

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION – WORKING AND REWORKING IDENTITIES**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, I discuss the key findings from the study as reported in the previous two chapters. I assess my findings by relating the findings with the relevant literature to determine where they converge with or diverge from current theoretical understandings (Charmaz, 2006). When I designed this study, my goal was to understand the barriers and obstacles that Indian women managers face in reaching top managerial positions in corporate South Africa. I followed this line of enquiry by formulating questions that enabled me to focus on their life stories.

In the course of engaging with the participants, I learned a great deal about the identity work they had to do throughout their lives. Therefore, one of the questions I used in interpreting the data was what type of identity work the women engaged in and I looked at the hybrid identities that emerged on their way to top managerial positions in corporate South Africa. The women's interviews indicated that the journey into adulthood for them had not been easy, and that they had to work continuously at forming coherent identities during adolescence and in adulthood. On their journey to top managerial positions in the workplace, the women were continuously adjusting and reconstructing their identities to ones they were comfortable with. They formed hybrid identities that allowed them to fit into the majority culture, whether that was in the Indian community or in the workplace.

I found that the participants' racio-ethnic and gender identities played an important role throughout their lives. In adulthood, formulating a professional identity became salient. The women's life stories illuminate the complexity of identity work and the concomitant hybrid identities formed. Especially when these identity negotiations were accompanied by the interlocking of gender and racio-ethnicity identities against the backdrop of an oppressive historical context the women engaged in all their lives. A central finding of the study is that these women had to integrate multiple influences on their identity emanating from Indian culture, family, and society as well as the

pressures of fitting into the white male-dominated corporate cultures that they encountered as the first cohort of Indian women to embark on management careers in South Africa.

In order to understand the identity work of the women who participated in this study, I used avian imagery to illustrate the desire of caged birds to be free and to demonstrate the constant power struggle the Indian women in my study faced in terms of being subdued, resisting the suppression imposed by apartheid, the restrictions of Indian culture, their community and family, and a largely white, male-dominated workplace. This struggle formed an essential part of their identity work and the formation of hybrid identities. I therefore do not see their identities as static, but regard them as multiple, complex, fluid, and fragmented.

The use of the caged bird image is an established scholarly instrument used by feminist writers such as Fanny Fern, Kate Chopin and Susan Glaspell to illustrate the subordinate status of women in their respective societies. Women are depicted as birds in literary writings to illustrate their vulnerability, subjugation and beauty (Campfield, 2009). However, I extended this metaphor by demonstrating how the Indian women managers in the study have resisted the confines of the cages.

The literature confirms that women in various communities across the world have resisted male power and control. Resistance by women against strictures placed on them by men, the community, culture, religion and the workplace are illustrated by these examples from the literature. Abu-Lughod (1990) conducted a study relating to Bedouin women in Egypt and indicates the strategies used by these women in resisting male dominance. Katila and Meriläinen (2002) conducted a study on women academics in Finland. Their focus was on the strategies women in academia used to resist patriarchal expressions of their professional identities and the organisational discussions the women's resistance resulted in. Killian and Johnson (2006) conducted work on North African immigrant women in France relating to how they negotiated their ethnic identities. The result of their study indicated these women negotiated their ethnic identities and resisted being classified as immigrants.

I now discuss identity, identity work and hybrid identities in relation to the experiences of the women in the current study and how the findings have been supported by the literature. In studying identity, I take a contextual position rather than assuming that the concept is fixed (Hall, 1992). Such an approach to identity implies that identity is always being negotiated within particular contexts (in the current study, namely the home, work and the community) and suggests that the women are constantly negotiating binaries in their lives and not moving away entirely from the gender and cultural identities that are ascribed and prescribed to them.

## **7.2 IDENTITY AND IDENTITY WORK**

The life stories of the participants reveal the identity work they engaged in over the course of their lives, whether it was in the Indian community, the family or the workplace. The women were confronted with situations that did not always match their self-concepts and their aspirations for who they wanted to become. For example, in their youth, when friends and cousins were getting married after completing their schooling, the women aspired to pursue tertiary education and careers. In the workplace, the women aimed for managerial positions and had to rework certain aspects of their identities. The women were socialized into being passive, meek in the presence of authority and to avoid conflict. In the workplace, the women embraced bold and assertive stances when they realized that adopting the characteristics of the “ideal” Indian woman espoused by their extended family and the Indian community would not lead to upward mobility for them in the corporate world. They negotiated the intersectionality between their gender and their racio-ethnic identities, as they wanted their supervisors to consider them for promotion and they therefore needed to “act the part”.

The identity formation of the women who participated in the study was influenced by their culture, family, community and the larger society in which they were raised. During the apartheid era, forced segregation did not allow Indians to interact on a social level with other races. Even when the women had the opportunity to interact with other races, it was difficult for them to do so. At university, other Indian students discouraged the women from interacting with whites. The result was there was

minimal transfer of cultural values and beliefs across race groups. Since the women were confined to their race group, community and family, cultural values became deeply entrenched and formed a core part of their identities.

Identity development is a fluid concept and occurs throughout an individual's lifespan (Maslak & Singhal, 2008). Erikson (1968) was one of the pioneers in the study of identity in terms of developmental stages, arguing that an individual progresses to the next stage only after issues in the previous stage of development have been resolved. The basic premise of Erikson's identity theory is that adolescents who achieve identity synthesis are better adjusted than those who experience identity confusion (Luyckx et al., 2008). It is important to note that Erikson (1968) focused on identity development in adolescents from a white, male, middle-class, English-speaking Eurocentric perspective (Ferguson, 2006). Erikson's model ignored how race, class, gender and ethnicity made identity development more complex for non-dominant groups in society (Constantine, 2002).

Gender, racio-ethnic and professional identities were all salient at various junctures in the lives of the women in this study. This finding is consistent with intersectionality theory, which emphasises social experiences rooted in multiple dimensions of difference that interlock and shape identities (Mahalingham, 2001). While some identities were more salient in the women's childhood (for example, racio-ethnicity and gender), others (racio-ethnicity, gender and professional identity) became more central in adulthood. Studying these identities in isolation in the lives of the women would have led to reductionism and would not have captured the intricacy and complexity of their life experiences (Constantine, 2002). These interlocking social identities had to be worked at and reworked through a process of identity work that the women in my study engaged in to reach a coherent sense of who they are.

The concept of identity work has gained currency in organisation studies as a means of understanding how individuals identify with their work, but also as a means to study the process that sustains identity development. Atewologun and Singh (2010) conducted a study on minority male and female black professionals in the United Kingdom and how these professionals construct and negotiate their gender and

ethnic identities in the workplace. Their study indicates that blacks are not a homogeneous group, as they have different experiences and use different strategies and adopt various aspects of “black identity”.

Another study using identity work was conducted by Mehrotra and Calasanti (2010) on first generation Indian immigrants in the United States and the salience of their ethnic identities. The study reveals that Indian families can be a source of both support and oppression. The family is a source of support against the Indian immigrant community, while at the same time it reinforces gender inequality.

Essers and Benschop (2009) took an intersectionality stance and focused on the interrelationships of work identities with the ethnic, gender and religious identities of Moroccan and Turkish women within their entrepreneurial context in the Netherlands. The authors took Islam to be the boundary in order to establish how religious customs overcome cultural ones and to allow for individualism, honour and entrepreneurship.

Slay and Smith (2011) conducted a study on African American journalists and how they negotiated their professional and stigmatised cultural identities in the construction of their professional identities. The results of their study indicated that the development of professional identity for blacks involves redefinition and not adaptation. In addition, the environment shaped these journalists’ careers. However, the journalists reported from their side they also shaped the environment, thus providing narratives that showed how blacks are viewed by society.

In the present study, Indian culture was also a source of support and oppression for the women who participated in my study, both in their childhood and adulthood. I now discuss my findings on the influence of Indian culture on the participants’ identities.

### 7.3 THE INFLUENCE OF INDIAN CULTURE ON THE PARTICIPANTS' IDENTITIES

The life stories of the women I interviewed show that, although Indians have been in South Africa for more than a century, they still hold on to traditional Indian customs. This filters through to sons and daughters as being raised and socialized into appropriate gender roles continues to be regarded as vitally important to upholding cultural and religious values and beliefs. In the case of the participants, they received patriarchal messages from parents, the Indian community and extended family, and this played a key role in the identity work the women engaged in at their respective workplaces. Thus, identity work and their subsequent hybrid identities allows me as a researcher to understand the ways in which the women worked with and through their racio-ethnic and gender identities, where they were placed in positions of both empowerment and disempowerment, similar to what is also described in a study by Joseph (2009).

One of the reasons for holding on to their customs was that the apartheid government forced Indians to live in segregated townships. This mono-cultural environment reinforced a common heritage, values and norms. Individuals and families had to subscribe to norms dictated by the community, because rejecting prescribed customs would have led to being ostracized. Subscribing to shared cultural values and norms allowed Indians in South Africa to have a positive sense of self in an otherwise negative macro-environment. This resulted in Indians forming a collective identity in subduing women's freedom to pursue careers. The community ensured that women were policed in order to maintain their purity (Dwyer, 2000). During the apartheid era, additional Indians from the subcontinent were not allowed to marry and reside in South Africa. For this reason, South African Indian women married within the local community. Therefore, maintaining the family reputation was vital, as girls from "disrespectable" families would not be able to marry (Dwyer, 2000). Even in post-apartheid South Africa, the majority of Indian women marry local Indian males.

Being a minority group in South Africa increased the salience of Indians' racio-ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). The findings of the current study confirm what others have written about the effects of culture on ethnic minorities. Minority groups aim to maintain their traditional culture and embrace a stable, positive sense of ethnic identity (Dasgupta, 1998; Malhi et al., 2009) which leads to self-esteem (Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002) and psychological well-being (Hyers, 2001). Das Gupta (1997) found in her study of second-generation Indian women's ethnic identity formation in the United States that parents held on to narrow-minded values and norms no longer practised in India. This stemmed from the pride that Indians living outside the Indian subcontinent take in preserving their cultural beliefs and their pleasure in raising their children with traditional cultural practices. Farver et al. (2002) posit that Indians on foreign soil are more religious than those living in India.

In the next section, I discuss the identity work that took place during the women's early lives and how this was shaped by the Indian culture, the Indian community and family. I then turn to the identity work the women engaged in as professionals in the workplace and as the first cohort of Indian women managers.

#### **7.4 IDENTITY WORK IN THE WOMEN'S EARLY LIVES**

To use the metaphor of birds in cages, the women's wings were clipped (Marshall, 2004) during their early lives by the families and communities in which they were raised. In their childhood, the women were not allowed to deviate from Indian cultural norms, as they were surrounded by the community and family who practised and enforced these values and beliefs. For example, members from the Indian community they were living in, religious leaders, teachers at school and the extended family were all instrumental in enforcing appropriate gender roles and behaviours. The participants' fathers allowed some deviation from the expected gender roles of daughters being housewives, but they still enforced gender division of labour where the women had to conduct housework and sons were involved in business. The women also witnessed their mothers being controlled by fathers and sons. Being



obedient, being aware of the prevailing norms of honour and shame, respecting elders and avoiding conflict were all patriarchal messages the women internalized.

The women were not allowed to deviate from the norms prescribed by Indian culture regarding what it meant to be a “good” Indian girl. The women’s movements outside the home were restricted and they could only venture out under close adult supervision. Once they reached puberty, they were not allowed to interact with boys and this extended to not being allowed boyfriends even at university. Conflict situations in the community were resolved by the males in the family. As young girls, the women were expected to dress modestly. The women watched as their brothers flew freely outside the confines of the cage of the home, airing their views, engaging in challenging family business deals, enjoying male superiority in their homes and Indian society, as also reported of male-female relations in the Punjab by Winkvist and Akhtar (2000). The women’s stories tell of being restricted to the confines of their homes, relegated to performing women’s work, such as household chores typical for the Indian community (Srivastava & Misra, 2001).

The Indian community and family the women were raised in was collectivist. The women were raised in a hierarchical community where elders had to be respected, autonomous decisions were not valued, and group interdependence was promoted, and they were encouraged to conform to traditional Indian norms and values, a phenomenon also described by Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997). For example, when they were growing up, teachers did not encourage the participants to be outspoken, to think critically or to engage in public fights. The community was also instrumental in enforcing that the girls and their families abided by cultural norms and expectations. In order to maintain social harmony, the women abided by these gender identities imposed on them in order to avoid conflict.

The women’s personal identities therefore became fused with the group identity when they were growing up (see also Raval & Kral, 2004), as they followed prescribed gender roles and performed duties such as housework and cooking, and were not involved in their fathers’ businesses like their brothers (see also Farver et al., 2002). The idea of their identity being fused with the community is noticeable for



these women, as they adhered to being passive and obedient, and avoided conflict. These behaviours have long been prescribed by Indian culture as the cornerstone of being a good daughter, mother, daughter-in-law and wife in terms of Indian women's code of conduct (*Stridharma*) (Raval & Kral, 2004). The women therefore adhered to community and family expectations of being "good daughters" in order to gain social approval and acceptance, which is an expectation for Indian women in collectivist communities (Inman, Howard, Walker, & Beaumont, 2007). In adulthood, the participants indicated that they would place their husbands' careers above their own, indicating an adherence to the concept of an "ideal wife" and the relational nature of their identities. This also indicates the importance of family in the lives of these women and is consistent with findings in collectivist societies (Raval & Kral, 2004).

The women were socialized to place family honour above personal desires and to maintain sexual purity. They did not challenge men for leadership positions in the Indian community as such behaviour would be frowned upon. As part of maintaining their sexual purity, they did not have boyfriends at university and they did not mingle with males at community social functions.

As the data revealed, the women internalized these cultural norms (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002) and had to work towards revisiting some of these beliefs once they entered their managerial careers (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Previous research on Indians outside the Indian subcontinent has reported similar observations about the powerful role of culture and that Indian women identify strongly with preserving their natal traditions (Chae, 2002; Mehrotra & Calasanti, 2010; Qian, Blair, & Ruf, 2001). Indian women also tend to avoid behaviour that would harm the family name and status (Dasgupta, 1998; Farver et al., 2002; Levine, 2006; Mahalingham & Leu, 2005), because identifying with the group remains vital (Mahalingham & Haritatos, 2006).

However, the findings of the current study also indicate that the women who participated in the study developed a sense of identity that was not relational and interdependent. The women negotiated a sense of developing separate identities from others which led them to engage in identity work and form hybrid identities. The

answers to questions relating to “who am I?” and “how should I act?” led to identity negotiation. This is evident from what they reported about their childhood, as they did not follow the cultural norms prescribed by the community relating to girls marrying early and focusing on cooking and household duties. Instead, they engaged in higher educational pursuits revealing a hybrid identity. The women also admitted that they identified more with their fathers than with their mothers. This finding supports the findings reported from a study conducted by Raval and Kral (2004), who indicated that a retired Indian woman principal living in Canada admitted that she had developed a self-identity that was not completely related to social ties. Lamb (1997), in a study on older Bengali women, showed that these women developed a sense of self that was partially related to others, but that at several junctures in their lives such as adolescence, adulthood and marriage, the women were also able to develop a separate sense of self.

In many respects, the participants’ grounding in Indian culture shaped a gender identity that might be viewed as subordinate, but paradoxically it also served as a means of empowerment. A clear message the participants’ fathers in the current study gave their daughters was that some traditional gender roles should be negated to allow for women’s empowerment and progress, especially relating to education and careers. The participants’ fathers also allowed equal opportunity to sons and daughters relating to further education and careers. When daughters performed well at school, their fathers encouraged them to do even better, a finding in line with that by Asher (2008). These fathers rejected Indian cultural precepts of daughters being financially dependent on males and confined to their homes. The fathers therefore encouraged their daughters to reject certain elements of patriarchy within their community which placed demands and burdens on Indian women’s gender roles. In adulthood, fathers allowed their daughters to relocate due to job opportunities, which are contrary to Indian cultural norms, once again resulting in a hybrid identity. Thus, the participants’ fathers were instrumental in laying the foundation for a hybrid identity which became part of these women’s identity negotiation in the workplace during adulthood. The women started living their lives more on the periphery of the cage (Johnson, 2010b) in adolescence, engaging in identity work and anxious for fathers to open the doors to freedom. The women’s desire was to pursue careers

and enter the workforce, which was frowned upon in the Indian community (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005).

My study reveals the women internalized agency and resistance as part of their striving toward identity coherence, and these characteristics were further supported by their fathers, who encouraged such behaviour (see also Inman et al., 2007; Mathur et al., 2008). The women resisted conforming to essentialized identities in some instances (see Sirin & Fine, 2008). The participants' fathers emphasised education over housework and careers over marriage resulting in the women identifying less with the traditional gender role expectations in Indian culture (Schroeder, Blood, & Maluso, 1992) that women should be homemakers and mothers only, as subscribed to by their mothers and other women in their respective families and communities (see also Bandyopadhyay, 2000). This is evident in the conflict they experienced with mothers who tried to inculcate in them a passion for cooking and housework, as also described by Liao (2006) and the women resisted these chores and performed these tasks unwillingly. My study contradicts the findings in the literature (e.g. Kallivayalil, 2004) that indicate that mothers' attitudes toward gender roles have a major impact on daughters.

The participants also broke with traditional expectations of women marrying immediately after completing their schooling, which confounded the expectations of the community and their extended family. This finding is in line with other research that indicates that the marrying age of professional women in India is increasing (Ahmed, 2001). The parents of the women in my study were criticised for supporting their daughters' desire to pursue careers and tried to cushion their daughters from the onslaughts of the extended family and the community.

Thus the findings of my study relating to particularly fathers and daughters are in line with those of a number of other studies. Zhou and Bankston (2001) conducted a study on Vietnamese refugees in the United States and found that fathers encouraged their daughters to pursue education and careers. Bell and Nkomo (2001) found in their study of African-American women managers in the United States that fathers exposed their daughters to business and played a major role in

encouraging their daughters to study. Abbas (2003) conducted a study on South Asian women in Birmingham in the United Kingdom whose fathers supported the further educational and careers of their daughters. Parents in India were the greatest form of support relating to their daughters' pursuing education and careers in Maslak and Singhal's (2008) study. D'Mello (2006), however, found that most fathers in India still do not subscribe to daughters pursuing tertiary education and careers. Levine (2006) found in her study of Nepalese women that fathers did not encourage their daughters to complete their schooling.

While the women in my study were expected to be subordinate in the family and community, the emphasis on acquiring a higher level of education led to their empowerment and individuality, where they made decisions relating to their careers and eventually their spouses in adulthood. Identity work in their early lives was just the beginning of their journey of self-discovery which continued into adulthood when the women entered the organisational cage. Challenging the status quo and resisting gender roles were two ways adopted by the Indian women managers in this study to embrace an identity of their own making. Yet the data also strongly suggest that their identity work is ongoing, as they constantly struggle to balance Indian cultural expectations and the need to forge a professional identity for successful management careers. A key challenge continues to be reconciling agency and resistance with expected cultural norms. The women continue to revisit some of the aspects of their culture in their adulthood and this leads to further identity negotiations. The bird cages became too confining for them during adolescence and they were ready to spread their wings and enter a new phase of their lives.

In the next section, I discuss the identity work the participants have been engaging in their workplaces and personal lives as adults.

## **7.5 IDENTITY WORK IN THE PARTICIPANTS' ADULT LIVES**

Although the participants tried to escape the restrictive definitions of what it meant to be a good, respectful Indian woman, some Indian cultural norms have become so much a part of their identity that these values and norms have become like shackles.

While birds try and escape the confines of their cages when they are initially caged, they eventually become accustomed to their confinement (Brasaemie, 2007). Even when the door of the cage is left open, they will not venture out without coaxing (Johnson, 2010a). In this study, the women did venture out of the cage, largely due to the support of their fathers. At the time, it was highly unusual for Indian women to pursue tertiary education and careers.

The study reveals that the women still have a strong cultural identity. The majority of women are still living in Indian townships and have strong bonds and relationships with extended family, and therefore they still maintain their cultural values. Also, the fact that their friends are family members and other Indian women means that they still hold on strongly to their Indian values, as the influence of other cultures on them is minimal. They have not learned to become intimate with women from other races outside work as a result of apartheid's keeping them apart and because they have large extended families where they do not feel a need for friends. In the workplace, they tend to have at most one close confidante, but do not have a relationship with that person outside work. They regard some white women's behaviour during social events as career-limiting and subscribe to an Indian culture which honours women's sexuality in a way that is different to some white women's libertine ways (Mahalingham & Leu, 2005).

The participants' stories suggest that they were themselves somewhat surprised at how much they had internalized particular cultural values and norms about how women should behave. Having been socialized to be subservient, passive, respectful of elders and authority, to avoid conflict, and to have no contact with non-related men, the women found it daunting to display the kinds of behaviour required to be viewed as a successful manager in corporate South Africa (Adya, 2008; Choudry, 2001) and developed an essentialized sense of self.

For the women it was important to negotiate their identities in the workplace for two reasons. The first reason was that they were spending most of their day in the work environment and had to learn to blend in and fit into the corporate environment. The second reason was that they wanted to progress in their careers and had to learn the

appropriate behavioural requirements for future managers. The women negotiated their identities within organisations and formed hybrid identities which Spivak (1987) describes as a form of strategic essentialism: they kept their cultural identities, but also adopted professional identities to move up the organisational hierarchy. When women's positions are vulnerable due to their gender and racio-ethnicity, they have to negotiate their identities to a greater extent (Spivak, 1993).

The women's narratives indicated that there was dual pressure on them between continuity and disjunction. That is, there was a need for them to change and adapt to organisational norms and values, but at the same time to belong and be connected to Indian culture. Identity work therefore related to finding and maintaining a point where they were comfortable and achieved balance, which led to renegotiating their identities and forming hybrid identities. This led to conflict that resulted in the women's being in a liminal space when the boundaries between their culture and organisational expectations began to shift and rub against each other. Identity work led the participants to re-evaluate their cultural and gender identities and renegotiate disjunctions between previous and new identities (see also Butcher, 2004).

As Swann (1987) states, identity negotiation is a process where people construct their identities in context across different domains. In this case, the workplace and the family and Indian community are two distinct domains in which the participants learned to negotiate their identities in such a way that they adhered to their cultural identities in the workplace and at the same time did not negate values and norms espoused by the organisation relating to their professional identities. A bicultural identity cannot be placed on these women, as they do not abandon their Indian culture in the workplace, unlike some African-American minority women who separated the black culture they practised at home from the white culture in the workplace (Bell, 1990). Rather, the participants' Indian culture forms part of their professional identity in the workplace and I therefore want to employ the term hybrid identity in their case, as their adult identity is a mixture of their cultural identities and the identities they have negotiated in the workplace.

The participants' identity work in the workplace was largely about negotiating how to fit into a white-male dominated organisational culture that specifies what is required to be a successful manager. The women in the study were raised in a patriarchal society where males dominated, and they found it daunting to be outspoken (see also Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Their fathers also encouraged them to be obedient to their supervisors and to avoid conflict. Their fathers were aware that racial discrimination existed in the workplace and felt that if their daughters displayed insubordinate behaviour toward their supervisors they might be considered rebellious and would be retrenched.

Their fathers' unwillingness to expose the participants to business in their youth placed the women at a disadvantage when they first entered the workplace. They would not air their opinions for fear of being embarrassed. When the women first entered the workplace and displayed these characteristics, their white male managers regarded them as passive and realized that the women avoided conflict and favoured group harmony even when they were slighted. In many cases, their managers placed the women in situations where they would be forced to defend their views and would encourage them to be outspoken, which led to their becoming able to present contradictory viewpoints. In other cases, the women were bullied by women from other races and they learned to become assertive through the guidance of older white women. Through this type of indirect coaching, the women learned to negotiate their gender and racio-ethnic identities and formed hybrid identities. They no longer regarded women's assertive behaviour as aggression, as they were socialized into believing when they were growing up. They became assertive and learned to handle conflict in a constructive manner. By watching the bold manner in which white women in senior positions resolved workplace issues, the women soon learned that in order to be promoted they would have to change the way they behaved.

However, the women still maintained some level of passivity as they are unable to refuse their supervisors' work assignments and are bogged down with work. This indicates the limits of a hybrid identity, as the women still adhere to a cultural identity. The participants were aware that adherence to Indian cultural norms



reinforced perceptions of Indian women as subservient and passive, as also described in a study by Fearfull and Kamenou (2006). However, their entry into corporate South Africa led these women to renegotiate past identities with new identities in the workplace and they started displaying a hybrid identity in the workplace that juxtaposed the Indian and organisational cultures, as also reported in a study by Maira (1999).

Entering corporate South Africa meant entering a new cage. Adapting to this new form of confinement took courage and time. When the women entered corporate South Africa, they faced three dominant forms of discrimination. First, they were ascribed low status due to being a woman in a male-dominated profession. Second, they belonged to an “inferior” racial group in apartheid’s racial classification system. Third, this problem was compounded by the patriarchal nature of South African society (Baden et al., 1998). Historically, women of all races have been subjected to patriarchal laws that entrenched a subordinate status relative to men. As a result of these factors, males in lower positions in the organisations in which they worked displayed disrespect for the women, despite their managerial positions. White and Indian peers stereotyped them as homemakers who did not belong in the corporate workplace, as also reported in a study by Slyomovics (2005). The men they encountered subscribed to traditional, patriarchal views, as also described in other studies (Budhwar et al., 2005; Kantor, 2002; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000; Wolfram, Mohr, & Schyns, 2007), and in a real sense regarded the women as “intruders in the workplace” (Eveline, 2005, p. 648). The behaviour of junior colleagues and peers (Bagilhole, 2006) undermined the women’s professional identity as managers. They had to expend a lot of time and energy defending their professional identities as managers.

Over time, the participants adjusted their behaviours and became more assertive in responding to disrespect from male subordinates by using their power to take appropriate disciplinary action. A different strategy was employed to deal with male peers in the workplace. These women chose to work even harder to prove they were worthy of their management positions. In terms of relationships with men in their homes and communities, they did not challenge the status quo and subscribed to the

cultural norms they had grown up with. This finding resonates with other research on professional ethnic minority women, which found that women from such backgrounds do not challenge the status quo in their homes (Maslak & Singhal, 2008). As previous research indicates, the women's gender beliefs combined with racio-ethnic and professional identities shapes their behaviour and responses to men in the various contexts they engage in (Randel, 2002).

The dichotomy between the Indian and organisational cultures became evident when the women were confronted with contradictory elements in the workplace and negotiated their cultural and professional identities to deal with the situations. The women negotiated their identities and engaged in selective integration according to situational demands, and this dictated whether their cultural or professional identities took precedence. Every time the women came across a situation in the workplace that would be frowned upon in their community and families, they renegotiated their gender, cultural and professional identities so that they were not alienated in the workplace, and at the same time they were still regarded as respectable Indian women.

For example, in the workplace, the participants were expected to work with males. Intermingling of the sexes is contrary to Indian cultural teachings, family and Indian community expectations. The women negotiated this identity dilemma by developing a professional attitude toward working with males and redefined their cultural boundaries. They justified working in close proximity with men in terms of achieving the goals of the organisation. However, the women also resisted some of the norms of the organisation and were not willing to attend social gatherings with all-male groups, as they adhered to their cultural identities regarding being respectable women (Rana, Kagan, Lewis, & Rout, 1998). This indicates that their identities were negotiated according to situational demands. This example indicates how the women moved back and forth in different situations and negotiated their gender, racio-ethnic and professional identities.

These types of justification for choosing to work with men and developing a pragmatic relationship toward men in the workplace are also evident from the

literature. One of the Turkish women entrepreneurs in Essers and Benschop's (2009) study created a boundary between herself and the men she massaged by stating that the men had approached her, and that she was free to refuse her services to men she was not comfortable with. Butcher (2004), in her study of minority youth in India and Australia, found that when youths moved from one context to another, they also changed their identity strategies. For the sake of continuity in the home, they adopted a traditional identity, but with friends they embraced hybrid identities. A study by Mishra and Shirazi (2010) focused on American Muslim women, showing how they negotiated new meanings in their everyday lived experiences of wearing the veil.

The life stories of the women who participated in my study revealed that they adhered to ethical behaviour as espoused in Indian culture and religions, and did not regard *impression management* as part of their self-concept. Hard work and high work standards were part of the women's self-concept in my study and they did not believe in using political skills, for example, in order to move up the organisational hierarchy. The women also avoided social gatherings where networking took place and which could be used as a means of enhancing their careers – they only attended when it was absolutely necessary. There was some tension between the strategies other people use to get ahead in the organisation and the women's cultural beliefs. The women did not compromise their cultural identities where hard work and high work standards are prescribed for advancement, but, as was also found in prior research (Agarwal, 2008; Catalyst, 2003; Singh, Kumra, & Vinnicombe, 2002), the participants in this study were not comfortable using impression management to advance their careers

The women in my study talked of the pain and unfulfilled expectations they experienced in the workplace. They were not able to construct their identities as they wanted to in the workplace, but they were constantly working toward negotiating their identities in the workplace and trying to find the best fit between their cultural and religious beliefs and the expectations of the workplace culture.

The women indicated that they did not wear traditional clothes or cover their hair at work, even on Indian cultural festival days, although they would wear such attire at home. However, in the workplace, they wore feminine accessories and clothes (but not anything that could be regarded as risqué) and kept their long hair, and they did not adopt masculine attire. The women were also aware that their upward mobility depended in part on their attire (see also Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006), as women wearing traditional clothes are seen as passive and submissive by male managers (see also Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006). This highlights the salience of their gender and professional identities and the formation of hybrid identities.

Also, their dietary requirements at work are generally met with great difficulty and this was another point of concern that they mentioned. The women are not prepared to negotiate on their dietary requirements, and this point indicates the juncture at which hybrid identity formation fails. Research indicates that food forms a symbol of personal and group identity and is a form of cultural and religious expression (Brettell & Nibbs, 2009).

My study indicates that the women uphold the honour and dignity of their families by not discussing personal problems in the workplace. At mixed gatherings they do not stay at social events till late at night and adhere to their religious dietary requirements. The women have reworked their religious identities by not demanding to take leave on religious festival days and do not demand that meetings be scheduled outside their daily prayer times. The women have negotiated their cultural and religious identities to fit into the dominant culture, as they do not want managers to perceive them as being difficult. At social events, the women request that their dietary requirements be met. This aspect indicates the need to maintain racio-ethnic identities, but at the same time, the boundaries between organisational expectations and their cultural and religious identities are negotiated. These results corroborate findings from the literature, which reports that ethnic minority women negate some of their cultural and religious beliefs and adopt some western ways to fit into the dominant culture, as they do not want to be negatively perceived, and they do want to advance their careers (Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006; Pio, 2005).

The current research did find that, even though the women subscribed to Indian culture norms at home, the burden of family and domestic responsibility was mitigated by living in a country with access to affordable domestic help. Under apartheid, African women were largely restricted to low paying domestic jobs. Even with the end of apartheid and despite some efforts to improve wages, domestic help remains accessible and plentiful (King, 2007), unlike in most Western countries where professional women struggle with childcare options and household assistance (Mahalingham & Leu, 2005). These findings are corroborated in the literature which reports the need for women to negotiate egalitarian relationships with husbands relating to household chores and child care which indicates a negotiation of gender and cultural identities (Mehrotra & Calasanti, 2010; Sudha, 2000). The structure of Indian families also mitigates some of the need to fulfil domestic roles in the home. The extended families of the women assist in taking care of their homes and children when the women are on business trips out of town. Support from their mothers allows them to devote the time necessary to their professional careers and decreases the extent to which they have to perform traditional gender responsibilities in the home. This is in line with a study of professional immigrant women in the United States, in which Mahalingham and Leu (2005) also found that extended families assisted with child care.

## 7.6 CONCLUSION

The women in my study are continually engaged in identity work and forming hybrid identities. They have a clear sense of what they want, in spite of experiencing various obstacles in their lives. These women do not blame their gender or racio-ethnicity for their lack of advancement in the workplace and work harder than the next person. Support and encouragement from their families assist the participants in getting get ahead in life.

The women's stories revealed multiple dimensions and complexities through their lives which shaped their identities. Various aspects of identity were intertwined, and they all shaped the women's lives. For example, when addressing racio-ethnicity, gender could not be excluded (Kawahara, 2007). The women's identities are related

to the political context in South Africa and to other elements such as race, religion, ethnicity and gender. The identity of the Indian females in the current study can therefore not be understood without considering the impact of race, ethnicity and gender that results in their marginalisation in the workplace. The women engaged in identity work in their respective communities first, by resisting the norm of prescribed Indian cultural gender role expectations in their early lives and displaying agentic behaviour. Thereafter, the women engaged in identity work within their respective organisations and held on to certain cultural and religious beliefs, despite being marginalised. In order to maintain a coherent identity at work, the women had to make adjustments in their professional identities. The women also engaged in identity work relating to their relationships with their spouses.

The participants' lives are grounded in the Indian community, but they have adopted hybrid identities that distinguish them from their mothers, other women in the family and community. They have, for example, negotiated egalitarian relationships with husbands in terms of child care and household chores. The women's workplaces became places of cooperation and resistance where their hybrid identities were constantly renegotiated. The workplace can be likened less to a melting pot than to a chowder (stew) where not all ingredients are "melted", but float in the chowder in chunks. It is these chunks that are parts of the cultural identity of the women. The women's hybrid identities continue to emerge in the interface between the past and the needs of the present. They operate in a "third space" where they negotiate gender, racio-ethnic and professional identities (Bhabha, 2004). They have to work harder in the workplace in negotiating their identities than others, as they find themselves on the periphery where they have a need to balance between maintaining their racio-ethnic identities and adopting professional identities as required by their respective organisations.

The caged birds have survived the restrictions of both their childhood and adult cages. Each cage produced its own challenges, and the women have survived with the support of their parents and spouses. In trying to find out who they were, the participants had to venture from their childhood cages to their organisational cages – their desire being their freedom. In their quest for freedom, they had to work through

and rework various identities, which resulted in freedom in certain contexts, and at other times reverted to and submitted to the restrictions imposed by the cages. Negotiating their identities is a lifelong process and they will always be grappling with identity work even after having reached the pinnacle of their careers, namely top management positions.

The next chapter presents the conclusion of the study, discussing the limitations of the study and making recommendations for future research.



## **CHAPTER 8:**

# **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of my study was to explore the barriers and obstacles that Indian women in South African organisations face in reaching top managerial positions. I investigated Indian women managers' life stories using a qualitative, interpretivist approach. In the process of conducting the research, the concepts of identity work and hybrid identities became critical to understanding the life stories of the women who participated in the study. I found that the Indian women managers engaged in complex identity work during their childhood and in their adulthood on their way to top managerial positions. A grounded theory approach enabled me to illuminate the particular nature of their identity work as well as the content of the hybrid identities they formed in response to the multiple influences they were exposed to.

### **8.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH**

The study focused on four research questions, namely, what barriers and challenges do Indian women managers encounter in the workplace? How did the Indian women managers who participated in the study negotiate the intersection between their racio-ethnic and gender identities during the early years of their lives? How did these women negotiate the intersections between their racio-ethnic and gender identities in the Indian family and community? How did these women negotiate the intersections of their racio-ethnic, gender and professional identities in the workplace?

In respect to the gender and management literature, specifically the women in management literature this study makes a number of significant contributions. First, it fills the gap in knowledge as it is one of the first studies of the historical journey of Indian women managers to corporate South Africa. To date, very little has been known about these women and the particular nature of their life and career journeys. As noted earlier, the literature on women in management in South Africa has primarily focused on samples of white women managers, with a few studies of the

experiences of African women managers (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Mathur-Helm, 2005).

Second, although the gender and management literature has stressed intersectionality as a framework for understanding women in management, it has been difficult to execute empirically (Acker, 2012). This study demonstrates one means of capturing multiple levels of social identities. At the same time, it shows how they can be considered in understanding the formation of professional identities. Additionally, the research suggests the gender and management literature should pay attention to context in understanding the careers of women in management. The use of the life story approach shows how women's lives evolve over time and cautions against studies focusing only on their career lives as if their early lives were irrelevant to identity formation as managers. The life story approach enhances the ability to capture what McCall (2005) refers to as intracategorical intersectionality. That is having an in-depth understanding of the experiences of a particular category of women. Finally, another contribution to this literature is the need for researchers not to overlook the complex interplay between how women's early gender role socialization may influence how they ultimately respond to organizational barriers when embarking upon managerial careers. What is clear from this study is that the Indian women had to rethink and adjust how they have come to understand themselves as women as well as how to respond to male-dominated corporate cultures.

The study also illuminates the identity work that Indian women managers in South Africa have engaged in over the course of their lives. A life story approach allowed me to capture and describe the on-going tension between the influences of their early life cultural socialization of what it means to be an "Indian woman" and the need to negotiate a professional identity in corporate South Africa. This is an important finding, as much of the existing literature on identity work in organisation studies has focused on professional identities and has not explicitly considered early life influences. As the literature from the field of psychology indicates, identity formation begins early in life and cannot be assumed to just happen at the adult stage of life (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, this study contributes to filling the gap in

knowledge about women in management on the African continent. As Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) note, the literature on women in management in Africa is generally sparse, compared to that in the United States and Europe.

The findings of this study are also in line with Alvesson et al.'s (2008) assertion that an individual's identity is formed by personal identities, as well as social identities. Social identities have not always been explicitly considered in most of the research on identity work in organisations. Consequently, professional identities are typically only juxtaposed to personal or self-identity. At the same time, identity work research has not taken into account how multiple social identities are accommodated and negotiated in the workplace (Cieslik & Verkuyten, 2006). Specifically, research on professional identities has generally not incorporated gender or racio-ethnic identity. A notable exception is a recent study by Slay and Smith (2011), who examined the professional identity construction of African-American reporters to demonstrate the identity work of persons with stigmatized cultural identities. The current study focuses on the intersection of multiple identities such as racio-ethnic, gender and professional identities and how these were managed and negotiated in the women managers' childhood and are being negotiated in their adult lives, as well as how "new" hybrid identities are formed.

Alvesson et al. (2008) also argue that an individual's identity is formed not only by personal and social identities, but also by the historical and cultural context beyond the organisation within which the person operates. The current study demonstrates how the apartheid and the post-apartheid eras (historical context) negatively influenced the women in their childhood and in their respective careers. This suggests that identity work research should be grounded within the broader socio-political and historical context shaping an individual's life experiences, as well as in the groups to which he or she belongs in society. Although the study focused on Indian women in South Africa, a "hybrid chowder" approach may be transferable to other groups within unique locations and socio-historical contexts (for example, the Indian diaspora). In other words, a three-level approach that includes context, social identities and intersectionality is important. Recently, diversity scholars have called for greater attention to context in understanding diverse identities in organisations

(Andersson, 2010; Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska, & George, 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006; Watson, 2008).

Most studies on identity work focus on individual identities. The current study indicates that the women's cultural identities are still pivotal in their lives, and they retain a strong collectivist identity, as they still live within their communities. Even the women who do not live in Indian communities still practise their culture and place group needs above individual needs. Their Indian cultural identity is deeply rooted in their self-concept. All other identities are adapted or rejected according to this core identity.

The study also has practical implications in respect of South Africa's goal of achieving transformation and gender equality in the workplace. The research results that are reported here should enable managers in corporate South Africa gain a better understanding of the unique challenges and barriers that Indian women managers encounter as they struggle to become successful managers in the corporate environment. The identity work that Indian women managers are reported to engage in should alert top management, human resource practitioners and organisational psychologists to the importance of cultural and religious values in the lives of ethnic minority women. Organisations that expect these women to assimilate fully may end up compromising the potential contribution that these women can make. Finally, the research should also alert managers to the need to accelerate Indian women managers' career advancement as an important strategy for talent retention.

### **8.3 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

This study used a life story approach to understand the women's journeys toward management careers. Life stories have a number of advantages, as Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) point out: the stories that leaders tell about themselves and their lives are means by which they convey important messages about their identities, traits, values and beliefs. The life story methodology used in the current study provided a means by which to capture the multiple influences on the

participants' identities and how they made sense of them. Life stories express the story-teller's identity, which is a product of the relationship between life experiences and how the person narrates those stories. In telling their life stories, people construct a longitudinal version of the self which explains and justifies the present self (McAdams et al., 2001).

Gabriel and Griffiths (2004, p. 114) point out that another advantage is that good stories are used to "educate, inspire, indoctrinate and convince". Stories are also a powerful research instrument, because they allow a researcher to understand the emotional lives of the participants. Listening to and comparing the stories of the different participants and examining how their narratives were constructed around particular issues allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of identity negotiation in the lives of these women. Another reason I chose to use life stories was that it would provide me with rich data regarding the women's complex lives which a survey would not be able to capture.

No study of this nature is without its limitations, however. The life story approach also has its limitations. Life stories are highly subjective, and participants reconstruct accounts of their life stories according to the meaning and perception of events in their lives. The same life stories and events can be narrated to different people in different ways. People distort, hide and inflate stories, depending on their relationship with the interviewer and how they want to be perceived (Rae, 2000). Since I am an Indian woman who has been in a managerial position, the women in the study could have presented the data to me differently to the information they would have provided to someone with a different identity, for example. Additionally, while the current study reveals the broad historical, racio-ethnic, and cultural influences on the women's gender and professional identities, the life story approach used does not fully capture the complex texture of the day-to-day life of the individual women in the study.

Another limitation could be retrospective bias in the data (Wallace & Bergeman, 2002). The themes were generated according to the information provided by the women relating to their life stories during the interviews, and retrospective bias could

have been an element in their stories. I also channelled the interviews according to the information I wanted to gather from their life stories to a large extent and the women provided me with information I was interested in obtaining. The women therefore included certain information and left out other pieces of stories, according to their perspectives. Although I spent hours interviewing the participants, I am aware that I did not touch on all the elements of their lives. Retrospective bias may seem like a limitation in the current study and the life stories may not have been “complete”, but they did allow the women to make sense of their current positions.

Another limitation in the study is the women’s memories of their childhood. Most of the women are over 30 years of age and it was difficult for them to remember the details of certain episodes in their lives. I therefore focused on their life stories from adolescence, and did not probe into earlier stories, as these would possibly have been even more inaccessible.

Sometimes researchers tweak the truth by revealing certain elements in life story analysis and concealing others (Shamir et al., 2005). By focusing on the prominent themes emerging over the course of their lives, I believe I avoided tweaking the results in such a way. Furthermore, the use of Atlas.ti allowed for detailed coding and integration of data into themes. I also followed an important prescription of a grounded theory approach in allowing the data to expand the research from its initial focus on the challenges and barriers of Indian women managers. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge that researchers examining my data from another lens could find other themes, and they could interpret the women’s life stories differently. I also tried to mitigate this, however, by having an independent expert review my analysis and the resulting themes.

#### **8.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has implications for future research on identity work in organisations, as well as women in management in Africa. The study of the lives and career journeys of women managers on the African continent is still in its infancy (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Overall, there is a need to expand the body of research on identity work and

hybrid identities using an intersectionality lens. For example, there has thus far been very little research on how minority male managers negotiate their identities. Specifically, a fruitful study might be an examination of how Indian male managers negotiate gender identities rooted in the superiority of males emanating from Indian culture and a subordinate status relative to white males and African males in the South African corporate context.

Research relating to the extent of agency and resistance manifested in the hybrid identity work of minorities in organisations can also be explored in future.

In the current study I had focused on Indian women's struggle in negotiating identity work as managers. Identity work can be conducted on minority women in less demanding occupations, where the burden to maintain a particular image may be less.

Future research should also be conducted on a younger cohort of Indian women who were not raised in the apartheid era to explore how they negotiate their identities in reaching managerial positions.

Finally, a comparative study of the identity work of women who live within an Indian community and those who live in mixed communities may shed light on how contextual differences shape identity formation.

## **8.5 CONCLUSION**

In the end, the research approach that was chosen has provided a thick description of the identity work engaged in by Indian women managers in South Africa by explicitly interrogating the multiple influences shaping their identities over time within a particular historical and political context. In addition to closing the gap in knowledge about a neglected group of women, namely Indian women managers, the study also makes a contribution to the growing literature on identity work in organisations. In this regard, it makes a significant contribution by heeding Alvesson et al.'s (2008) call for researchers not to shy away from empirically examining the complex factors that shape an individual's identity.



The next chapter shares personal reflections about my journey in conducting this study.