SOCIAL EQUITY: THE FOURTH PILLAR OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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> ***An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailments of all republics.*** **Plutarch, AD 46-120**

Social Equity: An Overview

In today's increasingly divisive world, issues of inequity are at the center of policy debates and public frustration regarding a variety of social problems. Widening income gaps, unequal access to health and education resources, and tensions between racial and social groups are at the forefront of conversations, in particular for the public agencies looking to resolve them. In order to appropriately discuss these issues, it is helpful to reflect on the history and evolution of the concept of equity, why it is a concern for public administrators, and examples of negative consequences that can be both caused and rectified by the state. By examining the context of the social equity conversation, public administrators may better understand how to reduce inequities in society.

Evolution of Social Equity

Although questions of equity remain more relevant than ever, the discussion of social equity as a concept has been documented as far back as Aristotle and Plato (Rutledge, 2002). Both discuss the importance of equity as a type of justice among humans that may "go beyond the written law" and can evolve as a practice (Rutledge, 2002). Despite rules, Rousseau argued, unequal distribution and economic needs create natural inequities and differences that "become more permanent in their effects" (Rousseau, 1992). It was these basic ideals of justice and equality upon which the United States originated. Frustrated by political and social injustices, the early colonists defined in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" (Johnson & Svara, 2011).

The 1960s and 70s observed dramatic leaps in the application of social equity to the field of public administration (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). The national context of these decades was centered on racial injustice and civil rights, highlighting the inequities of experience with government and institutions for different Americans based on their identity group. Frustrated by his observations of outdated approaches and conversations among political scientists, Dwight Waldo sought to convene a younger, more dynamic group of public administrators to discuss important issues in Syracuse, New York, for the first Minnowbrook Conference in 1968 (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). The conference served as the foundation for the ideals of the New Public Administration, which rejected the Wilsonian dichotomy and acknowledged the importance of administrators in using their discretion to enforce and influence policies (Johnson & Svara, 2011).

The role of administrators in promoting social equity was further solidified by Rawls' seminal 1971 work, "Theory of Justice," in which he described the importance of creation of institutions and policies that promote a just and fair society for those at the bottom (Rawls, 1971). In 1990, prominent social equity scholar H. George Frederickson proposed the inclusion of equity as a "third pillar" alongside economy and efficiency as a central value for administrators; under this philosophy, public administrators focus not only on whether a program or policy is working, but for whom it works – a concept Frederickson refers to as the "second question" (Frederickson, 1990). Shafritz & Russell argue that public administrators are tasked not only with administrating laws fairly and equitably, but also promoting equity through maintaining a diverse workforce with equal opportunities and providing moral leadership and inspiration for citizens to behave fairly (Shafritz & Russell, 2007).

More recently, the concept of social equity has been broadened to include far more categories than race and gender, including sexual and gender identity, economic status, physical and mental disability, and more (Frederickson, 2005). Inequities themselves have trended away from more overt forms of discrimination as witnessed in the 1960s and more towards subtle disparities in access and impacts that limit political participation and influence, skewing political responsiveness to more affluent groups (Frederickson, 2005). Currently, the top 10% of American earners generate 90% of the country's income, prompting major concerns about the possible impact of this growing inequity (Saez, 2015).

Social Equity Defined

Though social equity has many technical definitions, its fundamental essence boils down to the broad values of fairness and justice; As Hart (1974) cites from Black's Law Dictionary, "[equity] denotes the spirit and the habit of fairness, justness, and right dealing which would regulate the intercourse of men with men – the rule of doing to all others as we desire them to do to us." Similar definitions of equity include: Rawls' theory of "justice as fairness"(1971); Adler's definition of social equity as "equal treatment to which all are entitled by virtue of being human" (Adler, 1981); and Falk's description of equity as "impartiality, fairness, and justice." (Falk et al, 1993). Other more "complex" definitions expand the concept of social equity and apply it to public rights, access, and redistribution policy (Svara and Brunet, 2005). The World Bank describes equity as "equal access to the opportunities that allow people to pursue a life of their own choosing and to avoid extreme deprivations in outcomes." (2006).

The Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance of the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) defines Social Equity as "The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract, and the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.". Later in its Strategic Plan, NAPA identified Social Equity as being the fourth pillar of Public Administration. Goal 2 of this Plan states:

"The Academy's Board of Directors adopted social equity as the fourth pillar of public administration, along with economy, efficiency and effectiveness." (NAPAWash, 2005)

More recently, Johnson and Svara (2011) proposes a new definition of Social Equity. "Social Equity is the active commitment to fairness, justice, and equality in the formulation of public policy, distribution of public services, implementation of public policy, and management of all institutions serving the public directly of by contract. Public administrators, including all persons involved in public governance should seek to prevent and reduce inequality and injustice based on significant social characteristics and to promote greater equality in access to services, procedural fairness, quality of services and social outcomes (p. 282). Despite minor variances in definitions, these descriptions summarize the heart of the social equity concept for public administrators.

Why this concept is of concern to Public Administrators"

Charles Darwin famously remarked in the early 19th century, "If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin" (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009).

Much more recently, the National League of Cities stated:

"Governments at all levels is in part responsible for many of the glaring inequalities we see today and should therefore lead the way to solutions. Public policies adopted over time at the federal, state, and local levels have created and exacerbated many of the inequalities that our communities are struggling with today" (ESSENCE: The 2003 Futures Report Divided We Fall: Inequality and the Future of America's Cities and Towns, National League of Cities, 2003).

In response to this perception, the League created the Equity and Inclusiveness Endeavor which stated:

"Creating equitable and inclusive communities with opportunity for all can lead to a level playing field where everyone has a chance to succeed. The National League of Cities is exploring how government policies at all levels have contributed to increasing inequalities in America's cities and towns which threaten the well-being of regions and the nation. Divisions by race, class and geography have decreased access to much-needed jobs, adequate health care, affordable housing, and quality education. Through its leadership campaigns, research and publications, workshops and seminars, and advocacy priorities the National League of Cities is helping local officials create a sense of community and become trusted and reliable advocates for the well-being of all residents" (http://www.nlc.org/topics/index.aspx?SectionID=equity_inclusiveness).

Inequality undermines trust and community. It renders government vulnerable to special interests seeking to maximize short-term profit. Inequality, especially rising inequality, promotes status competition, social divisiveness, and weakens the will of the many to organize to defend common interests against the specialized interests of the few. Inequality corrodes social bonds, erodes friendship, diminishes civic participation, and attenuates trust in government.

How to Measure Social Equity

If the first step for administrators involves forming a basic definition for understanding social equity, the second involves the measurement of performance and results in order to assess and recognize inequities. By beginning to describe inequity through quantitative measures, administrators may begin to develop performance assessment benchmarks (Rutledge, 2002). Several measures exist to assign numerical value to degree of equity. The first, and most widely recognized on an international scale, is the Gini Coefficient measure of income inequality (Glaeser, Resseger, & Tobio, 2011). The Gini Coefficient represents the distribution of wealth in a community, with 0 representing equal distribution and 1 representing all wealth in the hands of one individual (Glaeser, Resseger, & Tobio, 2011).

In the United States, the 2015 Gini coefficient of 0.482 represents a steady rise in income inequality since the 1970s figure of 0.406 (World Bank, 2016). The rapid rise nationally in the 2000s can be attributed to the upward pull of the top 1% of income earners; if these exceedingly wealthy individuals are removed from the calculation, the curve becomes much flatter, though still reflects a widening income gap (Kenworthy & Smeeding, 2013). This distinction is reinforced by the measure of relative poverty in the US over time, which represents income inequality in the lower half of the income distribution and has risen slowly but steadily for the 99% over the past decades (Kenworthy & Smeeding, 2013). Metropolitan areas exhibit high Gini coefficients as compared to more rural areas, due mainly to the congregation of skilled workers and racial diversity within cities (Glaser, Resseger, & Tobio, 2011). In the United States, the highest Gini coefficients can found in Miami and New Orleans at .5744, are equivalent to the country of Zambia (Stilwell & Lu, 2015).

Though the population's Lorenz curve provides perhaps the most widely recognized measurement, inequality may also be identified by other numerical values. Different data sources and dimensions may be compiled and assigned weights to create a single indicator of multidimensional inequality and poverty (Seth & Alkire, 2014). A recent application of this technique combined indicators of education, health, and living standards (years of schooling, sanitation, electricity, child nutrition, etc) to calculate deprivation scores for each individual, which can then be summarized and compared to examine differentials among groups, communities, and geographic areas (CEPAL, 2015).

The Social Equity in Governance Standing Panel of the National Academy of Public Administration has provided four main criteria by which to measure equity: procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes (Johnson & Svara, 2011). Data collected from policies and programs can illuminate different impacts and experiences in these dimensions across different groups. Using the example of health care provided by Hug (2011): access indicators include insurance coverage and use of regular doctor visits, hospital emergency visits, and dental checkups; measures of quality include disease management, preventative care such as vaccinations, and overall satisfaction with doctors; procedural equity can be indicated by number of referrals to specialists and ratings of patient-centered care; finally, overall outcomes can be reflected in data on mortality rates, heart disease, and cancer. If large disparities exist between groups in outcomes measurements, there is a fair chance that barriers to equity have occurred in one or more of the other categories (Johnson & Svara, 2011). As Hug notes, accessing and analyzing the right data by group may prove challenging, but identifying disparities in performance remains the first step to achieving equitable outcomes (2011).

Quantitative data as described in the health care example can provide a critical component to assessing an agency's performance in achieving social equity, and is often a reporting requirement for departments under the Government and Performance Results Act of 1993. Yet it is important not to discount the importance of qualitative responses or discussion about social equity at the agency's leadership level (Gooden, 2014). An agency may commit to examining racial disparities in services and outcomes, then collect different perspectives from stakeholders to decide collectively on the best methodological approach (Gooden, 2014).

Government's Role in Resolving and Contributing to Inequity

The consequences of social equity can prove too great to ignore, providing a case for government interference. Over the course of history, several landmark policy and judicial decisions have helped shape the role of government in addressing social inequities. The cultural context of the 1960s that inspired the first Minnowbrook Conference also ushered in landmark decisions and policies such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and Kennedy's Executive Order 10925, establishing affirmative action in government employers (Gooden, 2014). A decade earlier, courts recognized that racial segregation in schools created disparate access to high quality education and resources, resulting in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling for integration of public schools (Gooden, 2014). At the same time, concerns were raised citing unequal access among low income children to education, nutrition, and health services during the critical period of early cognitive development, providing support for the federal Head Start program (Johnson & Svara, 2011). These government actions provide only a small sample of overall examples of possible government approaches to promoting equity in institutions, programs, and the legal system.

While the government may play a powerful role in ameliorating inequalities and injustices, administrators must also be cautioned that such policies can unintentionally create disparate impacts for difference groups. This possibility of state-caused inequities should always be considered during the policy consideration and assessment processes. As an example, the “war on drugs” declared by President Nixon in the 1970s established a set of drug abuse and incarceration policies that today cost the government more than $51 billion annually and accounted for more than 1.5 million arrests in 2014 (Drug Policy Alliance, 2015). Despite research suggesting that blacks and whites use drugs at almost exactly the same rates, American prisons admit African Americans at a rate 13.4 times greater than whites, and in some states blacks make up as much as 90% of drug prisoners (Boyd, 2011). When blacks are arrested and sentenced at higher rates than whites for the same drug-related offense, the long term effects of this incarceration – economic impacts from lost job opportunities, political disenfranchisement as felons – are also disproportionately distributed by race (Brunet, 2011). The disparate impact of punitive drug policies for African American men has become so severe that the American Civil Liberties Union refers to drug war policies as “the new Jim Crow” (Boyd, 2011).

State-caused inequities may also be observed in the realm of education policy. Despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* case integrating public schools and theoretically restoring access, data suggests that disparities still exist in minority access and outcomes as related to education (Stiefel, Schwartz, & Ellen, 2011). Historically, schools are primarily funded through local tax revenue supplemented by state funding allocations. Based on this system, wealthy suburban schools generate higher tax revenues, while poorer communities may devote fewer resources and less money towards their schools (White, 2015). Though state funding is intended to even out these differences, recent research by Mosenkis in Pennsylvania schools indicates that, while poor districts receive more state funding for education, districts with a higher proportion of white students receive substantially higher funding than schools with minority students at the same poverty level (White, 2015). These disparities in funding and resources are reflected in unequal outcomes. On standardized tests, African American and Hispanic students score on average a full standard deviation below their white counterparts (Stiefel, Schwartz, & Ellen, 2011). It has been estimated that this performance disparity would be greatly reduced, by at least half, if minority children began kindergarten or first grade with equal levels of oral language, pre-mathematics, pre-reading, and general knowledge skills as white children; Based on this research, it is evident that these inequities begin early, suggesting that federal programs like Head Start have not fully addressed the need (Farkas, 2003). Furthermore, it has been suggested that black and white teachers tend to exhibit differences in evaluating behavior of students of different races; nonblack teachers demonstrate lower expectations for black students and are more likely to recommend harsh disciplinary action such as suspension for their black students (Gershenson, 2015). This finding suggests that school districts could benefit from more extensive training requirements for teachers as well as broader public awareness of racial inequities.

Another example of state-caused inequities is provided by the American approach to health care. Unlike other countries, the United States does not guarantee universal care (Hug, 2011). While emergency care is available for all, continuous access to affordable, preventative, regular health care is not guaranteed, and coverage and outcomes vary widely by race (Hug, 2011). Minorities are more likely than whites to be uninsured, underinsured, or to use the hospital as their usual source of care (National Healthcare Disparities Report, 2007). These racial disparities are also observed in hospitalizations for controllable diseases like diabetes or asthma, which can be as four to five times higher for minorities than for whites (Hug, 2011). Evidence suggests that the disparities in health indicators are even more starkly apparent in racially segregated residential areas, where resources are limited (Williams & Collins, 2001).

The Case for Improving Social Equity: Consequences of Inequities

Thus far, this chapter has reviewed means by which administrators may identify, measure, examine, and resolve possible social inequities and barriers within a society, whether naturally occurring or state-caused. Yet, even if an inequity exists, the question remains why should administrators care? To what extent is it the responsibility of the government to interfere and mitigate inequities? Since America’s founding, prioritizing the values of freedom, equality and justice has presented a challenge, with the Constitution granting more weight to protecting freedom and liberty than equality (Johnson & Svara, 2011). The inherent tension between these values has been at the center of many policy debates, particularly surrounding freedom of expression and freedom of economic pursuits. Placing these debates in the context of the “four pillars of public administration,“ equity may at times require compromising on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (Norman-Major, 2012).

Despite the ideological tensions between liberty and equity and the debates against government interference, common arguments on behalf of social equity consistently emerge. Gooden (2014) describes organizational examinations of social equity as being catalyzed by four main triggers: moral, economic, political, and legal. A fifth additional argument for equity may be formed on the basis of the conflict and social unrest that occurs as a result of inequity (Wooldridge, 2016). Though proponents of social equity may choose to emphasize certain arguments depending on the audience they are attempting to persuade, the full case for support of social equity is rich and multidimensional in nature (Norman-Major & Wooldridge, 2011).

A primary argument for social equity centers around the morality of promoting what is “right” and “fair” (Hart, 1974). As Rawls assumes as his first principle in the original position of society creation, “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all”(1974). Hart argues that all public administrators should adopt this principle with consensus to establish unified ethical guidelines by which to treat citizens - based not just on altruism but rather a sense of fraternity and human bond (Hart, 1974). This view echoes that of John Locke, who believed that individuals are moral equals in nature (Frederickson, 2005). If the moral stance states that all humans are entitled to this sense of fairness and equality in treatment and access, then it follows that barriers to such equality should be of moral concern (Frederickson, 2005). As Frederickson summarizes, “persistent and grinding poverty is a profoundly moral issue, and social equity is a part of a moral stance on that issue” (2005). Moral arguments for social equity inspired civil rights legislation on the basis that mistreatment of citizens of different races was inherently “unfair” or “wrong” (Gooden, 2014).

Throughout American history, the moral argument for equality led to creation of laws and principles to protect groups from mistreatment and discrimination. The legal argument for social equity, therefore, hinges on the responsibility of administrators and policy-makers to enforce legislation and policy in keeping with previously established equity standards (Gooden, 2014). For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have filed legal complaints to combat racial disparities, such as on behalf of welfare clients in Wisconsin who were sanctioned disproportionately by race (Gooden, 2014). From this perspective, administrators should consider equity within policy to ensure that the impacts of services do not violate any existing legal protections.

As discussed above, many critics of equity-promoting policies cite interference with economic interests. Certainly, efforts to promote equity might challenge some economic freedoms, as demonstrated through tax redistribution policies, industry regulations, and environmental restrictions (Johnson & Svara, 2011). Despite these apparent conflicts, social equity yields many economic net benefits (Norman-Major & Wooldridge, 2011). Most notably, inequitable societies statistically demonstrate lower growth and economic performance than others (Buss & Ahmed, 2011). Increases in poverty impede the ability of individuals to gain the education and skills necessary to contribute positively to the nation's workforce (Turner et al, 2013). The Kellogg Foundation suggests that closing the earnings gap between white and minority incomes would improve U.S. earnings by 12%, increasing GDP by $1.9 trillion and generating over $290 billion in additional tax revenue (Turner et al, 2013) Similarly, poverty in communities is also associated with higher crime rates and worse health outcomes, further dampening economic productivity that could otherwise have generated goods and services for the economy (Holzer et al, 2007). The net cost of poverty can become very high – in many cases, costing more money to fix the negative impacts than addressing the root inequities to begin with (Norman-Major & Wooldridge, 2011).

Another cause of inequity is political in nature, thus must be part of any solution.. Those with control over resources tend to exhibit the strongest influence over public affairs. Bartels (2002) determined that voting behavior of senators reflected responsiveness to affluent constituents that was three times as great as to low income constituents. This pattern was further solidified by the *Citizens United v. FEC* decision, in which the Supreme Court determined that campaign spending by nonprofit corporations could not be limited due to freedom of speech (SCOTUSblog, 2010). Imbalances in political power between groups violate the principle that government should be representative of its people (Gooden, 2014). Furthermore, when individuals perceive themselves to have a lower rank in society, these feelings of low self-efficacy and unworthy of their place in society manifest in lower political participation, further damaging the political interests of the group (Kraus, Anderson, & Callaghan, 2015).

Related to the economic and political arguments for social equity but worthy of distinction, societies with high inequity tend to experience greater conflict (Wilkinson, 2011). When feelings of injustice and exclusion pervade a culture, the community exhibits lower levels of trust, weaker community connections, lower quality of social relationships and cooperation, and feelings of disrespect between individuals – all of which may trigger violence and jeopardize economic and political stability (Wilkinson, 2011). Indeed, areas with high Gini coefficients exhibit higher levels of violent crime. Buss & Ahmed (2011) assert that violence in these areas often has a "spill-over" effect into other developing areas, citing the example of regional conflicts in East Central Africa. In some cases, the conflict generated by inequity and poverty can worsen to extreme measures such as international and domestic terrorism. Burgoon (2006) argues that a country's government spending, which may help mitigate the political and economic barriers faced by the oppressed, is associated with a reduction in terrorist attacks and citizens perpetrating terrorism.

The frequency of observed conflicts in areas with high levels of inequity and poverty is no doubt fueled by the psychological and physical stress of the oppressed. Research has found a direct link between inequality in a society and negative psycho-social effects of toxic stress, depression, and psychotic symptoms (Piff & Wilkinson, 2014). Furthermore, those in the lower end of the social hierarchy face challenges to access health care services, leading to negative consequences for mental and physical health (Hug, 2011). Research suggests that the impacts of poverty and inequity on the brain are not only psychological, but also developmental and physiological.

Children from low income households demonstrate distinct differences in cognitive abilities than their peers at a very young age, creating disparities in mental disorders, educational attainment, and IQ scores, which can lead to permanent setbacks in educational and economic outcomes (Sleek, 2015). Despite previous claims that a child's development is primarily shaped by family structure, the primary factor negatively affecting cognitive development is long-term poverty (Nuffield Foundation, 2011). Furthermore, if children have developed in an environment surrounded by violence and unrest, MRI scans show weak neural connections and development in parts of the brain controlling judgment, awareness, ethics, and emotions (Hayasaki, 2016). Lower levels of the brain tissue called grey matter in specific areas like the hippocampus impeded the children's ability to follow instructions and devote attention to learning, resulting in lower standardized test scores (Hayasaki, 2016). This stunted brain growth is a direct biological response to an environment full of toxic stress – a type of sustained fight or flight – suggests that the cyclical effects of poverty begin much earlier than scientists may have thought, and that current programs promoting early child care and access to resources should also direct substantial resources to protecting children's socio-emotional development.

Future of Social Equity

As demonstrated by examples of state-caused and state-remedied social inequities, the relationship between government and equality, while politically complicated, is inextricably linked. Due to the potential for serious negative consequences of inequality within a society, the government should care, and indeed must care, about the promotion of equity from many perspectives, including political, economic, legal, moral, and conflict management arguments. Even as the current political approach champions a trend towards privatization to provide services (Ravitch, 2016), how can administrators continue to promote accountability and commitment to equity of access, quality, and outcomes for all citizens?

The question that lies before us is broad, but several concrete tactics may be used to advance equity for the future of public administration. First, administrators themselves must be educated and trained on the topic of equity in order to analyze systems and policies for disparate impacts and barriers to access and to seek alternative policy options. The curriculum within public administration programs should underscore the importance of examining issues of public administration and policy using an equity framework, examining equity from the perspectives of access, quality, procedural fairness, and outcomes (Larson et al, 2016). In conjunction with providing education to incoming administrators, current elected officials and staff may be provided with training and development opportunities regarding the importance of equity considerations and concrete tools to inform policy decisions (Johnson & Svara, 2011).

While awareness and education provide a solid foundation for examining equity issues, it is necessary to extend these efforts a step further to increase understanding of specific tools and measures that can be used to assess equity. Much progress has been made in this area in recent years. The social equity framework has helped create the demand to identify, define, and collect data sources where information was previously unavailable. Svara suggests administrators may utilize the questions posed by the social equity framework and the resulting data to conduct an "equity inventory" at different levels of government, from the operations and services of a small department to a more jurisdictional level reviewing results across departments. Some exemplary jurisdictions have already created equity "toolkits" or "scorecards" to serve as helpful templates to assess performance and proposals – for example, the Seattle Racial Equity Toolkit (Johnson & Svara, 2011) or the King County Office of Equity and Social Justice's "list of determinants of social equity" (Larson et al, 2016). In addition to expanding upon the foundation provided by these examples, administrators may also enhance measurement tools by seeking help from researchers and economists to reduce measurement and evaluation challenges such as inadequate or decentralized data, poor measurement tools and methodology, and nervousness and hesitation about evaluation among leadership.

Once administrators have the knowledge to seek out these possible inequities and identify them, the next critical step is generating broad public exposure and attention surrounding inequity's negative consequences. The political, economic, and moral dangers of inequity within a society should raise concern among public officials and individual citizens alike. Through collaboration with the media, public statements, reports to officials, and other actions, administrators can demonstrate their commitment to equity and continuously raise awareness regarding the impacts of inequity, ultimately giving stakeholders the knowledge and tools to normalize attention to equity issues and embed equity within policy considerations.

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