

Minnowbrook 50th Anniversary Conference – Rethinking the Administrative State

A Clarion Call to Action: Acknowledging and Addressing Public Administration's Functional Acts of Administrative Racism

A Concept Paper Submitted by
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Abstract

In light of recent debacles as a result of governmental policies and the practices of public servants, this paper builds upon the concept of administrative racism advanced by the recent article by Starke, Heckler and Mackey (2018). Administrative racism is a concept that reflects the harm that is done to people of color by government and its public administrators. It occurs when public administrators rely on technical rationality - those socially constructed workplace norms that have been reinforced by political constructions or public policies - to avoid making difficult decisions surrounding issues about race and ethnicity. Resultingly, public administrators become functional actors or instruments of doing harm. This is antithetical to the fields clarion call to do good.

Introduction

In *The Study of Administration*, Woodrow Wilson noted the field of politics aims to answer the question, "Who shall make law and what shall it be?" while the scope of work for public administration is to focus on the question, "How should the law be administered?" (1887). From Wilson's perspective, the world of politics is constrained to formulating policies while the world of public administration is to execute or implement those policies. Hence, Wilson argued that the objective of administrative study is to first, discover what government can properly and successfully do, and secondly, how to do those things with maximum efficiency and at minimum cost. These two questions have guided the theoretical development of public affairs scholars and the practical application of American public administrators for more than 130 years. In some respects, progress has been made, while in others, challenges are still apparent.

Racism in America: A Historical and Contemporary Challenge

One challenge that continues to negatively impact all aspects of American society is the problem of racism and the complicit role that our government and its administrators have played in maintaining its existence. In 1903, DuBois presciently noted that the problem of twentieth century America would be along the color-line – particularly the relationship between the darker and lighter races of our nation. Considering the recent incidents of racial profiling by proxy that have taken place on college campuses, at neighborhood swimming pools, golf courses, public parks and gyms, and in neighborhood coffee shops and other locales, coupled with the mass incarceration phenomenon and the current calamity emerging from the immigration crisis with its racial and ethnic features, the problem of twenty-first century

America continues to lie along the color-line. To address this American dilemma of race and our contemporary democracy (Myrdal, 1944) requires more than just effective and efficient public administration, but also ethical public administration.

America's history reveals a type of bipolar disorder. Our historical narrative ebbs and flows with resulting highs and lows, where triumphs are often coupled with tragedies with intermittent episodes that fluctuate between depressive and hypomanic states. America was founded as a nation that professed that all men were created equal, while yet embracing the practice of chattel slavery. This Janus-faced tactic reflected a utopian ideal for some with a dystopian existence for others. As a result, the legacy of slavery - our country's original sin - has contemporary implications and impacts.

Our nation's policies and practices of the past (and some would see in the present) seem to err towards a philosophy where being different is deviant and brings to the fore the need for governmental accountability, transparency and responsiveness, with an emphasis on social equity. Yet, the reality of racism, in general, and administrative racism, in particular, both comprised of micro- and macro-aggressive forms or dimensions (Russell, 1998), must be acknowledged, particularly the role that public administration has played and continues to play as detailed and systematic executors or implementers of public laws where some are flawed and seem to be racially motivated and intentional.

Our country and government continue to experience growing pains, much like Wilson's analogy of a lusty child. We have expanded in nature and grown great – in some respects - in stature but our movement or actions at times are awkward, boorish and graceless. We are at a moment in time where tension is increasing as many members of our public demand a more forward-looking “power with” approach to government and governance, while others are more backward-looking and are content with more of a “power over” approach especially when in regards to those who have been historically marginalized and otherized (Follett, 1918). To address the malady of racism requires collaboration and commitment on the parts of public administration scholars, instructors and practitioners alike.

A Clarion Call to Action

Contemporary public administration scholars have noted that race has been relegated to the periphery or margins of public affairs scholarship and curricula (Bailey, 2005; Farmbry, 2005; Rice, 2004; Gooden and Wooldridge, 2007; Hewins-Maroney and Williams, 2007; Starke, Heckler, and Mackey, 2018). Even though efforts have been made by NASPAA with its emphasis on cultural competency and diversity - a lack of willingness and commitment to invest, encourage, and engage in careful and painstaking inquiry into the nature, application, and results of things like race and racism not only on people, but on systems, institutions and structures is still evident within our field of study. Consequently, this reality perpetuates the problem that has served as a cornerstone of our country – white supremacy in conjunction with black or brown inferiority and crimmithology or the conflation of blackness/brownness and criminality in the minds of the American public (Close, 1997).

In the safe spaces of university settings where future public administrators are taught and trained, trepidation continues to rule the day. Our nervousness as instructors seem to prevent candid discussions and resulting action to understand and ultimately address the problem of white supremacy and racism in American society (Gooden, 2014). This is coupled with our disinterest or oversight in valuing and supporting research and scholarship on this and related topics. Our field's trepidation may be a result of a lack of understanding, a lack of institutional incentives, a disinterest in addressing the problem, a harboring of racist beliefs, or a combination of the above. As a result, our field is complicit either as intentional or functional actors in support of administrative racism.

Conclusion

As we rethink the administrative state, we must examine the past, to understand the present and plan for the future. The administrative evil (Adams and Balfour, 2004) and racism of America's past is a fact that must be acknowledged and its impact on contemporary America is evident. As we as a country and a field of study move towards the future, the challenge for public administrators of today and tomorrow is to reject the role of being functional actors of administrative racism, with its submissive aspects. The new administrative state is dependent upon active and ethical public administrators who seek to promote an approach to governance that is responsive and accountable to all persons who make up the 21st Century American mosaic. This includes safeguarding the least of these within our society.

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