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Editor's Introduction

From Etiology to Action: Exploring the Origins, Obstacles, Opportunities and Outcomes of Achieving Social Equity

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Social equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice have been the topic of many research projects in the last few years and the data paint a rather startling portrait of what life is like for many people of color in the U.S. and many other countries. In the U.S., the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution “guarantees” equal protection of the laws, but the evidence suggests that we are far from realizing that goal. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal”, but the evidence indicates that we are not all treated equally. While equality and equity are related, they are not the same. The former often requires policies to ensure that the latter is an outcome. More specifically, the data show that many citizens have a degree of access to education, income, housing, health, and other factors, but the data also bear out the many inequities that exists in our society (Kim and Taylor 2008; Wright and Unah 2017; Gooden 2020; Martin-Howard and Farmbry 2020).

In this special issue, we requested papers that identify and illuminate the origins, obstacles, opportunities and successful outcomes to achieving social equity. The National Academy of Public Administration (National Academy of Public Administration 2020) defines social equity as “the fair and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract: the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equality.” Although this definition is easy to understand, policies to promote and successfully implement equity have proven to be elusive to policy makers and bureaucrats who are charged with creating an equitable society. As the world becomes more and more diverse, the issue of equity has become even more important. Hence, it is prudent that scholars and policy makers take a closer look at the data with the goal of creating a system that allows all types of people a reasonable opportunity to achieve whatever goals that they have set for themselves. In our call for papers, we specifically requested papers that:

1. Identify policies and practices of government, non-profit organizations and the private sector resulting in social inequities.
2. Measure and assess social equity across policy domains.
3. Provide case studies, from local to global, that highlight paths taken and lessons learned from successful efforts to mitigate social inequity.

Five papers were peer-reviewed and selected for publication in this special issue, and they cover a variety of subjects that address inequities and policies that impact inequities. The first paper by Brown and Wright, "Social Equity and Body Worn Camera Policies: How Do State Politics Lead to Policy Adoption and Implementation?" examined the implementation of body worn camera (BWC) policies in U.S. States. Their goal was to determine the factors that led to states adopting BWC policies to improve accountability and mitigate social equity concerns. They found that budget allocation is correlated with BWC policy adoption. That is, states that allocated a greater percentage of their budget to law enforcement agencies were less likely pass BWC policies. The same was true if a large number of unions were present in a state. However, states with a large number of law enforcement interest groups and Black Lives Matter chapters were more likely to endorse the policy. The authors concluded that while the adoption of these policies increased the likelihood that equity can exist, the lack of collaboration on designing these policies remain an issue. In order to increase trust, collaboration with non-governmental organizations was essential.

The second paper by Miller-Jones and Rubin, "Achieving Equity in Education: A Restorative Justice Approach," focused on school engagement and student empowerment in reducing racial disparities in academic achievement, a critical issue in social justice. They used a case study approach to show how a series of town hall meetings were used in a predominantly White central Oregon school district to provide high school students of color with a more positive sense of self and with the tools they needed to change their school culture around race and ethnicity. They reported that town hall participants obtained the skills that they needed to effect changes in their schools. In addition, the school became a more hospitable learning environment where the academic achievement gap between students of color and White students could be narrowed.

The next paper by Rissler et al, is titled, "Assessing the Racial Equity Impact of Legislation to Establish a Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund". Food security is a very important issue because previous research has shown that regular consumption of fresh fruits and vegetable contain the necessary vitamins, minerals, fiber and other elements that are associated with low rates diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer and obesity, all of which are common risk factors among black and brown communities (Hendrickson et al 2006). While the legislation was not passed by the Virginia legislature, it did afford the authors an opportunity to assess the efficacy of the Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund as a basis for studying potential racial inequities and grocery store sites. Using the data that was available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, they made several policy recommendations. First, states that are seeking to address food insecurity should be clear in describing the communities that the policy is affecting and the factors that go into a formula that determines where a grocery store should be located. Second, they determined in their research that public transportation is vital to improving access to healthy food options. Third, a marketing campaign is needed to educate the affected groups on the health benefits of consuming fresh fruits and vegetables that lead to a healthy lifestyle. Last, states should

collaborate and partner with existing organizations and work with them rather create policies in a silo.

The next paper by Martin-Howard, titled, “Efforts to Diminish Social Inequity in South Africa: Evaluating Life Skills and Income Generation Programs on Maternal Socioeconomic Position in Cape Town”, used observations and semi-structured interviews to examine the perceptions of several programs that sought to uplift Black and Coloured women in the Western Cape Province. She focused her research on two key questions: “1) What are the barriers and/or facilitators to becoming self-sufficient and/or independent in an underserved context as perceived by low-income mothers? and 2) How has program participation improved life skills development and/or changed mother’s ability to partake in income generating activities?” She found that poverty was a key barrier to program success while social support networks were positive factors in program participation. Concurrently, she suggested that increasing community capacity to identify and address problems would facilitate program success. This included the creation of microfinance programs for the poorest populations. Other benefits from the program included improved knowledge and skills. Program participants indicated that they were better suited to assist their school aged children as well as manage things such as email, advertising their business and engage in basic computer skills such as the use of Microsoft Office programs. Last, Martin-Howard recommended that the province modify current programing to include a required internship at a business for program participants.

The final manuscript by Tarlton et al, titled, “Addressing Social Inequity: A Case Study of Success”, is a case study that examines a collaboration between two nonprofit organizations that created a program to address historic harms that affected community-police relationships. In so doing, they described the interactions and outcomes that emanated from a two-day workshop created by the Higher Education & Learning Professional Consulting (in conjunction with the NFL Foundation) with high schools, NFL Player Partners and Law Enforcement Agency Partners in Georgia and Texas. As a result of the interactions with the aforementioned parties, they posited the following. First, understanding a problem requires a collective awareness of the individuals and institutions involved. Second, addressing a problem requires collaboration and openness. Third, the desire to be innovative when working with groups is a must. Last, seize the opportunity when it presents itself.

While very different, each of these manuscripts provides one more step forward in addressing social inequity around the world. One of the common themes in all of this research is the need for governments to collaborate with non-governmental organizations when pondering solutions to equity problems. Last, it was also pretty clear that change is not likely to occur without intervention and a financial commitment of the part of governmental agencies.

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