

Minority Concept and Related Issues

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Abstract: *The article seeks to outline the concept of minority and its various interpretations by focusing on and laying special emphasis on ethnic minorities and the issues related to them. The topic of minority is indisputably well researched although it does not necessarily mean that all core and crucial problems that minorities face have been adequately addressed and given solutions to. The minority subject is one of those that everybody is aware of as being of great importance though less is done in practice than one might expect. More talk, less action-this is the reality.*

Key Words: *minority, ethnicity, acculturation, bilingualism, alienation, cultural determinism, ethnocentrism, ethno-phobia*

So far no commonly accepted definition has been given to the concept of minority. This may be due to the many-sidedness of the word. No one is certain of its precise meaning but everyone accepts the fact that this phenomenon does exist. It seems to be agreed, however, that "the minority is a subgroup within a larger society and that its members are subject to disabilities in the form of prejudices, discrimination, segregation, or persecution at the hands of another kind of subgroup, usually called a majority". [Harris, 1959] But to put it simply, it is a group thought to be different from the larger group of which it is part. In regard to this, we can also refer to Louis Wirth, an American sociologist, who in his work "Morale and Minority Groups" refers to the concept of minorities as to those who because of social or physical and cultural differences receive differential treatment and who regard themselves as a people apart. Such groups characteristically are held in lower esteem, are debarred from certain opportunities, or are excluded from full participation in the national life. Certain groups within our society occupy not merely a disadvantageous position but also tend to develop a conception of themselves as inferiors, as aliens, and as persecuted groups. The existence of such groups in our midst calls attention to the fact that our society has not been fully knit together into a single, integrated, national unit. [Wirth, 1941]

My personal perception of the concept is that of a tree trunk with its numerous branches and sub-branches symbolizing various minority groups. Hence, the minority constitutes the following groups: "ethnic/national minority", "religious minority", "racial minority", "gender minority", "age minority", "sexual minority", "economic minority", "disabled minority", etc. Like trees which are an important component of the natural landscape and play an essential role in producing oxygen, minorities too comprise a significant element or segment of any society and serve as material for building up society and for causing atmospheric changes within it. It would not be worthless to stick to the principle of this Latin motto "E pluribus unum" meaning "Out of many, one" the idea behind it being that out of many groups, people, peoples, races, religions, and/or ancestries and generations should emerge and spring up a single people and nation, and where unity and individuality, national and international, tolerance and respect should coexist.

Narrowing the article around ethnic minorities, we can admit that here again there is no commonly accepted, uniform definition found for the concept, no legal definition in international law, and no consensus reached. Hence, none of the terms has been vetoed, and researchers and politicians are given a "carte blanche" regarding their choice. International documents display a variety of terms for this concept, among them "minorities", "ethnic minorities", "national minorities", "racial and ethnic groups", "religious and language minorities", etc.

Nevertheless, between "ethnic" and "national" preference should be given to the term "ethnic" for the reason that it is more comprehensive, all-embracing and all-inclusive, whereas the latter has some shortcoming; its Achilles' heel lies in the fact that very often it does not imply nor does it include those nationalities that are deprived of their titled states.

“Ethnic minorities” embraces and covers all the minorities different from the mainstream, dominant population, no matter whether they form part of a nation or not. Therefore, “national minority” can be ethnic as well, whereas “ethnic minority” may not necessarily imply national, as is the case with the Kurds, Yazidi, Gypsies/Rroma, Assyrians, Gagauzi. Although, if we delve deeper into the etymology of the terms ethnicity and ethnic group derived from the Greek word ἔθνος ethnos and normally translated as “nation”, it can be assumed that the two terms (ethnic and national) are interchangeable. The concept “nation” has broader meaning, it is connected with the state, but nowadays the interpretation of the concept it’s not so topical because of the multiethnic character of the contemporary societies.

The most simple, uncomplicated, easy to understand and liberal of all interpretations regarding ethnic minorities, in my opinion, is that defined by an Italian researcher and Professor Francesco Capotorti. By ethnic minorities he meant “a group which under-numbers the rest of the population and does not occupy a dominant position in the state; its members are citizens of that country and possess a number of ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics other than the rest of the population, and experience, at least implicitly, a sense of solidarity aimed at preserving their culture, traditions, religion, and the language”. [Capotorti,1991] Standard dictionaries include the following definition of the word minority: “a minority is a group of people of the same race, culture, or religion who live in a place where most of the people around them are of a different race, culture, or religion”. [Collins Cobuild Learner’s Dictionary, 2001] Here there is no mention of linguistic characteristics though, i.e. people who share common linguistic attachments. Another definition is as follows: ethnic minority is a group of people with the same culture and traditions who live in a place where most people have a different culture and different traditions. This is quite a straightforward, simple explanation and its originality lies in its simplicity. [<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/ethnic-minority>] Finally, another source defines ethnicity as a group of people possessing common characteristic physical and mental features and cultural and genetic heritage which differs them from the mainstream group. [Баутиста, 2005] Despite the failure to determine the scope of minority, each and every definition has a right to exist irrespective of its weaknesses and strong points, and our aim is to provide the synopsis of the concept in general.

So, whatever the term, the fact is that this phenomenon is omnipresent as most countries/states in the world are poly-ethnic. And in today’s world of globalization multi-ethnicity is inevitable and it seems to be growing in arithmetic or even geometric progression. Almost every society contains ethnic minorities and the minority status is mostly conditioned by numerical relations but sometimes subordinate ethnic groups may constitute a numerical majority, which means that this, i.e. the quantity is not a decisive factor, either. The minority status is also conditioned by the long-term presence of the minority on the territory where it has lived.

To avoid conflicts and develop tolerance, society must be introduced to the idea of cultural pluralism. This can be reached through the support and contribution of various Government bodies that will help disseminate information calling for appreciation and acceptance of the variety of cultures present in each society.

Minority members often face such phenomena as acculturation, bilingualism, alienation, cultural determinism, ethnocentrism, ethno-phobia, culture shock, etc. This is because minority groups are perceived as “others” in society and also because of the lack of necessary degree of tolerance for one another, and all the above-mentioned phenomena are typical of the perception of the “other” in terms of intercultural communication.

Acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and values, or language preference of another group. Very briefly, it is the exchange of cultural features. Although acculturation is usually in the direction of a minority group adopting habits and language patterns of the dominant group, it can be reciprocal-that is, the dominant group also adopts patterns typical of the minority group. But when cultural practices of minorities deviate from commonly accepted, key behavioural patterns exercised in this or that society, there appears a clash, misunderstanding, and

even hostile behaviour towards the segments of population which break those rules. These segments are represented in our case by minorities. And they either choose to adhere to that culture or ignore it by promoting their own set of cultural patterns. The first case, i.e. adherence to culture makes life easier, just as breathing, walking, and other functions of the body; helps facilitate the transition from your cultural background and experiences to this new life thus making the interaction with the new culture less painful and more pleasing. While in the second case, at some point minorities have to confront challenges and face problems or conflicts- both inner conflict- a private war with oneself, and outer conflict- when interacting with external forces, in our case-the majority. So, the in-between inevitable choice is acculturation, which is in fact a two-way street, a two-way process, and as anthropologist Franz Boas argues "all people acculturate and not only minorities". [<http://www.titudorancea.com/z/acculturation.htm>] There are no peoples whose traditions, customs, morale principles and culture in its broad sense have not been influenced by foreign cultures. It is through intercultural communication that ideas are borrowed, then processed, and adapted to their own needs and environment and develop in their own way. As a result something new is born. But when totally isolated, no peoples can develop fully. This is obvious in the lexis of the Bulgarian language and not few examples can be brought to illustrate the case. It is evident in the loanwords from Turkish- which are a legacy of the period of Ottoman rule. Here we can come across such lexical units as "sapun", "chershav", "kaysiya" "dyushak", "chamashir", "masa", "chorap", "chekmejuh", "tabashir" etc. They are represented by a corpus of some 800 words, basically items of clothing, foods, and household items. The same phenomenon is observed in the Armenian language where one encounters lots of borrowings-again in the course of Turkish rule. Acculturation becomes obvious also in the cuisine. Bulgaria's traditional foods have been influenced by the surrounding region, including Turkey. "Halva", "baklava", "bosa"; popular Bulgarian dishes of Turkish origin include kebabche, kyufte, shishche. However, acculturation process can be both stressful and distressful for minorities.

Minorities are also potential bilingual speakers. So, on the one hand being a minority member is an advantage in this respect. A bilingual minority member acquires and maintains its first language that is the mother tongue during its childhood. Often it may be acquired without any formal education, through certain mechanisms. But with the environment being predominantly monolingual, minority members learn and use the dominant language as bridge language. The acquisition of the mother tongue may be interrupted later in life due to certain circumstances. Bulgarian Romas or the Turkish minority serve as a good example of bilingualism.

There exists a theory in sociology called alienation. This phenomenon can be observed in the context of minorities. Minorities may face the alienation problem, estrangement from and shallow relations with the majority. As a consequence, this leads to group isolation, to difficulties in understanding and adapting to the mainstream culture, mentality, behavioural habits and traditions.

How is the concept of cultural determinism linked to minority concept? The answer is simple: in terms of behaviour in a very straightforward way. The culture in which minority group members are raised determines their behavioural codex by thus supporting the existing theory that it is the environmental influences and the surroundings that determine our conduct and not the biologically and genetically inherited traits. Minorities are also easily susceptible to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the notion that one's own culture is superior to any other. Ethnocentrism is characteristic of all cultures in that "most peoples in the world regard their own culture as superior". [Samovar & Porter, 2001]; it is the tendency to evaluate and interpret other cultures in terms of one's own, and it displays itself vividly in the context of majority versus minority relationship. The notion of ethnocentrism is most likely to cause conflicts if minority members start viewing the dominant culture through the narrow lens of their own culture and judge everything by their

standards. Members are still in the habit of tending to make comparative judgements between their own culture and the dominant one yet assuming that their own is better, normal, natural, standard, or more adequate. The consequences of ethnocentrism can have destructive effects for minorities unless they stop prioritizing their own cultural traditions and/or values. In more simple ways, "ethnocentrism can cause the alienation of co-cultures from the dominant culture". [Samovar & Porter, 2001] If the minority group shuts itself out from the majority/mainstream population or rebuffs changes within its own group because it does not want to comply with the norm/rules set by the dominant culture, or builds protective walls, then it is most likely to have negative effects and outcomes and less likely to get fully integrated into the dominant society. In case of excessive ethnocentrism serious communication problems may arise due to narrowness, intolerance, rejection, and the minority's image may be endangered and perceived in a less favourable light. To avoid unfavourable consequences and effects it is advisable to recall St. Thomas Aquinas who said a century ago, "Beware of the man of one book."

Another common minority issue is ethno-phobia, meaning fear of ethnicity which is synonymous with xenophobia, fear of the foreign. Ethno-phobia denotes prejudice against a specific ethnic group. Xenophobia denotes prejudice against any dominant group that differs by ethnicity, religion or any other characteristics. Whatever the term, it comes to denote intolerance of others which has been the bane of humanity since time immemorial, a cause of continuous trouble and unhappiness provoking wars between peoples.

Thus, today there still remain minority related issues that need to be tackled and dealt with, and these issues are not new-they have simply been overlooked by us. Despite anything, minority members should be fully integrated into society, participate in and actively contribute to all areas of life. But the fact is that the reality is different-the reality is that the overwhelming majority of them face discrimination, exclusion, isolation, even abuse. Many face a range of marginalizing factors. The discrimination they face is widespread, cutting across geographical boundaries and affecting people in all spheres of life and all sectors of society. So, efforts should be made to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and opportunities and to promote respect for the dignity of minority members otherwise all those Conventions will prove useless and ineffective. Media too can play a key role in this and have a say: by illuminating their problems, disseminating information, spreading positive propaganda and putting out PR in order to effect a change in people's attitudes and call for action. Yes, the world is full of confrontations between people, groups, and nations who think, feel, and act differently. At the same time these people, groups, and nations are exposed to common problems which demand cooperation for their solution. [Hofstede, 1991]

"Mankind today is passing through global ethnic shoots the consideration of which is a very complex subject of research for the modern social sciences". [Живков, 2001] Ethnicity and ethnic identity are crucial, all-important issues in the world today and they require our understanding and careful tackling, necessitate a rethinking of the concept. People of different ethnic groups living together in one state can be found now at war with one another, societies- fractured. A. Rosman and P. Rubel in their book "The Tapestry of Culture. An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology" used the metaphor "the tapestry of culture" [Rosman, & Rubel, 1995] when relating to cultures metaphorically. Like the colours and designs of an enormous tapestry where every thread contributes to the pattern, in the same way individual ethnic groups and their cultures ultimately contribute to the picture of society. The metaphor emphasizes the interweaving of all the aspects to form a single, unified whole. The tapestry is composed of many interconnected threads, in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Standing back from the tapestry, one no longer sees the individual threads but an overall design. In today's world of increasing globalization it is no longer possible for a society to live in complete isolation like the Polar Eskimos do. Because of the isolation of the Polar Eskimo and their separation from the rest of the world, they saw only themselves and had no idea of the range and varieties of

human culture. Because they had no mirror of other cultures to hold up to themselves, they could not possibly develop nor form ideas about the basic characteristics of human cultures. On the other hand, paradoxically though it may seem, the more the world seems to be homogenised and mixed and intermingled, the greater is the need for people to assert the way in which their culture is different from others. But in order to gain insight into and to acquire understanding of one's own culture, one must take a journey to other cultures different from one's own. By seeing things from the viewpoint of others, we gain a new perspective, a new view on our own culture. As they say the truth is revealed through comparison. But the truth is not absolute but relative.

Cultures are different in terms of psychology as well as in various other terms in the sense that people of other cultures may think and feel very differently from the way we do, hence Rosman and Rubel compare this journey to other cultures "to Alice's trip through the looking glass. When we look at other cultures that are very different from ours, we are also holding up a mirror to ourselves." Even today despite the worldwide presence and widely spread concepts of fast food, Coke, brand mania, no problems, sex obsession, chat-mania, messages, OKs, or McDonald's and Levi jeans, cultural differences still impress and shock, and people in every culture think that what they do is the "right way" and here we clash with the example of ethnocentrism- belief that one's own culture represents the most natural and best way to do things, whereas all cultures have a degree of internal consistency. Just like many patterns, many colours, many strands contribute to the overall design of a tapestry, so do many ethnic groups with their traditions, behaviour and customs form patterns that, in turn, compose a culture. The European Union's motto should be adopted by us today as a universal motto which says "Unity in Diversity". One of the main topics of the globalizing world is how to protect cultural uniqueness and cultural identity. So, when we explore ethnic minorities we contribute to the global agenda where the issues of ethnic tolerance and ethnic integration are very sensitive ones today.

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