Male Tokens in a Masculine Environment:
Men with Military Mates

Chris Bourg

Department of Sociology
Stanford University
Stanford CA 94305
Email: mchris@stanford.edu

Paper presented at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association
ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of whether civilian husbands of military women are tokens, by Kanter's definition. Kanter (1977a) defines tokenism as membership in a proportionally underrepresented subgroup. Tokens generally differ from the dominant group on some ascribed "master" status. The common consequences of tokenism are: performance pressures, isolation and encapsulation into stereotyped roles. A review the relevant literature on tokens and tokenism is presented. Yoder's (1991; 1994) assertion that men do not suffer the consequences of tokenism is evaluated.

Based on descriptions of the military environment and accounts of the experiences of civilian husbands within that environment, the argument is made that civilian husbands are tokens. Data on the proportion of civilian husbands among the military spouse population along with descriptions of experiences of social isolation and role encapsulation are offered in support of this argument. In addition, inferences are drawn from available data concerning potential psychological costs of tokenism for this population. Areas for further research on this topic are suggested.
INTRODUCTION: TOKENS AND TOKENISM

Since the initial description of the concept by Kanter (1977a; 1977b), the concept of "tokenism" has generated much research and discussion among social scientists. Drawing on observations of women in a male-dominated work setting, Kanter (1977a) defines tokenism as membership in a proportionally underrepresented sub-group.

Based on her analysis, Kanter identifies three perceptual tendencies with associated consequences which result from token status. The first tendency is heightened attention and visibility which creates performance pressures. The second perceptual tendency is contrast. The consequences of contrast are a heightening of cultural boundaries by the dominants and isolation of the tokens from informal social and professional networks. The third perceptual tendency is assimilation resulting in encapsulation into gender-stereotyped roles (Kanter 1977a; 1977b).

Kanter's findings have been replicated across a variety of settings. Female corrections officers, coal miners, police officers, soldiers, military academy cadets, physicians, and academics have all been found to experience similar patterns of performance pressures, isolation and gender stereotyping (for review, see Yoder 1991). Earlier work by B. Segal (1962) described male nurses in similar terms. He found that, despite the higher status associated with their gender, male nurses faced experiences of isolation and role encapsulation similar to those experienced by female tokens.

In an assessment of Kanter's original work and the many subsequent replications, Yoder (1991, 181) argues that "gender status is a necessary ingredient in producing the negative effects of being a token" and "men avoid the negative consequences of numeric imbalance reported by women." Yoder has further claimed that token processes result not merely from numerical imbalance, but from "a three-way interaction involving token numbers, gender status and occupational appropriateness" (Yoder 1994, 151). Because women in general continue to have lower status in the domain of paid work, Yoder asserts that only token women will experience negative tokenism processes. In support
of this assertion, she cites studies in which male tokens appear to escape negative consequences of tokenism, and may even benefit from their token status. This evidence includes a study of female Marines and male nurses, in which male nurses were found to benefit professionally (though not personally) from their token status, while the female Marines experienced negative consequences (Grimm and Stern 1974; Schreiber 1979; Williams 1989; and Yoder and Sinnett 1985).

One potential limitation of previous work on tokenism is that the concept is generally discussed only in terms of narrowly defined occupational roles. Since paid work outside of the home has historically been a man's domain, it may not be surprising that men who enter predominantly female occupational fields do not suffer the same consequences as token women. Within the occupational world in general, men have higher status. Based of this prevailing gender-based status differential, Yoder (1991; 1994) argues that men do not experience negative consequences of tokenism when they are numerical tokens in occupational roles.

However, both Kanter (1977a) and Yoder (1985) recognize that in male dominated work organizations, prescribed roles exist for employee wives. In fact, Kanter (1977a, 104) refers to the managers' wives as "some of the most important role-players" in the work organization. She notes however, that there was no "corporate husband" role equivalent. In this paper, I argue that men who occupy the spouse role in male dominated work organizations are tokens. Furthermore, because this role has historically been occupied solely by women and is "attained" through family status, men are likely to encounter the same negative consequences as female tokens: performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation.

In a Weberian sense, the military represents an "ideal type" male dominated organization with both a masculine culture and prescribed roles for employee wives (M. Segal 1986). As such, the military provides an interesting and potentially informative setting in which to explore notions of male tokenism. Within the military context,
civilians married to military women become tokens by virtue of the intersection of their gender and their civilian status. A look at military family demographics will establish that these men meet Kanter's (1977a) numerical qualifications for token status. An analysis of the available documentation of the experiences of civilian husbands will further reveal that their tokenism results in isolation and gender stereotyping. Because the organizational role expectations for the military spouse are informal and laden with gender stereotypes, civilian husbands do not appear to experience the kinds of performance pressures placed on tokens in purely occupational roles. Survey data on the adaptation of different family types to military life will be discussed in the context of potential effects of tokenism on marital relations.

THE NUMBERS

Building on Georg Simmel's work on the significance of numbers in social life, Kanter (1977a; 1977b) defines tokenism in terms of proportions. Tokens are members of a subgroup that accounts for less than 15% of the total group (Kanter 1977a). Tokens differ from the majority group (dominants) by virtue of some easily identified, ascribed characteristic (usually a master status such as gender, race or age) that carries with it assumptions about culture, status and behavior (Kanter 1977b).

In discussing the perceptual tendencies associated with tokens, Kanter (1977a, 210) notes that it is possible that, as a group, tokens will be completely overlooked due to their proportional rarity. This tendency may account for the overwhelming scarcity of information available regarding civilian husbands of military personnel. Although much has been written about the changing nature of the military family, the bulk of the research attention has been directed at working wives, dual military couples, and single parents (for recent examples see, Bowen and Orthner 1989; Schumm et al 1993; and Segal and Harris 1993). Official data sources also contain little information on this population. The Department of Defense has only recently begun keeping statistics on male "dependents"
and prior to 1988 the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) failed to separate marital
data by gender and military or civilian status of the spouse (McGee 1990).

Despite being overlooked by the majority of military family researchers and
policy makers, enough information is available to establish the case for identifying
civilian husbands as numerical tokens in the military family community. Survey data
drawn from a random sample of over 11,000 Army personnel indicates that the vast
majority (88%) of spouses of military personnel are civilian wives. Active duty military
wives and husbands each represent approximately 4% of the military spouse population.
The remaining 3-4% of spouses are civilian husbands (Coolbaugh et al 1990; and
Schumm et al. 1993). Data from the most recent Annual Survey of Army Families
provide support for the 3% estimate (Rosenberg 1994). Data from a 1985 Department of
Defense survey of service members and spouses indicates that civilian men make up
between 2-4% of the spouse population across services (Griffith et al. 1986).

It is important to note that the majority of civilian husbands (73% of husbands of
enlisted personnel, and 64% of husbands of officer personnel) have some prior military
service (Griffith et al. 1986). There are, however, significant differences by rank of the
active duty wife in the percentages of civilian husbands who have never served in the
military. For example, in the lowest enlisted grades (E-1 thru E-3), 52% of civilian
husbands have never served. Similarly, nearly 60% of the civilian husbands of the most
junior officers (O-1 thru O-2) have never served (Griffith et al. 1986). Although it is
possible that the status of civilian husband may be experienced differently by those men
with prior service, an examination of anecdotal evidence reveals that even these men
suffer the consequences of their tokenism.

**THE CONSEQUENCES**

**Performance Pressures**
Civilian husbands of military women do not appear to encounter the same kinds of performance pressures experienced by token women in occupational settings, for several reasons. First, civilian husbands are tokens by virtues of the family role they occupy within the military community. Although the military wife role carries normative expectations for performance, there is some indication that the normative force of such expectations is diminishing (M. Segal 1989). To the extent that performance pressures continue to exist for military spouses, they may be experienced within social networks (i.e., volunteer organizations and "wives" clubs) that civilian husbands are socially isolated from due to their token status. In this way, civilian husbands may not be exposed to the socialization processes by which the expectations, or pressures, are communicated.

It is also possible that the organizational expectations for the role of spouse are so deeply rooted in gender stereotypes, that men are exempted from these expectations. The expectations of the role include taking care of family matters to free the husband for military concerns, and participating in, and even hosting, a variety of social activities (M. Segal 1986). In a Blue Ribbon Panel report on "spouse" issues published by the U.S. Air Force (United States Air Force 1988, 11-12), the panel notes that:

"Wing commanders wives perceived that they were the eyes and ears of their husbands in the wing's volunteer and service organizations."

"Spouses reported that as the military member moves up the chain of command, the Air Force expects the wife to assume greater responsibilities within both the formal and informal support structures."

"Much of the pressure perceived by spouses arises from their fear that reduced participation on their part will adversely affect their husbands' careers."

(emphases mine)
Although the panel was commissioned to study issues related to spouse participation in Air Force activities, it is clear that the performance pressures of the role of military spouse are felt primarily by wives.

Air Force women in dual military marriages actually reported experiencing pressures to leave the military "to better support their military husbands" (United States Air Force 1988, 14). For the Air Force woman married to a civilian, "her husband's participation is not considered as meaningful" (United States Air Force 1988, 14).

With respect to performance pressures, it appears that it is the military woman, rather than her civilian husband, who suffers the brunt of this consequence. Military women (particularly officers and senior NCOs) are expected to perform their own military job and the job usually performed by the wife. There is also a perception that the lack of a wife who participates in community and unit activities, and takes care of all family responsibilities, may be harmful to a service member's career (United States Air Force 1988; and author's own observations). This is precisely what Kanter (1977a, 107) observed when she found that "while men symbolically brought two people to their jobs, women were seen as perhaps bringing less than one full worker."

**Isolation**

Kanter (1977a; 1977b) notes that members of the dominant group tend to exaggerate their own commonality and the tokens' differences through a process of boundary heightening which ultimately results in isolation of the tokens. One aspect of boundary heightening is the exaggeration of the dominants' culture, which occurs when "majority members assert or reclaim group solidarity and reaffirm shared in-group understandings by emphasizing and exaggerating those cultural elements which they share in contrast to the token" (Kanter 1977b, 975). One striking example of this phenomenon in the military community involves the refusal of many wives clubs to change their name to spouses clubs in recognition of the growing number of husbands of
military women (Jowers 1992a). Many of the dominants within the total group of military spouses (the wives) appear to be reacting to the presence of token men within their midst by clinging to and highlighting their own shared gender status. One woman defended her own opposition to the name change on the basis that, "There aren't many Army traditions left" (quoted in Jowers 1992a, 47).

Wives clubs are a traditional source of social support and community involvement for many wives of military men. Even though most clubs officially allow men to join, retention of the name "wives" clubs serves to increase awareness of the shared gender of the dominants, and draws attention to the difference of the tokens. This creates a formidable social barrier to joining, and may serve to isolate many civilian husbands from this source of social support. In fact, even in clubs with gender neutral membership policies and names, few civilian husbands join (Jowers 1992a; and McGee 1990). These clubs have been traditionally and normatively defined as a place for wives, and it is likely that many men feel uncomfortable joining an organization that has such a strong association with female gender roles.

Another traditional source of social support and identity for the wives of military men is participation in volunteer organizations within the military community. Survey data indicate that civilian husbands display significantly lower rates of volunteering than civilian wives, or than both husbands and wives in dual military couples (Martindale 1987). Because of their social isolation, civilian husbands may be reluctant to volunteer, a situation which serves to perpetuate that isolation. It may also be that civilian husbands are reluctant to become involved in the social activities of the community (i.e. the wives clubs and the volunteer organizations) as part of an attempt to become "socially invisible".1 Kanter (1977a) claims that this is one strategy employed by tokens to deal with their visibility.

1 It may be that the higher rates of employment among civilian husbands as compared to civilian wives explains part of their lower rates of volunteering. It is also possible that
Kanter (1977a) notes that isolation also occurs when the dominants feel uncomfortable around tokens, and even keep secrets from the tokens for fear of lack of trustworthiness. The experiences of some civilian husbands who have participated in wives club events illustrates this phenomena.

The civilian husband of a Marine Corps officer describes feeling so uncomfortable with the wives that he relinquished his post as president of the officer's wives club. Ironically, he originally assumed the job under pressures stemming from traditions which called for him to take the position as spouse of the commanding officer (Jowers 1992a). Another civilian husband describes being cut off from the social interaction of the other spouses (all females) because "they didn't want to share their gossip with a man" (Jowers 1992a, 46). Research conducted during and after Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm reveals that the informal social networks which wives had developed within their military communities served as important sources of support while their husbands were deployed (Westhuis et al. 1991). The social isolation of civilian husbands may limit their access to this type of support. The husband of a female Air Force member who deployed to the Persian Gulf found little support among the wives in the military community and turned to military men who did not deploy for support and companionship. Since few of the military men had wives who were deployed, this particular civilian husband was unable to find someone with whom to share his experience (Jowers 1992a).

Kanter (1977a) relates that some of the token women she studied missed out on informal training by peers as a result of isolation. To the extent that social interaction with other spouses provides training in the form of socialization for the role of military spouse, civilian husbands miss out on informal training by being excluded from the social men in general have lower rates of volunteering than women in general. Neither of these explanations, however, explain why civilian husbands volunteer at lower rates than military personnel of both genders.
networks of the dominants—the wives. In addition, the official orientations provided by the military establishment for spouses are geared towards wives (author's own observations; and Ridenaur 1982). In a rather vivid illustration of this, Ridenaur recounts the orientation program for Navy spouses arriving in San Diego as consisting solely of a presentation by the Navy Wives Club and a review of the gynecological services available on post (Ridenaur 1984, 13).

Within the military community, civilian husbands experience isolation in a variety of ways and settings. In addition, they are isolated from both of the dominant social groups within the community. They are isolated from military men by their difference as civilians. They are further isolated from the civilian wives because they are men. The following comments from civilian husbands illustrate this double jeopardy:

"I don't fit in among the women, and I don't fit in among the guys" (Jowers 1992b, 46).

"I don't have much in common with the men or the women . . . they don't reject me, but we don't have much in common" (Jowers 1992a, 45).

"I feel kind of like I'm on the outside looking in" (Jowers 1992b, 46).

Because tokenism is associated with the perceptual tendency of contrast, civilian husbands are isolated from the larger military community where the commonalities of the dominants are exaggerated at the expense of emphasizing the tokens' differences.

**Role Encapsulation**

The third perceptual tendency associated with tokenism is assimilation. Assimilation involves the use of stereotypes or generalizations about the token's social category. As a result, tokens are encapsulated into gender stereotyped roles (Kanter 1977a; 1977b; and Yoder 1991).
One consequence of stereotyping is that tokens are often victims of "mistaken identity". Kanter (1977a) describes the female saleswomen she observed as being mistaken for secretaries, assistants, or wives or mistresses of their male colleagues. Yoder (1991) describes being mistakenly identified as the wife of one of the male professors during her time as a visiting professor at the United States Military Academy.

Within the military community, civilian husbands are likely to experience instances of mistaken identity on the basis of stereotypical judgments based on gender. Civilian husbands are assumed to be active duty men, because that is the status of the vast majority of men in the military community. One civilian husband recounts being told to get a haircut, while others tell stories of being asked to provide their own social security number to agencies who actually need the number of their active duty wife (Jowers 1992b). Sometimes the need to maintain and justify stereotypical assumptions about men is so strong that even when dressed in civilian attire and sporting a beard (something military regulations forbid), civilian husbands can be mistaken as Military Police officers on undercover assignments. It is also common for civilian husbands without prior military service to be mistaken for veterans (author's own observations).

There is some evidence that due to the higher status of men generally, any experiences of mistaken identity on the part of male tokens will have positive consequences (Kanter 1977a; and Yoder 1991). In the military community, being mistaken for an active duty service member can certainly have its advantages. In settings such as the military hospital, military personnel (and those assumed to be military personnel) have higher priority for treatment (Jowers 1992a). In addition, military status (or presumed military status) may result in preferential treatment at various military service agencies, as well as at the commissaries and post exchanges.

Despite the potential advantages of mistaken identity experiences for civilian husbands, Kanter (1977a) notes that mistaken first impressions always place the burden of establishing proper role relations on the token. In the case of male tokens, there may
be an additional psychological cost to continually having to defend oneself for occupying a role lower in status than the one others assume you occupy (see Williams 1989).

For the civilian husband of a military woman, mistaken identity situations may serve as a constant reminder that his identity within the military community is tied to his wife's position. Since men in general tend to derive substantial self-esteem from their work roles (Stein 1984), this mistaken identification and devaluing of their own occupational role is likely to affect the self-esteem of civilian husbands. Clearly, even for men, being the subject of a mistaken identity involves being treated as a symbol and being reminded of one's difference from the dominant group (Kanter 1977a).

Role encapsulation also involves the assignment of tokens to stereotyped roles. For the women in Kanter's study (1977a) this involved assignment to jobs and committee positions associated with stereotypical female concerns. Similarly, civilian husbands who have joined community spouse organizations find themselves asked to assume stereotypical male positions, such as master-at-arms, while their wives are asked to perform secretarial roles (Jowers 1992a). In some cases, civilian husbands who would like to participate in volunteer activities or assume roles in family support groups are not offered the opportunity because others assume that they would not be interested, presumably because of their gender (author's own observations).

For the small numbers of civilian husbands who choose to stay at home, the stereotypes they encounter come in two forms. The first stereotype involves the assumption that all men want to (and should) work. Civilian husbands not working outside of the home report that they constantly have to defend their decision to the community of wives. One civilian husband and father of two replied as follows to the wives who questioned his decision:

"I said 'I have the same right to raise my kids as you [women] do.' They thought because I was a male, I should be out working 40 hours a week. They didn't want to leave their kids in day care, but they thought I should" (Jowers 1992a, 46).
A second kind of stereotype encountered by civilian husbands involves assumptions about their lack of ability and lack of interest in traditionally female tasks. One husband who stays at home to care for his newborn son was asked by neighboring wives whether he would be able to change the diapers and feed the baby (Jowers 1992a).

Because of their gender, civilian husbands of military women encounter a number of stereotypes within the military community. Incidents of mistaken identity, assignment to stereotypical male roles, and exclusion from stereotypical un-masculine roles (i.e. stay-at-home parent or volunteer) are all examples of ways in which civilian husbands face the common token experience of role encapsulation.

**Personal Consequences**

Kanter (1977a; 1977b) argues that token status carries individual costs in terms of stress and self-esteem. Yoder (1991) confirms Kanter's arguments by documenting her own experiences of intense stress and diminished self-esteem as a result of her own token status at the United States Military Academy. While no large scale data exist to document the stress levels, self-esteem, or other measures of psychological well-being for civilian husbands of military women, inferences can be made from other types of data.

In anecdotal reports gathered by McGee (1990), several civilian husbands describe stress and self-esteem problems associated with lack of employment. One husband notes that he tried to find support at a spouses group meeting, but found that he was the only male there, and was made to feel unwelcome. He subsequently "became close friends with Jack Daniels" (McGee 1990, 52). While this husband's employment situation may have triggered his stress, his token status isolated him from at least one potential source of support.

Perhaps the most suggestive evidence of the costs of tokenism for civilian husbands in the military community comes from an analysis of family adaptation across various family patterns conducted by Bowen and colleagues (1992). The analysis is based
on survey data collected from a random sample of 7,524 married and single parent soldiers. Although the analysis is limited to responses obtained from the military member, findings with respect to marital relations may be relevant. Specifically, Bowen and others (1992) found that civilian husband families had lower levels of relationship resources and lower levels of family strength and coherence than either dual military or civilian wife marriages. The relationship resources variables measured communication, marital happiness and marital separation risk. Combined with research which describes military women as tokens (Williams 1989; and Yoder et al. 1983), these findings seem to indicate that the negative consequences of their separate token statuses combine to exact a toll on the marital well-being of couples made up of military women and civilian men.

**SUMMARY**

Women in a variety of male dominated occupations have been described as tokens and shown to experience the negative consequences of their status (Yoder 1985). Although men in predominantly female occupations may fit the numerical definition of tokens, their higher gender status appears to mitigate against some of the negative consequences of tokenism (Yoder 1991).

The bulk of the research on tokens and tokenism has focused on occupational roles. Although Kanter (1977a; 1977b; and 1977c) documents the important role wives of employees (particularly executives and managers) have traditionally played in many work organizations, she does not address the experiences of men who occupy the traditionally female family roles defined by male dominated work organizations. I have argued that men who occupy traditionally and predominantly female family roles within male dominated, masculine work cultures are tokens. I further argue that because societal norms continue to dictate that family is predominantly the domain of women, men's gender status is not likely to mitigate against the negative consequence of male tokenism in this arena.
The case of civilian husbands of military women is described as an example of men who are tokens in a masculine environment by virtue of occupying traditionally female family roles within that environment. Making up only 3% of the military spouse population, civilian husbands are tokens by virtue of their numerical under representation and by the intersection of their civilian status and their gender. Civilian husbands seem to escape the performance pressure normally encountered by tokens, but do experience social isolation within the military community and are encapsulated into gender stereotyped roles. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that their token status, combined with the token status of their military wives, exacts a toll in terms of marital and family strength.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Because of the true scarcity of any kind of research on civilian husbands of military women, the areas ripe for future research are many and varied. Certainly research similar to that done on civilian wives of military men in areas such as adaptation to military life and employment issues is needed. In addition, over sampling of this population in large surveys of military families is needed to examine the relationships between the military and the family for this population. Models of these relationships offered for the entire military family population (see, for example Segal and Harris 1993) may not capture the unique dynamics of civilian husband families. It may be that because the civilian husband is so isolated from the military community, findings of a generally strong relationship between various family variables and many military variables will not hold true for this population.

In the majority of military family research, sample sizes of civilian husbands are usually too small for meaningful quantitative analysis. Future survey research should consider aggressively over sampling this population.
With respect to the argument presented here on the token status of civilian husbands, three types of research might be particularly useful in examining the merits of the argument. First, systematic qualitative research modeled after earlier research on female tokens is needed. Case studies of the experiences of individual civilian husbands modeled after the work of Yoder and her colleagues (Yoder 1985; and Yoder and Sinnett 1985) might also be informative. More generally, research on men in similar token situations (for example, husbands of female political figures, corporate executives and ministers) is needed to test the proposition that men occupying organizationally defined family roles that are traditionally and predominantly held by females experience the negative consequences associated with tokenism.
References


Rosenberg, Florence, research scientist at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. 1994. Telephone interview by author, 27 February, College Park, MD.


