Racial Tokenism in the School Workplace: An Exploratory Study of Black Teachers in Overwhelmingly White Schools

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Online Publication Date: 25 May 2007

To cite this Article Kelly, Hilton (2007) 'Racial Tokenism in the School Workplace: An Exploratory Study of Black Teachers in Overwhelmingly White Schools', Educational Studies, 41:3, 230 — 254

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00131940701325712

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131940701325712

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This article examines how Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools evaluate their work experiences as both numerical and racial minorities. I extend Kanter’s (1977) theory of tokenism through a look at how ideology shapes the work experiences and evaluations of racial tokens. Kanter developed a framework that outlined three general processes associated with token representation: performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment. In this exploratory study, I show how token Black teachers positioned themselves as heroic individualists who managed numerical and racial processes in schools. More specifically, I show how participants used traditional civil rights ideology to justify and to evaluate positive aspects of racial tokenism, emphasizing performance enhancers, border crossing, and role integration. This article rethinks claims in educational research that token Black teachers face only negative work experiences due to Black and White differences in a White school culture. The conclusion is a discussion about how the work experiences of successful token Black teachers raise foundational issues for educational policy and practice.

In this exploratory study of racial tokens in the school workplace, I reconsider and extend Kanter’s (1977a, 1977b) theory of tokenism through a look at how ideology shapes the work experiences and evaluations of token Black teachers. Based on a study of gender tokens in a male-dominated industrial corporation, Kanter outlined three general tokenism processes rooted in the impact of numbers and independent of the beliefs and attitudes of tokens: performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment. Performance pressures are due to high visibility. Boundary heightening occurs when differences between the token and the dominants are polarized or exaggerated. Role entrapment emerges from stereotypes about the token in the larger society used to incorporate the token into the dominants’ world. Although I am convinced that these processes exist, I argue that they are not independent of the beliefs and attitudes of racial tokens in the school workplace.

In addition, I address claims in educational research that token Black teachers face only negative work experiences due to Black and White differences in a White school culture (see Mabokela & Madsen, 2003a, 2003b; Madsen & Mabokela,
Drawing heavily upon Kanter’s (1977a, 1977b) work, these studies make three familiar arguments: first, token Black teachers experience performance pressures and social psychological troubles due to high visibility, such as always being a representative of their race; second, they deal with incidents of boundary heightening, such as an exaggeration of differences between themselves and White teachers in their management and pedagogical styles, and third, they are role entrapped as the Black expert, playing a limited role in their school workplace. According to current educational research, Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools are mainly disadvantaged because of their racial status.

Writing against these literatures, I suggest that token Black teachers evaluate their work experiences in a more nuanced and complicated way. My participants reported positive, along with negative, aspects of being one among many (see also Alfred, 2001). In fact, they positioned themselves as “heroic individualists” who endure “stress and strain” and overcome obstacles to serve a purpose (Watts, 1994, p. 22). Although participants did talk about performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment, they also discussed performance enhancers, border crossing, and role integration. In this article, I explain how ideological work (matching beliefs, values, and attitudes for success) produced positive evaluations of teaching in overwhelmingly White school workplaces. To explain these mutually generative processes (performance pressures and performance enhancers, boundary heightening and border crossing, role entrapment and role integration), I present narrative accounts of Black teachers who work in token situations and offer an analysis of the ideological work that they do. In the conclusion, I explore how the work experiences of successful token Black teachers raise foundational issues for educational policy and practice.

**Traditional Civil Rights Ideology**

The term *traditional civil rights ideology* refers to beliefs, values, and attitudes that were popularized during and after the Black civil rights movements of the mid-1950s and 1960s (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiv; Peller, 1995). As one of many counterhegemonic racial projects (Winant, 1997) to White supremacist ideology, traditional civil rights ideology has several key assumptions and beliefs:

1. Because of past prejudice and discrimination, oppressed groups need equal opportunity and colorblind access to institutions in society.
2. Individuals can act to change racist attitudes and societal barriers through intergroup dialogue and interaction.
3. Progress is slow and evolutionary; once racist laws and policies are eradicated, everyone will be treated fairly.
Given that the term *token* generally has negative connotations, I think that knowing the logic of traditional civil rights ideology allows one to understand positive evaluations of being a racial token. I show how participants used traditional civil rights ideology to manage negative structural realities of racial tokenism in the school workplace. The focus here is on their responses and patterns of adjustment. One of the limitations of this article is that I show how participants drew upon only traditional civil rights ideology, instead of other racial ideological projects (e.g., Black nationalism and White supremacy). I do not wish to make a causal argument that participants drew only upon traditional civil rights ideology in their personal or work lives. However, I do believe that because traditional civil rights ideology is a widely accepted racial project, it enabled my participants to be successful in overwhelmingly White school workplaces.

**Problematising Minority Experiences**

There are at least two problems with previous research on minority experiences in the school workplace that elucidate my specific use of the term *racial token*. The first problem has to do with the multiple uses of the word *minority*. On one hand, the term is used to describe the racial/ethnic group of participants. The token Black teacher is understood to be a minority because Whites are in the majority in the larger society. On the other hand, the term *minority* is used to identify racial tokens as numerical rarities within the workplace. The experience of being a token is not the same as being a numerical minority, as Kanter (1977a, 1977b) pointed out several decades ago. Consequently, research about racial tokens in the school workplace has drawn conclusions that confuse minority status (e.g., Black) with numerical representation (e.g., token) in the school workplace. Through an analysis of narrative accounts from token Black teachers about their experiences in overwhelmingly white schools, I show how ideological work influences how they evaluate both being Black and being a token.

The second problem involves the lack of attention to historical changes in race relations between Blacks and Whites. The work experiences and evaluations of racial tokens change over time. During the first attempts to desegregate public schools, Black teachers faced violence and overt racism (Cecelski, 1994; Fultz, 2004). After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, for example, White northern and southern administrators in all-White schools hired Black teachers on a token basis in half-hearted efforts to desegregate (Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996). In other workplace situations, White administrators demoted, displaced, and dismissed Black teachers from teaching assignments (Foster, 1997; Fultz, 2004; Haney, 1978; Irvine & Hill, 1990; King, 1993; Perkins, 1989; Siddle Walker, 2001; Urban, 2000). Although I do acknowledge the legacy of overt White racism against Black teachers, especially pioneers who integrated White schools, I also
recognize the need to study how social forces may have changed their work experiences. And, although workplace pressures and stresses are real for Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools, I find that a focus on constraints has overlooked the likelihood of positive work experiences and evaluations.

The Study

The selection of participants was based on three criteria: a school workplace with at least 80% White student enrollment, teachers who were the only Black faculty member (no more than two) in their school, and a student body with no more than 5% Black youth. I used a variety of means to identify participants, such as contact with labor consultants with the state’s largest teacher organization, e-mail correspondence to area school superintendents, and community nomination. Six teachers met all three criteria and all agreed to take part in the study. Two participants teach at the elementary level, one teaches at the middle school level, and three teach at the high school level in reading, technology, and social studies departments. I interviewed each participant for approximately 1–1/2 to 2 hours. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Due to travel and time limitations in the 8 months in which the research was conducted, I observed three of the six teachers at every school level—elementary, middle, and high. The observations enabled me to see how participants interacted with their students and colleagues, to identify any significant differences between school levels, and to record in the moment aspects of their work experience that participants may not have mentioned in interviews. When appropriate, I have included insights from observations throughout the text.

If the goal of this article was to present statistical generalizations, a sample of six participants would obviously be inadequate. Instead, my research is a variant of the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998; Burawoy et al., 1991; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 1999). As Burawoy (1998, p. 16) concluded, this kind of research is interested in “reconstructing theory” and “offering novel angles of vision.” I began with Kanter’s (1977a, 1977b) general theoretical framework on tokenism and explored the work lives of Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools to push the theory further. I coded interview data for performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment. I noticed also that each participant made repeated references to the civil right movement, such as “the dream,” “not being judged by the color of skin,” and “Martin Luther King, Jr.” It was clear that these words, phrases, and sentiments came immediately after participants’ discussions of negative experiences. In every case, participants made a narrative turn in their stories, which led to new codes: performance enhancers, border crossing, and role entrapment.
Results

In this section, I illustrate how positive aspects of being a racial token can demand ideological work. I have matched one elementary (or middle) school teacher to one high school teacher to make the point that these processes exist across school levels. I also have provided full narrative accounts to reveal the tensions, twists, and turns in particular stories because, as Riessman (1993) noted, “taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context” would lose the broader story that my participants wanted to tell (p. 3). Each account drew upon traditional civil rights ideology to talk about and to evaluate their positive work experiences.

Performance Pressures and Performance Enhancers

“I raise their consciousness.” Shelia, age 51, elementary teacher.

Growing up in New York City and attending Catholic schools in the early 1970s, Shelia recalled that it was in her late teens at a “White wealthy college” that she experienced blatant racism from White classmates and teachers. According to Shelia, she had been sheltered from racism in a community that was “predominantly Black and Hispanic.” Describing herself as rather naive about dealing with White racism in her teen years, Shelia explained, “It was my parish priest who raised my awareness to what was going on in the Civil Rights Movement—it was through my church. And, that’s when I began to question things.” Shelia left college in her junior year, because “it was just so stressful” dealing with racism on campus. Soon after leaving college, Shelia married a White ordained minister and they had two children. After several years as a housewife and “as [she] was exposed to the Civil Rights Movement,” Shelia stated, “I finally said to myself, ‘what can I do to make things better’ and that’s when I became aware of my calling. I decided to go into teaching.”

Eventually moving to New England, Shelia started taking courses at a local community college and later enrolled in “a small White Irish Catholic college.” “At that point,” she reflected, “I had more experience dealing with racism in my marriage and my church.” In a second college experience nearly 10 years after the first, Shelia “found [herself] sharing in [her] education classes about multicultural education and a lot of her younger classmates were looking to [her] for answers about teaching minority children.” Unlike her first experience in college, White students and faculty were interested in diversity and multiculturalism. Shelia remarked, “I was very proud to do it. I did not mind people asking questions, because they wanted to learn—even a lot of my professors were asking me questions. It was a different time in my life experience. I could not have answered their questions when I was 19.”

At the time of the interview, Shelia taught in an elementary school with 85% White student enrollment. Shelia said that she knew the school system quite well
because her children graduated from it and she ran for school committee 1 year. As the only teacher of color in her school, Shelia stated that one of her proudest moments has been working on a committee to get a statue of a famous Black civil rights leader erected in her town. Shelia believed that this statue reminded White people of the Black civil rights leader’s life and struggle; but, more importantly, “it made [her] proud to be a Black woman.”

When I asked her what was good and bad about teaching in her school, Shelia replied

I have to prove myself. I have to make myself known to the community so that people get to know who I am and what I am all about. And, I feel that is another way to eliminate racism. There is racism here. It is so ingrained and a lot of them are just not aware of it. When I was hired here, I knew that I was going to be the only person of color…. The principal here was very positive and very supportive with my being a minority. I think she and I have a good relationship. I tell her how I feel when someone says something racial. I have confronted people and I’ve gotten support from the assistant superintendent and my principal…. But I do, I raise their consciousness. People know that when they need information about children of color, they go “let’s go ask Shelia.” You know I am the resource person. People come and ask me questions.

Kelly: You don’t mind being a resource person?
Shelia: I don’t. If I don’t have the answers I say, I don’t know. I’ll be very honest. I don’t mind, but it does sometimes give you a little pressure. Because sometimes I feel like I’m speaking for all Black people and that makes it very difficult—sometimes. But the fact that they are asking these questions, the fact that we have a relationship in this building that people feel comfortable asking. I think that is a good place.

“This is not what I got into teaching to do.” Timothy, age 30, high school teacher.

Timothy grew up in a predominantly White environment and attended desegregated public schools. His parents were among the first to integrate a small White elite liberal arts college in the Midwest in the 1960s. And, Timothy stated proudly, his mother was one of the first Blacks on the school board in his hometown. When it came time to choose a college, Timothy chose not to attend a historically Black college like his oldest sibling because “[he] wanted to get the same kind of opportunities that his mother and father got in college.” After receiving his undergraduate degree from an elite small predominately White college, Timothy earned his master’s degree in Education from a public state university near his current residence.
By the time of the interview, Timothy had taught 4 years as the only Black in a school with 84.3% White student enrollment. Timothy started a Black Studies course in his school with some disappointment that “[he hasn’t] had a lot of Black kids in [his] classes.” He remarked that there are few Black students in his school because there are not a lot of Black people living in the area. Timothy explained further:

It’s a public high school, so it’s going to represent the community that it’s a part of and so you can’t move people into the area. If it was a private school, you could march to the administration and have the students sign a petition that we want more Black students here. But, it’s a public school. You can’t demand that property values drop. You can’t demand that an African-American culture find its way with strength [here].

One of the most memorable moments of Timothy’s interview was a story he told about a time during the school year in which he got confronted with the fact that he teaches in an overwhelmingly White school:

The most dreaded experience for me is the fire drill. When the fire alarm goes off and folk have to go through the whole circus routine of getting up and marching calmly to the exits. For me, it’s a dread because we get out and I leave my classroom. Then, when we get down to the field, the location where we are supposed to go, I look out there and I see just what school I am in. That’s the time that I get to see everyone gathered in the same location … I get a chance to look out and I say, “I can’t pretend anymore, I am in a White school.” I try to turn around and look another way and I say, “I am absolutely in a White school.”

According to Timothy, the pressures due to visibility become less over time. He explained further that he has found a purpose at his school that keeps him going:

The experience that I have had at this school has been productive enough. If nothing else, I’ve had the chance to work with a lot of very talented students in general. I have not had a chance to work with a lot of minority students. This is not what I got into teaching to do. I went into it for all that nobility sort of stuff you go into teaching to do—supporting predominantly Black schools and trying to help people who on the surface look like me. I got into teaching to do that. I thought that I would be here for a little while, while I finish my little tour of duty (in White suburbia) and then go to Atlanta where my brother is or to Chi-
cago where a lot of my family are right now, or go back to [my home state] and work in the city—that’s what I got into teaching to do. With my being the only Black faculty member, I have found that the Black students, who are here, very tangibly and in ways that they don’t know, need me as much as, if not more than, I need them. So, it has become very important to tease this out as long as I need to be here, because I know there is a certain presence that [Black students] need also.

Awkwardly, Timothy talked about racism without actually saying the word. He may have thought that I would simply read between the lines as a Black male interviewing another Black male. Curious, I asked:

Kelly: Have you experienced racism in your school?
Timothy: The answer is yes, in the sense that we have all experienced racism as it filters through the modern world of small town United States. In terms of confrontational, blatant forms of racism—no. I have had a couple of incidents with the administration that I have felt [pause] like racism—the pink poodle syndrome.

Kelly: What is the “pink poodle syndrome?”
Timothy: The pink poodle—you are standing among a crowd of people and you are almost a mascot or a wild one. This is what I get from faculty a lot. It is more annoying than oppressive. “Hey,” somebody might say, “I saw the 60 Minutes report on the war in Africa, what do you think about that?” Or, “Hey, did you see what happened in [a nearby urban city] yesterday? A couple of [Black] students were suspended, what do you think about that?” I must say that I struggle to say racism only because I don’t want to cheapen the word. I don’t want to make little amusing vignettes that I have experienced and would occur in many different places, especially where there isn’t a whole lot of countering images [pauses] I would not want to attach my experiences with a term that I use to describe systemic degradation and deprivation.… Like I said, there are a lot of faculty members who shuffle Times articles that deal with race and want to talk to me about it.

In these accounts, Shelia and Timothy use traditional civil rights ideology to explain how they manage performance pressures and to talk about performance enhancers. Both accounts link civil rights and teaching, which sustains them as racial tokens. For instance, Shelia makes it a personal goal “to make things better” between the races through her work as a classroom teacher. Although she feels pressure to “prove [herself]” and to “make [herself] known to the community,” she also “feel[s] that is another way to eliminate racism.” Following the logic of traditional civil rights ideology, Shelia believes that racism can be eradicated through
interracial interaction and personal contact. Likewise, Timothy’s account gives several examples of performance pressures due to high visibility, such as the constant references to race issues in the news from his colleagues. However, he considers them to be “little amusing vignettes” that cannot be compared to “systemic degradation and deprivation.”

Both accounts point to the ways in which they must manage their work environments. Shelia talked candidly about how “stressful” it felt to be one among many as a young college student, but now she can deal with the stress in her role as a classroom teacher. As Shelia pointed out, she is committed to improving race relations in her classroom, school, and community (i.e., raising the consciousness of White people). What remains unclear, however, is whether or not this commitment actually came before or after she entered this workplace situation. For a Black nationalist, it is important to note, the very notion of raising White people’s consciousness would probably seem taxing and burdensome. Although I did not ask participants whether or not they identified as a Black nationalist, civil rights activist, or some other racialized political category, it is clear that Shelia’s talk signals ideological work in the form of traditional civil rights ideology.

Timothy reported that performance pressures are annoying and disheartening, but they are not insurmountable. Negative work stress as a result of feeling like the pink poodle gets reinterpreted as simply the reality of the token situation. In fact, this was not the first time that he had been in the token situation. Timothy came to his job with skills and knowledge about managing overwhelmingly White environments, which he probably learned as a college student or from his parents, who were pioneers at an all-White elite college in the Midwest. Remember also that Timothy chose to attend a college like the one his parents attended “to get the same kind of opportunities,” rather than attend a historically Black school like his older brother. Like Shelia, Timothy has had some preparation for the interracial speed bumps encountered daily in overwhelmingly White environments.

As racial tokens, Shelia and Timothy may experience civil equality (i.e., equal opportunity and access to resources) but their accounts do not point to social equality (equality of treatment, in addition to equal opportunity and access to resources). This distinction is important here because these accounts connect positive work experiences to equal opportunity and access within their school workplaces where, in the past, they would have been excluded. Satisfied with civil equality, for the most part, Shelia and Timothy forgave or ignored some forms of racial prejudice and discrimination in the school workplace. They believe that performance pressures are the reality for racial tokens in numerically-White dominant schools: “You can legislate behaviors, but you can’t legislate attitudes.” Shelia and Timothy reasoned that as long as they have access and equal opportunity, performance pressures (differences in treatment due to high visibility) can be managed.

Both accounts provide different adaptive strategies for generating positive work experiences as a result of the burdens that accompany automatic notice or high visi-
ibility. Motivated by the small number of Black people in her town, Shelia led the way for the erection of a commemorative statue in honor of a famous Black woman who lived in her town. Shelia explained that this was an opportunity to go beyond the work that she does daily with White students and colleagues. Although some might find raising the consciousness of Whites a negative aspect of racial tokenism, Shelia thinks of it as living out Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of racial cooperation and social justice.

In a completely different way, Timothy sustains himself by trying not to think about being the only one of his kind. Yet, he stated that there were moments in which he “can no longer pretend.” Timothy thinks that by not concentrating on being the only Black teacher, he is able to support and to encourage students of color who may have even greater difficulty as tokens in his school. In Kanter’s (1977a, 1977b) corporate world, racial tokens might be less inclined to stay in their jobs because of negative relationships with clients or coworkers. However, Shelia and Timothy have decided to stay because of their clients and colleagues—especially Black and White students who may never have a Black teacher in the areas where they live. In sum, performance pressures that are filtered through traditional civil rights ideology bring about performance enhancers, such as raising the consciousness of Whites, living out the Dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. for racial cooperation, and being a source for the few Black children who attend overwhelmingly White schools.

**Boundary Heightening and Border Crossing**

“I don’t teach color, I teach children.” Daisy, age 58, elementary teacher.

In 1974, Daisy accepted a teaching position in probably one of the smallest elementary schools in the state where she still resides. Pointing out that she was the first Black teacher ever hired in her school, Daisy remarked,

> Back in the day when I was worried about real racism and getting lynched from one of those trees in the back yard and never see home again, those [White] people treated me with high regard because it was their first time having a Black person [here].

Daisy said that she walked in with a big old afro hairstyle and nothing scared her. “My [White female] principal told me, ‘You know, I did not hire you because of your color,’” Daisy remembered, “‘I hired you because you are good.’” With quick wit, Daisy replied: “Guess what, I don’t teach color, I teach children. I just hope they’re ready for my color.”

Daisy was born and raised in the nation’s capital and attended all-Black schools from elementary school to college. In her first teaching position in another state,
she fought for civil rights through a Black teacher’s caucus to send the first Black representative to the National Education Association. Daisy remarked,

I did my protesting with MLK in D.C. Then, when they had the poor people’s campaign, I worked that until mud came up to my knees. I was active in SNCC on my campus. I was arrested and all of that. Those were exciting times.

Even today, Daisy is still politically active. She became the first Black elected official in her predominantly White town. When I asked her to comment on this accomplishment, Daisy stated, “being here has really provided me with all kinds of experiences—living out things, testing out things, and fulfilling the dream of Martin Luther King. I’ve had some groundbreaking moments.”

Daisy teaches in a school with 92.3% White student enrollment and one teacher for each grade level. In her interview, Daisy stated proudly, “I teach every child who comes through this school.” As a racial token for 28 years in her school, Daisy has encountered negative experiences right along with positive ones. For example, Daisy reflected upon a negative encounter that she had with a colleague,

I was talking to the 4th grade teacher one day. He said he went to have after-school drinks. I said, “I ain’t never been invited and it don’t bother me.” One day I said [in the office], “I ain’t never been invited to have drinks with y’all.” So, the secretary said, “You can go.” I said, “Honey, that’s all right.” I said, “Because if I went, who are you going to talk about? I will spoil your colorful fun.”

Daisy reflected,

I can be up in here and not have another adult talk to me. It is a good thing that I know who I am. I work here. I don’t come here looking for friendships and a life. I got a life. Just give me my money and let me go to my life.

Kelly: Tell me more about your relationships with colleagues and administrators.

Daisy: We have educated people in here with this new multicultural stuff—they got education and ain’t practicing any of it. I say, why take these racism classes? What is that about? I mean I been here 28 years and you still ain’t got nothing on Martin Luther King yet? And, you still coming to me about Black history? I don’t think so. Have I ran and asked you anything about George Washington or the Revolutionary War? And, who do they come to? They say, “We know you have.” You right, ‘cause I got
to do my job. I never go to them to ask them about anything. So, they know what resources I have—especially when it comes to Black history. For Black History Month, I can decorate the whole school and give you a lesson everyday. And, I can integrate it within any curriculum. They say, “How do you.” I say, the same way that if you are interested in something, you are going to find out about it. It just shows that you are not interested. You are just doing a Band-aid approach. I don’t Band-aid. I say, as long as I come to this school, that is what I’m doing, creating Black history…. I’ve been the only one here for 28 years now. They ain’t broke their necks to find me anybody else. We’ve had some in-betweens’ and here and theres, but nothing consistent.”

Kelly: What are other negative aspects of teaching in your school?

Daisy: Well [pause] there’s been good and bad in all of it. The only thing you can change is how you deal—not giving up and not always looking at things as racism. Some things are just natural human behavior and, in that aspect, I think that helps broaden my personal position as a teacher and as a public official. Ignorance is bliss—it’s going to come in any color. It could be a White person saying something ignorant. But, because of the way we think, we think of it as racism. It is not racism, they are just dumb, stupid, and do not have the knowledge of knowing any better. Once they have gotten some knowledge and with some corrections, they tend to change as a people.”

“Oh, you must be Mrs. Powell.” Beverly, age 50, high school teacher.

Instead of attending a historically Black college like her mother, sister, and other family members, Beverly enrolled in a midsize predominantly White university in New England, because she wanted to be near family. Soon after college, Beverly married and moved to Florida where she taught high school. By the time she returned to the area with her husband and two children, Beverly had earned a master’s degree in Reading Education, which she said helped her get a job in her school. According to Beverly, the school where she teaches had never hired a Black teacher before her and has not hired another one since then.

Beverly has taught reading for 14 years in a vocational high school with 98.2% White student enrollment. Beverly explained that every year she watches to see if they have hired a Black teacher, but it never happens. When asked about the absence of Black students in the school, Beverly remarked, “of the two or three Black students she has taught, none have graduated from the school. The kids can’t take it. I’m telling you in all of these years none of them have graduated—maybe one and that was a biracial girl.” In her interview, Beverly mentioned that if she could change one thing about her work situation, she would have more students of color in her school. When I followed up with a question about also increasing the number of faculty of color, Beverly replied “maybe.”
Quickly, she explained, “you are so isolated in the working situation that you don’t have much contact with faculty.”

According to Beverly, her work situation has become a reality and she has learned how to deal with it. Beverly explained:

I find that I live in two worlds. I leave [home town] and come here and then I go back into my other reality. [Kelly: And why do you choose to commute?] And you mean move here? [laughter] My daughters are in college now, but when they were little, in elementary school, I said that I would never have them go to school in a town where they are going to be the only Blacks in the whole school. The town does have a few more, but … I guess that’s the main thing—I just did not want to have my children in that situation. My family, my church, my neighborhood and everything like that is over in [home town], and that’s really where I belong.

“Even after all these years here,” Beverly reflected,

on the very first day of school I am always conscious of the fact that these kids have probably never had a Black teacher. They probably go home and tell their parents too, so by the time I meet their parents at open house they know who I am. “Oh, you must be Mrs. Powell.”

When I asked her about other ways she differed from teachers in her school, Beverly stated:

Because of the racial makeup, which is 100% Caucasian, I had to relook at some of the things that I traditionally taught, as far as literature is concerned. And so that meant learning a lot of things that I probably did not do before. When I was in a more integrated environment, you know you do a lot of Black literature, more of an across the board kind of thing, but when I came here they did not have anything. So, a lot of that I had to introduce, order, and make people aware of in my department. My colleague was like, “Hey you come up with the best new stuff that I never would have thought of,” so he admitted it. After we had been using the books I introduced for a couple of years, my colleague saw a picture of one of the authors and said, “This guy is Black?” He didn’t even know. The kids are really receptive [to my choices] and a lot of the books they like.

Kelly: What are some reasons that you have stayed here? What are some reasons for which you would leave?
Beverly: I think that [my students] have probably learned so much, I don’t mean to sound [boastful], but they have probably learned so much from me—maybe more—just having me as an experience—than they do even academically. I mean the academics are about always the same. But [pause] I have stayed because it’s a nice working environment and just the everyday situation as far as my class size and work load—manageable. I pretty much get along with everybody. I haven’t had any personal gripes. I have thought many times of leaving but it would be so that I can get some kind of advancement in my career. The stresses are like I said, the dual world. I don’t know if I really would call that stressful, now it’s just the reality of things. And, actually, it is kind of good. I just leave certain things behind if I’m at work or if I’m at home. It’s not like I’m doing cartwheels everyday when I come to work, but I would not say that I’m unhappy. I’m content.

When boundary heightening occurs, differences between racial groups are exaggerated. Members of the dominant group draw attention to differences between the subordinate group member and themselves. Power dynamics between racial groups get played out such that the dominant group members seek ways to establish commonalities with each other. Border crossing, in my use of the term, is one practical way to dismantle heightened boundaries between groups through intergroup dialogue, racial interaction, and personal contact.

Both narrative accounts draw attention to the boundaries between the racial token and the overwhelmingly White majority in their school workplaces. In the early 1970s, when she entered her “completely White” school wearing an Afro and shouting “I’m Black and I’m proud,” Daisy possessed a Black power ideology (a more radical form of traditional civil rights ideology). She remembered being surprised that White students, parents, and colleagues seemed to welcome and respect her as the first to integrate their school. As her narrative account indicates, Daisy was able to enter this all-White space with relative ease. The national and international attention given to the Black civil rights struggle probably took some of the sting out of a situation that 2 or 3 years earlier may have had White parents and the larger community in an uproar. Daisy’s school was one of many all-White schools in the North willing to hire Black teachers in their school, albeit on a token basis.

Beverly also was the first Black teacher hired in her school and, like Daisy, continues to be the only one. Beverly does not live in the community where she teaches. Rather, Beverly prefers separate worlds—one Black and one White. Beverly stated that the boundary lines between home and work are her reality. In her interview, she emphasized that no one bothers her at school; she is able to teach and go home. During an observation, I recorded in my notes that Beverly “seems to be well-liked by her students but she hardly has any contact with colleagues.” When Beverly took me on a tour of the school, however, I noticed that students
greeted her with a big smile and friendly hello. When I mentioned that I was surprised by the warm reception that students gave her, Beverly explained that all students know who she is because reading is a required course for 9th graders in her school; she teaches half of them and her colleague teaches the other half. Although Beverly does not make herself visible at the school-level and in the community, she has clearly made a connection with students and is known affectionately as the Black teacher.

Both Daisy and Beverly understand what it means to teach the racial Other when the teacher is Black and the students are White. As Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools, their work situation has the potential to complicate what researchers know about culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogy (see Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). It would seem that both teachers would have to cross borders in almost every way imaginable, from lesson planning to classroom management. When I asked Daisy how she has managed to teach for more than 30 years to all-White classrooms on an all-White faculty, she stated, “I don’t teach color, I teach children.” This was insightful. Did Daisy mean that she does not see color? Although I commended her efforts at border crossing, I wondered whether this had ultimately led her to a colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Lewis, 2003).

Daisy’s account calls attention to two ideas about how ideological work can impact race and tokenism: first, while colorblindness is not a reality, it is often used as an ideal among those who use traditional civil rights ideology; second, the power dynamics involved in border crossing and educating the racial Other are often ignored for the sake of managing race relations. In her talk about teaching children, Daisy drew upon traditional civil rights ideology to explain her approach to teaching in an all-White classroom—“I don’t teach color, I teach children.” However, Daisy also remarked that White students and parents were more likely to “have a problem with [her] color” than she had with theirs. As her account reveals, Daisy does not always subscribe to “traditional civil rights ideology” and she is well aware of the challenges and issues of teaching in an overwhelming White school.

For example, in her story about Friday after-school drinks, Daisy talked candidly about times of informal isolation as racially motivated. Even if her White colleagues were not intentional about the way in which they isolated or excluded her from Friday drinks, Daisy experienced them as a negative aspect of her work situation. Whether Daisy was excluded because of her personality or age, she believed that she was left out because of her race, as evidenced by her remark: “I will spoil your colorful fun.” Had Daisy believed wholeheartedly in colorblindness, she would not have talked about her colleagues’ actions as motivated by race; she would have traced the cause of her informal isolation to other differences.

Beverly and Daisy have developed an array of adaptive strategies that they use daily to facilitate, or as Daisy remarked, “to live out, test out, and fulfill the dream
of Martin Luther King.” For example, both teachers make their classrooms a haven where they can flee when boundary heightening becomes too taxing. In my observation notes, I commented on the ways that both teachers decorated their classrooms with portraits or cultural artifacts of Black people. When I walked in Beverly’s classroom, the first thing that I noticed was a huge poster of Grant Hill, a Black professional basketball player, reading a newspaper on her wall. In Daisy’s classroom, I noticed immediately the Black dolls by the window in her classroom. The point I wish to make here is that although it is true that these teachers do not teach Black children, it does not mean that they do not bring their own cultural ways and knowledge into their classrooms. Daisy and Beverly feel no pressure to assimilate into a White world, because their classrooms have become small havens away from White colleagues. Although their bodies make their schools integrated, the racial boundaries that are established in the school are managed by retreating to their classrooms.

In both accounts, the tension between boundary heightening and border crossing gets played out through curriculum. Beverly used multicultural literature in her reading classes and introduced many Black authors to her students and department. Interestingly, at least linguistically, Beverly stated that she “had to ‘learn’ things that she did not ‘do’ before.” Although border crossing typically involves multicultural learning of practices, values, and beliefs, the everyday reality of the lone Black teacher heightens her senses to the power dynamics between cultures. As a token, Beverly is confronted with the fact that she is the only person with her tastes and preferences in her school. She has to work hard to get her department to buy certain books or to get her colleagues to read certain Black authors. At first glance, this may seem like a race problem, and to a certain degree it is, but it is also related to tokenism. Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (2001), for example, has written about the struggle that she faced trying to convince even sympathetic male colleagues to include more women on required reading lists. The tastes and preferences of the dominants overrule that of the token (Kanter, 1977b). Thus, it becomes hard to know, as a token, if one’s ideas are being rejected because of race, tokenism, or both. To use Beverly’s words, “in a more integrated environment,” there were more students of color and faculty to “justify” her tastes and preferences.

Daisy commented that for the racial token, the only thing you can change is “how you deal—not giving up and not always looking at things as racism.” To some degree, this advice supports traditional civil rights ideological claims that progress is slow and evolutionary. Both Daisy and Beverly have learned how to deal with their work situation as any token would. That is, they know that they are going to be outnumbered every time! They talk about border crossing as an adaptive strategy to educate their White students and colleagues—with the hope that they will learn to diversify their tastes and preferences. (Some students, families, and colleagues have, yet others still have not.)
In sum, boundary heightening assumes that the differences (e.g. race or ethnicity) between the token and the dominant group members are significant. As a racial token in the school workplace, participants believed that they were “creating Black history,” to use Daisy’s words. As the first to integrate their overwhelmingly White schools, both participants felt the need to live through heightened boundaries to show that Blacks could qualify, survive, and succeed in their schools.

**Role Entrapment and Role Integration**

“I am able to make a Black man human.” Eric, age 41, middle school teacher.

Eric attended a small, predominantly White state college. After graduation, however, Eric decided to enlist in the military. At the end of a short stint in the military, Eric moved to the town where he currently resides. Eric married a local White woman and went back to school to get a master’s degree in Education. Describing his family as “very well educated,” Eric stated that he was socialized to believe that “knowledge is power.” In the 1960s, his parents decided to move their family from the South to the North for better opportunities. Both of his parents are graduates of historically Black colleges.

At the time of the interview, Eric was the only Black teacher in a middle school with 81.7% White student enrollment. Eric was not aware of other Black teachers working at his school before him. When asked how he has sustained himself as the only Black teacher for 6 years, Eric remarked,

I really love the kids and the kids love me and I like to feel that I am giving them more than just knowledge—hopefully, examples of how to do certain things and [how] not to do certain things. Sure it is a job, but I think it is a little more, because you are affecting young lives and I think that is more than just [pause] although there might be people who treat it as just a job.

Eric believes that his role as a teacher has greater purposes than collecting a paycheck.

Eric uses his professional role as a teacher in an overwhelmingly White school to surpass his low status as a Black man in the larger society. Eric talked candidly about his social location as a racial token in his school:

I am able to teach but I think I directly or indirectly am able to make a Black man human to students. If [students] are watching hoops on TV or if [students] are watching the movies and never deal with a Black person (besides passing them on the street) on a day to day, they really don’t know what a real Black person is like. But if you are a teacher, you are seen 180 days a year and you spend 42 minutes (a class period)
with students. They really see different sides and angles. I think [students] would take that image and carry it out and probably see people as more human. If I were a White student and I had one Black teacher (pause). The way that a lot of people are in our country, they might work with someone that is of a different race but they go home and you go home. You are not going to be playing basketball (well, you might play basketball with them), you are not going to be going out with them, they are not going to be coming to your house, and they are not going to be going to your wedding. A lot of people live that life from birth to death. If that is the only person that you know (and there are some kids that I will be the only Black person they deal with on a regular basis for the rest of their life), that is the only image they have to give to their kids and to their friends. Multiply that out. Thousands and thousands!

“My job is not to be a person of color.” Everett, age 57, high school teacher.

As a high school technology teacher for 33 years in a school that has a 98.6% White student enrollment, Everett says that he is seen as a “good positive role model.” When Everett started teaching, he recalled,

Obviously there weren’t many Black people—but again, I was very well respected and I did have an athletic background too. So, I coached track for 4 years. I did assistant coach basketball that first year. So, I got a chance to meet a lot of people…. They really didn’t draw any conclusions, it was sort of like, just see what happens and the like. I am really sort of the type of person where like race is really not my issue. I tend to try to force people to treat me as a person and go from there. I rarely run into situations where like that would be the criterion.

Reared in a working-class family in the 1950s, Everett grew up in White communities and attended predominantly White schools in New England. Although he was familiar with living and working among White people, as a first year teacher, Everett found solace in knowing that there was one other Black faculty member on staff. Everett recalled that it was his Black male colleague who told him about where he could and could not buy a house in the quaint New England town. In important ways, his Black colleague paved the way for him by making a name for himself as an accomplished teacher and coach. Unlike the other participants interviewed, Everett had one other Black colleague for much of his tenure at the school. During the time of the interview, however, Everett was the only Black teacher and had been so for about 10 years.

When I asked him whether it was hard teaching in a school that is more than 98.6% White, he remarked: “well teaching—it doesn’t make any difference who
you teach. The kids are here.” According to Everett, kids are the same no matter where you go. When I asked him about the few students of color who did attend his school, he began to talk a great deal about racial inequities in his school. Everett stated, “I think the Spanish [Puerto-Rican] kids get a raw deal, so many detentions handed [to them] and a lot of that is because they just don’t understand.” Moreover, Everett talked about racism directed toward Spanish [Puerto Rican] and Russian students because they make up the minority population. Everett continued,

You don’t have a principal or vice principal that is Russian. You don’t have a principal or vice principal that is Spanish [Puerto Rican] … that is Black…. So, my job is really like the go between so like we can maybe deal with it better and the kids [feel] that. Kids aren’t stupid.

When I asked Everett how he manages in this kind of environment, he explained, “I just come to work. I do my job. I ask, what do you want me to do? I do that and that is pretty much it. I don’t need the other things.” The “other things,” I assume, would be close friendships at work that spill over into his personal life. Like his former Black male colleague, Everett is quite active in his school. He is a coach of a team sport and an advisor of two extracurricular clubs. Everett declared in his interview,

My job is not to be a person of color. My job is to be a teacher at [this school] and if I do my job—and I look at that as, this is what the curriculum is and this what the kids should get out of it— then I am happy and I sleep good.

If you take the total enrollment for each of the schools in this study and multiply that number by the number of years that the six teachers have been in their schools, it is clear that the number of Whites who could have been shaped by these teachers is quite significant. Following this logic, Eric has taught in his middle school for 6 years with an average school enrollment of 750 White students. Both indirectly and directly, over 2,000 White students may have been influenced in some way by his presence. For Everett, the number is far greater. Through the use of traditional civil rights ideology, both Eric and Everett believe that in a very small and slow, yet important, way they are changing the attitudes of some White students and colleagues through interracial and personal contact. More importantly, they view their presence as possibly one of the few times that their White students will have contact with Black authority figures. Although White colleagues may view them as the Black male (excellent in sports and strong in disciplining trouble students), they see themselves as broadening the images and dismantling stereotypes of the Black male—from hostile to pleasant, from uneducated to intelligent, and from immoral to moral.
In varying degrees, all of my participants are role entrapped as diversity hires or unofficial deans of multiculturalism, with the task of enlightening White students, parents, and colleagues. In their interviews, however, participants talked more about the fluidity of their roles, or role integration (Staples, 1976), in overwhelmingly White schools. For instance, both Eric and Everett think about their presence as necessary for Black students and absolutely necessary for White students. Revealing his perception of being a racial token, for example, Everett remarked, “My job is not to be a person of color.” Instead, he pointed out other roles that he has identified—teacher and coach to all students, as well as a go-between for the few ethnic minority students in his school. Both of these accounts reveal that being the stereotypical Black male is one role that is forced on them whether they like it or not; however, Eric and Everett reimagined this role in a way that sustains them.

Nevertheless, both Eric and Everett face the dilemma of fitting in. On the one hand, they are expected to fulfill the duties and role of a teacher. On the other, racial characteristics often distort their teacher image due to preexisting stereotypes about Black males, in particular, and Black people, in general. Eric has remained “the only Black man on campus” but he has taken on a host of new roles that have been integrated into his persona as Mr. L, the 8th grade teacher, the published author, the military guy, the father of two children, and the serious runner. Everett is known as “Coach,” in addition to being a popular club advisor, father of two children, and the go-to-guy for computer problems. Both Eric and Everett have integrated multiple roles that have changed over time. In sum, drawing upon traditional civil rights ideology, Eric and Everett reimagine their roles in overwhelmingly White schools. Although their physical bodies are being used to integrate their schools, they use their position as a way to present countering images and experiences of the Black male to the larger school community—which they evaluate as a positive and essential aspect of their teaching. Instead of stressing the importance of being role models for Black students, my participants talk about being model citizens for White students, colleagues, and parents.

Conclusions

Even though the token Black teachers I studied do not transform the structural realities that are associated with being a racial token (performance pressure, boundary heightening, and role entrapment), they are able to manage the effects of minority status and numerical rarity in the school workplace through their ideological work. As Farber and Sherry (1995) concluded, “Ideology may be as important as race or class in defining the speaker’s voice” (p. 288). In this study, traditional civil rights ideology shaped positive work experiences and evaluations of being a racial token. For token Black teachers who might draw upon a Black nationalist ideology, for instance, it would seem laborious and despairing work to spend time educating White students, parents, and colleagues about racism. But what if one
believes, like Shelia, Timothy, Daisy, Beverly, Eric, and Everett, that individuals can transcend racism through racial integration, interracial dialogue, and personal contact?

I am not certain whether or not participants drew upon traditional civil rights ideology in their personal lives or in previous work situations, but these accounts are marked by a logic rooted in traditional civil rights ideology. In the absence of a collective strategy to relieve work stress due to race and tokenism, participants sought racial harmony and fairness through individual solutions. More specifically, they attempted to overcome performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment in the school workplace through ideological work and heroic individualism.

This exploratory research extends Kanter’s (1977a, 1977b) theory of tokenism through accounts of Black teachers as agents in overwhelmingly White schools. Although further research might show that there are other acceptable floating ideologies that could be used with success in desegregated public school systems, my participants drew upon the values, beliefs, and language of equality and multiculturalism to justify why they have stayed and to evaluate what they have been through.

The work experiences of token Black teachers raise several foundational issues for current educational policy and practice: First, in the social foundations classroom, it is important that students develop a sociological imagination and critical standpoint about education, so that they might imagine solutions to problems beyond what individuals can do and what society might allow (see Mills, 1976). Heroic individualism does not change oppressive structures and racist practices in the school workplace. I have shown the ways in which teachers drew upon traditional civil rights ideology to manage pressures and stresses related to being both a racial and numerical minority. However, I believe that any ideology that leads to individual solutions could pose problems for those seeking social justice and educational change. For example, look back at Timothy’s account. He remarked,

It’s a public high school, so it’s going to represent the community that it’s a part of and so you can’t move people into the area…. You can’t demand that property values drop. You can’t demand that an African-American culture find its way with strength [here].

Timothy’s focus on making a difference in his school and community has been limited to what individuals can do and assumes that racial compositions in neighborhoods change over time through individual choice rather than collective agitation and struggle—this is problematic.

Second, diversity hires have to deal with more than their master status in schools. Invariably, they must manage performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment as the only one of their kind in departments, classrooms,
neighborhoods, and communities. How might local educational authorities change the climate or culture of the overwhelmingly White school workplace, besides hiring diversity candidates in groups of three or more, to promote positive teaching experiences? How do local educational authorities address the psychosocial and cultural needs of teachers who are teaching as one among many in communities that have very few students who share their historical and cultural background? Unlike some national teacher training programs in which novice teachers may decide to teach for 1 or 2 years, there is a significant population of teachers—Black and White—in the field of education for the long haul that need a lot of support to manage homogeneous school cultures and dynamics.

Third, the ultimate cost of being a successful Black teacher in an overwhelmingly White school is that one can become an anomaly or invisible to close colleagues, despite best efforts to transcend race (or gender, sexual orientation, ability). Often participants believed that they were placed in schools to benefit their students and colleagues, which is another example of the unequal border crossing that I referred to earlier. Over time, friendships and acceptance could render the racial token invisible. Towards the end of his interview, for example, Timothy recalled,

There was a particular faculty member that I was close to—a close colleague—[who] told me that I didn’t seem Black…. She said that of all the Black people she knows, I was the least Black person. I kind of gave her a look. I told her, “I respect you, but you just told me that I’m not Black?” She said, “No, it’s just that you’re not like all in your face Black, Black, Black, like other people I know. Other people I know,” she said, “are hard core Black and you are just not hard core.”

This experience of racelessness, to use Signithia Fordham’s (1988) term, indicates that one can manage performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role entrapment too well.

Altogether, the six accounts that I have presented in this article suggest that ideology is a significant and intervening factor in the work experiences of Black teachers in overwhelmingly White schools. In this exploratory study, I have considered how one ideological orientation shaped positive evaluations of teaching in the token situation. I also want to emphasize the need for more systematic research about the role of ideology in teachers’ lives and careers and how it can redirect educational policy and practice. In the age of high stakes testing and mean and lean accountability measures, there is a need for more research that addresses the hidden and unacknowledged ways in which teachers might be fighting ideological battles in hostile school workplaces and educational systems. Although it remains important to consider race, gender, and class in education, it is just as important and necessary to consider how workplace composition and ideological beliefs shape work
experiences. Knowing that a teacher is Black tells one almost nothing about his or her experiences in the school workplace. And, knowing about Black teachers’ experiences tells one nothing about the ideological work they must do to survive.

Acknowledgments

This article is dedicated to the fascinating lives and careers of the six participants who inspired me to get this story right. I express much gratitude and appreciation to Robert Zussman, Dan Clawson, Eleanor Townsley, and Michelle Budig for their insightful comments on numerous drafts. I am also indebted to C. Shawn McGuffey and LaVada Taylor-Brandon for helpful suggestions and constant encouragement.

Notes

1. Although the word token has negative connotations in popular discourse, I use the term as it has been widely and historically used in the sociological literature.
2. According to Kanter (1977b), the token work situation is defined as a skewed group with a large number of one type and one or two of another type (85:15). She outlined three other group types that should be considered in future research projects on racial experiences in schools: the uniform group with only one kind of person (100:0); the tilted group with a majority and minority numerical composition (60:40); and the balanced group with minority and majority groups turned into subgroups (50:50).
3. In the school workplace, it is possible to be a token teacher in a school with a large number of students who share your master status (e.g., race or gender). The teachers in my study, then, are tokens in the strictest sense. Based on enrollment data published by the department of education in the state where the participants in my study work, the highest percentage of White students in a school is 98.6% and the lowest is 84.3%. The greatest proportion of Black youth in a school population is 3.9%, with the least being .2%. In the two schools with one other faculty member of color, only one identified as African-American. The total student enrollment for the three school settings based on 2002 data was approximately: 130 and 323 (elementary); 799 (middle); and 656, 769, and 1,198 (high school). These data point to the number of Black and White students who may have come in contact, directly or indirectly, with the token Black teacher in their school.
4. Community nomination is a term coined by Foster (1990, 1997) to legitimate securing informants through direct contact with the local community as a sampling method.
5. All names used in this article were changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.
6. In addition, observations gave me a chance to ask unresolved questions and to discuss observed contradictions with tokenism theory. Observations revealed that the teachers I interviewed were working in the most ideal teaching situations with abundant resources, such as very small class sizes, the latest educational technology, strong parental support, and available funds for their classroom.

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