

Narrowing the Gap, Leveling the Field: How We Talk About Economic Inequality

An analysis by Anat Shenker-Osorio

May 2010

This project was sponsored by the Progressive Ideas Network and conducted in partnership with the Institute for Policy Studies, Opportunity Agenda, National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Commonwealth Institute and Progressive States Network, with contributions from Cognitive Policy Works.



Acknowledgements

A project of this size and complexity is never the work of one person. The author owes an enormous debt of gratitude to those whose insights, careful reading and informed criticism strengthened the analysis and this report. In particular, Barry Kendall of Commonwealth Institute and Chuck Collins of the Institute for Policy Studies shared their expertise, shaped this research and deserve credit for insights contained here. Many additional institutions supported this work but it was, of course, the people at these institutions who gave generously of their time: Juhu Thukral of Opportunity Agenda, Jim Carr of National Community Reinvestment Coalition and Nathan Newman of Progressive States Network. Additionally, thanks to Joe Brewer of Cognitive Policy Works who facilitated inclusion of their work. To all the interviewees who sat for what were admittedly unusual questions, thank you; I hope I did your brilliance justice. These interviews would have been far less useful without the verbatim transcripts supplied in record time by Kasandra Griffin. Much of this research rests upon earlier findings about how to talk about the economy and the economic crisis; made possible by the unparalleled talents and persuasiveness of Jenifer Fernandez Ancona. Lucyna and Yoram Shenker are the best parents anyone could be randomly assigned; they have offered everything from copy editing to unending patience to every kind of support. So too my siblings, Dana Scheele and Ross Shenker. And, finally, there is no way to thank my husband Donaldo Osorio enough, so I'll just reaffirm *somos mucho mas que dos*. Any remaining errors or omissions are, of course, my own.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Preface

In 2007, twenty of the country's leading think tanks and activist organizations formed the Progressive Ideas Network as a platform for collaborating together on the ideas and policies that will lead to bold, transformational change in our society. Our work emerges organically from our convenings, where we gather to think outside the narrow range of possibilities in current policy discussions, and imagine strategies for improving the lives and livelihoods of our fellow Americans.

At our annual meeting in 2009, a working group formed around the question of economic inequality: in a time of deep economic crisis, how can we talk about the role that inequality plays in holding back millions from achieving their highest potential?

Participants in this working group were steeped in data describing three decades of accelerating inequality in income, wealth and opportunity. We were grounded in the research about the consequences of these inequalities for democracy, social mobility, public health and social cohesion. But our group struggled with several questions:

- Is there a way to cogently explain how economic inequality contributed to the economic meltdown of 2008?
- Why have we failed to persuade the wider public that economic inequalities are a human created disaster requiring engaged solutions?
- How can we talk more effectively about inequality, drawing on the lessons of opinion and cognitive research? How do we think about inequality? Are there images and metaphors that effectively convey our concerns and solutions?

This report is the result of our shared inquiry, targeting the last set of questions.

We were pleased to enlist Anat Shenker-Osorio as our lead investigator. She reviewed existing research, examined over a thousand data points and conducted interviews with a wide range people who talk and write about economic inequality.

This report represents a new synthesis of cognitive research and practical communications lessons for how to frame and talk about economic inequality. Future work will focus on further refinement of these concepts and popularization for policy makers and advocates. We look forward to your thoughts.

Chuck Collins, Director, Program on Inequality and the Common Good, Institute for Policy Studies

Barry Kendall, Director, Progressive Ideas Network

Table of Contents

Introduction and Data Set.....	5
Understanding Conceptual Challenges.....	6
The abstraction problem.....	6
The causation problem.....	7
The government problem.....	7
The definition problem.....	8
The acknowledgment problem.....	8
The agency problem.....	10
The goal problem.....	10
Underpinnings for Beliefs About Inequality.....	12
Semantic Frames and Meaning.....	12
The Basic Inequality Frame.....	12
Other Elements in the Inequality Frame.....	14
Entities and Parameters.....	14
The Wealthy.....	16
The Poor.....	20
Class.....	22
Wages.....	24
Wealth.....	24
Simplifying Models.....	25
Conceptual Metaphor.....	25
Metaphorical Models for Inequality.....	26
Inequality as Horizontal.....	27
Inequality as Vertical.....	29
Inequality as Barrier.....	32
Inequality as Imbalance.....	36
Inequality as Force/Opponent.....	38
Inequality as Distortion.....	39
Inequality as Resource.....	40
Non-metaphorical Models for Inequality.....	41
Inequality as Mathematical Identity.....	41
Inequality as Concentration.....	42
Inequality as Injustice.....	42
Concluding Thoughts.....	43
Directions for Further Research.....	43
Summary of Recommendations.....	44
Appendix A: List of Interviewees.....	48

Introduction and Data Set

This report details my investigation into how people make sense of, come to judgements around and talk about inequality. Communicating effectively here -- conveying that inequality is a problem rooted in our economic system requires overcoming layers of default reasoning. People readily assume a simple relation between cause and effect: the consequences that befall individuals are a product of their efforts. Many believe the worst about government and have trouble seeing it as a problem solver. Finally, all of us reason more easily about lived experience than abstract ideas. These are formidable challenges to saying what you mean and getting heard.

Two top-line lessons emerged: (1) Most ways of discussing inequality impede recognition that unequal outcomes are a product of deliberate policies and thus require careful attention and solutions. I call this the *agency problem*. (2) Our best hope of tackling this problem of agency, especially dispelling the myth that poverty results from lack of effort is to speak from a model of *inequality as barrier*.

My analysis emerges from scrutiny of language about inequality. The data set includes (1) materials from progressive and conservative organizations, (2) academic writing, (4) portrayals of inequality in traditional and new media and (5) campaign materials on "marriage equality." This sample also includes one-on-one interviews with 19 leading thinkers on the topic of inequality; see Appendix A for names. I don't cite anyone by name. This analysis is based on over 1000 data points, or notable constructions that demonstrate underlying reasoning.

As with any complex concept, INEQUALITY¹ is understood through multiple simplifying models. These models are noticeable by paying attention to linguistic structures such as semantic frames and conceptual metaphors. And paying attention matters because not all models are created equal. Some imply that wealth is reward for hard work and taxation is punishment. Others help focus on mechanisms that channel resources to certain groups while depriving others.

In this report I detail the most prevalent models for INEQUALITY. I begin by summarizing the core communication challenges. Then, I move onto examining the linguistic patterns in the data and what they tell us about underlying reasoning, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. I conclude by suggesting directions for further research and summarizing my recommendations.

¹ Throughout this document, SMALL CAPS are used to signify the simplifying models used to understand a concept, rather than this word's usual meaning in speech.

Understanding Conceptual Challenges

To start, there's difficulty saying what inequality *is*. Bringing the relevant actors, actions, motivations and relationships to a comprehensible level is a critical component of making inequality believable and worth addressing. There are core conceptual challenges at play here, as in every complex political issue:

The abstraction problem

The human brain is wired to latch onto the tangible and shy away from the abstract. Where it's hard to see, feel, hear and thus have a visceral reaction to concepts such as "inequality," lived experience is immediate and well-known.

Despite popular idiom, our cognitive system is one of "I'll see it when I believe it." This phenomenon, *cognitive consistency*, means we are innate pattern recognizers and want what we believe to hold firm over time.² We create order, automatically and unconsciously, by categorizing and attributing simple causes to observed effects.

It's no accident that the first words a child learns are nouns. We can literally point to *table, dog, ball*, not so with verbs or modifiers. In communication the more concrete and experience-based our illustrations, the more easily understood and believed.

This is an immense challenge for discourse on INEQUALITY. At the outset, INEQUALITY is about *population level* differences, not individual ones: "inequality is when groups of people have less than other groups of people."³

Further, in our worldview, it's about differences attributable to *systemic flaws*, not individual ones. Not so for conservatives. Their opposition to addressing inequality rests on assertions about *individuals* -- and this is where brains naturally go. This holds for (1) causes of inequality: "there are two main reasons that American children are poor: their parents don't work much, and fathers are absent from the home"⁴ (2) criticism of concern over inequality: "individuals who worry overmuch about inequality can succumb to life-distorting envy and resentment,"⁵ and (3) critiques of solutions to inequality: namely, they will destroy incentives that make individuals productive.

² I'll See It When I Believe It - A Simple Model of Cognitive Consistency, Leeat Yariv, January 4, 2005.

³ Individual Interview

⁴ Understanding Poverty in America, Kirk Johnson and Robert Rector, Heritage Foundation, January 5, 2004.

⁵ The Vanishing Republican Voter, David Frum, New York Times, September 1, 2008.

The causation problem

Effects of inequality are visible, to most, anyway. The *causes* of inequality are up for debate. A debate that dictates the viability of solutions to what we term a problem.

Faced with differences in the wealth of a racial group relative to another, for example, we seek explanations. Sadly, the simplest and most concrete one is that one group “deserves” riches, the other doesn’t. All of us have the experience of working hard and of slacking off; most of us have been spared repeated discrimination. And none of our brains can grasp “systemic patterns of unequal treatment” -- it has no shape or weight.

Worse yet, our brains seek out evidence that confirms our preconceived ideas, rejecting anything contrary. If we already have a hypothesis that differences in economic well-being are a result of differential effort, arguments that reinforce this carry greater weight than evidence (no matter how robust) that negates it. If we already ascribe to the success-is-due-to-effort theory, an African American president is proof of it.

Conservatives lay it out this way:

If you want a donkey, if you want a meal, if you want an employee, don't complain about what other people have, go get your own. The tenth commandment⁶ sends a message to collectivists, to people who believe wealth is best obtained by redistribution. And the message is clear and concise: Go to hell.⁷

Inequality is an *effect*. The *cause* is difference in people's economic production.⁸

Opinion research shows this view is common. Pew Research reports “an overwhelming percentage of Americans believe that people who are **poor do not succeed because of their own shortcomings**, only 19% emphasized the roll of discrimination or other structural and economic forces that go beyond the control of any one individual.”⁹

The government problem

Much has been said about the problem of talking about government.¹⁰ The list of complaints against government is long and, in today’s climate, growing.¹¹ Yet for any meaningful change to happen, we need government involved.

⁶ The tenth commandment: You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

⁷ Closing the Wealth Gap, PJ O’Rourke, Cato Institute, June 11, 1997.

⁸ In Defense of Income Inequality, Peter Schwartz, Capitalism Magazine, March 28, 2007.

⁹ Why are people poor?, Neeraj Mehta, Star Tribune, June 22, 2009.

¹⁰ How to Talk About Government, A Frameworks Message Memo, March 2006.

¹¹ See, The People and Their Government, Pew Research Center, April 18, 2010.

Finding ways to talk about government that don't prime pervasive beliefs about lack of accountability, "government waste" and inefficiency are integral to making an effective case on policies to address inequality.

The definition problem

How much difference and in what deserves the label "inequality" make the definitions of this term almost as numerous as the people who seek to define it.

This leaves an opening for a pet conservative take on this issue -- there's no inequality problem. The poor are not poor: "most of America's 'poor' live in material conditions that would be judged as comfortable or well-off just a few generations ago."¹²

Leading off with -- *What is inequality?* -- during my interviews stumped most of my subjects. It's not only an inability to put numbers on it, INEQUALITY begins to sound like that obscenity canard -- "I know it when I see it." One subject noted:

Huge disparities are ones where you can tell there can be **no real explanation looking at market behavior or individual contributions to activities.**¹³

Other responses ranged from the tautological "the state of not being equal"¹⁴ to the benign "inequality is just differences and there are ways of measuring differences across populations."¹⁵

But diminishing differences is not only an extremely vague and unmeasurable goal, it's not rooted in deeply held values. Fortunately, most respondents went beyond this to bring up issues of fairness, systemic causation and harm:

I think of inequality as the moral, political, social, economic, spiritual **otherizing of one or a group of people to the point where to some way you justify them having less.**¹⁶

...structural, **societal separation of groups, depending on what the majority perceives as the most desirable characteristics**, or the least desirable, there are these structural separations that occur on a daily basis that are so embedded in our culture that they would almost seem unconscious to individuals, but when

¹² Understanding Poverty in America, Robert Rector and Kurt Johnson, Heritage Foundation, January 5, 2004.

¹³ Individual Interview

¹⁴ Individual Interview

¹⁵ Individual Interview

¹⁶ Individual Interview

you step back and look at groups or societies, it's very obvious where the bright lines are between those with and those without.¹⁷

...a difference in levels of **economic security** where you have a certain percent (sic) of the population that has access to, not only to their basic needs but to much **more than anyone would ever need, while the rest of the population is treading water just to stay afloat.**¹⁸

Does “inequality” signify simply some detectable difference or does it automatically have a systemic and moral dimension? It's clear you hope for the latter, but language evidence doesn't prove it's always up to the task.

The acknowledgment problem

Throughout the interviews, experts expressed a clear understanding and empathy for people's scarcity fears. Essentially, with degradation of public institutions individuals opt out of these systems and need money to pay for replacements. They can't trust the local public school, so they loathe the taxes that fund it. Both because they won't use it and they need that money for the hefty private school tuition they now face.

This, of course, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. As more people leave public systems, these systems further degrade driving more people to want out and the cycle continues. It requires a leap of faith to believe it really will all work better for your family if you come back into the system. Because this requires all the other families on the block to think this way as well. This is a scaled-up prisoner's dilemma -- we can't obtain the best overall outcome because no one trusts others will cast their lot with the collective.

There's no quick fix here. For now, we need to **acknowledge that these fears are real** and valid. Our tendency to not publicly state our understanding causes two mutually reinforcing problems. First, we drive people toward populist movements that *do* profess to “hear” them and share their concerns. Second, we fail to provide a clear *role* for individuals in our movement and our policy solutions.

Looking closely at the language data, it's striking how often conservatives directly address their audience -- saying “you” or “we” and stating something to do (work hard, take care of your family, open small businesses.) Progressive discourse almost never includes direct address and consistently fails to tell people what they can do right now to be part of the solution.

¹⁷ Individual Interview

¹⁸ Individual Interview

The agency problem

Roughly speaking, a progressive inequality narrative is as follows: groups possess differential power, more powerful groups create rules that disadvantage other groups, powerful groups end up better off and thus even more powerful, disadvantaged groups end up less well-off and thus even less powerful.

In order for this causal chain to hold, several things must be true:

1. People can make deliberate changes to “the system”: the economy.
2. Therefore, these systems aren’t independent entities, they don’t have agency.
3. Different groups are endowed with equal abilities, talents and ambitions.

Contrast that with the conservative view of ECONOMY AS SELF-REGULATING ENTITY, often likened to a person with ability, authority and judgment. Here, we see it’s the economy that generates wealth (not the people working in it): “the U.S. **economy hands out wealth** far more evenly.” And markets act on their own, “**markets reward** successful entrepreneurs and innovations. Just as importantly, however, **markets will punish** bad ideas and inefficient behavior.”¹⁹

If MARKETS or THE ECONOMY are presumed to run independently, humans can’t “rig” them. This is just the tip of the agency problem iceberg I’ll bring up many times. Here, from conservatives again, is a clear example of our failure to adequately place agency with the actors and institutions who make the rules that control allocation:

This silly but sadly widespread misimpression [that income is literally distributed] is compounded by talk of the median worker’s dwindling ‘share’ of the ‘national income’ as if the United States of America was a super-sized firm with profits to be bargained over and divvied up of ‘distributed’ among the interested parties.²⁰

The goal problem

Both in surveying progressive writing and in my conversations with activists, I found two distinct goals. Many of us pride ourselves on nuanced understanding of complex problems and willingness to seek out and consider multiple solutions. This, in terms of crafting policy, is a major asset. In terms of communicating clearly, it’s a disaster.

These two sets of beliefs delineate the problem they seek to solve in these distinct ways:

¹⁹ Frankly Demagogic, Dick Arme, Washington Times, March 8, 2007.

²⁰ Thinking Clearly About Income Inequality, Will Wilkinson, Cato Institute, July 14, 2009.

1. Focus on extremes -- massive differences are problematic in and of themselves. They contribute to inflated and diminished self worth, at the high and low ends of the wealth spectrum, respectively. They make society less cohesive. Not only is it unacceptable for people to have less than what allows for a healthy and fulfilling life; unrestrained riches are also problematic.

If calling America a middle-class nation means anything, it means that we are a society in which **most people live more or less the same kind of life.**²¹

...extreme wealth is also a social problem, and the **superrich have become a burden on** everyone else.²²

...**raise the floor and lower the ceiling.**²³

2. Focus on mobility -- differences, even enormous ones, don't really matter as long as everyone has a fair shot of ending up in a different place than where they started. Believers in this tend to add that there must be minimal standards for health, safety and well-being as well. Note that this second point is tangential to the overall thesis.

...the core of America, has always been that **we can live with big gaps between rich and poor as long as there is also equality of opportunity**²⁴

Many Americans are even **unconcerned about the historically high degree of economic inequality** that exists in the United States today, because they believe that big gaps between the rich and the poor and, increasingly, between the rich and the middle class, are offset by a **high degree of economic mobility.**²⁵

Because we have a capitalistic system that, whose **foundation is built on the idea of unequal outcomes.** Which necessarily isn't a bad thing, as long as we are **ensuring that basic needs are met for everyone and that everyone really does have equal opportunity to fulfill their own potential and their aspirations.**²⁶

While you may see more commonalities than differences in these two "positions", what matters is what the public sees. There's a lot of background noise in the world of

²¹ The Spiral of Inequality, Paul Krugman, Mother Jones, November/December 1996

²² This Land is Their Land, Barbara Ehrenreich, The Nation, June 2008.

²³ Individual Interview

²⁴ Upstairs/Downstairs, Gabriel Thompson, The Nation, June 11, 2008.

²⁵ Getting Ahead or Losing Ground, Julia Isaacs, Isabel Sawhill and Ron Haskins, Economic Mobility Project, February 2008.

²⁶ Individual Interview

politics. The messages that get heard provide a clear problem definition and solution. It's not obvious that folks working on INEQUALITY are speaking the same language yet.

With these challenges in mind, let's turn to the underlying reasoning that determines thinking about INEQUALITY. These thought patterns are largely unconscious, which makes them impossible to question, and therefore incredibly powerful.

Underpinnings for Beliefs About Inequality

Semantic Frames and Meaning

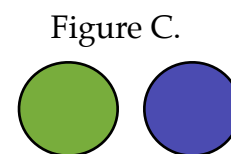
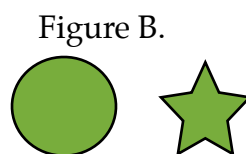
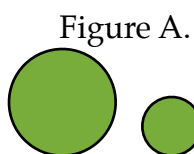
When we seek to make sense of complicated and intangible things, we explain them to ourselves and others, automatically and unconsciously, through different kinds of mental shortcuts. One common way to describe these shortcuts is **frames**. A frame is the whole package of information, both stated and implied, that we receive when we hear or read even something as simple as a single word.

When I say, for example, I went to a restaurant, this automatically brings many things to the listener's mind. You know that I most likely ate or drank something, paid for it and that someone else served it. You might assume I used a fork and knife; though if you heard I ate Chinese food, you could quickly modify your automatic assumptions about a restaurant to include chopsticks. Frames allow us to communicate about things without having to explain every aspect and detail of them every time.

While INEQUALITY is far less tangible and experiential than say, a restaurant, there are still some clear players and activities that shape our understanding of this issue.

The Basic INEQUALITY Frame

INEQUALITY suggests two entities and some detectable difference between them. As an image schema, inequality be represented as \neq or look like any of these:



Of course, INEQUALITY signifies more than simple difference for most people. Additional elements of meaning can include *fairness/equity*, *deviation from standard*, *undesirability*, *external causation*. In the sociopolitical context in which it's used, it means **differences**

between groups, not individuals. However, it’s critical to notice that these additional meanings -- with the potential exception of fairness/equity -- aren’t automatic. We can’t assume an audience hears any of these elements in the word “inequality.”

Consider, these ways to describe *difference* and the components of meaning they convey:

Descriptor	Elements of meaning
inequality	<i>difference</i> + improper, standard exists, two entities
disparity	<i>difference</i> + two entities
injustice	<i>difference</i> + improper, standard exists, external cause, negative
inadequacy	<i>difference</i> + unexpected, standard exists, negative
consequence	<i>difference</i> + intentional, generally negative, unspecified entities
diversity	<i>difference</i> + many entities, generally positive
discrepancy	<i>difference</i> + unexpected, lack, standard exists, neutral or negative

The fact of two entities or more differing isn’t necessarily a problem and certainly doesn’t imply a specific solution. Conservatives tout this (and taunt with it), “with wealth comes diversity — and what is inequality but diversity in monetary form?”²⁷

At minimum, we need INEQUALITY to convey (1) intentionality (2) unfairness (3) detectability (4) alterability (5) not inevitable. In other words, differences are a product of deliberate action, caused by unequal conditions, measurable and changeable. While these first four are largely self-explanatory, the fifth deserves more explanation.

Many contend that inequality is very much a natural product of a capitalist system. “Not inevitable” here is meant to convey that inequality isn’t a required feature of the system. We must communicate that inequality can be avoided either in structuring a more progressive system through, for example, robust minimum wage laws or through progressive taxation and increased EITC, on the back end.

Finally, there is one more issue with the basic meaning conveyed. INEQUALITY as the schematic representations suggest, leads the eye toward end states of difference --

²⁷ The Vanishing Republican Voter, David Frum, The New York Times Magazine, September 7, 2008.

outcomes. So much of what we seek to convey requires us to shift focus to *processes*. We need attention paid to the mechanisms in place, not just the results they deliver.

Other Elements in the INEQUALITY Frame

ENTITIES AND PARAMETERS

Just as INEQUALITY conveys difference, it also evokes *sameness*. Comparing two entities, especially groups, is a way of conveying that the members of each group have something(s) in common. These commonalities could be limited only to the characteristic being compared: Group A has X amount of assets and Group B has Y amount. Or, the members of each group could be said to share a range of characteristics like race, geographic location, origin, sex, age, occupation or political affiliation.

Thus, we must consider not only what we say about how the two groups differ, we must also investigate how we “bound” each group. It may be tempting, for example, to mention only relative economic well-being to preclude racist, sexist, classist, agist or ableist notions of inherent worth. However, this limited explanation shuts down further conversation, especially attempts to suggest a systemic problem and need for solutions.

If Group A is poor and, we note, Latino, we may prime the conclusion that this group is lazy or unskilled. If Group A is poor, and all we say they share is poverty, there is no explanation for why they and not others are in this condition.

There are two key frame elements stated or implied about INEQUALITY. The one just explored I will call the *entities*. The point of comparison, or difference between them, is the *parameter*. Here are two language samples with the **entities in bold** and the parameters underlined:

Rather, education and training have become a kind of lottery, whose **winners** and **losers** are determined, *ex post*, by the behavior of the economy.²⁸

This isn't garden-variety inequality — this is a winner-take-all deal that can destroy incentives for **everyone** except those in the **upper crust**.²⁹

Neither the entities nor the parameter need to be named explicitly. Sometimes one or both are implied just in the act of comparison, which, logically requires some criterion. In this example, “inequality has skyrocketed, climbing back to levels last seen in the

²⁸ The Evolution of Income Inequality in the United States 1969-2007, James Galbraith and J. Travis Hale, University of Texas Inequality Project, January 2009.

²⁹ A Billion Here, A Billion There, Eduardo Porter, New York Times, October 4, 2009.

1920s,”³⁰ there’s no mention of the entities nor the parameter -- though we can safely assume the latter is amount of wealth, assets, income or all of these.

Often times, only one of the entities is named, with the unnamed comparison entity understood as a baseline. In a sentence such as “those already not well-off suffered further setbacks”, there must be some second group (the well-off) for this to make any sense. The parameter is their level of affluence.

Consider, for illustration, “we must fight for women’s equality” and “what African Americans earn is unfair.” In the first, the implied comparison entity is men. The parameter is unspecified. Equal in pay? Educational attainment? Sports funding?

In the second, some group earns their due otherwise it makes no sense to register this complaint. The parameter, earnings, is used to compare African Americans to a baseline. Most readers would assume this is whites though nothing here asserts this.

Baseline matters because, at an unconscious level, it’s a way of expressing aspiration -- naming the goal toward which we work. It also triggers deeply embedded notions of prototype -- the “typical case” -- presumed for a given scenario. Again, if women are seeking equality to men, men are the standard by which we judge the achievement of or distance from our goal.

In the data from the progressive perspective, there is no one clear baseline entity. Here I’ve highlighted the named entity to facilitate recognition of the unnamed baseline:

...income inequality in the U.S. is more severe today than at any time since World War I, and the current recession is taking its heaviest toll on **the worst-off members of our society**.³¹

In this example, the baseline could be interpreted as the best-off members of society or simply anyone not in the worst-off group. This ambiguity leaves the reader to fill it in him or herself -- a potentially troubling situation. And, at the least, a lost opportunity.

This begs the question, then, what would we have as our implied baseline? A baseline is our way of implying the standard which we’d aspire the vast majority (some might even say all) would live. By virtue of using a comparative word like inequality, we are conveying the concept of a baseline -- whether we mean to or not. We might as well have this concept working for, not against, us.

³⁰ Inequality as Policy, John Schmitt, Center for Economic and Policy Research, October 2009.

³¹ Depression Era Inequality, Only Worse.

Conservatives often use the rich as their baseline, the standard they seek to achieve in their rhetoric. "If wealth is not theft, if the thing that makes you rich doesn't make me poor, why don't collectivists concentrate on the question, 'How do we make everyone wealthy?'"³²

A functioning economy doesn't allow for all its members to be truly wealthy, as we currently use this term. But, this leaves open the question of whether it's a desirable standard to promote for communication purposes. I argue no. It's disingenuous at best and muddles our arguments about the wealthy using up more resources than is sustainable.

One task before us, then, is to become more aware of and actively select the baselines we state or imply. Examine this example:

INEQUALITY: Basic Frame Elements
Entities -- the things compared, normally 2, stated or implied
Exps. *the poor, Asian Americans, those in the mainstream*
Parameter -- criterion/a of comparison, stated or implied
Exps. *earnings, net worth, educational attainment*
Recommendations
▶ When one or both entities are unnamed, notice the implied baseline or standard -- does it promote your goals?
▶ When the parameter is unnamed, make sure it's still obvious and intended or risk audiences thinking you mean identicalness not equality.

What King knew intrinsically, and **those who suffer the consequences of economic inequality** know through experience, has now begun to surface in mainstream economics: the greater the inequality the less our economy grows.³³

Here, the baseline is more obvious -- though still only implied: those who don't suffer the consequences of economic inequality. Given that we'd prefer no one "suffer", even if we favor some level of economic disparities -- bringing all people to this standard seems a credible, and worthwhile ambition.

With those elements laid out, let's turn to the particulars of what's in the INEQUALITY frame in this language data.

THE WEALTHY/RICH

Discussions of inequality don't go on long without mention of "the wealthy." By design, conservatives and progressives have differing opinions on the wealthy, which, in turn, generates divergent views on defining and problematizing INEQUALITY.

³² Closing the Wealth Gap.

³³ State of the Dream, Amaad Rivera et. al., United for a Fair Economy, 2009.

Rich people are characterized in many ways in common speech: “filthy rich” “in the money” “made of money” “flush” and “rolling in it.”

Except for filthy, these are characterizations of what rich people *have* not what they *are*. Wealthiness is defined by possessions, not immutable characteristics.

We see this pattern from progressives in the language data as well:

In that context, outrageously priced drinks at fancy clubs can be seen as simply taking money from **those with too much of it**, and passing it on to others.³⁴

This **private jet crowd** has been the big winner of the rigged tax system of the last two and a half decades...This **casino class**, with its hedge funds and mortgage gambling schemes, have fueled further economic instability.³⁵

The wealthy and the large Wall Street banks seem to live in **a world of their own**.³⁶

These forces, while easily measurable, don't fully explain the disparity between the **haves** and the have-nots.³⁷

However, we also see plenty of characterizations of wealthiness as imbuing set characteristics. Progressives allude to the wealthy as either predators or criminals:

All right, I'm sure there are still exceptions--a few scenic spots not yet **eaten up by** mansions...Of all the **crimes of the rich**, the aesthetic deprivation of the rest of us may seem to be the merest **misdemeanor**... There are other ways, too, that the **rich are robbing** the rest of us of beauty and pleasure.³⁸

Amid all this it's hard to see how **our oligarchs could be persuaded to restrain their appetites**.³⁹

The impact of technology and of foreign trade do not answer why it is harder today for most people to make a living but easier for a few to **make a killing**.⁴⁰

³⁴ Upstairs/Downstairs.

³⁵ Want to Stimulate the Economy? Tax The Wealthy, Chuck Collins, Institute for Policy Studies, January 24, 2008.

³⁶ Stimulus versus Deficit Reduction? Wrong Debate, Les Leopold, Huffington Post, November 30, 2009.

³⁷ The Spiral of Inequality.

³⁸ This Land is Their Land.

³⁹ A Billion Here, A Billion There, Eduardo Porter, New York Times, October 4, 2009.

⁴⁰ The Spiral of Inequality

We even see this kind of reference from conservatives, though not often: “Republicans do somewhat better further down **the corporate food chain.**”⁴¹

Otherwise, the wealthy are referred to as oligarchs or masters:

The new **titans** often see themselves as pillars of a similarly prosperous and expansive age, one in which their successes and their philanthropy have **made government less important** than it once was.⁴²

Top bank executives scored **regal paydays** for nearly destroying the economy, and some of them even helped pervert the government into an enabler of banking excess.⁴³

All of us, the great middle class that is striving every day to sustain each other, to build our futures and to build a better America, will stick together and defeat those who sought to **enslave us** economically.⁴⁴

There are advantages and problems with both talking about wealth as something people have and as something people are. On the one hand, we don’t believe the wealthy are some superior breed, an exclusive society not everyone can enter. However, as the negative *predator, criminal, master* notions attest, we are trying to tell our audiences that rich people behave badly. In a sense, being rich is something (unacceptable) they are -- or at the very least, a way they act.

Far more clear is the problem of talking about the wealthy “making money.” This suggests that the extremely rich create wealth. This belies the true and deeply important idea all the interviewees highlighted. Namely, money or wealth in a society is a product of resource endowments and labor acting upon these endowments. The notion that the rich, or anyone, can fabricate wealth out of nothing is not only false, it lends credence to superiority and deservedness.

The idea that money is “made” by the rich fits beautifully in a conservative worldview. As this author asserts, “many **super-earners** are also super-creative and **bring enormous value.**”⁴⁵ A sentiment echoed by many others:

⁴¹ Democratic Party of Elites, Michael Franc, National Review Online, May 7, 2008.

⁴² The Richest of the Rich, Proud of a New Gilded Age, Louis Uchitelle, New York Times, July 15, 2007.

⁴³ Fighting Inequality in Haiti and at Home, Zach Carter, The Media Consortium, January 19, 2010.

⁴⁴ Some Things Don’t Change in Grover’s Corners, online comment, New York Times, March 8, 2009.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Rogoff quoted in The Super Risks of Taxing the Super Wealthy, James Pethokoukis, Reuters, April 21, 2009.

Price reflects an object's market value--and the money someone earns reflects the market **value of his work**.⁴⁶

In this example alone, we find that the poor hold guaranteed entitlements on \$7 trillion of unfunded tax liabilities, for their old age and health benefits, which can only be paid for by the **rich, who are the nation's producers**.⁴⁷

There is no fixed, pre-existing (sic) glob of income that somehow oozes disproportionately into the pockets of the rich. Wealth is *created*. The top fifth of the population have ten times more income than the bottom fifth because they have *produced* ten times more.⁴⁸ (emphasis theirs)

In fact, not only do the rich do our producing -- they are practically public servants, to hear conservatives tell it.

Using the wealthy to pull the rest of us along is a very effective redistribution mechanism. No government-sponsored welfare system could deliver anywhere near the benefits that free markets routinely confer on American consumers.⁴⁹

Inequality of wealth and income...is the implement that makes the consumers supreme in giving them the power to force all those engaged in production to comply with their orders...**He who best serves** the consumers profits most and **accumulates riches**.⁵⁰

Top-performing CEOs in corporate America earn every penny of their compensation and then some. **They create wealth**, and by doing so create shareholder **value**, increased **consumer welfare and higher standards of living**.⁵¹

Another important aspect of the wealthy is their willingness to take risks -- the precursor to innovation and increased prosperity for all. This, WEALTHY AS MONEY MAKERS, creators of social good, idea is important to a conservative framework that not only accepts, but even encourages rampant inequality.

⁴⁶ In Defense of Income Inequality

⁴⁷ letter by Jude Wanniski, in response to The Spiral of Inequality.

⁴⁸ In Defense of Income Inequality

⁴⁹ Buying Time, Michael Cox and Richard Alm, Reason Magazine, August/September 1998.

⁵⁰ Inequality of Wealth and Incomes, Ludwig von Mises, Freedom Daily, October 1998.

⁵¹ Frankly Demagogic.

THE POOR

No single entity gets more airtime here than “the poor.” Colloquial expressions about the poor, “hard-up” “dirt poor” “piss-poor” “needy” and even “deserving poor”, which suggests others are *undeserving*, are generally about *characteristics not belongings*.

For the most part, poor is what people *are*, the reverse of what we saw about THE RICH -- as characterized on the left and right:

Edwards' (sic) two campaigns were an aberration in a two-decade-long shift in which the Democratic Party tried to frame its concern for **the neediest Americans** as part of a broader economic agenda directed, above all, at the middle class.⁵²

As long as the present steady flow of **poverty-prone** persons from foreign countries continues, efforts to reduce the total number of poor in the U.S. will be far more difficult.⁵³

He is going to take from those who believe in working to support their families and **give it to the worthless** and those who refuse to look for work.⁵⁴

Progressive language suggests helplessness among the poor, in an earnest attempt to direct attention, support and resources to them. For example, “all across the country young adults are **sinking economically**”⁵⁵ “this is an unmitigated disaster for **real people** trying to **hold their lives together**”⁵⁶ and “this life of **debt serfdom** often begins in college.”⁵⁷ Underwater, struggling to keep it together, under master’s control -- this suggests the poor have no agency. There is something about them that can’t succeed.

Surely this isn’t progressive intent, but in speaking about poverty in such dire and disempowering terms, it’s challenging to then portray the poor as equally capable of creating value and taking charge of their own lives as anyone else.

Above we saw the rich portrayed as predators. The poor even more frequently are prey. Or victims of various kinds:

⁵² The Poverty of Political Talk, Alec McGillis, The American Prospect, August 26, 2009.

⁵³ Poor Politics, Robert Rector, National Review online, August 27, 2007.

⁵⁴ comment on Barack Obama Should Listen to David Patterson, Brian Faughan, conservatives.com, December 12, 2009.

⁵⁵ Strapped, Tamara Draut, Doubleday 2006.

⁵⁶ Stimulus versus Deficit Reduction

⁵⁷ Strapped.

This current crisis, caused in part by **predatory lending** to communities of color, continues to erode the most accessible asset in communities of color: housing.⁵⁸

African Americans and Latinos were the **disproportionate targets** for the unfair, deceptive and reckless lending practices that triggered the foreclosure collapse and imploded the credit markets.⁵⁹

When **economically stressed and frightened people are anxious and sullen**, you never know who will capture their fears and hopes.⁶⁰

With little or no access to this essential protection, **these communities are nearly defenseless against the economic disasters** recklessly caused by wealthy individuals and corporations.⁶¹

The U.S. has been **waging a quiet war against its own poor** for decades as well.⁶²

Talking about the poor in a way that highlights what has and continues to impoverish them, while also asserting their worth and abilities as equal to anyone's -- is a huge communication challenge. These well-intentioned efforts to evoke the plight of the poor have a role -- but there's very little balancing this. We need more said about the possibilities the poor present for enriching society. The poor work hard. Where's the credit for all they do for society?

Authors who attempt just this, for example, "we squander **our human resources** when slack in the economy yields too few decent employment opportunities for those who want to work"⁶³ end up labeling the poor in a way we never would the rich. Can you imagine hearing about the wealthy as a "human resource"? And why are the poor "our" possession?

Right now, there are no perfect answers. The central focus of this research was on dissecting discourse on INEQUALITY, not THE POOR. It's clear there's more work to be done examining the latter in service of improving how we message the former.

In the meantime, one thing we must fix is **the complete silence of the poor themselves**. Every construction is about "them." Not only does this smack of paternalism and lead

⁵⁸ State of the Dream.

⁵⁹ An Equal Opportunity Recession, Jim Carr, National Community Redevelopment Corporation

⁶⁰ Rage the Left Should Use, Robert Kuttner

⁶¹ State of the Dream.

⁶² Carter

⁶³ Don't Blame Black Culture, Algernon Austin and Jared Bernstein, Baltimore Sun, November 8, 2006.

us to craft policy on behalf of a constituency that may not favor it, it implies a very dangerous thing.

If the poor are capable and knowledgeable about what needs to happen to them -- and we claim they are, why aren't we seeing them speak of and for themselves? This makes audiences think they don't care, haven't formulated opinions or can't communicate them. Hardly characteristics for a group we insist could really contribute to society if we stopped oppressing them.

CLASS

Depictions of class from conservatives and progressives differ. Progressives work from a CLASS AS CONTAINER model; conservatives almost always default to CLASS AS PLACE.

CLASS, for progressives, is an enclosure that holds some in and blocks others out. Authors speak of "bringing a greater number of Americans **into** the middle class"⁶⁴ or, conversely, people "**falling out** of the middle class."⁶⁵ CLASS AS CONTAINER brings up questions of adequate space -- "the American vision (though tragically denied to many initially) has been that growth and upward mobility would ensure **a broad middle class that always has room** for those willing to work and seek new opportunities."⁶⁶

This framework is great. Not only is it clear and based in something physical and common, it highlights what we believe about inequality -- that relative economic position is due to external impediment, not individual failing. CLASS AS CONTAINER primes audiences for what is, in my opinion, our most effective model, INEQUALITY AS BARRIER, described in the following section.

Whether they are just discussing difference or bemoaning the undeserved advantages of the public sector, for conservatives CLASS is a location in physical space:

It's not as if the Democrats have **taken over the top** of the socio-economic (sic) ladder and the Republicans **the bottom**. Rather, the Democrats dominate at the very **upper and lowest rungs**, while Republicans find their following **in the middle**.⁶⁷

[Government workers] **occupy a privileged class position**, their bonanza protected by law, and underwritten by the ability of the state to raise taxes on the

⁶⁴ Krugman

⁶⁵ Bottom Falls Out for the Middle Class, Ann Kim, Portland Press Herald, May 17, 2009.

⁶⁶ Rising Tide Economics, Gene Sperling, Democracy A Journal, Fall 2007.

⁶⁷ Goodbye "Regular Joe" Democrat, Karl Zinsmeister, The American Enterprise

rest of us, no matter how meager or nonexistent our own retirement arrangements or health care access.⁶⁸

More recently, conservatives have turned their antigovernment ire into the discourse of “new class struggle.” In this, the classes are personified -- people at odds over an unnamed goal. The conflict they describe is not of class as traditionally understood, similarity in economic status or family lineage, but as a skirmish between the public and private sectors. People who work in government are against people, rich or poor, subject to its dictates.

This accomplishes three things. It breeds further antigovernment feelings. Second, it creates confusion about what CLASS “is” by detaching it from wealth. (Though their principal complaint is the pay and perks of public employees.) Finally, it acknowledges the real lived fears and frustrations people feel.

What’s the *middle class*?

We’ve seen RICH, POOR and CLASS described. But what about THE MIDDLE CLASS? Those *working people, everyday Americans, regular folks* that politicians love? In this data, the MIDDLE CLASS, “grows” “shrinks” “is crumbling” “is joining the ranks of the poor” “is squeezed” and “erodes.” But this is about how the middle class gets affected from the outside. There’s almost nothing about what the MIDDLE CLASS *is*. Is it, for example, an immutable characteristic -- a way of being in the world like we see about THE POOR? Or is it more a life-style -- a set of things owned and accomplished, like THE RICH? This notable lack of discourse on, to coin a phrase, *middle-classness* is a lost opportunity. With a bit more work, we should be able to assign descriptors to “middle-class” that convey it’s a desirable place we should want to be.

Whether directed at government employees or more broadly, their focus is on *elitism*:

This is a herald of victory in **the class war: The elites speak, the masses laugh.** Social class in the US today is, at its heart, a modern version of the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787 when the states agreed that, for purposes of representation in the new republic, slaves were not worth as much as others. Our media, political, academic and entertainment elites are defined by a basic arrogance: They count more than us.⁶⁹

One group left out of this “elite?” Business. In this, they avoid mentioning who rich people are. Having enormous resources isn’t the problem -- displaying an attitude of disdain is. In making elitism, not wealth, the problem -- it remains possible to be incredibly rich and still lob charges of oppression on the government. Further, it provides a bond between “regular people” and the rich -- a common enemy.

⁶⁸ The New American Class Struggle, Thomas Lifson, American Thinker, March 11, 2009.

⁶⁹ The New American Class Struggle

WAGES

Another important component of INEQUALITY is WAGES and how they change over time.

Wages “have **trailed far behind** growth in productivity over the last thirty years, and, for many groups of workers, wages **have actually stagnated or even fallen** in inflation-adjusted terms.”⁷⁰ This kind of language suggests that wages are capable of locomotion. Of course no one believes this is literally true. But what’s important to recognize about metaphorical speech is that it leads audiences to unconsciously “get” certain things while obscuring others. In talking about WAGES as if they’re self-propelled, we miss out on the chance to highlight the external pressures -- the actors -- who caused wage levels to change. This is part of the **agency problem** that is hindering the clarity and impact of our discourse.

We would be better served to talk about WAGES as returns to workers on/for the value they’ve created. Wages are a share of the profits workers generate. Thus, describing their movement should include references to people. Rewriting the above phrase might sound like “over the last thirty years business has given workers less and less of the wealth they created.”

WEALTH

Finally, there’s WEALTH or MONEY in this frame. WEALTH is generally described as an object -- a thing useful not in and of itself but for accomplishing other things. “Wealth is good when many people have it. It’s good when few people have it. This is because money is a tool, nothing more. You can’t eat money or drink money or wear money.”⁷¹

What you can eat or drink turns out to be a good proxy for a main conservative focus -- purchasing power. Here they explain why the poor aren’t poor and perhaps it’s the rich we should feel for: “because the prices of such services (house cleaning, lawn care, yoga, psychotherapy) are relatively unaffected by the rise of competitive global markets, these landmark developments [goods are cheaper now] in **recent economic history have done less to improve the bang of a wealthy persons buck.**”⁷²

Conservatives claim that being rich and being poor is more similar these days. “The everyday **experience of consumption** among the less fortunate has become more like

⁷⁰ Schmitt

⁷¹ Closing the Wealth Gap.

⁷² Thinking Clearly About Economic Inequality.

that of their wealthy compatriots."⁷³ They've named this "the **democratization of luxury**."⁷⁴

However, WEALTH -- to the extent it has any real meaning -- isn't whether you can get a flat screen. Its most important features are (1) security and (2) enabling real, not just material, choice. The ability to start your own business, and forgo income in the meantime, or go to school or spend a year on a houseboat are the choices that wealth enables. Moreover, it's knowing that when life happens you have enough to survive.

This is a radically different and underrepresented idea of WEALTH. Progressives talk about it, but it's generally called other things like security, stability, savings. These are more precise descriptors, but if we want to dispel the notion that owning a microwave is proof positive everything is just fine, we need to alter how WEALTH is understood.

Simplifying Models

As we've just explored, there are multiple elements in the frame when we hear and read about inequality. And then there's INEQUALITY itself. The simplifying models we hold for it and what each tells us is "true" -- what's less relevant or simply not mentioned.

Knowing what assumptions we are conveying is critical. Without this, we may be saying things directly at odds with what we hope to -- sending mixed messages at best. And even reinforcing beliefs we oppose. Also, close examination of these models in use allows us to catalogue in which kinds of discourse they are most prevalent.

As usual, conservative rhetoric employs fewer models than our own. Thus, their messages sound at the same or similar pitch -- creating a clearer and generally louder impression. There's also a noteworthy difference between the models employed in progressive writing relative to those spoken by the interviewees.

The majority of these models are metaphorical. Thus, before launching into each, I explain conceptual metaphor.

Conceptual metaphor

Frames are just one way we deliver a whole bunch of information to our audience with very few or even one word. **Conceptual metaphor** is another pervasive mental shortcut.

⁷³ Thinking Clearly About Economic Inequality.

⁷⁴ Needing the Unnecessary, James Twitchell, Reason Magazine, August/September 2002.

This differs a bit from the regular metaphors you learned about in English. These comparisons are automatic and usually undetected by the author or the audience.

For example, one way people can make sense of something intangible like CHANGE IN EVENTS is through something experiential like FORWARD MOTION: we may get frustrated when our project doesn't *move forward* and we *hit a brick wall*; or we may instead hope we can *get the ball rolling*. And we ask how are things *going*?

Things get interesting when we have multiple conceptual metaphors for the same notion; this indicates we are able to think about the same concept in a wide range of ways and thus influence what's "true" about it. Consider for example, ANGER: we may be *boiling mad* or ready to *flip our lids*, especially if we're *hot tempered*. In these expressions we think of ANGER, something that assumes no real form, as HEAT APPLIED TO LIQUID IN A CONTAINER -- something we can see. On the other hand, it also makes sense to describe someone as *overcome by rage* and *struggling with their anger*. Then, ANGER is like an OPPONENT with whom we wrestle.

Conceptual metaphors are powerful things; they bring with them a set of conclusions that we transfer from the comparable concept to the one we describe and in so doing shape our understanding of it. When we think of ANGER AS HEAT APPLIED TO LIQUID IN A CONTAINER it's only natural that we'd want to let some of it go in a constructive manner -- in other words, *vent* or *let off some steam*. In contrast, if ANGER is our OPPONENT we'd more likely conclude that the way to handle it is to keep it all in, to *get a grip* on our feelings and not *give in* to our emotions and let them *get the upper hand*. Thus these mental shortcuts, here more specifically, conceptual metaphors, determine what makes sense about an abstract idea -- what we and others "should" do about it.

Metaphorical Models for INEQUALITY

I will now explore the seven metaphorical models most prevalent in this data.⁷⁵ The key insight here is that most of these models, and certainly the most popular ones in writing, are not effective and perhaps even damaging to conveying a progressive notion of system-based inequality as a problem requiring redress. For each, I highlight common expressions and explain how the model "works" in aiding or hindering our understanding of INEQUALITY.

⁷⁵ There were other models represented here but their language data was too scant to formulate robust conclusions. Further investigation that includes other kinds of language data may prove them more well-documented than in the current sample.

INEQUALITY AS HORIZONTAL

When people are reasoning about INEQUALITY AS HORIZONTAL, they use words like *spread*: “incomes rose faster than inflation for most Americans and **the spread between rich and poor** was much less.”⁷⁶ Or it can sound like “people who live in relatively equal societies live significantly longer lives than people who live in societies that are **deeply divided** between the rich and everyone else.”⁷⁷

By far, the most popular single expression of this is **gap**, as in “racial wealth gap” “worldwide gap between rich and poor”⁷⁸ “income gap” or “I really believe more and more that the way the United States is structured around capitalism is **generating a wider and wider gap between haves and have nots**.”⁷⁹ In writing on the progressive side, this was the most common formulation in this data set. In the interviews and from conservatives, it falls in the middle of amount of usage.

Just as we eliminate separation in space, we can diminish economic difference. We hear of “an economy that **bridges economic divides**.”⁸⁰ When you don’t have a gap anymore, you have *common ground*:

So I think that if we can get people to put themselves in other people’s shoes and not feel like there is a **vast gap** between the humanity that they think they have vs. the humanity they think other people of other colors and other genders have, maybe we can create that **common ground** to have policies that distribute things more equally⁸¹

This language is popular for good reason. It paints a clear image of what is otherwise intangible and uses something we all experience -- physical separation -- to convey monetary distance. This model allows us to get vivid and playful with our language -- “the chasm...has reached **Grand Canyon-esque** proportions”⁸² and “this is not just a gap. It’s a **deepening canyon**.”⁸³

Not only does it allow explanations of current difference, it offers easy ways to talk about change over time, the worsening of inequality, and still remain tangible. For

⁷⁶ Age of Riches.

⁷⁷ Individual Interview

⁷⁸ Individual Interview

⁷⁹ Individual Interview

⁸⁰ Individual Interview

⁸¹ Individual Interview

⁸² Is *Undercover Boss* Most Subversive Show on Television?, Arianna Huffington, Huffington Post, March 8, 2010.

⁸³ The Wealth Gap Gets Wider, Meizhu Liu, Washington Post March 22, 2009.

example, “across the political spectrum, there is almost universal acknowledgment that our nation (and planet) are **pulling apart** economically”⁸⁴ or “we will grow together or **grow apart**.”⁸⁵

Further, unlike the next model, it doesn’t introduce notions of inherent worth. We can’t glean from separation in space that one side is better than another.

However, the problems introduced with this language are serious. GAPS are about end-states. There is little here to suggest why we arrived at this divided place. It also offers no role for people inside of either increasingly distant sphere.

Further, it puts forth the idea that there are two separate, and therefore separable economies. According to conservatives, the poor even have their own address -- the “welfare state.” This works against the recognition of our interdependence, that at a certain point rich people have what they do *because* poor people do without.

Many authors express concern that we’re irreparably dividing, most famously John Edwards with his “two Americas” speech. Other formulations are intergalactic in their scope, asking “how vast has our **parallel universe** of the ultrarich become?”⁸⁶

But this is meant to express the differential rewards people are getting. In reality, there is **one** national economy and arguably one global economy in which we all consume, produce, exchange and live. Unfortunately, “there are two Americas when it comes to economic well-being and only one America when it comes to belonging to the same economy” is not the message we’re sending. And it’s the one we need heard.

Sentiments such as “the **more spread out we are**, the less we have a sense that we’re in the same boat, and we act differently toward each other”⁸⁷ and “we no longer live in a unified economy”⁸⁸ demonstrate that, at a policy level, progressives know this. As one interviewee declared,

Right now we’re developing into these separate little prisons of our own making; some people are there voluntarily and others are not, but that’s not really a healthy society.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ About inequality.org, Demos

⁸⁵ Sperling

⁸⁶ The Rich and the Rest of Us, John Cavanaugh and Chuck Collins, *The Nation*, June 11, 2008.

⁸⁷ Individual Interview

⁸⁸ Stimulus versus Deficit.

⁸⁹ Individual Interview

We just have yet to apply it to our messages, that continue to imply separate economic fates are possible. The language of *gaps* works against us.

INEQUALITY AS VERTICAL

Just as INEQUALITY can be represented horizontally, it also makes sense to talk of it as vertical difference. This, in defining inequality sounds like “I think of it as the difference in the power and security that people **at the top** have versus the absence of power and lack of security that people have really **in the bottom and at the bottom.**”⁹⁰

Top and bottom -- “they and their successors fought hard to **lift up the bottom and bring down the top**”⁹¹ -- are the most popular words. But there are other expressions that trigger this way of thinking:

‘Increased nutritional problems,’ they conclude, ‘may be a consequence of the psychosocial impact of living in a **more hierarchical society.**’⁹²

The enormous rewards that flow to **the summits** of Corporate America...⁹³

They may...have to **drop down** in their standard of living to some extent.⁹⁴

They never dreamed that starting a family would **plunge** them into such deep financial and emotional straits.⁹⁵

This model allows “**trickle-down**” to make sense. After all, you need to have someone above and below in order for assets to move as this theory posits. It also helps lend coherence to notions of “**bottom-up**” economic growth and the “**income pyramid.**”

Some solutions progressives have proposed emerge directly from thinking about INEQUALITY this way, “[by] keep[ing] **pay at the top within hailing distance of pay at the bottom**, the federal government would be unleashing several different marketplace dynamics — all of them positive.”⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Individual Interview

⁹¹ The Rich and the Rest of Us

⁹² Working Group on Extreme Inequality

⁹³ Working Group on Extreme Inequality

⁹⁴ Individual Interview

⁹⁵ Strapped.

⁹⁶ For a ‘Living Wage’ America, Cap the Top, Sam Pizzigati, Too Much, March 7, 2010.

This highlights some of the incredibly compelling reasons to use this model. First, unlike the previous one, it emerges from and reinforces the idea of common fate. It implies the ECONOMY AS CONTAINER: “there is a **giant hole at the bottom** of the American economy that has been **engulfing poor families** for decades.”⁹⁷

People are on top *because* others are below them. We are all *in* it together. Second, it is easily visualizable and offers language for describing the status quo, enumerating problems (e.g. people getting stepped on) and proposing solutions.

This model makes it easy to describe the reasons why we care about this issue. Notions like leverage are about the force one entity has over another due to weight or height:

Queen bees, priests, doctors, tend to be more rewarded, **more able to leverage other people toward more.**⁹⁸

My family was poor, it wasn't the lack of money that made life unbearable it was the ignorance...that allowed lots of people to have **power over us.**⁹⁹

But there's a reason it is the unchallenged favorite way conservatives describe INEQUALITY. It introduces hierarchy (literally) and with it the sense of moral superiority and deservedness. GOOD IS UP and the corollary BAD IS DOWN are some of the most fundamental conceptual metaphors we have in English. Thus, we say *he was down in the dumps* or *things are looking up* and call prolonged sadness *depression*. In this model, then, the wealthy are UP and therefore good, and the poor are bad.

Second, this model suggests why someone is in their relative position. It's all about *ladders* and *pulling yourself up by your bootstraps*:

So the entire '**decline**' of the middle class came from people **moving up the income ladder.**¹⁰⁰

As people **move from one rung of economic achievement to another**, their earnings, income, and wealth do not necessarily hold constant.¹⁰¹

But conservatives are in good company. Progressives also heavily rely upon this way of talking; this was a close second in popularity in the written data and commonplace in

⁹⁷ Stimulus for All, Sally Kohn, Huffington Post, January 14, 2009.

⁹⁸ Individual Interview

⁹⁹ Individual Interview

¹⁰⁰ Five Myths about the Poor Middle Class, Stephen Rose, Washington Post, December 23, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Analyzing Economic Mobility, Paul Winfree, Heritage Foundation, May 31, 2007.

the interviews. Both in overall use and in specifically mentioning ladders, “the intense concentration of wealth and income at the top of the **economic ladder** creates an enormous **dead weight** that **presses down** on society — and everyone in it.”¹⁰²

Our most basic assumptions about ladders are that you should use them to climb higher. When we introduce this, we bring implications that people’s lack of money is of their own making. This, as above, is a hazard of zeroing in on outcomes, without specifying what happened before.

Examine these sentiments that, while motivated by very different beliefs and aims, tell similar stories -- even as the second one attempts to place blame on the system:

...the **immigrants themselves are taking longer to achieve upward mobility** than earlier generations did.¹⁰³

...the massive black **underclass**--nearly a quarter of all black households live in poverty, according to the Census Bureau--is proof of lasting **structural inequality**.¹⁰⁴

Underclass implies there is something wrong with the people in it, not, as the author hopes, the classes above, who wedged them into this impossible position.

One of the most prevalent comments from the interviews, that we have a basic minimum of economic and social security for all, was expressed in language that evoked this model:

Bashing government from BELOW:

It’s always open season on government. Now with ideas of class-warfare, conservatives pit “us” against our government -- and use this model make the case:

“**Life at the top** used to be good for everyone. These days, it pays to be a public servant.”

“It’s a **two-tier system** in which the rulers are making steady gains at the expense of the ruled.”

“Public humiliation in front of Congressional hearings, punitive legislation, and regulatory hell are **rained down upon** those who seem to trespass on the ground reserved to the **higher caste** of public officials.”

Why TOP/BOTTOM to attack government? It’s the overall conservative favorite and advances that hierarchy is just fine but only if those on top climbed their way there. The problem isn’t rarely mentioned “inequality,” but the illegitimacy of who’s on top. That slot’s reserved for business.

¹⁰² Individual Interview

¹⁰³ Inequality as Usual, Ross Douthat, New York Times, October 4, 2009.

¹⁰⁴ The Assault on the Black Middle Class, Kai Wright, The American Prospect, August 4, 2009.

On the face of it, one may say that inequality of itself is not necessarily bad as long as you have a **floor** that everybody has access to.¹⁰⁵

I hear a **floor beneath which people shouldn't fall**.¹⁰⁶

As a policy goal, making sure we meet everyone's basic needs is unimpeachable. As a rhetorical device, the word most often used to signify this -- floor -- warrants further scrutiny. Floor hails from this VERTICAL INEQUALITY model, so it may bring along with it the negative aspects.

Regardless, "floor" may not convey all we hope. Where is a floor? At the bottom of a structure. When we say floor, we generally add "below which no one should fall." So, there's a floor -- and something below it. This doesn't make sense -- in physical or conceptual terms. The admittedly not catchy "minimum standards" or "things essential to survive and thrive" more accurately convey what we hope.

INEQUALITY AS BARRIER

This was the favorite among interviewees. Not so in written text where it appears infrequently. It's my top choice for communicating about INEQUALITY.

Before delving into details, I'd like to step back and mention the commonplace metaphor upon which this model relies: LIFE AS JOURNEY. When things are going well, we often say they are *moving forward* and when they're not we're *stuck in a rut*. If we're *rushing into something*, our friends may urge us to *put the brakes on* and think for a bit. Conversely, they may tell us to *step on it* and decide already.

LIFE AS JOURNEY is ubiquitous and so it's not surprising to find it in talk about the economy. There's an "income **starting line**"¹⁰⁷ and conservatives contend that "the middle class didn't **stand still**, either."¹⁰⁸ A progressive author seeks "to examine why so many young adults...are finding it so hard to **get ahead**..."¹⁰⁹

If LIFE can be construed as a JOURNEY, steps taken from a starting point to a destination, than it's no stretch to see the ECONOMY referenced in the language of VEHICLES. Phrases like *on the right path*, *veering off a cliff* or *slowing down* can be used as meaningfully about

¹⁰⁵ Individual Interview

¹⁰⁶ Individual Interview

¹⁰⁷ Unequal Starting Line, Institute for Policy Studies, You Tube

¹⁰⁸ 5 Myths About the Poor Middle Class.

¹⁰⁹ Strapped.

our cars as about our economy. Here, things get a bit more ideological. In previous research, I found progressives using ECONOMY AS VEHICLE more than conservatives.

We see this comparison used to explain why we should address inequality, “trying to revive **our stalled and stumbling economy** without addressing the fundamental problem of inequality that got us here is like trying to fix the flat tire on your car just by adding air. It's no solution at all: there's still a hole in your tire.”¹¹⁰ And, more directly, “this generation’s embrace of family bumps up against obstacles on the **tough economic road** they’re traveling”¹¹¹ and “our system seems trapped into staying on the **same deregulated path**.”¹¹²

If you’re on a journey you can’t get to your destination if there are obstructions. Here, we move from the general metaphor to the specific ways it interacts with inequality. INEQUALITY AS BARRIER flows naturally from JOURNEY.

We see this from an interviewee: “if **your starting place** is a resource rich place, vs. a resource-poor place, you’re much more able to parlay your resources into more resources, and **to potentially block people** from also gaining resource advantage.”¹¹³

And, similarly, from another:

I think we make these choices because we have a political system that is heavily accessible and influenced by people, by monied interests, whether that’s wealthy individuals or wealthy corporations, whose agenda has been to **pave the way** for lots of accumulation of wealth and income amount the very few, and **set in place obstacles for the rest of the population to move up or let alone stay in place**.¹¹⁴

There are multiple ways to describe BARRIERS that make it impossible to travel:

The depth and impact of poverty on individuals and families cannot be understated, yet it is the **structural ‘silo-ing,’** the racial segregation of specific communities, that continues to destroy the economic futures of the **people trapped** in these communities.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Stimulus for All.

¹¹¹ Strapped.

¹¹² The Forbes 400 Shows Why Our Nation Is Falling Apart, Les Leopold, October 1, 2009.

¹¹³ Individual Interview

¹¹⁴ Individual Interview

¹¹⁵ Individual Interview

Inequality leads to **holding people back** from being fully actualized and bringing to society the fullness of what they have to offer.¹¹⁶

We couldn't fully be in the crisis we are in if we didn't assume two things: one that markets work fairly and rationally. And two that by not paying attention to those who are **excluded from the economy**...¹¹⁷

[Inequality] reduces the number of people taking advantage of things, so it keeps crowds down, and it seems like it **keeps us divided into little pockets**. So if you go to this little pocket **people are just going to stay there, they're not moving around so much**, but if you go to the upper class, upper middle class ranges, people are moving and using more of what's available to everyone; it just looks like a way to **cord off a group and say 'mostly they're just going to stay here,'**¹¹⁸

...feeling **bounded themselves**, but the fact that they cannot contribute to society the full measure of the talent that they have.¹¹⁹

It's this sense of feeling trapped, while knowing you can do more and seeing other people free that makes unequal societies so hard to take. Conservatives deride this as envy but seeing someone flourish where you struggle to survive is it's own horrible trap. "People today, even those who are not poor but perhaps lower income, they see the enormous wealth that other people have, and it is, just does a number on you personally in terms of your sense of personal worth or efficacy; and as we know the internalization of that oppression, and **your sense of being bounded, of not being able to develop and go where you want to go.**"¹²⁰

A key word here is **access**, that's what a barrier denies people. For example, "access to opportunities,"¹²¹ "access to common wealth,"¹²² "access to information about how you gain wealth, how you save"¹²³ and "not accessing their basic human rights on an equal basis."¹²⁴

¹¹⁶ Individual Interview

¹¹⁷ Individual Interview

¹¹⁸ Individual Interview

¹¹⁹ Individual Interview

¹²⁰ Individual Interview

¹²¹ Individual Interview

¹²² Individual Interview

¹²³ Individual Interview

¹²⁴ Individual Interview

Access means you are no longer bound. This affords individuals the freedom to give their talents to the economy and the economy, in turn, to benefit from what every individual offers. “The more you have people of color, blacks, Hispanic, Asian Americans **participating fully in the economy**, working, starting businesses, being promoted within businesses based on their skills and qualifications, the stronger the economy is.”¹²⁵

This model serves as a powerful critique of the VERTICAL one. There the expectation is, given a ladder you should pull yourself up, the focus here is not on the outcome but the *process*. Impediments block anyone regardless of efforts or abilities, this goes against notions of inherent worth or willingness to work.

One author critiques the VERTICAL model by pointing out yet another kind of barrier: “the housing boom proved to be just another **trapdoor in a centuries-long game of Chutes and Ladders** for black and brown strivers.”¹²⁶

But, this isn't fool-proof. We may think we're speaking from this model, exposing what's false about TOP/BOTTOM ideas, when actually we're reinforcing them. As in this example: “it's not the **rich people pulling away at the top** who are the problem; it's that so many have been **stuck for so long at the bottom** and in the middle.”¹²⁷ This allows for the idea that the poor are the ones responsible for not having moved, while it explicitly gives agency to the rich who “pull away.”

Conservatives see obstacles created from government intrusion, “we have the right to achieve whatever our ambition and talents allow, with no one permitted to **forcibly stop us**”¹²⁸ and “government handouts...**trap the poor** in a vicious cycle of dependency.”¹²⁹ Whereas we see barriers constructed from the unjust rules that concentrate power in too few hands. Regardless, we share a distaste for barriers.

This is one of so many promising aspects of this model. It's widely accessible and based in lived experience. Whether it's benign like being stuck in traffic or horrifying like bars -- we know that things outside ourselves impede us. These barriers go against deeply American notions of freedom in its broadest sense and folk traditions more specifically about unfettered movement. *Go West*, “...the tough get going” -- are deeply ingrained in our nation's psyche. “Don't fence me in” is the poetry of the cowboy but it resonates

¹²⁵ Individual Interview

¹²⁶ The Assault on the Black Middle Class

¹²⁷ The Inequality Conundrum, Roger Lowenstein, New York Times, June 10, 2007

¹²⁸ In Defense of Income Inequality

¹²⁹ The “War on Poverty” Turns 40, Dick Armey, Freedom Works, January 9, 2004

strongly with the entrepreneur. Not to mention those NASCAR fans we're always trying to bring to our cause.

INEQUALITY AS BARRIER centers attention on process -- it makes a credible case that's not about lack of effort or intelligence for why certain groups can't catch up with others. As long as we're careful not to mix this model up with the VERTICAL one and convey the nature of what traps people, this language offers us our best opportunity for forcefully making the case about inequality.

INEQUALITY AS IMBALANCE -- SCALE

INEQUALITY can be thought of as IMBALANCE -- in two very different forms. First, I will describe the unhelpful form, the one I'm calling "scale." This is to draw a clear distinction between it and the positive version that follows; that one I'll call "vertigo." Neither version was very common in this data set.

The **negative** version of IMBALANCE can be imagined visually as a scale -- when one side goes up, the other goes down. Sometimes, this is explicit, "at the **poor end of the scale**, they have no money and can't consume. **At the high end of the scale**, they've got so much money it doesn't circulate into anything productive and there's no way they can use it all."¹³⁰

This, not surprisingly, is strongly tied to the VERTICAL model we saw above. Like a playground seesaw, or the scales of justice, we hear mention of a pivot point -- "I find the **fulcrum of inequality** actually going to be debilitating for political discourse."¹³¹ And there's a question of maintaining center: "**tilted** towards the haves in favor of the have nots."¹³²

Because this shares basic components to the vertical model, we see some of the same language. For instance "our **top-heavy era** has evolved from a heavily bankrolled effort by conservatives and corporations."¹³³ But it's the reference to weight that tips us off (pun intended) that imbalance is key.

This is where *playing field* comes in, needing to be *level* -- "there is something wrong when we allow the **playing field to be tilted so far** in the favor of so few."¹³⁴ Or again,

¹³⁰ Individual Interview

¹³¹ Individual Interview

¹³² Individual Interview

¹³³ The Rich and the Rest of Us

¹³⁴ Some Things Don't Change in Grover's Corners, Frank Rich, New York Times, March 8, 2009

showing the close connection to top/bottom notions and ladders -- “part of it is a continuing **unlevel playing field** that creates a more **difficult first step, and even second and third steps.**”¹³⁵

Like the VERTICAL model with which it shares elements, this model does much in the way of profiling interconnection. It’s hard to imagine a more direct way to convey that when something happens on one end, it directly affects another. Here, someone describes just such a process -- when “weight” is removed from one end, it helps lighten the load: “fairer policies would share the risks of our entrepreneurial economy by helping **balance the economic burdens** among all of us, **rather than piling them onto people of color, the poor.**”¹³⁶

But this benefit is also a major pitfall. It so strongly hones in on this up-down notion that it triggers zero-sum thinking: “the notion of economic equality is based on an ancient and ugly falsehood central to bad economic thinking: There’s a fixed amount of wealth.”¹³⁷ This when-you-rise-I-fall idea has those on top determined to stop any attempt to alter the status quo.

In reality, life is far more complex than a seesaw could ever describe. While this is true of all the models (otherwise they wouldn’t be simplifications), the particular set of ideas promoted here are so simple, the audience can’t hear much else.

INEQUALITY AS IMBALANCE -- VERTIGO

There’s another kind of IMBALANCE, in the world and in this language data. This is more commonly called dizziness or vertigo -- an imbalance that can only be righted internally. Examples of language that evoke this include “every human has some **sense of balance** and when that **gets disturbed** it gets **out of balance**”¹³⁸ and “an economy that has **gotten off kilter.**”¹³⁹

Language fitting this version was limited to three examples. The ones just quoted and this “excessive inequality leads to **instability**; patterns of economic instability, bubbles and busts, and that it’s inefficient, very unequal economies tolerate much more technically regressive dangerous unsafe and from a competitive standpoint more backwards processes and industries than more egalitarian ones.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Individual Interview

¹³⁶ State of the Dream.

¹³⁷ Closing the Wealth Gap.

¹³⁸ Individual Interview

¹³⁹ The Poverty of Political Talk

¹⁴⁰ Individual Interview

Despite this paucity, this model offers much to recommend it. Besides assuming interdependence, it avoids hierarchical notions of superiority and simplistic reductions to winners and losers.

Being off-balance is a familiar, and unpleasant experience, that transcends demographic groups. No matter where you're from or what you have, you've spun yourself into

Picking the right **IMBALANCE**

Avoid

Suggesting there are 2 entities

Words like scale, high/low end, tilt

Embrace

Imbalance itself

Ambiguity about number of entities

dizziness at some point. It suggests something familiar to the individual while allowing us to talk about the whole economic system.

But none of this is easy. Not only do we have little existing language to retool, we must take pains to avoid slipping into the other model of imbalance.

INEQUALITY AS FORCE / OPPONENT

Let me state the obvious in saying progressives are actively opposed to extreme inequality. It seems tempting then, to call it like it is and describe INEQUALITY as a powerful force or even, more specifically, an opponent. And we do this.

INEQUALITY is guilty of many things: "exaggerated inequality...**destroys** the notion of the common good...**tears at the fabric of society.**"¹⁴¹ We also say "the middle class is rapidly joining the ranks of the poor, reeling from the inevitable, **gravitational, polarizing pull of inequity.**"¹⁴²

That's significant agency for something inanimate. This concept is even capable of reproducing -- "inequality **breeds** more inequality."¹⁴³ So powerful is inequality, that we speak of combatting it. We must "confront directly the **threat** posed by this inequality."¹⁴⁴ And are "**challenging excessive income and wealth**"¹⁴⁵ as well as "fighting inequality."¹⁴⁶ We're not the only ones facing this foe, "the bill that President Obama signed on Tuesday is the federal government's **biggest attack on economic inequality** since inequality began rising more than three decades ago."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Individual Interview

¹⁴² Stimulus for All.

¹⁴³ Individual Interview

¹⁴⁴ The Rich and the Rest of Us

¹⁴⁵ Too Much, Sam Pizzigati

¹⁴⁶ Carter

¹⁴⁷ In Health Bill, Obama Attacks Inequality, David Leonhardt, New York Times, March 24, 2010.

Here's the problem with this model -- inequality isn't an accident. It's not a self-propelled force, seeking to get more entrenched and powerful. It's human creation.

I want to offer an alternative view, one that explains inequality as a function of power, sustained by politics, and implemented as policy. In this alternative view, it is not technological progress nor the inevitable march of globalization, but rather the sharp shift in the strength of capital and employers relative to workers that explains the increasing concentration of wages, income, and wealth over the last three decades.¹⁴⁸

Just as imbuing "the market" with agency cripples debate about the correct role of government, speaking of INEQUALITY as an independent, powerful actor makes it very hard to come back to a conversation about what can and should be done. After all, if INEQUALITY is evil unleashed, mere policies won't stop it. We need to insist, with our language, that people made this mess and they must fix it.

Conservatives, by the way, don't employ this model for INEQUALITY at all. They are battling a different opponent: "**poverty can be defeated** by fighting it with freedom."¹⁴⁹

INEQUALITY AS DISTORTION

In welcome contrast to giving agency to INEQUALITY itself, by portraying it as a FORCE or OPPONENT, and denying people agency by failing to mention them, there's a progressive notion of INEQUALITY AS DISTORTION, a feedback error in the economic system.

Here, we see overt references to INEQUALITY as the outcome of bad decision-making. "We have been extremely successful in **crafting rules for the economy that reinforce inequality** through the system"¹⁵⁰ and "the kind of inequality that I'm looking at comes from **the rules of the game**."¹⁵¹

The ECONOMY is referred to directly or implicitly as a MACHINE, and INEQUALITY inhibits proper functioning. "It's like they **rig the machine** so more comes to them."¹⁵² "**People of privilege or means** have been working for decades now to **overcome** the more equal distribution of income and wealth that we had in the US in the mid 20th century and they've been largely successful by manipulating their political power at changing the **rules of how our economy operates**."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Schmitt

¹⁴⁹ The "War on Poverty" Turns 40.

¹⁵⁰ Individual Interview

¹⁵¹ Individual Interview

¹⁵² Individual Interview

¹⁵³ Individual Interview

For conservatives, INEQUALITY can also be a feedback mechanism, but one that works well:

Profit and loss **tell the entrepreneur** what the consumers are asking for most urgently. And only the profits the entrepreneur pockets enable him to adjust his activities to the demand of the consumers. **If the profits are expropriated**, he is prevented from complying with the directives given by the consumers. Then **the market economy is deprived of its steering wheel**.¹⁵⁴

The restoration of agency back into the hands of people who enacted bad policies is a refreshing and desirable aspect of this model. In speaking of the ECONOMY AS A SYSTEM OR MACHINE, it also advances the idea of a single, unified, thing.

These benefits make the distortion model worth considering more closely. However, for a simplifying model -- it's not very simple. Where a BARRIER, SCALE, SEPARATION IN SPACE, LADDER and so forth are very easily imaginable and can be experienced, DISTORTIONS to a system are far less concrete. This, like the model of INEQUALITY AS INJUSTICE we'll see momentarily, may prove effective only at preaching to the choir. Overt assertions

The *rise* and *fall* of inequality:
When talk turns from what inequality is to how it changes over time, the problem of agency comes up again. Inequality is *skyrocketing, climbing, increasing*. Or, *falling, declining, plummeting* (though that hasn't happened recently.) It seems this concept has greater ability to move and make change than the unnamed people experiencing it. Like the tides, air pressure or the temperature, inequality *rises* and *falls*.

that the "game is rigged" may only work to convince those who see the game is rigged.

INEQUALITY AS RESOURCE

Our last metaphorical model is a uniquely conservative formulation. Here, INEQUALITY is painted as an asset -- a helpful aid in improving the economy overall. It's not just wealth that's good, but actual inequality. Here is a complete single example of this logic:

Bigness in **business** does not impair, but **improves the conditions of the rest of the people**. The millionaires are acquiring their fortunes in supplying the many with articles that were previously beyond their reach. If laws had prevented them from getting rich, the average American household would have to forego many of the gadgets and facilities that are today its normal equipment. This country enjoys the highest standard of living ever known in history because for several generations no attempts were made toward 'equalization' and 'redistribution.' **Inequality of wealth and incomes is the cause of the masses'**

¹⁵⁴ Inequality of Wealth and Incomes

well-being, not the cause of anybody's distress. Where there is a 'lower degree of inequality,' there is necessarily a lower standard of living of the masses.¹⁵⁵

Like the previous model, this one preaches to the choir. If you think inequality is just fine, this makes you think it's...just fine. If you don't, there's no way it persuades you otherwise.

Non-metaphorical models for INEQUALITY

Finally, I turn to the remaining three models, all non-metaphorical, for describing inequality.

EQUALITY AS MATHEMATICAL IDENTITY

Equal is not the same as identical...If by inequality we mean not the same, that's different. Identicalness is horribly destructive, whether it's communism, or cultural assimilation, any notion of forced homogenization, even aspired to, anything that hints at homogenization is horrible...So it's not that.¹⁵⁶

Less a true model than a conservative caricature, the notion that INEQUALITY is simply a mathematical symbol lends credence to the idea that what progressives seek is making everyone exactly the same.

This critique sounds thus, "the idea of a world where all people are alike -- in wealth or in anything else--is a fantasy for the stupid."¹⁵⁷ Or, more fleshed out, along these lines:

This is the standard of egalitarianism--the standard that demands a uniformity of income, regardless of anyone's ability or effort. It is the standard of *envy*, whereby a problem exists whenever some have more, of anything, than others. And the egalitarian's solution is to eliminate all such inequalities.¹⁵⁸

This model's relative infrequency makes it almost worth ignoring. However, it does provide an opportunity to observe -- and ideally, correct -- two communication pitfalls.

Hoping to discredit this or any idea by directly negating it won't work. Not only does it give more airtime to something we oppose, it further illustrates our difficulty saying what INEQUALITY is. Because we're stuck saying what it isn't.

¹⁵⁵ Inequality of Wealth and Incomes

¹⁵⁶ Individual Interview

¹⁵⁷ Closing the Wealth Gap

¹⁵⁸ In Defense of Income Inequality

The second lesson is around naming overt parameters. Not naming what it is we'd like to compare about two entities allows audiences and opponents to assume we mean every possible thing. Thus it's critical, at least some of the time, to say equal in "quality of life" or inequality of "health and security," for example.

INEQUALITY AS CONCENTRATION

The least "colorful" of the models found, this way of describing inequality is not metaphorical. It's the closest we get to a literal definition.

There are few, but often repeated, constructions here. Key words are *concentration* and *distribution*, as in these examples:

[Inequality is] the mal **distribution** of income and wealth.¹⁵⁹

Inequality happens when income and wealth **concentrate**.¹⁶⁰

[Equality is] a **compression** in the range of material experience.¹⁶¹

This brings us straight back to the agency problem. To communicate that INEQUALITY doesn't just happen, we need to bring people back onto the scene. Wealth, after all, doesn't distribute itself -- and it certainly won't redistribute without conscious effort.

INEQUALITY AS INJUSTICE

Not surprisingly, this formulation -- also direct and not made implicitly by way of comparison to another object or idea -- is fairly progressive. I say fairly because it's gaining traction among conservatives in their beef with government.

There are frequent refrains about fairness and justice -- "if we want to live in a **just society**, we cannot continue to subsidize the rich by exploiting the poor"¹⁶² and "this isn't **fair**; this is the government helping the politically connected."¹⁶³

This is a natural extension of a progressive worldview. However, as a communication tool, it falls pretty flat. It's almost as content-free as "inequality is unequal." In other

¹⁵⁹ Individual Interview

¹⁶⁰ Individual Interview

¹⁶¹ Thinking Clearly About Economic Inequality

¹⁶² Carter

¹⁶³ David Cay Johnston on Fresh Air with Terry Gross, January 3, 2008.

Are you naming your parameter? Check the preposition.
These won't name parameter
Inequality between...
Equal to...
These will name parameter
Unequal in...
Inequality of...

words, if you are already troubled by inequality you find it unjust. And if you're not troubled by it, tacking on notions of injustice won't persuade you.

At base, this way of speaking lends little explanatory power to the notion of INEQUALITY. It asserts that inequality is a problem instead of demonstrating this by way of foregrounding what we'd like people to "get" about it. This is what we lose in substituting overt arguments for embedded, unconscious beliefs -- or deliberate rhetorical devices for conceptual metaphors. Assertions are noticed and therefore can be challenged. Assumptions slip by undetected and are therefore more able to persuade.

Concluding Thoughts

The bottom line in all this: we must profile the deliberate, conscious activity people have had in creating and must have in addressing inequality. Our best hope for this is to speak about INEQUALITY AS A BARRIER to success and security. Now, I turn to picking things up from here -- directions for future research, message testing and applying these lessons in the diverse institutions passionate about this work.

Finally, I conclude by summarizing my recommendations, ideas both for what to invoke and avoid as well how to self-examine your language to ensure what you say is what your audience will hear.

Directions for Further Research

There's lots more to learn and plenty to test. In brief, there are concepts that could be better fleshed out, frames that could be tested and new directions for communication that could be considered. Here are some ideas for next steps:

1. **Examine more closely some or all the elements** within the INEQUALITY frame -- the WEALTHY, THE POOR, CLASS, WEALTH. And, perhaps most critically, WAGES and THE MIDDLE CLASS -- both are deeply under-specified and hold real promise. If not through analysis of language data, then in conversation with key stakeholders about what we'd like the public to understand and believe about these ideas.
2. Hash out differences and **agree upon immediate tactical goals** on INEQUALITY, **as well as a long-term vision** of how the world should look and what we need the public to understand to make this possible.
3. **Consider policies** with respect to what they convey about INEQUALITY, which model(s) they employ, which elements of the frame they highlight and so on.
4. **Test language** that evokes the more promising models -- first in more qualitative, open-ended formats and eventually in more traditional public opinion research.

5. Investigate the possibility of **communicating** about INEQUALITY **without mentioning "inequality."**
6. **Consider the implications of findings for different audiences.** How does what you know about specific groups impact what you've read here? Pool this information with other stakeholders to improve the application of this research.

Summary of Recommendations

Policy-makers, experts, journalists and activists, want to get the messages right. And want me to get right to the messages. A caveat and word of caution are in order.

The caveat: really effective communication comes from clearly defined goals. As I've said elsewhere, there's no magic "if you build it, they will come." But, it's certain that if you don't build it, they won't. Without a clear vision of what you'd like people to believe, it's impossible to ensure all the intermediate steps, policies and messages are advancing you on the right path.

The word of caution: understanding the reasoning that underlies people's political decision-making is not the same as messaging. It's a preceding, complex step. It's bold enough, based solely on language data (even lots of it) to make definitive statements about which models to employ and which to ditch. Using those findings to get into the details of phrasing is asking this analysis to do things it wasn't meant to accomplish.

While it's critical that messages emerge from good underlying models -- ones that align with your beliefs and promote your long-term interests -- there's much more to getting the words right. Questions of audience, format, tone, messenger, venue, repetition are integral, and simply beyond the scope of this current research. While I hate to disappoint, it's just too soon for crafting messages.

Here is a summary of my findings and advice broken up by relevant category:

On setting shared goals

➔ Decide whether you're working to **ensure mobility or diminish inequality**, these aren't the same thing.

- Know that the mobility framework doesn't naturally include the notion of minimal standards for everyone. If it did, you wouldn't need to make a point of this so often.

On overall communication and framing

➔ **Find a role for your audience**, give them something to do -- at least some of the time.

➔ **Acknowledge people's fears** and frustrations. Say, out loud, you know times are tough and trusting each other and our government requires great fortitude.

- ➔ Consider who or what has agency in your discourse. Do you speak of the ECONOMY, MONEY, INEQUALITY, WAGES or anything else as acting independently? Are they referred to as changing on their own? A quick check on agency is to **look at the subject of your sentences**. Do *people* ever suffer, impede, flourish, create or harm -- or is it just concepts and institutions that “do” these activities?
- ➔ Be careful about speaking for others -- especially when your speech is about how capable those others are of doing for themselves. In this discourse, this applies to the poor -- but it also applies more generally.
- ➔ **Effective repetition** does not mean saying the same words over and over again. It means having all of your messages emerge from one or few strong frames. These messages then reinforce each other, without boring your audience.
- ➔ As bad as any one frame is, it’s just as **bad to leap from one frame to another to another**. Pick no more than three (four if there’s a rationale or targeted separate audiences) overarching structures for conveying your point. Make sure all of your messages, whether they’re about income tax or high speed rail, access to contraception or urban blight, emerge from these frames.
- ➔ Know that in **negating a frame, you evoke that frame**. When you say “it’s not like X” assume the word *not* was inaudible.

On the basic framework on inequality

- ➔ Pay attention to your **entities**. What are you comparing to what? Do you come out and name both of them? One? None? Being vague has it’s place -- especially if your goals are broad or (be honest!) ill-defined. For example, if you’re asserting “X and Y both deserve quality pre-school” it makes sense to have these correlate to “boys” and “girls” but not to “girls” and “women.” The more you help your audience “see” the groups you’re talking about, the more your communication will make sense and stick.
 - Notice if you’ve introduced a **baseline** -- a standard of comparison for a named entity. There’s nothing wrong with having a baseline. There’s much wrong with having other people guess a baseline, especially one that doesn’t accord with your goals. Are rich people the standard to which we all should aspire? If your answer is no, don’t allow your language to suggest that they are. You won’t get much traction with “everyone deserves a ski chalet in Aspen.” Employ your baseline to suggest powerful things about what’s acceptable and not in society.
- ➔ Look at your **parameter**. Is it clear what you are comparing about the two groups? If not, you risk opening yourself to criticism that you seek an entirely homogeneous society where nothing can differ. You don’t believe inequality is him having a split-level and her living in a townhouse. So don’t let your silence imply you do.
- ➔ Bring attention, as much and as often as possible, away from outcomes to **process**. The fact of two things differing may be inconsequential and is far less important than why. I’m shorter than my sister but I’m not asking anyone to do anything about that.

Not discussing how things become unequal has people fill this in for themselves. And you most likely won't benefit from their version of the story.

On the elements within the inequality frame

➔ What do you hope to convey about **wealthy people**? For you, is wealth defined by a certain amount of assets? Or is it an attitude, a way of being in the world? These are genuine open questions; the answers will help you speak more effectively.

➔ What do you hope to convey about **the poor**? The same questions just asked apply.

➔ By far CLASS AS CONTAINER is the most consistently used positive frame I found for any topic in this data set. The **clarity and repetition** of this framework can act as a guide for how to speak about other topics.

➔ Speak more about **where wealth comes from** -- not in the individual, it's inherited, sense. But in the universal -- what makes an economy function and thrive?

Conservatives have a simple, oft-repeated story of where money comes from: heroic individuals with great ideas who work hard. Progressives are vague and inconsistent on this topic.

- What's the **role for innovation, creativity, genius** in a progressive view of the economy and inequality? This too is under-specified and thus the conservative narrative prevails.

➔ Reestablish the **connection between wages and the value workers create** in society. Wages aren't presents benevolent employers bestow. They are a portion (often a relatively meager one) of the money the worker brought into the company.

➔ **Don't allow wealth to be solely about consumption.** Even consumption of really important things, like health care or education. Emphasize that with wealth comes security and the ability to be the person you want to be in the world.

On evaluating and using different models for inequality

➔ Consider which **frames your opposition favors**. There are reasons why. Most likely, these ways of understanding an issue reinforce conservative notions and not yours. It's tempting to try to refashion popular conservative ideas to suit progressive objectives. After all, that's what they did in reverse. However, well-entrenched concepts come as packages of meaning -- it's very hard and takes a long time to make a word, phrase or idea mean what you hope it does. This said, if it's critical to your point -- it's worth doing.

➔ **Avoid** the models for inequality that just don't communicate what you want: INEQUALITY AS HORIZONTAL, VERTICAL, IMBALANCE-SCALE, MATHEMATICAL IDENTITY, and FORCE/OPPONENT. Continue to not use INEQUALITY AS RESOURCE.

➔ Recognize that INEQUALITY AS DISTORTION and INJUSTICE say **very little** to a broad audience.

- ➔ Consider employing **INEQUALITY AS INTERNAL IMBALANCE**. And, if you do, make sure you aren't accidentally spilling over into the other kind of imbalance. Avoid suggesting there are two entities that rise and fall, or move, in opposition to each other.
- ➔ Focus on **INEQUALITY AS BARRIER**. Take pains to highlight the obstruction, not the person or group obstructed. Keep the blame for inequality where it belongs -- on structural factors that impede.

In closing, I'd like to come back to the popular metaphor that figured prominently in the **BARRIER** model. Remember that **LIFE IS A JOURNEY** -- and use this to get specific with your audience.

Think about life insurance and real estate commercials -- the soothing voice overs narrating various life events: "The first day of school..." "That trip to the E.R. with a broken arm..." "Braces..." "The senior prom..." There's a reason this formula is so popular. It provides a steady stream of visuals, experiences we know intimately. This allows the seller to then introduce their brand/product/service.

You can make **BARRIERS** real and compelling by activating people's thinking about times they just haven't been able to do what they wanted because something stood in their way. Just as politicians love to include specific people, individual circumstances, in their speeches -- you can borrow this strategy and introduce common events to help move from abstraction to real experience.

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

1. Rebecca Adamson, First Nations Development Institute*
2. Algernon Austin, Economic Policy Institute*
3. Joe Bageant, author
4. Jim Carr, National Community Reinvestment Coalition*
5. Chuck Collins, Institute for Policy Studies*
6. Ejim Dike, Urban Justice Center*
7. Tamara Draut, Demos*
8. Barbara Ehrenreich, author
9. James Galbraith, University of Texas, Austin*
10. Alan Jenkins, Opportunity Agenda*
11. Sally Kohn, Movement Vision Lab*
12. Les Leopold, Labor Institute and Public Health Institute*
13. Meizhu Lui, Insight Center*
14. Kim Pate, Corporation for Enterprise Development*
15. Kris Perry, plaintiff Perry v. Schwarzenegger*
16. Sam Pizzigati, Institute for Policy Studies*
17. Maru Villalpando, Washington Community Action Network*
18. Elizabeth Warren, Harvard University*
19. Maya Wiley, Center for Social Inclusion*

* affiliation listed for identification purposes only