Addressing Remnants of the Past: Proactive Responses to Equity Issues in Public Administration

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Abstract

Local governments, along with other American institutions, have integrated culturally and ethnically diverse residents into the mainstream of society. Yet, vestiges of segregation and exclusion continue to impact quality of life issues for minorities. These historical remnants pose equity, ethical, and practical dilemmas for local government managers as they wrestle with delivery and access of services and corrections of past environmental injustices for all residents. This article explores how these holdovers continue to challenge managers today and seeks from a practitioner's point of view to provide methods to rectify these inequalities.

Introduction

Residential housing patterns in the United States have historically fostered racially separated communities. These distinct alignments formed patterns of unequal levels of municipal service delivery to minorities that persist to this day (Alexander 1997; Bullard 1990; Stivers 2007). Proponents of administrative theory suggest that public administrators do not place an appropriate emphasis on the benefits of racial diversity in their communities (Frederickson 1980; Alexander 1997; Stivers 2007). This lack of attention not only diminishes the role race and diversity contributes to American society but perpetuates policies of the past, leaving public administrators vulnerable to charges that they fail to follow modern public administration principles as equity, equality, efficiency, and responsiveness to all residents (England,

Pelissero, and Morgan 2012; Nalbandian 2001).

In recent decades, policy makers, scholars, and activists have turned their attention to the reality that political exclusion and environmental racism continue (Pellow, Weinberg, and Schnaiberg, 2001; Bullard 1990). Pellow, Weinberg, and Schnaiberg (2001, 424) define environmental racism as occurring when "the poor and people of color bear the brunt of the nation's pollution problem." Exclusion,

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according to Parnell et al. (2004, 4), results from periods of forced segregation, when "settlement patterns of rural black migrants during the 1960s and 1970s resulted in high concentrations of blacks located outside the borders of towns as well as segregated within towns." This article strives to refocus attention to the claim that past actions in residential patterns and adverse impacts adjacent to minority and low-income residential neighborhoods result in situations that in many cases continue to exist today.

Research Objectives—Role of Managers

Many managers inherit situations when hired to serve in communities and are not aware of the problems. Some chose to follow the tenets of a neutral administrator and ignore the problem or due to short tenures, fail to act on the situations. Minorities recognize the disparate environmental issues that exist in their communities compared to the majority white community but often lack a voice in correcting these long-standing wrongs. As a guide to local managers, this article addresses these concerns, some of the issues blocking public administrators from dealing with them, and offers ways to correct or in the least, address these lingering problems.

These problems are not new: Frederickson (1980, 47) noted that even the most progressive and productive governments can "still be perpetuating poverty, inequality of opportunity and injustice." This research looks at how public officials can become more involved in solutions to social inequity.

A secondary approach reflects upon the study of public administration and inclusion of social equity issues in its curriculum. Frederickson (1997, 11, 159) and Gooden and Myers (2004, 173) argued for stronger focus and coverage of social equity in the literature and theory of public administration education and linking equity to ethics. I will conclude by recommending solutions that are available to administrators who recognize the lingering color divide and attempt to provide social equity to all citizens. Several case studies will serve as examples of communities continuing to experience the types of problems that may confront practitioners in the course of their work (Yin 2003).

Literature Review and Public Administration

There are several aspects of public administration to consider in the discussion of social equity and environmental racism. First, as Nalbandian (1994) proposes, managers and administrators are no longer neutral competents who play little or no role in policy decisions. Instead, Nalbandian discusses the transformation of professionalism in local government and the movement of the manager from strict administrator to a professional who shares the role of governing with elected officials and with that a new shared sense of community and governance. Further, he recognizes and promotes the theory that managers have shifted from looking at efficiency as a core value to considerations of "efficiency, representation, individual rights, and social equity as a complete array of values anchoring professionalism" (Nalbandian 1994, 534). Frederickson and others also reject the premise that managers are value neutral and instead argue that values in public service include responsiveness, citizen involvement, equity, and participation (Frederickson 1980, 8; Wooldridge and Gooden 2009, 224).

Second is the issue of social equity. Social equity includes the fair and equitable management of institutions serving the public, equitable distribution of public services, implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness and justice in forming public policy (Pynes 2009). Often, for minority residents or those in lower socioeconomic income strata, government has treated residents differently, both in providing basic services such as water and sewer and in protecting them from environmental hazards or municipal waste and from participating or voting in local government.

Throughout the study of public administration, there has been much debate regarding the separation of politics and administration in local government and the evolving academic and practitioner thought on those divisions. Stivers (2007, 54) merges thoughts on the expanding role of the public administrator as implementer of social equity with the need to consider racial components in the face of a history of avoiding racial issues within communities and Svara and Brunet (2004, 100) suggests defining social equity to enable public managers to better understand what they are confronting: inequity can range from fairness and equal treatment to redistribution of services to reduction of inequalities in communities.

Finally, environmental racism comes into play. Minority residents are acutely aware of the many discrepancies between their communities and other, more affluent, predominately white neighborhoods that are not home to dirt roads, septic tanks, wastewater treatment plants, landfills, or divided by highways and railroad tracks. These divisions are further accentuated by the fact that many poor and "communities of color also continue to lack equal access to political power" through exclusion practices (Pellow, Weinberg, and Schnaiberg 2001, 428; Parnell 2004). Real power remains "with the local white elite" and minorities remain in subordinate positions (Parnell 2004, 2).

Proponents of studies of environmental racism have found that three of every five African Americans and Hispanics live in communities with at least one environmentally hazardous site. In addition, these past practices of municipal or racial exclusion of minorities often indicates that landfills, wastewater treatment facilities, interstates, or other waste sites are more likely to be present (Bullard 1990, 5; Checkers 2005, 13).

Passive Approaches

Many administrators have been passive in fixing these historical situations that today pose ongoing problems for residents, elected officials, and public administrators who view themselves as neutral administrators hesitant to engage in what may be termed *political activity* or *social policy*. Managers also must consider the position of the white population, who overlooks some of the inequities in their communities by pointing fingers at minorities for their current situations. Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997, 16) suggest negative stereotyping of African Americans remains current, with a tendency for whites to hold minorities responsible for their socioeconomic gaps and a resistance to policies that would promote change.

There needs to be recognition of the different belief patterns within communities. Nalbandian (1994, 534) suggests that managers need to participate in and implement public policy as a "context of growing diversity and interests." Public administrators should be able to assist elected officials in responding to citizen queries on why services or requests are provided to one group and not another. Involving elected officials is especially important since in many communities managers have short tenures, with the national average of about seven years (Ammores and Bosse 2005, 61; ICMA 2009). For city managers new to town, there may be a desire to serve the entire community, but they may be hesitant to overreach social boundaries. Because many managers inherit these situations of exclusion or environmental racism, they often lack the resources to tackle them during their initial forays on the job. Later, these issues often are placed on a backburner due to short tenures, managers following a neutral management path or lack of interest from the local government at large.

They should try, however. Frederickson (1997, 533) argues that some local governmental programs may be efficient for some citizens but not for others—creating the inequities in our societies. He further explains that social equity is necessary to the field of public administration in order to make government responsive to the needs of all citizens—a responsibility of both elected and appointed officials. Nalbandian (1994, 533) concurs and finds that residents will ask governmental officials: "you did it for them, why are you treating me differently?" This simple question raises

issues of equal justice that are central to the relationship between elected officials and their constituents and supports the ideals of elevating social equity to the same standards as other pillars of public administration—effectiveness, efficiency, and economy.

Denhardt and Denhardt (2001, 391) promote the concept that the role of government serves as the "primary actor" in the "steering of society." Using a sports' analogy, Denhardt and Denhardt suggest that public administrators should no longer remain on the "sidelines" of governmental service, but actively engage in policy decisions. Managers can and should work with local groups within the community in implementing policies administered by the governing body meeting the differing needs of different groups (Denhardt and Denhardt 2001, 391–392).

Importantly, government leaders remain charged with issues of resource distribution and "ensuring that one sector doesn't come to dominate others" (Denhardt and Denhardt 2001, 392).

Minority Communities and the Environment

Frederickson (1997), and Wooldridge and Gooden (2009), urge public administrators to be proactive and recognize the inequitable racial components remaining within their cities. They should initiate action to correct these remnants of segregation and environmental injustice and separately imposed standards instead of dealing with them in a reactive manner. Taking an energetic stance against inequities in public service has several benefits. First, it allows administrators to set the agenda and address issues on their terms rather than in a reactive and charged atmosphere. Second, it begins a process of urban renewal or redevelopment in communities in dire need of restoration.

Thus, the past remains as a stumbling block to total immersion into community or civic life for many minority residents. Examples indicate in the case studies continued endangerment to more vulnerable communities (Pellow,

Weinberg, and Schnaiberg 2001, 426). Economic disadvantages limit minority families from "voting with their feet," or relocating to better, more established, and mixed race neighborhoods as many whites have done (Bullard 1993, 21). Pulido (1996, xix), who focuses on environmental issues largely in California, with Chicano, and Mexican communities, articulates that "poor peoples' environments can rarely be improved without acquiring more power." As a result, these case studies are supported by literature that finds it is "politically marginal groups" that are affected by social injustices and issues remain due to the inaction of public administrators (Pellow, Weinberg, and Schnaiberg 2001, 428).

Case Studies—A Synopsis of Environmental Racism

Newspapers and other media outlets provide daily snapshots into community life and occurrences across the American landscape. This coverage exposes governmental activity and its interactions with its citizens and residents of a given jurisdiction. The case study approach allows social scientists and public administration practitioners to investigate and analyze "real-life events" that include neighborhood change and managerial processes (Yin 2003, 2).

Three groupings of case studies are used to demonstrate that throughout different regions of the United States, remnants of segregation and the routine placement of environmental pollutants on the fringes of community life continue to exist. Situations and causes differed nationally, between Southern segregation, Northern white flight from the inner city and Western experiences with Latino immigration. These studies are based on news searches to explore regional impact and similarity of content. The Florida cases with their similarity of circumstances and proximity to one another were the initiating factors for this study. The northern and western cases were randomly selected to emphasis the continuity of environmental injustice that exists throughout the United States.

Case Studies: Florida

Brooksville, Dade City, and a Shared History

Brooksville and Dade City are about thirty miles apart in central Florida, hugging the hill country of what is now referred to as the *Nature Coast*. Both share similar pasts. Brooksville was named after Preston S. Brooks, a congressman from South Carolina, best known as the man who beat Massachusetts abolitionist and Senator Charles Sumner with a cane at the US Capitol in response to a fiery speech Sumner made against slavery in 1856 (McCullough 2011, 224). Dade City is named after Major Francis Dade, of the US Army, who marching through west central Florida in 1835 was charged with moving Seminole Indians and escaped slaves out of Florida. In a battle that precipitated the Second Seminole War (Laumer 1995, 17, 185), Dade and 108 of his men were killed in an attack by the Seminoles just north of Dade City.

Today, Brooksville and Dade City share similar pasts and present. Both are the county seat and feature domed, picturesque redbrick courthouses that sit on squares in the midst of their downtowns. Both have been subject to lawsuits and charges of environmental racism by members of the African American community.

In Brooksville, a resident filed a complaint with the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2011 alleging that persistent contamination of groundwater and surrounding soils has contributed to toxic poisoning, illness, miscarriages, and other physical ailments for African Americans living in a long-established segregated community and in the vicinity of a local dump and petroleum plant. In his lawsuit, Richard Howell charged that long-term neglect, purposeful placement of contaminated substances in minority neighborhoods—aspects of "historical land uses in the African-American neighborhood" (*St. Petersburg Times*, August 31, 2011)—prompted the complaint with the EPA. Prior actions by the City of Brooksville and Hernando County, sanctioned by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Department of

Health, "allowed and permitted chemical contamination of the neighborhood," according to the suit. He alleged that city and county officials were slow to react or failed to react to complaints and correction of the problems. As a result, neighbors suffered higher rates of cancer, miscarriages, and kidney disease.

A testing firm hired by the state last year to test soils "found higher than acceptable levels of arsenic in soil tests" (*St. Petersburg Times*, August 31, 2011) including on property owned by Howell's mother, Rosa Lee. Her property is situated directly across the street from the petroleum facility, according to the *St. Petersburg Times* article. City officials did not respond to requests to comment in the news article, but county and federal officials said they are "processing and investigating complaints alleging discrimination" by governmental agencies and ordering additional soil tests (*St. Petersburg Times*, August 31, 2011).

Meanwhile, an aging wastewater treatment plant located in the Dade City neighborhood of Mickens-Harper, a primarily African American community east of downtown and across the CSX railroad tracks, processes more than 600,000 gallons of sewage a day. Placed in the Mickens-Harper community by white city leaders in the 1950s, it serves two purposes: first, its primary role in handling sewer treatments, and second, as a prime reminder of "a relic of the old South" (*St. Petersburg Times*, October 22, 2011). Some black residents complained of odors and fears of contamination of their drinking water and fishing ponds, others believed complaining would be useless. Then plans to expand the plant and locate a two-million-gallon tank for treated wastewater came to light. Plant expansion had been in the works for several years and consulting engineers were hired for the design. When confronted with residential concern at a City Commission meeting, Commissioners unanimously applied the brakes to the expansion and asked staff and the consulting engineers to revisit the plans.

After the outcry, city leaders in Dade City agreed to relocate the water tower and seek alternatives to the wastewater treatment plant to another more neutral location. The City

Commission approved a staff recommendation to initiate community planning and neighborhood meetings with city residents, beginning with the Mickens-Harper neighborhood. By early 2012, city commissioners agreed the tower would be placed elsewhere—not at Mickens-Harper.

Case Studies: California

Strong Presence and Prejudices

Mexicans have had a strong presence in California for centuries prior to its achieving statehood in 1850. With the influx of white Americans following the Gold Rush and other opportunities California offered, Latino demographics dipped. That changed in the early twentieth century, with Census data showing steady increases in new Hispanic movements into the state—33,444 Mexican immigrants in 1910, many fleeing the Mexican Revolution, 86,610 new immigrants in 1920, and more than 199,000 in 1930 (Hayes-Bautista 2004, 16). Yet, the Latino dream was hardscrabble in the Golden State; it was illegal to live in non-Hispanic white areas and the 1929 stock market crash ignited fears among white Californians that Mexican immigrants would take jobs away from Americans, leading to mass deportations (Hayes-Bautista 2004, 16–17).

By the 1990s, California's Latinos took advantage of middle-class white and African American flight from the inner cities and moved in, creating Latino barrios in areas that previously restricted them. Meanwhile, more affluent Latinos left the inner city as well, and moved into areas west of Los Angeles (Hayes-Bautista 2004, 19). Many of these areas today surround the I-710 corridor.

According to CNN contributor Maria Cardona, environmental issues are now at the forefront for Latinos "especially since many communities happen to be in historically unsafe and polluted environs." Despite efforts to protect the environment, for minorities low-income communities "overwhelmingly suffer the worst impacts of pollution nationally" (February 12, 2012).

Rail Fumes

In California, rail yards adjacent to residential communities provide constant fumes and noise from idling trains—some idling for twelve hours or more—emitting toxic diesel fuels into the air. Among the groups opposing the train yards is the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCAEJ). In October 2011, residents filed suit against hundreds of rail yards across California, seeking buffer zones between the yards and residential areas and limits on train idling. According to an article in *El Chicano Weekly* (November 3, 2011), a San Bernardino newspaper, the lawsuit against Union Pacific Railroad affects mostly inland residents and the fumes and toxins have been linked to serious health conditions. They are also seeking to have the diesel fuel emissions covered under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act.

According to a CCAEJ press release, millions of Californians are exposed to excessive levels of diesel pollution every year, and evidence indicates there are increased incidences of cancer, asthma, and respiratory and cardiac conditions attributed to inhaling diesel fumes. Residents have fought for reductions in emissions, larger buffer zones, and rerouting of diesel truck routes (*El Chicano Weekly*, November 3, 2011). Results of the lawsuit filed in California could take more than two years before any changes are seen on the ground.

I-710 Corridor

Californians along the I-710 corridor also face higher instances of toxic fumes and environmental hazards, although these fumes are the result of heavy truck traffic. The eighteen-mile corridor runs from the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles inland encompassing fifteen cities and unincorporated areas in Los Angeles County abutting communities now home to minorities such as Compton, Downey, and Huntington Park (Hayes-Bautista 2004, 119). The EPA estimates that 70 percent of residents along the corridor are minority or low-income residents (EPA Region 9 Strategic Plan, 2011–2914 November 1, 2012).

The California Department of Transportation has proposed to expand the freeway to

fourteen lanes against the wishes of residents and environmental groups concerned about impacts of fumes and air pollution, soil and water pollution, and other public health issues. Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice (CEHAJ) is fighting the proposal and urging for stricter air quality controls over this project (CEHAJ Factsheet 2009).

EPA is targeting vulnerable communities for "enhanced oversight" and land restoration in certain communities. However, ongoing concerns remain, including enacting anti-idling efforts in communities, improving indoor air quality in schools along the route, and to develop land use improvements to lessen industrial impacts on residential properties (EPA Strategic Plan 2012).

Case Studies: NY and IL

The Great Migration

Between the years 1915 and 1970, more than six million African Americans left their homes in the South and migrated to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. This pattern, called the *Great Migration*, witnessed one of the greatest demographic shifts in American history (Wilkerson 2010, 9). Despite the opportunities provided to the African Americans seeking a new life in northern and western states, they were still pocketed in segregated parts of many major US cities—New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles (Wilkerson 2010, 232, 245, 249, 275). These areas today are often the locations used to site hazardous waste dumps, serve as major truck routes and industrial parks. It was a trend that was noticeable even in the 1940s. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist and author of "*The American Dilemma*" labeled issues above the Mason–Dixon Line as the "Northern Paradox." Myrdal found that invisible barriers erected in northern states did not deal with sanctioned voting, but more subtle methods of exclusion including separate neighborhoods (Myrdal, 1944, 2:1010, taken from Wilkerson 2010, 387). These barriers and separate living spaces allow environmental racism to grow and continue unabated.

New York Hazardous Wastes

In New York, protesters marched, "some wearing straw hats evocative of their Latin heritage," others carrying an empty coffin, protesting a medical waste incinerator in their Bronx neighborhood, which according to the *Christian Science Monitor,* May 8, 1997, the residents blame for a "host of environmental and health woes." The marchers, led by a "four-year-old attached to a portable respirator," are protesting a medical waste incinerator in their community, which they claim resulted in environmental and health concerns. According to a director of the EPA's Urban and Economic Development Division, "the EPA has truly gotten more aggressive, we are recognizing that place matters—there can be concentrations of pollution."

The *Christian Science Monitor* reports that residents in New York claim that the "cumulative effect of truck exhaust, smoke stacks, landfills, and chemical emissions" impact poorer residents more than those in the wealthier suburbs. New York's *Amsterdam News* concurs, reporting "for decades, the U.S. has used Black and Latino communities as dumping grounds" (February 15, 2007). It notes that while parts of the South Bronx have "trees and gardens," it also serves as the "area where most of New York City's pollution of waste is deposited and incinerated. Adding to that, the diesel fuel from trucks … does not help the poor air conditions there."

Illinois Toxic Sites

The Southside of Chicago is another minority neighborhood battling industrial waste and pollution. In September 2011, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn strengthened laws to protect poor and minority communities from toxic pollutants, while approving a new coal-to-gas plant at the same time. This contradictory action has mobilized activists: "we are tired of the environmental assault on our community," said Cheryl Johnson, a lifetime resident of a local housing development, and quoted in the *Chicago Tribune,* "We want jobs and industry that don't pollute our neighborhoods and make our children sick" (September 15, 2011).

The new plant is two blocks from a local high school where a monitor indicates the neighborhood's air is already shown to have the state's "highest levels of toxic chromium and cadmium as well as sulfates" (*Tribune,* September 15, 2011). Nearby, the *Tribune* reports another company is seeking permits to build a kiln to burn refinery waste and scrap tires (*Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 2011).

Case Studies: The Past Continues

Svara suggests that the weakness of social equity as an equal pillar of public administration theory helps these problems to flourish. Despite positive steps in Florida to stop expansion of a wastewater treatment plant or attempts in California to reduce truck emissions that pollute entire communities, these environmental hazards remain fixtures in minority and low-income communities.

Alexander (1997, 344) recognizes that public administrators are not in a position to resolve historic social inequities, but they do serve as the gatekeeper to local government. Gooden and Myers (2004, 174) articulate that managers are "obligated" to perform social equity analysis when formulating, designing, and implementing public programs. Leadership skills are required to counter these obstacles. Nalbandian (2001, 63) recognizes the role of city and county managers to "play prominent roles in policy making."

Tools for Improvement

The question becomes how does a public manager begin to correct or undo decades old problems and improve infrastructure during times of fiscal restraint? Several options are available. Svara (2004, 102) suggests analyzing unmet needs coupled with recommendations either to improve policies or create new programs. This can include honestly declaring recognition that the problem exists but will take time to resolve or conducting an inventory of city facilities and infrastructure and their placement and impacts on all neighborhoods. Second, draw citizens into the debate and encourage public participation and dialogue (Nalbandian, 2001; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2001). Dade City's neighborhood planning sessions are a good start, meeting with different groups of residents in their neighborhoods, as are visioning or planning sessions many communities conduct on an annual basis. Denhardt and Denhardt (2001, 397) suggest that citizens also have a responsibility for how their neighborhoods are treated. They cite an Orange County, Florida, program, "Citizens First," that converts city residents into stakeholders in their community and encourages active citizenship and engagement.

A third step for managers is to assess their own conduct and contacts within their communities: do they talk only with the person sitting across a table from them at Rotary meetings or Chamber of Commerce events or do they reach out to service organizations or churches that serve a different clientele. Attending a church service in a black community sends a powerful message of a manager's interest in all citizens. The African American church plays a stronger role in the black community than simply worship, "it also includes the community building and empowering activities" that are vital to the community at large (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 199). Those kinds of efforts will be recognized.

Finally, Frederickson (1997, 131) joins with Gooden, Svara, and others in asserting that university programs need to promote social equity prominently in the field of public administration. Municipal reforms and merit-based bureaucracies have created stronger governments and promote better public service, Frederickson acknowledges. Yet, he further opines that continued and visible inequities are the result of a lack of professional public service. To reverse that situation, Gooden and Myers (2004, 173) believe it is necessary for students in public administration programs to be knowledgeable about "historical patterns of inequity" with core courses built around those concepts.

Conclusion

Public managers exist "at the convergence of policy and citizenry" (Alexander 1997, 344).

As the proprietors of the implementation of public policy, the administrator must understand the community and be knowledgeable about its needs, strengths, and weaknesses. This argument is not to imply that implementing social change is an easy option, or in current economic times, a financially viable one. Local governments are financially strapped with the ongoing struggle to ''do more with less'' (McNabb 2009, 13). However, change will not come if public administrators do not begin the process of exorcising past demons and finding alternative methods of fixing those historical relics in all of our communities.

Government leaders too often accept communities and the status quo as they find them and due to custom, culture, and financial limitations hesitate to tackle major social or capital repairs. Failure to address these components and the separateness that remain in many cities, towns, and counties will not make them go away. They will only exacerbate them, defeating the core mission to provide public services to all citizens with efficiency, effectiveness, social equity, and responsiveness. Failure to act today will mirror the past in another way as well—today's public administrators will leave these problems to the next generation of public administrators.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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