

1

2 **Abstract**

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

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

15

16 **Introduction**

17 Religions provide important discursive resources for negotiating self-identities yet are often
18 ignored within management research (Tracey, 2012; Tracey, Phillips and Lounsbury, 2014).
19 We make a situated contribution by focusing on identity work and religion within the Thai
20 Sikh diaspora, responding to the need for 'substantial consideration' of cultural, geographic
21 and economic contexts (Kuhn, 2006, p.1355). This develops understanding of identity work
22 tensions produced by powerful and often contradictory discourses, where discourses indicate
23 ways of 'behaving, thinking, speaking and valuing that are accepted as instances of particular
24 roles by specific groups of people' (Woodilla, 1998, p.4). Within an analytical framework

1 derived from discursive psychology, we consider how Sikhs resolve, accommodate or reject
2 discursive tensions through identity work processes, while attempting stable and coherent
3 hybrid self-presentations. We pose the research question: How is identity work utilised in the
4 self-presentations of Thai Sikh businesspeople to resolve discursive tensions? We show how
5 our participants draw on various hybrid forms of identity work, including what we term
6 equipollent identity work. Equipollent identity work can occur across various contexts where
7 individuals struggle to sustain coherence when drawing on two equally powerful discourses.
8 We contribute to the scant literature on religion and work as well as identity work by
9 exploring hybridity processes and religious social-identities.

10

11 **Religion and identity work**

12 Religion is more than the ‘wallpaper of the social system’ (Beckford, 1983, p.29); it is core to
13 many cultures, providing individuals with a sense of meaning and belonging (Berger, 1967)
14 and influencing working life. Yet, religion is a neglected topic in management research
15 (Tracey *et al.*, 2014). Tracey’s (2012) review of religion and organisation studies in 21
16 ‘mainstream’ management journals identifies only 86 relevant articles, mainly focusing on
17 management development (Bell and Taylor, 2004), business ethics (Weaver and Agle, 2002)
18 and spiritual leadership (Tourish and Tourish, 2010). While providing insights into how
19 religion has informed business practice, an important gap remains in the detail accorded to
20 religion and identity in working life. This oversight may suggest that scholars believe the
21 topic is taboo, better left to theologians, or fear accusations of attacking religion (Chan-
22 Serafin, Brief and George, 2013). However, dichotomies of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ separate
23 religious belief and practice: downplaying its prominence in many people’s lives; obscuring
24 the complexities of social practice (Turner, 2014); and ignoring its significance as a
25 difference marker (Hjelm, 2013).

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

21

22 *Identity work*

23 Identity is defined as ‘the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, and
24 [which are] developed and sustained through processes of social interaction’ (Brown, 2015,
25 p.23) and is central to understanding working lives. Identity work describes processes where

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

15 Individuals draw upon multiple social-identities given ‘the intersectional nature of
16 identity – that men are not just men but are immersed in social class relations, racialized and
17 so on’ (Wetherell and Edley, 2014, p.361). Intersectionality emphasises interactions between
18 ‘categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and
19 cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power’ (Davis, 2008,
20 p.64). Identity work therefore involves the experience of “‘fitting into” certain intersectional
21 locations – locations that may be manufactured by hegemonic discourses [... and]
22 articulatory practices’ (Prins, 2006, p.288). However, intersectionality research has also failed
23 to fully engage with religion (Weber, 2015).

24 This is important because social-identities, such as those derived from religious or
25 work-related discourses, are dynamic and ‘there is always scope for individual discretion’ in

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

18

19 *Hybrid identities*

20 Hybridisation involves adopting and recombining aspects of new and existing cultural
21 practices (Anthias, 2001; Hutnyk, 2005) through the displacement and synthesis of meanings
22 (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015), taking elements of different cultures and ‘transform[ing them]
23 into something new and useful’ (Essers and Benschop, 2007, p.62). This paper explores this
24 re-combination process through a nuanced consideration of how different ‘forms’ of
25 hybridity can develop (Anthias, 2001).

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

13 Hybridization needs to be understood in relation to intersectionality, ‘highlighting
14 individuals’ locations across a multiplicity of identity dimensions’ (Atewologun et al., 2016,
15 p.225). For example, ‘building businesses in the fashion or beauty industries is advantageous’
16 for female Muslim entrepreneurs as they can ‘use their hybridized cultural identities’ (Essers
17 and Benschop, 2007, p.63) and understanding of migrant communities to ‘sell images of
18 female ethnicity’. The concept of intersectional identity work ‘offers an approach for
19 elucidating identity-specific strategies in which multiple-identified individuals engage in
20 response to contextual identity threats’ (Atewologun et al, 2016, p.226) and for avoiding
21 ‘premature closure’ in analysis (Davis, 2008, p.79). Nevertheless, care must be taken not to
22 elide ‘the dynamic nature of power and inequality relations’ (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012, p.181).
23 Identity work at intersectional locations (Prins, 2006) highlights identities as a ‘precarious
24 achievement’ (Prins, 2006, p.288); they are fragile and open to contestation (Knights and
25 Clarke, 2014), for example where particular social-identities or forms of hybridity are more

1 easily accessible for some individuals than others.

2

3 *Hybridization and religion*

4 A key question within hybrid identity work research is the extent of coherence between
5 different social-identities (Down and Reveley, 2009; Jain, George and Maltarich, 2009),
6 particularly religious social-identities. Some scholars observe how ethnic or religious
7 minorities build identities that exhibit a high degree of coherence: such as Farah, a Muslim
8 female employee, who describes herself as ‘integrated’, embracing elements from both
9 Moroccan and Western cultures that ‘she experiences as positive’ (Van Laer and Janssens,
10 2014, p.190). Her resulting hybrid identity ‘allows’ her to move ‘between the two contexts...’
11 (*ibid*). This form of hybridity is elegantly explained, but the apparent ease of ‘movement’
12 ascribed to Farah seems to emerge from a relatively benign set of socio-cultural
13 circumstances. As Anthias (2001, p.631) asks, ‘Are some aspects of culture more difficult to
14 mix? How important [are] ... religious and moral rules?’

15 Management research tends not to treat religious social-identities as distinctive or,
16 where it has done so, typically explores Muslim or Indian business immigrants in Western
17 Europe or the US (e.g. Essers and Benschop, 2007; 2009), excluding other religions (Turner,
18 2014). In contrast, we examine a religious community with a heritage from one non-Western,
19 emerging economy (India) living and working in another (Thailand), albeit simultaneously
20 coming to terms with modernistic business values. We analyse more closely the relative
21 dominance of different social-identities in hybrid identity work. The existing literature is
22 suggestive of a precarious balance between ‘difference and sameness’ such that identities
23 become ‘neither one nor the other’ (Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p.193), reflecting the
24 intersectional, contested nature of identity (Prins, 2006; Knights and Clarke, 2014). The
25 suggestion that people can draw on ‘different and potentially conflicting dimensions that are

1 not normally expected to go together' (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997, p.594) indicates that
2 there may be a range of different forms of hybrid identity work yet to be considered.

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

15 Legitimacy is often required to maintain social and business relationships
16 (Atewologun et al., 2016; Watson, 2008) and, given the precarity and fragility of identity,
17 abandoning attempts to secure legitimacy in one's various self-presentations is not
18 straightforward. Thus, just as Phillips' (2012, p.810) entrepreneurial narrators 'draw
19 positively on business and environmental discourses to support their identities', it is likely
20 that under conditions when equally powerful discourses prevail, actors such as Sikh
21 businesspeople may not abandon their efforts to participate in both religious and business-
22 related social-identities. Yet, when working with social-identities derived from hegemonic
23 discourses, their identity work may become increasingly inconsistent and analytically
24 incoherent. In building on the prior scholarship of Essers, Benschop and colleagues and of
25 Van Laer and Janssen we ask: what do these challenges mean for how our participants

1 negotiate their Sikh identity in relation to their modern business practices?

2

3 **Method**

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

14

15 *The Thai Sikh context*

16 Sikhism was founded in 15th century Punjab and preaches the oneness of God and the
17 importance of ‘truthful living’. Sikhism combines schools of religious thought and
18 philosophy (Jagbir, 2011), incorporating values including bravery, sacrifice, service and
19 social responsibility and establishing clear physical and social boundaries (Kapur and Misra,
20 2003). Symbols are significant for maintaining these boundaries as Sikh religious teachings
21 carry an expectation of conformity to aspects of physical dress, seen as ‘markers of their
22 identity’ (Thandi, 2011, p.79) and indicators of religious virtue (McLeod, 1989). The dress
23 code includes ‘the five Ks’: kesh (unshorn hair), kachara (breeches), kanga (comb), kirpan
24 (sword) and kara (steel bangle), with kesh commonly associated with men in Thailand
25 (Theingi and Theingi, 2011), due to the visual symbolism of the unshorn beard and turban.

1 The body can therefore ‘convey the exclusivity of [the] Sikh community’ (Kapur and Misra,
2 2003, p.107); Sikhs in Bangkok have expressed the normative assertion that ‘a Sikh who is
3 shorn of the external symbolism of Sikhism cannot be a true Sikh’ (Mani, 1993, p.933).
4 Social interaction reinforces such normative influences for example through the Gurdwara
5 (Sikh Temple) which ‘continuously provide[s] a strong bond of ... Sikh unity’ (Kapur and
6 Misra, 2003, p.106).

7 The predominantly male gender of our participants matters: as we shall see, giving up
8 some of the masculine symbols of his faith-based social-identity to become accepted in the
9 commercial world can represent a considerable sacrifice for a male Sikh businessperson.
10 Tomalin (2017) confirms that there is ‘a much clearer injunction within Sikhism ... that the
11 turban should be worn, that the hair should not be cut, by initiated Sikh men’. The identity
12 work undertaken by Sikh entrepreneurs also merits exploration as they are business owners,
13 not employees, and thus not continually ‘seen as a “stranger” in the workplace’ where their
14 ‘colleagues keep confronting’ them with this discursive othering (Van Laer and Janssens,
15 2014, p.192).

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

1 information technology, with many still family-owned (Theingi and Theingi, 2011). This
2 community represents a valuable context for studying identity work because their religion,
3 considered as a social practice, is physically evident and provides a powerful set of social
4 norms and discursive resources for the construction and evaluation of their identities (von
5 Stuckrad, 2003).

6

7 *Western business discourse*

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

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

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

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

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

20

21 *The interviews*

22 Recruiting participants involved snowball sampling with two seeding approaches: individuals
23 from the researchers' networks; and contact with Sikh organisations in Bangkok supported by
24 Daya, a local Sikh businesswoman and prominent community member. All interviews
25 involved voluntary, informed participation and were conducted in English, as this was either

1 the participants' first language or provided a fluent and familiar common ground. Interviews
2 were digitally-recorded, lasted between one and a half and three hours and were
3 professionally transcribed. The interviews were conducted at Gurdwaras, participants' homes
4 and workplaces in Pattaya, Chiangmai and Bangkok.

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

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

24 Noting the suggestions of Saunders and Townsend (2016), Table 1 gives the
25 descriptive context of the interviews and characteristics of the 22 participants, with most

1 operating in textiles, reflecting the majority of Sikh businesses in Thailand. Participant ages
2 range from late 20s to 80s, including original emigrants (those born in India) and Sikhs born
3 in Thailand. Only two participants were women due to men inheriting the family business,
4 with women typically not involved in commercial decisions. More than two people were
5 present in the majority of interviews, see Table 1, and this reflects our analytical focus. Only
6 five interviews involved just two parties, with several interviewees or more than one
7 researcher and/or gatekeeper present at the rest.

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

1 'expansion' includes information on how the participants appear to interpret the discourse,
2 including any background knowledge (e.g. context) necessary to understand the interaction
3 (Wood and Kroger, 2000).

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

19

20 **Analysis**

21 We identified numerous examples where Sikh social-identities are influential in providing
22 self-presentations and accounts of individual actions with a source of legitimacy, including
23 direct appeals to religious observance, tradition and the local Sikh community. In general,
24 conforming to Sikh social-identity is characterised by drawing upon established Sikh
25 discourse such as showing loyalty towards the faith by attending the Gurdwara, community

1 service and conforming to the five K's as indicators of religious virtue. The power of a
 2 devout Sikh social-identity has some participants attributing their business 'success' to *God's*
 3 *grace* (Extract 1 L3-6); or to the *Lord's blessing* (Table 2). For instance, Gobind asserts this
 4 grace has to be *earned* (L8), though not just through 'trying hard' but by displaying Sikh
 5 *values* (L6), such as being *pure at heart* (L8) and *moral* (L12). In this way, he goes beyond
 6 personal responsibility with a heartfelt, non-rational credit for his success to his Sikh faith
 7 that is potentially at odds with Western business discourse. Gobind's narrative, spoken at the
 8 temple, is also enriched by reference to his son (also present) and to his father, whose
 9 'goodness' he claims to have witnessed at work.

10 **Extract 1: Gobind**

Line (L)	Speaker	Talk
1	Gobind	I always tell my kids, 'First you thank God everyday for what we have [...].'
2		As the matter of fact, I was just telling my son, I said, 'We walk past so many
3		tailor shops, I ask myself what is it that you think is made us more successful
4		than others? [...].' God's grace, because no matter how hard you try, you
5		can't be successful. I've seen a lot of people who tried very hard, but they
6		have not got God's grace. And then your values come after that. [...]
7	R1	How do you earn that grace?
8	Gobind	Well I think my dad has earned that a lot [...] He's very pure at heart and
9		well respected [...] I spend more time with him than I spend with my wife
10		because run the business together. And I'm at awe everyday that how my dad
11		handles himself in different situations. He always tells me that there's always
12		a moral behind him.

11
 12 However, when talking about work, there are frequent tensions in individuals' self-
 13 presentations between their Sikh social-identities and competing and potentially contradictory
 14 discourses. The most prominent discursive tension arises between Sikh social-identity and

- 1 social-identities derived from Western business discourse. Next we discuss how tensions
- 2 between these social-identities are resolved through hybrid identity work.
- 3

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 notⁱ</i>	<i>Birth country</i>	<i>Emigrant status</i>	<i>Premises interview conducted</i>	<i>Researchers/ gatekeeper present</i>	<i>Business/ industry</i>
Ranjit	1	80	Man	Full form	India	Initial emigrant	Home	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading, Textile – Retail & Real Estate Investment
Kharak	2	30s	Man	Full form	Thailand	Second generation	Work premises	R1 & R2	Real Estate Investment Hospitality Industry
Jagmeet	3	60s	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile – Retail/ Wholesale
Kuldip	3	40s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile – Retail/ Wholesale
Dalip	3	60s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile –Wholesale
Piara	4	30s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	Second generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring - Retail
Parkash	4	60s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring - Retail
Sukhbir	5, 6	40s	Man	Trimmed	India	Initial emigrant	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading & Manufacture
Sundri	5, 6	40s	Woman	N/A	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1, R2 & Daya	Trading & Manufacture
Gurbaksh	7	40s	Man	Full Form	Thailand	Second generation	Home	R1, R2 & Daya	Garment Export
Manmohan	8	80	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Religious Leader/ former business -Tailoring
Montek	9	60	Man	No uniform, shaved	Thailand	First generation	Hotel	R1	Medical Doctor – operating own practice
Preneet	10, 11	40s	Woman	N/A	India	Initial emigrant	Home	R1	Not-for-profit religious school and teaching
Raghuraj	10	20s	Man	Trimmed	Thailand	Second generation	Home	R1	Working for a MNC – and own business
Amarinder	11	40s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Work premises	R1 & Daya	Textile Wholesale
Gobind	12	40s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Gurdwara	R1, R2 & Daya	Tailoring Business
Arjan	12	teens	Man	Full form	Thailand	Second generation	Gurdwara	R1, R2 & Daya	Student working in family business
Karpal	13	60s	Man	Full Form	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Priest - business experience
Gurdial	13	50s	Man	No uniform, shaved	Thailand	Third generation	Gurdwara	R1	President of Gurdwara ⁱⁱ - and own Tailoring business
Zail	14	20s	Man	Trimmed	Thailand	Second generation	Payap University	R1	Niche Tailoring Business
Narinder	15	80s	Man	Full form	Thailand	First generation	Gurdwara	R1	President of Gurdwara – and own Tailoring Business
Ilbagh	16	70s	Man	Trimmed	India	Initial emigrant	Gurdwara	R1	Textile Industry
Giani	17	20s	Man	Full form	India	First generation	Pahurat Market	R1	Textile Industry
Bhagat	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>
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.
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.
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.
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 ⁱⁱⁱ , 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.
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
 2 an appreciation of markets drawn from the hegemony of Western business discourse (cf. Pio
 3 and Essers, 2014). This emerges in how participants present their businesses and, by
 4 extension, their working selves. For example, full form Sikhs father (Jagmeet) and son
 5 (Kuldip) co-construct a *successful* business as one founded on *quality* (repeatedly evoked by
 6 Jagmeet, L2-3), *know-how* (L13) and a degree of risk-taking (*very big price to pay*) (L14).
 7 However, they also construct their selves: Kuldip's interjection serves to display his business
 8 credentials as he explains his father's *deeper and deeper* adjective (L4) in terms of being
 9 *specialised* (L7); and Jagmeet categorises himself as a rational manager with his account of a
 10 changing *margin* (L8) driving the need to 'modernise'. Further helping to cement Jagmeet's
 11 identity, he claims this was facilitated via the purchase of *modern* 'Swiss' *machinery* (L11)
 12 and his own commitment to *training* (L15), thereby outdoing *our competitors* (L12). This
 13 contrasts with Gobind (Extract 1), for whom identifying with the social-identity of a rational
 14 manager might risk the legitimacy 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 we
3		have higher quality [...] 23 years ago, we are already doing some interlining
4		business ^{iv} , only non-woven [...] We went deeper and deeper into interlining
5		and we left all the other things which we were doing. How do you earn that
6		grace?
7	Kuldip	We are specialised in interlining.
8	Jagmeet	23 years ago, interlining was a very, very good margin business, but now not
9		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
4 commercial 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 now,
2		you will not find any bad history of Sikh here. No crime and we are living
3		peacefully. I'm doing wholesale business, cloth, textiles. We import and buy
4		from local factory and sell. Sikhs are hardworking people. That's why most
5		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*
11 (L2) 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 business
5		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
13 social-identity elements can be retained while other elements are separated out through a
14 process of dis-identification or split-identification (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2010). While less
15 individualistic, there is an emphasis on personal reward for hard work in the Sikh accounts
16 (as in Extract 3) appearing similar to that identified by Weber's (2002) Protestant work ethic

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

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

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

14

15 **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, it's
5		very visible also, not just subtle, it is very visible. When the form disappear,
6		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

10 business', constructing himself as highly flexible (*open-minded*) (L4) in relation to religious

11 imagery as he talks of different *pictures* of prophets or deities from other faiths (L4-5) that he

12 displays in his *office* (L3) 'to do his job'. Seemingly reflecting her husband's trimmed form

13 and business attitude, Sundri confirms their 'open-mindedness' (L7) by expressing a

14 preference for *a converted Sikh* (L8) (who is almost certainly more employable in Thai

15 society) as her son-in-law. Her aversion to traditional Sikh beards and hair suggests the

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

12		are in need, give it. It is more of a metaphor, these five things that you have
13		to live by, so again it comes down to how people perceive their identity. [...]
14		Actually, I think I am maintaining Indian/Sikh values more than many
15		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
5 and cannot be reshaped into a coherent self-presentation. We identified a second, more
6 extreme variant of equipollence that we term ‘acute’, where incoherence is particularly
7 manifest. Importantly, such precarious balancing within identity work occurred most
8 commonly of all the identity work practices (row h in Table 2). Reflecting the significance of
9 this finding, we provide two instances of participants attempting to reconcile (Clarke *et al.*,
10 2009) their religious social-identities with business practices, far from successfully,
11 suggesting identity work that is more than just the ‘opportunism of diasporic migrants
12 seduced by complicity and advantage’ as ascribed by Hutnyk (2005, p.97). Our analysis
13 highlights ‘the incommensurable facets of culture’ (Anthias, 2001, p.622) underpinning the
14 equipollent form of hybridity.

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

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

11

12 **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, 'How
7		many per cent you make profit?' I said, 'This question you don't ask me; I
8		can't tell the lie'. Everyone needs good profit.

13

14 The final stanza illustrates the negotiation of their respective self-identities by
 15 Amarinder and Preneet as they draw on religious and business social-identities. Their
 16 performances reflect the hegemonic nature of the two discourses and the pressures of the
 17 interview context. This occurs in a work setting and comprises a series of contributions from

1 a full form man and his wife, with an audience of R1 and Daya. Preneet states *This is a*
 2 *business* and defines ‘business’ (*It means*) by normatively asserting that *you don’t combine*
 3 *social life* (L1-2). However, Amarinder then contradicts his wife, attempting to legitimise a
 4 *little bit* of *Socialising* by claiming that *only* ‘business talk’ would be *very boring* (L4).
 5 Preneet then seeks to establish her self-identity in religious terms by othering *Thais and*
 6 *Chinese* as social categories happy to ‘drink together’ (L6-7). The constraints (*stops us*) (L7)
 7 of a religious social-identity are then emphasised to explain why *we cannot go drinking to*
 8 *that extent* (L9).

9

10 **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.

11

1 Consequently, these constraints are claimed to limit our participants' (*we probably*
2 refers to Sikhs in general) ability to *communicate at the same level* (L10) with their clients.
3 Preneet's incoherent narrative struggles to balance *taking a drink or something* with *sticking*
4 *to the rules* (L8-9). Trying to make sense of Preneet's contribution, Amarinder contests the
5 meaning of *socialising* (L12), stabilising his self-identity by contrasting *normal* and *immoral*
6 *socialising* (L13-14). The former is normatively attributed to *everyone* (presumably in
7 business) and the latter defined implicitly in relation to his faith and an activity he distances
8 himself from (*I don't think so*) (L14). Thus, inconsistent and unstable self-narratives again
9 emerge as our participants seek to enhance their identifications. Incoherent equipollent
10 identity work occurs where the social-identities utilised by participants draw upon hegemonic
11 discourses, such as Sikhism, where there is less 'wiggle room' (Clarke *et al.*, 2009) for
12 variation, and observance is to some degree policed.

13

14 **Concluding Discussion**

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

1 highlighting equipollence as a new conceptualisation of hybrid identity work.

2

3 *Religious social-identities and tensions at work*

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

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

22 Tensions can arise between Sikh and Western business discourses and become
23 problematic when individuals draw on social-identities derived from these discourses. Our
24 analysis demonstrates important ways in which religious social-identities can heighten the
25 precarity and insecurity of identities and self-presentations; as discussed below. Nonetheless,

1 for many of our participants, religious conforming self-presentations remain stable and
2 coherent while accommodating the influence of the business discourse, suggesting the local
3 construction of a particular version of religious tradition that manages to engage with, but not
4 be overwhelmed by, Western modernity (Extracts 2 to 5).

5

6 *Equipollence: Balancing between two equally powerful discourses*

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

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

21 Equipollence differs from the antagonisms outlined by Clarke *et al.* (2009) as the
22 identity markers (Sikh and Western business discourses) are not exact opposites (e.g.
23 professionalism/ non-professionalism). Despite the tensions evident as traditional, collective
24 religious values within Sikhism intersects with modern, individualistic Western business
25 discourses, our participants incorporate both within their talk. Complex processes of

1 balancing these contradictions are required to achieve a degree of stability within identity
2 work practices. The inherent masculinity underpinning kesh symbolism plus the relatively
3 senior owner/entrepreneur status of our participants, in contrast to, for example, the female
4 Muslims interviewed by Essers and Benschop or the ethnic minority employees interviewed
5 by Van Laer and Janssens, suggests that Sikh businessmen may not experience (or perhaps
6 cannot acknowledge) the struggle that appears in other religious minorities' work-related
7 hybrid identity work, even when this equipollent identity work is analytically incoherent.
8 Equipollence means that a coherent 'dialogue between cultural givens' is not necessarily
9 occurring (Anthias, 2001, p.630). Thus, a key conceptual contribution is to show how the
10 nature of hybrid identity work takes many forms, emphasising the importance of both the
11 wider social context and the immediate interactional context.

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

1 seem prepared to sacrifice coherence in their efforts to enhance joint identifications; and it is
2 this discursive strategy that characterizes their identity work in these situations.

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

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

1 scholars to attend to potentially different social-identities, such as those related to religions,
2 that might pose challenging tensions to people's self-presentations.

3

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- 15

ⁱ 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.

ⁱⁱ Head of the elected management committee whose responsibility is day to day Gurdwara management.

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

^{iv} Interlining is the fabric added to a garment when more warmth is needed; non-woven is one manufacturing process for producing interlining fabric.

^v Guruji photos are images of various Sikh Gurus or spiritual teachers.