

The Perception of Tokenism Toward Disabled Personnel Working in the Public Sector: An Application in Van, Turkey

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Introduction

According to the theory of tokenism, people who make up 15% or less of the total presence of a group to which they belong and whose experience with various difficulties such as high visibility, isolation, and limited opportunities is thought to be placed in front of their promotion and career in the group are defined as tokens (Kanter, 1977b, p. 966). When looking at the literature on tokenism theory, the literature outside of Turkey is often seen to discuss the effect of race on social status and token difference (Yoder et al., 1996) and whether racial and gender differences in the police profession cause stress on the police (He et al., 2005). Moreover, studies were determined to have occurred on the relationship between the experiences of female professors in academia in terms of asymmetrically distributed gender ratios (Sanders et al., 2009) and on the function of gender and race in the police profession (Stroshine & Brandl, 2011). The current study is one of the very few studies on tokenism theory in the Turkish literature and discusses the experiences of men in female-dominated professions as well as women in male-dominated professions. The study has shown women with token status to feel less valuable and to be forced in stereotypes against men who are members of the dominant group, whereas men with token status were determined to aspire to managerial tasks and to achieve these tasks quicker than women (Yılmaz, 2019).

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Conceptual Framework

Tokenism Theory

According to the theory of tokenism, tokens are defined as individuals who make up less than 15% of the group to which they belong and are considered to experience various difficulties regarding their career and getting promoted, such as being highly visible, being isolated, and having limited opportunities (Kanter, 1977b, pp. 966–967). Tokenism is also explained as individuals or groups who are members of a minority or who are thought to have a disadvantageous feature, only being considered as representatives of the social categories to which they belong rather than as individuals in society or business life, and only being evaluated against stereotypes.

Dimensions of Tokenism

By arguing that minorities in an underrepresented group, also called tokens, have negative experiences regarding group dynamics, Kanter identified the negative experiences women with token status face and stated that individuals with token status experience three basic problems in the workplace: performance pressure, heightened boundaries, and role struggle (Kanter, 1977a, pp. 240–242).

Heightened Boundaries. Social isolation examines the ability or inability of tokens or minorities to identify with the organization and members of the dominant group (Mallett, 2013, p. 23). Kanter (1977b, p. 974) defined social isolation as the “inability to integrate into a majority group” and stated that the feature that distinguishes a token/person from the majority group can lead to the token being isolated by the dominant group.

Performance Pressure. Performance pressure is characterized by the idea that, if a person with token status is successful, that person’s success can be explained as an exception to the norm rather than a result of individual talent (Mallett, 2013, p. 21). If the person in the token group fails, the failure is often considered confirmation of that person in the token group being inferior and/or less qualified than someone in the majority group (Kanter, 1977b). Yoder defined performance pressure as the increasing interest in tokens who always stand out in workgroups (Yoder, 1994, p. 150).

Role Struggle (Assimilation). Kanter stated the third interaction dynamic centered around tokens to be due to the perceived tendency to assimilate (1977b, p. 980). Tokens are isolated from the dominant group by being forced into the stereotype group the dominant group had previously created for them. The dominant

group has stereotypical expectations about what role a token should play and what skills they should be good at (Harper, 2016, pp. 37–38).

Research Methodology

Research Question

The literature review shows many studies to have occurred on tokenism theory (Terborg, 1977; Spangler et al., 1978; Yoder & Sinnott, 1985; Adams & Yoder, 1986; Ott, 1989; Jackson et al., 1995; Smedley et al., 1993; Stichman et al., 2010; Mallett, 2013; Harper, 2016; Yılmaz, 2019). When looking at these studies, the theory of tokenism is seen to have been mainly discussed within the context of gender and race/ethnicity, especially in the USA and European countries.

However, the studies in the literature conducted within the scope of tokenism theory were determined to have not included disabled individuals, and no study on tokenism theory in the national or foreign literature was found to have dealt with the experiences of disabled individuals. Based on this shortcoming identified in the literature, this study aims to determine disabled individuals' perceptions toward tokenism in their work lives.

Research Method and Design

This study applies the qualitative research method by conducting in-depth interviews with the participants in order to reveal their experiences regarding tokenism. The research has conducted analyses by adhering to the phenomenological design, a qualitative research method.

Population and Sample of the Research

The participants of the research were determined using the purposive and criterion sampling methods. The universe of this study's research consists of disabled public personnel working in public institutions in Turkey's Van Province. The sample of the research consists of 20 disabled public personnel working in the public sector in Van who meet the criteria specified for the universe, work in different public institutions, and have different statuses.

Data Collection Method and Tools

This research conducts in-depth interviews using the semi-structured interview method in order to determine the participants' views regarding the negative consequences of tokenism theory.

The researchers developed the semi-structured interview form used during the interviews with the study's participants by taking into consideration the studies on the theory of tokenism in the national and international arena and adhering to the literature. The interview form is composed of five open-ended questions for the theme of heightened boundaries, five open-ended questions for the theme of performance pressure, and two open-ended questions for the theme of role struggle, as well as six questions about demographic information.

Data Analysis

During the data encoding process, the codes were encoded under three themes: heightened boundaries, performance pressure, and role struggle. As a result of analyzing all the interviews, a total of 645 expressions were encoded, and these codes were categorized and associated under the three themes. After modeling the codes and subcodes, the relationships and hierarchies among the codes were revealed, and the visuals that were obtained through the program MAXQDA were interpreted and reported.

Research Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion

During the research process, the participants were asked questions about their views regarding the tokenism dimensions of performance pressure, heightened boundaries, and role struggle, and the views of each participant were evaluated separately. In the participant statements encoded under the theme of heightened boundaries, the participants were observed to generally feel lonely, to feel highly visible due to their disability, and to generalize the negative results. The studies from Yoder and Sennett (1985), Ott (1989), and Strohshine and Brandl (2011) also support these results.

When evaluating the participants' expressions encoded under the theme of performance pressure, the participants were seen to express intense opinions on community performance by focusing on different features of tokenism, fear of revenge, and generalization of the results. These results are similar to and supported by the studies from Terborg (1977), Sacket et al. (1991), Yoder (1994), Mallett (2013), and Yılmaz (2019). When looking at the participants' views regarding the dimension of role struggle, the participants were seen to have been exposed to role assignment and status leveling. The findings obtained as a result of the participants' opinions regarding role struggle parallel the findings from the studies by Kanter (1977a, 1977b), Cherry and Deaux (1978), Mosley (1980), and Floge and Merrill (1986). This study has shown that Kanter's (1977a) idea of female individuals in a male-dominated en-

vironment being evaluated as tokens is not only based on gender but that disabled individuals can also be evaluated as tokens. Analyzing the data obtained as a result of the interviews shows that the disabled personnel working in the public sector have also been experienced performance pressure, heightened boundaries, and role struggle, which Kanter (1997a) expressed as the negative consequences of tokenism. These findings that were obtained as a result of the research were also the same as those determined in previous studies (Terborg, 1977; Spangler et al., 1978; Yoder & Sinnett, 1985; Adams & Yoder, 1986; Ott, 1989; Jackson et al., 1995; Smedley et al., 1993; Stichman et al., 2010; Mallett, 2013; Harper, 2016; Yilmaz, 2019). This situation shows the perceptions the individuals in the current study had regarding their negative experiences of tokenism to be supported by the studies in the literature and that these individuals can also be considered to have been treated as tokens.

When evaluating the results obtained from the study based on the literature, the perceptions the disabled individuals had about tokenism were seen to resemble the results from the studies in the literature. However, the claim that disabled individuals can be considered as tokens in addition to gender or racial ethnicity differences being considered as tokens makes this study separate and distinct from the studies in the literature. These results are thought to be able to add a different dimension to the national and international studies on the theory of tokenism.

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When evaluating the results obtained from the study based on the literature, the perceptions disabled individuals have regarding tokenism resemble the results from the studies in the literature. However, the claim that disabled individuals can be considered as tokens alongside gender or racial/ethnic origin differences makes the study separate and distinct from other studies in the literature. These results are thought to be able to add a different dimension to the national and international studies on the theory of tokenism.

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