JPS
Journal of Policy Studies

Park, S. (2022). The Construction of Social Inequity and the Role of Public Bureaucracies. *Journal of Policy Studies*, *4*(37), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.52372/jps37401

Articles

The Construction of Social Inequity and the Role of Public Bureaucracies

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Keywords: social equity, public bureaucracy, bureaucratic roles, social construction, policy areas

https://doi.org/10.52372/jps37401

Vol. 4, Issue 37, 2022

This essay explores the notion of social equity as a public value underpinning public administration and public policy. Despite being regarded as one of the pillars of public administration, social equity is loosely defined and conceptualized in various ways and challenged by measurement issues. The concept of social equity is evolving and being constantly constructed; therefore, not all equity issues are given the same degree of attention and support by the general public and policymakers in political institutions and governments. This article is an effort to reflect on equity considerations as social constructs and highlight the equity-enhancing role of public bureaucrats at different ranks within the bureaucratic hierarchy.

This study first identifies and defines social equity practices and explores prominent inequities in six areas: education, housing, welfare, environment, policing, and immigration. Social equity is conceptualized as diminishing discrimination, providing the minimum safety net, increasing access for minorities, closing and leveling gaps or disparities, and improving the social justice system. The conceptual diversity and measurement issues lead to diverging perceptions of the problems and solutions, oversimplifying social issues, and setting a deceptive or hostile environment toward marginalized social groups.

Second, this essay explores the roles and capacities of public bureaucrats at different ranks within the bureaucratic hierarchy. Although both bureaucrats and politicians are embedded in the current institutional arrangements and policy environments, bureaucrats in the administrative arena could effectively address inequities among social groups compared to elected officials. Marginalized groups are often negatively constructed and not organized enough to voice their concerns to their political representatives. This study reveals bureaucrats' significant potential to progress social equity in diverse areas by redefining identity groups with finer social constructions, changing perceptions of deservingness, and reducing administrative burden.

Introduction

Since Frederickson (1974) advocated social equity as the third pillar of public administration, attention to inequity and discriminatory outcomes within and among groups continues to grow in different contexts. The National Academy of Public Administration defined social equity as "the fair, just, and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract, and the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy." (Guy & McCandless, 2012, 2020, p. 2). The concept of equity has "evolved from a philosophical (social contract) to a structural (constitutional) to an administrative (social equity) concern" (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 56) and is still evolving and being constantly constructed. Despite the ongoing, critical dialogue in the Minnowbrook tradition, it needs clarification and empirical exploration in the scholarship (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Gooden, 2015; Gooden & Portillo, 2011; Guy & McCandless, 2012, 2020). In particular, it is unclear what constitutes social equity in various policy areas and whether and how individual bureaucrats promote equity in terms of accessibility, treatment, service quality, and policy outcomes within their complicated relationship with political leaders and policy elites.

This study explores social equity as a public value underpinning public administration in different policy areas and highlights the role of public bureaucrats in designing and implementing policies. Public administration is uniquely positioned to promote social equity in policy processes

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(Frederickson, 1974), but its position is also settled under politics and political environments. Political scientists and public administration scholars acknowledge that bureaucratic neutrality is mostly a myth, as is the politics-administration dichotomy (e.g., Meier & O'Toole, 2006). Politics and administration are interdependent in the policy processes within which bureaucrats play a distinctive role in shaping public policy (Epp et al., 2014, 2017; Marrow, 2009; Meier, 2020; Meier et al., 2019; Meier & O'Toole, 2006). However, what bureaucrats would/should/could do to advance equity under the influence of politics needs more theorizing. Political environments are not always favorable but often hostile, distrustful, and conflicting. Elected leaders are often short-sighted, and allocating benefits to marginalized groups is not always their priority in policy design (Meier et al., 2019), especially when the target populations are less powerful and not positively constructed (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Bureaucrats and elected officials may be conflicting or colluding with each other depending on specific policy issues. However, to a varying extent, bureaucrats can play a far-reaching and proactive role in policy design and implementation to reduce marginalization, segregation, and stigmatization.

Nevertheless, it involves disparate and distinct efforts to improve social equity depending on various dimensions, having different implications for different social/identity groups by gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, disability, and social class. Public administration scholarship has proposed four dimensions of social equity – procedural, access, quality, and outcomes (Gooden, 2015; Guy & McCandless, 2012, 2020). Procedural equity and equitable access to public services/benefits have been examined with frequency measures such as the number of services and beneficiaries, and the percentage of applications and approvals, especially in terms of administrative burden creating a negative impact on service quality and democratic outcomes (Heinrich, 2016, 2018; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Moynihan et al., 2022). On the other hand, equity in outputs and outcomes are usually examined with the percentage or percentage change in service quantity and quality, test scores, poverty reduction, and the like.

This study seeks to reflect equity considerations as social constructs that influence marginalized groups differently. The first step is to identify and define target populations in various policy areas facing distinctive challenges in policy design and implementation – education, housing, social welfare, environment, policing, and immigration – and review equity dimensions and measurement strategies. The conceptual diversity and measurement issues could lead to diverging perceptions of the problems and solutions, oversimplifying social issues, and setting a deceptive or hostile environment against marginalized social groups. As defined by various social discrimination and exclusion mechanisms, marginalized groups are often negatively constructed and not organized enough to voice their concerns to their political representatives. Some inequities remain unattended intentionally and unintentionally as deservingness is socially constructed, and political officials consider social construction "part of the reelection calculus" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 335).

Second, this study explores the roles and capacities of public bureaucrats at different ranks with significant potential to progress social equity in terms of theory and practice. It indicates that bureaucrats in the administrative arena could effectively address inequities among social groups compared to elected officials in political environments characterized by political polarization and limited democratic leadership. This study focuses on the two research streams of public administration closely tied to social equity: representative bureaucracy and administrative burden. The representative bureaucracy literature promotes a social equity lens in public administration by redressing inequities within government and enhancing responsiveness and equity in policy outputs or outcomes. The emerging scholarship of administrative burden tackles inequities in procedures and access throughout the policy processes.

In the following section, social equity is conceptualized as diminishing discrimination, providing the minimum safety net, increasing access for minorities, closing and leveling gaps or disparities, and tackling institutionalized social systems. The third section discusses how social equity for different groups has been identified and measured in various policy areas. In the fourth section, I highlight the role of public bureaucrats at different ranks in defining and agendizing social disparity and using equity-conscious policy tools over the public policy processes. The last section concludes with final thoughts and avenues for research.

Conceptualizing Social Equity

The concept of social equity encompasses efforts and commitments from political and administrative institutions at all levels and contract agencies, nonprofits, and quasi-government organizations in designing and implementing public policies. Social equity is defined in various ways ranging "from simple fairness and equal treatment to redistribution and the reduction of inequities," without differentiation from several related but distinct concepts, such as equality, justice, diversity, representative bureaucracy, and cultural competency (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021, p. 1020). In the representative bureaucracy and diversity management literature, social equity primarily concerns the fair and equal distribution of government jobs and positions across minorities regarding gender and race/ethnicity. Institutional efforts such as affirmative action and quota-based hiring have been discussed to increase representation and neutralize discrepancies in employment since the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Gooden & Portillo, 2011; Park, 2022).

However, whether and how a specific group receives attention as a target population in policy design and implementation depends on how they are socially constructed in different policy areas (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The four types of target populations are the advantaged, contenders, dependents, and deviants, by the convergence of power and social constructions. The salient groups for improving social equity are dependents for whom society car-

ries the burden and costs for services. In most cases, they are beneficiaries of social welfare programs such as children, mothers, disabled, and indigenous Americans. In this category, target populations are provided with benefits and services along with sanctions or conditions in case they are incapable or irrational in their decisions. Sensitive to public support for (or opposition to) target populations, political representatives are often uninterested in (or hostile to) expanding this group, especially from the deviant category, such as illegal immigrants, drug addicts, and gender minorities. Politically weak and negatively constructed, deviants are often left out of important political debates while often stigmatized and penalized for politicians' electoral gains. While protests or riots are often the only way for deviants to make their voices heard, elected officials usually take a stronger line on breaking the rule of law and often manipulate or use the negative social constructions against deviants for their political advantage.

Furthermore, social constructions are political and subject to contention when it comes to specific groups. As the degree of consensus varies across policy issues and types, it is necessary to consider multiple constructions of target groups (Kreitzer & Smith, 2018). For various reasons, some previously negatively constructed groups, such as illegal immigrants and their children, gender minorities, AIDS patients, and marijuana users, are more positively or neutrally perceived. Although undocumented or illegal immigrants have been regarded as deviants for a long time, unaccompanied migrant children who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border are increasingly viewed as vulnerable populations deserving attention (Edlins & Larrison, 2018), and naturalized citizens and permanent residents are positively constructed as highly skilled labor (Medina, 2020). In addition, drug users are differently perceived depending on which drugs (e.g., marijuana) are used by whom (e.g., patients). During the past decades, gender minorities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender, Queer) are quickly moving from deviants to dependents while politically divisive. However, American Indians and other Native groups have been sidelined in the major debate on environmental justice, although they are particularly vulnerable to environmental harm (Kagan, 2020).

On the other hand, as being more organized and powerful, women are increasingly regarded as the advantaged or contenders with negative construction (e.g., anti-feminism). Despite the prevalent gender disparities, an effort to increase women in elected and executive institutions to promote women's interests is likely to face resistance when the elites push back, and the public does not see women as dependents (e.g., backlash). In fact, electoral gender quotas have been "controversial but trendy," regardless of their effectiveness in increasing women parliamentarians (Dahlerup, 2008; Park, 2022). As White women are on the borderline between dependents and contenders (Kreitzer & Smith, 2018), focusing on a specific group of women, such as sexual assault victims, would be more compelling to make the police workforce representative (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006).

Social Equity for Different Groups across Policies

This section discusses how and what dimensions of social equity have been addressed for various target populations in designing and implementing policies in six areas: education, housing, welfare, environment, policing, and immigration. Those areas of focus fulfill distributive, redistributive, and regulatory functions that have significant implications for improving equity at the individual and group levels. This section seeks to reveal the distinctive conceptualization and measurement across the areas and identify the gaps that need further attention in social equity research and practice.

Education

Educational disparities have been a critical policy agenda related to income inequity, unequal opportunity, and social security. These disparities particularly impact racial minorities, first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students, women in STEM, women of color, and those who need physical and mental care. Equity in education policies and practices concern not only underrepresented students and teachers but also their interactions. In the representative bureaucracy scholarship, one of the key questions is whether having more minority teachers helps minority students to perform. Increased representation of Black and Latinos within school district leadership levels, such as principals, teachers, and school boards, is associated with positive outcomes for Black and Latino students (Meier, 1993; Meier & Stewart, 1992). Better educational *outcomes* were observed for girls with more female teachers (e.g., higher pass rates on exams and math scores) (Keiser et al., 2002; Xu & Meier, 2021) and for Black students when interacting with Black teachers (e.g., referred to gifted services) (S. Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016). Concerning equity in mitigating discrimination, Rocha & Hawes (2009) found that increased minority representation among teaching faculty reduces second-generation discrimination against minority students, contingent on socioeconomic status. Yet, Haider-Markel et al. (2022) suggested that the beneficial effect of minority representation may vary by teachers' role as educators or regulators.

Focusing on distributive outcomes of representation, Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2011) explicitly address whether benefits for minority clients come at the expense of clients from other groups in the assignment to Gifted and Talented Programs in U.S. elementary schools. In this study, equity was defined by the population proportionality standard, assuming that "the equity condition has been reached when the proportion of students in the G&T program from a group is the same as the proportion of total students from that group within a given school" (p. 588). The study found the equity-moderated distributional patterns increasing in Black and Hispanic teachers are associated with the increase in Black and Hispanic students' G&T placement thereby, costs occurred to White students, but only when the groups are underrepresented in the G&T placement. On the other hand, using survey data on students' attitudes toward the fairness of school discipline, Keiser et al. (2021)

Table 1. Social Constructions and political power

		Construction	
		Positive	Negative
Power	Strong	**Advantaged** Policy tools: Capacity building, inducement, self-regulation Distributive policies Groups: The elderly*, businesses*, veterans*, scientists*, White men†, police†, military†, women, mothers, permanent residents, naturalized citizens Legitimation rationale: efficiency as a means for instrumental goals, common-pool resource problem solving, sacrificing for the public good	**Contenders** Policy tools: Grant (hidden) benefit, progressive taxation Competitive regulatory policies Groups: The rich*, big unions*, cultural elites*, minorities*, moral majorities*, industries†, banks†, CEOs†, media†, women in power, feminists, minorities in power, advocacy groups, private firms Legitimation rationale: justice-oriented
	Weak	**Dependents** Policy tools: Eligibility requirement, labeling and stigmatizing, symbolic, hortatory, paternalistic, the use of authority Groups: Children*, mothers*, disabled*, farmers†, college students†, dreamers†, transgender†, homeless†, disabled†, women in a low-paid job, sexual assault victims, single moms, teen moms, LGBTQ, FGLI students, pre-existing conditions, low-income, the elderly, indigenous Americans, racial minorities, migrant children Legitimation rationale: justice-oriented, means-testing	**Deviants** Policy tools: Coercive measures, strict law enforcement, sanctions, the use of force, beneficial policies (e.g., rehabilitation programs) in order to change individuals, not the system or problem itself Groups: Criminals*, drug addicts*, communists*, flag burners*, gangs*, teaparty†, hackers†, terrorists†, illegal aliens†, prisoners†, sex offenders†, LGBTQ, marijuana users Legitimation rationale: punishment, instrumental to reduce crimes, protect constitutional rights for everyone

* based on Schneider and Ingram (1993, p. 336); † based on Kreitzer and Smith (2018, p. 771)

report that increasing minority representation is not zero-sum, nor does it trigger tradeoffs among different minorities, but improves legitimacy through symbolic representation. This study targeted equity in faculty representation measured by the mean Euclidean distance between the student and teacher composition and diversity of the institution measured by the Blau index of diversity.

Recent studies reveal the intersectionality and heterogeneity among groups and their impact on educational outcomes. For example, Fay et al. (2020) measured inequities in graduation rates among minority undergraduate students at the intersection of race/ethnicity and sex in U.S. higher education. Capers and Smith (2021) shed light on group heterogeneity among racial groups and its impact on student performance crossing ethnic lines. Despite the mature dialogue of educational equity, it centers on gender, race, and ethnicity but largely ignores prominent gaps in FGLI students, immigrant students, and students with physical, mental, cultural, and language barriers.

Housing

Since the Fair Housing Act of 1968, racial discrimination in housing and homeownership has been prohibited in the U.S. Housing inequity, segregation, and marginalization has been understood as an outcome of economic markets (labor and housing) and state institutional contexts such as public policies and ideological factors (Arundel, 2017). Poor minorities were intentionally confined, alienated, and segregated, which is attributed to racism, urban redevelopment, economics, and local governments' and the private sector's priority to generate revenues (Alkadry & Blessett, 2010). As a clear sign of social inequity, racial disparities in housing resource allocations related to mortgage, eligibility, affordability, and wealth.

However, public administration has been less attentive to inequities in housing, renting, and zoning while intertwined with crime, health, and social mobility. Alkadry and Blessett (2010) is one of the few studies focusing on ghetto communities and neighborhoods related to the stigma that immigrants and minorities experience and deprived opportunities for better housing, security, and social movement. Deslatte et al. (2017) highlighted public managers' equity-promoting role by adopting inclusive zoning, land use tools, and affordable housing for low-income residents in local governments. The link between the share of minorities (African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans) in district offices of the Farmer's Home Administration (FmHA) and resources allocated to those groups (i.e., FmHA eligibility decisions) was found as evidence of the active representation (Selden, 1997; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

Within broader policy studies, social equity in housing has been measured in various dimensions: homeownership and housing wealth (Flippen, 2001), net housing equity (Arundel, 2017), FmHA eligibility decisions (Sowa & Selden, 2003), affordable housing for low-income households (Aurand, 2013; Deslatte et al., 2017), and housing discrimination complaints based on race, disability, family status, sex, national origin, color, and religion (C. M. Lamb & Wilk, 2010). As housing is the largest financial asset, Arundel (2017) focused on housing wealth polarization and generational inequality, while Grohs et al. (2016) examined non-discrimination in government responses to citizen requests. Using the survey-based field experiment, Grohs et al. (2016) found limited evidence of ethnic discrimination

by public authorities in response to citizens' mobile home requests.

Another line of studies demonstrates unequal access to services or benefits, leading to inequitable health outcomes and life expectancy. Beyer et al. (2019) measured inequality by the association between MSA-level cancer disparities, mortgage discrimination, and MSA racial segregation. In this study, housing inequity was measured with mortgage discrimination calculated by the odds of denial of a mortgage application for Black applicants compared with White applicants in the MSA. The Black-to-White cancer mortality disparities increase in areas with greater mortgage discrimination. Furthermore, studies show that inequities may not be mended by policy efforts such as affordable housing targeting low-income households (Aurand, 2013).

Social Welfare

Social welfare policies are primarily defined by redistributive politics that shift resources from haves to have-nots. Due to significant levels of administrative discretion and the gendered and racialized nature of welfare policies, disparity and disproportionality can occur in both services and sanctions. In the representative bureaucracy scholarship, social equity outcomes are often measured with increased service quality and benefits for women and minorities (Amirkhanyan et al., 2018; Wilkins & Keiser, 2006), increased expenditure on social services (Park, 2013), and decreased disproportionate punishment and sanctions against minorities (Pedersen et al., 2018). Moreover, inequities in social services accessed and received differently by demographic and socioeconomic groups come to the fore in administrative burden research. Administrative burden is a deliberate policy instrument but can be particularly onerous to certain groups, such as women, children, minorities, low-income families, immigrants, and Latino farmworkers. In means-tested welfare programs, eligible beneficiaries' take-up rates or participation rates have been much lower (Herd et al., 2013; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Moynihan et al., 2016). The reduced benefits for eligible clients are direct measures of administrative burden and social inequity.

Administrative burdens occur in the different loci of bureaucratic encounters (i.e., intra- or extra-organizational transactions) and their initiation by the person inside or outside, which could vary geographically and politically due to intentionally allowed discretion at the lower level of government (Heinrich, 2016). The degree of administrative burden and its impact on the application, verification, and enrollment has been examined in various contexts, such as South Africa (Heinrich, 2016 for Child Support Grant program), Pakistan (Nisar, 2018 for ID rules on genderqueer individuals), and the U.S. (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010 for TANF; Herd et al., 2013; Moynihan et al., 2016 for Medicaid; Herd, 2015 for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program). Focusing on low-income households, Moynihan et al. (2016, p. 508) examined Medicaid generosity measured with "the maximum eligibility threshold to access a Medicaid benefit plan that meets federal guidelines—as a percentage of the federal poverty line." Herd et al. (2013) evaluated the effectiveness of shifting the administrative burden of verification to the state, i.e., BadgerCare Plus, by comparing enrollment rates by clients below poverty before and after the program. Thus, the effect of reduced administrative burden was measured with an increased new enrollment of the eligible.

In this area, studies extend the attention to marginalized groups beyond women and racial/ethnic minorities such as children, the elderly, and gender minorities. In the context of the Child Support Grant program in South Africa, Heinrich (2016) examined the loss of monthly benefits by comparing actual and intended child support grant doses and evaluated the program effectiveness with adolescent educational attainment and engagement in risky behaviors. In addition, Herd (2015) found that burdens fall disproportionately on older adults among those eligible for food stamps or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). Nisar (2018) examined the administrative burden in citizen-state interactions when a genderqueer individual gets a legal ID.

Environment

The disproportionate impact of environmental policies on socially vulnerable populations has become an important dialogue for environmental justice (EJ). Since Elinor Ostrom's institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework, equity has become one of the evaluative criteria for governing water as a common-pool resource. However, equity concerns have not always been at the center of the environmental policy debate. While the debate has been focused on racial and ethnic minorities and the poor, the existence and extent of environmental inequities remain loosely defined and examined (Liang, 2016; Ringquist, 2005). Environmental hazards and toxic wastes disproportionately affect poor and minority communities, Native Americans (Bowen et al., 1995; Kagan, 2020), and religious minorities, such as Jews and Muslims (Al-Kohlani & Campbell, 2022). Environmental inequalities are measured with diverse indicators such as disparities in administrative outputs (e.g., compliance inspections and punitive actions) (Liang, 2016, 2018; Liang et al., 2020) and environmental outcomes such as hazards (Bowen et al., 1995), pollution (Eckerd, 2013; Graham et al., 1999; Ringquist, 2011), and water allowance (Wikstrom et al., 2019).

Wikstrom et al. (2019) explored the disproportionate effect of water cutbacks on water allowances and consumption by racial and ethnic minorities in California facing severe drought. This study argues that environmental injustice outcomes are due to the institutional design rather than explicit discrimination. Examining the effect of mandates with agent-based modeling, Eckerd (2013) measured gaps in environmental quality between majorities and poor and/or minority populations. Linking EJ with representative bureaucracy literature, Liang et al. (2020) found that a more racially representative workforce in the state EPA agencies promotes their enforcement actions in socially vulnerable communities, supporting distributive equity in environmental policy implementation. In this study, the social vulnerability was measured in terms of race/ethnicity and so-

cioeconomic status by the difference in the percentage of minority or low-income populations between the block group and the United States. In addition to outcomes, inequities in the choice of policy instruments were found when implementing water conservation policies (Krause et al., 2019). Using survey and archival data, Krause et al. (2019) demonstrated that cities are more likely to employ regulations and less likely to use incentives in communities with higher racial minority composition.

However, not all studies found evidence of inequitable implementation processes and outcomes based on race and income. Examining the effect of the Clean Air Act (CAA), Ringquist (2011) found no evidence of trading equity for efficiency in the environmental policy area. A meta-analysis of 49 studies indicates race-based environmental inequities but little evidence of class-based inequities (Ringquist, 2005). On the contrary, Konisky (2009) presents that state enforcement behavior is associated with class but not with race. Graham et al. (1999) report that riskier facilities tend to operate in communities with above-median proportions of non-White and Hispanic residents, and existing inequities are primarily economic rather than racial bias. Environmental policies within the EJ framework are an active, promising research area, but there has not been enough attention given to these issues in public administration research.

Policing

Policing is one of the richly debated topics in public administration involving citizen-government interactions and street-level bureaucracy. In the U.S., policing equity addresses the unequal treatment of racial minorities (especially African-American males). Social equity is an essential aspect of police performance, including citizen perceptions of police regarding fairness, adequacy, and timeliness of police action, such as case files for prosecution (Charbonneau & Riccucci, 2008). Like social vulnerability in other policy areas, policing inequity is tightly coupled with individuals' and groups' demographic identity and socioeconomic status (SES). In the police officer-civilian relationship, the use of a police force, such as investigatory stops, is determined by racial biases and social class visible to police officers through drivers' vehicles (Epp et al., 2014). DUI conviction rates were higher for Latino/Hispanic men (Kagawa et al., 2021), and the incidence of trespass stops and arrests is more than two times higher in public housing where Black people and Hispanics are populated (Fagan et al., 2012). There is ample evidence that citizens/civilians' social class indicated by vehicles, housing, and the neighborhood does matter in judgments made by police officers.

Representative bureaucracy scholars have explored the impact of police representation on the use of force on minorities and claim that increasing representativeness of the police workforce would serve as an effective internal control mechanism to promote integrity and improve efficiency and equity (Hong, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Meier & O'Toole, 2006; Riccucci et al., 2018). For example, increasing police representativeness was associated with decreased stop and search against Blacks (Hong, 2016), decreased racial profiling against ethnic minorities (Hong, 2017b), arrests by police (Headley & Wright, 2020), police killings among Black and Hispanic victims (Gaston et al., 2021), and citizen complaints (Lee & Nicholson-Crotty, 2021). The symbolic effect of Black police officers' representation on police misconduct and stop-and-frisk practices has been explored in various settings (e.g., Hong, 2016, 2017a; Riccucci et al., 2018).

However, evidence suggests that socialization processes could better explain minority officers' behavior (e.g., Wilkins & Williams, 2008), and police officers may not disproportionately target minority suspects (Menifield et al., 2019). In an experiment on police shooting decisions, James et al. (2016) found the "reverse racism effect" whereby police officers are slower to shoot armed Black suspects and less likely to shoot unarmed Black suspects compared to White suspects. Further, the evidence of symbolic representation from individual-level data appears not as solid as expected (Headley et al., 2021; Lee & Nicholson-Crotty, 2021), implying that increasing minority representation itself may not be enough to improve policing equity. Currently, studies on inequitable and discriminatory policing practices focus on African Americans, leaving other racial/ethnic groups unattended, such as Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and other intersectional minorities.

Immigration

Social inequity in immigrant policy implementation involves unequal access to legal immigration status and citizenship, targeted burden, and costs unequally distributed along racial/ethnic lines. Applying the social equity lens to this area is more complicated due to various classifications of immigrants (e.g., permanent resident aliens, naturalized citizens, refugees, and undocumented immigrants) and various barriers engendering inequities (e.g., legal, linguistic, administrative, and cultural barriers) (Medina, 2020). Social inequity in immigration and immigrant policy implementation can be manifested with various indicators, such as immigration background checks (Chand, 2019), asylum granted (Chand et al., 2017), deportation enforcement (Calderon, 2020), employment discrimination (Villadsen & Wulff, 2018), access to economic and health resources (Cadenas et al., 2022), and administrative burden (Heinrich, 2018; Moynihan, 2019; Ray et al., 2022).

By focusing on the impact of administrative burden within immigration policy, i.e., identification requirements, Heinrich (2018) examined the short-term and long-term consequences on immigrant families and U.S.-citizen children by comparing the rates of birth certificates issued and those denied. The potential long-term negative impact includes permanent marginalization of those U.S.-born children of immigrants. Racialized administrative burden in the U.S. immigration processes was explored where Whiteness is regarded as a credential (Ray et al., 2022). Non-White immigrants from Central America and Africa are less likely to overcome public charge requirements than White immigrants from Europe and Canada (Moynihan, 2019). The inequities and discrimination further lead to negative health outcomes for immigrants. Cadenas et al. (2022) examine discrimination against Latinx immigrants and its negative

health outcome during the COVID-19 pandemic due to reduced access to economic and health resources. Latinx immigrants in the survey held five legal statuses, i.e., U.S. citizenship, permanent residency, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, undocumented, and temporary status, which moderated the link between discrimination and health outcomes.

Immigration and immigrant policies profoundly impact social equity in the long term via social welfare, education, health, income, and housing. Thus, colorblind immigration and immigrant policies could aggravate existing inequities by implicitly discriminating against minorities, low-income immigrants, and non-English speakers. A randomized controlled study performed by Hainmueller et al. (2018) highlights financial barriers for low-income immigrants and argues for offering fee vouchers to reduce the gap in naturalization rates. Examining the role of nonprofit organizations, Calderon (2020) found that philanthropic funding for integration services influences local immigration policy outputs that lead to more protection for deportable immigrants.

Public Bureaucracies as Equity Advocates

This section discusses the roles of public bureaucrats at different ranks within the organizational hierarchy of government agencies. Public bureaucracies gain prominence in addressing persistent inequalities due to the failure of politics and the internationalization of minority rights (Meier, 2020; Meier et al., 2019). Connecting with the discussion of social equity in different policy areas, I discuss the roles of top-level bureaucrats designing policies with different equity considerations, mid-level bureaucrats being involved in policy design and implementation, and street-level/frontline workers implementing policies and programs. Table 2 offers this study's analytic frame for linking target populations, equity dimensions, and bureaucratic roles by their ranks and policy areas.

Top-level Bureaucrats

Close to political authorities and directly involved in policy design and decision-making, top-level bureaucrats are well-positioned to contribute to the equal and equitable distribution of government resources and services. Regardless of politics and political environments, those upper-echelon executives, along with for-profit CEOs and third-party stakeholders, could significantly affect policy designs by negotiating and depolarizing administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2019), revealing the "hidden politics" against marginalized groups (Nisar, 2018, p. 104), and changing eligibility requirements, such as the FHA loan programs requiring economic soundness.

Second, top-level bureaucrats can improve equity by intentionally recruiting women and minorities. Governments are scrutinized in terms of whether and the extent to which they provide equal opportunity and address inequality over the policy process and service delivery. The passive or descriptive representation in leadership positions matters in itself, and it is socially inequitable that women and people of color are underrepresented in leadership positions and segregated in gendered and racialized agencies (Gooden, 2015; Riccucci, 2009). There is evidence that the presence of women and minorities at higher ranks, such as supervisors and state government officeholders, leads to active and symbolic representation (Keiser & Miller, 2020; Meier & O'Toole, 2006; Meier & Stewart, 1992; Wilkins & Keiser, 2006).

Third, bureaucrats in a leadership position can also enhance equity by providing enough resources for frontline operation and implementation. Frontline workers without adequate resources, i.e., time, budget, staffing, and legal authorities, may be more likely to discriminate as a coping strategy (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Epp et al., 2014, 2017). In the case study of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program in Chicago, Brodkin (1997) demonstrated that frontline caseworkers are less accountable to welfare contracts when faced with limited resources and ambiguous guidelines, which results in inequities in service outputs and outcomes. Top executives could streamline administrative processes to dwell on equity-oriented performance rather than efficiency, as NPM-style reforms have increased discriminatory behavior by street-level bureaucrats (Soss et al., 2011).

Fourth, top public officials have the greatest leverage in policy change, although their positions are affected by administrative culture and dominant values held by the general population (Fernández-Gutiérrez & Van de Walle, 2018). Indeed, senior civil servants' social identification affects their motivation for policy change, depending on policy agendas in conflict (or accordance) with organizational or professional missions (Gilad & Alon-Barkat, 2018). Bakir and Jarvis (2017) argued that entrepreneurship in the public sector could lead to policy and institutional change over the policy processes.

Mid-level Bureaucrats

Middle managers' roles and capacity are essential as they interpret multiple mandates from top decision-makers and turn them into actionable goals pursued by lower-level bureaucrats. First, mid-level managers facilitate equity by outlining basic principles, policies, executive orders, and legislation, such as urban renewal and rehabilitation (Alkadry & Blessett, 2010) and performance measurement (Miller et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2018). In particular, public managers in council-manager forms of government "oversee strategic planning, manage municipal operations, and play an outsized role in interactions with council managers on policy making" (Deslatte et al., 2017, p. 416).

Second, mid-level managers could improve intra-organizational equity and minority representation by equalizing human resource management practices. They could also promote interagency collaboration to offer more equitable and diversified services in areas such as early care and education (Selden et al., 2006). Marrow (2009) highlights a process of bureaucratic incorporation of Hispanic immigrants where bureaucrats play a service role with their internal professional missions. As government agencies prioritize tasks corresponding to their organizational mission

Table 2. Social equity, target populations, and bureaucratic roles by policy areas

	Target populations	Equity dimensions	Role of bureaucrats
Education	Target populations: Student: racial/ethnic minorities, first-generation and low-income (FGLI), women for STEM, intersectional minorities; Teacher/faculty: racial/ethnic minorities and/or women Attention needed: immigrant students, students with physical, mental, cultural, and language barriers	Process/Access: reducing discrimination, increasing legitimacy, increasing teacher/faculty representation, Outputs/Outcomes: educational performance in exams, graduation rates, college admission, scholarship selection, G&T placement	Top-level: changing benefit categories to reduce negative constructions as dependents, revealing injustice and inequities Mid-level: revealing gaps and disparities beyond gender and race/ethnicity, providing specified goals for equity and enough resources Street-level: moderating any negative social constructions, increasing interactions and communications
Housing	Target populations: Racial/ethnic minorities, low-income residents Attention needed: college students, immigrants, and women susceptible to intimate partner violence, temporary homelessness, landlords' eviction filing	Process/Access: discrimination against minorities, low-income, and immigrants in eligibility decisions, mortgage denial, responses to complaints and requests Outputs/Outcomes: housing segregation, marginalization, wealth polarization, generational inequity, health outcomes, life expectancy	Top-level: changing social construction against homelessness, avoiding penalizing marginalized population Mid-level: reducing administrative burden, distributing resources to mitigate the disparities in policy implementation Street-level: increasing communications and mitigating the negative impact of administrative burdens
Welfare	Target populations: Racial/ethnic minorities, low-income families, children, the elderly Attention needed: gender minorities (LGBTQ), immigrants, people with disabilities, limited language proficiency	Process/Access: administrative burden disproportionately imposed upon the target population in the application, verification, and enrollment Outputs/Outcomes: service quality and benefits, increased expenditure, decreased discrimination in punishment and sanctions	Top-level: distributing enough resources to social/welfare services, revealing injustice and inequities Mid-level: reducing administrative burden, changing categories, addressing the matching problems Street-level: reducing biases and stereotypes against target populations, increasing communications, mitigating the negative impact of administrative burdens
Environment	Target populations: Racial minorities, low-income residents Attention needed: Native Americans, ethnic minorities (e.g., Latino farmworkers), religious minorities	Process/Access: reducing discrimination in environmental regulation Outputs/Outcomes: inequities in the choice of policy instruments, compliance inspections, punitive actions, environmental hazards, pollution, water allowance/consumption	Top-level: recognizing the tradeoffs between regulatory effectiveness and social equity, designing equity-conscious environmental policies Mid-level: designing performance management systems within the environmental justice framework, redefining policy priorities Street-level: enforcing regulations to protect socially vulnerable populations and reduce disparities among groups
Policing	Target populations: Racial minorities (mostly African Americans), low-income people Attention needed: Hispanic, Asian, Native Americans, and other intersectional minorities	Process/access: reducing discrimination in law enforcement Outputs/Outcomes: inequities in the use of force, such as stop-and-search, racial profiling, DUI conviction, arrest, police killing, minority/women representation in the police workforce	Top-level: improving police representativeness Mid-level: designing and outlining the goal of social equity in policing, including equity indicators in performance evaluations, providing enough resources, limiting discretions in enforcement decisions Street-level: minimizing biases and stereotypes in implementation

	Target populations	Equity dimensions	Role of bureaucrats
Immigration	Target populations: Minorities, low-income immigrants, non-English speakers Attention needed: immigrants from Central America, refugees, immigrants with different cultural and religious backgrounds	Process/access: reducing administrative burden in access to legal immigration status and citizenship, economic and health resources Outputs/outcomes: education, employment, health outcomes, deportation, background checks	Top-level: changing social constructions, designing non-discriminatory immigrant policies, streamlining administrative processes over various agencies Mid-level: redefining identity groups with finer social constructions, formulating SOP, increasing transparency in performance evaluation Street-level: equity-oriented policy implementation, professional accountability, increasing targeted interactions and communications

or policy goals, they can increase social equity by establishing performance evaluation schemes that include equity-conscious measures (Miller et al., 2008), initiating an information campaign for street-level bureaucrats and formulating standard operating procedures (Bell, 2021), engaging targeted communication to stakeholder groups (Walker et al., 2018), and targeted intervention for minority communities (Eckerd, 2013).

Third, mid-level managers provide clear guidelines and mandate specified goals related to social equity, which lessens biases and prejudices in critical decisions made by frontline workers (Heinrich, 2018). For example, Kagawa et al. (2021) suggest that limiting discretion at each level of the criminal justice system could minimize individual and structural biases involved in their enforcement decisions. Similarly, limiting ambiguities through the equity allowance formula and automatic referrals help reduce bias in the teacher nomination processes and mitigate inequitable enrollment in gifted and talented programs (K. N. Lamb et al., 2019).

Fourth, a recent study by Moynihan et al. (2022) demonstrated the constructed nature of state categorization and the matching-to-categories problem in the social safety net. This study highlights the significant role of administrators in solving the matching problem, which is "an underappreciated aspect of bureaucratic discretion" (p. 11). This is a promising area of research and practice for improving social equity, given that categories, such as poverty, race, and ethnicity, reflect social construction that is "relatively fixed, [but] the *presentation* of categories is not something that typically requires changes to the law or rules, but can be modified with relative ease." (Moynihan et al., 2022, p. 12).

Street-level Bureaucrats

Street-level or frontline bureaucrats take charge of day-to-day policy implementation, and their values and behaviors significantly influence clients' experience of public policies. Although there is little disagreement about the significance of their roles in implementation, there are two contrasting perspectives about the administrative discretion they have and its impact on equity. On the one hand, as discussed earlier, a selective or arbitrary implementation by street-level bureaucrats may disrupt social equity. Cepiku and Mastrodascio (2021, p. 1019) argue that "an ambiguous conceptualization of social equity by street-level bureaucrats may compromise the achievement of social outcomes." The U.S. immigration policy shaped by racial restriction and discrimination has raised concerns about discretionary and uneven implementation against immigrants (Heinrich, 2018).

On the other hand, with sufficient discretion, street-level bureaucrats may contribute to accountability through their engagement and cooperation with one another and direct interactions with the public, i.e., grassroots accountability (Mulgan, 2019). As policies are mostly interpreted and implemented by frontline workers, their effort to reduce red tape and administrative burdens will significantly improve social equity. Public officials working at lower hierarchical levels with proximity to citizen clients are more equity-oriented than those at the top level (Fernández-Gutiérrez & Van de Walle, 2018). For example, street-level bureaucrats make many decisions that can significantly impact the children's experience and future as a custodian and a government agent (Edlins & Larrison, 2018), and their self-binding mechanisms could be as strong as professional accountability (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Mulgan, 2019). Viewing themselves as professionals, they are heavily influenced by colleagues/coworkers and involved in different modes of implementation within multi-dimensional governance, which contributes to public-administrative accountability (Hupe & Hill, 2007).

To this end, street-level bureaucrats play a huge part in moderating the negative impact of stereotypes and enhancing the sense of belonging and inclusion through interactions and communications with citizens of different classes (Harrits, 2019; Medina, 2020). Second, street-level bureaucrats could facilitate compliance through various efforts to alter public values through education, persuasion, and sanction. Pedersen et al. (2018) report that ethnic minority clients are punished for policy infractions more often than ethnic majority clients, but caseworkers' work experience mitigates part of this bias. However, frontline workers are constrained by a lack of resources, administrative power,

and legal authority (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Brodkin, 1997; Epp et al., 2014, 2017). In addition, their interpretation of administrative burden varies with their political ideology and the social construction of the target population (Bell et al., 2021; Nisar, 2018), which limits their roles in reshaping and redefining the perceptions of client deservingness. The influence of minority representation at the street level may diverge due to the different roles minority bureaucrats play within the organization (Haider-Markel et al., 2022) and clients' deservedness (Zamboni, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study overviews the concept of social equity studied with varying focuses and dimensions across different policy areas. It also highlights the role of public bureaucrats in embracing equity in their policy design and implementation. Given the marginalized voice and interest of minority citizens, bureaucrats' roles as equity advocates serve well for calls for equity within democratic governance. In the dynamics of social constructions, equity-conscious bureaucrats can play a mediator role in facilitating social change. Bureaucrats can be more proactive in advocating the interests of these dependents and allowing them to access services and benefits, mitigate labeling and stigmatizing in receiving them, and treat them with respect, not "disinterest and passivity" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 342). Bureaucrats can become institutional entrepreneurs when they "steer the translation of these ideas to policy decisions and implementations to deliver institutional outcomes as promoters of policy ideas and elite-decision-makers" (Bakir & Jarvis, 2017, p. 466). For women and gender minorities, establishing transparent and fair practices in their employment, pay, and promotion is more crucial and less contentious than introducing quotas, while more targeted, aggressive measures may be necessary to remedy existing discriminatory and burdening administrative systems for low-income and racial minorities. For immigrants and refugees, how a government treats them and categorizes them significantly shapes citizens' perceptions. South Korean government admitted Afghan evacuees who worked for government facilities as 'persons of special merit' to be better received and positively viewed by the public.

Recognizing that the loss of equity leads to long-term consequences for society, the prominent role played by bureaucrats in a polarized political environment cannot be overstated. Revealing injustice and inequities in the administrative processes, outputs, and outcomes could be more effective in removing discriminatory practices and less likely to attract political conflicts with policies favoring a certain group. Apart from group-centric politics adopted by politicians and elected officials, bureaucrats can redefine identity groups with finer social constructions based on intersectional to socioeconomic (income, education), legal (immigrants, marital status), physical (disability, medical condition, pregnancy, LGBTQ), and natural status (age, LGBTQ). Scholars have emphasized public values in public administration, e.g., empathy, love, openness, benevolence, compassion, and ethics (Bozeman, 2002; Soss et al., 2011) and the role of empowered citizens and public administrators as co-creators of democracy. Therefore, public bureaucrats at all ranks can play a significant role in reducing discrimination, changing perceptions of deservingness and administrative categories, and providing more information on the implications of administrative burden.

However, not all equity issues get attention and are supported to the same degree by the general public and policymakers in political and administrative arenas. Public administration has not always played a role in redressing inequities but has perpetuated or even aggravated them with its focus on instrumental rationality (Alkadry & Blessett, 2010). Social equity is "a moving target" due to intersectional identities that complicate the lens through which fairness and justice are interpreted (Guy & McCandless, 2020, p. 174). Despite the equity-enhancing potential, we cannot rely on individual bureaucrats' public service motivation or public-spiritedness, assuming that politicians are self-interested and incentivized only for reelection. Both bureaucrats and politicians are embedded in the existing institutional arrangements and policy environments. Bureaucrats may invest in proactive roles in advancing social equity when they assess that returns are greater than risks (Bertelli & John, 2012).

Nevertheless, this article claims that the role boundary of modern bureaucracy can be redrawn across policy areas and bureaucrats' ranks within organizations. As discussed, there are many areas/groups that need further attention and action from the government to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. This article reveals the potential of public administration in leveling disparities among social groups and enhancing and complementing democratic governance. Public bureaucracy offers consistency, efficiency, and predictability in public service delivery; and creates alternative accountability mechanisms as they "represent" citizens through more frequent, direct interactions (Meier & O'Toole, 2006; Peters, 2019). Future research might seek a more detailed comparison and/or individual-level analysis to fully explore the varied relationships between bureaucratic roles and social equity beyond representative bureaucracy and administrative burden. A range of administrative actions and managerial modes, such as collaboration, decentralization, coproduction, and automation, could have significant implications for social equity. Some bureaucratic actions or levels may be more relevant to certain policy areas, while some areas, such as housing and immigration, have been sidelined from the discussion in public administration.

Submitted: May 01, 2022 KST, Accepted: August 01, 2022 KST

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