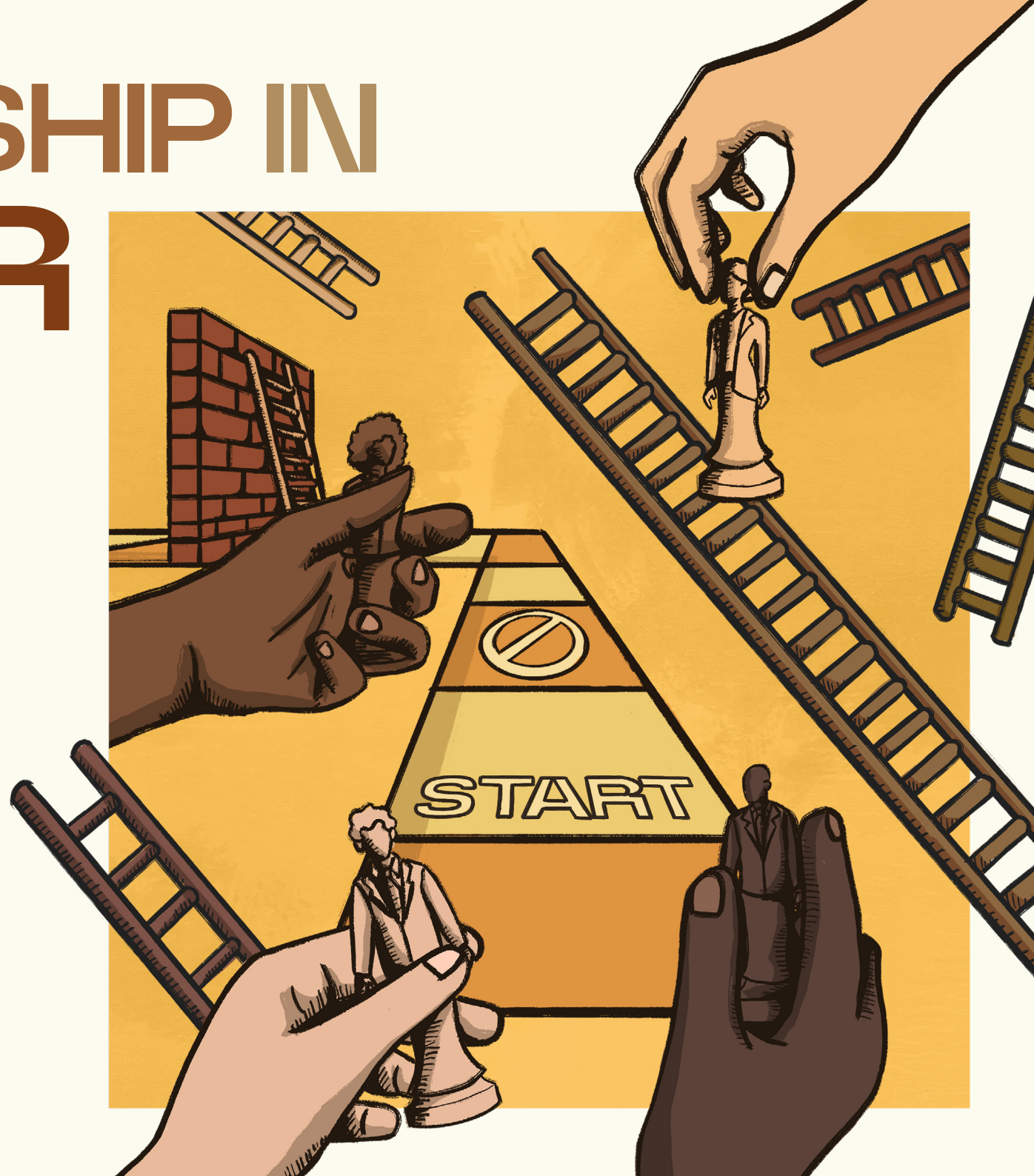


LEADERSHIP IN COLOR



JUDI MESMAN

Summary

This report describes an exploratory qualitative study of the experiences of 40 people of color who were appointed to leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector, such as in (local) government, culture, education and healthcare, after May 2020. The semi-structured interviews took place in the period May-November 2023. Although the themes reflect different challenges and struggles, the vast majority of participants do their work with great pleasure and dedication. Their insights are nevertheless sometimes painful and confronting, but were usually shared in an atmosphere of optimism and motivation to make a difference.

The stories of the participants are described on the basis of six themes that have been developed through reflexive thematic analysis. (1) A colorful group. This refers to the diversity in personal background, education and careers within the group, where all kinds of barriers such as under-advancing and racism regularly occurred. Overcoming adversity was seen as a source of strength. (2) White standards and expectations. Almost all participants indicated that they had conformed to dominant norms on their way to the top, because organizations leave little room for real diversity. Finding the balance between authenticity and conforming was often mentioned as a challenge. (3) Recognizing talent of color. Many participants agreed that 'color' always plays a role in job applications, if you get the job and if you don't. That can also cause insecurity. No one wants to be appointed just because of their ethnic-racial background. An impressive CV is important to make sure that this is not how it comes across. (4) Color in leadership practice. Acceptance of the leaders of color was not always self-evident, they often have to earn it with extra effort. Many participants cite a bicultural background as a strength in their leadership in general and in the field of diversity and inclusion in particular. Many see this dossier as an important task that must be approached with the necessary caution in order to remove resistance, but also not to be (only) associated with that dossier. (5) The color of unsafety. There was often a double burden: leading the organization and navigating 'otherness', in which misunderstanding and lack of support from above often occurred. This sometimes led to experiencing loneliness. Characteristics of 'the glass cliff' were present in a small group: an organization in trouble that increases the risk of failure. (6) A colorful vision of the future. In the experience of the participants, their role model function is considerable. That sometimes takes some getting used to and often creates a feeling of obligation that can be difficult: you must not fail. People were generally (cautiously) optimistic about a more diverse and inclusive future in their sector. That is, if it continues on the chosen path and everyone takes responsibility.

All in all, the stories of the participants are characterized by different areas of tension. People recognize the importance of 'color' and cultural heritage in their life story, career and leadership style, but in the end would prefer that it doesn't play the role that it does and that the core of the work and their qualities can come first. For many participants, conforming is second nature. This may mean that to a certain extent they maintain or have maintained existing norms, but once at the top, they make a striking effort to make room for 'otherness' so that others do not have to conform to a dominant norm. The exceptionality of the participants (often the first and the only one at the top) and their survival mentality emphasizes the individual level, while participants emphasize changing systems in their leadership practices. Forty people of color in top positions may give the impression that institutional racism is not that prevalent, but that conclusion ignores the real challenges that this group still faces and the resistance in organizations to bring about real change. Yes, there is progress, but it doesn't happen by itself.

Based on the interviews and additional input from the participants in group meetings and e-mail exchanges, five recommendations were formulated. (1) Think before you start: is the organization ready for 'color' at the top? Is there sufficient support from above and organizational motivation to question what seem like self-evident norms? (2) Be realistic: Diversity and inclusion issues in an organization are not solved by one person of color in a leadership position. Mandate and widely shared responsibility are necessary. (3) Take seriously the experiences, concerns, and suggestions of employees and leaders of color about restrictive norms and racism in the organization. Don't look away, deny, or trivialize. (4) Shift the focus from individuals and interpersonal behaviors to a focus on structures and work culture when it comes to an inclusive organization. (5) Avoid the pitfall of focusing on the marginalized group as a source of problems or lack of success. Shift the focus to the entire organization so that development and building bridges comes from all sides and does not depend on the ability to conform of people of color.

This is not an easy list of boxes to tick off. That is also the main message of this report: diversity and inclusion in leadership should not be a box that an organization can just tick. It requires serious preparation and continuous commitment from everyone. Above all, this path requires courage, something that the participants possess in large quantities. As Maya Angelou wrote, "Courage is the most important of all virtues, for without courage you cannot practice any other virtue consistently."

Samenvatting

Dit rapport beschrijft een exploratief kwalitatief onderzoek naar de ervaringen van 40 mensen van kleur die na mei 2020 zijn benoemd in leiderschapsposities in de (semi-)publieke sector, zoals in de (lokale) overheid, cultuur, onderwijs en zorg. De semigestructureerde interviews vonden plaats in de periode mei-november 2023.

Hoewel de thema's verschillende uitdagingen en worstelingen weerspiegelen doen verreweg de meeste deelnemers hun werk met veel plezier en toewijding. Hun inzichten zijn desalniettemin soms pijnlijk en confronterend, maar werden doorgaans gedeeld in een sfeer van optimisme en vanuit de motivatie om een verschil te maken.

De verhalen van de deelnemers worden beschreven aan de hand van zes thema's die hier kort worden samengevat. (1) Een kleurrijk gezelschap. Dit verwijst naar de diversiteit in afkomst, onderwijs- en loopbanen binnen de groep, waarbij allerlei barrières zoals onderadvisering en racisme regelmatig voorkwamen. Het overwinnen van tegenslagen werd gezien als bron van kracht. (2) Witte normen en verwachtingen. Vrijwel alle deelnemers gaven aan zich in de weg naar de top behoorlijk te hebben aangepast aan dominante normen, omdat organisaties weinig ruimte laten voor werkelijke diversiteit. De balans vinden tussen authenticiteit en meebewegen werd vaak genoemd als uitdaging. (3) Talent van kleur (h)erkennen. Veel deelnemers waren het erover eens dat 'kleur' eigenlijk altijd een rol speelt in sollicitaties, als je de baan wél krijgt en als je de baan niet krijgt. Dat maakt ook onzeker. Niemand wil alleen vanwege hun afkomst benoemd worden. Een indrukwekkend CV is dan belangrijk om de schijn niet tegen te hebben. (4) Kleur in de leiderschapspraktijk. Acceptatie van de leider van kleur was lang niet altijd vanzelfsprekend, die moeten ze vaak met extra inzet verdienen. Een biculturele achtergrond benoemen veel deelnemers als kracht in hun leiderschap in het algemeen en op het dossier diversiteit en inclusie in het bijzonder. Vaak met de nodige voorzichtigheid om weerstand te weg te nemen, maar ook om niet (alleen) met dat dossier geassocieerd te worden. (5) De kleur van onveiligheid. Er was vaak sprake van een dubbele belasting: gewoon de organisatie leiden én het navigeren van 'anders-zijn' waarbij onbegrip en gebrek aan steun van bovenaf nogal eens voorkwamen. Dat is soms eenzaam. Kenmerken van 'de glazen klif' waren bij een kleine groep aanwezig: een organisatie in de problemen waardoor het risico om te falen groot is. (6) Een kleurrijk toekomstbeeld. De rolmodelfunctie van deze deelnemers is groot, zo is de ervaring. Dat is soms even wennen en schept ook vaak een gevoel van verplichting die zwaar kan vallen: je mag niet falen. Men was doorgaans (voorzichtig) optimistisch over een meer diverse en inclusieve toekomst in de sector. Als we tenminste doorzetten op de ingeslagen weg en iedereen verantwoordelijkheid neemt.

Al met al worden de verhalen van de deelnemers gekenmerkt door verschillende spanningsvelden. Men erkent het belang van 'kleur' en afkomst in hun levensverhaal, loopbaan en leiderschapstijl maar zou uiteindelijk liever zien dat het er niet toe doet. Dat de kern van het werk en hun kwaliteiten voorop kunnen staan. Aanpassen is voor veel deelnemers een tweede natuur waarmee ze bestaande normen mogelijk deels in stand houden of hielden, maar eenmaal aan de top zetten ze zich juist opvallend in om ruimte te maken voor 'anders-zijn' zodat anderen zich niet zo hoeven te conformeren aan een dominante norm. De uitzonderlijkheid van de deelnemers (vaak de eerste en de enige aan de top) en hun overlevingsmentaliteit legt de nadruk op het individuele niveau, terwijl deelnemers in de leiderschapspraktijk de nadruk leggen op het veranderen van systemen. Veertig mensen van kleur in topposities kan de indruk wekken dat het wel meevalt met institutioneel racisme, maar die conclusie gaat voorbij aan de wezenlijke uitdagingen waar deze groep nog voor staat en de weerstand in organisaties om werkelijke verandering te bewerkstelligen. Ja er is vooruitgang, maar het gaat niet vanzelf.

Op basis van de interviews en aanvullende input van de deelnemers in groepsbijeenkomsten en e-mailwisselingen zijn vijf aanbevelingen geformuleerd. (1) Bezint eer je begint: is de organisatie klaar voor 'kleur' aan de top? Is er voldoende draagvlak, steun van bovenaf en motivatie om vanzelfsprekendheden te bevragen? (2) Wees realistisch: Problemen in een organisatie rond diversiteit en inclusie worden niet opgelost door één persoon van kleur in een leiderschapspositie. Mandaat en breed gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid zijn noodzakelijk. (3) Neem de ervaringen, zorgen en suggesties van werknemers en leiders van kleur over beperkende normen en racisme in de organisatie serieus. Niet wegstijven, ontkennen, of bagatelliseren. (4) Verleg de focus op individuen en interpersoonlijk gedrag naar een focus op structuren en de werkcultuur als het gaat om een inclusieve organisatie. (5) Vermijd de valkuil van een focus op de gemarginaliseerde groep als bron van problemen of gebrek aan succes. Verleg de aandacht naar de hele organisatie zodat beweging en verbinding van alle kanten komt en niet afhangt van het aanpassingsvermogen van mensen van kleur.

Dit is geen makkelijk af te vinken lijstje. Dat is ook de hoofdboodschap van dit rapport: diversiteit en inclusie in leiderschap zou geen vakje moeten zijn dat een organisatie zomaar kan afvinken. Het vergt serieuze voorbereiding en doorlopende inzet van iedereen. Boven alles vergt deze weg moed, iets wat de deelnemers in grote hoeveelheden bezitten. Zoals Maya Angelou schreef: 'Moed is de belangrijkste van alle deugden, want zonder moed kun je geen enkele andere deugd consistent in de praktijk brengen.'

I dedicate this report to Philomena Essed, who in 1984 provided Dutch academia and society with a necessary starting point for an in-depth understanding of racism and discrimination in our country with her groundbreaking book *Alledaags Racisme* (Everyday Racism). She was way ahead of her time.

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Introduction

Many organizations in the Netherlands have developed policies on diversity and inclusion in recent years. Diversity refers to the representation of different groups of people in an organization, with attention to all kinds of characteristics, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and physical disabilities. Inclusion is about (policies to promote) a work culture in which there is space, support and appreciation for difference, for polyphony. Or as one of the participants put it: a working environment that says 'I have taken you into account'.

A central focus of diversity policy is often attracting diverse talent in general and increasingly in leadership positions in particular. In recent years, in the Netherlands a lot of attention has been paid to the representation of women in top positions. Figures are available on this in most organizations and research has been done on their experiences.

The focus on ethnic diversity in organizations increased after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent international visibility and actions of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, figures on ethnic-racial diversity in organizations are not reliably kept in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, research has been conducted into the position and experiences of employees of color, but there are virtually no studies in the Netherlands on the experiences of people of color in leadership positions ([see Box 1](#)). This research was conducted to change that and gain insights that can contribute to effective policies on ethnic-racial diversity and inclusion when it comes to leadership positions. The central research question is exploratory in nature and is:

What are the experiences of people of color in leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector in the Netherlands?

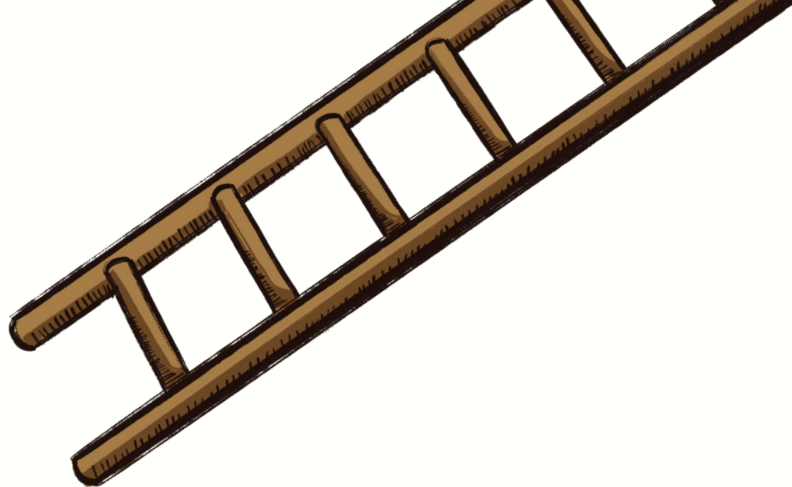
Box 1: Previous research

In the Netherlands, virtually no research has been done into the experiences of people of color in leadership positions. An exception is a qualitative study by Waldring, Crul and Ghorashi (2015)¹ on people with a Turkish or Moroccan background who were born in the Netherlands, have a higher education degree, manage at least five people in their work in the public or private sector and earned at least 2000 euros net per month. This research focused on the experience of discrimination at work and the power relations that play a role in this. This study shows that these leaders experience subtle discrimination at work at different levels of the organization: from managers, subordinates and subordinates. Furthermore, it appears that these leaders are aware of the different positions of power in the organization and that they adjust their strategies aimed at dealing with discrimination accordingly.

The research described in this report differs from the study by Waldring and colleagues in a number of ways. In short: the current study covers a broader group of people of color ([see Box 3 for its definition](#)), focuses mainly on people in positions of final responsibility with usually a larger number of subordinates and a significantly higher salary level than in the earlier study, potentially covers all experiences of people of color in and prior to their leadership position and not only experiences of discrimination, and is limited to the (semi-)public sector (see also the methods section). The differences do not make one study better than the other, but indicate where the current research complements the previous research.

Marieke Slootman's research on social mobility of ethnic-racial marginalized groups in the Netherlands is also relevant as a context for the current study.² Slootman describes various processes and experiences that the leaders of color also mention in this report on their way to the top. In addition, there are several international overview works on leaders of color that are worth reading.³





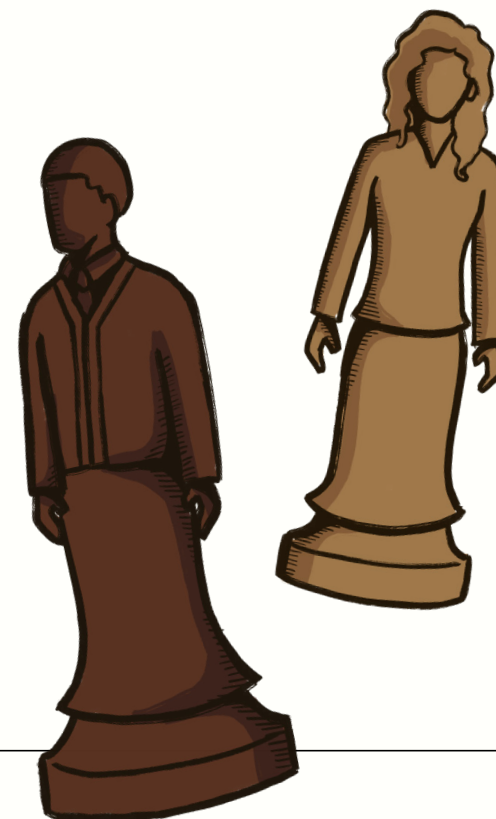
This report is written for a general audience. This means that it contains as little jargon as possible and that scholarly backgrounds and references are not in the running text but in separate boxes. Because of the target audience of this report, the texts in the scholarly frameworks are concise and the discussion of research is not as complete as it would be in a scholarly publication. Rather, they are sketches of scholarly insights to give an idea of the results of research on the central themes in this report.

The research focused on people of color in top positions in the (semi-)public sector (see also Methods). Initially, the intention was to include the private sector, but gradually I got the impression that the difference between the sectors is such that it is better to examine them separately. The (semi-)public sector is a logical starting point given the social responsibility that comes with this sector, which also includes issues of representation and justice.

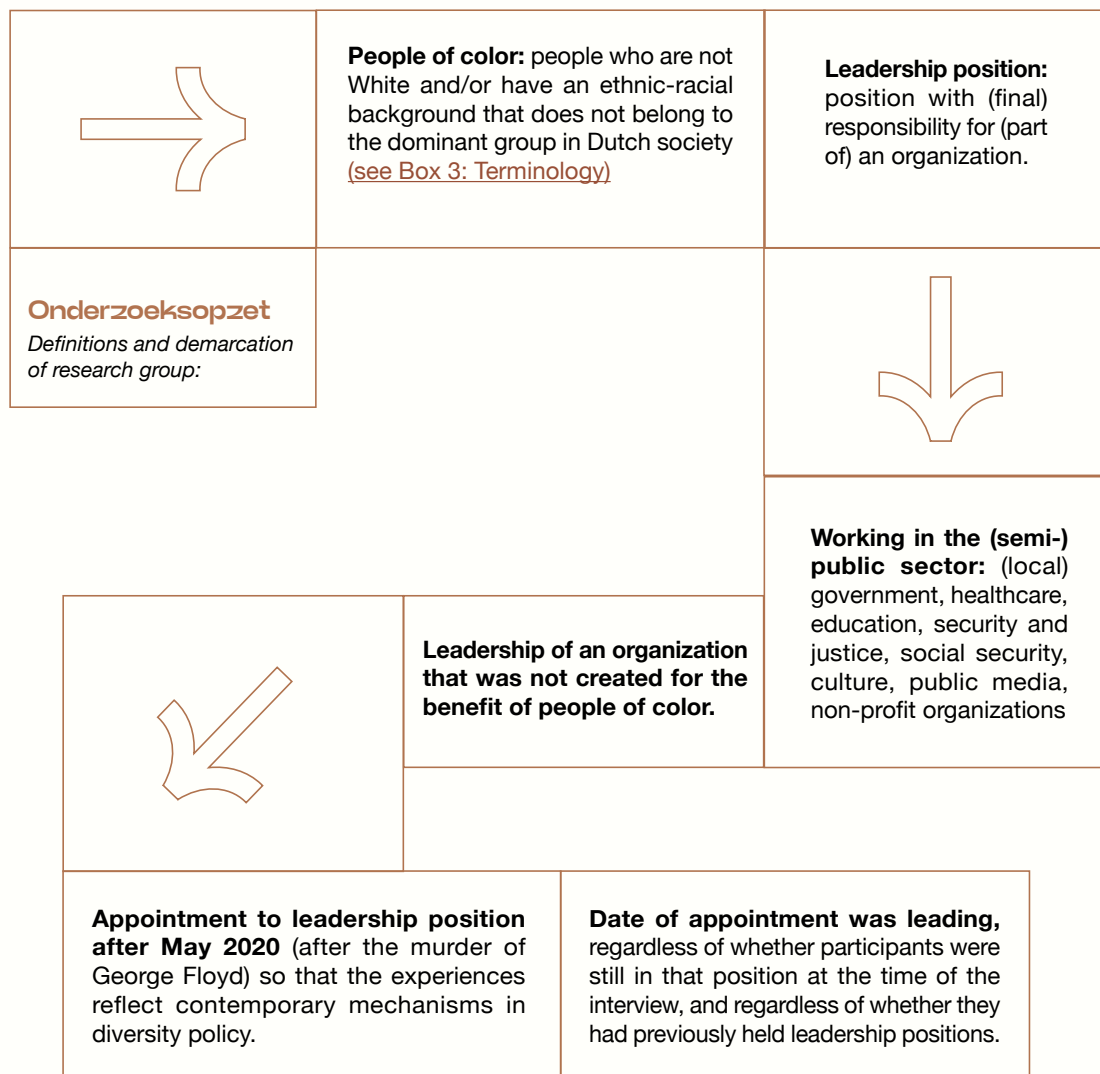
Finally, this report is explicitly about the Netherlands and the findings are also placed as much as possible in the light of previous (scientific) work on the Netherlands in this area. This proved difficult for some subjects, as research on people of color in organizations in general and in leadership positions in particular is still very scarce in the Netherlands. I sincerely hope that the research that is central to this report will be an inspiration for more Dutch studies in this area and thus more insight into opportunities, barriers and risks for people of color at the top of governance. ([Box 2: Ethics, collaborations, and funding](#))

Box 2: Ethics, collaborations, and funding

The research design has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs of Leiden University. All interviewees have given permission for the recording of the interview and the anonymous processing of their experiences in publications. In addition, they gave permission for the use of specific anonymized quotes from their interview. As a form of peer review, a scientific sounding board group provided critical feedback for the analysis and reporting. This sounding board group consisted of Prof. Halleh Ghorashi, Prof. Sennay Ghebreab, Prof. Sandra Groeneveld, and Prof. Guno Jones. The material costs of the project were financed by the Stevin Prize, which was awarded to the author by NWO in 2021. Leiden University provided *in-kind* funding in the form of the author's hours.



Study design



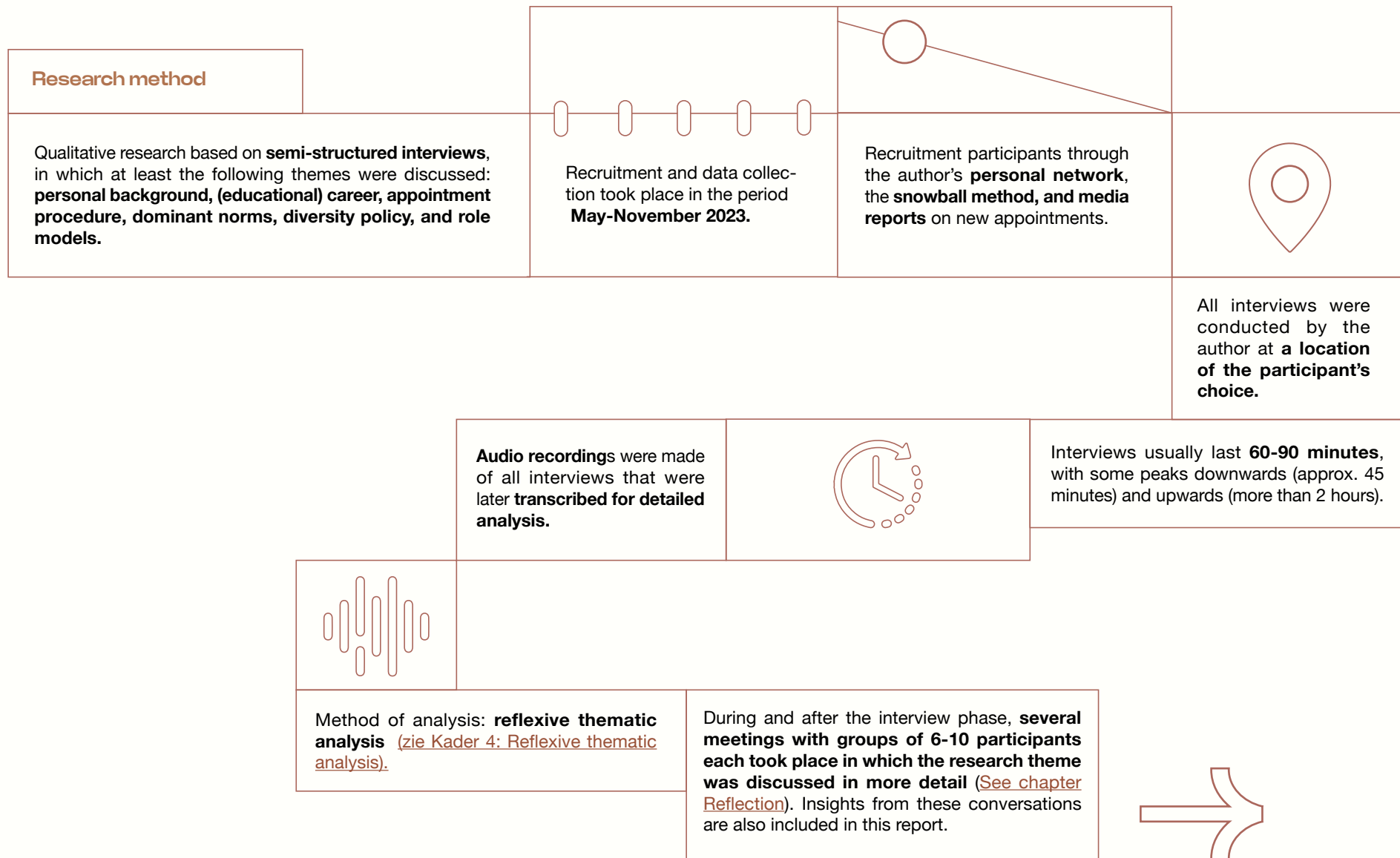
Box 3: Terminology

The term 'of color' is used for people who are not White and/or have an ethnic-racial background that does not belong to the dominant group in Dutch society. Many participants also used this term to describe themselves or the broader group. Several participants called themselves bicultural: raised in the Netherlands but with roots in a different culture. Others used the now old-fashioned word 'allochtoon' or even 'foreigner', often including imaginary quotation marks. Still others called themselves Surinamese or Moroccan or Black. The different terms were also regularly used interchangeably during the interviews, depending on the specific topic. Almost all participants called the Dutch majority group White. Only a few participants used the word Blank.

The word ethnic-racial is also a choice. The word 'race' is not used much anymore in the Netherlands because of the deterministic associations it evokes, and because of scientific insights that race when it comes to people is mainly socially constructed, albeit in interaction with biology⁴. The word 'ethnicity' refers to a shared cultural identity based on shared customs, religion, language, region of origin, and so on. In the interviews, it was found that participants identified themselves and others both on the basis of what can be called race in the old-fashioned sense and on the basis of cultural characteristics, as well as regularly interchangeably. My choice of the term ethnic-racial is a reflection of this.

In this publication, the words White, Brown and Black are capitalized to indicate that they do not (only) refer to a person's skin color, but to the ethnic-racial group identity associated with that color and which was also expressed as such by several participants. The use of the color words occurred as an indication of a group to which someone explicitly counts himself, but also to indicate that this group is seen by others in a certain way based on their physical characteristics. In the case of 'White', it was often a reference to the ethnic-racial majority group and dominant culture in the Netherlands. Whether or not to capitalize these words – especially the word White/White – is controversial, see an insightful article by Olive Nduwanje in Oneworld⁵. I have chosen the capital letter to make it clear that White is also an ethnic-racial position and not a neutral starting point from which only deviations are 'ethnic'.

Finally, the word 'racism'. In this publication, racism is used to mean all forms of discrimination based on race, color and national or ethnic origin⁶. Overview studies show that racism in the Netherlands occurs structurally in various sectors.⁷



Box 4: Reflexive thematic analysis

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the data.⁸ That is to say: the analyses are primarily based on the collected data and the organization and interpretation of the data takes place on the basis of the scientific and personal knowledge and experience of the researcher. This method of analysis acknowledges that neutrality does not automatically lead to maximum objectivity. Because complete neutrality is impossible in reality, sources of bias remain invisible in much research and sometimes even form an obstacle to objective insights, especially when it comes to marginalized groups that are usually described through the lens of the dominant group, often in the context of oppression.⁹ No wonder that scientific research is sometimes seen by these groups as ‘a dirty word’.¹⁰

It is important to note that the research group at the heart of this publication should not simply be seen as a marginalized group. They are people of color who, due to their ethnic-racial minority status in the Netherlands, do indeed have to deal with marginalization mechanisms in society, as this report will also show. But they are also people in positions of power, people who function in the top layers of organizations and are part of an elite. They are usually very aware of that position, and that goes hand in hand with a sense of responsibility towards other people of color who do not (yet) belong to the elite. Their insights and the accompanying recommendations directly and indirectly concern the latter group.

Donna Haraway introduced the notion of ‘situated knowledge’: the idea that all forms of knowledge are a reflection of the context in which they are produced, including the person of the researcher.¹¹ Sandra Harding developed the concept of ‘strong objectivity’, referring to a research practice in which the experiences of the (marginalized) group in question are taken as a starting point and in which openness is given about the profile of the researcher and its possible influence on the results and conclusions.¹² That is why I write in this report in the first person and not only in the passive form in which the researcher remains invisible.

In reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher goes through the following steps: (1) Study the data multiple times (listen, read); (2) Formulate and record provisional codes that reflect interesting aspects of the data; (3) Clustering and arranging of codes that together form a possible underlying theme; (4) Verify that the preliminary themes are indeed a good reflection of the codes and of the dataset as a whole; (5) Defining and labeling themes through continuous adaptation and refinement, including in relation to the overarching storyline; (6) Reporting. In practice, the first four steps take place partly at the same time. In the reflection chapter in the main text, I elaborate on my role in the research process as a whole and the influence this may have had on the recruitment, the interviews, the analyses and the conclusions.

Profile of the investigator

For conducting qualitative research and reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data, the scientific and personal knowledge and experience of the researcher are important tools. The researcher does not hide behind so-called neutrality, but is open about his or her own profile and how this can influence the research process.

Over the past 30 years, I have gained my scholarly knowledge and experience by studying clinical and health psychology and obtaining a PhD in developmental psychopathology, followed by the execution and supervision of several dozen small and large research projects. All studies were about children and young people, focusing on the role of culture, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in parenting and education. In recent years, I have mainly focused on issues related to racism and various forms of discrimination. I have experience with both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The Color at the Top study is the first study I have conducted that is not about youth.

My personal knowledge and experience that are relevant to this research have to do with my background and work experience. I am a cis-gender heterosexual woman of color with Indian roots. I was raised by socially engaged, left-leaning parents. I had to deal with racism and discrimination, especially in my youth. In my professional life, I haven’t come across it much, except for a few comments from colleagues that betray that people see me as ‘the other’ and that they know little about the experiences of people of color in the Netherlands.

Finally, I myself held formal leadership positions in the semi-public sector for 10 years, namely at Leiden University. From 2012 to 2016 I was director of the Institute of Educational Sciences and from 2016-2022 dean of Leiden University College (LUC). In particular, the experiences at LUC have taught me a lot about navigating issues around racism administratively and personally and the precarious position in which someone of color finds themselves when this theme presents itself.

In the section ‘**Reflection**’ I describe how my profile played a role in the different phases of the research, from the recruitment of participants to the analysis of the data and the presentation of the results.

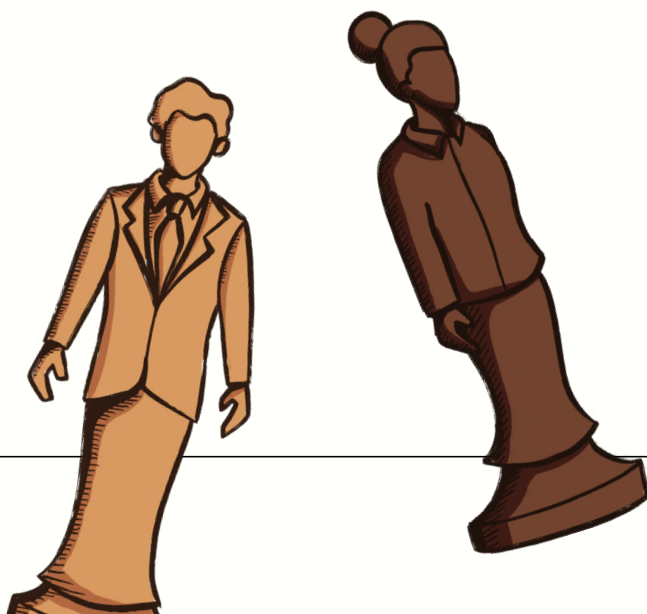
Results

The six analysis steps associated with reflexive thematic analysis have led to the identification of six themes that together form a narrative in which the experiences of the interviewees are expressed. Although the themes reflect different challenges and struggles, the vast majority of participants shape their roles with great dedication and passion. Most of the interviewees are clearly at home in their (relatively) new position and enjoy their work. Their insights are nevertheless sometimes painful and confrontational, but were usually shared in an atmosphere of optimism and motivated to make a difference. This report should be read in that context.

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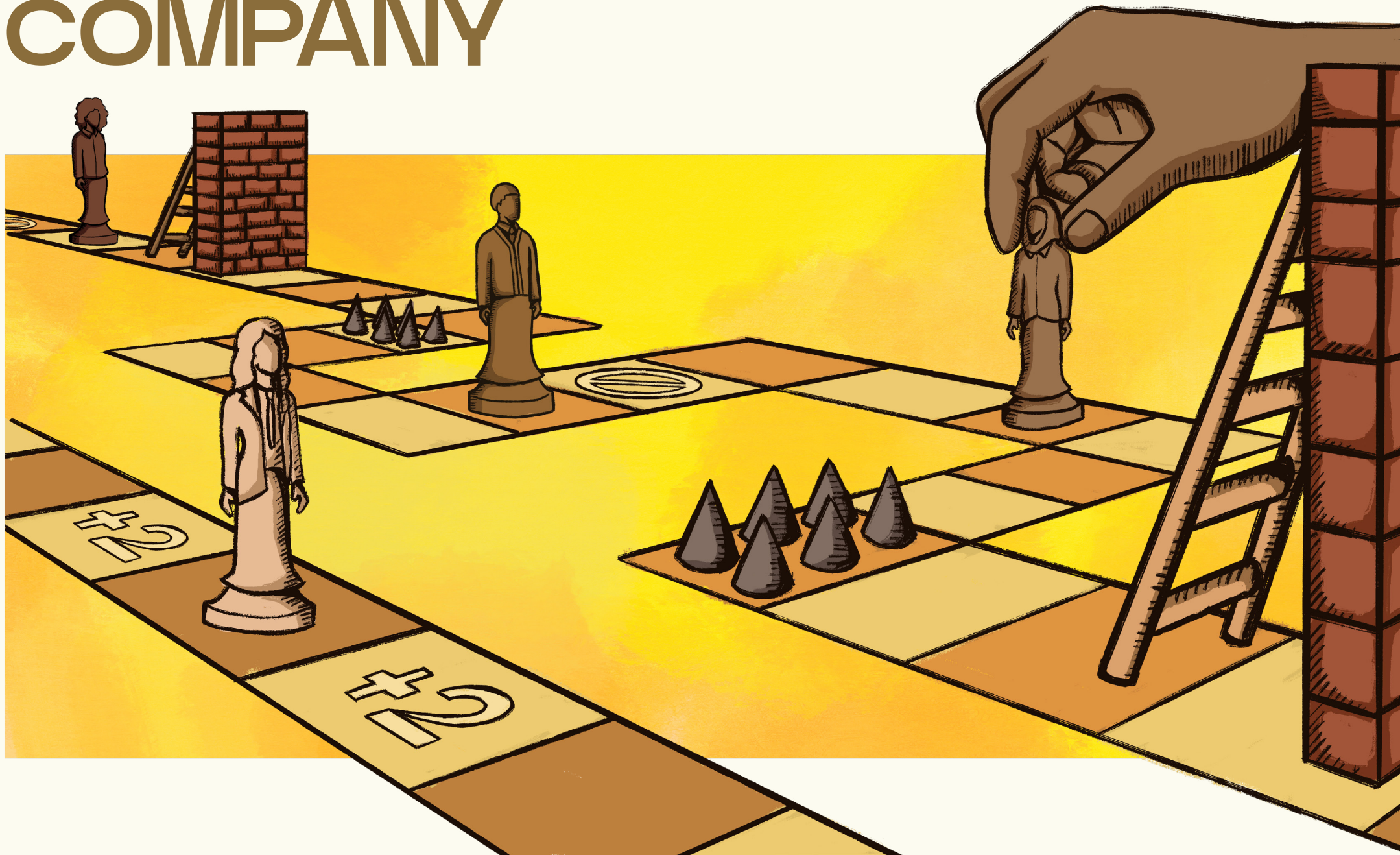
Below, I elaborate on these themes and illustrate them with anonymous quotes from participants. I would like to make a few more points. 4-6 quotes from each participant are included to ensure that everyone's experiences are represented. Quotes within one sub-theme always come from different participants, and such a block never contains multiple quotes from one participant. Finally, it's tempting to think that all the quotes that are a bit more critical or negative all come from the same people. That is not the case. On the contrary, there was a striking mix of experiences and narratives, also within participants. So a very painful experience and an optimistic statement can come from one and the same person.

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A COLORFUL COMPANY

01



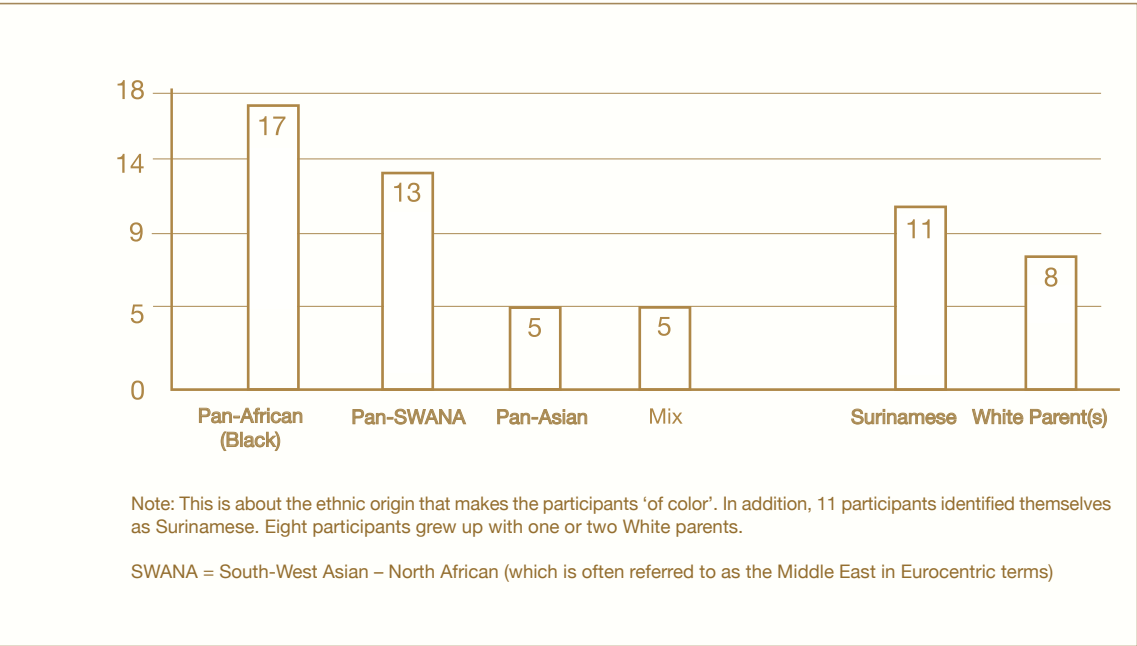
The research participants are a colorful group in every way. They have roots in regions all over the world, work in a variety of sectors and often have a remarkably diverse background in terms of education and work experience. Intersections will not be reported to prevent recognizability of the participants. I approached 46 people to participate in the study. Four people did not respond, two indicated that they did not have time. The final group consists of 40 people. Here is a general description of the research group, after which we go deeper into characteristics of their background that they themselves identified as formative in their lives and careers.




40 Participants - 18 women, 22 men




6 LGBT



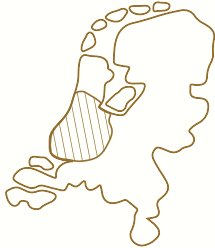


18 Born in the Netherlands

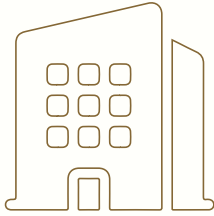


22 Born abroad
5 Came to the Netherlands as adults


Leeftijd	30 ERS	40 ERS	50 ERS	60 ERS	
	4 Participants	19 Participants	13 Participants	4 Participants	




35 Work inside the urbanized western region of the Netherlands




size of organization (unit) over which the participant was in charge in terms of number of employees



18 Participants




12 Participants




10 Participants

Average months in office



range: 2-36 monts



6 Participants

Many participants have impressive careers and it struck me that they did not always follow the usual paths. They moved between different types of jobs within sectors and made the transition to other sectors. Their teaching careers and careers typically demonstrate great ambition, creativity, and broad interests. Few have followed a linear predictable path. And for all participants, a desire to make a difference in society is central to their careers. It is also striking that many participants take the credo 'lifelong learning' very literally by constantly following new training courses, sometimes also in addition to their job. Because these are people who hold a top position, it is not surprising that curiosity, hard work and perseverance are not foreign to them.

However, this profile cannot be seen in isolation from their background. Almost all participants mention their experiences of growing up in a White world in which they were often seen as 'different' and treated as particularly formative in their lives. Although the childhood experiences of many participants bear witness to many (painful) challenges, these were usually shared in the interviews as if they were self-evident, it was just the way it was. Almost everyone experienced racism, from microaggressions ('you speak Dutch so well') and racist abuse to physical violence. Even when participants spoke candidly about experiences that still affect them from time to time, it was almost always in the context of what it has brought them and how this gives them a valuable (different) perspective on society in general and their field of work and function in particular. In this way, necessity was made a virtue.

More than half of the participants said that they had to work harder from an early age and prove themselves more than other (White) people. They often received this message from their parents from an early age.

<i>"We have indeed been told, yes you are different and you will really have to work harder."</i>		<i>"The idea of your B is worth less than Fleur's B, I was brought up with that. "</i>
	<i>"And in addition, I learned from my mother, and that's kind of in it, that I will always have to go a step faster than if I had looked different."</i>	
	<i>"The reality was: you're at a disadvantage, people are going to see you as less competent. So, like your grandparents, you have to be very disciplined, very hard-working, and have integrity."</i>	

Because these are people who hold a top position, it is not surprising that curiosity, hard work and perseverance are not foreign to them.



The parents of the participants were right, as it turned out during their school careers. Half of the participants who attended school in the Netherlands were demonstrably under-advised in the transition from primary to secondary education. In other words, the primary school's advice on the next level of education (e.g. MAVO or HAVO) was lower than could be expected on the basis of school performance and/or the final test score (see Box 5: Color in education). This also happened to seven participants whose parents were highly educated. On the face of it, there were no clear differences between the group that was under-advised and those that were not under-advised in terms of gender, ethnic origin or country of birth (whether or not they were in the Netherlands). In addition to under-advising, there were also other experiences with racism and discrimination by teachers during the school career. The undervaluation and discrimination in education has left its mark on several participants.

"And those [teachers] would imitate my accent, out loud in class. Yes.... Yes, the Dutch teacher was the worst, really an asshole. I should not think about that for too long, such a bad time... it was really bad."

"I wanted to study literature and I kept being told [by teachers], well forget that, you're never going to be able to do that anyway. "

"It hasn't been easy, I've had to work really, really hard, just start from the bottom and swallow a lot. But I do wonder that if I wasn't of color, I wonder if it would have been so hard."

"Yes, it was just a very White school. I also had a lot of trouble with teachers and the management of the school (...) When I received my diploma, the rector literally said 'we never thought you would ever leave here with a diploma', in the speech of a packed auditorium. "

"Well that [the under-advising] just broke me down physically, that's kind of a struggle, kind of a fight. That was the most painful thing, fighting in silence to climb up. "

Box 5: Color in education

In the field of education, national figures show that young people with a non-Western migration background (as it is called in many reports) differ less and less from young people without a migration background.¹³ It is interesting that the representation of young adults with a non-Western migration background at universities is very close to that of young adults without a migration background (14% versus 15%), while the difference is larger at the highest level of secondary school, VWO (13% vs 19%). Young people of color are also much more likely to be 'stackers' than other young people, according to national figures¹⁴ and research specifically among students with a migration background.¹⁵ Researchers link this stacker pattern to under-advising, among other things.

National figures show that for children with a non-Western migration background, the primary school's advice regarding the child's next level of education (e.g., MAVO or HAVO) is lower than for other children more often than would be expected on the basis of school performance.¹⁶ This pattern disappears when corrected for the education level of the parents and figures show that the initial advice is often adjusted upwards on the basis of the final test, especially in schools with a large population of pupils with a migration background.¹⁷ These relatively recent figures therefore do not show any under-advice on ethnic-racial grounds. It should be noted, however, that the category of 'non-Western migration background' can be both too broad and too narrow to identify racist mechanisms. And because socio-economic disadvantage also has a color in the Netherlands¹⁸, under-advice often affects pupils with a migration background. The research participants were roughly in the last year of primary education in the period 1970-2000. For that period, there are little or no figures available on under-advice.

In addition to under-advising, institutional sources of inequality in education include: (low) expectations and less support from teachers¹⁹, underrepresentation and stereotypical representation of people of color in teaching materials²⁰, the teacher shortage that disproportionately affects schools with many students with a migrant background²¹ and the language policy in schools, where a ban on speaking a language other than Dutch is common, but is not based on science and has an exclusive and discriminatory effect in various ways.²² Finally, there is a tendency to approach students of color from ideas about what they would not have and what they could not do (deficit thinking), a thought that, according to educationalists Orhan Agirdag and Louise Elffers, is not conducive to inclusive education and equality of opportunity.²³ See also Sloomman's research with interesting personal stories about the school experiences of young people of color in the Netherlands.²⁴

Half of the participants who attended school in the Netherlands were under-advised in the transition from primary to secondary education.

Among the research participants, it was often an assertive parent who ensured that the participant went to the appropriate level of education if the recommendation was too low, but this did not always happen. Half of the participants had parents who had little or no education, and spoke little or no Dutch. Sometimes it was the participants who supported their parents (and other family members) as children because they themselves spoke Dutch well and knew their way around.

The participants who did not receive a higher school recommendation first had to prove themselves by getting high grades in secondary school before they moved on to a higher level within one or a few years. Others became so-called ‘stackers’ who obtained multiple diplomas. Dutch research by the Knowledge Platform for Inclusive Living showed that half of the stackers with a migration background had missed support from education professionals and felt insufficiently seen in education (see also Box 5). The quotes from the participants in the current study show a similar pattern. Still, most participants – including those who mentioned the negative sides – emphasized the fact that their childhood experiences have made them stronger and better able to cope with difficult situations in general and racism in particular.

“Once you know exclusion, you know how to deal with it. (...) This is not so special, I’m back in my high school days. The harder they kick, the harder I work. ”

“It was mainly a matter of discovering and figuring out for yourself (...) and that also breeds a certain mentality. (...) I’m a true survivor. I can really solve a lot myself.”

“I lived through a war as a child, fled and had the role of caring for my family and leading them more often in a new country. All of that comes in handy in my work now. Taking care of people and organizations in many areas, that’s what I can do!”

“In a sea of adversity, grab a shovel and dig in one direction. A lot of people of color have learned that in this White society. They have learned: you just have to choose a direction and start digging. Otherwise, you’ll break. That quality is super functional.”

Their childhood experiences have made them stronger and better able to cope with difficult situations in general and racism in particular.

So the participants were not easily discouraged, and it’s not surprising that they’ve all made it far. However, not all participants remembered their childhood as particularly challenging. There were also participants who went through life relatively smoothly, who immediately ended up at an appropriate (high) school level, who had parents who had the knowledge and experience to offer guidance and/or ‘naturally’ let things slide away quickly. And who, as a result, went out into the world from a more comfortable position.

Several participants also indicated that they did not have to adapt or conform very consciously. Their way of acting and speaking was already in line with what is considered acceptable by the majority group in the Netherlands. Sometimes by parents who themselves had a certain level of education and spoke Dutch well, but certainly also by the peers with whom they interacted at school and during their studies. This often went hand in hand with a certain style of dress and a general way of doing things that fits well with the dominant White culture. They also noted that as a result, they encountered less resistance in their youth and afterwards than others with a migration background who do sound and act 'different'.

"But I've never had to make an effort and never felt like I had to adapt. (...) I've never had that sense of urgency myself. It's all pretty good for me and I've mainly worked with White people everywhere I go. But I also find that realization confrontational. "

"I have the same cultural customs, for the most part. I am used to formal gatherings and drinks I know when I should or shouldn't say something, so I completely conform to those mores and I'm not a threat in them. I do not ask much of the adaptability of the other."

"I think I'm quite acceptable in that sense. I think I'm similar to the rest in that sense... Yes, it's a bit of a camouflage perhaps. "

"On the outside I'm Asian, but I had a very Dutch upbringing, so I feel very Dutch in that sense. "

"I make low demands on the adaptability of the other""

The highlighted quote is telling: in order to be accepted, it is useful not to ask or expect too much adjustment from the (White) other. The participants who did not or hardly had to adapt were also very aware of the fact that other people of color who are further removed from the majority in language and culture are not allowed to participate just like that. And that means that conforming to the White norm to a certain extent is seen as the only option if you want to participate in Dutch society.





White STANDARDS

AND EXPECTATIONS

02

Conforming and adapting is second nature to many participants, as the interviews showed. Make sure you are acceptable and meet the White standard. For example, it was about language: speaking Dutch perfectly, not speaking with an accent, whether that is a Surinamese accent or an accent from outside the Randstad. My guess is that less than a handful of participants would be recognized as someone of color by a stranger based on the audio recording. Of course, there is no standard way someone with roots in the Caribbean or North Africa should sound, especially if they were born and raised in the Netherlands, but it was striking that almost no one had their roots outside the Netherlands. Almost all participants thought that they would never have gotten to this position if they had had an accent.

The awkward question of whether you can have an accent in a top position was clearly expressed by Tanja Jadnansing, chair of the Amsterdam-Zuidoost district, in an article for NieuwWij in early 2024. Her beautiful maiden speech in the House of Representatives was not criticized for its content, but for the Surinamese accent with which she pronounced it. She writes: “(...) At every parliamentary debate, I tried to speak without my

“I also think that a lot of people like me who have ended up in positions like mine are really good at being extremely adaptable. I really think that’s our talent.”

accent. Until I heard a voice telling me that my accent is me, my connection to where I come from and that without my accent I can only be half myself.”

More generally, the research participants were aware that it has been important in their careers not to leave room for criticism in any area and thus to ensure that they not only talk ‘nicely’ but also look neat and do not swim against the current. In any case, not be too different (see Box 6: Conforming to the White standard).

<i>“No, I’ve always been very aware that I have to look proper, so that there is no comment or criticism of how I look, and I have to talk very nicely so that there is no comment on how I talk. I also taught myself to use very expensive words.”</i>
<i>“I felt that it was tolerated. So that if I were to say this is the line, that could be really negative for my career. Then you get into the mode of I’m going to adapt, more like pleasing and avoiding things.”</i>
<i>“I think that in the Netherlands we are still looking for that bicultural leader who is actually secretly very Dutch. (...) And that can be a little different, because that gives color, but not too much. (...) I also think that a lot of people like me who have ended up in positions like mine are really good at being extremely adaptable. I really think that’s our talent.”</i>

Box 6: Conforming to the White standard

“It’s a conflict for me because I can’t fit in and be myself at the same time. It’s a struggle. Integration is not the same as assimilation. But how can I integrate without losing my identity? I want to be part of the group, without losing myself.” Mahin, lecturer at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences, is interviewed by Charlotte Wekker.²⁵

Mahin talks about conforming: adapting to the dominant norm as much as possible so that you belong. The workplace is pre-eminently a situation in which people want to belong and be judged positively. But the dominant norm doesn’t suit everyone. The variation between people on all kinds of dimensions is far too great for that. People who deviate from the norm, in whatever way, are sometimes only welcome if they participate in the existing organizational culture.²⁶ This is also true for many people of color. They can add color to the picture, but they should not be too different.²⁷

Mainly American research shows that people of color conform to the dominant cultural norm in the workplace to a large extent in order to be accepted by the White majority.²⁸ This pattern also emerged in the study on racism at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs²⁹ and in the aforementioned Dutch study by Waldring and colleagues (see Box 1). This adaptability is regularly seen by people of color as a strength, something that helps them move forward in life. But the downside is that it can be exhausting if you have to conform all the time and that your colleagues never really get to know you if you pretend to be different than you are, according to these studies.

In the scholarly literature, this theme also recurs in reflections on authenticity that is at stake if one has to conform too much in the workplace. For example, in Dutch research into professionals of color, there appeared to be a tension between conforming to the norm and authenticity.³⁰ The American researcher Patricia Hewlin calls this adaptive behavior ‘façades of conformity’.³¹ Her research shows that forced conformity can actually lead to feelings of exhaustion and less engagement at work. She also found that Black workers report a higher degree of that conformity than other ethnic-racial groups in the United States. An important reason for this conformity, according to the Black research participants in Hewlin’s study, was the ignorance and lack of cultural sensitivity of White colleagues.

This adaptive behavior that leads to someone talking differently at work and sometimes behaving differently than in the home environment. This is also known as *code switching*.³² The obvious advantage is acceptance by colleagues, but the disadvantage is that it perpetuates the (White male) norm.³³ Another strategy that can be applied is to assume the role of connector between worlds, as described by participants in a survey among Turkish-Dutch education professionals.³⁴ Not someone who only stands between worlds (*in-betweenness*, as Edward Said called it³⁵), but someone who can actively use multiple cultural repertoires to creatively create connections that were not there before.³⁶

Different participants also experience code switching: speaking differently depending on the company and the context. This can be about literally speaking another language, but also about accents, word choice and even choice of subject. This in turn could lead to criticism from their own group among some participants. That they act too ‘White’ or sound too ‘White’. Then they were called Bounty (Black/brown on the outside, White on the inside) or banana (yellow on the outside, White on the inside). Some called themselves that and laughed about it.

Conforming to the norm is not the only way in which the participants’ awareness that they are different from the majority is expressed. This has to do with the awareness of stereotypes and associated prejudices that other people may have about the ethnic-racial group to which they belong (see Box 7: Racist stereotypes). Knowing how people tend to think about your group and therefore possibly also about you can lead to anticipatory adjustment aimed at preventing or removing prejudices by behaving differently. This is a form of compensation: behaving in the opposite direction to the stereotype and thus compensating for possible negative images that someone might have (see Box 8: Compensating).

Compensatory behavior was prevalent in all ethnic-racial groups, but there were nuanced differences in the nature of the racist stereotypes and prejudices that participants anticipate based on experience. And that, in turn, has consequences for the nature of the preventive compensatory behavior.

Many Black participants were painfully aware of the way other people look at them and that stereotypes can play a role in this. This knowledge, which they also know from their own experience, often makes the Black participants feel the need to make themselves small, to take away the fear or discomfort that White people might feel. This occurred in both men and women.

<p><i>“So as a Black person, you have tactics, methods to undo the other person’s sense of discomfort. (...) I have made myself smaller than I am..”</i></p>	<p><i>“Well then I make a gesture by being just a little kinder (...) so that the perceived threat to the other person is as small as possible.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I always assume that just my presence is going to be frightening to people. And that’s why they need to get to know me as a person and understand that I’m a human being rather than an idea. ”</i></p>
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Box 7: Racist stereotypes

Stereotypes are exaggerated images about groups of people that often do not (or only partially) correspond to reality and that in turn can result in prejudices: value judgments about another person that are not based on facts about that person, but on assumptions about the group to which someone belongs. Stereotypes and prejudices about ethnic-racial groups, in turn, underlie racial discrimination.

Research shows that racist stereotypes are still commonplace in the Netherlands.³⁷ People have all kinds of (automatic) associations with specific ethnic-racial groups that are formed by exposure to one-sided representations of people of color. These associations are often based on images that go back centuries and are based on a history in which White supremacy existed by virtue of attributing inferiority to the non-White other.³⁸ In addition, the modern open-minded White Dutchman is often pitted against the traditional and narrow-minded migrant.³⁹

There is also evidence of internalized racism: the phenomenon that people of color may think stereotypically about their own ethnic-racial group.⁴⁰ In certain situations, this in turn can have a negative effect on performance in domains to which the stereotypes apply, as described in the scientific literature on stereotype threat.⁴¹ Exposure to the ubiquitous one-sided stereotype-confirming images and stories therefore leaves no group untouched.

Because any representation of the content of racist stereotypes contributes to perpetuating the associations that are at the root of prejudice and discrimination, I appeal to the reader’s imagination. Based on your own internal and external experiences, you probably know exactly which stereotypes are meant here. The words and images that come to mind are not an individual problem, but the product of a long (colonial) history of dominant ways of thinking, speaking and writing about people of color that have left a mark on how people view the ethnic-racial other.⁴²

Such strategies are also described by Claude Steele in the book Whistling Vivaldi, in which he tells the story of Brent Staples – a Black journalist – who whistles a Vivaldi tune on the street at night when he encounters White people to let them know that he is not scary, but “civilized.” When he does that, people visibly relax. In the Dutch-speaking world, Johan Fretz refers to a similar mechanism in the last paragraph of his book *Onder de paramariboorn*: “My name is Johannes. Round. Soft. Harmless.”

Box 8: Compensatory behavior

More than a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of Black Americans that they have a “double consciousness”: they see themselves not only from within, but also through the eyes of the White other whom she views with contempt and pity.⁴³ The awareness of the view of the other person with a higher status and their stereotypes can lead to compensatory behavior, going the extra mile to show that you are not what people probably think you are.

In the Dutch context, this phenomenon is described, for example, in the report on racism at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It turned out to be one of the strategies of employees of color to keep up with the organization. An employee with a bicultural background put it this way: “It is an inferiority complex that many people with a migrant background have to deal with. So you’re going to overcompensate. Being extra sweet, being funny, etc.”⁴⁴ Research into the maiden speeches (first speaking engagements in office) of Dutch MPs of color showed that, in addition to their family background, they often emphasize their Dutchness, probably motivated by the expected prejudice that they are insufficient.⁴⁵ In another study, compensating also turned out to be an important strategy for Dutch Muslim women: being as polite, helpful and friendly as possible to White Dutch people, not only to be judged positively (despite negative stereotypes), but also to portray the group as a whole in a positive light.⁴⁶

American experimental research shows that people of color who (due to a manipulation in the experiment) expect prejudice from the White interlocutor, often use compensatory behavior: they are extra friendly and do their best to make the interaction as smooth as possible.⁴⁷ This paid off, as it turned out, but only for the White interlocutors who turned out to find these conversations very pleasant. On the other hand, the people of color who had gone out of their way were less positive about the conversation than those who had not (because they had not been encouraged to expect prejudice in the experiment).

It also works the other way around: if White Americans tried very hard not to appear prejudiced towards a Black interlocutor, it had a positive effect on the latter, but a negative effect on the former.⁴⁸ All in all, research shows that people often find interacting with an ethnic-racial other quite stressful and exhausting. So much so that their performance afterwards is less good than if they had spoken to someone from their own ethnic-racial group.⁴⁹ This may be one of the reasons why it is consciously or unconsciously less attractive to hire people with a bicultural background in a White organization. More on this in [Box 9](#).

A sense of attentiveness also played a role among a number of participants with roots in Southwest Asia or North Africa, all of whom have an Islamic family background. These participants feel like they have to watch their words or defend their culture. And they often recognize the feeling that they have to keep a low profile when it comes to events in the news from their region of origin, while those events often affect them personally.

	<i>“I speak Arabic and I work in a place where that language is associated with a lower status in society. The only people who speak Arabic in this building are the cleaners. So it must be very strange for my employees that I’m now the one telling them what to do.”</i>	
		<i>“I have had strange interview questions in the past when it comes to being Moroccan or foreign. For example, how I felt about women. ”</i>
	<i>“Others want you to respond and be accountable for such events. What do you think about that? That’s a very awkward position.”</i>	

Lotfi El Hamidi talks about the view of others on people with an Islamic background in his book Generation 9/11. Major events such as the attack on the Twin Towers or the murder of Theo van Gogh in which the perpetrators were Muslims led to a heightened awareness of their own otherness through the racist reactions of White Dutch people, especially if they had previously had the illusion that they were ‘ordinary’ Dutch people.

The stereotypes about Asians are very different from those about other groups of color. Some of these are ‘positive’ stereotypes that belong to a so-called model minority, but also negative stereotypes. In addition, Asians are often estimated to be younger than they are (especially women), which also does not always contribute to being taken seriously, although it can also be an advantage.

	<i>“I don’t have to worry about being less threatening, because we are already seen as weak. (...) Especially with people I don’t know, that you can see that you need to show a little bit more firmness than you normally would, because they might assume that you’re passive and weak. ”</i>	<i>“My leadership style is one of connecting, which means that I do not often end up in a conflict situation if it is not necessary to achieve a result. And it doesn’t help that we’re not necessarily seen as very senior or very sturdy.”</i>
	<i>“Yes, I’ve heard before, also in my previous position, that people think I look so young. (...) If they haven’t heard me talk or seen me do something, then they expect me to be younger, yes. But in some situations, it is an advantage. ”</i>	

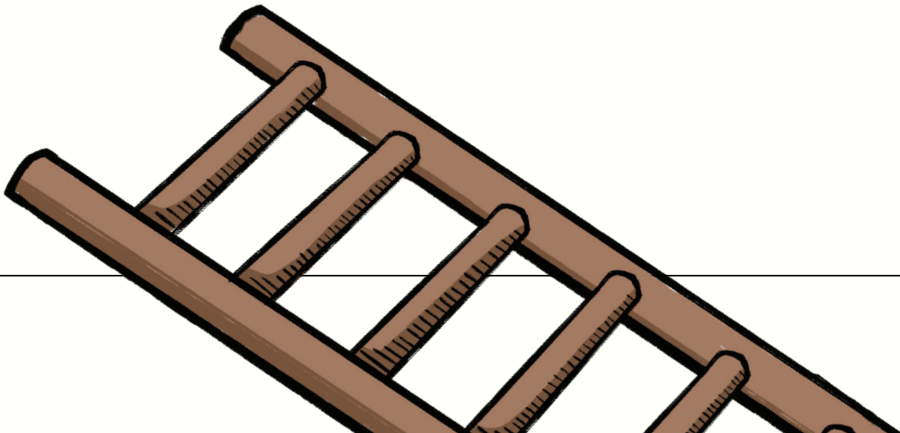
Journalist Pete Wu has written the book De Bananengeneratie (The Banana Generation) on these themes, in which he reviews all the different aspects of stereotypes and prejudices about Asians. He also describes the specific forms of discrimination he experiences as a gay Chinese Dutchman. These experiences are not private but reflect a broader pattern that also affects people of color from other ethnic-racial groups, as Haroon Ali beautifully describes in his book Half.

Then there was the very diverse group of five participants who had come to the Netherlands as adults (from four different countries) and did not grow up in Dutch culture and do not come from countries where the classic migrant groups in the Netherlands come from. The conversations showed that this can be an advantage and a disadvantage.

According to several participants, the advantage of not belonging to the classic migrant groups is that you do not belong in a Dutch minority box that already has all kinds of prejudices attached to it. When it comes to a Surinamese or a Moroccan, all Dutch people have an image, including all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices that are quite common in this society. Someone of color from another country is often found interesting and sometimes even received as a welcome specialty, someone who really brings something new.

Although the Dutch work culture is sometimes difficult to navigate for people of color who grew up in the Netherlands, there are usually landmarks. Simply because they went to school here and have also been irrevocably in contact with Dutch culture outside of it. For people who have only come here as adults, it takes a lot of time to understand Dutch manners and that does not always happen automatically. Several participants from this group remarked that the Dutch are supposedly so direct, but when it comes to themes of color and racism, they are not direct at all. In fact, the Dutch hardly have a good vocabulary or antenna for this subject, as several participants noticed.

People in this group also noted that the Dutch work culture is often presented as egalitarian, but they experience it differently in practice. Several participants even had the idea that it would be better to transform their natural style of collaboration orientation into a more directive style, because otherwise you would not be taken seriously enough as a leader.



During the interviews, participants reflected on the tension between conforming and being yourself. The need for authenticity came to the fore, often with the awareness that this need can be risky and with despair about what the best choice is. Others have already found a balance and have a way of embracing different sides of themselves.

	<p><i>“But I’m just really myself, but yes, can I afford that space or not? And I don’t know, I’m not sure about that yet. ”</i></p>	
		<p><i>“You have to stay true to yourself. Take it or leave it, yes. Because otherwise we will maintain that system that requires us to conform. ”</i></p>
	<p><i>“That despite your color, you can also just be nice. You conform (...) but what do you lose of your own identity? That’s pretty intense. (...) That it goes so far, that you don’t even know who you are anymore because you’ve been able to adapt so much all these years. ”</i></p>	
<p><i>“If you say I’m Dutch, then the PVV members (right-wing party in NL) are happy and your fellow multiculturalists think you’re a traitor. If you say I’m Dutch with Moroccan roots, then the PVV members go wild. So it’s actually a very lonely position at times like that.”</i></p>		<p><i>“I started to appropriate the space in between, the space between the cultures. If we’re talking about between the shore and the ship, that’s mine, that’s my domain.”</i></p>
		<p><i>“I’ve become much closer to myself over the years, because I also felt like I’m stuck between two worlds at some point. And because of that, you can also suddenly develop a different type of character, who almost seems like you’re denying yourself for who you are.”</i></p>

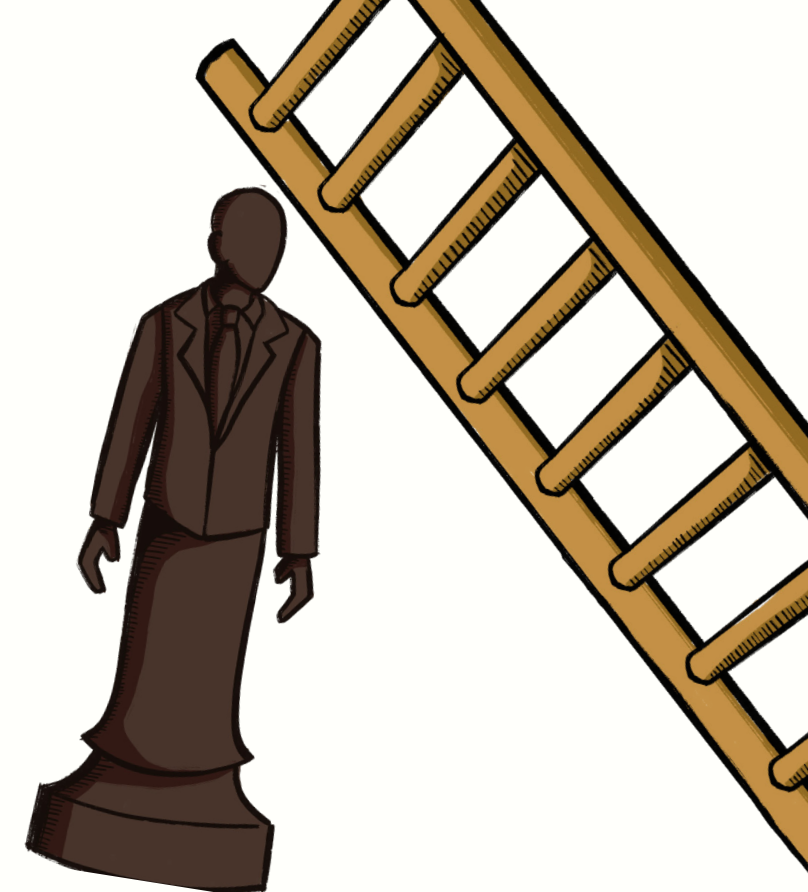
“I started to appropriate the space in between, the space between the cultures. If we’re talking about between the shore and the ship, that’s mine, that’s my domain. ”

The idea of appropriating that in-between space fits with the idea that Halleh Ghorashi beautifully articulated in her 2016 blog post titled What if everyone were a migrant? on the website of the Knowledge Platform for Inclusive Society. In it, following Edward Said, she describes how migrants can connect worlds and thus have an enriching and innovative influence on their environment where certain habits have become self-evident but are no longer viewed or questioned from a different angle.

The interviews showed that not everyone with a migration background automatically finds this in-between space or feels comfortable there. The ambivalence about whether or not to conform to prevailing norms or preemptively adapt to debunk racist stereotypes was palpable in many conversations. Almost everyone emphasized the importance of going with the flow if you want to get somewhere in this society, but they also thought it was sad that a certain individuality is sometimes lost, and would have preferred that there was more room on the career ladder for real diversity and thus for more authenticity of people of color [\(see Box 6\)](#).

Awareness of the potential biases of others and attempts to prevent or eliminate them is exhausting, many participants said. It is therefore not surprising that there were also participants who had made a more or less conscious choice not to dwell too much on discrimination and injustice that they had indeed experienced or not to take it too seriously. Several participants mentioned this as a survival strategy and/or character trait. And still others said they simply hadn't experienced much discrimination.

	<i>"That maybe comes from my trust and absolute will to want to trust people and believe in goodness, that I don't have many examples in which that has gone radically wrong for me. "</i>	<i>"So luckily I don't have a lot of negative experiences. Yes, and I think the small delusion that I was already assertive enough myself. "</i>
		<i>"I've kind of trained myself not to be too sensitive to that kind of thing, because I see that if you're very alert to those things, that's very unhealthy for you because it drives you crazy. "</i>
	<i>"Doing your best and functioning well is also a kind of protective layer against all kinds of nonsense. Because you can show more or less objectively, what is your point with these negative comments?"</i>	
		<i>"I've also developed a knack for dismissing things. (...) So things do not affect me as quickly as they do others. (...) I think that's part of that survival mechanism. "</i>



Survival mechanisms have brought this group a long way. The step to a leadership position often came relatively early in the career, but even where that was not the case, many participants in all kinds of fields were pioneers who steadily made a name for themselves and thus came into the picture for top positions. The bicultural identity of the participants sometimes faded into the background at various stages of their careers, but almost always played a role on the way to the top and once at the top, whether they wanted it or not. And that conforming is part of that was a matter of course for many.



RECOGNIZING AND
RECOGNIZING
TALENT OF COLOR

03

Each interview started with a set of questions about the application process for the leadership position in question and the participant’s previous work experience, with a special focus on the role of ‘color’ in the recruitment and selection process (see [Box 9: Institutional bias in leader recruitment](#)).

The vast majority of the participants (34) already had managerial experience and two-thirds (27) already had experience in a management position when they applied for the leadership position that was the focus of the survey. Participants who had not previously held a management position usually had extensive experience in the sector in question, often in informal or more project-based leadership positions. Two-thirds of the participants (27) were asked to apply by the organization itself or by a recruitment agency. Ten participants took a formal assessment during the application process. Several participants who did not do so for this position had already done so for previous positions.

When asked, more than 80% of the participants (33) indicated that they think their ethnic-racial background played a role in their appointment. ‘Of course, it always plays a role’ is something I often heard. This observation is almost never based on an explicit statement by the organization about this. In most cases, this involves an assessment based on the advertisement text (‘in case of equal suitability, we will give preference to a candidate with a bicultural background’), a policy plan with goals regarding diversity, and/or the profile of the recruitment and selection agency in which diversity plays a prominent role.

	<i>“It always plays a role, both where I’ve been invited and where I’ve not been invited.”</i>	<i>“Of course, it matters, because someone’s experience, because of how they look or their gender or whatever, determines the knowledge they bring with them.”</i>	<i>“The obvious advantage for them was indeed, he has something that we want to develop on, which was diversity and inclusion.”</i>
			<i>“They had problems in terms of inclusion, so they liked the fact that I understand this, that I see things and that it was seen as a valuable skill.”</i>
	<i>“I had the idea that it fits in these current times, it is also just nice for an organization to be able to show ‘we have a Black woman, we’re contributing’. That’s fun, right? Tick the boxes.”</i>	<i>“With such a selection committee, I am very aware that they think: we need to bring in more diverse people, and now there is someone sitting across from us here, so that is a great opportunity.”</i>	

Box 9: Institutional bias in leader recruitment

Scientific research shows that people generally have a preference for others who are similar to them and are distrustful or dismissive of others whom they do not automatically consider to be part of their own group, for example on the basis of skin color or ethnic-racial origin⁵⁰. In organizations, this often leads to a kind of cloning culture in recruitment and selection processes: the tendency to look for new employees who meet a certain type, who meet the normative standard and with whom you feel comfortable⁵¹. In a White society in which men have held all the key positions in organizations for a very long time, this means in practice that it is mainly White men that are sought out and selected.

This bias embeds itself in organizations in ways that transcend the individual and affect the entire work culture and therefore also recruitment and selection. Precisely because the bias is so ingrained, individual employees are hardly aware of it. ‘We only look at quality’, as it is often said. However, organizations often appear to have a very limited vision of quality and they are not at all good at objectively assessing it, because they are immersed in a system in which there is little room for deviating from the norm that does not automatically suit people from marginalized ethnic-racial groups.⁵²

Quality is often defined in a way that mainly reflects and copies the existing profiles in the organization. Is a stacker seen as someone who is less smart than someone who has only done grammar school or as someone who is valuable to an organization because of perseverance shown? And is there any understanding and insight into the structural barriers that a educational ‘stacker’ may have had to overcome? It just depends on how you look at it.⁵³

But even if a CV does meet the standard standards, bias plays a role. Several studies in the Netherlands show that Achmed is invited for a job interview less often than Anton, even if they have exactly the same CV.⁵⁴ Even if Anton has a criminal record and Ahmed does not, employers prefer Anton. And the more a candidate of color embraces their own cultural identity, the less enthusiastic people from the majority group are, even if this person otherwise has an identical CV as another candidate.⁵⁵ So quality turns out to be quite subjective.

Australian research shows that discrimination based on names on CVs is even stronger when it comes to a vacancy for a leadership position.⁵⁶ American and Dutch research shows that leadership and leadership qualities are mainly associated with White men.⁵⁷ The proverbial glass ceiling is therefore less likely to let women and people of color through (see also [Box 14 on intersectionality](#)).

Discrimination against specific ethnic-racial groups in the selection of leaders is again linked to the stereotypes discussed in [Box 7](#). Cultural differences in style also play a role in this. For example, there is a ‘bamboo ceiling’: due to both actual and perceived lower assertiveness, East Asians in the United States are less likely to get into leadership positions.⁵⁸

Not everyone likes the idea that their ethnic-racial background may have played a role in the appointment. Preferably, people are hired because of their qualifications. Especially since many participants have experienced that others implicitly or explicitly say that they only owe their job (this or one in the past) to their color or origin. In other words, that they are a token, someone who is allowed to bring diversity mainly for the sake of the picture and whose suitability is therefore not paramount in the image formation (see Box 10: The first and the only).

“If that was the main reason for hiring me, then I don’t want the job anymore.”

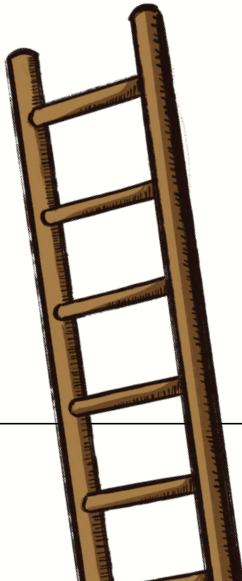
			<p>“Yes, in previous positions, yes. I do remember that it really hurt me at the time. A colleague, consciously or unconsciously, who said ‘hey, you must be here because you’re such a model nice Moroccan (in Dutch: knuffel-Marokkaan).”</p>		<p>“And then in one of those e-mails it says that I was there because of my roots and my network. Well, that hit hard.”</p>
	<p>“If I start thinking too much about people who think I’m only here because of my color, then I find it very difficult. People then think yes, that’s another one of those people who has been hired for the photo.”</p>		<p>“Yes, someone said, nice that you got that position, now that we White people are no longer eligible for those kinds of jobs.”</p>	<div><div>Box 10: The first and only</div><p>“Everywhere the first”. This is the subtitle of a book about the life and career of Ahmed Aboutaleb, who has been mayor of Rotterdam for 15 years.⁵⁹ Logically, being the first everywhere also means (at least for a while) being the only one everywhere. Being the first and only one can have a powerful role model effect (see Box 18). However, it also has disadvantages for both the person in question and the group on which the qualifications ‘first’ and ‘only’ are based.</p><p>Being the first and/or the only one can give the impression to the person himself and to others that they have only been given the job in question to achieve a certain diversity goal or worse: to appear diverse just for the sake of the picture. This is also known as tokenism. According to token theory, marginalized groups that are heavily outnumbered in organizations due to hypervisibility face increased pressure to perform, greater distance from peers, and more stereotyping and being seen as representing an entire group.⁶⁰</p><p>According to token theory, it is important to reach a critical mass to counteract these mechanisms. Once a certain proportion of the subgroup has been reached, the cultural change will come naturally because it is then ‘normal’ for these people to also be part of the work culture. In other words, larger numbers would lead to a more inclusive</p><p>working atmosphere for that specific group. American research showed that with smaller numbers of women and Black employees in organizations, there was more ‘token stress’ among these groups. That means: more loneliness, having to prove yourself more, not being able to express your own identity.⁶¹ Another American study showed that the well-being of employees of color is higher when there are more of them in the organization, but less when they are the majority, which may have to do with the type of jobs in which people of color are in the majority.⁶² A review study also shows that people of color in a more ethnically-racially diverse organization are better able to cope with the stress of work and experience more control over their work in relation to their personal well-being.⁶³</p><p>As far as I know, there is no Dutch research that looks quantitatively at the idea of critical mass for the well-being of people of color in organizations. However, there are studies on the influence of diversity ideologies and leadership on an inclusive work culture. These are discussed in Boxes, 11, 12 and 13.</p></div>	
	<p>“If that was the main reason for hiring me, then I don’t want the job anymore.”</p>		<p>“You’re just trying to do your job professionally and that’s why you want to be chosen, but at the same time it’s an important theme. So that’s always a bit of a dilemma, how do you deal with that?”</p>		
	<p>“Then I would always struggle with the question: was I hired because I am the best or because it contributes to some quota?”</p>				

These experiences also make several participants feel that they have to prove themselves extra, that their talent is not automatically recognized or that they are only seen as that person of color. Not being taken seriously (immediately) and being questioned more about your qualifications than others in similar positions was an experience shared by several participants anyway.

	<i>"I always have the feeling that you have to prove that you can do what you can do, and I wonder whether if my name had been Jan Klaas if it would have been the case."</i>	
	<i>"So that's also a proactive survival mechanism. (...) I feel like I need to legitimize myself more strongly. So, for example, in a recruitment and selection process, I need to be able to substantiate better why to pick that one candidate of color than I would do with any other candidate."</i>	
		<i>"Where the other person has to tell the story once, I have to do it three times, and show it again and show it again and then they are convinced. While another is brought in for the promise alone."</i>

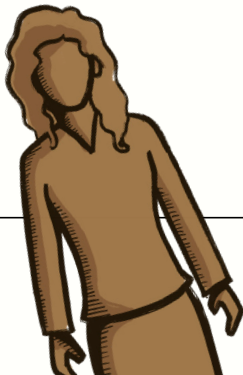
Several participants also specifically emphasized their qualifications in the interview. This sometimes happened in combination with the observation that as a person of color you should not be able to be 'caught' on a CV that is too scanty.

<i>"My first thought was that I was an interesting candidate because of what I've done in other places, what I've brought about there, my experience in that world, my network in the sector and in the country. "</i>	
	<i>"Everyone knew, I scored the highest, so it was clear, it belongs here, so that makes it very pleasant. I just really know that I deserve this job, I really don't doubt that at all."</i>
<i>"Nor do they have any interest in hiring someone who has lesser qualities. So yes me, I already had a proven track record, so that wasn't at all a question, whether I was in the wrong place or anything."</i>	
	<i>"I'm not saying that the fact that I'm Black didn't play a role, I'm just saying that the qualities are so convincing for the image of the appointment that that couldn't be a question. And of course that's actually the problematic part, if you're of color then you need that."</i>



A number of participants (often after years of struggling with the theme) have become indifferent to the suggestion that they were hired somewhere only because of their origin. They start from their own qualities and also name the broader story in which origin can be a source of both selection and rejection.

	<p><i>"I see people thinking it sometimes, but it doesn't interest me at all. I think, that's your problem, if you think I don't have the qualities and I'm only here because of my name and my color. I really let go of working on that. I'm sure I've been turned down for positions in the past because people thought: 'We're looking for someone who is more like us'."</i></p>	<p><i>" 'We want to become a more diverse organization and a more inclusive organization.' I think it's only logical [that they hire me]. In the course of my life, I have often experienced that your origin or diversity can be an advantage or a disadvantage."</i></p>
	<p><i>"I'm not that sensitive in that area. I rely very much on my own strengths, I know what I can and can't do, what I'm good at and what I'm not good at, and I take every opportunity to be able to send out some kind of message that diversity can work at the top, can have some kind of positive effect."</i></p>	
<p><i>"Well, frankly, that doesn't happen to me. And I won't let that happen. I've fought so hard for this position, if there's one person who deserves to sit here, it's me."</i></p>		



“You’re both good and you’re bicultural, so why shouldn’t you take advantage of that when it comes to selection? ”

Participants also indicate that their bicultural background and the benefit it can sometimes bring in this zeitgeist is something to embrace and that there is no shame in making use of it.

	<p><i>"You're both good and you're bicultural, so why shouldn't you take advantage of that when it comes to selection?"</i></p>	
<p><i>"In particular, people of color should not feel embarrassed if we are indeed put in a position that we implicitly know looks very well for such an organization. Because that's a win-win for me."</i></p>		<p><i>"At the time, I thought it was easy. At that moment I thought okay fine, I'm going to show that I can do that. If that's a stepping stone, then so be it."</i></p>
	<p><i>"If you had asked me this ten years ago, I would never have talked to them if I knew they were looking for diversity. That was a process I went through myself. At some point, you also get to the age where you are more aware of the role you play in a certain context. And then you have the choice to embrace that role or not. You can choose to be visible in terms of your biculturality, and I do."</i></p>	

According to a number of participants, embracing this also means simply having your picture taken with a smile or climbing the stage, while you have the strong impression that you were probably asked to do so because they were looking for diversity for a magazine or an event. So be it.

Box 11: ‘Colorblind’ or color conscious?

Research shows that so-called ‘color blindness’ is the norm in countries where the dominant majority group is White.⁶⁴ That is, White people prefer to pretend not to see color and avoid naming ethnic-racial differences between people,⁶⁵ while research shows that people are by no means “colorblind.”⁶⁶ This avoidance often stems from the idea that mentioning color actually encourages racism.⁶⁷ But is that so? The answer is no. In fact, it’s the other way around.⁶⁸

In an American experimental study, a ‘colorblind’ mindset among White participants predicted more negative prejudices about people of color than a color-conscious mindset.⁶⁹ And that, in turn, led to negative behavior towards Black interlocutors, after which those Black participants performed worse on a test they had to take after the interview.⁷⁰ In Belgian research, students of color felt less accepted in a working group with a supervisor who adhered to ‘colorblindness’ instead of color consciousness, even without the students being aware of this ideological preference.¹⁷ Dutch research showed that employees of color were more satisfied with their work if they recognized color-conscious multiculturalism in their employer.⁷² Finally, research showed that children of White Dutch mothers who are color-evasive when reading a picture book with ethnically-racially diverse characters have stronger interethnic prejudices than children of mothers who did mention color.⁷³

There are several possible reasons for negative consequences of ‘colorblindness’. Completely ignoring any aspect of someone’s life and identity can give the impression that the person is not really seen, not fully accepted for who they are. Also, ignoring, avoiding or denying ethnic-racial differences between people makes it a taboo subject, which in turn makes it difficult to discuss and tackle racism and discrimination. This is also known as omission racism: the tendency of White people to look away from racist discrimination and do nothing about it, which perpetuates the patterns.⁷⁴

This looking away is in turn related to what Gloria Wekker calls White innocence: the Dutch self-image that racism hardly exists here, while the history of this country has centuries of violent colonial domination over Brown and Black people.⁷⁵ Information about the existence of racism is confrontational, affects the ‘colorblind’ self-image and is therefore often received with distrust and sometimes aggression. Halleh Ghorashi also relates this to the idea that people of color should be grateful for the opportunities they get here, that the Dutch are tolerant and generous (and therefore not racist) and that all forms of belonging and participation should actually be seen as a favor that has been granted.⁷⁶ Noting racism is then seen as ingratitude.


Color and everything that comes with it is therefore often preferred to be swept under the carpet. However, being very color-conscious with good intentions can also have negative consequences if White people put someone in a box or in an uncomfortably visible position (the ‘minority spotlight’).⁷⁷ This effect was also discussed in [Box 10](#). How things can be improved is discussed in [Box 12](#).

Although almost all participants had the impression that their ethnic-racial background had played a role in the appointment process, the subject was rarely discussed in the selection interviews. When I asked about it, the response was often ‘no, strange actually, nothing has been said about that’. This is not surprising given the tendency of White people (who made up the overwhelming majority of selection committees) to adhere to ‘colorblindness’ ([see Box 11: Color Blind or Color Conscious?](#)).

A quarter of the participants mentioned their ethnic-racial identity themselves in the selection procedure and what that means for who they are and what they can do, because they want the subject to be open on the table and the organization knows ‘who they are bringing in’ and what that means for the interpretation of the role.

“It’s also been my own quest for the past few years. We have to be able to step forward as women of color, you have to dare to put your identity forward.”

	<i>“Yes, I am who I am and I have my own value in that, and I am outspoken about that. And that may suit you or not, you can always talk about that, if you see it differently.”</i>	
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<i>“That has certainly been a subject, but it came from me, because I have said that it is an enrichment, that it has in any case enriched me very much that I know several cultures; and on top of that, through me having moved a lot, I also got to know all kinds of subcultures within the Netherlands itself.”</i>			
	<i>“Look, I’m Black. That’s going to affect the way I react, the way I think, my experiences.”</i>		



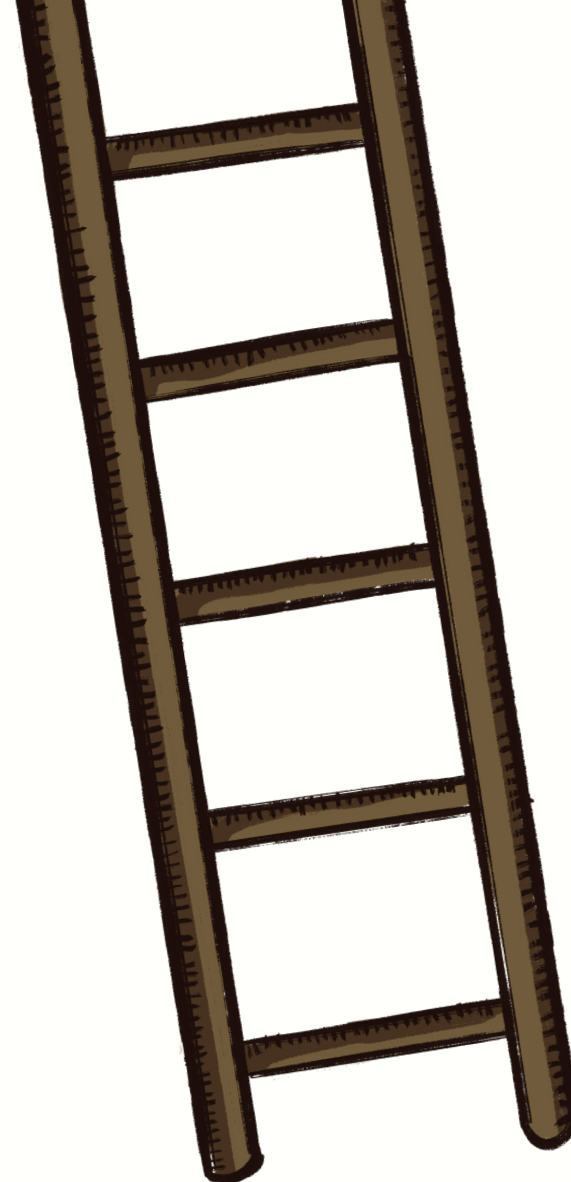
"Because I don't want to experience that when I bring something up, everyone says 'we don't see color and we don't understand it.' Don't downplay it, but ask me what I need. So understanding, support and guidance, et cetera. "

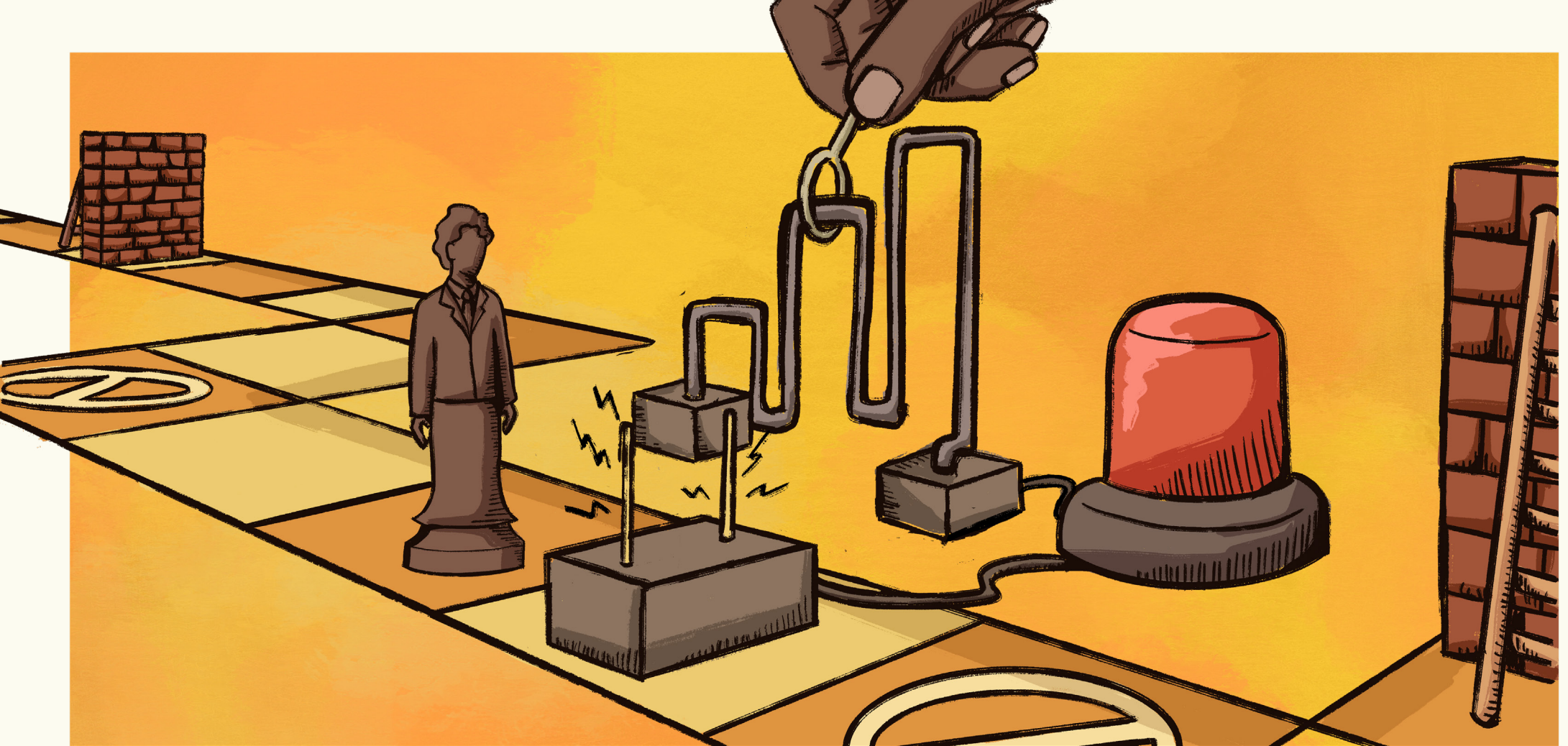
"I want to know: to what extent will we be able to have the conversation when things get awkward? Because that's what's going to happen. (...) I do ask questions all the time."

"I always want to discuss it, also in relation to my management so that they know that it will be difficult. That people will also start to doubt whether I can do this or whether I can do that. So I make it explicit to be honest about what they can expect."

"I talked about the opportunities I see for diversity and inclusion that were in the organization's plans and about my perspective as a Black woman. But that really came from me."

This strategy of self-naming one's own bicultural background in relation to the position they are applying for is a way of saying that people don't just leave their ethnic-racial identity at the front door of the building before entering. Not even if they conform significantly to the dominant norm in many areas, as described earlier. According to a number of participants, the general insight that all kinds of issues around color and identity that play a role in society are also present in the workplace cannot be shared often enough. The illusion that an organization will be able to keep that completely at bay is naïve. Whether or not participants proactively mention and discuss their origins in the application process, they are almost without exception aware of the fact that being of color affects how people perceive you, your position in society in general, and in the workplace in particular. And that has an impact on their interpretation of and experience in their leadership role.






COLOR IN LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

04

Being the first is an experience that many participants share: the first Black person at the top of the board, the first woman of color in a leadership position, the first director with a migration background. Not only are they often the first, they are also often the only ones in the broader sector in which they work [\(see also Box 10\)](#). This is noticeable at large events or meetings, especially those where the top of a sector comes together.

<p><i>"So I've had a lifetime experience of always being the first Black anywhere. So I have the lifelong experience of fear and how you deal with it, to make sure that the other person doesn't see you as the other, but as someone you have similarities with, instead of just difference."</i></p>	<p><i>"Then you have to imagine, then there are six White men and I sitting together. The MT. All over 50, I had never experienced such a one-sided group."</i></p>	<p><i>"Well, the fact that at gatherings where all those people come together, there are only one or two who are of color. And that says it all."</i></p>		<p><i>"I've been to a number of events where I was the only non-White person and then I felt like the others didn't know what to do with me."</i></p>
				<p><i>"I wasn't the first Black person in the organization, but I was the first person who was actually paid to work there. All the others were interns. And then you notice that there are dynamics that have not been thought about before."</i></p>

White isn't just a skin color either, it's a cultural feature. An organization can also be very White if it employs people of color. Then it's about a culture in which the White Dutch way of doing and thinking is the norm.

<p><i>"It is a kind of dominance of a 'we' that is Dutch, that says how 'we' do it (...) and that 'we' is supposedly White."</i></p>				<p><i>"You notice that in Dutch situations you are really expected to behave in a Dutch way. I always find that obligation extremely difficult."</i></p>
	<p><i>"I don't actually walk freely into the world as if it were mine. (..) The world I'm in, that's just not made for me yet. It's up to me first to fit in."</i></p>		<p><i>"The ease with which a White colleague enters a place and feels comfortable and assumes that the whole world is waiting for you. I find it fascinating. I'm really socially skilled, but I just work much harder for it."</i></p>	

According to the participants, being of color in the White world at the top of organizations also regularly leads to a kind of ‘short circuit’ for others. The short-circuit in others perceived by the participants stems from the discrepancy between the expectations of what a leader or a director looks like and the appearance of the participants (see also Box 9). This effect is aptly mentioned by Joyce Sylvester in the title of her book: Bent u de burgemeester? (Are you the mayor?) That surprise is a little less common nowadays than it used to be, several participants note, because people can now just google you and often know what you look like long before they meet you. And for some, their name alone suggests that they look different from the standard director that many people have in mind.

But even if people already know what someone looks like, the real ‘confrontation’ with that fact is just that: a confrontation, with one’s own prejudices, that is. However, not everyone takes that last step in thinking. Often unaware of the cause of their confusion, they say things that confirm the very existence of those prejudices. That the director speaks Dutch so well, or take offense at someone’s cultural style, or wonder out loud how it is possible that this director thinks he knows what he/she is talking about.

	<p><i>“Then I was told that I was too loud, that I should talk differently and move differently.”</i></p>	
	<p><i>“Actually, my leadership was not accepted. I encountered a lot of resistance, when I came up with suggestions there was always a rebuttal, which is good, but at a certain point in such a way that I had the feeling of ‘I can’t get through to this’.”</i></p>	
		<p><i>“He always told me how to do things, because he had a certain image of a leader, you have to do that this way and that. That may have been well-intentioned, but it comes across as derogatory. .”</i></p>

So for many people, it takes at least some getting used to, someone of color at the helm. Even in a top position, the expertise of someone who looks different from the standard picture is not simply accepted by the shop floor, it was noted.



It soon became clear to most participants that there is still a lot of work to be done in most organizations around the theme of diversity and inclusion. The goals that organizations have in this area (at least on paper) are usually about a better representation of different groups of people and about a working environment in which these people are also valued and can feel at home.

At the start of their new position, fourteen of the participants had been explicitly instructed to work on diversity and inclusion in the organization in their leadership role. Nevertheless, almost all participants report that they have actively started working on this file, even if that assignment was not explicitly mentioned.

None of the participants indicated that they did not like the theme or that they did not think it was important. Almost as a matter of course, they took up this gauntlet, even if it was not thrown at them at first. Then they put the theme on the agenda themselves.

In their leadership roles, they usually tackled this theme by asking critical questions about matters such as representation, procedures and working methods, by questioning standards and by making proposals for change. Often the starting point is a plea for more diversity in the organization.

	<i>"I just started asking questions about recruitment and selection, how does that work, what is the procedure, and are you aware of the biases that will cause you to end up with the same person every time?"</i>			<i>"I would say: 'Yes, diversity and inclusion brings us something, we also have to be able to say what exactly it brings.' Then we make it valuable beyond altruism."</i>	
		<i>"I put that list of [Dutch] names together and said: 'What do we think of this?' So I think it's important and I discuss it regularly."</i>			<i>"Yes, what I would like them to question is their own frame of 'what is a talented young starter', that that is not always the standard slick trainee."</i>
			<i>"I just want more diversity, so that already does something to the managers who have to select, that's their job, and by saying it all the time, you open the windows for them to take a risk – or what they see as a risk. Or that I say very emphatically: 'We already have enough of the same, so this vacancy really has to change.'"</i>		

Several participants also point out the pitfall of being a figurehead on the theme of diversity and inclusion. It shouldn't be self-evident that someone of color takes on that role. They also do not necessarily have the substantive knowledge about how such issues should be tackled in organizational practice. It is also noted that it should be part of what everyone in the organization does.

And as soon as you are associated with this theme, everyone is immediately on edge and you run the risk of being seen as someone who is only concerned with that. Many participants were aware of this, although most of them did not let it stop them when push came to shove.

"I'm not the diversity officer"

	<i>"But I do notice that the image is that it is my hobbyhorse and it is not. Of course I think it's important, but from my role it's not the only thing."</i>	<i>"I'll be by your side if you put it on the agenda, and I'll mention it, but I'm not necessarily the diversity officer because I just don't have that expertise."</i>	<i>'I had to draw a line there too, of I'm not the diversity officer here. I'm the director, and this is part of what's on my list, but also a lot of other things, so let's not just talk about that.'</i>	
				<i>"And then, all of a sudden, it becomes the responsibility of the person of color to start changing the mindset that's been in those people's minds for decades."</i>
	<i>"Of course you sometimes think, she thinks that topic is important because she is a person of color herself. I used to suffer more from trepidation, but not really anymore. That may also have something to do with age. That you don't give a shit about that."</i>	<i>"It is easier to be accused of not being neutral and not objective."</i>		
<i>"Nor did I want to give the impression that my arrival solved that problem. (...) So for me, it was also very important to make it clear that I am simply setting an example because of who I am, how I do my work, but not so strongly expressing it in a way as if I represent that portfolio."</i>			<i>"I do think it's important to talk about D&I, but it's more based on plans and things I do, and not 'I'm coming in and I'm Black'."</i>	
	<i>"Do I think that this is important as a person and have I always found that, or do I do it now because I think I should? And I think the answer is the latter. From my role, I just think that this should become a more diverse organization where inclusivity eventually becomes self-evident. But as a person, I've never been that concerned with it."</i>			

Several participants reflected on the tension between being the boss and being a victim when you experience racism from employees in a leadership position. On the one hand, you have a position of power from which you can set boundaries, but it almost feels like an abuse of power if you have to discuss such experience with employees whose boss you are. In those situations, these participants still felt powerless. There is also the doubt whether it should be about individuals because it distracts from structural aspects. This is also related to the feeling that the people could get the impression that a focus on diversity and inclusion only stems from a 'colored' view based on one's own experiences. On the one hand, because of their background, participants are seen as someone who can put this theme on the agenda, but on the other hand, they are also taken less seriously if colleagues interpret it as too personal and less as a professional vision. According to some participants, bringing up one's own experiences with racism or exclusion, especially within the organization, can actually weaken credibility instead of strengthening it. One way to prevent this is to always make exclusion and discrimination open to discussion in a broader sense, including characteristics that do not directly apply to one's own identity.

More than half of the participants experience resistance to diversity policies from the employees. Employees seem tired of the subject and/or just don't think it's important. Quite a few participants get the idea that they are not really open to change in this area. That one can only muster motivation for minor cosmetic procedures and showing a nice diverse 'picture', but not for profound cultural changes.

<p><i>"There is resistance. People are tired of the topic and do not participate in training on a voluntary basis."</i></p>	<p><i>"I think it's too often 'we want diversity, but we don't want to change anything else in our culture'."</i></p>	
<p><i>"People found it very complicated that I mentioned diversity and inclusion so directly. Then a vacancy comes up, and then they come up with more of the same. I said something about that and it was not appreciated."</i></p>		<p><i>"Talking about diversity and inclusion and doing diversity and inclusion is very often about what others have to do. (...) And if there are critical voices, yes, they were seen as annoying employees."</i></p>
<p><i>"There are people who then ask questions in a certain way that I ask myself: do you really want to understand it, do you want to take it from me, do I have to explain it or teach you? Or is it resistance?"</i></p>	<p><i>"Not only making room in that you have to give up that chair, but also giving up beliefs, a direction, your idea of quality... And then, yes, there are people who are in principle in favor of that change, as long as it does not affect their own position. That's still a thing."</i></p>	
<p><i>"I said, 'Yes, diversity and inclusion requires us to do difficult things, different from what we were used to in hiring new people.' And then you see: we say we find it important, but it shouldn't take too much effort."</i></p>		
	<p><i>"Well then we will see if someone really wants it and it turned out a few times that that was not the case, so they did leave."</i></p>	

Because the resistance to diversity and inclusion is familiar territory for many participants, they sometimes prefer to use other terms that are more appropriate, such as polyphony and multiple perspectives. In doing so, the importance of polyphony was sometimes described in terms of effectiveness or in terms of justice, or both. Research also shows that these arguments are received differently by people (see Box 12: Diversity policy).

Although several participants indicated that it is now really time to ‘just do it’, to adopt it as the norm and not just talk about it, they also realized that such a thing does not happen without a struggle. Many participants indicate that they do their best to discuss the topic with caution and sometimes adapted language so as not to scare people off but to get them on board, to build bridges. Words such as support, dialogue and understanding are often used.

<p><i>“I’m always looking for how can you massage, move without creating that resistance. Because the moment I make it too explicit, they become very defensive. That’s not going to help my goal.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I have built it up slowly, I also know I need support. I can have all kinds of opinions, but if I don’t have that support within the organization, then of course you won’t get anywhere.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“I wrap it in language that doesn’t hurt anyone. You have to listen, you also have to look at the sensitivity that is in the discussion. I ask myself: how do I convince my colleagues that I’m here for them too, even if they’re White? If we want to solve this problem, we have to do it together. And that’s not going to happen if I just fight.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I try to understand and that works very well, because people just feel a lot freer when they feel that there is no judgment. And then something comes out of it that we can use.”</i></p>	
<p><i>“If I put something on the agenda about this, the discomfort becomes very palpable. And breaking through that, naming it, making sure it’s not uncomfortable, I see that as a goal for me.”</i></p>	

Box 12. Diversity policy

Whereas people of color generally feel more comfortable with a color-conscious approach in organizations (see Box 11), it appears that White Dutch employees feel more comfortable with an employer who radiates ‘color blindness’ than one who stands for multiculturalism.⁷⁸ This has to do with an (unconscious) desire of the dominant group to maintain the current balance of power.⁷⁹ A dominant group’s fear of social change is also known as status stress.⁸⁰ The question is which type of policy creates support and is actually effective in achieving more diversity and inclusion in organizations.

Dutch experimental research shows that goals around social equality receive more support from the majority group if they are presented as a moral ideal (something to aspire to) than if they are presented as a moral obligation (something that must be pursued).⁸¹ At the same time, the idea of that moral ideal does lead to a greater sense of threat when interacting with people from the marginalized group, possibly due to felt pressure to live up to the ideals.

Instead of the moral argument, the effectiveness argument (diverse teams do better work) is often⁸² used to promote diversity. However, this has the disadvantage that people of color are seen as a kind of utilitarian object, something that benefits the organization, but of which it is unclear what the marginalized group benefits from. The founders of the effectiveness argument also emphasize that a diverse team does not automatically guarantee more success and that effectiveness should not be the ultimate goal. It is about the way in which that diversity is used, in which learning from each other, fairness and the review of power structures are important elements.⁸³

Which brings us to the importance of inclusion: making belonging and participation possible not only for employees who conform to the dominant norm, but also for those who are ‘different’. Strategic essentialism can be helpful here: space and attention for (marginalized) ‘others’ in society and the organization without elevating stereotypical differences between groups to fixed truth.⁸⁴ Dutch research in which employers were interviewed and the life stories of people from marginalized groups were described showed that there was room for improvement in three areas in particular: culture, structure and connection. This means, among other things, broadening social norms, promoting inclusive structures and facilitating (intercultural) encounters.⁸⁵

A Dutch study into the effectiveness of different forms of policy on ethnic-racial diversity in an organization showed that policies aimed at inclusion are indeed more effective than policies aimed at mapping or increasing diversity.⁸⁶ It is possible that the latter types of policy are more symbolic in nature, which means that real diversity is less likely to get off the ground. It reduces people to numbers and distracts from more fundamental questions about the self-evident nature of the majority norm.⁸⁷ An organization can also hide behind the good intentions of such symbolic diversity policies and not actively engage because they think they are already doing the right thing.⁸⁸

Furthermore, mainly American research shows that anti-bias training does not work or even counterproductive, just like testing procedures in recruitment and selection and complaints procedures.⁸⁹ In fact, experimental American research has found that the presence of formal diversity structures among the dominant group can lead to an overestimation of fairness in the organization, the legitimization of the status quo and a reduced tolerance for complaints about discrimination.⁹⁰ The literature on inclusive leadership (see Box 13) provides insight into more effective strategies.

It was regularly mentioned that an empathic style on this subject simply works better, that it is more effective. (see Box 13: Inclusive leadership). The vast majority of the participants indicated that this non-threatening approach also suits their personal style, that they use this way of working in several areas. In addition, several participants mentioned that their empathy and their connecting leadership style were partly shaped by their own bicultural background. And that this pays off in a variety of situations.

	<p><i>“The empathy also comes from being from a different culture. (...) It goes without saying that I then give the space to look for each other, to find each other, to support each other.”</i></p>	
	<p><i>“Because I have a bicultural background, I can quickly see what the processes are in a work culture, how different groups relate to each other. And because of that cultural sensitivity, I saw things that others didn’t.”</i></p>	
	<p><i>“The value of being able to connect with others, strengthen the contacts in the relationships, bring people together. That is also my culture, my origin, it also determines the way I lead.”</i></p>	

Box 13. Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership is defined in the scientific literature as leadership in which an individual is treated as someone who belongs and is encouraged to maintain one’s own uniqueness within the team.⁹¹ This includes openness to and appreciation of new ideas and fair treatment of team members. Research shows that inclusive leadership contributes positively to the motivation, creativity and well-being of employees, among other things.⁹² Research in the Dutch public sector shows that a diverse team can even be associated with a less inclusive working climate in the absence of inclusive leadership.⁹³

Another leadership style that has been associated with diversity and inclusion is transformational leadership, in which a clear vision and an inspiring direction is given to professional practice in the workplace and thus contributes to an intrinsic willingness to show extra commitment to the organization.⁹⁴ Dutch research shows that diversity management that goes hand in hand with transformational leadership is more effective.⁹⁵ Because this style combines attention to individual growth of employees with inspiration for collective goals, all employees may be motivated to contribute to diversity and inclusion. For example, an approach in which the majority group is explicitly involved in diversity policy appears to be more effective than an approach in which this is not done.⁹⁶

For a leader of color, it is an extra challenge to get both White employees and employees of color on board. American researchers suggest that there are four types of leaders of color in this field.⁹⁷ Leaders who do not get either group on board are logically the least effective. Leaders who are only joined by groups of color are called opposition leaders. They are a powerful voice for the minority group, but ultimately do not have sufficient access to (in)formal power to bring about real change. Leaders of color who mainly get the White group on board (co-opted leaders) lack credibility for the minority group and are more likely to opt for cosmetic change than for fundamentally challenging the status quo. Finally, the consensus leader is the one who gets both groups on board and resembles the inclusive leader and the transformational leader mentioned above in terms of profile.

Unfortunately, virtually no research has been done into the question of whether someone of color is at the helm of an organization in order to achieve goals around diversity and inclusion. American research in the non-profit sector showed that a more ethnically diverse board pays more attention to diversity and inclusion policies and also behaves more inclusively.⁹⁸ Another American study found that the presence of leaders of color in organizations in the local social domain contributes to questioning dominant perspectives, raising awareness of ethnic-racial inequality, and breaking down barriers to a more diverse organization.⁹⁹

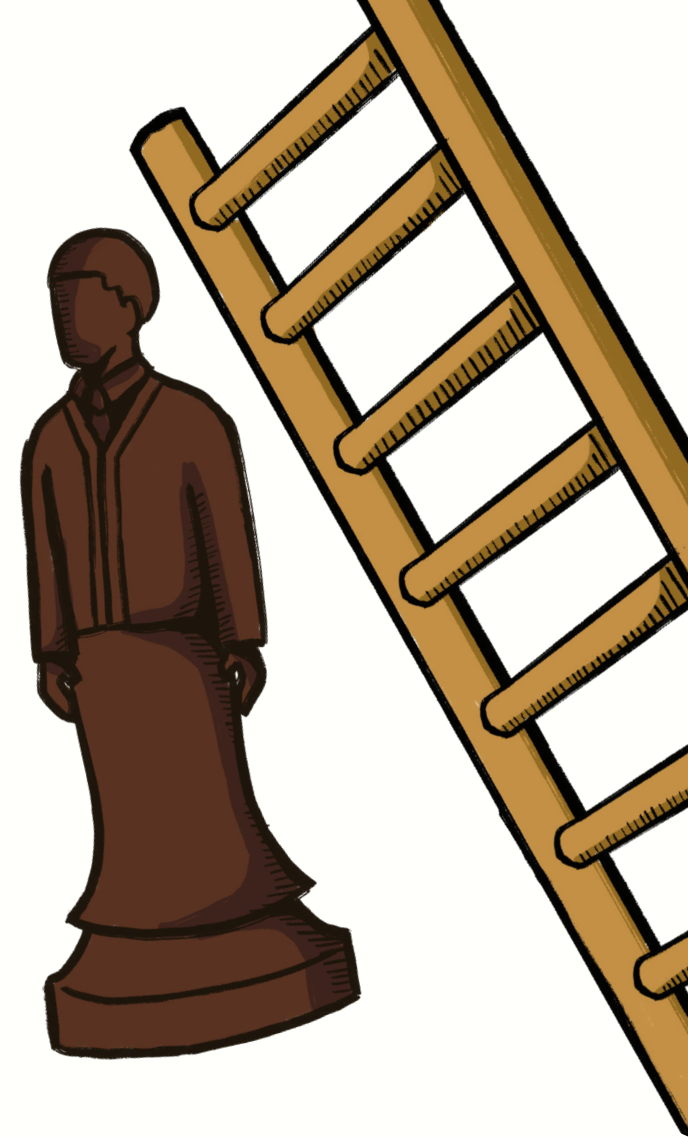
Nevertheless, European experimental research and other research shows that people are generally more inclined to adapt their behavior to moral standards if they are propagated by someone from their own group.¹⁰⁰ Unless the leader of color is seen as ‘one of us’ in the organization, the norms that this leader propagates are not automatically adopted. This may help explain why attention to diversity and inclusion in the workplace of a White organization can count on less appreciation when it is done by leaders of color and women than when White men do it.¹⁰¹

Whether or not participants approached the subject from a personal angle differed considerably. Some found it helpful to do so, while others felt that it worked well not to.

"I think the peace with which I bring it, I bring it as a personal story. I don't attack, so you don't have to defend yourself.."

"Well, it helps that I didn't experience it as annoying, or detrimental or irritating, or at my own expense. This means that the conversation is relatively neutral. It's not about my obstacles or what I've personally experienced, but it's about the issue at hand."

In some conversations, it was also mentioned that people who are more confrontational never end up at the top, at least, not if they are of color. In their experience, a somewhat tougher leadership style is still accepted from a prototype White man, but with someone of color, let alone with a woman of color, it is not a characteristic that will get you far, many participants agreed. This is doubly true for a more outspoken or assertive style in relation to the topic of diversity and inclusion. This is rarely accepted in White organizations and the people who try to do so run into it and leave themselves before they can even move towards the top, was the conclusion in a group discussion with some participants. According to the participants, caution is therefore advised.



THE COLOR OF UNSAFETY

05



At the White top, some participants feel more at home than others, some feel more pressure to conform than others, but many mentioned that the position of people of color in White organizations is vulnerable, even at the top. This has to do with several things. Some of them have already been discussed: it is lonely to always be the only one, it is exhausting to always have to conform to the majority, and the responsibility that one feels to put policy on diversity and inclusion on the agenda costs energy, especially when there is resistance. And that resistance in turn evokes the necessary emotions in a number of participants because it is also personal to them if people are not open to other perspectives. The words emotional labor and insecurity were used several times. And for a few participants, this also affected the motivation to continue in a White organization.

All of this makes some participants feel like they are working a double job (see Box 14: Having to work harder again). Not only do they have to 'just' run the place as the director or the head, but they also have to navigate all the challenges of the minority position that come into play at all levels of daily work. It was jokingly said several times that they should actually be paid double for that. All that vigilance, conforming and explaining is often experienced by participants as tiring and some wonder whether they can afford it for much longer. Even people who themselves do not have this experience do understand that it can be like that for others.

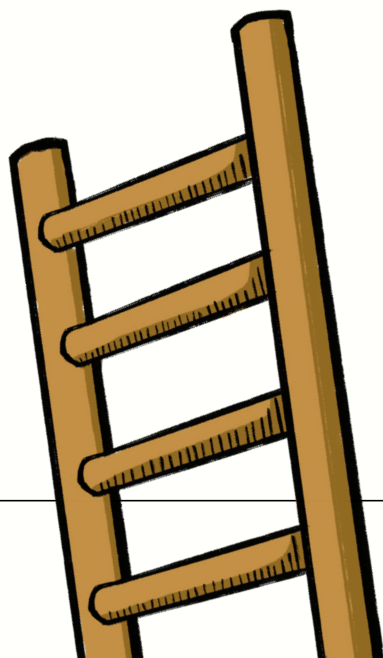
Box 14. Having to work harder again

"There is nothing more exhausting than fighting against the obvious, a real fight against the odds. It's exhausting to yourself, to keep explaining racism." This is what anthropologist Sinan Çankaya writes in his book *Mijn Ontelbare Identiteiten* (My Countless Identities).

The fatigue that is mentioned in this quote as a result of having to explain or address racism over and over again is often referred to as emotional labor. In the scientific literature, this term was introduced by Hochschild in 1983, with an emphasis on dealing with (the expression of) feelings in order to meet the emotional demands of a job.¹⁰² Attention was paid to the role of gender: women are more likely to have caregiving/social professions in which emotional interactions with others play a role. This line of research does not discuss dealing with and addressing racism as a source of emotional labor.

The literature on emotional labor is generally about the perceived need to withhold negative emotions and to show positive emotions and to meet the social-emotional expectations and needs of the organizational context.¹⁰³ As can be seen from Boxes 6 and 8 on conforming and compensating, people of color in the workplace are regularly confronted with dominant norms and stereotypes in relation to their ethnic-racial identity that influence their social behavior and their emotions.

Research into the emotional burden of committing to diversity and inclusion in an organization, regardless of your formal position, shows that the double burden of not only doing regular work, but also doing diversity work is often experienced as emotionally taxing, especially if it is accompanied by experiencing racism yourself.¹⁰⁴ Experimental research also shows that the latter can lead to stress and physical and mental exhaustion¹⁰⁵ and generally with health problems.¹⁰⁶ Research into dealing with sources of emotional fatigue at work offers clues for preventing exhaustion and dropout.



At the White top, some participants feel more at home than others, some feel more pressure to conform than others, but many mentioned that the position of people of color in White organizations is vulnerable, even at the top.

<i>"Yes, you make up your mind, if I'm at the helm, then I'm going to make a difference and that's what I want to do and that's what I eventually do, but I do notice how much stomach pain that causes. "</i>	
<i>"I've spoken out a few times, but I'm not someone who's on the front line. So with people who have been very vocal about that from the beginning, I understand that fatigue very well. I don't have that as much. I can also still bring myself to explain things, take them along or listen to them."</i>	<i>"I don't feel safe. I just see that I'm getting small, and I don't want that. I think I'm pretty strong, but sometimes I'm in meetings, and I don't open my mouth anymore, because I lose strength."</i>
	<i>"I don't really want to help a White institution in that way anymore. That is too much at the expense of myself."</i>

The fatigue described here cannot be seen in isolation from the enormous commitment that participants show in their jobs in general and for diversity and inclusion in particular, while sometimes experiencing racism themselves. The vast majority of participants are and remain highly motivated for their work and usually experience temporary (but also recurring) fatigue that does not turn into more severe exhaustion that could interfere with their functioning. This may have to do with the strategies used by the participants in their daily work, including a high level of empathy (see earlier) and a strong sense of one's own identity, both of which are well-known buffers against the negative effects of emotional labor and racism (see Box 15: Dealing with emotions in the workplace).

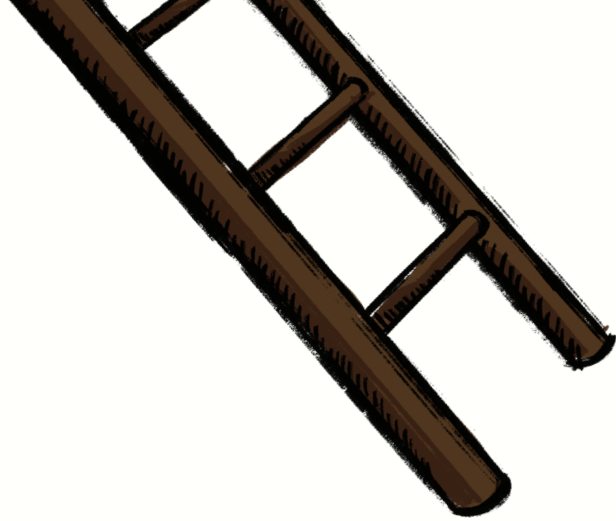
Box 15. Dealing with emotions in the workplace

The literature on emotional labor (see Box 14) also examines different ways in which people deal with it. Although this line of research is not specifically about dealing with themes around racism and discrimination, there are general lessons to be learned from it about dealing with emotional labor in the workplace. A distinction is made between 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'.¹⁰⁷ In the superficial strategy, the underlying emotion does not change, but someone expresses themselves in a socially desirable way, for example by remaining friendly while someone is actually angry. In the deep strategy, someone not only adjusts the outside but also the inside, for example by trying to see the situation differently with empathy so that the emotion originally felt also changes (anger changes into empathy, for example).

A meta-analysis in which all research in this area was analyzed together shows that the deep strategy is less likely to lead to burnout and mental problems and is associated with more job satisfaction than the superficial strategy.¹⁰⁸ Apparently, suppressing emotions in the workplace is not beneficial to an employee's well-being, similar to the findings around the negative consequences of a lack of authenticity (see Box 6). Empathizing with the other person and trying to see the situation differently so that felt and shown emotion are more in line with each other also costs energy, but does lead to better outcomes for that employee. For someone in a leadership position, 'deep acting' fits with transformational leadership that is characterized by attention and understanding for individual employees. And transformational leadership is in turn related to more effective diversity policies (see Box 13), but also in a broader sense to better team performance.¹⁰⁹

More specific research has also been conducted into the effectiveness of different ways of dealing with racism and discrimination and the influence of personal characteristics on the consequences of experiencing discrimination. Consistent with the findings on 'superficial acting', there is evidence that suppressing anger about racism leads to more stress, and seeking social support has a positive effect, although these links are not always found.¹¹⁰ The most consistent finding is that racism has fewer negative consequences for a person's (mental) health if that person has a strong ethnic-racial identity.¹¹¹ A strong ethnic-racial identity means that a person feels at home with a specific ethnic-racial group and the cultural values, traditions and language that go with it, while also paying attention to a balance between belonging to that group and positive relationships with the dominant group in society.¹¹²

Finally, this discussion of the strategies of people of color should not give the impression that it is their job to ensure that they are not so affected by racism. The overwhelming evidence that (institutional) racism exists in the Netherlands¹¹³ and that it has a range of negative consequences for people of color should primarily encourage the approach to racism itself. As former member of parliament Sylvana Simons said in an interview with the newspaper Trouw in 2022: 'Whether we should get rid of racism is not a question, is it? We just have to do that.'



The vulnerable position of people of color at the top due to the experience of double taxation is further exacerbated when there are problems in the organization. Half of the participants indicated that there were problems in the organization at the time they took office. For example, there were financial problems, an unsafe working atmosphere, many changes at the top in a short period of time and/or overdue maintenance in various areas. The term 'neglected organization' was used several times.

It happened that the problems were already put on the table during the selection procedure and the participant in the new role was also given the task of solving the problems. But not all participants knew in advance that these problems were at play, some only found out once they got started and the skeletons fell out of the closet. Research shows that people from marginalized groups are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions when the organization in question faces significant challenges. A position with a high risk of failure, because being the leader of an organization in trouble and from whom miracles are sometimes expected is not an easy task. This phenomenon is called 'the glass cliff' (see [Box 16: The glass cliff and other dangers](#)).

Box 16. The Glass Cliff and Other Dangers

"Why are we always called out when cleaning is needed? They made that mess themselves, didn't they?" According to director of the Rotterdam Theatre Alida Dors in an interview with the newspaper *Het Parool* in early 2024, in which she expresses a voice from the Black community about the phenomenon of the glass cliff.

The glass cliff refers in the scientific literature to a phenomenon in which women and people of color are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions in times of crisis when the risk of failure is greatest. They may have broken through the glass ceiling, but then they find themselves on a dangerous glass cliff that could break at any moment and cause them to sink through into the ravine. The phenomenon was first described in relation to women in top positions.¹¹⁴ In the meantime, a review study has shown that not all aspects of this phenomenon are equally strong in research findings, but that the greater odds of selecting a woman as a leader in crisis situations is present.¹¹⁵

The idea of the glass cliff has also been explored in some studies in recent years in relation to people of color in top positions, especially in the United States and England. The overview study on women and the glass cliff also looked at this and found that organizations in crisis are indeed more likely to appoint someone of color to a leadership position.¹¹⁶ The authors list a number of possible reasons behind the glass cliff phenomenon. It may be that boards have the idea that an 'out-of-the-box' candidate can save a struggling organization from collapse by bringing new impetus. In addition, there is also a risk of unrealistic demands and expectations that the candidate can never meet under these circumstances. Sometimes there could even be a preconceived idea to appoint a scapegoat for when the organization really goes under. For candidates from marginalized groups, information about the state of an organization may be less accessible (due to a closed old White Men stronghold), leaving them unsure of what they're getting into. It is also suggested that candidates from marginalized groups feel that this is the only chance to move up the ladder, accepting the risk of failure.¹¹⁷

The risk of failure is exacerbated by the fact that leaders who are seen as less representative of the organization (such as a leader of color in a White organization) are judged worse than leaders who fit very well with the dominant group and culture.¹¹⁸ And success of White men is more likely to be seen as a personal success, while for women and people of color it is more likely to be seen as situational.¹¹⁹ There are also indications that high-ranking White people who have supported people of color in their appointment to a top position quickly feel that the new leader of color does too little in return for that 'favor' (see also [Box 10](#)) and that in turn can lead to undermining behavior by someone who was initially supportive.¹²⁰

A crumbled glass cliff where the leader falls into the ravine is more often followed by the appointment of a White man as his successor. The thinking seems to be: we tried it with a woman/someone of color and that didn't work, so they go back to the old familiar model.¹²¹ Someone of color is then seen as a representative of an entire group and his failure reflects on others from that group (see also [Box 10](#)). All in all, very little research has been done on the elements of the glass cliff in relation to leaders of color to properly understand this phenomenon. Research on this theme in the Netherlands is completely absent and therefore desperately needed. Meanwhile, the top often doesn't feel like a safe option for people of color. Or as writer Rasit Elibol put it in *De Groene Amsterdammer* at the beginning of 2024: "Nice goal, making the world more diverse and fairer. But the road there is slippery and paved with dubious intentions. You, member of a supervisory board?"

It is not easy to say with certainty whether the glass cliff applies to the participants who found organizations where significant problems were at play. It is striking that six participants no longer hold the position for which they were interviewed, while all of them had only recently been appointed. In any case, based on all the information I have, I can say that several characteristics of this phenomenon apply to the experiences and situation of about a handful of participants, both in the group that left and the group that is still there. By this I mean the combination of a non-standard leader with the impossibility of the assignment given the context in which they ended up and about which they often had too little information beforehand. The latter is something that also emerges in the literature about the glass cliff.

	<i>"I found out that there were all kinds of problems, all things that they hadn't told me, even though all kinds of people around the organization knew about it."</i>	
		<i>"No, I didn't find out until I was hired. A colleague from another organization even said, 'I don't know if I should congratulate you on this.'"</i>
<i>"Well, I was so happy with the opportunity I was given, that I asked very few critical questions. What am I actually getting into? And is it okay? And is it okay to expose myself to that level of overdue maintenance, because there was, look it felt to me like beggars can't be choosers. "</i>		

Lack of top-down support for addressing the problems in the organization was also a common theme. The twenty participants who found significant problems in the organization had very different experiences when they started working on them. Support from above, i.e. from one's own manager or the Supervisory Board, was an important factor in this. This support was not sufficiently present in more than a third of the twenty participants who found problems. A lack of support manifested itself in resistance to the participants' ideas, not being taken seriously and a lack of understanding of the challenges the participants faced, among other things. This was also often about a lack of understanding of the double burden that people of color experience and the emotions that this evokes in themselves. And those emotions are often not recognized at all by one's own manager (but also by others in the organization).

<i>"When I'm trying to explain what things were like for me. Well they were flabbergasted, they didn't understand anything at all."</i>	
	<i>"But I didn't feel a lot of support, and they didn't know what to expect. Because it's an incredibly vulnerable position."</i>
	<i>"I told them about that bad experience but I didn't really get any support, it was really an old-fashioned panic, like oh no soon this will be a big thing."</i>
<i>"I find it really hard to say whether how I have been treated was due to the fact that in many ways I do not resemble people I deal with. But for me, it doesn't really matter if it's because of that or not, I've felt alone over and over again, that matters."</i>	<i>"It seems like I'm more emotional than others because I experience racism, but it's actually very sad when White colleagues don't get emotional about racism."</i>

And then the double burden starts all over again: having to explain to your own manager or supervisor (or to direct colleagues) what the daily reality is for someone of color. Or having to defend yourself against accusations of being oversensitive. Or swallow it all because it is not understood. Several participants indicated that this experience, in the here and now but also in the past, can sometimes lead to uncertainty. If your experiences are systematically denied or distorted, you will end up doubting yourself. A deep-seated insecurity and sometimes the fear that you might not be good enough for this position was also explicitly mentioned by several participants.

	<i>"At the same time, I also see all the characteristics of imposter syndrome in me."</i>	
		<i>"For a long time, I worked out of fear. A lazy day is not in the cards for me. I've had to do more all my life to prove my worth. Much more than if I hadn't been a person of color."</i>
<i>"Doubting yourself is a structural problem that I have, because you have been questioned so many times about your expertise, your knowledge, your professionalism. That's what we do to people of color. And that self-doubt can be detrimental to people who take on this type of position. "</i>		

“If your experiences are systematically denied or distorted, you will end up doubting yourself.”

Apparently, it was a special experience not to encounter resistance and to receive support.

About half of the participants indicated that they received sufficient support from above. Not very much, not very little. That support was usually of an administrative or substantive nature. Of course, such support is also crucial for the functioning of a leader in an organization and should not be underestimated. Implicitly, this support can also be seen as support for the participant's general way of working, in which attention to diversity and inclusion often plays a prominent role. But it is precisely in this area that support has sometimes been moderate, even if in a more general sense the support from above has been excellent.

In some cases, support from above was striking. Some of the supervisors had even explicitly tied their own fate to the success of the participant in the leadership position in question. Other superiors, who are not of color themselves, were alert to racism and also mentioned it without hesitation when the participants shared such experiences. Not only did they mention it, but they also supported the participants when they took action on it from their leadership position. One participant appreciated the fact that an important person in their organization not only really supports the

theme, but doesn't expect compliments for it all the time. However, these forms of support that really provided space to discuss the specific challenges faced by leaders of color around the theme of diversity and inclusion were very scarce.

Something that has also stayed with me is that a participant who was doing very well in the new leadership role repeated several times that he was so pleasantly surprised by it. And even literally knocked on wood several times in order not to lose this streak of good luck. Apparently, it was a special experience not to encounter resistance and to receive support. Furthermore, there were no clear patterns in terms of ethnic-racial origin or age of the participants in relation to a negative or positive experience towards work. There were also no clear differences between the participants with predominantly positive or more negative experiences in terms of sector or size of the organization, or in the extent to which D&I was explicitly part of the assignment.

One pattern that did stand out is that women were overrepresented in the group of participants who had predominantly negative experiences in their position. The ‘double jeopardy’ of being a woman and being of color is very likely to play a role here. Women of color face both the prejudices that exist about women when it comes to leadership and the prejudices about people of color (see Box 17: Intersectionality). In both cases, others tend to take them less seriously, not associating their profile with leadership and having certain stereotypical expectations about how they should behave and how strong they are.

	<i>“Too pretty, too sweet, wanting to be perfect. As a woman, you don’t dare to be too angry. You’re too quick to get too angry and too grumpy, so you just have to connect all day.”</i>	
		<i>“He has always given me the support from day one. That is very nice, of course, but there is also a disadvantage to that support, that people see that you get that support, perhaps precisely because you are a woman of color, that you need help to survive.”</i>
	<i>“At the beginning of my career, I noticed that the way you dress, for example in a suit like some men, gives you more prestige in discussions. So I always paid attention to how I dressed. But now I’ve decided that I don’t care anymore, I just come as I am and dress like a woman, period.”</i>	

Box 17. Intersectionality

This report focuses on the experiences of forty people of color, but within that group there are people with very different identities in terms of ethnic-racial origin, gender, sexuality and class (of the family of origin), among other things. The concept of intersectionality refers to the idea that each specific constellation of identities determines how you are perceived and treated in society and that these can be an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the context.¹²² The vast majority of research on intersectionality in the context of leadership is about the combination of ethnic-racial identity and gender.¹²³ As explained in Box 9, the standard image of a leader is White and male. This means that women of color face a double challenge because they deviate from the standard on two dimensions.

That leadership standard is usually based on perceptions of competence (someone has the right qualities) and dominance (can lead someone). Women are generally considered less suitable for both characteristics.¹²⁴ But American research shows that the ethnic-racial origin of women matters. For example, it turned out that Black women are seen as more dominant but less competent than other women, while Asian women are seen as more competent but less dominant (more passive).¹²⁵ Dutch research showed that the stereotype of passive (oppressed) is also attributed to Muslim women.¹²⁶

Being a woman already puts people at a disadvantage, but ethnic-racial identity can reinforce or weaken that disadvantage, although (‘positively’) deviating from the ‘female norm’ is not greeted with enthusiasm either, research shows, even if the deviation fits a stereotype about an ethnic-racial group.¹²⁷ Broader gender stereotypes are not only descriptive (descriptive), but also prescriptive: they indicate how groups would behave on average, but also how they should behave. This means that a woman of color at the top is easily viewed with suspicion and is not judged in the same way as other leaders.

For example, American experimental research shows that Black female leaders who made a mistake are evaluated worse than White and Black men and White women who made the same mistake.¹²⁸ This is in line with Dutch research that shows that networks within organizations that focus on singular identities (such as women’s networks) do not pay sufficient attention to the hierarchies within those groups, as a result of which subgroups are still marginalized.¹²⁹ The ‘color-blind’ curtains behind which racism in the Netherlands often tries to hide still often (unintentionally) exclude women of color from feminist movements.¹³⁰ But even within the category of ‘man of color’, specific subgroups will face different prejudices and challenges than others (see also Box 7).

The purpose of intersectionality is not to create an infinite number of boxes so that ultimately no more than a handful of individuals fit into one box based on a range of characteristics. Intersectionality calls for particular attention to the inherent complexity of human (perception of) identity and to solidarity within the broader ‘boxes’ (such as women or persons of color) within which inequality also exists.

It was also striking that the participants who had previously held similar leadership positions tended to have a more positive attitude towards their work. This probably has to do with the development of general leadership skills that make the job easier, but also learning to deal with the challenges of leadership when you are of color, a growth in self-confidence that brings the experience of previous success and therefore daring to be much more outspoken, also about diversity and inclusion.



<i>"It's also just getting older, and dealing with people isn't always nice, but I'm not panicking anymore. The fact that I deal with it this way has to do with years of experience."</i>			
		<i>"They look to the boss, they know what I think, because they know where I stand on that theme, so I don't beat around the bush. I'm really willing to take your perspective if you don't see it, but this is where I stand."</i>	<i>"In the meantime, it has been confirmed so many times that people appreciate me for what I can do, that I don't need it so much anymore."</i>
			<i>"I listen to everything and everyone, but we're not going to discuss whether we're going to do it... We can talk about how we are going to do it, but that we are going to do it, that is just not a topic of conversation. So there's an irreversibility to that."</i>

The combination of an organization with significant problems and a new leader who does not yet have much experience in a position of responsibility is probably always risky, but may be even more difficult if the new leader is someone of color. The aforementioned double burden then actually becomes a triple burden: the regular leadership tasks must be combined with crisis management and with the specific challenges of racism and prejudice. One of the participants for whom this was the case explicitly indicated that inexperience had played a role. Looking back, this participant suspected that they would have asked a lot more questions about specific files in the selection phase in order to be able to make a more informed choice. As one participant said, “If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn’t have started it.”

The interviews show that in several cases there was a lack of match between the state of the organization (in general and in the field of diversity and inclusion in particular) and the profile of the participant prior to taking up the new position. In a number of cases, the mismatch between organization and participant was so great that the employment contract ended prematurely, sometimes at the initiative of the participant, sometimes at the initiative of the organization, or a combination thereof. In the majority of these situations, features of the glass cliff ([see also Box 16](#)) were clearly present.

Several participants (inside and outside the group working in a problematic organization) had the impression that the desire to bring more ‘color’ at the top is partly to blame for situations reminiscent of the glass cliff. A number of participants were also critical of the desire of organizations to appoint someone of color to the top and of the role of recruitment agencies that are too eager to comply with this. Sometimes this leads to unwise choices that can be especially harmful to the candidate of color, but also to the broader group of people of color.

<p><i>“So if things go wrong, then you just have a stick to hit you with. That puts you down by 5-0.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Then they say ‘Yes, we tried it with that one, but look, that didn’t go well’, so the chance that someone of color will come to that place next time is quite small. And that does not happen the other way around when a White person fails somewhere – or at least, what is seen as failure.”</i></p>	
<p><i>“If a Dutch person makes a mistake here, then it is Jan has not done a good job, but if a Moroccan person makes a mistake, then it is immediately an entire population that is no good. And that’s how I feel, that I always have to walk on eggshells.”</i></p>		<p><i>“There is still a long way to go to integrate people of color into leadership positions. Nobody knows how to do it and then it becomes that person’s responsibility to do it and that creates quite a bit of pressure.”</i></p>

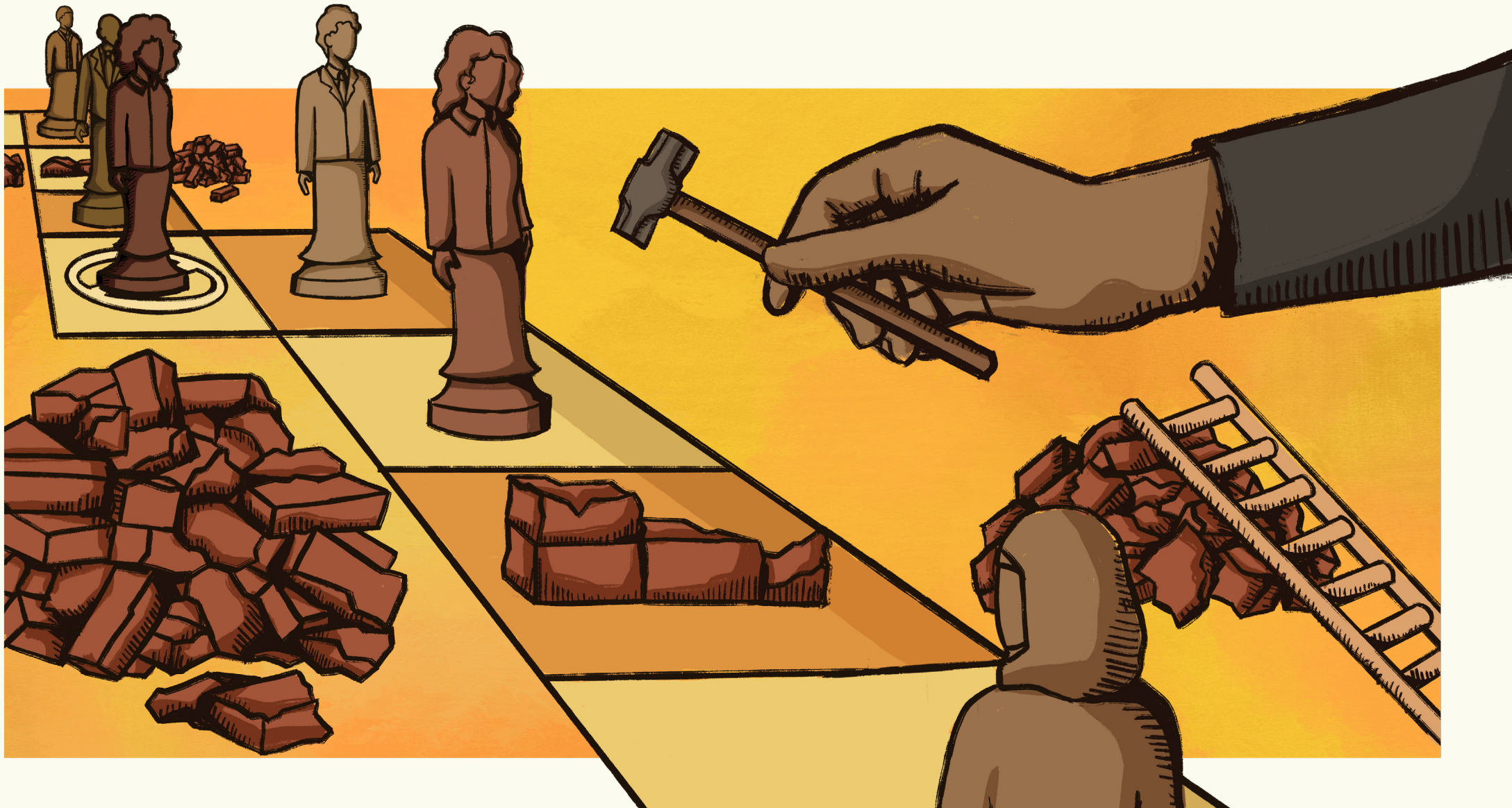
But many participants indicated that they need a network of people of color in leadership positions with whom they can exchange experiences and strategies.

I also asked participants about support from outside the organization. Do they have people they can turn to when they want to discuss the difficult sides of their positions and organizations? Most participants were able to go to partners, family and friends to vent. Sometimes there were also people with experience in a leadership role so that they could also give useful advice, but those were exceptions. Some participants have mentors or coaches, usually of color, who can advise and assist them, almost all of them outside their own organization. But many participants indicated that they need a network of people of color in leadership positions with whom they can exchange experiences and strategies. And to feel less lonely in their role. That there is a great need for contact with other people of color in similar professional positions was also evident when I organized a number of meetings to get feedback from participants on the first research results. More on that in the reflection below.

Despite the sometimes major challenges that the leadership position entails, many participants are extremely motivated to take them on, to succeed despite setbacks or even opposition. In doing so, they point out the importance of their place in that position for the bigger story, for the future of people of color in organizations in general and in top positions in particular.

A COLORFUL VISION OF THE FUTURE

06



This story started with a description of the colorful company of participants and their (teaching) careers in which they took quite ambitious and daring steps, often off the beaten track and often without much help from home. Sometimes with a big ideal picture of the future in mind, but often more in the form of steps of smaller dreams and wishes. When I asked them how they got there and how they knew how to get it done or where to go, they often didn't have an answer. It usually came down to a very strong inner ambition, a good nose for opportunities, a survival mentality in a sea of adversity and the general feeling of wanting to do something good for their sector and society.

Although not all participants had role models, the majority indicated that they had at least been inspired by different people in their (teaching) careers. The sources of inspiration were parents and friends, more experienced professionals they encountered in their careers, and celebrities (with Obama being mentioned most often). In most cases, participants mentioned people of color as role models or inspirations, but a few also mentioned White people they found inspiring or an

important source of advice and support. Incidentally, this almost exclusively concerned women about women. Apparently, a female role model, regardless of origin, is a source of inspiration for women of color anyway. This is understandable in a context in which White women still face barriers on their way to the top of organizations.

I also asked participants if they feel they are a role model or source of inspiration for others of color. The vast majority of participants answered in the affirmative, but see the influence of their position on others of color more broadly. It is not only about being a role model, but also about the simple presence of someone of color in a certain position that encourages others, or gives them the feeling that an important step has been taken in a sector and even makes working there more attractive (see Box 18: Role models).

	<i>"He said to me: 'Seeing you in this position. Now I know why I do it.'"</i>	<i>"I regularly receive messages from women with a refugee background. They see me as an inspiration and want to learn how she can still get far despite all the barriers you face from fleeing and having to start over."</i>		<i>"At no point did I have the feeling that I didn't belong or that it was special, but of course I did hear that this young Moroccan employee thinks it's fantastic that I have become a director."</i>	<i>"When I came in, I got reactions from all the networks of people of color, flowers were delivered to my home. I had to visit them all. No, really gigantic role model. I had never thought about it that way before."</i>	
		<i>"So I had just been appointed 4 weeks ago and I really got emails [from people of color] from all corners of the organizations, then they had seen my picture and my name and how nice to see someone of color in this position, so you notice it also triggers something in employees."</i>				<i>"You notice that this can have an impact on the way young people of color in the organization think about their ambitions."</i>
			<i>"That has always touched me, that I thought oh but it really works like this. So that if you do indeed see a non-Dutch name, it lowers the threshold for some people."</i>			

Box 13. Role models: you can (not) be what you don't see?

The idea that having a role model is helpful for one's professional career makes intuitive sense, as claimed in the phrase “*you can't be what you can't see.*” The idea stems from general theories that people are more likely to want to imitate or imitate someone else if that person belongs to their own group.¹³¹ A role model can be an example of how to achieve something, can broaden the idea of what is possible for someone, and can generally inspire them to follow a certain path.¹³² Yet many people of color are the first in their careers everywhere and therefore have not seen someone from their own ethnic-racial group in those places before.

Role models are typically more than simply people to admire or a source of motivation to want to pursue their success. In the scientific literature, it is described that a role model with the same background also has added value for marginalized groups because they can act in a more culturally sensitive way and thus offer better support and understanding than someone with a different background.¹³³ In Dutch research, this was also the conclusion of qualitative research among medical students of color who expressed exactly these needs.¹³⁴ In an American review study, it was concluded that having a teacher of the same ethnic-racial origin has a positive influence on the performance and learning behavior of students.¹³⁵ Research in the U.S. military found that Black cadets who had a Black mentor were much more likely to choose the same specialization as their mentor than if they had a mentor from a different background.¹³⁶

Role models can also be effective when they are remote. In the United States, a lot of research has been done on the ‘Obama effect’: the influence of a Black president on the self-image and behavior of Black Americans. The exact research design seems to matter, but scientists conclude that there is a positive effect of (media) attention on Obama's performance and the performance of Black Americans on tests and their self-image.¹³⁷ Apparently, exposure to a Black success story gave them confidence, even if it's a story about someone they don't know personally. In the Netherlands, Franc Weerwind described something similar in an interview about his time as mayor of Almere. An alderman of color from that city did a version of the famous doll test with his children: will the Black or the White doll advance in his career? The answer was: the Black doll, because we have a Black mayor too!¹³⁸

Exposure to successful people who look like you opens up new ways of looking at what is and isn't possible and for whom. In the absence of such role models, it often comes down to the fact that people from minority groups who rarely see themselves represented in certain (high) places have to rely on their inner motivation and ambition. They really have to be willing and able to get there. While someone who sees himself everywhere with less firm conviction will also get there, because it is self-evident and everyone recognizes them.

The fact that their appointment can be so important to other people came as a surprise to many participants. As a result of these experiences, quite a few participants had to adjust their ideas about the importance of color at the top and only then fully realized what their appointment means and that being a role model for others is also a natural part of it.

	<i>“That also opened my eyes a lot, you are just a rarity at the top and that gives strength to a lot of people. (...). And that's very much about empowerment in a broad sense.”</i>	
		<i>“But you know, being a role model is something that has been bothering me for the past 10 years. I did flip the switch, you're a role model whether you like it or not, you are.”</i>
	<i>“I didn't become very aware of it until I took this position, because other people of color literally said that, ‘My goodness, you're the first director of color of such a large institution, and that's so fantastic, and it makes me emotional’, that kind of reaction. And then I thought, wait a minute, it's a thing. (...) For people who think, oh it's actually possible!”</i>	
	<i>“I was always like, ‘well, we shouldn't exaggerate the idea of being a role model. How big is that impact?’ I have to say that as my career progresses, I've come to discover that it has quite an impact. (...) That someone is now comfortable to giving his child an Arabic name because I have also come to this position with my name.”</i>	

This role model function also means that many participants feel a certain obligation to do well, not to fail and to use their position to structurally change things to pave the way for other people of color. While this can be an inspiring thought, sometimes that duty also feels like a burden. You're not just doing it for yourself, but for an entire community. And if you fail, it also reflects negatively on others of color, because then the image is confirmed that 'they' can't do it, as was also mentioned earlier when it came to dealing with problems in the organization and the risk of things going wrong.

	<i>"The obligation (...). I have to stay put, I have to stay put to make it possible for a future director with a migration background."</i>				<i>"I really thought about it, do I want to keep doing this? But I also thought to myself, yes, I don't want to be the one who leaves because it doesn't work out (...) I also see that the fact that I am in that position is bigger than myself. And that, that's great, but it's also a burden."</i>
		<i>"And if I'm there, I can say it. But if I'm not there, it just goes on again. And if I can't change those frameworks, it just happens again. So that's the responsibility that's exhausting, and then ending up being on those boards."</i>			<i>"So not only a responsibility to myself, to my environment, to society, but also to the people in the organization who really needed to be seen, to be heard on this issue."</i>
		<i>"So it's actually bigger than you think. That's why there can be quite a bit of pressure, like I have to do this right. In any case, I do everything with that intention, but there is an extra pressure around it – you actually carry a bit of the whole community as well."</i>			

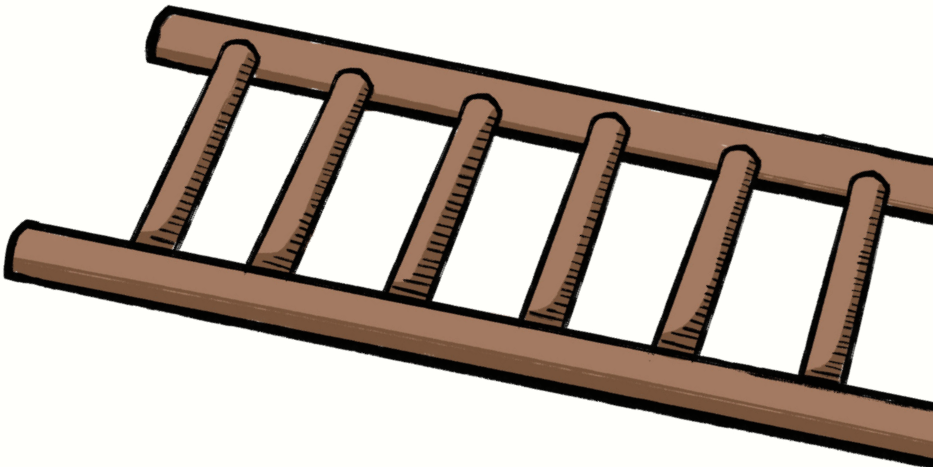
It is all a great honor and also gives energy, but it also comes with an additional and sometimes tiring burden for this group. Not only feeling responsible for an inclusive working climate within the organization, but also responsibility for the image and hopes of an entire 'constituency'.

There was also criticism of the idea of the role model function specifically for people of color, as it reflects an overly restrictive vision of identity. That was a point made by several participants on several levels: you are not just one thing and it is not pleasant to be reduced to that.

<i>"It limits Blackness to one thing. In that sense, we don't allow people of color to be the diversity that they are. We expect those little boxes in which they can play and that's what they are."</i>	<i>"We don't want to pigeonhole people, nor do we want to define what identity means, because that denies the complexity of who we are as human beings. In fact, it plays on the kind of structural racism and stereotyping that we suffer from."</i>

With these ifs and buts in mind, there is a great awareness among the participants of the importance of their position for other people of color, inside and outside their own organization. This awareness is also an important motivation to do this work and to work for a more inclusive organization, sector and society.

	<i>"I strongly believe in the power of role models and I know that this can lead to new dreams, thus to inspiration for someone else."</i>	
	<i>"From that sense of justice and responsibility, I always want to be able to do something for people who don't have that position. And if we're talking about position, I have a leadership position and I can do something with that, I try to use that."</i>	
	<i>"And that's really a driving force for me, to this day, that if I get the opportunity to make a difference somewhere in a place that matters, then I take it, or I try to put other people forward that I think, just sit there, it's necessary."</i>	
		<i>"Above all, I want to show that it is very normal that I have been given a chance here and that it is also very normal that if you work hard that you can really make a difference. (...) I am very proud that I can now also set a good example."</i>



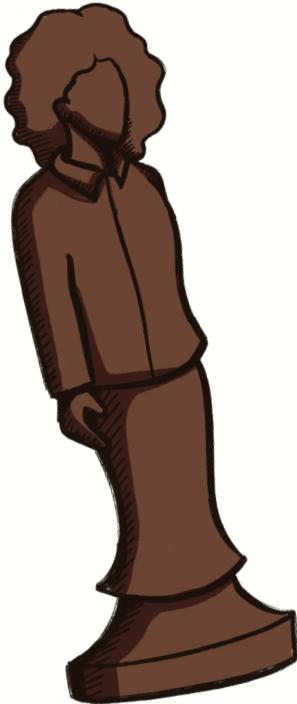
In addition to the specific motivation that comes from being a role model and the positive effect of more people of color in organizations that can make a difference on the issue of diversity and inclusion, the participants are also generally very passionate about their work. They have a heart for the sector in which they work, are happy to contribute to the social mission of their organization, and are committed to the well-being of their employees with love.

In several interviews, it was also about the younger generation and the future. Sometimes optimistically and sometimes pessimistically. For example, participants talked about their own children and that, just like them, they still face underestimation in education and racist prejudices in daily life. The conversations I had after the November 2023 election results (in which a right-wing party became the biggest in the Netherlands) were also significantly less positive in tone than previous conversations when it comes to the broader progress on the theme of diversity and inclusion in society. Many participants also said something along the lines of ‘there is still a lot to be done’ or ‘why haven’t we made much progress?’. Nevertheless, participants were also optimistic about the future.

<p><i>“I am absolutely optimistic. I see small steps forward. In this organization, but also just more broadly. I think it’s also very much a theme of awareness (...) And if you look at how much is now being done in certain positions. The hope I cherish is that it is a theme that gets lasting attention without it blowing over, that we will continue to do what we do.”</i></p>	
	<p><i>“I think there’s a big difference between my generation and the younger generation. They still have to fight, but it’s more self-evident and obvious.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I’m optimistic about that, yes. Although I do think that we have been talking about this for a long time, and I hear the same things now, the same arguments that I heard twenty or twenty-five years ago. But at the same time, I really do see changes, and then I think these are permanent changes.”</i></p>	<p><i>“We’re a very White organization and people weren’t enthusiastic about this theme, I’m glad I jumped into it, because now I see that it’s suddenly tilting and all of a sudden people are signing up, like hey I’m doing something in this too, or I have ideas about this.”</i></p>

<p><i>“There was a period in my career when people still found it difficult to accept that discrimination and racism are taking place in the workplace. That’s different now. There will be people who still see it differently, but in a general sense you usually find people who are aware of the fact that it happens, that it exists.”</i></p>

In these quotes it becomes clear that the (cautious) optimism is linked to a number of conditions, for example that the theme must not disappear from the agenda. And that it’s time to do diversity and not just talk and write about it, as Gloria Wekker and her co-authors argued years ago in the report Let’s do diversity. But that does require empathy and self-reflection. For the participants, both are a daily occurrence. They have an empathetic attitude towards people who still find diversity difficult, reflect on the role of their own identity and position or the reaction of others to it, but also on their own prejudices. In many interviews, participants readily admitted that they themselves also have blind spots and are still able and willing to learn a lot from the experiences of groups they know less well. Participants often missed that attitude among their White colleagues. Empathizing with the other person is often still a very one-sided matter ([see Box 19: Color empathy](#)).



Box 19. Colored empathy

The ability of people of color, born out of necessity, to always be aware of how others view them and to empathize with the perspective of the dominant group (see also Box 8) can be useful in the leadership role to quickly understand social mechanisms in the organization and to respond to them in a timely manner. However, this empathy is not always reciprocal.

Predominantly American experimental research shows that people feel more empathy for people who look like them or who belong to the same group as them than for others.¹³⁹ On top of that, empathy and helpful behavior are also less common when the status of the ‘other’ is lower.¹⁴⁰ Since people of color are the minority in a White society (and therefore more often the ‘other’) and therefore usually have a lower social status, they cannot automatically count on empathy from the majority group.

American experimental research also shows that the physical response of White people to pain in Black people is much less strong than when they observe pain in White people.¹⁴¹ A similar effect has also been found for the observation of emotional pain in someone who is not counted as part of one’s own group.¹⁴² This may also partly explain the fact that White bystanders do not always intervene when they witness racism. Of course, it is always exciting to talk to someone about problematic behavior, but research shows that the physical reaction of White people to seeing racism is also characterized by apathy¹⁴³ that may also stem from a reduced empathy with what the person of color is experiencing at that moment.

There are also indications that empathy with the ‘other’ is not static. For example, emphasizing and experiencing an overarching group identity (such as belonging to an organization or company) and/or emphasizing shared goals or challenges can already contribute to more empathy for someone who would not be considered part of their own group in a different context.¹⁴⁴ However, it is important that the shared group identity does not come at the expense of insight into and understanding of inequalities within the group. A ‘colorblind we’ can be counterproductive (see also Box 12).¹⁴⁵ This is where inclusive and transformational leadership can play a role, as both individual and collective perspectives are valued (see Box 13).

Another line of research relevant to empathy between groups is the multiple confirmed contact theory that states that more contact between groups leads to less prejudice between those groups.¹⁴⁶ One of the mechanisms that explains this effect is the increase in empathy. Multiple studies show that more contact with another group leads to more empathy for and subsequently less prejudice against members of that group.¹⁴⁷ Dutch research also shows that employees who have more contact with other ethnic-racial groups have more empathy for the ethnic-racial ‘other’ and also have a more positive attitude towards diversity in the organization.¹⁴⁸ With the insights from Boxes 11, 12, and 13, the circle is complete: more ethnic-racial diversity in the workplace leads to more contact between groups, which in turn leads to more mutual empathy, which in turn leads to more support for policies on diversity and inclusion.

Another condition mentioned by several participants was about the need for more diversity at all levels of the organization, but certainly also at the top. One is none, one is a drowning person, they assured me. Stereotypes and prejudices don’t suddenly disappear when someone of color appears at the top. It is, however, a first step in the right direction towards a critical mass (see Box 10). And every example that contradicts a persistent association can contribute to a (slow) broadening of the image of a leader. The fact that having a director of color can change someone’s image of an entire group was also evident from one of the interviews. One participant said that an employee said that since this director took office, he had started to think very differently about Moroccans. The participants was not sure whether that should be taken as a compliment.

“If you want a change in your organization, hire two new people with a non-Western background. Not one, two. Why two? Well, because that one can’t speak for all the different diversities. And it’s very lonely. Then it helps if there are more of you.”

In that last quote, several storylines come together. That it is lonely for people of color at the top, that addressing diversity and inclusion should not be the responsibility of one person and that with more can offer mutual support and guidance on the way to a more colorful future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS



Box 20. Limitations of the study

This research is exploratory and qualitative in nature. This has the advantage that it yields rich data that are much less limited by assumptions in advance and leave more room for discovering new relevant themes than hypothesis-testing quantitative research. Exploratory qualitative research also has some limitations.

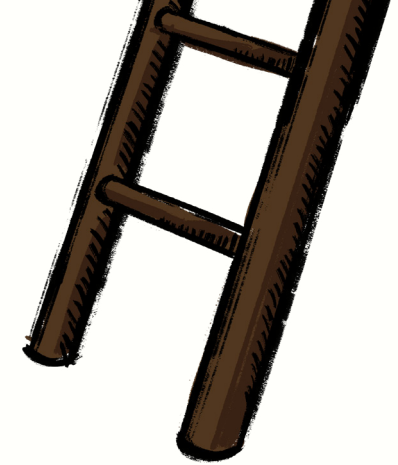
A questionnaire with closed-ended questions can easily be completed by thousands of people and its analysis takes hardly more time than a questionnaire study with, for example, fifty participants. Qualitative analysis methods are time-consuming and are therefore usually applied to studies with relatively small numbers of participants. In exploratory qualitative research, it is not possible to determine in advance how many participants are needed to get a good picture of a topic. Typically, it is advised to continue until so-called saturation occurs. In this case, that is: when interviews with new participants no longer provide new information. Of course, each story is unique and each participant gives their own interpretation to the themes, but after a while you will notice that there are no more striking new themes or patterns. In this study, this happened after I had done more than 30 interviews. Every interview thereafter continued to contribute valuable to insight and deepening through individual experiences and ways of articulating, but no themes were added.

Qualitative research does not necessarily strive for representativeness, but rather for deepening and insight into groups and phenomena that are underexposed in other types of research. Still, people will wonder how representative the research group in this study is for the total population of people of color in leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector. It is not possible to say for sure. There are no reliable figures on numbers in the Netherlands, including for various subgroups within the Netherlands that may or may not be represented in this study. It is also possible that people who value diversity and inclusion in particular participated in this study. People who are allergic to these themes – and there are also people of color – are unlikely to be motivated to participate in this type of research. Indeed, all participants considered the topic to be important. Nevertheless, the variety of visions, strategies and experiences around this theme was quite large, as can be read in this report.

In general, it can be said that a certain social involvement is characteristic of people who are committed to the public good in their work, to matters such as culture, education, or health. It is therefore not surprising that none of the participants had anything to do with a socially relevant topic such as racism. Of course, the fact that they themselves are people of color also has to do with this, but is no guarantee. Nevertheless, it is precisely the ‘strong objectivity’ (see also Box 4) that I have striven for with this research that means that these are insights that are very close to daily reality and can therefore contribute to guidelines for improvement in the problem areas that have been identified, even if the group is not (entirely) representative.

Due to the design of this study, no causal relationships can be established: it is not possible to make strong statements about cause and effect, about what works and what doesn’t. Such relationships can be better established in experimental research, for example by randomly implementing certain interventions in a number of organizations and not in others. Then it can be examined whether a specific change actually has an effect on a specific outcome. Nevertheless, patterns about situations in which the participants had positive or negative experiences can contribute to an initial understanding of what works and what doesn’t.

Finally, no control group was included in this study: experiences of White people in leadership positions were not examined. Some of the participants’ experiences may also apply to White leaders, such as resistance to renewal. Nevertheless, many of the themes that emerge in this study have to do with the ethnic-racial identity of the participants. For example, it is unlikely that White leaders will be told that they only got that position because they are White. The lack of studies into the experiences of people of color at the top also made it important to focus on this group. I see that in the words of Philomena Essed as a remedial measure.¹⁴⁹



Discussion and conclusions

In the previous sections, various patterns have been discussed, both in the sense of common themes and in the sense of individual differences in experiences, visions and approaches. In this section, I’ll bring those patterns together in an attempt to draw more overarching conclusions. In doing so, it is important to also keep in mind the limitations of the study ([see Box 20: Limitations of the study](#)).

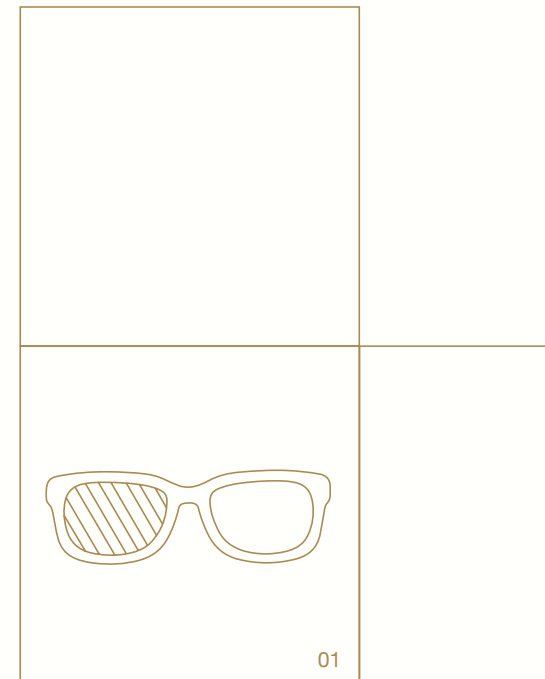
One way to draw overarching conclusions is to identify common threads that run through the themes discussed. In this way of looking at the results, I was particularly struck by the fact that in all thematic areas there are several apparent contradictions that need to be clarified. These contradictions are about ambivalence with regard to the meaning and influence of origin, the tension between conforming to the norm and questioning that norm, and navigating between individual and structural levels.

A colorful or colorblind career

The first common thread is the ambivalence about the meaning and influence of ethnic-racial background and ‘color’ in relation to the career and content of the current top job. Almost all participants had a clear and strongly felt ethnic-racial identity that partly determines how they approach their work. Almost unanimously, the participants confirmed that their background and associated experiences give them a unique perspective that is not at all or far too little present in many organizations. It was specifically mentioned that they notice group processes and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion more sharply than others because of the double consciousness of a minority in society. This phenomenon has also been called contextual alertness by Halleh Ghorashi (blog post 2016 on the website of the Kennisplatform Inclusieve Samenleving). It was also agreed that racism is still pervasive and also determines how they are perceived and treated by others. So ‘color’ and ethnic-racial background matter.

At the same time, participants would prefer that this would be different. Just being able to do your job and being appreciated for it because you have something (new) to offer, because you are capable, have a passion for the sector. Not the extra burden of being a figurehead for an entire group and having to be a pioneer of diversity policy, no matter how important you think that is. In a considerable number of interviews, the substantive aspects of the job were discussed in detail that have little to do with the main theme of this research. That’s what they do it for, what they’re passionate about. In their daily work, most participants are not at all concerned with their background, identity, or color. Until something comes along that forces them to face the facts: again the only one of color in the meeting room, again that restrictive way of judging quality, or another dubious remark that makes it clear that you are seen as different after all.

Going through working life ‘colorblind’ is simply not an option for most participants because of this reality, even though most see it as the dream situation. This reality also means that the participants are critical of essentialism (the idea that one’s ethnic-racial is all-important) but at the same time cannot and do not want to deny that background is simply part of their daily reality and should therefore not be ignored. In addition, many participants see strategic essentialism (implicitly) as the best middle ground: showing and acknowledging one’s colors where necessary, without allowing this to result in deterministic and therefore limiting identity frameworks ([see also Box 12](#)).





02

Who or what needs to adapt?

The second common thread is the tension between adapting to dominant norms and questioning and changing or broadening those norms. For the vast majority of participants, conforming and driving change coexisted and alternated. It was generally agreed that without conforming it would not have been possible to get to the top. Being acceptable to the majority, not being too different and some insensitivity to racism and exclusion were important survival mechanisms for many participants. Yet they were also critical of this. Ideally, they would have liked to see a society and a field in which this is not necessary, where you can also make a career if you do not fit into the usual frameworks. And by choosing conformation as a strategy, dominant and restrictive norms are maintained. But in addition to conforming, there is also resistance from the participants to the status quo.

Even during periods of the career when conforming was perhaps more prominent, most participants were critical of restrictive norms. Whether they openly voiced that criticism differed from person to person and from situation to situation. In that respect, quite a few participants were quite pragmatic and strategic. Swallowing and smiling (or selective amnesia) if you prevent hassle that cannot be expected to have a good outcome, but questioning and being critical if you see an opening to change something, or if something really crosses personal boundaries. This continuous consideration characterized the professional attitude of many participants. Others indicated that they were still looking for a balance.

Once at the top, almost all participants choose to play a fairly active role in policy on diversity and inclusion. Not least to ensure that others can find a place in the organization with less resistance and less pressure to conform. A number of participants also explicitly mentioned that it is better to try to change a system from the inside than to kick it from the outside. Even though this has been preceded by a long road of conforming and it is sometimes a tiring extra task, most participants always kept the bigger goal in sight: as a leader you are in a position to make a difference and the participants take that task seriously. This observation reminds me of lines of poetry by Babs Gons: do it anyway / even in those moments / when you think / no one sees you / keep doing it / stir the pot / show up / make a fist / make yourself heard.

In the daily practice of diversity and inclusion, participants also identify conflicting wishes and interests. Almost all of them say that it is time to take action, to embrace fundamental change. But they also see that this is met with resistance and in order to create support, they have to pull out all the stops and sometimes adjust their ambitions in this area. They sometimes opt for velvet gloves to prevent everyone from becoming 'afraid of diversity and inclusion' and it not coming to fruition at all. So it doesn't always work out to want to go faster. Rather, it comes down to a long-term approach in which the underlying goal turns out to be a disappointingly distant dot on the horizon. Yet this ambition is so strong in most participants that they take it for granted. It's better to take small steps in the right direction than to take a giant step that ends in a swamp. Although some still choose the giant step and accept possible opposition.

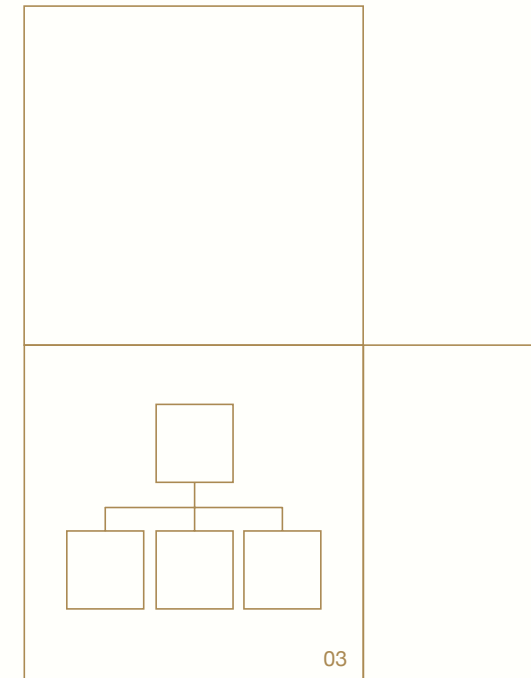
Of individuals and structures

In many interviews, the emphasis was alternately on the individual level and the structural level, the third common thread that seems to imply a certain contradiction. Participants talked about their individual qualities, interests and perseverance as characteristics that have helped determine their success. Parents, mentors and other role models were sometimes mentioned as important support at specific stages of life or career, but there were no interviews that clearly emphasized the role of others in participants' careers. This observation fits a pattern of fighting against unequal opportunities, overcoming setbacks, struggling and coming out on top. The exceptional status that many participants have achieved (the first, the only) understandably gives rise to an individualistic explanatory model, but in the context of unjust structures. The participants have survived despite considerable (institutional) barriers in all kinds of phases and aspects of their careers. Mediocrity won't get you there if you're of color in a White society. Success in that group is only reserved for the best of the best. Many participants are justifiably proud of this.

The pride about struggling and coming out on top and the feeling of having become stronger from that struggle is an understandable one. This attitude has most likely been a factor in their success, and once you're successful, it's easier to look back on harder times as positively formative than when success doesn't come. It can be a pitfall to glorify the struggles to some extent, as if it had been necessary for this career. The adversity becomes an individual issue, something that a specific person has managed to harness, rather than a systemic issue that affects many people of color in their careers, as this research also shows.

In the discussions about top-down support, both individual and systemic aspects emerged. For some participants, the narrative was one of success despite lack of support, for others one of failed ambitions due to lack of support, and for still others one of success (partly) thanks to support. The presence of support was usually seen as an individual exception: a special higher-ranking person who stands firmly behind the participant despite institutional mechanisms that make others more hesitant or even dismissive of a leader of color. The absence of support was therefore often interpreted as a structural issue: people of color are viewed with suspicion in a White organization because they do not fit into the standard picture.

The downside of an individualistic interpretation of success is that it highlights the exceptionalism of people of color who make it to the top (or the exceptionality of support from above). For example, the image persists that the top is actually not for people of color, unless they are exceptional and/or they receive exceptional support. Not a nice picture, but unfortunately probably true. Once at the top, many participants do put the emphasis on systems: selection processes, visions on quality, representation in the sector, room for polyphony. Here, too, I see a certain pragmatism: the leaders of color use the (still exceptional) position of power to change the system and make it possible in the future for a much broader range of people of color to make a career in their organization. As Seada Nourhussen (editor-in-chief of OneWorld) says, the migrant also has the right to mediocrity, just like all other Dutch people.



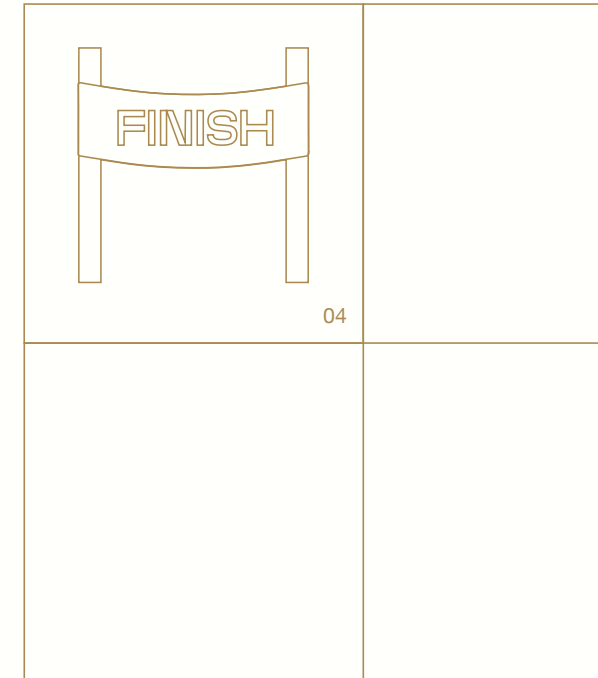
Doing well or going a long way to go?

A fourth thread in which there is a contradiction is the combination of criticism and optimism that resounded in many interviews. On the one hand, the participants have reached a top position and have thus broken through the glass ceiling. And in that top position, they have and use the opportunity to really make the organization more diverse and inclusive. They see that they are role models for other people of color inside and outside the organization and that this gives hope and inspiration. These are all reasons for optimism. Nevertheless, the participants feel that things are moving too slowly, that there is still a lot of misunderstanding of the challenges faced by people of color and that there is an inability and sometimes outright unwillingness to fundamentally change the work culture.

This pattern of successful people of color still criticizing persistent sources of inequality is sometimes seen as a paradox: how can there be institutional racism when all these people make it to the top? Isn't that proof that it's not all that bad? That's a rather lame and fake contradiction. A bit of the 'it's very cold right now, so why climate change?' type? Of course, it is about the bigger picture, about the patterns that still systematically disadvantage people of color in society, as much research shows (see also Box 7). One swallow doesn't make a summer, and forty leaders of color don't make a post-racial society. In doing so, we must also guard against a narrative in which the exceptional leaders of color are used to put other people of color down along the lines of 'if they can do it, why can't you?'.

As with the other common threads, seemingly contradictory patterns exist side by side. Progress is being made when it comes to opening up leadership positions to people of color and the opportunities that this creates for pluralism and institutional change. However, as some participants also pointed out, they are sometimes expected to be grateful and that criticism such as naming racism is an expression of ingratitude (see also Box 11). This puts the finger on the sore spot: bringing in diversity is sometimes disappointing for the organization as soon as it becomes clear that the new colleagues (or leaders) require an effort that not everyone is willing to make. After all, it is quite exciting and not always attractive to let go of the status quo, to really invest in a different way of thinking and working that leaves more room for differences.

The answer to the question 'Who is afraid of diversity and inclusion?' is: everyone, at least, if you do it right. In other words, diversity and inclusion usually demand more from an organization than most slogans and policy plans suggest. And this is exactly what many participants also observed once they questioned the obvious at the top. Yes, there is progress and no, it doesn't happen by itself. This idea is central to the now almost proverbial Inclusion Marathon that Kauthar Bouchallikht and Zoë Papaikonomou described in their book of the same name. Ahmed Marcouch put it beautifully in his book *My Dutch Dream* when he wrote about serving the public good: "I see myself as a kind of gardener, you are never done, you have to rake, prune, clean up and sow continuously."



One swallow doesn't make a summer, and forty leaders of color don't make a post-racial society.

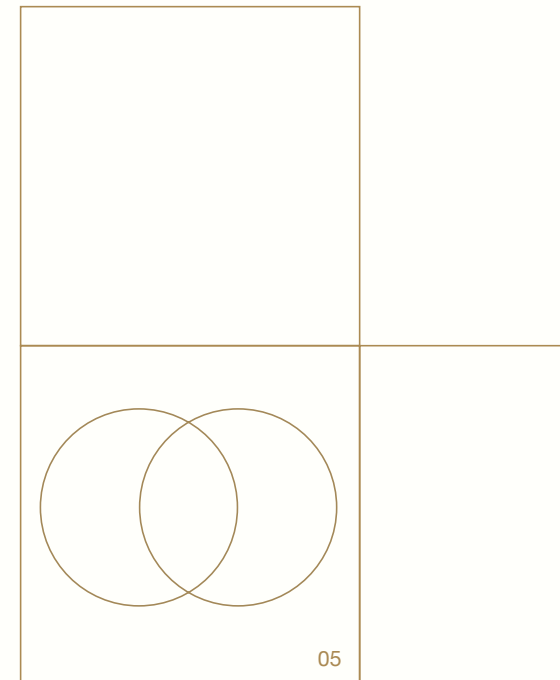
From common threads to typologies?

Another method to arrive at overarching conclusions is to look for possible subgroups of participants who are similar and characterized by their position on different dimensions discussed in the report, such as ethnic-racial background, gender, sector, views on diversity, leadership style, degree of conformity versus criticism of the status quo, support from different ranks and job satisfaction.

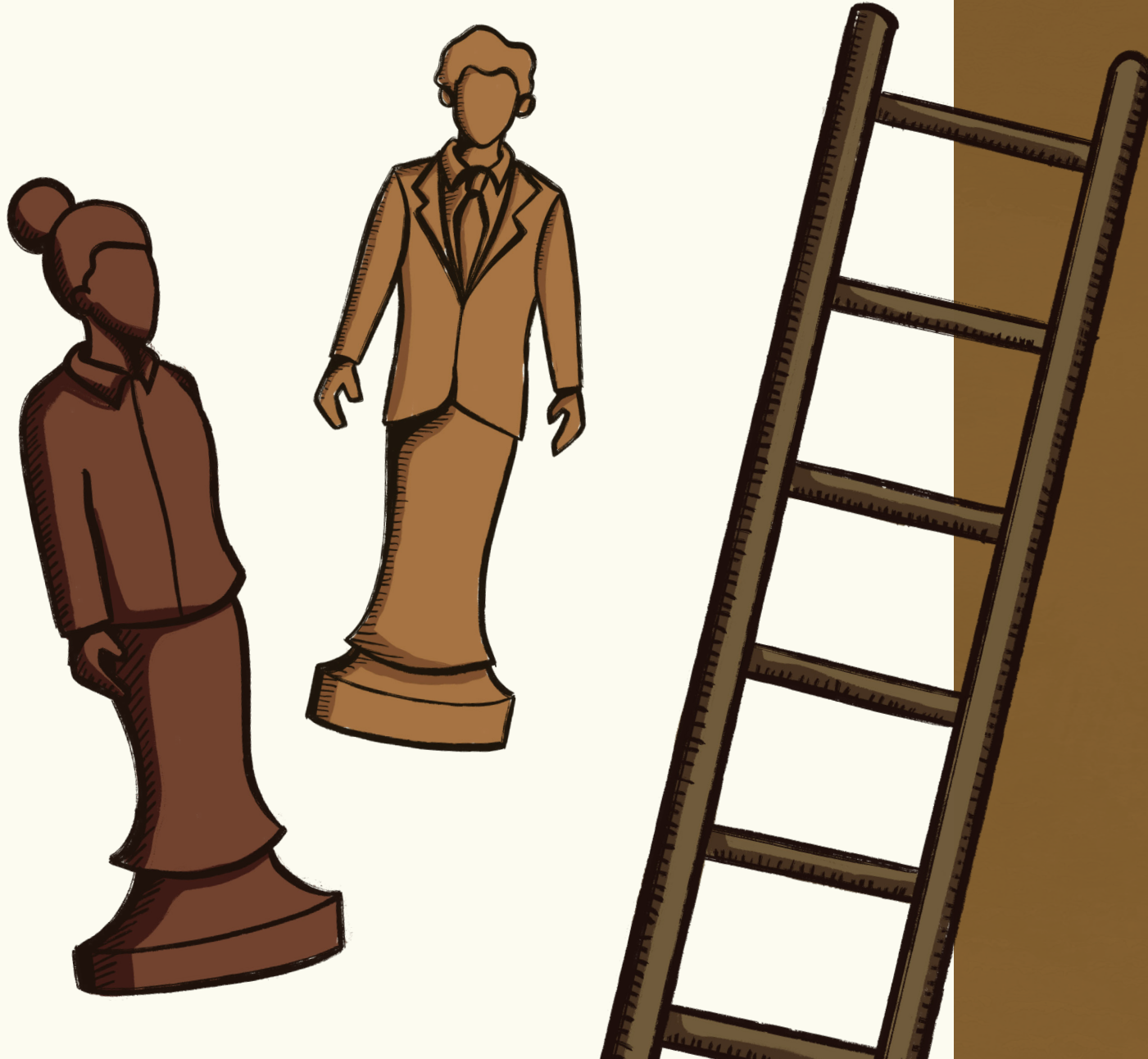
Based on a detailed analysis of intersections between different sets of characteristics and experiences of the participants, I conclude that a clear characterization of subgroups cannot be made. The variation within possible subgroups was always too great to be able to speak of clearly distinguishable types of leaders of color. Of course, there were shared experiences within certain groups (as discussed in several parts of the report), but these could not be combined into broader categories of participants who had a similar profile on multiple dimensions. Virtually all intersections of different subsets of features occurred. It is possible that the absence of clearly distinguishable subgroups has to do with the number of participants. A meaningful pattern of clustering based on multiple characteristics is likely to require (much) larger numbers.

All things considered, the group as a whole can be described fairly well on the basis of typical leadership characteristics: ambitious, driven, persistent, responsible, social, pragmatic and agile. They desperately need this package of success-enhancing qualities to meet the multiple challenges that many are facing. I'll list the double taxation here. The participants have (had) to deal with racism, are often the only people of color at the top, which sometimes makes it lonely, often feel internally responsible for setting the diversity agenda and externally for paving the way for others of color. Even without a glass cliff, they do not always experience support and often a lack of understanding, prejudice and resistance. Not an easy task. But one they take on.

Perhaps the most important common denominator among the participants is that in this playing field they draw strength from bicultural background and experience and reject the role of victim. In many interviews, the enthusiasm for the work and the satisfaction they derived from it played the leading role. That's what they want to do it all for. They have something to offer, they know that and they show that. That's an impressive accomplishment.



RECOMMENDATIONS



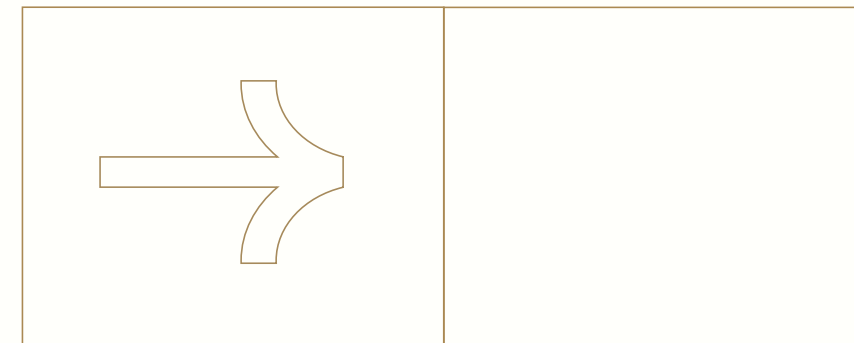
Recommendations

This research is qualitative and exploratory in nature and this approach has provided a rich picture of the similarities and differences between people of color in leadership positions in the (semi-)public sector when it comes to their background, experiences, vision and approach. It gives rise to more research on specific aspects of the underlying issue ([see Box 21: Recommendations for research](#)) en aanbevelingen voor de praktijk.

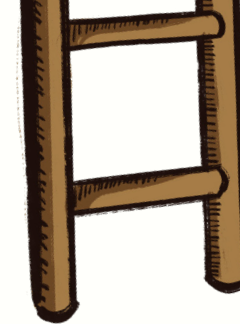
For readers of color who work in this sector, whether at the top or not, this report will hopefully provide food for thought and inspiration for their own careers. What trade-off do you make between conforming and questioning standards? Is it helpful to explicitly mention 'color' in selection processes or not? Are you fully committed to an active role in diversity policy or would it be better to have that portfolio in someone else's hands? Who are your role models and how can you be a role model for others? There are no unambiguous answers to these questions, but the stories of the participants do offer a wide range of possibilities and considerations that can provide new insights into their own ideals and choices.

From the participants' reactions to the first version of the report, I also concluded that reading about others with similar experiences can in itself feel like a huge boost, even if some patterns are sad. Learning about other people's struggles doesn't solve anything directly, but it does reduce the feeling of loneliness I often heard about. So it's not surprising that the vast majority of participants at least agreed on the value of contact between people of color in and on their way to top positions. The mutual recognition and support that automatically determined the atmosphere in the group meetings with participants were – forgive the corny word – heartwarming. More about the group meetings will follow in the reflection chapter below.

Although recognition and inspiration for other people of color in similar positions is certainly a valuable by-catch, it was not the central goal of this research. The report started with an observation about diversity policy in general and for top positions in particular. Based on the forty stories and the common threads that emerged from them, what lessons can be learned for policy and practice in this area in the (semi-)public sector? Possible answers to this question can be partly deduced from the previous text, but at the end of the study process I also explicitly asked the participants to formulate recommendations for organizations that want to attract and retain more diverse talent at the top. Based on these two sources, I come to the following list of recommendations:



1	If you have an ambition to get more 'color' at the top, ask yourself whether the organization is ready for that. Is there sufficient insight into the complexity of what that means in practice, both for the organization and for the person of color? Can such a person really be different from what has been the (White) standard so far? Is there a willingness to seriously question self-evident things in the organization? Is there enough support from above and in the workplace to give space and backing to someone of color in a leadership position? Are there mechanisms in place to cover the risks described in this report? If the answer to such questions is no, the organization is not ready.
2	Be realistic. Diversity and inclusion issues in an organization are not solved by one person of color in a leadership position. Organizations that have serious ambitions in this area would do well to appoint several key positions by people of color or people from other marginalized groups at once. Give the leader in question the space to advertise such vacancies and select them for them. But even then, the diversity agenda should not become their primary responsibility. Widely shared responsibility is necessary.
3	Take seriously the experiences, concerns, and suggestions of employees and leaders of color about restrictive norms and racism in the organization. The experiential knowledge that these people bring with them is invaluable for a truly inclusive organization. Don't look away, deny, trivialize, or put the blame on that person.
4	Shift the focus on individuals and interpersonal behaviors to a focus on structures and work culture when it comes to an inclusive organization. When an incident occurs, ask yourself what system characteristics in the organization made it possible for this to happen and intervene accordingly. It is not about 'bad apples' but about the institutional context that allows them to be hired and behave.
5	Avoid the pitfall of focusing on the marginalized group as a source of problems or lack of success. Many programs focus on 'fixing' this group so that they fit better into the current system so that conformity remains the norm. Shift the focus to the entire organization so that movement and connection comes from all sides and does not depend on the adaptability of employees and leaders of color.



I realize that this is not an easy list to tick off. That is also the main message of this report: diversity and inclusion in leadership should not be a box that an organization can just tick. It requires serious preparation and continuous commitment from everyone. The real challenge is nicely described in the open letter *We see you* from 600+ art professionals (2016):

"This is not about guilt or innocence, this is about acknowledgment. Diversity is not adding color. It's more than hiring and managing. It is acknowledging what is, acknowledging what was, acknowledging what is to come. It's having the courage to hand over, it's getting off your chair and admitting that you don't know. Diversity is making space. For more, for different. And not just on your terms. Your house is my house."

Above all, this path requires courage, something that the participants possess in large quantities. As Maya Angelou wrote, "Courage is the most important of all virtues, for without courage you cannot practice any other virtue consistently."

Box 21. Recommendations for further research

Due to the exploratory and qualitative design of this research, many larger and smaller themes have been addressed that give rise to more (research) questions. Although the interviews were open conversations and there was room for everything that the interviewees considered important for interpreting their experiences in and on the way to the leadership position, it was of course not possible to discuss all possible themes in depth without setting aside half a day for it. Here I give a brief overview of the themes that have been touched upon and seem to be important for the larger story about people of color in leadership positions, but that have only been discussed to a limited extent in the interviews.

Identity over time: The extent and nature of the importance of the ethnic-racial background of the participants varied, of course, between individuals, but also within individuals. That is to say: in many interviews there were all kinds of progressive insight into one's own identity in relation to one's career and ultimately the top position. Such developments have been identified in this report, but not investigated and analyzed in depth. This would be a nice addition to a firmer understanding of the interplay between identity and career among people of color who hold top positions. See also the work of Marieke Sloodman in this regard.¹⁵⁰

Intersectionality: This theme did emerge, but could only be explored to a limited extent by the relatively small subgroups on dimensions such as sexuality, but also gender within specific ethnic-racial groups. Qualitative research specifically focused on the experiences of people of color in leadership positions that also do not fit into the dominant norm on other dimensions could give more substance to this theme. Quantitative research with larger numbers of participants also offers opportunities to better map the implications of these intersections for the career and leadership role.

Own community: Apart from mentioning the 'bounty effect', the interviews rarely discussed possible negative reactions from one's own family and wider ethnic-racial community to the success of the participants. It was about positive reactions because I explicitly asked about the role model function, but I didn't ask about the other side of the coin, while it could be that sticking out from the crowd is not always greeted with enthusiasm even in marginalized circles. It is also possible that it leads to alienation from the group of origin.¹⁵¹ See also the essay by the Moroccan-Belgian Ish Ait Hamou: The theory of the 1 or 2.

Finally, it is important to further examine the vision of other players in this domain. In this report, their roles are seen through the eyes of the leaders of color, but how is the practice of more color at the top seen and experienced by recruitment and selection agencies, supervisors, employees, and the social target group of the organization? What influence does the person of color in the top job have on the ins and outs of the organization in general and diversity and inclusion in particular? And so this scientific research into good use ends with the provision of jobs for researchers.

The role of White relationships: Eight participants were raised by one or two White parents. For a number of participants, I know the ethnic-racial background of their partners, some are White, others of color. Some participants grew up in a fairly White world, others did not. In this study, little attention has been paid to the influence of having personal relationships (parents, classmates, partners, friends) with White people on the ideas and experiences at different stages of their careers. Research on this can provide insights for a better understanding of the social context of success for people of color.

The people who don't make it: One topic that is not covered in this study is the experiences of people of color who (just) don't make it to the top despite trying to do so. Are their stories similar to those of the participants in the current study or do they have a different profile? What can we learn from any differences between these groups when it comes to access to the summit for people of color?

Political context: In the interviews and the group meetings that took place after the November 2023 elections, politics was a theme. People expressed concern about the hardening of public opinion about migrants and their descendants and wondered what that would mean for their sector, their work, their positions, but also their children. Because visions of leadership, especially in the (semi-)public sector, are closely linked to political reality, research into the influence of political twists and turns on policy, practice and experiences around diversity at the top is desirable.



REFLECTION



Reflection

As described in [Box 4](#), in this research I use a method in which the identity of the researcher is important in the process. In this part of the report, I therefore reflect on the research process and the role that my own profile has played in it.

To begin with, in all my years as a researcher, I have never seen so much motivation among a target group to participate in research. Many participants told me that they are very happy that this research is happening and that it is desperately needed. They also often suggested other potential participants and put me in touch with these people. The motivation to participate is also reflected in the high response rate of 87%. Only 6 people I wrote to did not respond or indicated that they did not want to participate. However, quite a few participants were keen on emphasizing confidentiality and anonymity. It was clear that not everyone had the feeling that you can just talk openly about this subject without unpleasant consequences.

One participant only wanted to participate after I had shared my own position on the topic, because they no longer wanted to invest time and energy in research on this topic that they felt could not contribute to solutions. Other participants had googled me before committing and apparently felt that my profile instilled confidence. Mostly implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, the fact that I am a woman of color with the necessary experience in top positions was a recommendation for the participants. It also became clear to me that the fact that I started this research from my own motivation and not for some paying client was perceived as positive by participants. Commissioned research with associated funding sometimes comes across as too institutional and pre-framed. It was my impression that the fact that no one with other goals was looking over my shoulder also instilled confidence.

I also noticed that confidence during the interviews. The participants were remarkably candid and often shared very personal and sometimes emotional stories, sometimes even things they had never discussed with anyone else. Precisely because these are people in high positions, whose experiences are often sensitive and confidential, it was nice for participants to be able to talk uncensored. After all, as a researcher, I am bound by confidentiality. Participants regularly said afterwards that they had really enjoyed telling their story, to list all their experiences and reflect on them. As some participants said, “I didn’t expect it to be so therapeutic”. Another participant remarked afterwards “I really feel seen”.

My profile and approach probably also played a role here. I approached the interviews as a conversation in which, of course, the emphasis was on the experiences of the interviewee, but in which I did not simply work my way through a list of questions in a fixed order. I asked the questions in a different order each time, depending on the course of the interview, so that I could connect with what the participant was telling me. If the participant mentioned their childhood early on in the interview, I elaborated on that at that point. If it didn’t come up naturally, I asked about it later in the interview. Also, I didn’t act like a neutral interviewer who only responded to the participants’ stories with ‘hm hm’. I reacted as authentically as possible, sometimes with horror when a bad experience was shared, sometimes with recognition and sometimes by sharing an anecdote of my own.

While I was writing the report, I wanted to present the first of insights to the group to ensure that my (preliminary) conclusions really reflect the experiences of the participants. I thought it would be useful to organize some group discussions about this, because in a group other themes sometimes emerge, that may have been left unsaid in the individual interviews, accidentally or not. Although many participants were quite keen on anonymity, there was a lot of enthusiasm for openness within the participant group for the purpose of networking. Many participants found it encouraging that so many people participated and were also curious about the experiences of the others.

“I’m very happy that I’m your 38th interview, because wherever I go, I always think: how is it possible that I’m the only one? So I’m happy to hear that there are already 37 others. And I’d love to meet them too.”

By now, 28 of the 40 participants have lifted their anonymity within the group so that they can meet each other. In practice, this means that this group is in the regular address bar of emails about the research that I send to the group and the 12 others are in bcc. There have been four participant meetings so far. I organized three of them myself (one of which was online) and one was organized by one of the participants who took the initiative to invite the group for dinner. 7 to 10 people were present at each meeting.

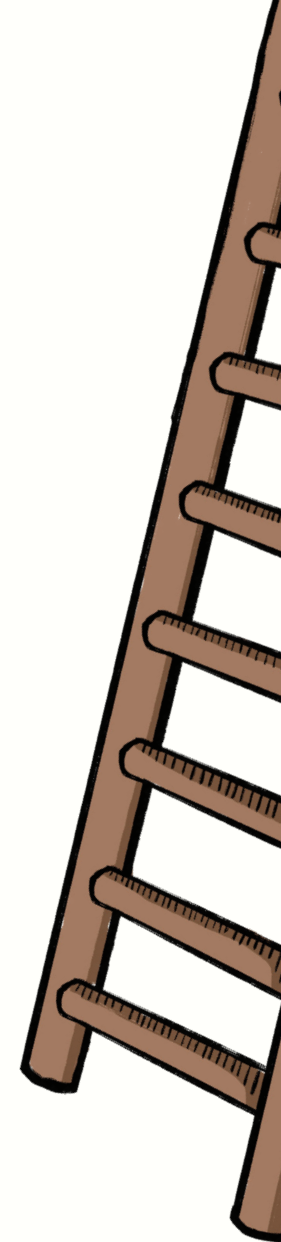
During those meetings, I was struck by how quickly everyone seemed to feel comfortable with each other. There was an atmosphere of recognition and confidentiality that allowed people to share personal experiences without hesitation. Especially the informal dinner has stayed with me as particularly open and warm. Eight people at the table and it remained a group discussion throughout the evening in which a few tears were shed, but above all there was a lot of laughter. A sorrow shared was clearly a sorrow halved. The interest in each other's strategies and insights was high in all meetings, advice was shared, and this clearly led to new ideas among some participants.

When I spoke about the dinner party in a completely different context, someone wondered aloud whether it was a good idea for people to retreat into their own 'bubbles'. Isn't it part of the problem that groups isolate themselves from each other and only know and understand their 'own' world? While this is an understandable concern in a society where words like polarization and information bubbles are in the newspapers almost daily, it is also a misplaced concern when it comes to this group specifically. Every day, all day, all week, all year round, this group of people does almost nothing but put themselves in the shoes of others in a White organization, explaining, connecting, building bridges, dedicating themselves to the appreciation of different perspectives. That is beautiful, but also tiring and sometimes lonely, especially because it is not self-evident that this is reciprocal. Then it is a (necessary) relief if you can sometimes surround yourself with people to whom you don't have to explain anything, to whom you don't have to prove yourself and by whom you are not looked at with prejudice or disapproval. So that you can start building bridges again the next day in good spirits. Which brings me to the realization that this research has also been an intervention. Not only through the group meetings in which information

and experiences were exchanged and mutual support was found, but also through the interviews themselves. Some participants had never really thought about certain topics or had not really thought about them for a long time, and once they did, it sometimes brought new insights. A question in which this often came up was the question about whether 'color' had been mentioned in the recruitment and selection process. And if they had mentioned it themselves, how they would have reacted to it. In response to those questions, I often heard "Now that you mention it, no, weird actually, nothing has been said about it, or it was not responded to when I mentioned it." And that, in turn, sometimes led to participants asking themselves questions out loud about their position in these kinds of situations and formulating an answer on the spot that they said was a new insight.

The research led some participants to some of the larger existential questions about whether or not they want to be visible as someone of color, whether or not they want to or can be role models, or how conforming they do or do not want to be. These were often issues that they had been working on for some time, but that suddenly came up very directly in the interview and thus invited explication. And once you've said something out loud, it's harder to put it away and pretend that the doubt or the desire to change course doesn't exist. And getting to know other participants who were further along in that process or had a different attitude sometimes added to that.

Participants also knew where to find me outside of the group meetings. I received links to news items on the broad theme of 'color at the top' and some participants called me to tell me about difficult developments in their organization. Precisely because the participants had been appointed to their current position relatively recently (all after May 2020), many were still in the process of getting to know each other and gradually discovered new things that sometimes shed a different light on the organization and/or the position. That often turned out not to be a positive turn, but it is very likely that the people for whom everything went smoothly without unpleasant surprises did not feel the need to call me about it.



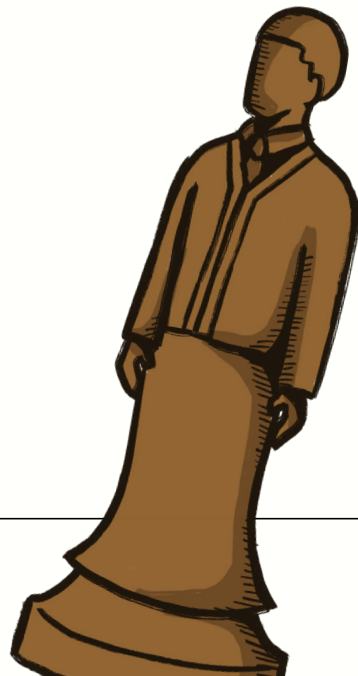
In the analysis and writing phase, I quickly noticed that it is tempting to focus mainly on problems, things that many participants experience as difficult and heavy. Reading the very first versions of the report made me realize that this focus did not do justice to the diversity within the group. The decision to include at least four quotes from each participant in the report was helpful in correcting this picture. In this way, I was forced to make room for patterns and storylines that were not yet sufficiently present in the report. It also reminded me of the fact that several participants who have gone through their careers relatively smoothly said something to me along the lines of: “Boring, isn’t it, is it useful to you?” Although this was a small minority within the group, it is important to explicitly include these voices.

My own career was also ‘boring’ in that respect. As an Indo, I am not often reminded of my color and origin in professional situations. People with Indo roots are generally seen as belonging in the Netherlands and are seen as considerably less strange or different than people with other ethnic-racial backgrounds. But I’ve always been aware of the fact that I’m a huge exception as a woman of color in the rank of full professors in the academic world and certainly in administrative positions within the university. I don’t have any experiences that indicate that my origins have been limiting in my career. I do notice that when I speak out on issues of diversity and inclusion, my color and background come more to the forefront, not only in my own experience, but also in that of others. On a day like that, I come home browner than I felt when I got up.

Finally, a short reflection on my role as a scientist who researches themes in which I, as a woman of color, am quickly suspected of not being neutral and not objective (but see Box 4), or even ‘worse’, of being an activist. The suspicion of activism is used very selectively in relation to scholarly work, namely only if the subject or angle is not to the reader’s liking. A scientist who researches the treatment of diseases or the reduction of child abuse or crime is rarely labelled an activist, even though they too use knowledge to change society. A certain form of social activism is therefore not uncommon for many scholars in the social domain. They often say that they do this research precisely because they think it is important, because they want to make a difference. A so-called neutral stance would also be very strange in this domain. It is inconceivable for a researcher to say ‘I don’t have an opinion about child abuse/crime/poverty/abuse/racism, I only do research on it’.

As Guno Jones nicely explains in his chapter in the 2018 book *Smash the pillars*, dismissing scientists and other knowledge carriers (such as the participants of this study) as activists is a way to prevent polyphony and to hold on to the outdated distinction between objectivity and subjectivity that leads to certain forms of knowledge, research and analysis are taken seriously and others are not. This resistance to doubt, curiosity and transparency (about underlying norms and values) continues to amaze me, precisely because these should in fact be core values of science.

In the interviews, I encountered a lot of transparency, doubt, and curiosity, which can be summarized as ‘This is me, this is what I stand for, I find this difficult, I haven’t figured this out yet, I would like to learn more’. The participants generously shared their (life) stories with me, *the good, the bad, and the ugly*. They hoped to turn the bad and the ugly into something good by sharing them.



Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the person who inspired me to conceive and carry out this research: Anthony Heidweiller. What strength, what calmness, what courageous vulnerability, what a leader!

In the initial phase of the research, Freek Ossel and Vinod Subramaniam also regularly provided me with advice and helped me identify potential participants. Together with Anthony, they formed a formidable triumvirate that supported me unconditionally, for which I am grateful.

Colleague Sandra Groeneveld contributed ideas about the design and implementation of the study at an early stage. Her keen eye for public administration was very welcome. Sandra was also part of the scientific sounding board group together with Halleh Ghorashi, Sennay Ghebreab, and Guno Jones. I am grateful that they made time in their busy schedules to assist me with expert and inspiring advice in the analysis and writing phase.

Throughout the research process, I regularly talked about the research with my great team: Marleen Groeneveld, Lotte van der Pol, and Joseph Jordan (and Rosanneke Emmen and Yasamin Modhej who now work elsewhere). Their support is indispensable in everything I do. Thank you for that! Marleen and Yasamin, together with students Laïs Bentall, Rieke de Vries, and Kitty Horsten, also deserve a heartfelt thank you for their contribution to transcribing some of the interviews. There was also welcome support from the members of the 'Bomengroep', the reading club in which we read books together on almost all the themes covered in this report and more. Thank you for your warm encouragement during this process.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the participants. I am deeply impressed by your strength, courage, wisdom and idealism. It has been a true privilege to be a part of your experiences.

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