

**Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation**

Research Report Summary

# TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANISATIONAL IDENTIFICATION: CHANGING LIVES BY EMPLOYING THE SOCIALLY STIGMATISED

**Joellen Nicholson**

MSt Social Innovation, 2020

Edited by **Dr Michelle Fava**

Research supervised by **Dr Neil Stott**



Cambridge  
**Centre for  
Social  
Innovation**

 **UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**  
Judge Business School

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## Key findings

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Socially stigmatised people are able to positively renew their sense of personal identity through organisational identification, when they are employed in a safe and supportive working environment. In this case study of Tonlé, a Cambodian 'fair fashion' enterprise, we observed how stigmatised female employees rebuilt their self-worth, and their lives.

Employment at Tonlé enables women to reimagine themselves. We describe three stages in this process: sensemaking, in which they reflect on their social status; sensebreaking, in which they reject the social stigmas assigned to them and sensegiving in which they find renewed identities through independence and shared purpose. We describe this process as 'transformative organisational identification', in which the stigmatised women's lives are transformed by their identification with the organisation.

We identify three elements that foster transformative organisational identification:

- 1) a safe working environment to build confidence
- 2) a supportive work community with deep relationships
- 3) the enactment of the foundational ethos of trust and respect.

## Background

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Gender inequality persistently limits women's access to formal employment in the Global South (ILO, 2018b). This barrier to economic inclusion, compounded by stigmatisation, exacerbates chronic poverty and exploitation. Formal employment can improve social protections, financial stability, and access to worker rights (ILO, 2018a). Inclusive social enterprises therefore make an important contribution to social, human and economic development (Seelos and Mair, 2009, p. 235). As social innovation becomes more mainstream in the Global South, many ventures purposefully employ the most marginalised in their communities. These organisations must support their vulnerable employees, helping them to understand and cope with "disconnects in a way that avoids emotional and physical costs from the individual and loss of productivity for the organisation" (Paetzold, et al., 2008, p. 188).

The researcher spent time with Tonlé, a 10-year old enterprise dedicated to social justice for employees and zero-waste fashion production. Their work involves repurposing and reusing scrap textiles. Central to Tonlé's mission is to provide fair employment for all, with dedication to sub-groups of Cambodia's socially stigmatised and marginalised women and LGBTQ people, including those with disabilities or HIV-AIDS, and single mothers. Their goal is to provide women with stable economic means, opportunity, and personal pride. Employing stigmatised populations can change the expectations, acceptance, and enactment of organisational culture and values (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p. 14). In the Global North, there are some formalised systems of support for marginalised workers. In the Global South, stigmatised and vulnerable women have especially limited opportunities. Prior to Tonlé, the employees had little, if any, organisational association and were isolated from working with others. It was novel for these women to encounter an employer committed to their wellbeing. Tonlé provided them with a safe space where they could belong to a group.

Twenty-three Tonlé employees were interviewed for this study. Careful safeguarding measures were taken when working with vulnerable and sensitive individuals. The researcher was able to treat cultural

matters sensitively, drawing on her prior experience of living, and starting a rural-based business in Cambodia.

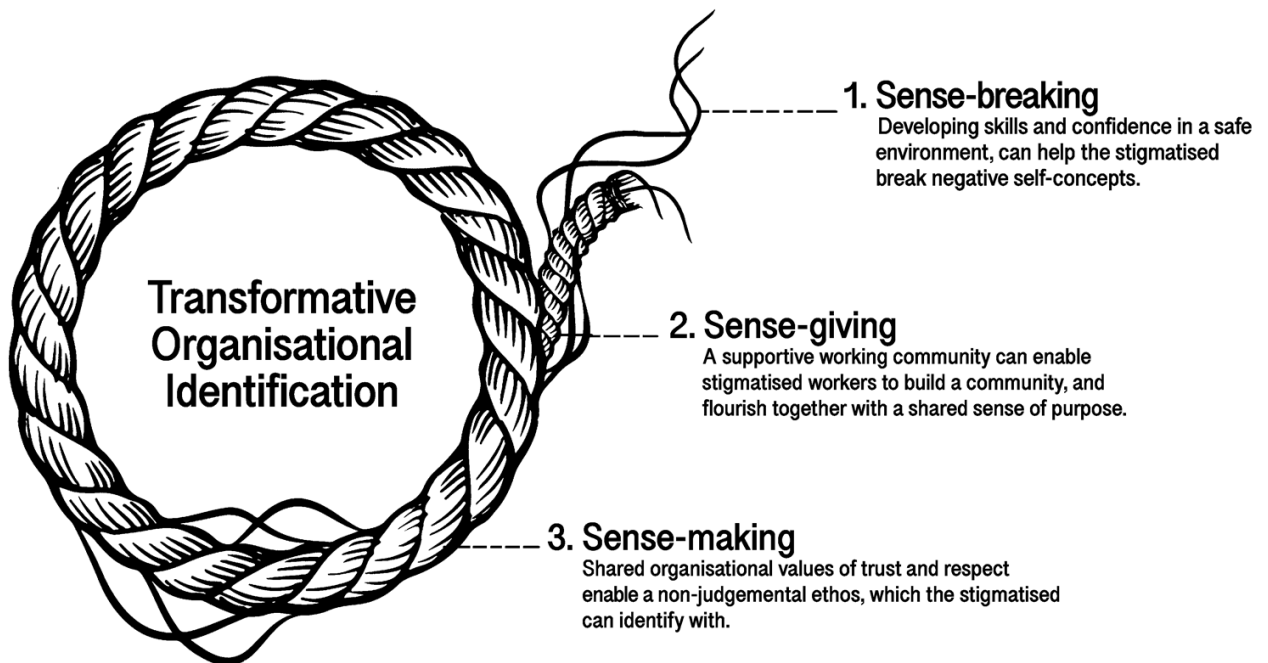


Figure 1. The three stages of transformative organisational identification.

## Emerging themes

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By noticing and bracketing stigma as a barrier to work inclusion, Tonlé was able to reframe new possibilities for the women working there.

We noticed that the women's personal transformative process echoed the textile repurposing process they were working with (see Figure 1). That is, they de-construct discarded waste textiles, creating usable yarn from the scraps, and then combine the yarns to create new, different, higher value woven and sewn goods. Similarly, the women felt discarded by society. They needed to break their past (negative) self-image (sensebreaking), before finding new purpose through shared endeavour (sensegiving). Working together at these tasks in a safe environment with a supportive community enabled the women to connect and thrive, with a renewed sense of independence. This was reinforced by the organisational ethos of trust, respect and non-judgement (sensemaking).



Figure 2. Repurposing materials at Tonlé. Left to right: scraps of fabric are cut; fabric is given new purpose as yarn; repurposed yarn is woven; completed items are created

### Sensebreaking

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Providing socially stigmatised individuals a safe working environment means eliminating persistent exposure to stereotypes and discrimination, and allowing unhindered work participation. Prior research has shown how such positive professional experiences can empower stigmatised individuals (Shih, 2004). Tonlé provide an excellent model of this. They instituted non-discrimination policies which employees needed to acknowledge and agree to. These were made explicit during interviews. These policies supported their values that everyone should have opportunity to learn and be recognised as a contributor to the organisation.

The safety of this work environment allowed the women to gain new skills, with which they could support themselves. This enabled them to gain confidence and self-legitimacy, helping break any past negative self-image associated with their experience of social stigma.

### Sensegiving

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Past research has shown that social isolation at home and work is a chronic effect of social stigmatisation (Crocker and Major, 1989; Link and Phelan, 2001). Tonlé demonstrates the importance of fostering good working relationships as a remedy to isolation. Their leaders intentionally provide a supportive community of acceptance and understanding, creating purposeful and deep connections. The clustered workshop layout (rather than a traditional assembly line) allowed interaction amongst the women while they were working. Team-based production created a collaborative environment for the women to work with their peers from the start to finish of a product. Passing on their skills and helping others with tasks, the women build relationships in which they can openly share experiences and express concern. These relationships were critical for stigmatised individuals' development of positive alternative work identities. Over time, this fostered group identity.

### Sensemaking

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The women's sense of common purpose strengthens bonds to the organisation, as well as to each other. Their newfound self-legitimacy and deep relationships created the foundation for the women to make sense of the organisation and their role within it. The foundational ethos of the enterprise was trust, respect and non-judgement. By steadfastly enacting these organisational values, norms and identity, the leaders "negotiated the social construction" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 434) of inclusivity, opportunity, and acceptance. They embedded skills training and encouragement, mission-oriented

posters, daily team shared lunches, and yearly team retreat. This fostered teamwork, offered a sense of purpose and provided support structures. This approach enabled the women to adopt and emulate the same ethos. In this effort, it was important to have consistent narratives, symbols, and actions to reinforce the organisational values. The meaningfulness of their work also contributed to stronger identification with Tonlé.

This case illustrates that, when given opportunity, socially stigmatised women in the Global South can actively engage in employment, and benefit from it. They value interpersonal connections, which can break patterns of isolation. Meaningful organisational identification allowed Tonlé's women to flourish. It legitimated the professional identities of these stigmatised women and increased their sense of self-worth.

## **Implications and future research**

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The case of Tonlé demonstrates that stigmatisation does not prevent a person from working, when the working environment is fit for them. They can even develop a new sense of self, through their connection to their workplace.

When employing stigmatised or vulnerable groups, it is important to recognise how each individual is experiencing their transition into employment. For this transition to be personally transformative, the way in which people are received, the environment, and the ethos of their working community, are all important.

Fostering the three stages of sensemaking described in this research can help organisations wishing to create inclusive environments that enable transformative work. However, the ways in which stigma is socially constructed will differ with culture, and, therefore, the ways of being inclusive must also differ. Further case studies in other organisations and geographies could provide useful comparisons and enable a richer picture of how employment-affirmative social enterprises are responding to different cultural contexts. Tonlé represented a culturally-mixed organisation, the founder being from the United States and the stigmatised employees from Cambodia. This aspect was surely significant, and would have been interesting to analyse further, but was outside the scope of the present study.

This study contributes a new concept to organisational theory: *transformative* organisational identification. This challenges conventional notions of organisational identification by focusing on the social value an organisation can create by accommodating marginalised employees. We hope that this concept can help build theory and encourage further research into how the process can best be supported in different contexts. For example, it would be interesting to explore the impact of transformative organisational identification on the socially stigmatised, outside the 'walls' of work. Through understanding multiple identity constructs between work, home, and community, we might better understand the influence of a strong organisational identification in social or domestic interactions. This would be valuable for future efforts to support stigmatised groups.

It would also be useful to understand how organisational identification occurs when stigmatised employees join an organisation that already employs non-stigmatised workers. This would likely offer a very different set of challenges.

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## About the project

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This research is based on the analysis of interviews and participant observation of Tonlé leaders and employees, in Cambodia. It was carried out with the support of the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme.

The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: [socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk).

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Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School  
University of Cambridge  
Trumpington Street  
Cambridge  
CB2 1AG  
United Kingdom

**T** +44(0)1223 339700

[socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk)

[www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/centreforsocialinnovation](http://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/centreforsocialinnovation)

