

A CONFLICT MODEL FOR THE ANALYSIS
OF MAJORITY-MINORITY RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The sociological study of majority-minority relations has been handicapped by the lack of models which stress the elements of power and conflict. The model presented in this paper begins with the assumptions that: (1) majority-minority relations are power relations, and (2) conflict and struggle are inherent in all power relations. The relationship between any majority and minority is viewed as a conflicting, changing relationship between two parties--one with the power and the other desiring a fair share of that power and the rewards that come as a result of power holding.

Morton B. King, Jr. criticizes sociological analyses of minority groups as not being objective, systematic or sociological. He feels that a truly sociological approach to minority phenomena has been delayed by preoccupation with problems and their solutions and by the lack of conceptual position from which these phenomena can be successfully approached.¹ It might be added that the sociological literature on this subject has tended to focus principally on Negro-white relations in the United States. Moreover, these analyses tend to reduce the independent variables to psychological ones. Thus, such studies have not taken us very far in the understanding of majority-minority relations cross-culturally and from a sociological point of view.

It seems to this writer that the focus of sociological research in this area should, first of all, be centered on problems and variables in majority-minority relations which have universal applicability. This is predicated on the assumption that minorities are a universal phenomenon. Secondly, sociologists must make their contribution to understanding from a sociological point of view--looking at majority-minority relations (and the resulting phenomena of conflict, prejudice and discrimination) as arising from specific social structures. This is not to say that psychological and other dimensions are not needed for a full understanding of this complex phenomenon. Nor does it say that social factors are "dominant" over psychological ones. I simply advocate that social structure helps to explain the phenomenon and the sociologist is the logical one to explore this aspect. Lastly, the perspective of the sociologist

should be realistic--including, among other things, the elements of power and conflict.

The intent of this paper is to present a tentative model for the sociological study of majority-minority relations which is applicable to the analysis of these relations everywhere. As employed here, model refers to a conception of a phenomenon which identifies and simplifies strategic variables and the way they are related. As a mental construct it is not an exact replica of the phenomenon but an approximation. It is a heuristic device to guide the researcher in making a consistent and adequate analysis.

The presentation of the model will be at two levels: at the societal level and at the specific level of majority-minority relations within such a social system. The attention of this paper is on the latter but to have an adequate model at that level requires that it be consistent with a particular view of the larger system.

The societal model. The functionalists' model of society as one of consensus, stability and harmony has been widely criticized for its lack of fit with the real world.² Using this model, one would indeed be hard pressed to explain the conflict between groups and within groups that is to be found universally. The dialectic approach offers an altogether different model of society--viewing society as one of dissension, conflict and disequilibrium. Recently, several writers have advocated that a true picture of a social system must incorporate both sides of the coin--thus synthesizing the functionalist and dialectic models into a realistic model of society.³

The emergent model of society which unites the strengths of both models seems to be the one meeting the scientific requirement of an ever better approximation of social reality--thus enhancing the explanatory power of sociological analyses. In the words of Ralf Dahrendorf,

As far as I can see, we need for the explanation of sociological problems both the equilibrium and the conflict models of society; and it may well be that, in a philosophical sense, society has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus and one of change, conflict, and constraint.⁴

Thus, an appropriate model of society would assume that:

1. "Human societies are always ordered. Human societies are always changing."⁵
2. Societies are systems of interrelated parts. This implies the principle of multiple and reciprocal causation.⁶
3. The system is stable and harmonious yet there are structural sources of tension which "cause" conflict. Conflict in turn brings about change.⁷

4. The sub-parts of the society (groups) are both interrelated and relatively autonomous.
 - A. Groups (and individuals) interact with others in two characteristic ways--they cooperate or they are in opposition. The processes of association and dissociation are facts of social life.
 - B. Consensus within groups is related to cleavage between groups. ". . . it is important to recognize that cleavage between groups is in many respects only the obverse of consensus within groups. When people feel strong identification with a particular group, whether it is national, religious, ethnic, or another, they are necessarily setting themselves off from other persons not in the group."⁸
 - C. Groups and subgroups are viewed as having interests, values, goals, etc., which may clash with those of other groups.

The conflict model of majority-minority relations. Our model of society posits that society has "two equal faces of reality"--consensus and conflict. It appears that a model of majority-minority relations will most closely approximate the real world if it focuses on conflict and power. I do not agree with Dahrendorf that to concentrate on conflict is to look at "the ugly face of society."⁹ I view conflict, rather, as a fact of social life which may be functional as well as dysfunctional for the parties or for the society as a whole.

The initial assumptions of our conflict model are:

1. Majority-minority relations are power relations.
2. Conflict and struggle are inherent in all power relations.
3. Groups and individuals desire, among other things, prestige, power and wealth. These are in scarce quantity. Majority-minority relations can perhaps best be understood as group attempts to hold on to or increase their share of these scarce values.
4. We look for the source of conflict in the conditions of the social structure--not in the psychological needs of individuals within it. "If we start from the position of real societies it is evident that conflict situations are intrinsic and organic to social structure."¹⁰

Minorities are not all alike. They differ because of the variables that affect majority-minority relations (e.g., the number of minorities in the society, the degree of incongruence between the values of the

majority and the minority, the type of stratification system in the society, and the symbols that set the minority apart).¹¹ However, all minorities are alike in at least five fundamental respects: first of all, by definition, all minorities are subordinate to the superordinate group. The power of the dominant group may be derived from size, superior weapons, property, finances, skills, and eminence derived from myths, legends, and history.¹² The power dimension of majority-minority relations is best seen by the fact that the dominant group determines what status the minority will have without the consent of the minority.¹³ Secondly, all minorities are singled out because they differ from the majority in physical and/or cultural traits which are held in low esteem by the dominant group. The minority, again by definition, must be objectively or subjectively identifiable. Thirdly, all minorities receive differential and unequal treatment in the host society (e.g., status and access to certain occupations). Fourthly, the members of a minority group are likely to feel a sense of kinship with each other not only because of their cultural distinctiveness but also as a result of majority treatment and policy directed toward them. Lastly, minorities are generally viewed by the majority as threatening to their dominant position.¹⁴

Thus, power relations is the key to understanding majority-minority relations since power is the chief agency through which minorities are differentiated. Minority groups (which may be racial, ethnic, or religious) are categories of people with less power than the dominant group--hence, with unequal access to the opportunities and rewards of the society. The difference in social power between majority and minority groups is ". . . both marked and institutionalized, being rooted in fairly rigid social structures."¹⁵

Source of unequal power between majority and minority groups. Power is defined by Schermerhorn as ". . . the asymmetrical relationship between two interacting parties in which a perceptible probability of decision resides in one of the two parties, even over the resistance of the other party."¹⁶ The origin of the power distribution between majority and minority groups is found in the initial contact between the two groups. Groups become minorities by emigrating to another land, by being annexed or conquered by another group. They become minorities if they differ from the host society in discernible ways: physical appearance, values, behavior patterns, etc.¹⁷ The point to be made is that the groups come into contact as power unequals; they differ in ways considered important by the dominant group; and the dominant group tends to feel that the minority is a threat to its power--hence, the need to exert control over the group to keep it in a subordinate position. This control may be in the form of extrusion (annihilation, expulsion, or displacement), non-contiguous control (colonialism) or incorporation (enclosing the subordinates within the superordinate's territorial boundaries).¹⁸

Once the configuration of power relations is established it is perceived by members of both sides in terms of legitimacy or illegitimacy. "Such perceptions crystallize and are elaborated into orientations, belief

systems, or ideologies of each party to the encounter."¹⁹ Thus, the interaction between the two groups with unequal power becomes crystallized into a social structure reflecting the power differentials and the value incongruencies of the two. This arrangement tends to persist because of the principle of cumulative directionality (i.e., once a particular action is taken by the dominant group toward the subordinate group it tends to "load the dice" for subsequent interaction between them).²⁰

Majority-minority conflict. Minorities are the "children of conflict." They are "conceived" in a conflict situation. Their presence means further conflict. However, the conflict between the majority and minority groups is not always overt and continuous. Indeed, the situation between the two groups at times may appear to the observer as non-conflictual. It is assumed, however, that the seeds of conflict are ever present (albeit at times dormant) in majority-minority relations.

All conflicts between groups are not alike. There are important differences, depending upon many variables. The conflict may involve physical violence, strikes and boycotts, non-violent sit-ins or even ridicule and insolence.²¹ Thus, conflict is viewed in its broad sense, wherein one individual or group ". . . seeks to reduce the status of one's opponent . . ." ²² Conflict is a

. . . situation of competition in which the parties are aware of the incompatibility of potential future positions and in which each party wishes to occupy a position that is incompatible with the wishes of the other.²³

What, then, is the explanation for the conflict between majority and minority groups? Jessie Bernard states that conflict will arise from either "position scarcity" (two groups cannot be superordinate at the same time) or "resource scarcity" (the supply of desired objects is limited so that parties cannot have all they want of anything).²⁴ Basically, majority-minority conflict arises over the issue of the dominant group retaining its power and the minority attempting either to gain autonomy or to achieve equality of status with the dominant group.²⁵ Subordination in power results in unequal access to the rewards of society (e.g., wealth and status). To achieve equality in these areas requires assertion on the part of the minority. Since the majority is unwilling to give up its superior position there is a tendency to view the subordinate group as a threat and to use techniques designed to keep the minority group "in its place" (e.g., control of immigration, discrimination and terror tactics). Any effort by the subordinate group to secure access to power must involve conflict. This is substantiated by Allen D. Grimshaw who sums up the history of Negro-white relations in the United States by stating,

The most savage oppression, whether expressed in rural lynchings and pogroms or in urban race riots, has taken place when the Negro has refused to accept a subordinate

status. The most intense conflict has resulted when the subordinate minority group has attempted to disrupt the accommodative pattern or when the superordinate group has defined the situation as one in which such an attempt is being made.²⁶

Another way of viewing this phenomenon is to apply Dahrendorf's model of the formation of conflict groups to majority-minority relations.²⁷ This model is based on the assumption that the differential distribution of authority in society is the determining factor in social conflicts. A further assumption is the tendency of dominating groups to maintain and defend their dominant status. The majorities, with authority (power), and minorities, without power, each become an interest group with programs, actions and ideologies. The interest of the dominant group is preservation of the status quo, while the interest of the minority group is to change the distribution of power. This is the issue that causes conflict. In the words of Joseph S. Roucek, ". . . self interest is the backbone of all majority-minority struggles. . ."28

An important fact to consider in majority-minority relations is the phenomenon of relative deprivation. Although this concept has social-psychological overtones, it has relevance for the sociological analysis of majority-minority relations because: (1) it is a consequence of the social structure--the differential allocation of resources, occupations, status, and power regardless of the qualities of the individuals involved; and (2) it is a source of frustration (for the individual and the group) and hence it helps to bring about conflict. James A. Geschwender has empirically tested the validity of the concept of relative deprivation among American Negroes. His findings are applicable to all majority-minority situations under the following conditions: as a minority group experiences an improvement in its conditions of life it also experiences a rise in the levels of desires which will rise more rapidly than improvement of its conditions of life, and it will become dissatisfied if it observes another group experiencing a more rapid rate of improvement. Both conditions lead to dissatisfaction and rebellion.²⁹ This helps to explain why rebellion is more frequent among groups that have risen in status than among those groups which remain in a very low position.

As stated previously, not all majority-minority relations are the same. A review of the literature, however, reveals some general propositions which hold cross-culturally and should be brought into the analysis of majority-minority relations. The probability of conflict will be greater:

1. the more rapid the social change occurring in the society.³⁰
2. the more direct the intergroup competition for the distributive rewards of wealth, power, prestige, or

other scarce values.³¹

3. the greater the level of anomie in society brought about by economic depression or other types of social disorganization.³²
4. the larger the ratio of the incoming minority to the resident population, and the more rapid the influx.³³
5. as the minority group increases in size.³⁴
6. when the minority group's position is rapidly improving or when it is rapidly deteriorating, especially if this follows a period of improvement.³⁵

Types of conflict. Following the insights of Georg Simmel, Lewis Coser distinguishes two basic types of conflicts. Realistic conflict is the conflict involving the deliberate collective effort to achieve predetermined social goals. Nonrealistic conflict, on the other hand, involves interaction of two or more individuals or groups which engage in conflict not for a rational goal but because of the need for tension release by at least one of the actors.³⁶

It is axiomatic in psychology that aggression tends to follow frustration. In the case of majority-minority relations nonrealistic conflict is a result of the structure of the relationship and the blocked opportunities felt by the minority group members. There is the need to "strike back" either directly at the oppressive group or through displacement. Generally, this type of conflict is of little benefit to the subordinate group because it does not change the relationship and may even bring about further subjugation. It should not be inferred that only the members of the minority group employ nonrealistic conflict. The majority group and its members may also use this type of conflict as well as the other alternatives presented below. Arthur I. Waskow clearly documents this in his social history of American race riots since 1919.³⁷

Realistic conflict is the rational attempt to achieve a goal. The goal for the minority is to bring about a change in the pattern of domination. Joseph S. Himes demonstrates how the American Negro through court action, political action and non-violent mass action has secured positive changes in the pattern of majority-minority relations--by altering the social structure, enhancing social communication, extending social solidarity and facilitating personal identity.³⁸ Gandhi's use of realistic conflict in India is another instance of a minority bringing about positive changes (for it) in the distribution of power.

There is a third type of conflict also found in majority-minority relations. This is the use of violence. Violence, of course, may be closely related to nonrealistic conflict. It may also be a means for goal attainment, hence a form of realistic conflict. The majority may feel

that violence is the most effective way of keeping the minority "in its place." The minority group, on the other hand, may use violence in the hope of changing the pattern of power relations. Moreover, violence may be the only means by which the minority can gain self-respect and group unity--thus, changing itself from a category to an interest group. In this way violence may have a group formation function (ethnogenesis).³⁹

The minority group in any society is not a homogenous unit. Individuals and groups within the minority may differ in their reaction to subordination, type of leadership, ideology, degree of allegiance to their group or to the larger society, ultimate goals of the group, etc. Consequently a minority (and by inference the majority as well) will generally not be a wholly united group--groups and individuals will favor various modes of action in response to majority constraints.

What, then, are the alternative responses available to minority groups? The minority has two basic responses available to it: (1) adjust to the situation either by pluralism (living side by side with the majority and accepting the status quo) or by assimilation (becoming one with the majority); or (2) protest against the situation. This latter response may be either in terms of a separatist movement which seeks an autonomous existence or a militant movement which seeks to aggressively alter the existing power arrangements.⁴⁰

Obviously the majority would be content with only one of these alternatives--pluralism. Hence, the other responses of the minority are a threat to the perpetuation of their superiority in status, resources and rewards which are concomitant with the holding of power. This fact logically necessitates the development of a counter-response. Henderson calls these attempts by the majority to retain the status quo "maintenance movements."⁴¹ These maintenance movements can take the form of a: (1) reactionary movement where action is taken to re-impose the traditional pattern of dominance over the minority; (2) status quo movement which does not go back to the past but back to normal; and (3) conservative reform movement which attempts to reduce the unrest in the subordinate group by removing obvious sources of immediate irritation.⁴² An additional response by the majority would be to extend repressive measures.

Majority-minority conflict and social change. Conflict on the inter-group level is primarily oriented toward change. I have suggested that majority-minority relations can perhaps be viewed most profitably from the attempts by minorities to shift the power of the dominant group to a more equitable level while the dominant group resists such a change. The vested interests of both groups are in opposition--hence conflict. Conflict, in turn, brings change--changes in norms, statuses, power relationships, etc. The changes accrued from majority-minority conflict affects the power relations (e.g., positive gains to the minority in terms of power with a subsequent loss to the majority). Conflict may also have

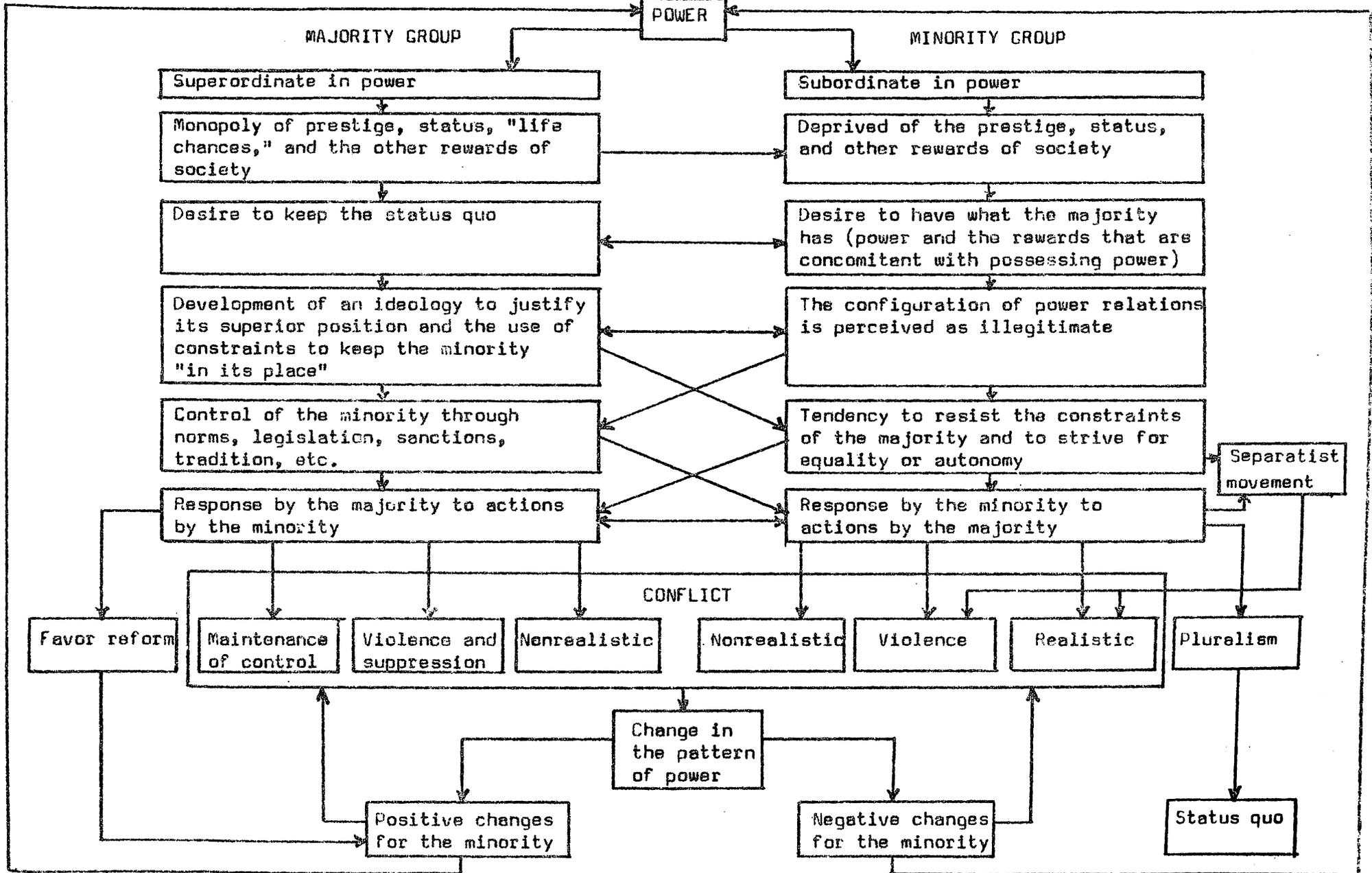
positive or negative consequences for the society as a whole (e.g., conflict may harm both the majority and minority or both groups may benefit from the conflict). Coser reminds us also of the reciprocal nature of change and conflict, "Change, no matter what its source, breeds strain and conflict."⁴³ Thus, majority-minority relations must be viewed as a conflicting, changing relationship between two parties--one with the power and the other desiring a fair share of that power and the rewards that come as a result of power holding.

Summary. To summarize, Figure I portrays graphically the conflict model of majority-minority relations elaborated in this paper.

This model begins with the allocation of power since minorities, by definition, are subordinate in power to the majority. The model presented in Figure I shows the consequences of this power configuration leading to conflict which in turn produces change in the patterns of dominance (e.g., more power to the majority, more power to the minority and the subsequent changes in statuses and norms). Such changes, too, bring about additional conflict. Thus, with Dahrendorf, we assert that in social life in general and majority-minority relations in particular, constraint, conflict and change are always present.⁴⁴

It is hoped that this model will be a heuristic device which will aid in the understanding and analyses of majority-minority relations in any setting. It is, however, only a model--an abstraction and hence an approximation of reality. The goal is understanding--hence, the need to refine, throw-out and supplant existing models to achieve a better fit with reality. Perhaps the model presented here will so challenge sociologists.

Figure I



FOOTNOTES

1. Morton B. King, Jr., "The Minority Course," American Sociological Review, XXI (February, 1956), pp. 80-83.
2. Cf. Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis," American Journal of Sociology, LXIV (September, 1958), pp. 115-127; Alex Inkeles, What is Sociology? An Introduction to the Discipline & Profession, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 36-38; Helmut R. Wagner, "Displacement of Scope: A Problem of the Relationship between Small-Scale and Large-Scale Sociological Theories," American Journal of Sociology, LXIX (May, 1964), pp. 571-584; Clifford Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change," American Anthropologist, LIX (February, 1957), pp. 32-54; David Lockwood, "Some Remarks on 'The Social System,'" British Journal of Sociology, VII (June, 1956), pp. 134-146.
3. Cf. Pierre L. van den Berghe, "Dialectic and Functionalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," American Sociological Review, XXVIII (October, 1963), pp. 695-705; Pierre L. van den Berghe, "Toward a Sociology of Africa," Social Forces, XLIV (October, 1964), pp. 11-18; Alvin L. Bertrand, "The Stress-Strain Element of Social Systems: A Micro Theory of Conflict and Change," Social Forces, XLII (October, 1963), pp. 1-9; Robert Cole, "Structural-Functional Theory, the Dialectic, and Social Change," The Sociological Quarterly, VII (Winter, 1966), pp. 39-58; Stanislaw Ossowski, Class Structure in the Social Consciousness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); and Gerhard E. Lenski, Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966).
4. Ralf Dahrendorf, op. cit., p. 127.
5. Arnold S. Feldman, "Evolutionary Theory and Social Change," Social Change in Developing Areas, Herbert R. Barringer, et. al. (eds.) (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1965), p. 274.
6. van den Berghe, "Dialectic and Functionalism," op. cit., p. 702.
7. This is the model posed by Dahrendorf, op. cit. and is used explicitly by Donald Henderson, "Minority Response and the Conflict Model," Phylon, XXV (Spring, 1964), pp. 18-26.
8. James S. Coleman, "Social Cleavage and Religious Conflict," Journal of Social Issues, XII (1956), p. 44.
9. Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959) p. 164.

10. Irving L. Horowitz, "Consensus, Conflict and Cooperation: A Sociological Inventory," Social Forces, XLI (December, 1962), p. 180.
11. George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 16.
12. Milton L. Barron, "Ethnicity," Contemporary Sociology, Milton L. Barron (ed.), (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1965), p. 453.
13. Calvin Redekop and John A. Hostetler, "Minority-Majority Relations and Economic Interdependence," Phylon, XXVII (Winter, 1966), p. 369.
14. Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," Race Relations: Problems and Theory, Jitsuichi Masuoka and Preston Valien (eds.), (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 220.
15. King, op. cit., p. 82.
16. R. A. Schermerhorn, "Power as a Primary Concept in the Study of Minorities," Social Forces, XXXV (October, 1956), p. 54.
17. Cf. Schermerhorn, op. cit., p. 55; R. A. Schermerhorn, "Toward a General Theory of Minority Groups," Phylon, XXV (Fall, 1964), pp. 239-241; Robin M. Williams, Jr., The Reduction of Intergroup Tensions (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1947), p. 54; and E.K. Francis, "Variables in the Formation of So-Called 'Minority Groups,'" American Journal of Sociology, LX (July, 1954), p. 10.
18. Schermerhorn, "A General Theory of Minority Groups," op. cit., pp. 241-242.
19. Ibid., p. 240.
20. Ibid., p. 242.
21. A strong case has even been made that various art forms can be used as weapons in conflict. Cf. Brewton Berry, Race and Ethnic Relations (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 118; and John S. Szwed, "Musical Style and Racial Conflict," Phylon, XXVII (Winter, 1966), pp. 358-366.
22. Berry, op. cit., p. 104.
23. Kenneth E. Boulding, Conflict and Defense: A General Theory (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 5.
24. Jessie Bernard, "Parties and Issues in Conflict," The Journal of Conflict Resolution, I (June, 1957), p. 112.

25. Robert E. Park, "The Nature of Race Relations," Race Relations and the Race Problem, E.T. Thompson (ed.), (Durham: Duke University Press, 1939), p. 23.
26. Allen D. Grimshaw, "Lawlessness and Violence in America and Their Special Manifestations in Changing Negro-White Relationships," The Journal of Negro History, XLIV (January, 1959), p. 17.
27. Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict, op. cit., pp. 165-176; and Ralf Dahrendorf, "Toward a Theory of Social Conflict," The Journal of Conflict Resolution, II (June, 1958), pp. 176-179.
23. Joseph S. Roucek, "Minority-Majority Relations in Their Power Aspects," Phylon, XVII (First Quarter, 1956), p. 29.
29. James A. Geschwender, "Social Structure and the Negro Revolt: An Examination of Some Hypotheses," Social Forces, XLIII (December, 1964), p. 249.
30. Gordon W. Allport, The Nature of Prejudice (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 219.
31. Williams, op. cit., p. 57.
32. Ibid.
33. Allport, op. cit., pp. 220-221.
34. Raymond W. Mack and Richard C. Synder, "The Analysis of Social Conflict--Toward an Overview and Synthesis," The Journal of Conflict Resolution, I (June, 1957), p. 235.
35. Williams, op. cit., p. 61.
36. Lewis A. Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict (New York: The Free Press, 1956), pp. 49-55.
37. Arthur I. Waskow, From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960's (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966).
38. Joseph S. Himes, "The Functions of Racial Conflict," Social Forces, XVI (September, 1966), pp. 1-10.
39. Cf. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Constance Farrington (trans.), (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
40. There is a lack of empirical research which asks the question: what are the structural reasons for a minority (or sub-groups within the minority) choosing a particular response instead of another? Perhaps Neil Smelser's "value added" model provides

the most fruitful theoretical approach for answering such a question. Cf. Neil J. Smelser, Theory of Collective Behavior (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

41. Henderson, op. cit., p. 23.
42. Clarence E. Glick, "Social Movements Involving Racial Groups," Race: Individual and Collective Behavior, Edgar T. Thompson and Everett C. Hughes (eds.), (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), p. 350-357.
43. Lewis A. Coser, "Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change," The British Journal of Sociology, VIII (September, 1957), p. 204.
44. Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia," op. cit., pp. 115-127.