

The Institute on Inequality and Social Structure: A Conceptual Overview

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In both scholarly research and in Social Work practice, economic and social inequalities are observed on the individual level; they are most often described in terms of ascribed social location; and they are most often addressed through policies and programs that individualize and often pathologize disadvantage. This framing obscures the less readily observed structures – social, spatial, economic, policy and other – through which inequalities are produced, institutionalized, and reproduced. In scholarship, it has fragmented research across disciplines and across types of inequality and has slowed progress toward identifying causal mechanisms that produce and reproduce inequalities. In public and political discourse, it has displaced attention to inequality *per se* in favor of policies that reduce specific forms of disadvantage for specific groups.

The proposed Institute will address the gap, in social science research and in social policy / programs, in knowledge about the structured dimensions and causal mechanisms that institutionalize inequality. It will bring together a group of faculty, researchers, students, and practitioners from within and beyond the school, representing multiple disciplines and Social Work practice traditions, with shared interests in health, economic and social inequality. The Institute will pursue two goals. First, to increase knowledge about the ways in which inequalities are structured and reproduced. Second, to leverage this knowledge to influence intellectual and policy agendas. The Institute will pursue these goals by providing the intellectual space, structured interactions, support for collaborative research, educational and training opportunities, vehicles for disseminating knowledge, and other resources necessary to focus individual and shared expertise on advancing and disseminating knowledge.

Conceptual Overview

An Institute anchored in the School of Social Work provides a natural, perhaps even unique, vantage point from which to understand critical intersections in the study of inequality and to increase their visibility within and beyond the profession.

Intersections between individual and contextual factors that serve as mechanisms for producing / reproducing inequality. Inequalities are observed at the individual or group level. The causal or translational mechanisms linking individual-level experiences to contextual factors – political, economic, social, spatial, and other – are less well understood. For example, we know that social position and social inequalities explain much of the variation in health and illness, but we do not fully understand how they affect biological processes that underlie health outcomes; we know that race and ethnicity predict economic, social and health care resources but we do not fully understand how these biases are institutionalized in the everyday “taken for granted” practices of workplaces and agencies; we know that income and wealth inequality

has grown in recent decades but we have not fully explicated the role of public policies in reducing or exacerbating market-generated inequalities. Scholars in various academic disciplines are beginning to address these mechanisms. Accumulation of knowledge has been slowed by the fact that within each discipline or field, scholars work from different assumptions, theories, conceptual frames, and empirical methods. The Institute will provide a platform for a multidisciplinary group of scholars to interact regularly and, building on common interests, to advance multi-level theory and methods for the study of translational / causal processes that produce and maintain inequalities.

Intersections among multiple forms of inequality. The deep social significance of inequality arises from the intersection of multiple and interacting disparities in, for example, access to economic opportunities, the availability and quality of health care, the receipt of supportive assistance, the experience of discrimination, and the experience of coercive government interventions through, for example, child welfare and criminal justice systems. The interdisciplinary structure of the Institute will create opportunities to critically reformulate our understanding of inequality by bridging traditional disciplinary and professional foci.

Intersections across and within dimensions of inequality. Inequality is typically studied within discrete categories of social position, e.g. gender, income, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nativity. These categories obscure critical across- and within-group variations that arise at the intersections of social-economic locations, e.g. differences between women of color and those who are European-American, or among people of color who have differing socio-economic resources. The involvement of scholars studying various forms of stratification will force a critical rethinking of the dimensions of stratification implicit in our scholarship, teaching, and practice.

Intersections among methods. Scholars affiliated with the Institute are using a variety of methods to study the processes that produce and maintain inequalities, from ethnography to organizational studies, longitudinal / life-course analyses, and various forms of quantitative modeling. Interactions and collaborations among Institute participants will allow us to build on common methodological foundations and to explore new connections, e.g. between qualitative and quantitative methods, or between the modeling approaches used by researchers focused on individual- and policy-level processes.

Intersections between research and influence. Advancing scholarship will increase our influence on national intellectual and political agendas. Conceptual agenda-setting and the production of persuasive evidence are critical for fostering collective awareness, willingness, and strategies for redressing injustices. Social workers, as advocates, are most visibly present in the local and national professional affairs of the profession and in networks of community and professional organizations seeking to improve the efficacy of local, regional, and state service systems. But social work scholars are often missing from scholarly discourse that directly informs – for good or ill – collective understanding and public policies for addressing inequality and injustice. By contributing new conceptual analyses and knowledge, the Institute will help shape the national intellectual discourse; it will increase the prominence of inequality on scholarly and policy agendas; and it will influence public debates and choices about policy, laws, and resource allocation that bear directly on the reduction of inequality.

Overview of Proposed Activities

The Institute will serve as a platform linking existing and emerging scholarship, teaching, and service within the school. The core members of the Institute are already engaged in many projects that serve each of these missions. The value-added of the Institute will be to sharpen their focus on inequality themes, strengthen their theoretical and methodological sophistication, diversify their perspectives, increase their contribution to graduate education, and increase their external influence.

Specifically, for the first five years the Institute will focus on activities that (1) advance theoretical, methodological, and empirical knowledge in the study of inequality; (2) produce new scholars who use innovative and integrated theories and methods to study inequality; (3) disseminate new knowledge to influence intellectual and public policy agendas.

We envision a number of collaborative efforts to advance these goals. Each involves synergy among research, teaching, and advocacy missions; each has the potential to link individuals and groups within and beyond the school. Following are the initiatives envisioned for the first one-two years of the Institute.

Faculty / Graduate Student Seminar on Inequality.

We have begun a regular seminar involving presentations of works in progress by faculty, researchers, and graduate students. Eventually, the seminar will be expanded to include others in the UW community and visiting scholars / speakers. Seminar presentations involve ‘works in progress by faculty (and eventually students) that raise significant theoretical or methodological questions. These presentations / discussions are sharpening and deepening the focus on inequality in our individual work. They provide opportunities to refine methodologies and identify applications to new topics. They serve an educational function for Ph.D. students and post-doctoral fellows by modeling the development and refinement of intellectual contributions through collegial review; they will also provide a supportive yet intellectually critical forum for presentation of graduate student research. Seminars could result in a number of products that serve the dissemination / influencing goals of the Institute, such as working papers, panels at relevant conferences, or proposals for special issues in academic journals. Seminars will also serve as one vehicle for generating new, collaborative research projects.

Incubator for Applied Policy Research

The regular activities of the Institute are already fostering new collaboratives among faculty within and beyond the school. The Institute will also foster collaboratives between faculty and the larger community of policymakers and programs in the city and region and help existing and new collaborative projects leverage their knowledge-building activities into greater influence on intellectual and policy agendas. Local / regional research, service, and public interest organizations often engage in data collection and analysis on questions with immediate relevance for their own programs

or issue agendas. These questions often have great relevance for national intellectual and policy agendas as well. But these organizations frequently lack the resources and analytic capacity to conduct credible analyses and the visibility to leverage these analyses into influence.

The Institute will foster collaborations between community organizations and the University by creating opportunities for faculty and graduate students to engage in research projects generated by local / regional organizations. The Institute will be particularly interested in projects that have the potential for national significance. One mechanism will be the development of policy practice MSW field placements in organizations engaged in applied policy research. A second will be the linkage of faculty and doctoral students to applied inequality-related research. The Institute will pursue funds for matching grants to joint University-community research projects that (1) apply rigorous scholarly methods to the analysis of inequality issues; (2) have immediate relevance for local or regional policy; and (3) have broader relevance for intellectual and policy agendas.

For example: The Economic Opportunities Institute of Seattle has developed nationally significant models for state / local policy in the areas of child care, early education, welfare-to-work transitions, and family leave. They would like to expand their activities to consider issues of universal health care but currently lack the staff resources and expertise to undertake the background research. The Institute could serve a linking function by arranging for an MSW practicum placement and / or a doctoral research project on this topic; a University-EOI project might be able to raise funds jointly for such a project or (with outside funding) the Institute could match funds raised by EOI.

Campus-wide, multi-disciplinary “Workshops on Topics in Inequality”.

We would like to sponsor / support workshops that bring together scholars from diverse disciplines working on common substantive or methodological issues in inequality. Workshops (or symposia) on topics in inequality would increase the visibility of inequality research; integrate knowledge across disciplines; educate graduate students; and disseminate innovative work to the academic and practitioner communities. They would provide ideal opportunities to build linkages with other academic centers (e.g. the Center for Research on the Family) as well as applied policy research groups within and beyond the University. Depending on the topic, they may involve researchers, senior policy makers and / or practitioners; invited papers could be disseminated as Institute working papers; depending on the topic, they may also be disseminated more widely to the media and various policy and practitioner communities.

For example: With initial support from the Center for Family Research, Meyers and Romich are organizing a one-day working conference on multi-disciplinary approaches to understanding inequalities in participation in public programs / receipt of public benefits. Scholars representing diverse perspectives – e.g. behavioral economics, sociology, public health, Social Work – will present invited papers on their conceptual framing of the “participation” dynamic and the methodological approaches and challenges that arise in empirical study of these dynamics.

Summer Institute on Inequality Research.

One of the key goals of the Institute is to elevate studies of inequality on national intellectual and research agendas. We hope to create a nucleus of scholarly activity, involving the School of Social Work and other University partners, that will both attract and inform scholars nationally (and potentially internationally) through regular research and educational activities. One vehicle we are considering is an annual summer Institute on Inequality. Under a broader umbrella of advancing multi-disciplinary scholarship on the “gap between individual and context” in understanding inequality, each Institute might be organized around specific areas of inequality or translational mechanism. They would be designed to articulate an intellectual agenda and identify emerging methods for the study of inequality. They would involve faculty, researchers, and graduate students from around the country in focused discussions of theoretical constructs and methods for the study of inequality. A likely product, in addition to the direct exchange of ideas and education, would be one or more edited volumes of papers.

Interdisciplinary graduate and post-graduate training program in inequality studies.

Another goal of the Institute is the development of new scholars who have a deep commitment to inequality and the training across disciplines that is needed to address the multiple intersections described above. We envision a funded graduate and post-graduate training program that prepares students to pursue inequality studies within their chosen discipline (Social Work or other) using a multi-disciplinary range of theoretical and methodological tools.

As a first step, the Institute will organize a new Ph.D. seminar on inequality. The elective seminar will be conducted jointly by three or more faculty who can speak to the distinct set of assumptions, theories, conceptual frames, and empirical methods that inform inequality studies in their fields. These distinctions are common to but not synonymous with academic disciplines, e.g. economics, social geography, social psychology, etc. Each instructor will prepare a three week module addressing the (1) theoretical foundations, (2) professional / disciplinary history, and (3) methodological approaches and limitations to the study of inequality within their field. Over time, the modules will rotate to introduce emergent and interdisciplinary paradigms. Once established, it should draw students and faculty from other disciplines at the University. The Seminar would incorporate the regular faculty / student seminars and campus-wide workshops, e.g. through faculty-facilitated debriefings aimed at drawing linkages between public events and the doctoral curriculum.