Irene's Journey: A Theoretical Perspective of Cultural Identity Development

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Abstract

Irene Meyer is a fictional character in a novel titled, I don't know…I mean…you know… (Azmi, 2014), who gives voice to the crises and commitments involved with identity development among adolescent females in a suppressed society. Irene's identity is heavily influenced by the cultural contexts of her development. Four theoretical perspectives illustrate the thinking, feeling and raw emotion of a young woman seeking her identity. Marcia's theory of adolescent identity development is used as a framework to lend voice to the struggles and insights that may be unique in various cultural contexts. Implications for lessons learned, drawn from the four theoretical perspectives, are provided at the end of the article.

Introduction

Women of India, like women of other regions of the world, develop a sense of personal and cultural identity through a complex series of events, experiences, and personal developmental tasks. The purpose of this paper is to utilize a fictional character from a novel to illustrate the personal thoughts, crises, dilemmas involved in an adolescent female's development that ultimately leads to the achievement of her personal identity. A premise of this paper is that personal knowledge gained through the process of identity development leads to power. Many agree that knowledge is power (Winfrey, 2014). A recognition of the aspects of identity development may help individuals reach clarity about issues of identity, thus promoting a sense of power. Power is a central component of culture, especially as it relates to issues of gender and economic independence.

In 2014, the word of the year was culture (Rothman, 2014). People were curious about the definition of the word and what it meant in context to

the world today. Does culture change? How does this change impact the world? What are the elements of culture? Aligning with the purpose of this paper, these questions are organized around the following conceptualization of culture: Culture pertains to the values, beliefs, and behavior that are learned from a group of people. Culture ensures the survival of group identity and creates a sense of belonging. Identity is how one perceives self and is constructed by the integration of language, social structures, gender, and culture. There is a complex relationship between culture and identity. Cultural identity is not static; it evolves over time. Tension emerges as one goes through the journey of life and questions one's held beliefs, values, and behavior. Cultural identity can change due to social, political, economic, and contextual factors, especially over time. The contributions of culture upon a person's identity development are well documented (Rubin & Menzer, 2010).

I.
Theoretical Orientations Associated with Cultural Identity Development

First introduced in the 1970s, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is widely utilized to explain processes of how the environment impacts child/human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The model incorporates five socially organized subsystems that provide the environmental context of development. The systems include the microsystem (relationship between person and immediate environment such as family, school, peer groups), mesosystem (relationship between two or more microsystems), exosystem (relationships between two or more settings in which one setting does not contain the developing person—for example, a child and his/her parents' workplace), the macrosystem (overarching influences of culture, belief systems, resources that impact a developing person) and the chronosystem (the influence of change or consistency that persists over time—relationship between the person and patterns of culture, economics, customs, etc.) (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The microsystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem will be explored in this paper in the context of impacting cultural identity development (See Figure 1).

http://drewlichtenberger.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Bronfenbrenners-Bioecological-Model-Graphic.png
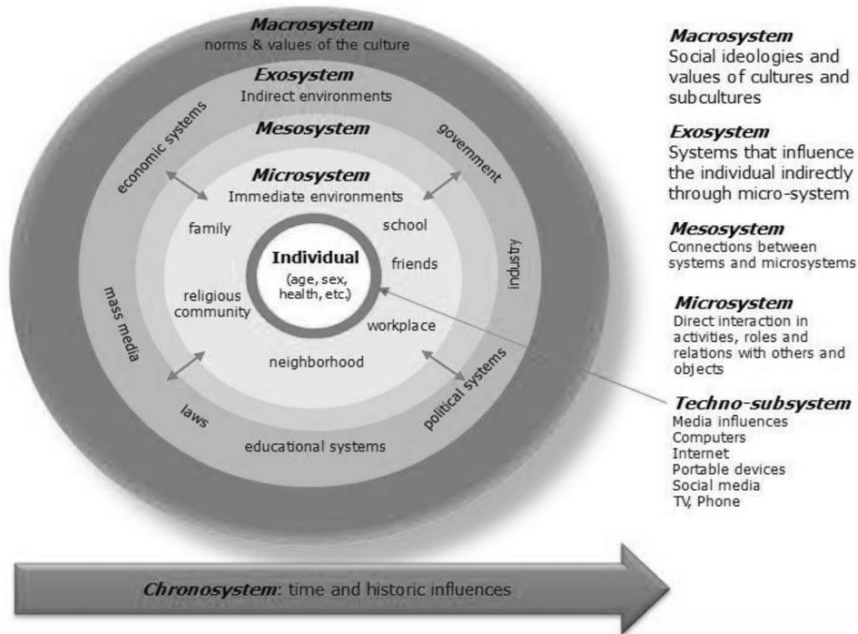
Figure 1: Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Lev Vygotsky (1978) theorized about sociocultural influences on development. Vygotsky wrote extensively about the impact of three key concepts; social interaction, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (https://www.learning-theories.com/vygotskys-social-learning-theory.html). The premise of this approach is that individuals construct sociocultural knowledge in the context of social interactions with others. Development is maximized when learning and development occur within the ZPD under the direction of an MKO. The ZPD is the theoretical and conceptual space between where a person functions independently and where a person functions with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other (coach, teacher, peer, etc.). According to Vygotsky, growth and development happens in this space. See Figure 2 for an illustration of ZPD.
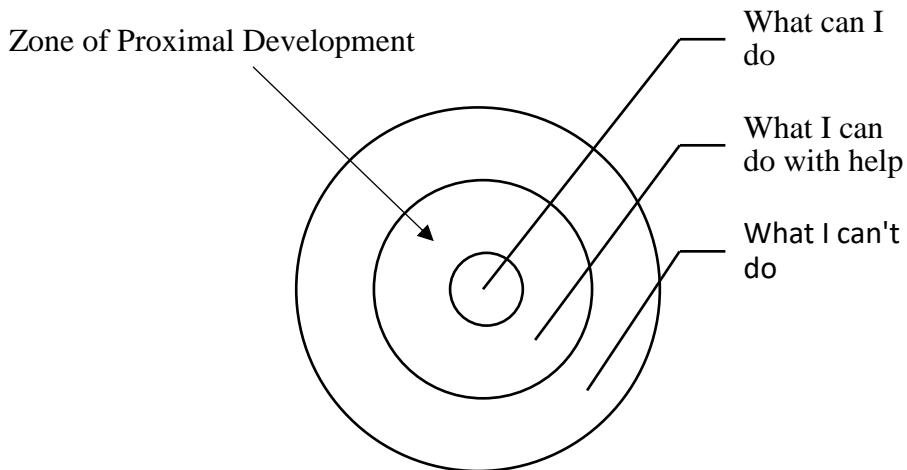
Zone of Proximal Development

What can I do

What I can do with help

What I can't do

Figure 2: Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1950, 1964, 1993) suggests that psychosocial development in life is achieved through a series of crises. The successful resolution of one crisis provides the foundation for future developmental tasks. How one resolves each crisis determines the next step in psychosocial development. The central task of adolescence, according to Erikson, is to resolve the crisis known as identity development versus identity confusion (1994). Erikson's theory of development takes into account the impact of external factors such as parents, culture and societal norms upon personality development from childhood to adulthood (See Table 1). According to Erikson, clarity about personal identity development is critical before a person can proceed to the next critical task, intimacy vs. isolation (1963, 1964).

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development			
Age	Conflict	Resolution of "Virtue"	Culmination in old age
Infancy 0 – 18 months	Basic Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	Appreciation of interdependence and relatedness
Early Childhood 18 months-3years	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will	Acceptance of the cycle of life, from integration to disintegration
Play Age 3-6 years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	Humor, empathy, resilience
School Age 6-12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence	Humility, acceptance of the course of one's life and unfulfilled hopes

Adolescence 12-18 years	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity	Sense of complexity of life; merging of sensory, logical and aesthetic perception
Early Adulthood 18-35 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	Sense of the complexity of relationships; value of tenderness and loving freely
Adulthood 35- 55 or 65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	Caring for others, empathy and concern
Old Age 55 or 65-death	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	Existential identity; a sense of integrity strong enough to withstand physical disintegration

Table 1: Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Building upon the work of Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development model, James Marcia (1966, 1980, 2009; Marcia and Josselson, 2012) concentrated on adolescent development. Marcia focused upon understanding the identity development during adolescence. He suggested four distinct identity statuses that may be experienced during adolescence. These statuses are consistent with the premise of Erikson's theory, which asserts life as a series of crises and how one resolves each crisis determines the next step in psychosocial development. Figure 3 provides an overview of the four statuses of adolescent identity development according to Marcia.

CRITERIA: Exploration and Commitment
AREAS: Occupation, religion, and politics (ideology), sex roles, sexuality, etc.
STATUSES:
1)   Identity Achievement
2)   Moratorium
3)   Foreclosure
4)   Identity diffusion
Level of Exploration:

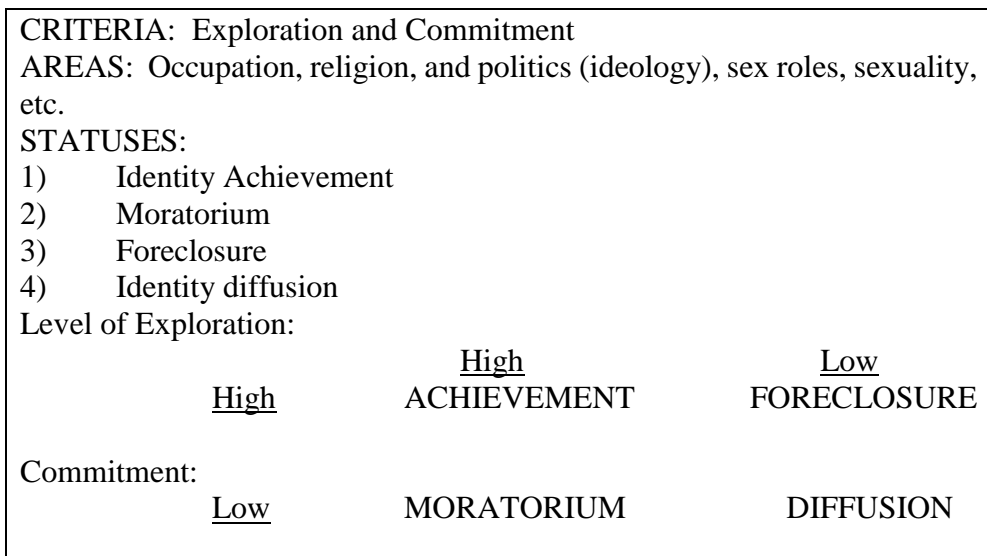|		High	Low
	High	ACHIEVEMENT	FORECLOSURE
Commitment:			
	Low	MORATORIUM	DIFFUSION

Figure 3: Marcia's Model of Identity

Marcia suggested that the four identity statuses are based on the criteria of exploration (active search among alternatives) and commitment

(demonstrated investment) in important areas of life such as occupational choice, religious and political ideology and ideas about relationships (Marcia & Josselson, 2013). The four statuses are:

- Identity Foreclosure is when an adolescent accepts the ideology system that the familial unit has provided. This acceptance provides an example of a false identity which is rigid and does not assist the adolescent in developing the skills to manage a crisis in the future. Identity foreclosure is characterized by high levels of commitment without any identity exploration or crisis. For example, an adolescent who accepts cultural and gender role teachings without personal critical examination.

- Identity Diffusion is a state of struggle or exploration, but the adolescent does not develop an ideology that is one's own. The adolescent does not experience an identity crisis or identity exploration and there is no commitment to any particular identity. For example, an adolescent who is neither committed to an identity nor is particularly concerned about the lack of exploration of personal identity development.

- Identity Moratorium exists when an adolescent is in a state of exploration/crisis but is not committed to any particular identity. In this stage of development, the adolescent is actively exploring and/or having an identity crisis but has not made a decision or developed a commitment to a particular identity. For example, a person who may be in exploration mode but is low in commitment to determining his or her personal identity.

- Identity Achievement is marked by a state of identity clarity by the adolescent. The adolescent has made a commitment to an ideology and has more of a direction toward the future and occupational goals. These decisions are autonomous and have assisted in the development of a formed ego identity. Upon this clarity, a person has acquired identity achievement. For example, a person who has experienced an identity crisis/exploration and has reached a conclusion/commitment about his or her personal identity.

A Journey: Identity Issues Within An Inflexible Society

The novel, I don't know…I mean…you know…, (Azmi, 2014), was inspired by the experiences of young females between the ages of 15 and 22 from moderate to high income families in a cultural environment that allows oppression and discrimination based on gender and cultural identity. The journey described in the novel by Azmi (2014) is one that documents the thoughts, feelings and experiences of adolescents at each of the four stages of Marcia's identity development. The novel was inspired by qualitative research using interviews and participant observation.

Irene Meyers, the main character in the novel, provides insight into the crisis/struggle of an adolescent female from a restrictive culture. James Miller is a supporting character in the novel who plays a pivotal role in Irene's development. As a child, Irene Meyers was sure of what she wanted from her life. Over the course of years and an eventful life, Irene finds herself drawn inside the confines of her fear, caged in her confused soul. Born and raised in a society bound by traditions, religion, and culture, Irene finds it hard to relate to any of the conformities. When trying to pave a way for herself she is looked down upon as a rebel, a deviant, and selfish. This book chronicles the life of a young girl in a city in India, who struggles to stand her ground, defying irrational social norms and beliefs, and having the courage to follow her dreams.

Using Irene's words, we aim to help the reader recognize components of identity development in an effort to help all reach clarity about who we are and what we believe. Through gaining insight into our personal identity, we achieve personal power.

Excerpts from the Novel as Related to Identity Development

What follows below are the four processes of identity development as outlined by Marcia (1966, 1980), along with excerpts from the novel.

Identity Foreclosure

Irene Meyers begins her journey by utilizing an identity based on external forces such as family, without exploring independently her own identity. Marcia's theory suggests that at this level of identity development a person is highly committed to a belief but the belief has not been examined or the person has not been through any type of identity crisis. The following passage illustrates the stage of identity foreclosure:

One last touch of gloss on my pouted lips, dark eyes and crazy hair, I stomp out in style, ready to experience the rave. Men, women, gypsies and hippies, wannabes and junkies all around me excited and high. Happiness. Just pure happiness is the only vibe you get here. From every damned soul who had been looking for it. Suddenly we all know what it is that we want from life. Peace. Yeah, I am here and I feel I can sense that in every person who is dark and twisted quite like me, wishing for peace. We dance and we dance and then we just dance and dance and dance and dance some more.

'Excuse me' he said with a funny part British part Italian accent, or it could have been slurred with what he had been smoking. This outlandish person is now walking towards me, and I look around for my friends, they are busy doing the same, approaching other pretty strangers and I wonder what I should hit this man with. The beer in my bottle was still there and I had paid for it. No, I wouldn't waste it. I walk backwards. And he tells me, 'Ma'am please, I just need a lighter.' Damn.

I'm in bed now. It's a cold morning, but I am sweating. I'm so thirsty I could drink up the pool I had partied in. But I have no strength to move. I lay in bed, now dreaming of water. My mind is playing tricks. The design on the ceiling above my bed starts to move. It does a circle then becomes a straight line, traveling across the wall, my eyes follow the lines, it glides like a snake, but changing shape, and colors. It is now a fish! Water. I need some water. My throat is parched. There are folks lying on the floor, on the couch. Some I don't even know. I try to call out my friends, but they lay dead like me and I try to shut my eyes and not think of water. I see black and white circles intertwined in one another, they move so fast, the color becomes grey. Now its techno color. Neon and bright. I raise my head. Enough, I'm not going to die thirsty. I might as well have my last wish. A little water. My head is heavy. I fall back. Now asleep.

Irene is describing the lifestyle of an adolescent/early adult who is participating with the cultural norms of same-age peers. Irene seemingly is blindly participating in the adolescent party scene without an examination of her commitment to the lifestyle. There seems to be no crisis here and a high level of commitment to the activities. These characteristics define identity foreclosure.

Identify Diffusion

Within this excerpt, Irene is struggling as an adolescent with developing her own ideology. She is in an identity crisis and she is working toward resolution.

Back at home, Irene was pondering on the words of James. Have I really stopped enjoying life? Do I not make attempts to be happy in the moment? Am I always judging people and wanting better? But isn't desiring for better considered healthy? I mean, if people don't desire anything at all, aren't they depressed? Not wanting anything, isn't that a sign of depression? But heck, I am the most depressed soul, and my wants are just way too much. I need some balance. But isn't that mediocre? Being balance, safe and average? Where's the thrill in life if you don't take risks? Where's the fun in knowing what you are eventually going to get? But then, I get so frustrated if I do not get what I want, and that too instantly! But isn't impatience a virtue? I mean in today's day and age when the whole world is in such a race for the top, shouldn't you be worried to get the pie first? But then, do I want to be like the millions of ordinary people looking for the pie? Shouldn't I take another route? A different path? A path no one has dared to? Yes, I guess I did, didn't I? Which is why my choices seem odd to the society, absurd, a chimerical plan for my life. And girl, haven't they rubbed that on you? I am too afraid to make my own decisions now. Asking myself a zillion times if what I am doing is right. I get so worked up if I have to stay back late for work. I hate to be answerable

to anyone. For once, I'd like to set my mind free of such thoughts and simply focus on work. Sometimes, having to justify myself over and over is overwhelming, it's suffocating.

Identity diffusion involves a lack of commitment and no real crisis either. Here Irene is questioning, but she does not seem to be in a crisis. She is wondering but not intently exploring.

Identity Moratorium

Irene continues her identity development but is increasing the intensity of the crisis as illustrated in this excerpt below. Irene is still exploring and experimenting with options and the experimentation is important to her in her development at the stage. She has still not made a commitment to a particular identity but she seems to be actively searching for her own identity.

Why create so much fear before you take the first step? Why create rules for the game you yet don't understand? The walls are cemented so strong with uncertainty, without an understanding, built with fear and without any reasons, built with guilt and without any personality, that it becomes so hard to break that wall. It's a terror. It's a crime to do so. If you do that, you are made to fear that you will lose yourself, you will lose your ground, and you will lose your principles and all that makes you sane as a person. But what I see standing on top of this wall, is clarity. With breaking that wall I see what I am capable of. Beyond that wall I understand myself. But, I will not break it. For I will be uprooting what my people call it, "our very foundation". But when I'm floating into my own desires and decisions, I feel alive. Their voices drown out when I drown below. I love that sinking feeling, falling into nothingness. Falling and knowing that I am not going to get hurt. I will just be guarded by water all around me, hugging me and loving me, touching me and enveloping me in its welcoming charm, keeping me away from the madness of the earth and telling me that I was right to choose the uncertain waves. My heart has stopped beating fast, I am calm and I'm going down. But just when I start to feel comfortable in there, the water turns cold, it seems to understand me, for it pushes me out of my comfort. It compels me to fight for my life. It turns colder and warns me, that I stayed in there too long. That I need to move on, into another unknown, learn and come out alive. I can't breathe.

I fall deeper down in the ocean. The weeds of uncertainty trap my legs, making it impossible for me to move. The weeds twirled around my ankle appear to be like the fear in my head instilled by the society, I can't take any step ahead. I want to cry, the weeds are suffocating me. My time is running out. But then, I see myself as a survivor out of this situation, I am certainly made for better things to deal with, but for now I am dealing with the entangled fear of weed. I set my goal, of coming out of my decision alive. The weeds

unwind. Not wanting any help, nor any power, I put all my faith in myself and keep pushing myself.

What have I learnt? Certainly there must be something in this wild creation so huge and cold, at first loving but now unrelenting to help me, smothering me to learn something here. I take the lesson. I have to keeping pushing forward. I have to keep moving ahead. I feel alive when I kick my legs to fight for something. To fight for my breath. It is rewarding. I don't know which way I am going, but I am sure making a path on my own, of my own, and I can live or die with that. Without any regrets.

Irene's thought process in this excerpt clearly show a growing crisis. She is questioning, wondering and asking questions but she has not reached any conclusions. She is clearly in the moratorium stage because her angst is obvious and she has not yet reached a solution to the angst.

<u>Identity Achieved</u>

In the end, Irene experienced and struggled with her identity crisis, explored all options available and then made a commitment to a new identity that broke from traditional norms.

Irene looked fragile, vulnerable and in distress. James couldn't help but notice, though very tall, Irene made for a slim frame, with slender bones. In her black dress and deep emerald earrings, Irene for once looked like a complete woman, thought James. James wasn't sure what could possibly be such a problem back home. But he did not breach that topic. For now, all he wanted was for her to have a real good time.

And Irene didn't want any of that. She did not get out of her house this time to have some fun. She did not want a breath of fresh air. She did not want some temporary relief from her problems. All she wanted was surety. She wanted that strength in her where she could put her foot down and get what she wanted. It was that time now. No more lies, no more fooling herself, no more crying, no more pretending to be happy. She wanted strength and courage. And she was ready to take it from anything that was even remotely willing to give that to her. But here in the madness and shenanigans of the party, with lights glittering all around her, Irene wondered what she would need to ignite that spark in her. Until now her dreams though big and wide as the ocean, had also seem to be wavering just like it. Amid the blinding lights, she saw people dancing, laughing, loving and living in those moments. Irene wanted that blinding light in her heart, she wanted to illuminate and spread that spark in every nerve and every cell in her body, just like James had told her that afternoon. She wanted her blood stream to be running wild inside her body making her relentless; she wanted her heart to be beating to the music of success and her eyes to be shining bright with happiness. "Just believe" said a voice in Irene's ear from behind. She turned around quickly to see James

standing very close to her. She then turned to look far away at the horizon smiling.

"Just believe and know that you will go beyond that horizon, and you've already achieved half the battle" he continued with a smile. She looked at James, who was now standing beside her, his light eyes gleaming with the lights around, 'no, it must be the intensity with which he believes in himself, that make him shine so bright' she thought and asked him softly, "everything will be okay, right?" Without wasting a heartbeat, he answered, "Everything is okay Irene" Those words hit Irene hard and deep. It cut out all negativity and the confusion.

Those words magically seemed to take away all her burden. Irene suddenly felt a gush of blood rush up in her head, her mind was instantly at peace, the tangled thoughts seemed to disappear for a moment and Irene felt light and carefree. "Yeah!" she beamed, "That works for now. I mean, yeah, everything IS okay James, all I have to do is simply believe in myself. You pierce my soul. You make me want to become a better woman."

The final excerpt shows Irene reaching peace and clarity about herself. With the help of a more experienced other, she is able to reach a level of calm and peace. She experienced the crisis but used that tension or stress to propel her to greater clarity about herself and her values. Achieved identity is often a struggle. It can take years and pain. But when achieved, it can result in true identity. In order for Irene to move to Erikson's next stage of psychosocial development, successful resolution of identity is required (1963).

Conclusion:

Lessons Learned from Irene

1.)   Culture provides the context for identity development – Women across the world are impacted by the cultural environment of their broader surroundings.   Whether   a   woman   grows   up   in   a repressive/traditionally bound/non-secular country such as India, or a western country, beliefs, messages and ideologies are powerful organizers. As Bronfenbrenner demonstrates, the ecological context that a person is exposed to has a powerful influence on many aspects of development, including identity development. An important part of the developmental process is recognizing the influence of culture upon development and reaching some level of resolution with it. The value of analyzing Irene's character is in our ability to see her thought process, struggles and clarity. Bronfenbrenner's concept of the chronosystem aids in understanding the impact of generational differences, historical differences and cohort differences in the development of identity roles.

2.)   Identity development can be facilitated with a more experienced peer/expert. James plays an important role in Irene's development. James is a

more experienced other who is helping Irene to achieve important realizations. Identity development is heavily influenced by important characters/relationships. Irene's thinking was clearly influenced by the input, questioning and insight offered by James. Thus, James was questioning and probing within Irene's zone of proximal development. Lev Vygotsky's theoretical notion of the zone of proximal development is a valuable lens to use to understand James' contributions to Irene's development.

3.) <u>Identity development often happens in the context of a developmental crisis</u>. The four excerpts demonstrate Irene's angst in her identity development. We witness a growing sense of questioning, unease and unrest in Irene's thought processes. She is challenged to decide who she is and what she believes. Erikson's theory clearly describes the importance of conflict resolution as an important component in the development of psychosocial and identity development. Only upon the successful resolution of a crisis is a person able to move on to higher levels of psychosocial development.

4.) <u>Identity development has many facets.</u> Marcia's theory helps us understand Irene's relationship between exploration/crisis and commitment. The four aspects of identity development are clearly seen in the excerpts; Marcia's theory and Irene's words help the reader to more fully understand the statuses of identity development within an adolescent female. The knowledge of these aspects helps the reader more fully understand the facets of identity development within adolescent populations.

Women of India, like women all over the world, are stronger and more powerful when they successfully resolve identity development conflict during adolescence. Crisis resolution during adolescence sets the stage for additional personal development in adulthood.

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