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Diversity management in European companies: intersectionality and individual experiences of bias at work

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1. Introduction: why does intersectionality in European companies matter?

Consider this example:

Li is newly employed in a Swedish multinational technological firm, and although the official language is English she finds that Swedish is often used in everyday work situations. She does not generally initiate ideas, demonstrate her knowledge or argue for her suggestions without being asked to do so. Other employees, not necessarily the ones with something relevant to share, tend to dominate. How could managers understand and approach this problem? Some scholars would say: This behaviour is typical of someone from the Chinese culture. Others would say: No, it is because of her gender! Yet others would realize the difficulties of working in an English-Swedish mixed environment for a non-Swedish speaker. (Lücke et al., 2018, p. 299)

The opening example illustrates one of the key challenges we set to explore: how intersectionality affects experiences at work in smaller European companies. Intersectionality means how different aspects of a person's identity—such as gender, race, age, or class—interact with each other and with the surrounding context to shape their experiences. Furthermore, we explore what managers should consider when addressing intersectionality issues in their company management.

Diversity management (DM) research has long recognised that individuals' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organisations are shaped by multiple identity dimensions such as gender, age, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, etc. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly highlights that these dynamics are not static attributes of individuals but relational and context-dependent (Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Zanoni et al., 2010). The same person can be privileged in one setting and marginalised in another, depending on how organisational processes, norms, and institutional expectations interact with their social positioning (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Holck, 2018). People who occupy complex identity positions may therefore encounter bias differently across these contexts (Mahadevan, 2020). For instance, intersectionality-informed studies in international business show that individuals may experience both marginalisation and privilege simultaneously across cultural or organisational boundaries (Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Syed and Özbilgin, 2019). Such findings call for shifting the analytical lens from hierarchies based on identity labels toward understanding *when* and *where* bias occurs most strongly, and *why* some domains amplify inequalities more than others. Intersectionality offers an interpretive framework for exploring these contextual variations and research on it call for further investigation into how to manage these complex dynamics.

One such important context in every business is human resource management (HRM) process, a strategic business function concerning employee management to achieve business goals (Bratton et al., 2021). Within HRM, discrimination has been typically investigated as a general or global experience (Kulik, 2014). However, recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and everyday inclusion each implicates distinct power relations and evaluation criteria (Healy et al., 2011) thereby providing diverse context to explore experiences of intersectionality. Recognising that experiences of diverse individuals may differ in each HRM domain blurs the line between who is and who is not disadvantaged within the HRM process and requires further attention if firms hope to create an inclusive workplace.

Unlike in North America, in Europe intersectionality remains less researched, despite continuous institutional efforts in the European Union (EU) to promote appreciation of diversity and existing legal frameworks to support best practices and create legal obligations (e.g., the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)). The situation regarding reported discrimination remains pressing. In the EU, 'over 21% of people aged 15 years and older reported experiencing discrimination in

the preceding year' and '56% of people who identify as part of a minority group based on their ethnicity or skin colour, disability status, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity state that they have experienced discrimination in the preceding year – up from 46% in 2019' (OECD, 2024, pp. 10 and p. 4). The situation concerning self-reported discrimination is particularly high in some countries, such as Austria, Sweden, and Germany among others who score above the EU average for discrimination in society (OECD, 2024, p. 11).

In Europe, where cultural and linguistic diversity was historically present across countries, changes in the demographic composition bring new challenges to societies and local managerial practices. Considering internal issues in the continent, Europe is one of the fastest-ageing continents (Eurostat, 2025a), where youth unemployment remains rather high at 14.5 per cent, compared to an average general unemployment rate of 5.8 per cent (Eurostat, 2025b). The EU has long-standing internal short-term mobility programmes, like ERASMUS+, that often result in long-term relocations as students or faculty might find work or a partner in the country they visited during their short-term mobility period, contributing to increasing diversity within European countries. In terms of externally influenced changes, Europe has undergone several migration crises, including one in 2015, the consequences of which are still felt today in societal, political, and business domains (Squire, 2020). Some countries, such as Finland, have adopted aggressive education internationalisation policies that led to steep yearly increases of immigrants from outside the EU who seek to stay in the country or the EU after completing their degrees, but often face challenges of integration (Lu and Everson Härkälä, 2024; Institute of International Education, 2023). Therefore, the demographic situation in Europe has been very fluid and requires further investigation on how to better understand and address the experiences of individuals in social and organisational life.

This chapter responds to these needs by situating the playing field away from a North American perspective, which has thus far dominated the intersectionality and bias discrimination research, to how perceived discrimination differs across HRM processes in European small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs, defined as companies that employ fewer than 250 people and have less than 50 million euros in turnover, comprise 99 per cent of all businesses in the EU (European Commission, n.d.). They wield a significant amount of power in reshaping individual experiences at work in the European context.

Drawing on survey data from Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania, we analyse how individuals with different identity constellations, i.e., combinations of socially meaningful categories such as gender, age, student status, and ethnicity, perceive bias in six different HRM domains: recruitment, inclusion, advancement, training, evaluation, and workplace adjustments known as accommodations. Rather than presuming that those with more intersecting minority identities automatically face greater discrimination, we investigate how specific HRM contexts activate or silence perceptions of unfair treatment. Our results show that intersectional disadvantage is neither uniform nor cumulative; instead, discrimination varies across HRM processes, suggesting that the organisational context mediates and sometimes blurs expected patterns of inequality.

By incorporating intersectionality within HRM contexts, this study advances recent debates on contextual intersectionality in organisations (Atewologun, 2018; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Zanoni et al., 2010). We argue that understanding discrimination through context-specific processes challenges the binary distinction between ‘privileged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ groups as originally argued in classical research on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In doing so, we contribute to a more nuanced diversity management perspective: one that recognises how inclusion and exclusion are dynamically produced (e.g., Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025) through everyday HRM practices rather than pre-existing identity categories and without reducing specific identity configurations into ‘dominant’, i.e., privileged, or ‘non-dominant’, i.e., disadvantaged, identities.

2. Intersectionality effects on individual experiences of bias at work

2.1 Conceptualising intersectionality in the context of European business

Classically, intersectionality has focused on race and gender, especially in North America. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and subsequent Black feminist and critical race scholars have demonstrated that focusing on ‘gender’ or ‘race’ alone can obscure the lived realities of, e.g., Black women, whose experiences cannot be reduced to the sum of sexism and racism (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015). This work has highlighted how multiple systems of power, including racism, sexism, ageism, classism, ableism, and

heteronormativity, interlock in ways that generate specific configurations of advantage and disadvantage (Bowleg, 2012; Carbado et al., 2013).

While much research has treated intersectionality as an additive model of disadvantage, recent organisational research warns against simplistic counts and labelling of identity categories and calls instead for attention to structures, discourses, and contexts (Atewologun, 2018). Moreover, the classical derivation of intersectionality is somewhat problematic in the European context where addressing one's race has historically been avoided (Mahadevan, 2020). Recent organisational and cross-cultural management research has further emphasised that intersectional dynamics are deeply contextual (Atewologun, 2018; Holvino, 2010; Zanon et al., 2010). Rather than simply adding more diversity categories, the intersectionality lens suggests that each mix of a person's social identities creates a unique position in society, shaped by law, policy, organisational practices, and cultural discourses (Mahadevan, 2020).

Researchers in critical cross-cultural management further argue that the diversity categories used to understand and manage DEI issues are not universally transferable. Rather, they are specific to the national, social, political, and cultural environment in which they are employed, and to a particular moment in time (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025). This implies that the relevant intersections cannot simply be imported from other settings but must be deduced from the context under study, taking seriously the subjective processes through which individuals make sense of their situation. Crenshaw's (1989) original argument remains valid in this view, yet it is extended by an insistence that intersectionality must attend simultaneously to objective structures of inequality and to the ways people interpret and cope with those structures in specific organisational fields (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

The same identity constellation can be privileged in one setting and marginalised in another, depending on how local norms, sectoral logics, and institutional regimes operate (Köllen, 2019; Sinicropi and Cortese, 2021). Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) show, for instance, how managers and employees in international business environments may simultaneously benefit from and be disadvantaged by different aspects of their identities as they move between national and organisational fields. They argue that diversity categories are not fixed entities, but fluid constructs whose meaning changes across contexts, and that intersectionality therefore blurs a straightforward understanding of who is favoured and who is disadvantaged at work. This contextual focus shifts attention away from

simply ranking groups and towards examining where and how bias materialises in concrete organisational processes, and it challenges simple business case logics that treat diversity categories as stable resources to be managed (Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025).

At the same time, intersectionality scholarship reminds us that some patterns of discrimination cut across contexts. For instance, Roma communities constitute the largest ethnic minority in several Central and Eastern European countries and continue to face pronounced discrimination across the intersections of culture, ethnicity, and race (European Commission, 2021). Such examples illustrate both the context specificity of diversity categories and the persistence of structural inequalities that span national settings, and they underscore the need for intersectionality-informed analyses that can capture these multilayered dynamics.

Therefore, to ensure we can further enhance the understanding of intersectionality in the European context, instead of describing identities we investigate how different identities intertwine with the cultural context they emerge in (Romani et al., 2018). Intersectionality thus becomes a *lens* rather than a variable: it sensitises researchers to how the salience and meaning of identity can change across organisational processes and how certain contexts render specific intersections visible or invisible (Holvino, 2010; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025). These insights reinforce our decision to focus on identity configurations that respondents themselves indicated as meaningful in relation to their work experiences. Instead of predefining who counts as ‘disadvantaged’, we attend to those identity dimensions that participants report as relevant in their organisational context.

We recognise that adopting an intersectional lens in companies is challenging. Organisational and legal infrastructures in many European countries remain structured around single characteristics such as gender or disability, which limits the room for recognising and acting on more complex constellations (Kornau et al., 2023; La Barbera et al., 2024). Managers often lack tools to diagnose intersectional patterns and may be unsure how to respond without reproducing hierarchies between groups (Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025).

Building effective DM and HRM policies and practices remains a challenge for many organisations (Ayoko and Fujimoto, 2023). In both research and practice, DM has typically relied on relatively stable and clearly bounded categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability, or

migration background, and has asked how the needs of each identified group can be addressed through targeted initiatives (Collins, 2015; McCall, 2005).

Policy frameworks and organisational guidelines in Europe often mirror this approach by naming a small set of protected characteristics and designing single issue interventions around them (European Commission, 2015). While this has been crucial for establishing legal protection and visibility, it risks treating diversity dimensions as separate silos and underestimating how people's experiences of bias are shaped by the interaction between multiple identities and specific organisational contexts (Shortland and Perkins, 2022; Yadav and Lenka, 2023).

Scholars therefore call for empirically grounded, context-sensitive studies that can reveal how different identity constellations are linked to specific experiences of bias across multiple HRM domains, and how such knowledge can support less discriminatory managerial practices (Hankivsky, 2014; Sinicropi and Cortese, 2021; Woods et al., 2022).

In this chapter we respond to these calls by treating intersectionality as an analytic sensibility (Carbado et al., 2013) or investigative lens rather than as a variable that can be directly measured. We focus on how individuals with different identity constellations describe their experiences of bias across key HRM domains, namely recruitment, inclusion, evaluation of work results, access to training, career advancement, and accommodations in European organisations. By centring on HRM contexts, we ask not only who reports bias but also in which domains this bias is most salient. This enables us to explore how specific processes may activate or mute disadvantage for particular identity constellations, and how patterns of discrimination can shift across work domains. The aim is not to determine whether one group is 'more oppressed' than another, but to examine how context shapes the breadth and intensity of bias that individuals perceive.

2.2 The breadth and depth of bias for understanding intersectionality in work experiences

Following Warner's (2008) and Woods et al.'s (2022) critique of 'oppression Olympics', i.e., critique of treating oppression as a competition by comparing whose struggles are 'worse', instead of focusing on solidarity and collective solutions, we deliberately avoid conceptualising intersectionality as a simple hierarchy of suffering. Instead, we distinguish

between two complementary aspects of perceived bias: breadth and depth. *Breadth* refers to the number of identity dimensions, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and student status, along which an individual reports experiencing bias in each HRM domain. *Depth* refers to the maximum intensity of perceived bias reported on any of these dimensions within that domain. This distinction is a heuristic device to capture how widely and how strongly individuals feel targeted in specific processes, while recognising that any attempt to quantify bias inevitably simplifies complex experiences and should not be used to compare whose discrimination is 'worse' (Bowleg, 2012; Woods et al., 2022).

Existing research suggests that individuals who occupy more complex social positions, i.e., those who hold multiple overlapping identity factors, are likely to encounter bias in more areas of their working lives, but not necessarily in a straightforward or linear way. For example, Salter et al. (2021) show that multiple minority statuses do not simply accumulate into uniformly worse attitudes in the workplace. Rather, different constellations of race, gender, and other identities produce distinct patterns of experience. Similarly, people may experience substantial disadvantage in some organisational arenas and relative privilege in others, sometimes at the same time (Lücke et al., 2018; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Syed and Özbilgin, 2019). These findings resonate with the idea that context mediates intersectional effects and that the same identity constellation may be vulnerable depending on the HRM domain.

In this specific study, we focus on identity constellations that respondents themselves identified as salient to their work experiences in European organisations: gender, age, ethnicity, and student status. We expect that these constellations will be associated with different patterns of perceived bias across HRM domains. Importantly, however, we do not assume that holding more identity positions automatically translates into uniformly higher levels of discrimination. Instead, we anticipate that complexity will primarily be reflected in the spread of bias across domains, while the maximum intensity of bias within each domain may vary in nonlinear and context dependent ways (Atewologun, 2018; Woods et al., 2022).

We therefore theorise that individuals with more complex identity constellations are likely to encounter bias in a greater variety of HRM domains, because their multiple social positions can be devalued under different organisational logics, e.g., age norms in training decisions, gendered assumptions in promotion, or racialised expectations in recruitment. At the same time, individuals with a single salient non-dominant

identity, for instance older workers or students, may experience as intense or even more intense bias in specific domains where that identity becomes especially visible or contested, such as training access or evaluation of work results in smaller firms. In that sense, intersectionality does not describe a simple gradient of disadvantage but a complex, contextually mediated pattern of who is disadvantaged, when, and where (Holvino, 2010; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Zanoni et al., 2010).

Considering the above, we develop expectations about how identity constellations relate to perceived bias across HRM domains in European firms. When developing these expectations, we also recognise the fact that individuals can experience inequalities in different ways as their intersecting diversity dimensions create one set of experiences in one context, e.g., discrimination, but another set in a different context, e.g., relative privilege (Woods et al., 2022). Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Individuals with diverse constellations of identity will experience bias at work differently across HRM domains, namely recruitment, inclusion, evaluation of work results, access to training, career advancement, and receiving accommodations at work.

Second, and in line with the argument above, we posit that the relationship between identity complexity and bias is not linear or purely cumulative. Rather than assuming that more intersecting identities always correlate with higher maximum levels of perceived bias, we expect that complexity is more strongly reflected in the breadth of bias. Individuals with more complex identity constellations are likely to report bias across more HRM domains, while the depth of bias within each domain can remain moderate and is likely to vary by context (Salter et al., 2021; Warner, 2008). Thus, we propose that:

H2a: Individuals with more complex identity constellations will experience bias across a wider range of HRM domains.

H2b: The complexity of identity constellations will not necessarily be associated with higher maximum intensity of bias in each HRM domain.

We further explore these assumptions in an underexplored European context, focusing on individuals working primarily in smaller firms in

Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania. The selected countries differ in reported rates of discrimination in society, with Austria and Germany scoring above the EU average and Finland and Lithuania scoring below (OECD, 2024). This variety allows us to capture patterns of perceived bias in HRM processes across diverse institutional environments and to consider how national context may interact with organisational practices. In the next section, we present the methodology we used to examine how breadth and depth of perceived bias vary across HRM domains for different identity constellations in these European workplaces.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The survey was conducted as part of the DEI4SME project (Erasmus+) activities in four countries: Austria (70), Finland (71), Germany (70), and Lithuania (93), receiving a total of 308 responses, of which 304 were from relevant countries. The survey targeted individuals who were either employed or seeking employment. The attempt was to gather insights from individuals working in smaller firms (48 per cent of respondents). However, half of the respondents worked in other organisations, such as public institutions, larger international firms, or other types of organisations, most of them having some international exposure in their operations (77.3 per cent). Most respondents had medium to long work experience in companies, with over 76.3 per cent having been employed for at least over a year, and within this percentage, almost 34 per cent have been employed for five years or more (further details about the dataset, respondents' profile, and in-depth descriptive analysis are presented in the survey analysis report, see Kiverä, Šilenskytė, and Delecour (2025)).

The survey covered a large set of questions concerning demographics, reported self-identification, and individual experience at work in relation to various DEI management aspects. Survey items used seven-point Likert-type scales, with response options ranging from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. Additional options *Don't know* and *Doesn't apply* were included to capture uncertainty or inapplicability of the question. The survey was translated into local languages of each target country by at least two native speakers and tested in the field before the start of the real data collection. This ensured comprehensibility of concepts in different languages and understanding of the concepts studied for local

respondents. Alignment across the language versions was secured by aligning the English version of the survey with all the translated versions.

3.2 Data preparation and creation of indices

In this chapter, given the focus to explore intersectionality, analysis covered only the data concerning some demographic factors and experienced biases when seeking employment and during employment reported by respondents of specific identities. Responses on experienced biases according to self-identification were originally recorded on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree, 6 = Don't Know, and 7 = Doesn't Apply. Responses 6 or 7 were treated as missing and excluded from calculations and analyses. The remaining values were recorded to a symmetrical scale ranging from -2 (Strongly Disagree) to +2 (Strongly Agree) to ensure consistency in the directionality, where higher scores indicated stronger perceptions of experienced bias in certain domains, such as *recruitment*, *inclusion*, *career advancement*, *access to training*, *evaluation of work results*, and *practices of accommodation*, at work. For easier interpretation, the resulting scores were then rescaled linearly to a 0–100 scale. For each respondent, separate bias breadth and depth indices were calculated for each domain.

Breadth of bias was computed by counting the number of identity dimensions (within each HRM domain) where the participant reported moderate to strong bias (i.e., a score of 1 or 2). This provided a metric for how widely bias was experienced. *Depth of bias* (MAX score) was calculated by identifying the highest individual score across identity items for each domain. This captured the most intense perception of bias the respondent had experienced. These indices allowed for analysis to differentiate between the severity of single-identity-based bias (depth) and the extent of bias across multiple identities (breadth).

This approach aligns with intersectionality informed work that stresses the need to derive relevant intersections from the specific context rather than imposing them a priori (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025). In the EU, legal frameworks identify certain protected characteristics, yet these do not exhaust the ways in which individuals experience inclusion and exclusion at work. By allowing respondents to indicate which aspects of their gender, age, ethnicity, and student status were linked to perceived bias, we capture both objective and subjective properties of intersectionality. Objectively, reported

experiences of unfair treatment point to patterned inequalities across HRM processes. Subjectively, they reflect how individuals interpret and attribute their experiences, which is crucial for designing diversity initiatives that address the ‘real’ problems in need of resolution rather than those that organisations have predefined in abstract terms. We return to these implications in the discussion.

By constructing these breadth and depth indices we also respond to a methodological gap in quantitative intersectionality research. Much existing work either treats social categories as separate dummy variables or focuses on single composite groups, which makes it difficult to examine how experiences of bias unfold across several domains of work at once (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Our approach builds on conceptual arguments that intersectionality should be understood as an analytic sensibility that attends to both accumulated constraints and situational advantages across contexts (Carbado et al., 2013; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025; Thatcher et al., 2023). The breadth index captures the extent to which respondents experience bias as touching multiple aspects of who they are in each HRM domain, while the depth index captures the most intense experience of bias within that domain. Together, these indicators allow us to move beyond single episode or single category perspectives and to explore how repeated, moderate exclusions and occasional high intensity experiences combine in different HRM domains. They also make it possible to compare patterns across countries and organisational types, which is crucial in the European context where diversity categories and their intersections are strongly shaped by national and sectoral conditions (Kiverä et al., 2025).

3.3 Assumption checks and statistical approach

Initial analyses tested assumptions for parametric testing (ANOVA), including normality (via Shapiro-Wilk tests and visual QQ-plots) and homogeneity of variances (via Levene’s test). Several variables demonstrated significant deviations from normality, and unequal variances were present across identity groups. Due to these violations, we opted for more conservative non-parametric alternatives (for a differing view on the robustness of ANOVA to these violations see Norman (2010)).

Kruskal-Wallis H-tests were used to compare breadth and depth scores across four identity complexity groups (1 identity, 2 identities, 3 identities, and 4 identities); for simplicity, only one specific set of identity complexity progression was used (Gender, Age, Student Status, and Ethnicity),

where 1 identity meant those identifying with only 'Gender'. This method was appropriate for ordinal or non-normally distributed interval data and did not assume equal variances (Field, 2013). All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26), and statistical significance was determined using a threshold of $p < .050$.

3.4 Correlational analyses and post-hoc comparisons

To explore the relationship between breadth and depth of bias, Spearman's rank-order correlations were computed for each HRM domain. This non-parametric method was chosen due to the ordinal nature of indices and non-normal distributions. These correlations allowed us to assess whether broader experiences of bias co-occurred with higher levels of severity in at least one specific domain.

When the Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant group differences, pairwise comparisons were conducted using Bonferroni-adjusted Mann-Whitney U-tests. This conservative correction was used to control for multiple testing and reduce the risk of type 1 errors (Corder and Foreman, 2014). These post-hoc tests then identified specific group differences in perceived bias intensity and distribution across identity combinations.

4. Results: experiences of diverse individuals at work in the European companies

4.1 Descriptive statistics and overview of biases experienced due to identifications

Descriptive statistics were examined to assess how perceived bias scores differed across the studied identity constellations and across the different work domains. Group level mean scores for depth of perceived bias, that is the MAX scores on the 0 to 100 scale, suggested that individuals who reported more complex constellations of gender, age, student status, and ethnicity often perceived bias at relatively high levels across multiple HRM processes. For example, in *Inclusion* at work, respondents whose experiences of bias were linked only to gender reported a mean depth score of 57.14, while those whose bias experiences were associated with the combined constellation of gender, age, student status, and ethnicity reported a mean of 81.58. Similar patterns of relatively high mean depth scores can be observed across other domains such as *recruitment*, *advancement*, *training*, *evaluation*, and *practices* related to accommodations (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Mean MAX* (depth) bias scores by reported identity group across HRM domains

Domain	Age	Ethnicity	Student	Gender	Gender+ Age	Gender+ Age+ Student	Gender+ Age+ Student+ Ethnicity
Recruitment	51.43	45.00	67.39	63.10	68.10	82.14	80.00
Inclusion	79.88	60.00	68.48	57.14	77.59	83.93	81.58
Advancement	75.00	62.50	69.32	68.42	71.43	78.57	80.26
Training	82.50	62.50	70.65	69.12	80.36	85.71	84.21
Evaluation	84.37	62.50	77.50	73.61	79.31	89.29	85.53
Practices	77.21	56.25	73.75	70.83	78.57	86.54	82.89

Note: *Score from the rescaled scales 1–100, in which closer scores to zero mean less bias, and higher scores indicate more experienced bias towards the individual (see methodology section where scoring is explained more in depth).

At the same time, Table 3.1 and the corresponding domain-specific means also highlight that high levels of perceived bias are not limited to the most complex identity constellations. Individuals who reported bias linked primarily to age, that is, those in the Age group, showed mean depth scores of 82.50 for access to training and 84.37 for evaluation of work results. These values are very close to the corresponding means of the most complex constellation, gender plus age plus student status plus ethnicity, which reported 84.21 for training and 85.53 for evaluation. In other words, in specific HRM contexts such as training and evaluation, respondents with a single salient non-dominant identity, in this case age, perceived bias at levels similar to those with more complex constellations. This descriptive pattern already suggests that the experience of strong bias is shaped by context and is not exclusive to those with the highest number of intersecting identity dimensions. Thus, the descriptive domain-by-domain patterns provide partial support for H1.

To better understand who is represented in each constellation, we examined age and gender distributions across the identity groups. As shown in Table 3.2, the Gender+Age+Student constellation was strongly concentrated among younger participants, with 71.4 per cent of this group aged 18 to 25. Respondents whose bias experiences were linked only to gender were predominantly 26 to 35 years old, with 57.1 per cent in that age band, whereas those in the Gender+Age constellation were mainly 26 to 49 years old. The most complex constellation, Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity, displayed greater age diversity, with 15.0 per cent aged 18 to 25 and 45.0 per cent aged 26 to 35, and a substantial proportion, 30.0 per cent, in the 36 to 49 category (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Demographic age group distributions by identity group

Group	18–25 (%)	26–35 (%)	36–49 (%)	50–65 (%)
Gender	–	57.1	33.3	9.5
Age	–	17.1	34.1	48.8
Student	60.0	28.0	12.0	–
Ethnicity	18.2	45.5	36.4	–
Gender+Age	6.5	35.5	48.4	9.7
Gender+Age+Student	71.4	14.3	7.1	7.1
Gender+Age+Student+ Ethnicity	15.0	45.0	30.0	10.0

Gender distributions further contextualise these patterns. Respondents who reported bias experiences related to gender were predominantly women or non-binary individuals, with 57.1 per cent identifying as female and 14.3 per cent as non-binary. In the more complex constellations that combined gender with age and student status, women formed the clear majority, for example 80.6 per cent in the Gender+Age group and 78.6 per cent in the Gender+Age+Student group. The Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity constellation also contained a sizable share of men, 40.0 per cent, alongside 55.0 per cent women and 5.0 per cent who selected another gender category (Table 3.3).

These descriptive statistics show that high depth scores of perceived bias are not concentrated in a single group but appear across several identity groupings. Some respondents who highlighted only one salient identity, particularly older workers who pointed to age, reported very high levels of perceived bias in specific HRM domains such as access to training and evaluation of work results. In these domains, their mean scores were almost as high as those of respondents in the most complex group that combines gender, age, student status, and ethnicity. At the same time, the profiles of the groups indicate that younger women and students were strongly represented in many of the more complex identity configurations. These patterns underline that who appears as disadvantaged depends both on the HRM domain and on how particular combinations of gender, age, ethnicity, and student status are represented in this European sample. Rather than revealing a simple and uniform progression from less to more discrimination as the number of identities increases, the descriptive findings already point to context-dependent and sometimes blurred distinctions between groups. This partly supports H1 and H2b.

4.2 Depth of bias experienced by diverse working individuals in Europe

Group level differences in the maximum depth of perceived bias were examined first. The Kruskal-Wallis tests indicated that identity groupings differed significantly in their depth scores only in one of the six HRM domains, namely Inclusion at work. For *Inclusion*, the test yielded $\chi^2(3) = 10.34$, $p = .016$, which suggests that the intensity of perceived inclusion related bias varied across the four identity constellations. In contrast, *Recruitment*, *Advancement*, *Training*, *Evaluation*, and *Practices* to receive accommodations did not show statistically significant group differences in depth, with p values clearly above the conventional threshold. The full set of test statistics is reported in Table 3.4. In line with H2b

Table 3.3 Gender distributions by identity group

Group	Male (%)	Female (%)	Non-binary (%)	Other (%)
Gender	28.6	57.1	14.3	0
Age	29.3	70.7	0	0
Student	32.2	68.0	0	0
Ethnicity	45.5	54.5	0	0
Gender+Age	19.4	80.6	0	0
Gender+Age+Student	14.3	78.6	0	7.1
Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	40.0	55.0	0	5.0

Table 3.4 Kruskal-Wallis test results for depth (MAX bias scores)

Domain	H (df = 3)	p-value
Recruitment	3.62	.305
Inclusion	10.34**	.016**
Advancement	2.72	.437
Training	5.00	.171
Evaluation	4.18	.243
Practices	4.61	.203

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < .001.

identity complexity is not associated with uniformly higher maximum bias across domains: statistically significant group differences in depth appear only for inclusion. Recruitment, advancement, training, evaluation and accommodation practices show no significant differences in maximum intensity.

Evaluated together with the descriptive means presented earlier, these results indicate that strong feelings of being treated unfairly are not confined to those who reported the most complex identity profiles. In the *Inclusion* domain, respondents with more complex combinations of gender, age, student status, and ethnicity reported higher maximum scores of perceived bias than those who reported only gender-related bias, and this difference was large enough to reach statistical significance. In the other HRM domains, however, the overall variability in depth scores within and between the groups meant that differences did not reach statistical significance, even though some constellations, such as older workers who emphasised age, reported descriptively high depth scores in *Training* and *Evaluation*. This pattern suggests that the intensity of perceived bias is particularly sensitive to how included people feel in their everyday work, while in other domains the differences between groups are less clear cut.

These findings support a contextual interpretation of discrimination. Identity complexity appears to matter most for how strongly individuals feel excluded in day-to-day interactions at work, whereas for more formal processes, such as recruitment or performance evaluation, the maximum levels of perceived bias do not differ systematically between the identity groupings. In other words, the analysis of depth shows that it

is not possible to rank groups consistently across all domains in terms of who experiences the strongest bias. Instead, context shapes where intensity of experienced bias peaks. Everyday inclusion emerges as a domain in which complex identity profiles are more likely to be associated with stronger perceptions of unfair treatment, while in other areas single salient identities, such as age, may be sufficient to generate similarly high levels of perceived bias. These results support H1 and H2b.

In parallel with these domain-specific patterns in depth, Kruskal-Wallis tests for breadth of perceived bias showed a different picture. Here, identity complexity was significantly associated with the range of bias reported across all six HRM domains, with *p* values below .001 in each case (Table 3.5). These results support H2a: individuals with more complex identity constellations tended to indicate that they experienced bias on a larger number of identity dimensions within a given HRM domain, for example reporting bias related to gender, age, and ethnicity in the same process, whereas those in the least complex identity group were more likely to link bias to a single dimension. This combination of results, namely limited differences in depth but consistent differences in breadth, underlines that complexity is reflected more clearly in how widely bias is perceived to spread across identity dimensions than in how extreme the maximum level of bias is in each domain, consistent with findings in intersectional research (Bowleg, 2012; Warner, 2008).

Table 3.5 Kruskal-Wallis test results for breadth of bias

Domain	H (df = 3)	p-value
Recruitment	19.54	<.001
Inclusion	39.01	<.001
Advancement	23.63	<.001
Training	36.14	<.001
Evaluation	26.88	<.001
Practices	21.29	<.001

4.3 Relationship between breadth and depth of bias experiences by diverse individuals

To better understand how perceived discrimination is patterned across HRM domains, we examined the relationship between the breadth and depth indices within each domain. Spearman rank order correlations were calculated between breadth, which captures how many identity dimensions respondents link to bias in each HRM domain, and depth, which captures the highest reported level of bias for any one of these dimensions. The results, summarised in Table 3.6, show positive associations in all six HRM domains. In general, respondents who felt that several aspects of who they are, for example, age, gender, student status, and ethnicity, were relevant for their experience of unfair treatment in a specific HRM domain also tended to report higher maximum levels of perceived bias in that same domain.

The size of these correlations, however, differs between HRM domains, which again points to the importance of context. In *Inclusion* and *Evaluation* of work results, the associations between breadth and depth are relatively strong. This suggests that when people experience exclusion in everyday work interactions or feel unfairly evaluated, they often perceive that more than one aspect of their identity is being questioned, and the intensity of perceived bias rises sharply as more dimensions are involved. In contrast, in *Recruitment* and access to *Training* the correlations are more moderate. Here, some respondents report very high depth scores even when they link bias primarily to a single salient dimension, such as age, while others experience wider but less intense patterns of bias across several dimensions. These domain-specific differences

Table 3.6 Spearman correlations between breadth and depth of bias

Domain	ρ	p-value
Recruitment	.696	<.001
Inclusion	.574	<.001
Advancement	.702	<.001
Training	.581	<.001
Evaluation	.607	<.001
Practices	.632	<.001

indicate that ‘how many’ and ‘how strongly’ are connected in different ways depending on the HRM domain in question.

To explore how these relationships relate to the four identity constellation groups, we conducted Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons for breadth using Mann Whitney U tests. The results, presented in Table 3.7, show a clear overall tendency for respondents in more complex identity groups to report broader experiences of bias than those in the least complex group. For example, in several HRM domains the group combining gender, age, student status, and ethnicity reports significantly higher breadth scores than the group that reported bias only in relation to gender. This means that, in these domains, respondents with more complex identity profiles often feel that several aspects of their identity matter at once when they encounter unfair treatment.

At the same time, not all pairwise comparisons are significant, and the pattern is not a simple stepwise increase from one group to the next. In some domains, the differences between adjacent groups are small, and in others, the main contrasts appear between the least complex profile and all other profiles taken together. Moreover, the earlier descriptive results showed that respondents with a single salient identity, particularly those who emphasised age, can report very high depth scores in domains such as access to *Training* and *Evaluation* of work results, even if their breadth scores remain lower. This combination of findings reinforces the idea that identity complexity is most clearly reflected in the spread of bias across dimensions and HRM domains, while the intensity of bias is strongly shaped by the specific HRM context and by how respondents interpret what is happening to them.

Overall, the correlations and post hoc tests deepen the picture that emerged from the earlier analyses. The more complex identity profiles are associated with a tendency to experience bias, yet intense discrimination is not restricted to these groups and can also be reported by those who report a single identity in particular domains. In other words, intersectional disadvantage in this European sample does not follow a uniform gradient where each additional identity automatically adds more discrimination. Instead, the results suggest that relevant intersections must be deduced from the concrete HRM context and from the ways individuals make sense of their situation. Some patterns, such as the high levels of bias reported by older workers in *Training* and *Evaluation*, cut across the groups and highlight specific processes where diversity management problems are especially acute. These context-dependent and

Table 3.7 Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons for breadth of bias across identity groups

Domain	Comparison groups (Group 1 vs Group 2)	Mean rank difference	p-value (adj.)
Recruitment	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-32.46	<.001***
Recruitment	Gender+Age vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-20.45	.018*
Inclusion	Gender vs Gender+Age	-20.54	.016*
Inclusion	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student	-35.50	<.001***
Inclusion	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-44.67	<.001***
Advancement	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-35.83	<.001***
Advancement	Gender+Age vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-23.10	.005**
Training	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student	-33.86	<.001***
Training	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-43.21	<.001***
Training	Gender+Age vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-23.37	.005**
Evaluation	Gender vs Gender+Age	-18.39	.042*
Evaluation	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student	-30.99	.001**
Evaluation	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-36.52	<.001***
Practices	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student	-25.50	.014*
Practices	Gender vs Gender+Age+Student+Ethnicity	-33.53	<.001***

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < .001.

subjective patterns provide the basis for the discussion that follows, in which we consider what they imply for intersectionality-informed diversity and HRM practice in European organisations.

To summarise, H2a is supported as identity complexity is consistently associated with broader experiences of perceived bias across HRM domains. H2b is also supported; complexity does not correspond to uniformly higher maximum intensity of bias as depth differences emerge only for inclusion. H1 receives partial support, as the results indicate domain-specific and context-dependent differences in perceived bias rather than a uniform pattern across all domains.

5. Discussion

Europe is a continent of cultures and languages where workforces increasingly consist of people who hold multiple, intersecting identities that do not fit into single, stable categories. While EU regulations provide an important framework for supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, they cannot by themselves capture the complexity of how bias is experienced in everyday work situations. This study examined how individuals with different combinations of gender, age, ethnicity, and student status perceive bias across six HRM domains in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania, with a particular focus on smaller firms. Rather than asking who is always more or less disadvantaged, we explored how context shapes when and where people feel discriminated against and how this blurs clear-cut distinctions between ‘target groups’ and others. In doing so, we aimed to provide insights that can support SMEs and other organisations in managing diversity in a more nuanced and context-sensitive way.

5.1 Theoretical implications to intersectionality research

Our findings do not ‘prove’ intersectionality in a strict sense, but they do engage with and extend intersectionality informed debates in organisational research. Intersectionality theory emphasises that social identities are not independent variables that simply add up, but relational positions that intersect within systems of power and produce qualitatively distinct experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins and Bilge, 2020) whereas diversity categories themselves are context specific (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025). Our results are in line with this perspective by showing that the same identity element, for example age, can

be associated with different patterns of perceived bias depending on the HRM domain, and that complex identity profiles do not form a single, unified category of ‘most disadvantaged’ workers.

The analyses of breadth and depth of perceived bias showcase this point. Across all HRM domains, individuals with more complex identity profiles tended to report bias on a larger number of identity dimensions within the same HRM domain. In this sense, complexity was clearly reflected in the breadth of perceived bias. At the same time, statistically significant differences in depth were found only in the *Inclusion* at work domain. Descriptively very high depth scores also appeared among respondents who highlighted a single salient identity, particularly age, in *Training* and *Evaluation* of work results. These patterns point to intersectional dynamics that are strongly shaped by context. More complex profiles are not automatically associated with the most extreme levels of bias in every HRM domain, while some less complex profiles can still experience intense discrimination when a particular identity becomes especially salient, for instance when older workers are considered for training or performance is evaluated against age-related norms. This supports the argument that intersectional disadvantage cannot be reduced to a simple hierarchy of suffering based on the number of identity markers, and it aligns with critiques of so-called ‘oppression Olympics’ in intersectionality research (Hancock, 2011; Warner, 2008; Woods et al., 2022).

The breadth and depth distinction that we introduced offers one way of conceptualising and operationalising this complexity. *Breadth* captures how widely respondents feel that different aspects of their identity matter for their experiences of unfair treatment, while *depth* captures the highest reported level of bias in a specific context. Together, these indices highlight that many people experience moderate levels of exclusion across several HRM domains at once, rather than only a few individuals facing extreme discrimination in one domain. This perspective is consistent with work that calls for moving beyond an exclusive focus on severe episodes of discrimination and attending to the repeated, lower-level exclusions that accumulate over time (Bowleg, 2012; Woods et al., 2022). Our findings also echo recent suggestions that intersectionality must account for both constraints and situational advantages. The same person can benefit from some aspects of their identity in one context and be disadvantaged in another, depending on how actors and contexts interact (Thatcher et al., 2023). The pattern that older workers report high depth of bias in *Training* and *Evaluation*, even when age is the only foregrounded identity, while younger women and students with multiple

relevant identities report broader yet not always more intense bias, illustrates this dynamic and context dependent character of intersectional experiences.

By letting respondents indicate which identity dimensions were relevant to their experiences of bias, rather than predefining who counts as disadvantaged, we also follow calls to derive relevant intersections from the context and from subjective sensemaking (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2025). In the EU, there is no single, stable agreement on who is disadvantaged, and formal anti-discrimination law recognises only some of the ways people experience marginalisation at work. Our findings show that, even when experiences are reported subjectively, recurring patterns can be identified. The strong and repeated disadvantage of older workers in *Training* and *Evaluation* across the four countries, for instance, suggests that some configurations of identity and HRM process deserve particular attention as persistent sites of inequality.

Finally, the results contribute to ongoing debates about the limits of the business case for diversity. Many organisations have embraced a narrow version of the business case that links diversity to performance outcomes and treats diversity categories as stable resources to be managed. Empirical evidence for such straightforward benefits is mixed, and recent studies warn that this framing can undermine equality and inclusion efforts (Ely and Thomas, 2023; Georgeac and Rattan, 2023). Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) argue that a fixation on the business case discourages engagement with intersectionality, because it encourages organisations to prescript problems and to rely on a small set of legal categories, rather than exploring how people experience inequality in context. Our study provides an empirical illustration of why a more intersectionality informed perspective is needed. The variation we observe in breadth and depth of perceived bias across HRM domains and identity profiles cannot be captured by simple business case indicators or single category approaches. Intersectionality, understood as a lens that integrates objective patterns and subjective interpretations, appears uniquely suited to reveal such complex, context dependent configurations in European workplaces.

5.2 Implications for managers, especially in smaller companies

The findings have several implications for managers and for diversity and inclusion practice, particularly in smaller companies that do not have extensive HR infrastructures. First, the results suggest that effective

interventions should not focus only on the most visible or extreme forms of diversity, e.g., highly salient categories such as gender or disability, but should also pay close attention to the more ordinary, repeated exclusions that occur across multiple HRM domains. People in our sample often reported moderate levels of bias in several domains at once, rather than a single dramatic incident in one place. For managers, this means that listening carefully to how employees describe their experiences in recruitment, everyday inclusion, evaluation, access to training, career advancement, and accommodations may be more informative than relying solely on formal policies or aggregate indicators.

Second, our findings indicate that identity constellations associated with increased vulnerability vary by HRM process. Younger women and students with diverse ethnic backgrounds appear particularly exposed to bias across a wide range of domains, while older workers, regardless of gender, are especially vulnerable in *Training* and *Evaluation* domains. In practice, this suggests that managers should not assume that one set of target groups is relevant for all aspects of the HRM process. Instead, they should examine, for each key process, who is present, who progresses, and who reports feeling unfairly treated. For example, in smaller firms, it may be helpful to review how training opportunities are communicated and participants in training are selected, and whether evaluation criteria are applied in ways that disadvantage older employees or those who balance work and study. Similarly, managers may need to reflect on how everyday inclusion practices, such as team communication norms and informal social activities, affect younger workers who occupy multiple marginalised positions.

Third, the results reinforce arguments that HRM is not only the responsibility of HR specialists but an integral part of what every manager does. Decisions about recruitment, task allocation, feedback, promotion, and accommodations are often made by line managers in day-to-day practice. Our analysis through an intersectional investigative lens suggests that these seemingly routine decisions can have different consequences for people depending on their identity constellations and on the specific context in which they work. Managers, especially in SMEs, can therefore play a key role in identifying where in their processes people feel exposed and in adjusting practices accordingly. For instance, they can make decision-making procedures more transparent and participatory, ensure that communication channels enable different voices to be heard, monitor access to support and development opportunities, and foster an atmosphere of respect and emotional safety. Woods et al. (2022) argue

that organisational efforts to achieve intersectional equality should consider procedural, discursive, material, and affective dimensions. Our findings support this multi-dimensional view and point to concrete HRM domains where these dimensions can be examined.

Fourth, because many SMEs lack formalised DEI strategies, it may be tempting to conclude that they are ill equipped to address intersectional inequality. However, the relatively small size and shorter distances between managers and employees in such firms can also be an advantage. SMEs may find it easier to engage with employees as individuals, to adjust practices quickly, and to experiment with context-specific solutions. The patterns we observed suggest that a pragmatic starting point is to focus on those HRM domains where perceived bias is most pronounced in the organisation. Managers can, e.g., conduct structured conversations or small surveys to identify which domains, such as recruitment, evaluation, or training, are perceived as least fair, and then co-develop targeted changes with employees. In doing so, they should move beyond a narrow business case framing and consider how their practices support or undermine fairness and inclusion, even when there is no immediate measurable performance effect.

Finally, managers should recognise that legal compliance, while necessary, is not sufficient for ensuring that employees experience HRM processes as fair. Meeting EU and national requirements regarding non-discrimination based on a limited set of protected characteristics is an important baseline. However, our study shows that individuals may experience bias linked to constellations of identities and HRM process-specific dynamics that are not fully addressed by legal definitions alone. Examining the workplace through an intersectional lens invites managers to treat legal categories as an entry point and to extend their efforts by paying attention to the nuanced and context-dependent ways in which employees interpret and report unfair treatment in their organisations.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study follows a rigorous approach, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size is modest and covers only four European countries. Given that Europe comprises many more countries with different histories, legal frameworks, labour market structures, and diversity challenges, the patterns we observe cannot be generalised to the continent. Larger and more diverse samples would be needed to examine whether the configurations identified here, such as the vulnerabilities of older workers in *Training and Evaluation domains*

and the broader bias experienced by younger women and students with diverse backgrounds, recur in other contexts. In addition, the relatively small number of respondents in some identity groups limited our ability to disaggregate further by, for example, specific ethnic backgrounds or sectors.

Methodologically, the study relies on self-reported experiences of bias and on a set of survey items that did not cover all potentially relevant identity dimensions. Participants answered questions only for the categories they selected as relevant, which resulted in non-uniform item exposure across respondents and complicated direct comparison of scores. Our breadth and depth indices are heuristic devices that summarise complex experiences into count and maximum metrics. While they provide complementary perspectives and help to reveal patterned differences across domains and groups, they also simplify. Maximum scores may overrepresent extreme responses in some cases, and breadth scores reduce nuanced experiences to a threshold of whether bias on a dimension is present or not. The composite indices were not psychometrically validated as scales, which further calls for caution in interpreting them as definitive measures. Future research could refine these operationalisations, validate them in larger samples, or combine them with qualitative approaches to capture more fully the richness of intersectional experiences.

There are also conceptual limitations. Our grouping of respondents into identity profiles was constrained by the available survey items and by the need for sufficient cases in each category. As a result, the intersectional configurations we examined are partial and do not encompass the full range of diversity that may matter in European workplaces. Moreover, while we treated all respondents as potential reporters of bias, regardless of whether they occupied positions typically considered dominant or non-dominant, our data did not allow us to distinguish systematically between perceptions that reflect structural oppression and those that reflect situational discomfort or loss of relative privilege.

Future research could build on this chapter in, e.g., the following ways. Comparative studies that treat country, region, or industry as units of analysis could shed light on how national histories, legal frameworks, and sectoral norms shape intersectional patterns of bias in HRM domains. For example, it would be valuable to examine whether the domains in which older workers feel most vulnerable differ between manufacturing and services, or between public and private organisations, and how

national policy regimes influence these patterns. Longitudinal designs could investigate how breadth and depth of perceived bias change over time, particularly in response to organisational interventions or broader socio-political developments. In line with recent work that explores not only disadvantages but also context-dependent benefits associated with intersectionality, future studies might also look at how certain identity constellations enable access to resources or opportunities in specific settings, and how these are balanced against experiences of exclusion (Thatcher et al., 2023). Such research would further advance a contextual and dynamic understanding of intersectionality in the European workplace and provide a stronger empirical basis for designing more just and inclusive HRM practices.

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