The Social Ecology of Tokenism in Higher Education

YOLANDA FLORES NIEMANN

> We must remember that the university was developed with white males in mind as students, and people of color have only recently in our history been admitted to some universities. Tokenism has sufficed to appease the masses and prevent national revolt from people of color. If we are to have a truly integrated society, it will never develop through tokenism.
>
> —Martin Luther King Jr., March 17, 1966

As evident from the pervasive university student activism of the last two years, the likes of which have not occurred in half a century, and with demands for more faculty of color, tokenism is no longer appeasing the masses. The cost of this tokenism and race-related activism can be measured in dollars required to address demands, in damaged careers, in student time and energy, and in the damaged reputation of higher education. The greatest damage of tokenism, however, may well be to the careers of faculty of color who work in predominantly white institutions.

More than six decades after the implementation of federal affirmative action policy, faculty of color remain significantly underrepresented on college campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2013, of the total numbers of all instructional faculty—692,302, white males and females make up 75 percent, or 520,703. In contrast, the combined, collective total of African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians make up roughly 19 percent, or 131,228 (the remaining percentage is made up of international and/or unknown ethnicity). The numbers are worse with respect to tenure-track faculty of color. Out of 275,217 tenure-track faculty (professors, associate professors, and assistant professors) in the United States in 2013, 79 percent are white men and women. The combined, collective group of African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians makes up only 17.8 percent of the total number of faculty on highly coveted and prestigious tenure tracks. These heavily skewed numbers create a social ecology fertile

for the tokenization of faculty of color. This essay builds on extant literature on tokenism and related constructs in order to present an applied theory of the social ecology of tokenism in higher education institutions. The theory posits that the structural social ecology of higher education is the foundation for the creation and maintenance of tokenism for faculty of color who work in predominantly white institutions.

The tokenized status of persons in educational contexts is not a new concern. At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed tokenism in multiple speeches. In March 1966 at a speech at Southern Methodist University, he said,

> Massive resistance has given way in the South to a kind of sophisticated kind of resistance embodied in tokenism. If we are to have a truly integrated society, it will never develop through tokenism. We get a few Negroes in formerly all-white schools and say we have integrated schools. The fact is that this kind of tokenism is much more subtle and can be much more depressing to the victims of the tokenism than all-out resistance. And so we have a long, long way to go in dealing with this problem, but it is not only a Southern problem that we face, it is a national problem.

Malcolm X also addressed tokenism in educational systems in a speech at the University of California, Berkeley in October 1963, saying,

> What gains? ... It has been nine years since the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated schools, yet less than ten per cent of the Negro students in the South are in integrated schools. That isn't integration, that's tokenism! We must have a permanent solution. A temporary solution won't do. Tokenism will no longer suffice.

Experientially, tokens are rare persons of their demographic groups within the context, especially in contrast with majority, numerical dominants. In her classic work on power dynamics in the workplace, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter concluded that the perceptual processes associated with tokenism generally occur when the numerical minority constitutes 15 percent or fewer of the total persons in comparison to the dominant majority group in the workplace context. The skewed group structure is the foundation that affects interactions and perceptual phenomena associated with the non-dominants, or tokens, in the context. These perceptions relate broadly to three overarching phenomena. The first is visibility and awareness, for example, tokens capture a larger share of awareness due to numerical proportions. The smaller their proportions, the greater the awareness. The second is polarization—dominants are more aware of commonalities with and differences from the token, and differences between tokens and dominants are exaggerated. The third is assimilation—tokens' attributes are distorted to fit preexisting generalizations about their social types.

The low numbers of faculty of color in the midst of high numbers of dominant, white persons afford exaggeration of differences between whites and people of color in the university context. This exaggeration of differences leads to a high level of distinctiveness in the environment, providing the environmental supports that evoke tokenism and its consequences. "Environmental supports" are the generative sources of perception found not in the individual, but in the physical and social world. As James Gibson argued, the properties of the physical environment afford the direct perception of physical objects in a certain manner. Gibson referred to the information attributes of the visual array as "affordances." That is, the basis of perception lies in what is afforded in the environment. In the case of tokenism, the overarching affordance is the very low numbers of faculty of color relative to the numbers of white faculty. These disproportionally low numbers become evidence that supports attributions of belongingness and of perceptions about which particular roles are more appropriately served by the faculty of color rather than by whites.

The affordances derived from the chronic distinctiveness of faculty of color are also social identity contingencies, which Purdie-Vaughns and her colleagues define as possible judgments, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments tied to one's social identity in a given setting. That is, features or cues in a setting may create the expectation that a person's treatment will be contingent on one of their social identities. Among the most overt cues are the number of individuals in the setting who share a given racial identity. Because there are so few faculty of color in typical research universities, their racial identity becomes their most distinctive feature. Their chronic distinctiveness is the mechanism that moves the non-dominant, or token, faculty of color beyond being a data point within the low numbers to high visibility and exaggeration of differences between themselves and the dominant group members.

Skewed proportions shape power dynamics, perception of, and interaction with, faculty of color to such an extent that their identities are disrupted. Faculty of color enter their positions as colleagues, scholars, and experts in their field, but their overarching identity quickly shifts to being the Black, Brown, Asian, or Indian faculty member. Their racial identity becomes the lens through which they are perceived, especially for the diversity-related needs of the university and communities within and around it. In other words, for the perceivers, including white dominants and people of color, the environment affords seeing faculty of color mainly through the salience of their racial group membership. Such identity disruption is reflected in Kanter's book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, where her findings say:

> Tokens are not merely deviants or people who are different from other group members along any one dimension. They are people identified by ascribed characteristics (master status such as sex, race, ...) or other characteristics that carry with them a set of assumptions about culture, status, and behavior highly salient for majority category members. They differ from dominants, not in ability to do a task or in acceptance or work norms, but in terms of secondary and informal assumptions. Tokens can never be just another organizational member while their category is so rare. ... In these contexts the word token reflects one's distinctiveness in the context and status as a symbol of one's kind.

Due to conscious and unconscious biases, including racial stereotypes, it may seem quite obvious and natural for white faculty peers, students, staff members, community at large members, and university administrators to believe that matters involving race and/or diversity are best handled by the nonwhite persons in the context. Faculty, staff, and administrators may impose on faculty of color roles they perceive to be best suited to nonwhite faculty, irrespective of their expertise in the task or activities associated with those roles. For instance, white administrators may place faculty of color in the spotlight when it is in the interest of their unit, their grant, or the university brand (e.g., touting diversity as a priority). Faculty of color may be asked to teach race-related curricula, irrespective of their expertise in that scholarly domain. White colleagues may believe they have a right to place the names of faculty of color colleagues on grant proposals when the granting agency values diversity, with or without their permission. Countless possibilities of this tokenization arise, as reflected in the narratives written by faculty of color. Tokens experience constant challenges of being viewed as "other," including lack of professional support systems, excessive scrutiny by peers, superiors, and students, an unstated requirement to work harder to gain recognition and respect, assumptions that positions are acquired through affirmative action and that, therefore, these Black women lacked the necessary qualifications, and denial of access to power structures normally associated with their positions.

As the forces at play call on their racial identity to meet the needs of the university, the predominant perception of tokens as racial persons, rather than as faculty peers and professors with disciplinary expertise and valued scholarship, is exacerbated and compounded. Tokens' distinctiveness leads dominants to assimilate faculty of color to their preconceived notions about their group, and to question their goodness of fit for a given environment, role, and/or occupation. As a result, faculty of color may be evaluated under different, and more stringent, criteria than their dominant colleagues. They also attract disproportional attention and causality. Due also to their racial salience, faculty of color are perceived as homogeneous, with associated actions, decisions, values, and mannerisms interpreted in a stereotype-consistent manner.

These stereotypic expectations may lead to the encapsulation and entrapment of tokens in particular roles, such as specialists in ethnic or gender matters and symbols of workplace diversity. Suddenly, instead of, or in addition, to, teaching the courses within their research areas of expertise, tokens may find themselves teaching the "diversity" courses within the department. They may be called on to represent the university administration's response to the last student protest, or to local or national racial concerns. Students and local community members may also call upon tokens to be engaged in race-related matters, whether or not they have expertise in the particular issue or concern at hand. They may become the university's symbol on the state of Martin Luther King Jr. events.

As the needs of the context override their intent and motivation, the identity of faculty of color is further disrupted. Their agency is obscured, perhaps even rendered irrelevant at worse and secondary at best, relative to the university's needs for them to fulfill diversity-related rhetoric and action. The situation becomes cyclical and compounding—the more tokens engage as racial entities, the less they are perceived as scholars, and the more they are called upon to function through their racial identities. Yet, these faculty of color in token positions often have no real choice. They typically enter the university in less powerful roles, especially relative to whites in dominant positions, whose large numbers and historical status in the academy ensure representation in the most powerful positions. Faculty of color who turn down administrative or colleagues' requests risk being accused of not being team players, with potentially career-ending consequences. Those who turn down community organizations and/or students of color risk being perceived as selfish, at best, and as traitors, at worst.

S ocial ecology imposes identity and behaviors, irrespective of the identity beliefs of faculty of color. In his classic tome, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon, a famed psychiatrist and one of the twentieth century's most renowned theorists of colonialism and racial difference, wrote of his token experience:

> It was always the Negro teacher, the Negro doctor. ... I shivered at the slightest pretext. I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. What could one expect, after all, from a Negro physician? As long as everything went well, he was praised to the skies, but look out, no nonsense, under any conditions! The Black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace. I tell you, I was walled in: No exception was made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of quantum theory.

The weight of the needs of the university structure relative to any matters related to race is placed on the few visible faculty of color in the con-

text, leading to their assignment to tasks and roles that the dominant group perceives require engagement by faculty of color. Tokenism is thus a function of the needs of the organization and dominants' expectations and perceptions of the appropriateness of faculty of color to fulfill these needs and related roles, coupled with dominants' power to impose their will along these expectations. As a result, because the university structure consistently includes only a few faculty of color, the social structure creates and maintains tokenism.

Tokenism is a disrupted identity, a psychological state imposed on faculty of color. It is a function of a social–ecological context that faculty of color are typically left on their own to navigate. Irrespective of individuals' personal racial identity (and lack of), political ideologies, expertise, credentials, character, and so on, faculty of color become caught up in the needs and perceptions of others in the context. The complexity and consequences of marginality increase when race, ethnicity, and gender intersect, for example, women of color. In some cases, these faculty members, especially those new to the academy, may not have the experience or mentoring to understand the effects of token status, or to know how to minimize or navigate these impacts. The same can be said for their white colleagues, who may want faculty of color to succeed, but also lack the knowledge to help their colleagues diffuse the damaging ramifications of tokenism.

The weight of the social–ecological structure and resulting needs imposes psycho-social consequences on faculty of color, including high visibility, cultural isolation, tensions with colleagues, loneliness and isolation, cognitive business, focus on impression management, representativeness, attributional ambiguity, role encapsulation, stereotyping, and racism. For further elaboration on these concerns, please see the recommended readings.

The foregoing discussion affords and supports a theory of the social ecology of tokenism with the following ten interconnected tenets. The first is that tokenism is imposed on faculty of color and maintained by the institutional context and structure. Second, the primary foundation, or environmental support, of the tokenized context is the low numbers of tokenized group members, which make faculty of color highly distinctive, relative to the skewed numbers of dominant group members. Third, the tokenized context creates and maintains the phenomenological realities of the perceived and perceiver. Fourth, tokens do not differ from dominants in ability to do a task or in acceptance of work norms, but rather, in terms of secondary and information assumptions associated with the perception of their belongings in the context. Fifth, tokenism results in identity disruptions that impact tokens' institutional role, job description, career success, and career path, as well as their psycho-social realities. Sixth, tokenism has no regard to the competence or character of the tokenized persons, nor from their qualifications, accomplishments, character, motivations, or intentions. Seventh, tokenism

does not necessarily arise from intentional prejudices of white persons or persons of color in the workplace, whose conscious and unconscious biases and perceptions are effected by the context. Eighth, dominants in the context have the power to intercede in the identity disruption through interventions that facilitate belonging, inclusiveness, identity integrity, valuing of research of concern to communities of non-dominant groups, and applied community relevance. Ninth, through the power of their hiring practices and rules of success, members of the dominant group create and maintain the tokenized context. The tenth tenet is that dominants have the power to change the context such that it does not support or maintain tokenism.

University leaders can diffuse the negative impacts of tokenism by facilitating a context that places meaningful value on faculty of color, for example, rewarding them for race and diversity-related service with merit increases, tenure, and promotion, and celebrating their presence. In such environments, the distinctiveness of faculty of color will be positive, rather than stigmatizing and demoralizing. To reduce the strain on faculty of color, white faculty can be rewarded for having knowledge of communities of color that they apply to areas of teaching, research, and community service.

Numbers matter. Ultimately, hiring decisions create tokenized contexts. For decades, we have read phrases such as "women and minorities are encouraged to apply" and/or, "University X is an affirmative action employer." Yet, as noted earlier in this essay, the percentages of faculty of color have hardly changed since affirmative action became the lay of the land in 1964. Administrative leaders have been content to espouse rhetoric about the importance of diversity, without facilitating any real change through their leadership and/or examination of biases in the hiring process. As the demographics of the United States continue to change toward an increasingly nonwhite majority, students and community members are increasingly likely to demand change such that faculty and students reflect the demographic makeup of the community. We are at the point that Martin Luther King Jr. warned us about tokenism in a March 1963 essay in *The Nation* where he said,

> But tokenism can now be seen not only as a useless goal, but as a genuine menace. It is a palliative which relieves emotional distress, but leaves the disease and its ravages unaffected. It tends to demobilize and relax the militant spirit which alone drives us forward to reach change. ... The day for assessing that experience is a hand. Token gains may well halt our progress, rather than further it. ... There segregation, the evil heritage of slavery, remains.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Yolanda Flores Niemann is Professor of Psychology at the University of North Texas (UNT). Previously, she served multiple administrative positions, including Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at UNT. Her research interests include the effects and social ecological contexts of stereotypes and tokenism across various domains. Her most recent book (coedited) is *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia.* E-mail: Yolanda.niemann@unt.edu
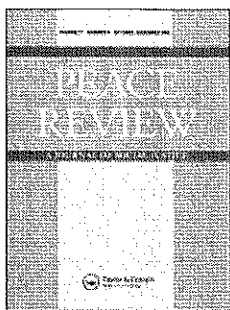
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