

ideas to embrace

Inequality as Barrier



Privilege the idea of external constraints as the source of inequality, not individual failings or lack of effort:

- “inequality **blocks people** from getting resources”
- “inequality leads to **holding people back**”
- “**set in place obstacles** for the rest of the population”
- “those who are **excluded** from the economy”

When you eliminate barriers you create access, helping people go where they want and enriching the economy overall.

- “**access** to resources” “**access** to opportunities”
- “**participating fully** in the economy”

Benefits of Barrier Language

Conveying that the economic differences we see are a result of differential access to resources and opportunities that we don't see accomplishes many things:

1. It implies all people are equally capable and deserving
2. It suggests inequality has structural and deliberate causes -- “barriers” are generally understood as man-made, not natural
3. It suggests a role for the audience, you can further develop and specify, in breaking down barriers
4. It's tangible and part of lived experience, we've all faced impediments

INDICATE THE OBSTRUCTION IS THE BARRIER, NOT THE PERSON BEHIND IT

You may think you're activating the barrier idea when really you're bringing in problematic notions of hierarchy and deservedness -- for example:

- “it's not the rich people pulling away at the top who are the problem, it's the poor stuck for so long at the bottom...”

Notice how the rich have agency -- they pull away, while it's not clear why the poor don't move, is it their circumstances -- or their lack of initiative? Try rewording along these lines to make it clear:

- “the rich enjoy unfettered access to resources, it's the obstacles poor people face that keep them from reaching their economic goals”

ideas to avoid

Inequality as *gap*

Inequality as *top/bottom*



Horizontal notions of inequality sound like

- “racial wealth **gap**”
- “**divide** between rich and poor”
- “deepening **chasm**”
- “**widening** inequality”
- “**bridge the gulf**”

Vertical notions include phrases such as

- “a more **hierarchical** society”
- “money flows to the **summits**”
- “income **pyramid**”
- “**plunge** them into **deep straits**”
- “**trickle-down**” and “**bottom-up** economic growth”
- “the income **ladder**”
- “**pull yourself up** by your bootstraps.”

What’s problematic about *gap*?

Suggesting inequality is physical division makes sense. It’s tangible and visual. But focuses attention on

- Rich and poor live in **separate economies**; if “two Americas” who cares what happens in *that* one?

- Emphasis is on **outcomes**, not how division came to be

- Allows audience to fill in **what caused the gap**

What’s problematic about *top/bottom*?

Conservatives favor this model and it’s no wonder why. It reinforces things like

- The top (**rich**) good; the bottom (**poor**) bad

- There’s a ladder so **those at bottom are lazy** and don’t climb

THESE AREN’T THE ONLY PROBLEMATIC MODELS TO AVOID

INEQUALITY can be thought of as a FORCE, CONCENTRATION or MATHEMATICAL IDENTITY. All work against exposing sources of unequal outcomes and building will to address effects. Consider these --

Negative Model:

- “a uniformity of income”
- “inequality destroys notions of common good”
- “when income and wealth concentrate”

Preferable:

- an acceptable minimum of living standards
- policies that hold the poor back destroy notions...
- when we elect to funnel resources to the rich