You Can Get There From Here…

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Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Discussing Inequality

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Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Putting it into Practice

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of ***You Can Get There from Here***. This occasional publication series is part of the Social Equity and Opportunity Forum in the Dean's Office of the College of Urban and Public Affairs. Directed by Janet Hammer, Ph.D., the Forum emphasizes the interconnectedness, interdependence, and shared values that are the connective tissue of our society while working to advance economic and social opportunity and reduce inequality.

This inaugural piece addresses a fundamental problem of communication – how to effectively talk about an issue. It's not as simple as it seems. We always knew that people did not always "hear" what we said. Now, with the help of cognitive science we have a better understanding of what people do hear. Joe Grady and Axel Aubrun's article "*Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Discussing Inequality*" shows this problem in a very compelling way as applied to the issue of inequality. Lori Dorfman and I explore the implications of the Grady and Aubrun piece in our commentary, "*Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Putting it into Practice*."

Keep in mind this stuff gets pretty complicated very quickly and there are no easy or quick answers. Much work remains to be done but Grady and Aubrun have provided a real service with their work and given us a challenging starting point. To learn more about this important work check out their group, Cultural Logic LLC, at http://www.culturallogic.com. Also, Lori Dorfman has done pioneering work on framing, communication, and community advocacy and you may benefit from the work of her organization, the Berkeley Media Studies Group, at http://www.bmsg.org.

Hope you enjoy this new publication and let us know what you think.

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Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Discussing Inequality

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Inequality as an organizing idea

Advocates on any number of social issues find it natural, even necessary, to raise the subject of Inequality. Whether the topic is economic opportunity, criminal justice, immigrants' rights, health outcomes, environmental justice or educational attainment, the theme of Inequality is often front and center, providing the organizing anchor for the discussion.

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

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

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

In this essay, we explore a number of reasons it is difficult to have a productive conversation about Inequality. These observations arise from both the experience of communicators and communications researchers on a wide range of issues, and from insights from the cognitive and social sciences.

1 Unequal *outcomes* don't indicate a problem.

From advocates' perspective, measurable differences in life chances among different groups are smoking guns. When different segments of the population have predictably different life outcomes – whether separated by race, zip code, or other demographic factors – this by itself demonstrates the existence of a problem that needs addressing. If black children are more likely to live and die in poverty, if women have lower odds than men of being business owners, the idea of Inequality is evoked, and methods of redress are sought.

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* The authors thank Lawrence Wallack, Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State University, and Lori Dorfman (Berkeley Media Studies Group) for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

The result of this mindset is that advocates often feel that *demonstrating unequal outcomes is sufficient to motivate action.*

But this type of communication typically does not work well with average people, partly because they often see differences in outcomes as natural and expected, and even as evidence of a society that is working *as it should*. While advocates on various issues tend to see outcome disparities as evidence of *external forces* at work (i.e. forces *acting on* people who are essentially the same), other people are more likely to shift their attention to *how those people got themselves into those bad situations*:

You talk about outcomes, they ask how people got themselves there.

Put briefly, all of advocates' hard work in vividly demonstrating inequality of outcomes is wasted if their audience sees those disparities as the inevitable (if unfortunate) results of the different ways in which people lead their own lives.

In the remainder of the discussion we will have a chance to consider more closely why this response is so natural, and why it is so hard to overcome.

2 Individual Responsibility as a deeply-engrained value

It doesn't come as news that Americans of all backgrounds and political leanings tend strongly to believe in Individual (i.e. personal) Responsibility as a guiding principle for how we should live our lives. Whether the topic is "Just Saying No" to drugs, "getting off welfare," making smart buying and borrowing decisions, or any number of others, Americans swim in a sea of cues (in advertising, popular entertainment, political rhetoric, etc.) about the importance and power of Individual Responsibility in our lives.

Many of us even understand Individual Responsibility as a defining feature of American culture, and of American Exceptionalism. According to this common view, our society wouldn't have the success and prosperity we have if not for Americans' "rugged individualism," and our cultural emphasis on this core value.

This is one important reason why any discussion of unequal *outcomes* is immediately met with questions (or assumptions) about what people could and should have done to improve their outcomes.

3 Cognitive "blindness" to systemic factors

Setting aside the *moral* emphasis on personal responsibility – which may be especially strong in American culture – there are also more universal reasons why people tend to focus on individuals and to "blame the victim": It is simply more difficult, in a cognitive sense, to grapple with systemic problems. Even for a sympathetic person, they are *harder to see*[1].

It is helpful here to consider for a moment the nature of "Everyday Thinking" – that is, the kind of thinking that we are (all) best equipped for and find most natural, most of the time. The human mind evolved mostly to deal with physical and social situations at a *human scale* – not microscopic or miles wide, not milliseconds or centuries. It evolved to deal with *concrete* things and events rather than abstractions. It naturally looks for *simple cause-and-effect relationships*. While we also have the capacity to

[1] This pattern is closely related to what social scientists sometimes call the "Fundamental Attribution Error" – the tendency to attribute other people's actions to their *character*, while recognizing that our own actions are largely based on our *situation*.

develop subtle philosophies and intricate theories, the Everyday Thinking mode is always the most natural, and this helps explain why concrete analogies are so pervasive even in the most sophisticated writing and thinking.

Closely related to the idea of Everyday Thinking is the idea of *default* patterns of thinking, on any given topic: People can "know better" in some sense, and yet still habitually revert to particular ways of thinking about an issue (often because the default perspectives are a better fit with Everyday Thinking). For instance, people can "know" that the federal government consists of many thousands of people in many different agencies, located throughout the country – yet the *default* understanding of the federal government, which they easily slip into, is the elected officials in Washington. (This view is a better fit with Everyday Thinking – it involves a manageable number of individuals, located in a particular place, engaged in recognizable activities like arguing and making decisions, etc.) Likewise, people can realize, on an intellectual level, that it is possible for human activities to have effects on weather and the atmosphere – yet their strong *default* understandings make it seem as though the climate is something beyond our control, that we simply adapt to.

Returning to the subject at hand, Everyday Thinking tends to effectively "blind" us to inequality. It predisposes us to think in terms of anecdotes rather than statistics – and anecdotes about people from all backgrounds achieving success in the world (from neighbors to music stars to Condoleezza Rice) are vivid and easily remembered "counterexamples" to any statements about Inequalities of opportunity. Statistical claims about the life chances of particular groups are much more difficult to understand or focus on, since they don't fit well with Everyday Thinking.

To take one important example, when Americans think about racism, it is far easier for them to envision scenarios of "Personal Racism" – i.e. one person responding negatively to another due to a racial bias – than to understand the idea of "structural racism." But while the word "racism" may call to mind images that most Americans find deeply distasteful, these images do not necessarily help them think about (broad, systemic, institutional) *inequality* in the way advocates would like. After all, racism at this level "cuts both ways," and many people have direct experience of this fact.[2]

In short, whatever the moral weight of the issue, there is an abstract dimension to the notion of Inequality that makes the topic harder to grapple with than advocates might recognize. When people are in *default mode*, as most of us are, most of the time, on most topics, understandings of differential outcomes tend to boil down to assumptions about the choices and actions of individuals that might have led them to an unfortunate place in life.

4 Historical perspectives offer little help

Americans are notoriously indifferent to things that happened "a hundred years ago," and communications experience on a wide range of issues shows that historical

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[2] And for that matter, given common understandings of "reverse discrimination," the entire phenomenon of race-based "unfairness" can easily seem to cut against Whites, and in favor of others. For futher discussion of Personal Racism and related topics, see "Thinking About Race: Findings From Cognitive Elicitations," Cultural Logic, 2004, commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as part of the Framing Race in America Project, also supported by the JEHT Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

observations and arguments tend to be disappointingly ineffective with average people.

Furthermore, most Americans believe that there has been a steady movement away from various forms of inequality and discrimination, and that the process may even be complete. Many different pieces of anecdotal evidence demonstrate for them that the situation for minorities, for instance, is "much better than it used to be" (again, see Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, etc.). And facts such as the increasing rates of inter-marriage reinforce the idea that *Personal Racism* is steadily declining, and make it easy for people to conclude, erroneously, that Inequality is no longer a problem in our culture.

Given most Americans' ahistorical perspectives, and the widespread perception that discrimination is largely a thing of the past – or on its way out simply due to the passage of time – historical arguments end up carrying very little weight with nonexperts.

(Of course, historical arguments can carry a different kind of weight with advocates themselves, as Lori Dorfman of the Berkeley Media Studies Group points out: It is *inspiring* to recognize the kind of cultural shifts that can happen over time – think of current perceptions of the tobacco industry or of all things "green" compared to a generation ago.)

5 Us/Them Thinking

Yet another important reason why conversations about Inequality may not have the desired effects is that they can reinforce the divide between "us" and "them."

Stories about inequality, by definition, group people into distinct categories. While this kind of categorization is essential from a policy perspective – for instance, it is critical to an understanding of health patterns, and what to do about them – it is problematic from a communications perspective. Dividing people into distinct groups can have the effect of reinforcing the sense of *distance* between the groups. We are all naturally inclined to identify most closely with people more like us, and rather than helping bridge the differences between people, discussions of inequality inevitably reinforce the sense of difference. To the degree that distance is salient in people's thinking, it is hard to imagine all of us being "in the same boat" – a key pillar of support for many social welfare programs (e.g., Medicare, Social Security).

6 Inequality and "rhetorical mode"

One more factor that makes it difficult to talk productively about Inequality relates to what can be called "Reasonable Mode" and "Rhetorical Mode" in people's thinking and communication.

In reasonable mode, people are open to new information, focused on practical understanding and problem-solving. Rhetorical mode, on the other hand, is characterized by a focus on opposition, defense of my position against yours, identity-based thinking, and resistance to new ideas. In rhetorical mode there are winners and losers; in reasonable mode, everyone in the conversation is working towards the same goal.

By definition, the topic of Inequality is about contrasting one group against another. And while it is possible to have a reasonable mode discussion of why one group isn't faring as well as others, and what to do about it, it is also very easy for the topic to

provoke rhetorical mode, as people instinctively line up on one “side” or the other of the issue. People may dig in rather than opening up, they may get defensive rather than constructive.

Specific language choices make a difference here, too. A term like “disparity” is a relatively objective way of referring to differences in outcomes. “Inequities,” on the other hand, are about fairness. All things being equal, there are “costs and benefits” to either approach, based partly on the differences between reasonable and rhetorical modes of thought and communication[3].

7 Guilt and Denial

In a closely related dynamic, Inequality is a topic that those at the “more equal” end of the comparison may be especially uncomfortable talking or even thinking about. Advocates can sometimes underestimate people’s power to deny a truth that seems to implicate them or their way of life in a serious way.

Guilt and denial are natural triggers for Rhetorical Mode, as people look for ways of arguing away their discomfort: “*That’s an exaggeration*.” “*Well that certainly hasn’t been my experience*.” “*I never denied anyone their rights*.” “*What we really need to do is stop focusing on our differences, and just get along*.” “*If anything, I/we are the ones who get shafted*.”

Just as damagingly, people may simply become uncomfortable and avoid the topic.

8 “Compassion fatigue”

Any American who follows the news or public affairs at all hears frequent accounts of groups that are not doing well, individuals that are suffering, communities in need of assistance – not to mention whole nations in trouble on the other side of one ocean or another. Even sympathetic people have only finite reserves of energy and of attention, only so much time in the day to think about the seemingly infinite numbers of their fellow human beings who are in trouble. Discussions of Inequality often end up sounding like yet another plea to “help,” and may take their place in a long line of issues that people wish they could do something about.

9 Powerlessness

Finally, since Inequality, by definition, relates to large groups – differences between the life chances of whole segments of the population – it is easy for average Americans to feel they themselves can do little or nothing about the problem, even if they believe it is real and shouldn’t be tolerated, *in principle* …

A focus on the problem, rather than on possible solutions, can easily leave people feeling there *are no (workable) solutions*.

Implications: What happens when you talk about Inequality?

Of course, the problems discussed in this essay don’t mean that it’s *impossible* to have a productive discussion about Inequality. People are capable of seeing beyond

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[3] For a detailed semantic analysis of the terms “disparity” and “inequity” in the health context, see “Health Disparities – A Cognitive and Linguistic Analysis,” by Real Reason for the Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2007.

category differences between people, and of responding sympathetically to people in other categories. They are capable of transcending the Everyday Thinking bias towards stories about individuals, and of focusing on history at least for a while.

But, like systemic discrimination itself, the patterns discussed here are all about *tendencies* to respond in counterproductive ways, which add up, and cumulatively produce a terrain that is very difficult for advocates to navigate.

Certainly, anyone who has tried to talk about Inequality with a range of different audiences has encountered *dismissal* (flat out rejection that there is inequality in the country or in their community, *fatalism* (the sense that the problem is too big or stubborn to be addressed), *confusion* (not really sure what you're talking about), *denial* (emotionally-charged insistence that "it's not like that"), and other counterproductive responses.

More subtly, and probably more often, they have encountered audiences who seem to nod in agreement, but whose subsequent thinking and actions show no real signs of change, and who are likely to lapse into the default patterns described earlier.

Even with audiences that are by no means hostile, it is easy to provoke reactions like these:

> **You say:** People who live in zip code X are three times as likely to be victims of crime, or to get sick from toxins in the environment.
>
> **They hear:** People living in neighborhood X have made some bad choices that have landed them in that neighborhood. (And why don't they get it together and organize neighborhood watches or NIMBY associations – or simply leave?)

> **You say:** Group X suffers from higher rates of sickness than Group Y.
>
> **They hear:** Group X needs to change its habits and lifestyle.

> **You say**: Group X makes less money than Group Y.
>
> **They hear**: Group X needs to work harder. More broadly, Group X needs to take a hard look at itself and figure out how to "play the game" more like Group Y.

> **You say:** Group X faces long-standing barriers to success.
>
> **They hear:** Group X is trying to cash in on "history" to avoid taking responsibility for itself.

> **You say:** Group X is facing systematic discrimination.
>
> **They hear:** Group X is trying to blame their problems on other people, rather than taking responsibility.

> **You say:** Group X's problems are created by their circumstances.
>
> **They hear:** Group X are not (but should be) fully autonomous individuals capable

of creating their own destinies.

Even when (or especially when) such reactions are unspoken or even unconscious, they can derail any chance of a constructive conversation.

So, what to do?...

There are sure to be advocates who feel that, no matter what the challenges, it would simply be *wrong* to sidestep the issue of Inequality. If it is one of the greatest wrongs in our society, then it *must* be addressed squarely and forcefully – anything else would be at best an abdication of responsibility, and at worst dishonest.

What this essay has highlighted is some of the communications "traps" that advocates can encounter as they try to do just that. What the discussion implies is not that advocates should stop talking about Inequalities (and certainly not that they should stop working to eliminate them!). What it does mean is that they need to be very careful in how they talk about them, and should also think hard about whether they might be able to achieve their purposes –including combating inequalities – *without* taking about them directly. (This will depend both on the issue area in question and on advocates' differing goals, priorities and commitments.)

The following are a few ways advocates can work towards the goals they care about, and that can help them avoid the unfortunate traps related to the topic of Inequality:

- Highlight practical steps that can be taken ("solutions," rather than just "the problem"). Take advantage of people's interest in good news about programs/ideas *that work*.
- Find ways of linking the issue to "all of us." If public transportation can reduce a particular inequality, then maybe there are ways that the entire community will benefit, even if less directly.
- Talk about the harms of Inequality itself – i.e. ways in which "gaps" (whether in wealth, health or other domains) are inherently corrosive of overall wellbeing.
- Be as careful as possible to explain the *causes* of the Inequality, in ways that are hard to tie to individual choices and behavior.
- When illustrating a given social problem, depict the affected parties in language and pictures that help audiences identify with them, rather than creating distance between them.

Each of these may sound like common sense, but each is also much easier said than done, given American culture and the nature of Everyday Thinking. For advocates looking for a challenge, there can be few greater than the task of moving the public conversation forward in ways that constructively deal with Inequality.

Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Putting it into Practice

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Joe Grady and Axel Aubrun have given us a provocative assessment of the harms that may come from talking about inequality without a good understanding of framing. What are the practical implications of Grady and Aubrun's warning? We are all eager to see more research about the topic, but in the meantime, how do we figure out what to say?

The Promise of Framing Research

Advocates have long struggled with how to shape their message. Community organizers talk about "cutting an issue" and these days everyone talks about framing. From our perspective studying framing and working with public health advocates, framing research represents great promise but also presents some challenges. The promise is clear in that framing research can inform advocates about the unintended consequences of their words. Just as Grady and Aubrun have done here, research alerts us to how we may be inadvertently undermining our own cause. Framing research is important because we can learn whether the words we say transmit what we intend and, consequently, better communicate about issues that we hold dear.

Framing research examines how thinking, communication, and culture interact, and understanding those interactions can help advocates determine how to communicate more effectively. Researchers try to identify counterproductive patterns in how target audiences, journalists, and advocates themselves are currently thinking and talking about a topic; identify new perspectives that can lead to constructive change; and test whether there are effective ways of conveying those new perspectives. In this sense, framing research is about more than developing a message. Framing research can be enlightening, but instituting new ways of thinking and talking about old problems just isn't easy.

Framing Happens in a Context

So, given that there are no "magic words", how do we figure out what to say? The starting point for us is grounded in the change the advocate seeks. This is usually expressed as a policy change, since policy is how we construct systems and structures to foster change. The first step, then, is being able to describe not only the problem but also the specific solution(s).

Practically, this means advocates must, as Grady and Aubrun put it, take "advantage of people's interest in good news about workable solutions."

Along with knowing—and being able to articulate—the solution, advocates also need to be able to say why it matters. Most advocates can easily recite facts about an issue, but usually stop there, assuming that knowing the facts is reason enough to inspire action. But framing research suggests that audiences respond more to values, rather than just facts. Advocates need to be able to say *why* they care, and why others should care, about the problem. Stating the values allows people to connect in a way

that simple facts do not. This is the first step toward Grady and Aubrun's advice to link the issue to "all of us."

Advocates must then inject their perspective into the public conversation. One of the most effective ways for policy advocates to inspire discussion about their solution is to be sure it is included in news coverage. News brings legitimacy and credibility to issues. And, the news is even more important when policy change is needed because it helps set the agenda for policy makers and shapes the policy debate. If advocates want their solution considered seriously then they need serious news coverage. (But news frames have their own complications; we will get to that shortly.)

Advocates need to be able to clearly specify the problem, name the necessary solution (even though it may be just an incremental step), express the values that motivate action, and insert all three—problem, solution, and values—into public conversation via the news.

Putting it into Practice

Taken together, Grady and Aubrun's suggestions would change the overall story about inequality from one of individuals overcoming unfortunate prejudice to one about people dismantling systems of oppression or bolstering structures that support progress for every group in society. The narrative would shift from a story of people making it on their own against sometimes great odds to making it as a result of a caring community defined by communitarian values and supportive public policy.

UC Santa Cruz professor Manuel Pastor illustrates these competing narratives with two versions of the same story about his own history. His first story is the classic "rugged individualism" tale emphasizing what he did personally, on his own, as the son of poor immigrants to become a professor at a leading university. It is a heartwarming, inspirational, and familiar story about overcoming great odds. But, as Professor Pastor points out, it is not the whole story.

The second story—the complete story—explains how he grew up in a house that was purchased with federally sponsored loans for veterans. He tells how his father had access to community colleges and was able to learn a trade. And he tells how the family went from poor to working class because his father's union fought hard to represent its members. Pastor makes clear that his life is indelibly connected to larger social conditions: "In my success, I stand not alone but in the shadow of my parents' history and in debt to the social policies that helped all of our hard work pay off—and I have always felt an obligation to keep those opportunities alive."[i]

Both stories are quintessentially American. Yet the second is less familiar (more hidden) and so harder to conjure. Advocates must be able to articulate both types of stories equally well so they can counter what Grady and Aubrun call the default patterns of thinking. Such patterns obscure the reality that individuals always act in a context of social policy that supports or inhibits their success.

Stories can help, but stories are framed too. Grady and Aubrun suggest we will avoid the pitfalls of talking about inequality if we can show how the harms of inequality affect *all of us*, explain the *causes* of inequality, and highlight *practical steps* toward solutions. To do this, advocates need to know the solutions they seek and be able to tell stories that illustrate the larger context, as Manuel Pastor's story does. To articulate why problems go beyond the individual, advocates have to be able to describe, for example, how subsidizing early care and education benefits people without children, or how affordable housing in one part of a city benefits people who already own their homes elsewhere. We have to show how long it takes a young mother in a neighborhood without supermarkets to get healthy food to feed her family, or how hard it is for children to walk and play in neighborhoods without parks or sidewalks. We have to illustrate how public policies like school funding based on property taxes perpetuate conditions that prevent entire social groups from succeeding.

After all…

Berkeley Media Studies Group uses a training exercise to help advocates develop ways to articulate interconnection and illustrate how rectifying inequality benefits all of society.

To conduct the exercise, BMSG asks participants first to work individually completing statements like those below. The statements are designed to reflect the issues the group is addressing and the specific solutions they seek. Next, small groups work together to improve on each other's statements; then the large group joins in. The group process generates the specifics that help advocates identify their values and make interconnections tangible.

The "after all" statements look like this:

- Of course parents want their children to eat well and be physically active. But whether children have nutritious diets and plenty of exercise matters to more than just their immediate family. After all…
- Well-functioning public transportation is important, even to people who will never use it themselves. After all…
- Preventing childhood asthma is a high priority for parents whose children suffer from the disease. But it should be a high priority for others in this region as well. After all…
- Strong affirmative action programs at colleges help members of historically disadvantaged groups. But the programs also help historically privileged groups. After all…
- Living wages directly improve the lives of the workers. But the benefits of living wages extend far beyond one person's paycheck. After all…

Advocates could test the statements they develop to see how different audiences respond to their vision of interconnection. But if resources for research are not available, advocates will at least have done the first step: articulate clearly for themselves how an equitable society benefits everyone. Advocates with specific policy goals can use the statements to make logical links to the policy battle at hand.

Personal stories are told more often and are easier to tell than stories that illustrate the systems and structures that perpetuate inequality. Stories of individual change are at the core of our culture and they engage us. Stories of collective action are there as well but told less often. With practice, advocates can identify the conditions they want to illustrate and better link those descriptions to the particular policy debate and values

they hold.

News frames pose special problems. News stories are especially important because they can influence policy makers. But typical news frames tend to reinforce the idea that inequality is the result of personal failings. In part this is because reporters strive to “put a face on the issue.” Reporters try to illustrate the impact on a person’s life, rather than describe the context or policy implications, because they believe that readers and viewers are more likely to identify emotionally with a person’s plight than with a tedious dissection of policy options. They might be right. But this is a significant problem for social change advocates. Seminal research from Shanto Iyengar[ii] shows that stories focused this way reinforce a “blame the victim” view. This results in the solutions to social problems being seen as little more than demanding that individuals take more responsibility for themselves.

A simple way to distinguish news frames is to think of the difference between a portrait and a landscape. In a news story framed as a portrait, audiences may learn a great deal about an individual or an event, heavy on the drama and emotion. But, it is hard to see what surrounds individuals or what brought them to that circumstance. A landscape story pulls back the lens to take a broader view. It may include people and events, but connects them to the larger social and economic forces. People who see news stories framed as landscapes are more likely to recognize solutions that do not focus exclusively on individuals, but also the policies and institutions that shape the conditions around them. Landscape stories connect the plight of the person to a broader context and thus highlight the importance of fixing the context as part of fixing the problem.

Moving from portraits to landscapes is not easy to do, but crucial. It is perhaps the single most difficult *and* important lesson for advocates.

Race is the hardest conversation to have in America. Iyengar’s work about the implications of episodic (individual) versus thematic (contextual) news reports gives us a solid direction for storytelling via news: if we can illustrate the landscape we have a better chance of avoiding Grady and Aubrun’s pitfalls in talking about inequality. Except when it comes to race. The hopeful effect that Iyengar found for framing news stories thematically existed if the story was about whites, but not if the story was about African Americans (his study did not distinguish news stories about other racial or ethnic groups). For us, this finding is extremely disheartening and evidence of the extraordinary difficulty we have in this country when it comes to race. This is an enormous problem that simple prescriptions about storytelling cannot easily overcome. And, of course, it goes to the heart of many discussions of inequality.

America has transformed some of its conversation about race—and many of its most egregious practices. The civil rights era in the 1950s and 1960s saw tremendous progress. But even there, as the storyline changed from one of individual triumph over personal prejudice to institutional constraints on race and class, the story got harder to tell, the landscape harder to illustrate. Journalism professor William Drummond has shown that as the made-for-TV drama of racial segregation with dramatic footage of Southern sheriffs turning dogs and hoses on Blacks protesting for equal rights gave way to more complicated stories about economic development, jobs, and institutional

racism, the civil rights story disappeared from headlines and from TV news.[iii]

Robert Entman has shown that since that time images of African Americans on television news are relegated to few categories: victims, criminals, demanding politicians, and reporters and anchors.[iv] The repeated juxtaposition of these images, Entman concludes, reinforces underlying tendencies toward individualism. Highly successful Black anchors and reporters "prove" the default thinking anyone can succeed if they try hard enough.

Conclusion

Showing how inequality harms all of us forces us to tell stories about systems and institutions, not just individuals. This should help make the case for policies to reduce inequality. But the fact remains: some groups suffer more than others. Inherent in Grady and Aubrun's advice for avoiding the pitfalls of talking about inequality—illustrating solutions, making tangible its harms to all, and telling stories that make interconnection clear and compelling—can create distance from those who suffer most from the problem. If we talk only about "all of us" who talks about "them"? For us, this remains one of the most difficult problems in talking about inequality.

Furthermore, when we move our discussion to solutions focused on changing systems and structures in society, then we are no longer talking about inequality per se. Instead we are talking about housing, transportation, education, health, and prison systems. Will our allies recognize that this new discussion is their discussion? Ultimately, advocates will have to bridge the old frames to the new, or find mechanisms—like this brief—to share new ways to talk about old problems.

Ultimately, inequality is about our society, not individuals. It needs to be seen as a structural problem: a matter of public policy, not just personal behavior. When some have a lot and others have little, the tendency is to attribute this circumstance to individual effort. But most sources of inequality are rooted in the way that we have organized our society, and how that organization ends up favoring one group over another. To accelerate progress in eliminating structural inequalities we have to talk more effectively about structures, say why they matter, and offer tangible solutions for transforming them.

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[i] Blackwell, Angela, Kwoh, Stewart, Pastor, Manuel (2002). *Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America*, New York: WW Norton.
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[iii] Drummond, William. (1990). About Face: From Alliance to Alienation, *American Enterprise* magazine, July/August, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 22-29.
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