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The Clinical Irrelevance and Scientific Invalidity of the “Minority” Notion: Deleting it from the Social Science Vocabulary

DORIS WILKINSON*
(conclusion by JOHN SIBLEY BUTLER)

A systematic socio-linguistic and historical analysis of the minority label reveals its multiple irregularities and imperfections. These encompass a misleading array of vastly dissimilar nationality or group designations and the erroneous comparison of behaviors and life styles with racial status. As it is currently applied in U.S. political culture and in a variety of disciplines including sociology and social work, the concept has virtually no substantive meaning nor reality-linked usefulness. A thorough appraisal of the consequences of the perpetual reliance on the notion demonstrates that it eradicates ethnic cultural diversity and ignores historical antecedents and the “lived” experiences of oppressed racial populations.

In fact, the politically framed designation has no psychological nor social significance for targeted racial/ethnic groups. Rather, it comprises “politically correct” language and functions solely for those who seek to equate behavior and conditions with race or ethnic status. Yet, objective examinations clearly show that the word is lacking in definitive dimensions and fails to reference any of the standard rules for logical concept formation and category construction. A thorough knowledge of social science methodology and U.S. history provides insights into the theoretical and research limitations of the minority tool. Thus, in clinical and social science vocabularies, there is an urgent need to disconnect behavior from race for the two are not equal on any criteria. It is simply axiomatic that behavioral frames of reference are completely distinct from race paradigms. The chronic

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insistence on placing racial groups under the minority label constitutes an unusual preoccupation with purposefully defining "the other" without their consent.

Introduction

I have been most pleased with the extraordinarily positive response to my thoroughly researched and objective analysis in "Rethinking the Concept of 'Minority': A Task for Social Scientists and Practitioners." In this follow-up to that milestone article, several interrelated aims are presented. These are (1) to reinforce the fundamental premises introduced in the initial explanation of the deficiencies typifying the minority category, (2) to present the voices of African American scholars and others on the topic of the scientific shortcomings, social policy limitations and clinical meaninglessness of the currently framed minority construct, (3) to re-assert the humanistic need and right of persons of African, Hispanic, American Indian, and other racial/ethnic descent to contextualize and define their own identities without vexing intervention by those who are either members of or who identify with the privileged racial and numerical majority, (4) to introduce a set of valuable references for those who are neither knowledgeable about U.S. history, especially slavery, nor have experienced "Jim Crowism," nor encountered continuing racial discrimination and segregation and the prevailing significance of race (Wilkinson, 1999a), and (5) to support the rational movement to eradicate the use of the all-encompassing minority fallacy that virtually undercuts the unique histories, experiences, and daily dehumanizing encounters of specific racial and ethnic populations in the United States (Butler, 2001; Butler, 1993; Turner, 2000; Strickland, 1979; Wilkinson, 1987). "Umbrella labels do harm when they lump into a single term a variety of diverse people with different problems" (Gans, 1998: 101).

Deficiencies in the Minority Construction

In the spring of 2000, my comprehensive review of the "minority concept" was introduced to the readers of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Work*. In that carefully researched critical ap-

praisal, several fundamental points with regard to its misuse were outlined. One of the guiding themes of my conceptual analysis is reflected in Randall Robinson's observation that "in America, whites have caused all Americans to read, see, hear, learn and select from a diet of their own ideas with few others placed to make suggestions . . ." (2000: 85–86). The basic principles of the initial discussion are reiterated below in order to reaffirm their implications for the social and behavioral sciences as well as for clinical fields and public policy (See Devore and Schlesinger, 1999; Guinier, 2000; King, 1970; Logan, 1990; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Wilkinson, 1999b).

- (1) Minority is a nonscientific word that lacks conceptual precision and empirical soundness. It is also not sensitive to variation. Further, "two-thirds of the world is not a minority . . . [Thus], the word 'minority' for 'nonwhites' doesn't ring true" (Burton, 1995: 351).
- (2) Contemporary sociological paradigms and theoretically derived suppositions linked to 'minority' are without scientific value.
- (3) The label is saturated with political nuances and purposefully denotes behaviors as well as conditions and biological traits.
- (4) The conception cancels out ethnic distinctiveness and does not allow for appreciation of the enormous cultural and racial heterogeneity that exemplifies American society.
- (5) The category is deficient in concrete indicators and its assorted components (e.g., behaviors, conditions, statuses, experiences) tend to be ambiguous and inconsistent. Consequently, it has no applicability in quality scientific endeavor or culturally specific clinical practice.
- (6) Since the designation does not comply with any of the standard principles for concept validity, 'minority' is unwieldy and baseless in sociological inquiry and in the behavioral and biological sciences. For example, "white women who make up a majority of the population suddenly [have become] *a disadvantaged minority* whose demands [are] juxtaposed against Black claims as equal" (Strickland, 1979: 4).

- (7) The word symbolizes one of the most obvious brands of political correctness to have entered the discipline of sociology as well as the broader culture.
- (8) Groups defined as minorities can overlap in numerous traits and characteristics or they may not share anything in common such as sex, racial identify, ethnic heritage, personal biographies, nationality, social class position, gender orientation, chances in the opportunity structure, access to power, family life styles, *ad infinitum*.
- (9) The idea of minority does not allow for the lasting effects of racial and economic class inequities or the present-day consequences of white racism.
- (10) The classification diminishes rational theoretical discourse in the social and behavioral sciences and completely discounts racial and ethnic group identity and hence legitimacy.

Each of these central points is maintained in this interpretive assessment and the hoped for outcome is the permanent removal of the concept from social science whenever discussions of race, ethnicity, and economic class-status are involved. For when the effects of race and ethnic discrimination are taken into account, "to be referred to as a minority is a disadvantage to those so labeled and maintains the power and privilege of those not in such groups" (Turner, 2000).

Minority is unquestionably extraneous to realistically formulated social policy. Certainly, it has zero usefulness in scientific medicine as a tool for categorization, diagnosis and/or treatment (Braithwaite and Taylor, 1992; Logan et al., 1990; Swignoski, 1996; Williams and Ellison, 1996; Wilkinson, 1997). Kendall Wilson—a well-known African American journalist—points to the economic and political consequences of the misused concept. He notes that "some critics of the word have stated that the term has 'watered down' the gains intended for African Americans in affirmative action and set-aside programs on the federal and state levels." In his comprehensive discussion prepared for this essay, John Sibley Butler points to the absurdity of incorporating white females in the *same* category as men and women of African ancestry. Understandably, widespread consensus exists among people of African

descent about this unanticipated outcome of the "minoritization" of their history, status, and identity.

Interestingly, the policy and clinical worthlessness and stigmatizing nature of the 'minority' construction were illuminated in a decision in California regarding its application.

San Diego—The City Council unanimously banned the word "minority" from city documents and discussions, saying the word is disparaging. In supporting the ban, Councilman George Stevens said people sometimes expect less of those who are labeled minorities. Councilman Ralph Inzunza said the term no longer applies because census figures show some areas don't have a majority group. *USA TODAY WEDNESDAY; APRIL 4 2001: 7A.*

Moreover, no contradiction exists between seeking to replace the minority classification and simultaneously talking about race (Edsall and Edsall, 1991; Feagin, 1991; Guinier, 1994; Guinier, 2000; McDaniel, 1995; Robinson, 2000; Wilkinson and King, 1987; Wilkinson, 1997; Wilkinson, 1999a). For those who have studied Demography, U.S. History, Biology, Physical Anthropology, and/or Social Epidemiology, race is a very basic constitutional and socio-demographic variable (Farley, 1996; McDaniel, 1996). In fact, the academic polemics surrounding it have minimal applicability in the biological sciences. "Owing to race and only race, it was American slavery that created [a] bottom rung disproportion, consigning *en masse* a whole people to unending . . . social debilitation" (Robinson, 2000: 79). Additionally, the meaning of race as well as its distinction from the politicized and emotionalized minority concoction are well articulated in "Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line" (Dyson, 1997). Dyson's insightful assessment underscores the historical fact that that there is *only one population in the United States that has ever experienced slavery and centuries of systemic and pathological racism from majorities and 'minorities' and that is the African American race* (Bell, 1992; Billingsley, 1992; Clayton, 1996; Du Bois, 1908; Forest, 1968; Hacker, 1992; hooks, 1998; Reverby, 2000; U.S. Riot Commission, 1968; Watkins, 1997; Wilkinson, 1991; Wilkinson, 1992; Wright, 1941). Also, the earliest Americans or American Indians experienced a protracted racist political culture and its enduring manifestations. No other component of the minority misnomer and basically racially neutral

category can make these legitimate claims (Blauner, 1972; Feagin, 1991; Franklin and Moss, 1994; Locust, 1988):

'Race as *context* helps us to understand the facts of race and racism in our society. Race as a *subtext* helps us to understand the forms of race and racism in our culture. And race as a *pretext* helps us to understand the functions of race and racism in America. They are impure and flexible. . . . I'm using these categories as a tool to analyze race and as a way to describe how race and racism have affected American life" (Michael Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line*, 1997).

William Turner, a product of the University of Notre Dame and one of the leading scholars in the study of Appalachian African Americans, notes that "classifying someone as a 'minority' diminishes individual personalities and devalues unique heritages."

"It is a term of political convenience, a nice-nellyism contrived and promoted by those in power . . . to describe who people are and thus how they are seen, by themselves and by others . . . "Just whom are we talking about when we refer to minority groups? Sometimes we're talking race (Black American) or ethnic groups (Hispanics or Asians). In the next breath—depending on what is politically correct at the moment—minority refers to groups that experience discrimination in the workplace (women, white ones). Multiracial (or biracial) people, economically depressed people, people who are unemployed, white Appalachians, those in the inner city or on reservations are all lumped under the minority label. Then there are minorities such as gays and lesbians, those with physical limitations, and those with handicapped status and mental challenges."

"The power structure has a vested interest in retaining the usage of *minority*. It functions to lump those who are rejected in the same package. How un-American. People are who they are—and not what they are . . . After all, to be called a "minority" robs people of their legitimate ancestral heritage. It diminishes the honor of separate histories and identities and experiences . . . It's not only confusing, it's also downright belittling. The majority of us should know better" (William Turner, "Wrong Word." *Winston-Salem Journal*, June 21, 2000).

At the culmination of the 1970s, William Strickland, a former Research Fellow at the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta

and Professor of Political History in the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, commented on "the personal 'lostness' [that] mirrors the condition of [a] race [that] has also lost its sense of what it once had been." He noted that the calculated political use of 'minority' was a relevant factor. "The minority question is simply one example of the way we have foresworn our right to define ourselves and the nation" (Strickland, 1979: 5).

"Perhaps the best place to begin is at the beginning, and the beginning was . . . when Mrs. Rosa Parks sat down in the white section of a Montgomery bus and sparked a movement, which inspired Black people throughout the nation and fired the imagination of the world . . . Then a most curious thing happened . . . [A] movement whose strength had been its non-materialism, a movement fueled by the Black church and rooted in southern folkways and national Black culture, was turned into its opposite by America's concessions . . . We have lost hegemony over the interpretation of our condition and America's . . . In all this rainbow of ethnicity, race as the basis of identity and privilege in America was downplayed. The black-white question that had convulsed the country for two decades seemed to melt away. Everybody now was the same. We were all ethnics and minorities together . . . But the Black movement and the minority and ethnic movements are not the same . . . Clearly then the term 'minority' is not a neutral designation. It is in fact a political and not a sociological concept. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the conception of Blacks as a minority . . . is an ahistorical and badly flawed analytical tool" (William Strickland, *IBW Monthly Report* May/June 1979).

Conclusion

*Why Black Americans Should Eject from the Minority Concept***

"The term minority has evolved to the point where it is useless as an analytical concept, but very powerful as a funding category. The reason for the former is that a basic rule of classification has

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been violated as commentators and “scholars” try to compare certified minorities with Black Americans of African, European and Asian descent. Related to this is how groups “bait-and-switch” Black Americans in order to get included in the funding minority category. This baiting and switching is an expected phenomenon when resources are involved. As one who was socialized as an American Negro, *and not a minority*, I think that it is time for Black Americans (of European, Asian, and African descent) to remove themselves voluntarily from this confounding and misleading category” (Butler, 2002).

Violating the Classification Rule

“I have been interested in this topic for quite some time, and wrote a piece that appeared in *Society* (Butler, 1990) that related to how “white minorities” have made use of the “just like Blacks” (other groups are hardly if ever included) argument to see themselves as members of a minority (but not Black) category. In a free country, people should be able to identify themselves in whatever fashion they wish, and all people should recognize this. But, like the Ancients taught us, although truth is forever changing, it stands outside of the thinking of people, like a lighthouse guiding one home. After reading the response to Professor Doris Wilkinson’s informative work, it is undoubtedly correct that we need to think about how true the category of minority is to the robustness of all who would like to enter. More importantly, can such a category produce excellent research that stands as the ever-changing nature of truth? It is time for scholars to re-evaluate their tendency to compare all groups (immigrants, gender=white) as well as life-styles and health problems, et cetera. to the *Black experience* because the Black experience also contains elements of these.”

“Perhaps the most interesting trend in the last thirty years is how majority group members gravitated toward the minority label. Undeniably all groups have their own history, but the greatest methodological error is to compare Black Americans (of African, Asian and European descent) to *experiences, behaviors, or health conditions or groups*. For example, in Mitch Berbrier’s “Disempowering Minorities,” the following statement is made: ‘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." This statement is not only revealing in terms of the author's underlying argument but also violates all principles of classification characterizing the research process. One cannot say, Blacks *and* gays or Blacks *and* deaf people, and so on, because there are Blacks that are gays and Blacks who are deaf. As noted in my work, "Homosexuals and the Military Establishment" (1993), a white man who is gay is a white guy with a different sexual orientation and a Black woman who is lesbian is a Black woman with a different orientation than heterosexuals. One should not confuse behavior (even when the source is biological) with racial categories. This is one of the major problems with the "minority" category in research. Of course we can solve this problem by seeing the category as an interaction effect, say for example White gays or White deaf people. But this has not been done systematically (for example, as used in the literature women should be recorded as white women because this is what is meant 100% of the time), and we are left with categories that overlap all groups. Instead of having a clean category, we are left with one that produces confusing results."

"Now realizing this does not mean that *behavior groups*, whether the behavior is biologically determined or not, have not had a history of people not liking them and discriminating against them. This is true whether the behavior comes from Black Americans, White Americans, or Asian Americans. *But the proper theoretical framework is behavior, and not race.* The term minority lumps all groups together, thus creating a 'research' category that can produce results that do not square with the realities of the world, and consequently leading to faulty conclusions."

"For example, one of the interesting things about the title of Berbrier's paper is that he argues that the term minority empowers groups. As I always inform my Asian students, *never ever* let them call you, classify you, as a minority. It strips you of your historical accomplishments and forces future generations to develop a complaint mentality. Let us not forget that it was

American Negroes and Black Americans, not African Americans (who mostly complain) that created the foundation for Black success in America. This success was developed in the face of extreme legal and racial hostility. Over 100 private colleges and universities were formed; business people, safe communities, and professionals were developed. "American Negroes" were not minorities, and they thought differently about the world. At the dawn of desegregation, many "American Negroes" quietly noted that only about 12% of the white population in the old south was "worth" integrating with because the majority did not share their thrust for the education of children. The point is that within America, there have always been people who could act and think like free people, in the face of hostility. Even today, some of the best-ranked private schools in the south are in the tradition of *Negroes and self-help*, while many of the previously all-white state schools of the south struggle for national prominence. Japanese-Americans (though they never developed an emphasis on building institutions or higher education) share historical self-help traditions of building shoulders through the systematic development of business enterprise. Among Europeans, those in the Jewish and Mormon tradition share this historical task of creating the preparation model for future generations in the face of hostility. In an interesting kind of way, the more historical hostility developed toward a group, the better off they are today (as measured by education, home ownership, etc.) if they concentrated on building shoulders. For example, Black southerners faced the greatest amount of legal segregation. Because they did the right thing, their future generations have the highest level of education attainment than those living in other parts of the country today. This is the main reason that Black Americans need to get out of the minority category. This also means re-engineering the history of self-help and the "can-do" spirit that categorized a people who moved from slavery to the building of institutions, community and family."

"Of course the term minority has become powerful because it presents a funding category rather than an academic one. Like the old G.I. Bill of World War II, it carries with it a certain protection under the law. The difference is that earned veteran status, which was a yes/no indicator, was clear and easily measured.

In years past, African Americans replaced Negroes and Blacks and dominated this minority category. But resources have always attracted people. White females also became a minority, reflecting the fact they did not share, as a group, in the wealth and position fashioned by "whites" (males), but rather came to it as a result of birth or marriage. Although they are unquestionably white, their exclusion has led to the creation of the ambiguous phrase "women and minorities." Placing White females in the same category as African Americans is remarkable in itself, and is probably the most significant classification in the last 1000 years. But to be sure, the daily lives of White females, and other white "minority" groups, reflect the background of their primary racial and economic group; some are wealthy, some are comfortable, and some are from poverty backgrounds. That is, any rational analysis of significant life events (housing, marriage, children, friendship circles, etc.) clearly points to the fact that they live their lives as "white" people and are minorities only under certain workplace situations; any reasonable person understands that white females are not minorities in the sense of how the term is used. White men who marry white women do not say that they are married to a minority group member. But this should be expected when so many resources are connected to the concept of minority. While one cannot deny a complicated history of exclusion, groups should draw on their own relevant histories, and not consistently compare themselves to the history of Black Americans because this simply becomes problematic."

"The place of science is to develop theoretical frameworks to analyze where people and groups are, and what science is about is finding truths outside the minds of people, or thinking like the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks. We need to construct a behavioral paradigm that cuts through all racial groups, as opposed to arguing that a person should be placed in a minority group. As a matter of fact, it is because behavior is a different topic than one's race that a meaningful analysis can evolve. Of course, health groups should not require the term "minority" for funding. But behavior acceptance, especially with respect to whites, is one of the most unusual movements in search of a paradigm."

"A behavior model would show how certain behaviors that have not been out in the open or taboo become accepted in

society. Among all racial groups, this includes homosexuality and its struggle with religious and civic institutions, the tattooing of one's body, divorce, living out of wedlock, having children out of wedlock, for example. It is especially interesting to see how certain behavior that was once stigmatized or forbidden has become accepted, or struggles to be accepted. These issues have been tackled in books such as Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* and Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz's *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. Behavior paradigms must be separated from race paradigms because the non-separation leads to mis-informed analyses and interpretations as well as information. If a white behavior group would like to be defined as a "minority" in the workplace, or when a federal grant is on the table, then God Bless America. But Black Americans of African, European and Asian descent need to do something else" (John S. Butler, 2002).

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