**Global Diversity Management: Think Global, Act Local?**

**Abstract**

The debate about the adaptability and localization of Global Diversity Management remains nebulous and ambiguous despite the fact that different scholars propose different perspectives from global best practices models to situational approaches taking into account historical and cultural contextual elements,. This paper addresses diversity management as a practice embedded in a social and cultural context in which understanding meanings and taking into account social aspects becomes critical to successful cross-cultural implementation of diversity management practices. We propose a longitudinal comparison of the social meanings of diversity in the U.S. and France using the general and business press as a vehicle. Our findings not only show that there are differences in the social meaning of diversity in the two contexts, but also indicate how these differences could have practical implications for multinational organizations transferring global diversity and other diversity related IHRM policies and practices beyond their national borders.

Keywords: global diversity management, international human resources management, cultural diversity

1. **Introduction**

One of the concepts more recently espoused by international human resources management (IHRM) is that of global diversity management (GDM) (see for example Thomas, 2004; Thomas and Kanji, 2004). According to Dunavant and Heisse (2005), its importance was recognized by all participants in their survey of global Fortune 500 firms. The available literature addresses GDM both in terms of cross-national differences in work populations (e.g. Agocs and Burr, 1996; Egan and Bendick, 2003; Sippola and Smale, 2007; SuB and Kleiner , 2007), and also in terms of cultural diversity where there is intercultural interaction of employees and organizations (e.g. Barinaga, 2007; Earley and Gibson, 2002; Barkema et. al., 2003; Salk and Brannen, 2000). The former addresses local diversity issues and their variation across countries while the latter investigates individual and group interactions in multicultural teams and international project groups. The two applications refer to conceptually different social phenomena and should not be confused under one umbrella term (Harrison and Klein, 2007).

In this article, we take the first approach and consider GDM in terms of the formulation and application of diversity management practices in multinational firms across countries. Within this context, the main issue of interest from an IHRM perspective is whether or not multinational organizations should adapt their GDM strategies to local contextual and operational particularities. The ‘think global, act local?!’ debate has been applied to a wide range of IHRM strategic (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1987; Prahalad and Doz, 1987) and functional areas ( Schneider and Barsoux, 2009; Gröschl et al. 2008). However, many HR academics and practitioners remain uncertain as to how to respond to this question of localization when it comes to GDM. As Nishii and Ozbilgin (2007) note in their introduction to a volume dedicated to GDM, the term remains amorphous and practices associated with the concept are far from established or successful.

Pudelko, in his works with Carr (Pudelko and Carr, 2006) and Harzing (Pudelko and Harzing, 2010) exploring management practices across national business systems and cultures, argues that the HRM function has converged to a world-wide best practices model. Pudelko and Harzing (2010) suggest that

‘companies should seek standardization around best practices, wherever they originate from. If home-country practices are highly successful, this competitive advantage should be carefully exploited throughout the entire organization, and standardization toward home country practices should prevail. If, however, foreign practices appear superior, these should be the source of inspiration. Consequently, whenever there is no necessity to localize management practices and whenever home country practices are not defining best practices, MNCs should strive for standardization toward global best practices’ (p. 553)

Although GDM has strong affiliations with the HRM function, applying these management implications to GDM seems challenging. First, the potential rationales for implementing diversity management may differ across firms and across countries. Within the same country context, one firm may implement diversity management to gain market share while another may do so solely to comply with a legal constraint. Second, there is a wide variety of dimensions that may fall under the umbrella of diversity. Across countries, variance exists in identifying what groups need legal protection from discrimination. This complexity of diversity management in terms of its different rationales and objectives (e.g. legal compliance argument, anti-discrimination argument, market argument, creativity and innovation argument, problem solving argument, etc.), and its many dimensions (e.g. gender, age, sexual orientation, disability) makes it difficult to have a global definition of what is diversity and diversity management, and even more difficult to identify best practices and to speak of a global best practices model.

In contrast to the notion of a global best practices model, several scholars advocate a “situated” perspective, paying attention to the specificities of the particular culture (Agocs and Burr, 1996; Nishii and Ozbilgin, 2007; Sippola and Smale, 2007; Sub and Kleiner, 2007; Syed, 2007). According to Djelic and Quack (2000) management models, which propagate across countries and become established often experience a transformation at the local level. This transformation may be carried out by local actors or institutional agents such as the European Commission, who manage to attach local meaning to such practices and thereby situate management practices in the context so that they can be understood and shared and become a source of action. Nishii and Ozbilgin (2007) lament that the human resources literature does not take this type of observation sufficiently into account, and note that the general over-confidence found in research on the global applicability of domestic findings is problematic.

Our contribution to this discussion of diversity management and its global applicability or local transformation is twofold. First, we propose a methodological framework in which the theoretical discourse can advance, and second, by applying this framework, we provide empirical evidence from which we can draw potential practical implications for managers and organizations developing and implementing GDM policies and processes across national boundaries.

In the subsequent section, we outline our methodological approach that explores the evolution of the use of the term “diversity”, and whether there are differences in social meaning between the country of origin and the host country. We assume that the validation of our contribution to the research field of diversity in the form of a methodological framework would be grounded in and emerge from the empirical findings of our study. These findings are presented and discussed in the main part of our study. This is followed by our conclusions and a discussion of potential practical implications for managers and firms.

**2. Methodology**

We decided on a comparative study of the social meaning of diversity between two countries, one in which diversity practices originate and the other in which such practices have been imported and implemented, to better understand potential difficulties and challenges of implementing GDM policies and practices. Such a comparative perspective allows us to investigate the fit of the meaning of diversity between the country of origin of a diversity practice and the country of application of that practice.

Taking into account the dynamic nature of the concept of diversity, we chose to carry out a longitudinal as opposed to a cross-sectional comparison to also investigate the potential evolution of the field of diversity in the two countries and the changes over time in the meaning of diversity. Our starting point was inductive in nature. This was based on our assumptions and the abstract nature of the phenomenon under investigation.

We chose the U.S. as our ‘country of origin’ as it is often the source of ideas around diversity and how to manage it. The U.S. represents one of the most active countries within the Anglo-Saxon community in terms of the promotion, development and implementation of diversity-related management concepts and ideas. As early as the mid 1980s, when a range of writers predicted an increase of diversity in the U.S. labor markets due to demographic changes in the population (e.g. Johnston and Packer, 1987; Jamieson and O’Mara, 1991), paradigms or concepts of diversity management have been developed and hailed as an effective response to the challenges of managing such increasingly diverse workforces (see, for example, Rice, 1994; Thompson and Gooler, 1996). Since the 1990s, many U.S. firms such as IBM have developed strategic approaches with diversity policies, initiatives and programs at a national and global level (see, for example, Thomas and Kanji, 2004) providing a benchmark to multinationals to gauge their activities on the diversity front. As such, the U.S. is a prime target for understanding how diversity is understood socially and culturally.

As our ‘host country’ we chose France, an example of a Continental European country that continues to rely on non-differentiating concepts regarding the management of its increasingly complex and diverse workforce. The choice of France was determined by the current location of the two authors and serves as an example of the type of comparison that is possible and necessary.

**2.1 Data collection**

We investigated the use and meaning given to the term “diversity” and focused exclusively on this term. More specifically, we studied the use of the term in the general and business press in the U.S. and France between 2001 and 2006. Although expressions such as “race relations” or “discrimination” are also potentially related to the term in question, we did not look at them except when they appeared as interpretations or clarifications of diversity.

In order to identify press articles specifically addressing diversity in the two countries, we decided to focus on the main business and general newspapers and journals in the U.S. and France. Our choice of newspapers and journals is presented in Table 1. While the weekly journals are nationally distributed in both contexts, the daily newspapers in the U.S. tend to have local distribution (e.g. San Francisco Chronicle), the exception being the Wall Street Journal. Rather than identifying the main newspaper in each region of the U.S., we decided to choose USA Today which has national distribution and the most widely distributed local newspaper, The New York Times. We used FACTIVA as the search engine on which our targeted publications were available for the period identified for our study.

Insert Table 1 about here

After an initial browse through all articles generated by a search using “diversity”[[1]](#footnote-2) as the key word, we eliminated those that were not directly linked to social diversity. We therefore identified diversity not including “biodiversity or biodiversities or ecosystem or ecosystems or animal or animals or plant or plants or vegetation or vegetations or landscape or landscapes or nature or natures or climate or climates or stock or stocks or bond or bonds or portfolio or portfolios or mortgage or mortgages or investment or investments or finance or financing”[[2]](#footnote-3) as the basis of our search. Articles that included the term either in the title or the text were identified. Tables 2a and 2b show the number of articles using the term in our target publications.

Insert Table 2a and Table 2b about here

**2.2 Coding and Analysis**

One of the authors carried out the coding and analysis of the content of the articles assisted by a research assistant. Although there are a range of content analysis software tools (see Tesch, 1992; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996; Brislin, Lonner, Thorndike, 1973, for a list/discussion of these tools), for the following reasons we decided to conduct the preparation and interpretation of the data manually. Firstly, we were unsure whether the use of the term “diversity” would be systematic[[3]](#footnote-4) and secondly, an initial reading of some of the articles quickly showed that the use of the word “diversity” was vague and needed interpretation. Thus, one of the authors read all the articles identified by the search and immersed herself in and built a close relationship with the data throughout the analysis process, thus providing the necessary basis for an interpretative analysis.

In contrast to positivistic models of science, the author was actively seeking the interplay between herself and the data throughout the interpretative process of the data analysis. In line with Suddaby (2006: 638) the author became an ‘active element of the research process’ identifying key categories and contexts and ascribing meaning to the different units of data. It became clear that differences existed in whether or not, and how the term “diversity” was described. There was a range of issues or contexts around which the topic of diversity was discussed. In order to ascertain the meaning of the term “diversity”, we generated a list of indicators used in relation to the term in each article. Also, we developed a categorization of contexts which these articles addressed. From these lists and categorizations, we attempted to construct categories of meaning and context (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in which diversity discourse existed in the two contexts.

We counted the number of articles that discuss diversity of different stated categories and contexts to illustrate any potential longitudinal changes regarding the evolution of the use and the meaning of diversity in each country.

**3. Results and discussion**

In terms of volume of articles, if we look at the percentage of articles on diversity for each publication, we observe that the U.S. publications have lower percentages of diversity articles than their French equivalents. For example, five percent of the total number of articles dealt with diversity issues in the Wall Street Journal between 2001 and 2006, whereas 15 percent of the total number of articles in Les Echos talked about diversity in the same time period. The difference between the weekly journals was slightly less with Business Week and Newsweek at eight percent and 13 percent respectively, and L’Express and L’Expansion with 18 percent and 14 percent. However, as we show later, all of the U.S. articles dealt consistently with minority issues while the focus of the French articles was wider and much more general.

When we look at the percentage of diversity articles per year, we observe a general increase in articles discussing diversity in the French press, while U.S. articles on diversity have decreased slightly. These trends are particularly noticeable for journals and the business press as presented in Figures 1a and 1b.

Insert Figure 1a and Figure 1b about here

These figures indicate that the use of the term diversity has gradually increased in France during our study period. As in the case of the general volume of articles on diversity, it is necessary to look into the content of each article identified in order to understand these trends and to determine the similarity or differentiation in terms of meaning.

**3.1 What does the term ‘diversity’ actually apply to?**

It became quickly apparent during the coding that the term diversity was used very explicitly in the U.S. press to apply to clearly identified minority groups and minority issues. These findings reflect Litvin’s (1997) observations that diversity discourse in the U.S. serves to identify and specify membership categories, and to distinguish between these categories. For example, an article in Business Week on corporate diversity discusses a “view of diversity – in gender and racial terms…” (21/5/2001). In an article entitled “Diversity is about to get more elusive, not less” (Business Week, 7/7/2003), not only does the article talk about minorities, but clearly specifies “Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians, and Native Americans”, and compares them to “Caucasians”. In fact, a majority of the U.S. articles on diversity apply specifically to race and ethnicity, and a significant number of these articles specify the category “black” or “African-American” as the target of their discussion regarding diversity. Figure 2 represents the percentage of U.S. weekly journal articles on diversity that discuss diversity in terms of race, socio-economic factors, gender, and other categories.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The list of categories presented is exhaustive for this data source. It should be noted that articles may have discussed one or a combination of these categories as indicators of diversity. Within the race category, we combined all articles that use any or all terms such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’, ‘minority’, or any specific ethnic groups. The socio-economic category refers to articles that either mentioned something related to income, the poor, or made other explicit socioeconomic distinctions. Articles included in the gender category either mentioned gender or women. Other categories that were mentioned as indicative of diversity included religion, sexual preferences, and generational differences. We clustered differences in social opinions, language, nationality, and immigration issues into one social/cultural category.

In the U.S. business press, a similar phenomenon could be observed where a majority of articles on diversity discussed race as an indicator of diversity. There was a larger percentage of articles that discussed gender issues compared to weekly journal articles, but none that discussed more general categories such as political and social opinions. In this data source, the indicators of diversity were even more precise and applied strictly to clearly identified minority groups. In “Ethnic diversity doesn’t blend in kid’s lives” (WSJ, 18/6/2004), the article started out by proclaiming that:

“Despite sharing a pop culture infused with a variety of ethnic influences, the most ethnically diverse generation of American kids ever is growing up in predominantly segregated environments. That's the main conclusion of a new comparative study released by Viacom Inc.'s Nickelodeon, which taps into the lifestyle, attitudes and mind-sets of African-American, Asian, Hispanic and white children between the ages of six and 14.”

We see clearly here that diversity is directly linked to ethnicity, and it immediately mentions four ethnic groups as examples. In a business context, an article on Pepsi began with an anecdote of the CEO (“Pepsi, Vowing Diversity Isn't Just Image Polish, Seeks Inclusive Culture” WSJ 19/4/2005):

“STEVE REINEMUND says he was stunned when he got an e-mail late one night back in 2001, shortly after becoming PepsiCo's chairman and CEO. He had spent the evening with a small group of African-American employees at Pepsi headquarters in Purchase, N.Y. At the end, he had stood on some patio steps to give a few closing remarks. In the e-mail, one of the attendees wrote that the scene reminded her of a plantation owner lecturing his slaves from on high.

Mr. Reinemund was troubled she felt that way -- and grateful she shared her concerns. Ever since, he tries to avoid speaking from a podium.

In recent years, Pepsi, like many big companies, has elevated more minorities and women into management roles and made progress in building a work force that reflects the changing demographics of its customers. Last week, DiversityInc ranked the company fourth on its annual list of the best companies for diversity. In additional rankings, Pepsi took the top spot for the best workplace for African-Americans and Latinos.”

In this example, even though diversity was not specified as “ethnic” as in the previous example, it was nonetheless clearly applied to minorities and women, and in particular African-Americans and Latinos.

In over 70% of the U.S. articles diversity was applied to the race category, and in over 30% of U.S. articles diversity was applied to the gender category (as shown in Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

In the American context it seems that the concept of diversity is of a differentiating nature with a strong tendency to specify individual membership categories.

Litvin (1997) criticizes this conception of diversity and calls its discourse ‘divisive and disabling’ (p. 207). In line with this negative connotation of diversity, Lorbiecki and Jack~~’s~~ (2000) argue that ‘unless we engage in this opportunity to create a critical and reflective debate on ways in which we might theorize diversity in a philosophically and socio-politically different manner, then the discourse of diversity management will mark just another colonizing moment of the Other’ (p. 29). According to these two authors, the essentialist and divisive nature of diversity engenders “responses of antagonism and resentment on the part of the ‘managed diverse” (p. 29).

In France, it was much more difficult to code the French articles in both the weekly journals and the business press into categories of indicators. As illustrated in Figure 4, articles on diversity covered a much larger range of diversity indicators, including not only ethnic and gender differences, but also differences in family composition, educational establishments, clientele and product choice, as well as workplace, housing, and professional diversity, some of which were indirectly related to “cultural” or “population” diversity.

Insert Figure 4 about here

In addition, until very recently, articles that talked about ethnicity in particular have been comparatively indirect in their approach rarely specifying any particular ethnic group(s) but rather using individual names (“…je m’appelle Yamina!...” from “Faire du cinema n’est pas evident pour une femme” L’Express, 19/9/2002) or styles of clothing (e.g. “costard-cravates” as opposed to “djellabas”; L’Express, 2004) to evoke such differences. When we combined the categories “ethnicity”, “housing”, “nationality/immigration” and “geographic” since they are contextually generally concerned with race and ethnic differences, we could see from Figure 4 that this category constituted the largest percentage of the articles. We included in the “geographic” category, articles that discuss populations from “quartiers sensibles” and “quatiers difficiles” (trouble areas), “milieu defavorizé” (underprivileged backgrounds), and ZEP (zone d’education prioritaire) and ZUS (zone urbaine sensible). These terms are often used to describe areas that are highly Arab and black. At the same time, the French articles also included more categories in their discussion of diversity such as the handicapped, the elderly, and the obese.

In the French business newspaper Les Echos, the range of indicators of diversity was much broader (see Figure 5).

Insert Figure 5 about here

Furthermore, Figure 1b indicated a clear longitudinal evolution of these indicators over our study period. Before 2005, very few articles dealt with minority and disadvantaged indicators such as race, gender or the disabled. A large percentage of pre-2005 articles discussed “cultural diversity” regarding a European initiative to encourage diversity in artistic domains such as music and cinema (e.g. “Vive la diversite culturelle”, 9/7/2001; “Autrans paide pour une diversite culturelle”, 14/1/2002). Other articles discussed service and product diversity, architectural diversity and even the diversity of opinions within political parties (e.g. “Noel Mamere defend la gauche plurielle”, 23/7/2002; “UDF-UMP-Charente souhaite un cessez le feu”, 23/1/2003). This explained the comparatively low percentages of indicators presented in Figure 5. However, as of 2005, nearly all articles dealing with diversity focused on disadvantaged minority groups or issues (e.g. “L’idee d’un decompte des minorities ethniques refait surface”, 22/11/2005). Also, when discussing ethnic minorities in particular, the articles became more specific regarding membership categories. For example, in an article on diversity in the workplace (“La diversite en enterprise, un combat difficile pour les syndicates”, 22/11/2005),

“Les syndicats peinent a intégrer, en interne, la diversité d’origines du salariat……..Si les syndicats ont fait un effort de féminization en interne, ils restent beaucoup moins metissés que le salarait, les appareils, plus blancs que blacks ou beurs, en sont le reflet. »

Here, whites, blacks and beurs are specifically mentioned as ethnic groups, as well as women in the workforce who also constitute a minority category according to the article.

When these figures were compared with those from the American press, not only were they significantly lower due in part to their recent apparition, but they represented more categories which also included obesity and attractiveness. Overall, the French usage of diversity seemed to be more inclusive and less narrowly defined than the American usage. It tend to be less focused than in the U.S. press but there was an increasing focalization around and specification of minority categories in the latter part of our study period.

In the next section, we discuss the themes or topics of the articles that we have looked at in this study. We see that particularly since 2005, French diversity articles tackle the issue of urban violence and political, social and managerial reactions to the social events of 2005. This indicates the role played by historical events in how diversity is discussed, and what categories are presented as its indicators.

**3.2 What are the contexts within which diversity is discussed?**

Our interpretative approach combined with the longitudinal perspective directed us to the importance of the context for the understanding of the social meaning of diversity and helped us to develop a categorization of contexts covered by the articles in our study. The context categories that emerged were the following; (1) business and employment issues in which diversity was discussed within an employment context (e.g. “Discrimination positive – Peugeot ose la diversite” L”Express 27/9/2004) or as an opportunity for good business practice; (2) education wherein discussion centered around the representation of minority groups in universities (e.g. “Wanted: a campus that looks like America. Guess who’s pushing a bold plan for diversity? Big Business” BW 11/3/2002), and bringing diversity into the classroom in different ways; (3) representation of minority groups particularly in the media; (4) legal issues which often dealt with discrimination (e.g. “White men can’t help it: Courts have been buying the idea that they have innate biases” BW 15/5/2006), but also looked at the legal environment that determines what types of diversity initiatives are possible; and (5) political which relates the above contexts to particular political figures. Figures 6 through 9 show the percentages of articles that discuss one or more of these contexts.

Insert Figures 6, 7, 8, 9 about here

Some similar themes emerged from both the French and American articles on diversity. As can be observed, in both the U.S. and French press, diversity articles addressed the impact on business in particular. At the same time, whereas the French articles discussed employment and discrimination issues in this context, U.S. articles focused more on the role of affirmative action on business performance. Relating this category with the legal and political categories, French articles referred often to the c.v. anonyme (anonymous resumes) as a method supported by political figures to combat discriminatory hiring practices. Although a law enforcing the use of this method recently got voted down, it is seen as one possibility of getting around an existing law that prohibits firms to count and to reveal the ethnic make-up of their workforce which would be necessary to implement a method such as affirmative action.

The majority of articles on education in the U.S. also focused on affirmative action. This debate focused on the negative consequences of the abolition of affirmative action in university classrooms in states such as California and Texas, and the efforts made by schools to increase the proportion of ethnic minorities. There was much less interest on diversity issues in the educational context in the French press.

Overall, our findings clearly show differences in the meaning of diversity between the U.S. and France. The usage of the term diversity was clear and standardized in the U.S., universally connoting minorities populations, but most predominantly ethnic minorities and in particular, the Afro-American category. While the U.S. press also discusses discrimination in the workplace, it is more likely to point out the benefits of diversity for performance and overall outcome. In France, up to 2005 the term diversity was most often used to denote cultural diversity in a political context against American cultural hegemony of music, cinema and other artistic (i.e. cultural) domains. In other contexts, it was used interchangeably with “differences” with no particular application. Since the (race) riots of 2005, the term diversity has been much more frequently applied to ethnic issues and has focused on how to combat employment discrimination - portraying this as a social responsibility on the part of firms.

As some of the above arguments have indicated, and as the following section will show in greater detail, a methodological approach exploring the social context of the term ‘diversity’ provides a critical and important perspective to the discussion of how much adaptation and localizing diversity management policies and practices will require in their global applications.

**4. Implications for Practitioners**

Based on our findings, the practical consequences of operating diversity initiatives in contexts in which diversity has different meanings are multifold. In the U.S., being able to name and count ethnic minority groups has provided the legal framework for affirmative action programs and race sensitive entry policies at an educational and organizational level. Companies in the U.S. have had to respond to those legal frameworks and requirements with recruitment and promotion policies and activities that are aimed at better matching their workforce profile with that of their labor markets. Companies wanting to transfer their recruitment and promotion policies of employees of ethnic descent from the U.S. market to France lack the legal support necessary from French legislation. Instead, U.S. based managers have to become familiar with France’s rather different recruitment procedures such as the selection of employees with ‘anonymous CVs” in order to encourage hiring ethnic minorities. Transferring global recruitment and selection procedures of ethnic minorities requires practitioners to be cautious of the legal obligations and barriers that reflect the social meaning of ethnicity in particular and diversity more generally.

On a related point, being able to name ethnic minorities has meant that U.S. businesses are able to measure the impact of diversity-related initiatives through employee quotas and targets. For any manager in France involved in the recruitment and promotion of ethnic minorities, this inability to quantify the impact of diversity initiatives remains one of the main challenges in this country. In other words, any company that relies on quotas and targets as its means to demonstrate the impact of its diversity programs may need to create alternative methods of assessing and evaluating diversity initiates when transferring its diversity agenda abroad.

Also, being able to identify members of ethnic background and, in turn, their position within the organizational hierarchy has enabled or required U.S.-based companies to identify and respond to glass ceiling barriers for race. In countries in which the categorization of ethnic minorities is not possible, the identification of race glass ceilings might be more challenging than in the U.S.. Thus, practitioners have to develop alternative procedures and policies that enable them to prevent race related segregation between operational and managerial levels, and between functional areas.

The organization of interests groups and networks within firms that are based on ethnic or other minority group membership is another aspect companies in the U.S. have to reconsider when operating abroad. For example in France, any identification of interest groups is considered to be communitarian and against the republican principles of equality. Practitioners who advocate company internal interests groups have to be aware that the categorization of certain interests groups lacks the legal justification and can back fire.

As our findings show, different connotations of ethnicity and diversity across countries and cultures influence the diversity management approaches dominant in each cultural context. U.S. based companies transferring their business-oriented and performance-driven diversity agendas to France need be aware of its host country’s reactive stance and limited focus on anti-discriminatory and equal opportunity policies particularly regarding ethnic origin. Societies have different histories of diversity; some have decades of experience while others are still relatively new to the concept. This difference is in part related to the level of stability of the definition of the term diversity, and also the tools implemented to manage diversity. The longitudinal aspect of our study shows that while the understanding of diversity issues is stable over time in the U.S., it is still strongly debated in France. Practitioners need to understand at which stage is a host country when it comes to the arguments and rationales supporting diversity actions.

On a related point, when we observe the politicized nature of the urban riots in 2005 and more recently, the failed debate around national identity in France, the volatility and instability of discussions indicate a need for practitioners to comprehend the local political climate around diversity issues and the potential social responses to diversity initiatives in their host countries. Practitioners need to think about if and how to adapt their GDM policies to the local political climate.

Operating outside the home country borders could mean operating within different zones of prioritization. For example, in contrast to the U.S., there are countries where there is little perceived and recognized ethnic diversity (e.g. Japan) and/or countries in which such differences are politically and socially minimized or ignored (e.g. race issues in France). In some countries, gender differences may be legitimated, generally perceived as “taken-for-granted”, and institutionalized in the social structure so that it may be more difficult to address this issue than in other contexts where womens’ rights have been voiced and recognized. Practitioners need to understand that companies’ prioritization of certain types of diversity over others most often reflect the legitimacy and importance of these dimensions in the home country’s context but not necessarily in the host country.

**5. Advancing the theoretical discourse of GDM**

While much of the think global act local debate has covered most strategic and functional areas of an organization, the adaptability and localization of GDM is still in is infant stage – nebulous and ambiguous. Different scholars propose different perspectives from global best practices models to situational approaches taking into account historical and cultural contextual elements. Yet, no studies in this area have addressed explicitly diversity management as a practice embedded in a particular social and cultural context in which understanding meanings becomes critical to the successful cross-cultural implementation of management practices.

Using a comparison between the U.S and the French business press as our research vehicle, we have illustrated and highlighted the importance of a comparative understanding of the social meaning of diversity between the source of the diversity practice and the place where it is applied, and how this understanding is central to identifying potential difficulties and challenges when creating and implementing global diversity initiatives.

With our comparative methodological research approach we have been able to identify a number of implications in France including linguistic, and legal constraints which limit the application of a US oriented concept of diversity in a French organizational or management context. Our methodological framework could be an alternative to traditional situational methods and help advance the conceptualization of diversity and the exploration of different social meanings of diversity so crucial for practitioners who translate or apply those different meanings into policies and IHRM actions and processes.

Considering the dynamic nature of diversity, we recommend researchers to choose a longitudinal research approach rather than a cross-sectional comparison as the former illustrates the evolution of the use and the meaning of diversity in each country. We also propose to take an interpretative stance as the term diversity remains vague and non-systematic. This requires the researcher to emerge in and interactively play with his/her sets of data. Proposed by our comparative methodology and interpretative stance, and confirmed by our findings, an exploration of both categorical and contextual aspects are imperative when exploring the concept of diversity. With these methodological guidelines we hope to have contributed to the development of a better understanding of the social meanings of diversity so critical to the successful cross-cultural implementation of global diversity and other diversity related IHRM practices.

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Table 1: Data sources

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of source** | **US sources** | **French sources** |
| Weekly journals | Business Week | L’Express |
| Newsweek | L’Expansion |
| Business newspapers | The Wall Street Journal | Les Echos |
| General newspapers[[4]](#footnote-5) | USA Today | Liberation |
| The New York Times | Le Monde |

Table 2a: Number of articles in U.S. business journals and newspapers

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of Source** | **Source** | **Diversity Articles 2001 - 2007** |
| Business journals | Business Week (1985) | 24 |
| Newsweek (1994) | 16 |
| Business newspapers | Wallstreet Journal (1979) | 89 |
| General newspaper | USA Today (1987) | 105 |
| NY Times (1980) | 253 |

Table 2b: Number of articles in French business journals and newspapers

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of Source** | **Source** | **Diversity Articles 2001 - 2007** |
| Business journals | L’Express (2000) | 60 |
| L’Expansion | 9 |
| Business newspapers | Les Echos (1997) | 314 |
| General newspaper | Libération (1998) | 203 |
| Le Monde (1994) | 512 |

Figure 1a: Percentage of diversity articles by publication by year (weekly journals)



Figure 1b: Percentage of diversity articles by publication by year (Business newspapers)



Figure 2. Different types of diversity represented in U.S. weekly journal articles by percentage

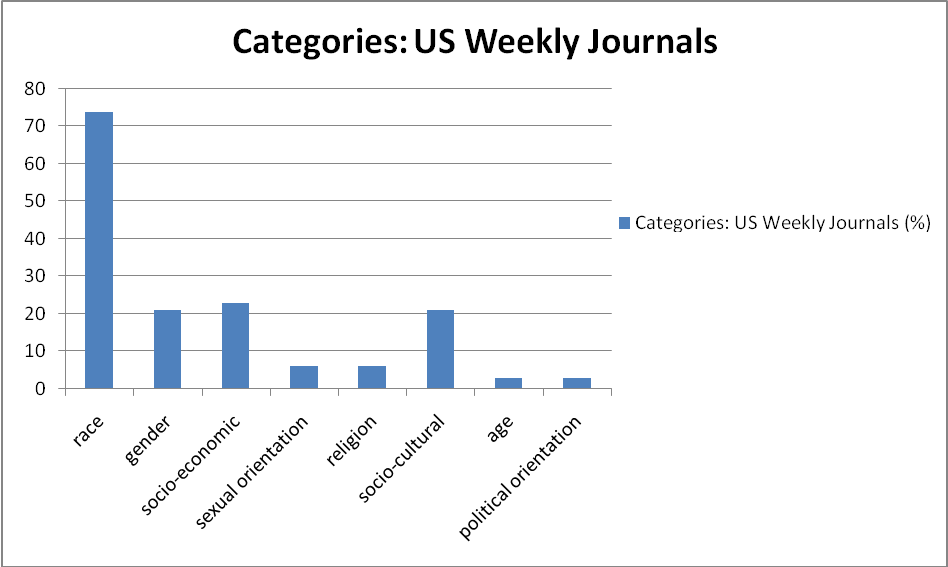


Figure 3. Different types of diversity represented in U.S. business newspaper articles by percentage

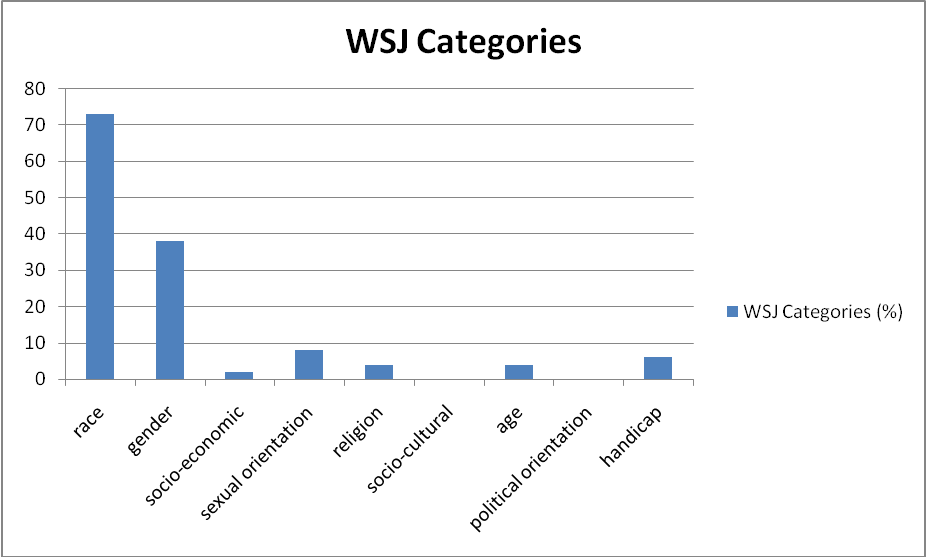


Figure 4: Different types of diversity represented in French weekly journal articles by percentage

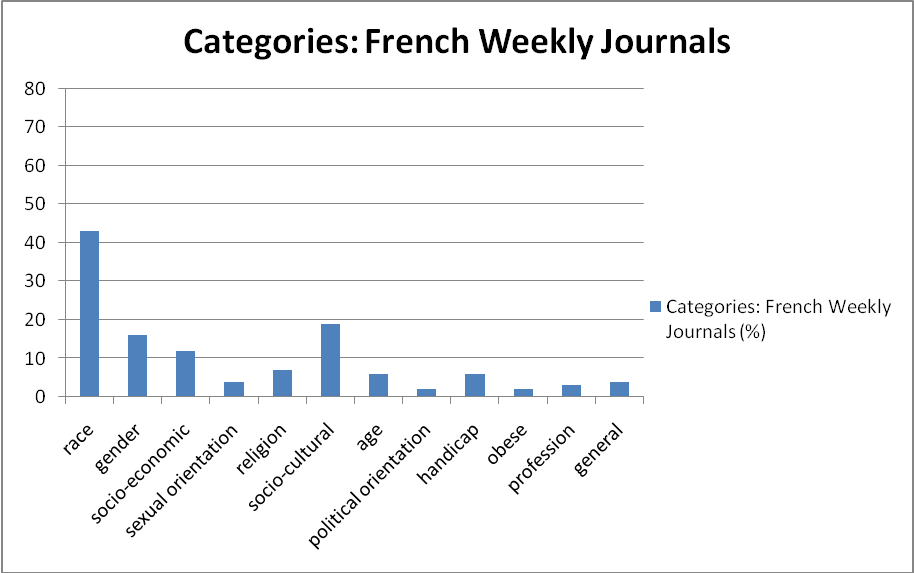


Figure 5. Different types of diversity represented in the French business newspaper by percentage

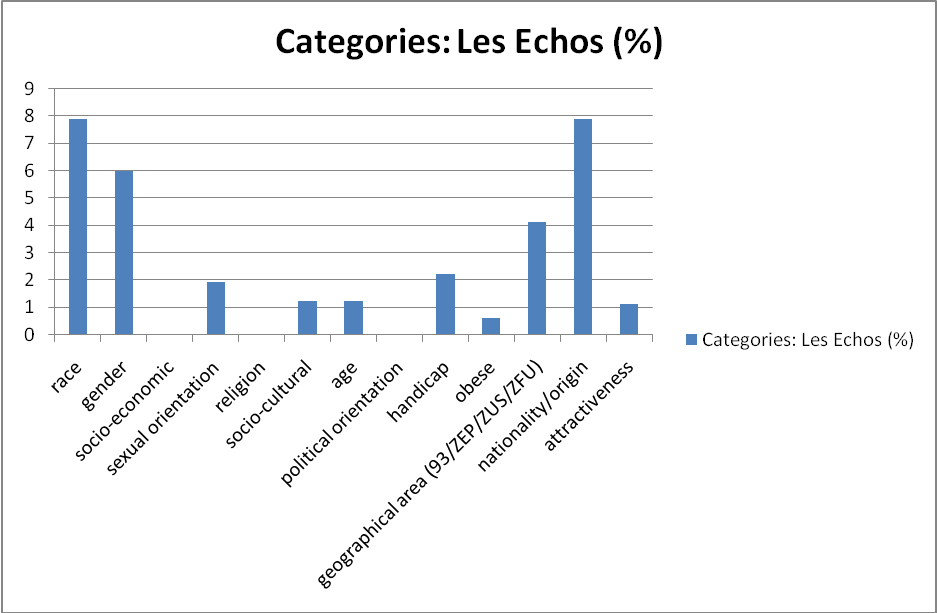


Figure 6. Diversity topics in U.S. weekly journals in percentages

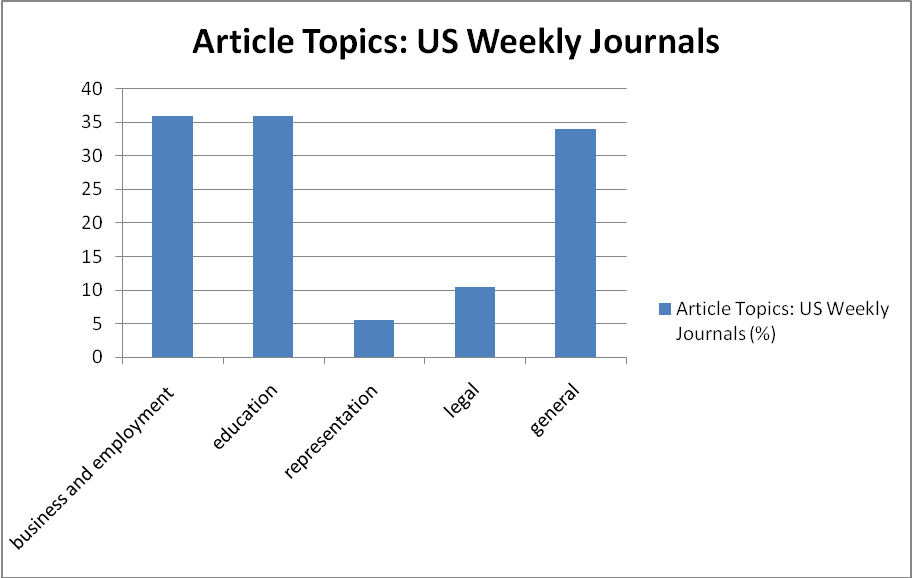


Figure 7. Diversity topics in U.S. business newspaper

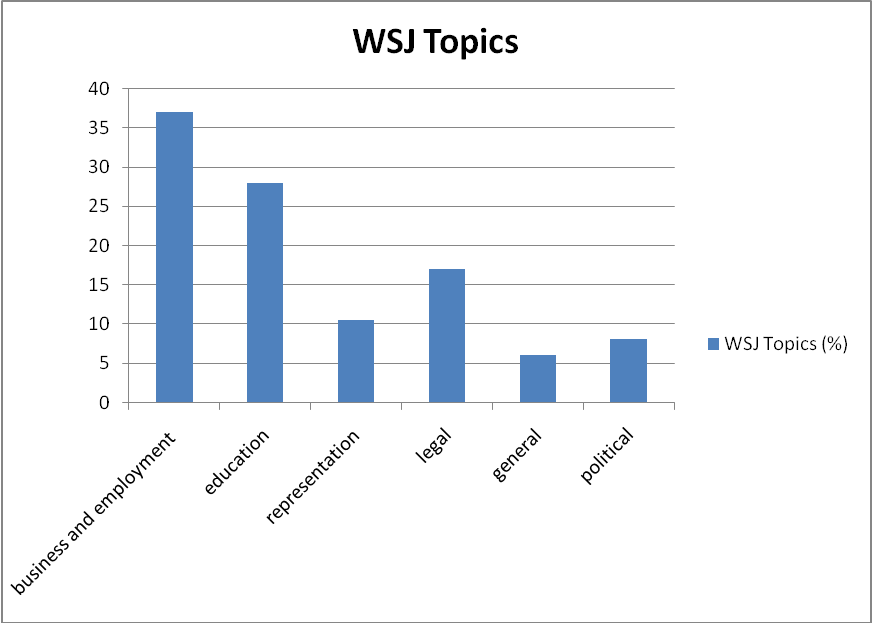


Figure 8. Diversity topics in French weekly journals

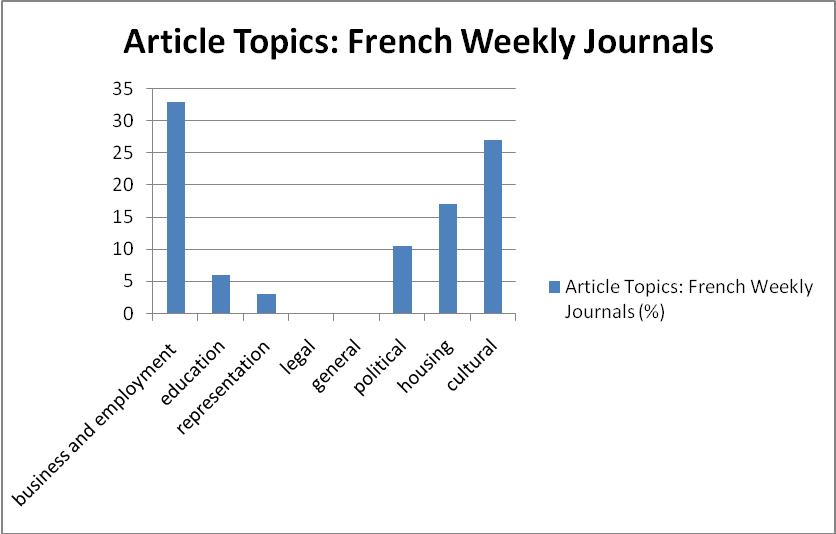
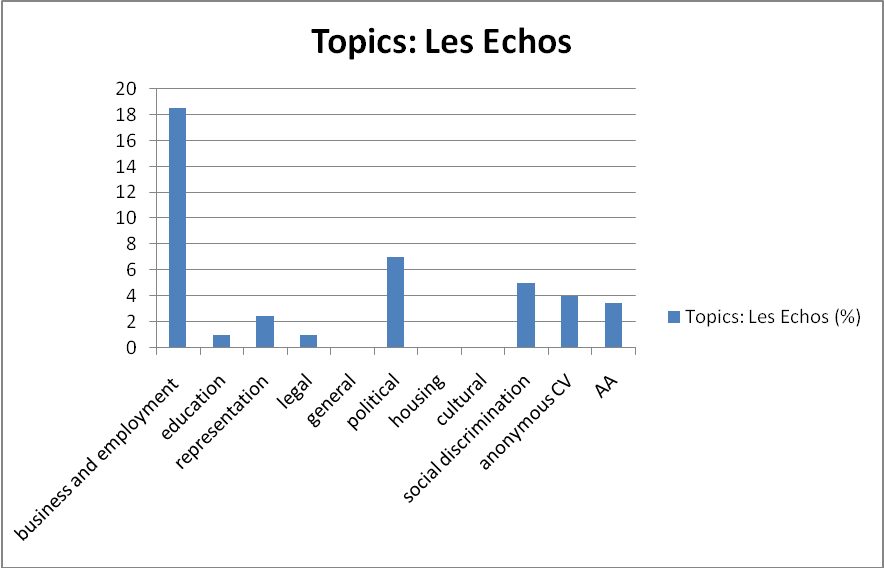


Figure 9. Diversity topics in French business newspaper



1. For our search in the French press, this term was consistently translated as “diversité”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The exact term used for our search in the French press was “Diversité not (biodiversité or biodiversités or bio diversité or bio diversités or écosystème or écosystèmes or animal or animale or animaux or plante or plantes or végétation or végétations or végétal or végétale or végétales or végétaux or paysage or paysages or nature or natures or climat or climats or vin or vins or action or actions or obligation or obligations or option or options or portefeuille or portefeuilles or stock or stocks or hypothèque or hypothèques or investissement or investissements or financement or financements or finance)”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. As we explain later, the context of the term was diffuse and thus difficult to code systematically. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The general newspapers are still being evaluated with the findings supporting our arguments and current findings presented in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)