



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 17: KATHLEEN SLEVIN – AGE/ING PART 1

Kathleen Slevin

I'll always argue that if you want to understand people in the labor force, you really need a life course perspective. You need to see where they started. You need to see how they progress through the labor force.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome, listeners, to another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. Thanks, as always, for joining us. It truly is an honor to welcome today's guest to this episode. This episode is really exciting, not just because of the content but because of the prolific nature of our guest. Again, it's an honor to welcome Kate Slevin, who is Chancellor Professor Emeritus of sociology here at William & Mary. Kate is an award-winning researcher and teacher. She's a thought leader. She has served in a variety of administrative capacities here at William & Mary, including as Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. And Kate studies the intersections of age and other mechanisms of social inequality. You are in for a true treat. So, Kate, thank you so much for joining us. Before we begin, why don't you go ahead, introduce yourself, tell us who you are, what you do, and then we'll kick off our conversation?

Kathleen Slevin

My name is Kathleen Slevin. I grew up in Northern Ireland as a member of the Catholic minority. I went to a Catholic boarding school in Northern Ireland, and then I went to University in Dublin. I studied sociology, and I came to the United States as a young woman after undergraduate school to the University of Georgia, where I did my degree in sociology. My area of concentration then was gender and gender inequality. And as I progressed in my career, I added an emphasis on age and studying age. And that became a very interesting segue into studying retirement and particularly women in retirement because there was almost in my discipline nothing written about women in retirement. What was written was really quite biased because the assumption was women retire much more easily than men because they go back to being housewives. Well, I said to myself, well, you know what? As a woman in the workforce, I never wanted to be a housewife. So it doesn't really make much sense that, as a retired woman, that would be the attraction to retirement. So that started a series of studies specifically on women in retirement and issues surrounding age and age inequality. And that's

really. I have three books, two of them co-author, no all of them co authored, and I have a slew of articles, but they've all concentrated on basically gender and age. And of course, as a woman who is now in an old age myself, I find this kind of even more interesting as I now live what I have been writing about. So that's the short version of my life.

Phil Wagner

A short version, we'll take it. Part of what we try to do in these podcast episodes is do a deep dive in individual areas with the full recognition that, number one, that's impossible. And number two is not best practice. We know that there are so many identity intersections. And one of your books, though, *Stumbling Blocks to Stepping really strong* book on this issue, looks at the lives and stories of 50 professional African American women. What did you learn about intersections like between age and gender, and race in that project? Can you speak to that?

Kathleen Slevin

Okay, can I go back a little bit just to lay a foundation, because I think it'll make our lives much easier, as we discussed? So I want to first just talk about age and ageism just as a foundation because that kind of covers the ground for everything we'll talk about. So if you think about age, it's an identity, just like race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and all of these identities really serve as critical locations that shape our lives. And all of them are embedded, as sociologists would say, into social structure. So if you want to look at the workplace, the workforce, all of these entities are embedded into the social structure, and our jobs really are to expose the ways in which they're embedded. And when we do that, one of the things that we see is that age takes on a very unique and special place, especially in the United States. And in general, I will be talking about the United States but because there's a glorification of youthfulness in the United States, and there's a very strong ageism, not just in the workplace but in the society in general. Now, unlike racism and sexism, ageism is openly accepted. People make jokes about old people. Old people make jokes about themselves. So even among the old, it's the one identity, one might say, certainly one contrasted with gender and with race, where those who are occupying this stage of life really make fun of themselves. And we don't find that with race. We don't find that people of color denigrate themselves. We don't find that women, in general, denigrate themselves, but we do find with age that we have such a pervasive emphasis on being youthful in this culture that we do denigrate old age. And so if we look at ageism as a systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, what happens is then we start to treat them as other, and that becomes a problem. And of course, that starts to intersect with other identities, whether it's gender being one of the most powerful ones because we know that women experience ageism earlier than men, and we know that in general, women experience more ageism than men. Part of that has to do with the fact that we live in a culture of youthfulness and we emphasize looking young. And so we put that onus on women more than men, so that when men start to age, we say, oh, to you, for example, you look so distinguished. Oh, don't you look such a lovely grey-haired man? He looks so distinguished. Women of the same age, we say, yes, they're really past their prime. So that becomes a problem that has all sorts of implications for the world of work. So

we know, and I'm almost finished, that being old and the notion of old carries a very unique stigma with it. And we know that bodies, our bodies are the sites of the judgment about age. We live in a culture that where age is being biomedicalized. And so if you, Philip or me, decide, you know what, I don't like to look old. I really am going to do things to make myself look more youthful. I'm going to dye my hair. I'm going to Botox my face. I'm going to get cosmetic surgery. We now know that age a lot. We can't change our race. We can increasingly maybe play with gender, but we certainly can't change our race, but we can do things biomedically to make ourselves look younger. That presents its own set of challenges. And I'm going to make two other points about age. If we look at age, particularly as we are sociologists, we talk about chronological age, and that is obviously, I am 40, I am 50, I am 60, the chronology of age. And we know that people can be seen as old at different stages. And I'll give some examples, and it's important for employment. A woman model at 30 could be considered old. A professional football player at 40 is usually considered old, but a Senator who is 70 is considered an appropriate age to be in that role. So chronological age is a complicated and often not particularly useful way to look at people in the labor force. So that's number one. Secondly, we have functional age, and functional age is really about an individual's physical and mental capabilities. So are you Phil at your age? Are you physically and mentally? Do you have disabilities? How is your eyesight, how's your body strength, and so forth? So functional age is a much different thing. But the one thing that we know is that, unlike functional age, chronological age is a very poor predictor of many things, including what happens in the labor force. So I wanted to kind of lay that foundation.

Phil Wagner

No, that's such a good foundation because I think that it's so important to distinguish those avenues. And we just got done recording an episode for this series on size diversity and thinking about the Biomedicalization of weight and size configurations. So it really shows how malleable some of these are, while they're also permeable, such a good foundation. Let's talk about age, then, as an intersecting concept. So again, in that book, *Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones*, you really look at the lives and stories of African American women who are professionals and working through the intersections of age, gender, race, three really complicated intersecting variables. What did you find out in that project? What does that do to shape your understanding of the topic we're talking about?

Kathleen Slevin

Fascinating. Well, first of all, it's provided me with my own role model. These women provided me with my own role model for retirement. Why don't we look at these women? We looked at these women for a very pragmatic reason. They were part of a cohort where their white counterparts were typically not in the labor force or if they had been in the labor force. So these women, when I interviewed them, their average age was 69. They were highly educated. Twenty-four of them had master's degrees. Nine of them had PhDs. They were not typical, but they were women who had always been in the labor force, unlike their white contemporaries, because white privileged women, educated women at the time these women were coming up, dropped out when they had children. So to see these women through their

life course in the labor force and then to see them in retirement presented us as sociologists with a very interesting way of seeing a group of women who had never exited the labor force and they had come through the labor force through tremendous systemic racism and tremendous systemic sexism. And so the intersection of those created for them life opportunities that had they been white and had they been male, many of them probably would have ended up being President of the United States or some of them. I mean, they were just so well qualified, but they worked in segregated they were almost all in education because that's all that was available to them. We have one lawyer. We have one MD. The rest were in education. That's what was available in the 1950s and 60s to educated women. So they went through their work lives in a very, very segregated system. We took a life course perspective. And I think I'll always argue that if you want to understand people in the labor force, you really need a life course perspective. You need to see where they started. You need to see how they progressed through the labor force. And so these women, in many ways, they were very successful, certainly compared to they were very successful they didn't have peers, let's put it that way. But race and gender very powerfully shaped their work lives. As I said, they experienced a lot of very blatant discrimination. Promotions they didn't get. Salaries they were in school systems. Once the school systems integrated, they were actually in school systems where they could demonstrate they could look at the statistics and find that they were getting paid several thousand dollars a year and less than some white women with less qualifications than they had. So the discrimination that they faced was really pervasive. But they were very resilient, strong women. So they were; also, I think one of the things that fascinates us about them, certainly compared to their white cohorts, if you look at white people, even today in the labor force, white people tend to take a very individualistic notion of success. My success is my success, and what I do is about me. Whereas African Americans and particularly women of the generation we interviewed, very much saw their role as race uplift. They saw that as educators, their job was not just to educate kids. It was to take particularly black kids from disadvantaged backgrounds and to give them the advantages and the education that they needed in order to succeed. They were conscious of that. They spent time with these kids outside school. They mentored these kids. They did what in the sociology literature is called race work. They were very conscious of doing race work. And then finally, I would say that when we talk to them as we were talking to them in retirement, we find that they engaged in tremendous unpaid labor in retirement. Unlike their white counterparts, who, for example, privileged white women would tend to go to museums and work as dolcents in museums, or they would work in garden clubs or whatever affluent white women do. These women spent their time working in the black community to advantage or to minimize the disadvantage, particularly young people in the black community were experiencing. So just one little example, when I would try to get on their calendars now, these are retired. Remember when I tried to get on their calendars, it often took me three to four weeks to get on their calendars. They were like, oh, no, I have three things to do this day, and I have to go to the school system, and I'm tutoring kids. It was unbelievable. So I think it underscored the way that race and gender intersected throughout their lives, the discrimination, the race work that they did, the unpaid labor that they did in retirement to really better their communities.

Phil Wagner

That unpaid labor is something we definitely want to talk through as well. We're going to run a podcast episode later in the series on the role that particularly people of color, and now I think Asian American people as well are carrying into the world of workplace from the trauma that exists outside. That doesn't go away when you clock into your nine to five, right.

Kathleen Slevin

Exactly.

Phil Wagner

All of the extra responsibilities that are carried along, and certainly want to explore that. But you've also written on age as a sort of prime space for social inequality. What are the tensions between inequalities that are brought about by age in the workplace? And then what about the privileges brought about by age, things like security and longevity, and all the things that come with tenure in the workplace?

Kathleen Slevin

Right. I think the most useful concept to help us explore that is the notion of cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage because if you look at cumulative advantage and you take a life course perspective, a man or woman, and let's say a white man, just for the sake of argument, a white man who in his earlier life has been very advantaged, has gone to the right schools, has been mentored by other powerful white men who have taken them along, who has played golf, who has had all of the unseen advantages that come with being a privileged person and being surrounded by privileged persons, then I think you see how cumulative advantage really works. And as that man goes up the hierarchy and then becomes an older man, you often find he is turning backward, and he is doing the same thing typically to other white men because that's who remind him of himself. So we know those stories of cumulative advantage, and then the other side of that coin is cumulative disadvantage. So you start off on the wrong side of the tracks. You don't go to the schools where you have the contacts. You get into the workforce. You're kind of marginalized in the workforce. Promotions come along, and for a variety of reasons, you don't get the promotion. Then you have how all of these issues play out of privilege and disadvantage. We know that men of color don't have the same advantages that white men have. We know that white women have advantages. And I would be a very good example of that myself. Even though I came as an immigrant, nobody stopped ever in my career. Nobody stopped and said, you know what? You talk weird. Where are you from? They would say, oh, I love your accent. Where are you from? Ireland. I love Ireland. And so they would love me. I had Turkish friends who were colleagues. And when they went into the classroom, for example, they had a hard time. Students were like. I don't understand you. Why don't you speak English the way the rest of us speak English? So there you see kind of cumulative disadvantage, even if you look, say, at white women.

Phil Wagner

But doesn't that change who then or how we teach? So thinking as educators, so often, we reduce this to a simple upward trajectory based on merit. Right. Like based on cumulative achievements. And I think fundamentally rewrites our pedagogical responsibility to prepare students with diverse experiences for the realities that may not be necessarily how it works.

Kathleen Slevin

Yes. Well, let's even talk a little bit there, Phil, about diversity within groups, and that's kind of what I was hinting at. But one of the things that we do when we stereotype is that we homogenized members of the group. We treat them all the same. All old people are the same. All Latinos are the same. All Asians are the same. And we know that that is such a false way, whether we're in the labor force or not, to homogenize people. For example, if you look at immigrants, somebody could be a recent arrival. They could be a fifth-generation American. Hispanic or Latinx are very diverse. You have Mexican Americans who are mostly seen as Brown. You have Puerto Ricans who are mostly seen as black. You have Cubans who are often seen as white. You have Asians who are also very diverse. You have Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean. So the extent to which, whether in the workplace or the real world, that we homogenize a group and say, oh, they're all immigrants, or they're all Asians, or they're all whatever, we're doing an enormous disservice to diversity. Does that make sense?

Phil Wagner

That makes total sense. I couldn't even respond because I'm really trying to process because there's such nuance here. For as much as we're talking about age simultaneously, we aren't. Because we can't, right. That goes back. You cannot reduce down to just the simplest root of it all because those roots are so intersectional. It's so strong. So there seems to be another layer of inequality here. And you hinted at this just a bit ago that your work really touches on. And then, when we think of the labor force, the labor market, when we think about labor, we think of paid labor. Right. Can you speak to the issue of unpaid labor, particularly for women, and how that shapes their role?

Kathleen Slevin

Yeah, there's a huge amount written in sociology about unpaid labor, and I've always loved that literature. And, of course, when we talk about unpaid labor, it's not exclusively the labor of women, although it is certainly predominantly the labor of women. And when we look at it in the case of women, we need to look at women who are working outside the home. So we know, for example, that working mothers, full-time working mothers spend 50% more time each day caring for kids than fathers. That's unpaid labor. We know in this century, and we know in the last certainly 30 to 40 years, that men have been much more engaged in household work than their fathers or grandfathers were. But still, women still carry the burden. And I'll give you a very personal example. When we talk about, we're going to talk more about COVID. I have a daughter who's in her 30s, married, with two young children, very privileged. She's a fertility nurse. Her husband is a Vice President of a start-up. They have two little kids under four and six. COVID hit and the nanny. So they were privileged enough

to have a nanny. The nanny got freaked out, and she said, I'm out of here. And the five-year-old was starting kindergarten online. So my daughter had to quit her job. Now, why did they decide that? They decided that because her husband made more money than her. Again, the unpaid labor by default came to the woman in the family, and she was the one who has to. She is the one. It's not that he doesn't help, but she carries the burden of the unpaid labor of childcare. So childcare is a very important part of unpaid labor. But throughout the life course, another very important part of unpaid labor is looking after older members of the family, or if you're at my stage, looking after grandkids. And those are the jobs that fall predominantly to women, particularly in the United States. And, of course, the pandemic absolutely ratcheted up the pressure on women to do that unpaid labor, even more than they had been doing, for they were working two jobs.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. We're going to have the pandemic for sure because I want to set it up. But you raise this notion of this sort of mythical ideal of empowerment that comes from being a woman and being active in the workforce. And there's this other mythical ideal we have surrounding much later in life, which is retirement.

Kathleen Slevin

The golden years.

Phil Wagner

The golden years, right. Like the very idea of retirement that varies greatly by demographic. That's mythical, too, that there's this automatic dream that we think after a 40-year work career, we're just going to settle in and play golf forever, right.

Kathleen Slevin

Look at the ads on television, Phil. You see a very good-looking, predominantly white, sometimes upper-class Blacks. They're standing on a dock. They have a glass of wine in their hand. The sun is setting, and they're just like, what will we do tomorrow? We've reached the good life and so forth. That's such an anathema to what most people experience. That's the life of white affluence. That is not the life that working-class men experience because many of them have to re-enter the labor force in order to make enough money to survive retirement. And, of course, it most certainly is not the life that women, unless they're extremely affluent, have.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. So how does the nature of retirement from the perspective of your work, how does that shift than by those demographic intersections? Can you observe that in any way?

Kathleen Slevin

Yeah. Well, I mean, if you look at social class, you certainly can see that blue-collar. Let me backtrack a little bit. So you have a situation where you have bodies that are not stressed on a

daily basis in terms of your physicality. If there's stresses because you go to the gym or because you go running or whatever, you do not have a job that debilitates your body. Blue-collar men of all races have jobs. And women, whether they're waitresses carrying heavy trays or they're working for Amazon, and they're on their feet 14 hours a day, and their legs are killing them. Their bodies, for lack of a better word, disintegrate much earlier in their lives than people of privilege, like all of us who sit at desks, men and women who work in the fields and are the laborers who are providing our food for us, the same thing, back-breaking work without adequate health benefits. So there's the other part, adequate health benefits. So I used to always say to my students, look at me, a privileged woman who has had excellent health care all of her life, who has had nothing but the best, who exercises for pleasure, who keeps fit. I'm 73 now, and I say this is what 73 and privilege looks like. Take somebody who's 73 who's been working in the fields. Their bodies are going to be in much worse shape. And the way in which they enter and exit the labor force is going to be shaped by their bodily, the way that their bodies have been disintegrating, for lack of a better word. Does that make sense?

Phil Wagner

It makes total sense. And this is not a planned question. So sorry for any surprises, but you keep using this word, that it's the P-word, right. And that's privilege and even teaching diversity courses among students and certainly working among faculty and business professionals. That word is a bad word. I mean, that is a word that elicits so much emotion. Is that just sociological lingo, or how do you make that term palatable?

Kathleen Slevin

How else can you describe the advantages? Call it an advantage. In sociology, it's not a bad word. It's just a descriptive term. It's a non-pejorative descriptive term to describe the lives and the work experiences, but the lives in general of people who have been advantaged by health care, by education, by choices of jobs in the labor force, by availability of childcare, name all of the aspects that create advantage.

Phil Wagner

And the work that you do is so helpful in illuminating that conversation because I think when we work with students to simply recognize privilege as not something to fear or be ashamed of but as a catalyst to produce change, you get those knee jerk reactions to say, well, I had a tough go of it. I didn't grow up rich, and it's so much deeper than that. And it's those intersections again that I think thank you for the work that you do. You talked about COVID earlier, and we want to ask about that as well. So we're certainly still in the midst of COVID-19. As we record this, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Not sure what the other side will look like, but we see another perspective or change coming, we think. So. How has COVID impacted the planned post-professional or retirement life of older workers? Do you have any insight on what COVID did?

Kathleen Slevin

I don't think we know yet, but what do we know, or what can we conjecture? Well, we know that age and older age makes workers much more vulnerable to the virus, and so we know that many had to quit work unwillingly in order to minimize the risk of dying or getting infected. Now, that's if they could afford to. But if they couldn't afford to, and many millions could not afford to, whether they were on the front line, they were essential workers, and so forth. They had no option but to go to work and expose themselves. And many, particularly minorities and people of color, have died at much higher rates because they did not have a choice. The three of us had a choice to sit in our lovely houses and work online. And that is not a choice that everybody has had. And let me give you an example of again of age. I listened early on in the pandemic. I listened to the school Superintendent of Virginia Beach talking about how the teachers her supply of teachers had changed. And she said typically, in a summer, I would get 20 unexpected retirements. And she said last year, in one month, I got 200.

Phil Wagner

Whoa.

Kathleen Slevin

I got 200. Now, teachers, certainly they're not, on the scheme of things, well paid, but they do have advantages that blue-collar people do not have. They have pensions or some form of financial security that allows them to withdraw from the labor force. They may re-enter at another time, but they can withdraw in a way that a blue-collar person can't afford to withdraw. They have to pay the rent, and they don't have a pension, and they don't have a 401K, or there's not enough in their 401K to cover everything. So I think in that way, age and privilege intersect in very interesting ways. And, of course, the ways in which everybody's retirement income has been affected by COVID remains to be seen. People may have to work longer. They probably will have to work longer, particularly those in the service sector. And those in nonunionized jobs because they're going to have to make up for loss. They're going to have to make up for lost time. And many of them have been in tremendous and are in tremendous debt. That's going to take them years to get out of. So their retirements are going to be well. They will not retire. That's my prediction. They will die with their boots on because they won't be able to retire. But as opposed to again, I use that term, not pejoratively privileged, particularly privileged white men, when they exit the labor force, sometimes they re-enter by choice, and they become consultants.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Kathleen Slevin

That's a choice. Most blue-collar people who exit and re-enter the labor force do not do so as a choice. They do so because they need the income. So I think COVID, of course, everything you read about women have said that COVID has knocked working women back ten years, and I believe it. And certainly the example I gave you of my daughter, she's lost a year of

income. She's lost a year of contributions to her 401K. She's lost a promotion that she could have had. That's going to be the story for many women. Now, on the other side of that coin, she could afford to only do the unpaid labor.

Phil Wagner

There's so many again, I keep using the term, but complicated intersections for as dire as the situation is, the goal of our podcast, the goal of our teaching, I think the goal of our day to day work is recognizing that we don't have a magic wand to just wave and fix everything. But by creating awareness and a sense of personal responsibility and ownership, we can start to address some of the systemic inequality as it relates to these issues. But let's assume that we did have a magic wand because I sit and think about that often. If you had a magic wand and you could just wave it, what is one thing you would waive it, and you'd wish that the world of work would do to become a more inclusive place for the people that you've worked with and what your work has revealed.

Kathleen Slevin

I have thought about this so much since you raised it. It's not one answer.

Phil Wagner

Okay. That's all right.

Kathleen Slevin

Okay. So I would say if I were to take the absolutely global big picture, what would it be? It would be, again, taking a life history perspective. And I would say we need to begin by reducing inequities and disrupting all of the ways that needs to be disruptive so that we can get a fairer and more level playing field. So that we would realign labor market policies with schools, with daycare systems, with the modern realities of working parents. Then we would have a permanent federal paid parental leave policy that we would have subsidized daycare, that we would enter the 21st century, for God's sake, like most of the Scandinavian countries, and say, you know, this is the reality. We have fathers and mothers in the workforce, and we cannot ignore that. We cannot leave them on their own. So it would be to create a world of work that reflects the real world. And of course, you know this, work in the United States, people are obsessed by work. It takes a dominance in their lives. Now you say, well, it has to be because I have to make a living. But if you look at vacations in other Western, quote, developed economies, you find that when my husband goes with me to Ireland or to France, he's like, oh, my God, they're on vacation all the time because people do not work. They don't live to work. So I think that the United States, I don't see it coming in my lifetime, but I think that we've got to improve wage equality. We have got to decrease the gender-race gap. We've got to be realistic and say we've got to realign or align our policies with the real world. Does that make sense?

Phil Wagner

It makes such sense. And I'm just sitting here so inspired. For as important as the work is that you do, you're also just a delight to speak with. So if you ever lecture, count me in as a student in the front row because I think we're both here to learn, too. We've committed our lives to this. Our research focuses on this. But for every element, you know, there are some elements that you do not or areas that can continue to grow. I really appreciate you taking the time to educate us. I look forward to reading more of your work, but this means so much to us. I think it's going to just take this conversation in such a powerful direction. So now that we greatly appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Kathleen Slevin

It is my pleasure.

Phil Wagner

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