Sonia M. Ospina and Rogan Kersh, Editors

Elizabeth S. Overman
University of Central Oklahoma

“A Nervous Area of Government”: A Serious Impediment to Our Realization of Democracy


Susan T. Gooden, author of Race and Social Equity: A Nervous Area of Government, is a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, professor of public administration and public policy in the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, and executive director of the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institution at Virginia Commonwealth University. In this book, she identifies a distinctly enduring imbalance in American society that is widely known but, until this tome was published, seemed so intractable as to defy any solution short of a total social overhaul. As one of my graduate students candidly stated, “We all know about the problems of race. We talk about them all the time at home, but never in the workplace.” Unfortunately,
we know that not every household is alert to—or willing to discuss honestly—racial issues. Gooden correctly attributes a lack of forthright discussions about race to what she identifies as a “nervousness” so pervasive that it fosters what some see as race neutrality or the refusal to acknowledge that race should be a consideration. This ostrich-like, paralyzing retreat actually fosters social inequities in a society such as ours that is suffused with racial difference. As she points out, “it is a constant state of operating under an illusion of not existing” (xv).

Gooden calls on practitioners and teachers of public administration to use the very managerial skills and tools that we teach and seek to improve to deepen the understanding of racial social neglect by deploying measures and assessments of social injustice within our public organizations. Many wrongs are structurally anchored in the fabric of American society and work to prevent social equity. “Racial outcomes in health, education, employment, environmental risk, occupational status, and crime are not randomly assigned,” she writes incisively. “They are embedded in a historical structure where racial minorities, chronically experience pervasive negative differences” (39). Some may say that they are already committed to delivering public services in “fair and just” ways. But Gooden calls on us to heed H. George Frederickson’s query by questioning “fair and just for whom?” (16). Are we sure that the entire community receives the best services possible?

Gooden identifies the juxtaposition of race and social equity as a “nervous area of government.” This is a new addition to the lexicon of public administration. Nervousness portends a fear of “saying the wrong thing about race, fear of being misunderstood, fear of what will be said next, fear of speaking up, fear of not participating in the discussion, fear of interacting with colleagues after the discussion, fear of being labeled a racist, fear of being labeled a race-baiter, fear of being isolated at work” (47). It also may harbor a complicit past when a public servant knowingly inflicted unjustness. Gooden understands how this nervousness could create a “vulnerability” that compromises a public administrator’s ability to serve the public. To counter this debilitating hesitation, examples from the federal, state, and local levels of government illuminate what can be done to manage nervousness while reducing racial inequities in government. In addition, the book examines master of public administration (MPA) programs as well as the comparative and global challenges to social equity.

The first chapter, “Nervousness, Social Equity, and Public Administration,” describes how social theory, when focused on racial equity, is both a neglected approach to governance and one that too often stifles both individuals and organizations because it is not effectively managed. She does not pretend that this is the only area that governments neglect, but it is one that generates such apprehension that problems fester and injustices are compounded, making it ever harder to unwind or defuse issues. She explains how “discrimination in contract” or the “standardization of racial bias through private structures” creates the context for structural racism and contradicts those premises of the “American dream” that imply opportunity for everyone (11, 17). The achievement of social and racial equity has been promoted by public administration theorists since the 1960s as a normative ideal. This is the first time the problem has been characterized in a manner that moves it squarely into operationalization at every level of government.

“The Saturation of Racial Inequities in the United States,” Gooden’s second chapter, examines housing, education, and environmental policy making from the perspective of distribution. This is the heart of public policy and the realm in which the lives of citizens are enhanced or thwarted. The three pivotal questions, following Deborah Stone (1997, 55), are, in Gooden’s paraphrase, “First, who are the recipients and what are the many ways of defining them? Second, what is being distributed and what are the many ways of defining them? And, third, what are the social processes by which distribution is determined?” (21). “How,” Gooden asks, can we have “a discussion about inequities in the provision of public services without talking about race”? (39).

Chapter 3, “Nervousness within Individual Public Administrators,” links emotions to the avoidance of race talk and makes a profound argument for the use of “conversation” to “connect” with one another and create “democratic” spaces where people with multiple perspectives, histories, and issues can interact and build better “understanding and appreciation” of each other. This “individual-level understanding of the role of race in the administration of public service should lead to intentional, specific organizational actions that will eliminate racial inequities in the administration” (56).

“Nervousness in Public Sector Organizations,” the following chapter, examines organizational cultures to see whether an agency is willing to “perform [a] racial-equity analysis of the services it provides” (60). Values and goals, socialization, leadership and change, organizational discourse, learning and performance all shape the context and contour of public services, and all are critical when working to achieve racial equity. Once an organization’s leadership is dedicated to justice, argues Gooden, it can embark on a continued process of discovery that illuminates the internal and external mechanisms of structural racism.

The book’s fifth through seventh chapters provide a series of concrete applications of this rigorous theoretical approach, focusing on race and social justice in
vital in the development of conscious efforts to build socially equitable practices in government. Chapter 10 explains how democratic governments across the globe are struggling with social equity issues. And the final chapter warns readers that ignoring race and social equity causes inequities to worsen, whereas an intentional action that addresses racial and social justice promotes societal health.

Gooden’s monograph is well-thought-out and expertly developed. For such a slim volume, the book has breadth and depth beyond its size. Each chapter stands on its own; taken as a whole, Gooden’s scholarship and exposition rivals the classics in the field of public administration. All students, as well as practitioners and professors, should read and discuss this book in detail. The bibliographies at the end of the each of the 11 chapters are as rich and generous as the text itself.

M. E. Sharpe’s packaging of the first edition of this book is also worthy of note. The cover of the book incorporates three outlines of human profiles shadowing a Greek column, suggesting that American public administration can conceptually connect with our intellectual foundations and that we can build a true democracy premised on the realization of actual social equity for all.

Reference