

Undergraduate Research Award Proposal
Applicant: Nicole Humphrey
Faculty Advisor: Shannon Portillo, Ph.D.
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Who and What Matters: Conceptions of Social Equity from Local Elected Officials

Abstract

Of every level of government, local government has the most direct impact on the day-to-day lives of its constituents. With the authority to direct, form, and manage municipal policy (Demir and Reddick 2012), local elected officials have the ability to define who and what matters in their local communities through the policies and laws they decide to create and implement. These patterns of decision-making carried out by local elected officials demonstrate how public values are enacted at the local level and what influence these values have on social equity and community outcomes. This project examines how elected government leaders – charged with conceiving, administering, and achieving social equity at the local level – conceptualize and operationalize social equity in the communities they lead. The conceptions of social equity held by local government officials have implications on the resources and policies produced by municipal governments, as well as citizens residing in these jurisdictions. Due to the substantial impact local government can have on the lives of citizens, exploration regarding policy at the local level is essential.

Background and Introduction

This proposal builds on a previous research project of mine, which explored how local chief administrative officers (city managers, assistant city managers, and department heads) use the concept of social equity in their decision-making processes. Social equity focuses on the allocation and effect of government resources and services (Guy and McCandless 2012). Through the proper allocation of resources and services, a local government can “enhance the political power and economic well being” (Frederickson 2010) of underrepresented populations. This means local government officials have the ability to influence policy in a manner “that ameliorates some of the effects of poverty and opens opportunities” (Frederickson 2005) to some of the most disadvantaged community residents. Although the implementation of social equity seems simple and can create positive externalities, most administrators prefer to focus on being efficient (saving time and money), which prevents social equity from being a top priority (Le Grand 1990; Hasset and Watson 2002).

My previous study attempted to determine why chief administrative officers preferred efficiency to social equity. The findings from my study indicated that local administrators often blamed their local elected officials for why they were unable to operationalize social equity. Although elected officials are expected to represent the local community, it was often asserted that certain constituents receive far more attention than others. For instance, local elected officials are highly responsive to dominant community stakeholders, such as business owners, so the need to respond to these powerful residents consumes both local elected officials and chief administrative officers. Due to their increased focus on dominant community members, social equity was made a lesser priority. At the conclusion of my previous research project, I began to question the role of elected officials and how they influence the implementation of social equity. To investigate this issue, I intend to address these questions: *How do local elected officials*

conceptualize social equity? How do local elected officials implement social equity? How do local elected officials perceive their relationship with chief administrative officers?

Locally appointed and elected officials work closely to serve the same population, but as Nalbandian (1994) notes, “Even though they speak the same words, politicians and professional staff often talk a different language because their perspectives are different.” The differing perspectives held by elected and appointed officials further complicate the decision-making processes and use of social equity. Although a substantial amount of research has been done on broader issues of public management and equity, “underlying mechanisms such as value differences and decision-making styles in the public sector need further exploration” (Hamidullah, Riccucci, and Pandey 2015). My research answers this call by exploring how differing values and perceptions of social equity among local government officials can result in laws and policies aimed at protecting or supporting specific segments of the community, while neglecting others. Although every public servant has a significant role in the pursuit of social equity, local elected officials possess a distinct function in the advancement of social equity because they are “community builders and enablers of democracy” (Nalbandian 1999).

Although social equity is a concept traditional to the field of public administration, bureaucrats are not the only government officials responsible for ensuring that all residents of a community are treated fairly and receive the assistance that they need. Elected officials also play a significant role in determining the treatment of local residents. Even though local elected officials and public administrators are expected to work in unison to achieve common goals, the values and decision-making processes used by each group differ. Understanding the values that administrators and elected officials use to make decisions will provide insight on how officials with varying backgrounds and perspectives work together to support their communities. A further investigation exploring the relationship between these two groups needs to be conducted, so that the perspective of elected officials is also provided in public administration scholarship.

Methods and Approach

I intend to conduct interviews with local elected officials from six different municipalities in the Kansas and Missouri area. I will obtain contact information of local elected officials through their city websites. Each participant will be contacted through email. See Appendix I to view the Recruitment Email. Research subjects will not be compensated for their participation. Interviews will follow a semi-structured, narrative format and last 30-60 minutes. Narrative interviews are essential to local government research because they provide insight to rationalizations of established community practices (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005). See Appendix II to view the Research Protocol, which lists the standard questions that each participant will be asked. I have completed Human Subjects training and will submit my IRB application for approval by December 1, 2015, so that I can begin recruiting participants when I return to school in January. I plan to interview 20-30 local elected officials during the spring semester. Each interview will be audio recorded, so that I have the ability to analyze and identify patterns within the narratives. Because interviews will be recorded, all participants will sign a consent document granting me permission to record. See Appendix III to view the Consent Document. Each participant will be asked to share multiple stories that provide information regarding their decision-making practices when faced with community conflict. In addition to their decision-making strategies, local elected officials will be asked explain how they conceptualize and utilize social equity during their decision-making process. The objective when coding interviews will be to determine how local elected officials define social equity, whether

or not they implement social equity in their day-to-day work, and what are the external influences that can prevent them from implementing social equity. Upon the completion of coding interviews, I should have greater insights regarding the use of social equity at the local government level. The location and time of each interview will vary as needed to make the interview process more convenient for participants.

Date	Research Progress
January	Receive IRB approval and begin scheduling interviews with participants.
February	Completing scheduling interviews with participants. Begin conducting interviews.
March	Complete Interviews. Transcribe and analyze interviews.
April	Write research paper.
May/June	Submit paper for publication/Present research at Law & Society Association Conference and

Applicant’s Preparation

Upon my acceptance into the McNair Scholars Program, I completed an interdisciplinary research methodology course and composed my first research proposal. The project that stemmed from my research proposal, *Globalization and World Order through Empire and the European Union*, was inspired from a political theory course with Dr. Paul Schumaker. For this project, I conducted a theoretical analysis of the book *Empire*, by comparing theses from the book to current policies governing the European Union. This project provided me with a comprehensive background in political theory that I have been able to apply to other research projects throughout my undergraduate career and will continue to use as a graduate student. I shared the findings of my research at the McNair Scholars Research Symposium, serving as the keynote speaker and the University of Kansas Undergraduate Research Symposium. In addition to campus presentations, I shared my research at the Regional Heartland Research Conference and the University of Maryland National Conference for McNair Scholars and Undergraduate Research.

To expand my research training, I became an undergraduate research assistant for Dr. Shannon Portillo on the Sociolegal Justice Project (SJP), which is an empirical study focused on providing a meta-analysis of scholarship on justice from peer-reviewed journals. Within SJP, I was responsible for coding implicit and explicit forms of justice in scholarly articles.

Contributing to this project allowed me to collaborate with a team of scholars, while simultaneously developing research skills that could enhance my independent research. I continued to work with Dr. Portillo through an independent research project designed to explore how chief administrators (city managers, assistant city managers, and department heads) utilize social equity when making decisions. Specifically, I conducted semi-structured interviews with local administrators, as well as transcribed and analyzed each interview to examine how administrators perceived and utilized social equity in their respected positions. It was essential that my research focus on chief administrators because they are often ignored in the literature. To fund this project I was awarded an Undergraduate Research Award from the Center of Undergraduate Research at the University of Kansas, and provided with additional funding from the McNair Scholars Program. Upon the completion of this project I presented a poster at the

University of Kansas Research Poster Symposium, as well as an oral presentation at the McNair Scholars Symposium. In addition to presentations, I served as a guest lecturer for the TRIO Upward Bound Liberal Arts & Sciences Program where I constructed interactive lesson plans based on my research. Next semester, Dr. Portillo and I will submit an article for publication based on the information gathered from this study, so I can further disseminate my findings. I will also be presenting at the Law and Society Association Conference. My undergraduate research experiences have provided me a rigorous and interdisciplinary training designed for successfully completing an independent research project. I have an extensive background in qualitative methods, which will provide me with the skills needed to complete this project.

Conclusion

Because of the social turbulence currently affecting many communities throughout the United States, the need to research topics pertaining to local government and social equity is at its peak. Local government officials are at the epicenter of many community problems, so it is imperative that their decision-making processes in regards to social equity are investigated.

There is an expectation that public servants and organizations adapt to changes in the population and continue to provide for the needs of their constituents. (Gooden and Portillo 2011). A significant portion of this adaptation is dependent on the information public servants gain through public administration scholarship. Through conducting semi-structured, narrative interviews with local elected officials, I can contribute to the field of public administration and help inform practitioners by investigating inequities within government that influence local communities and underrepresented populations. Local government and social equity have not been provided with enough attention in current public administration literature and need further exploration. My research will fill this gap by exploring the relationship between local elected officials, chief administrative officers, and the implementation of social equity.

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[Appendix I]

Dear _____,

My name is Nicole Humphrey and I am a student from the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study on the decision making process of elected. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are an elected official in the state of Kansas or Missouri. I obtained your contact information from the City of ____ website.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a 30-60 minute interview discussing how you make decisions when faced with community conflict. Interviews will be audio recorded, so you will be required to sign a document granting me permission to record prior to the interview. However, all information gained from the interview will be confidential, so your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you would like to participate in the study or have questions regarding the study, please contact the investigator with the information listed at the end of this document.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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[Appendix II]

Interview Protocol

Investigator Name: Nicole Humphrey

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Shannon Portillo

Objectives

The purpose of this research study is to determine how elected officials make decisions when faced with competing community ideals. To determine the logic behind decisions made by elected officials from multiple municipalities will be interviewed. Each interview will be semi-structured and all information gained from the interview will be confidential. Data will be compiled at the aggregate level, so participants are not identified.

Standard Questions – Elected Officials

Tell me a story of a time that you resolved or participated in resolving a community conflict/problem.

Local government officials are expected to uphold the values of efficiency, effectiveness, and social equity. Which of these values did you find the most helpful in resolving this conflict and why?

Tell me a story of a time that you were forced to respond to the demands of a specific group within your community.

How did the demands of this group influence the rest of the community?

How do you make yourself accessible to community members?

What do you consider to be the most effective way for community members to contact you?

Why did you want to become an elected official?

What is the most challenging aspect of being an elected official?

Can you describe your relationship with public administrators? Specifically, city managers, assistant city managers, or department heads.

What would say is beneficial about working with public administrators?

What would you say is difficult about working with public administrators?

There are three accepted pillars of public administration: social equity, efficiency, and effectiveness. As an elected official, which of these pillars do you feel you rely on the most often? Why do you think you rely this pillar the most often?

Ask them to define the pillar if they do not define it in their answer.

How would you define social equity?

How would you define justice?

Interviewee Demographics of Interest

- Race/ethnicity
- Sex
- Level of education
- When degree was completed
- Year of birth

[Appendix III]

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT: ELECTED OFFICIALS

INTRODUCTION

The University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with the investigators or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to determine how elected officials make decisions when faced with competing community ideals.

PROCEDURES

You will be asked to participate in an open-ended audio taped semi-structured interview, which will last approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. During this interview, you will be asked a variety of questions regarding how you make decisions as an elected official. The interview will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be used exclusively by the research team, recorded with their own equipment, and stored in a secure location that is only accessible to the principle investigator of the research team. Audio recordings will be destroyed after they are translated into data, which will occur no later than six months after the date of the interview.

RISKS

There are no risks associated with participation in the study.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for the subjects participating in this study, but subjects can benefit the field of public administration by helping to conceptualize the values of public administration and clarify the current practices being used to implement these values. This information may be used to enhance current practices of policy implementation surrounding the values of public administration.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANT

You will not receive any payment for your participation in this research study.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. The researchers will use a code number or a pseudonym instead of your name. The researchers will not share information about you unless required by law or unless you give written permission. Only the investigator and faculty supervisor will have access to the audio recordings, which will be stored on a password-protected computer. Once all data analysis is complete, all recordings will be destroyed.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Nicole M. Humphrey, Wescoe Hall Room 4060, 1445 Jayhawk Boulevard, Lawrence, KS 66045-3177. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you and none of the information you have provided will be used.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

Participant's Name (Print)

Date

Participant's Signature

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