Introduction

The term minority has been defined in any number of ways. Wirth (1945, p. 347) offered one of the earliest definitions of minority:

We may define a minority as 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. The existence of a minority in a society implies the existence of a corresponding dominant group enjoying higher social status and greater privileges.

A number of scholars have maintained that the central feature of a minority group is the power deficiency relative to that group (Blalock, 1960; Dworkin & Dworkin, 1982; Geschwender, 1978; Wilson, 1973) and the resulting oppression of one group by another. This imbalance of power may be manifested in the economic, political, and social domains of life (Ashmore, 1970; Barron, 1957; Howard, 1970; Kinloch, 1979; Ramaga, 1992; Wagley & Harris, 1958) through overt or more subtle forms of influence, exploitation, domination, oppression, and discrimination (Meyers, 1984; Ramaga, 1992). This power imbalance allows the establishment and maintenance of both control and dependency (Manderson, 1997). Within this paradigm, it is the relative power or lack of it that is determinative of minority group status rather than the numerical superiority or inferiority of a group (Meyers, 1984; Ramaga, 1992). The disempowerment and oppression of the black majority by a white minority in South Africa during the years of apartheid serves as such an example. Some writers, however, have refused to characterize a group as a minority if the group is larger in relative size within the population under discussion or if the group has no desire to preserve the characteristics that are believed to render it distinct (Anon, 2007; Schermerhorn, 1964).

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Characteristics that have been linked to minority group identity include sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, nationality, race (without debating the validity of that concept), language, culture, and religion (Baron & Byrne, 1977; Barron, 1957; Hacker, 1951; Pap, 2003; Rose, 1964; Wagley & Harris, 1958), although religion has rarely been relied upon to define a minority in the United States (Minority, 2008). One scholar explained:

Minorities are sub-groups within a culture which are distinguishable from the dominant group by reasons of differences in physiology, language, customs, or culture patterns (including any combination of these factors). Such sub-groups are regarded as inherently different and not belonging to the dominant groups; for this reason they are consciously or unconsciously excluded from full participation in the life of the culture. . . . Some minorities are physically different but culturally similar with respect to the majority . . . others are culturally different but physically similar . . . and still others are both culturally and physically different . . . . The cultural and/or physical differences between majority and minority actually may be so minute as to make it impossible to detect by simple observation who is a member of the minority and who is a member of the majority (Schmerhorn, 1949, p. 5).

As a result, an individual who is a member of more than one defined minority group may be multiply stigmatized (Capitanio & Herek, 1999; Herek, 1999; Herek, 1999; McBride, 1998; Reidpath & Chan, 2005). For example, a woman who is a member of an ethnic minority and is nonheterosexual may be stigmatized because of her ethnicity, sexual orientation, and biological sex (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003). For the past two decades, the literature on racial disparities has focused on developing “intersectional theory” to depart from both traditional conceptions of race as biology, on the one hand, and from the influence of cultural or lifestyle behaviors, on the other (Mullings, 2002). Intersectional approaches, instead, underscore the interactive interweaving effect of the hierarchies of race/ethnicity, class, and gender on the lives of impoverished women (see Mulling, 2002; Schulz & Mullings, 2006; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Rather than seen as additive, gender, race, and class are conceptualized as relational categories that have deep and enduring consequences for minority women’s health and on their ability to successfully cope with everyday stressors (King, 1988). For instance, for the Harlem Birth Right Project (1993–1997), Mullings and her team developed a conceptual framework to examine the roots of African-American babies’ low birthweight vis-à-vis the babies of white women from all socioeconomic levels. Findings showed that the intersecting effect of race, class, and gender creates unique stressors in the lives of black women which, in turn, lead them to delivering preterm low-birthweight babies. Based on research scientists’ research (Wadhwa, Culhane, Rauh, & Barve, 2001), Mulling explains that “. . . hormones released during episodes of acute stress and chronic strain may stimulate spontaneous labor and preterm delivery” (Mullings, 2002: 35). This theoretical approach is coincident with what Geronimus (1992) refers to as the “weathering” effect or the chronic and enduring burden drawn from African-American women’s continuous adaptations to structures of social inequality.