

A VOLUME IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & SOCIAL EQUITY

Transforming Public Administration in Canada

*An Exploration of Social Equity
in Research, Practice, and Teaching*

edited by

Jill Anne Chouinard | Susanne Thiessen

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*This book is dedicated to students everywhere who are interested
in advancing social equity in their work.*

Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory we work and live, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. As we reflect on our presence here, we recognize the ongoing impacts of colonization and the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples. We commit to actively working towards reconciliation and upholding principles of social equity, recognizing the inherent rights and dignity of all individuals and communities. In honoring the land and its original inhabitants, we acknowledge the importance of centering Indigenous voices and perspectives in our efforts towards social justice. We recognize that true equity requires dismantling systems of oppression and fostering inclusive spaces where all people can thrive. May this acknowledgment serve as a reminder of our collective responsibility to work towards healing, justice, and equity.

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SECTION I

GOVERNANCE AND JUSTICE

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Positioning Social Equity in Public Administration

**Jill Anne Chouinard
Susanne Thiessen**

The curious thing is how hard it is to integrate all those who have for so long been silenced, privatized, and oppressed into legitimated public knowledges, into public lives in all of their dimensions, even when some realize that this should—indeed, must—be done for the sake of justice, and because otherwise what is known is radically—from the root—falsified. (Minnich, 2005, p. 49)

It will always be the task of public servants to balance the needs for efficiency, economy, and social equity—but there can be no balance if public servants understand only the complexities of economy and efficiency but cannot plumb the details of fairness and equality. (Frederickson, 1990, p. 235)

Equity demands that we keep learning, keep trying. (Minnich, 2005, p. 70)

This book is motivated by our collective interest in exploring the intersection of social equity-related issues with concerns within the field of public administration in Canada. Shifts in public sector governance, populist

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discourse and political extremism, democratic instability, and challenges such as climate change and environmental disasters, demographic transformations (aging society along with increased migration), financial crises, terrorism, housing crises, religious conflicts and racial inequities, dominate the landscape. The ongoing local and global effects of COVID-19 bring these issues into sharper focus. The current governance system was founded with a different set of goals and principles, and while it has shifted over the years to accommodate the changing societal demographics, needs and values, it has not kept pace with current challenges. Meaningful change requires us to reframe and rethink our responses to current challenges intentionally and critically. As educators, we cannot remain impassive to these mounting local and global challenges.

Ultimately, a key aspiration we have as co-editors is to deepen critical dialogue about social equity in the field of public administration and to build a community of scholars, practitioners and teachers of public administration who together aspire to broaden the political, social, and cultural scope of the field. As [MacDonald III \(2021\)](#) has argued, the field of public administration needs to have “an open dialogue on what comes next” (p. 5). This book challenges scholars from schools of public administration to use a social equity lens to reimagine and rethink the ways in which public administration is currently practiced, this with the goal of abandoning colonial logics that betray social equity.

We are motivated by questions such as: “How can our work as teachers of public administration contribute to social good?”; “How can we, as scholars working in public administration, contribute to a dialogue about what it means to teach and practice public administration?”; “How do we engage our students to think about what it means to be a responsible public administrator today?”; “How do we encourage them to critically examine the social, political, cultural, and ethical impact of their work as public administrators?”; “How do we teach students to be sensitive to other ways of knowing and being?”; “What can they do when public service values conflict in potentially politically volatile environments?”; “How do we teach our students to take appropriate action to remove systemic barriers to social equity and justice that have been normalized in our public institutions?”; and “How does the advancement of social equity assist in solving some of our society’s biggest crises?” While we recognize the difficulty of addressing these questions, we believe that the meaningfulness of our field will be measured not by how many of our students join the ranks of the public service but by our continued relevance in creating a more just, humane, and democratic future that enables all life on the planet to thrive.

In this introductory chapter, we use broad brush strokes to talk about the conceptualization of social equity, its historical origins in the civil and racial tumult of the 1960s in the United States, the breadth of the current

scholarship nationally and globally, and the current challenges and obstacles that prevent it from taking root in the field of public administration. We then offer a conceptual framework for understanding social equity in public administration, providing an important conceptual lens for understanding the chapters in this volume. We conclude with a descriptive outline of each chapter, highlighting areas of concern, opportunities for transformation and scholarship.

SOCIAL EQUITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Public administration has been defined as “whatever government does” (Farmer, 2010, p. 236) when it leads, manages, plans, organizes, directs, coordinates and controls government operations, programs, and services (Farmer, 2010; Mosher et al., 2024). While this definition may seem simple, many different disciplines shape the theory and practice of the field locally, institutionally, and globally. As Ramon Gil-Garcia (2003) points out, “The field of public administration is a practical and theoretical combination of small parts from many other disciplines” (p. 102), including political science, management studies, law, sociology, anthropology, human resources, and psychology, among others. There are also emergent critical discourses (Farmer, 2010) that broaden the scope of the field, such as critical theory (e.g., see Box, 2005), postmodernism (e.g., see Fox & Miller, 1995), feminism (e.g., see Feeny et al., 2019), gender studies (e.g., see Findlay, 2015), decolonization and Indigenous studies (e.g., see Poucette, 2018; Thiessen, 2023), and queer studies (e.g., see Larson, 2022), to name only a few. As a field of study and practice, public administration is also shaped and influenced by its sociopolitical and cultural context, by an “ecology of practice” (Kemmis et al., 2012, p. 33) that is very much grounded in the ideologies and practices of what we now call the neoliberal state.

The concept of social equity is not new, though it remains “stubbornly contentious” (Minnich, 2005, p. 69) and highly political, since it advocates for the provision of fair and just opportunities to ensure that no one is prevented from achieving their potential (Whitehead, 1991). Unlike equality, which aims to treat everyone in the same way regardless of individual or group differences, equity focuses on fairness, understood as an effort to mitigate, and obviate the conditions of historic disadvantage and structural inequality that perpetuates disadvantage (Thomas & Campbell, 2021). While both terms are related to the concept of justice, the difference between the two is fundamental to understanding the need for social equity in public policy and decision making. As Candler et al. (2009) explain, “Equality advances a single approach to achieving equity through sameness. Equity

expands the “one-size-fits-all” approach to include more complex distribution arrangements” (p. 373).

Not surprisingly, despite ongoing advocacy from American scholars and practitioners for the inclusion of social equity as a meaningful third pillar of public administration (along with efficiency and economy), the concept has nonetheless remained outside the “legitimate” knowledge base of the field in terms of research, practice and teaching. As [Nabatchi and Carboni \(2019\)](#) argue, “Despite the decades-long efforts of policies, practices, and programs designed to promote equity in public administration, both the scholarly and professional sides of the field still face many challenges” (p. 27). Introduced in the late 1960s to address what was felt to be a “glaring inadequacy in both thought and practice” (p. 228), more than 50 years later social equity is still described as “unfinished business” ([McCandless & Larsen, 2018](#)), as “skeletal” ([Blessett et al., 2019](#)) and as a “quizzical failure” ([Young et al., 2023](#)). A content analysis of *Public Administration Review* by [Gooden \(2015\)](#) found that only 4.26% of articles were focused on issues of social equity. More recently, [Blessett et al. \(2019\)](#) expanded this research to three journals in the field, observing a significant decline over the years in the number of articles covering issues of social equity. For social equity to be given serious consideration in the academy and in practice, it must be included in graduate curricula, which [McCandless and Larsen \(2018\)](#) note is not the case, with only 10% of graduate programs (12 out of 120) in the United States emphasizing social equity.

In a field focused on systems, policies, and processes for the delivery of programs and services to a highly diverse and differentiated public, the omission of equity in public administration as a guiding principle of practice seems morally unacceptable, especially as many public policies have, over time, exacerbated so many of the inequities that currently exist ([Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009](#)). The recent global pandemic has exposed significant inequities across a broad range of historically, geographically, and systemically marginalized populations (see [Agrawal et al., 2021](#); [Gaynor & Wilson, 2020](#); [Martin-Howard & Farmbry, 2020](#)), highlighting quite clearly the need for a public sector response that acknowledges, accepts and adopts social equity-based principles in its approach to the administration of programs, services, and policies for its most vulnerable citizens.

While many innovative concepts in public administration have been adopted by Canadian practitioners, the concept of social equity, focused on the *fair, just, and equitable* management, distribution and implementation of programs, services, policies to the public ([Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009](#)), has not migrated across the forty-ninth parallel into Canada. A 2004 review of 13 public administration programs in Canada (see [Gow & Sutherland, 2004](#)) identified a course curriculum focused on budgeting and finance, economics, political institutions and processes, and research methods. A

more recent review (see [Roberge & Oduro, 2022](#)) of 31 master's programs in public administration across Canada reported five programs offering courses on equity, diversity and inclusion, three offering courses on anti-Black racism, and 11 offering elective courses on decolonization and Indigenous affairs, with the majority of programs maintaining their focus on economics, research methods and public policy course offerings. While the range of curricular topics has grown over the past 15 years, with some current offerings directly related to social equity concerns, we note the limited range of offerings that fall broadly under the social equity domain (e.g., environmental/climate, globalization, race, gender, colonization, migration/immigration, class, etc.). Today's climate crisis, to take one prominent example, demands that we critically *rethink* the role of government in civil society and that we *reframe* public challenges in a way that is more responsive to current social, political, economic and cultural realities, what [Bourgon \(2017\)](#) describes as a “profound” (p. 19) rethinking.

The historical antecedents of social equity and the related concern for democracy in public administration go as far back as 1947, when Frances Harriet Williams, an advisor on race relations in the federal Office of Price Administration and a champion of racial equity throughout her life, wrote an article entitled “Minority Groups and OPA,” in which she identified concerns about equity and minority rights in the policies and practices of government, questioning to what extent programs were being fairly administered (see [Gooden, 2017](#) for a more complete historical account). It would be more than twenty years before questions about race and gender would be taken up again in public administration ([Candler et al., 2009](#)).

Social equity was introduced in American public administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the height of the social protest movement sweeping across the country. Considered one of the normative touchstones for public administration scholars, it addressed the fair, just and equitable management, distribution and implementation of all systems, structures and policies serving the public ([Cooper, 2004](#); [Woolridge & Gooden, 2009](#)). The commitment is explicitly to fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy and program delivery. According to [Frederickson \(2010\)](#), the term *social equity* was used to address the concept of equality and inequality, standing in as a marker for race and color and compounded by issues of gender and poverty. As [Frederickson \(2010\)](#) notes, “What began as a comparatively simple argument about problems of fairness and justice in public policy and administration evolved into a more sophisticated consideration of the density and complexity of the subject” (p. 133). This complexity becomes evident in the first Minnowbrook conference convened by Dwight Waldo in 1968, designed expressly to consider the role of public administration in the social unrest of the 1960s, with issues of fairness, justice and equality taking center stage. There have now been three Minnowbrook

conferences over the past 50 years, and while the demographic of the conference attendees has changed over time, topics have consistently included social equity, ethics, and democratic governance.

The concept of social equity represents one of the three pillars of public administration (alongside efficiency and economy) and has become part of the lexicon in public administration theory and practice since the first Minnowbrook conference, where many of the “legitimizing myths” (Miller & Fox, 2015) of the field that still persist today were initially taken up critically. Social equity considers fairness, justice and equality in the design, management, implementation and distribution of public services, questioning not only *how* but *also for whom* policies, services and programs are designed and delivered (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). As Frederickson (2010) explains:

In the pursuit of efficiency, public officials will strive to make the entire organization and its delivery of public services efficient or economical, assuming that all of the public served by the organization will benefit, more or less in equal measure, from greater efficiency or economy. It is clearly evident that the public is highly varied—rich and poor, old and young, fortunate and unfortunate, urban and suburban—and that while public services may, in a general sense, be more efficient or economical, in the specific sense, these public services will almost certainly be efficient and economical for some more than for others. (p. xv)

Social equity, as Frederickson makes clear, requires an intersectional lens to appreciate the complexity of social identity and the connections to systems that perpetuate inequality and disadvantage in our society. In asking the question *for whom* are these services, programs or policies fair, just and right, social equity thus broadens the focus to include structural and systemic issues that perpetuate inequality in public administration. Today, the concept of social equity also includes global interconnections, dependencies and vulnerabilities such as climate change, migrations, COVID-19 that help to broaden our understanding of equity beyond the boundaries of organizations and nation states. We also see influences on social equity from global actors such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, and other international agencies.

THEORETICAL FRAMES THAT INFORM SOCIAL EQUITY

In what follows, we provide the theoretical perspective that has informed our thinking about social equity in public administration, and that has guided our reading and understanding of the relevant literature. We begin with a brief discussion of justice as defined by Nancy Fraser. She identifies what we take to be three crucial ways of thinking about equity, namely, the economic,