

## Token Worries



There are many grounds to object to tokenism, but that doesn't mean we should always avoid being the token woman, argues

Anca Gheaus

Sometimes people are chosen to positions of privilege, power or prestige, because they belong to a minority—for instance, they are women active in professions dominated by men—and people elect them in order to be perceived as inclusive of that particular minority. Yet, in fact, electors have no intention to fight prejudice against minorities, or to otherwise promote inclusion. Rather, they nominate some token minority person out of self-interest: to improve their public image or avoid some penalty. There are many grounds to object to tokenism—most obviously, it often fails to really address discrimination and it reflects badly on the characters of those who practice it. But does this also mean that you ought to avoid being a token person, or to feel in any way embarrassed if you discover that you've been 'tokenized'? Or, perhaps, ought you worry that accepting the role of the token person will—all things considered—set back your own interests? Not necessarily.

Let's zoom in on a particular case: Over the years, I've often heard academic women worry that they have been invited to participate in projects—speaking at a conference, authoring a chapter in a book—because they are women. Some of them are young, not yet established scholars. They want to be invited because their work is appreciated, not in order to promote a political agenda, and resent the thought that others may suspect that, had it not been for their gender, they wouldn't be there. Can it ever be fair to issue, or accept, an invitation of this kind? Plus, there is a looming worry that public promotion of gender inclusiveness in academic events—as done, for instance, by the Gendered Conference Campaign (GCC)—may backfire by making people discount the contributions of female scholars. Finally, some feel oppressed that the audience may expect them to speak as female authors rather than as, simply, themselves.

I cannot discuss all these legitimate worries here. I will limit myself to arguing against the thought that it is somehow unjust—and hence good reason for embarrassment—to be given an opportunity to speak or write because of your gender. (But you can find a more comprehensive discussion of the various issues in an article I published recently in the Journal of Applied Philosophy.) I also think that my considerations about gender apply equally to race.

One of the very few claims about social justice that are widely accepted in this day and age is that we ought to have equal opportunities to access public positions that yield significant benefits. Many think that merit alone should determine who occupies these generally desired positions. (Although there is very resilient disagreement over what it takes to have a fair chance to develop and exercise one's talents.) Gender-based selection of candidates—of which tokenism is a sub-case—blatantly violates this requirement. Now, it is possible to defend such selection without renouncing the commitment to equal opportunities: one may argue that women had fewer opportunities to develop their talents than men, and some gender selection is merely levelling the playing field. I find this mostly unconvincing in the case at hand. Under a regime of equal opportunities all the way down, different people—perhaps different women—would have been invited in the place of the women now asked thanks to gender

selection. There is no guarantee that organizers and editors following, for instance, the GCC, will or can reach the very same individuals that would have been invited according to purely meritocratic rules. (Some of the best potential female scholars may have left the profession or perhaps never entered it!) It is even less likely that organizers engaged in mere tokenism will invite the female scholars of highest academic merit.

And yet, I think that those who gender-select speakers and authors do no injustice because nobody is, in fact, invited based exclusively on merit; nor could anyone be. These days, conferences and publications are global events and, barring some exceptional cases, considerations of merit are not enough to determine a list of speakers or authors. Usually, there are too many academics working on each topic for anyone to know all of them. An ability to make comparative judgements of merit across all these people is even more difficult. And some partiality is unavoidable (and possibly not undesirable) in human beings.

Think of real cases that you know of when someone has been selected for a prestigious position. On what likely criteria were they chosen? Quality was, hopefully, always one of them; but this is (in happy circumstances) a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. Very likely, additional criteria were needed: maybe an appealing speaking or writing style, maybe acquaintance with the person or people deciding who to give the position to, or maybe sociability or a good sense of humour.

All the above are innocuous criteria to help decide between large numbers of qualified candidates. Gender is, I submit, at least equally innocuous but, possibly, even better. We have a lot of research indicating that people in general display unconscious negative attitudes or stereotypes concerning women—interestingly and disturbingly, often in spite of their conscious attitudes. (This is the literature on implicit bias.) We also have good reason to think that members of stigmatized minorities tend to perform worse when they are reminded of the stereotypes associated with their minority status. (This is the literature on stereotype threat.) Finally, some research indicates that increasing the number of women in positions of visibility is a good way to keep in check biases against them. If this is the case, then extending—and accepting—invitations partially based on gender is likely to have

desirable consequences of an important sort, even in the unhappy case in which some tokenism is involved.

So, if you're a woman or racial minority, don't say no to a role merely because you suspect that your gender or race played a part in receiving that invitation. Participate! First, it serves a good cause: if you accept, you may help fight implicit biases and stereotype threats irrespective of the intentions of those who invited you to play that role; and people who devalue the voice of women or racial minorities will do so whether or not there are public attempts to promote gender and racial inclusiveness. Second, it is not unfair to anyone: barring exceptional cases, all invitations will be issued on the basis of several criteria and, most likely, there is a quality threshold that you passed in order to be considered. Moreover, gender and race are, in this context, commendable reasons to invite you to take up this role. And, third, it is good for you! Even in a gender- and racial-just world, not everybody will have such a chance. It's worth taking, in spite of some people's cynical attitudes and the unrealistic expectation that you'll represent more than yourself in the process.

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Image credit: David Jenkins, Spot the Odd One Out.