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Rethinking the Concept of "Minority": A Task for Social Scientists and Practitioners

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Although sociologists have articulated the components and scope of the "minority" concept, many of the characteristics are no longer germane. Originally those placed in the category were viewed as subordinate and as possessing cultural or physical qualities not approved or preferred by the larger population. There has been no systematic questioning of ingrained seductive words and value-based constructions like "minority". This brief critique offers an evaluation of the "minority" conception that is so pervasive in the social and behavioral sciences, the print and broadcast media, politics, and the entire language system.

INTRODUCTION

In current academic discourse, feminist theory and critiques of post-modern thinking have ushered in reappraisals of conventional language, especially about gender. However, this has not led to objective interpretations of how men and women of non-white racial and ethnic groups translate their experiences. Nor has there been any systematic questioning of ingrained seductive words and value-based constructions like *minority*. In the United states, at least, this latter notion represents a classic example of an ambiguous concept that is accepted as theoretically sound and scientifically measurable in the social sciences and given credibility in matters of policy. As an abstraction most often regarded as virtually synonymous with race, "minority" is actually nonscientific and devoid of conceptual clarity and empirical validity.

American Sociology has played a major role in generating a specialized vocabulary and in giving legitimacy to concepts

like "minority." The field evolved from European philosophical roots as a social science permeated with values. Numerous biased terms and expressions like "invasion" and "visibility" comprised the original sociological frames of reference. The preoccupation in the United States with racial differences institutionalized the minority idea and resulted in the absence of historical explanations of causal social forces (e.g., slavery, discrimination). Consequently, existing sociological concepts and theoretically derived assumptions linked to "minority" are without historical or scientific merit. Actually, they have suppressed realistic and unbiased examinations of racial attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies.

Although sociologists have articulated the components and scope of the "minority" concept, many of the characteristics are no longer germane. Originally those placed in the category were viewed as subordinate and possessing cultural or physical qualities not approved or preferred by the larger population. The assertion was that minorities have a shared sense of group identity. Interestingly, this was overlooked as also being a feature of majority groups. The initial definitions emphasized being self-conscious and viewing themselves as "objects of collective discrimination" (Wirth, 1945: 347). In establishing the boundaries of *the identity of the excluded*, Wirth stated that they possess an inherited status. Without presenting the influences of divergent power relations, he and other sociologists thought of a minority as a group singled out from others for "differential and unequal treatment." This formulation included biology, culture, structural, and perceptual aspects. Several of the traits assigned to "minorities" covered all racial and ethnic groups and economic classes including the "power elite."

Basically, the label "minority" is engulfed in political connotations and refers to behaviors as well as biological traits. As a multidimensional and generic notion, it encompasses behavior but negates ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness. Additionally, this linguistic tool does not denote the vast contrasts that are characteristic of ethnic and racial group life. The variability embodied in ethnic traditions, lifestyles and group modes of affirming collective identity are not reflected in the assorted meanings of "minority" (Aguirre and Messineo, 1997; Snyder, 1990; Wright, 1997).

Moreover, "minority" does not accurately incorporate the histories and biographies of diverse ethnic and racial populations such as American Indian, Mexican American, African American, Puerto Rican, and Asian American (Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Garcia, 1997; Harjo, 1993; Mendoza, 1994; Snipp, 1989; Wilkinson, 1990). That is, the concept appears to have no relevance to ancestral linkages that provide a sense of family and community unity. An underlying thesis of this discussion is that social science interpretations of identities must be group-centered as well as racially specific. Ethnic affiliation and racial attachment, as opposed to externally ascribed "minority" status, are essential parallels with social placement and self-images (Plummer, 1995; Ramsey, 1991).

This brief critique offers an evaluation of the "minority" conception that is so pervasive in the social and behavioral sciences, the print and broadcast media, politics, and the entire language system. Given my long-term interest in the language that frames sociological theory and research, an insightful review of the concept in *Race, Gender & Class* (Nibert, 1996) was well received. While I have a different perspective on alternatives, the author correctly described "minority" as a "sociological euphemism." In the discussion, the evolution of the abstraction is interpreted with respect to the reasons for the sustained reliance on this particular term instead of "oppressed groups." The author states that "the term [constitutes] a social scientific euphemism for the victims of widespread exploitation, injustice and incalculable hardship and suffering . . ." Highlighting trends involving possible substitutions, aspects of the thesis offer a starting point for this discussion (Nibert, 1996: 131).

As this critical analysis will show, unlike other immigrant populations designated as minorities, African Americans have encountered a myriad of barriers since their forced arrival. Throughout the twentieth century, obstacles to upward mobility and equal life chances have confronted them. No other ethnic group in the United States has been enslaved or has faced perpetual racial segregation and discrimination in all institutional domains. Only the American Indian's history approximates this legacy, to some degree. Against this background, the reasons given for continuing the "minority" classification in the 21st century are overshadowed by historical forces. The expression

simply does not enable understanding of the immense cultural and racial heterogeneity that typifies American society.

OBJECTIVES

Contextualized within the culture of the United States, two central questions guide this argument. (1) *What are some major deficiencies associated with the minority concept?* (2) *How can the minority idea be transformed and removed from the social science vocabulary?* Another important question guiding this inquiry is *what are the scientific and policy issues associated with the word minority?* At the outset, the basic principle is reaffirmed that identifying individuals by their race or ethnic background is no less important than recognizing them by their gender or sexuality. All of these indicators provide a sense of the essence of individuality and communal solidarity. Self-knowledge and feelings of personal worth are enhanced through articulating the components of one's identity. Learning is similarly advanced by becoming cognizant of the specific groups comprising the society.

An important related scientific and "sociology of knowledge" issue is why the word "minority" has been retained in the sciences and in the language system itself. While used in other countries where it most often refers to language minorities, in the United States the concept has always been ambiguous and value-laden. Since its origins, the word has been framed in negative imagery. Juxtaposed with problems of definition, typically those so labeled have been depicted as lacking in political and economic power. In addition, they have been considered as occupying the status of the culturally disadvantaged. Each of these descriptors carries a stigma (See: D'Amico, 1997; Goffman, 1963; Riggs, 1997; Snyder, 1990).

POLITICAL LANGUAGE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Science and the various professions have special modes of constructing and using language. Among the principal requirements in scientific reasoning is that concepts should be reliable, capable of measurement, and empirically verifiable. Correspondingly, clinical fields seek to rely on relatively precise diagnostic tools for behaviors and emotions. In spite of the particular

paradigms in disciplines like sociology, innumerable words are obscure and without a reality basis. "Minority" is one of the key words that is imprecise.

The clarity and logic of concepts is a critical area in the social and behavioral sciences. While "minority" is applied incessantly, the category lacks concrete indicators and its miscellaneous attributes tend to be flawed and conflicting. Thus, given the wide variability among the diverse groups to whom the label refers, problems emerge with its application in social science paradigms. The difficulties disclosed with its usage are multiple. In fact, the contemporary qualities appear to confuse the initial definitions offered by sociologists.

Frequently, "minority" indicates only races (African Americans) or ethnic populations (Hispanics, Asians). At times, it extends to occupationally subordinated groups (e.g., women) and socially isolated populations. Multiracial (biracial persons) and economically depressed persons (unemployed, poor) are subsumed under the minority label. Sexual orientation, physical handicapped status and being white and male or female are similarly classified. It is also applied to processes and changes such as access to college, aging, migrants, opportunities, businesses, rights, issues in mental health, political perspectives *ad infinitum*.

Of special concern in this critical review is the use of the minority concept as representational and as an analytical medium. This interest stems from the interpretations and consequences of the word and its diversified nature as illustrated in the sciences and in the national media. Because "minority" does not meet any of the conventional standards for concept validity, it is an extremely problematic term in sociological inquiry. The numerous referents for the idea are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the array of meanings associated with it produce misleading conclusions. Ultimately, the complications surrounding minority have serious ramifications for social science generalizations as well as clinical practice.

THE MINORITY CHALLENGE

A few selected examples illuminate the contradictions inherent in the use of minority. In an instructive essay by William

Raspberry, a perceptive and influential African American journalist, the mistake is made of using the word "minorities" to denote Blacks only, the group to whom he is referring. The author notes that "Black students at the College of Holy Cross [had] won the right to exclude whites from membership in the school-supported Black Student Union." The theme of the article is "In some instances, separation of the races helps minorities" (Raspberry, 1995: p. A9). However, the essay focuses solely on race.

Similarly, an article appeared in *Black Issues in Higher Education* on the challenges to private scholarships for minorities (Wright, 1997: 14–16). From the title, it was not clear whether the emphasis was on African Americans, sexual orientation, or handicapped status. Actually, the report focused on a student who felt that a community college in Northern Virginia violated the law by preventing Whites from applying for a particular scholarship. A mathematics instructor was quoted as saying that there "appears to be a major hysteria, or fear, of more minority students gaining access to colleges and universities" (Wright, 1997: 16). This comment is obviously not about females and gender issues nor sexual orientation. For, the single "minority" group presented is the African American.

Numerous studies have been designed to examine racial and ethnic bias in a variety of areas from housing and the occupational sphere to advertising. With respect to the latter, a Federal Communications Commission report on this subject appeared in *USA Today* (January 14, 1999). The findings revealed that "advertisers regularly discriminate against minority-owned radio stations and those that have large African American or Hispanic audiences" (Alexander, 1999). Throughout the article, the word *minority* preceded the following: radio stations, listeners, consumers, media, hiring, and magazines. But, as one examines the results from the study by the Civil Rights Forum on Communications Policy, the consumer groups, stations, and audiences discussed are African American and Hispanic. In this context, minority was used as equivalent with race since the focus was on just two racial populations. Questioning such research as well as the presumption that minority is a useful classification provides a foundation for this discussion.

Finally, a *USA Today* report pertained to Denny's becoming one of the first advertisers to launch a campaign about race. The author stated that "with a high number of minority customers, Denny's can't ignore them" (Horovitz, 1999: 1B). Again, the primary "minority" being referred to is the African American. In most of the examples relating to African Americans, "minority" is used as a politically correct term to conceal racial specificity. As a matter of fact, the concept epitomizes one of the notable forms of politically correct language permeating sociology and the broader culture. The choice of this word marks the "sociological imagination" as well as the American national consciousness. Nibert (1996: 133) noted that "sociologists have been reluctant to call 'minority groups' oppressed because such a perspective is outside the range of accepted political discourse." Regardless, the term is not only deceptive in advertising but is inaccurate in the social sciences and inappropriate for policy decisions.

In earlier writings, I have used "minority" as a result of indoctrination in sociological reasoning and forced compliance with editorial stipulations (Wilkinson, 1980a, 1980b, 1987b). However, when I incorporated the term in an examination of psychotherapy, its coverage was clearly restricted.

" . . . white therapists [must] be trained to understand the multicultural history of the society and to cope with racial and ethnic biases and race/sex role stereotypes, since these have an impact on the therapeutic experiences of minority women." (Wilkinson, 1980b: 297).

Selected issues encountered in psychotherapy with women from economically and educationally disadvantaged strata were explored. A significant void was observed in examinations of therapeutic processes and outcomes with "minority women (i.e., American Indian, Black or African American, Mexican American and Puerto Rican)" (Wilkinson, 1980b: 285). I pointed out that "most studies of racial and ethnic minorities had not been sex-specific." Nevertheless, my principal thesis at the time centered on African American women. Dissonance was evident throughout my usage of the term.

Again, in a demographic review of "Ethnicity" in the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, my hesitancy in using "minority" was

obvious. In order to minimize misrepresentation, in the introduction I stated that:

"To date, most of the information on minority families had tended to mirror biases intrinsic in the nation's dominant culture. To counteract these biases an attempt has been made to incorporate the . . . conceptual frameworks . . . offered by contemporary minority scholars" (Wilkinson, 1987: 183).

"Minority families" were limited to those delineated by their racial heritage and ethnic lineage.

"Minority families differ from those in the majority population on the basis of race, ancestry, and other characteristics. They are part of a socially, politically, and economically subordinated population. Differential treatment is a significant consequence of minority status. The dominant minority groups (or populations) in the United States are Blacks or Afro-Americans, Chicanos or Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos" (Wilkinson, 1987: 183).

As this discussion demonstrates, the word "minority" has substantial variation and hence translations. This invites illogical reasoning in its numerous applications. Groups so defined have very few shared attributes with respect to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and/or culture. In other words, minimal social and behavioral traits are held in common. Most groups detailed as minorities have separate class positions, racial and ethnic origins, family backgrounds, and life styles. Likewise, exposure to the opportunity structure and with oppression vary. Only one population assigned minority status in the Americas has ever been subjected to slavery and centuries of systemic racism (Darity, 1996; Dyson, 1997; Frankberg, 1993; hooks, 1998; Hutchison, 1994; Levy, 1998; Reed, 1992; Wilkinson, 1987).

A MISSING DIMENSION: HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Dissecting the minority construction, a lack of understanding or even acceptance of macro-social forces and power differentials is evident with its use. Certainly, the impressionistic notion nullifies the effects of a post-slavery culture and the prevailing

race-based and class hierarchy. Anchored within the matrix of economic inequality, the minority idea does not allow for the residual outcomes from race and class-related disparities. Using it to suggest sex/gender or behavior has an entirely different set of meanings and outcomes than applying the classification to ethnic and racial populations.

In most basic texts on race and ethnic relations, a "minority group" is defined as one that "has restricted power and an inferior status" or is "any group that has less than its proportionate share of wealth, power, and/or social status" (Farley, 1995: 7; Marger, 1991: 44–54). Size is usually not considered as the most important sociological factor. Thus, a minority group is one that

"experiences a pattern of disadvantage or inequality; has a visible identifying trait, and is a self-conscious social unit. Membership is usually determined at birth and group members have a strong tendency to marry within the group" (Healey, 1995: 14).

Introducing the "visible trait or characteristic" that justifies mistreatment by the majority population, the above definition blends with "blaming the victim" assertions. Presumably, the traits may be of a variety of types ranging from cultural to physical or combinations of the two. Depending on the perspective, some groups are called ethnic minorities, while others are referred to as racial minorities. "The visibility factor" confirming membership in a particular racial or ethnic group has been explained as central to the minority thesis (Wirth, 1945). However, more recent interpretations maintain that minorities are determined not merely by race or ethnicity but by "sex, physical disability, lifestyle, or sexual orientation" (Farley, 1995: 7). Despite this, the historical and contemporary relationships between people of African and European descent are completely unlike those of any other groups so categorized.

Concentrating on visibility and embarrassed self-awareness does not permit grasping the pervasiveness of racial animosities and associated forms of prejudicial treatment. These are entirely separate social processes from the discrimination against groups because of their behaviors or physical limitations. Thus,

the perplexing nature of "minority" is revealed in the virtually opposite groups included in its coverage.

In the final analysis, groups presented as minorities have faced vastly dissimilar patterns of acceptance and integration as well as exclusion and residential isolation. Further, intolerance and segregation have always been more injurious and permanent for African Americans than for any other ethnic Americans, regardless of social position or "visible" traits. Therefore, highlighting populations by their actual identities situates them within a narrative frame along with the dilemmas linked to the ethos of equal opportunity. With respect to the limited choices facing women of any ethnic or racial heritage, the minority conception calculatedly omits the intersection of class, gender and race (Wilkinson, 1997).

Probing the content of "minority" permits viewing it as depriving groups of their lived experiences. Its incongruous meanings have been created and reaffirmed by those who have not been among the economically, politically, and/or racially hindered populations. As pointed out earlier, the concept is devoid of historical specificity. Neither the aftereffects of American slavery on self identification nor the influence of the class system on economic status can be explained through its use. No provisions are made for interpreting the circumstances surrounding contemporary inequities that are repeated by other groups also classified as "minorities." Therefore, past and current disparities in opportunities and privileges are discounted through reliance on this impressionistic label. Since it is embedded in the political culture of the United States and hence in the social sciences, questions will be raised when confronting its idiosyncratic and ideological nature. Significant adjustments will be encountered by attempts to replace it since "minority" has been retained through custom and practice. Rationales will proliferate for preserving the concept in spite of the justifiable quest by groups to reclaim and define their own identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Researchers, clinicians, and teachers must seek ways to incorporate race and ethnicity in all relevant contexts and omit

entirely the "minority" concept. Since race is such a highly sensitive subject in the United States, a host of avoidance strategies restrict weighing its impact. On one hand, its influence is pervasiveness throughout American society and culture. On the other, the "minority" idea negates this reality. Fields that emphasize research and document identity issues must be among the first to reappraise the diffuse "minority" constellation.

Insisting on race and ethnic precision and race-consciousness is fundamental for addressing in a meaningful way economic and status disparities. The "minority" tag cannot yield solutions to issues bearing on racial injustices in the United States. Policies cannot be based on obscure ideas or presumed neutrality in the identification of groups in need. Specificity is imperative in policy formulation (Allen, Hunt and Gilbert, 1997; Culp, 1994; Reed, 1992; Rhode, 1997; Snyder, 1990; Wilkinson and King, 1987; Wright, 1997). With respect to this, in an examination of the Banneker scholarship program at the University of Maryland, researchers found that race-specificity remains necessary. This recommendation was made because of past, present and cumulative discrimination against African Americans (Allen, Hunt, and Gilbert, 1997). In other words, race-conscious policies in higher education are sound and necessary.

Scholars who explore language have described words as indicators of power and privilege. Ruling classes and majorities engage in identity dialogue that continually estranges existing disenfranchised and disadvantaged populations (Riggs, 1997). Thus, "minority" is substantively Eurocentric and reinforces erroneous racial assumptions. Along with its negative referents, the absence of commonalities among those so classified makes the word political and lacking in theoretical usefulness. Since "minority" is so deeply grounded in the American language system and psyche, as stated earlier, inevitably any change will become an arena of controversy.

Particularizing groups in the United States within the context of their racial and ethnic backgrounds is past due. No systematic evidence exists indicating that in this country, American Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Asian and African Americans prefer assigning themselves a "minority" image or status. Rather, their orientation is toward the distinctiveness of their family

lineage and the racial/ethnic groups to which they belong. In contrast to the vagueness of "minority group" (Nibert, 1996), the self-views of these populations have definitive historical and cultural meaning.

Additionally, the "minority" construction does not lead to any solutions for the numerous social problems correlated with economic levels and racial constraints in the United States. Rational policies cannot be designed using generic categories. Unless words like *subordinated* or *inferiorized* are used, "minority" has no plausible substitutes. Specific group recognition is an imperative in research and in policy formulation. Race and ethnic specificity and race-consciousness are indispensable for addressing problems and major forms of inequality.

Various contemporary perspectives have suggested that traditional modes of thinking have been devoid of the capacity to address the needs and self actualization experiences of diverse populations. This indicates that the different ways that women and men translate their lives is identity related. "Minority" does not convey either personal identity nor historical continuity. In order to accurately incorporate the life stories of women and men of different ethnic backgrounds, interpretations of their uniqueness must be gender-centered as well as racially and ethnically grounded. "Minority" serves as an anachronistic political device that obliterates natural and contingent social distinctions.

The comments presented in this discussion have not been without forethought. Also, they are not presented for continuous argument but rather for self-reflection, learning and understanding. They should prove helpful to those in the social and behavioral sciences and to others who have reinforced illogical constructs. Considering the numerous incongruities in the "minority" concept, scientists and practitioners will have to dissect all applications and cease using it. As noted earlier, while I have regrettably used the word in my early writings, I have sought to discontinue this practice (Wilkinson, 1980a; 1987b; 1980b; 1992).

Currently, the "minority" image is so broad that it includes groups exposed to a whole range of majority beliefs and norms of exclusion. Some of the groups are members of the numerically and politically dominant population. Since science is the study of difference, classifying on the basis of race, ethnicity and economic

class should be normative. Continued attempts to connect, at any level, disabilities, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, economic position and gender under a vague symbol is prejudicial and unreasonable. Describing the experiences of African Americans as characteristic of those encountered by sexual, language or handicapped "minorities" minimizes the far-reaching impact of the country's race ideology.

CONCLUSION

Via the "minority concept, the social sciences are weakened in theoretical logic. For among the predominant problems of the modern era and hence in sociology are those relating to class, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and gender. While all frame social placement and self-conceptions, race is the most challenging and complex. The "minority" idea reduces the scientific challenges associated with careful and objective study of race and racism (Dyson, 1997; Hochschild, 1996; Levy, 1998).

In addition to hindering understanding of the effects of past and present exclusionary processes on identity, the "minority" classification disregards group attachments and the legitimacy of difference. By maintaining this ideologically encumbered and politically correct word, those who embrace it in their teaching impede the imaginations of others. Ironically, the "minority" concept restricts *and* simultaneously politicizes the "sociological imagination."

The unrelenting incorporation of "minority" in scholarly writings and social science language ushers in the need to include ethnic origins and race in scientific analysis. African Americans should be called by their racial heritage which *they may decide* is "Black", Afro-American, or African American. The purposive act of dismissing identity through the "minority" lens eliminates being informed of the ongoing purposive subordination of particular populations on the basis of their race or ethnic status.

Social and behavioral scientists and social workers are products of cultures and distinct populations. They must be able to deal objectively with race, ethnic group membership and racism. To do so, requires immediate abandonment of the "minority" theme. A rational alternative is needed to eliminate it from the

scientific literature, the print media, and the national conversation. When confirming theoretical principles and attempting to facilitate understanding of group differences, taking into account race and ethnic ancestry is mandatory.

Nearing the end of the twentieth century, it is thus imperative that we begin to alter the language and our mind-sets regarding the manifest and latent implications of the minority misnomer. Perhaps, one way to begin is to delineate possible options. The first involves deleting "minority" from the social and behavioral sciences because of its intrinsic biases, lessening of the significance of racialized economic inequality, and elimination of personal preferences. This step alone could improve the scientific credibility of selected disciplines. Retaining obscure and controversial language at the outset of the present century poses an especially compelling paradox for sociology.

The accent on minority standing overrides the necessity for bringing race and racism into research as well as into clinical therapy and social work practice. Dismissing race, ethnic identity, class status, and even gender through repeated use of the "minority" label reduces the ability to understand the authenticity of the life stories of distinct populations. The narratives of those so named are actually eradicated.

Considering gender, the "visibility" component of "minority" is offensive and unsuitable in the social sciences and in other fields. This feature does not contribute toward explaining outcomes bearing on the lives of women of Spanish, Asian, African and American Indian origin, for example. It is chronically misleading and undermines any appreciation of the personal stories of these racial/ethnic women. Recognizing the special identities that they have is much more principled than analyzing them using nebulous symbolism. The internalization of gender roles and ethnic and racial "being" is a central part of the self-definition process for women (Beale, 1970; Garcia, 1997; Morgan, 1993; St. Jean and Feagin, 1998; Wilkinson, 1995).

To reiterate, examinations of racial obstacles are clouded via the use of the term "minority." The word conceals the realities of particular group circumstances. Comparisons among those so typed erase the differential economic and political inferiorization of one population over another. Given this, the most important

recommendation from this critique is that the concept must be instantly dismantled and constructive possibilities introduced that specify individual and collective identities. Ethnic and racial consciousness is a rational choice.

Overall, racial and ethnic specificity could have several positive outcomes: (1) accepting a population's authentic request to be defined and related to in terms of ancestry or other preferred status qualities, (2) facilitating sensible communication and meaningful interaction between the self and others, (3) providing a sense of in-group solidarity for those now portrayed as minorities, (4) enhancing knowledge of American history and the country's rich cultural diversity. These possibilities reinforce the recommendation that the exclusionary motif embodied in the notion of "minority" must be eradicated from social theory, research, and all policy decisions.

In the United States, race, class and ethnicity have been the principal molders of group interaction, work roles, power, and social hierarchy. Historical forces and change have dramatically shaped family life and occupational outcomes. The "minority" idea does not grasp these realities. Greater explicitness in setting priorities can be forthcoming with the deletion of the concept from the social sciences. Expectedly, any move toward change of this linguistic symbol will be an area of dispute and rationalization for its continuation. This is due to the fact that the word is entrenched in the broader cultural mores. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the "minority" idea does not reflect America's racial and ethnic mixture.

Ultimately, the minority marker is not pertinent for dissecting the roots of racial inequality in the employment sector nor biases in the workplace. The term does not account for the stratification in employment nor contrasting occupational advantages among persons within the "minority" category some of whom are labeled on the basis of lifestyles. Several groups in the category have greater opportunities for upward mobility than others. That is, for selected populations judged as comparable, systemic differences in chances for success prevail. Thus, intermingling handicapped status, health conditions, and behaviors with race and ethnic heritage is problematic, unwarranted, and unfair to heretofore disenfranchised racial and ethnic populations.

"Pretending that U.S. society . . . has moved beyond racial and gender biases to meritocracy ignores its long and continuing history of bias and inequality" (Rhode, 1997).

As interpreted in this critical assessment, "minority" is not an appropriate formation. Members of particular ethnic populations do not automatically describe themselves using this figure of speech. In contrast, those so defined by the dominant sector seek to have their stories, encounters, and needs included in analyses of their experiences. Their family and ancestral sagas are important to them. Removing "minority" from the lexicon of the social and behavioral sciences means that clarification in establishing hierarchies of need and sound public policy will be forthcoming.

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