his particular person, as he utters, “*a certain stigma*”.

At this point, with low pitch in her voice, Joy, another bidder, interrupts Mark saying that what Mark is talking about is a matter of the positioning a person’s character that is presented, or perceived by others. As Joy says: “*it’s a persona*”; a claim that she repeats for the second time with a louder pitch in her voice.

Following, Mark explains what he meant when he previously used the word *stigma* in his speech. We can ensure that his further explanations are based on his own point of view because he uses the personal pronoun *I* followed by the verb *to mean*. He keeps on saying, “*our face seems to tell us*”. By uttering *our face* he does not articulate clearly whom he is referring to. It could possibly be the faces of everyone who is participating in that workshop, or bidders’ faces in general. Knowing whom Mark refers to is not relevant here. Rather, what is relevant is the fact that the face he talks about apparently (seems) to tell something (that he does not quite articulate) to someone, *us*. Once again, the pronoun *us* is unknown, which is rather irrelevant. However, Mark uses a figurative form when he claims that faces tell something, because in reality faces are just a body part that are not able to speak by themselves. In English, when someone says that faces tell something, it is culturally accepted the meaning of how it (e.g., *face*) looks like and how it may anticipate preconceived ideas about someone or something.

He keeps on saying that when he walks into a store, *they target* him as a *booster*, a *shoplifter*. Here, Mark does not explain whom the pronoun *they* refers to. However, it is possible to be someone who works in the store (or in this context, any establishment) that he may walk in. According to Mark, other workers recognize him as a criminal. Mark does not clarify the reasons he is recognizable as such. However, due to his figurative previous sentence, it may be something that is evident on his face, as he puts it in words: “*my face tells a story*”.

Following, by uttering the conjunction *because*, Mark explains the motives he is recognizable as a criminal. According to him, it is due to how his face looks like, or the anatomy of his face. “*My high cheekbones*”, Mark says, meaning that the bones below his eyes are prominent, hence very visible, which can be one of the side effects of the excessive use of drugs. Such side effect may be caused by the severe weight loss suffered by whoever deals or had dealt with drug related problems. This is a fact that Mark articulates himself in his next sentence: “*I am ex heroin addict*”. By using the prefix “*ex*”, he clarifies the fact that he used to have drug related problems (e.g., heroin addiction). However in his next sentence, he affirms that he is not an ex heroin addict: “*I am not ex*”. From his speech it is not clear the motives he contradicts himself, although he finalizes his discourse by saying that he will always be a heroin addict for the rest of his life. The reasons he makes such a claim, which, in so doing, contradicts him is not relevant to our study. Rather, his explanation regarding the fact that he is (or used to be) a heroin addict is evident on the way he looks. In other words, the symptom of drug related problems (e.g., weight loss) is noticeable on his face, because his cheekbones become more prominent. Fact that may mediate people’s preconceived ideas about his drug addiction, hence associating him with a criminal, since in Canada heroin is an illegal drug.

The previous episode suggests a link between the way bidders look or dress and how they may be perceived by the general public and the way they identify, often resulting in stigmatization. Discourse analysis helps de-mystify prejudice, providing opportunities for measures that assist in overcoming discrimination or intolerance [40]. In the following third episode, John touches on the issue of preconceived ideas that the general public has towards him. As we further articulate, these preconceived ideas, may be mediate by the way he looks.

**John:** *“Not all people like homeless people, do drugs. They, ah, they, they said I look too healthy to be a homeless person. They said I look too clean to be a drug addict. How they, what makes them think I am, I’m one to begin with? Right? This is what I comment. I don’t, I don’t (.) tell them I am a drug addicted, cause I’m not.”*

John starts out his speech by arguing that not everybody who lives in the streets has drug related problems. However, by uttering *“not all”* he is also claiming that there is a portion of the homeless population that has drug related problems. Moreover, by starting his speech talking about the drug issue that homeless people may have, he anticipates to his listeners the topic of his discourse, which is about drugs. He keeps on arguing that someone said something *“they* (which he repeats for three times) *said”*. So far, it is not clear neither, whom the personal pronoun *they* refers to, nor what *they* said. However due to his previous sentence, it is predictable that whatever was said it was about drugs. He articulates what has been said, which is that he looks healthy to be a homeless person. From John’s speech we cannot know who said that, because John says *they* but do not articulate who they are. However, if John looks healthy to be a homeless person, it is implied that homeless people are not healthy.

Then John says, *“they said I look too clean to be a drug addict”*. Once again, John does not articulate who he is referring to, because he keeps using the identifiable pronoun *“they”*. Nonetheless, we can argue that whoever said anything to him, happened in the past because he uses the verb *to say* in its simple past form. Hence, it is clear that John talks about some personal experience he had in the past, because whatever was said, it was said to him. Additionally, if John looks clean to be a drug addict, it is not just implied that drug addicts are dirty, but also John is a drug addicted himself (although he looks clean).

Then, John inquires (maybe to his audience, maybe to himself), what mediates people’s knowledge (*“what make them think”*) about his drug use problems (*“I am one of them”*). John concludes his speech by affirming that he does not announce that he has drug related problems, and the reason he does that is because he claims to not be a drug addict himself. John’s drug addiction (or not) is not relevant to this article. What is relevant here is the fact that according to John’s discourse, it appears to be a certain preconceived idea (from the general public) around how bidders look (or should) look like. For instance, for being homeless a person should also be dirty, for being unhealthy and homeless, a person should also be a drug addict. Such preconceived ideas can be mediate by the media, which in the example we presented compares the bidders to raccoons. We can further conclude from this last episode that there is a certain stigma (among the general public) around how bidders look like, or should look like.

## 5. Conclusions

Using concepts of critical human geography, social semiotics, and discourse analysis *The Story of my Face* draws on one simple type of printed media (flyer) and videotaped workshop material with the binners in Victoria to investigate how local printed media generates and perpetuates stigmatization against binners. More so, this paper addresses the recyclers' perceptions about stigmatization. We presented excerpts from a locally distributed flyer that illustrates how binners are to be associated with urban animals, which at the same time, decreases the value of their work and increases their social exclusion. We recognize that the flyer does not exclusively refer to binners, since raccoons also pose a certain threat to people's garbage. From a socio-political perspective though, the campaign launched by the CRD throughout greater Victoria goes beyond protecting the general public against scavenging or identity theft. Despite the innumerable social, economic, and environmental benefits from resource recovery (scavenging, selective collection, waste picking, *etc.*), it is still illegal in most places, as it is also in Canada. Throughout the world, informal and organized recycling extends the lifetime of landfills and thus saves the cities money due to the reduced need for collection, transport and disposal equipment, personnel, and facilities [41]. In the case of Victoria the city under study, the garbage belongs to the generator until placed into the *blue box*, when it becomes the property of METRO Waste, which is a waste management firm in charge of collection and final destination of the recyclables in Victoria.

One reasoning behind this message on the flyer is that the CRD has a contractual obligation to provide certain quantities of different recyclable materials to the recycling company METRO Waste. This was revealed several times during conversations with CRD solid waste officials since 2008. After collecting the *blue box* materials from Victoria residents the CRD sells the recyclables to METRO Waste, who separates and commercializes the materials to different businesses. In this context, binners may represent a threat to the CRD because they might also collect bottles and cans out of the blue box and sell these to the local bottle depots, hence possibly diminishing the amount of materials METRO Waste is expecting to collect. Nevertheless, this activity represents an income generation for the recyclers, and for most of them, the only earning they have [42]. The CRD—through this recent campaign is appealing to the general public to protect their recyclables from being taken by the raccoons or the binners. In so doing the CRD is not just preventing income generation for the most excluded, but it is also reiterating existing stigmatization against this group of people. Furthermore, the city of Victoria's reasoning suggests a focus on profit making through recycling, rather than supporting the social economy and building a better community.

There are examples from the global South acknowledging the 'environmental service' recyclers perform. Some of these cases are described under 'participatory sustainable waste management' [2,5]. Several municipalities in Brazil, for example, now remunerate the recyclers for the quantity of recyclables recovered, thus recognizing their environmental service contribution. Informal and organized recycling initiatives are crucial in provoking a necessary paradigm shift towards resource recovery and zero waste. A local journalist in Victoria once expressed that without knowing much about binners, she had perceived them as 'losers', whereas when learning about their livelihoods and their contribution to resource recovery, the image had shifted towards environmental steward. *Human language, and by extension, information and knowledge is subjective and contextually biased-created*

within certain ideological, organizational and socio-cultural contexts ([43], p. 81). Allowing for social cultural awareness is one of the preconditions for such a shift from 'looser' to 'steward'. We are surrounded by signs (e.g., photography, texts, cartoons) that have become central in shaping the identity of our society and in creating and disseminating information [44].

Signs have become so common that they not only mix with reality, but also have become reality in itself. In this context, printed media becomes a powerful tool in producing people's perceptions of their surroundings. That is, what and who we are, what we know, and what we might become as human beings is mediated by books, texts, magazines, images, and so forth. Semiotics and visual culture analysis can contribute to decode media's discourse, which helps us to understand how we know what we know and how we make meaning of the content from printed media. In other words, the understanding of signifiers is fundamental to expose differences in worldview and shape different behaviours, allowing us to filter and contest the signs we come across every day, and preventing us from becoming passive of certain situations. Therefore studying semiotics in the context of social issues is important because it assists us in understanding the role signs play in constructing social realities.

Deconstructing social semiotics and discourse that formulate our daily messages and mediate social norms and interactions, helps us identify messages that reiterate marginalization. Understanding education as a process of active *conscientization*, as suggested by Paulo Freire, provides a pathway to overcome this reiteration of marginalization and reinforced stigmatization. Changing the perception of waste from something dirty, unwanted, without value towards waste as a resource, as something valuable which can be reused or recycled will also change the perception of those involved in its recovery, recognizing the opportunity for recovering their citizenship. In reality informal recyclers and binners are environmental stewards. They collect recyclables not only from waste bins but often also out of the litter carelessly left behind in streets, parks, drainages, *etc.* These facets of the binners' work need to be recognized. Propagating the image of 'resource recoverer' and environmental protector is an important strategy to support the social inclusion of those that until now are the most marginalized in our society.

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