

# **Wedding Intersectionality Theory and Identity Work in Organizations: South African Indian women negotiating managerial identity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the continuing tension between focusing on identities and categories rather than processes and systems in intersectionality research based on a study of the identity work of South African Indian women managers. We wed intersectionality theory with extant understandings of managerial identity work in organisations to demonstrate the dynamic interaction between both identities and categories and the institutionalised processes and systems by which they are formed, shaped and reshaped over time. Specifically, we demonstrate through life story interviews of thirteen South African women managers how an individual's managerial identity is not formed solely by personal and social identities in the workplace but by the socio-historical political and cultural contexts within which individuals and groups are embedded. These contexts shape not only the racio-ethnic and gender identities of individuals but also the processes of racialization, gendering and culturalization that create and reinforce particular social locations in society and in the workplace.

## Introduction

Despite the continued call for mainstreaming intersectionality theory as a fundamental way of understanding organizations and the individuals within, it continues to occupy a largely peripheral place in the study of work organizations (Acker, 2006; Holvino, 2010). One of the areas where this occurs is the study of identity work in organizations. The concept of identity work has gained currency in organization studies as a means of understanding how individuals identify with their work and the organization (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) but also as a way to study the processes that sustain identity development at a personal level (Andersson, 2010). At the core of this work are explanations of how individuals form, repair, maintain, strengthen or revise constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness especially during transitions in workplace identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p.1165).

Research examining sequential identity transitions when an individual is promoted to a management position has been the topic most studied by organisational scholars (e.g. Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2007; Watson, 2008, 2009). Research on managerial identity has ranged from how managers shape the organizations in which they are employed (Watson, 2001), levels of self-confidence in managers (Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley and Littlejohns, 2006) to how external and organizational factors regulate identity construction (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Beech, 2008; Watson, 2008). However, the construction of a managerial identity has largely been positioned as a homogenous phenomenon premised upon masculine constructions without full recognition of how it is complicated by the intersection of racio-ethnicity, gender, and other categories of social difference.

The intersectionality of racio-ethnicity, gender, and other categories of social differences should be positioned as central to identity work and not peripheral. Not only does intersectionality theory recognize the simultaneity of the different social categories to which individuals belong and that inform their identities but also the ways they structure organizations and people's

experiences within them. Recently, a number of scholars have argued for greater explicit attention to both processes of differentiation (e.g. racialization, ethnicization, gendering) and systems of domination (e.g. racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, patriarchy) to avoid limiting intersectionality research to content specification of marginalized identities of individuals and social groups (Acker, 2006; Dhamoon, 2011; Hancock, 2007; Holvino, 2010).

Thus, wedding identity work with intersectionality requires attention to the socio-historical-political context and the way in which it shapes the meaning of racio-ethnicity, gender and other categories of otherness. Incorporation of the socio-historical-context in analyses of intersectionality allows for recognition of the role of the state in exercising power over diverse groups through processes of differentiation emanating from particular systems of domination. These processes and systems position diverse groups in particular ways within social structures including organizations. In this paper, we focus on the identity work of the first group of Indian women to enter managerial positions in corporate South Africa. Their narratives reveal how the women continually engage in renegotiating their racio-ethnic, cultural and gender identities in a struggle to form workable managerial identities amidst changing state definitions and positioning of social groups within South Africa. Hence, the subjective meaning of identity intersects with factors in the socio-political-historical context to create complex, dynamic and irreducible effects on identity formation and *re*formation of these women. We demonstrate how the state system of apartheid assigned Indian women to a particular citizenship locating them within a particular marginalized racio-ethnic and gender status (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Their subordinate status was reinforced by cultural prescriptions intensified within the segregated geographical spaces allocated to Indians through processes of racialization and ethnicization emanating from apartheid and patriarchy.

We also show how the changes in the socio-historical-political context became impetus for the identity transitions the women faced. The identity work engaged in by Indian women to adopt

managerial identities in corporate South Africa was not just a matter of answering, 'Who am I as a manager?' but a more complex question given the continuing influence of the racio-ethnic, cultural and gender identities formed in their early lives as well as the complex historical, societal and political position of Indians and all ethnic groups during apartheid and currently in post-apartheid South Africa.

Following a discussion of our theoretical framing, we share the methodology of the research. Next, we illustrate through the women's narratives how their identity work required engaging the intersections of multiple social identities, an oppressive political system rooted in racism and patriarchy, a deeply masculine conception of the ideal organizational manager as well as deeply embedded cultural prescriptions of what an Indian woman ought to be and how she should behave in society and in organizations.

### **Theoretical Framing: Identity Work, social identity theory and intersectionality**

Identity work is in essence about answering the question, 'Who am I in this particular context or role?' in the midst of 'Who are we?' social messages (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). Analytical and empirical treatments of identity work give primacy to explaining the negotiations of the self in the construction of a coherent identity in response to multiple discursive pressures emanating from disciplinary mechanisms and prototypical personas in work organizations (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008, 2009).

At the individual level, identity work involves the dynamic interaction between internal processes and external prescriptions to create a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. That is the answer to the question, '*Who Am I*', is not simply a one-sided internal answer but is also influenced by the demands created by the external social-identities to which they relate (McKenna, 2010; Watson, 2008). Although scholars have drawn upon social identity theory as integral to understanding identity work, extant empirical studies largely overlook the significance

of racio-ethnicity, gender, culture and the socio-historical-political context as important constitutive components of the external elements shaping its nature.

Further, the overwhelming majority of studies focus on the identity work of white male managers (Watson, 2009; Beech, 2008). The whiteness and maleness of the subject remain unmarked categories and managerial identity work is portrayed as race and gender neutral when studies only make reference to 'managers, 'middle managers' or 'supervisors' (e.g. Musson and Duberley, 2006; Pullen, 2006). Not only is the experience of becoming and being a manager gendered, it has also been shown to be racialized, ethnocized, and classed across a number of different national contexts (e.g. Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Cohen and Huffman, 2007; Davidson and Burke, 2011; Healy, Bradley and Forson, 2011; Livingstone and Rosette, 2012; Özbilgin and Syed, 2010).

There have been a few studies examining racio-ethnicity and identity work of professionals. Atewologun and Singh (2010) confirmed the extra identity work of young black male and female professionals in the United Kingdom; while Slay and Smith (2011) illuminated the hindrances of professional identity construction of individuals with stigmatized cultural identities. While these studies empirically achieve what Choo and Ferree (2010: 132) refer to as giving 'voice' to marginalized persons and groups or what Hancock (2007) labeled 'content specification', they do not address the temporal nature of identity work as well as the dynamic interaction between identity content and the institutionalized processes and systems by which they are formed, shaped and reshaped over time. We argue that explicit attention to the broader socio-historical-political context surfaces how multiple axes of difference intersect to structure the subjective meaning to identity in society and in organizations (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76).

Intersectionality theory, particularly recent developments, provide a means to capture the mutually constitute nature of the multiplicity of social identity categories shaping the nature of identity work in organizations, and at the same time account for the significance of the socio-

historical-political context in the changing meanings and content of these categories (Choo and Ferree, 2010). While early treatments of intersectionality sought to illustrate how the intersection of race and gender placed women of color into marginalized societal locations (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982). it has evolved to a means for interrogating how race, gender, class and other categories of difference are constructed through complex interlocking and interdependent social processes and practices that position groups differently in society as well as organizations (Acker, 2006; Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Benschop and Doorewaard, 2012; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Browne and Misra, 2003; Glenn, 2002; Holvino, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It also has been used to understand inequality and discrimination in post-colonial states (e.g. Mohanty, 2003), transnational dimensions of otherness (e.g. Calás, Smircich, Tienari and Ellehave, 2010; Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012) and to questioning the stability of identity demarcations by underscoring notions of hybridity, liminality, fluidity and fragmentation (e.g. Butler, 1990). Unfortunately, many of the advancements in intersectionality theory since its inception have not been fully embraced in the study of organizations and workplace phenomenon despite calls for better adoption and uptake (Acker, 2010; Holvino, 2010; Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2012).

The research in this paper relies heavily upon Brah and Phoenix's (2004:76) assertion that intersectionality "signifies the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of social identity difference intersect in historically specific contexts." We also draw upon Dhamoon's (2011) formulation that intersectionality analysis requires attention to the interactions between processes of differentiation and systems of domination. According to Dhamoon (2011:235) this requires recognition of the simultaneous interaction between systems of domination (e.g. racism, patriarchy, apartheid, colonialism) and institutionalized processes (e.g. racialization, gendering, and culturalization). Attention to processes and systems moves intersectional analyses beyond the content of particular identities to the specific processes and

conditions in which representations of difference are socially organized (Dhamoon, 2011:235). Such an analysis can reveal how subjects are socially produced through the simultaneity of processes of differentiation and systems of domination (Choo and Ferree, 2010). In other words, identities do not naturally pre-exist and nor are they something subjects possess (Dhamoon, 2011: 235).

We incorporate the socio-historical-political context as a basic dimension of intersectionality to illuminate the mutually constitutive nature of racio-ethnicity, gender, and culture and the systems through which they are created to show how they influence the managerial identity work of Indian women in South Africa. This leads to the main questions of this study: How did the social-historical-political context give meaning to the social identity categories in which the women were located? How did the systems of apartheid and patriarchy and processes of racialization, gendering and culturalization intersect to socially produce particular understandings of “Who Am I?” and “What it means to be a manager?” among the women? What was the nature of the identity work the women engaged in when they entered managerial positions? How did their early life understandings of who they were interact with the demands of becoming a manager in post-apartheid South Africa?

### **Methodology and Sample**

A qualitative, interpretivist approach was used to gain in-depth understanding of how the participants negotiated intersections between their racio-ethnicity, gender and culture and the formation of a managerial identity. Thirteen Indian women in senior and top managerial positions from various South African organizations were interviewed. Indian women comprise a mere 2 percent of top and senior managers in South Africa (Department of Labour, 2013). Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling. All participants were provided pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The ages of the women ranged from 35 to 46 years. The women had on average ten years of work experience and a minimum of three

years of experience in senior management. All the women were highly qualified with a majority holding postgraduate degrees. The women were born and raised during the apartheid era and grew up in demarcated Indian townships. Twelve participants were from the Gauteng region, namely Johannesburg and Pretoria, and one was from the Western Cape. They were all educated in designated Indian schools and universities, except for two who were granted special permission by government to attend white universities. Nine of the women were married, one divorced and three were single at the time of the interviews. Table 1 provides the pseudonyms and biographical profiles of the participants.

The women were from middle-class backgrounds and were descendants of *passenger* Indians, one of two groups of Indians brought to South Africa. The first group was indentured laborers who were brought to work in the sugarcane plantations in the old Natal province beginning in 1860 (Maharaj, 1995) (Radhakrishnan, 2005). The second group, designated as *passenger* Indians, arrived ten years later and was brought from India to meet the merchant demands of Indian indentured laborers. These demarcations created class differences among Indians although both groups transmitted homeland cultural norms and values, except those prohibited by South African law, (e.g. widow immolation) to future generations. While indentured men and women worked on the sugarcane plantations, wives and daughters of *passenger* Indians did not work outside of the home as their husbands and fathers were merchants (Maharaj, 1995).

Data were collected through life story interviews (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). According to Denzin (1989) life stories capture the subjective meaning of experience over a person's life course and express the storyteller's identities. Life story interviews fall within a life history approach which allows for incorporation of historical events and the sociocultural context of participants lives (Plummer, 1983). One of us who is a South African Indian female conducted the interviews. Research has shown that racio-ethnic and gender similarity between interviewer and interviewee can and does affect rapport during the interview, although power differences

Table 1: Biographical data of participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Tenure in management (years)</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Educational level</b>	<b>Management level (Senior or Top)</b>	<b>Position</b>
Shamila Rumi	40-46	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Senior	Business Application Manager
Saira Rehman	33-39	5-7	Single	Postgraduate	Top	Chief Financial Officer
Waheeda Banu	33-39	3-5	Married	Postgraduate	Senior	Senior Public Prosecutor
Shabana Mahal	40-46	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Top	Chief Financial Officer
Firdous Azmi	47-53	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Senior	Executive Director Operations
Zeenat Khan	40-46	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Top	Chief Communications Officer
Bipasha Chaudry	33-39	7-9	Married	Postgraduate	Senior	Operations Manager
Mahima Basu	33-39	5-7	Single	Postgraduate	Senior	Legal Manager
Preity Sen	33-39	5-7	Single	Undergraduate	Senior	Project Manager
Sushmita Zinta	47-53	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Top	Human Resource Director
Rani Kapoor	33-39	> 10	Divorced	Postgraduate	Top	Human Resource Director
Karina Mukerjee	40-46	> 10	Married	Undergraduate	Top	Marketing Manager
Shilpa Chopra	40-46	> 10	Married	Postgraduate	Top	Human Resource Director

between the researcher and subject are always present (Bhopal, 2001; Phoenix, 1994). However, a co-inquiry approach was followed where in the interviewer shared aspects of her own life story (Bell and Nkomo, 2001).

The interviews focused on two themes. The first set of questions probed childhood experiences of the women with specific focus on the socio-historical-political context and cultural, family and community influences through tertiary education. The questions required the women to reflect on their childhood experiences with specific focus on the apartheid system, their families and communities. Examples of questions included: Tell me about where you grew up? Describe what it was like growing up during apartheid? What were the expectations of your parents regarding your role in the home? In society?

The second set of questions probed women's adult lives and the obstacles encountered in the workplace as well as the influence of racio-ethnicity, gender, culture, family and community on their work and personal lives. Questions included: Tell me about your journey into management?" How are you treated by your colleagues, subordinates and supervisors? What obstacles have you faced in becoming a manager, if any? The interviews lasted two hours and were conducted in places preferred by the women. Two follow-up interviews of two hours each were conducted to probe deeper and clarify themes based on the data extracted from the first round of interviews. Additional follow-up interviews were not conducted as data saturation was reached. By the completion of the interviews, we had collected each woman's life story. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

We used grounded theory techniques guided by the four research questions to extract themes emerging from the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). We did not divorce our participants from their social context taking cognizance of Indian culture, family, community and the socio-historical-political context during our analysis (Charmaz, 2006). We used an iterative approach where we moved back and forth between the data, relevant theory and interpretation.

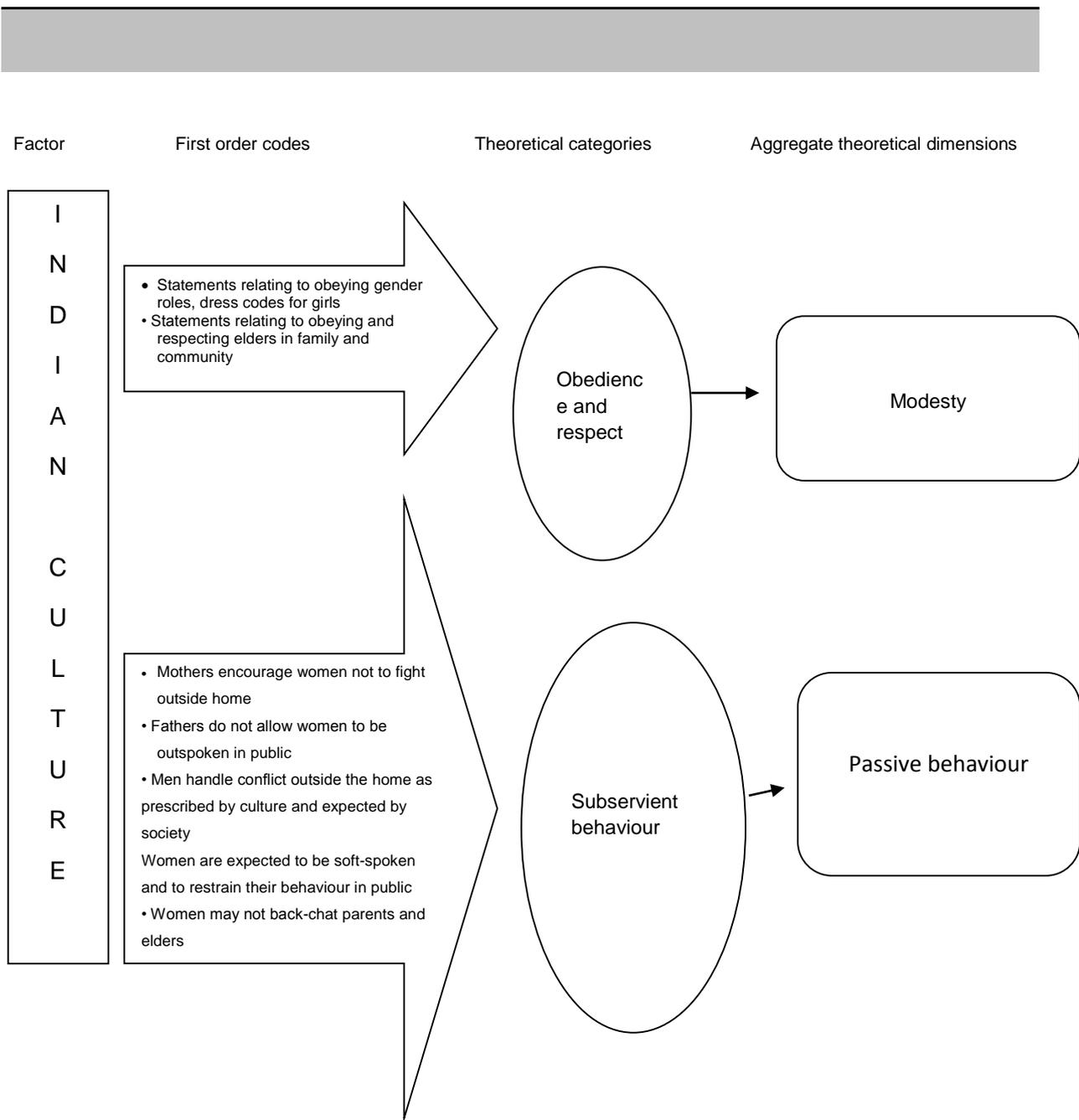
Analysis commenced with inductively formulating codes that emerged from the interviews. Both of us independently read the interviews and coded them and either confirmed or challenged each other's coding. After we had reached agreement with the coding, a third independent researcher was given a subset of the interviews to code. Any differences were discussed and reconciled until a final coding structure was agreed upon. Atlas.ti software was used to assist with managing, analyzing and coding the data.

Our analysis moved from first order coding of statements relating to specific categories to identification of theoretical categories and dimensions and ultimately relationships among dimensions. We also made sure we were thoroughly conversant of each participant's life story. The diagram in Figure 1 is an example of how we moved from first-order codes to aggregate theoretical dimensions in line with recommendations from Pratt (2009) on how to illustrate qualitative data analysis. We constructed coding diagrams for each of the main themes in the data. Member checking of our key themes was also done with a group of the women.

## **Social-Political-Historical Context**

The focus of the research was on the identity transitions of the women as they moved from the deeply imprinted racio-ethnic, cultural and gender prescriptions they received in their early lives during apartheid to adopting the persona and identity expected of managers. Collectively, the women's life stories revealed critical aspects of the social-political-historical context within which their lives unfolded. The women were born and raised during apartheid and racism was the cornerstone structure shaping the social and economic inequalities these women experienced during their childhoods. Apartheid was a state system of racial domination that essentialized the

Figure 1 Example of Data Structure



superiority of whites over Africans, Indians, and Coloureds. Racialization processes did not just exclude 'non-whites' but also created a 'white' category that suppressed ethnic and class conflict between English and Afrikaners while heightening the racial difference of Africans, Indians and Coloureds (Marx, 1998).

Growing up in a racialized patriarchal society where white males dominated and was superior to all others, the women's voices were silenced from an early age. Racial separation across political, economic and social boundaries was entrenched, controlling the lives of all South Africans. Africans, Indians and Coloureds were restricted to racially demarcated areas known as townships with their own infrastructures including schools (Fiske and Ladd, 2002; Ramsay, 2007). All of the women grew up in segregated, self-contained areas. Typically, their entire extended family lived together in the same township or even the same home. They experienced little contact with other racio-ethnic groups.

Patriarchy co-existed with apartheid to create a race and gender hierarchy throughout society including the workplace resulting in distinct workplace locations for each subordinate group (Booyesen and Nkomo, 2010). Management and skilled work was reserved for white men. African men were relegated to the most dangerous, unskilled menial jobs and were designated as a reserve labour pool. African women, who had been declared 'unnecessary appendages' of African men, were only allowed employment as domestics or confined to so-called rural homelands. The participants' fathers were largely business owners in Indian townships or in Black and Coloured ones with a few holding professional positions. A very small minority of African, Indian and Coloured men and women were able to train as lawyers, doctors, teachers and social workers and work within their segregated spaces (De Kock, 1996). Because of cultural prescriptions, particularly among Indians with 'passenger' lineage, the women's mothers largely worked in the home and when they did work, they often assisted in the businesses of their husbands. The 1994 democratic election heralded a new era in terms of labor legislation where

equal opportunities and affirmative action was mandated by Employment Equity Act of 1998 to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups (Africans, Coloureds, Indians, persons with disabilities, and women). This legislation opened the door for the Indian women in our study to enter managerial ranks with the hope of advancing their careers (Mathur-Helm, 2005).

### **Adopting a Managerial Identity**

In this section, we describe the three most difficult managerial identity transitions shared by the women: becoming assertive, managing conflict and working closely with males. Their narratives reveal a rather complicated interrelationship between the identity formed during their early lives and that which was expected of a manager. Although they had ascended to managerial positions, remnants of being passive were still an aspect of their identity and behavior. During their early lives, the interaction between cultural values and the institutionalization of racial domination resulted in the women growing up in a multi-layered insular environment where Indian cultural values became deeply entrenched. The passive role of women was inculcated from a very early age as families strongly adhered to cultural values brought from India and the gender roles of males and females were rigidly demarcated within families.

Karina Mukerjee, a Marketing Manager, recalled what she was taught as a young girl:

*“As young girls we were taught to be quiet and accepting and never questioning or challenging our parents and elders otherwise we would be regarded as big mouths.*

*Men on the other hand were encouraged to be assertive, bold and daring.”*

Confinement to townships because of the racialization processes of apartheid fostered a situation where the women experienced subordination from Indian cultural prescriptions fused with the general subordination of all Indians under apartheid. This was further inflected by patriarchy as women in South Africa were legally designated as minors.

Passivity did not only emanate from the women's gender identity. Many of the women like Waheeda Banu, a Senior Counsel, pointed to the lingering effects of apartheid on the advice she received from her father when entering corporate South Africa. Assertiveness was not something Africans, Indians and Coloureds could display without fear of repression:

*"I feel standing up for myself should have been inculcated in me a long time ago so by the time I got to the workplace I could have also voiced my opinions with confidence. I must say my father always told me not to get onto the wrong side of my white bosses and to avoid confrontations and conflicts with them. My father was afraid I as an Indian female will not be able to win against a white male as whites had always had power over us during the apartheid era."*

What it meant to be an effective manager in corporate South Africa was both raced and gendered and the women had to attend to the cues they received from white male colleagues and strive to fit into a pre-existing managerial identity. Even in post-apartheid white males continue to dominate senior management. The women did not have the power to assert a different type of managerial identity but instead had to mimic the identity of their white male colleagues and bosses. Preity Sen, a Project Manager indicates how she was coached by her white male manager on becoming assertive:

*"I was working on a project with my manager. We had to present our ideas to a panel and answer their questions. Ten minutes before the presentation my manager told me he is going to lunch and I had to present to the panel by myself. I told him I would not be able to handle the situation. He told me that I was well prepared and that I would be able to handle the situation. By watching and learning how he handled such situations I was able to do it myself."*

As the women realized being assertive was the expectation of a successful manager, they slowly started changing their behaviors but their identity work was not without angst and discomfort as Shamila and Saira shared during the interviews:

*“We feel guilty and terrible for asking for what we need. I felt like I’m doing something horribly wrong as I sat there and expressed to them my needs. That is that I need further development and how they are not fulfilling it for me, and I need more support from them to move in a different direction. And I felt bad doing that. I felt bad because as Indian females our needs are placed second, third, fourth or fifth – it’s never first. It’s cultural and the way we’ve been raised. Up to today we behave that way and I was feeling bad for asking for what’s rightfully mine. We’re too loyal. We are concerned about what the next person will think of us. Are we making them feel bad? We are unable to articulate what we need. We lack confidence and assertiveness.”*

*Shamila Rumi (Senior Business Applications Manager)*

*“As Indians we are taught not to be outspoken towards our elders, as it denotes disrespect. I’ve got people reporting to me who are older than me. That’s the difficulty. It just doesn’t feel right, that you’re telling them what to do and you’re the instructor, you’re the authority figure and that’s where the awkwardness comes through. You learn to get over that.”*

*Saira Rehman (Chief Financial Officer)*

Managing workplace conflict emerged as another poignant aspect of the women’s identity work. The women were raised in collectivist hierarchical communities where independent decisions and conflict were not valued and group interdependence was encouraged. Female engagement with conflict was viewed as particularly negative by the community. Family honor was embodied in the respectability displayed by females.

Fathers and brothers handled conflict situations outside the home. This behavior spilled over into the workplace and the women were reluctant to engage in open confrontations with colleagues, often passively responding to being bullied and harassed. Zeenat Rajah, a Chief Communications Officer summarizes the attitude toward conflict which the other women also commented on:

*“We were raised in communities where men handled quarrels outside the home and not women. Then I entered the workplace and was surrounded by rude people, constant fights and petty jealousies among colleagues. I used to ignore snide remarks and nasty behavior from my colleagues as we as Indian women were taught to behave as ladies and not engage in vulgar behavior. My colleagues used to see me as being scared and used to be even nastier toward me.”*

Bipasha Chaudry, a Senior Operations Manager, explained the tension between this managerial identity expectation and cultural expectations:

*“We didn’t realize it when we were growing up because we grew up in an all-Indian environment where people were nice to each other and we would stand together as a community. We did not experience any vulgarity and violence in our community because people were passive and everyone was concerned about maintaining the honor of their family name. We then came into the lion’s den, when you literally had to fight your way out of it and here other races do not worry about their reputations.”*

Entering managerial positions in corporate South Africa placed the women in predominately male contexts. Being a manager meant they had to work closely with male peers for the first time in their lives. Working closely in an all-male team remains a problem for the women as the communities they grew up in and in which many still reside generally frown upon close relations between males and females who are not related. Mahima Basu, a Legal Services Executive, talked about how long it took her to adjust to working closely with male colleagues and subordinates:

*“It was hard to adjust working closely with men in the workplace. It took me a few years getting used to being in male-only meetings and being in charge of males because I had this innate shyness in me. I guess due to always being told by family not to mingle with men and even in the school I adhered to society’s expectations that we should be segregated although we attended a co-ed school.”*

The women realized, while working with males in the Indian society is frowned upon, being a manager in a male-dominated organisational context was an inevitable part of South African corporate life. The women adopted a bifurcated approach to this dilemma to reconcile their cultural identities and the demands of their managerial identities. They adopted a strategy of building professional relationships with male colleagues and subordinates but at work-related social events they avoid all-male circles, especially all-Indian male groups. The words of Shabana Mahal, a Chief Financial Officer describe what we heard in the women's life stories:

*“Within the Indian community and family we have strict segregation of the sexes at social events. Although I have gotten used to working with males I have segregated social events at my home. For me it was at first strange to work so closely with males in the workplace. However, in my environment there are more males than females and I realized if I did not learn to work more closely with males I might as well pack up and leave. I therefore decided in order to advance my career I would need to compromise my cultural beliefs and accept the workplace realities of working with males. So I decided since working closely with males was unavoidable I would keep the relationships professional.”*

### **Resistance and hybridity**

Adopting the managerial identity prescriptions imposed upon them did not protect the women from experiencing exclusion and discrimination as illustrated by Shamila's and Waheeda's organizational experiences:

*“I'm in charge of doing all changes on applications and I was instructed by my GM that we will tolerate no change. So HR wanted a change and I sent an e-mail and said under the current circumstances we cannot afford to make any changes, and can you please prepare a countermeasure to the problem that you have. The HR Manager wanted a meeting with my GM. I set up a meeting with the GM. The GM wanted me at the meeting because I was in charge. So I went for the meeting. The guy says to me, I am not starting this meeting if your GM is not here. So I said to him I am in charge here. He says I am not having the meeting with you and he banged the table and spoke harshly to me. So I said, in that case, I'm leaving and you can have a discussion with my GM. I phoned*

*the GM and said: apparently having the title means nothing. I will not tolerate the bad manners I'm exposed to so I'm leaving and will you please come and I left."*

*Shamila- Senior Business Application Manager*

*"I applied to enter the workforce in the apartheid days just before Mandela came into power but was constantly rejected. There were two or three firms that would take on whites only and I remember one particular firm telling me and this was just after Mandela came into power and introduced Affirmative Action they would rather pay the fine than to take on people of colour. They will only take whites on. This pushed me back a few years as I could have had those extra few years of experience in the workplace and been in a higher position today."*

*Waheeda- a Senior Counsel*

## **Liminal Spaces**

The women's life stories did not reflect total acquiescence to the hegemonic managerial identity in corporate South Africa. There was resistance to totally integrating into the white male dominated organisational cultures they entered. For example, the women would not engage in social outings with an all-male team and risk compromising their identities as respectable Indian women. An important identity negotiation strategy was to partition managerial identity adoptions and valued aspects of their cultural identities. The words of Firdous Azmi, an Executive Director of Operations, shared this reality in regard to interactions with elders:

*"We were inculcated from a tender age to respect parents and elders. Although I'm in a top managerial position, I still do not disrespect elders in my community and family."*

But there was also discomfort with adherence to some Indian cultural practices. Within the Indian community and family, many still conform to cultural prescriptions of segregation of the sexes in social gatherings despite finding it difficult to relate to discussions of homemaking and cooking. Although they expressed preference for being part of the business conversations

Table 2: Experiences of exclusion and discrimination

Tactics	Experience	Quote
Exclusion from informal networks	<p>The women commented on the differential access of white and Indian females to senior white male managers during social events. The women found white males tended to accommodate white females in their conversations, but do not make the same effort with Indian females. White females are also able to converse with white males on topics such as sports, farming and hunting, which Indian females are not familiar with as such activities do not form part of the Indian culture. As a result, the women feel uncomfortable and marginalized and tend to leave social events early.</p>	<p>Shamila described the ease with which white women converse with males at social events:  <i>“In the white society, the women have been through the stage we’re at now and they have moved on. So when they’re in a social gathering they can discuss topics with their uncles and fathers and they’re comfortable discussing these things. But we’re not – we haven’t got that. It doesn’t come with our socializing that we do when we’re growing up. It certainly does not come from the socializing we do when we’re women – in fact, it gets worse because you ought to know better.”</i></p>
Challenges to authority	<p>The women in the study found that male managers prefer to discuss important issues with their male managers and by-pass the women. Although the women feel that they have been promoted on merit, they believe that the perception amongst most senior male managers is that these women are filling the quotas as per legislative requirements and are incompetent to make strategic decisions.</p>	<p>Saira, like the other women, believes that one needs to be assertive in order to be heard:  <i>“Unless you are the sort of person who’s willing to dig in your heels and say, no, I’ve got an opinion and I want to be heard, you can easily be brushed aside. I mean that’s where I am right now. It hasn’t been easy. The entire road here has been to prove that you’re actually not as good as, but you are actually better than most. So it hasn’t been an automatic acceptance.”</i></p>
Barriers to entry and promotion	<p>By the mid-1980s, multinational organisations were recruiting Indians to serve articles and these women were recruited immediately after completing their studies. However, whites held on tightly to their positions in human resource management, and it was only in the early 1990s that companies started recruiting top Indian female graduates into the human resource field. These women applied for jobs in multinational organisations which were dominated by foreign nationals, as they believed they would have a chance of being employed due to their outstanding university results and were immediately recruited in the human resource and chartered accounting fields. However, their Indian female friends who were not top academic</p>	<p>Waheeda captures the negativity the women experienced when applying for jobs after graduating:  <i>“I applied to enter the workforce in the apartheid days just before Mandela came into power but was constantly rejected. There were two or three firms that would take on whites only and I remember one particular firm telling me and this was just after Mandela came into power and introduced Affirmative Action they would rather pay the</i></p>

	<p>achievers in these fields were only recruited into South African organisations after the demise of apartheid. The first signs of the cracks in the apartheid system were noticeable during this period, and Indian females who were top academic achievers could actually enter careers once deemed not pursuable by the South African Indian community.</p> <p>Employment equity legislation worked in the women's favor, until they reached senior management positions. Beyond this point, rubbing shoulders with top management became the criterion for upward mobility. The participants believe that top management in their respective organisations is not concerned with employment equity legislation and is willing to pay the fines imposed for non-compliance by the Department of Labour. The women mentioned the perception in corporate South Africa is that there are too many Indians in management and therefore their organisations are no longer promoting and recruiting Indian females. For the women in the study, this assumption is flawed, as in their respective organisations they are sometimes the only Indian females in management.</p>	<p><i>fine than to take on people of colour. They will only take whites on. This pushed me back a few years as I could have had those extra few years of experience in the workplace and been in a higher position today."</i></p> <p>Saira voiced the concern the other women feel relating to the misconception that there are too many Indians occupying managerial positions in corporate South Africa: <i>"There is a perception that there are too many Indians in management and that makes it bad for us. Even here, I hear there are too many Indians. Yet when I look around I don't see many Indians. We are just a handful. Like I said, in my division I am the only Indian female and now I'm talking at all levels. There are no other females at lower levels. We are at least a few hundred people in our division and yet no Indian females, except me. So I can't understand why they say we are too many Indians."</i></p>
<p>Challenges to competence</p>	<p>Most of the women in the study had experienced sexist behaviour, especially from white and Indian male colleagues. Many of the women shared being targeted by senior white male colleagues who constantly challenged their expertise in their respective professions. Most of the women ensured that they became even more knowledgeable in their respective fields and even anticipated the questions male managers would pose and prepared well before entering meetings so as to counter attacks.</p>	<p>The challenges that Rani encountered from male colleagues are typical of the stories shared by the participants: <i>"In my last position I was the only female in Company B and from the time I walked into that company, I was like a dartboard. Three white men were aiming darts at me all the time. They were all my colleagues. I think you don't have to be quiet, you have to be active. Because what was happening is every decision I made I had to substantiate and they found a problem with everything I did. To the extent it became personal where I had to look over my shoulder and that is not normal."</i></p>

among male family members, such behavior would not be condoned by their families and communities.

We also learned from their narratives that the women had displayed resistance strategies during their childhoods to the cultural prescriptions of what it meant to be a respectable Indian female. This may account for their ascendancy as the first group of Indian women to enter corporate South Africa. The norm in the Indian communities during their childhoods was for females to marry immediately after completing their secondary schooling and in some cases even before completing their education. Twelve of the thirteen women interviewed did not marry after secondary schooling completion but only after completing their undergraduate degrees. The women's life stories also revealed they did not have very close relationships with their mothers as their mothers wanted them to be perfect housewives. The story of Rani Kapoor, a Human Resource Director, captures what we heard about the women's resistance to becoming housewives:

*"My mother insisted I cook and clean the house but I was not interested. Our biggest issue was that she wanted me to be a good housewife and I refused." She continued, "My extended family was always discouraging me from studying. They were always talking to my father not to allow me to study and I was fortunate my father did not listen to them. They were jealous and they are conservative and felt women should not study."*

However, the women had to achieve a delicate balance between resistance and obedience in their communities as the former may have resulted in isolation from the family. This was not a viable option under an oppressive racial system that restricted the movement of Indians. There were also expressions of resistance in the women's narratives against the apartheid system as some participated in school boycotts.

In the end the women, occupy a liminal space between maintaining their personal identities strongly influenced by the norms that had been so deeply transmitted through Indian

cultural prescriptions and reinforced in the context of apartheid and adopting a corporate managerial identity. Sushmita Zinta, a Human Resource Director aptly summarized the hybrid identity formation the other women also alluded to:

*“In order to fit in with male managers, you tend to become more assertive and learn to handle conflict constructively. However, you struggle to advance in the organization, stemming from the fact you cannot bridge cultural and organisational values and norms, as the Indian culture remains a major part of you. You’re not one of the boys and that is where we struggle because we’re caught in this chasm of we’re not very ‘male’, neither are we very ‘western female’ and we’re caught in this trap. You can’t make it in the male domain because you’re not into drinking and golf. So, there is always conflict between whom you are as an Indian female and who you are as a professional working in a western corporate culture.”*

## **Conclusion**

The results of this research demonstrate the dynamic interplay between identities and categories of social difference and the institutionalised processes and systems by which they are formed, shaped and reshaped over time (Dhamoon, 2011). Wedding recent developments in intersectionality theory with identity work helped to illuminate the hindrances Indian women faced in adopting a managerial identity in corporate South Africa. Explicit incorporation of the social-political-historical context was used to move beyond a tendency in intersectional analysis to focus on the content of marginalized identities of individuals and groups while neglecting the structural and systemic forces that create difference (Dhamoon, 2011). By explicitly situating the identity work of the women within the larger social-political-historical context we were able to show how the racialization processes of the system of apartheid fused with patriarchy and Indian culturalization practices to shape the identity work the women encountered when entering corporate South Africa. These processes and practices created complex and irreducible effects on the formation of what it means to be an Indian woman in a managerial position but also the gendered identity work they do in their families and communities (Mehrotra and Calasanti, 2010).

The simultaneous intersection between systems of domination enacted through particular processes (i.e. racialization and ethnicization) had the effect of intensifying Indian group culturalization processes that defined what it meant to be an Indian woman. Group formation, identities, and social categories were shaped, manifested, and entrenched through the power of the state (Marx, 1998). Enforced racial separation had the effect of fostering a common identity among its victims stalling the natural shifting and evolving nature of cultures (Charles, 2008; Marx, 1998).

The corporate space they entered as adults was not only man's business (gendered) but 'white' man's business (raced). Hence, the identity of an ideal manager was informed by white masculine ideas (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The very fact that these women had to acquire and display white male definitions of what it means to be a manager reflects processes of racialization and gendering. White men were constituted as the unmarked norm of how managers should behave, that is managers are assertive and manage conflict. The women could not assert their own definitions of being a manager and had to attend to the cues they received from white male colleagues about what it means to be a manager. Yet, the women resisted adopting all the cues of becoming successful managers from white males. There were parts of their cultural identities they were reluctant to relinquish leaving them in a liminal space. The women formed compartmentalized hybrid identities and practiced what Spivak (1987) coined as strategic essentialism. There were cultural identity boundaries they were not prepared to cross and attempted to retain valued aspects of their identity as respectable Indian women (Seedat-Khan, 2012).

Our findings make a dual contribution. First, we extend the empirical literature on intersectionality research by illuminating the power of the state in giving meaning to racio-ethnicity and gender in society and in the workplace as well as the dynamic interaction between identity formation and *re*formation and institutionalized processes and systems. Second, we expand the

conceptualization of identity work in organizations by illustrating managerial identity is not formed solely by personal identities in the workplace but also by the socio-historical-political and cultural context within which individuals are embedded. We also show how multiple axes of difference intersect in historically specific contexts to socially produce particular identities. These contributions have several important implications for centering intersectionality into identity work.

Studying the identity work of any individual in isolation of the multiple social categories to which he or she belongs as well as the socio-historical-political context in which the identity work occurs can lead to reductionism and a failure to capture the simultaneity among the many influences on forming workplace identities. Intersectionality theory with its attention to categories of difference can surface the omissions in current empirical work on identity that too often leave intact unmarked categories like whiteness and masculinity (Hearn and Collinson, 2009; Grimes, 2001). There is no identity work done outside of the multiple social categories in which individuals are positioned. The silence or non-recognition by a white male manager of the fact that he can speak of his identity work without acknowledging the significance of his race-ethnicity, gender and class makes them active not passive factors and only relevant to a particular group (Holvino, 2010).

The life stories of the women in our research confirm that identity work does not begin at the point of entry into a managerial role (Watson, 2008). Instead, identity formation is an iterative process of reconstructing and renegotiating aspects of the multiples sources of one's identity over the life course. This suggests research on identity work should be grounded in the broader socio-historical-political context in which individuals and organizations are embedded to capture the effects of evolutionary changes in systems of domination and the concomitant institutionalized practices by which social categories are constituted.

No study of this nature is without its limitations, however. Class effects in this study were somewhat muted as the women were all descendants of passenger Indians. It is possible that

Indian women with a different legacy may have a different life story to tell. While this study falls within what McCall (2005) labeled intracategorical intersectionality due to its focus on a single group, future research might take an intercategorical analysis of complex relational identity work that is underway in South African organizations as all social groups have been affected by the societal changes occurring in the post-apartheid era. Since the women interviewed were similar to the author who conducted the interviews, the participants could have presented their stories differently to the information they would have provided to someone with a different identity. Sometimes researchers tweak the truth by revealing certain elements in life story analysis and concealing others (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). By focusing on the prominent themes emerging over the course of their lives and having an independent review of the coding and themes, we believe we avoided this problem.

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