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# “Why not a blonde woman?”

## Identity realism and diversity work in New York and in Paris

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on 112 in-depth interviews with diversity managers in the regions of New York and Paris throughout the 2010s, this article explores how identity realism plays out in large companies that simultaneously affirm their commitment to abstract individualism and celebrate the benefits of diversity. The notion of identity realism refers to the organizational valuing of workers’ group identity attributes, notably race and gender, for the performance of specific functions. The comparative study shows that while in the United States minority identity (being all but a white male) is perceived as a qualifying attribute for the job, in France, majority identity (white masculinity) is tacitly valued as an asset for the role. Ultimately, the gendered and racialized bodies of diversity managers are major symbolic vehicles through which U.S. and French-based companies align the transnational category of diversity management with distinct national frameworks of equality and difference.

**KEYWORDS** Diversity; workplace; France; United States; comparison; management

In contemporary liberal societies, where the principle of non-discrimination has become a powerful referent, it is mostly regarded as illegitimate and illegal to consider gender and race as valuable qualities for a job. While research on discrimination and segregation has brought to light the structural mechanisms that underlie gender and racial inequalities at work (Acker 2006; Gorman and Mosseri 2019; Nelson and Vallas 2021), the valorization or depreciation of workers’ ascribed identity in assessment and selection processes rarely operates explicitly. It is either entrenched in apparently neutral work routines or takes place behind closed doors. However, in the past decades, the norm of blindness to difference has been rivaled by another equally consensual management discourse, that of diversity, which encourages employers to leverage employee differences to reach organizational goals. In the United States, this managerial ideology has favored the spread of what John Skrentny has called “racial realism,” a strategy by which employers deliberately “use racial differences to their advantage” (Skrentny 2013, 10). One dimension of this process has been the channeling of minorities into a class of “racialized jobs” (Collins 1997), explicitly created to connect the predominantly white organizations with minority issues and communities. The organizational role of diversity

manager, which has become institutionalized within large workplaces, is emblematic of job racialization.

Research on the organizational valuing of identity in contemporary workplaces most often focuses on minority identity and on the U.S. context, where the discourse of diversity was born, and where the language of race is legitimate in social, political and legal life. This article innovates by offering a comparative analysis of the organizational use of workers' identity in large contemporary workplaces in the United States and France, focusing on the case of diversity managers. The comparison between the two national contexts is particularly heuristic. On the one hand, the rhetoric of diversity, celebrating difference and equity for the sake of performance, has become a managerial doxa both in the U.S. and French business worlds. But on the other hand, in contrast to the United States, France is marked by a powerful political discourse that strongly resists the language of identity politics, and refuses to acknowledge ethnoracial categories (Beaman and Petts 2020; Bleich 2000).

Drawing on 112 in-depth interviews with diversity managers in the regions of New York (n = 44) and Paris (n = 68) during the 2010s, this article explores how identity realism plays out in large business organizations that assert their commitment to both abstract individualism and the value of diversity, but are located in two national contexts with contrasting regulations and conversations about difference and equality. The notion of identity realism introduced in this article refers to the organizational valuing of workers' group identity attributes, notably race and gender, for the performance of specific functions. Expanding on John Skrentny's concept of racial realism (2013), identity realism takes up the idea that employers perceive and use workers' identity as a source of specific abilities to accomplish certain tasks and as a way to signal messages to targeted audiences. Compared to racial realism, however, the notion of identity realism involves three main analytical shifts: it applies to a range of workers' group identity traits beyond ethnoracial difference – including gender, which will be particularly explored in this article; it refers not only to the organizational valuing of minority identity, but also to that of majority identity; and beyond the practices of employers, it focuses on how workers respond to the organizational commodification of their identity.

The comparative study shows that in France as in the United States organizations assign value to identity traits of workers dedicated to diversity work. However, identity realism translates into contrasting definitions of the “good diversity officer” in the two contexts: in the United States, the minority identity (being all but white male) was generally perceived as a qualifying attribute for the job, whereas in France, the majority attributes (being white, but also being male) were tacitly viewed as advantages for the role. I will argue that gendered and racialized bodies of diversity managers are major symbolic vehicles through which U.S. and French-based companies align the transnational category of diversity management with distinct national frameworks of equality and difference.

## The organizational value of race and gender

Research on inequality in organizations, professions and occupations has documented the mechanisms leading to the overrepresentation of women and ethnoracial minorities (and other disadvantaged groups) in less favorable positions in terms of prestige, authority, working and employment conditions, compensation, and mobility opportunities, at different levels of the job hierarchy. The consideration of group identity traits in the selection, assessment and promotion of workers is largely denied in contemporary liberal societies, and particularly as one moves up the hierarchy of qualifications and jobs. In professions and higher managerial ranks, where whiteness and maleness are tacit markers of professionalism, smartness and cultural fit, the commitment to the principle of abstract meritocracy is more ostensibly affirmed

(Rivera 2015). However, in the last few decades, the legal and moral norm of blindness to difference has been challenged by management strategies that deliberately, and more or less overtly, take workers' identity traits into consideration. The U.S.-born discourse of diversity management, which has quickly become a global management motto, has openly encouraged employers to capitalize on the cultural differences of their employees (Dobbin 2009).

In the United States, the rise of the diversity rhetoric has fueled the development of what John Skrentny has called "racial realism", a strategy by which employers "use racial differences to their advantage" (Skrentny 2013, 10). Many employers have been perceiving race as a job qualification for certain occupations, not only because it is depicted as generating specific cultural skills, such as the ability to connect with minorities constituents (what Skrentny calls "racial abilities"), but also because it allows certain messages, such as the organization's commitment to racial fairness, to be conveyed to targeted audiences, from customers to regulators ("racial signaling"). In a related perspective, also based on the study of the U.S. case, legal scholar Nancy Leong has called "racial capitalism," a process by which "a white individual or a predominantly white institution derives social or economic value from associating with individuals with nonwhite racial identities" (Leong 2013, 2154). Extending this model to a broader range of power relations, the notion of "identity capitalism" refers to a system in which out-group identities based on race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, etc., are commodified for the benefit of in-group members (Leong 2016). Responding to the exploitation of their identity, some out-group members have become "identity entrepreneurs": by strategically highlighting their minority identity and manipulating it to fit the expectations of the majority group, they intend to "leverage their out-group status to derive social and economic value for themselves" (Cha and Roberts 2019; Leong 2016, 1334; see also Wald 2016).

In U.S. workplaces, a central dimension of the commodification of minority identity has been the channeling of professionals of color into a particular class of management jobs that Sharon Collins called "racialized" jobs (Collins 1997). In contrast to "mainstream jobs", racialized jobs explicitly link the predominantly white organization with minority communities and issues, such as marketing products to the Black community, running affirmative action programs, dealing with "urban affairs", or managing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Several studies have explored the benefits and costs of racialized occupations for workers who hold them. On the one hand, a study conducted by Adia Wingfield and colleagues on diversity officers in the U.S. found that holding this role with "a heightened racial salience" was often described by professionals of color as a source of satisfaction and personal fulfillment (Wingfield, Hordge-Freeman, and Smith-Lovin 2018). Diversity officers interviewed for the study appreciated a role that "enable them to address issues of inclusiveness" (211) and offered relative protection from racist microaggressions. On the other hand, minority workers are often pigeonholed in racialized jobs, with few career perspectives within the field, and limited opportunities to leverage their skills in mainstream jobs and careers (Abad 2019; Collins 1997). Assigning people of color within the narrow confines of a racialized position replicates the racial hierarchy of predominantly white workplaces, keeping minorities out of the most valued organizational and professional positions. Moreover, the racialized identities of diversity officers are used by organizations as "trophies" to showcase their virtuous commitment to equal opportunity and equity without substantially combating racial discrimination and inequality, thus reproducing the racial status quo (Ahmed 2018; Shin and Gulati 2011).

Focusing on workers whose job is to do diversity work from a comparative lens, this article aims to fill several gaps in the literature on the commodification of gender and racial identities as well as in the field of diversity studies. First of all, most of scholarship on racialized jobs has been conducted in the United States. Yet, the logics that govern racialized – and more broadly, difference- based – management strategies, such as globalization, the rise of

the diversity norm, and the demographic diversification of the workforce, concern a much larger number of countries. More research is needed outside the U.S. to test the validity of these concepts, especially in contexts where race is not a legitimate language, like France. Second, while most empirical studies on the managerial uses of workers' identity have focused on race or gender, looking at the diversity occupational role, which is closely linked to issues of race and gender, enables to explore the intersection of gender and race as organizationally valuable identities. A third gap in the literature is the disjunction between research on the organizational valuing of minority identity and research on the privileges associated with majority identity, such as whiteness and masculinity (for an exception, see Wald 2016). Adopting a comparative perspective between the United States and France allows us to observe the organizational valuing of minority identity (in the United States) and that of the majority identity (in France) for the same occupational role, that of diversity manager. To carry out this analysis, I introduce the notion of identity realism, which expands on that of racial realism (Skrentny 2013). Identity realism refers to the organizational valuing of workers' group identity traits, such as gender and race, as qualifying attributes for the performance of specific functions. Similar to racial realism, identity realism is a strategy of valuing workers' identity for the sake of organizational goals. This conceptual framework, however, extends Skrentny's notion of racial realism in three ways: (1) rather than focusing merely on race, identity realism refers to the organizational valuing of various workers' group identity traits; (2) identity realism refers to the commodification of not only minority identity, but also majority identity; (3) far from a top-down management practice imposed on passive workers, identity realism can be actively embraced by minority and majority workers.

## Fieldwork and methods

The data and findings draw from a larger qualitative study on corporate diversity practices in the United States and France. The core of the fieldwork is a series of 112 in-depth interviews conducted between 2008 and 2016 with full-time diversity managers, most of them working in the headquarters of large companies based in the regions of New York (n = 44) and Paris (n = 68). Diversity managers were recruited on LinkedIn and by snowballing, with the aim to build a stratified panel of participants holding various hierarchical ranks (from entry-level manager to chief diversity officer) and working in a broad range of industries (from finance to energy, consumer goods, tech, and equipment). The fieldwork mostly took place in the broader metropolitan areas of Paris and New York, which concentrate headquarters of large companies, where this type of functional specialization is possible.

Participants were asked about their career path, their skills and competencies, their daily work activities, their tactics to gain organizational legitimacy, and their perception of the role. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. They were recorded, transcribed and analyzed inductively using the software Atlas-Ti. I identified 42 codes, including "diversity management and race", "diversity management and gender", and "valued skills for the job". The interviews were accompanied by participant observations I conducted between 2011 and 2021 in diversity practitioners events, such as seminars, conferences, and workshops. In France, as the facilitator of a working group on the "diversity label" within the main diversity professional organization, I was able to observe 30 hours of meetings in 2014-2015. On the U.S. side, I attended two 2-day diversity workshops held in New York in 2011, as well as 20 hours of webinars between 2011 and 2021. During the same period, I gathered a corpus of writings, images and videos on diversity management that were highlighted by diversity practitioners on LinkedIn, resulting in a 180-page text file. This content was analyzed inductively and qualitatively.

Because the initial focus of the research was not the managerial uses of identity, I did not conduct interviews with the people in charge of the selection of diversity managers. The organizational valuing of diversity managers' gender and racial identity emerged as a salient dimension as the fieldwork progressed. In the interviews, this issue was addressed incidentally by some respondents, in particular when I asked them to talk about their career paths, the reasons why they had been attracted to and selected for the job, and the qualities and skills required to perform it. My personal identity traits as a white, French woman in her thirties holding a research position in a French academic institution most likely limited my access to the experiences of racialized diversity managers. Luzilda Carrillo Arciniega, by contrast, emphasized the research benefits of having a “familiar brown face” in her ethnographic fieldwork with diversity practitioners in the U.S. (Carrillo Arciniega 2021, 230). But on the other hand, in the U.S., my majority identity along racial lines was mitigated by my status as a foreigner, recently arrived in the country, speaking imperfect English. This foreignness enabled me to establish connivance with non-white respondents who had immigrated to the U.S., and to collect data on the organizational value of ethnicity. In France, being perceived as white allowed me to collect data on the organizational value of whiteness.

## Diversity management, race and gender

In the U.S., diversity management emerged in the late 1980s, amidst the triumph of market ideology and the growing threats to the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) programs that U.S. companies had implemented in response to civil rights legislation (Dobbin 2009; Edelman 2016). The diversity programs that rebranded “old” EEO policies were mostly justified by their economic benefits: diversity was more about doing well than doing good. Moreover, the meaning of diversity was expanded to designate a wide range of individual differences, from thinking style to educational background, beyond race and gender. In France, corporate diversity programs developed in the 2000s as anti-discrimination law expanded under the impetus of the European Union. Several French statutes increased the number of grounds for discrimination claims, outlawed indirect discrimination, and made it easier for plaintiffs to seek redress.

Diversity management emerged as the main corporate response to this new legal regime. By the early 2010s, the global discourse of diversity, emphasizing the economic advantages of diversity, as well as the wide array of differences to be celebrated, had spread to the French business world, and very large companies had put in place structures and staffing that resembled those of their U.S. counterparts. When the study was conducted in the 2010s, diversity managers in both countries performed quite similar tasks: raising employee awareness, arranging diversity training, facilitating employee resource groups, expanding the recruitment and promotion pool to underrepresented candidates, monitoring the representation of disadvantaged groups, among others. They carried out these activities alone or with very small teams at the headquarters of large companies, usually within HR departments, with very limited budgets and no authority on other departments. In the U.S. and in France, corporate diversity programs were confined at the surface of organizations, far from substantially challenging organizational norms and routines that reproduce discrimination and inequality (Bereni 2023; Berrey 2015).

While the global discourse of diversity celebrates a wide range of individual traits, diversity policies have primarily focused on certain differences. On both sides of the Atlantic, initiatives targeting women – and more particularly those of the managerial elite – have been central (Berrey 2015; Pochic 2022). But U.S. corporate diversity programs differ from their French counterparts when it comes to the salience of race: employee resource groups have typically formed around different ethnic and racial identities, ethnoracial monitoring has long been routine, and minorities have been one of the main targets of programs aimed at



diversifying recruitment and promotion (Berrey 2015). This tropism reflects the salience of race as a social, political, and legal category in the United States, which is marked by the history of slavery and de jure segregation on its territory, and where about 40 per cent of the population identifies as racial or ethnic minority in 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In the United States, race has been one of the main concerns of antidiscrimination public policies since the 1960s; the racial justice movement has been powerful and visible; claims of racial discrimination have been perceived by large corporations as particularly costly threats to their reputations.

In France, although the term diversity was introduced by its first advocates as an indirect way of talking about ethnoracial minorities, the latter have only been a marginal target of corporate diversity policies, which have focused on other disadvantaged groups, primarily women and disabled workers. In the 2010s, the share of people of colonial and post-colonial descent could be estimated at around 15 per cent of the general population (Beauchemin, Hamel, and Simon 2018). Due to the French history of colonial and racial domination, descent-based difference has long been an axis of power relations and social hierarchy. Immigrants of non-European origin and their descendants (most of whom arrived after the 1960s, mainly from the former colonized territories of the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia), as well as persons from French overseas territories, face structural discrimination and racism. But like in other Western European societies such as Italy and Germany, the language of ethnoracial difference has not historically acquired, in France, the same social, political and legal legitimacy as in the United States (Morning and Maneri 2022; Möschel 2011; Peer and Sabbagh 2008). After the French Revolution, slavery and legal discriminations based on racial assignments were primarily deployed in colonized overseas territories. The Vichy regime that collaborated with Nazi Germany during the Second World War opened a short historical sequence during which the French State applied ethnoracial classifications in metropolitan France, in the service of a racist and anti-Semitic ideology and the persecution of the Jews. Since this political episode, the French Constitution prohibits basing public policies on ethnoracial nomenclatures. In line with this legal framework, most French elites leaning both left and right, but also prominent French anti-racist organizations, have long been hostile to racial classifications, fueling a particularly maximalist version of the global ideology of colorblindness (Beaman and Petts 2020; Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin 2023; Mazouz 2021). And yet, despite the persistent illegitimacy of the language of ethnoracial difference, the discourse of diversity has enjoyed growing popularity in the French business world since the 2000s. In France like elsewhere, the term “diversity” has typically referred to ethnoracial representation, as indicated by the common phrase “issu de la diversité” (from a diverse background) and recurring public calls for (implicitly, ethnoracial) diversity in politics, culture, and employment. Therefore, on both sides of the Atlantic, the success of the keyword “diversity” has ultimately rested on its plasticity. It has been used alternatively to emphasize or to downplay racial issues.

## The race and gender of diversity managers in New York and Paris

A comparative examination of the gender and ethnoracial breakdown of the diversity managers interviewed for the study reveals a contrasted picture (see Figure 1). In both countries, women accounted for seven out of 10 respondents. But in the United States, ethnoracial minorities represented nearly eight out of 10 respondents, twice as much as their share of the U.S. population. Women of color made up by far the largest group, followed by men of color, white women, and white men. This ethnoracial composition of the respondent population was consistent with the findings of existing professional surveys in the U.S. (Dexter 2010). Among ethnoracial minorities, African-Americans or Blacks were the largest group (50 per cent), followed by Hispanics (37 per cent), then Asian-Americans (13 per cent). The

overrepresentation of Blacks/African-Americans among respondents was particularly marked, as this group represented about 13 per cent of the U.S. labor force in the 2010s. By contrast, among diversity managers interviewed in France, three groups emerged in order of importance: white women, white men, and finally women and men of color (persons of North African descent and Blacks). The over-representation of women was consistent with the findings of surveys conducted by French diversity practitioners organizations (Bereni, Prud’homme, and Coulon 2017). On the other hand, drawing on existing ethn racial data (Beauchemin, Hamel, and Simon 2018), it can be assumed that ethn racial minorities were not concentrated in the role of diversity manager in France, in contrast to what was observed on the U.S. side.

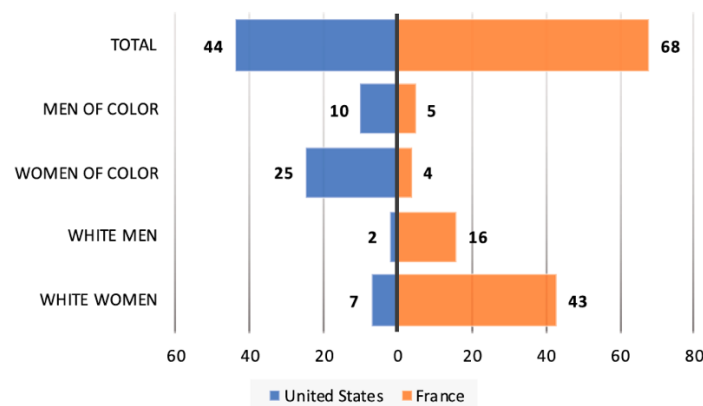


Figure 1. Demographics of respondents.

The overrepresentation of women among diversity managers in both countries, and of ethn racial minorities in the United States, reflects the concentration of these demographic groups in “soft” support roles, such as HR. However, I argue that it also indicates a specific dynamic of identity realism, i.e. the organizational valuing of gender and racial identity for the performance of the diversity function. The next two sections highlight the contrasting ways in which identity realism operated in the United States and France in the 2010s. While in the United States minority identity was valued as an asset for the job, in France it was majority identity that made a “good” diversity manager.

## In New York: “That job for a black woman”

### Managing diversity: a tacitly racialized job

While the diversity credo has relentlessly celebrated the contribution of differences to organizational performance, few managerial discourses – even in the United States – have overtly advocated the assignment of workers to occupations associated with their ethn racial and/or gender identity. The diversity role is no exception. A 2010 report on chief diversity officers in the largest U.S. companies enumerated a long list of skills that did not distinguish them from other business professionals: “business acumen,” “leadership,” “change management,” “result orientation,” “ability to influence,” etc. (Dexter 2010). In the vast of management literature devoted to the skills of diversity managers, the racialized and gendered nature of this job was most often left unsaid. This topic was however addressed in an article by a young (white) human resources consultant, Vadim Liberman, which appeared in 2006 in the journal of The Conference Board – a leading organizations of human resources professionals. The article, devoted to strategies for enhancing the organizational value of diversity, explicitly addressed what almost no one said openly in the field – that companies avoided to appoint white men. As diversity directors and their companies struggle to infuse their businesses with a



rainbow of different backgrounds, there's one department that remains devoid of many colors. Ironically, it's diversity itself. A profession geared toward making corporate America more inclusive remains a clique of African-Americans, particularly black women. (Lieberman 2006, 20).

Comments from the diversity practitioners interviewed in the article revealed their overall adherence to the value of minority identity for the role. While one (white) consultant was quoted saying that "putting a white man in the job" could "improve the stature of the job, so that it's no longer "that job for a black woman," and "show that the company is really serious about diversity issues," this view was isolated. The other diversity practitioners interviewed in the article argued that minorities were more suited for the role. A white man might not be "credible" to minorities within the organization, "who might look at him and say: he's not one of us," said consultant Sondra Thiederman, a white woman who pioneered diversity management in the early 1990s. "A diversity role is not viewed the same way by minorities and women as it is by white men," argued Clayton Osborne, a black man who headed the diversity department of a large company. "Minorities see it as a way of helping other minorities", he added.

Thus, in the few managerial writings acknowledging the value of diversity managers' minority identity, the focus was on the skills they were assumed to possess as a result of their minority experience – what Skrentny (2013) calls racial abilities. Drawing on their ethnoracial background, diversity managers were expected to provide a "communication function" between "people of their own racial background and the predominantly white firm" (Anderson 2011). Yet, the strategy of racial signaling (Skrentny 2013), which consists of assigning to these jobs members of disadvantaged groups in order to communicate the company's commitment to fairness and equity, was almost never acknowledged in the management literature, or only to denounce a lack of sincerity of corporate diversity efforts (Jan 2021).

#### Minority identity: between assignment and circumscribed resource

As in the managerial literature, the connection between minority identity and the diversity occupation was rarely addressed spontaneously by the diversity managers I interviewed in the United States. Yet, this connection appeared clearly through the analysis of their career paths: most non-white diversity managers had racialized careers, i.e. had long specialized in race-related jobs, in human resources, marketing, or communications. It was the case of Richard, an African-American man who was in his early sixties when I met him, in the early 2010s. For the previous three years, he had been chief diversity officer of a multinational consumer goods company. His specialization in diversity came at the end of his career, but it extended a professional trajectory already marked by the organizational valuing of his racial identity. Raised in a working-class family, he began his career as a public relations specialist in a major consumer goods company in the late 1970s. He co-founded the company's first employee network, the Multicultural Organization for Men and Women of Color, in the 1980s. He then worked as a press attaché for African-American elected officials before returning to the business world at the end of the 1990s as director of public affairs for a large company. Because the company was then "facing image problems" – a risk of lawsuits for racial discrimination – he was soon given responsibility for the group's diversity initiative, which confirmed his specialization in this function for the last decade of his career. Among research participants who shared life stories attesting to the racialization of their careers, some presented their minority identity as a source of "intercultural competence."

Such an explicit acknowledgment of the organizational value of minority identity was more often made by respondents with an immigrant background – particularly those identifying as Latinx. Several of them explicitly connected their ethnicity with cultural and linguistic

“skills,” such as speaking Spanish and “understanding” Latin American markets, but also with a cultural sensitivity associated with their minority experience. Alyssa, in charge of “international diversity” in the Diversity & Inclusion team of a large U.S. consumer goods company, was a 45-year-old woman who spoke English with a slight Spanish accent when I met her in 2012. When I asked her how she came to the diversity function, she explained that she had immigrated to the United States 20 years earlier from Puerto Rico, where she obtained a nursing degree. Without mentioning the professional de-qualification she faced after immigrating to the United States, she emphasized the benefits of her ethnic identity in the corporate world; “The fact that I am different allows me to see who else is not being seen.” Employees in the company’s foreign subsidiaries, she said, often perceived the United States as “a nation that pushes and passes through,”: “I’m more open, receptive, curious” she said, referring to her immigrant background that enabled her to “make global connections.” She gave the example of “skin color and religion in India”: “These are sensitive subjects. I couldn’t be imposing the American black and white paradigm!”

Yet, deploying minority identity is an ambivalent strategy for workers. On the one hand, among the diversity managers of color interviewed, those stemming from immigrant and/or working-class background, like Richard and Alyssa, had been able to leverage their minority identity to compensate for their lack of cultural, social and economic capital. Some enjoyed an upwardly mobile and fulfilling career path. On the other hand, only a small minority of diversity practitioners would reach the most prestigious, senior positions of the field, and it appeared particularly difficult, for racialized diversity managers, to transfer their competencies to “mainstream” jobs and careers (Collins 1997). Unsurprisingly, the respondents of color with the most favorable class, educational, and career backgrounds were more reluctant to strategically mobilize their minority identity. During interviews, they expressed concerns about the career risks associated with being an ethnoracial minority occupying a diversity role.

Susan, in her fifties, had been chief diversity officer in the U.S. subsidiary of a large European insurance company for five years when I met her in 2012. Coming from an African-American middle-class background and having graduated in accounting and business from a reputable college, she had joined the company more than 20 years earlier after a consulting experience in a prestigious audit firm. In her company, she pursued a career on the “business side,” she insisted, away from racialized positions. Her achievements within a company that, in her words, was dominated by “middle aged white men,” attracted attention: in the mid-2000s, she was included in the list of “Influential Black Women in Business” drawn up by an influent business magazine. Shortly afterwards, the subsidiary’s CEO asked her to take on the position of chief diversity officer, offering her a promotion from Vice-President to Senior Vice-President and a substantial salary raise. Despite the appeal of this offer, she emphasized her strong initial reservations:

*At first I declined...I didn't see myself in the role. What was the intent? Why me? Because I am black? Because I am a woman? (Interview with Susan, banking, New York, 2012)*

Unlike the vast majority of minority respondents working in U.S.-based companies, Susan refused to define herself as a diversity specialist: she said the diversity manager she replaced in the company “was the consulting type,” whereas she was chosen because of her credibility as a “business person” – “because you need to have relationships to get things done”, she insisted. Determined to “get back to business” after several years in the diversity role, she mentioned her fears of being locked into this position: “It’s hard because now everybody sees me as a diversity person. It’s very hard.” Susan thus rejected the role of what I call minority expert of minorities. Like other diversity managers of color interviewed, who had middle-class

backgrounds and reputable degrees, she perceived the organizational valuing of her racial identity as a denial of her professional and managerial skills, and as a factor potentially limiting her career prospects.

Although women made up a majority of diversity managers interviewed, the diversity function appeared to be more clearly racialized than gendered. This can be explained by the strong historical links between diversity management and public policies against racial discrimination (Berrey 2015). Women from ethnoracial minorities who referred to their identity to justify their career path to diversity management emphasized their ethnic or racial background. Yet, with one exception – a former gender equity consultant –, white female interviewees did not present their gender identity as a factor in their orientation towards a diversity role. All of them (seven of 44 respondents) accessed this position as a result of experience in other highly feminized occupations, such as human resources. In interviews, they presented diversity as one among other roles in their careers. All of them subsequently held other functions in the field of human resources, while only one woman of color (out of 25) left the diversity field five years after the interview. The study thus shows that white women were driven towards the diversity field in a more indirect way than women and men of color, as an extension of women’s broader ascription to “soft” support functions. The main value derived from appointing a white female to a senior diversity role was about signaling the organizational commitment to gender equity, rather than leveraging specific gendered experiences and perspectives.

### In Paris: “Why not a blonde woman?”

“If you’re the son of a black ambassador, there’s nothing to worry about”

For the first diversity entrepreneurs in France, in the mid-2000s, the term diversity had an obvious ethnoracial undertone. Corporate diversity efforts initially developed against the backdrop of growing government concern for fighting discrimination experienced by postcolonial immigrants and their descendants. The impetus was twofold: in 2000 the European Union enacted a Racial Equality directive, and in late 2005 riots ignited predominantly immigrant and ethnoracial minority outer-city neighborhoods of Paris and other cities. In these initial years, minority ethnoracial identity played out as a qualifying attribute for the first appointed diversity managers. Several pioneers in the role came from working-class, immigrant Maghrebian families, who started their careers as community organizers, social workers, or local government officers in the predominantly working-class, immigrant neighborhoods where they had grown up. However, from the end of the 2000s, a process of “whitening” affected diversity management: as it institutionalized, it gradually became detached from the ethnoracial dimensions that had strongly marked its birth, reflecting a more general evolution of anti-discrimination public policies in France (Doytcheva 2020; Mazouz 2021).

The interviews revealed the support and active participation of white diversity managers in this process of whitening diversity management. When I met her, Christelle was a 35-year-old white diversity manager with a HR background who intended to pursue a career in HR outside of diversity. Asked to comment on the low number of ethnoracial minorities on the upper floors of her company, she said that she saw this solely as a reflection of the “problem” of “social background,” as did most of the white respondents:

*Clearly, at BigCorp, the issue is not the color of the skin. It’s the social background. That’s the problem. If you are the son of a black ambassador, there is no problem. It’s the social codes, it’s the school you attended, it’s the*

*neighborhood, it's the way you dress, but it's not your skin color at all...(Interview with Christelle, consumer goods, Paris, 2014)*

But the ethnoracial undertones of the term diversity proved to be tenacious. Notwithstanding the widespread denial of ethnoracial discrimination and the decline of diversity practices targeting ethnoracial minorities in corporate settings, the term “diversity” continued to be strongly associated with ethnoracial meanings in the French public debate. The organizational value of whiteness These efforts to erase the ethnoracial connotations of diversity management are key to understand the growing organizational value of diversity managers’ whiteness in the French context. One striking manifestation of this phenomenon is the increase in the proportion of whites among diversity managers interviewed for the study: they represent four in five of those appointed before 2009, nine-tenths of those appointed between 2009 and 2016, and almost all of those appointed after 2013.

During interviews, unsurprisingly, white research participants almost never spontaneously addressed the value of whiteness for the job. Race is not seen as a legitimate attribute to take into consideration in management and professional occupations, and even more in France, where race itself is not a legitimate category of identification at all (Cohen 2018). But interestingly, when I mentioned that, on the other side of the Atlantic, diversity roles were mostly held by non-white people, the respondents generally found it acceptable, in front of a white interviewer, to talk about the racial identity of diversity managers in France. Interviewees’ comments highlight the triple organizational value of diversity managers’ whiteness in the French context: first, it signaled the marginal place of ethnoracial concerns in diversity practices; second, it displayed the loyalty of the company to a national Republican model of a colorblind non-racism; third, it conveyed the idea that diversity is a business rather than a political issue.

#### Broadening diversity

A first important organizational benefit of the whiteness of diversity managers was to signal the “universality” of diversity management, that is, its broader scope than ethnoracial issues. Alexandra, a 37-year-old white diversity manager at a French multinational company, after 10 years in other roles of the HR department, used this argument. She expressed her strong concern to decouple the company’s diversity initiative from “the issue of origins” (by which she meant ethnoracial background) and to associate it instead with issues “such as disability, for example”. “Employees tell us, “I’m neither black nor racist, so I’m not interested in diversity.” They are not concerned.” It was to “concern them,” she told me, that it was necessary to “broaden diversity.” When I said that a majority of people identifying as ethnic and racial minorities held the function in the United States, Alexandra mentioned “the dilemma of whether the diversity manager should be a diversity person themselves”. She acknowledged that her white identity, which she indirectly designated by the color of her hair and eyes (in a national context where the term “white” is not a legitimate qualifier), was one of the criteria justifying her assignment to the role:

*I don't see why you have to be from a minority background to understand and deal with diversity. At Global Inc, we are no longer at the time when diversity managers were from minorities...When I was appointed to my diversity role three years ago, the person who recruited me said: “You, it's good, because you're blonde with blue eyes!” (Interview with Alexandra, consumer goods, Paris, 2014)*

Audrey, a black woman in her thirties, talked about her experience as a member of the diversity office of a French multinational company, a few years after leaving her job. She

recalled that, for her and her colleague, who was also black, “It was hard, very hard” to deal with “amalgams” because for many, “diversity meant positive discrimination” (a term strongly associated with race in the French context), and she had a hard time “showing internally that diversity was everyone’s business, that it wasn’t just a matter of recruitment and people of color.” She reported the ordinary comments of her supervisor, a white male senior leader in his fifties, the company’s diversity director: “Yves was always telling us, “We can’t let diversity remain black, it’s like a club for black girlfriends!”” Audrey’s account of her superior’s demeaning comments not only reflect his paternalistic attitude and racist stereotypes. It also suggests that if the non-white bodies of diversity managers were seen as problematic, it was because they made “visible” the ethnoracial meaning of diversity.

#### Embodying French republican anti-racism

In French workplaces, the second organizational value derived from white bodies of diversity managers was to “perform” the company’s loyalty to a respectable form of “non-racism” (Bonnet 2014). Unlike the race-conscious paradigm that prevails in anti-racist movements in the United States, the predominant framing in France has been an “anti-racism without races” (Bleich 2000) premised on the notion that fighting against racism should neither rely on nor fuel the recognition of race as a social category. This anti-racialist ideology has been conveyed through the bodies of those who stand for antiracism: in mainstream anti-racist organizations, such as SOS Racisme, being white has not prevented people from being fully recognized as the political subject of the cause. On the contrary, in the French context, whiteness signals that the anti-racist commitment is placed under the auspices of universalism and altruism, as illustrated by the slogan “Don’t touch my buddy” [Touche pas à mon pote] (whose subject is implicitly white) that made SOS Racisme so successful in the 1980s (Laplanche-Servigne 2014).

Aline, a black woman in her thirties who works in the diversity department of a French multinational in Paris, talked about the French management’s endorsing a “national” definition of anti-racism. Strongly opposed to “communautarisme” (a term commonly used in public debate to demonize multiculturalism and identity politics), the head of diversity programs in the French headquarters categorically refused to set up employee networks based on ethnoracial identity in the U.S. subsidiary, even though it was considered a best practice, and despite the subsidiary’s chief diversity officer, a 50-year-old black woman, wanting them:

*This is the French approach, which does not want internal communautarisme. For the moment it’s niet for employees of color networks. On the other hand, there is a taskforce of employees on disability issues, and there are networks for women. (Interview with Aline, consumer goods, Paris, 2014)*

Much like the absence of networks of black employees in the U.S. subsidiary made it possible to display the corporate refusal to see race, the whiteness of diversity managers was a way of signaling the company’s loyalty to the national ideology of colorblind non-racism. Christelle, the 35-year-old white female diversity manager mentioned above, praised her superior for his “commitment” to “associations, such as SOS racisme.” His status as a senior executive, but also his whiteness, helped to signal a respectable antiracism: his distance from minority identity made him more credible in his commitment to “universal” values. While in the United States, appointing a non-white diversity officer was commonly viewed as validating the authenticity of the corporate commitment to non-racism, in France, the sincerity of the organization’s non-racism was better conveyed by white bodies. The appointment of non-white diversity managers could even be perceived as a form of tokenism. Valérie, a white woman in her forties, upon being told that in the U.S. diversity manager positions were overwhelmingly



held by non-whites, thought for a moment and said: So on the other hand...I don't think it's bad to put a blonde senior woman on diversity in France. Why necessarily put a different profile? It shouldn't be an alibi either! (Interview with Valérie, energy, Paris, 2014)

#### The impossible figure of the minority expert of minorities

In Paris-based companies, the third organizational value associated with the appointment of white diversity officers was to signal the managerial orientation of diversity programs, keeping their unwanted political connotations at bay. For Alexandra, mentioned earlier, the whiteness of diversity managers signaled a distance from the cause and, inseparably, the subordination of corporate diversity programs to business concerns:

*[Reflecting of the fact that many diversity managers are white] It means that it is not activism, that it is not everyone for their cause, and that it is part of the company's strategy. (Interview with Alexandra, consumer goods, Paris, 2014)*

Audrey, the black diversity manager introduced earlier who used to work in the diversity department of a multinational French company, confided that she constantly had to dissociate herself from her racial identity in order to be perceived as a legitimate, business-oriented diversity expert. In front of her superior, and in her daily interactions with colleagues from other departments, she felt that she needed to constantly deny the link between her interest in the job, her professional competence, and her minority experience:

*I was often told, "But why are you doing diversity – because you're a woman, because you're black? Have you been discriminated against in your life?" And I would say, "No, I've never felt that I was discriminated against!" (Interview with Audrey, consumer goods, Paris, 2014)*

Thus, in French-based companies, unlike what is observed in the United States, the figure of the minority expert of minorities had no organizational legitimacy. The non-whiteness of diversity managers exposed them to the suspicion of a partial (subjective) and biased (militant) vision of issues related to race and ethnicity, and thus constituted an obstacle to the recognition of their professional expertise and of their alignment with organizational goals. On the contrary, white diversity managers, who enjoy the privilege of embodying a universal position "outside" of racial assignments (Frankenberg, 1993), benefited from a presumption of objectivity in the treatment of minority issues.

#### The advantages of (White) masculinity

On the French side, whiteness thus appeared as particularly valued to embody the "good" diversity manager. The numerical domination of white women in the diversity function (nearly two-thirds of the respondents) suggested that they were legitimate figures. But the study shows that masculinity (implicitly white, straight, cis) also played out as a valuable asset. Firstly, masculinity operated as a signal of professional expertise and business acumen. Although to a lesser extent than people of color, white female diversity managers faced the suspicion of advocating for their group. Conversely, beyond the technical, instrumental and visionary rationality traditionally associated with the figure of the male expert (Azocar and Ferree 2015), (white) masculinity signaled the ability to keep at distance the specific interests of women, and to fully embrace business goals. Danielle, a white woman in her sixties, remembered that she experienced this suspicion of standing for women when she held a common presentation on diversity management with a male diversity officer in another company:

*The fact to bring up this subject [of diversity] as a man, it's still an extraordinary asset...There were 70 people in the room, managers, top executives, etc. And I could see that when Patrick was speaking, when he talked about women, the men, they said, "Oh wait, there's a man who says that". Because when you are a woman and you deal with diversity, you are already suspected of being quite militant...And moreover, when you want to talk about women, you are suspected of being a feminist, so it's extremely delicate, extremely difficult. (Interview with Danielle, consumer goods, Paris, 2009)*

Relieved of the suspicion of standing for their own group, male diversity managers were also better equipped to perform the non-sexism of the organization, in the same way that white people were deemed better suited to perform respectable non-racism. Their masculinity signaled the organization's loyalty to the discourse of "gender mixity" (mixité), which has been associated with modernity, performance and moderation, rather than with "feminism," an ideology still suspected of being rife with separatism, conflict, and radicalism. Gilles, a white man in his fifties, diversity officer at the French subsidiary of a U.S. company, said during the interview that he did not refrain from mentioning to his co-workers his "commitment" to "causes" associated with diversity. Reflecting on the fact that, at his company's headquarters diversity office in the U.S., "if you want to embody, you have to be different", he insisted that in France, by contrast, he found it easier to promote diversity as a "married man, two children, white" (Interview with Gilles, IT, Paris, 2014).

## Conclusions

Comparing the organizational value of diversity managers' identity in the U.S. and in France reveals a striking contrast. In U.S.-based companies, minority identity is a relatively undisputed – albeit tacit – quality for performing diversity work. The organizational value of minority identity is threefold. First, it points to the symbolic salience of race in the definition of corporate diversity, despite the ubiquitous, colorblind discourse celebrating an infinity of individual traits. Second, it signals the company's loyalty to the national race-conscious framework of anti-racism, and therefore the authenticity of its nonracist commitment. Third, it is associated with a specific expertise, the minority expertise on minorities, oriented toward connecting Corporate America with minority issues and constituents. In France, by contrast, whiteness, and to some extent masculinity, are tacitly considered as valuable qualities to perform diversity work. The whiteness of diversity managers signals the marginality of ethnoracial concerns within corporate diversity programs; the loyalty to a national model of colorblind non-racism; and the alignment of diversity management with corporate interests and purviews. On this last matter, white male diversity managers hold an even greater advantage than their female peers.

This article contributes to both the literature on the commodification of identity and on workplace diversity. Firstly, the article introduces the notion of identity realism, which refers to the organizational valuing of workers' group identity attributes for the accomplishment of specific functions. Identity realism extends in three respects the concept of racial realism (Skrentny 2013). Firstly, the notion takes into account the organizational valuing of a race and other identity traits that are bases of inequality between social groups. Secondly, identity realism offers a conceptual framework for thinking jointly the organizational valuing of minority and majority identity. It is not a matter of symmetrizing the two processes: majority identity is structurally valued for performing the most valuable roles within organizations. But for both majority and minority identity traits, the two mechanisms that Skrentny (2013) has

identified in relation to racial realism are at work: identity abilities, i.e. the organizational valuing of specific aptitudes stereotypically associated with workers' minority or majority identity traits (empathy, intercultural know-how, communication skills, business acumen, leadership, or technical expertise); and identity signaling, a strategy whereby organizations use workers' minority or majority identity attributes as symbols to convey messages to various audiences, from customers to regulators (compliance, equity, elitism, or business performance). Third, the notion of identity realism is not limited to employers' practices. Workers can also embrace it strategically, although mobilizing the minority identity almost never leads to the most valued positions and careers within organizations.

This article also highlights the benefits of a comparative approach to workplace diversity. Most sociological analyses of workplace diversity have been drawn from national case studies, with a particular focus on the United States. The recurrent features of diversity management across borders have already been brought to light: the global category of diversity management celebrates a broad range of individual differences for the sake of performance and profit, and is associated with a shared repertoire of practices. In contrast to existing research, my comparative study sheds light on the national variations of diversity management, and does so by paying attention to diversity workers' identities, beyond discourse and practices. The article shows that the gendered and racialized bodies of diversity managers are major symbolic vehicles through which U.S. and French-based companies align the transnational category of diversity management with distinct national frameworks of equality and difference. On the U.S. side, the minority identity of diversity managers enables large businesses to signal their loyalty to the national standards of antidiscrimination, while leaving the corporate discourse untouched by undesired, political debates on race, gender and sexuality. In the French context, the majority identity of diversity managers enables corporations to express loyalty to the prevailing norm of colorblind universalism, as well as to emphasize the business value of diversity and mark their distance from identity politics and activism.

But despite this contrasted picture, the comparison shows that in both the U.S. and France, diversity managers' identities are commodified by large businesses to increase their legitimacy in their social, political and legal environment, replicating, in the process, the structures of racial and gender domination. In France, the organizational valuing of majority identity for the diversity role helps to reproduce the denial of racial discrimination in the workplace, and to discount the expertise of minority groups on discrimination and inequality. In the United States, diversity management is a racialized occupation that keeps minorities out of the most valued mainstream managerial careers. The role is part of the repertoire of racial tasks (Wingfield and Alston 2014) by which minority workers are assigned to building and glorifying the organizational culture for the benefit of the majority groups. Ultimately, in both countries, valuing the minority or majority identity of diversity managers supports merely symbolic diversity practices, which celebrate the innocence of organizations and relegitimize the structures of discrimination and inequality.

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## Statement of ethics

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