ISSUES OF RACE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Pamela Tarquinio Brannon

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Pamela T. Brannon
Warner Southern College
Florida Atlantic University
1422 Keller Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33406
Phone (561) 582-5741
Fax (561) 533-5726
E-mail PTBDLB2@gateway.net
ABSTRACT

As we enter the second year of the new century, issues of race and diversity continue to be important items on the public agenda. Are they also important for public administration? This paper answers the question by reviewing current literature, discussing a report of the NASPAA Diversity Committee, and describing a “Study Circle” which engaged its participants in conversations about race. The author concludes that public administration needs to bring issues of race into the mainstream literature and into the classroom. Recommendations for further research and action are presented.
Introduction

There is no doubt that racial issues continue to dominate a large part of the public discourse. However, public administrators do not discuss race. We either ignore it, or oversimplify it. The reasons are varied: it is complex, it is anxiety-generating, it makes us uncomfortable, and it can be hidden behind traditional views of government neutrality and impersonal service delivery. (Alexander, 1997; Broadnax, 2000; Esman, 1997; Harrison & Shariff, 1996).

In order to ameliorate this situation, Alexander (1997) suggested several things: expand the concept of administrative responsibility to include a look at one’s personal ethics; analyze the racial dynamics of one’s institution, and conduct “directed” or “committed” conversations about race and ethnic issues. The concept of committed conversations is based on former President Clinton’s Initiative on Race. Committed and directed conversations enable individuals to work toward a more inclusive society. Alexander sought to “promote such a dialogue in the public administration community” (p. 344).

This paper builds on hers by examining the state of the public administration dialogue on race, three years after her call for action. It asks two questions. First, is public administration paying attention to racial issues? Second, has Alexander’s call for action made any difference? If we as a profession want to “facilitate the achievement of what we call ‘America’s promise’” (Murray, Terry, Keller & Washington, 1997), and if public administration is to be fully relevant to society in this new century, then issues of race must be examined and discussed.

The search for answers led to the literature, the classroom, and the community. The first section of the paper contains a brief review of public administration literature. The second section discusses a report compiled by the Diversity Committee of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA, 2000). The third section describes a “Study Circle”
project which focused on conversations about race. The final section includes recommendations for future research and future action.

Literature

This paper examines the literature for two reasons: it is the way to determine if the dialogue exists, and it is the way to determine how widespread the dialogue is.

Alexander (1997) reviewed articles in nine journals (Administration and Society, Administrative Science Quarterly, American Political Science Review, American Review of Public Administration, Policy Sciences, Policy Studies Journal, Public Administration Review, Public Administration Quarterly, and Public Management) from 1990 through 1996. She found 46 articles, or roughly 2 percent by her calculations, which addressed racial issues. Very few of those addressed the issue of racism and administrative responsibility. She also found that, while journals which focused on local government and urban issues contained numerous articles about economic growth, diversity, and representation; top public administration journals, for the most part, did not address racial issues.

Esman (1997) surveyed the titles of articles in Public Administration Review from 1986 through 1995 as part of his research on integrating three streams of literature - ethnic politics, economic development and public administration. He wrote that the "implications of ethnic pluralism has [sic] been a neglected topic in the literature on public administration" (p. 527). In his survey he found 15 articles which fit his criteria; an average of 1.5 per year. Although his emphasis was on economic development, he expressed a concern that public administration was not paying enough attention to the realities of the existence of ethnic groups and conflicts within society.

Harrison and Shariff (1996) reviewed the literature contained in the Sage Public Administration Abstracts from 1979 through 1994, and Public Administration Review from 1980 through 1994. They found a small number of articles which discussed racial issues; these constituted between 1.2 and 1.4 percent of the
total number of articles published. Although they characterized their findings as fragmented, Harrison and Shariff recognized that "the experiences of people of color, and the contribution of scholarship by and about them, is not being integrated into the central themes and the highest levels of debate in the field" (p. 28).

Three journals not analyzed by Alexander (1997) nor Esman (1997), and perhaps not included in the Harrison and Shariff study (1996), were reviewed for this paper. The first was the Journal of Public Affairs Education (JPAE), formerly the Journal of Public Administration Education. This is published by ASPA's Section on Public Administration Education. From 1995 through 2000, three articles and two book reviews addressed diversity, prejudice, and people of color. This represents 3 percent of the total items published during that time.

The second journal was the Review of Public Personnel Administration (ROPPA), published by ASPA's Section on Personnel Administration and Labor Relations. From 1998 through 2000, two articles, one professional note, and one book review contained information on race, diversity and affirmative action. This represents 7 percent of the total items published for those years.

The third journal was the Journal of Public Management and Social Policy (JPMSP), published by ASPA's Conference of Minority Public Administrators. In contrast to JPAE, ROPPA, and the journals discussed above, 17 articles in JPMSP in 1998 and 1999 were related to race, diversity, affirmative action, minorities, and environmental justice. This represents 65 percent of the items published during those two years.

The Public Administration Review from 1997 through 2000 was also examined for this paper. In Volume 57 for 1997, seven articles and three commentaries addressed diversity. This represents 14 percent of the items published for that year. Volume 58 for 1998 contained three articles that discussed affirmative action and diversity. This is 4 percent of the total items for that year. In 1999, Volume 59 included one article on affirmative action. This is 2 percent of
the items for that year. In 2000, Volume 60 included four articles on diversity and race, which represents 7 percent of the total items. Additionally, the section “Book Notes”, initiated in 2000, contained 125 reviews of which 6 presented race and affirmative action subjects. This is 5 percent of the total books reviewed. One of the books is the Broadnax volume, discussed below.

With regard to textbooks, most public administration human resources/personnel texts contain sections on affirmative action, civil rights, and diversity. Some examples include Berman, Bowman, West, and Van Wart (2001), Klingner and Nalbandian (1998), and Pynes (1997).

Two recent books of edited articles specifically addressed issues of race and diversity. Broadnax (2000) edited a volume in the ASPA Classics series: *Diversity and Affirmative Action in Public Service*. The majority of the chapters (18) were drawn from *Public Administration Review* from 1973 through 1996. One article from *The Bureaucrat* in 1992 and one article from the *Review of Public Personnel Administration* in 1986 were also included.

Broadnax observed "...the subject of race and differences has captured a substantial amount of our national psychic energy. And yet, it seems to occupy such a small part of the scholarly materials produced between the inception of PAR and now" (p. xv). He suggested several reasons for this. First, it is still a relatively new subject area for inspection: "...we must remember that it has only been roughly forty years since segregation was declared illegal" (Broadnax, 2000, p. xv). Second, apparently there is only a small group of individuals in public administration that is researching and writing on the subject. Third, it is still an uncomfortable subject to discuss.

Rice (1996) edited a volume of 16 original articles entitled *Diversity and Public Organizations*. The Harrison and Shariff study discussed above came from this volume.
With regard to Alexander’s call for action (1997), only two citations of her 1997 article were found: one in a JPAE review essay (Stafford, 1999) and one in a later article of hers (Alexander, 1999).

Classroom

This paper examines classroom activities in order to determine if “real” dialogues, that is, committed and directed conversations about race, are occurring in those settings. Informal conversations with colleagues have indicated that, unless they were teaching introductory or personnel courses, they generally did not discuss race. They specifically did not engage in conversations about race and how they and their students felt about the issue, or how it may have affected their lives.

This type of non-involvement in a racial dialogue is not unusual, according to the Report of the Diversity Committee of NASPAA (NASPAA, 2000). Based on the results of surveys on the diversity of faculty, and the curriculum and program activities in NASPAA schools, the report discussed barriers to the inclusion of racial issues in the classroom. Some of those barriers are: little or no organizational support for diversity or multiculturalism, no empathy for and no interest in those issues by faculty, students or administrators; a lack of faculty knowledge about the issues, competition with other courses and topics for teaching time, and a lack of materials.

The conclusion of the Report mirrors the views of the authors discussed in the previous section:

In general, we - as individual faculty, as programs, as a discipline, as an accrediting body, and as a profession - are not prepared to fully respond to the demands of increasing diversity and multiculturalism. This is reflected in our student and faculty composition and the lack of emphasis on diversity within the required curriculum, among other things (p. 34).
This author has taught two courses in which conversations about race figured prominently. One was for a state university, with the course title “The Impact of Federal Legislation on Personnel Administration”. One was for a private college; the course was entitled “Managing Diversity”. I presented my experiences with developing and teaching those courses at the 1998 COMPA national conference (Brannon, 1999).

Community

Finally, this paper presents an example of “committed and directed” conversations that took place in one community during the summer and fall of 1998. Two public administration professors, myself and a colleague, and several public administration doctoral students participated in the dialogue.

The Urban League of Broward County, located in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, developed a program entitled “Broward Talks!” This was accomplished in collaboration with volunteers from the Broward County Division of Human Rights, the Broward County Library, and Florida Atlantic University. The program was in response to the President’s Initiative on Race, and his challenge to increase the dialogue on race relations.

The purpose of the Urban League program was to “recruit persons from all walks of life interested and willing to share their feelings about race, diversity and ethnicity” (Summary, 1998, p. 1). Conversations among those persons were conducted in “Study Circles”. A “Study Circle” has the following characteristics:

* it is a process for small group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory
* the group typically consists of 8 – 12 individuals
* it is led by a Facilitator who is impartial and helps to manage the deliberation process, but is not an expert or teacher in the traditional sense
* it considers many perspectives rather than advocating a particular point of view
* it uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion
* it is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate
* it has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering viewpoints, to strategies for action
* it does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concerns
* it provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community (Facilitator Training Handbook, 1998).

The "Broward Talks!" program was designed in three parts: to train Facilitators (three sessions were planned), to conduct a series of Study Circle workshops (three topics were planned for each Study Circle), and to conduct a Dialogue Session at the end of the Study Circle process.

This author’s participation was in a Facilitator Training session. Participants received a handbook which contained definitions and guidelines for conducting a Study Circle, observed a mock Study Circle conducted by trainers, then engaged in a Study Circle of their own. After both the mock Study Circle and the "real" one, participants were debriefed, and shared thoughts, feelings and concerns about the process.

The session lasted approximately three hours, and 12 Hispanic, Black and White women and men participated. One of them, an editorial writer for the Palm Beach Post, traveled from West Palm Beach to Fort Lauderdale to join in the session. She later shared her experience with her readers, and described it as a "painful pleasure...because the sessions made me painfully aware that we are afraid of each other" (Jefferson, 1999, 3A).

Three trainers, two Black men and one White woman, conducted the session. The two men were from the Urban League, and the woman was from the American
Friends Service Committee of Miami. The question that guided this Study Circle was "How is your life affected by race?" This was in keeping with the procedure that one question or one theme is put forth for each Study Circle meeting. This question provided for some thoughtful, revealing and informative answers by the group, some interesting conversation, and enabled the trainers to demonstrate the role of facilitator to the group.

Although my personal participation in the "Broward Talks!" program was curtailed by my university responsibilities, I continued to receive information regarding the process. It appears to have been very successful. Three Facilitator Training sessions were held in July with 33 individuals participating. Three Study Circles were organized and met once a week for three consecutive weeks in October with a total of 32 individuals participating.

Each Study Circle meeting focused on one question or theme. The three questions were: Who are we?, Where are we?, Where do we want to go? Attendance was consistent and participants reported that they looked forward to the meetings each week. Participants were diverse, with the exception of white males, who were scare. At the end of the process, almost every participant indicated that three meetings were not enough to discuss all the issues, and they would be interested in organizing and participating in more Study Circles in their communities and organizations. The Urban League continues to be committed to continuing the community dialogue and explore other Study Circle options (Summary, 1998).

Conclusion

Referring to the questions that formed the basis for this paper, is public administration paying attention to issues of race, and has Alexander’s call for action made any difference, the answers appear to be “Not much.” If public administrators are paying attention, there are few examples of their endeavors in the literature. The only publication that appears to include articles on race and diversity issues on a regular basis is the journal published by COMPA. It
appears that “mainstream” or, perhaps, “traditional” publications are still not publishing very many articles on the subject. The dialogue exists only marginally and is not widespread.

This raises some interesting questions. First, is the COMPA journal the only vehicle that is considered appropriate for issues of race within public administration?

Second, is this an indication that these issues are viewed as only “minority” concerns? It would be interesting to find out if the authors who published in COMPA had attempted to publish in other journals, or if the COMPA journal was their first choice.

Third, is it possible that public administrators are engaging in the dialogue, but are publishing in journals outside the public administration arena? We need to review the social science literature, especially political science and sociology, to determine this answer. What we find could raise additional questions about the venues available for research that focuses on race.

It does appear that some actual conversations may be taking place in the classroom, as evidenced by three articles published in JPAE: Bernotavicz (1997), Malec (1997), and Leland (1995). We should also examine the Proceedings from the PA Teaching conferences for further evidence of committed conversations in the classroom.

In fact, reviewing the programs and proceedings of the various public administration conferences would be another way to ascertain the existence of the dialogue within the discipline.

With regard to the “Study Circles”, my colleague (Leip, 1999) and I (in this paper), have written about this activity, so we know actual conversations about race have taken place in at least one community. We should find out what is happening in other cities. Who participates, are there written records, and, if so, where are they and who reads them?
Additionally, I would highly recommend that public administration professionals, both academics and practitioners, take part in community Study Circles. The experience has the potential to enhance our organizations, our research, and our classrooms.

We must also move beyond the questions raised by this paper to determine if directed and committed conversations about racial issues do, in fact, enable individuals to work toward a more inclusive community. We view knowledge as a powerful resource; however, "knowledge must be applied before it is considered effective knowledge" (Waters, 1996). We must ask ourselves how we can ensure the knowledge will be applied, and how the move toward inclusiveness can be sustained.

The field of public administration is well situated to play an important role in the building of the inclusive community. The issues of race are too important to be ignored. I strongly suggest we assume a leadership role in this effort. We must engage in dialogues about racial issues, and we must share our experiences and our research with our students and our colleagues. As Harrison and Shariff have said: "Our thoughts... when they do get expressed...are found all too often, in the present academic division of labor, far from the shores of public administration. Updating and bringing that knowledge to our discipline is long overdue" (1997, p. 28).
REFERENCES


