



# Embodied intersectionality and the intersectional management of hotel labour: The everyday experiences of social differentiation in customer-oriented work

Gabriella Alberti<sup>1</sup> | Francesco E. Iannuzzi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Work and Employment Relations Division  
Leeds University Business School, University  
of Leeds, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, Sociology,  
Pedagogy and applied Psychology, University  
of Padua, Italy

## Correspondence

Gabriella Alberti, Leeds University Business  
School, Maurice Keyworth Building,  
University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK  
Email: g.alberti@leeds.ac.uk

This article contributes to debates on critical diversity and intersectionality by focusing on hotel labour in a global tourist destination, the city of Venice. Through a qualitative study it explores how social differences are experienced by workers and valued by hotel management. We find that while management tends to allocate workers to different jobs according to the perceived 'desirability' of their embodied attributes by customers, the gendered and racialized divisions among workers do not simply conform with traditional patterns of 'back' and 'front-of-house' occupational positions. Rather they reflect variable compositions along the gender, migration and racial stereotypes reproduced by employers' attempts to fulfill perceived changing expectations of customers. We develop the notion of 'intersectional management' to capture these fluid forms of valorization of social difference, which appear influenced by workers' practices of embodied intersectionality through the selective performance of entrenched stereotypes, and their everyday encounters with an internationalizing clientele.

## KEYWORDS

diversity, gender, hotels, internationalization, intersectionality, migration, race

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article critically explores diversity management (Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher, & Nkomo, 2016; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010) and workers' embodied experiences of differentiation (Mirza, 2013) in the hotel industry choosing Venice as a paradigmatic destination in the global hotel market. In the literature on work and organization, *hotel work* has been studied under various perspectives: exploring the intersection of migration and staffing agencies (Alberti, 2014; Lai & Baum, 2005; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2008); in relation to dynamics of privilege and penalty in career outcomes (Mooney, Ryan, & Harris, 2017); cultural diversity (Devine, Baum, Hearn, & Devine, 2007); or with an international and comparative focus on worker conditions (Vanselow, Warhurst, Bernhardt, & Dresser, 2010). Critical scholars in this journal have studied hotel work from the point of view of worker narratives and inequalities regimes, revealing the workings of intersections between gender, ethnicity, migration and age in shaping workers' experiences (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2010; Mooney et al., 2017). Here we respond to Rodriguez et al.'s (2016) call to expand the field of critical diversity in work and organizations to engage notions of intersectionality by applying an intersectional lens to the study of hotel labour in an under-researched geographical area. In the Italian context in particular, despite the growing significance of migration in industries such as tourism, research on diversity and the internationalization of the workforce has been strikingly scarce, and this is where our research contributes empirically.

On a theoretical level, despite the workplace long being recognized as a critical site for the (re)production of intersectional inequalities (Acker, 2006, 2012), intersectionality has not been fully utilized to explore structures of power and discrimination from the perspective of a multi-actor, relational approach to diversity (Healy & Oikelome, 2011). Workers' social identities have been rather 'trapped' by individualizing management-led notions of diversity and inclusion, where relative disadvantage and unfavourable treatment have been considered the result of 'unconscious biases' and individual prejudice under a 'social psychological paradigm' (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 11). Moving towards a stronger theorization of relational power within the field of diversity, we critique mainstream literature not only for reducing power to individual acts of discrimination and cognitive processes, but for approaching differences instrumentally. With Janssens and Zanoni (2005, p. 335) we believe that diversity is a political management process reproducing 'power-laden relations of production between management and employees'. Instead of limiting our power analysis of diversity as an 'organizational product' developed unilaterally by management according to the nature of work/sector (e.g., Healy & Oikelome, 2011), we look at diversity and organizational inequality through the lens of intersectionality as *contested fields* where a galaxy of different actors, including workers, managers, customers and labour intermediaries play a critical role in mobilizing workers' social differences (Adamson & Johansson, 2016; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2007).

Customer-oriented work, which tends to involve *physical interactions*, elicits a close analysis of how the intercorporeal everyday relations and micro-encounters at work (Adamson & Johansson, 2016) contribute to reproduce intersectional divisions in the workplace. Choosing the hotel sector to operationalize intersectionality offers some unique advantages to enlighten new research avenues. On the one hand, the hotel industry is emblematic of the ongoing salience of social categories of difference that tend to segregate groups such as women and black workers into invisible service and domestic work (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Dyer et al., 2010; Glenn, 1992; Mooney et al., 2017). Gender, combined with ethnicity and age, for instance, appears to be still central in explaining the different career outcomes of men and women in the hotel sector (Mooney et al., 2017). On the other hand, these categories appear increasingly unstable, whereby different occupational positions and degrees of advantage and disadvantage coexist *within* allegedly homogenous socio-demographic groups in an 'intra-categorical' manner (McCall, 2005; Mooney, 2016).

The aim of the article is therefore to consider through the everyday practices of workers and managers how embodied social differences are produced, experienced and contested in the hotel environment. How are the social embodied attributes of hotel workers (gender, race, ethnicity, migrant status) differently valued by management

across hotels and occupations? How do workers respond/contribute to management mobilization of their social differences?

We aim to contribute to extant debates on intersectionality, diversity management and the literature on hospitality work. In particular, we show how the notion of embodied intersectionality (Mirza, 2013) and of gendered 'occupational closure', hitherto developed in the field of professional work (Bolton & Muzio, 2007), can be productively applied to service labour in the hotel industry. Additionally, paying attention to management's stereotyping of both workers and customers' social attributes, our research discloses how changes in the composition of the hotel clientele (and its internationalization) shapes management strategies of differentiation and valorization of hotel workers and how workers contribute to this process with their practices of 'embodied intersectionality' (Mirza, 2013). We finally demonstrate how stereotypical assumptions about the gender, race, ethnicity and migrant status may be challenged by workers on the ground, as minorities attempt to set themselves free from the historical constraints that segregate them into certain occupations. Workers embodied practices produce relatively unexpected combinations of advantage and disadvantage, while remaining within the framework of what we call the 'intersectional management' of hotel labour.

## 2 | DIVERSITY, INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE ROLE OF CUSTOMERS

The notion that dimensions of social differences such as gender, race, class, age and nationality interlock in non-additive and complex ways to shape experiences of discrimination, advantage/disadvantage, has been long established by sociological research and feminist scholarship (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is not coincidence that intersectionality originates from black feminist theories of racial and gender inequalities, and specifically from the work of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) who showed the co-constitutive layers of oppression faced by black women compared to black men or white women in relation to sexual violence. Only later with the pioneering work of Joan Acker on 'gendered organizations' (Acker, 1990) and 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006) the interaction of gender, race and class was considered from the perspective of norms embedded and reproduced in organizational processes. Rodriguez et al. (2016) have recently contended that 'intersectionally sensitive' *empirical studies* in the field are, however, still limited. Existing studies have tended to privilege individuals' 'meaning-making' of their multiple locations through 'identity work' (e.g., Atewologun, Sealy, & Vinnicombe, 2016). In contrast, we find Rodriguez et al.'s (2016, p. 204) suggestion 'to move from a solely subjectivity-identity-centred approach to one that encompasses the interplay of subjectivities, *micro-level encounters*, structures and institutional arrangements' (author's emphasis) extremely helpful. Moving away from abstract and individualistic accounts of inequality in organizations that tend to obscure perpetuating structural forces that marginalize women and racialized/sexual minorities, we favour an *embodied* approach to intersectionality that:

*... knit together the macroeconomic political social discourses which structure inequities with a complex array of individuated subjectivities which by imposition, choice or desire are written on and lived within the body.* (Mirza, 2013, p. 7)

Not only the simultaneity of organizational strategy and micro-level encounters (Holvino, 2010), but the material body of the worker must be brought to the centre to fully explore the contested nature of 'diversity' in contemporary workplaces. The body is not just a biological product but shaped by external expectations and ideals (Dale, 2001, cited in Adamson & Johansson, 2016, p. 2206), both situated and situating (Casey, 1993) performative (Butler, 1990) and socially constructed by subjective and institutional regulatory practices (McDowell et al., 2008). These elements compose a suitable sensitivity for our research as we study a highly embodied labour involving physical proximity with the recipient of the service (Wolkowitz, 2006). Hotel labour also involves ongoing comparisons with other workers' bodies in space, with those of employers and, critically,

with the desires and expectations of managers and customers (cf. Janssens & Zanoni, 2005). While we agree with Atewologun et al. (2016, p. 225) that 'exactly how micro-processes, playing out through intersectionality, affect differences in power and privilege remains unclear', we depart from their constructivist concern with identities' internal congruence, as we are rather interested in juxtaposing the analysis of privilege and disadvantage for the same group or individual only to the extent that it reveals how everyday encounters in the workplace *reinforce or challenge* entrenched social positionalities.

We build specifically on Mirza's operationalization of embodied intersectionality (whose analysis centred on the 'narratives of the self' by transnational Muslim women) but we further emphasize the element of *relationality* of these practices, as they emerge through embodied interactions with other subjects in the workplace. In tune with theoretical approaches highlighting the 'ineluctably processual and relational nature of individual subjectivities' (Linstead & Pullen, 2006, p. 1290), we understand gender and other dimensions of difference as *social practices* and organizing principles that operate in a fluid and relational manner.

The microcosm of the hotel has provided historically a clear expression of processes of social differentiation thanks to the large presence of migrants, women and ethnic minorities employed in these activities. Traditionally hotel work has been divided into two main segments: one where interaction with customers is the primary aim (front office); and the other where contact is non-existent (back office) (Urry, 1994). Such division results in a specific spatial and social partition of workers, where those who belong to the privileged social groups (males, white, natives) tend to perform tasks requiring high levels of interactivity and social skills. On the contrary, those who belong to socially marginalized groups are called upon to play those tasks far from the 'tourist's gaze' where contact with customers is mostly minimal (Sherman, 2007; Urry, 1994). Adib and Guerrier's (2003) study of women's narratives in hotel work has emphasized how certain interactive or domestic occupations continue to be naturalized as 'women's work' and to be less visible. Others have rather focused on the intersections between traditional forms of social division such as ethnicity, race, gender and class and the growing contractual differentiation of the hotel workforce, where migrants experience higher level of temporariness and insecurity (Alberti, 2014; see also McDowell et al., 2008). Applying a similar sensitivity to the study of transnational workers, Dyer et al. (2010) and McDowell et al. (2007) have focused on the operation of 'complex inequalities' for transnational migrants in the hotel industry, showing how the reproduction of intersectional differences embedded in labour migration regimes occurs through the everyday social relationships between workers, managers and other actors such as recruitment agencies.

This literature has, however, failed to tackle the ways in which management value differences among workers according to changing tourism flows and the social profile of customers. Since hotel labour is fundamentally a customer-oriented activity, not only organizational context but also employers' strategies and assumptions towards customers' preferences critically shape expectations of suitability of worker's identities for certain (gendered and racialized) occupations. Indeed, in a low-skilled service sector such as hospitality 'who the ideal hotel worker is' remains relatively contested. Previous studies have analysed clients' expectations directly in the service interface, focusing on the ways in which the identity affiliations of both workers and customers affect the conditions of the interaction (Sherman, 2007; Urry, 1994; Williams, 2006). What has remained under-researched is how tourists, coming themselves from different socio-geographical contexts, are believed to carry heterogeneous expectations about the gendered and racialized attributes of those who provide the service. For this reason, it is essential to shed light on the practices of employers and their attempts to mould the composition of the workforce (e.g., through the everyday management of diversity) on the basis of *their perception* of customers' stratified expectations.

McDowell et al. (2007) employed the Althusserian notion of 'interpellation' to describe how individual hotel workers in London interiorize and perform the stereotypical representation of their social attributes by management. In our view this concept of interpellation falls short of grasping the instances of embodied disjunctions, re-naming and re-appropriation strategies of the hotel workers in our study. Instead, we apply the notion of 'embodied intersectionality' as developed by Mirza to uncover not only how the regulatory discourses are 'written

on' the bodies and 'lived out' through the subjectivities of raced, classed and gendered workers, but also how sometimes these workers challenge hegemonic discourses and power relations at work. Through their embodied practices and identity strategies hotel workers remain inscribed in the dominant regulatory and management framework of the hotel but also appear to 'consciously rename' their intersecting identities in resistant ways (Mirza, 2013, p. 13).

### 3 | THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN VENICE

Since the 1990s, the Venetian hospitality industry has experienced a period of growth due to the internationalization of its three core components: the structure of production, tourist flows and the labour force.

In 2016, there were 403 hotels in Venice, a city characterized by a fragmented supply of accommodation and the absence of mega hotel facilities. In this sense, the sector is marked by the heterogeneity of the production structures that differ on the basis of hotel classification, size, company ownership governance and, critically, management style. Against this heterogenous landscape, Venice confirms its preference for exclusive and luxurious tourism.

The first process of internationalization critical to understand changes in the diversity management of labour concerns the structure of the hotel industry. One of the innovative elements stimulated by the entry of multinational corporations into the Venetian area has been the hotels' re-organization through outsourcing of parts of the production process and the simultaneous increase of flexible employment, which reflects employers' aim to reduce labour costs in the context of increasing global competition (Vanselow et al., 2010). As stressed by practitioners, this outsourcing process coincides with the hiring of migrant workers through third parties' 'cooperatives' (contractors) and the proliferation of insecure employment contracts, low or unpaid wages, the diffusion of a piece-work payment system and minimal labour rights.

The second process of internationalization concerns the clientele. Together with the general increase in the absolute number of tourists (4.8 million in 2018), the city has witnessed an increase in the relative share of foreign tourists (who now represent 86 per cent of the total) and in the number of tourists coming from BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and other newly industrialized nations in Latin America, East Asia and the Middle East (City of Venice, 2017, pp. 40–45).

Starting from the end of the 1990s, the third internationalization trend concerns the hotel workforce. According to Istat (2017), the number of employed migrant workers in Venice's accommodation services sector is about 43 per cent (over 1700 workers) while in the food and beverage sector 46 per cent. The main countries of origin of these migrant workers are Bangladesh, Moldova, Romania, Albania, Ukraine, Philippines, Senegal, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Nigeria. In turn, migration for work in the industry has a strong gender connotation, whereby the majority of Bangladeshi are male, while the majority of Moldovan, Ukrainian as well as Romanian are female. In terms of migrants from Africa, there are more African men working in the sector, especially citizens of the Maghreb countries, while for all other nationalities there is a more balanced gender distribution (Istat, 2017).

The hotel industry has indeed a long tradition of employing migrant workers and women. The hospitality sector, thanks to the high turnover rates and the availability of low-skilled jobs, has been considered a point of entry into local labour markets. However, in the Venice hotel industry, the presence of migrant workers, as well as female workers, is less relevant than in other international tourist cities (e.g., Dyer et al., 2010). This is partly due to the higher stability of employment in the sector as a result of a lower incidence of seasonality, and the relatively high standard of service, increasing the attractiveness of these occupations for native male workers. The average level of service (there are 20 five-star and 134 four-star hotels) is very high, maintaining a wide range of opportunities for prestigious, well-paid and socially recognized professions that limit the entry of women and migrants. As a result of these characteristics, Venice hotels offer a rich field of observation of the dynamics of privilege and disadvantage among various categories of workers along the migration, race and gender line.

## 4 | METHODS

This article draws from a broader interpretative study on the reproduction of inequality in the hospitality industry in Venice, through the exploration of the practices and experiences of three subjects: workers, managers (including third-party agencies) and experts (including policy specialists and trade union practitioners). Here we focus on the data that emerged from the interviews with managers and workers.

Based on qualitative techniques, the research strategy chosen is the case study (Yin, 1989, p. 23) that aims to thoroughly and holistically understand a phenomenon in its natural context (see also Creswell, 2009). However, differently from most labour studies where the case study coincides with a single production unit, our research involves a 'multiple' case study (Stake, 2003; Yin, 1989). A multiple case study is a particularly suitable technique to investigate a heterogeneous set of organizational contexts, involving different types and sizes of hotels, such as in the city of Venice.

A total of 49 interviews were carried out, plus two not recorded as requested by the workers themselves. Eighteen migrant workers were interviewed, of whom seven were women and 11 were men. Thirteen were Italian workers, six of whom were women and seven men. Seven key informants (including trade unionists and former workers) were interviewed. Interviews among managers, recruitment specialists and employers' representatives involved 12 respondents, of whom only two were women.

Given the vulnerable employment conditions in the sector and to facilitate trust from migrant workers with precarious contracts, it was not considered appropriate to obtain formal consent from the companies to conduct observation inside the hotel premises as this would have exposed vulnerable workers. For the same ethical reasons in all the interviews quoted we used pseudonyms instead of real names of participants and anonymized the hotel companies involved in the study.

All interviews were carried out in Italian without the assistance of any simultaneous translators. Different types of interviews were chosen according to the different subjects of the research. Semi-structured interviews were used with managers and experts since we were interested in discussing specific topics with them. A list of topics was provided to managers and experts before the interview. In-depth discursive interviews characterized by a biographical approach were carried out with the workers. The sampling strategy, although not statistically representative, allowed for covering different subgroups of workers (migrant and Italian, men and women, temporary and permanent workers) and for an intersectional analysis of advantage and disadvantage and workers' practices across and against these categories.

We chose to use interviews instead of the participant observation (which is very common in hotel work research, see Sherman, 2007, and Adler & Adler, 2004, among others) for two reasons. First, the participant observation would have required institutional approval from the hotels' managers that we deemed inappropriate due to the research objectives. Second, the decision of the researcher to be hired in a particular hotel department would have critically limited the ability to explore the experiences of workers *across* different occupations, given the spatial segregation of workers into different departments. Instead, the research design based on interviews reflected the aim of disclosing the range of workers and managers' experiences in different hotel organizations and occupations.

We used a random sampling strategy. The participants were selected mainly with the snowball strategy using different generative points and different animators. Managers were selected using direct contacts and social networks of the researchers as companies refused or did not respond to interview requests. Most of the workers were selected using the social networks of the interviewers and asking the first participants to involve colleagues. Also, we accessed some of the workers through the trade unionists involved in the research. Finally, some migrant workers have been involved through ethnic associations that provide support to different migrant communities in Venice.

By following the methodological approach of Rubin and Rubin (2005), the analysis of the interviews was divided into three consecutive phases. The preparatory phase, in which we identify the most relevant observations and coded the texts; the descriptive phase, identifying the recurrent typologies and macro-categories and providing the

descriptive analysis; and the third phase, in which we connected the observations in order to proceed toward the explanatory analysis. At the heart of our analysis were the accounts of the everyday practices of both workers and managers, and overall processes that reproduce particular experiences of differentiation and inequality in the workplace, focusing on an iterative internal comparison between hotel structures. This analytical focus on contextualized, lived experiences of marginalized workers reflects our black feminist standpoint epistemology that sees intersectionality as contextual and contingent knowledge (Mirza, 2013, p. 6; see also Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

Overall, we identified three dimensions that appear shaping the management of diversity and labour divisions in Venice hotels: the differential recruitment and positioning of workers in (to) the different occupational segments of the hotel, according to extent and type of interaction with customers; the intersectional management strategies according to managers' stereotyping of different groups of customers; and finally workers' embodied responses to their social and organizational positionings.

## 5 | RELATIONAL PRIVILEGE AND DISADVANTAGE SEGMENTING THE HOTEL WORKFORCE

In Venice hotels, workers' gendered and racialized positions across back and front house jobs (Glenn, 1992) varied according to the composition of the clientele to be found in a particular segment of the local hotel market. The profile of customers (or better the ways they were perceived) appeared to have critically influenced management's strategies of social differentiation of the workforce.

The interviews with workers and management highlighted that while male migrant workers tend to have a higher chance of being hired in a variety of departments (housekeeping, reception, maintenance, restaurant and kitchen), *female migrant* workers are rather almost entirely confined to the housekeeping department. Within the latter, however, women workers may also be hired in higher hierarchical positions (e.g., head housekeeper or the 'cooperative manager'). In housekeeping, career opportunities seem to depend on internal differentiation of the migrant workforce based on intersections of nationality, migration and race rather than solely on the categorical dimensions of age, ethnicity and gender already identified in other studies (Mooney et al., 2017).

The interview with one of the security staff in a luxury hotel well portrays the way in which workers themselves are aware of the segmentation of the hotel workforce along the migrant vs. local and ethnic lines:

*Cooks are almost always Italian, mainly from southern Italy. Chambermaids are, let's say, we can divide, a quarter from Africa, a quarter from Latin America, a quarter from Asia and, finally, a quarter from Eastern Europe ... roughly.* (Omar, male luxury hotel security, Senegalese)

Beside ethnic stratification internal to the migrant workforce, notions of femininity and masculinity were mobilized to position workers in different hotel roles according to the management perception of customers' expectations. Hochschild's (1983/2003) pioneering research argued how managers consider women to be more adept to jobs requiring emotional labour, hence particularly able to reflect the stereotypical skills associated with femininity in their interactions with clients. In contrast in Venetian hotels, male workers were found in customer-facing roles such as receptionists. The reason why in Venice most of the positions that require *interactive exchange* and emotional customer care are firmly in the hands of the *male component* might be sought in the starker persistence of patriarchal stereotypes held by Italian employers about women's and men's roles. Workers selected to perform these tasks must be:

*trusted people, capable of keeping any secret but also charismatic figures, with a certain authority. People with the power to fulfil even the most unlikely requests of customers.* (Vincenzo, male former luxury hotel manager, Italian)

Critically, workers may themselves share the same assumptions, thus reproducing *idealized* occupational roles and associating them with gendered roles:

*They have all the male staff in those positions. But I do not think that it is a fact of discrimination, I think that the presence of males makes the service more 'authoritative'.... I say that it has always been so in all the luxury locations in Venice. The same thing happens for [the exclusion of] migrants. These are [still] prestigious jobs for Italian workers.* (Ben, male luxury hotel waiter, Albanian)

The fact that working in a hotel may be still perceived as 'prestigious' at least *for some of the occupations*, may explain the segmentation between Italian and migrant workers. The intersectional analysis reveals, however, that it is not only the ethnic differentiation by management that locates different workers in differently ranked positions (of status/prestige/authority). The male 'authoritative' character associated to the higher-level occupations confirms the persistence of the binary gender stereotyping of service labour, whereby 'privilege is upheld by masculine values' (Mooney et al., 2017, p. 372), and where the segregation of women to housekeeping positions is reasserted.

The stereotyping process at the point of recruitment in Venice hotels appears therefore ambivalent at its core: on the one hand it advantages a certain social group (e.g., women tend to be preferred in housekeeping), and, on the other hand, it produces a series of disadvantages and barriers for the same group (e.g., the exclusion of women from interactive or managerial roles associated to notions of credibility, authority and professionalism).

The processes of essentialization of the social characteristics of workers are even more explicit when recruitment is entrusted to external actors such as staffing agencies. As confirmed by the following interview, agencies offer refined tools for *screening* the workforce that allows them to interpret the desires of managers:

*Of course they [the hotels] have preferences.... For example, many hotels did not want the Bangladeshi chambermaids because they were considered a bit slow. Others do not hire Ukrainian women because they are thought to be too dominating and, at the same time, 'too cold' to deal with clients.* (Rossella, female former official temporary agency, Italian)

Different 'hierarchies of suitability' in this regard emerged within the male group along the line of nationality/race:

*It happened for a couple of hotels that told me 'Tunisian no, Moroccan no'. They made me understand that they had warlike behaviour, too angry.... I was so impressed by the kitchen ... let's say that I saw a lot of cooks from Bangladesh apply for these positions, but they asked me for only male Italian workers. For the maitre, they used to look for men from a range of countries, mainly Italian, even foreigners as long as they were white. As regarding managers, there were well-structured gender prejudices, especially with respect to the 'aggressiveness' of [certain] women and men.* (Rossella, female former official temporary agency, Italian)

Away from seeing each generic social group as internally homogeneous and generally advantaged/disadvantaged, due to the simultaneous action of other social differences (both individual and subgroup) the experiences of discrimination and privilege of members may differ substantially (McCall, 2005). In this regard unexpected and variable combinations of racial and gender stereotypes of workers appeared in certain occupations whereby it was possible to see both the 'de-genderization' of traditionally male tasks (such as chefs, concierges), and the presence of migrant instead of Italian workers in high interactive and visible tasks. As reported by one porter in a luxury hotel:

*Concerning the position of migrants and women, they were not always where you couldn't see them [i.e., back of house]. For example, in a notorious luxury hotel even then [the 2000s] there were migrant workers ... how to say that? The 'migrant aristocracy'. There was a barman from Ghana, a*

*very enjoyable guy, but migrants who spoke 4 or 5 languages.* (Francesco, male luxury hotel night porter, Italian)

The intersectional analysis here shows how the combination of race, gender and education give rise to an unusual outcome, whereby black migrants with a higher social background are promoted to interactive positions against the traditional racialized distinction between back and front-of-house positions (Glenn, 1992). The worker in the example was highly educated, spoke multiple languages and displayed a unique mix of social attributes which made him to be perceived as suitable to entertain tourists 'despite' being a black migrant. This account indicates how less visible social characteristics such as class or cultural capital are likely to determine a *relative position of advantage* within a generally disadvantaged group of service workers. Analysing both penalty and advantage for male black workers in this case is useful to expose how non-dominant groups/individuals may be 'sometimes privileged' in relation to others (e.g., Atewologun et al., 2016, cited in Mooney et al., 2017, p. 361).

Hence, we found that employers and agencies, but also workers' mutual stereotypes tend to exploit the intersections of social differences while reducing them to *naturalized attributes and attitudes* (e.g., virility, sweetness, docility, caring skills, sensuality, sympathy, coldness) in turn associated to certain national or ethnic, sexual and gendered groups. This process of differentiation emerged from the everyday micro-level interactions and embodied practices of workers and managers:

*I mean that, for example, the Filipino has courtesy in his DNA, because he has a hosting culture. For them it is difficult to say no to their boss or the guest, it is an insult. They have a suitable attitude for this sector. Instead, when it comes to a different culture, Arabs for example ... I sometimes get angry with my workers, but not with them. With Arabic people, you mustn't because they react badly.* (Eduardo, male hoteliers' representative, Italian)

Employers appear to consider some skills (or the lack of them) as bond to a pre-established 'cultural background' understood as homogeneous for each national group (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Litvin, 1997). In the case above the Filipino nationality was associated to a particular cultural propensity to reverent hospitality work, comparing it with another social group such as the Arabs perceived as lacking traits such as discipline and deference.

How did then employers try to mould the composition of the workforce on the basis of *their perception* of customers' expectations about who delivers the service?

## 6 | MANAGEMENT STEREOTYPING OF CUSTOMERS' PREFERENCE

Management appeared to be valuing difference according to the perceived expectations and desires of customers towards the attributes of the hotel workforce. Specifically, the recruitment strategy is aimed at selecting a workforce that is 'culturally compatible' with the background of customers while limiting potential conflicts emerging in a 'super-diverse' environment developed in the context of internationalization. Customers coming from new developing countries pose specific challenges:

*For example, we now have Brazilian tourists; it is something new for Venice. So, we have to adapt to the guests. We have to be clever for understanding the new markets.* (Riccardo, hoteliers' representative, Italian)

Our fieldwork showed that employers tend to assume that the origin of tourists from different social and geographical contexts and their ascribed social characteristics shape and differentiate their expectations on the ethnic and

gender roles of the workforce *also in an intersectional manner*. Managers (but also workers) believe that customers have different expectations based on the intersection of their most salient identities (culture, gender, nationality and religion). This means that a mix of intersectional positionings can be considered advantageous for a job in one hotel because it confirms the expectations of managers, but it can also be reconfigured as disadvantageous when the department, or the 'tourist markets' change:

*There was an important luxury event and the company called me asking 25 waiters in a short time. I sent their curriculum to the company that answers me with an email saying: 'ah, we forgot to tell you that we want white waiters because for the customers we have, we want them white, absolutely' ... Let's say that the requests of companies can change significantly according to the customer target. If a hotel has mostly American clients is one thing, if it is Russians is another thing. (Rossella, former official temporary agency, Italian)*

Nowadays, with the growing flow of tourists from the newly industrialized countries, the internal stratification of hotel clientele is a challenging terrain for employers. In other words, what exactly different customers may want remains an imponderability that employers reduce to stereotypical cultural differences among them, for example, based on nationality:

*The American tourist [North American] who comes here and wants to taste the authentic Italian cuisine also wants to find the Italian chef because for him this is part of the experience. You can't let him find the Chinese who cooks Italian, he eats that in New York or Boston. (Riccardo, male hoteliers' representative, Italian)*

The research has in this sense brought to light how hotel managers deal with the 'super-diversity' of hotel customers as well as that of the workforce, thus giving rise to specific methods through which management build labour force clusters that can be perceived as socially and culturally appropriate to highly differentiated groups of tourists. Critically, workers are well aware of such mechanisms as well as of the 'hard skills' still required to serve specific customers:

*I was hired because I have a background of knowledge of East Asian culture and I speak Japanese. At that time, that [particular] hotel had a strong flow of Japanese tourists and needed someone to speak their language. (Emanuela, female medium-market hotel receptionist, Italian)*

In order to adapt and to make the workforce suitable to different needs, management 're-functionalize' the workforce, through training and refresher courses, often taught by cultural mediators. Workers are offered preliminary knowledge of the cultural attributes of customers to be able to *prevent conflicts* with the clients.

In some cases, staff recruitment is restricted to workers who are believed to own 'internationally accepted social characteristics' for certain occupations, such as Filipino workers for domestic activities. The stereotypes of deference and adequacy to domestic work attached to this nationality of workers construct them as a kind of 'gender neutral nationality' whereby Filipina/os are considered to adapt more easily to clients' different understanding of masculinity and femininity:

*I remember that when Middle Eastern tourists began to come en masse we wondered if it would be appropriate to fill out the ranks with Arab workers. The problem is that the Arab world, as everyone knows, is not a homogeneous world. So, instead of preventing the conflicts, there was the risk of provoking them. While with workers, for example from the Philippines, this rarely happens. (Vincenzo, male, former luxury hotel manager, Italian)*

More broadly the Filipino nationality was essentialized and associated to a common culture of docility, instrumental to avoiding conflicts between workers and between workers and customers. Similar findings were highlighted in the context of London's hotels and hospitals (McDowell et al., 2008) where Vietnamese workers were preferred by employers for being allegedly less prone to conflict as compared to Eastern European workers. Such strategies underpin the social engineering of work teams in service sector jobs, where mixed-nationality teams are put to work in the same department.

Managers claim to gain direct experience of the groups' 'intrinsic' cultural dispositions and thus express allegedly indisputable beliefs and generalizations. By denying the fluid and contested nature of identities, employers ignore that these are not innate attributes of human beings, but unstable and contingent social constructions, continuously performed in society and the workplace (Butler, 1990; McDowell et al., 2007). And yet, while social stereotypes proliferate and change according to the composition of the clientele, hotel workers in Venice appeared to respond creatively, rather than simply submitting to management expectations or merely adopting their idealized/stereotypical images.

## 7 | WORKER PRACTICES OF EMBODIED INTERSECTIONALITY

Our interviews with workers have shown a rather contradictory picture in the way in which workers conform (or not) with the managerial and customers' expectations about their emotional, aesthetic and other forms of service labour. The testimonies of workers may, on the one hand, confirm the acceptance or 'normalization' of stereotypical constructions, but at the same time workers appear to play them strategically, being also aware of their 'bargaining power' vis-à-vis such wanted characteristics:

*We're all women, but that's normal. I don't see a man who puts himself with that patience to try to make the bed in a careful manner, folding the corner in a certain way etc. Cleaning seems to be an easy thing that everyone can do, but it's not like that, is it? (Regina, female, luxury hotel chambermaid, Filipino)*

While apparently accepting the feminized nature of housekeeping, women workers, through their embodied intersectionality of class and gender in the hotel (i.e., providing examples of embodied labour practices such as folding corner with care), either re-qualify or re-gender the stereotypes attached to these jobs. Reproducing the idea that it is 'normal' that all cleaners are women, the respondent also reclaims for themselves the skilfulness of this occupation, thus challenging the notion of cleaning as menial, unskilled, unworthy work usually associated with women's inferior social status. As argued by Butler, 'Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculinity and femininity are produced and naturalized, but gender might well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized' (Butler, 2004, p. 42).

At times workers judge critically the behaviour and expectation of hotel customers, and, if problematically, recuperate/(re)claim notions of masculinity to justify the preference for men in certain jobs:

*But there are also customers who are not at all recommendable; there are those who get drunk, those who mess regardless, I cannot let them do what they want, they smash the hotel. There you have to try to be, as it were, kind but also with an iron hand. So yes, there may be women there, but one also has to deal with these things. (Pasquale, luxury hotel former waiter and night porter, Italian)*

The male presence in positions traditionally considered 'feminine' and organized around *attitudes* of deference and servitude may threaten gender identity and self-esteem (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). To counter this, the male worker in this case expressed the need to reaffirm his identity by celebrating the attributes of masculinity that service work

may require in order to tame guests' inappropriate behaviour. Similarly, male hotel workers erect gender barriers that protect them from the entry of women into 'their' jobs (see also Mooney et al., 2017), following the pattern of gender-based 'social closure' typical of interactive work in the professions (Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Hochschild, 1983/2003).

In some cases, women workers explicitly challenged essentialized notions of feminine labour. While doing so they also reproduced gender stereotypes highlighting the positive effect of male presence in teamworking:

*They can hire men, but they hardly do it. I saw them. They do exactly what women do. I can tell you that I've met men who clean better than women ... If you take 5 girls and put them to work, it is unlikely that 5 girls will join. If you take 4 girls and a man, those 4 girls rely on the man because they recognise a protective figure, even if sometimes you may find the man who hides more than a woman. (Lidia, medium-market hotel chambermaid, Italian)*

While the example above only takes into account gender in relation to occupational class ranks in cleaning work (cf. Mooney et al., 2017), the point of view of embodied intersectionality further reveals that the intersections of gender and migration give rise to different ways of valuing social difference by different actors in the hotel environment. In particular, the research shows how the relevance attributed to the *work ethic of migrants* has the greatest weight in the mobilization of social difference. This is also where workers often reproduce stereotypes against other workers. Almost all the migrant workers interviewed have repeatedly evoked the poor ethics of (and the lack of fair treatment with) Italian workers, considered little inclined to sacrifice and hard work, lazy as well as predisposed to a cunning attitude.

*The difference is that they don't want to and don't know how to work hard. We are used to working hard and we are not afraid of working harder. For example, when we have to clean the common bathrooms, everyone disappears ... We are more serious at work. (Regina, luxury hotel chambermaid, Philippines)*

This example shows how workers actually do not merely adopt the same essentializing approach to identities reproduced by management, but rather play around with them, ultimately saying that Italians (in this case) refuse to do these kinds of jobs rather than lacking the intrinsic characteristics to do them well. Although migrant workers appeared to partly internalize the stereotype of stronger work ethics and employers' rhetoric about the 'good worker' (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009); and positively respond to the practices of 'interpellation' by management (McDowell et al., 2007), in other cases their embodied practices clearly challenged the narrative that depicts them as naturally inclined to deference and docility:

*A boy from Naples works with me always says to me 'look, don't push your luck; we can lose our job'. I'm sorry, it's not that I don't care. I have a family, two children but working for free or without rights, I'm not in. They make billions, they say 'it is the crisis' and then they get rich. (Karim, male luxury hotel bell boy, Algerian)*

Overall, the interviews have shown how the association between the skills and abilities of workers to the socially constructed attributes by management is a process that requires the proactive participation and performative process (Butler, 1990) by workers. Rather than merely conforming to management interpellation and tourists' alleged expectations about their social attributes (McDowell et al., 2007), workers in Venice, more often than not, engage critically with employers' stereotypical assumptions. They do so relationally, by consciously re-naming their intersecting positionings through different identity strategies (Mirza, 2013), comparing their bodies in space, and through their embodied workplace micro-encounters with others in the context of persisting social structures of inequality and entrenched regimes of gendered racialization.

## 8 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our multi-sited case study has revealed how management stereotyping of customers' social characteristics and the everyday encounters of multiple actors in the workplace critically shape the ways in which embodied social differences are valued in the hotel sector.

On the one hand, the attempt to meet the different expectations of tourists as perceived by management leads to the modification of gender, nationality and race roles giving rise to unexpected outcomes (e.g., black workers with high cultural capital positioning in higher status occupations in luxury hotels). On the other hand, traditional ethnic and gender division of labour can be found in the cases where Italian men preserve the more prestigious jobs for themselves and manage to stay away from the poorer terms and conditions and insecurity typical of the lower segment, reserved to racialized migrants and women.

We thus propose the notion of 'intersectional management' to describe the *fluid interplay* of advantages and disadvantages in the experiences of diversity by hotel workers. Worker embodied experiences of intersectional differentiation (Mirza, 2013) appear based on *relatively unstable* social categories of inequality (Brah & Phoenix, 2004), resulting from managerial discourses, recruitment and selection practices *as well as* from the everyday *relations* between workers, employers and customers. What emerged indeed is that hotel managers construct defined social groups by stereotyping and essentializing also the social identities of tourists – for example, on the basis of nationality, with the effect of different combinations of advantages and disadvantages for workers.

For instance, workers, managers and agencies explained how Filipino chambermaids are disadvantaged by gender and migrant status, which segregate them in the housekeeping and other invisible sections of the hotels. At the same time because of the cultural attributes associated to their nationality they are 'advantaged' at the point of recruitment over Arabs and Black Africans, who are considered more rebellious, with poorer work ethic and less docile. The operation of advantage and disadvantage is indeed always relational across groups (Sherman, 2011) and demonstrates the processual nature of subjectivities (Linstead & Pullen, 2006) and their embodied performativity (Butler, 1990).

In terms of the segmentation of labour in Venice hotels, 'intra-categorical intersectionality' in this regard allows us to understand different experiences among apparently homogenous groups (see Mooney, 2016). And yet we also need to acknowledge that systemic marginalization on the basis of categorical gender/race interlocking does persist when 'black and brown' women (from the African continent and Middle Eastern countries) are still the group segregated to non-interactive contingent positions. Migrant women appear still over-represented in the lowest hierarchical positions, hired through agencies under precarious contracts. Against the continuation of these systemic forms of differentiation and segmentation, workers did not simply conform to the expectations of customers and management.

In contrast different processes of re-appropriation of stereotypical assumptions by workers emerged, although remaining inscribed within specific forms of local regulations and entrenched patriarchal/nationalist prejudices typical of Italian society and its work organizations. These practices of embodied intersectionality (Mirza, 2013) were indeed at times contesting the essentialization of identities and social positioning by management: without refusing the attribution of social identities as such, workers at times dispute the essentialization of their and others' identities. The latter can be defined by the emergence of a gap between the identities and social attributes/behaviours expected and desired by the employer and those manifested (and/or 'felt') by the workers.

What are the implications for theory? We agree that paying methodological and theoretical attention to intercorporeal relations at work (Adamson & Johansson, 2016) does not deny the ongoing salience of sedimented categories of differentiation reproduced by managers, customers and workers (cf. Mirza, 2013). In this sense, we considered *the organizational practices* of hotel management, based on the mobilization of stereotypical identities and on the production of occupational hierarchies between the migrant and Italian workforce, as a distinctive (if not explicit or formalized) *managerial diversity strategy* aimed at reinforcing the fragmentation of the workforce. Wary of the risk of neutralizing the critical and emancipatory power of intersectionality, which finds its roots in the black feminist

epistemology of situated inequalities research (Crenshaw, 1991; Mirza, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006) we develop the notion of 'intersectional management' *not* as a substitute for diversity management, but to describe the emergence of specific managing techniques to value social difference in this internationalizing section of the service economy. We show how micro-level encounters between different actors and management stereotyping of workers and customers' characteristics contribute to reinforce long-lasting structures of exclusion, power hierarchies and social/organizational differentiation in an increasingly migrant workforce (Johansson & Śliwa, 2016), but also how they constitute contested terrains where workers selectively appropriate or reject the performance of such social differences through practices of embodied intersectionality.

Only through adopting such fluid understanding of social difference it is possible to develop truly inclusive policies to break patterns of discrimination in the hotel industry. The accounts of participants have shown how these highly *embodied, located and intersectional* positions can be disrupted by workers who appear consciously taking jobs that 'Italians do no longer want', but who also refuse essentialized notions of identities, as well as to do work and/or express a submissive behaviour when too much is demanded from them.

By bringing light to the role of an increasingly internationalized clientele, itself subject of intersectional management strategies, our contribution also opens a new question on the ways in which customers, rather than displaying homogeneous preferences, may also help to actively reverse rooted stereotypes about the 'ideal hotel worker'. This finding suggests new lines of inquiry in re-thinking the management of diversity and the role of customers in promoting effective equality policies in the hospitality industry and other super-diverse work settings.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interests.

## ORCID

Gabriella Alberti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5673-6568>

Francesco E. Iannuzzi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5828-2528>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Gabriella Alberti** is Associate Professor in Work and Employment Relations at the University of Leeds. She researches migrant precarious labour in intersectional perspective as well as the everyday politics, union and social mobilisation of insecure and marginalised workers.

**Francesco E. Iannuzzi** is a PhD in Sociology of Labour and researcher at the University of Padua. His work mainly concerns the segmentation of labour markets, social protections for vulnerable workers and, more recently, the impact of technological innovations on labour processes.

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