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Social Equity as a Tool for Social Change

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The history of social equity as a subfield within the academic field of public affairs has its roots in the late 1960s. This was of course more than a half century after the field was created. H. George Frederickson is credited with having coined the term *social equity* and has called for it to be the “third pillar” in public administration along with efficiency and economy of the field (Frederickson, 1990). Frederickson is in this instance considered the father of the subfield.

In 2010, Frederickson wrote *Social Equity and Public Administration Origins, Developments and Application*, in which he describes the concept of social equity and its applications for the 21st century. Of particular note is Frederickson’s chapter on the work and legacy of the late Philip J. Rutledge, who is also credited with founding the Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance of the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA).

The NAPA Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance defines social equity to mean the following:

Issues of fairness, justice, and equity have always been a part of public administration, and these issues were front-and-center in the early years of affirmative action. Now the focus has moved from hiring and promotion practices and contractors selection, to fields as broad as education, policing, welfare, housing, and transportation. In the language of public administration, the phrase “social equity” has come to be the way we bring these issues together and apply them to the field. (NAPA, 2011)

But while Frederickson and Rutledge may have helped to shape the subfield over the last four decades, it is important to note the strong contributions of other faculty taking on the charge to do the same. Some of these committed individuals include Blue Wooldridge (chair of the Standing Panel on Social Equity for National Academy of Public Administration), Mitchell Rice, Audrey Mathews, Kristen Norman-Major (whose article appears in this special issue), Susan Gooden, Mario Rivera, James Ward, James H. Svara, Roddrick Colvin, Wallace Swan, and Jami Kathleen Taylor.

THE CURRENT STATE OF SOCIAL EQUITY WITHIN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

There is a growing, albeit still small number of talented faculty writing and teaching on social equity issues. However, a doctoral student or faculty member wanting to obtain a job would be hard pressed to find an academic posting that calls for research and teaching expertise in this subfield.

A further look at the current state of social equity from an anecdotal perspective suggests that at least 95% of the vacant academic postings (*PA Times* and *Chronicle of Higher Education*) for assistant professors to full professors, in 2009 to 2010 called for expertise in one or more of the following areas: state and local

government, human resources management, public sector management, public services, budgeting, nonprofit organization, or homeland security. The remaining 5% percent of vacancies called for open rank and open expertise.

It must be noted however, that in January 2011, North Carolina Central University (NCCU) posted three available faculty positions on its website calling for an array of public affairs subfields that includes social equity. This is definitely a step forward and an embracing of social equity as a legitimate subfield.

SYMPOSIUM FOCI

This special *JPAE* Social Equity Symposium has three primary foci. The first is to address the faculty who are not interested in social equity and prefer not to have it as a subfield at all. For instance, during dinner at the 2010 American Society for Public Administration conference in San Jose, California, a group of faculty were discussing the content of their public affairs classes and the topic turned to social equity within course content. A renowned scholar and department chair retorted that he was not concerned about social equity, knew nothing about the subject, and thought that his graduate students were learning about the topic from another department faculty—though he could not definitely state which faculty or course provided the content. The symposium is for faculty who fall into this category in an attempt to have them understand the changing nature of our society and the need for graduate students to be prepared in meeting those challenges.

Second, the symposium is designed with the intention of providing faculty and students with an understanding of why social equity is important in all classes of the public affairs curricula. In other words, many MPA and MPP programs offer a class or two that address social equity issues. All programs should receive credit for those efforts. However, at the core of this symposium is the belief that social equity is an important area for any class to cover and that it should not be relegated to just one or two classes. For example, students taking a state budgeting class may want to know why the course covers social equity issues. This moment can be a wonderful teaching opportunity for the instructor of the class. For example, suppose trash is being picked up three days a week from an affluent neighborhood in State A. The same level of garbage collection should be occurring within State A for a working-class neighborhood or a predominantly gay or lesbian neighborhood. Social equity provides a framework for analyzing these types of situations.

Third, the symposium seeks to provide a broader array of scholarly topics that graduate students will need to understand as they approach the changing world of the 21st century. Charles Goodsell could not have possibly known how the world would change so greatly after the publication of his book, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic* (1985). Otherwise, he would have been wise to suggest that the homogeneous street-level American bureaucrat

of the mid to late 20th century would be replaced in the 21st century by more people of color, women, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) individuals, and people for whom English is not their primary language and who come from other nations.

SYMPOSIUM CONTENT

The impetus for this special *JPAE* Social Equity Symposium first surfaced in fall 2009, when the former editor in chief, Heather Campbell, noted that academics having published on social equity issues did little to advance the topic within the scope of teaching about it in public affairs graduate programs. As the guest editor of the symposium, I received approximately 25 proposals, and selected four of them for peer review. Proposals were selected for peer review based on their alignment with the symposium theme and uniqueness of topic.

The papers included in the *JPAE* Social Equity Symposium are the results of an almost 2-year effort in bringing the topic of social equity to fruition in the following pages of *JPAE*. The symposium content includes Wyatt-Nichol, Brown, and Haynes's paper, which raises the importance of social class education and how the concept is overlooked in the public affairs literature and classroom. The authors seek to provide a road map for infusing the topic of social class and socioeconomic issues into core requirements of MPA-MPP graduate programs. They see the lack of social class information in the public affairs classroom as creating a generation of public administrators with no depth of understanding on how social class creates barriers and obstacles for individuals and families that are working class or poor. Wyatt-Nichol and coauthors conclude their paper by outlining strategies faculty can use to educate their students on such issues.

Kristen Norman-Major takes a generalist approach with her topic of elevating social equity to the status accorded to other subfields of public affairs. The same concern was raised earlier in this introduction; but it needs to be raised again because it has not yet been addressed. Norman-Major's paper speaks directly to years of the unelevated status of social equity as a critical subfield of public affairs. Norman-Major tackles three areas in her paper that help elevate the status of social equity: definitions, measures, and curriculum. As such, Norman-Major believes that progress in raising the status of social equity will begin to occur.

The last two papers in the symposium are vastly different from those just mentioned. The paper authored by Waldner, Roberts, Widener, & Sullivan, considers another aspect of social equity that addresses health disparities within the United States. This topic is greatly overlooked, even in the social equity literature. However, the topic is critical since many MPA and MPP programs, such as the one at the University of San Francisco, offer a concentration in health care administration. Atlanta is a city of great importance to the global community in terms of commerce and culture. However, the city continues to post some of the highest rates of AIDS and infant mortality in the world. Sullivan and coauthors

sagely suggest that using social equity as a framework helps their students to understand the racial and socioeconomic implications of such high infection rates as those of Atlanta and to determine how public administrators should respond.

Sexual orientation and gender identity has received little attention in the public affairs literature (see Oldfield, Candler, & Johnson, 2006). I have taken up the mantle with a recent study on transgender education and awareness. I also aim to expand the scope of social equity literature beyond race and ethnicity; it is important for public affairs students to understand that not all of their contingents will be heterosexual or fit nicely into the traditionally constructed binary of gender. My article concludes with three tangible recommendations for how faculty can infuse transgender education via curriculum reform and their own research. In the article, I also underscore the value of internships whereby students can gain experience in working with groups such as the Human Rights Campaign, which helps create transgender inclusion policies.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED, AND WHERE SOCIAL EQUITY IS HEADING

The lessons learned from this Social Equity Symposium were many. The first is that race and gender continue to dominate the social equity dialogue and scholarship. Most of the proposals received addressed either race or gender. While race and gender are still important topics, it is important for scholars and public affairs practitioners to understand the importance of other matters that come under social equity.

The second lesson learned is that social equity continues to have a small voice within public affairs. This lesson is observable by the lack of opportunities to teach in this subfield. The perception of social equity from many may be that only women and people of color need be bothered with issues of justice and fairness. However, Frederickson has continued to model a different course, which suggests that anyone and everyone within public affairs may be involved in social equity education and research.

Finally, it is rewarding that many of the leading public affairs journals have produced, or are now producing, special issues dedicated to social equity. But the true test of endurance on this topic will be whether such articles appear in public affairs journals in coming years without having to be included in a “special issue.”

As society changes, so must the traditional or *safe* topics that are covered within the scope of most public affairs programs within the United States and abroad. This symposium is in response to the evolving need for progress, since change often starts with education.

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