

Why won't anyone talk? Assessing disinterest in focus group discussions about naming and addressing tokenism in the workplace

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BACKGROUND

Tokenism is the practice of doing something superficially in support of a minoritized group to give the appearance of equity and prevent criticism. Despite extensive recruiting for a study on tokenism in LGBTQ+ oriented organizations, we did not get participation. This project examined why.

METHODS

The plan:

In collaboration with an administrative team that works with a network of over 70 non-profit organizations in New York State, we planned to investigate how tokenism operates internally and externally in organizations that serve the LGBTQ+ community. We proposed holding 12 focus groups with organizational staff.

The problem:

Despite extensive outreach and months of recruiting, only one person signed up for a focus group.

The pivot:

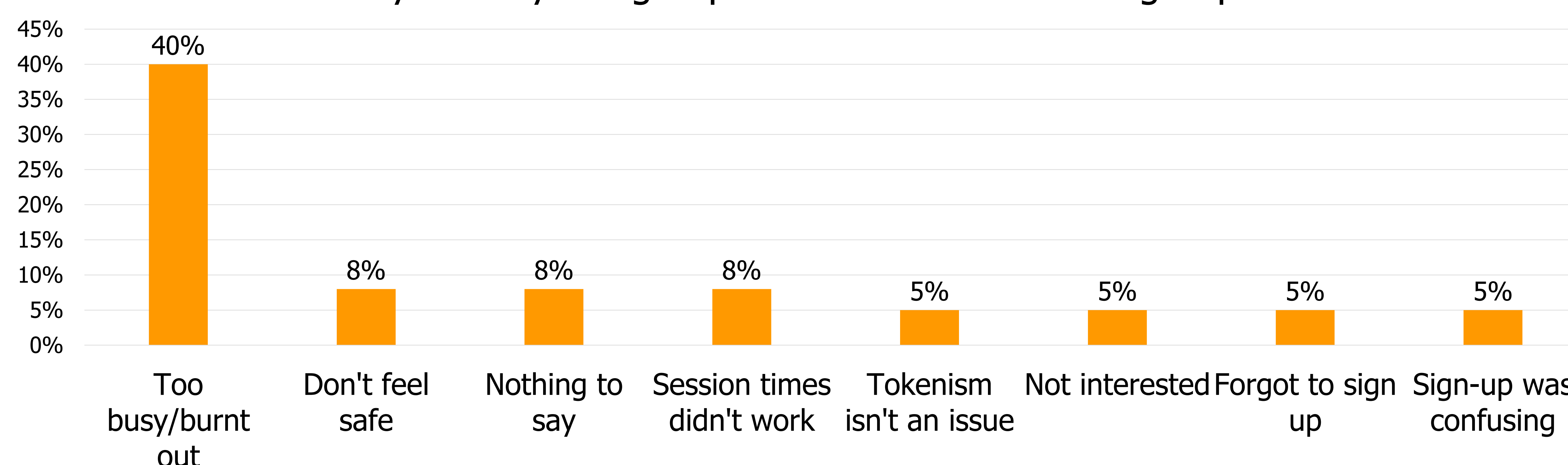
We created an anonymous survey of four multiple-choice questions to examine why individuals did not sign up for focus groups and recruitment suggestions. We distributed paper surveys to organization representatives at an in-person meeting in April 2023.

Participants who picked up a survey received a set of colored pencils. Completed surveys received a coloring book from a Rochester-based BIPOC artist as an incentive.

RESULTS

41 meeting attendees completed the survey
42% reported hearing about the tokenism project
40% reported being too busy/burnt out to participate

Why didn't you sign up for the tokenism focus groups?



Free-text responses for 'other reasons' included:

- "whats the outcome we're looking for and how do we get there?"
- "there is so much happening & I am disappointed with the equity efforts of my org"
- "translating my experiences of tokenism is heavy work. I would like to participate, but don't feel i have adequate resources re: support, selfcare, aftercare, etc"
- "need approval of supervisors"

The majority (58%) of respondents affirmed rescheduling focus groups. Fifty-eight percent reported they may not attend, but would share information with colleagues and 43% would sign up themselves.



Free-text responses for 'other reasons' included:

- "tools offered to support the difficult labor of discussing lived experience"
- "hesitant because responses might get back to management at my job"
- "more privacy & provide supportive follow-ups"

CONCLUSIONS

Tokenism may have a harmful effect on equity within organizations and in the communities that organizations serve.

Asking staff with marginalized identities about tokenizing experiences may retraumatize and/or jeopardize current employment.

Ensuring safety, confidentiality, and after-care support were missing from our recruitment and implementation.

Future efforts will clarify the study's outcomes and work to highlight safety, confidentiality, and after-care considerations during study implementation.

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