

## **Rethinking the Administrative State through an Intersectional Framework**

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Since Wilson's 1887 essay "The Study of Public Administration," the discipline and practice of public administration has been influenced by the ideologies and preferences of white men who are heterosexual and wealthy. These collective identities reflect the most privileged perspectives within U.S. society. bell hooks (2013) identifies imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy as systems of domination that are interlocking and used to sustain oppression for people with intersecting and marginalized identities. Public administration, through its research and practice, reinforce and reproduce disparity based on the identified systems of domination. In 2018, the United States is incredibly diverse and the international community is extremely accessible, therefore public administration must be considerate of a broader constituency. This essay argues for an intersectional framework to be part of the practice of public administration.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality explores the ways in which identities intersect in shaping the structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against people of color (Crenshaw, 1995). While Crenshaw's analysis was specific to the experiences of Black women in the workforce, this discussion is inclusive of all intersecting identities typically pushed to the margins of society (e.g. gay men, black transwomen, English language learners). As a social science discipline and field of practice, public administration must be as concerned with the lived experiences and marginalized voices of the citizenry to the same extent that it prioritizes white perspectives and quantitative measurements.

At a foundational level, race is the "nervous" area of government that has prohibited public administrators from thoroughly interrogating and confronting the roots of disparity and inequity for Black people in the United States (Gooden, 2014). While other systems of domination are deeply impactful for justice and equity considerations, a focus on race intentionally places it at the center of examination in order to "[re]introduce it to the conscious discourse" (Luft, 2009, p. 103). In other words, the unconscious and embedded nature of how racism operates requires special attention to the ways it manifests across all spheres of life. Therefore, contextualizing race specifically but other systems of domination as well, can illuminate how marginalized groups are multiply burdened and experience oppression based on having identities situated outside of whiteness and maleness.

Intersectionality is an oppositional framework because it debunks the ideologies for which the field of public administration was founded. In this regard, an intersectional analysis centers on individual, group, and community experiences as being socially constructed as (un)deserving or (un)worthy, examining power dynamics *within* and *between* groups, and elucidating the interdependence of knowledge and activism (or a lack thereof) (Berger & Guidroz, 2009). Under this guise: 1) Notions of colorblindness would be usurped by antiracist analyses designed to examine the pervasiveness of racial disparity, inequity, and injustice. An examination of the criminal legal system aided by intersectionality can illuminate the ways crime and criminality are socialized to produce disparate outcomes for persons of color who identify as LGBTQ (Gaynor, 2018). An analytical frame inclusive of gender, race, and sexual identity are needed to understand the experiences LGBTQ people of color have with state actors. 2) Conceptions of neoliberalism is normative in public administration and stipulates parameters for the ways government encourages and promotes free-market capitalism. When examining the how the communities in Flint and North Dakota have been denied access to clean water, race, class, and colonialism are at play. State actors and private interests have worked collaboratively to circumvent environmental standards, as well as increase profit and tax revenues at the expense of its vulnerable populations (Jurkiewicz, 2016;

Whyte, 2017). Within this context, private interests will always be prioritized over human rights. These examples reveal the need for inclusive ideologies and diverse perspectives in the examination of the social ills of the administrative state. Incorporating a wider array of knowledge into the discipline can help inform policy decisions and influence administrative actions, particularly as information is situated within the real-world context of public administrations research and practice.

**Pedagogy.** bell hooks (1994) stated “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” and within this laboratory a new direction for the field can take shape (p. 12). For public administration to become relevant and responsive to a broader constituency, educators must be willing to “shift the way we think, write, and speak” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). An education that is not self-reflective, open, honest, critical, and emancipatory will never facilitate the betterment of the field nor will it improve the quality of life for its citizens. Reframing public administration education fundamentally requires an obligation on the part of educators to take ownership in their own respective development and competence about the world outside of the ivory tower.

Institutionalizing intersectionality is not an easy feat, particularly because it seeks to dismantle the hegemony for which the discipline is grounded. Fitts (2009) suggests several strategies. First, diversifying intellectual perspectives that consider the nuances of integrating social categories requires the concomitant diversification of faculty bodies within academia. Demographic and intellectual diversity in the front of the classroom change the dynamics regarding the structure and flow of the conversation. Second, new bodies and perspectives enter the field, course offerings related to these emergent ideas should not be “ghettoized” and offered as elective courses, but rather incorporated into core classes (Fitts, 2009, p. 250). As seen across public administration curriculum, diversity, ethics, or equity are rhetorically applauded, but practically marginalized. Classes on diversity, cultural competence, and equity are rarely included as core curriculum and typically assigned to faculty of color. When faculty do not embrace developing competence related to these key issues, such concepts are reinforced as subordinate. Third, be mindful of the material conditions of schools, departments, or programs, the subsequent resources available to maintain an intersectional infrastructure, and how the model engages students (Fitts, 2009).

At a micro or interpersonal level, intersectionality can be applied in ways that empower administrators to engage strategically and differently, but not universally (Luft, 2009). The American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA) Code of Ethics has placed value on principles such designed to advance the *public* interest; encourage *democratic* participation; promote *ethical* organizations; and strengthen social *equity*. The Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) (2014) mandates graduate programs cultivate several core competencies in students, which include, but are not limited to: articulate and apply a public service perspective and to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. The principles expressed by ASPA (professional network) and COPRA (accrediting body) demonstrates a desire for administrators to be thoughtfully engaged with all communities regardless of privilege. Street-level bureaucrats are engaged in intersectional activities based on the varied interactions she/he have with citizens every single day. Therefore, public administration programs should prepare students to be critical and inquisitive about how and why disparity exists, to examine the ways institutional practices reinforce the status quo, to develop culture competence, and be lifelong learners (Lopez-Littleton & Blessett, 2015; Lopez-Littleton, Blessett, & Barr, forthcoming). In the classroom and in practice, administrators should be competent about the context (e.g. time, people, environment) for which people request and receive services.

## Conclusion

Admittedly, the field has been incredibly slow in its work toward racial justice, but also to adopt social equity as a value in the field (Gooden, 2014). Given the potential of intersectionality to deconstruct and disarm the systems of domination that characterize the field, it seems impractical for public administration to fully embrace this idea. This critique does not attempt to negate the influence the discipline has had in helping to structure and influence of U.S. government, but it also recognizes its role in sustaining and reinforcing systems of domination and oppression. As a result, the normative ideology of public administration (e.g. avoids context, ignores history, silences the voices and lived experiences of vulnerable others) cannot continue as it has in the past.

Intersectionality as a framework for the study, practice, and teaching of public administration is a disruption of the norm. The willingness of public administration, as a field, to embrace inclusive perspectives, ideologies, and methodologies is an alternative tool to combat the cruel, inhumane, and in some cases deadly consequences persons with intersecting and marginalizing identities face when dealing with state actors and institutions. Moreover, a public administration discipline that does not interrogate or challenge policy actions and administrative decisions that are unjust is complicit in the marginalization of vulnerable people and communities across society.

Every single day, the Trump administration works to reimagine a society where safety, security, and wellness for a vast majority of people are constantly under attack. Under this guise, to rethink the administrative state is a focus on all things in direct opposition, whereby inclusion, justice, equity, and fairness is accessible and available to all persons. Public administration is a practical field, so intersectionality is warranted. "Intersectional theorizing and action must continue to insist on a deep recognition of the power issues at the center and the implications for the creation of knowledge and social policy, as well as movement strategy and action" (Russo, 2009, p. 316). Russo (2009) continues "I would ask each of us to interrogate ourselves, our organizations, our work places, our families – to examine our individual gender, sexual, and class politics, and our power and privilege in each realm (p. 316). More than anything change starts with self.

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