

Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 45: Intersectional identities and career progression in retail

Speakers: Dr Kathryn Watson and Dr Juliet Kele

[00:00:00] **Kathryn:** Hello everyone. And welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. I'm Kathryn Watson, a research manager at Leeds University Business School. And I'm joined today by my friend and colleague Juliet Kele, who is a lecturer in leadership and HRM at Northumbria University.

[00:00:23] **Juliet:** Lovely to see you, Kathryn.

[00:00:25] **Kathryn:** And you Juliet. We would like to talk to you about intersectionality in the workplace, and we're going to discuss what is intersectionality and why is it important? We would also like to talk to you about our research in the retail sector, where we identified intersectionality as an important issue.

And then we will go on to consider what should managers do to tackle this issue. Before we get started, I'd like to mention that we have a journal article published in "Gender Work and Organization" on intersectional identities and career progression in retail. You can find the link to this paper in the episode show notes. We will refer to some of the findings in this paper in our discussion.

So, Juliet, let me bring you in now and ask you what is intersectionality?

[00:01:18] **Juliet:** Well, I think people may consider intersectionality as some sort of awareness that everyone has multiple identity characteristics. And this is partially right, but I think it's much more than that. So intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw and it has its origins in black feminist theory.

So the theory recognizes that, and this is where it gets a bit complicated, but socially constructed identity, characteristics (so race, class, gender, sexual orientation) they simultaneously interact with each other and with wider societal and power structures to construct experiences of either oppression or privilege, which is unique to each individual.

So where you are intersectionally, socially located in a given context will affect your lived experience. So you're either assigned different meanings to power structures based on this positioning. So you can see it gets complicated rather quickly.

[00:02:11] **Kathryn:** Yes indeed. Thank you. So now we know what intersectionality is, can I ask you, why is it important that we adopt an intersectional perspective, or lens, in the workplace?

[00:02:23] **Juliet:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think we forget that workplaces are not neutral spaces. They are environments which create and reproduce inequalities, and this can be seen for instance, in inequality regimes. So these are the organizational practices or processes, which can create inequalities based upon sort of class, gender, and or race.

And these are things we might not even consider in our day-to-day work. So wage setting, recruitment practices, informal interactions. So I think once we reflect upon the power structures in our organizations, and we consider the diversity of our workforce, we're then more aware of the potential inequalities that employees may face such as access to training or career progression barriers, for example.

And so adopting an intersectional approach is important not only for such moral reasons, but in terms of the business case. So I think Kathryn, you're aware that there are petitions of organizations increasingly under the spotlight. So companies are increasingly taking notice about their role in the world, quite rightly, and are now focusing more on how best they can support their employees, which can only be a good thing.

[00:03:24] **Kathryn:** Okay, thank you, Juliet. Let me just go on to ask you, what does the academic research tell us about intersectionality?

[00:03:32] **Juliet:** So we've heard now that intersectionality is so complex. The definitions and the methodological application for research is really, really challenging. But I feel a great strength is its multi-dimensional approach to understanding inequalities. So no individual identity is segregated nor individual experiences discarded.

And I think this has fuelled its popularity really. And so when a scholar has used intersectional analyses, this really importantly challenges a dominant narrative, which has traditionally presented by the white majority population, and most importantly, it gives voice to underrepresented populations.

And so I feel this is really, really powerful. And so these analyses are not only more holistic and accurate in examining these kinds of multiple structures. So for instance, if we take it in a company context, not only in analysis at the individual level but the team or department level and the wider organization, if we think about this framework on a day to day organizational basis.

Kathryn, I know you've been looking at reports and intersectionality within organizations. What does that tell us?

[00:04:33] **Kathryn:** Yes I have. And actually, there aren't all that many reports really that pick up on intersectionality. But one that I found that is very useful is by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. That's the CIPD. And they make a very important point about intersectionality, that we have multiple overlapping identities is rarely a feature of the research that is around there. So there's very much a tendency in research to focus on sole protected characteristics. So that is a weakness in the research literature, and it

highlights the need for a more holistic view of diversity. And the CIPD report goes on to give two practical implications of this failing in the literature.

Firstly, what it says is that, there has been a lot of emphasis on gender diversity on boards and you know, a lot of organizations have made a real effort to address that imbalance. But they do say that this has not benefited women of colour to the same extent that women from the majority population who are not from ethnic minorities have benefited.

And then another area where it shows up is with regard to the pay gap. So, obviously organizations are required to do gender pay gap reporting, and many have also taken up doing race pay gap reporting, but how do these two things fit together? And the CIPD report goes on to comment that diversity and inclusion at work does not really take account of these intersectional influences and the outcomes and barriers that they present to people who are from multiple minority groups.

So it's that knowledge that intersectionality is complex in research, but yet the failing to address this has very broad implications for a lot of people. So what I'd like to do then is to just move on, to look at the paper that we have recently published in "Gender, Work and Organization."

This research explores organizational practices and processes that lead to career progression inequalities in the retail industry. Of course, the sector is very interesting in that it's highly feminized. Both in terms of the workforce and the clientele. So, Juliet, could I just ask you to tell us some examples of what the research in this paper found out with regard to intersectionality?

[00:07:19] **Juliet:** Yeah, thanks, Kathryn. Well, I think you touched upon it right there. You know, despite the feminized nature of retail, our participants faced multiple career inequalities due to their intersectional positioning as minority ethnic women. So, minority ethnic female participants were actually disproportionately affected by discrimination from customers, in comparison to their white counterparts, which was quite surprising.

And as we all know, appearance is very significant in retailing, from demographic characteristics to the uniforms that employees wear. So we found that actually customers made assumptions that our participants lacked in certain forms of sort of social or cultural capital required in their role, and so discriminated against them which I think was quite shocking, we both thought that from conducting the research.

And so actually in the paper, then we propose that the power relationship between the customer and employee, whilst perhaps causing alienation at the best of times in terms of that power dynamic, maybe then exacerbated between a minority ethnic female employee and clients or customers in higher positions of privilege.

And so such a lack of sort of matching, as it's termed, between how customers think retail service staff should look like and their real life experiences points to how the gendered and

racialized assumptions are interwoven within the power relations that are firmly, still embedded within retailing. So there's much to do, I think, in terms of the retaining space.

So Kathryn, is there anything else that you'd like to mention from the research?

[00:08:48] **Kathryn:** Yes, there is. Thanks Juliet. What strikes me as particularly deserving attention is the intersection of age, with gender and ethnicity. There are two aspects to this really. First of all, we found that younger minority, ethnic women may be optimistic about their ability to achieve their career ambitions, and that they may very well feel happy in that current role. You know, they see that they have a good job and it's interesting and rewarding, but what they do is look to the future and they look around them, and if they don't see people they feel they can relate to, you know, as role models, then they will doubt their future in the organization.

And that obviously has real implications for retention of the workforce for the organization. And it can, you know, it can be a real shame that people will move on to another job if they don't feel that they are represented there in the senior year.

The other aspect to this intersection that we found out is that there are a number of older women where they have been trying to overcome challenges throughout their whole career. And basically they've got to the position where they feel worn out with it, and they've simply given up trying to fight against these barriers. They accept where they are now and they don't try to progress their career anymore. And I do think this is such a great shame, you know, that having the opportunity to realize the full potential in their careers.

And I certainly hope that organizational attitudes are changing. I think in this context, the line management and the organizational culture are key and it is in addressing these broader issues that is absolutely critical. So that gives some insight into our findings from the research, but I'd like to just now go on and consider what are the implications of these findings.

And Juliet, if I can ask you, what do you think line managers or HR managers need to do about intersectionality?

[00:11:06] **Juliet:** Well, I think once managers consider the power structures in their organizations and the multiple identities that their employees, not only grouping workers based upon one sort of singular identity such as gender - and we've seen that quite a lot in the media and so on and so forth - then leaders can then take constructive steps, I think, informed by the experience and voices of all their colleagues to ensure that everybody in our organizations is treated equitably.

And what does this look like then? Well, these steps can include the education piece. So absolutely establishing staff networks, investing in training on pronouns or microaggressions. But I think that training can't just be a singular, you know, singular event.

I think leaders themselves need to be held accountable and demonstrate this kind of visible allyship through concrete actions and behaviours.

We need to remember that intersectionality highlights power structures. So leaders, I think, should use their positions to amplify the voices of their employees. And this will help to build a culture of transparency, hopefully trust and belonging to the company. And this will be beneficial to employees, I think, in the long-term and being able to speak to their authentic experiences and to feel more comfortable in bringing their whole selves to work, without fear of discrimination.

[00:12:16] **Kathryn:** Thank you Juliet. So that brings me to wrap up this podcast. Now, Juliet, I would really like to say many thanks for talking with me today. I very much enjoyed our discussion. The work that you in particular have done on intersectionality is really insightful. So thank you for that. I think we've raised many issues here and I hope our listeners find them useful.

[00:12:40] **Juliet:** Thanks very much, Kathryn. Always a pleasure.

[00:12:42] **Kathryn:** So then I'd like to just say, thank you to our listeners for joining this podcast. I hope you found it both useful and inspiring, and that there's some practical tips here.

[00:12:54] **Juliet:** If you're interested in this research, please get in touch either directly with me at the University of Northumbria or via the link provided with the podcast.

[00:13:03] **Kathryn:** And so thank you and goodbye.

[00:13:05] **Juliet:** Bye-bye.