Social Equity in Nonprofit Organizations: An Exploratory Study of Practitioners and Scholars' Perspectives

BOK GYO JEONG

Kean University, USA, email: bjeong@kean.edu

JUNG AH (CLAIRE) YUN

Kean University, USA

SUNG-JU KIM

North Carolina State University, USA

DEBORAH MOHAMMED-SPIGNER

Institute of Social Equity and Sustainability, Canada

SARAH A. MACK

Kean University, USA

ABSTRACT

Social equity is a fundamental pillar in defining the main contributions of nonprofit organizations to civil society. Through a survey and focus group interviews, this study examines how nonprofit scholars and practitioners perceive social equity by focusing on nonprofits' governance, policies, and program operations. By surveying and interviewing both practitioners and scholars, this study observes the importance of social equity in the nonprofit field in terms of its practical implications and program activities. Results show that nonprofits incorporate social equity values into their practices in varying degrees regarding policies; scholars associated more with accountability related criteria while practitioners placed more emphasis on practical management and action-oriented elements in their perceptions of social equity. This study contributes to the increasing significance placed on social equity in the nonprofit sector by recognizing and comprehending various approaches in scholarly research and practice management.

INTRODUCTION

Social equity, as characterized by fairness, justice, and inclusivity, is recognized as a core value in various academic disciplines and professional fields across both public and social sectors. In the field of public administration, social equity has been emphasized in its practices and scholarly works since the Minnowbrook Conference highlighted the concept in 1968 (Gooden & Portillo, 2011). In accordance with the Minnowbrook definition, social equity refers to the direct and indirect delivery of public services

and the formation/implementation of public policy (National Academy of Public Administration [NAPA], n.d.). Public administration scholars have also advised how government agencies should manage their financial and non-financial resources, embracing the value of promoting social equity (NAPA, n.d.). The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) reiterates the importance of social equity, listing it as the fourth principle in their code of ethics (ASPA, 2013, as cited in Guy & Williams, 2023). Recently, public administration scholars concurred with these growing calls by highlighting the intersection between social justice and traditional administrative themes including budgeting, personnel management, and performance management (Wright II, 2023).

The definition of social equity continues to evolve as societal efforts increase to ensure fairness, justice, and inclusion for all individuals and communities. Fredrickson (1971), for instance, defined social equity as focusing on the protection and enhancement of the rights of minorities in the realms of political power and economic well-being. NAPA defines social equity as fair and equal management of public institutions, equitable public service distribution, and policy implementation/formation committed to the value of fairness, justice, and equity (Rivera & Knox, 2023).

With the value of social equity being widely discussed in the public sector, investigations related to social equity in the nonprofit sector have emerged through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI studies within the nonprofit sector typically focus on internal practice and cultural aspects such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and religious diversity rather than underlining broader societal structures and systems (Borrego & Johnson, 2017; Buse et al., 2016; Hartarska & Nadolnyak, 2012; Weisinger et al., 2016).

Recently, social equity received increased attention as a critical perspective in nonprofit organization research and such practices have gained momentum (Sandberg et al., 2019). This has resulted in an increase in the criticism of social inequalities and ethno-nationalism in the public sector while emphasizing the role of nonprofits to address these structural issues. Although social equity as a critical pillar of social well-being has become a cornerstone of the operations of the nonprofit sector, it may not have always been explicitly prioritized in nonprofit practice. Furthermore, social equity has yet to be fully embraced in nonprofit research as a stand-alone theme to support management, program operation, and policy formulation/implementation in the nonprofit sector.

The purposes of this study are firstly to understand how nonprofit scholars and practitioners define and perceive the role of social equity in nonprofit organizations. Secondly, it aims to explore how nonprofits incorporate social equity into their governance, policies, and program operations. This paper starts by reviewing the existing literature on social equity both from the public administration and nonprofit management fields and explores the key values and themes related to social equity from the perspective of nonprofit management. Subsequently, by using both surveys and interviews, this study comprehends the perceptions of nonprofit scholars and practitioners on the themes of social equity. Finally, the study concludes with implications for social equity practices and research in the nonprofit in relation to governance, policies, and programs.

Social Equity in Public Administration Studies

The term "social equity" has been discussed and emphasized in the field of public administration since the late 1960s as a result of decades of social and political movements focused on systematic inequality and inequity (Gooden & Portillo, 2011). The discourse on social equity in public administration has broadened and evolved across various sub-topics. These include the diversification of the public sector workforce

regarding gender and racial/ethnic minorities and the impact of affirmative action in the public sector (Kellough, 1989; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Riccucci, 2009; Selden & Selden, 2001), the significance and link between passive and active representation (Dolan, 2000; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Riccucci & Marcia, 2004), and individuals' actions and perceptions including public sector motivation and rules (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006; Perry & Wise, 1990; Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009).

Conceptual frames of social equity were comprehensively argued from various angles in public administration studies. When Frederickson (1971) first coined the term, social equity was defined as, "activities designed to enhance the political power and economic well-being of these minorities" (p. 311). This definition also addressed the tenets set of social equity, including treating citizens from different social groups equitably or fairly, thus reflecting the democratic constitutional values of fairness, justice, equal opportunity, and equality (Jennings, 2005; Brunet, 2006). The principles of social equity have continued in later social equity studies (see, for example, Rosenbloom, 1997; Jennings, 2005; Brunet, 2006). Frederickson (2015) also examined the philosophical and theoretical background of social equity and proposed that it will always be the task of public servants to balance the needs for efficiency, economy, and social equity. However, there can be no balance if public servants understand only the complexities of economy and efficiency but cannot conceptualize the details of fairness and equality (Frederickson, 2015).

Equity as a concept has evolved from a philosophical concern (social contract) to a structural concern (constitutional) and finally an administrative (social equity) concern (Guy & McCandless, 2012). Appleby (1947) stated, "let us not get so concerned with charts, work measurements, and classification problems that we cannot lift our eyes and see the place where we work, its real nature, its opportunity, and its responsibility" (p. 95). Appleby (1947) further outlined that the field was slow to remove its scientific management blinders so that it could see this administrative imperative - an imperative that distinguishes the study of government from the study of business and one whose substance slowly expanded from structural and procedural concerns to issues of race/ethnicity and gender (Broadnax, 2000; Oldfield et al., 2006).

Gooden and Portillo (2011) forthrightly accepted the definition of social equity by the National Academy of Public Administration's (NAPA) Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance as the following:

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 (Gooden & Portillo, 2011, i61-i62).

To clarify the concept of social equity as a crucial pillar of public service administration, the authors outlined the differences between the three important units (building blocks) of social equity: diversity/diversity management, representative bureaucracy, and cultural competency.

These three building blocks of social equity are viewed separately yet interconnected. The first building block, diversity, is generally referred to as a broad range of differences among employees, including race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical disabilities, income, and sexual orientation (Gooden & Portillo, 2011). Secondly, cultural competency refers to the ability to understand and respect the beliefs, language, attitudes, and practices of the individuals and communities an agency serves (Gooden & Portillo, 2011). Cultural competency in an organizational context refers to the ability to manage cultural characteristics within the body of employees (that is employee diversity or cultural diversity) to build an effective organization (Borrego & Johnson, 2017). Finally, the concept of representative bureaucracy refers to the reflection of employee demographics to the demographic composition of the general public (Gooden & Portillo, 2011).

Social Equity in the Nonprofit Sector Studies

While the term social equity has recently become prolific in public administration scholarly studies, the term has not yet been widely adopted within nonprofit studies. However, scholarly investigations regarding social equity have been reflected in nonprofit studies while conducting DEI studies in nonprofits. Primarily, the complexity of defining diversity and how it is commonly interchanged with representativeness were inferred in nonprofit studies. Weisinger et al. (2016) provided three conceptual definitions which have mainly evolved in the private and public sectors; the first is anchored in the legacy of equal employment opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action initiatives. These initiatives led to a strategic view of diversity for enhancing organizational performance. The second conceptual definition relates to efforts to be inclusive in terms of involving minorities and protected groups in governing and operating processes in organizations. The third focuses on the politics and complexity of the concept of identity and the oversimplifications and stereotypes that occur when diversity is treated as an objective attribute of individuals (p. 9s).

Some DEI studies in the nonprofit sector have highlighted the lack of diversity in the sector. Hayes (2012) for instance, gave an overview of representational diversity within the nonprofit sector where nonprofit employees were predominantly white and few were minorities including African American and Hispanic/Latinx (82% in white, 15% either African American or Hispanic/Latinx). The study also affirmed that only one percent of the nonprofit employees were Asian/Pacific Islander (Hayes, 2012). As for representation within upper management, according to Hayes (2012), employees of color only made up about 14 percent. Employees of color within specialized positions made up less than six percent compared to their white counterparts (Hayes, 2012).

Various aspects of the significance of diversity in the nonprofit sector are proclaimed in the following studies. First, the benefit of diversity in the performance aspect was emphasized by McLeod et al. (1996) and Williams and O'Reilly (1998). McLeod et al. (1996) stressed that racially/ethnically diverse groups had higher quality outcomes on creative tasks when compared with non-diverse groups. Diversity is also known to have a significant effect on group level outcomes (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). In examining board size and diversity as a governance mechanism for measuring performance, Hartarska and Nadolnyak (2012) stressed that the efficiency of organizational performance improves when board size diversifies in gender identity. Second, leadership diversity is also underlined as an essential element of diversity in nonprofit organizations. Perkins and Fields (2010) stated that diversity in age in Top Management Teams (TMT) was positively related to not only attendance of the program participants but also efficiency within internal processes.

In addition, the benefit of cultural diversity was underlined in nonprofit studies related to DEI studies. Cox (1994) defined "cultural diversity" as "the representation, in one social system, of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance" (p. 6). Nonprofits are called to enhance hiring practices to be representative of the diversity of their stakeholders because understanding the role of culture and its impact on organizational functioning is important for nonprofit organizations that are increasingly serving diverse populations (Daley & Marsiglia, 2001; Jung, 2015). Legal aspects for nonprofit organizations enforce cultural diversity as well. Organizations in both the private and public sectors must legally abide by laws that have been passed at the federal level to protect groups and individuals from discrimination in the workplace when it comes to hiring. For example, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Act of 1972, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 facilitated the basis of legal protections for groups of diverse groups and protected individuals from discrimination based on their cultural or physical attributes. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 broadly banned

the discrimination of women and minorities, the EEO was designed to prohibit job discrimination based on race, religion, color, national origin, and sex, while the ADA prohibited discrimination based on disability.

Cultural diversity does not mean simply that everyone is unique, but rather it means that people have differences in social group identity, such as differences in national origin, race, gender, work specialization, and so on, that represent socio-cultural distinctions, and that have a significant impact on their life experiences, and their work (Cox, 2008). Borrego and Johnson (2017) spotlighted cultural competence in an organizational context as the ability to manage different employees' cultural characteristics to build an effective organization. They also reiterated that effective managers have to create common ground or establish an environment in which culturally diverse employees can work effectively together.

Subsequently, a volume of literature on diversity studies in nonprofits has been conducted with particular attention to board diversity (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Brown, 2002; Duca, 1996; Parker, 2007; Rutledge, 1994; Siciliano, 1996; Steane & Christie, 2001; Widmer, 1987). Due to boards typically overseeing organizational policies, they can be the main driver of diversity policies and strategies. Board diversity is investigated as an important area of equity in nonprofit organizations. Diversity is adopted by boards with the intent to promote diversity and are, "practices and procedures that are commonly believed to enhance diversity and improve the experience for minority group members, such as diversity statements, policies, committees or task forces dedicated to diversity and inclusion, diversity training for board members, and integration of diversity into the core mission and values" (Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013, p. 641).

Prior studies underlined that if boards are not sensitive to or aware of their constituents' interests, they may incorrectly interpret the environment, potentially leading to errant policies and programs. The primary way to include underrepresented individuals is through recruitment and encouraging a diversity of opinions on the board (Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013; Brown, 2002). Furthermore, with a more diverse membership and when the board behaves inclusively with policies and practices in place to allow diverse members to have an impact, diverse board governance can be improved (Buse et al., 2016). The importance of boardroom behavior, respect, and trust from board members is also accentuated because the open-door perceptions on board behaviors are associated with the experience of inclusion (Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013). Open leadership opportunities enhanced equality and assured that inclusion can be met with board members. Organizations that employ an integration-and-learning approach to diversity and focus on encouraging their majority group members to engage in inclusive behaviors, rather than on policies and procedures, that will engender the racial/ethnic minorities' experience of inclusion.

METHODS

Research Questions

This study asks the following two research questions: First, how do nonprofit scholars and practitioners define and perceive social equity? Social equity has been strongly emphasized in the public and nonprofit sectors due to their inherent mandates and roles in society. However, the term social equity itself is mainly highlighted in public administration. As seen in the literature review, social equity has been embraced in nonprofit management literature centered on several sub-themes such as diversity, stakeholder representation, and cultural competency. Therefore, as an initial exploration, this study aims to explore how nonprofit scholars and practitioners perceive and understand the concept of social equity.

Second, how do nonprofits incorporate social equity into their governance, policies, and program operation? Governance, policies, and program operations may be influenced by the value of social equity. This

study examines how governance is affected in nonprofits from the perspective of stakeholder composition. It also examines policies (staff/board recruitment/retention, salary/income, age, vendors, committee-related policies, upper-level management policies, strategic operation/plan, and board leadership, etc.) that are influenced by social equity considerations in respective nonprofits. Lastly, how nonprofit programs change when social equity value is taken into consideration.

Data Collection

This study used mixed methods (online survey and focus group interview) with multiple sources to examine the perception of social equity by practitioners and scholars in nonprofit studies. First, the authors conducted two sets of online surveys using Qualtrics. Both surveys for practitioners and scholars were conducted from April 2021 to November 2021. For the practitioner survey, the authors began by compiling a list of 501(c)(3) human service nonprofits in New Jersey, using the Guidestar database, now known as "Candid", to recruit practitioners. This list of human service organizations included nonprofits in platinum, gold, and silver groups. Based on the information drawn from Candid, the authors collected missing information via comprehensive web searches and phone calls. After assembling the list along with the relevant contact information, reminder emails for the survey were sent three times. The initial sample list compiled from the Candid data set includes 560 nonprofits. Overall, a total of 442 organizations were contacted, with 118 organizations not responding. In addition, this study also reached out to nonprofit practitioners who are members of nonprofit-focused professional associations (e.g. Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action and the International Society for Third Sector Research). Utilizing both methods, a total of 132 practitioners responded to the survey, but only 39 surveys were completed with full answers and incorporated in this study.

The survey for scholars was conducted using professional membership listservs, including the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR), and the Nonprofit Regional Scholars Group (NRSG). The authors issued three reminder emails to collect the data. As a result, a total of 91 scholars participated in the survey, but only 29 responses were used for analysis in this study due to a lack of information. Consequently, a total of 68 entries, which included both practitioners and scholars, were used for analysis in this study (39 practitioners, and 29 scholars). The collected data was processed through SPSS-15 for statistical analysis.

Second, the authors conducted a single virtual interview with practitioners from each of the three nonprofit organizations. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to examine how social equity is perceived and applied in practice to supplement the findings from the online survey. All three practitioners hailed from nonprofits based in New Jersey. To recruit the interviewees, the authors sent an invitation email to the listed human service organizations for the practitioner survey. As a result, practitioners from three agencies participated in the focus group interview. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

The first organization (initiated as "A") has the mission to create an environment that supports the whole person, by providing tutoring, mentoring, and career exploration. It particularly focuses on youth who show interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. There are three people listed in the organization structure, the Executive Director, an administrative staff person, and a data manager. A has six (6) partners listed, including the county government where they reside.

The second organization (initialed as "B") has provided services to communities in need since the mid-1940s. Its mission is to provide economic and social parity to African Americans and other minority groups in underrepresented populations. B focuses on employing the tools and methods of social work and intervening at all points in the social and economic structure where the interest of African Americans and other minorities. They supply information on the minority population they serve, conduct surveys and training programs, secure jobs, motivate youth, and provide essential services in education, housing, health,

and welfare. They are governed by a board of directors who represent various areas of the community. Their board of directors consist of 10 individuals plus the president/CEO, additionally they employ 11 individuals.

The third organization (initialed as "C") was founded in 1998 by a group of longtime community members who were frustrated by the difficulty of finding suitable volunteer opportunities. Written in its mission, C enhances the impact of their community by building an increasingly diverse, skilled, and engaged group of board and staff leaders. Its focus is to provide training and resources for nonprofit boards and executive leadership.

The collected information from the focus group was analyzed qualitatively. Respective co-authors separately extracted codes and keywords related to social equity from the interview transcripts to break down nonprofit scholars' and practitioners' understanding of social equity. Then, the respective co-authors cross-checked those codes/keywords to synthesize concepts brought by respondents to understand social equity. The authors carried out in-depth analyses of transcripts focused on interviewees' evaluation of stakeholders, assessment of diversity criteria, perception on the social equity's effects on organizational management criteria, and significance of cultural competence.

Measurement

Survey questions in this study were developed based on the GuideStar survey that examines diversity strategies within nonprofit organizations. Two distinct sets of survey questions were tailored for the practitioner group and scholar group, enabling a comparison of perceptions toward social equity between practitioners and scholars. The GuideStar survey included 1) board/staff diversity based on gender, race/ethnicity, and disability, and 2) equity practices questions ("social equity strategies checklist") such as policies and practices that nonprofit organizations use to build a culture of equity and inclusion (GuideStar, n.d.). A total of 8 questions on "social equity strategies" were included in the data including: retention, income, age, vendor, committee, manager, plan, and other strategies. Plus, the authors added two more to include board leadership and program operation and activities. Practitioners were asked to choose yes or no (whether they adopt these social equity strategies in practice or not). While scholars were asked to rank their priority on these policies on a five-point scale (1. low priority ~ 5. high priority).

Furthermore, the authors asked the subjects whether they think social equity practices enhance the overall nonprofit organization's governance, operation, and management. A five- point Likert scale was used (1. Strongly disagree ~ 5. Strongly agree) to answer eight questions about 1) organizational culture, 2) organizational fairness (in hiring and service provision), 3) organizational mission and values, 4) inter-organizational partnership, 5) organizational innovation (practices and work process), 6) stakeholder representation/inclusive governance, 7) organizational transparency, and 8) non-financial sustainability (e.g., volunteer recruitment). These eight questions were derived from relevant literature (Bernstein, 2013; Brown, 2002; Buse et al., 2016; Harris, 2014; Weisinger et al., 2016).

Additionally, the authors asked the participants their perception of stakeholders and to identify the most significant stakeholders that affect decision making in nonprofit organizations. A five-point Likert scale format was used to answer the degree of significance of each stakeholder (1. Not significant - 5. very significant). To explore how nonprofit scholars and practitioners define and perceive social equity, several survey items were added. First, survey respondents were asked to choose "five keywords" that describe the social equity management practices of nonprofit organizations. Several other questions were included in the survey to ask about the participants' perception on various aspects of social equity. Second, both practitioner and scholar groups were asked what diversity criteria they thought were important for nonprofit

organizations. A five-point Likert scale format was used to assess this (1. Not important - 5. Very important). Seven diversity criteria questions were included to gather race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, disabilities, cultural practices (including religion), age, and sexual orientation. Subsequently, a five-point Likert scale was used (1. Not important - 5. Very important) to measure how important the participants think it is for nonprofit organizations sto embrace cultural competency such as cultural practices, belief system, language, and religion. For the focus group interview, the authors asked the same questions in the survey with open-ended format to supplement the findings from the survey. In particular, the focus group interview covered the questions for social-equity related keywords, effects of social equity on nonprofit organizations' management and program operation, diversity criteria priorities, stakeholder significance, and perception of cultural competency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey Results

Descriptive analysis. As shown in Table 1, the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were analyzed. For the practitioners, the majority of respondents held positions as executive director of nonprofit organizations (20 respondents), followed by senior managers or HR managers (6), administrators (3), board members (3), and others (7). For gender, 26 of the practitioners were women and 13 of them were men. No participants were identified as non-binary, transgender, or other gender identifies or chose not to disclose their gender. 20 of the respondents were Caucasian, followed by African American (5 respondents), Hispanic/Latino (2), and others (4). For age, 13 respondents were aged 55 or older and 13 respondents were aged 45-54 years old. Followed by 34 or younger (10), and 35-34 years old (3). In addition, the majority of respondents in the practitioner survey, belonging to nonprofit organizations with a budget size of $100,000 and above, were 26 respondents. Followed by $ 25,000 - $49,999 (7 respondents), $50,000 - $74,999 (1), and $75,000 - $99,999 (1).

For the scholar survey, the respondents held different positions, including full-time professor (8 respondents), assistant professor (7), associate professor (5), adjunct faculty/ part-time lecturer (2), researcher (2), and others (4). For the respondents' gender identification, 21 scholar respondents identified as women, and 7 of them were men. The majority of race/ethnicity of respondents were Caucasian (20 respondents), followed by Asian (3) and Others (3), Hispanic/Latino (2), and Black/African (1). Eleven (11) respondents belong to age 55 or older, and 10 respondents belong to age 35~44. Followed by 45-54 years old (3), 34 or younger (3). In addition, the survey asked scholars about their professional experience in nonprofits. The majority of the scholars had served as board members (21 respondents), followed by consultants (16), staff members (13), and others (2).

Comparative analysis. Table 2 shows the integration of social equity in agency policies and the prioritization of social equity considerations in policies for scholars. First, by adopting the diversity strategies questionnaire items from the GuideStar survey, practitioners were asked whether they incorporate social equity into their agency policies. The practitioners in this study highlighted that social equity was incorporated in the agency's policies across multiple aspects. The agency's policy regarding program operations and activities had higher odds of incorporating social equity into policies (90.0% of yes in this category) compared to all other policies. This was followed by other methods (88.2%), staff/ board recruitment (86.1%), committee-staff/board (84.4%), and strategic or operational plans (83.8%). In contrast, "salary/income" (73.1%) and vendors (73.3%) had lower odds of adoption.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Practitioner			Scholar	
Position	Executive Director	20 (51.3%)	Full-time professor	8 (28.6%)
	Senior/HR Manager	6 (15.4%)	Associate professor	5 (17.8%)
	Board	3 (0.7%)	Assistant professor	7 (25.0%)
	Administrator	3 (0.7%)	Adjunct/part-time faculty	2 (7.1%)
	Other	7 (17.9%)	Researcher	2 (7.1%)
			Other	4 (14.4%)
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian	20 (51.3%)	Caucasian	20 (68.9%)
	Black/African	5 (12.8%)	Black/African	1 (3.4%)
	Hispanic/Latino	2 (5.1%)	Hispanic/Latino	2 (7.1%)
	Asian		Asian	3 (10.3%)
	Other	4 (10.2%)	Other	3 (10.3%)
Age	34 or younger	10 (25.7%)	34 or younger	3 (10.3%)
	35-44	3 (7.7%)	35-44	10 (34.5)
	45-54	13 (33.3%)	45-54	3 (10.3%)
	55 or older	13 (33.3%)	55 or older	11 (37.9%)
Gender	Female	26 (66.7%)	Female	21 (72.4%)
	Male	13 (33.3%)	Male	7 (24.1%)
Budget Size	$25,000 - $49,999	7 (17.9%)		
	$50,000 - $74,999	1 (2.6%)		
	$75,000 - $99,999	1 (2.6%)		

For scholar group surveys, respondents were asked to rate the priorities of the diversity strategies/policies on 1-5 scale (5 = most important). As shown in Table 2, scholars indicated higher priorities on other methods (average rating of 4.6 out of 5). Similarly, the three categories received the same average score of 4.3, including program operations and activities, staff/board recruitment, and upper-level management. The agency's policy regarding strategic or operational plans had an average score of 4.2, while the committee-staff/board received an average score of 4.1. In contrast, certain policies pertaining to agency aspects had lower levels of priority, such as salary/income (average of 3.4), and age (average of 3.4).

Table 2. Social Equity Incorporation in Policy

	Practitioners			Scholars		
	yes	no	% of Yes	Average	practitioners	scholars
Program operation & activities	36	4	90.0%	4.3	1	2
Other methods	15	2	88.2%	4.6	2	1
Staff/board recruitment	31	5	86.1%	4.3	3	2
Committee (staff/board)	27	5	84.4%	4.1	4	6
Plan (e.g. strategic, operational, etc.)	31	6	83.8%	4.2	5	5
Staff/board retention	28	7	80.0%	3.9	6	9
Upper level management	27	7	79.4%	4.3	7	2
Age	26	9	74.3%	3.4	8	10
Board leadership	26	9	74.3%	4	8	7
Vendors	22	8	73.3%	4	10	7
Salary/income	19	7	73.1%	3.4	11	10

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
* Note: Two survey questions are used as follows:
[practitioners] Does your organization incorporate social equity into policies regarding the following items? (Yes/No)
[Scholars] What is the priority of the following items when you perceive a nonprofit organization as incorporating social equity into their policies? (1~5)

Table 3 shows the ranking of essential diversity criteria for nonprofits between practitioners and scholars. In the survey, practitioners were asked about diversity criteria: to what extent they thought it was important to nonprofit organizations. Overall, the scholar group reported higher importance on average than practitioners. As shown in Table 3, both practitioners and scholars regarded racial/ethnic criteria as the highest essential diversity criterion for nonprofits, with an average rating of 4.6 for scholars and 4.0 for practitioners. This was followed by gender (4.5 for scholars and 3.8 for practitioners), socioeconomic status (4.4 for scholars and 3.8 for practitioners), disabilities criteria (4.1 for scholars and 3.8 for practitioners), and cultural practices (3.9 for scholars and 3.6 for practitioners). In comparison, age and sexual orientation were less likely to be highlighted as essential diversity criteria in both groups. However, the ranking of age and sexual orientation differed between practitioners and scholars. Age received a higher average rating of 3.5 compared to sexual orientation's average of 3.2 for practitioners. In contrast, sexual orientation received a higher average rating of 3.8 compared to age's average of 3.7 for scholars.

Table 3. Essential Diversity Criteria for Nonprofits

Diversity criteria	Practitioners	Scholars	Difference	Rank* (prac)	Rank (scho)	Rank (diff)
Race/ethnicity	4.0	4.6	-0.7	1	1	1
Gender	3.8	4.5	-0.7	2	2	2
Socio-economic	3.8	4.4	-0.6	3	3	4
Disabilities	3.8	4.1	-0.3	4	4	5
Cultural practices (including religion)	3.6	3.9	-0.3	5	5	6
Age	3.5	3.7	-0.2	6	7	7
Sexual orientation	3.2	3.8	-0.6	7	6	3

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
*rank - practitioners, rank for scholars, rank of difference (practitioners - scholars)
**Survey question: Q. What diversity criteria (for board and staff) do you think are important for your nonprofit organization?

Table 4. Impact of Social Equity on Governance, Operation, and Management

Stakeholders	Practitioners	Scholars	Difference	Rank* (prac)	Rank (scho)	Rank (diff)
Organizational culture	4.59	4.46	0.12	1	3	8
Organizational fairness (in hiring and service provision)	4.38	4.59	-0.22	2	1	3
Organizational mission and values	4.27	4.54	-0.26	3	2	2
Inter-organizational partnership	4.24	3.82	0.42	4	10	1
Organizational innovation (practices and work process)	4.24	4.19	0.05	5	5	11
Stakeholders representation/inclusive governance	4.21	4.39	-0.18	6	4	6
Organizational transparency	4.17	4.07	0.10	7	6	10
Non-financial sustainability: volunteer recruitment	4.12	3.96	0.16	8	7	7

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
*rank - practitioners, rank for scholars, rank of difference (practitioners - scholars)
**Survey question: Q. How do you think social equity practices enhance overall nonprofit organizations' governance, operation, and management?

Table 4 presents divergent ranking on the influence of social equity on organizational governance, operation, and management as perceived by both practitioners and scholars. In the survey, the authors asked how they thought social equity practices enhance overall nonprofit organizations' governance, operation, and management. Both practitioners and scholars reported positively on the effect of social equity practices and higher than 4 out of 5 on most of the items. Among eight nonprofit organizations' governance, operation, and management related items, the top 3 ranked items were organizational culture, organizational fairness, and organizational mission and values. As shown in Table 4, organizational culture was the highest for practitioners (4.59 out of 5 on average) and the 3rd highest item for scholars (average of 4.46). Whereas scholars perceived organizational fairness in hiring and service provision as the highest category that social equity impacts on the organizational governance/operation/management (average of 4.6). This category was the 2nd highest for practitioners (average of 4.4). On the other hand, both practitioners and scholars responded that social equity had a relatively lower impact on organizational transparency and non-financial sustainability when compared to the aforementioned categories.

Table 5. Key Stakeholders on Decision-Making

Stakeholders	Practitioners	Scholars	Difference	Rank* (prac)	Rank (scho)	Rank (diff)
Clients	4.21	3.54	0.68	1	6	4
Board members/ employees	4.20	4.32	-0.12	2	1	7
Local communities	3.97	3.86	0.12	3	4	8
Individual donors	3.47	3.75	-0.28	4	5	5
Volunteers	3.43	3.27	0.16	5	8	6
Foundations/ grant providers	3.32	4.21	-0.90	6	2	1
Government agencies	3.22	4.11	-0.89	7	3	2
Businesses/ corporations	2.78	3.52	-0.74	8	7	3

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
*rank - practitioners, rank for scholars, rank of difference (practitioners - scholars)
**Survey question: Q. Who are the most significant stakeholders that affect your organization's decision making?

Table 5 displays the degree and ranking order of key stakeholders involved in organizational decision-making. Both surveys included questions regarding stakeholder perceptions. In the practitioners' survey, they were asked, "who are the most significant stakeholders that affect your organization's decision making?" For the scholar group survey, they were asked, "who do you perceive are the most significant stakeholders that may affect an organization's decision making?" According to Table 5, practitioners considered clients (average of 4.21) as the most crucial stakeholders, whereas scholars ranked clients as the 6th most important stakeholders (average of 3.54). Scholars, on the other hand, highlighted board members (average of 4.32) as the most significant stakeholders, while practitioners ranked board members as the 2nd highest in importance (average of 4.20). Furthermore, scholars regarded government agencies as the 3rd most significant stakeholders, whereas practitioners ranked them among the least important (7th ranking). The most substantial differences in average ratings of stakeholders between practitioners and scholars were observed for foundations/grant providers (0.90 higher for scholars), government agencies (0.89 higher for scholars), businesses/corporations (0.74 higher for scholars), and clients (0.68 higher for practitioners).

Table 6 shows the essential organizational elements for culture competency, as perceived by practitioners and scholars. Both groups were asked to rate the importance of these elements for nonprofits to embrace cultural competency with the question: "how important are the following elements for a nonprofit organization to embrace cultural competency?" As shown in Table 6, the ranking of crucial organizational elements was consistent for both practitioners and scholars. Cultural practices emerged as the most vital elements for cultural competency with an average rating of 4.2 for practitioners and 4.1 for scholars. This was followed by belief system (4.0 for practitioners and 4.1 for scholars), language (3.9 vs. 4.0), and religion (2.8 vs.3.8). While the ranking of these elements was the same for both groups, religions exhibited the largest difference in average significance between practitioners and scholars. For both groups, religion had the biggest gap, an average of significance between practitioners and scholars, with scholars rating it 0.9 points higher on average.

Table 6. Essential Organizational Elements on Cultural Competency

Cultural competency	Practitioners	Scholars	Difference	Rank* (prac)	Rank (scho)
Cultural practices	4.2	4.1	0.0	1	1
Belief system	4.0	4.1	-0.1	2	2
Language	3.9	4.0	-0.2	3	3
Religion	2.8	3.8	-0.9	4	4

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
*Survey question: Q. How important are the following elements for a nonprofit organization to embrace cultural competency?

In addition, this study explored the top 10 keywords deemed most pertinent to social equity by the respondents. Figure 1 presents the different ranking of top 10 keywords regarding social equity between the practitioners and scholars. As shown in Figure 1, a total of eleven keywords were addressed across both groups. The keywords that were mentioned by both groups include equity, diversity, inclusion, fairness, and culture competencies. The keywords that were mentioned by only the practitioner group include justice, representation, and transparency. The keywords from only the scholarly group include mission, belief system, and vision. For the practitioners, "Equity" was the most frequently highlighted keyword (15 times), whereas "Diversity" was the most frequently addressed keyword for the scholar group (18 times). For the practitioner group, "Diversity" was the secondly highlighted keywords (12 times), followed by "Inclusion" (9 times), "fairness" (7 times). "Culture competencies", "Justice", "representation", and "transparency" were mentioned with some frequency (5 times each) for the practitioners. For the scholar group, "culture competencies" was the secondly highlighted keywords (15 times), followed by "inclusion" (14 times), and "mission" (7 times). "equity", "fairness", "belief system", and "vision" were mentioned five times each by the scholars.

Focus Group Interview. As previously mentioned, the authors conducted virtual interviews with three practitioners from nonprofit organizations. Initially, the interviews were carried out using five primary questions as a basis, including 1) keywords to describe social equity; 2) effects of social equity on nonprofit's governance, operations, and management; 3) important criteria that nonprofits should consider for social equity; 4) significant stakeholders; and 5) types of culture competencies. The key findings from the interviews were underlined in Table 7.
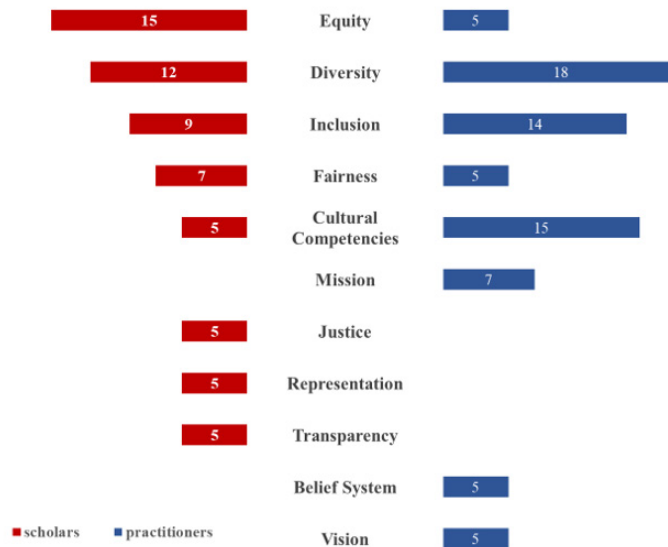
Figure 1. Top 10 Social Equity Keywords

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)
*Note: [survey question] Social equity can be perceived with different lens. In this study, social equity is suggested as the fair, just, and equitable management of nonprofit institutions. Components of social equity in management may include overall diversity of board and staff members, proportional representation of stakeholders, and incorporation of cultural competencies (e.g. language, religion, cultural practices, belief system, etc.). What are ten keywords that describe the social equity management practices of nonprofit organizations? (You may choose words listed in the statement above, or you may select additional keywords from your organization's documents/practices, e.g. mission, vision, diversity statement, etc.).

Table 7. Key Findings from Interviews

	Interview Summary
Social equity keywords	Action-oriented & providing practical tools Keywords: access, action plan outcomes, partners/collaboration, engagement, giving people chances with different backgrounds, openness to learning, social equity management
Organizational variables and social equity	Culture, financial sustainability, client-centric
Diversity criteria	Mix of multiple criteria: gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, cultural practices (including religion), disabilities, socio-economic status, and age.
Significant stakeholders	Highlighting clients, government, and donors/partners
Cultural competency	Religion, language, and political beliefs as key considerations

Source: Authors' survey data (2021)

First, the participants were asked to provide keywords that described social equity. The interviewees noted seven keywords, including "access", "action plan outcomes", "partners/collaboration", "engagement", "giving people chances with different backgrounds", "openness to learning", and "social equity management". Organization A, focusing on their alternative education tutoring service, used the term "access" as removing barriers for their clients. The interviewee rephrased the term with "family-like engagement." To characterize the term, "action plan," she emphasized that it should be "client-centric," not "casebook driven." The value of social equity lies in recognizing the existing inequalities when understanding the respective clients' situation in the starting line in their action map. Organization B highlighted "social equity management" and connected the task with the idea of board and staff diversity

in their human resource management. Organization C pointed out the elements of "development" and "journey" as the process from a social equity perspective. The interviewee emphasized the possibility for change and development by embracing "openness to learning."

Second, regarding the question on the effects of social equity on nonprofit organizations' governance, operation, and management variables (e.g. performance, mission/values, financial sustainability, culture, innovation, and inter-organizational partnerships), the interviewees gave generally high evaluations for the effects of social equity. Akin to the survey, focus group interviewees also gave high scores to organizational culture. However, most of the other variables were also given equivalently high evaluations. This common high evaluation comes from various grounds. For example, organization A characterized the relationship between these organizational variables as "interconnected," implying that social equity and organizational variables are not separable in the management practices and priorities. Organization B pointed out "client need" to justify diversity of board recruitment and this client perspective connects the social equity's contribution to organizational variables. Organization B also stated that various "mindset" brings organizational innovation by providing examples of its innovative reentry program. Organization C paid attention to a "funding perspective" in order to explain the contribution of social equity to organizational sustainability. Donors place emphasis on social equity and diversity when they choose their beneficiary organization. Therefore, embracing social equity in their organizational management would enhance financial sustainability.

Third, for the diversity criteria upon which nonprofit organizations place importance, three organizations prioritized different criteria for their diversity such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ ethnicity, cultural practices (including religion), disabilities, socio-economic status, and age. Organization C chose "race/ethnicity" and "age" as their diversity criteria. In terms of "political belief" and "religion," they were not very inclusive, although they did think they needed to be more inclusive. Organization B selected "social economic status" (poverty and their claim status) and "age" as diversity criteria that they thought was important (4 out of 5 scales of importance) as well as "cultural practices (including religious beliefs, religious practices)" and "disabilities" (3 out of 5 scales of importance). Organization A chose "religion" and said "shared values" would be more important than diversity criteria themselves. Organization B pointed out that relatability and empathy are the grounds upon which diversity is important, and these criteria had to be comprehensively mixed. It was because people tend to work more closely when they can "relate to or have empathy" for a certain group of people in the population.

Fourth, regarding identifying most significant stakeholders, focus group respondents emphasized the importance of client-driven decision making. Organization A emphasized the importance of clients engaging in decision-making processes. Local communities were selected as important stakeholders by two focus group nonprofits. Organization B emphasized "client need" as the essential element to be taken into account in nonprofits' decision-making process. Government agencies were underlined as the key funding source for nonprofits. Organization B was willing to work more with for-profit donors and partners ("business") because of less restrictions on funding. Furthermore, board members are "big decision makers" and bring networks for funding and resources for the nonprofit organization. Organization C chose clients, foundation/grant providers, and community as its stakeholders and intended to diversify funders to make the nonprofit organization more financially sustainable.

Fifth, as for cultural competency in organizational operation and management, focus group respondents mentioned religion, language, and political beliefs as key considerations. Organization A embraced cultural competency by having people (e.g., recruiting volunteers) who represent the groups.

Furthermore, organization A emphasized the religious component of cultural competency as "more values they can share." Organization B was an inclusive organization, having diverse people who can speak different languages and feel comfortable in terms of overall culture. From the religious perspective, they try not to "discriminate" and set a certain day or time for people who may practice their faith (e.g., going for prayer). Organization C mentioned they are not always inclusive of different political beliefs in terms of their board member recruiting.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how nonprofits embrace social equity through their practices and examined the differences in perceptions of social equity by scholars and practitioners. With discussions on social equity and DEI increasing in the nonprofit field, existing empirical data lacks comprehensive explorations of the current practices and the differences in perceptions of the practitioners and scholars.

This study's findings suggest that nonprofits incorporate social equity values into their practices proactively and comprehensively. Among the items, program operations and activities show a higher level of adoption compared to other policies. For the scholar group, their priority assessment on policy incorporation was significant for staff/board recruitment, upper-level management, and program operations/activities. The scholar group tended to emphasize diversity criteria more than the practitioner group. Across the criteria items, the emphasis level was relatively even, while the racial/ethnic criteria were the highest in both groups. As for stakeholder significance, the practitioner group emphasized clients and local communities, whereas the scholar group emphasized regulatory agencies (government agencies) and funders (foundations). As for cultural competency, both groups commonly emphasized varied components of cultural competency such as religion, language, and cultural practices.

Practitioner and scholar groups showed slightly different orders in terms of their perception of social equity and its related values. The scholar group's priority was in the order of equity, diversity, inclusion, fairness, cultural competency, justice, representation, and transparency. On the other hand, the practitioner group's priority order was as follows: diversity, cultural competency, inclusion, mission, belief system, fairness, vision, and equity. This priority order could not be configured in a single dimension and these values are not mutually exclusive. However, the difference lies in the fact that the scholar group emphasizes accountability related criteria such as transparency more, while the practitioner group emphasizes practical management elements, cultural competency, mission, and value systems. In a similar vein, the interview findings show that nonprofit practitioners frequently mentioned action-oriented keywords and specific tools to achieve related values. For example, "access," "action plan," "engagement," and "management" were highlighted by nonprofit practitioners in the interview, revealing specific measures taken and managed by respondent nonprofit organizations.

Regarding the question on nonprofits' mission/program focus, respondents mentioned the importance of stakeholder engagement. During an interview, a practitioner emphasized the significance of stakeholder engagement. Identifying and scanning stakeholder environments is key to understanding the demands and expectations that an organization addresses and manages (Jeong, 2013; Jeong & Kearns, 2015; Romzek & Dubnick, 2018). Understanding stakeholder representativeness also requires the existing intersectionality among various identities including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status (Weisinger et al., 2016). Intersectionality of organizational management and its programs was also pointed out during the interview. The representativeness of respective sub-groups in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation may be a good indicator to reveal how fairly an organization considers the voices/views of the corresponding groups as well as their overlapping identities. This also raises tasks for researchers to better

capture the intersectional dynamics when examining social equity and diversity for nonprofit organizations (McCall, 2005; Weiginger, 2017).

Identifying and understanding nonprofits' key stakeholders provides insight into whose interests and expectations drive nonprofits' decisions on their management and policy, including a matter of social equity. This stakeholder assessment can also be a reflection of their perceptions to whom nonprofits are accountable. Based on the results in this study, Scholar and practitioner groups seemed to have different emphases between upward and downward accountability. Upward accountability refers to nonprofits' relationship with and responsibility toward donors, foundations, and government, whereas downward accountability is about nonprofits' responsibility toward organizational mission, staff, and community level implementers and beneficiary groups (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). The scholar group highlighted upward accountability more than downward accountability, while the practitioner group revealed the opposite priority. This may reflect the foundations of the respective groups and their priorities. Scholar groups may emphasize reporting obligations toward regulatory agencies and grantors because of the legal and financial accountability. The scholar groups may also focus more on the narrow definition of accountability such as legal compliance or financial transparency. On the other hand, a substantial number of nonprofit practitioners may base their priorities on the clients and communities they serve because it is their main organizational mission. The organizational mission and its commitment to the mission are at the core of nonprofit practitioners' perception of accountability. While both aspects of accountability are important, the approach of nonprofit practitioners' is more directly focused on organizational missions and broadened definitions of accountability.

This study's findings contribute to enhancing social equity in the nonprofit sector, for both academics and practice. Scholarly research and practice management mutually influence each other and the whole nonprofit sector may evolve from the effects of the integration of these two groups. For example, the two most prevalent nonprofit and voluntary sector professional associations, The Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) and The International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), bring these two groups together to discuss and seek the advancement of the sector. Understanding the similarities and differences of these two groups' perception of social equity will contribute to embracing and enhancing accountability and commitment towards multi-stakeholders including internal (e.g. staff, board members) and external (e.g. government agencies, donors, clients, community), upward (e.g. funders and regulators) and downward (e.g. clients and beneficiary groups), by revisiting differences to reduce the gap (e.g. emphasis on theoretical or practical elements) and underlining similarities to be reflective of these common emphases (e.g. emphasis of board and employee significance by both groups; acknowledgement of cultural competency by both groups) in social equity understanding.

Despite this study having made valuable insights regarding different perceptions of social equity between nonprofit practitioners and scholars, it is essential to acknowledge notable limitations of the findings in this study. First, due to the small number of survey responses, conducting further statistical analysis to compare the difference between practitioners and scholars was not feasible. Second, while surveys were conducted for both groups (scholars and practitioners), this study has not conducted separate scholar group interviews. This can be justified because the main objective of the practitioner interviews is to further examine nonprofit practices given the limited information available in the literature on nonprofit social equity practices and management. However, it is still left as a limitation because the full comparison is offered only via survey information. Third, this study is exploratory in nature. This study explored the differences and similarities between practitioners and scholars in their perceptions of social equity between practitioners and scholars in the nonprofit sector, indicating the need for further research with more comprehensive data.

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