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Aislinn R. Brookshire  
*University of Alabama in Huntsville*

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# Tokenism & Resistance:

## Gender, Sexism, and Culture in the United States Military

Aislinn R. Brookshire  
Department of Sociology

**Abstract** – Tokenism occurs when there are a small number of minority members within a work group. Token minority members sometimes experience structural and cultural practices which prevent them from advocating for one another or future minority members within the organization. Aspects of tokenism include heightened visibility, isolation, and stereotyping. This study uses interviews from female veterans in the United States military to understand their experiences of tokenism and how these experiences shaped their ability to resist sexism and advocate for cultural changes at work.

### I. Introduction

Enlisting in the United States military can increase career opportunities and result in higher lifetime earnings (Padavic & Prokos, 2017). This is particularly true for members of socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Military service provides access to higher education through the GI bill and job training, and by providing a bridge between young adulthood and a career. Moreover, those who serve in the armed forces are more likely to later work in highly paid careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (Steidl & Werum, 2017). Additionally, military service helps integrate traditionally marginalized groups into the mainstream of American society (Fischer, Lundquist, & Vachon, 2016). This may be in part due to contact between majority and minority group members during their time of service, because increased contact between minority and majority groups can help break down perceived stereotypes over time. Another explanation may also be that those who share in the cost of maintaining society are entitled to an increased proportion of that society's representation and resources. Historically, one of the most successful arguments for including new elements as full members of American society has been predicated on military service during conflict (Salyer, 2004). One of the largest such previously excluded groups of American citizens are women.

Women benefit from serving in the armed forces. However, women currently comprise approximately 15% of the United States armed forces (Department of Defense, 2014). In 2016 women's opportunities for military service expanded as the Department of Defense opened almost every military occupational specialization (MOS) to female service members. More recently, the U.S. legislature has debated requiring women to enroll in selective service and studies are ongoing about the roles of women in the military.

The percentage of women in the armed forces has been slowly increasing (Patten & Parker, 2011). Women's opportunities within the military have been increasing, but integration has been slow and incremental. Relatively few women are enlisting and the reason why may lie in organizational culture. Adding a small number of women into a predominately male workplace may not be enough to break down barriers for full integration. This article will investigate how women experience their status as tokens in the armed forces and how these experiences limit women's ability to advocate for further gender equity.

### II. Literature

In the 1970s, feminist scholars turned their critical lens on work and organizational cultures. One of the breakthrough theories developed in the course of this line of inquiry was Critical Mass Theory (Kanter, 1993). This theory was developed to understand why introducing a small number of minority members into an organization was insufficient to yield full integration. A token is a member of a small group within the larger group – in Kanter's work tokens were women in “skewed work groups” – where women were less than 15% of the total number of people in the group. Token minority members are unable to advocate for other minority members or create organizational transformations which would render the context more welcoming

because of their own token status within the organization (Kanter, 1993). More succinctly, there are not enough people to form a coalition to push for change.

Moreover, Critical Mass Theory outlines the mechanisms through which token minority members are deprived of opportunities and power within an organization. The organizational dynamics underlying these mechanisms include increased visibility, contrast, and assimilation (Kanter, 1993). Visibility manifests as a sense of being under increased scrutiny. Heightened visibility means that tokens feel pressure to perform at a higher level and fear sanctions for minor failures. Contrast leads majority group members to be more aware of the differences between themselves as a group within a group. According to Kanter, dominant group members may then make exaggerated displays about how intrusive they find token women. Loyalty tests were also part of the boundary heightening process. A loyalty test might be an off-color remark or a sexist joke and the token was expected to play along or not complain. Assimilation led to token minorities being more readily stereotyped – often resulting in women being expected to perform in gendered ways that would be inappropriate for their occupational status; for example asking female executives to perform secretarial tasks or expecting female employees to arrange meals or drinks at meetings. These mechanisms combine to continually remind token minority members that their position within an organization is precarious and that any demands or attempts at change will be met with resistance or reprisals.

There have been a variety of criticisms lodged against Critical Mass Theory. Notable among these is an acknowledgment that it does not account for inequality in the broader social context (Yoder, 1991; Williams, 1992). Those who are marginalized in society at large will be similarly disadvantaged in their workplace. For example, token men in majority female occupations are more likely to be promoted and do not experience the negative effects of tokenism. Individuals can also inhabit overlapping social categories which will produce qualitatively different experiences of accumulated social (dis)advantage (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Furthermore, the way that work organizations are structured has changed in recent decades. Workplaces rarely promote from within and that career trajectories are less well-defined (Williams, 2013). In light of these transformations,

discourse about who is promoted from within and why may be less relevant.

Subsequently, the military is a unique workplace and an ideal test case to examine the validity and relevance of Critical Mass Theory. Firstly, the military is one of the few workplaces that still has a long career ladder with internal promotion. Secondly, more so than even in Kanter's case study, social life, residence, and occupational activities are bundled together within the military. Thirdly, the military is one example of a gendered organization. While the definition of a gendered organization can be symbolic and complex as it pertains to assumptions about who the ideal worker is or how work is carried out, one of the simplest definitions is that the majority of workers are male (Britton, 2000). The military qualifies on both counts. First, the majority of those in the military are men. Second, the common cultural perception of soldiers is that they are "physically and mentally tough, goal-oriented, aggressive soldiers with skills of violence, weaponry, and ultimately death" (Silva, 2008) and these attributes are commonly associated with masculinity. It has been argued that militarism is so deeply masculine that military service is part of the social construction of masculinity itself (Kimmel, 1996; Salyer, 2004). For these reasons the military is a worthwhile organization to examine to what extent Kanter's theory is still relevant.

In Kanter's work tokens' experiences decreased their potential for creating a more inclusive work place for future minority workers in their field or firm. Studies of Critical Mass Theory in other masculine work environments indicated that increasing the proportion of women was a baseline for institutional transformations but was not a guarantee of inclusion. Within the sciences, when women constituted less than 15% of a work group, men's behavior towards women was found to be chilly and exclusionary (Cain & Leahey, 2014). In the construction industry women have tended to split off into their own separate firms and committees. These majority female firms could advocate for change within the industry and institute more inclusive policies at the firm level—however, the industry as a whole remains stubbornly resistant to widespread integration and inclusivity (Greed, 2000). In medical practice, women in male dominated specialties have reported less supportive peer relationships (Wallace, 2014). Freedom from harassment and discrimination

were a baseline necessity for token members to advocate for more inclusive workplace policies. The present study will examine two questions. First, in what ways and to what extent did interviewees experience the hallmarks of tokenism? Second, did their experiences inhibit their self-perceived agency to advocate for a more generally inclusive workplace culture?

### III. Data & Methods

The sample of interviews is a subset from a series of interviews collected for another project conducted by Dr. Christina Steidl at the University of Alabama in Huntsville which examined gender performativity and the military more broadly. This analysis draws on ten interviews by female veterans from across the United States. Time and feasibility constraints limited the number of interviews included for this project. Women in the sample were included the seven in the United States Army, two in the Navy, and one in the Air Force with a mix of active duty, Reserve, and National Guard represented. While over half of the participants spent some time in the Reserves or National Guard participants all served at least one year of active duty between 2005 and 2015. Consistent with the qualitative nature of the project this is a non-random purposive sample.

Dr. Christina Steidl recorded the interviews both in person and via Skype over a period of several months in 2015. The interviews were then transcribed by Brooke Killion, also of the University of Alabama in Huntsville. For the purpose of this analysis, the interviews were then read for common thematic patterns in the responses and analyzed with a grounded theory approach (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Charmaz, 2006).

### IV. Findings

Overall, participants reported that their experiences in the military were positive. The majority of interviewees entered the military for educational and occupational opportunities. Most found them. However, several common themes emerged during the interviews that are consistent with the mechanisms of social exclusion outlined by Kanter (1993). The first section of findings will describe women's experiences with visibility, isolation, and stereotyping, which are

the behavioral manifestations of the exclusionary social processes. The second section of findings will describe interviewees' experiences of sexism in the workplace and how they did or did not respond. While the interviews were not focused on sexual harassment or discrimination, multiple interviewees voluntarily spoke about their experiences with these issues and their responses. Interviewees' descriptions of sexism and their responses give insight into how their experiences as tokens mitigated their ability to advocate for women collectively.

### Tokenism & Exclusion

This section of findings will explore how female veterans experienced tokenism during their military service. Some of the women felt that failure was generalized and attributed to gender, while success was attributed to them as individuals. Thus, they felt increased pressure to perform better than their peers. While their status as exceptions sometimes worked to the women's advantage, they were often ambivalent about how benevolent sexism would impact their relationship with their co-workers over the long term.

Stacy described an incident where a male superior officer brought all the female soldiers hot chocolate on a cold day. While she appreciated the courtesy she expressed ambivalence about the attention and unequal treatment: *"I'm not gonna you know, just be like, 'No, I don't want this...' but at the same time it's... it's so hard to like, that fine line. Like I want to be treated just like everybody else."* Stacy also noted in her interview that male soldiers would remark about women getting special treatment – which justified her concerns about being singled out for special courtesies.

Kelly describes a situation where her gender made her more visible and more memorable and that she feared she would be judged by a different and more rigorous standard than her male colleagues: *"Like, they just, you didn't get away with anything, you know? And there was just this expectation that they just wait for you to mess up so they can drop the iron clad on you."* Whether the result was positive or negative in the short term, those who felt that their token status made them more visible realized that they were not viewed the same as other soldiers.

Some women in the sample felt isolated from informal social networks with their peers. When male workmates went out drinking, attended sporting events, or discussed hunting, women sometimes felt left out. One interviewee recounted how it made it difficult for her to bond with her male colleagues in the National Guard: *"...it's a little bit more macho. Slightly, I mean, yeah just a little bit. So, a lot of the guys were hunters, and they would sit around all day talking about bow hunting and I caught this and I shot this and I just didn't have you know, any way to relate to these guys."* - Brenda

*"A lot of the males were going out to a baseball game and they didn't even think to invite me. It was like 'Oh. Why do—I'd like to go!' and so sometimes it just takes a little bit of personal initiative to try to break down some of that stuff."* – Harriet

Cultural mismatches like this sometimes occurred. While the women were reluctant to describe the process as deliberate exclusion, the result meant that the women missed opportunities to connect with coworkers or exchange information about work during informal social events. The lack of women coworkers made some women feel lonely or isolated. Ingrid closed her interview with the summation, *"I guess my closing comment would be to say that being a female in the military is a very lonely"* because there are so few women to interact with.

Many of the women spoke about the hostile stereotypes they encountered. The primary stereotypes were that women were lazy, promiscuous, or incompetent, as illustrated by the following quotation: For example, Rhia said, *"for females, a lot of the negative comments that I got were that they didn't feel that she was physically capable."* Three of the women had similar experiences of stereotyping, with a common worry from their male colleagues that they would be a burden because of laziness, weakness, or promiscuity.

Some stereotypes were more subtle – women sometimes described being asked to do things which were outside of their normal work responsibilities – such as handling planning for social events, acting as a secretary, or doing extra cleaning because they were women. These interactions and stereotypes were an omnipresent reminder to women tokens that they did not belong and would not be seen as equal unless they worked harder to prove themselves. Even when

women fought for and gained acceptance, these women viewed their status as precarious. The price for admission into the boy's club was steep.

### Acceptance & Resistance

This section will elaborate on how the women's experiences as tokens prevented them from changing the culture and structure that might harm other female soldiers. There is already a robust set of scholarship and popular discourse about sexism and harassment in the military, therefore, none of the interview questions were intended to prompt interviewees to discuss these issues. However, it became clear during the research process that sexism shaped women's daily lives. While relatively few women felt they had been in danger many spoke with resignation about incidents which could be viewed as demeaning or sexist in other workplaces. Sexist interactions could be included within the framework of tokenism—women's acceptance of workplace sexism was shaped by their precarious inclusion in their work groups.

Examples of women accepting sexism occurred in every interview where women discussed sexual harassment and sexist behavior. For example, Erin said, *"if you're in a locker room, it's a guy's locker room, you're going to hear stuff. And you've just got to let it roll of the back. Don't take everything seriously... I just think that if you realize it's more of a guy's world than a girl's."* Another interviewee, Quianna said, *"Hey, if you don't like it then go somewhere else, 'type of deal. You know, versus if a male – you know, and I feel like I'm sounding very biased but at the same time it's just really kind of like the reality. It's the reality."* These quotes combined illustrate women's acquiescence to sexism as being the price of acceptance and success in the military.

The women's reports of sexism ranged from crude remarks framed as jokes, to staring, to quid pro quo sexual harassment. Their responses never included a single official complaint to their chain of command. There are formal policies in place for reporting discrimination and sexual harassment in the military, yet women in this sample did not use these formal channels of resistance. Nor did the women use informal channels to resist discrimination, such as directly challenging colleagues or superiors who participated in sexist discourse. Instead, it was understood that a certain level of sexism was to be tolerated and that the onus was on individual women

to protect themselves from unwanted sexualization, even when circumstances made it impossible for women to implement the anti-harassment guidelines that were outlined for them. Melissa recalled seeing a large poster about how women could avoid sexual assault and noted how her billeting during deployment did not allow her to follow any of the safety guidelines: “*Women should only walk in well-lit areas. Okay, well you billeted me on the other side, women should be billeted together, women should be moving—I literally could do none of the things on the list.*”

This response illustrates that women understood that they were responsible for enforcing boundaries about appropriate sexual conduct. Combined with their concerns about being rejected for overreacting, complaining, or being accused of falsely reporting harassment, their relative isolation made collective advocacy for change exceedingly difficult. Still, women did manage the situation sufficiently in most cases to their own satisfaction. Some women asserted that their male colleagues’ behavior had, at some point, crossed a line and was inappropriate. In the words of Allison, “*I project myself as you know, and I apologize for the word, but as someone who’s not going to take any shit from people.*” Others, like Vanessa, regretted that they did not feel empowered to push back: “*...but I don’t in the military, and I think I actually don’t act that way because of the stereotypes that are with that and because I know we’re a giant minority. And I don’t say a lot of things to act against or anything like that.*” The interviewees proved to themselves and their fellow soldiers time and again that they were capable, fit, and qualified. However, proving their status as soldiers by not objecting to routine sexist interactions came at a cost. Individuals secured their tenuous acceptance in part by acquiescing to the status quo.

## V. Discussion & Conclusion

These interviews reveal an important factor of tokenism and resistance; numbers matter. Women in the military do sometimes still experience the

impacts of being a minority within a majority: visibility, isolation, and stereotypes are constant reminders that they are not going to be immediately and unquestioningly accepted. Although the struggle to find acceptance is not insurmountable, women understand that their position is insecure and their connections are more tenuous. In sum, forty years after the initial publication, Kanter’s Critical Mass Theory is still relevant

On a practical level this means that when women face sexism at work in the military, they have fewer options for resisting. Most of the women found individual solutions. They managed to protect themselves and disarm the hostility of their fellow soldiers. The women were generally uncritical and fatalistic about the masculine culture of the military and their own position within it. In the words of Brenda: “*It is what it is.*” Furthermore, all ten of the women in the sample attributed their experiences with harassment and sexism as the action of a few bad actors rather than a systemic issue even though all of them could recall at least one incident of harassment, sexism or discrimination. Four of the women in the sample used phrases like “locker room culture” and one, Vanessa, specifically said that she could not express empowerment because “*Every once in a while I kind of get a hint of something like, ‘Go women power!’ but I don’t in the military, and I think I actually don’t act that way because of the stereotypes that are with that and because I know we’re a giant minority.*”

Women individualized and trivialized their experiences with sexism and their responses to sexism. Perhaps this was because there were few other women around to socialize with. Even when other women were present, the code of silent acceptance was strong. Regardless, the lack of other women and the contingent acceptance among men meant that there was little groundwork for collective resistance and cultural change. The prospects for individual women are positive, but women are not structurally or culturally positioned to open a path for further integration.

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