

# Revealing Intersectional Dynamics in Organizations: Introducing ‘Intersectional Identity Work’

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Little consensus exists regarding conducting intersectional studies. We introduce ‘intersectional identity work’ as an approach for examining individuals’ experiences at the nexus of multiple identities. Incorporating identity work as a theoretical and analytical framework, we use journals and interviews to examine identity-heightening episodes that trigger meaning-making of intersecting senior, gender and ethnic identities among British Asian and black women and men. Our analysis reveals how intersecting identities are leveraged in encounters with subordinates, superiors and clients. Intersectional locations provide resources and cues for claiming or restricting privileged and disadvantaged status in asymmetric power positions. Intersectional identity work expands and restricts identification at juxtaposed locations. It offers a prospect for elucidating intersectional dynamics present in a range of identity configurations and addresses critiques that individual-level intersectional analyses at intersections are mere narrative. We encourage further research that examines other socially salient identities using our approach to develop theory on how multiple identities play out in everyday experience.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, identity work, methodology, ethnicity, gender

## Introduction

Conducting intersectional studies is a primary focus of debate in feminist scholarship across legal, political, sociological and psychological disciplines. Yet there is minimal consensus regarding exactly how one conducts such research. Explicit methodological guidelines are elusive (Nash, 2008), conducting it challenging (Browne and Misra, 2003), complicated and ‘fraught with dangers’ (Healy *et al.*, 2010, p. 4). We contribute to the conversation regarding developing a new approach befitting this influential framework conceptualizing the complexity of simultaneous identity and subject positions. We propose incorporating identity work as a theoretical lens and analytical framework into intersectionality research, due to its focus on explicating everyday experiences of self-identification. Adopting an individual constructivist perspective, we utilize identity work — the effort engaged in personal meaning-making — as an orienting device for analysing/making sense of intersecting identities. We conduct intersectional analyses of identity-heightening experiences of senior black and Asian male and female professionals in Britain. Using an identity work lens, we contribute to the debate on elucidating intersectional dynamics by revealing how intersecting identities are engaged as cues and resources, expanding and restricting power positions in asymmetrical interactions with clients, subordinates and superiors.

We provide an overview of approaches to conducting intersectional research, including critiques regarding descriptive approaches of individual-level treatments of intersectionality. We

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continue discussions on 'mainstreaming' intersectionality (Dhamoon, 2011), and fulfilling its potential contribution to organization studies (Atewologun and Sealy, 2011; Holvino, 2010). Next, our identity work approach operationalizes 'how being intersectional works' at the individual level. Subsequently, we evaluate the benefits and limitations of this approach. Finally, we offer suggestions for further systematic analyses of socially-salient identity facets.

## Conducting intersectional studies

A handful of papers are regularly cited in debates on 'how' intersectionality research may be conducted (e.g., Choo and Ferree, 2010; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). These scholars describe intersectional researchers' approaches to examining how ideologies, structures, institutions and experiences interact to sustain societal inequalities and power relations. Choo and Ferree (2010) promote 'systemic intersectionality', examining 'how inequalities span and transform structures and activities at all levels and in all situational contexts' (p. 135). They view intersectionality as a complex system in which everything intersects, such that no single axis of inequality has a 'main effect'. Choo and Ferree distinguish this 'institutional interpenetration' from the lower-level, 'process-centred' structural approach which focuses on specific interaction effects. This structural focus parallels the highest analytical level in McCall's (2005) typology: her preferred 'intercategorical approach'. Here, scholars examine multiple between-group differences charting shifting configurations of inequality along various dimensions. This is McCall's preference because it uses categories strategically, managing the complexity of multiple dimensions by examining relationships between multiple social groups within and across multiple categories. Dhamoon (2011) encourages analysing processes of differentiation through which subjectivities are produced (e.g., racialization and sexualization) and systems of domination (e.g., racism and sexism). This appears to combine Choo and Ferree's highest two levels. Here, focus is not on individuals, categories, groups or institutions, but on techniques of power, i.e. 'doing difference' and 'Othering' rather than 'the Other'.

Organizational scholars of intersectionality tend to favour a systemic approach, often referencing Acker's (2006) 'inequality regimes'. Acker's socio-structural concept is useful for simultaneous conceptualization of multiple inequalities and identification of barriers to workplace equality. For instance, Healy and colleagues (2011) utilize Acker's framework to demonstrate how formal and informal activities sustain inequalities for Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women even in public sector organizations with relatively progressive approaches for fostering inclusion. Such sociological perspectives are important as they emphasize structural and context-specific contributions to inequality. However, it remains important to understand the micro-processes in which higher level findings play out, as power differentials linked to social categories persist at self-identity, interpersonal, structural and systemic levels (Browne and Misra, 2003). Thus, reviewers of intersectional methodologies also appraise individual-level approaches, such as Hancock's (2007) 'content specialization' and McCall's (2005) 'intracategorical approach' (both emphasizing individual experiences and within-group differences), Choo and Ferree's (2010) 'group-centred' approach (emphasizing voice and inclusion), and Dhamoon's (2011) focus on 'embodied knowledge' within individual and social group identities.

Individual-level analyses give voice to individuals rendered invisible due to their multiple minority positions. For instance, African-American women offer 'a different consciousness and a different way of knowing' about sexism and work (Holvino, 2010, p. 251). Such epistemologies privilege life history and case study methods that provide significant narrative

content. Typically, these studies direct attention to the lived experiences of (a usually small sample of) minority ethnic women, highlighting how their experiences differ qualitatively from white women and minority ethnic men. Davidson (1997) details black and minority ethnic (BME) women managers' career challenges of cracking the 'concrete ceiling'. Bell and Nkomo (2001) use life histories to describe the trajectories of executive African-American women, comparing and contrasting their experiences with white counterparts. These studies reflect the origins of intersectionality, positioning those who have been 'placed at the margins' or 'fallen through the fault-lines' of research, at the centre of organizational scholarship. Such work offers insight into the 'outsider's view within', for the benefit of management scholarship as a whole (Hill Collins, 1986) and contributes to a culturally sophisticated and nuanced understanding of ethnicity in organizations, often emphasizing the structural location of minority ethnic women (e.g., Bell, 1990). These approaches are, however, relatively restricted in the extent to which they can produce generalizable explanations of patterns or behaviours to alternative intersectional positions (Atewologun and Sealy, 2011). Thus, scholars are urged to move beyond pure phenomenological descriptions (e.g., by Atewologun and Sealy, 2011; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Hancock, 2007; and McCall, 2005). Whilst descriptive narratives are important, we seek here to examine intersecting identities as 'ongoing dynamic social practice' and explore how individuals 'relate to the structural restraints of multiple organizational inequalities' (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010, p. 18).

Research focusing on individual experiences is critiqued for additional reasons. The specific focus on subordinated groups arguably romanticizes (Nash, 2008) and 'fetishizes study of "difference"' (Choo and Ferree, 2010, p. 133), ironically risking accusations of essentialism it seeks to counter (Dhamoon, 2011). It ignores clusters of power and privilege and does not allow for simultaneous location on advantage and disadvantage (McCall, 2005). Additionally, such work remains confined to the margins of organizational research, limiting its value to mainstream theories (Atewologun, 2008; Zander *et al.*, 2010). Finally, exactly how micro-processes, playing out through intersectionality, affect differences in power and privilege remains unclear. It is important to continue to develop analytical strategies for explicating everyday practices in the context of difference (as demonstrated by Essed, 1991, and recommended by Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). We seek to elucidate such intra-/inter-personal processes, extending the scope of intersectional research beyond narratives of multiple-oppressed individuals.

We see 'intersections' as highlighting individuals' locations across a multiplicity of identity dimensions. This suggests focusing on individuals' experiences of juxtaposition across identity categories, rather than the cumulative impact of straddling multiple worlds. This also expands our focus to multiple axes, including simultaneously subordinate and dominant positions as recommended by Nash (2008) and Tatli and Özbilgin (2012). Attention to 'relations of marginality and privilege' is critical for mainstreaming intersectionality (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 230). This is particularly pertinent for organization studies as subjects are unlikely to be subordinate across all categories of difference. Next, we introduce identity work theory to inform our approach to examining mechanisms and conditions through which identities intersect.

## Identity work

Individuals put effort into making sense of everyday events, especially those events that challenge self-identities, to maintain self-esteem and a sense of coherence (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008; Burke 2007). This mindful process is 'identity work'. Although subjectivities are shaped by surrounding discourses, individuals are not completely passive in the face of these pressures (Watson, 2008).

Identity work emphasizes the dynamic interaction between individual and environment, and the effort expended in creating congruence between the two (Beech 2008; Watson, 2008). It conceptualizes individuals' motivation to reduce 'identity gaps' triggered by everyday encounters that prompt a questioning of whom one is (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008; Pratt, 2000).

Some authors emphasize the ongoing struggle of identification, featuring individual insecurities and external identity controls (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). Our perspective is that identification is an ongoing meaning-making process of working out 'whom one is'. We see intersectional positions as offering individuals active means to 'fight through contradictions and messiness in the pursuit of a sense of self' (Alvesson, 2010, p. 200). We focus on the effort invested in constructing identities, although stop short of assuming unification and coherence as an outcome (e.g., Kreiner and Sheep, 2009; Roberts, 2005). We locate identity work sites in the interpersonal encounters during which individuals negotiate congruity between their sense of self and others' view of self (Hatmaker, 2013; Polzer and Caruso, 2008).

A significant early contribution to scholarship on everyday responses to being the 'Other' is Essed's (1991) investigation of how black women recognize, acquire knowledge of, and challenge, everyday micro-practices of racism. Everyday interpersonal encounters may manifest as 'marginalizing interactions' (Hatmaker, 2013), prompting identity construction for minority professionals. In the workplace, senior woman managers engage in 'remedial work' individually and collectively to manage apparently conflicting identities (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001); female entrepreneurs draw on various gendered discourses to construct authentic identities (Lewis, 2013); young black British male professionals (Atewologun and Singh, 2010) and African-American medical students (Roberts *et al.*, 2008) manage issues of identification and self-congruence through professional identity construction to counter stigma. Altogether, this underscores the significance of everyday meaning-making and identity work in the context of difference and disadvantage. It is important to shed light on micro-encounters triggering identity threat for atypical or minority professionals (Clair *et al.*, 2012) and everyday acts of agency or 'micro-resistance' to such threats (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). Identity negotiation during marginalized interactions is considered particularly challenging for low status group members with positive self-views (Polzer and Caruso, 2008), such as successful minority ethnic individuals in senior management positions. Examining identity work is deemed particularly useful in this context because 'analysing status differences and identity negotiation processes simultaneously allows us to isolate several distinct challenges that are at the core of the diversity paradox' (Polzer and Caruso, 2008, p. 110). This 'paradox' is the threat of counter-stereotypes against the potential value that minority individuals' high status (talent, expertise, competence, power) and inclusion may offer organizations (Polzer and Caruso, 2008). These authors encourage examining intrapersonal processes through which individuals seek to gain interpersonal congruence in dynamic interactions. We contribute to theory by incorporating identity work as a framework for understanding how the 'complexity of multiple identities are filtered through self-views, appraisals, and dynamic interaction, to demonstrate how negotiation across social groups may be grasped and how people can influence their interactions with others' (Polzer and Caruso, 2008, p. 113).

For more nuanced understanding of multiple identity construction, some have explicitly integrated intersectionality with identity theories. Zander and colleagues (2010) propose research on multiple social group membership to shed light on individuals' identification processes and career patterns in multinational corporations. Azmitia and colleagues (2008) illustrate emerging adults' construction of multiple identities over time. However, approaches for examining everyday (rather than developmental) identity work and meaning-making of intersecting identities are less apparent in the literature.

We extend previous work on the potential of incorporating identity work into intersectionality (Atewologun and Sealy, 2011). We present intersectional identity work as a perspective for examining the ongoing construction of mutually constituted identities in response to identity threat. There is conceptual proximity between intersectionality and identity work. Both are broadly concerned with identity, or how individuals make sense of who they are. Intersectionality enables simultaneous consideration of multiple identity categories, and identity work emphasizes self-construction in interaction with external cues. However, they differ in their assumptions regarding the nature of identity. Intersectionality's emphasis on socio-structural identity construction is contrasted with identity work's emphasis on primarily cognitive, internal meaning-making. Combining perspectives with differing assumptions requires identification of personal ontological positions and coherent explanation of the phenomenon under consideration (Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011). Identities are constructed or 'worked' in the context of socio-structural power relations that trigger ongoing self-evaluation and resolution of identity gaps. However, the identification process, involving recognition of sameness or difference in others does not imply permanence (Tomlinson, 2010). Intersectional identity threat may be conceptualized as a momentary intrapersonal perception of lack of fit between personal identities, or as imposed primarily by external social structures that do not recognize 'oppositional' categories such as 'senior Indian woman'. In this study, we acknowledge the socially constructed nature of identification and the intertwining of self, other and context in this; however, our individual constructivist approach privileges individuals' effort in constructing intersecting identities.

Intersectional identity work attunes us to multiple identity dimensions, acknowledges the dynamics of identity construction and offers an agent-centred perspective on experiences. Intersectional identity work offers an approach for elucidating identity-specific strategies in which multiple-identified individuals engage in response to contextual identity threats. Explicating these processes moves us beyond narrative descriptions of intracategorical intersectional research. Next, we detail how we implemented this approach.

## Methodology

We investigated meaning-making of intersecting identities elicited from everyday events that raised salience of individuals' juxtaposed locations. Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) caution against using pre-determined categories of difference, which lead to static, single-axis, acontextual research findings. We countered this by examining intersections likely to be meaningful sites of identity work and sensemaking in the context of upper hierarchies in UK organizations. We examined the juxtaposition of high with low status identities in male and female senior managers of black, Asian and mixed ethnicity. We see gender and ethnicity as socially constructed and lacking in fixed meaning (Kenny and Briner, 2013; Tomlinson, 2010), yet as primary bases upon which people self-identify in Britain (Jenkins, 2008). We opted for 'ethnicity' over the term 'race'. While 'race' has historically referred to biological differences between people, it is now accepted as a meaning system that signifies socio-political conflicts between groups (see Brooks and Clunis, 2007). Intersectionality work stems from minority racial experiences. However, we use 'ethnicity' to denote group differences based on shared ancestry, traditions and categorization by those within and external to the group, and 'minority ethnic' to denote non-white ethnicities in Britain (following Kenny and Briner, 2007). Ethnicity is less contested than race, and used more commonly in Britain.

Being a senior minority ethnic man or woman involves constructing personal and social identities that are variously visible, malleable and oppositional in social value. The status benefits that may or may not accrue to people are neither uniquely individual, nor merely influenced by organizational hierarchical location. Status is also shaped by group membership within societal context. Historical, ideological and political frameworks affect BME individuals' structural position in the UK and across Europe, maintaining their overall lower status in society and constraining occupational and life choices (Tomlinson, 2010). Within organizations, seniority denotes a privileged organizational status, signifying higher rank or standing within an institution's structure (Peiro and Melia, 2003). However, women and BME individuals are significantly under-represented at senior levels (Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2012). This is despite women making up the majority of university graduates in some professions (such as medicine and law) for more than 20 years (Deech, 2009). Additionally, although levels of educational attainment have improved for ethnic minorities over the last 20 years, there are still clear ethnic penalties in labour market trends, although these vary by group. White individuals (apart from the Gypsy and Irish traveller groups) are distinctively more advantaged on economic activity and unemployment indicators. For example, Black Caribbean and Pakistani men and women have 1.5 to over 3 times higher unemployment rates compared to their white counterparts (Nazroo and Kapadia, 2013). Further, ethnic minority people who fear they will be subject to institutional racism are almost half as likely to feel they belong to Britain, compared to BME people who do not share this concern (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2010). Thus, self-identity, sense of belonging or 'Otherness' and structural constraints are tightly intertwined (Tomlinson, 2010).

Another factor guiding social identity selection was that gender, ethnicity and seniority are socio-politically salient identity dimensions in the UK today. There is significant UK government and media attention on diversity in senior spaces. Finally, as gender and ethnicity are relatively stable and salient (especially at intersections with seniority), intersectional identity work at this location is potentially easier to theorize, offering a prototype for developing more nuanced and sophisticated perspectives on intersectionality.

Our research questions were 'How do senior black, Asian and minority ethnic men and women make meaning of episodes that raise the salience of their intersecting identities at work? How are intersections of ethnicity, gender and seniority revealed in their accounts of these episodes?' Individuals self-nominated for 'a study on senior minority ethnic men and women's identities' promoted internally in a large UK public sector organization ('Govt Plc') and a Big 4 Professional Services Firm ('PSF'). Following self-nomination, respondents were asked about their ethnic-gender self-ascription. We referred to respondents' intersecting identities using descriptors that most resonated with them (e.g., 'senior Indian woman') in personalized journal templates and interviews. Viewing multiple identities as mutually constitutive, we avoided additive assumptions (e.g., asking respondents to rank or separate their identities).

Twenty-four individuals participated, nine from PSF and 15 from Govt Plc, half of whom were women. About half the respondents described themselves as 'British' without prompting, emphasizing that, despite their minority ethnicity, they also identified as UK nationals. Three respondents described themselves as 'mixed' when asked about their ethnicity but referred to being 'black' or of 'minority ethnicity' interchangeably during interviews. Other respondents identified as Indian, Black African, Black Caribbean or Chinese. Respondents' ages ranged from 29 to 'over 50'. On average, Govt Plc respondents were aged 46 years, and PSF, 34 years.

Although quantitative intersectionality methodologies have been developed (e.g., Stirratt *et al.*, 2008), our interest in subjective experiences suggests a qualitative approach. Following Chell (2004), we loosely adopted principles of Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique, for constructionist research, using diaries and interviews. Each respondent was asked to 'think

about a time, event or episode at work today that prompted you to think of yourself as a senior [black woman<sup>1</sup>] or a time, event or episode in which being a senior [black woman] was salient/meaningful for you'. Respondents were asked to reflect in a diary and discuss in a follow-on interview what happened during the episode — their thoughts, feelings and actions, and the significance or impact of the episode.

### *Briefing and diaries*

Respondents completed diaries to record everyday identity-heightening episodes and minimize poor recall of retrospective interviewing. Diaries are useful for accessing 'ongoing everyday behaviour' (Symon, 2004, p. 98) and have been successfully utilized for researching similarly private, nuanced and complex issues like psychological contract breach (Conway and Briner, 2002) and sensemaking (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Previous experience of diary-writing was not sought from respondents. No concerns other than time commitments and detail required were raised by respondents (five to ten minutes of writing/reflection, every one to three days was recommended).

Twenty-seven people initially received a telephone briefing and a personalized journal template (see Appendix for an example) from the first author. She emphasized that diary completion was an 'aide-memoire' to support recollection during interviews, to allay potential anxieties about the effort required to maintain diaries. Additionally, every week, she reminded each participant by email or text message to complete the diaries. Diary and interview questions were identical (see Appendix). Following initial briefings, three respondents declined to participate (two cited work commitments; one did not respond to subsequent email communication). Twenty-four respondents completed the diary (in varying degrees of detail) and participated in an interview two to four weeks later.

### *Interviews*

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with all respondents, with care taken to refer to respondents using their preferred identity descriptors. She first explored respondents' experiences of diary completion for rapport-building. Then, diary entries served as interview prompts, enabling deeper and broader discussions about how respondents made sense of identity-heightening encounters and constructed their intersectional identities therein.

The interview method is familiar, flexible and ideally suited for exploring everyday, subtle identity work (LaPointe, 2013). It encourages openness and sharing, especially as many people enjoy talking about their work, but often do not have the opportunity to do so with interested outsiders (King, 2004). This is particularly pertinent as ethnicity is socially salient, yet considered overly sensitive for workplace conversation. Mostly, respondents spoke extremely openly about their experiences of intersectional identity salience. This was likely facilitated by the first author's visible minority ethnic identity. However over-identification could constitute a validity threat (Lofland *et al.*, 2006); addressing this is described in the analysis section. The interview schedule was followed, with additional probing where necessary for understanding respondents' reactions to episodes that had recently raised the salience of their identities as senior minority ethnic women or men. One Indian woman and one black man (both from PSF) did not complete the diary. Combined, they reported 13 episodes that 'happened recently'. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were recorded and transcribed.

Our methodology mitigates some challenges of identity construction research. Compared to interviews in isolation, we were less reliant on respondents' memory for recalling micro-episodes. Also, although interviews are considered as having the best potential for understanding identity work (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), narrating one's stories in interview constitutes an identity construction activity. Diary entries supplemented with text/email reminders helped to contain (at least partially) identity work construction within respondents' everyday experiences, rather than primarily during interview. Our method also enabled focus on lived everyday experiences, rather than memorable episodes like bullying and traumatic life events often used to examine identity work (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Maitlis, 2009).

## Analysis

Analysis was conducted primarily by the first author, with the second and third authors providing consistency checks. Interviews were transcribed and 101 identity-heightening episodes elicited from the data. We adopted a primarily abductive analytical approach, integrating observations from accounts of everyday experiences to stimulate the production of explanatory positions and theories (Blaikie, 2007; Locke *et al.*, 2004). Analysis began with extensive data immersion (Witz and Bae, 2011) and manual coding. Then, we utilized Excel software for initial organizing and sorting of episodes and associated attributes, and Nvivo for subsequent coding of text. An Excel meta-matrix aided comparison across episodes in a standardized format (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Nadin and Cassell, 2004). For this paper, we focus on intersecting identity construction during identity-salient episodes, rather than delineating episode attributes.

We adopted an 'intersectional sensibility' (i.e., sensitivity to pertinent identity dimensions) (Crenshaw, 1991; as demonstrated by Healy and colleagues, 2011), paying attention to how gender, ethnicity and/or seniority were revealed in respondents' identity work. This involved coding terms linked to these identity dimensions, and being sensitive to identity dimensions visible to us (and not necessarily to the respondents) due to their absence during identity work. Our aim was not to disaggregate identities or 'rank' them in order of salience or importance (such as by counting how many times gender was mentioned in comparison to ethnicity). Our purpose was to examine how respondents made sense of, or constructed ethnicity, gender and seniority, in response to identity-heightening events. This diverges from critical intersectional approaches, such as Bowleg who recommends that individual-level intersectional researchers analyse each 'structural inequality' separately 'within a macro socio-historical context' (2008, pp. 319–20).

However, the data challenged assumptions that individuals would refer to their intersecting selves holistically. Despite our anti-additive design, respondents referred simultaneously, sequentially and independently to ethnicity, gender and seniority in their accounts of identity salient episodes. There were several incidents of different strands of identities becoming prominent over others as respondents recounted episodes of identity work. Sometimes, they paid attention to one identity facet over others; other times they considered all three simultaneously. In line with our mutually constitutive stance on identity construction, we attended to additional identity dimensions (e.g., religion, nationality, culture) when they coincided with any of the three dimensions of interest. Eleven respondents referred to alternative identity dimensions in this way.

Our identity work perspective enabled focus on identity construction and negotiation tactics within the data. As analysis progressed, we became more attuned to the mechanics and dynamics of intersectional identity work prompted by a range of interactions. Rather than focus on the structural contexts that prompted identity-heightening events (a traditional intersectional approach) or the processes by which respondents attained identity resolution (a traditional



identity work approach), we focused on the dynamics of making sense of multiple identities, which combining these frames offers. Whilst acknowledging the importance of structural position with regard to power differentials of BME individuals in the UK context, we believe this micro-approach offers additional value to the traditional macro-sociological analyses of intersectionality in organizations. Inductively, and in regular conversation between co-authors, we identified episodes that appeared to reflect such dynamics. We identified and coded these episodes using constant comparative analysis and following an open coding scheme. Intersectional identity dynamics emerged within three broad clusters, comprising interpersonal encounters across subordinate, superior and client relationships. Of the 101 episodes recounted, 53 occurred in such encounters (see Table 1). These clusters reflected respondents' positioning in different asymmetrical power relationships. Analysing each power position (rank above subordinates, rank below superiors and client/consultant dynamics), our data revealed the tensions and opportunities within what we term intersectional identity work — the process by which individuals leverage identities as cues and resources to negotiate power positions inherent in their juxtaposed disadvantaged and privileged locations.

### *Attending to rigour*

We aimed for robustness, authenticity and trustworthiness in fitting with interpretivist research by clarifying our position, methodology and decision making (as recommended by Bansal and Corley, 2011; and Guba and Lincoln, 2000). Like Egharevba's (2001) experiences of researching 'An-Other', the first author was aware of simultaneously shifting insider/outsider status during interviews. While insider status can fast-track rapport and trust, it is important to explicitly surface shared assumptions and experiences. As our subject positions cannot be easily erased, we sought to be reflexive and self-aware. To guard against 'lone researcher bias' (Lofland *et al.*, 2006), the first author regularly discussed transcripts and findings with her co-authors. These discussions were challenging and insightful. For instance, as feminist management scholars of differing ethnicities, we debated the predominance of ethnicity as a dominant lens for interpretation. We also debated the relative invisibility of gender in men's reflections, but which appeared in their accounts. Further, we demonstrated authenticity in our research, evident in respondents' raised awareness (Guba and Lincoln, 2000; Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Findings were shared and reflected on in individual and group sessions. Participation was considered valuable (described as 'cathartic' by one respondent), prompting new learning. Another participant commented:

It's not that I didn't know these things, but you're helping to bring them together to make new shapes ... which is kind of a revelation to me.

Next, we discuss our findings.

*Table 1: Distribution of power position encounters by gender and ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Gender	Subordinate encounters	Superior encounters	Client encounters	Total
Asian	Female	6	6	2	14
Black		1	6	4	11
Asian	Male	2	11	7	20
Black		1	3	4	8
Total		10	26	17	53

## Elucidating intersectional identity work

Our approach afforded rich insights into how individuals at the intersection of socially salient identities consciously and systematically engage multiple identity dimensions during identity work. Identification as senior minority ethnic women and men involved actively tuning in, sequentially and simultaneously, to single or multiple self-facets to make sense of, anticipate and engage in interactions. Identities were constructed and leveraged as personal resources and perceiver cues, for inferring and projecting meaning during interpersonal encounters. In asymmetric encounters, in which respondents and other actors presented as unequal in power or status, intersectional identity work appeared to alter prior existing structural power positions. Intersectional identity work enabled and restricted identification, empowering or prohibiting respondents in interactions with subordinates, superiors and clients. 'Power quotes' (Pratt, 2009) are used in the text to demonstrate this process, and 'proof quotes' presented in Tables 2–4 to further illustrate how gender, ethnicity and senior intersections played out more broadly in the data.

### *Subordinate encounters*

Encounters with subordinates comprised the smallest cluster of power positions (see Table 2). Notably, most of these encounters occurred between individuals with shared combined gender-ethnicity. Although rank may unilaterally bestow senior minority ethnic individuals' privilege and power over their subordinates, our data revealed how shared intersecting identities served as cues and resources, expanding and constricting identification and power in such interactions. For example, in the encounter between Louise, a Senior Civil Servant of mixed black/white ethnicity and a black female middle manager, shared gender and ethnicity affirmed her identity as a senior black woman and increased Louise's accessibility despite her hierarchical rank over the subordinate female.

We know each other, not well, but I knew who she was, she knew who I was ... The fact that I had particularly noticed her was to do with the fact that she was a black woman ... so when she came up to me and said 'Oh could I have a word with you?', I was pleased 'cos I had a positive vibe about her ... I had an inkling it was something more personal, and that's flattering ... (Later) I was conscious that the reason (she) wanted to talk to me was really because I am a senior black woman in Govt Plc and I was pleased, I mean I was really pleased and flattered ...that (she) wanted to talk to me.

Although they did not know each other well, Louise was positively predisposed towards her black female subordinate, having previously 'noticed' her in the culturally hierarchical Civil Service. Their shared intersecting identities maximized their mutual visibility in Govt Plc, facilitating Louise's willing support. Another respondent, Bernadette, a Chinese manager at PSF, referred to a 'female minority senior manager who I look after, because she's like my friend and she works with me a lot'. Referring to another minority female subordinate, Bernadette 'felt really proud ... that she had enough trust to talk about (a sensitive issue) with me'. Although minority women's hyper-visibility has been described as a 'double-edged sword' (e.g., Blake-Beard and Roberts, 2004), our data reveal how mutual intersecting gender with ethnicity strengthened affinity and engendered pride across hierarchy. Rather than emphasizing power inequity, shared identities closed the distance between parties. Gender, ethnic and organizational status intersections facilitated and augmented these interactions.

Table 2: Intersectional identity work: Power positioning in subordinate encounters

	Claiming and/or expanding power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections	Granting to others and/or restricting power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections
Subordinate encounters	<p>So you walk into a room of people, and you can see someone's introduced, and they're thinking 'Well, (here comes) the big white guy from London'. I walk in and you can see on people's faces, 'Who is he? Is he the global lead?' ... I don't visibly stand out (in India), so I'm different, but not really, which is a different dynamic to here, which is I'm not really different, but I am ... People in India in the firm ... they just trust you more ... the ability to motivate them, they see you as one of them and they're thinking 'I want to work with you'. It really helps you connect ... they see you as one of them (in India) and they're thinking 'I want to work with you'. (Elsan, Indian male, PSF)</p> <p>They wanted to set up their (black women's network, and) they were getting more engagement from the women's network than from the race side. ... I am a man, I do all the things that men do as well apart from being a BME. ... (I advised them to) remind (the women's network) that you suffer a double whammy 'cos you're a woman and you are a minority ... It reinforces the fact that I am seen as a visible BME leader. If people get into trouble as BMEs and they feel they are not getting any traction, they feel they can come to me and get advice. (Steve, mixed ethnicity, PSF)</p>	<p>Regardless of grade ... I say hi to the people who clean the toilets because they are doing a job.... I say hi to the clerical assistants... I talk to the ladies downstairs in the canteen who make the sandwiches... because (as black women) we need to acknowledge each other. (Serena, African-Caribbean female, Govt Plc)</p>
		<p>I think he sees me as a role model, but I didn't know that until recently. I just thought he saw me as his line manager, but I can see now... (that) people will look at you when you're different and say 'Oh, if you can do it ... (so can I)'. It feels a little bit uncomfortable, because I don't mind being responsible for my hopes and aspirations ... but to be responsible for somebody else's hopes and aspirations, or at least have that influence over that ... (tails off) (Elsan, Indian male, PSF)</p>

Table 3: Intersectional identity work: Power positioning in encounters with superiors

Superior encounters	Claiming and/or expanding power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections	Granting to others and/or restricting power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections
<p>(In the meetings, I ... raised the point ... I allowed them to dismiss it the first time, I wasn't going to allow them to do it a second time. ... These are quite senior people ... when you're dealing at a strategic level, I expect that you would always first and foremost put the business first. ... You should be able, at that level, to say 'Hold on a minute, that girl's got a point, OK, I didn't expect it to come from her, but now that she's said it, let's discuss it' (Vivian, African-Caribbean female, Goot Plc)</p> <p>The first thing that the senior Partner said was 'Oh my God, Bernadette, are you stuck in the disco years wearing that suit?' I guess he was joking, but that one statement was such a big deal for me that I actually threw away all my 'does not fit in' type suits. (Years later, a different) senior Partner said ... very loudly in our open office ... 'Oh my God, Bernadette, you're in your power suit. Red. Scary!' I just looked up at him and I said 'What do you mean red is scary. Red is good. Red is luck! It's optimistic, it's good, what's scary about red?' (Bernadette, Chinese female, PSF)</p>	<p>I said 'My name is Gurditta Joshi and I'm (key position in high status departmental function) ... and he said '... Are you?' and I said 'Yes' ... and he goes 'I thought it was Graham'. Graham (my deputy) is white ... Graham is grey-suited, 50s, looks like he has experience ... he must be (my role). ... (It's) embarrassing, someone who doesn't know you, says 'Are you?' (Gurditta, Indian male, Goot Plc)</p>	<p>I turned up at the interview with a guy who I spoke to on the phone like five days before on a work issue. When I walked into the room and (my interviewer and potential boss) saw that I was black woman, you could see kind of amazement and when I put my hand up to shake his hand he was like (demonstrated with a limp hand) ... There was a reluctance ... He was visibly — you could see on his face he was totally surprised ... It was actually quite obvious. ... You couldn't tell from ... my name, you couldn't tell from what I said (on the phone) ... don't you expect black people, women or otherwise to be at that sort of level? Did he think that I wouldn't be as good as anyone else because of who I was? I did think, what hope is there for us ... it just knocks you, and you say ... I don't want to do this anymore. And it just disappointed me that even at that level, you still get those kind of reactions and I just think, what hope is there for us?(Serena, African-Caribbean female, Goot Plc)</p>
<p>I am a British-born Asian from Wolverhampton, which is a very, very poor town. I'm very working-class by background and I'm a huge Manchester United fan, and I think to myself I'm never going to be a Partner here ... And he said 'Oh, by the way, my name is Deepak, I was born in Wolverhampton, my dad had a market stall and my dad died when I was fifteen. I'm a Manchester United supporter and I'm Indian obviously, and I'm a Partner. (Stunned) Now there's ... someone that I closely identify with: he'd been on the same journey that I want to go on. (Ehsan, Indian male, PSF)</p>	<p>(My boss) thought I'd be a good representative (for this internal meeting) ... Whenever I (spoke) ... they were not even looking at me ... There was a guy from another department and even though he was lower in rank, even though I was giving the reply, they were more or less just talking to him ... they were not taking me seriously. As the meeting went on, whatever he said they were lapping it up and writing notes ... I ... felt ... invisible ... (Indira, Indian female, Goot Plc).</p>	<p>(My boss) thought I'd be a good representative (for this internal meeting) ... Whenever I (spoke) ... they were not even looking at me ... There was a guy from another department and even though he was lower in rank, even though I was giving the reply, they were more or less just talking to him ... they were not taking me seriously. As the meeting went on, whatever he said they were lapping it up and writing notes ... I ... felt ... invisible ... (Indira, Indian female, Goot Plc).</p>

Table 4: Intersectional identity work: Power positioning in client encounters

	Claiming and/or expanding power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections	Granting to others and/or restricting power at gender, ethnic and senior intersections
Client encounters	<p>So, we went for a meeting ... a massive client of the firm ... And all these guys are like way above my pay grade ... And I'm sitting there, I'm thinking I'm the note-taker ... So, the big cheese (client) from London goes to big cheese (client) from India and says, 'Lalit is here with some of his colleagues from (PSF)'. So he didn't even bother ... (to introduce my other senior colleagues) ... As things went along ... the client seemed to quite cling onto what I was saying ... I was so active in that meeting, it completely surprised me ... This was somebody who is dragging me onto a forum I definitely don't belong in for the sole reason that I'm a senior person from an Indian background (Lalit, Indian male, PSF)</p> <p>I was quite nervous about (meeting a potential client) ... I was thinking, 'Is she religious, does she not drink, how ambitious is she, how important is career? ... Is she going to think 'Oh my God, what are you doing, not thinking about getting married? You're 31 years old and you don't have children'. I was thinking a lot about how is she going to feel about me ... because I'm also an Indian woman ... I met her and I was like okay ... we are quite similar, yeah ... So career is very important to her, she's driven by the same values. Married, bit older than me, no kids, completely understands why career is so important. Completely of the same opinion that it's not about this (waves her hands over her face), it's about what I can deliver. (Devi, Indian female, PSF)</p> <p>I'm very comfortable in this environment, very comfortable with the senior team, so I don't tend to think about being a black woman. So here are two people who I didn't know and who didn't know me, and ... it just flashed across my mind ... that they would see me as a black woman in a room full of white people, and would they be bringing any preconceptions, assumptions about me? ... I would then be conscious of having to prove myself ... (The department) does feel smaller when you get above a certain grade ... so I know enough people ... I normally know one or two people in any group and they would often be the more senior people. It just gives you that kind of comfort blanket, they kind of know you, they know you're fairly good. (Louise, mixed ethnicity, Goet Plc)</p>	<p>I owed (a client) some advice, and he sent me a couple of Happy Diwali messages, he doesn't say Happy Diwali to everyone. He sent them to me and, you know, a phone message with a bit of Hindi in there just to make me understand it's urgent for him ... 'How are you doing? How's mum? Where's my advice?' They understand that I am a British Asian, but they want some urgent advice out of me, they call me because they know they can exert a different kind of pressure on me, a different kind of influence ... I think it creates more ownership ... when you ask me to do something I will be more responsive to doing it. (Ehsan, Indian male, PSF)</p>

However, identity intersections also simultaneously expanded and restricted the power inherent in rank for several female respondents. This dialectic was reflected in Rani (an Indian female Senior Civil Servant)'s encounter with a younger Indian female.

I was the most senior person in the room ... I knew everyone round the table apart from one person who happened to be a young Indian girl ... we made eye-contact, smiled at each other ... apart from being in that meeting as ... somebody who's you know, trying to knock a few heads together to get work done more efficiently/effectively, I'm also there as a role model. There are a fair amount of women around ... there are a fair number of younger women around but there aren't that many Indian women around ... she probably hasn't met any other Indian women ... so she will be — I was about to use the word 'judging', but it's not 'judging' — she will be observing me.

Rani's status power was heightened as 'the most senior person in the room', aiming 'to knock a few heads together'. Seeing the 'young Indian girl' raised the salience of gender and ethnicity (with age), morphing intersecting gender, ethnic and senior identities into 'role model'. Although role models are often constructed as symbolic, powerful and aspirational positions in management discourse, this had a contrary impact on Rani. Rather than enabling Rani to just 'be' herself, intersecting gender, ethnicity and seniority apparently became constraining with the awareness that her actions may be scrutinized more closely by the subordinate Indian female colleague.

Another Indian female manager's experience at Govt Plc revealed the simultaneously enabling and constricting nature of intersectional identity work. Sinita described her line management relationship with a black woman as very open and positive. While personally affirming, this created 'fuzzy' management boundaries when her friend/subordinate suspected she was being racially bullied. Being a senior minority ethnic woman was both reinforcing and restrictive as Sinita managed the tension between inter-functional and inter-personal dimensions of this relatively standard asymmetrical work relationship. This restricted Sinita's rank power position.

She views me first as a non-white person before a manager. It's a very difficult position to be in, you know because she shares some things in confidence that you think 'Should I report it further?' ... I shouldn't because she's sharing it as a friend ... I know she wouldn't have shared it if it was a white manager (but) obviously it is my responsibility as the manager to protect my staff.

Research indicates the positive impact of matched gender and ethnicity and detrimental effects of low similarity between mentor and protégé (Ensher and Murphy, 1997; Thomas, 1993). Our identity work lens reveals additional complexities at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and seniority in such relationships. Constructing identities at this juxtaposition empowered and weakened privileged and disadvantaged status in subordinate encounters, fast-tracking favour (in Louise's experience) and limiting authoritative capacity (in Sinita's). Perhaps, elevated status necessarily raises minority gender and ethnic salience in encounters with minority subordinates, explaining the prominence of identity work in these interactions. However, the data also revealed similar tensions and opportunities in encounters with superiors.

### *Encounters with superiors*

In encounters with line managers, respondents' intersectional positions enabled identity work beyond a unilaterally disadvantaged position (see Table 3). Respondents used their intersectional location as cues and resources that expanded and restricted power positions in these encounters. For example, Amber, an African-Caribbean senior manager at Govt Plc, reflected on

a meeting with her boss, a white woman, in which she felt she had been ignored and undermined.

I can't then not come up with ideas and not do anything or else they may think I'm withdrawing or being really stropy and sulky ... if I've got ideas I should still carry on ... As long as I'm not being aggressive, or negative ... I think women probably always have this issue anyway. When you say something the first time you don't always get listened to ... it's probably more noticeable because it's the first time I've had a women manage (me) ... when it's a guy you can be a bit more forceful I think, but, when it's a women I think 'Am I being too forceful?' ... I've got the feedback that I can be aggressive ... So I always try sometimes not to be the first one to come up with an idea ... I try that tactic (with her).

Professional women, women managers and leaders are caught in a double-bind — typecast with less valued feminine traits but punished for counter-stereotypical behaviour (Eagly and Carli, 2007). For success, women may have to carefully cultivate skills to perform both feminine and masculine behaviours (Brannan and Priola, 2012). Amber learnt to be more '*forceful*' in meetings if she was being ignored, to avoid the (somewhat gendered) accusation of being '*stropy and sulky*' if her views were not considered. Being managed by a woman, however, now elicited concerns regarding gendered and ethnic stereotyping that may reconstruct her '*forceful*' behaviour as '*aggressive*'. This perceived reconstruction of the same behaviour from forceful to aggressive was prompted by her boss's gender. Different stereotypes are triggered with women of different ethnicity: White women tend to be stereotyped as emotional, Asian women as reserved and black women as hostile (as reported by Warner, 2008). Our data suggest this is a dynamic process — respondents use self and perceiver identities as cues to anticipate others' reactions and modulate their behaviours in response. Thus Amber's intersectional identity work constituted enabling her interaction with her white male boss, but constraining and moderating behaviours with her white female boss. This reflects power inherent in having an expanded range of options for identity negotiation even in a subordinated rank, gender and ethnic power position.

Such application of intersectional identities as cues and resources to expand identity negotiation options was particularly evident in Dean's appraisal meeting. The manager of Afro-Caribbean descent reflected on his encounter with his boss, a prominent member of Govt Plc's prestigious Senior Women's Network.

I probably wouldn't have recorded the episode if my manager was a white male middle-class individual, but the fact that she was white and female ... women have had their own problems in having a presence in senior ... grades ... women generally are faced with similar challenges (as) people from ethnic minorities.

Dean considered their common subordinate identities, construing this as a potential bridge between hierarchy and gender for fostering mutual empathy and enhanced understanding. However, he claimed:

You've got to be so careful with what people may be comfortable discussing ... But wouldn't it be nice though ... if we could make an impact in the team, for the things that she's had to face as a woman and the things that I've had to face as well as a black man?

The enabling and constraining aspect of intersectional identity work is evident here. Dean recognized the potential for action based on their shared, though different, subordinate identities, yet felt unable to affirm and enact his senior black male identity. However visible their identities may have been, they remained unspoken. Following this meeting, Dean facilitated the launch of Govt Plc's Black Men's Network. At the time of data collection, this happened without his boss's input.

Thus, the invisible boundaries between these visible identity categories were sustained at both interpersonal and structural levels. Arguably these were further exacerbated — rather than the usual ‘Women’s’ vs. ‘Black’ networks, Dean and his boss were now embedded within ‘Black Men’ vs. ‘Senior Women’ structural silos. Current understanding of superior/subordinate power dynamics across colour and gender lines is heavily influenced by North American literature. For example, Thomas’s (1993) fascinating psychoanalytical take on mentor/protégé relationships across gender and ethnicity describes social interactional workplace taboos, rooted in the US’s slavery history. Our identity work approach reveals shifting power positions playing out in a less poignant historical context.

### *Client encounters*

Frequently documented in the organizational research on oppositional identities are identity and impression management tactics necessary for professional self-presentation (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Kanter, 1977; Roberts, 2005). In our data, intersectional identity work was often prompted by internal and external client encounters, sites rife for impression management and power positioning as identity negotiation tactics (see Table 4). Rather than primarily describing adaptation processes and strategies for fitting in, our methodology enabled insight into individuals’ awareness of enablers and constraints of intersecting identity positions and the potential impact on clients. These comprised about one-third of the episodes.

Anticipating unfavourable assumptions of her capability as a black woman, Louise emphasized her competence as a Senior Analyst in a highly masculinized occupation.<sup>2</sup>

To counter my thought that people might be making assumptions of me as a black woman, it’s useful then for them to know that I’m an analyst ... People assume that analysts are clever ... I’m a black woman and I’m an analyst, I think the assumptions around those two things are very different so, hopefully, when people meet me they won’t know what to think.

Such identity negotiation tactics are typical of women in masculinized or male-dominated environments (e.g., Hatmaker, 2013). Amarachi, a black African female tax expert at PSF, engaged in significant intersectional identity work prior to meeting a client.

He’s been dealing with Partners and Directors and, in my tax, I’m his only contact ... I think that he’ll be surprised I’m female ... because he’s quite senior ... I will not be what he’s expecting to see. It was immediately gender; it wasn’t my race. Yeah, he might expect my race because of my name, but it was specifically my gender.

Amarachi anticipated a gap between her client’s expectations and her intersecting black female tax specialist identities. She weighed visible minority ethnic status (‘because of my name’) against invisible gender (they had had only email contact) in the context in which her client had been operating (‘with Partners and Directors’). Although Amarachi attributed the identity gap to her invisible gender in the senior context, perhaps her (African) ethnicity also rendered her gender ‘invisible’, as Amarachi is a female gender-specific Nigerian name. Despite its presumed invisibility, Amarachi employed stereotypically feminine attributes to prepare for the meeting.

We’re having difficulties getting this guy to pay ... we need to sort of leave him with that warm, cosy feeling ... (I) can use (my personality) to disarm or diffuse what could otherwise be a really difficult or tense situation.

Amarachi described herself as ‘personable’. Along with ‘warm’ and ‘cosy’, she conveyed a communal, facilitative, relationship-oriented approach to business — stereotypically female



behaviour. Infusing competence as a tax expert with feminized practices for diffusing client interactions is a power play reflected in other professions, such as female social workers' and nurses' deployment of emotional skills for violence prevention (Virkki, 2007). Overall, Amarachi's identity work comprised restriction through gender invisibility, shifting to expansion through repositioning femininity to facilitate the client relationship.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our intersectional identity work perspective surfaces identity negotiation tactics that shift power positions in apparently asymmetric power encounters. Respondents utilized gender, ethnicity and senior rank as cues and resources to glean meaning and shift (through empowering or attenuating) disadvantage or privilege inherent in identities. Rather than demonstrating the impact of multiple structural oppression through narratives, we reveal how senior minority ethnic women and men, engaged in everyday interactions, encounter asymmetric power positions in which their intersectional location affords and limits identity negotiation options, subsequently expanding or restricting their power.

We sought to elucidate how people establish a pattern of being, and being with, each other in intersectional terms, at the micro level. Respondents did not construct their intersectional locations as negative or positive, but used identity multiplicity to make sense of power positions and expand or restrict their identity work and negotiation options therein. By incorporating identity work into intersectionality, we potentially bridge the divide between 'universal diversity research' concerned with interactions across difference regardless of how this difference may be described and 'contextually/historically' sensitive diversity research, which is sensitive to power and status differentials (Polzer and Caruso, 2008). While power positions have been considered in studies of identity negotiation in diverse contexts (e.g., Leonard, 2010; Tomlinson, 2010), we are not aware of work that incorporates this within intersectionality and identity work frames.

Our methodology of journal entries and interviews elicited rich insights into the process of 'intersectional identity work'. We adopted a broad perspective on intersections. Rather than focus on multiple disadvantage, we examined how individuals make sense of their locations as simultaneously disadvantaged (through female gender and minority ethnicity) and advantaged (through male gender and organizational rank) individuals. At these intersections, individuals construct gender, ethnicity and seniority simultaneously, sequentially and separately as perceiver cues and individual resources to negotiate their power positions inherent in juxtaposed disadvantaged and privileged identities. The consequence is ongoing restriction and expansion of 'what it means to be a senior minority ethnic woman or man' in subordinate, superior and client encounters.

We believe this study contributes to both the intersectional and identity work literatures. It enabled insight into how respondents engage with identity facets, adapting them to anticipate and interpret encounters, negotiating self and others' views about them. Individuals are conscious of their/others' complex intersectional identities and the potential for identity dimensions to maximize or delimit identification in interactions with others. Although intersectionality discourse has shifted from additive assumptions of 'double' or 'triple jeopardy', its subjects' multiple subordinate locations are often conceptualized as negative and undesirable. Regarding identity work, many accentuate identity management in response to external (social or discursive) pressures and controls or in reconciling intrapersonal tensions. These perspectives present identity as fraught with tensions, requiring reconciling or dismissing identity management strategies. However, insights gleaned from intersectional identity work revealed enabling and constructive experiences afforded by intersectional locations, rather than

solely strategies for coping with unique disadvantage. Such broader focus on 'intersectionality of otherness' (Sang and Özbilgin, 2013) enables insight into how multiple minority locations may be experienced as enabling. For example, Sang and colleagues (2013) reveal the flair for success and resource mobilization that boosts migrant women academics' careers. Our respondents constructed identities as resources and cues that enabled meaning-making and interpersonal interactions.

Integrating identity work theory with intersectional sensibilities enabled design and analytical clarity. Our combined diary and interview method elicited rich data on intersectional identity work. Currently presented, our approach does not reflect how intersections affect the structures of work and organizations, nor what sustains or perpetuates power mechanisms. However, it addresses how intersectionality is understood and applied, suggesting a useful approach to revealing intersectional dynamics. Focusing on how intersectional locations are experienced through an identity work lens informs us about sites and patterns of identity construction, countering the criticism of essentializing subordinate identities. Our approach distances us from intersectionality's emancipatory tradition. We agree with Cole (2009) that, even for non-critical scholars, intersectional analyses provide new insights into complex social phenomena. However, in privileging the individual we do not propose ignoring historical, structural and socio-cultural influences on differentially privileged identities; these are to some extent acknowledged in the concept of shifting power positions during intersectional identity work. Nevertheless, we consider some limitations of our approach below.

An overly agent-centred focus on identity work ignores the strong role of structures and practices in defining experiences relating to ethnicity. Perhaps focusing on micro-episodes of agent-centred identity construction diminishes the role of social, economic and cultural context in defining racio-ethnic experience. Undoubtedly, factors at macro level (e.g., history, legislation), meso level (e.g., organizational policy) and micro level (individual agency) influence issues of diversity and ethnicity within it (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). However, our position responds to authors like Zanoni and colleagues (2010) who highlight the value of alternative perspectives to the traditional emphasis on structural influences on ethnicity in organizations.

We pre-selected the primary intersections for analysis, based on theoretical and contextual relevance and personal interest. We may thus be accused of forcing analytical categories. However, there is some indication that the intersections examined were the ones that 'mattered'. It may be easiest to elucidate identity work processes from intersections experienced as particularly salient. Compared to white men, African-American men and women and white women may have more prominent racial and gender identities (Stirratt *et al.*, 2008). We identified our respondents using self-ascribed labels we believe closely mirror their self-perceptions. We were, however, also sensitive to additional identities in our analyses. Overall, we concur with Healy and colleagues (2011) that intersectional analyses will always be partial, and accept there will be privileges and disadvantages absent in our project that may have influenced our study, such as heterosexuality and social class. However, we accept that all research (not just intersectional studies) necessitates making choices.

A further limitation concerns diaries, which may raise behavioural awareness of intersecting experiences prompting 'over-reporting' of identity-heightening events. However, respondents reported between two and nine episodes over four weeks, suggesting not everyone felt under pressure to 'report something'. Admittedly, there are few established guidelines for diary studies; however, several factors appeared to facilitate response. In addition to following Symon's (2004) guidelines for clear diary design and comprehensive briefing, respondents were highly motivated and deemed the topic personally salient. Furthermore, our approach entailed

multiple contact points with respondents before first interview, which also probably helped response rates.

### *Implications and future research considerations*

It is important to render visible those experiences of individuals marginalized due to their multiple subordinate locations, as successfully done by intracategorical research. However, to advance theorization of 'what it means to be intersectional', we can extend our understanding beyond accounts of the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. Our data inform us how individuals read the environment and respond to it, from their intersectional positions. It goes beyond the discourse of oppression to describe how those partially disadvantaged by ethnicity and gender draw on their identity facets with agency to anticipate and interpret encounters with subordinates, superiors and clients. The approach detailed in this study offers a practical way forward for conducting intersectional research.

Our approach also suggests considerations for diversity management practice. 'White backlash' is attributed to white, heterosexual men's status threat resulting from initiatives targeted at 'diverse individuals', stereotypically, 'women and minorities' (Kidder *et al.*, 2004). This further segregates social identity groups. The diary method may be modified to capture majority and minority employees' experiences of inclusion (signifying power and privilege) and exclusion (signifying powerlessness and subordination). This could raise awareness of common experiences of social injustice, increasing empathy across identity groups. Second, our focus on experiences at 'cross roads' may prompt organizations to break down silos between groups (e.g., 'race' vs. 'gender' vs. 'LGBT' networks), prompting focus on common experiences of multiple identification, irrespective of component identities. Opportunities exist for progress in equality practice and research when coalitions are built across diverse groups, 'seeking similarity across seemingly disparate social identity groups based on shared relationships to power' (Cole, 2008, p. 445). Third, the finding that senior minority ethnic women noted encounters with subordinate minority ethnic women more often than their male counterparts suggests the existence of informal relationships in which respondents have psychologically invested. This raises questions regarding the extent to which these developmental relationships are recognized and supported by organizations (e.g., in developing mentoring skills).

While identity negotiation work is a dyadic or multi-person process, we have emphasized one perspective — the individual located at the intersections of multiple identities and their perceptions of how identities are leveraged as resources or cues that shift power positions in subordinate, superior and client encounters. Further research could focus on the outcome of this process, i.e. the extent to which individuals successfully alter subordinates' or clients' views about their identities and power status. Focus could also be on group rather than dyadic interactions (which were evident but not prevalent in our data set).

We have argued that gender, ethnicity and seniority form salient bases for examining intersectional identity work. We expect testing this approach with other salient identity dimensions (e.g., sexual orientation, disability and social class) would prove insightful. For example, future research may examine homosexual professional men's intersectional identity work — to what extent is masculinity positioned/experienced as an enabler or restrictor in identity work? What asymmetrical power positions primarily attenuate or empower privileged and disadvantaged identities? How do such processes and interactions compare to, say, black lesbian professionals' experiences? Future research could catalogue episode attributes or illustrate patterns in how intersections are worked across different identity configurations. Additionally, although we did not aim to quantify the frequency of intersectional identity-heightening events, diaries

proved valuable data sources and could potentially provide precise, valid and quantifiable accounts of identity episodes (compared to interviews or questionnaires). Future intersectional identity work methods could also integrate audio diaries or self-interviews (Keightley *et al.*, 2012), to capture moments of intersectional complexity better than written diaries.

We believe our contribution of integrating intersectionality with identity work in this way enables insights into intersectional dynamics. This approach offers ideas for design, analysis and interpretation of intersections at the individual level. As well as rich insights, we believe we provide a reproducible approach for examining the construction of multiple socially salient identities. We suggest that our approach addresses the criticisms of mere narrative levied at intracategorical research. Primarily, our approach embraces the juxtaposition of subordinate and dominant group membership that reflects people's reality. This advances theorizing regarding how multiple identities play out in everyday experiences. We believe we have offered a useful way forward for understanding intersectional dynamics. We hope other scholars will join us in furthering this discussion, with a view to developing empirically grounded process theories of identity construction at multiple intersecting identity locations.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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### Notes

1. This varied according to participant's self-ascribed ethnic-gender identity.
2. This is unspecified for participant anonymity.

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## Biographical notes

Doyin Atewologun is a Lecturer in Organisational Leadership and Learning at the School of Business & Management, Queen Mary University of London, where she lectures to undergraduate and postgraduate Management students. Doyin completed her PhD at the Cranfield School of Management’s International Centre for Women Leaders on ethnic minority professionals’ identity work. Doyin’s research interests lie at the intersection of leadership, identity and diversity. Doyin has published in practitioner and academic journals including *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *Equality Diversity & Inclusion: An International Journal*, *Gender in Management* and *The Psychologist*. She has also contributed chapters in books with international co-authors published by Edward Elgar and Routledge. Doyin is Deputy Chair of the British Psychological Society’s Division of Occupational Psychology working group on Diversity & Inclusion at work. Ruth Sealy is Senior Lecturer and Deputy Programme Director of the MSc Organisational Psychology at City University London. Ruth’s research areas include women in leadership, board composition, role models, and various aspects of corporate governance. She was lead researcher of the Female FTSE Report 2007–2013 whilst at Cranfield School of Management, presenting the reports’

findings to both academic and practitioner audiences, globally. She continues to write reports on women on corporate boards for government, major organizations and the European Commission. Ruth lectures on doctoral and MSc courses and has written a number of book chapters. Her academic articles are published in *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Managerial Psychology* and *Gender in Management*. Susan Vinnicombe is a Professor of Women and Leadership, Director of the Cranfield International Centre for Women Leaders, UK and Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Endowed Chair in Women's Leadership, Simmons College, Boston, USA. Her particular research interests are gender diversity on corporate boards, women's leadership styles and the issues involved in women developing their managerial careers. Her Research Centre at Cranfield University is unique in Europe with its focus on women leaders and its annual Female FTSE Report is regarded as the premier research resource on women directors in the UK. Susan has been elected as Fellow of the British Academy of Management and has been honoured by The International Alliance of Women (TIAW), who have awarded Susan the TIAW World of Difference 100 Award 2013, which recognizes those who have made a significant contribution to the economic empowerment of women. Susan is a member of the Davies Steering Committee and Vice Patron of the charity Working Families. Susan was awarded an OBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours List in 2005 and a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2014 for 'Services to Diversity'.

## Appendix

*Briefing note and reflective journal*

### **Identity at Work: Investigating senior minority ethnic experiences at work**

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

CONFIDENTIAL

Thank you for participating in this study on the episodes at work that shape your understanding of how you see yourself. I hope you will find it useful to prepare for our meeting by keeping a brief record of any episode in the next four weeks that prompts you to think of yourself as a senior man of Indian origin.

*What is an 'episode'?*

An episode may be an apparently 'trivial' event; it doesn't matter what it is, the only consideration is that it made you conscious of your position in Professional Services Firm as a senior man of Indian origin. For instance, it may be a meeting you attended, in which you noticed you were the only senior man of Indian origin. You are free to record only episodes which you will be comfortable discussing, and the journal will be destroyed at the end of the research project.



*How much should I write?*

It will be most useful to try to make an entry at least every 3 days, although making an entry every day may be helpful, especially if you build it into your routine, e.g. on the train home from work every evening. As a guide, you should probably spend about 5 to 10 minutes on it. You are free to write much more (or slightly less) than this, if you chose to. Please keep the journal for about one month and aim for somewhere between four and eight different episodes.

Please note that the questions here are just prompts to help you express/record your reactions to episodes that prompt you to think of yourself as a senior minority ethnic woman or man. If, however, you'd rather express yourself using diagrams, poetry, or anything else, that's fine too. Please keep a record of your response in the format that you find most comfortable.

NAME (OPTIONAL): \_\_\_\_\_

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns:

email @xxx.ac.uk

Mobile No.: XXXX XXX XXXX

*Episode 1*

Can you think about a time/event/episode at work today that prompted you to think of yourself as a senior man of Indian origin?

Can you think about a time/event/episode at work today when being a senior man of Indian origin became salient/meaningful for you?

Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Date, Time, Place: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why did this episode come to mind?
2. What happened?
3. How did you respond?
  - What did you think?
  - How did you feel?
  - What did you do?/What did this prompt you to do?
4. Why do you think you responded in this way?
5. What was the outcome of this episode? For you/others?
6. On reflection, do you wish you had responded differently? Why and how?