

Theory to Practice

Response to Commentators

Article

Public Administration Review

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A Solution in Search of a Problem? Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and the New Public Service

November | December 2006
Volume 66 | Number 6

I am very appreciative of the thoughtful remarks and insights provided by Dornonic Bearfield, Lael R. Keiser, J. Edward Kellough, and Sharon H. Mastracci and the opportunity to build upon issues raised in their responses. The commentaries highlight the salience, complexity, and diversity of perspectives regarding affirmative action and its impact. I will begin with some general observations, followed by suggestions for future research.

The research on affirmative action and related topics is not only voluminous, it is complex to interpret because it spans different academic disciplines (including, but not limited to, public administration, law, management, sociology, economics, and education) and employs different research designs and methodologies. Because of the array of approaches used, general lessons may be extracted, yet questions remain regarding the actual, direct impact of affirmative action or the lack of affirmative action on eradicating discrimination and disadvantage in the United States. In general, most of the com-

mentators agree that discrimination against minorities and women has not been eliminated and further effort is needed to promote equality in the labor market.

The dialogue also underscores the importance of three concepts that emerge in the literature: disadvantage, representative bureaucracy, and diversity management. Discrimination is defined as "prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action, or treatment"; however, disadvantage refers to persons "lacking in the basic resources or conditions (as standard housing, medical and educational facilities, and civil rights) believed to be necessary for an equal position in society" (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2006a, 2006b). While equal employment opportunity (EEO) law and affirmative action policy evolved to address racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, recently the public discourse has focused on affirmative action practices that target socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals or groups. Such class-based affirmative action programs would be oriented toward increasing the economic mobility of

those persons with the greatest need. This interest is fueled, at least in part, by the concern expressed by Domonic Bearfield that truly disadvantaged subgroups may be overlooked with the blunt affirmative action instruments currently employed.

Traditional EEO law and policy cannot be divorced from the broader issues included in representative bureaucracy and diversity management literatures. Traditional EEO programs, as well as class-based affirmative action programs, reflect a concern for social justice. Public administration scholars often focus on the normative and substantive benefits of a representative bureaucracy, as discussed in detail by Lael Keiser and Ed Kellough. While a representative public bureaucracy can serve as "a primary indicator of the progress we are making toward achieving broader social justice," according to Kellough, the theory offers scholars and practitioners a rationale for reconciling bureaucratic power and democratic governance. Moreover, as discussed by Keiser and Kellough, the general population benefits from having a public workforce that reflects its demographic composition and values. Rather than being underpinned by broader notions of social justice, diversity management is business-driven (Cornelius, Gooch, and Todd 2001). Here, scholars and practitioners advance diversity management because both fundamentally believe that organizations benefit in tangible and intangible ways from workforce heterogeneity (Cornelius, Gooch, and Todd 2001).

Together, the commentators provide an extensive agenda for research. Adding to their suggestions, I will briefly discuss four avenues of study worthy of pursuit. First, scholars should explore the recursive, temporal relationships between discrimination and disadvantage across different policy domains, such as housing, education, and em-

ployment. As suggested by proponents of class-based affirmative action policies, persons may be intentionally or unintentionally discriminated against because of their socioeconomic status. At the same time, discrimination may contribute to a person's or group's disadvantaged status.

Figure 1 (see Appendix 1) presents a model that highlights the potential cumulative effects of discrimination and disadvantage across housing, education, and labor markets. Where a person lives determines, in most instances, where his or her children will attend public school. Schools serving students in higher socioeconomic localities and neighborhoods may have access to more governmental resources (e.g., higher tax base) and/or parental resources, (e.g., time and money), which may influence program quality. The quality of a child's primary and secondary education will affect his or her post-secondary education, training, or employment opportunities.

A recent study shows a significant correlation between inputs (resources and attention to students) and outputs (educational achievement and behavioral outcomes) in public education systems (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund 2005). Consistent with Domonic Bearfield's commentary discussing African-American men, the NAACP report highlights the challenge faced by African-Americans students.

[I]n 2000, African Americans represented only 17% of public school enrollment nationwide, but accounted for 34% of suspensions. Likewise, in 2003, African-American youths made up 16% of the nation's overall juvenile population but accounted for 45% of juvenile arrests. Studies show that African-American students are far more likely than their white peers to be sus-

pended, expelled, or arrested for the *same kind* of conduct at school.

While a number of factors may contribute to these trends, the NAACP concludes that these findings are "also part and parcel of the continuing disparities in the quality of education available to African Americans" (2005). A 2005 report by Rand projects that universal preschool might help alter the trends (Karoly 2005). The report discusses numerous benefits, including higher retention of ninth-grade students, fewer children placed in special education, fewer children with juvenile petitions or court filings, and higher high school graduation rates.

Second, Sharon Mastracci highlights the import of social network theory to explain employment disparities and the need for further study of this topic. Mastracci points out that the opportunities perceived by individuals and groups (access) is largely dependent upon an individual's network. While there is an emerging body of public management work exploring service delivery networks, public management and human resource management scholars should examine how an individual's social networks influence housing, educational, and employment opportunities.

Third, while class-based affirmative action programs may be, as pointed out by Sharon Mastracci, more politically and judicially feasible given the courts' and public's sentiment toward existing affirmative action programs, we should carefully study the implications of this shift. Importantly, Mastracci is not arguing that race, ethnicity, and gender do not matter, but rather that the political climate is changing and that groups most discriminated in today's marketplace are persons of lower socioeconomic status. While in general I agree with Mastracci's

perspective, I am more cautious about reconceptualizing the primary problem as class-based discrimination. Perhaps a middle ground that looks at the multiplicity of overlapping dimensions of diversity, including but not necessarily limited to race, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status, is required to reach subgroups most in need of affirmative action programs. Although not all individuals within a social group share the same forms of disadvantage, social grouping—particularly race, ethnicity, gender, and disability—needs to be recognized as a fundamental contributing factor to patterns of disadvantage. Domic Bearfield agrees at least in principle with the exploration of class-based affirmative action, but he is reluctant to advance a "one-size-fits-all" approach because challenges and barriers differ between subgroups. Diversity management supporters also might scoff at adopting a standardized affirmative action-type policy, but for different reasons. Proponents of diversity management typically seek to "involve a broader range of people than the social groups usually covered in 'equal opportunity' policies" (Kirton and Green 2005, 125).

Fourth, while a number of studies have examined the impact of representation on policy outcomes and outputs, as suggested by Keiser and by Kellough in his commentary and recent book on affirmative action, additional study of the impact of workforce diversity on performance is needed. Ironically, as noted by Kellough, affirmative action and diversity programs in private organizations are subject to less scrutiny by the courts than programs used by public organizations. While we expect governments to serve as role models, private sector organizations may have more opportunity and incentive to implement programs to diversify their workforces.

To fully understand the link between diversity and performance, scholars need to examine further the impact of diversity and diversity management policies on internal organizational processes and cultures in public, nonprofit, and private sector organizations. To what extent are diversity management policies successful? Sharon Mastracci may be correct that managers rather than judges will have the most significant impact on increasing workforce diversity and therefore advancing the economic mobility of historically marginalized groups. As additional lessons are learned about the consequences of increasing group representation, organizational diversity, and internal diversity management policies, public organizations and managers will be better able to prepare and educate employees on how to manage and benefit from a diverse workforce.

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Appendix 1

Figure 1 The Cycle of Disadvantage and Discrimination Across Policy Domains

