

# Inequality: My unfair disadvantage, not your unearned privilege

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Ashleigh Shelby Rosette is an associate professor of management and organizations and a Center of Leadership and Ethics scholar at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. Credit: Justin Cook

Efforts to address social inequalities in income, education and

employment opportunity can be boosted simply by the manner in which that inequity is presented, according to new research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

If you benefit from an [inequity](#), how you handle the situation could depend upon how it is described to you, Professor Ashleigh Shelby Rosette found.

Her study tested people's willingness to surrender part of a bonus at work as a way of studying the presentation of an unjust imbalance or inequity.

"The manner in which you frame inequity or privilege, whether it's focused on the self—my unearned privilege—or focused on the other—his or her unfair disadvantage—can influence the extent to which you want to rectify it," Rosette said.

"When attempting to influence individuals who are in a position to help rectify financial and social inequity, the way in which you phrase it makes a difference," Rosette said.

Previous research had found framing inequity as a group advantage made members of the group more likely to support efforts to address the inequity. But Rosette found the opposite is true for individuals.

"We show that at the individual level, when you tell a person that what they have received is unearned," Rosette said, "it triggers self-serving biases and they become less likely to rectify the inequity."

The study, Framing advantageous inequity with a focus on others: A catalyst for equity restoration, is newly published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Rosette worked with Christy Zhou Koval of Hong Kong University, who received her Ph.D at Fuqua.

The researchers asked 199 white participants to imagine they were sales associates who were to receive a performance bonus. They were told an audit had found company policy had assigned sales opportunities unfairly based on race. Then they were given the opportunity to share some or all of their bonus.

Participants who were told a specific black colleague had been unfairly disadvantaged by the policy were willing to give up more of the bonus than those told they had been given an unfair advantage because they were white. They also gave up more than the participants who were told that all white personnel were undeservedly advantaged, or that all black employees were unfairly disadvantaged. A second study replicated the results.

"When we frame inequity as a person's undeserved privilege, that person tends to justify their status by talking down the other party, describing the colleague as lazy or incompetent. This disparagement then justifies their decision not to share their rewards even though they were unfairly distributed in the first place." Rosette said. "Simply by changing the framing and presenting inequity as another person's undeserved disadvantage, we find people are more interested in addressing it and are less likely to blame the other person."

The findings suggest that understanding how people think about the disadvantages of others may be just as important as understanding how people think about their own advantages—especially when the goal is to encourage behaviors and policies to redress the imbalance.

"It's two sides of the same coin," Rosette said. "How you look at it determines whether you are willing to address inequity. Our findings suggest the focus should be on the disadvantages bestowed upon the other person, rather than the unearned privileges that accumulate to the self."

**More information:** Ashleigh Shelby Rosette et al, Framing advantageous inequity with a focus on others: A catalyst for equity restoration, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.002)

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