

Nervousness in our Field of Public Administration

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The field of public administration has been particularly nervous since the election of U.S. president Donald J. Trump. Our field was, and remains, inadequately equipped to confront the saturation of governance challenges that raise serious concerns regarding our core public service values such as democracy, equity, ethics and integrity. Responding to these challenges is not a problem that is solely “out there” in the world of our federal, state, and local practitioners. It is also “in here” in our public administration programs and schools of public affairs. A looming question confronting us is, “How does the field of public administration effectively navigate its nervousness and promote our core public service values during a period of ‘other resentment’?” Addressing this question necessitates that we 1) understand the concept and role of nervousness; 2) consider how nervousness operates in the current political context; and 3) develop norms for the field to effectively navigate this difficult terrain.

What is nervousness and why is it important?

Nervousness is an emotional and physical reaction that can interfere with one’s ability to perform critical tasks. Both individuals and organizations can experience nervousness. In government, it becomes harmful when it debilitates actions that are needed to promote social equity and justice. “The nervous area of government is how an organization considers, examines, promotes, distributes, and evaluates the provision of public justice in areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, and ability status” (Gooden, 2015, 9). While often attractive over the short term, ignoring the problem of nervousness makes the underlying problems worse. Nervousness, then, can be viewed as a condition similar to that of a dental cavity. While it may seem initially preferable to the option of an extended visit to the dentist, the condition, left untreated, only worsens” (Gooden, 2014, 196). Conditions then become ripe for administrative evil, in which within the technical-rational tradition, “there seems to be little or no room for allowing or encouraging civil servants to publically disagree with politics that threaten the well-being of members of the polity, particularly policies that may produce or exploit surplus populations” (Adams and Balfour 1998, 169).

At the first Minnowbrook conference in 1968, the young Minnows noted, “A government built on a Constitution claiming the equal protection of the laws had failed in that premise. Public administrators, who daily operate in government, were not without responsibility (Frederickson 1990, 288). Reflecting in 2005, Frederickson recalled, “It was during the 1960s that it became increasingly evident that the results of governmental policy and the work of public administrators implementing these policies were much better for some citizens than for others” (2005, 31).

The minnows of 1968 provided the intellectual foundational basis for New Public Administration that rejected the idea that administrators are value neutral and recognized a constellation of five normative core values that, although legitimate, can also be conflictual. These values are responsiveness, worker and citizen participation in decision making, social equity, citizen choice and administrative responsibility (Frederickson 1980). The policies of the Trump Administration are

challenging the depth of our commitment to these values and our willingness to provide their solid manifestation.

Fifty years later, as we gather together at the Minnowbrook conference of 2018, nervousness in our field of public administration looms. It is both thick and heavy. It is thick because it is impacting public service values at all levels of government both domestically and abroad. It is heavy because it is very dense in terms of frequency and intensity. We have slowly adopted behaviors that are more aligned with neutral competence than with the articulation of public service values, arguably because the latter is more comfortable. Nervousness in the field of public administration is directly impacting our faculty and students, our teaching and our research, our schools and our programs, and most importantly, our citizens and our residents.

Nervousness in the current political context

With less than two years into the Trump Administration, nervousness among public administrators in the provision of public services is exceedingly high motivated by multiple trigger points including, for example, blatant actions and behaviors related to the promise of the “big, beautiful, wall,” multiple travel bans with strong ethnic and religious overtones, the “two-sides” response to the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville, the lack of support for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), the strong victim blaming of Puerto Ricans impacted by Hurricane Maria, using vulgar descriptions of African countries, and separating families seeking asylum at the U.S.- Mexico border. It also includes more subtle actions and behaviors that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, such as reducing access to affordable health care, acceptance of sexual harassment and violence, indifference to police brutality, and pervasive rollbacks of regulations to protect environmental and community sustainability.

The actions, policies, and behaviors of President Trump operate in strong alignment with white separatists and religious nationalists. While Trump is a Republican, the viewing of these actions as partisan not only mischaracterizes conservative values, but also provides a dangerous shield that thwarts attempts to aggressively challenge these related policies and actions in our field and in our classrooms. In his thoughtful and methodical analysis, John Powell (2013) identifies such behaviors as “The New Southern Strategy” designed to create a national majority, built largely on white resentment. In essence, Powell argues that the “dog whistle” tactics commonly employed regionally in the South designed to race-bait and activate racial resentment, is fast becoming a national political strategy. As Powell explains, “It is more likely that the concern about taking from the “real Americans,” and giving to the 47% of underserving ‘takers’ who don’t truly belong. The hostility to this imagined group of “others,” the takers, is not just because they want stuff, but because they represent an existential threat—they are perceived to undermine the meaning of being American. The anxiety about the other, whether racial, gay, immigrant, or another identity, is not just about the distribution of material goods, but also about who we are as a nation (2013, 2).”

Extending Powell’s discussion, this anxiety (or nervousness) is directly affecting our schools of public affairs. Steeped in a tradition of the positive virtues of neutrality, our voices are formally absent. In its best light, we are silent accessories to this imprudent political strategy. Sure, we may argue, debate, and offer critical perspectives, but we do not formally take a position. Silence is the “safest”

response to our nervousness, as the sun continues to rise and set daily within the Trump Era. But, silence, of course, is consent.

Developing norms for our field to effectively navigate nervousness

As Stivers (1993) reminds us, active citizenship requires participation in governance and the exercise of decisive judgment in the public interest. Our field of public administration has a code of ethics, as well as moral responsibilities to the polity. The American Society of Public Administration's (ASPA) code of ethics binds us to fundamental principles including a commitment to uphold the constitution and the law, strengthen social equity, and promote ethical organizations. How could this manifest itself in practice?

Re-orient our PA programs and schools of public affairs from neutral actors to first responders – The National First Responders organization (2017) defines the term “first responder” as “an individual who runs toward an event rather than away.” If our schools of public affairs and PA programs operated as first responders when public service values are compromised, we adopt an orientation as protectors of public service values, and align our actions accordingly. As Adams and Balfour (1998) suggest, “A public ethics for public administration would require that administrators be attentive to social and economic outcomes of public policy, as well as to their proper and faithful implementation. Public administrators could not ethically implement a policy that was overtly detrimental to the well-being of any segment of the population” (180). Likewise, we would adopt this approach in the values-orientation of our programs, using broad communication strategies to articulate the incongruence between administrative policies and our ethical code.

Proactively operate in the nervous area of government – National associations in the field of social work for example, such as the National Association of Social Workers, communicate publically their commitment to social justice. A quick visit to their website includes a wealth of information on policy issues and statements, legislative alerts, social justice, as well as sign on letters and statements to elected officials. Where is a similar commitment to public sector values articulated within the field of public administration? We should introspectively examine our reluctance to act and critique the negative aspects of neutrality.

Lead the promotion of good governance and strong communities – Our commitment to the field of public administration requires us to stand up for good governance, social equity, and strong communities, both in season and out-of-season. It requires a clearer distinction between partisanship and public sector values. Admittedly, doing so makes us uncomfortable and nervous, but it is nonetheless our responsibility to do so. Our public administration programs and schools are well positioned to lead the way.

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