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Disempowering Minorities: A Critique of Wilkinson's 'Task for Social Scientists and Practitioners'

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In this article, I examine Wilkinson's (2000) injunction that practitioners "omit entirely the 'minority' concept" (pp. 124–25). I maintain that Wilkinson's argument disempowers groups—such as gays and the disabled—who have used a "minority" identity effectively, and speciously indicates that African-Americans would benefit from such retrenchment, thereby implying that social justice is a zero-sum game. Rather, "minority" coalitions are effectively pursuing justice for all. Moreover, Wilkinson's deconstruction of "minority" conflates conceptual breadth with conceptual vagueness, and conveniently ignores (or denies) the socially constructed character of "race" and "ethnicity." I suggest that practitioners learn more about the historical development of all of these concepts and honor clients who self-identify as "minority" group members, lest they become alienated from them.

"I didn't raise my son to sit on the back of the bus. You get in there and fight for your rights." (from the movie *Philadelphia*, 1993)

Continued attempts to connect, *at any level*, disabilities, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, economic position, and gender under a vague symbol is prejudicial and unreasonable. (Wilkinson 2000, p. 127, emphasis added)

Why are so many people attached to their marginality and why is so much of their intellectual labor spent developing theories to justify it? Why insist on difference with such rigidity, rancor, and blindness, to the exclusion of the possibility of common knowledge and common dreams? (Gitlin 1995, p. 32)

Introduction

When, in the summer of 2000, I first happened upon Doris Wilkinson's article "Rethinking the Concept of 'Minority': A Task for Social Scientists and Practitioners," I was excited to find that another sociologist was working on the meaning of "minority status." Just a year earlier I had done another literature search and found virtually nothing along these lines (from sociologists!). Based on the title, I eagerly anticipated a thesis that would "re-think" the concept. However upon reading the article I found myself frequently confused and disappointed by the approach taken by my esteemed colleague. While implying that her pursuits are "objective" (p. 115), Dr. Wilkinson here puts the activist cart before the analytic horse, leaving out crucial information that oversimplifies the issues involved and renders her arguments both errant and polemical. The result is a paper that misleads practitioners into thinking that the minority concept is always useless and/or harmful, when from the perspective of many pursuing their vision of social justice it most certainly is neither.

All of this is not to say that I found the article entirely without merit. Dr. Wilkinson is to be commended for what is to me the central insight of her paper, which is to follow Nibert's (1995) lead in indicating that "the minority concept" can at times be obfuscating rather than clarifying. Specifically, Wilkinson argues that people often use the term "minority" when they mean African-Americans. This critique of euphemistic obfuscation is entirely appropriate: Practitioners, and the rest of us, ought always say what we mean. We ought not speak of "minorities" when we mean "Blacks." Dr. Wilkinson also correctly points out that there are important differences in both the historical treatment and current circumstances of the descendants of Africans in America, and that those might sometimes be ignored in a leveling of all groups under the rubric of "minority." To the extent that the excessive and liberal use of "minority" fosters ignorance of important differences between socially recognized groups, such problems ought be addressed, and Wilkinson does us all a service to point this out. (On the other hand, I argue below that that danger similarly exists in categorizing African-Americans with groups under the rubrics of "race" or "ethnicity." This Wilkinson chooses mysteriously—

given Wilkinson and King 1987—to ignore.) Finally, Dr. Wilkinson also humbly subjects her own work to critique, indicating that she too has used “minority” where she might have preferred to use “race” or “ethnic,” and pointing out how we social scientists are forced to use terminology, sometimes based on editorial or reviewer constraint, that we might otherwise eschew.

So practitioners (and the rest of us) should heed Wilkinson’s call to refer to Blacks as Blacks and not euphemistically as “minorities”; but we should all be wary of throwing the minority baby out with the minority bathwater (unless that is exactly what we want to do).

A Brief History of the Broadening “Minority” Concept in America

“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 persons (biracial) and economically depressed persons (unemployed, poor) . . . Sexual orientation, physical handicapped status, and being white and male or female are similarly classified.” (Wilkinson 2000, p. 119)

One of Professor Wilkinson’s problems with “minority” seems to be that it is a concept that is significantly *broader than* “race” and “ethnicity.” Leaving aside her choice here to include Asians as an ethnic-but-not-racial group, I believe Wilkinson here accurately represents the breadth *not* of the minority concept, but of *claims to* the minority concept. She indicates here that “minority” is “extended” to her list of groups. We are not given a specific indication here of who is doing the extending, but I believe that that is important. That is, what is really sociologically important and interesting here is that so many groups are indeed *claiming* minority status (Berbrier forthcoming). Wilkinson gives short shrift to this crucial issue, thereby failing to incorporate a careful analysis of *how and why* the minority concept achieved its historical role and cultural resonance. I put it forth as axiomatic that an understanding of its history and (resulting) obdurate social reality would aid practitioners in deciding how and when to use the term “minority.”

While the first sociological use of the term is usually traced to Donald Young (1932), it was Louis Wirth's (1945) landmark definition—as Wilkinson does note—that clearly became the standard, widely cited and extraordinarily influential on the sociological study of race and ethnicity (McKee 1993). Wirth held that “minority” refers to:

“A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.” (1945, p. 347).

On one level this definition was perhaps the initial effort to denude the term of its numerical connotation and replace it with one of social and economic power. However, Wirth's defining took place in a social context and, as Benton Meyers argued, Wirth was initially trying to distinguish American “minorities” from the idea of a “national minority” (e.g. Albanians in Yugoslavia or Chechens in Russia) in order to lend credence to his [Wirth's] assimilationist view that “minorities need not be disloyal to the state in which they live” and that “they need not have any ambitions to found a state of their own” (Meyers 1984, p. 5). Thus, the “meaning” of term was both controversial and expanding from its very conception.

The Civil Rights Movement of African-Americans became perhaps the crucial historical turning point for the “minority” concept. Historian Earl Lewis (2000) indicates that while African-Americans have been referred to as a “minority” since about 1930, this application was not prevalent until the 1960s. He argues that until Africans came to be considered a part of the nation, rather than alien to it, they could not be considered a minority group within it. Therefore, given the understanding of “minority status” derived from Wirth's definition—with its emphasis on unequal treatment and discrimination—once deemed eligible for minority status, Africans in America immediately became the best example of it, and as the Civil Rights Movement progressed, “minority” became virtually synonymous with “Black” (Gleason 1991). Moreover, by the 1970's “minority” became in effect a “code word” for “Black”: If people referred to “minorities” they

very often meant (and, as Wilkinson indicates, many still mean) African-Americans (Lewis 2000).

However, as we know, the Civil Rights Movement impacted not only the status of African-Americans in this society but many, if not all, movements for social justice (Colburn and Pozzetta 1994). Thus, since the 1960's many "minority" groups who had been frequently also labeled "racial" and/or "ethnic" began to more actively and successfully stake a wide variety of claims, many of these building on the foundation laid by American Blacks (see e.g. Espiritu 1992 on Asian-Americans; and Nagel 1996 on Native-Americans). At the same time, many non-racial and non-ethnic groups—often so-called "deviant" groups—also began to claim minority rather than a deviant status (Berbrier forthcoming), and frequently with the help of professional sociologists. For example, in 1971 the sociologist Edward Sagarin edited a book entitled *The Other Minorities: Nonethnic Collectivities Conceptualized as Minorities*. In this book we see the development of the claim that both "racial and ethnic" and these "Other" groups (e.g. women, homosexuals, the disabled, and hippies) were effectively "minority" groups.

How could such claims be made? It turns out that the clear favorite intellectual basis for the claim was Wirth's (1945) classic definition. While Wirth had himself specified "ethnic, racial, national and religious" groups (p. 350) as the *types* of minorities, his abstract social scientific operational definition left open the door to the possibility of what we may call "minority status claims-making" (cf. Best 1995; Loseke 1999). That is, by defining a subjectively perceived "differential and unequal treatment" as the main criterion for minority status, his *operational definition* was sufficiently broad and abstract that "Others" would use it to lay claim to the territory. In order to ground their claim in an essential reality, Sagarin and several of his contributors deployed similar abstract definitions that specified criteria for "minority status," and applied these to the Other groups, almost invariably finding that the term "minority" was indeed applicable. Thus, Sagarin's volume is a testament to this kind of minority-status claims-making (as was Robert Winslow's 1972 reader *The Emergence of Deviant Minorities*, which also drew explicitly upon Wirth's definition), and began a form of activism that has continued to the

present (Berbrier, forthcoming). Note that this is a long-standing form of activism, and not a “recent interpretation” of the minority concept as Wilkinson would have it (p. 123); the first documented use of the term with respect to gays, for example, was over fifty years ago (Cory 1951). In the intervening years—as Wilkinson notes with some displeasure—numerous non-“racial” and non-“ethnic” groups have utilized the injury and oppression implied by the minority concept to press claims for social justice.

Minority vs. Race vs. Ethnic

(1) On Operational Definitions and Status Claims

From the outset, Professor Wilkinson wishes to convince us that her concerns about the minority concept are based on generally accepted principles of social science: “As an abstraction most often regarded as virtually synonymous with race, ‘minority’ is actually nonscientific and devoid of conceptual clarity and empirical validity” (p. 115). Her first argument here is that “minority” is used synonymously with “race.” To support it, Wilkinson cites research articles that use the term “minority” to refer to specific groups that Wilkinson would presumably classify as “races.” However, the data she then presents actually speak more directly (and accurately) to the point that it is people-in-society (and not only researchers) who frequently neglect to make distinctions between terms like “minority,” “ethnicity,” and “race.” (She analyzes more discourse from journalistic sources—William Raspberry, *USA Today*—than academic ones). While I believe that Wilkinson is properly concerned about this issue, this fact of (what we may think of as) poor terminological choices does not preclude the possibility that the term “minority” *is* (or *can* or *ought to be*) used more carefully by researchers, or people-in-society, or practitioners.

Wilkinson’s second point here also appears reasonable, at first glance. Concerns regarding valid operational definition and reliable measurement of abstract concepts are longstanding in the social sciences and few would question the aim of developing terms that are conceptually clear. The problem here is that Wilkinson seems to see lack of clarity and validity through an extraordinarily selective lens: the “minority” concept is curiously singled out. As

mentioned above, one of Wilkinson's central themes is that the concept of "minority" is just too broad. As she writes:

"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 lifestyles*" (p. 122, emphasis added).

While everything Wilkinson says here seems to be true, there is absolutely no basis for assailing the "minority" concept as the problem. That is, one could easily compose an isomorphic sentence about "culture" or "race"—two terms she notably assumes to be *unproblematic*—that make about as much sense. Thus, if I tell you that "*most groups detailed as 'cultural groups' have separate class positions, racial and ethnic origins, family backgrounds, and lifestyles,*" should we therefore get rid of the "culture" concept?? Indeed, there are few broader terms in our lexicon than culture, yet we do not claim its meaninglessness; rather we decry its misrepresentation. Similarly, I might argue that most groups detailed as "races" have separate class positions, ethnic origins, family backgrounds, and lifestyles. Do we therefore get rid of the concept of "race"? Obviously, if we take to Wilkinson's logic, we will lose a number of important sociological concepts, and quickly.

Wilkinson's argument that all "minority concepts" rely on ideas that are unscientific ("the category lacks concrete indicators and its miscellaneous attributes tend to be flawed and conflicting" [p. 119]) thus seems to be confusing breadth with a lack of scientific verifiability. One wonders by what standard Wirth's definition of minority is not *as* empirically verifiable as extant definitions of "race" or "ethnicity." Relatively speaking Wirth's definition is fairly clear (at least he provides one), and given the plethora of operational definitions of ethnicity and race (e.g. Isajiw 1974, 1994; Smith 1996), it seems unfair to single out Wirth's minority concept, or those that follow directly from it, for ambiguity. The definitions of minority are broad—and intentionally so!—but that does not make them vague.

Furthermore, any group—or any putatively objective researcher—can make *claims* to minority status (or to "ethnic" or

"racial" status for that matter). In theory, each claimant must either adhere to the operational definition or risk that her or his claim will not be recognized as legitimate. For example, Deaf and Gay activists who claim minority status might have their claims recognized more readily than, say, white males who claim to be a minority (Berbrier forthcoming; 1998a) because both social scientists and people-in-society are more likely to recognize the legitimacy of their claims to "subordination" and "discrimination." If there is a debate then, it would be about the accuracy of the *claims*, not the reasonableness of the operational definition. That is what Wilkinson crucially omits: Just because representatives of many and diverse groups claim minority (or "cultural" or "racial") status does not make those concepts any more or less scientifically valid. Indeed, since that initial deployment in 1951, gay rhetors have regularly explicitly drawn upon a Wirthian notion of minority status to posit very *specific operational criteria* by which one would judge gays to be a "minority" group (e.g. Herek 1993; Kameny 1971), and I have noted a similar pattern among the Deaf (Berbrier 1998b). Wilkinson, it seems, would define such social movement framing out of existence.

Now, it bears pointing out that "minority" as it is usually used, is not only a broader level concept (vs. race and ethnicity). That is, one thing that the minority concept does that neither the race nor ethnic concepts do is to specifically *exclude the powerful*. The contemporary definitions that Wilkinson cites bear this out—for example, Farley, in the 1995 edition of his textbook, defining a "minority" as a group that "has restricted power and an inferior status". "Race" usually *includes* the dominant as well as the subordinate, or following Nibert (1995) the privileged as well as the oppressed (as in the "white" race). "Minority," by either Wirth's or Farley's definition, particularly *excludes* the dominant and/or privileged. Hence, one might argue that because it definitively excludes the dominant and powerful, the "minority" concept can be (and has been) effective in uniting diverse oppressed groups. From this perspective, by advocating the removal of the term from the vocabulary of social justice pursuits, Wilkinson effectively advocates a form of unilateral disarmament (by the already relatively powerless).

(2) *On Categories: Separating African-Americans from (Other) Minorities*

Intermingling handicapped status, health conditions, and behaviors with race and ethnic heritage is problematic, unwarranted, and unfair to heretofore disenfranchised racial and ethnic populations. (p. 129)

Another element of Wilkinson's critique of the broad interpretation of "minority" is that it is African-Americans who are hurt: It results in a leveling of grievances and victimization among all groups, and since African-Americans have historically been and continue to be the victims of the most insidious racism, then there ought to be a separation of Blacks from others in policy and social service considerations. She asserts that we must recognize "hierarchies of need" (p. 130).

Indeed, the minority concept may, in a sense, level all those considered minorities: African-Americans are put in the same category as gays, the disabled, Latino-, Native-, and Asian-Americans. But it is unclear how the categories of "race" or "ethnicity" do any less (or, for that matter, how a pan-ethnic category like "Asian" does not do the same to subgroups such as the Hmong [Hurh and Kim 1989]). Thus, when Wilkinson writes that "only one population assigned *minority* status in the Americas has ever been subjected to slavery and centuries of systemic racism" (p. 122, emphasis added), I could again replace the term "minority" with either "race" or "ethnicity" and the statement would have similar implications: "*Only one population assigned racial/ethnic status in the Americas has ever been subjected to slavery and centuries of systemic racism.*" Whether as "minority" or "race" most people would likely immediately recognize that both Wilkinson and I are referring to African-Americans; yet in my example Blacks *still* are put in the same category as, say, Asian-Americans. The "hierarchy of need" applies to either categorical assignment. If we are talking about a zero-sum competition among disadvantaged groups for scarce resources (a questionable assumption), then the "minority" (or "race" or "ethnicity") concept may indeed disadvantage African Americans, or at least give insufficient attention to the particular history and plight of

Blacks in America. However, even granting Wilkinson's point, this does not discredit the minority concept any more than the related concepts (although it may increase the number of people dividing up the zero-sum pot).

Think about it this way: one might argue that the experiences of (non-African-American) gays and of (heterosexual) African-Americans are different. Yet if one were so inclined, one might also argue that the experiences of a Black female engineer in Burlington, Vermont and a Black male construction worker in Birmingham, Alabama are different (not to mention the different experiences of gays in these places!). We could continue to parse out more and more specific identities until, we get down to Identity—the individual. This approach turns sociology slowly into psychotherapy: "it's all your own subjective experience, everybody's experiences are different, everyone reacts differently to it, etc . . ." I imagine Wilkinson does not want to take us down that road.

My point is that *of course* the Black female engineer in Vermont and the Black male construction worker in Alabama also likely *share* certain cultural experiences and are also reacted to in similar patterned ways by others: *that* is what holds them together. *That* is what we all, including (I believe) Wilkinson, are recognizing when we say that it is meaningful to *categorize* these people together as "African-Americans." That is why sociologists can reasonably speak of groups or of collectivities in the first place. Presumably, when Wilkinson argues that it is meaningful to categorize people by "race," "ethnicity," "class," and "gender," she is implying the same: that all those classified within a race, ethnicity, class, and gender share *something—but not everything!* (For that "something" we would need to know Wilkinson's operational definition of race, ethnicity, class, and gender). Certainly, these people are not all the same, and each of these categories comprise many different kinds of people from many different segments of society.

The concept of minority follows an identical logic! It holds that anyone can see that there are differences between white gay males and Black heterosexual females, *and* that there is also something they share—such as experiences of discrimination, of hatred, of fear of violent attack, of rights-violations—just for being who they are. For some this has come to be understood,

in effect, as the “minority” experience, and they often argue that there is something to be gained by recognizing the broad patterns in society that lead to this. The term becomes a resource by which people can then work together on certain things that they share—e.g. perhaps the need for hate-crimes legislation, anti-discrimination enforcement, or sensitivity training for criminal justice workers.

Wilkinson seems to assume that throwing out the minority concept entirely will somehow lead to a greater good, or at least a greater good for African Americans. Clearly I am skeptical about whether the pursuit of social justice is this kind of zero-sum competition. In Professor Wilkinson’s view of the world, there is no minority baby, only minority bathwater. I believe that the concern ought rather be that the euphemistic use of minority *instead* of Black causes leveling; if minority were used more judiciously perhaps to *include* Blacks (but not become all that Blacks are) then it might be less of a leveler and more of a coalition concept—a Rainbow Coalition, if you will, or a Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. While there surely may be instances when such separation would benefit Blacks, others would argue—as William Julius Wilson does in *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide* (1999)—that the lack of common cause and common front with others claiming victim status will ultimately hinder the path toward social justice for all, including and perhaps especially for African-Americans (cf. Wilson 1999, p. 8). I would suggest that there might be times when African American political activists will find it much more efficacious to combine efforts with others—be these other “racial” or “ethnic” groups such as Latinos (e.g. Affirmative Action in California), or with gays (e.g. hate crimes legislation). Yet Wilkinson seems to point us in a different direction, arguing that such attempts at connecting groups “at any level” are “prejudicial and unreasonable” (p. 127).

I wonder why Dr. Wilkinson prefers a hierarchy of need *rather* than an umbrella minority concept. Why not a hierarchy of need *in addition to* minority coalitions? I am flummoxed. Wilkinson seems to be miffed that some are groups making progress by using “minority status” claims, and she presumes this advantage is gained at the expense of African-Americans rather than, say, the privileged groups in society, or at the expense of no one at all.

(3) *On Ontological Gerrymandering and the Social Construction of Categorical Statuses*

“Ethnic affiliation and racial attachment, as opposed to externally ascribed ‘minority’ status, are *essential* parallels with social placement and self-images.” (Wilkinson 2000: 117, emphasis added).

In a classic critique, Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) take those who deconstruct concepts and practices to task when they, in effect, play favorites by assuming the validity of some concepts while failing to apply symmetrical critical analysis to others (Bloor 1991). While we are likely all guilty of this at times, this problem is especially of concern when the concepts are conceptually linked (e.g. psychology vs. parapsychology [Allison 1979], or science vs. religion [Gieryn 1983]). In the context of Wilkinson’s paper, we might observe here that there is no reason whatsoever to believe that “race” or “ethnicity” are any more real, or any less “political” conceptions than “minority status.” Yet Wilkinson seems entirely comfortable with that assumption.¹

One suspects however that these concepts are indeed just as real and just as political, YET somehow in ways that are more to Wilkinson’s liking, and hence not subject to her analytical skills. Wilkinson thus ably deconstructs the minority concept, but some of her key weapons are the putative inherent reality of “ethnicity” and “race,” exhorting in her conclusion that “researchers, clinicians, and teachers must seek ways to incorporate race and ethnicity in all relevant contexts and omit entirely the ‘minority’ concept” (pp. 124–25).

Wilkinson thus essentializes race and ethnicity, while deconstructing minority status. But on what basis? The dynamic and burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on the construction of such “categorical statuses” (Calhoun 1993) indicates extraordinary fluidity in concepts of ethnicity, race, and nation, as well as minority status (Berbrier forthcoming; Hobsbawm 1990; Davis 1991; Nagel 1994; Loveman 1999; Rockquemore and Brunson, 2002; Roosens 1989; Stern and Cicala 1991). Each of these terms have a history. “Race” once distinguished the Irish from the Jews; now it combines them (Brodkin 1998; Jacobson 1998). The distinction between “race” and “ethnicity” was initially made eighty years ago (Woolfer 1933) to recognize the different histories of

American Blacks and white immigrants, yet came to connote the absence vs. presence of culture, and to reflect many white Americans' (and white sociologists') long-standing prejudicial assumption that African-Americans had long ago lost—and thus no longer possessed—any distinct culture, other than “American” (McKee 1993). “Ethnics,” on the other hand, came to be immigrants and active carriers of vibrant and distinctive cultures from other places. As a distinct African-American culture came increasingly to be recognized, “ethnicity” (as well as “race”) would be used to describe them as well (e.g. Singer 1962)—a point of significant contention (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Loveman 1999; Omi and Winant 1994; Wilkinson and King 1987). My point is that over the years, these terms—“minority,” “race,” and “ethnic”—have all become common forms of identification both in sociology *and* in the wider culture. The distinctions among *all of them* have long been murky, contested, variable and politically charged. The inevitable conclusion from any examination of the literature is that “race” and “ethnicity” concepts are no more ontologically suspect than “minority” ones. Minority is a broader concept, and perhaps more culturally resonant (Berbrier 1998c; Snow and Benford 2000), but that makes it no less real. Indeed, some might argue that it is its very resonance, force, and obduracy that make the idea of minority most “real”—sociologically speaking (Latour 1987). That this empirical observation irritates Wilkinson does not make it any less empirically observable.

Conclusion

The problems with Wilkinson's piece then, are less the issues it broaches—which are important and valid—than the extraordinarily strident and sweeping conclusions it reaches—which are overdetermined by the neglect of crucial and complex issues. The strength of Wilkinson's suggestion is in the idea that people need to be aware of the constructedness of categories, the fluidity of their definition, and the danger of assuming members of categories to be identical. The weakness of her formulation is in her insufficient assessment of the pragmatic and political aspects of the term, the obfuscation of her political agenda behind claims to scientific objectivity and expertise, and in the ontological gerrymandering whereby she decries the heterogeneity of those labeled

“minority” while showing no concern about the heterogeneity of those labeled “race” and/or “ethnic.”

Recommendations

Although I am generally in accord with Nibert’s (1996) suggestion that we replace “majority/minority” with “privileged/oppressed,” I advocate here imposing neither the retention nor the replacement of the “minority” concept. My position is that the “minority” concept is a social reality to many people in society and that practitioners would do well to remain sensitive to this, while working to be clear and direct about what they mean to say. The existence of broad socially constructed categories of “races” and “ethnic” groups does not preclude the existence of a broader socially constructed category of “minority” groups, and it has turned out that the very breadth of the term has made it a useful rhetorical resource for coalition politics. This empirical observation has nothing to do with whether you as a practitioner, nor Wilkinson or I as academics, like those politics! Furthermore, it follows that the idea of minority rights is no less real than the ideas of “racial” or “ethnic” rights. In terms of rights, all of these might be categorized under the even broader rubric of what we often call human rights. (And surely Professor Wilkinson would not have us get rid of that concept too, nor argue that “human” has no meaning because it is too vague a concept).

In the end, what practitioners have to understand, to get back to the epigraph and Todd Gitlin’s (1995) concerns in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, are the implications of Wilkinson’s argument for the fragmentation of justice activism, and the idea of coalition. Gitlin is concerned about a balkanization of oppressed peoples from divergent backgrounds and situations when they would do better to recognize that they usually aspire to similar dreams of justice, peace, material well-being, and lives free from the fear of hate crimes. The pursuit of those is precluded when we over-emphasize differences, and when we not only emphasize victim status, but spend most of our energy debating who the most victimized are rather than pursue justice itself.

Certainly gays and Blacks and Deaf people should not be reduced to each other. But to ask practitioners to simply stop using

the term, period—to tell a Deaf or a lesbian client who claims to be a member of a “minority” group that “you are not a member of a minority group”—seems, after so many years of struggling to allow people to identify themselves *on their own terms*, rather imperious. I would suggest that practitioners be wary. If the dominant approach becomes purely what Dr. Wilkinson suggests, then the result, unless people are very careful, may be severely strained relations with those who deploy the “minority” label with vigor and with the aim, in their minds at least, of social justice and human dignity.

Note

1. Generally I would argue that Woolgar and Pawluch take their idea of ontological gerrymandering way too far—effectively denying the possibility of talking about any reality—and cast my lot with the “contextual” constructionist school proposed by Best (1993). Nonetheless, I believe that Woolgar and Pawluch’s point has been so influential because it sensitizes us to exactly the kind of *asymmetrical* analysis that Bloor (1991) had earlier indicated, and that I believe Wilkinson is up to, whereby some concepts that are generally accepted as comparable on the same plane of reality as others, are either mysteriously, ideologically, or politically favored over those others.

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