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Chapter

Introductory Chapter: Minorities - New Studies and Perspectives

John R. Hermann

1. Introduction

Minorities are a group of people "with unique social, religious, ethnic, racial, or other characteristics that differ from those of the majority ([1], p. 1). Minorities frequently lack access to or clout in the political process. And, while minorities are typically non-white, they are increasingly "complicated by immigration of the growth of multicultural people" ([1], p. 1). Facing implicit and explicit discrimination, experiencing a lack of equal opportunity and disparate treatment, confronting structural and institutional barriers, and suffering through policies based on racial threat theory are deleterious elements of the marginalization and stigmatization of minorities.

The treatment of minorities can be examined from at least four dimensions. First, academic scholarship explores issues of lack of equal opportunity (e.g., race, gender, LGBTIA+, religion, ablism, ethnicity, and other forms of discrimination). Second, research details institutional and structural barriers that prevent equal opportunity in practice (e.g., health care, the criminal justice system, education, voting, government and corporate policies, immigration and migration, and other institutions). Third, racial threat and critical race theory are discussed (i.e., micro-aggressions, majority oppression, minority, and intersectionality). Fourth, strategies for overcoming the unfair treatment of minorities are considered (e.g., affirmative action, civil rights legislation, court decisions, and corporate policies).

2. Four central ways to study minorities

First, academic scholarship details issues of lack of equal opportunity for minorities. For example, in the United States, the Fifteenth Amendment ratified in 1870 was supposed to grant African-Americans the right to vote. Yet, African-Americans could not systematically vote in the Southern states until the codification of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ninety-five years later. Similarly, women were also confronted with systematic discrimination. Associate Justice William J. Brennan of the Supreme Court of the United States laments in *Frontiero* v. *Richardson* (1973) ([2], p. 684) that:

> our statute books gradually became laden with gross, stereotyped distinctions between the sexes and, indeed, throughout much of the 19th century the position of women in our society was, in many respects, comparable to that of blacks under the pre-Civil War slave codes. Neither slaves nor women could hold office, serve on juries, or bring

suit in their own names, and married women traditionally were denied the legal capacity to hold or convey property or to serve as legal guardians of their own children…. And although blacks were guaranteed the right to vote in 1870, women were denied even that right—which is itself "preservative of other basic civil and political rights"—until adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment half a century later.

Like African-Americans and women, other minority groups in the United States faced similar discrimination from the majority. Still, the issue of lack equal opportunity for minority groups transcends one country's borders or one issue area. Globally, refugees, indigenous cultures, gender discrimination, LGBTIA+, and racial and ethnic minorities are just some of the groups that face implicit and explicit discrimination in the public and private spheres.

Second, research details institutional and structural barriers that prevent equal opportunity in practice. For example, in the United States, the Baldus study found that African-Americans were more than four times more likely to receive the death penalty than Caucasians for interracial murders when controlling for other key factors [3]. Globally, minorities do not receive equal health care or outcomes than their majority counterparts [4]. Linguistic minority students in primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools face formidable discrimination—both explicitly and implicitly [5]. And, religious and ethnic minorities experienced genocide based on minority status and as a scapegoat to the country's larger problems (e.g., WWII between 1941 and1945 and Rwanda in the 1990s).

The literature on minorities also examines possible explanations for discrimination (i.e., racial threat theory) and perspectives of minorities by minorities (i.e., critical race theory). Racial threat theory, for example, reveals that the majority uses disproportionate power to oppress minority groups based on the perceived danger (e.g., Jim Crow Laws in the United States) ([6], pp. 1–2). These types of oppressive laws discriminate against minorities in social, cultural, and political ways. It is also found that the more of a minority in a political, social, and cultural system, the more likely the laws are to be more oppressive ([6], p. 2). Still, other scholars share how it is perceived to be a minority by minorities. For instance, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was born out of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to show that institutional and structural factors in society are part of the culprits of discrimination. Equality under the law is not possible, because equal opportunity is defined based on the majority's perspective, not based on the historical discrimination of the minority. CRT is an "academic field of inquiry, a movement, and framework … which has sought to examine the racialized experiences, structures, and outcomes of contemporary Western social democracies" ([7], p. 1). It explains the minority perspective, the majority's explicit and implicit biases, and the dynamic nature of how an individual can change from majority to the minority based on the precise setting of the racial or minority relationship, commonly known as intersectionality ([7], p. 1).

3. Discussion

While progress to mitigate or even end discrimination is not linear, there are intentional and strategic policies that have helped improve minority standing. Social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter), Civil Rights legislation, court decisions, and private actors have helped to begin to root out the deep-seeded discrimination. For example, the politically disadvantaged theory postulates that groups that lack access

to or clout in the electoral process regularly turn to the courts to lobby for or redress their grievances (e.g., [8]). Aboriginal or indigenous groups have lobbied for self-determination in their lives (e.g., [9]). In some instances, aboriginal or indigenous groups have retained some semblance of tribal sovereignty. What is more, minorities on college campuses sometimes fear to speak or reveal their true identities now have "safe spaces" (e.g., [10]).

It becomes increasingly apparent that the study of minorities continues to evolve as we try to unearth the different meanings of minorities, and the myriad of ways that minorities are mistreated. Minorities face explicit and implicit discriminatory behavior in virtually all areas of life. Systemic and systematic discrimination and marginalization of minorities take many forms. Research in STEM, Business, Social Sciences, and the Humanities explore minority oppression and marginalization. Additionally, scholars use qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine majority oppression of minority groups.

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