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## A RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF MINORITY AS A TOOL OF OTHERNIZATION BY SETTING LIMITS

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### Abstract

*The concept of minority is a highly significant concept that attracts widespread attention across many social science fields. However, because it is often used for the purpose of othering, it can carry negative connotations. In fact, there is a considerable amount of theoretical knowledge surrounding this concept, which is frequently used to define boundaries in identity definitions. However, examining the creation of minority identities through othering, using a process-based, relational sociological approach that rejects essentialism, has gained even more importance today. This is because, instead of being defined by a single characteristic, identities are now increasingly diversified, resulting from a multitude of statuses and roles held at intersections. In parallel with this, the social value of being a minority or a member of the majority can also change, so this article attempts to examine the concept of minority as a dynamic and uncertain concept rather than a static and essentialist one. Furthermore, examples from Turkey and around the world are explored, highlighting how immigrant identities are marginalized through the labeling of minority. Thus, the article points out that the relevant literature is replete with examples demonstrating that the concept of minority is frequently used in the construction of hegemonic relations, not only sociologically but also politically.*

**Keywords:** minority, group, boundary setting, intersectionality, relational sociology

### 1. Introduction

When studying minorities sociologically, they are generally thought of as groups. When speaking of minority groups, two fundamental characteristics stand out. The first is "unequal treatment," and the second is "collective discrimination." In this context, minority groups were first defined by Wirth (1945) as "individuals who are subjected to unequal treatment and who see

themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (Henslin, 2001). Differences, whether physical, such as race, or cultural, such as ethnicity, form the basis of inequality. In fact, discrimination goes even further, preventing minorities from fully participating in society and paving the way for their exclusion (Wirth, 1945).

One of the most important points to consider sociologically is the potential for errors in thinking of minorities in numerical terms, that is, the number of people in the group. One of the most significant examples of this is the discrimination against millions of Indians by a small British colonial administration in India before the War of Independence. Another crucial example is the discrimination against the Black majority by a small group of Dutch people in South Africa during the apartheid regime. Viewed from this perspective, women, regardless of their numbers, are treated as a minority group in many countries around the world. Therefore, sociologically, the concept of a "dominant group" is preferred over a numerical majority of the oppressing group. This means they possess higher status, privilege, and the power to discriminate. Members of the dominant group exalt their own characteristics while discriminating against other groups by portraying certain physical or cultural differences as inferior and worthless. Furthermore, dominant groups ensure the perpetuation of discrimination by attributing their privileged position to their own innate superiority.

There are numerous studies on the formation of minority groups (Wagley and Harris, 1958). However, two processes can generally be considered for a group to become a minority. The first is the formation of a minority group through the expansion of political boundaries. Furthermore, with the exception of women, in traditional tribes, the entire community shares the same physical, linguistic, and religious characteristics, making the formation of a minority group unlikely. However, as a group expands its political boundaries, it can lead to the formation of some minority groups with different languages, customs, traditions, and customs. For example, in North America, Mexicans, once a dominant group in their own right, were relegated to minority status within the United States after their defeat. However, influenced by their former power, they counterattacked by developing a rhetoric that read, "We did not move toward the borders of the United States; the borders of the United States moved toward us" (Henslin, 2001).

The second path or process of minority formation occurs through migration. While some of these migrations are undoubtedly voluntary, others are forced or coerced. For example, Africans were forcibly brought to North America and enslaved to meet the labor needs. Migration to Turkey, which began in 2011 due to the Syrian civil war, is also forced. The 2021 Afghan migration is also a forced population movement of those fleeing the Talabani regime to Turkey via Iran.

A third sociological phenomenon, regardless of their numbers, stems from the marginalization of women within the patriarchal system and their unequal treatment as a minority. Feminist studies strongly oppose this discrimination, and international agreements are combating gender inequality. The most important of these is the Istanbul Convention. However, as always, the issue has been exploited as a tool of current politics in some countries, marginalizing women and succumbing to the prevailing ideology of the sanctity of the family.

When the literature on minority groups is examined, it can be said that all societies, regardless of their location in the world, share certain fundamental common characteristics (Henslin, 2001: 322-323):

- a) Membership in a minority group is not voluntary, but rather a status assigned at birth.

- b) The distinguishing physical and cultural characteristics of minorities are disrespected and belittled by the dominant group.
- c) The dominant group treats minorities unequally.
- d) Minorities tend to intermarry.
- e) Minorities demonstrate strong solidarity among themselves to survive.

As the conditions listed above increase, an identity is formed among members of the minority group, and even a sense of shared future and destiny emerges (Chandra, 1993). Particularly when ethnic identities are formed, the distinction between "us" and "them" is constructed within tight boundaries. However, this may not always be true for everyone. Some, when they become so deeply assimilated by the dominant group, may not even be aware of their true identities. As inter-ethnic marriages increase, it becomes increasingly difficult to know which country their family hails from, or even what their origins are. For example, in America, people might say, "Irish and German," or "I'm a little Italian and French." In Turkey, ethnic and sectarian identity politics have increased over the last 20 years, deepening the vulnerabilities along society's sensitive fault lines.

Boundaries Theory, most frequently used in the literature on minority formation, actually deals with closure through the establishment of boundaries. There are also theories of closure at home and at work. This article primarily focuses on boundary-setting studies (Lamont et al., 2002; 2016, 2018).

## 2. Boundaries Theory

The topic of boundaries has become increasingly used in various fields of the social sciences. For example, social/collective identity, class, race, gender, knowledge, and science, as well as boundaries between societies, nations, and places, are primary areas of study. It can be said that the cultural production of boundaries, differences and hybrids, and classifications as well as group memberships are particularly prioritized.

K. Marx, one of the pioneers of sociology, focused primarily on the boundaries between those who own the means of production (capitalists/bourgeoisie) and those who do not (workers/proletariat), and therefore on class conflict. Unlike him, M. Weber was interested in the boundaries between consumption-based status groups.

Weber's fundamental concept for our topic is "power," meaning the ability to force others to do what one wants. If this power is deemed legitimate by those who exercise it, it is called "authority" (Kasapoglu, 1982). As the Critical Power Conflict Approach carefully emphasizes, power is not distributed equally in societies. Indeed, men have more power than women and those with different sexual orientations; the rich have more power than the poor; and those in power based on ethnic and sectarian affiliations have more power than those in minorities. They not only determine the rules but also control the law enforcement agencies that maintain control in society (Feagin, Feagin, 1997). Furthermore, according to French and Raven (1959), while political and economic power is discussed at the institutional macro level, legitimate power, along with expertise, knowledge, affection and identification, and reward and punishment, plays a significant role in interpersonal relationships at the micro level. For example, a small number of highly educated professionals bind the less educated majority to themselves through their expert power (Kasapoglu, 1982).

On the other hand, today's boundaries are quite different from those of the past. For example, Marx's distinction between classes, Weber's distinction between ethnic and status groups, or the sacred and the secular, are long gone (Calhoun, 1991). Today, more emphasis is placed on the role of "symbolic" resources such as conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, and cultural traditions, which play a significant role in creating, maintaining, or eliminating boundaries. These symbolic resources are even considered important and are being investigated in the reduction of institutionalized social differences such as class, gender, and race.

According to Lamont (2002), symbolic boundaries are conceptually constructed by social actors to categorize objects, people, actions, time, and space. In essence, they are tools over which individuals and groups struggle to define social reality. Indeed, these symbolic boundaries can later divide individuals into groups and even lead to group memberships that are shared by those who share similar sentiments (Epstein, 1992). This is essentially a process by which people gain status by accessing resources through group membership. Often, inequalities, rather than diminishing, increase during this process. So much so that similar or shared behaviors become perpetuated and institutionalized. Limits are imposed to ensure unequal access to resources. In fact, inequalities become a sign of limits, and limits become a sign of inequalities.

Consequently, symbolic boundaries become social boundaries. As a group's difference from others increases, its superiority also increases. This even plays a role in intragroup preferences, meaning divisions that emerge among members of high-status groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Hogg and Abrams, 1988). For example, subgroups always exist within high-status groups, such as scientists and faculty members. While all may appear high-status, some hold more power than others. While most are academic staff, administrators at most universities are selected from medical schools. The fact that physicians often predominate in terms of numbers undoubtedly plays a significant role in their influence in management. Furthermore, not all physicians possess the same power, and this power struggle brings about constant status changes. For example, the emergence of robotic surgery and technological advancements has challenged the status of surgeons, once the most powerful specialists.

Lamont et al. (2015), who study cultural sociology, primarily seek to understand how boundaries are created by traditions, narratives, and cultural factors. In other words, it is concerned with how group membership, which plays a significant role in the relationship between society and the individual, is culturally constructed. P. Bourdieu also shows us the exclusionary tactics of elites in the French education system, such as how boundaries are constructed through unequal access to resources.

Gender inequality, as mentioned earlier, is a matter of setting boundaries. It is known that boundaries are constructed through social-psychological interaction. Indeed, Ridgeway (1997) demonstrates that this process operates automatically and unconsciously. Especially when it comes to one's professional roles, different meanings, sometimes positive or often negative, automatically come to mind through associations. Whether it's medicine, nursing, or teaching, we often find ourselves familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of a profession, its employment opportunities, or the possibility of gender discrimination. However, advancing technology has now enabled the proliferation of women in surgical specialties once closed to

women. Male dominance has been broken, particularly in thoracic and ophthalmic surgery (Kasapoglu, 2020). Theoretically, three waves or stages can be identified in the construction of boundaries (Gieryn, 1983). The first is expulsion, the second is expansion, and finally, preservation:

- a) Deportation, expulsion: Preventing border violations through sanctions.
- b) Expansion: Attempting to legitimize and control borders to establish authority.
- c) Preservation and protection: Protecting borders to further strengthen autonomous/autonomous regions and preventing unauthorized entry.

Furthermore, according to the literature on borders (Bowker and Star, 1999), it is possible to mention various objects to ensure unity within borders. Three of the most important of these are:

- a) Material objects: Buildings, gates, signposts, etc.
- b) Organizational forms: Diplomas, identity cards, passports, membership forms for group entry, etc.
- c) Conceptual fields and procedures: All forms of bureaucratic correspondence, recording, and filing.

In particular, the self-policing boundaries of groups without physical face-to-face connections are established in the information age through communication technologies, virtual environments, and social media (Calhoun, 1991). Rather than real ones, personal connections are established through television or other printed materials, imaginary. Members of such groups may use words, symbols, spatial or other classification systems to establish boundaries that construct their identities (Hunter, 1974; Lamont & Calhoun, 2001). Ethnic groups often have different colors, leaders' sayings, or symbolic signs. Flags and pennants carry symbols that distinguish groups from one another. When discussing flags, it's important to mention national boundaries. While these boundaries are sometimes very strongly defined by differences in language, religion, and traditions at the societal level, others are at the ritual level. They may even form hybrids of different groups. However, the following basic concepts can be stated (Lamont & Calhoun, 2001):

- a) Symbolic boundaries are crucial. Symbols are often used as cultural markers to draw, maintain, normalize, or rationalize boundaries that mark differences between social classes.
- b) Symbolic boundaries are used to establish or reframe social boundaries.
- c) There are differences across cultures in how symbolic boundaries are linked to social boundaries.
- d) Symbolic boundaries can sometimes silently replace social boundaries.

According to Lamont and Molnar (2002), when examining boundaries from a relational perspective, four groups of studies are observed in the literature:

- a) Social and collective identity
- b) Class, ethnic/racial, and gender inequality
- c) Inequality in access to science, profession, and information
- d) National and community affiliation and spatial boundaries.

According to them, similar processes are at play in the emergence and maintenance of boundaries in these different fields, whether



spatially or in the functioning of institutions. Studies cover cultural capital, proportionality/equivalence, racial and ethnic groups, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, consensus, group rights, scientific disagreements, immigration, and many other topics.

In this context, symbolic boundaries are conceptually constructed by social actors to separate people, objects, practices, time, and space. Individuals and groups initially struggle to agree on these concepts. These symbolic boundaries are then used to separate people from others, while also bringing them into alignment with similar feelings and thoughts (Epstein, 1992). In this context, symbolic boundaries are fundamental tools that enable the monopolization of resources and the achievement of status.

Social boundaries are the objectified forms of social differences in access to social, material, and spiritual opportunities, which are not equally distributed in society. However, it is crucial to recognize that both symbolic and social boundaries are real. Symbolic boundaries manifest themselves in relationships between individuals, while social boundaries manifest themselves among individuals within groups.

According to Lamont (1992), symbolic boundaries are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for social boundaries. Indeed, numerous non-symbolic factors play a role in the emergence of social boundaries. Chief among these are undoubtedly economic, or rather structural, factors, and more recently, physical, geographical, and climatic conditions. Indeed, climate migration has recently begun, and developed countries are imposing boundaries on climate refugees not included in existing agreements while simultaneously attempting to resolve ambiguities in their legislation. Although climate migration is not defined in the Geneva Convention, it has elevated the issue of boundaries from a human rights perspective to the dimension of international relations (Kasapoglu, 2022).

### 3. Creating a Minority Identity by Othering

Some studies have investigated why some people place great importance on the ethnic origins of some while others remain indifferent. For example, according to Doane (1993), four factors influence ethnic affiliation:

- a) Group size: If the group is large, affiliation increases; if it is small, affiliation decreases.
- b) Group strength: If the group is strong, affiliation increases.
- c) Differences: If the group is seen as different from others, is recognized, and is known, sense of belonging increases.
- d) Discrimination: If there is a high level of discrimination against the group, sense of belonging increases. If no discrimination occurs, there is no reason for a person to have a strong sense of belonging.

In fact, most ethnic studies concern the construction of ethnic identity, or rather, how it is enriched and preserved (Kasapoglu and Ecevit, 2004; Kasapoglu, 2021). Chief among these are undoubtedly differences in dress, eating, and drinking habits, religious ceremonies, and music listening. Conversely, in some countries, such as the United States, with vast continental territories and rich ethnic diversity, intense political efforts are being made to achieve a common ground. In the People's Republic of China, differences are being smoothed over more harshly than in

the United States. However, considering the events following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is possible to argue that ethnic and cultural differences are never forgotten, but are revived and strengthened with regime changes, particularly in terms of language and religion. It is observed that attempts to establish hegemony, such as the Slavization of non-Russian communities, are counterproductive. Similarly, it can be argued that religion, and especially the Orthodox Church, which were marginalized under the socialist regime, far from disappearing, has become much stronger. The same situation emerged in Poland, one of the Iron Curtain countries, where the Catholic Church became a symbol of the liberation efforts of union labor movements.

The establishment of boundaries based on identity, and consequently, exclusion, is a crucial area of study. In contemporary Turkey, although immigrants are criticized on various grounds, primarily economic ones, they are no longer excluded to the same extent as the systematic inequalities experienced in Western societies and are accepted in proportion to their contribution to the economy. In contrast, in developed industrial societies, immigrants face institutionalized discrimination, and numerous studies have addressed this issue (Cerulo, 1997; Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Jenkins, 1996; Somers, 1994).

In fact, it is now being discussed that non-economic factors, such as the symbolic values attached to identities, play as significant a role in interpersonal inequalities as economic factors. The lack of recognition or negative recognition of an ethnic group in society can disadvantage it within the social stratification system. For example, it can negatively impact its access to resources and undermine its status. Taylor (2010), who made a significant contribution to this issue, emphasized the importance of the link between recognition and identity construction.

Therefore, the widely adopted approach, led by Lamont (2009), acknowledges that a third factor, specifically the recognition gap, plays a significant role in inequality, alongside economics and education. In a study conducted on Kurdish youth in Turkey by Turgut and Çelik (2021), the analysis was taken one step further, drawing on Goffman (2014) and his concept of stigma.

### 4. Intersectional studies

Intersectional studies are gaining increasing importance today. Many scholars argue that multiple statuses, such as race, class, and gender, cannot be studied individually due to their interplay. For example, even if wage inequality is initially considered simply in isolation, examining it without the influence of race, class, and gender is doomed to be incomplete (Cotter et al., 1999). Indeed, studies have shown that race, gender, and class, including sexual orientation, influence wage inequality (Mac Cartney and Makiko, 2006). Furthermore, there are studies demonstrating that not only being a minority but also being a minority in combination with gender exacerbates wage inequality. For example, it has been shown that 15 minority men receive lower wages than white men. It has been determined that female minority workers are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts, and that ethnic and racial minorities are not only disadvantaged but also disadvantaged to varying degrees, with Africans coming first, followed by Spanish-speaking South Americans. Sexual orientation has also been shown to exacerbate these inequalities, with gay men earning the lowest wages. Researchers have thus demonstrated that sexual orientation plays a significant role in the construction of social hierarchies among different groups. In fact, more detailed analyses

have shown that among white, Asian, and Hispanic gay men in the United States, those of African descent are the most disadvantaged (Mac Cartney & Makiko, 2006).

A glass ceiling effect always exists in women's advancement. They are always at a disadvantage compared to men. However, it can be observed that lesbian women, under certain circumstances, turn this orientation into an advantage and are employed in better-paying jobs. However, white gay men always have an advantage over non-whites. Similarly, gay men consistently earn better incomes than women due to patriarchal discriminatory principles. Research findings by Mac Cartney and Makiko (2006) have revealed that heterosexual men consistently earn the highest wages, and therefore, sexual orientation is an intersectional factor in the construction of social hierarchy, alongside race, social class, and gender. In fact, the most significant contribution of such studies is to demonstrate how inequalities and stratification in the labor market are formed. There are many significant distinctions within the labor market. For example, white gay men find more employment opportunities in the service sector, while gay men from other non-white ethnic minorities are concentrated in manufacturing. Such intersectional studies sociologically demonstrate the significant role of "differences." It is also understandable why inequalities are particularly pronounced in higher-status jobs obtained through education. In this regard, Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) objections to the glass ceiling, as a Black immigrant woman, are even more significant.

In studies on stigma, drawing on Lamont's work, it is important to address the processes of "counter-stigmatization" (Lamont et al., 2016). Those excluded through stigma often rewrite their own stories through strong objections, discover their strengths and advantages, and attempt to construct their identities in exceptionally positive new forms (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012). For example, immigrants use their differences in music, art, nutrition, and clothing to establish their new identities (Lamont et al., 2018). Thus, they transform their previously negative identity characteristics, enhance their values, and create a sense of recognition within society. Ethnic music and diets, in particular, are powerful counter-attacks. For example, in Germany, Turkish döner kebab is widely accepted in the gastronomy scene. Nutrition is an important area where the boundaries between Turks and Germans are blurring. The same example could include restaurants opened by immigrant Turks and Kurds in the UK. Immigrants, who found employment opportunities much faster than the British who were left unemployed as a result of the removal of heavy industry from England, quickly joined the food sector, acquired capital through the ethnic restaurants they opened, and carried their identities to higher status through social recognition.

Furthermore, symbolic boundaries often occur at the intersubjective level. Social boundaries, on the other hand, are more often associated with groups and collective affiliations. As Lamont (2015) points out, symbolic boundaries are often constructed first, followed by social boundaries. However, this process may not always necessarily work this way. In fact, as is often the case with immigrants in Turkey, social boundaries can be established through renaming them as national, racial, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, or gender, with the aim of reproducing inequalities. Ascribed identities can also shift from positive to negative over time. For example, while we are all Muslims and they are temporary guests, as economic conditions change and time

drags on, they can transform into hate speech, parasitic, disregarding their homeland, and self-interested.

## 5. Conclusion

There is a rich literature on the concepts of minority and majority not only in sociology but also in other social sciences such as history, law, anthropology, social psychology, politics, philosophy, communication, and management sciences (Bowker and Star, 1999). While this shared interest may initially appear advantageous, it can also be argued that it creates some problems. In particular, there are numerous characteristics that different fields focus on or neglect.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to argue that, from the outset, a more relational sociological perspective is needed, one that rejects dichotomies and essentialism and focuses more on differences and ambiguities. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the concept of "minority" emerges during the process of "othering" and is related to "stratification" in the social structure, and therefore "inequalities," the construction of power and hegemony. It may be appropriate to look at the fundamental ideas of theories such as "Closure" and "Boundaries" in the sense of exclusion, which have been developed to understand the processes in the construction of inequalities and which guide empirical studies in many fields from education to health, from politics to art.

While the prevailing literature focuses primarily on limited areas such as ethnic minorities and media in the United States, it should be noted that this article proposes an "intersectional" perspective that addresses inequalities based on class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and age, as more appropriate.

When examining daily life, it is often observed that those in the majority are also excluded and marginalized in various ways. It should also be noted that many characteristics together lead to social and economic exclusion and, consequently, the reproduction of inequalities. Therefore, it is important to recognize that being a minority is not always disadvantaged. For example, in some countries in the Middle East, such as Syria, the Alawites and their Arab Socialist Party (BAAS), once a minority group, held a voice in the country's governance, but they are no longer so due to a change in the regime. These examples can be extended to the apartheid regime in South Africa, where whites were a minority.

Ethnic identities are crucial in establishing boundaries. Because they carry within them historically and culturally symbolic and social boundaries. Therefore, ethnicity is the identity with the most significant boundary-forming power. Ethnic identities clearly demonstrate the distinction between "us" and "others" in daily life. Ethnic groups quickly display their differences in their leisure activities, social customs, and traditions, without hiding them. Thus, ethnic boundaries possess the capacity to easily transform into social boundaries. It's fair to say that Turkey is experiencing the most significant examples of how society stigmatizes certain ethnic identities, for example, by labeling them "terrorists." Unfortunately, similar examples also apply to sects such as Alevi-Sunni. Symbolic cultural boundaries, fueled by differences in daily life practices and beliefs, such as worship, can also draw social boundaries. For example, mosque and cemevi communities easily draw their own boundaries, and symbolic differences can affect social life, from marriage and cooperation to neighboring relationships. Tilly (1998) is absolutely right when he believes that dominant groups cultivate oppositions to marginalize others and limit their access to resources. It's also important to recognize that

consistent inequality is the result of individual or cumulative organizational processes that often go unnoticed. For example, as a very recent example, becoming a civil servant in the health or technical services classes is often not available to everyone. Many university graduates, including sociologists, who perform similar jobs in the same workplace often experience this discrimination. It is a frequently observed phenomenon that undermines the sense of justice.

Borders are addressed in numerous scientific meetings and journals. In classical sociology, Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane in his work *The Primordial Forms of Religion*, Karl Marx's positioning of the proletariat against the capitalist bourgeois class, and Max Weber's emphasis on ethnic and status groups over economic class are important aspects of the classical literature on borders. Indeed, recent studies are a synthesis of these classical studies. More integrated theoretical frameworks are needed to address borders at the individual, group, social, psychological, structural, and cultural levels. However, since such a broad scope is difficult to study, it is generally observed that distinctions between symbolic and social borders are often made.

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