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**Diversity in sex workers' strategies for the protection of social identity:  
Content, context and contradiction.**

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## **Introduction**

Sex work is a stigmatised profession in India, as in many other parts of the world. As such, sex workers constitute a subordinate social group: in a society comprised of social categories which stand in power and status relations to one another, sex workers are categorised, by themselves and others, into a group ranking low in both. This is all the more salient in the context of a strongly patriarchal society, where a woman's honour, status and, hence, security is closely linked to her sexuality through chastity before marriage and faithfulness after (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1996). Within such a context, the identity ascribed to sex workers is profoundly negative and problematic, framed by both material and symbolic social realities that would appear to provide little scope for maintaining a positive sense of self (Cornish, 2006).

This paper examines the strategies that female sex workers in Kolkata use in their attempts to construct a positive sense of self. Specifically, it examines the strategies adopted by a group of sex workers involved in the Sonagachi Project - a participatory development project which works on HIV prevention and community development. This Project explicitly encourages the development of a politicised understanding of the nature of sex work, problematising the subordinate and marginalised social status of sex workers, and thus promoting a route to social change. Our aim is to explore the diversity of strategies which sex workers use, focusing on both the content and context of identity work. Pursuing this analysis, we suggest that insights from social identity theory need to be supplemented by consideration of the social representations of sex work which shape and constrain sex workers' identities.

## **Social identity theory and identity maintenance strategies**

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The starting point for our analysis is social identity theory's (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) analysis of how group members respond to the evaluative connotations of their group memberships, given the status and power relations in which they are embedded. Social identity is defined by Tajfel (1981: 255) as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership'. The theory assumes that members of *subordinate* groups will experience negative social identity. It further assumes that members of marginalized groups are motivated to restore a positive sense of self through various creative and transformational strategies.

Three types of strategy in response to unfavourable social identities are outlined in social identity theory: social mobility, social creativity and social change. *Social mobility* is an individualistic strategy aimed at moving between social categories. In this strategy, group members are oriented towards leaving or disidentifying with the subordinate group and identifying with, or joining, another group with a more positive evaluation. Since individual group members are oriented towards distancing themselves from the group, this strategy reflects an implicit acceptance of the status quo and thus undermines collective action (see Wright, 2001). In contrast, *social creativity* and *social competition* are collective strategies that aim to improve the social identity of the group as a whole. Social creativity strategies aim to improve the identity of the group in various ways, but do not actually change the group's status. Such strategies include selecting and attempting to gain recognition on a different dimension of comparison, attempts to redefine traditionally negative ingroup characteristics, and changing the comparison group from the dominant group to another equally or more subordinate outgroup. *Social competition* is rather more radical: it involves directly calling into question the legitimacy of the status quo and confrontation with the dominant group, with the aim of altering not just the social identity, but the actual status of the subordinate group in terms of material (e.g. salaries) and/ or symbolic (e.g. stereotypes) inequalities.

According to social identity theory, the choice of strategy adopted by members of stigmatized or low status groups is determined largely by their ability to imagine 'cognitive alternatives' to their current position, which are constrained by the social realities of belonging to the stigmatised group. Here, 'social realities' refer to both the material conditions that structure social relations, and the shared belief systems that sustain and legitimise these relations. For example, in addition to material barriers to social mobility preventing group members from entertaining the possibility of exiting a particular category, perceptions of the historical stability, pervasiveness and legitimacy of stigmatization may also curtail any imaginings of the group overcoming their stigmatised status. Such 'social realities' influence group members to adopt either social mobility *or* social change belief systems, through which they enact *either* individualistic (i.e. social mobility) or collective (i.e. social creativity or competition) identity maintenance strategies (see Ellemers, 1993; Wright, 2001; Mummendy, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel and Blanz, 1999). Importantly, social identity theory conceptualises social mobility and social change belief systems as incompatible.

Social identity theory provides a useful framework for conceptualising how group members respond to potentially stigmatising identities. However, the theorisation of

identity in terms of underlying general psychological processes, and an emphasis on quantitative experimental methods have led to a neglect of questions regarding the content and context of social identities (but see Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997; Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007, for exceptions). Different social contexts, and different identity content may shape processes of identification and disidentification in different ways. A focus on content prompts us to ask questions such as: Which aspects of a marginalised group's identity cause them particular discomfort? What do group members perceive to be the material and symbolic barriers they face, and how do they negotiate or confront these barriers in their pursuit of a more positive identity? Asking such questions requires, we suggest, a different approach, one that takes into consideration the lived realities of group members' everyday lives and the system of culturally shared knowledge that constitutes the experienced reality of group life, its construction, reproduction, and transformation. We suggest that Moscovici's (1973; 1984) theory of social representations provides a useful approach to dealing with such questions of content.

### **Social representations and social identity**

Social representations theory is concerned with the collective elaboration, communication and diffusion of knowledge, as well as the consequences of this knowledge for individual reasoning and acting in social contexts (Wagner, 1994). According to Moscovici (1973), social representation can be defined as:

a system(s) of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social worlds and to master it; and secondly, to enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history.

(p. xiii)

From this perspective, the 'social realities' constraining the construction of positive social identities for sex workers are constituted by social representations surrounding sex work and its place in society. These representations may include notions about the meanings of sex-work (e.g. dirty) and the nature of stigma (e.g. reversible or not), as well as more general beliefs about gender roles, 'legitimate' work, and family values. It is through this network of social representations that an individual's or group's social world is structured, and from which the social knowledge and beliefs pertaining to group membership (i.e. identity content) is derived. Moreover, these representations also provide the resources for imagining and constructing 'cognitive alternatives' in the management of social identities.

As the above quote makes clear, representations are at once the communicative and discursive *processes* taking place within groups (by which we construct our reality) and the *product* of this process. Continually under debate and contestation, social representations surrounding the stigmatized group are malleable. This further implies, as Duveen (2001: 267-8) argues, that "the stability of particular forms of identity is

therefore also linked to the stability of the network of social influences which sustain a particular representation". As representations of particular groups change, so too may the constraints on and opportunities for imagining alternatives change, paving the way for constructions of new identities at both individual and collective levels.

However, the power relations at play within symbolic meaning-making cannot be ignored: not all social groups are equally equipped to maintain, promote or have recognised their own social representation of a concept (Jovchelovitch, 1997; Foster, 2003). Thus while attempts to challenge dominant, stigmatising representations from within the group may provide new ways to imagine and construct sex workers' identities, the new identity may not hold sway in the broader society in which traditional representations persist (Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002). Hence while such efforts can open up new identity management possibilities, in the face of resistance by the dominant group, they may not curtail other strategies. Rather, re-presentations of sex work may simply provide a more varied set of potentially contradictory strategies. For example, faced with an audience composed of more powerful group(s) unwilling to recognize alternative representations (and the associated empowered identities), individuals may opt for social mobility strategies. By contrast, in contexts where the audience recognizes and validates the new identity being claimed, social change strategies may seem more viable. Thus different identity protection strategies may be pursued in different contexts, depending on the perceived potential of successful challenges to dominant (stigmatizing) representations. In contrast to social identity theory, therefore, a social representations framework suggests that different types of strategies are *not* considered incompatible. Rather, it is possible and theoretically meaningful since in different contexts individually agentic group members may draw on a wide range of representations in constructing and managing their identities.

This paper examines the range of strategies developed and adopted by sex workers to construct a positive social identity. Focusing on the content of identities and strategies, the analysis then examines the links and tensions between different strategies, highlighting the ways in which they reinforce or undermine each other. Finally we try to relate the diversity and contradiction across strategies to the social representational context in which sex workers must live out their everyday lives.

## **Methodology**

Our analysis is based on six interviews and four focus groups with women in the sex trade in Kolkata, India. In common with sex workers around the world, sex workers in India suffer extreme marginalisation at economic, political, social and symbolic levels. Their scope for achieving a positive identity on the terms of the dominant morality is very restricted. However, in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, an alternative, rights-based approach to sex work has developed, which attempts to be non-judgemental, and to encourage sex workers' active participation in HIV prevention efforts, partly by encouraging the development of more positive identities.

The Sonagachi Project in Kolkata represents one such response. Founded in 1992 in Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest red light area, the project's remit is to contribute to HIV prevention through promoting safer sex and clinic attendance. The project's philosophy is

summed up as ‘3 R’s’: Respect, Recognition and Reliance; that is ‘respect of sex workers and their profession; recognizing their profession and their rights; and reliance on their understanding and capability’ (Jana & Banerjee, 1999, p.11). Thus the Project is engaged in formulating new definitions of sex workers and their capabilities. Sex workers are recruited and trained to take on most of the Project roles, discrimination against sex workers is challenged, and raising sex workers’ political awareness of their rights is emphasized. While these policies and arguments were initiated by individual founders of the Project, including politically-aware sex workers and non-sex worker academics and activists, they have now taken off, to become part of the discourse of the red light district.

A total of 36 current and former sex worker participated in the interviews and focus groups. In all interviews and focus groups at least one peer-educator or supervisor (sex workers who are also employees of the Project) was present, making 12 interviewees out of the total sample of 36. Where the term ‘sex workers’ is used, this refers to the whole group of interviewees; distinctions between those more or less involved in the Project are only made where relevant to the analysis. Ages ranged from approximately 20 to 40 years. The interview topic guide covered three main areas: (i) contextual information on life-history, community life and living and working conditions; (ii) health, sexuality and condom use; (iii) views of the Sonagachi Project.

The analytic perspective on the interview and focus group data was to view them as accounts (see Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). That is, the concern was not with whether or not responses reflected some objective ‘truth’, but with how sex workers chose to self-present, and in so-doing constructing and re-constructing the social reality in which they must live. Following the thematic analysis approach advocated by Attride-Stirling (2001), coding began by distinguishing different identity strategies. Interpretative work then focused on consolidating and clarifying the codes, to yield a set of distinct strategies. A final round of interpretation grouped the strategies into 5 higher level ‘categories of strategies’, namely ‘*Justifications and Excuses*’, ‘*Distance and Resistance*’, ‘*Recategorisation: alternative social identities*’, ‘*Social creativity strategies*’ and ‘*Social competition: legal recognition for profession*’ (table 1). Complementary and contradictory relationships between the strategies were identified, and are represented in Figure 1. The following section first details each strategy, and then turns to considering the relationships between the strategies.

Table 1: Strategies used for the construction and maintenance of a positive social identity

<b>Category of strategy</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
1. Justifications & Excuses	i) Deception & naivety ii) No option: poverty iii) No option: society
2. Distance & Resistance	i) Lies about sex work ii) Hatred of sex work iii) Dreams of leaving iv) Symbolic resistance
3. Recategorisation: alternative social identities	i) Family Roles ii) Project worker iii) Fighters against injustice
4. Social Creativity strategies	i) Evaluation on alternative

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 5. Social competition: legal recognition for profession | ii) Comparison with alternative<br>iii) Redefine value of existing dimension: re-evaluation of lifestyle<br>i) Comparisons with other work<br>ii) Legal recognition for profession |
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## Analysis & Interpretation

### 1. Justifications & excuses

A variety of justificatory discourses and excuses were used in accounting for a person's status as a sex worker. Implicit in this type of strategy is the acceptance of the dominant, stigmatising representation of sex work: there is no attempt to alter the (negative) social identity, only to deny responsibility for becoming a member of that group.

In general, very similar, seemingly standardised accounts were repeated throughout the interviews. One version of this type of strategy- '*deception and naivety*'- featured in all but one of the sex workers' accounts. Using this strategy, sex workers explain that they had come into sex work through being deceived, "tricked" or "cheated" by a friend, relative or pimp, and brought to the red light area under the pretence of finding other work. In almost all cases this story is reinforced by describing a tearful or fearful reaction on the part of the sex worker. The following excerpt provides a typical example:

We have been brought here by trick. Yes, yes no-one joins this 'line' [sex work] willingly. [.....] She brought me here. That time I was not clever enough to understand. I was foolish. One person told me that he would give me a good job and I would get good money. (Sex worker)

[1]

In the instances where sex workers did express the view that some women came to the 'line' knowingly, it was swiftly justified with references to poverty. This second type of strategy -'*no option: poverty*' - consists of accounts of being forced to accept sex work due to poverty, and is stated in a way that is hard to disagree with:

My life story is that I came here due to poverty. I am not making up this story but telling you frankly. I am not making it up. I came here due to poverty. I met my needs from this line. Poverty spoilt me. (sex worker)

[2]

This strategy was used by all sex workers, from those with the least to the most politicized views of sex work. Informants emphasized their desperate need to earn money to support themselves and their families, and their lack of alternative options.

In a third type of strategy, a number of sex workers directly blame 'society' (and men in particular) -'*no option: society*'. Three aspects of this strategy can be distinguished. First,

'society' is blamed for providing no alternative other than sex work for women abandoned or mistreated by their families. Second, 'society' is also blamed by some for their continued involvement: the stigmatisation of sex workers is such that they have been permanently 'spoilt' and will never be accepted back into 'respectable' society "no matter what". Thirdly, sex workers argue that 'society' creates the demand for commercial sex, the implication being that if there were no demand, they would not have become sex workers. The following extract encapsulates all three aspects of the '*no option: society*' strategy:

They think we prostitutes are so bad that we find no place. But who have made prostitutes? This society. And the society itself is not accepting them. You are a police officer, I work in your house as a maid-servant. I am 11 years old. My parents are very poor. You rape me one night. Your wife thinks that it is my fault. She drives me out of the house. I get a bad name. Other people come to know this. My father and brothers don't let me enter my home. Where do I go then? I finally land up at Sonagachi? Who then brings me to Sonagachi? Society. (peer educator)

[3]

Most accounts involved a combination of these excuses and justifications, and were often very similar. A typical account of their entry into the 'line' involved being forced by poverty (both their own and that of the family) and maltreatment at the hands of their husband or family to accept the help of someone offering to find them work, but who subsequently sold them into the sex industry where they became trapped, either due to financial exploitation and/or to the social conventions of a deeply patriarchal society.

A number of interviewees did also, however, highlight the hypocrisy inherent in 'society's' attitudes. For example:

He comes here and enjoys himself. No one blames him because he is a man. .... When the men come here, no one disrespects them. But they are doing the same sex act. But when we are doing the same thing with customers we are given no respect. That's because we are females. We have the same blood. Then why this discrimination? (peer educator)

[5]

Nonetheless, in using this category of strategies, sex workers draw heavily on dominant (negative) representations of sex work, and it is these representations that furnish the content of their sex worker identity. Moreover, no attempt is made to reject or alter the negative representation of sex work itself: rather, the function of this category of strategies is to defend the woman's respectability by denying that she *chose* this shameful work.

## **2. Distance & Resistance**

This category consists of strategies for symbolically distancing themselves from or resisting the category of 'sex worker'. One such strategy - '*lies about sex work*' - used by sex workers at all levels of Project involvement, is to lie about the work they do. Most of

the interviewees report that they pretend to their family, people from their neighbourhood (if they live outside the red light district) and/or native place that they have a different type of job in Kolkata (e.g. maidservant, mason). Such lies allow sex workers to distance themselves from the stigmatizing social identity of a sex worker. For example:

Interviewer: Does anyone of your house know what you do?

Sex worker: No. They don't know. They know that I am working in a house as a maid-servant. If they know, they won't let me enter [the house].

[6]

This type of strategy may be seen as a form of symbolic individual mobility (see Paez, Martinez-Taboada, Arrospe, Insua and Ayestaran, 1996). However, it is a risky strategy as their secret may be discovered: as one peer educator commented, “They will know. How long will you hide it?”

Where lies are obviously impossible, almost all informants attempt to distance themselves from sex work and preserve some degree of respectability by conveying how much they dislike sex work (*'hatred of sex work'*), emphasising that they do not *want* to have sex with clients (as distinct from boyfriends) but are 'compelled'.

Another form of symbolic individual mobility can be seen in the *'dreams of leaving'* category. Some sex workers distance themselves by maintaining and talking about dreams of leaving sex work, returning to their native place or moving to a respectable suburb, there assuming 'respectable' identities as wives or mothers. For example:

Interviewer: Do people here consider marriage as very essential?

Peer-educator: Yes, all want it. They want to have a husband, children. They want to cook, to live peacefully in a family.

[7]

Yet such dreams are often in stark contradiction to the tales of family life characterised by abuse and maltreatment which precipitated their entry into sex work, and descriptions of a 'society' that will never allow sex workers to become respectable. Thus it is in tension with some of the justifications given for having entered the 'line'.

Finally, sex workers may engage in *'symbolic resistance'*. In this strategy, sex workers symbolically resist the negative identity connotations of sex work by refusing to engage in intimate or 'weird' sexual acts. This strategy allows them to assert a certain moral superiority and thereby distance themselves from the 'dirty' or 'bad' identity associated with sex work, as this sex worker (discussing oral sex) expresses so clearly:

Even if he gives me lots of money, I shall not do such a thing. I frankly told them so. I can't suck anyone's dick, just because I have been compelled to become bad. (sex worker)

[8]

Throughout these types of ‘*distance and resistance*’ strategies, there is, again, no attempt to challenge the dominant, stigmatising representation of sex work. Rather, use of this category of strategies suggests that these sex workers accept the dominant representation, yet work to find ways, through self-presentation, to symbolically distance themselves from the associated identity. In the case of ‘*dreams of leaving*’ and ‘*lies about sex work*’ in particular, these sex workers are attempting a form of symbolic individual mobility. This resonates with the finding within social identity theory research that pursuit of an individual mobility strategy suggests agreement with the dominant group’s ideology, reflecting a desire to ‘exit’ the ingroup and assimilate into the high-status group (e.g. Ellemers, 1993; Mummendey, et al. 1999). However, within these strategies tension exists between the implicit acceptance of the dominant representation of sex work and the inaccessibility of alternative ‘legitimate’ identities, since “whatever we do, people will say ‘you are a whore’, they won’t call me a housewife.” (peer educator). Nevertheless, sex workers appear to manage this problematic by distancing themselves from sex work, entertaining symbolic, rather than actual, individual mobility.

### **3. Recategorisation**

The strategy termed ‘*recategorisation*’ comes from self categorisation theory (following Mummendey et al., 1999): here, interviewees distance themselves from categorisation as sex workers by emphasising alternative roles with more positive social identity connotations. There are three main alternative roles. One alternative identity is their family role - as mother, daughter or sister. They repeatedly explain how they fulfil these roles through sending money to their family, arranging marriages for their children and siblings and taking care of ageing parents. The perception of these roles as ‘good’, and positively valued by society, is articulated explicitly by sex workers themselves. For example:

Some look after their parents with this money. Some look after their children, bring them up. They want to be good. (Peer educator)

[9]

Another alternative identity is as a Project worker. This role brings them respect from other sex workers and, more importantly for many, respect from ‘society’. Presenting themselves in this way allows opportunities to mix with members of ‘society’ as valued health workers. For example, this peer-educator, who states that she could never tell her daughter that she works as a sex worker, said:

If I was not involved in this job I would never been able to go to my native place. But as I am working here, I took the identity card and went to my home, to see my daughter. If I were only in this ‘line’, I would have no identity of my own. Now, since I am working here I have my own identity. (Peer educator)

[10]

Ironically, and somewhat problematically for the politicising goals of the Project, adopting the identity of ‘Project worker’ is therefore being used to support the distance-

resistance strategy of hiding their identity as sex workers, implicitly accepting the negative representation of sex work that the Project aims to challenge.

For those more involved in Project activities, the role of a ‘fighter against injustice’ is a third alternative. In this role, sex workers present themselves as ‘strong’, ‘gutsy’ and ‘fearless’. Those *most* involved in the Project present quite an extreme picture of this heroic, at times life-threatening, role, stating, for example, that “We will carry on with our struggle till death” (supervisor). Again, we see that one social identity can support claims to another, since being a ‘fighter against injustice’ also supports their role as mothers: frequent references are made to fighting not just for themselves, but for their children. For example, this peer educator expresses a view echoed in very similar language by other Project members:

We will fight. We may not get it, but at least our children will live peacefully. (peer educator)

[11]

The way sex workers present themselves in these roles- gutsy, fearless, independent-somewhat undermines the helpless image they present of themselves during the justificatory accounts of being forced to become sex workers. Nonetheless, again in using this category of strategies there is no challenge to the dominant, stigmatizing representation of sex work, but rather attempts to avoid, or at least downplay the negative sex worker identity by mobilizing more positive identities associated with higher status groups (mothers, health workers, social justice campaigners).

#### **4. Social Creativity strategies**

Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) identify three types of social creativity strategies: evaluation on an alternative dimension, comparison with an alternative outgroup (of equal or preferably lower status), and redefining the value of an existing dimension. Each of these appears in our data.

Using the first strategy, members of the subordinate group select and try to gain recognition for alternative dimensions of comparison. In this case, sex workers highlight their possession of attributes valued by the dominant Indian culture, creatively redefining what it is to be ‘respectable’. Education and skills comprise one such attribute: while most sex workers lack any significant formal education, they readily assert the skill necessary to become a good sex worker:

I have to do a lot of things to satisfy him, only then is he paying me.  
I have to use my hands, eyes etc. Then how am I bad? (Supervisor)

[12]

Another important criterion for being a ‘respectable’ person is showing deference and respect. Sex workers can lay claim to respectability by emphasising their adherence to such behavioural prescriptions, and asserting the strong principles or morals that they follow. In addition, informants assert their ‘humanity’ - describing how supportive they

are of each other, the care they show for those stigmatised by HIV, asserting their belief in ‘equality’, and demonstrating their lack of greed and refusal to exploit people. For example:

I can also keep young girls under me as bonded sex workers and make them work. But more than money, I love people. I find it unethical and I would not feel like eating out of their money. I don’t even feel like having tea with their money. It’s my principle. (sex worker)

[13]

In pursuing this strategy, contrastive rhetoric is a pervasive feature of accounts, as it allows sex workers not only to emphasise their possession of positive, respectable attributes, but also their superiority over others on this dimension. Thus it is closely linked to the second *social creativity strategy* identified – comparisons with an alternative (subordinate or equal status) outgroup. In these cases, the sex workers compare themselves favourably with thieves, beggars and, in some cases, men who visit sex workers: thus, they argue, despite what ‘society’ says, sex workers do not deserve the same social status as these groups. For example:

Thieves and robbers take away everything by force. We do not do that. We don’t force anybody, people enjoy and pay us willingly. This is not the same. (Peer educator)

[14]

However, there are many instances of contradictory views concerning such comparisons, within both individual and group responses. For example, this strategy clearly contrasts with ‘*justifications and excuses*’ strategies, which imply sex work *is* ‘bad work’ (see e.g. quote 2).

The third social creativity strategy identified within sex workers’ accounts is ‘*re-evaluation of lifestyle*’, i.e. redefining the value of an existing dimension. Here, sex workers re-evaluate the typically negatively viewed absence of a conventional married, family life. Contrastive rhetoric is used to devalue the conventional view and emphasize instead the benefits of sex workers’ lifestyle in terms of personal freedom and financial independence. For example:

Interviewer: Don’t you think that if you got married you wouldn’t need to come to this profession and earn like this?

Sex worker: No.

Sex worker: No

Sex worker: When we go to our villages we see the scene. Women have so many children, they are in a bad state.... There are so many problems. Here we go all decked up and enjoy. There are no problems. We are fine.

[15]

However, this strategy is not common to all informants, and there is much contradiction surrounding this view. Even amongst those who express the more politicised views of sex work encouraged by the Project, there are those who do not espouse this positive view of the sex work lifestyle. Such contradictions, within and across informants, are evidenced most clearly when talking of hopes and future plans for their children. For example, one peer-educator, while arguing that sex work is a “profession” and not “bad” work, also explains that she intends to:

educate my daughter. I will try to marry her off. I have seen what exploitation we have to face in this line. I will want her to marry a man and have a family. Even if the man is poor, even if there is hardship  
(Peer educator)

[16]

As with the previous categories, in pursuing these *social creativity* strategies, sex workers draw on dominant representations: for example, in the dimensions used to make claims to being respectable (they are hard workers, respectful of men, humane) and in the representations of the subordinate outgroups they choose to make comparisons with (thieves, beggars). However, in this category of strategies, we also begin to see the elaboration of an alternative, positive representation of sex work: valuing, for example, financial independence and freedom from family obligations, or introducing into representations of sex work the idea that it is skilled, hard work. Yet this alternative view is not unproblematically accepted by all: sex workers appear ambivalent and skeptical of ‘society’s’ willingness to accept this re-presentation.

The emergence of this new representation of sex work is evidenced more clearly in the final category of strategies which, in contrast to social creativity strategies, represents a more explicit attempt not only to challenge the dominant representation of sex work, but to bring about material change, in this case in terms of legal recognition and rights.

### **5. Social Competition: legal recognition for profession.**

This more radical and confrontational strategy is to lay claims, through both discourse and action (demonstrations, lobbying etc.), to legal recognition of the profession and concomitant human rights. The crux of the argument, strongly encouraged by the Project, is that ‘society’ ought to view sex work as a legitimate profession, and so entails a re-elaboration of the representation of sex work.

There are two variants within this strategy. One is ‘*comparisons with other work*’: here, participants use comparisons with other socially acceptable professions to support arguments for the legitimacy of sex work. In contrast to the comparisons characteristic of social creativity, which are lateral or downward comparisons, these comparisons are with work women do that *is* legitimate (for example, construction or domestic work). Sex workers argue that in this type of work women are also forced have sex with the boss, the difference being that those women are ‘exploited’ rather than paid. Sex work is also compared with other businesses or services: as one supervisor says, “like a landlord rents his house, we also rent our body for some time and get money in return”. The use of business terminology, e.g. ‘supply and demand’ or ‘*bouni*’ (a term shop keepers use for the first transaction of the day) also supports this strategy.

However, there are also contradictory views on this point, within and between informants' accounts. Again this suggests ambivalence with regard to acceptance of the new representation, whether their own or 'society's'. For example:

The one who is doing treatment is called doctor. The one who is pulling rickshaw is a rickshaw-puller and in the same way, the one who is doing sex work is a sex worker. But the work, which is not good, people will always mark it as 'bad'. (peer educator)

[17]

A second aspect of this social competition strategy is the invocation and dissemination of the discourse about human rights - '*claims to human rights*'. This is clearly linked to the 'fighter' identity, but the function here is not to claim a positive evaluation from the role itself, but rather social change: to assert that sex workers are humans too, and thus deserving of the right to freedom from discrimination, abuse and harassment. Such claims are frequently located within the wider issue of women's rights, rather than rights for sex workers alone. Thus in a sense, they are again re-categorising themselves (as women, rather than sex workers), but this time with an orientation to a *collective* strategy (rather than individual exit) that aims to alter the existing status relations between sex workers and the group they call 'society' (e.g. being able to run a formally recognized, cooperative bank, whereas previously they were denied on the basis of their marginalized status as sex workers).

<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Figure 1. Main contradictory and complementary links between identity strategies.

[Key for diagram: ----- contradictory link  
\_\_\_\_\_ complementary link ]

### **The relationship between strategies: contradiction or complement?**

The above analysis demonstrates that sex workers use a range of strategies to construct and defend a positive social identity. These various strategies entailed contradiction and tension, as well as complement, and we now turn to examining in more detail how the various strategies are related. This complex web of contradictory and supportive links is illustrated in figure 1.

The strategies identified include all three types of strategy proposed by social identity theory: symbolic individual mobility (*distance and resistance*), social creativity and social competition, as well as two strategies which do not fit neatly into this typology: '*justifications and excuses*' and '*recategorisation*'. Both individualistic strategies (symbolic individual mobility and recategorisation) and collective strategies (social creativity and social competition) were identified within the group, and in some cases within the same individuals.

As the above diagram illustrates, there are contradictory links between some strategies, including between individualistic and collective strategies. For example, '*distance and resistance*', '*hatred of sex work*' and '*dreams of leaving*' portray sex work as 'bad',

unpleasant work that sex workers aim to eventually escape from. These contradict the social creativity strategy '*re-evaluation of lifestyle*', wherein sex workers argue that sex work is good work, allowing them financial independence and the freedom to "go all decked up and enjoy". Similarly, recategorisation strategies are individualistic, and are in tension with the collective social change category of strategies. For example, all the Project workers interviewed feel unable to tell their family they are sex workers, instead using their Project worker identity to return to their native place and mix with 'society' as valued health workers. Yet this strategy is in tension with their assertions that sex work is legitimate work, no different from other socially acceptable professions, and deserving of legal recognition.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986), individualistic and collective strategies are incompatible because they are assumed to be based on different belief systems: individualistic strategies are associated with the belief that intergroup boundaries are stable and permeable; conversely, collective strategies are associated with the belief that intergroup boundaries are impermeable yet the structure of intergroup relations itself can be changed. Yet in our analysis, both within and across participants, we find both collective and individualistic strategies and evidence of both belief systems. For example, beliefs in the impermeability of intergroup boundaries ("whatever we do, people will say 'you are a whore', they won't call me a housewife") *and* the permeability of boundaries ("I want to get married.... Even after all this, if he is interested, I shall go away with him"). This suggests these strategies are not in fact so incompatible.

So how then can tolerance of these contradictions be explained? Drawing on social representations theory, our analysis suggests that the contradictions and tensions between certain strategies are a consequence of being associated with competing representations. While some strategies draw on dominant, stigmatizing representations of sex work, others rely on the elaboration of a new, more positive representation of sex work to inform the content of social identities and strategies to defend or promote them. For example, continuing the previous example, strategies in the category of '*distance and resistance*' are associated with the dominant, negative representation of sex work, while the social creativity strategy '*re-evaluation of lifestyle*' and social competition strategies are associated with an emergent, more positive representation. The fact that complementary relationships exist between strategies that draw exclusively on the same representation of sex work further supports this view. For example, while both '*re-evaluation of lifestyle*' and '*legal recognition for profession*' are associated with the more positive re-presentation of sex work, neither *recategorisation* as a family member nor *no option: poverty* – strategies which reinforce each other - involve a challenge to the dominant representation, but implicitly accept it.

The analysis also suggests that it is social creativity and social change strategies that are associated with re-elaborations to the dominant representations, while more individualistic strategies draw on traditional representations of sex work. That is, having considered the content of both identities and strategies, we see that one distinction between *individualistic* and *collective* processes may be whether or not dominant representations are challenged and resisted.

But why do sex workers pursue both collective and individual strategies, draw on both old and new representations, and both reject and accept the new representation within the same interview? One possibility is that this reflects a pragmatic response to the resistance of the more powerful group – ‘society’ – to their re-presentational efforts. Despite their interest in a challenging new representation, they are realistic about the scope of convincing others, ‘society’, to recognize this new alternative version of sex work. As one peer educator put it “society wants the rubbish to remain in the dustbin”. Such differences in status and power between the subordinate group of sex workers, and the dominant ‘society’ are bound to affect, and constrain, the nature and scope for the re-elaboration by sex workers’ of their identity, according to social representations theory (Duveen, 1998; Jovchelovitch, 1997). As a marginalized group, sex workers’ access to the material, ideological or symbolic resources necessary to maintain, promote or have recognised their own social representation of a concept or group is constrained. The plurality of strategies sex workers use may reflect the complexity and difficulty of this task.

Nonetheless, given sex workers’ ambivalence toward the new representation, the apparent prevalence of the belief that a social change strategy will not succeed, and its potentially undermining effect on other categories of strategies, it is legitimate to question why sex workers adopt strategies involving a positive re-elaboration of the sex worker identity at all. One reason is that while the re-presentation of sex work itself may not achieve actual social change, it still has positive value in undermining stigmatisation by society. Asserting an alternative representation (and their awareness of competing representations) allows sex workers to identify ‘society’ as having “misconceptions”, and, further, facilitates the separation of ‘society’s’ negative judgment from their own image of a sex worker identity. Moreover, enacting that more empowered identity is itself rewarding. For example, while relying on discourses associated with the new representation of sex work, the value of an empowered ‘fighter’ role (allowing sex workers to experience social acceptance) may be more important than the struggle for social change itself. For example:

Interviewer: Is there any use standing under the sun the whole day and shouting?

Sex worker: Yes, very much.

Sex worker: Our courage gets boosted up.

Supervisor: They say, no, we like it, we enjoy ourselves

Sex worker: We see so many other girls, we like it. [...]

Sex worker: We like going there. The men move apart and make way for us, we like it.

[18]

A final explanation emerging from the analysis of the *supportive* links between collective and individualistic strategies is that elements of the social competition approach support other individual-level strategies. For example, devaluing traditional married life (through a collective re-evaluation of the sex worker lifestyle) is complementary to (individualistic) justifications which blame ‘society’. Similarly, presenting sex work as a profession like any other (thus deserving of legal recognition) supports the justification that sex work exists because society demands it. Another part of this social competition

strategy is to focus not only on the rights ‘society’ denies sex workers, but on the rights denied to all women in Indian society. While supporting justifications for entering sex work that blame society (*‘no option: society’*), emphasising the rights of *women* allows informants’ categorisation of themselves as women to take precedence over their categorisation as sex workers, thus obscuring some tension with other strategies associated with a representation of sex work as bad.

## **Discussion**

While social identity theory outlines a clear, or perhaps ‘ideal’, picture of how group members manage their identities, the current analysis shows the picture to be considerably more complex. By taking into account the role of social representations, the power relations at play within re-presentation as process, and giving space to the agency of individuals in constructing their identities within a particular material and symbolic context, these dynamic processes can be better understood.

Analysis of the links and tensions between strategies suggests that where they contradict, they are derived from different representations of sex work. However, in some instances strategies associated with different representations can reinforce, or complement, each other. Examining the representations that underlie the content of identities thus suggests the different types of strategies are not as contradictory as social identity theory predicts.

In drawing on multiple strategies, sex workers are active in exploiting this expanded representational repertoire, allowing them to deal with a complex social world that demands flexible reactions in different situations. However, their choices of identities, and identity strategies, are constrained by the tremendous power of other groups to assert and maintain their stigmatizing representations of sex work. Sex workers’ choice of strategy is therefore contingent on the social context, or audience, and the perceived potential for the success of their re-presentational project. In some instances they adhere to and promote a new, positive representation of sex work. In others, faced with the resistance of powerful groups, success seems doubtful and they rely on strategies which do not challenge the stigmatizing representation of sex workers, seeking instead to distance themselves from or avoid the categorisation. From this context-bound perspective, the prevalence of beliefs in both the permeability and impermeability of intergroup boundaries appears less problematic than social identity theory would predict.

In addition, beginning the analysis from the perspective of individuals within the group also allows consideration of the multiplicitous nature of identity. In several instances we saw how one social identity can be used to support or reinforce another. For example, being a ‘fighter against injustice’ is used to support the role of being a ‘good mother’, while still being a sex worker. That is, it is not *only* their social identity as sex workers that is pertinent. Rather, there is a complex, dynamic interplay between the multiple contexts into which an individual is *simultaneously* embedded, and thus the self should be construed, not as compartmentalised, but as a collection of identities intertwining and mutually defining each other (e.g. Howarth, 2002, Rosenthal, 1987, Aveling & Gillespie, in press). Thus in understanding the strategies used to manage the stigmatised identities deriving from their membership in one social group, it is important to also consider the

other social groups of which an individual is a member and the ways these alternative identities may be drawn upon to achieve a positive construction of self.

What are the implications of this analysis for the Sonagachi Project's goals of social change? Social change is usually thought of as emerging from collective action, but our analysis has shown that sex workers simultaneously use a diverse set of collective and individualistic strategies to protect their identity, and that some of the individualistic approaches undermine the more collective arguments. Does this multiplicity of approaches undermine the Sonagachi Project's official interest in social change and promoting a politicized representation of sex work? Does the cacophony of approaches prevent them from having a strong unified collective voice and really changing representations?

At one level, the individualistic strategies are indeed antagonistic to the collective ones. For example, denial of being a sex worker, certainly perpetuates the idea (among sex workers and others) that sex work is 'bad'. Yet there are other dynamics within sex workers' choice of strategies. In some cases, elaborating these individualistic options is empowering for the women: they dare to go to their native place with a health worker identity card; they gain some status and confidence in the world, and some experience of being respected – as a domestic worker or dutiful family member. This may give women some basis from which to become more confident about their sex worker status. Thus appropriating these discourses they nevertheless may begin to legitimate sex work and undermine the negative stereotype of sex workers.

In addition, as we have seen, one identity, such as that of an empowered, proud sex worker, can 'work' in one context but not another. Thus, while 'society' might not recognise the collective identity of proud, independent sex workers, other audiences may do so. In front of sympathetic activists (like the interviewers), the sex workers are treated as professional workers, and receive respect. In HIV/AIDS fora, sex workers' role as Project workers is often respected by others. In these instances, the identity of proud independent sex workers is validated and respected – it works. Social identity theory focuses on the actions of the marginalised group themselves in bringing about social change. However, identity is as much about being identified by others, as it is about making identifications (Duveen, 2001). For the sex workers' efforts at collective identity to succeed, it is not just the sex workers who have to adopt new discourses, but others who must recognise these new discourses.

In sum, we have suggested that the apparently contradictory set of strategies used by sex workers in fact represent a complementary repertoire for dealing with the complexities of multiplicitous real-life social identities and power and status differentials within society. Using social representations theory to highlight the importance of the *content* of identity, we see that 'social belief systems' are in fact plural, flexible and informed by the content of representations of the group held by *both* outgroup and ingroup members. The sex workers in this study are positioning themselves in relation to a variety of different representations of sex work, and in relation to the relative power of different groups to assert and recognise their representation. Which strategy is most appropriate may depend

on the audience with whom they are faced. Thus sex workers do not so much have to 'manage' conflicting strategies, as decide when to invoke the most useful.

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