



Talking About Income Inequality

Topos research for the Ford Foundation establishes a set of framing principles that can help communicators more effectively engage audiences on job quality issues like minimum wage and paid sick leave. This memo considers how the recommended strategy relates to the current widespread conversation about *income inequality* – and also reflects earlier Topos research experience on topics related to inequality.

A challenging topic

A 2008 paper by Topos principals¹ focuses on *inequality*, and addresses some of the potential pitfalls inherent in a discussion of this topic:

From one point of view, [a] focus on inequality is justified and even morally essential. What could be more important than trying to address the many areas in American society where one group is disadvantaged relative to others? Observations about inequality aren't just true, they're also at the heart of many people's motivation to become involved. Much of the passion that drives activism and advocacy springs from people's instinctive rejection of inequality, and their commitment to working against it.

BUT, does a commitment to reducing inequality mean that we know how to talk about inequality? Years of research on how Americans understand and talk about social issues suggest that, depending on the audience, discussions of inequality must overcome important and complex challenges. In fact, the findings show clearly that when we talk directly about inequality, listeners often take away a message that is the opposite of what we intended, and despite our skill and our good intentions, the discussion can end up doing more harm than good. While there are certainly some audiences that respond exactly as hoped, communications that are targeted at the general public can often fall on deaf ears, or worse, when they focus on this theme.

The reasons have partly to do with American assumptions and values – and at an even deeper level, with the (universal) nature of everyday thinking, and the mental tools people everywhere use to think about the world.

The challenges discussed in the paper include the following, among others:

¹ Joseph Grady and Axel Aubrun, “Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Discussing Inequality,” 2008, published in the “You can get there from here ...” paper series from

- For insiders, significant *outcome* disparities signal that external forces are creating different advantages and disadvantages for different groups. But for average people, there is a natural tendency to see different outcomes as the result of different *individual* actions and choices.
- Opportunity and individual responsibility are deeply engrained American cultural values – we *want* to believe that people create their own destinies in our society.
- The cognitive realities of everyday thinking make it easier to focus on *anecdotes* than on statistical disparities – and there are plenty of anecdotes to support any perspective we are predisposed to take, including perspectives that dismiss systemic barriers to equality.
- Some discussions of inequality can trigger defensiveness, guilt and denial if people feel they are being accused of causing others' suffering.
- More generally, discussions of inequality can sometimes trigger an us-them perspective that plays out in unhelpful ways, and a rhetorical mode of dialog (as opposed to reasonable mode), that is more about defending positions and taking stands than about taking in new perspectives.

Importantly, these reasons hold even *aside* from political orientation – that is, even liberal Americans can easily default to perspectives that minimize or rationalize the problems related to inequality.

The authors do not conclude that communicators should *avoid* discussions of inequality, but that they need to take great care in *how* they discuss it, if they hope to engage attention and change minds. For instance, they can focus on *solutions* rather than just problems, on *causes* rather than just outcomes, on *broad* impacts rather than just individual ones, and on stories told in ways we can *all* identify with.

Things haven't changed much

Since publication of the earlier paper, the economy has changed and the Occupy movement made headlines, so can we assume none of the earlier cautions apply?

We should be very careful about assuming that is true – partly because the challenges discussed in the 2008 paper mostly arise from fundamental cultural perspectives and cognitive tendencies, that don't change quickly, if ever.

The Pew Center conducts a regular survey of American values and in a recent report, the Center's founding director Andrew Kohut and his co-author conclude that there's been no real shift in public opinion about economic inequality despite the fact that there's been more media attention to the issue since the Occupy movement and the 2012 election.

...[T]here is little demand for addressing economic inequality as a social issue (see Tables 9 and 10). In a December 2011 Gallup survey, most Americans (54 percent) rated reducing "the income and wealth gap

between the rich and the poor” a relatively low priority for the federal government; just 46 percent rated it as important for the government to tackle, compared with 70 percent who wanted to see policies aimed at increasing equality of opportunity. In the same survey, a 52 percent majority believed that income inequality is an “acceptable part of our economic system.” This is a slight increase over the 45 percent that held that view back in 1998.²

Anecdotal evidence supports the Pew research and analysis. Consider the following representative selection of comments regarding a recent article about income inequality on the *Boston Globe’s* web page³:

Some people make more money, some people don't. That's life - Why are we obsessed with making sure we all have the same amount? Educate yourself and prosper yourself, stop wanting what others have achieved.

Simple solution: go to school and improve your skills in something that you enjoy doing and you too can be successful.

Anything to do with the influx of immigrants who take low paying jobs?

Sounds like capitalism is working in Boston! You get paid your value to your employer, if you don't think you're being paid fairly find a new job.

Capitalism has a "built-in" minimum wage. It's called, if you don't like what the job is offering, don't take it. And, if you don't like what your current job is paying, find another that pays better.

You [liberals] always talk about fairness.... Is it fair for somebody to get paid just as much as you even if they're not as skilled as you or work as hard as you?

if you educate yourself, work hard and don't fall into the liberal "share the wealth" and government dependency nonsense, you will do just fine.

You want to make more money? Work harder, get a better education. Oh, and stop whining.

So what's the problem? Some people are smarter than others. Some people work harder than others. Some people are luckier than others. Some people make a contribution to society. Some people are just slackers.

I went to college, I worked hard, I make good money. If you don't, well that's your

²Resilient American Values: Optimism in an Era of Growing Inequality and Economic Difficulty, Andrew Kohut and Michael Dimock, May 2013, Council on Foreign Relations, found online

³ See “Boston Has an Income Inequality Problem,” by Roberto Scalese, Boston.com staff, April 24, 2014, <http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/2014/04/24/boston-has-income-inequality-problem/jaHMvF5ifOGDG2lyxuNXcK/story.html>

problem. Welcome to America.

High taxes ... pay for a welfare state which attracts and retains those with low skills and low ambitions. If the state would stop being such a magnet for the poor, including illegals, it could reduce the cost of living and attack the "income inequality" problem from both ends.

Of course the group of individuals commenting online is self-selected, and may represent an extreme subset of readers. Yet, it's telling that there is no equivalent self-selected group standing up for the problem of income inequality described in the post.

One reason is that the same cultural and cognitive biases described earlier mostly still apply. Most of us still tend to see outcomes as the result of individual choices; we believe anyone who works hard can do well. Another important reason is the powerful ratcheting up of conservative objections to the conversation. For both ideological and self-interested reasons, there are loud voices ready to condemn talk of income inequality as class warfare. Given the default thinking of most people about individual responsibility – these criticisms have resonance.

In short, we're certainly not out of the woods when it comes to an explicit conversation about income and economic inequality. The idea may have gained wider currency, but is not yet become part of our shared cultural common sense.

Signs things are changing, even if we aren't there yet

Since the earlier paper by Topos principals was published in 2008, some developments may have shifted the playing field when it comes to explicit discussions of inequality.

A dramatic rise in references to "income inequality" in particular – among leaders, journalists and advocates, and disseminated in all media – suggests that influential individuals feel the climate has changed in ways that make an inequality discussion more palatable than it has been in the past. The President has spoken forcefully on the subject, and some Americans have at least heard of a film with "Inequality" in the title and featuring extended discussion of the topic by a former Secretary of Labor.

The presumed shift has to do with the default us-them divide. The 2008 paper was written during the Great Recession, but at a time when the longer-term implications for many Americans may not have been as widely appreciated as they are today. And it reflected assumptions about an "us" consisting of most Americans, doing OK by most measures, and a "them" consisting of smaller segments of the population, falling behind in various ways. But William Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, sums up a new Us-Them alignment like this (emphasis added)⁴: "The big change between 50 years ago and today is, back then we were looking down at the plight of the poor. Now we're looking up at the privileges of the wealthy."

In other words, the economic impacts of the Great Recession – which has created economic insecurity for such a high percentage of Americans – may eventually open up

⁴ As quoted by Meghan Barr of the Associated Press, in an April 30, 2014 piece entitled 4/30/14 in "How Much Credit Should the Occupy Movement Get?"

possibilities for a very different and more constructive discussion of inequality, in which *us* is now most of us, and *them* is now something like the often-cited “one percent.”

The Topos job quality research for Ford offers at least indirect confirmation of a potential realignment of *us* and *them*. Messages originally written about low-income work at the bottom of the economic scale were responded to as relatively *universal* themes. So many Americans feel economically insecure that the idea of difficulty affording “the basics,” for instance, resonates with a broad cross section of working people. The research suggests that there is a stronger tendency than there used to be to see *us* as struggling while *they* get richer – seemingly the start of a different context for an inequality discussion.

Recommendation

The core recommendations from the research for Ford are messages that help people focus on inequality without using the word itself. Build understanding of the way our economy works, without using language that will turn some people away from the discussion.

Consider language like the following:

If jobs don't pay enough for workers to afford the basics – from food to doctor visits and basic repairs – then people can't spend enough to keep the economy moving. We need economy-boosting jobs – ones that allow workers to spend on the basics. But large, profitable companies often pay as little as they can get away with, and even full-time jobs can pay so little that workers qualify for food stamps. If we demand a higher floor for wages and work standards, it ends up helping not just individuals and families, but also communities and the economy.

A broad cross-section of Americans responds strongly positively to this message. While it focuses explicitly on ideas about how the economy works, it also ends up striking a strong nerve with regard to the dignity of work, and basic fairness questions regarding how much people are compensated. In short, it is heard as an (indirect) indictment of exploitation (of *us* by *them*) and of the staggering and growing income gap between top executives and the rest of us.

A problem for everyone

More generally, one important goal when talking about the topic is to clarify that this is an issue that is important for all of us.

The research-based language above takes one approach to conveying this idea, but creative communicators can find others – such as the following (untested) metaphorical language:

Our economy/society has gotten more and more top heavy. A few at the top own a growing amount of our resources – and that's not sustainable. We need to change the rules that have pushed money to the top before we tip over.

The result of choices

Just as importantly, we need to consistently reinforce that current economic distributions are largely a matter of the choices we have made as a society. (The economy is *not* like the weather because we can impact the economy with our public policy choices.) That is, we need to reinforce the assertion that "We make the rules of the economy – and we have the power to change those rules." (See <http://inequalityforall.com>.)

Focus on solutions

Most of the time, our audiences are more engaged and motivated by discussions of solutions than of problems. It is helpful to point to concrete steps we can take – e.g.

Average people will be better off if we make sure we have the right to stick together to speak up for ourselves at work – about pay and so forth – and that employers can't take away this right.

Conclusion – be cautious about using the word inequality

While we can't offer evidence about how much the word "inequality" helps or hurts when *included* in a communication, we can say with some confidence that it is more divisive than helpful *when treated as the leading term and idea in a communication targeted at broad audiences*. It may be helpful with particular segments of the population who are predisposed to perceive that economic (and other) injustices are being done, but is not likely to be compelling (as the leading term/concept) for many others. It may even suggest a stance people object to – e.g. sounding like jealous complaining about those who are more successful.

If communicators want to make a point about inequality per se, they may want to refer to "extreme inequality" or use other such terms, to distinguish from the inequality that Americans believe is to be expected.

Overall, however, our goal should be to help see people see the bigger picture – of what is happening, how it is happening, who is affected, etc. And with this in mind, we may be better off leading with other ideas and words for now.