

Social Equity Is a Pillar of Public Administration

James H. Svara and James R. Brunet
North Carolina State University

Abstract: In this article, the authors respond to points raised David Rosenbloom regarding our 2004 *JPAE* article “Filling in the Skeletal Pillar: Addressing Social Equity in Introductory Courses in Public Administration.” We conclude with an operational definition of social equity for public administrators.

James H. Svara teaches administrative ethics and the doctoral course in foundations of public administration in the Public Administration Program at North Carolina State University. He is chairman of the Research Committee of the Social Equity Panel of the National Academy of Public Administration.

James R. Brunet teaches introduction to public administration and administrative ethics at North Carolina State University. He is currently conducting a review of social equity measures in criminal justice policy and administration in the United States for the Social Equity Panel of NAPA.

The standing and importance of social equity in public administration is elevated by giving it careful scrutiny. In our article in the *JPAE* symposium on Teaching Social Equity (Svara and Brunet 2004), we examined and defined the concept, noted its vague and imprecise usage and the surprising lack of attention given to it in public administration textbooks, and proposed how the major elements of social equity could be incorporated into an introductory course. David Rosenbloom has provided scrutiny by confronting self-satisfying assumptions about social equity and fuzzy pronouncements about what it means. He challenges the basic notion that social equity is a useful—much less central—concept in public administration. In the final analysis, the points he makes help to clarify what social equity means and why it is important for public administration as a profession to be committed to its advancement. We will respond to each of the points Rosenbloom makes and then present, with refinements stimulated by his commentary, an operational definition of social equity.

1. What are the pillars?

We acknowledge that we simply accepted the social-equity-as-third pillar analogy from the literature and sought to give it more precise meaning. We did not consider the fundamental question: “what are the pillars of public administration?” The rule of law is critically important, and we did not suggest that it was a subordinate component of social equity itself, although aspects of law are part of our measures of social equity. Dismissing the idea that administrators have a “duty” to “redistribute resources” (from White, 113), Rosenbloom argues that MPA students should “understand that public administrators are bound by the rule of law to implement regulations, such as regressive taxes, that may not comport with concepts of social equity.” The binding nature of the

law, however, does not preclude administrators from recognizing that the taxes they collect are regressive and trying to change this condition through legitimate methods. Without an awareness of and concern for social equity, administrators might simply follow the letter of the law or fail to question whether the law should be changed. The concern for social equity also can guide administrators in the exercise of discretion under the law. Having a commitment to social equity is, therefore, crucial as a major perspective in public administration. We feel that social equity deserves the prominence of pillar status. Re-examining what the other pillars are would be a useful topic for a separate discussion.

2. Definition.

Rosenbloom complains that the definitions of social equity in two of the symposium articles are tautological.¹ We start our definition by linking the concept to "fairness, justice, and equitable distribution" (101). It may be redundant to include "equitable" along with fairness and justice in the definition of social equity, but one can argue that equitable administrative practices promote social equity. We suggest that for social equity to be meaningful, it must be measurable and—drawing on the work of the NAPA Social Equity Panel—propose four dimensions that build on the definition and provide the basis for measurement: procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes. We describe the conditions that are consistent with social equity in each dimension.

Rosenbloom raises the substantive complaint that we "confound equity and *social* equity"² and ignore that "constitutional procedural due process is overwhelmingly an *individual* right, not one that protects large groups from unfair deprivation of liberty or property by government." If individual rights are protected in a universal and consistent way across all groups, there are no social equity concerns. Much negative experience, however, indicates that procedural fairness should be examined from a social equity perspective (and, in addition, many social equity shortcomings would persist even if procedural fairness were the same for all citizens.) To sharpen the language we used in our article, practices such as failure to provide due process before relocating a family as part of an urban renewal project or unfairly denying benefits to a person who meets eligibility criteria raise equity issues. When the unfair practices are used disproportionately in dealings with members of identifiable groups, there is a *social* equity issue, just as there is when using racial characteristics alone to "profile" criminal suspects. When individual rights are systematically denied to members of groups identified by characteristics such as gender, income, race, ethnicity, or age, there is a social equity problem.

¹ He criticizes Gooden and Meyers for defining social equity tautologically as "fairness or social justice" (92). Except for the double use of "social," the definition seems appropriate. The Oxford dictionary defines equity as "fairness, impartiality, even-handed dealing;" a definition of equitable is "just." We identify four dimensions of social equity as procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes, but we see these as elaborating what social equity is, not restating the same idea in different words.

² Similarly, Frederickson distinguishes between equity and social equity. "Certainly, there has always been a concern for fairness in the better practices of public administration, but it was not until the 1960s that the phrase 'social equity' became a feature of public administration with an attendant set of concepts and a cluster of shared values" (2005, 2-3.) Still, later in the paper Frederickson returns to a view of social equity as concerned with "fairness, justice, and equality."

Rosenbloom indicates that constitutional tests of equal protection are more appropriate to the “‘social’ in social equity,” but then focuses entirely on equal protection as a judicial standard that tends to focus on individuals. (This matter is discussed further in the next section.) A commitment to equal protection helps to prevent social equity problems from arising or leads to the correction of socially inequitable practices such as assigning unqualified teachers or sending old textbooks to low-income schools.³

Procedural fairness is the obvious starting point in defining social equity and specifying corrective action because the behavior is not problematic—indeed constitutional competence is required of public administrators (Rosenbloom and Carroll, 1990)—, even if it is complex. As Rosenbloom says, public administrators should “do equal protection”—as well as due process and equal rights—“on the job.” But this is not all they should do with respect to social equity. We will return to the matter of providing a more coherent, clear, and operational definition of social equity at the end.

3. Confront the inequities of social equity.

It is important to consider in a dispassionate way the potential inequities of social equity, as Rosenbloom observes. Still, one cannot ignore the fundamental inequalities in society, many of which cannot be explained by differences in individual aptitude or inclination. The commitment to social equity indicates that public administrators are not indifferent to these conditions. Proponents of reducing inequality are guided by Rawls’ second principle: “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged” (1971, 302). Through developing policy proposals to reduce social and economic problems and through choosing proactive administrative and management practices within existing policy,⁴ public administrators seek to address the effects of discrimination based on personal characteristics or the restricted prospects produced by inadequate socio-economic resources.

Public administrators need to be constantly aware that in efforts to reduce inequality, there will be losers as well as winners, even if the “losers” are in theory more advantaged. In devising remedies that change the distribution of benefits⁵, the equal protection test is relevant, as Rosenbloom has argued. Court decisions require race and ethnicity based public policies to be “narrowly tailored,” and applicants for public benefits must be given “individualized consideration.” These requirements do not preclude taking race into account if it is not the only or deciding factor. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* regarding the University of Michigan, Justice O’Connor wrote that “the Equal Protection Clause does

³ Rosenbloom usefully points out that “remedial law” is a practice used by courts to correct pervasive failure in administrative performance. As indicated in the closing section, we feel that administrators should undertake systematic examination of their own practices.

⁴ For example, the Raleigh Police Chief last year instituted new procedures in dealing with illegal encampments. Officers are to ask residents to dismantle the camp and give them reasonable time to do so, to counsel homeless persons about available services, and inventory protect their property if it is removed from an illegal encampment. *Raleigh News & Observer*, July 11, 2004, B1.

⁵ As noted earlier, examining equal protection can also be used to prevent or correct practices that violate social equity.

not prohibit the Law School's narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body." In its undergraduate admission policies in *Gratz v. Bollinger*, the court ruled that the university went too far in automatically awarding points to minority candidates, although once again the court permitted race to be used as a factor in admission if it was not the deciding factor. The concern about creating inequities should be a salient one to administrators, but it should not cause administrators to ignore the persistence of inequalities nor immobilize them from seeking to correct inequalities, even if this means testing the limits as the University of Michigan did.

4. Explain the advantages, if any, of applying the term "social equity" to standard, longstanding subject matter in MPA education.

Rosenbloom argues that MPA education should cover the rule of law—constitutional rights and equal employment opportunity law—and representative bureaucracy and that nothing is gained and much is lost when subsuming these topics under the discussion of "social equity." In his view, "these subjects stood and can continue to stand on their own." These subjects are important and will be recognizable in the curriculum, but can they be viewed as covering the full scope of social equity? The reason that we proposed teaching social equity across the introductory course is that these and many other topics contribute to a full understanding of social equity. Similarly, representative bureaucracy may be "more inclusive than social equity" because it can examine more categories, but this topic focuses only on public sector employment patterns and not the full range of policy and management issues covered by social equity.

In our view, Rosenbloom provides an argument for retaining an emphasis on social equity along with examination of the rule of law. He observes that equal protection analysis by the courts permits (or does not provide the basis for invalidating) public school financing systems that provide less money for each student in districts with predominantly ethnic minorities than those that have predominantly non-minority student bodies (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1 [1973]).⁶ Social equity analysis emphasizing the distribution of resources and legal analysis emphasizing equal protection may lead to differing views. A legal remedy in the form of a court-ordered redistribution of funds is not permissible in the Texas case, but that does not mean that the court would overturn a state plan to achieve greater uniformity in funding across districts. There is a wide zone of acceptable activities around equal protection. A commitment to social equity prompts one to analyze and explore the activist limits of equal protection, whereas the absence of this commitment might cause one to tolerate instances of inequality out of concern that remedies might not pass the equal protection test. Although Rosenbloom is concerned that social equity will be "muddled when it is treated as a pillar built of sometimes incompatible concerns and concepts," an opposing view is that it is stronger because it is based on considering and balancing multiple forms of analysis reflecting the four dimensions.

⁶ From our reading of this case, the decision does not permit unequal funding in the same district, as Rosenbloom indicates.

Rosenbloom's final concern seems misplaced. There is no reason why the coherence of equal protection and representative bureaucracy need to be compromised when the concepts are applied to the examination of social equity and also examined separately. Indeed, it seems that the understanding of equal protection is expanded by applying it both to test the adequacy of administrative practices as well as the Constitutional appropriateness of policy remedies.

We state the question in the opposite way: What is lost by not talking about social equity as a central concept? Rosenbloom seems to dismiss advocating social equity as a self-satisfying diversion for MPA faculty and students but a practice that is irrelevant to practicing administrators. We think that it should be a concept that deserves serious intellectual inquiry in the academy and also a major responsibility for public administrators. Practitioners should *do* social equity analysis and—within appropriate limits—action.

5. Avoid "stealing" popular sovereignty. What indeed are the appropriate limits? Just because, as Rosenbloom reminds us, some aspects of the New Public Administration implied an illegitimate presumption that administrators should substitute their preferences for those of elected officials, promoting social equity as a pillar does not carry the same presumption. As we argued—and Rosenbloom recognizes—, examining the appropriate limits of administrative action are an essential part of the study of social equity. We stress that public administrators should make elected officials and the public aware of social equity problems, should promote social equity in their policy recommendations to elected officials, and should examine their own administrative and management practices to insure that social equity is being observed and advanced. We share with Rosenbloom the emphasis on advocacy rather than “imposition of personal and professional values.” Consistent with this view, there are extensive opportunities to advance social equity in administrative and management behavior as well as in the appropriate advocacy of policy proposals.

6. Analysis of textbooks.

Rosenbloom asserts that we were mistaken in the way we characterized his textbook co-written with Robert Kravchuk. He points out that they do not index social equity (nor did we rely on index references alone), but they integrate subject matter that we treat as part of social equity throughout the book. We recognized that broad coverage, but the coverage of due process and equity in different parts of the text make no reference to “social” equity. The preponderance of material related to social equity in their book—discrimination, sexual harassment, EEO/AA, and representativeness—is included in their personnel chapter. Thus, our generalization about the two approaches is appropriate: explicit coverage of social equity occurs either in a stand-alone chapter or in the human resources section of the book (108). Their book provides extensive discussion of topics related to social equity but not social equity itself.

This brings us back the fundamental question. Should social equity be a topic that receives explicit attention, or should we rely on discussion of other topics that may

develop awareness, understanding, and commitment to the some of the concerns encompassed by the concept of social equity? We prefer the former approach because the clarity, coherence, and importance of the concept may otherwise be lost. How do students know that the various topics are related to social equity if it is not emphasized as a separate theme? Still, this approach of making social equity a central theme is defensible only if the concept has clear meaning and is accepted as a core value of public administration.

Conclusion: Operational definition of social equity.

Thus, we conclude with a response to Rosenbloom's challenge to provide a "clearer, operational definition." The definition of the NAPA Social Equity Panel (2000) provides the starting point, as in our original article:

The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract, and the fair, just 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.

In operational terms, public administrators should demonstrate the following commitments:

Procedural fairness. Provide due process, equal protection, and equal rights to all persons regardless of their personal characteristics. Each individual should be treated fairly, and any instances of unfair treatment of individuals should be corrected. Furthermore, existing and new practices in implementation, service delivery, and management should be examined to insure that procedural fairness is not disproportionately denied to any groups of persons. Any deviations should be corrected and the factors that contribute to this behavior should be eliminated.

Distribution and Access (equity in availability of services/benefits). Services and benefits should be distributed equally or in such a way that those who are less advantaged receive greater benefits. These general principles should guide the observance of requirements that are multiple and complex and that vary with the purpose of a program or the problem that is being addressed. For existing policies and programs, distribution and access should match the intended purpose. For example, if all are to receive a service or benefit, then it should be made available to all equally. If all are eligible, then it should be accessible to all equally. If special conditions are required to receive a service or benefit, efforts should be made to reach all who are eligible, and legal discretion should be used to include rather than exclude persons whose eligibility is borderline. In formulating new policy, promote equal distribution, compensatory redistribution, and efforts to correct past discrimination, depending on the nature of the problem being addressed. Avoid creating barriers to access, such as service fees for essential services that impose a disproportionate cost for persons with fewer resources. In developing policy proposals that entail redistribution, take into account the obligation to be accountable to the rule of law and the importance of making best use of scarce resources.

Quality (equity in the process of providing services and benefits). Insure that there is consistency in the quality of services and benefits delivered to all groups of people. Although some persons have the means to secure enhanced quality, public

administrators should strive to insure that prevailing standards of acceptable practice are met for all groups.

Outcomes: Seek to achieve an equal level of accomplishment or outcomes in the social and economic conditions for all individuals and seek to eliminate differences in outcomes for groups. While recognizing the importance of individual behavior on outcomes and the constraints that general conditions impose on outcomes in specific areas, e.g., the impact of poverty on educational performance, public administrators should examine why different outcomes occur and identify possible approaches to reducing disparities. Public administrators should ask how much inequality is acceptable and to what extent government can and should—on its own and in partnership with the business and nonprofit sectors—intervene to reduce the inequality in outcomes.

Related responsibilities: Guarantee all a place at the table so that they can express their own views about public policy choices and service deliver. Take proactive and affirmative efforts to involve all citizens and solicit feedback.

It is a step into uncharted territory to specify what it means to put the commitment to social equity into action. We acknowledge David Rosenbloom for challenging us to take this step and invite others to help move beyond this initial effort. This statement makes it clear how broad-ranging and fundamental the commitment to social equity is for practitioners and scholars. Social equity defines the larger purpose to which public administration is dedicated that stands alongside (but cannot override) accountability and rises above (but cannot ignore) instrumental management values. In sum, social equity is a pillar on which public administration rests.

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