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*Religious social-identities in the hybrid self-presentations of Sikh businesspeople*

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the identity work practices of Thai Sikh businesspeople. We focus on two important social-identities in participants' self-presentations -- those derived from religious (Sikh) and Western business discourses -- and identify powerful tensions in their hybrid identity work. Conducting discourse analysis on identity work practices within interview settings, we explore how participants resolve, accommodate or reject these discursive tensions while attempting stable and coherent hybrid self-presentations. We identify several different forms of hybridity, including what we term equipollence, which occurs when two equally powerful, contradictory discourses are incorporated in self-presentations, producing potentially irresolvable intersections and leading to a lack of coherence. Contributions are made to the literatures on religion and work, hybrid identity work processes and social-identities.

**Key words:** religion, identity, hybrid, equipollence, Sikh, Western business, discourse

### **Introduction**

Religions provide important discursive resources for negotiating self-identities yet are often ignored within management research (Tracey, 2012; Tracey, Phillips and Lounsbury, 2014). We make a situated contribution by focusing on identity work and religion within the Thai Sikh diaspora, responding to the need for 'substantial consideration' of cultural, geographic and

economic contexts (Kuhn, 2006, p.1355). This develops understanding of identity work tensions produced by powerful and often contradictory discourses, where discourses indicate ways of ‘behaving, thinking, speaking and valuing that are accepted as instances of particular roles by specific groups of people’ (Woodilla, 1998, p.4). Within an analytical framework derived from discursive psychology, we consider how Sikhs resolve, accommodate or reject discursive tensions through identity work processes, while attempting stable and coherent hybrid self-presentations. We pose the research question: How is identity work utilised in the self-presentations of Thai Sikh businesspeople to resolve discursive tensions? We show how our participants draw on various hybrid forms of identity work, including what we term equipollent identity work. Equipollent identity work can occur across various contexts where individuals struggle to sustain coherence when drawing on two equally powerful discourses. We contribute to the scant literature on religion and work as well as identity work by exploring hybridity processes and religious social-identities.

### **Religion and identity work**

Religion is more than the ‘wallpaper of the social system’ (Beckford, 1983, p.29); it is core to many cultures, providing individuals with a sense of meaning and belonging (Berger, 1967) and influencing working life. Yet, religion is a neglected topic in management research (Tracey *et al.*, 2014). Tracey’s (2012) review of religion and organisation studies in 21 ‘mainstream’ management journals identifies only 86 relevant articles, mainly focusing on management development (Bell and Taylor, 2004), business ethics (Weaver and Agle, 2002) and spiritual leadership (Tourish and Tourish, 2010). While providing insights into how religion has informed business practice, an important gap remains in the detail accorded to religion and identity in working life. This oversight may suggest that scholars believe the topic is taboo, better left to theologians, or fear accusations of attacking religion (Chan-Serafin, Brief and

George, 2013). However, dichotomies of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ separate religious belief and practice: downplaying its prominence in many people’s lives; obscuring the complexities of social practice (Turner, 2014); and ignoring its significance as a difference marker (Hjelm, 2013).

Religions are ‘systems of life-regulation’ that help shape societies, including their ‘economic ethic’, providing explanations, for example for wealth distributions (Weber, 2009, p.267; Tracey, 2012), and acting as ‘systems of communication and shared action’ (Von Stuckrad, 2003, p.268). Weber highlights how religions exist in tension with other socio-historical discourses and institutions (Freund, 1962) and, over time, these discourses interpenetrate and influence one another. Religions are powerful discursive regimes that combine a variety of religious and non-religious discourses in the hegemonic understanding of a specific religion, subject to unequal power relations and representing the temporarily fixed outcome of power struggles. Religious discourses guide the construction and negotiation of self-presentations (Hjelm, 2013), where one is not only expected to perform the roles related to such social-identities but to *be* a Sikh, Christian or Muslim (Berger, 1967; Weaver and Agle, 2002). Religion can provide a stabilising effect on group and individual identity (Mol, 1976) yet also acts as a source of tension. Tensions have been explored between individual and collective levels of identity (e.g. Maoz, Steinberg, Bar-On and Fakhereldeen, 2002, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and within organisations, for example through dis-identifying with, and seeking to change, aspects of religious organisations (e.g. Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville and Scully, 2010, in the Catholic Church). These studies demonstrate the potential for tension but also for change through selective (dis)engagement with specific elements of a religious social-identity and the development of more complex, nuanced identities.

*Identity work*

Identity is defined as ‘the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, and [which are] developed and sustained through processes of social interaction’ (Brown, 2015, p.23) and is central to understanding working lives. Identity work describes processes where people seek to exert agency in the construction of self-presentations, shaping a reasonably coherent sense of who they are and negotiating the affirmation of meanings they attach to themselves (Watson, 2008). This perspective allows us to utilise a discursive psychology approach to ‘the formation and negotiation of psychological states, identities and interactional and intersubjective events [...] while describing also the collective and social patterning of background normative conceptions’ (Wetherell, 1998, p.405). This approach focuses on how unfolding dialogue shapes the identities that people enact and invoke. Watson posits that discourses are not straightforwardly appropriated into self-presentations, suggesting a third intermediate step where ‘social-identities’ are shaped by socially-available discourses, like religious teachings (Hjelm, 2013), and (re)negotiated through social interaction. Social-identities are defined here as socially-available ‘notions of who or what any individual might be’, as analytically distinct from self-identity which is ‘the individual’s own notion of who and what they are’ (Watson, 2008, p.131). Social-identities act as focal points within discourses and are adopted through identity work as part of a self-identity.

Individuals draw upon multiple social-identities given ‘the intersectional nature of identity – that men are not just men but are immersed in social class relations, racialized and so on’ (Wetherell and Edley, 2014, p.361). Intersectionality emphasises interactions between ‘categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power’ (Davis, 2008, p.64). Identity work therefore involves the experience of “fitting into” certain intersectional locations – locations that may be manufactured by hegemonic discourses [...] and] articulatory practices’ (Prins, 2006, p.288). However, intersectionality research has also failed to fully

engage with religion (Weber, 2015).

This is important because social-identities, such as those derived from religious or work-related discourses, are dynamic and ‘there is always scope for individual discretion’ in their take up (Watson, 2008, p.131). However, from the multiple social-identities derived from a given discourse (e.g. male Sikh, Thai Sikh), individuals tend to draw upon discursive resources perceived as legitimate, involving ‘the micropolitics of identity constructions in relation to social categories’ (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.52). Identity work is always constrained, always over-determined, by what is discursively available in a particular context. Individuals are not passive (Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2016), they exhibit agency in negotiating their identities (Wright, Nyberg and Grant, 2012) albeit ‘act[ing] within socially constructed ranges of possibilities’ (Calhoun, 1995, p.144, cited in Srinivas, 2013), some discourses may be more powerful and/or legitimate than others and some social-identities less amenable to adaptation. Religious social-identities are influential, providing identity claims that believers ‘constantly validate by their social behaviour, to the approval of their co-religionists and the hostility or apathy of others’ (Herriot and Scott-Jackson, 2002, p.252). Religious social-identities are important because they are drawn from a hegemonic discourse that provides an influential resource for religious members to make sense of their selves, the world around them and the conduct of others. They are deep rooted, relate to family and work and may be particularly important for diasporic communities. However, they may differ in their effects and how they are taken up in hybrid identity work.

### *Hybrid identities*

Hybridisation involves adopting and recombining aspects of new and existing cultural practices (Anthias, 2001; Hutnyk, 2005) through the displacement and synthesis of meanings (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015), taking elements of different cultures and ‘transform[ing them] into

something new and useful' (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.62). This paper explores this re-combination process through a nuanced consideration of how different 'forms' of hybridity can develop (Anthias, 2001).

Cultural studies research indicates that actors constructing hybrid identities draw from dominant practices (Anthias, 2001) or host cultures (Hutnyk, 2005), while organisation studies discuss actors as having 'the advantage of being able to take the "best parts"' (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.62), and identify 'facets of identity' (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p.188) as salient. However, actors may lack the opportunity to choose elements or the freedom to (re)negotiate religious social-identities as behaviours where assumptions may be observed, policed and sanctioned. While religious social-identities can provide stability, '[n]ew content typically is assimilated, and old content significantly revised or reinterpreted, only after cautious censorship' (Seul, 1999, p.558). Choices around adopting identity elements that include conflicting dimensions can therefore create 'latent tensions' such as those between the creative and commercial in arts organisations (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane and Greig, 2012, p.45).

Hybridization needs to be understood in relation to intersectionality, 'highlighting individuals' locations across a multiplicity of identity dimensions' (Atewologun et al., 2016, p.225). For example, 'building businesses in the fashion or beauty industries is advantageous' for female Muslim entrepreneurs as they can 'use their hybridized cultural identities' (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.63) and understanding of migrant communities to 'sell images of female ethnicity'. The concept of intersectional identity work 'offers an approach for elucidating identity-specific strategies in which multiple-identified individuals engage in response to contextual identity threats' (Atewologun et al, 2016, p.226) and for avoiding 'premature closure' in analysis (Davis, 2008, p.79). Nevertheless, care must be taken not to elide 'the dynamic nature of power and inequality relations' (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012, p.181). Identity

work at intersectional locations (Prins, 2006) highlights identities as a ‘precarious achievement’ (Prins, 2006, p.288); they are fragile and open to contestation (Knights and Clarke, 2014), for example where particular social-identities or forms of hybridity are more easily accessible for some individuals than others.

### *Hybridization and religion*

A key question within hybrid identity work research is the extent of coherence between different social-identities (Down and Reveley, 2009; Jain, George and Maltarich, 2009), particularly religious social-identities. Some scholars observe how ethnic or religious minorities build identities that exhibit a high degree of coherence: such as Farah, a Muslim female employee, who describes herself as ‘integrated’, embracing elements from both Moroccan and Western cultures that ‘she experiences as positive’ (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p.190). Her resulting hybrid identity ‘allows’ her to move ‘between the two contexts...’ (*ibid*). This form of hybridity is elegantly explained, but the apparent ease of ‘movement’ ascribed to Farah seems to emerge from a relatively benign set of socio-cultural circumstances. As Anthias (2001, p.631) asks, ‘Are some aspects of culture more difficult to mix? How important [are] ... religious and moral rules?’

Management research tends not to treat religious social-identities as distinctive or, where it has done so, typically explores Muslim or Indian business immigrants in Western Europe or the US (e.g. Essers and Benschop, 2007; 2009), excluding other religions (Turner, 2014). In contrast, we examine a religious community with a heritage from one non-Western, emerging economy (India) living and working in another (Thailand), albeit simultaneously coming to terms with modernistic business values. We analyse more closely the relative dominance of different social-identities in hybrid identity work. The existing literature is suggestive of a precarious balance between ‘difference and sameness’ such that identities

become ‘neither one nor the other’ (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p.193), reflecting the intersectional, contested nature of identity (Prins, 2006; Knights and Clarke, 2014). The suggestion that people can draw on ‘different and potentially conflicting dimensions that are not normally expected to go together’ (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997, p.594) indicates that there may be a range of different forms of hybrid identity work yet to be considered.

This is especially pertinent to work contexts where religious discourses circulate. For example, in Essers and Benschop’s (2007, pp.62-3) analysis of the ‘hybrid identities’ of Muslim entrepreneurs, there is an unacknowledged mix between a form of hybridity with one social-identity dominating and a form where equally powerful social-identities co-exist and remain unresolved. Thus, Salima talks somewhat unclearly of ‘taking a road in between’ the look of Moroccans and Dutch people; and Mekka claims to have ‘both cultures inside of’ her. Similarly, Van Laer and Janssen (2014, p.192-3) provide a vivid description of Jaafar who portrays himself as ‘an integrated Muslim’ as ‘he unites some elements from the Moroccan and the Flemish culture’, but not without considerable ‘struggle’. We suggest there may be alternative ‘stratagems’ (Jenkins, 1996, p.25) to be unpacked within identity work than the ‘hybrid style’ and ‘hybrid business approach’ attributed to Salima and Mekka or the ‘hybrid identity’ of Jaafar.

Legitimacy is often required to maintain social and business relationships (Atewologun et al., 2016; Watson, 2008) and, given the precarity and fragility of identity, abandoning attempts to secure legitimacy in one’s various self-presentations is not straightforward. Thus, just as Phillips’ (2012, p.810) entrepreneurial narrators ‘draw positively on business and environmental discourses to support their identities’, it is likely that under conditions when equally powerful discourses prevail, actors such as Sikh businesspeople may not abandon their efforts to participate in both religious and business-related social-identities. Yet, when working with social-identities derived from hegemonic discourses, their identity work may become

increasingly inconsistent and analytically incoherent. In building on the prior scholarship of Essers, Benschop and colleagues and of Van Laer and Janssen we ask: what do these challenges mean for how our participants negotiate their Sikh identity in relation to their modern business practices?

## **Method**

This paper emerged from a broader study of Thai Sikh businesspeople utilising an open, semi-structured interview approach allowing us to follow developing lines of interest and be partially guided by the participants. Identity talk emerged as an analytical focus, especially in relation to religion. Interaction and self-presentation *within* interviews is valuable for exploring self-presentations as they occur (Dick and Cassell, 2009); representing the social, negotiated nature of identity work. To provide the necessary background for our study at the macro social level, this section begins with an overview of the Thai Sikh context before exploring the potential influence of Western business discourse on the social-identities of Sikh businesspeople. We then explain the micro level detail of our data collection and approach to analysis.

### *The Thai Sikh context*

Sikhism was founded in 15th century Punjab and preaches the oneness of God and the importance of 'truthful living'. Sikhism combines schools of religious thought and philosophy (Jagbir, 2011), incorporating values including bravery, sacrifice, service and social responsibility and establishing clear physical and social boundaries (Kapur and Misra, 2003). Symbols are significant for maintaining these boundaries as Sikh religious teachings carry an expectation of conformity to aspects of physical dress, seen as 'markers of their identity' (Thandi, 2011, p.79) and indicators of religious virtue (McLeod, 1989). The dress code includes 'the five Ks': kesh (unshorn hair), kachara (breeches), kanga (comb), kirpan (sword) and kara

(steel bangle), with kesh commonly associated with men in Thailand (Theingi and Theingi, 2011), due to the visual symbolism of the unshorn beard and turban. The body can therefore ‘convey the exclusivity of [the] Sikh community’ (Kapur and Misra, 2003, p.107); Sikhs in Bangkok have expressed the normative assertion that ‘a Sikh who is shorn of the external symbolism of Sikhism cannot be a true Sikh’ (Mani, 1993, p.933). Social interaction reinforces such normative influences for example through the Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) which ‘continuously provide[s] a strong bond of ... Sikh unity’ (Kapur and Misra, 2003, p.106).

The predominantly male gender of our participants matters: as we shall see, giving up some of the masculine symbols of his faith-based social-identity to become accepted in the commercial world can represent a considerable sacrifice for a male Sikh businessperson. Tomalin (2017) confirms that there is ‘a much clearer injunction within Sikhism ... that the turban should be worn, that the hair should not be cut, by initiated Sikh men’. The identity work undertaken by Sikh entrepreneurs also merits exploration as they are business owners, not employees, and thus not continually ‘seen as a “stranger” in the workplace’ where their ‘colleagues keep confronting’ them with this discursive othering (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p.192).

Over the past century Sikhs have migrated in substantial numbers, with the Thai Sikh population estimated to have grown to 20,000, representing 0.04% of the Thai population (US Department of State, 2010). Before the 1947 India/Pakistan partition, the ‘first wave’ of Sikh immigrants rarely had plans to settle, repatriating funds to what they saw as ‘home’ (Theingi and Theingi, 2011). We focus on the ‘second wave’ of post-1947 Sikh immigrants (Mani, 1993), many of whom sent their children back to India for an education still heavily influenced by British colonialism (Baber, 2001). The Thai Sikh diaspora occupy ‘a visible mercantile minority ...and continue to risk ...scapegoating (Dusenbery, 2011, p.68). Nonetheless, Thai Sikh business ventures have evolved from hawkers and traders to tailors and manufacturers

with some second-generation Sikhs expanding into real estate and information technology, with many still family-owned (Theingi and Theingi, 2011). This community represents a valuable context for studying identity work because their religion, considered as a social practice, is physically evident and provides a powerful set of social norms and discursive resources for the construction and evaluation of their identities (von Stuckrad, 2003).

### *Western business discourse*

To find a legitimate voice, non-Westerners can be compelled to draw upon Western discourse, often promulgated by the ‘institutional apparatus’ of management knowledge via universities and related organisations (Westwood, 2006, p.103). Western business discourse is therefore influential, especially where it is ‘a key lever of access to social privilege’ (Srinivas, 2013, p.1667). Western ways of conducting business carry expectations and its values are informed by modernisation discourses emanating from the US, alongside economic thought and work-related attitudes that equate managerial efficiency and rationalism with social development.

Blumenberg (1985) places secularisation at the heart of the rise of such modernity, yet notes that religion continues to represent a powerful spiritual force. For Weber, Protestantism in particular was crucial for shaping Western capitalist modernity in terms of individualism, rationalism and the ‘Protestant work ethic’ (e.g. Weber, 2002, pp.212-3; see Holton and Turner, 2010). This included important elements of autonomy and agency but also personal responsibility where hard work and the investment of time and effort in one’s endeavours would be rewarded. Rationalism, so much part of modernity, is commonly described as an ‘American’ way of doing business carrying strong normative force (Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). This manifests in notions of a ‘professional demeanour’ and ‘interaction’ including thinking in ‘linear, strategic – in a word, “rational” – terms’; covering ‘the body in conservative, mainstream attire’ and deriving ‘primary identity and fulfilment from occupation and work

accomplishments' (Ashcraft and Allen, 2003, p.27).

While religion was not the sole determining factor, this suggests that it played an important role in shaping the development of capitalism (Freund, 1962) and associated discourses. The hegemony of Western business discourse is such that entrepreneurial behaviour has widespread legitimacy in societies that celebrate individualism and rationalisation (Brandl and Bullinger, 2009). Thus, 'personality-based features, such as personal ambition and social attractiveness' become more highly valued than 'social virtues' like dependability and integrity (Herriot and Scott-Jackson, 2002, p.252). Western notions of autonomy develop, in part, via economic growth; thus, economic wealth is an ultimate goal and the sovereign individual's social status is promoted through competition.

Moreover, management discourse legitimises the capitalist process. A 'spirit of capitalism' can be regarded as 'a configuration of discourses articulated together ... and inculcated as ways of being or identities' (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002, p.188). Those embracing capitalism seem to do so with considerable enthusiasm; and this is often manifested by small family firms seeking 'freedom from local communities' and progress via 'bourgeois capitalism' (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002, p.188-9). Such ideas are perpetuated in neo-colonial discourse where the West is constructed as 'superior, modern, civilised and active' and where this discourse 'regulates the identity of those who use it' (McKenna, 2011, p.389-90).

### *The interviews*

Recruiting participants involved snowball sampling with two seeding approaches: individuals from the researchers' networks; and contact with Sikh organisations in Bangkok supported by Daya, a local Sikh businesswoman and prominent community member. All interviews involved voluntary, informed participation and were conducted in English, as this was either the participants' first language or provided a fluent and familiar common ground. Interviews were

digitally-recorded, lasted between one and a half and three hours and were professionally transcribed. The interviews were conducted at Gurdwaras, participants' homes and workplaces in Pattaya, Chiangmai and Bangkok.

All interviews were conducted by a Burmese woman academic based in Thailand and half in conjunction with an Australian woman academic (R1 and R2 respectively). Where Daya acted as gatekeeper, she often remained for the duration of the interview which, in some cases also included family members who would actively contribute to the conversation. Intermediaries can help develop rapport, introducing a more conversational, less formal tone to an interview (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2015). This represents a non-Western, less individualistic approach, with members of a family, business or social-group making sense of things through group discussion, at times disagreeing with each other and, to some extent, leaving the researcher redundant. This reflected a more collective approach than is typical in Western studies (see Brown and Humphreys, 2002, for an example of rich empirical material in a non-Western context that includes analysis of group conversations).

We analysed the identity work within the interview setting rather than focussing on respondents' retrospective accounts of their identity work that may be more suitably discussed in a one-to-one interview. These self-presentations include trying to convince those present of the legitimacy of identity claims (Gallagher and Lawrence, 2012) and enacting identity changes depending on participants' perceptions of those with whom they interact (Cascón-Pereira and Hallier, 2012). This approach to interviewing resulted in different identity work provocations in terms of representatives of Western business discourse (the academics), the Sikh community, businesses and family members.

Noting the suggestions of Saunders and Townsend (2016), Table 1 gives the descriptive context of the interviews and characteristics of the 22 participants, with most operating in textiles, reflecting the majority of Sikh businesses in Thailand. Participant ages range from late

20s to 80s, including original emigrants (those born in India) and Sikhs born in Thailand. Only two participants were women due to men inheriting the family business, with women typically not involved in commercial decisions. More than two people were present in the majority of interviews, see Table 1, and this reflects our analytical focus. Only five interviews involved just two parties, with several interviewees or more than one researcher and/or gatekeeper present at the rest.

We used discourse analysis, drawn from discursive psychology, to ‘unpack’ the co-constructed linguistic moves within the interviews, exploring how this talk may perform identity work by identifying specific legitimating and naturalising discursive practices (Potter and Wetherell, 1995). We endeavoured to remain reflexive to ‘researcher-researched dynamics’ (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.57). In terms of religion, R1 is a Buddhist whereas the remaining three authors are agnostic. The topic of the researchers’ faith was not raised during the interviews, although the Sikhism of the gatekeeper Daya was pertinent, as shown in Extract 6. Moreover, although our participants were predominantly men, the fact that R1 and R2 were both women did not appear to affect the interactions. What may have been more significant was their academic status, since participants often attempted to position themselves as credible businesspeople to this scholarly audience. The other two authors, who were not part of the interviews, were involved in the interpretation and writing-up after complex themes of identity emerged during the interviews. While appreciating a potential loss of the Sikhs’ voices, the experience of these researchers in discourse analysis facilitated more abstraction and theorizing (*ibid.*). All four authors compared interview transcript coding to ensure a high degree of inter-researcher consistency. We then undertook a series of ‘expansion analyses’ of stanzas from each practice to provide written interpretations in which we assumed that the meaning of the discourse was not necessarily self-evident. The ‘expansion’ includes information on how the participants appear to interpret the discourse, including any background knowledge (e.g.

context) necessary to understand the interaction (Wood and Kroger, 2000).

To allocate stanzas of talk to particular identity work practices, transcripts were coded partly on categories from the literature (i.e. religion, identity work, hybridity and notions of Western business) while emphasising participant-generated meanings. We thus used pre-existing categories, such as Sikh male or Western businessperson, which we transferred to the interview talk. Where other social categories emerged, and were relevant to the identity work being undertaken, this intersectionality was noted during our analysis (e.g. Table 2 practices labelled d, e and i where Christianity, family hierarchy and Thai nationality are brought up by our participants); however, these dimensions do not form the focus of this paper. In Table 2 we identify 14 types of identity work practices or stratagems (Jenkins, 1996), which also includes the number of stanza occurrences. Among these stratagems we identified three core themes: social-identities where one discourse is dominant; hybrid identity work drawing on multiple social-identities but where one has greater salience; and equipollent identity work that draws on two social-identities from equally powerful discourses, such that an impasse is reached (i.e. one social-identity is no longer dominant), leaving a discursive ‘irresolution’ (Tempest and Starkey, 2004).

## **Analysis**

We identified numerous examples where Sikh social-identities are influential in providing self-presentations and accounts of individual actions with a source of legitimacy, including direct appeals to religious observance, tradition and the local Sikh community. In general, conforming to Sikh social-identity is characterised by drawing upon established Sikh discourse such as showing loyalty towards the faith by attending the Gurdwara, community service and conforming to the five K’s as indicators of religious virtue. The power of a devout Sikh social-identity has some participants attributing their business ‘success’ to *God’s grace* (Extract 1 L3-

6); or to the *Lord's blessing* (Table 2). For instance, Gobind asserts this grace has to be *earned* (L8), though not just through 'trying hard' but by displaying Sikh *values* (L6), such as being *pure at heart* (L8) and *moral* (L12). In this way, he goes beyond personal responsibility with a heartfelt, non-rational credit for his success to his Sikh faith that is potentially at odds with Western business discourse. Gobind's narrative, spoken at the temple, is also enriched by reference to his son (also present) and to his father, whose 'goodness' he claims to have witnessed at work.

**Extract 1: Gobind**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Gobind	I always tell my kids, 'First you thank God everyday for what we have [...]'. 2 3 4 5 6 7
	R1	[...]
8	Gobind	How do you earn that grace? 9 10 11 12
		Well I think my dad has earned that a lot [...] He's very pure at heart and well respected [...] I spend more time with him than I spend with my wife because run the business together. And I'm at awe everyday that how my dad handles himself in different situations. He always tells me that there's always a moral behind him.

However, when talking about work, there are frequent tensions in individuals' self-presentations between their Sikh social-identities and competing and potentially contradictory discourses. The most prominent discursive tension arises between Sikh social-identity and social-identities derived from Western business discourse. Next we discuss how tensions

between these social-identities are resolved through hybrid identity work.

**Table 1:** Descriptive characteristics of participants & interview settings

<i>Participant name</i>	<i>Interview number(s) attended</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Full form or not<sup>i</sup></i>	<i>Birth country</i>	<i>Emigrant status</i>	<i>Premises interview conducted</i>	<i>Researchers/ gatekeeper present</i>	<i>Business/ industry</i>
<b>Ranjit</b>	1	80	Man	Full form	India	Initial emigrant	Home	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading, Textile – Retail & Real Estate Investment
<b>Kharak</b>	2	30s	Man	Full form	Thailand	Second generation	Work premises	R1 & R2	Real Estate Investment Hospitality Industry
<b>Jagmeet</b>	3	60s	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile – Retail/ Wholesale
<b>Kuldip</b>	3	40s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile – Retail/ Wholesale
<b>Dalip</b>	3	60s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile –Wholesale
<b>Piara</b>	4	30s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	Second generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring - Retail
<b>Parkash</b>	4	60s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring - Retail
<b>Sukhbir</b>	5, 6	40s	Man	Trimmed	India	Initial emigrant	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading & Manufacture
<b>Sundri</b>	5, 6	40s	Woman	N/A	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading & Manufacture
<b>Gurbaksh</b>	7	40s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	Second generation	Home	R1, R2 & Daya	Garment Export
<b>Manmohan</b>	8	80	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Religious Leader/ former business -Tailoring
<b>Montek</b>	9	60	Man	No uniform, shaved	Thailand	First generation	Hotel	R1	Medical Doctor – operating own practice
<b>Preneet</b>	10, 11	40s	Woman	N/A	India	Initial emigrant	Home	R1	Not-for-profit religious school and teaching
<b>Raghuraj</b>	10	20s	Man	Trimmed	Thailand	Second generation	Home	R1	Working for a MNC – and own business
<b>Amarinder</b>	11	40s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile Wholesale
<b>Gobind</b>	12	40s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Gurdwara	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring Business
<b>Arjan</b>	12	teens	Man	Full form	Thailand	Second generation	Gurdwara	R1, R2 & Daya	Student working in family business
<b>Karpal</b>	13	60s	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Priest - business experience
<b>Gurdial</b>	13	50s	Man	No uniform, shaved	Thailand	Third generation	Gurdwara	R1	President of Gurdwara <sup>ii</sup> - and own Tailoring business
<b>Zail</b>	14	20s	Man	Trimmed	Thailand	Second generation	Payap University	R1	Niche Tailoring Business
<b>Narinder</b>	15	80s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Gurdwara	R1	President of Gurdwara – and own Tailoring Business
<b>Ilbagh</b>	16	70s	Man	Trimmed	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Textile Industry
<b>Giani</b>	17	20s	Man	Full form	India	First generation	Pahurat Market	R1	Textile Industry
<b>Bhagat</b>	17	50s	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Pahurat Market	R1	Textile Industry

**Table 2: Forms of identity work in Sikh interview talk**

<i>Identity work</i>	<i>Identity work practices</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Example stanzas</i>
<b>Religion conforming</b>	a Asserting salience of religious symbols	10	Dilbagh: [...] if you're from the Sikh family and you cut your hair then we don't look with a lot of respect to that person. Means he has not be able to live up to his Guru's teachings.
	b Claiming adherence to religious practices	6	Gurdial: I came (to the temple) every day, almost, if I'm in Chiangmai. The rule of Sikh is you should worship the Guru first and then go to work [...] I came to worship, and go to open my office and go to work.
	c Attributing success largely to faith & power of God	7	R1: Does your religion affect your business operation? Parkash: 100% affect. You improve your character of life. When you deal with anybody personally, this is the service type business. Because you are blessed, nothing is in your hand, nothing is in man's hand. It's always Lord's blessing.
<b>Hybrid but religion dominant</b>	d Acknowledging Sikhs' positioning in society and vs. Others (i)	12	R1: What kind of contribution do your businesses bring to Thailand? Karpal: We're in Pattaya and I'm President (of the Gurdwara) for the last 30 years: you ask what you want and we will give you, in social way, in school, in whatever; and we don't care what you are: you're Christian, Burmese, whatever.
	e Reflecting on hierarchies within religion (i)	5	R1: So the seniority still plays an important role? Because most of the Presidents are of older generations? Preneet: Yes, politics, family hierarchy also plays a big part. But I'm not criticizing them because there is lots of work they are doing [...] I'm not saying they are swindling because they are religious people and we kind of have faith in them.
<b>Equipollent</b>	f Contrasting outward facing vs. inward facing identity work	16	R1: Do you identify yourself as a Thai or Indian? Jagmeet: First we have to say we are Indian because our look is Indian. You cannot say Thai. I have to say my face is Indian but my heart is Thai.
	g Qualified positioning of the self (& Others) in terms of religion	23	Sukhbir: If you meet my father, he's never cut his beard; it is now so long. At some point, I might return to that lifestyle. But right now, it's time to do business and become successful. If I was strict with religion, I would not have left home...
	h Attempting to reconcile/balance faith and values with business practices	26	Jagmeet: Everybody said if you don't lie, you can't do business. We try our best not to lie. Frankly speaking, I can't be 100% sure that If I'm not doing, my staff is doing. You are not lying but not telling the truth. [...] Sometimes you have to do that, nobody is perfect ... This business need to have secret. Otherwise, you can't make money. That's important.
<b>Hybrid but business dominant</b>	i Acknowledging Sikhs' position in society vs. Others (ii)	13	Kharak: We are living in Thailand and we do not want to be generalized as the Sikhs who have done something in a negative way. This is an awareness that most Sikhs have; they want to blend in.
	j Reflecting on hierarchies within religion (ii)	5	Sukhbir: The Aroras are urban Sikhs. I would not like my daughter to marry a Jats Sikh <sup>iii</sup> , because they are working in land area. They work in the field; they are practical and strong physically, but we are strong mentally through education.
	k Contrasting generations & acknowledging forces of modernity/time	11	Raghuraj: Although my religion actually has a direction in terms of marriage and values, I separate it. The reason is that religion was made a long time ago, and now the world is different, and I think to adapt is the smarter way to go. Because there is so much more you can learn and so much more you can do.
<b>Business conforming</b>	l Confirming growth of professions/professionalism	7	Montek: Up until when I was a child, we never indulge in other professions except business. Then, I would say that I'm one of the first few generations of those Sikhs or Indians who moved professionalism. Before me, there were only a couple of Indians who were doctors. Today, there are plenty.
	m Attributing success to business knowledge, hard work & networks	19	R1: And what are the factors which made you successful? Kharak: As a human being, everyone should try to be a nice person, but of course as a businessman in Thailand, it's not just the know-how but the know-who as well. The main key is relationship building with customers, suppliers and banks.
	n Discourse emphasising markets, business, & customers	23	Jagmeet: [...] I have a lot of problems with my workers. When they deliver, they don't have manners, customers cannot take it. I try to keep good ones who has no problem with customers, because for businesspeople the customers are God.

1 Many participants identify with social-identities such as entrepreneur or manager, reflecting an  
 2 appreciation of markets drawn from the hegemony of Western business discourse (cf. Pio and  
 3 Essers, 2014). This emerges in how participants present their businesses and, by extension,  
 4 their working selves. For example, full form Sikhs father (Jagmeet) and son (Kuldip) co-  
 5 construct a *successful* business as one founded on *quality* (repeatedly evoked by Jagmeet, L2-  
 6 3), *know-how* (L13) and a degree of risk-taking (*very big price to pay*) (L14). However, they  
 7 also construct their selves: Kuldip's interjection serves to display his business credentials as he  
 8 explains his father's *deeper and deeper* adjective (L4) in terms of being *specialised* (L7); and  
 9 Jagmeet categorises himself as a rational manager with his account of a changing *margin* (L8)  
 10 driving the need to 'modernise'. Further helping to cement Jagmeet's identity, he claims this  
 11 was facilitated via the purchase of *modern* 'Swiss' *machinery* (L11) and his own commitment  
 12 to *training* (L15), thereby outdoing *our competitors* (L12). This contrasts with Gobind (Extract  
 13 1), for whom identifying with the social-identity of a rational manager might risk the legitimacy  
 14 of his non-rational credit for success.

15 **Extract 2: Jagmeet & Kuldip**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Jagmeet	The reason we went into production is we have to have better product quality
2		control. We are successful because our quality, in comparison competitors
3		we have higher quality [...] 23 years ago, we are already doing some
4		interlining business <sup>iv</sup> , only non-woven [...] We went deeper and deeper into
5		interlining and we left all the other things which we were doing. How do
6		you earn that grace?
7	Kuldip	We are specialised in interlining.
8	Jagmeet	23 years ago, interlining was a very, very good margin business, but now
9		not anymore [...]
10	R1	How do you keep in touch with technology?

11	Jagmeet	Our factory is very modern. Our machinery are from Switzerland [...] We
12		purchase the know-how as well. Our competitors set up the factory, didn't
13		purchase the know-how. They struggled about a year to produce sellable
14		quality. It took us two weeks to start selling. But know-how is the very big
15		price to pay: I went to Switzerland for training about the machinery.

1 Later in the same interview, Dalip, a family friend, joins the discussion providing a  
2 historical narrative constructing Sikhs as *trusted* (L1) and *hardworking* (L4), attributing their  
3 'success' (L5) to the latter trait. He legitimates his opinion by informing R1 of his commercial  
4 credentials, supported by a detailed description of his own *business* (L3-4).

5 **Extract 3: Dalip**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Dalip	[...] Sikh people were mostly trusted people with good heart. Even up to
2		now, you will not find any bad history of Sikh here. No crime and we are
3		living peacefully. I'm doing wholesale business, cloth, textiles. We import
4		and buy from local factory and sell. Sikhs are hardworking people. That's
5		why most of them are successful.

6

7 We can observe a rational demeanour (Ashcraft and Allen, 2003) or performance with  
8 some participants confirming the growth of 'professionalism' within the Sikh business  
9 community. Interviewed in the workplace with his wife present, Amarinder explains why he  
10 was not trained in a profession. He uses a historical framing to re-imagine *professionalism* (L2)  
11 as a modern (*today*) *capitalist* (L7) approach to *business* (L4) that involves actors (*you*)  
12 'having' *to be in big companies* (L6). This also legitimates his personal prior lack of  
13 professionalism and perhaps mitigates his full form appearance (which may have denied him  
14 *job opportunities*) (L5). Then, by seeking affirmation from R1 at the end of his account (L7),

1 Amarinder portrays himself as aware of Western business developments.

2 **Extract 4: Amarinder**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	R1	Why didn't your parents feel that you should go professional?
2	Amarinder	[...] At that time professionalism has not reached the stage where you can
3		earn so much money. Today professionalism has reached an age where it
4		outmatches business; back then business was everything. And from
5		business comes professionalism and from professionalism comes more job
6		opportunities [...] Now, professionalism is in; you have to be in big
7		companies. It's the capitalist world today, you understand?

3

4 The stanzas highlighted above draw unproblematically on Western business discourse  
5 in participants' self-presentations. However, there are also occasions where these social-  
6 identities are espoused in relation to a potentially contradictory Sikh social-identity and  
7 participants engage in hybrid identity work.

8

9 *Hybrid identity work*

10 In hybrid identity work, interactions between religion and business need not be antagonistic,  
11 for example in the Judeo-Christian framing of the UK enterprise culture (Dodd and Seaman,  
12 1998) or Muslim women entrepreneurs' accounts (Essers and Benschop, 2009). Valued social-  
13 identity elements can be retained while other elements are separated out through a process of  
14 dis-identification or split-identification (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2010). While less individualistic, there  
15 is an emphasis on personal reward for hard work in the Sikh accounts (as in Extract 3)  
16 appearing similar to that identified by Weber's (2002) Protestant work ethic that continues to

1 represent an important part of Western business discourse. In this way, Sikh and Western  
 2 business discourses are not always in tension allowing scope for selective appropriation of  
 3 particular elements. However, points of tension tend to dominate, for example in a past-present  
 4 disconnection where transformations of Sikhism, while economically beneficial, are also  
 5 discussed as potential threats to religious traditions. Modern Sikhs re-invent themselves as  
 6 astute, successful businesspeople while being devout based on their own interpretation of  
 7 Sikhism. Such re-interpretations come with the knowledge that they may not be fully accepted  
 8 within the Thai Sikh community.

9           Hybridisation processes are evident as participants selectively invoke aspects of social-  
 10 identities according to the audience and situation. The extent to which one or other social-  
 11 identity is drawn upon indicates a ‘salience hierarchy’ (Table 2) where variations occur in the  
 12 commitment shown to different elements of hybrid self-identities (Jain *et al.*, 2009). The  
 13 presentation of a ‘modern Sikh’ demonstrates a hybrid social-identity drawing upon elements  
 14 of both Sikh and Western business discourses. With his mother present, Raghuraj contrasts past  
 15 (*long time ago*) and present (*now*) (L2-3) to justify his ‘smart’ decision to *adapt* (L3) in order  
 16 to fulfil his contemporary ambitions (the repetition of *so much more*) (L4) while still  
 17 acknowledging his religion’s *values* (L2):

18

19           **Extract 5: Raghuraj**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Raghuraj	Although my religion actually has a direction in terms of marriage and
2		values, I separate it. The reason is that religion was made a long time ago,
3		and now the world is different, and I think to adapt is the smarter way to go.
4		Because there is so much more you can learn and so much more you can do.

20

21           Where participants largely align with the religious social-identity and selectively invoke

1 elements of the Western business discourse, their talk often confirms the five Ks (especially  
2 kesh) as symbolic markers of tradition and religious affiliation. For instance, Gurbaksh debates  
3 the connection with form and trust even as he confirms his disquiet at the waning importance  
4 of religion. With *money* as an opening gambit (L1), Gurbaksh constructs himself as worldly-  
5 wise to his audience. More significantly, he concludes by confirming that religion brings a *fear*  
6 *factor* (L11), and ‘accountability’ (L12), thus repositioning himself within the social-identity  
7 of ‘having’ a religion and, by extension, not making what are presumably moral *mistakes* (L12),  
8 thereby establishing to himself and others that he is a moral person who can be *trusted* (L10).  
9 This stanza illustrates the co-construction of meaning as Gurbaksh contradicts Daya over her  
10 assertions regarding *form* (L5), and then repairs any potential undermining of the resonance of  
11 Sikhism caused by his earlier remarks (L7). His self-identity thus emerges as a more devout  
12 Sikh than the business persona he had constructed in previous talk.

13

14 **Extract 6: Gurbaksh & Daya**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Gurbaksh	Money has become very important issue...
2	Daya	Because the importance of religion has gone down.
3	Gurbaksh	Yeah...
4	Daya	The young Sikh, they trim their beards, they don't wear turban. It's there,
5		it's very visible also, not just subtle, it is very visible. When the form
6		disappear, the philosophy disappear...
7	Gurbaksh	No, no, it is not, you cannot, not, I am sorry, it doesn't mean that.
8	Daya	Do you feel that a Sikh that remains in full form...
9	Gurbaksh	Is more trustworthy? Yes, but, but not guaranteed. Chances are much more
10		that's true, if you don't have a religion you cannot be trusted. Basically
11		because there is no fear and when there is no fear factor, you could do

12		anything because you are not accountable, and then you make mistakes.
----	--	---

1

2 For Gurbaksh the Sikh social-identity reasserts itself, creating a relatively  
3 unproblematic degree of hybridity as he attempts to negotiate a coherent self-presentation.  
4 Other participants selectively resist elements of religious social-identities, more readily  
5 aligning with a Western business social-identity, reflecting an identity work strategy where  
6 certain social-identity elements become more or less prominent depending on the specific  
7 situation's context or dynamics. As Sukhbir and Sundri (husband and wife) reflect on  
8 hierarchies, both within Sikhism and compared to other faiths, they each construct a hybrid  
9 self-presentation. First, Sukhbir claims there are no *religious barriers* (L3) to 'doing business',  
10 constructing himself as highly flexible (*open-minded*) (L4) in relation to religious imagery as  
11 he talks of different *pictures* of prophets or deities from other faiths (L4-5) that he displays in  
12 his *office* (L3) 'to do his job'. Seemingly reflecting her husband's trimmed form and business  
13 attitude, Sundri confirms their 'open-mindedness' (L7) by expressing a preference for a  
14 *converted Sikh* (L8) (who is almost certainly more employable in Thai society) as her son-in-  
15 law. Her aversion to traditional Sikh beards and hair suggests the illegitimacy of kesh in her  
16 vision of the commercial world.

17

18 **Extract 7: Sukhbir & Sundri**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	R1	As comparatively new immigrants of Thailand, do you still have any
2		barriers in doing business?
3	Sukhbir	[...] For religious barrier, there is none. If you come to the office you'll see
4		that we have the Buddha here, we have Guruji photos <sup>v</sup> . I'm very open-
5		minded person. If I have to, I'll put up pictures of Christ or Allah as well to
6		do my job.

7	Sundri	Yes, we are very open-minded. Like for my daughter, I would want a Sikh
8		boy for her, but a converted Sikh, who doesn't keep his beard or his hair [...]

1

2

3 *Equipollent identity work*

4 Coherent self-presentations are achieved through selectively appropriating discursive elements  
5 to adapt legitimate social-identities. However, in equipollent situations where two equally  
6 powerful discourses co-exist, hybrid identity work is not straightforward. Equality is not  
7 something we are measuring, rather, the notion of equipollence characterises the tensions that  
8 occur where one discourse is not primarily drawn upon (e.g. through selective appropriation of  
9 more legitimate social-identity elements), producing potentially irresolvable intersections.  
10 Where self-presentations struggle to successfully engage in the selective invocation of, or  
11 resistance to, elements of either social-identity, identity work appears constrained by the  
12 hegemonic nature of the underpinning discourses and/or social processes such as interactions  
13 with others who confirm or challenge a self-presentation (Phillips, 2012). Discourses can be so  
14 ‘strongly embedded, that they overwhelm any effort that individuals can make to resist them’  
15 (Beech, 2008, p.65). Therefore, relatively stable self-identities may lack coherence despite  
16 stratagems employed to ‘eliminate discordant elements’ and reduce contradictions (Down and  
17 Reveley, 2009, p.383). This highlights ‘the dualities inherent’ in businesspeople’s accounts of  
18 themselves (Clarke *et al.*, 2009, p.324).

19 Two variants of equipollent situations can be discerned. First, a variant that we term  
20 ‘tempered equipollence’, where participants achieve a qualified degree of stable resolution in  
21 their identity work. This practice was fairly prevalent in our interviews (row g in Table 2). In  
22 Extract 8, Raghuraj’s interaction contains a complex amalgam of discursive identity tensions

1 after being prompted by R1. His performance reflects the power of religious and business  
 2 social-identities in the production of equipollent self-presentations. He claims that his  
 3 ‘difference’ (even though his beard and hair are trimmed) is an *advantage* and a *disadvantage*  
 4 (L4) in the workplace, constructing an unspecified balance as a consequence of his *Indian*  
 5 (L14) ethnic social category. In a home-based interview setting, with R1 and his mother  
 6 present, Raghuraj reflects on a ‘definition’ of *identity* by using himself as an example (L7).  
 7 After initially positing that he may *not* be ‘maintaining’ an identity in terms of ‘his’ religion  
 8 (L8), after much soul-searching he declares (*Actually*) (L14) that he is in fact upholding *Sikh*  
 9 *values*. The discursive journey he undertakes is full of contestations of meaning as he  
 10 legitimises his relationship with the ‘symbols’ (*hair; sword*) of Sikhism (L10-11). Only by  
 11 constructing the *five things* (five Ks) as a *metaphor* (L12), does he justify the compromises  
 12 made over his faith, thereby reaching some sort of stability in his self-identity.

13

14 **Extract 8: Raghuraj**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	R1	When you work at a new place, how do they react towards you?
2	Raghuraj	They acknowledge that I am different, but because of that, they try to
3		approach me more and know me better rather than stay away [...] I get that
4		advantage, but it’s also sometimes a disadvantage.
5	R1	We want to know how the younger generations try to maintain their religious
6		and social identity.
7	Raghuraj	Okay, first define identity for me. I think I might be a good example of how
8		not to maintain an identity. The identity of my religion is about, the core
9		comes into it, the five main values of our religion. If they say, ‘Keep your
10		hair’[...] it means I have to respect my hair and take good care of it [...]
11		And give one a sword, the symbolic meaning is that to protect someone

12		when they are in need, give it. It is more of a metaphor, these five things that
13		you have to live by, so again it comes down to how people perceive their
14		identity. [...] Actually, I think I am maintaining Indian/Sikh values more
15		than many Indians that are physically look like Indians and Sikhs more than me.

1

2 Equipollent identity work is inconsistent with the ‘complementariness’ inherent in the  
3 stable hybridity balance postulated by Kreiner *et al.* (2006, p.1331). Instead, our analysis  
4 unpacks instances where two social-identities are drawn from equally powerful discourses and  
5 cannot be reshaped into a coherent self-presentation. We identified a second, more extreme  
6 variant of equipollence that we term ‘acute’, where incoherence is particularly manifest.  
7 Importantly, such precarious balancing within identity work occurred most commonly of all  
8 the identity work practices (row h in Table 2). Reflecting the significance of this finding, we  
9 provide two instances of participants attempting to reconcile (Clarke *et al.*, 2009) their religious  
10 social-identities with business practices, far from successfully, suggesting identity work that is  
11 more than just the ‘opportunism of diasporic migrants seduced by complicity and advantage’  
12 as ascribed by Hutnyk (2005, p.97). Our analysis highlights ‘the incommensurable facets of  
13 culture’ (Anthias, 2001, p.622) underpinning the equipollent form of hybridity.

14 Ranjit’s account oscillates wildly between religion (*pure life; true path*) (L3-4) and  
15 *business* (L5). He begins by apparently rejecting a ‘powerful’ force (*money*), drawing on  
16 negative notions of modernity to bemoan the ‘spoiling’ of the *young generation* (L2-3). This  
17 contrasts with a list of religious constraints (*you must*) entailing ‘truth’ and ‘honesty’ (L5). Such  
18 rhetoric is perhaps to be expected from an octogenarian man in full form. Immediately,  
19 however, Ranjit proclaims his *business* achievements, including the activity of *selling* enabling  
20 him to *do any profit* (L5). The traditional Sikh and commercially-aware businessperson thus  
21 appear as two equally powerful social-identities. Then returning to a faith-driven discourse he

1 responds to *jealous people* (L6) by fending off any curiosity over his *profit percent* by claiming  
 2 *I can't tell the lie* (L7-8). This claim is also being made to his interview audience, comprising  
 3 Daya plus two business academics who Ranjit then addresses with his closing normative  
 4 statement that *Everyone needs good profit* (L8). He thereby reclaims a business social-identity  
 5 that sits incoherently alongside his opening assertions about *money*. By using notions of  
 6 'honesty' in relation to business practice, he attempts to reconcile this disparity to reach a stable  
 7 outcome; yet, due to his efforts to simultaneously enhance both his religious and business  
 8 social-identities, Ranjit undermines the coherence of his discursive strategy.

9

10 **Extract 9: Ranjit**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	R1	Do your religious values influence how you run the business?
2	Ranjit	Our requirement is very simple. Money is not important [...] When money
3		become power, young generation was spoiled. You must live with the pure
4		life. You must fulfil true path. Don't cheat anyone, don't misbehave, and be
5		true and honest. In business, we can do any profit. I'm selling goods and
6		everyone is jealous of me because my business was best. People asked,
7		'How many per cent you make profit?' I said, 'This question you don't ask
8		me; I can't tell the lie'. Everyone needs good profit.

11

12 The final stanza illustrates the negotiation of their respective self-identities by  
 13 Amarinder and Preneet as they draw on religious and business social-identities. Their  
 14 performances reflect the hegemonic nature of the two discourses and the pressures of the  
 15 interview context. This occurs in a work setting and comprises a series of contributions from a  
 16 full form man and his wife, with an audience of R1 and Daya. Preneet states *This is a business*  
 17 and defines 'business' (*It means*) by normatively asserting that *you don't combine social life*

1 (L1-2). However, Amarinder then contradicts his wife, attempting to legitimise a *little bit* of  
 2 *Socialising* by claiming that *only* ‘business talk’ would be *very boring* (L4). Preneet then seeks  
 3 to establish her self-identity in religious terms by othering *Thais and Chinese* as social  
 4 categories happy to ‘drink together’ (L6-7). The constraints (*stops us*) (L7) of a religious social-  
 5 identity are then emphasised to explain why *we cannot go drinking to that extent* (L9).

6

7 **Extract 10: Preneet & Amarinder**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Preneet	This is a business. It means you deal with business people; you don't
2		combine social life.
3	Amarinder	Socialising comes, because if you talk only of business and it's on the table
4		and it's very boring, only business. So we have little bit social, but it's all
5		just the part of business that makes the business flow better, you know.
6	Preneet	I would like to comment here that the social life for Thais and Chinese
7		means drinking together. Our religion stops us from drinking alcohol so,
8		subconsciously, even if we are taking a drink or something and sticking to
9		the rules, we do not go drinking to that extent and all. So we cannot
10		communicate at the same level. We won't have that long hours of drinking
11		and talking.
12	Amarinder	What type of socialising are you talking about? If you're talking about
13		normal socialising then everyone goes, but if you're talking about immoral
14		socialising, I don't think so.

8

9 Consequently, these constraints are claimed to limit our participants' (*we probably*  
 10 refers to Sikhs in general) ability to *communicate at the same level* (L10) with their clients.  
 11 Preneet's incoherent narrative struggles to balance *taking a drink or something* with *sticking to*

1 *the rules* (L8-9). Trying to make sense of Preneet's contribution, Amarinder contests the  
2 meaning of *socialising* (L12), stabilising his self-identity by contrasting *normal* and *immoral*  
3 *socialising* (L13-14). The former is normatively attributed to *everyone* (presumably in  
4 business) and the latter defined implicitly in relation to his faith and an activity he distances  
5 himself from (*I don't think so*) (L14). Thus, inconsistent and unstable self-narratives again  
6 emerge as our participants seek to enhance their identifications. Incoherent equipollent identity  
7 work occurs where the social-identities utilised by participants draw upon hegemonic  
8 discourses, such as Sikhism, where there is less 'wobble room' (Clarke *et al.*, 2009) for  
9 variation, and observance is to some degree policed.

10

## 11 **Concluding Discussion**

12 Religions provide discursive resources, characterised here as social-identities (Watson, 2008),  
13 for the construction and negotiation of self-identities. Our situated study provides valuable  
14 theoretical insights into hybrid identity work, unpacking how Thai Sikh businesspeople attempt  
15 to resolve discursive tensions. Sikh and Western business discourses are frequently  
16 contradictory, creating challenges in presenting a stable and coherent self. When drawing on  
17 these powerful discourses, discursive tensions are produced and benign hybrid self-  
18 presentations can begin to falter. In balancing between two equally powerful, contradictory  
19 discourses, we suggest that individuals engage in equipollent identity work. This research  
20 makes two main conceptual contributions. First, we consider how religious social-identities are  
21 drawn upon during identity work in work contexts. Second, we extend the identity literature  
22 through a more nuanced analytical approach to the construction of identity, highlighting  
23 equipollence as a new conceptualisation of hybrid identity work.

24

25 *Religious social-identities and tensions at work*

1 This study demonstrates some ways in which religious social-identities are of crucial  
2 importance to working lives. We provide examples of identity work practices that largely  
3 conform to powerful collective religious expectations (Table 2), including attributing success  
4 largely to faith or the power of God and through the religious symbols of kesh (Extracts 1 and  
5 6). Religious social-identities can exert sufficient pressure that ‘wearing their religion’ becomes  
6 a key part of Sikh self-identification and defining social boundaries (Thandi, 2011, p.90).  
7 Findings suggest that tensions between traditional and modern Sikhism underpin participants’  
8 identity work and are particularly strong at points of intersection in relation to social-identities  
9 derived from hegemonic religious and Western business discourses.

10 While many Sikh businesspeople in the study selectively appropriated discursive  
11 elements successfully, for some, such hybrid identity work revealed significant tensions. As  
12 our cultural context indicates, there is likely to be little advantage in drawing on (the often  
13 highly distinctive) images of their ethnicity for male Sikh businesspeople who trade goods and  
14 services beyond their community. The client audience generates a very different set of  
15 hybridization-related challenges. This suggests that migrant Sikhs may not be able to so  
16 straightforwardly ‘take the “best” out of both cultures’ (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.66) in  
17 the way that a female Muslim, Fatna, ‘uses her headscarf as a trademark to distinguish herself  
18 as an entrepreneur’ (Essers and Benschop, 2009, p.416).

19 Tensions can arise between Sikh and Western business discourses and become  
20 problematic when individuals draw on social-identities derived from these discourses. Our  
21 analysis demonstrates important ways in which religious social-identities can heighten the  
22 precarity and insecurity of identities and self-presentations; as discussed below. Nonetheless,  
23 for many of our participants, religious conforming self-presentations remain stable and  
24 coherent while accommodating the influence of the business discourse, suggesting the local  
25 construction of a particular version of religious tradition that manages to engage with, but not

1 be overwhelmed by, Western modernity (Extracts 2 to 5).

2

3 *Equipollence: Balancing between two equally powerful discourses*

4 The explicit discussion of both the macro social and micro interview context allows us to  
5 consider how Sikh businesspeople seek to resolve, through identity work, their ‘narratives of  
6 belonging’ that are ‘not given or static, but are emergent, produced interactionally and contain  
7 elements of contradiction and struggle’ (Anthias, 2001, p.633). When analysing our  
8 participants’ attempts to maintain some sense of stability in response to significant discursive  
9 tensions, we identify *equipollent identity work*.

10         Rather than straightforwardly ‘hybrid’ (e.g. Extract 7), equipollent self-identities take a  
11 unique hybrid form where the discourses in tension are hegemonic, with relatively fixed ideas  
12 about what is legitimate. Participants may have limited agency to decide which aspects of the  
13 two powerful social-identities they incorporate. Equipollence may therefore be particularly  
14 relevant for religion. Sikh businesspeople accommodate conflict and integrate it into their  
15 identity talk as they debate meanings of business and weigh them against religious  
16 expectations. Participants balance tensions between social-identities, thereby offering self-  
17 presentations that are analytically incoherent yet still relatively stable.

18         Equipollence differs from the antagonisms outlined by Clarke *et al.* (2009) as the  
19 identity markers (Sikh and Western business discourses) are not exact opposites (e.g.  
20 professionalism/ non-professionalism). Despite the tensions evident as traditional, collective  
21 religious values within Sikhism intersects with modern, individualistic Western business  
22 discourses, our participants incorporate both within their talk. Complex processes of balancing  
23 these contradictions are required to achieve a degree of stability within identity work practices.  
24 The inherent masculinity underpinning kesh symbolism plus the relatively senior  
25 owner/entrepreneur status of our participants, in contrast to, for example, the female Muslims

1 interviewed by Essers and Benschop or the ethnic minority employees interviewed by Van Laer  
2 and Janssens, suggests that Sikh businessmen may not experience (or perhaps cannot  
3 acknowledge) the struggle that appears in other religious minorities' work-related hybrid  
4 identity work, even when this equipollent identity work is analytically incoherent.  
5 Equipollence means that a coherent 'dialogue between cultural givens' is not necessarily  
6 occurring (Anthias, 2001, p.630). Thus, a key conceptual contribution is to show how the nature  
7 of hybrid identity work takes many forms, emphasising the importance of both the wider social  
8 context and the immediate interactional context.

9         We build on Van Laer and Janssens (2014, p.193-4) who suggest that at a certain point  
10 when experiencing identity tensions, individuals often abandon their efforts to rethink their  
11 identities as 'they do not see ways to further adapt to either of their audiences ... without losing  
12 their sense of coherence and ability to participate in both worlds'. We argue that, while this  
13 may apply under conditions of tempered equipollence (Extract 8), in contrast, under acutely  
14 equipollent situations, simultaneously achieving this sense of coherence and being able to take  
15 part in both worlds becomes impossible and, in order to manage mutual  
16 participation/acceptance, coherence is sacrificed. Moreover, Van Laer and Janssens indicate  
17 that when people are confronted with continued identity tensions, they may 'abandon efforts  
18 to "enhance" their identifications and engage in efforts to stabilize their established self-  
19 narrative...' (*ibid*). This can be contrasted with acute equipollence where we argue that Sikhs  
20 do not abandon their efforts to participate in both worlds, but rather, in their attempts to work  
21 with(in) both sets of social-identities, their identity work ends up as analytically incoherent or  
22 unstable (Extracts 9 and 10). Thus, we posit that our participants (unwittingly perhaps) often  
23 seem prepared to sacrifice coherence in their efforts to enhance joint identifications; and it is  
24 this discursive strategy that characterizes their identity work in these situations.

25         We show how Sikhism is not always used 'strategically' to facilitate entrepreneurship,

1 in contrast to Islam in the findings of Essers and Benschop (2009, p.419). Our participants  
2 move beyond the predominant use of religion in their identity work under the equipollent  
3 conditions that can constrain agency. Therefore, we suggest a form of identity work that is not  
4 solely based on the degree of conformity to a collective religion, but on the strength of the  
5 tensions between the values represented by the different social categories that resonate for Sikh  
6 businesspeople in Thailand. It is the resulting analytic lack of coherence in their self-  
7 presentations rather than anything explicitly acknowledged by the participants that is striking.  
8 These inconsistencies can be compared to the apparently successful strategic attempts to  
9 articulate ‘a coherent whole’ by the environmentalist businesspeople in Phillips’ (2012, p.811)  
10 study. This is important since, if conditions of acute equipollence result in incoherent self-  
11 presentations, speakers run the risk of impeding sensemaking, as an illogical or inconsistent  
12 discursive strategy might be perceived by audiences as implausible and/or illegitimate.

13 In conclusion, the study of identity work and religion in a non-Western context suggests  
14 different discursive tensions and alternative forms of hybridity within the social practices that  
15 attempt to resolve these tensions. Primarily, we provide insights into equipollent identity work  
16 which is a particular form of the too-analytically-broad ‘hybrid’ notion of identity work extant  
17 in the literature. Our contribution rests chiefly on the identification and analysis of equipollent  
18 situations, but the dominant (e.g. religion conforming) and productive (e.g. modern Sikh) forms  
19 of hybridity somewhat familiar from prior studies that we identify have also been key to build  
20 upon in our analysis of the tensions at the intersections faced by our participants. Our study  
21 thus highlights the need for identity scholars to attend to potentially different social-identities,  
22 such as those related to religions, that might pose challenging tensions to people’s self-  
23 presentations.

24

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<sup>i</sup> Participants described men following the 5K’s as being in ‘full form’. Kesh, particularly the unshorn beard, is a visible symbol of whether participants followed full form as observed during the interviews.

<sup>ii</sup> Head of the elected management committee whose responsibility is day to day Gurdwara management.

<sup>iii</sup> Sikh caste based on profession: Arora conduct mainly business activities while Jat are an agricultural and land owning caste.

<sup>iv</sup> Interlining is the fabric added to a garment when more warmth is needed; non-woven is one manufacturing process for producing interlining fabric.

<sup>v</sup> Guruji photos are images of various Sikh Gurus or spiritual teachers.