

Mark A. Glaser
Wichita State University

Commentary

Social Equity and the Public Interest

Mark A. Glaser is professor of public administration in the Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs at Wichita State University. He specializes in survey research and citizen engagement processes that strengthen community attachment and commitment to public investment decisions guided by the public interest.
E-mail: mark.glaser@wichita.edu

In “Social Equity: Its Legacy, Its Promise,” Mary E. Guy and Sean A. McCandless carefully reconstruct the history of advances in social equity and develop convincing arguments for why it is, or at least should be, a “pillar of the field.” This commentary builds on the logic of Guy and McCandless but reframes the discussion to treat social equity less as a dimension of performance and more as a component of the public interest.

Business is ruled by markets and customer demands that are focused on narrow bands of self-interest. Government is guided by a blend of professional capacity and democratic processes that, ideally, advance the public interest. When narrow bands of self-interest creep into the decision-making processes of government, markets are distorted, the public interest is obscured, and inequality grows. Weak democratic processes yield to potent economic forces and power concentrates, with important implications for both capitalism and democracy. Guy and McCandless argue that without intervention, these distortions contribute to inequality that triggers “episodic corrections.”

A number of forces are converging, including a particularly aggressive form of capitalism driven by the global economy, forming what is often referred to as a “perfect storm.” The perfect storm brings a new economic and fiscal reality to the United States that demands change. Prior to the rise of the globalized economy, Americans enjoyed job security and employment-related guarantees, including access to health care, retirement benefits, and disposable income. Manufacturing was instrumental in creating opportunity and a path to the middle class for many Americans. Now, as manufacturers struggle to compete globally, they are forced to reduce wages and benefits and, in many cases, move their operations outside the United States. These global trends, exacerbated by economic downturn, contribute to a growing class of disadvantaged and widen the divide between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Guy and

McCandless describe the implications of these trends for all, but they give special attention to the concerns of citizens who are caught in the “intersection” of disadvantage, including victims of multiple forms of discrimination.

Many people have contributed to the theoretical foundation of social equity, but it is the vision, courage, and the tenacity of H. George Frederickson that gave shape to the normative discussion that pushed this concern to the forefront of the field of public administration. Today, there are countless public leaders who rely on embedded norms that are the product of the counsel of Frederickson. He introduced social equity as an agenda for public administrators by giving the public bureaucracy a gentle nudge through a test of the “underclass hypothesis,” which focused on equity in the delivery of public services. More recent works by Frederickson reflect growing concern about the socioeconomic divide and encouragement for “moral leadership,” as opposed to forced implementation of social equity. Frederickson recognizes that the mood of the nation is changing as citizens brace for an uncertain future. This commentary argues that moral leadership should be guided by the public interest. As a result, it is incumbent on public leaders to demonstrate connections between advances in social equity and the public interest. These types of demonstrations are instrumental to building public support. Guy and McCandless lay the groundwork for moral leadership with the understanding that social equity is a slippery concept that varies considerably based on context and functional area. For example, connections between social equity and the education of public schoolchildren are relatively straightforward. In contrast, issues of social equity as they apply to investments in basic infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and water delivery systems are not as obvious.

Guy and McCandless argue that advances in social equity must be guided by outcomes. Outcomes-based evaluation uses logic models to systematically define the problem as manifested through varied targets.

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Therefore, public agencies must publically defend why a target was selected, why is it reasonable to expect the intervention to yield anticipated outcomes, and how the outcomes are connected to the public interest. In some cases, the demands of moral leadership are less daunting because societal norms predispose the community to accept responsibility. For example, people tend to be more willing to accept responsibility for providing assistance to individuals who are mentally or physically disadvantaged. In contrast, the burden of moral leadership is considerable when it involves helping people understand the plight of those who are victims of discrimination, particularly those caught in intersections of disadvantage. Even more troubling, intersections of disadvantage are often intergenerational in nature.

Frederickson introduced the subject, and Guy and McCandless advance the argument for what is sometimes referred to as intergenerational equity. For example, if public education is instrumental to the creation of opportunity, and if economic and social disadvantage are important barriers to educational achievement, then interventions must compensate for weak family support systems to overcome intergenerational disadvantage. In this case, the public interest is advanced when moral leadership is instrumental in encouraging the community to invest in the future by accepting responsibility for the creation of educational opportunity for all schoolchildren.

Some researchers argue that the public interest is advanced when individuals behave in ways that are less about personal interests and more about community well-being. This tension between community and self-interest is both the product of, and a contributor to, the perfect storm. Without public leadership

guided by the public interest, citizens being battered by the perfect storm instinctively retreat into self-interest. The behavior of citizens is driven by perceptions and perceptions are not necessarily anchored in reality. As the perfect storm advances, it becomes increasingly important for government to develop more meaningful dialogue with citizens facilitating the flow of information and mitigating fear of the future. This will not be easy because media focused on profitability tends to give priority to stories that sell as opposed to those that inform. As a result, the media is not always a reliable conduit of information between citizens and government.

Guy and McCandless describe what can happen when there is a void in moral leadership and reliable information. Voids such as these create opportunity, and self-interest creates motive, for actions fed by prejudicial bias and selective perceptions. When citizens carry prejudicial views fortified by self-interest, they are less likely to understand the plight and accept responsibility for the well-being of their fellow citizens.

Transitions from government to governance, including intergovernmental and intersectoral collaborations, create much-needed capacity necessary for responding to the challenges of the perfect storm. Unfortunately, collaboration also increases the probability that the public agenda will be captured by narrow bands of self-interest. As a result, it is important that citizens be involved in defining appropriate outcomes that are tested for consistency with the public interest. When citizens are involved in directing change that is less about self-interest and more about community well-being, democracy is more likely to yield outcomes that are consistent with the public interest.