

## *Equity: How to Design Organizations Where Everyone Thrives*

By Minal Bopaiah  
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### Introduction

Organizational design scholars and social equity scholars share epistemological commitments. Both believe that allowing unconsidered structures and norms to dominate our organizations can be harmful. Design scholars argue the value of deliberate organizational design that questions those elements of an organization that “simply emerge” (van Bree 2021, 3). Social equity scholars similarly contend that an organization’s status quo often fosters insidious discrimination against marginalized groups. Both also contend that solutions are seldom one-size-fits-all. Our notions of social equity in public administration are rooted in theories like Rawls’ Difference Principle, which contends that resources often need to be allocated unequally to ensure justice for the least advantaged (Gooden and Starke 2021; Rawls 1971). Design scholars similarly believe in “producing a solution that is specifically geared toward the issues and context that the organization in question is facing” (van Bree 2021, 3).

Minal Bopaiah’s (2021) *Equity: How to Design Organizations Where Everyone Thrives* resides at this epistemological confluence. The text offers a toolkit to practitioners and scholars alike for designing more equitable organizations that question those marginalizing structures while giving administrators the tools to dismantle them in the way that most suit their own organization. The prescriptions of the text are malleable and accessible, providing a clear vision for equity-minded organizational design.

### Summary

The book’s core argument is that equity largely goes unconsidered in organizational design as the “middle child” of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), often shirked in favor of diversity and inclusion initiatives that require

less work and yield more immediate, symbolic rewards. Bopaiah argues this directly with the passage, “Inclusion without equity is toothless; organizations end up talking about how to make people ‘feel more included’ without doing the hard systems redesign that actually yields equal pay, more diverse leadership teams, and other signs of equal access to opportunity” (7). Bopaiah proposes the alternative IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility) with the stated goal of both further emphasizing equity and embracing accessibility as a design goal.

The book then progresses through several organizational dimensions, offering prescriptions for more equitable organizational systems, leadership, communication, and marketing. The core design principles Bopaiah employs come from the notion of Human Centered Design (HCD), which calls on designers to employ five phases of equitable design: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (32). These principles embrace the notion that design ought to be an engaged practice that interrogates the individual needs of each participant in an organization rather than developing a one-size-fits-all solution.

Bopaiah is well-suited to the topic of equitable organizational design. Bopaiah’s expertise is oriented across sectors given her experience as both a consultant and employee of notable nonprofits like Sesame Workshop and National Public Radio (NPR), and as the principal consultant for her firm Brevity & Wit. Bopaiah also created the DEI Executive Forum, a six-month-long workshop that encourages managers to develop their own IDEA designs.

Bopaiah interweaves her own personal and professional experience throughout the work. Her firm, Brevity & Witt, is frequently analyzed as an agent of HCD. Bopaiah is also transparent about her own relationship with colonialism and inequity as a woman of color born to Indian immigrants through a candid positionality statement early in the text (13).

### Strengths and Weaknesses of *Equity*

The real strength of *Equity* is its accessibility. The book is straightforward and easy to read, giving it tremendous pedagogical application. The book also includes highlighted terminology throughout that provides readers with a collective baseline of understanding about concepts related to equity such as colonialism, intersectionality, gaslighting, and virtue signaling.

Another strength of the text is a willingness to embrace firsthand storytelling as a means of conveying the core principles of HCD and IDEA. Readers are left with little doubt as to how these ideas were developed by Bopaiah and others, and readers are also given a clear idea of what these approaches to design look like in practice. This is useful and somewhat contradictory to the common view in organizational design that the discipline is an objective “design science” that develops from the top down in organizations (van Bree 2021, 10). Here, Bopaiah occupies a similar epistemological terrain to Henry Mintzberg’s view that organizational design and strategy are best when adaptive and rooted in bottom-up, dispersed knowledge (Foss, McCaffrey, and Dorobat 2021; Mintzberg 1990). This approach to design also aligns with the view of many equity-minded public administration scholars that no public administrator is truly neutral and must embrace normative principles like equity rather than the pursuit of neutrality (Frederickson 2010).

Other strengths of the text are its emphasis on tools for practitioners, particularly its tools for communications and marketing which emphasize accessibility and embrace the evolving nature of language. The text also proposes a macro view of the organization in which firms across all sectors—public, private, and non-profit—must consider their role in guarding democracy against the worst effects of capitalism, a reasonable consideration given the tempestuous relationship between democracy, capitalism, and equity (Dahl 1998).

Finally, readers need to consider that the text is short and primarily focused on its own design principles. Because *Equity* does not consider a particularly broad array of organizational design frameworks, instructors would benefit from using the book as a supplemental

rather than a primary text in an organizational design or organizational behavior course.

### Conclusion

*Equity* is a text that successfully capitalizes on epistemological compatibilities between equity scholarship and organizational design scholarship while challenging the latter with its emphasis on the personal experiences of the author. The text is accessible and gives readers an idea of what it means to design with equity in mind through compelling firsthand design narratives. The tools for discussion in the classroom and design outside of the classroom make it a compelling supplemental text for organizational design or organizational behavior syllabi that will give students a common vocabulary when discussing issues of equity. Most importantly, Bopaiah encourages candor from all of us about our own positionality through her open and honest discussion of her own viewpoint as a woman of color in the United States. This text successfully illustrates how to develop a normative focus on equity in workplace design that manifests in equitable design praxis.

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