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# Changing the Social Equity Language Game in Public Administration: An Ethical Perspective

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*In this paper, we use the concept of language games to explore social equity, particularly racial equity, through the lens of public administration ethics. We argue that underlying language games – how the interconnectedness of language, policy, and action - prevalent in public administration contexts can enhance or diminish the pursuit of social equity. We give examples of ethical challenges to achieving social equity in public administration due to entrenched language games favoring status quo power structures and inequitable policy and administrative approaches. Specifically, we examine dimensions of social equity and ethics across four issue areas including: economic development and infrastructure, artificial intelligence, public health, and social welfare. We offer examples of language games occurring in each issue space, including instances of how policymakers and public managers are working to shift their language games to focus more on social justice and equity considerations and away from an inequitable status quo.*

Keywords: Public Administration Ethics, Social Equity, Racial Equity, Language Games

**S**cholars have argued that social justice and equity should be considered core, foundational pillars of public administration (Norman-Major, 2011; Svava & Brunet, 2005; Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). Nevertheless, contemporary society remains plagued with systemic racism in many policy arenas historically replete with structural barriers keeping non-White individuals

from fully participating in society. Examples include but are not limited to redlining and housing discrimination (Rothstein, 2017; Trounstein, 2018), access to healthcare (Laurencin & Walker, 2020), criminal justice outcomes (Alexander, 2012), educational inequalities (Kozol, 2012), and social welfare treatment (Soss, Fording & Schram 2011).

To understand why some of these inequities persist and how we can start to engender social equity principles, we use the concept of language games to extend Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction of target populations framework. How a group of people becomes socially constructed and portrayed partially determines what kinds of policies and services they might receive (or not). For instance, drug offenders constructed as undeserving "criminals" might receive sanction and incarceration, while offenders constructed as battling addiction with public health connotations might be "patients" deserving of treatment and support services.

In the Schneider and Ingram framework (1993, p. 335), social construction includes "the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics" that determine policy design and implementation practices. Our goal within this conceptual paper is to extend and refine that framework by incorporating the concept of language games (Wittgenstein, 1953) played within selected policy arenas, as language is another way to shape perceptions and exert power (Fairclough, 1989). Looking at language games helps reveal what happens when people on different sides of a policy issue are speaking past each other; this has implications for achieving social equity when people can manipulate symbols, language, and narratives to construct people as deserving or undeserving in public arenas.

In this conceptual and exploratory article stemming from our participation in the online Scholar Strike in 2020, we select four core policy areas where racial and socioeconomic inequities have historically persisted but are also potentially compounding in today's political climate: economic development and infrastructure, artificial intelligence (AI), public health, and social welfare. Schneider and Ingram (1993) postulated on many of these same areas, but we included infrastructure and artificial intelligence to extend their framework into contemporary policy and public service challenges. Within each area we highlight examples of social equity language used to frame the issue and associated target populations at the micro-, meso-, and macro- levels in public administration (Roberts, 2020), and why these matter for policy and administrative outcomes across various levels of governance. We also offer suggestions for future research in each area, hoping to push forward a research agenda that delves more closely into the language and narratives surrounding social justice successes and barriers in public administration (Miller, 2020).

### **The Power of Language in Social Construction**

Language is complex and can affect everyday lives. Language helps people navigate the social world and create meaning (Ribes-Inesta, 2006). Language becomes powerful when it leads to behaviors and actions (or in the case of public policy and administration, inaction as well). Language is part of a social system, which in turn affects how people are viewed as part of that social order. Schneider and Ingram (1993) introduced the concept of social construction of target populations to help understand how policymakers (and thereby the public) construct images about certain target groups in public arenas. In their matrix intersecting power (weak vs. strong) with social construction (positive vs. negative), four types emerge: advantaged (high power, positive construction/deservingness); contenders (high power, negative construction/deservingness); dependents (low power, positive construction/deservingness); deviants (low power, negative construction/deservingness).

Those in the advantaged group, for instance, are oftentimes constructed in positive frames and are thereby seen as deserving of positive or less burdensome policy interventions. On the other extreme, deviants are perceived as negatively constructed and powerless people who should be shrouded in policy and administrative burdens (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

While the authors note the importance of messages and symbols, understanding language as a tool shaping social constructions and power differentials could use more expounding and explanation in public affairs. Specifically, Wittgenstein (1953) details language games to showcase how language is one part of how we understand and shape our world. In games, people need to know the rules to participate, but sometimes context changes the words and the game's rules. Language games can break down when people interpret the rules differently. Wittgenstein (1953) uses the example of building construction, whereby various actors communicate about materials, structure, and pattern. People need to communicate precisely, or the building could be misaligned, materials could be in the wrong places, or the structure could collapse. Put another way, people use language games to communicate about their lived realities - and failure occurs when people are using language differently or to mean different things.

Once someone learns the rules of a game, in this case a language game, they can choose to follow them, bend them, or break them (Sellars, 1954). Breakdowns happen when intricacies are added to the language game. For spoken words, sarcasm and nonverbal communication can alter the game's meaning (Ribes-Inesta, 2006). As such, language games are complex because they include not only what is written but also signs, symbols, and the unspoken (Ribes-Inesta, 2006). But as Hunter (1990) points out, even Wittgenstein using the term "language game" leaves more questions than answers. For instance, we play games often for fun yet there are winners and losers; how do we win or lose when language is at play? Games have rules, but language rules can be violated often - but with what consequence (Hunter, 1990)?

For our purposes, we use language games to understand the underlying words and slogans surrounding design, implementation, and communication of public policy and administrative problems - and explore what happens when those language games favor the status quo rather than equity ethics and social justice. We understand that rules in play are situational, contextual, and changeable (Abel, 2007). Leaving existing rules in play is a conscious choice, especially when other evidence indicates a change is needed. As Wittgenstein (1953) notes, language games have a life of their own and help us create meaning in our world (Kavanagh, 2010), so sometimes different sets of ideals with their language games clash, creating inequitable and potentially unethical outcomes.

Gooden (2015) noted that race is considered a nervous area of government for public institutions. Per Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton (1992), this nervous area can be addressed through naming, blaming, and claiming injustice (Gooden, 2015, p. 66). This process involves: recognizing a public policy, program, or practice that is racially unjust or inequitable; identifying the cause of the injustice or inequity and the entity responsible; and changing the entity's racially inequitable policies, programs, or practices (Gooden, 2015, p. 66). Without deploying clear language that names, blames, and claims the inequities and injustices within public health and other key policy areas, officials will be unable to remove the structural barriers that prevent equal access to systems and services.

Social justice and equity as concepts also have their conceptual differences and embedded language games. Different language games are played when policy interventions can stall or proceed, as social justice has different meanings when placed within a language

game context. One reason is that justice is more complex to measure than, say, financial returns (Boulding, 1988; Frederickson, 2010). From a communicative perspective, language “identifies and foregrounds the grammars that oppress or underwrite relationships of domination then reconstructs those grammars” (Frey et al., 1996, p. 112). In other words, we can look at the language and social construction underlying some of today’s administrative challenges to unveil the gaps in addressing the ethics of social equity.

Following Gooden’s (2015) logic of sharing examples of social equity successes and challenges, we provide examples under four broad areas to showcase the language games that lead to inequitable outcomes and ideas for changing those language games going forward. The micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Roberts, 2020) are used to detail how intertwined and complex social justice issues in public administration are today. Primarily, the following four policy topics were chosen due to the high degree of impact that they have on the everyday lives of people that public administrators serve. For example, with AI, there is the real potential to completely redefine the parameters of public administration and service delivery under the guise of increased efficiency, but these changes are laden with ethical, equity, and social justice risks and implications. In public health, COVID-19 inequities by race and ethnicity in resource allocation and treatment have more widely exposed the inherent structural racism and discrimination entrenched through mutually reinforcing inequitable systems, which underscores the necessity of deploying new language games and concepts (e.g., critical race theory, intersectionality, and racial equity). These health inequities can be worsened through where people live; low income, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) people most often live in previously redlined areas and may be exposed to more environmental pollutants—and the infrastructure and economic development actions (or inactions) by public administrators can reinforce or alleviate these conditions.

Further, the survival of our country’s most vulnerable people, often of BIPOC background, hinges on the delivery of equitable social welfare services. Social welfare benefits like cash, food, and housing assistance can provide sustenance and baseline familial protections from material hardship and economic precarity. However, this policy area historically and presently struggles with overt and covertly racist language games, often limiting the reach of public welfare benefits for low-income citizen clients. As demonstrated below, each policy area has room for improvement in the language games and actions associated with equitable policy and administration in the 21st century.

### **Infrastructure and Economic Development**

Infrastructure is the foundational means to build something greater and along with economic development they create tools that are used to enhance the mobility of social justice and equity in communities (Shulman, 2021). A core defining aspect of social and economic equity is the physical infrastructure that has been put in place that upholds the literal foundation of communities, with economic development serving as the driving force for mobilization and revitalization. Decolonizing the mechanisms, language, and narrative in which economic development and infrastructure are created and implemented will narrow equity gaps. As we begin to think beyond the United States’ colonized mindset, we can eradicate the default settings in systems that perpetuate injustice cycles. Public administration scholarship has a responsibility to decolonize the field and move policies and practices toward social equity. As such, the “government has an obligation, they say, to remedy structural racism regardless of its cause decades ago” (Rothstein, 2017, p. 177). When we begin to illustrate inequitable language games and address previous economic development and infrastructure practices that

perpetuate injustice and inequity, we can start righting the wrongs that historically and contemporarily plague marginalized communities.

### **Example in Practice**

The defining aspects of social equity and language significantly impact the usage of terminology in infrastructure and economic development. When referring to infrastructure and economic development, language games construct groups in policy debates at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of public administration (Roberts, 2020). To demonstrate the usage of language games in infrastructure and economic development, we can identify the terminology used in President Biden's "American Jobs Plan." The dominant language game currently observed in news cycles relates to the discussion of "what is infrastructure?" President Biden's "American Jobs Plan" aims to rebuild the country's infrastructure with equity explicitly at the forefront to address systematic racial injustices. The Administration's characterization of "infrastructure" differs from previous macro-level economic plans or governing strategies to pursue these laudable ends. Traditionally, "infrastructure" is conceptualized as transportation, bridges, highways, and physical public works projects; however, due to the emergence of technology, the language used to describe "infrastructure" is more fluid and requires updating in broad governance approaches at the macro-level.

At the micro-level, we have seen the linguistic split between the context of skilled vs. unskilled workers. This language game furthers classifications in what is perceived as a skill and creates job market polarization. Schneider and Ingram (1993) add credence to this claim as they state that "policy directed at persons whose income falls below the official poverty level identifies a specific set of persons. The social constructions could portray them as disadvantaged people whose poverty is not their fault or as lazy persons who are benefitting from other peoples' hard work" (Schneider & Ingram 1993, p. 335). The language between skilled and unskilled workers further emphasizes the need to be cognizant of the power and management of institutions and the weight of their words. At the meso level in the legislation, it is evident that there is a need for program development to execute the American Jobs Plan, as these concrete operating components at the meso level function from the bottom-up and create potential benefits for marginalized people and communities.

Social equity messaging can be bypassed rather than embraced in evaluating the language games associated with governing strategies at the macro level in infrastructure and economic development. Although, for example, President Biden's Infrastructure plan emphasizes messaging to bring "aid" to disadvantaged communities, the framing of "aid" not only directs attention to the fact that the policy is purposeful but also attempts to achieve goals by changing people's behaviors instead of focusing on broader structural shifts or improvements (Schneider & Ingram, 1993 as cited in Ingram & Schneider, 1991). The existing language of "aid" also allows the governing apparatus to focus on economic revitalization via infrastructure, not more prosperous or profound structural shifts in capitalist economic arrangements. The mechanisms in which we approach policy and amplify social equity in our messaging are vital. However, due to the bias of messaging and language, the ethical implications can further reinforce inequities in our communities.

The shifts in political ideology and economic climate in the U.S. have highlighted that traditional infrastructure and economic development terminology can and should be changed. The ideology and political stability play a significant role in economic development and infrastructure, with dominant strands emphasizing self-sufficiency that diminishes the role of public investments. The galvanizing mindset and perspective around individualized self-

sufficiency create conceptual differences in pursuing social justice and equity; the belief in challenging the paradigm of systems is often scrutinized. Ideological and political stability does not change as rapidly as we would like to see, “since the colonial area, Americans have strongly valued personal liberty, and equality as Deborah Stone has noted, this belief in liberty and equality is rather diffuse with considerable disagreement as to what these terms mean in practice” (Birkland, 2001, p. 88). Language games from policymakers and agency professionals in infrastructure and economic development could center more on advancing structural changes and transformational “empowerment” of marginalized communities over temporary job provision and piecemeal, project-based “aid.”

Table 1 summarizes the competing language games within areas of infrastructure and economic development, as well as avenues for future research.

**Table 1: Language Games in Infrastructure and Economic Development**

Policy Example	Social Construction/ Language Games	Example in Practice	Questions/Topics for Future Research	Suggested Method Approaches
Infrastructure and Economic Development	Macro – Aid to communities; changing governing apparatus to focus on economic revitalization via infrastructure investments	American Jobs Plan	How can we understand the resistance to infrastructure development?	Interviews with key policy makers and administrators
		Redlining		
	Meso – programs to execute the American Jobs Plan	Internet access/digital services	How can a critical race lens unveil problems in infrastructure and economic advancement?	Surveys of infrastructure needs of local government leaders and marginalized communities
		Micro – skilled vs. unskilled workers		What are the popular narratives surrounding infrastructure development in the U.S.?

**Artificial Intelligence**

Another emerging area in public management with an underlying language game is the emergence and use of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence (AI) commonly means how machines or technology to guide decisions and actions. The promise of AI “to transform our societies - in positive and negative ways” has elevated its importance for public service (Robinson, 2020, p. 1). In public administration, the prevailing language game centers upon using technology to make government actions more efficient. Much like the New Public Management rhetoric focusing on making government “better” or more “businesslike,” a similar language game emerges around using technology in an almost impersonal way to bring forward the “neutral” bureaucrat. For example, one language game to help shape administrative practice and public policy focus on the advantages of technology to speed up and even neutralize some aspects of decision making. On the other side, a language game warns about the social justice and racial implications of technologies that could negatively affect people of color.

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To illustrate the first kind of language game, public administration practitioners and scholars remain concerned with making management more efficient via neutral public servants. Nevertheless, humans have emotions and prejudices, so they are not the so-called perfectly neutral administrators many of the field's founders desired (Portillo, Bearfield & Humphrey, 2020). Thus, introducing technology and AI into administrative operations reduces that uncertainty (Bullock, 2019).

One seeming positive aspect in this language game is that computers can handle more tasks than humans, yet technology is better suited to complex yet routine tasks rather than in conditions of much uncertainty (Bullock, 2019). Using technology in public service changes how bureaucrats, especially street-level ones, perform their core job functions. For some, it could shift them from active case managers, for example, to passive systems designers only implementing what the algorithms say (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). This is preferred in the efficiency language game to reduce uncertainty, speed up response time, and streamline the bureaucracy.

However, some scholars are beginning to shift that language game to highlight the social justice and ethical implications of artificial intelligence and technology used in the public sector. This line of thinking is emerging as the AI stakes move beyond our choices of what to watch on Netflix or purchase on Amazon (Busuioc, 2020). Instead, more high-stakes applications in areas such as public safety bring about severe ethical and social justice concerns, as "historical discrimination and human biases get propagated by automation while simultaneously becoming harder to spot and challenge" (Busuioc, 2020, p. 3).

For example, Borry and Getha-Taylor (2019) focus on how automation and technology, again implemented under an efficiency language game, are often deployed at the expense of equity. Using data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the authors find non-White men and females are most likely to be pushed from the workforce via automation, including areas such as transportation and administrative support. Their findings demonstrate the inequitable consequences of the efficiency language game - non-Whites and females being removed from the workforce in the name of progress. Knowing the potential for inequitable outcomes should enable AI decision-makers to shift their language game to focus on how automation can preserve those positions for people of color and women.

On this side of the language game, any biases are often pinned on the developers - machines are neutral because they lack feelings. However, people program the algorithms to reflect broader societal gender and racial biases upon use (Wellner & Rothman, 2020). Cave and Dihal (2020) note this could be because AI is seen as White in its scope and use. They offer an example of searching for images of robots that yield primarily, if not all-White-based images, subconsciously equating Whiteness with trust and decision making. Giving machines names (like Watson, for example) and human characteristics also then gives machines race and associated power dynamics (Cave & Dihal, 2020). This embedded Whiteness exacerbates this side of the language game, whereby social justice scholars and advocates are trying to raise awareness of biases in AI and technology.

We argue for shifting the language game of AI from only efficiency to one with built-in considerations for ethical and equitable applications. This means social justice and ethics are thought about at the design stage - especially for government applications at meso and micro levels - rather than fit after the algorithms go awry. Indeed, the field of machine ethics is emerging to counter these harmful applications of the technologies. Ntoutsis et al. (2020) offer a three-part framework to build ethics and social justice: understanding bias, mitigating

bias, and accounting for bias. This aligns with the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of governance presented in this paper - finding bias, targeting it, removing it when identified in the algorithms, and understanding AI use's ontological reasons and foundations.

Young, Bullock, and Lecy (2019) remind us that “public managers need tools to anticipate the impact of deploying these technologies and to assess how programs’ costs and benefits might accrue to subpopulations differently” (p. 302). They strike a balance between the language games we offer here - AI can be capable of both efficiency and social equity. Their framework includes areas where AI works better than others, focusing on task complexity. Equity, they argue, should be a guiding value no matter the level of AI implementation. Without an equity lens, AI programs (not to mention the programmers) can be racist, sexist, and inequitable in practice (Zou & Schiebinger, 2018).

### **Example in Practice**

To demonstrate a language game in this policy arena, the ways in which artificial intelligence, algorithms, and big data can be used are highlighted. Within the public sector, computing power has the potential to harness the power of big data to reduce administrative complexities (Wirtz & Muller, 2019). In this language game, words and images such as “harnessing,” “complexity,” “discretion,” “evidence-based,” “big issues,” “problem solving,” and “data science” are used to positively frame the powers of these tools (Jones, 2017) at the macro-level. Yet in recognition of potential improvements and challenges associated with implementing AI applications and algorithms, especially in the public sector, the federal government created a National Artificial Intelligence Advisory Committee to advise President Biden on these crucial concerns (Starr, 2021).

While there is potential for using AI, the United Nations recently warned against widespread technology applications that could harm people based on discriminatory algorithms (Leprince-Ringuet, 2021). Some language on this side of the debate includes “discrimination,” “profiling,” “privacy,” “freedom,” “racial discrimination,” and “equity,” for examples. The language games on each side only heighten how people affected by the policy at the micro-level are constructed. For instance, those constructed as deviants seem deserving of this additional monitoring even though it is potentially harmful (Leprince-Ringuet, 2021). Often constructed as advantaged from a public management view are those who will have reduced burdens and an easier time interacting with the government (Helms, 2015). Table 2 shows the language games in the area of artificial intelligence, along with some questions for future research.

### **Public Health**

Language games are also well-entrenched within the status quo of systemic racism in public health and health care systems. The narrative that promotes the belief that equity exists because all people in the United States have equal access to health care obscures the existence of structural racism, which imposes many barriers that prevent BIPOC stakeholders from gaining access. “Structural racism” itself is a term that is rendered linguistically neutral by those who conflate it – deliberately or unknowingly – with personal racism, allowing those who defend racist systems to deny the structural problems of those who do not feel themselves or perceive others to be overtly racist. However, the term, too well-established to be so often misconstrued, describes how societies foster discrimination through mutually reinforcing inequitable systems and embed those inequities in-laws and policies (Bailey, Krieger,

Agénor, Graves, Linos, & Bassett, 2017). Government entities at all levels have contributed to developing and perpetuating racial inequities in decisions, policies, programs, practices, and processes within health systems.

There is a long-standing history of racism embedded within public health systems. The Tuskegee study is one of the most egregious examples of the unethical medical testing and irreparable harm that the medical system inflicted on Black people (McVean, 2020). Adding to such injustices are the disparate medical treatment experiences and outcomes of Black patients compared to White patients, including high rates of pregnancy-related Black mortality that occur at three times the rate of non-Hispanic White women (Lopez-Littleton & Sampson, 2020).

**Table 2: Language Games in Artificial Intelligence**

Policy Example	Social Construction/ Language Games	Example in Practice	Questions/Topics for Future Research	Suggested Method Approaches
Artificial Intelligence	Macro – AI framed as boon to state intelligence, big data, efficiency, evidence-based policy	U.N. Programming	What are the implications of moving more toward computer-generated models of decision making in government?	Simulation studies
		Biden AI task force		End-user perceptions of AI tools
	Meso – government AI policies/personnel; potential for administrative evil to emerge (see Bullock, 2019)	Apps collecting big data	How can coders make the algorithms more ethical? Can they?	Critical race theory analysis
		Machine learning in public administration		Social network studies/network analysis
Micro – individuals singled out via algorithms			What are the social justice implications for organizations and individuals facing AI breakdowns?	

Nevertheless, the well-regarded Social Determinants of Health, identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality-of-life-risks and outcomes, do not address structural racism as the root cause of racial health disparities. This macro-level gap in ignoring structural racism in turn influences meso-level discriminatory impacts in policies and systems. The CDC recently identified discrimination, including racism, as influencing “social and economic factors that put some people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk for COVID-19” (“Health equity considerations & racial,” 2021), but the omission of structural racism remains problematic. As a result, some health equity champions seek to change that narrative by applying critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and feminist theory (Yearby, 2020).

Inherent within these inequities is the language game of blaming the most marginalized for their undesirable health outcomes. By framing these issues through the lens of “personal responsibility,” conservative policymakers have been able to forestall equitable change for decades. However, Dawes and Williams (2020) argue that political determinants

of health supersede personal responsibility, as they create social drivers such as inadequate transportation, unsafe neighborhoods, poor environmental conditions, and lack of healthy food that negatively affect all aspects of health. The shortcomings of the Social Determinants of Health underscore the necessity of creating new language games as a tactic to increase odds of disrupting entrenched racial health inequities by shifting the micro-level focus of blaming the victim to the macro level of governing approaches that address the underlying structural inequities that cause and aggravate racial health disparities.

Racial inequities exist within all systems. Across the country, discrimination has evolved and persisted in such practices as redlining, whose effects—significant disparities in health, economic, and educational outcomes—live on by ZIP code (Rothstein, 2017) in a system of inequities that prior to COVID-19 had mainly remained invisible to most Americans. This place-based discrimination has resulted in significant differences in life expectancy by neighborhood (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2021). The pandemic exposed these cruel inequities, as COVID-19 disproportionately kills Black people at over twice the rate of White people (The COVID Racial Data Tracker, 2021). This alarming statistic increases the urgency for public health and government officials to tackle systemic racism as a public health imperative. Nevertheless, in the absence of clear guidance from the former Trump administration health officials, local health and public officials were slow to pivot from their go-to efficiency framework that prioritized speed of response over targeted equity in decisions related to the allocation of limited resources (e.g., COVID-19 testing and vaccines). This emphasis on efficiency over equity is an overused language maneuver that favors the status quo.

Interestingly, policy approaches are often made evident in the objectives public officials pursue. Despite the suffering inflicted on the United States by the significant dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism (Gooden, 2020), public policy responses to these two complex problems have been vastly different. For example, according to Gooden, the strategy for the problem of COVID-19 is to solve it, while the objective for racism is to manage it as a condition (ASPA DSJ, 2020). It could be argued that an objective to solve it necessitates macro-level policy reengineering and intervention while an objective to manage it only necessitates incrementalist micro-level response. As a result, a greater sense of urgency has been felt, and more money and resources deployed in the broad fight against COVID-19 than in ending decades of discrimination or the inequitable allocation of testing resources and vaccines.

The persistence of inequity in these critical resource decisions underscores the fact that the fight against COVID-19 is the fight against structural racism itself. While increasingly more cities and a few states have named racism a public health crisis (Vestal, 2020), few have taken concrete action to change inequitable outcomes. Then, it becomes clear that public servants need to apply a framework to solve the pandemic and use a racial equity lens to address the underlying racism inherent in public health systems. Effectively using a racial equity framework would require reworking the previously used language games and implementing the anti-racist language, practices, and tools, including naming, blaming, and claiming (Gooden, 2015).

### **Example in Practice**

Considering that the burden of the pandemic response has fallen overwhelmingly on local officials, it may be helpful here to examine one jurisdiction's effort to embed racial equity in its administrative approach. The efforts of the City of Long Beach, California, to operationalize racial equity in its COVID-19 pandemic response offer some emerging best

practices of shifting the language game from the status quo of inequity toward social justice. Prior to the pandemic, the city created an equity toolkit, resources, and training that set the value and language of racial equity at its operating core (Long Beach Equity Toolkit, 2019). Then, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the city's emergency response team and operations put those equity tools and training into practice (Lara, 2020).

As racial disparities in COVID-related illness and death became evident, with Black residents and other people of color affected at higher rates than White residents, the city mandated a health equity lens statement to be included on all staff reports involving pandemic decisions and actions (City of Long Beach, 2020). Disaggregated data by race helped guide decision-making on how to leverage and allocate limited testing capabilities, e.g., to better match mobile testing labs with the areas of greatest need and to determine the equitable distribution of vaccines ("How Cities are Prioritizing Equity," 2021). While these efforts have been uneven at times, which has frustrated racial justice advocates (BLM Long Beach, 2020), Long Beach has been recognized for more quickly, equitably, and effectively addressing racial inequities in its overall pandemic response than most cities ("How Cities are Prioritizing Equity," 2021).

However, to fundamentally change the language game that sustains the entrenched and intersecting inequities within U.S. public health and health care systems, the link between ethics and equity must be made explicit and appropriate consequences for violations be attached to professional and organizational codes of ethics. Thereby, a new language game can be established such that public servants' inaction and failure to tackle systemic racism and deliver antiracist policies at the macro-and meso-levels would be understood as breaching their ethical obligations. Only then will a redesign of public health systems be possible with racial equity centered within language, objectives, and actions.

Table 3 highlights some of the language games in the public health policy area, along with potential avenues for future research.

### **Social Welfare**

A final area of ethical concern involving equity language games in public administration pertains to social welfare policy and delivery. The language of "welfare" is fraught in the U.S. context with some actors viewing governmentally involved welfare benefits as necessary for survival and economic fairness, and others viewing welfare as unjustified redistribution that encourages sloth and dependency (Trattner 2007; Gilens 1999). Welfare policy development and administration are also intertwined with a deeply racist history of White supremacy, reflected in the caustic language and negative stereotypes towards non-Whites as lacking work ethic (Dyck & Hussey, 2008; Gilens, 1999), alongside entrenched perceptions of "dependency" on "handouts" (Feagin, 2020; Minoff, 2020; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011).

Indeed, public opinion polling dating back to the 1980s finds that when the word "welfare" is used in survey language, support for government spending declines sharply; however, when the alternate phrase "assistance to the poor" is employed, support for government social programs rises significantly (Jardina, 2018; Smith, 1987). The word "welfare" itself is seemingly value laden, tapping into enduring stereotypes of racial minorities as undeserving dependents, influencing language games in the social welfare issue area.

**Table 3: Language Games in Public Health**

Policy Example	Social Construction/ Language Games	Example in Practice	Questions/Topics for Future Research	Suggested Method Approaches
Public Health	<p>Macro – Improve public health by addressing structural racism</p> <p>Meso – make equity a primary focus of administrative objectives at all levels; link ethics and equity in professional and organization codes of ethics and institute consequences for violations</p> <p>Micro – shift focus on individuals from blaming the victim to the underlying structural inequities that cause and aggravate racial health disparities</p>	<p>Social Determinants of Health</p> <p>COVID-19 inequities</p> <p>Long Beach, CA, response to the COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p>How can the application of critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and/or feminist theory better identify, disrupt, and transform structural racism in public health policy, including the Social Determinants of Health?</p> <p>How can the link between ethics and equity be fostered within the street-level bureaucracy?</p>	<p>Apply an intersectional and racial equity lens in policy problem and research analysis, policy development, and development of measurable policy outcomes</p> <p>Using COVID-19 as a case study, conduct surveys of street-level bureaucracy public health and public administration officials, potentially using grounded theory to surface implicit biases or perceptions related to race</p>

After a relatively short period of generous welfare state expansion following the New Deal and Great Society initiatives, broad macro-level governing strategies have been revised toward ostensibly race-neutral cultural concerns about “crime” and “welfare dependency,” limiting the reach of social supports (Alexander, 2012; Bobo, Kleugel & Smith, 1997; Carten, 2016; Gilens, 1999; Hayat, 2016). For instance, Republican elite Ronald Reagan would tell hyperbolic gendered and racialized narratives about the “welfare queen,” a fictional single mother from the Southside of Chicago who lived a lavish lifestyle from fraudulent income derived from government benefits (e.g., driving multiple pink Cadillac automobiles derived from gaming cash assistance programs) (Gilman, 2013; Hancock, 2003).

This language projecting unflattering racialized characterization of welfare beneficiaries as irresponsible, lacking work ethic, and comprised primarily of undeserving “welfare cheats” has come to dominate social welfare program functioning and administrative priorities at the meso-level and client/administrator interactions at the micro-level (Carten, 2016; Gilens, 1999; Hayat, 2016; Minoff, 2020; Soss et al., 2001; Soss, Fording & Schram 2011; Trattner, 2007; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Policymakers and administrators must start to forge a new language and ethic of inclusivity and supportive, transformative social services within this racialized and gendered welfare milieu.

### **Example in Practice**

The culmination of macro-level reform governing strategies to “end welfare as we know it” occurred in bipartisan fashion in 1996 under the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (Dyck & Hussey, 2008; Trattner, 2007). As the legislative name implies, PRWORA ended the long-running entitlement to federal cash benefits and instituted strict conditions on cash assistance by establishing work requirements for able-bodied recipients in the name of “personal responsibility” and “temporary assistance” (Soss et al., 2001; Trattner, 2007). Additional policy limitations included a 60-month time limit on benefits, family cap provisions that limited unwed births, and sanction penalties for failing to adhere to program rules (Carten, 2016; Soss et al., 2001; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011; Trattner, 2007).

Trickling down to the meso and micro-levels, programmatic and administrative directives under welfare reform were shifted from providing supportive income maintenance to supervising poor families (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). Low-income able-bodied individuals must now adhere to paternalistic programmatic demands to end their own economic precarity through paid employment and be punished by welfare administrators and removed from public benefits when failing to adhere to strict workfare rules (Monnat, 2010; Riccucci, 2005; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). This presents a series of ethical dilemmas for policymakers and public managers regarding social equity and racial justice considerations in the 21st century.

Work requirements for public benefits are partially rooted in language games portraying racial minorities as “lazy” and prone to “dependency” that existed from the days of chattel slavery (Carten, 2016; Feagin, 2020; Gilens, 1999; Dyck & Hussey, 2008; Minoff, 2020). Negative perceptions of deviance and irresponsibility that require correction by strict workfare program rules and punitive administrative delivery undergird much of contemporary U.S. social welfare. For instance, continuing this macro-level governing posture emphasizing self-sufficiency, the Trump Administration used the language of undeservingness and dependency to support work requirements for Medicaid beneficiaries and deportation for non-citizens receiving public benefits under the “public charge” rule (Evelly, 2020).

Correcting the behavioral poor and limiting welfare receipt, instead of addressing structural disadvantage or providing more unconditional material support remains the centerpiece of U.S. welfare provision (Trattner, 2007). In turn, street-level implementation filters down in racially discriminatory fashion among ostensibly neutral frontline welfare administrators operating at the micro-level (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Samudra, 2019; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011). Numerous PRWORA implementation studies demonstrate that Black, Latinx, and Asian welfare clients are significantly more likely to experience discretionary case sanction or punishment for non-compliance than White welfare recipients (Kahlil et al., 2003; Monnat, 2010; Samudra, 2019; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011). Negative perceptions of minority welfare recipients under welfare reform rules likely shape the behavior of case managers in a punitive and limiting direction toward clients of color (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011; Watkins-Hayes, 2009).

To engender a public service ethic oriented toward social equity, our current social welfare regime arguably requires foundational retooling in language framing and administrative action to promote greater and more consistent material support for low-income families, disproportionately families of color. In terms of macro-level welfare governing

frameworks, officials and administrators could emphasize the language of “empowerment” and structural change to address economic and material hardship, not the language of “temporary assistance”. For example, promoting broad transformative approaches like universal basic income, unconditional child allowances, baby bonds, or reparations for descendants of Black slaves can provide more equitable and sustained baseline resource access.

This approach can be observed with the federal Child Tax Credit passed under the American Rescue Plan in early 2021 that provides direct cash payments to all families with children aged 17 or younger, an idea championed by select Republican officials like Senator Mitt Romney in his proposed Family Security Act (Levitz, 2021). “Family security”, even under more conservative perspectives, needn’t be achieved merely through gritty hard work in capitalist employment, but through guaranteed public supports that can help boost resource access and family stability. Absent major welfare governing overhauls toward transformative redistribution at the macro and meso-levels, which are difficult to achieve politically, frontline human service agencies and individual welfare administrators need to be rethinking their ethical roles in their interactions with the citizenry.

Within welfare programs like TANF that require intensive client-case manager interactions, the first step toward an administrative ethic of equity at micro-levels is to minimize discriminatory treatment toward clients of color. Discretionary aspects of frontline welfare implementation, such as intake and assessment, employment placements and service referrals, and sanctioning for non-compliance need fundamental rethinking and restructuring toward equity priorities. For instance, following a formal complaint by the ACLU and NAACP under Wisconsin Works (“W-2”), racial equity analysis started receiving targeted attention by Division of Workforce Solutions agency leaders through a steering committee (Gooden, 2015). In turn, case managers and other frontline personnel began receiving formalized training to reduce racial bias and sanction disparities among welfare clients of color (Gooden, 2015).

Future research should work to examine contemporary language games in the social welfare arena and seek to better understand how language influences multiple levels of welfare administration and poverty governance. One potentially fruitful avenue for public affairs researchers is the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones, Shanahan, & McBeth, 2014; McBeth & Jones, 2014) that involves examining language and stories that can structure feedback loops and changes to policy design and administrative directives. Researchers could undertake content analysis and catalog the words and narratives about poverty in national news coverage and how that might impact macro and meso-level governing approaches.

For instance, how has the language around poverty and material hardship changed since passage of welfare reform in the 1990s? Have poverty language games and narratives shifted in a more sympathetic direction following COVID-19, helping to alter macro-level governing strategies that favor guaranteed material relief over punishment or conditionality? Through usage of surveys and in-depth interviews, researchers can better examine language and narratives occurring among frontline social service organizations and street-level interactions between case managers and welfare clients.

Table 4 shows some language games in the social welfare policy area, along with avenues for future research.

## **Conclusion**

As it becomes apparent from this article, the language games around social equity are of paramount importance to multiple public administration and policy areas. Through the



arguments and examples offered in infrastructure and economic development, artificial intelligence, public health, and social welfare, it becomes clear how underlying language games often inform policy development and implementation – who seemingly deserves what, when, why, and how. For social justice and equity to take root, there needs to be an examination and ultimate reconstruction of the underlying language games hindering ethics of equity for public administration. One way forward is to understand and critically examine existing language games, then break those down to achieve social equity and ethics goals (Blessett, 2020; Crenshaw, 1995). Additional avenues for research are offered in the enclosed tables that summarize the critical language games in each policy area.

**Table 4: Language Games in Social Welfare**

Policy Example	Social Construction/ Language Games	Example in Practice	Questions/Topics for Future Research	Suggested Method Approaches
Social Welfare	Macro – Governing strategies emphasizing “welfare dependency”, “self-sufficiency,” and “temporary assistance” with strict conditions to receive material benefits	The Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996	How does the social construction of those experiencing material hardship influence social welfare burdens?	Surveys and interviews of welfare clients and frontline welfare administrators  Administrative burdens studies
	Meso – programmatic rules and welfare agency priorities that place strict conditions placed on material benefits (work requirements, sanctions, etc.)	Public charge immigration rules  2021 Child Tax Credit	How can welfare administrators enhance racial and social equity under a framework centered on welfare conditionality?	Narrative Policy Framework analysis  Critical race and gender analysis  Evaluation studies documenting inequitable welfare outcomes and street-level improvements in equity
	Micro – “undeserving” individuals receiving discriminatory administrative interactions that punish program clients and withhold benefits		How can persistent constructions of individuals as “undeserving” affect the citizen-state relationship in welfare systems?	

As described in multiple examples in this paper, the confluence of complex factors causes inequitable and often unethical outcomes for communities of color. This is a direct result of playing a White-leaning language game and trying to achieve positive outcomes for certain groups of people to exclude others—a well-utilized tactic from the founding of the United States to present times. Applying the language game of an intersectional lens would

appreciate the convergence of, for example, race, class, gender, and power to break down existing status quo structures and improve administrative functioning in policy areas like public health, artificial intelligence, economic development, and social welfare. However, to substantively advance social justice and equity goals—and specifically achieve racial equity and justice outcomes—requires not only the right messaging with aligned capacity and resources but the re-engineering of the very rules of the language games being played.

To create paradigm shifts of the language game in this way, we must affirm one of the central values of public service that to improve the lives of people that the government serves, we must embrace our ethical duty towards advancing social equity. According to the American Society for Public Administration's Code of Ethics and practices (2018), public servants should strengthen social equity, oppose all forms of discrimination, and improve and eliminate laws and policies that are unethical to promote the public good. As noted by Hunter (1990), games have set rules, yet language rules are frequently violated, which raises the question of how to impose penalties when language games rules are broken. Without the creation of tangible consequences applied to public servants who resist or outright dismiss this new language game linking ethics and equity, there can be no proper accountability, and the status quo of inequity persists. Thus, it is imperative that public administrators proactively identify and re-configure the embedded language games that produce inequity at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels within public administration.

It could not be more evident that the field of public administration is at a critical inflection point. Since the heinous murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the renewed societal push for racial justice, public servants have a clear ethical mandate to redesign systems, programs, and services with racial equity at the core. Explicitly employing the language of racial equity lens is necessary to shift the complexities of systemic oppression toward justice (Government Alliance on Race & Equity, 2015; National Equity Project, 2021). When the inherent racism and oppression of status quo language games are understood, public servants have a real chance of fundamentally disrupting and transforming public administration to serve all people rather than the elite few benefiting from the current system rooted in White supremacy and racial capitalism.

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