

Broad Matters Season 7 Episode 4 “Studying Bias In The Office” with Christy Zhou Koval

Quinetta Roberson:

Welcome to Broad Matters.

Ken Szymusiak:

A podcast bringing you thought leadership, innovative perspectives, and real-world impact from Michigan State University's Eli Broad College of Business. I'm Ken Szymusiak, managing director for the Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship & Innovation.

Quinetta Roberson:

And I'm Quinetta Roberson, the John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor of Management and Psychology. On this episode, Ken and I are joined by fellow management department faculty member, Christy Zhou Koval. She's an assistant professor. And her research focuses on diversity and inclusion in the workplace, stereotyping and bias, and intergroup relations.

Christy Zhou Koval:

Broad matters because we have amazing top-notch faculty doing cutting edge research and generating knowledge that is very important for our workplace. I'm hoping that my work can also contribute to this vibrant research community.

Ken Szymusiak:

Welcome, Christy.

Christy Zhou Koval:

Thanks for having me.

Ken Szymusiak:

Before we begin talking about your impactful work, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at the Broad College?

Christy Zhou Koval:

So I have been at Broad since 2019. Prior to coming here, I was working in Hong Kong University of Science and Technology as an assistant professor of management. Here at Broad, I have two primary responsibilities: teaching and research. In terms of teaching, I teach negotiations and intro to organizational behavior and human resource management in both the undergraduate and the master's program. And I also have the privilege to mentor and work alongside with our brilliant PhD students in the management department as well. In terms of research, I'm pretty passionate about topics related to DEI issues in the workplace. I use theories and principles of social psychology to understand how we form perceptions and attitudes about people from different social groups. The impact of these perceptions and attitudes can have on workplace outcomes, especially related to diversity and inclusion issues.

Ken Szymusiak:

You're well known for your research around essentially hair biases as maybe a starting point in terms of how you dove into research around DEI and some of the discrimination that occurs. Especially against

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Black women with natural hairstyles. How did you lean into that topic or uncover that topic as a place of interest for you to begin research and what have your findings been?

Christy Zhou Koval:

So I started this project when I was a PhD student. And my PhD supervisor, Ashleigh Rosette, she's amazing. She's African American. And one day, we're just talking about our hair. I'm Asian and so my hair is very easy. I can wake up in the morning and not brush my hair, you won't be able to tell the difference. But for her, obviously, there's a lot more work involved in taking care of her hair and styling her hair. And we have our mutual interest in doing research on diversity inclusion. And so we started diving more into this natural hairstyle bias that may be present for or against Black women.

Ken Szymusiak:

And what have you uncovered so far in that research that people might find surprising?

Christy Zhou Koval:

So basically, in this project we use across multiple different samples including general working population and MBA students. What we did was we get them to rate hypothetical job applicants and we digitally manipulated their hairstyles so that either had their natural hairstyles. For Black women applicants, it could be with braids and afros and twists and so on. Or they have their hair straightened. And we also had white female applicants as well with wavy hair or with straight hair. So we got our participants to just rate how professional do you perceive these applicants to be? How competent do you perceive these applicants to be? And how likely would you be to offer them a job interview?

So what we found was that for Black women with natural hairstyles, they were rated to be the least competent and professional when they had their hair styled naturally as compared to these other groups. And they were less likely to be recommended for job interviews. And we found this effect over and over again across different hairstyles, whether the job applicant was dressed up in a suit or a casual wear. Whether they posted their profile on a professional website like LinkedIn or a personal social media space like Facebook. We found this effect across all these different media. So that was a pretty robust effect. One of the things that was interesting or not as obvious was that there was this, what we call, moderating effect of industry. Such that we see this natural hair bias a lot more prominent in industries that have more strict dress norms so industries like management consulting. And we see this effect a lot less in industries that have relatively more lax dress norms such as marketing.

Quinetta Roberson:

As a throw to your research, I was going to come here with my natural hair. But you study this, so I was like, "No. It'll be lost on her." What I find really interesting about that study that you described is the intersectionality between race and gender, but I know some of your other work has found gender discrimination a number of different ways and also in some pretty cool contexts. So I was wondering if you could give us some other examples of your work, maybe talking about gender discrimination.

Christy Zhou Koval:

There's this one recent project I was pretty excited about that looks at gender stereotyping and the effect of gender stereotyping in the context of freelancers. Specifically, we looked at creative artists. In the particular context of Korean popular singers, so K-pop songwriters. Two things you want to know about K-pop songwriters. So the first thing is they work as freelancers. They don't work for a particular

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organization, they're just on their own. They need to actively seek out clients who want them to write a song for them. And the second thing you want to know about these K-pop songwriters is that in songwriting, there are actually multiple different skill sets that you use. As a songwriter, you can be a lyricist, so someone who just specialize in writing lyrics. You can be a melodist, so someone who writes a melody. Or you can be an arranger, so someone who arrange the chords. They actually use different skill sets and then they're considered different specialties even within songwriting.

As a freelancer, when you first starting out in the job, what you want to do is you want to hone in on one particular skillset that really gives you that legitimacy and establish you in the business. But over time, what you want to do as a freelancer is gradually expand your career portfolio, what we call lateral expansion. So if you're a songwriter and starting off as let's say an arranger, you want to eventually pick up being a melodist, you want to also perhaps pick up writing lyrics as well. You need to be versatile to survive in the freelancing career. It's a tough business. Over time, you want to expand. But this research hasn't really looked at whether this plays out across different genders. So this is a pretty cool part that my collaborators and I, we track the career trajectory of over 8,000 songwriters over a 12-year period. And what we found was that for male songwriters, they get this advantage as they expand their careers over time.

As they become more generalists, they engage in this lateral skill expansion. They got more hits, and they also were able to sustain their career over a longer period of time. But we did not find this effect for women, for female freelancers. So what we found for female freelancers was that for those who expanded into more generalist roles, they actually were less likely to survive in the industry.

Quinetta Roberson:

Did you find that the roles or the freelancing job is stratified, so more men versus more women in that job?

Christy Zhou Koval:

In the K-pop songwriting, yes. So in general, there are more male songwriters than female songwriters. We found these effects even after controlling for the proportion of songwriters in the industry. And then we also looked at things like genre of the music, how many hits they've had previously, are they also a singer? Because once you're a singer, you start working with a recording company and then a label. It works a bit different then. So it was a really cool context to look at this phenomena.

Ken Szymusiak:

Do you suspect cultural norms to play a role in this too? Like, how does Korea compare to the US or Canada? Do you think that plays a role a little bit in terms of these perceived biases in Korea versus elsewhere or anything like that?

Christy Zhou Koval:

Yeah. So we did do a follow-up study with a US sample. This one, we weren't looking at songwriters, we were looking at creative freelancers in the film industry. They can either work as, for example, cinematographers or they can also work in lighting for example. And so we again looked at, in a scenario, we showed our participants like portfolios of two different people, men versus women. Whether they expanded and then they work in a more specialized setting or work as a generalist. And again, we found this effect. And so we're curious, why is this happening? In some follow up studies, some experiments we've found that the reason we're observing these gender differences is due to

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gender stereotypes. This idea that when women expand their roles, they're seeing us less committed to their jobs because oh, maybe they expanded because they're feeling insecure about their jobs. Or like they have family reasons they need to move around, diversify. So they're seeing us less agentic when they expand their roles. Whereas for men, we don't observe this effect. And that's why we're seeing what's driving these effects.

Quinetta Roberson:

So given that stereotyping seems to be driving this effect and that we can't control the way other people think, what advice or strategies could you offer to women particularly in these highly specialized or highly skilled roles in order to break through that glass wall?

Christy Zhou Koval:

So one of the things we recommended in our paper is incorporate a business when you're trying to introduce yourself as a freelancer. Use a business card and write the business name on the card to represent you as a corporation.

Quinetta Roberson:

Not Quinetta songwriter, but Quinetta Incorporated.

Christy Zhou Koval:

Right. Exactly. Kind of like obscure your gender, right? And then also just be proactive about explaining why you're making these lateral moves. And also, earning professional accreditations could also help just to give that more legitimacy to freelancers who are actively seeking out clients. One of the things I would say is that even though we offer these recommendations to the songwriters themselves, we need to make systemic changes. And so we also have advice for policymakers and for clients just at that level there should also be change. And now, of course, the first thing is just being aware. So this research as the first steps to show, "Hey, look, this phenomena exists. You probably want to be aware of this. If you're a client actively seeking out freelancers to help produce your music because you could be missing out on a very competitive talent pool."

Ken Szymusiak:

I know you're continuing to study other interesting novel situations that occur in the workplace, specifically around language and how people's dress codes might affect employees.

Christy Zhou Koval:

In general, I'm interested in kind of all forms of diversity in the workplace and then it's effect. Our workplace and the world is becoming so global. I mean, you hear so many different languages spoken around you. So I'm curious what effect, if any there is, for language diversity in the workplace? For example, things like if you're a non-English speaker, does it make a difference if you are given the freedom or not given the freedom to speak your own native language in the workplace? How does that do for your wellbeing? But also, from someone who does not speak this foreign language, if you hear foreign language in the workplace, how does that make you feel and how would that impact your attitudes in the workplace, your wellbeing and your interactions with the person who's speaking the foreign language? And so those are just topics around language that I'm interested in.

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So I have this other project as you mentioned on dress labor. So it takes a bit different direction so it's not biases per se. In this project, I'm curious about the effort we put into dressing ourselves for work and how that could impact our workplace experience. That's the first thing we do before we go to work. Well wait, everybody has to get dressed for work. For some people, they spent a lot of time and effort getting dressed in the morning, but other people just grab whatever they see in their closet. There's variation in how much effort one puts into dressing themselves for work. This phenomena, what we call dress labor, so the effort you put into dressing, how that impacts our energy and engagement in the workplace. So we have some initial findings showing that for those who don't really identify with their organizations, dress labor makes them feel depleted and they're less engaged at work later that day. Whereas for those who highly identify with their organizations, dress labor actually makes them feel energized and they're more engaged at work.

Ken Szymusiak:

It's funny because I've had multiple conversations with colleagues about this. I mean, my first job out of college, I remember it was a suit and tie thing and it was every day. And then how that's just waned, but at the same time now post-COVID, I think we all took probably a major step back in terms of dress labor. It was like put on sweatpants and a dress shirt. But that's how we lived life for two years, three years almost. And now you see people dress up and you're like, "I remember doing that." I was like, "I kind of felt pride when I did that". It felt like it did kick off your day if you got a little more dressed up than usual. And now people are like, "Where are you job interviewing?" They question why you're dressed up, which is an interesting thing to see come full circle.

Quinetta Roberson:

My first corporate position was at a financial institution, and everyone had on blue, black, gray. I didn't have those colors. And so I asked if we could wear something else. And they're like, "Sure, you could wear whatever." And the next day, it just looked like Skittles in the room. It says everybody had on orange and red and yellow. But I'm wondering if then the dress labor has to do with norms. So the effort you put in to be consistent with the norms of your work environment and or is it that your coworkers or people at work pick up on your dress labor? So if somebody might only put in a little bit of effort, but maybe they're just very skilled at it. And so it doesn't take a lot of effort. Can you tease that out or do you tease that out in your research?

Christy Zhou Koval:

So everybody has a baseline amount of effort you put into dressing yourself. But some days, you probably put in a little bit more effort. Other days, you probably put a little less effort. Just depending on the day or the events that you anticipate unfolding in the workplace. So I always give an example of like for me, on my teaching days, I put in a lot more extra, do my hair, makeup. And what do I want to wear to appear professional and authoritative, right? On my research days, when I'm just going to be holed up in my office, I'm like, "Sweater is fine." So we're interested in these fluctuations above or below your baseline level or any individual's baseline level, so what we call within person variation. And how that fluctuation impact your energy level more or less than any particular day.

To your point though about dress norms, we ask participants, "Hey, is there a strong dress norm in your workplace or not?" And we control for that as well. So we still see that across the board, whether someone works for workplace that has really strict or very clear dress norms versus very vague or ambiguous dress norms across the board. We do seem to observe this effect.

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Quinetta Roberson:

I know also sometimes we talk about doing “me-search”, that we study things that are relevant or important to us. What inspired you to research these topics and issues or motivated your interest in diversity and inclusion?

Christy Zhou Koval:

We spend such a big chunk of our life in the workplace. It's safe to say that we want to be happy where we work. And to be happy, we know a lot of researchers shows we want to be treated fairly and we want to feel like we belong in our workplace. I'm inspired to do research in the DEI space because these topics and issues can just have such a profound impact on one's wellbeing and happiness in the workplace and just life in general. And so to me this feels like very impactful work and it's fun to study hair and dress as an example. But yes.

Ken Szymusiak:

On that topic, we have a variety different research projects and topics you've been diving into. What surprised you the most as you've explored these?

Christy Zhou Koval:

I guess not so much surprising as encouraging, if I could say. Which is that over time, I do see my data especially from the last few years, that there has been an increasing amount of awareness and support for DEI issues. So that has been pretty encouraging. At the same time though, whenever I talk about my research, I still have a number of people coming up to me and tell me, "Yeah, they resonate with the findings from my research." So it feels like there's still a lot of work that needs to be done.

Quinetta Roberson:

So here's a gotcha question. How have you used your research in your own work and or life?

Christy Zhou Koval:

I definitely try to be more agentic in negotiating for things I want. I have a daughter and I teach her to be agentic and speak for herself. I definitely think about those issues a lot, so it has been informative in my personal life as well.

Quinetta Roberson:

From your findings, I'm thinking about hair at work. I'm thinking about dress effort as I come to work. I'm thinking about being a specialist versus generalist, et cetera. But as you mentioned earlier, we don't really want to victim blame or put all the onus on individuals who are experiencing the stereotyping and the biases, et cetera, to have to make changes. What's the thing or things you hope your research does to help business leaders and or policymakers?

Christy Zhou Koval:

I think the first thing is just get the message out there really, because a lot of these biases are pretty subtle. By being able to really show in a very evidence-based way that these subtle biases do exist. And that they can, and they do have a significant impact on individual's careers and their experiences at work. I'm hoping that's the first step for policymakers to be aware and then to hopefully help to minimize these biases.

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Quinetta Roberson:

I think it's also important to amplify, for example, your research on hair discrimination. There's legislation like the CROWN Act, for example. And so there are really some real-world important practical implications for policy and for businesses, et cetera that are coming from your work.

Christy Zhou Koval:

Yes, it has been very rewarding to see the impact my work has for real policy changes.

Quinetta Roberson:

Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast, Christy. It has been great talking to you today.

Christy Zhou Koval:

So it's a pleasure being here.

Quinetta Roberson:

How can we keep up with your work going forward?

Christy Zhou Koval:

You can find me and my research on my faculty website. I'm also on Google Scholar, LinkedIn, and Twitter. So just Google my name, Christy Zhou Koval at MSU and you'll be able to find me.

Ken Szymusiak:

Well, if you want more Broad news and insights, you can follow us on social media platforms, @MSUBroadCollege or visit us on the web at broad.msu.edu/news.

Quinetta Roberson:

And remember, like, rate, and subscribe to Broad Matters on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. That does it for this episode. I'm Quinetta Roberson.

Ken Szymusiak:

And I'm Ken Szymusiak. Join us next time to hear faculty and staff weighing in on relevant issues and discussing how their work makes an impact, illuminating how and why Broad Matters.