

Race and Social Equity: A Nervous Area of Government

By Susan Gooden. New York: Routledge, 2015.
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Race and Social Equity: A Nervous Area of Government provides a compelling encapsulation of a construct that has haunted government and public administrators for decades. This construct is race, which is an integral facet of social equity. With the core theme focusing on social equity, the book's author Susan T. Gooden (2015), Dean and Professor of the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, asserts racial equity is a nervous area of government that has stymied individual and organizational efforts to rectify equity issues within government organizations. This nervous area pertains to how an organization "considers, examines, promotes, distributes, and evaluates the provision of public justice in areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, and ability status" (Gooden 2015, 25). Racial equity is a nervous area because of the associated emotional, historical, and societal contexts (Gooden 2015). The emotional burden and humiliation stemming from being placed into social purgatory must have been inexplicable considering Black Americans were emancipated at the time. This notion has unfortunately withstood the test of time, posing a contemporary and contentious issue for Black Americans in the 21st century. This text is filled with nuanced concepts and themes that are salient in public affairs, public management, social policy, and administration contexts, bolstering its utility and applicability across many areas within the public and nonprofit sectors. Given the regression of race relations within the United States due to the innumerable racial inequities and injustices minorities have experienced, Gooden's work is more relevant now than ever.

Book Summary

The core theme of this book is equity—social and racial—which has received lackluster attention within government for far too long. The reason for this lack

of attention, Gooden contends, is due to the nervousness public administrators possess surrounding issues of race and racism. This nervousness is undergirded by the immense emotional charge and turmoil that stems from the long-standing history of inequities and racism toward minorities by the U.S. government, specifically Black Americans. Gooden shows how social equity has been and will continue to be a nervous area of government until uncomfortable conversations are normalized within public sector entities and the underpinned emotions of the historic events (e.g., slavery) are recognized and respected by public administrators identifying as nonminority. Simply stated, since government has an adverse equity track-record that is well-documented throughout history, administrators who serve as "street-level bureaucrats" are nervous to make decisions that will cause further inequity and upset citizens. Equity is a nervous area of government when it should not be. Administrators that are value-neutral, willfully blind, fearful of repercussions, or leverage their administrative discretion for unethical purposes are contributors to this nervousness problem.

A commitment to social equity requires fluidity and change, characteristics ill-suited for a stoic government. The contemporary state of social equity in the public sector, specifically government entities, is still very much perceived as a "zero-sum game" between administrative efficiency and political responsiveness (Frederickson 1971; Gooden 2015). This connotes the dichotomy that exists between efficiency and responsiveness, and increases in efficiency result in decreases in responsiveness, and vice versa. Further, this also perpetuates the idea that to obtain social equity in public sector programs, policies, and services, economy and effectiveness must be sacrificed, which is not the case. With social and racial inequity being a prevalent issue within government, Gooden (2015) propounds that performance evaluation and addi-

tional training is a critical solution to redress the issue and shift the racial equity needle. This alludes to the notion that the fields of public affairs, public management, social policy, and administration require better trained professionals in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Improved training along these lines is not a new idea, but one that has been downplayed by leadership within government entities, higher education institutions, and the public sector in totality despite recommendations made by scholars in the field (Gooden and Myers, Jr. 2004; Nabatchi and Carboni 2019). Such training is integral to rectify the nonequity-minded mentalities and practices administrators are subjected to, especially those in public administration doctoral and masters' programs, as they comprise the future administrators who will enter the U.S. workforce to serve a diverse citizenry in all meanings of the word. The recommended training bodes well with the 10 equity principles Gooden suggests public administrators should be aware of, abide by, and advance to rectify social equity issues in government and the sector at large.

The 10 Fundamental Principles: A Chain Only as Strong as Its Weakest Link

This book possesses two key strengths, which aid in its applicability and relevance in public administration regardless of the audience. The first is the provision of 10 equity principles public administrators can arm themselves with to combat inequity. The second is the inclusion of three robust case studies that focalize government entities and illuminate what comfortability with equity looks like from a governmental lens. To aid in the government's ideological shift to become more embrasive of social equity and contentious dialogue, Gooden offers the "10 Fundamental Principles for Conquering Nervousness in Government" that all public administrators should be cognizant of, adhere to, and implement within their respective public sector entities. Gooden's principles consist of the following:

- 1) Public administrators have a responsibility to operate in nervous areas of government
- 2) The legal history of racism and discrimination is an important context that cannot be minimized
- 3) Political, moral, legal, and/or economic triggers

are the initial motivators of nervousness navigation

- 4) Senior leadership is a critically important factor in realizing sustained progress
- 5) At the individual-level, public servants must recognize and eliminate behaviors that impede racial equity progress
- 6) At the organizational level, government agencies should evaluate their socialization boundaries and extend them to accommodate a wider range of racial equity work
- 7) There are no perfect solutions; however, solutions embodying a race-conscious approach most directly facilitate structural equity solutions
- 8) Racial equity needs to operate in the context of accountability
- 9) If legal barriers to racial discrimination have been largely eliminated, agency leadership, policies, and practices form the foundation essential to frontline racial equity work, and
- 10) Significant racial equity progress in government can be achieved (Gooden 2015, 206–211).

These principles are a core strength of the book that are intertwined into each chapter and underscore the valuable lessons conveyed and are encapsulated within the final chapter. By being summarized in the final chapter, the principles serve as a high-level overview of the text's key lessons and takeaways for students, scholars, practitioners, and administrators across a variety of fields, sectors, and industries. This makes said principles easier for individuals to digest regardless of their knowledge or comfort level with social equity. The strength of these fundamental principles resides in the explicitly courageous language that provides clear directives for public administrators to advance social equity within government in places where it may not be prioritized or supported, mitigate nervousness, and avoid ambiguity that may lead to analysis paralysis regarding equity initiatives. The bold and specific expression of ideas comprising these principles enables them to be generalizable beyond government, transcending the public sector. This generalizability is an innate strength of the text as social and racial equity pose challenges in many fields, industries, and in society.

Gooden masterfully incorporates three case studies that provide an analysis of governments operating at the local, state, and federal levels that are actively engaged in social and racial equity work. Collectively, the case

studies demonstrate the way these respective governments are making significant strides in addressing race as a nervous area of government while explicating some of the important work that remains to help equity stay in motion to continue moving the needle in a positive direction. For instance, employees within the City of Seattle became more comfortable discussing concepts of racism and white privilege, which led to the implementation of racial equity impact analyses on the governmental policies, practices, and services provided by the city (Gooden 2015). At their core, these case studies provide excellent, contemporary examples of what focusing social and racial equity looks like for planning, participation, and action within government. Most importantly, these case studies yield insight on what the results of such an equity focus can be for organizations committed to social equity and the benefits citizens may receive when conversations about race are normalized and public administrators are comfortable communicating about race, racism, and equity. This positive change also underscores the benefits case studies may yield on graduate public administration programs and the field from a scholastic and practical perspective (Lopez-Littleton, Blessett, and Burr 2018; McCandless and Larson 2018). Their usage emphasizes the commitment future administrators (i.e., students) must make to the field to assume the mantle of a “change agent” in standing up for good governance and social equity (Blessett et al. 2019).

Building on the 10 Fundamental Principles

Gooden’s 10 fundamental principles formulate a “quick reference” guide public administrators can rely on when necessary and continue to be relevant today. In their current state, the principles are a strong chain that can be used by staunch public administrators in their quest for equity to mitigate nervousness in governments. However, considering the recent regression in race relations and rising racial tensions in U.S. education systems, including debates around teaching Critical Race Theory in U.S. classrooms, cyclic patterns of inequity, nervous public administrators, and paralyzed government entities still exist. Failing to acknowledge and/or teach about racism or slavery constitutes an inequity as well as a disservice to students because they are only being taught one side of U.S. history. This is problematic because education tends to be a prominent public sector

area that is laden with inequity, but is often overlooked (Gooden 2015; McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piqueux 2019).

To aid in redressing equity issues endemic to education, one principle, which I will refer to as Principle 11, should be considered as an addition to the extant principles. Principle 11 could read as follows: The onus of racial and social equity education should not be bestowed upon nor expected from racial minorities. Instead, this onus should be placed upon academic institutions, organizational leadership, and nonminority identifying individuals to help offset the immense intangible weight of emotional labor associated with being a minority in the United States.

The purpose of including such a principle could accomplish two things. The first is that it places and shifts the onus of racial equity propagation *on us* as a society, field, and educational medium. This is important because equity is everyone’s responsibility and only through collective, unified efforts can real, palpable, and lasting change regarding racial and social equity be acquired. The second is that it provides a genuine demonstration to racial minorities, who already fight many battles and encounter several obstacles in their everyday lives due to inequity, that there are public servants, government entities, academic institutions, and educators that are cognizant of their inequities, care about change, and are committed to change as much as the minorities on the frontlines are. The inclusion of Principle 11 forces public servants and government entities to be the equity intermediaries they proclaim to be electronically and in print to help shoulder the immense burden of what it means to be a minority in the United States as it relates to safety, mental health, financial well-being, and other dimensions essential to one’s existence.

Conclusion

Social equity is a concept many public and nonprofit sector entities claim to be committed to, but policies, processes, administrators, and budgets demonstrate otherwise. The assertion that racial inequities within the United States are saturated is a sad truth that manifests in public policies that notably impact one’s life in a variety of areas (e.g., housing, education, and environment) (Gooden 2015). This is only compounded by race being a nervous area of government, which cannot be overstated. Through this book, Gooden

provides an excellent examination of the intersection of race and social equity within government as well as the field of public administration while elucidating the implications of nervousness in these two areas. Gooden underscores that organizational nervousness can never be eliminated, rather it must be effectively managed. This management can place government and the field of public administration in an advantageous position to proactively address social inequities that are saturated within the United States, endemic to certain public sector entities such as higher education (McNair et al. 2019), and have proven to be pervasive, especially within communities of color (Gooden 2015). Such a solution is pivotal to redress inequity that is embedded within government and public administration often manifesting through contemporary laws, policies, and practices. These statutes covertly propagate racial disparities, warranting a new moniker of Jim Crow Jr., Esq., due to the chicanery utilized to keep minorities suppressed.

This text serves as a paramount call to action, which has rung silent for far too long, for public administrators, governments at each level, and the public sector at large to arm themselves with the tools and knowledge available and become entrenched in the equity battle. This entrenchment is a necessary step if nervousness is ever to be successfully managed, reduced, or eliminated. For nervousness to be reduced or even eliminated, structural changes would need to occur first, which would help facilitate systemic changes. The use of Gooden's 10 principles by public administrators serve as a prime example of how structural change can facilitate systemic change, lead to long-lasting change with equity at the forefront, and help diminish nervousness many public administrators and governments experience.

Gooden's scholastic and practical experiences as well as her expertise provide a compelling backdrop about the state of equity within government surrounding issues of race and how this poses a unique challenge for bureaucratic extensions of government. This is especially problematic in public administration programs that exist to train individuals to combat societal ills because they do not adequately cover social or racial equity within their curricula. These implications are accentuated through Gooden's many illustrative examples, which are supported by the rich background of how fleeting social equity endeavors have been within government and why. It is these historical accounts that provide significant

guidance regarding how government entities should prioritize their racial equity efforts. Effectively leveraging this history should place social and racial equity scholars, organizational leadership, and industry professionals in an advantageous position to prevent history from repeating itself. This is important to redress past, present, and future racial equity issues while preventing equity from being framed as a compromiser and supplanted by the traditional pillars of public administration: economics, effectiveness, and efficiency (Frederickson 1971; Gooden 2015). The fight for equity has proven to be a slow race, one that bears semblance to the old narrative of the tortoise and the hare; however, this book and its call to action give me hope that in spite of a slow race, public administrators will, ultimately, be victorious in the quest for equity.

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