

Equity at the Intersection: Public Administration and the Study of Gender

Senior–Junior Exchange: The Concept of Social Equity Reconsidered

While gender has emerged as an important research subject, the development of a feminist theory has been slow. This paper calls for a commitment to the development of a feminist theory of public administration. As part of this development, the author argues that the field also must embrace research focused on the intersection of multiple identity categories such as race and class.

In her essay “The Pursuit of Social Equity in the Federal Government: A Road Less Traveled?” Professor Norma M. Riccucci begins with a quotation from the novelist James Baldwin and the familiar metaphor of a glass that can be perceived as half empty or half full. The Baldwin quote captures the frustration felt by many Americans concerning the country’s struggle for full equality and civil rights. The glass metaphor asks whether, at the midpoint, one should be pleased by the progress we have made or disappointed that we have not accomplished more. As the reader begins to grapple with the idea of pleasure, disappointment, and patience in the context of social equity, as if by sleight of hand, Riccucci presents the usually homogenized category of “people of color” as individual groups organized by race and gender, turning what appeared to be a single glass into many, with levels of progress that range from optimism to despair. Even the very question of progress is a lot less clear.

This is particularly true for female federal employees. According to Hsieh and Winslow (2006), although women have made gains in overall representation, inequality exists

among women of different racial and ethnic groups. The information presented by Riccucci supports this observation. In her section on “Social Equity in Leadership Posts,” she reports that during the period from 1985 to 2007, women showed a 22.4 percent gain in the number of Senior Executive Service (SES) appointments, with white women increasing 16.3 percent. However, all other women showed much more modest gains. African American women increased their total by 2.7 percent, while Asians, Latinas, and American Indians improved by less than 1 percent each. Although all female racial and ethnic groups continued to trail their male counterparts in terms of total SES appointments, an argument can be made that one would expect, among African

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among African Americans, to see more women in the SES than men because of the fact that they are the only group for which the number of female federal employees was substantially greater than the number of male employees in both 1984 and 2007. While one should be careful about how much is inferred from descriptive statistics alone, an examination of the rest of Riccucci’s essay, particularly the section on “Social Equity across Agencies,” does suggest that gender, as well as race, affects the employment experiences and opportunities of federal workers.

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The study of race, gender, and representation is not a new idea to our field. However, reflecting on the information presented by Riccucci, one is inclined to believe that the future of social equity research lies in questions that address the *intersection* of race and gender as opposed to approaches that deal with

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them as separate categories. In the spirit of exchange, this essay is an argument inspired by information presented by Riccucci. It is time for the field to make a commitment to the study of gender, including the development of a feminist theory of public administration. As part of that theory, the field must engage in research focused on the intersection of multiple identity categories such as gender and race.

Feminism, Equality, and Gender

In a recent article, Stivers (2005) asks, “What is it about public administration that has made it so impervious to feminist inroads?” Certainly, the need to ask this question is distressing enough. However, coming from the author of *Gender Images in Public Administration* (2002), one of the most important books on gender in our field, the question is downright depressing—a point underscored by the author’s lack of optimism. She adds that there is “very little [research] that takes seriously the question of how feminism of any kind requires us to think differently about central questions in the field” (2005, 365). Hutchinson and Mann share her concern, pointing out that public administration has been unable to create a “defining body of feminist theory” (2004, 79).

While feminist theory development has been slow, several authors have noted an increase in research that is compatible with the ideals of liberal feminist theory (e.g., Burnier 2005; Condit and Hutchinson 1997; McSwite 2004). According to Burnier, research in public administration written from a liberal feminist point of view would address “various equality questions including the numerical representation of women in public bureaucracies; women’s underrepresentation in specific government professions and agencies; sexual harassment in the public workplace; the need to create family friendly public workplaces; and the presence of a ‘glass ceiling’” (2005, 395). Condit and Hutchinson (1997), in their examination of articles published in leading public administration and public policy journals by female scholars between 1960 and 1995, discovered that 26.4 percent of the articles reflected a liberal perspective.

Considerations of gender as an area of research and the development of questions that address questions of equality are important steps toward the development of a feminist theory (McGinn and Patterson 2005). Yet, as Riccucci demonstrates, equity questions focused on gender alone tell only part of the story. Instead, as McGinn and Patterson remind us, we must “make

room for other variables that contribute to gendered experiences including (but not limited to), race, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation” (2005, 939).

Learning to Speak Intersectionality

According to Hutchinson and Mann (2004), “other disciplines are fluent feminisms,” while public administration has been slow to learn the language. Fortunately for our field, we can turn to the literature and experiences of these disciplines to use as our Rosetta stone. Since the 1960s, feminists of color have argued that mainstream feminism has not paid sufficient attention to the lives of nonwhite women. Several prominent African American feminists have described feelings of alienation during the development of the contemporary feminist movement. For instance, when asked why she did not join the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s, former Black Panther Angela Davis remarked, “There wasn’t a place for me there” (Bhavnani 1989, 69). During her time as a graduate student, bell hooks decided to turn to the Black Studies Department to teach courses on feminism because “[w]omen’s studies programs were not ready to focus on race and gender” (1990, 29). As a response to this alienation, black feminists, and other feminists of color, began to confront what Zinn and Dill describe as “the hegemony of feminisms constructed around the lives of white middle-class women” (1996, 321), or what King describes as “[t]he theoretical invisibility of black women” in the feminist and gender literature (1988, 43).

The intersectional perspective, or *intersectionality*, is one of the important research developments to emerge from this challenge. Intersectionality, a term first used by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1994) in her examination of violence against women of color, refers to an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that is focused on the intersection of identity categories such as race and gender. Scholars working from an intersectional perspective challenge the idea that race, gender, and class form independent analytic categories (McCall 2005). Although the intersectional perspective remains closely associated with study of

women of color (Collins 1986, 1989, 2000), Browne and Misra declare, “Race is ‘gendered’ and gender is ‘racialized,’ so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all grounds—not just women of color” (2003, 488).

Perhaps the strongest articulation of how an intersectional perspective would work in public administration comes from the following passage by Stivers:

Intersectionality...refers to an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that is focused on the intersection of identity categories such as race and gender. Scholars working from an intersectional perspective challenge the idea that race, gender, and class form independent analytic categories.

Examining gender dilemmas in public administration does not imply the view that other factors such as race and class are less important. Gender is tied to race and class; gender's importance is not as the solo source of domination but as a lens that enables one to see things that other lenses miss. In what follows, I try to be consistent about pointing out the interrelationships among the three factors— to show, for example, where the harmful effect of gender stereotypes is exacerbated by influences of race and class. I also try not to generalize about gender in ways that obscure the visibility of these influences. (2002, 5)

Several important ideas are captured in this passage. One is the appropriateness of women of color as a subject for public administration apart from their white female or minority male counterparts. Another is the acknowledgment of what King (1988) would describe as the “triple jeopardy” of race, class, and gender, which can subject women of color to multiple, simultaneous forms of discrimination. And perhaps most important is the articulation of an intersectional framework that can be applied to public administration.

Although these ideas have not been fully integrated into public administration, recent research provides hope for an intersectional approach. Portillo (2008), in an examination of social and official identities, states that the structure of racial and gender hierarchies influences the public official use their legal authority. According to Portillo, “officials with traditionally low social statuses are not immediately recognized as public authority figures, because their social status is inconsistent with [the] traditional cultural image of a public authority figure” (2008, 8). Hutchinson and Mann (2004) argue for the use of multicultural feminism in public administration. According to the authors, a multicultural perspective is informed by the interaction or “travel” among women of different cultures and that interactions can be used to overcome practical and intellectual differences between the two cultural groups.

While race and class are almost certain to dominate intersectionality research, it is important that we remember to include sexual orientation. Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson (2005) note “a near absence of attention to sexual orientation” in their review of social equity articles in leading journals from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Brazil from 1940 to 1999. They also report that during that time, there were only two articles in the *Public Administration Review* on sexual orientation. While research on sexual orientation is scarce, we do have a few studies that can serve as a foundation. Lewis (1997a) provides a detailed

examination of efforts to remove homosexual employees from the federal civil service since the 1950s. The examination also notes how the courts and the civil service commission helped shape federal policy. In another article, Lewis (2001) offers an important examination of the evolution of federal policy concerning the denial of security clearance to homosexual employees. Additional research conducted at the state level (Colvin 2000; Riccucci and Gossett 1996) can also enrich our understanding of sexual orientation and provide an opening for future intersectional research.

Final Thoughts

Let us conclude by returning to the half empty/half full metaphor. Cornel West, who has spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on the progress and challenges faced by those engaged in the struggle for social equality during the last 50 years, offers the following: “Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet we know that the evidence does not look good” (1997, xii). Instead of turning to optimism in the face of despair, West suggests that we consider hope. Now, admittedly, hope is a strange term to be using in our field. And yet, the belief that we can marshal the power of research to improve the lives of others is a clear part of the public administration tradition. Dedication to the study of the complexities of gender is one way we can operationalize that hope.

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