

# Ten Chair Simulation of the Distribution of Wealth

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Inequalities of wealth are extreme in the U.S. Billionaires double their wealth every 3-5 years, while poverty is the highest in the industrialized world. The corporate elite who own the majority of the wealth not only control our economy, but also own most of the media and influence government policies. When students become aware of this concentration of wealth and power they begin to see the necessity of thinking critically about the system in which we live. A Boston-based group, United for a Fair Economy, has developed a simulation to dramatize the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. This article describes the activity and how I use it in my college human relations classes. The exercise is appropriate for middle school to college levels.

To begin the simulation I ask ten students to volunteer to line up at the front of the room seated in their chairs, facing the rest of the class. I explain that each chair represents ten percent of the wealth in the U.S. and each occupant represents 10% of the population, so that when each chair is occupied by one student, the wealth is evenly distributed. I explain that wealth is what you own: your stereo, the part of your house and car that are paid off, savings like stocks and bonds, vacation homes, any companies you own, your yachts, villas on the Riviera, private jet airplanes, etc. Then I ask students to estimate how much wealth each family would have if the wealth were equally distributed. Students usually guess about \$50,000 and are surprised to hear that the answer is \$250,000. I ask them what it would feel like if every family could have a \$100,000 home, a \$10,000 car paid for and \$140,000 in savings. Some make comments like, "It'd be wonderful, I wouldn't have to work two jobs and take out a loan to go to college," but many can't imagine such a society, and others express concern that the incentive to work would be taken away: "It sounds like socialism."

I tell those worried about socialism that they have nothing to fear, that in reality we have nowhere near an equal distribution; the poorest 20% of the population are in debt, and the next 30% average only \$5000 in wealth (primarily in home equity). When I ask, "Who owns most of the wealth?" students began to talk about the superrich. During this discussion I ask the students at either end of the line-up which one of them wants to represent the richest 10% and experience being rich. Some students will volunteer happily, and others will express distaste at the idea. When asked about their motives, they say: "I'll never be rich, so I'd like to see what it feels like." "I don't want to oppress other people and rich people exploit their workers." Sometimes a student, often female, will say, "I don't like to be above other people."

I invite the class to guess how many chairs belong to the richest student, let's call her Sue. Students are dismayed to hear that in 1976, the richest 10% of the population had five chairs or 50% of the wealth. I tell the four students sitting nearest to Sue to give up their chairs to her and to move to the poorer end of the line up. Then I point out, "But with tax breaks and a skyrocketing stock market Sue is getting richer. By 1996 she increased her share of the wealth

from 50% to 70%, so the next two students in the line up have to give up their chairs to her." If students have not yet begun to get upset, I provoke them by telling them that the standing students can sit on the laps of the three students seated at the end, and I invite Sue to sit in the middle of her seven chairs, to stretch out, relax, or even lay down across the chairs.

To upset them further I announce that Sue's arm represents the wealthiest 1% of families and that her arm's share of the wealth doubled from 2 chairs (22% of the wealth) to 4 chairs (42%) during the years from 1979 to 1992. I solicitously help Sue find a comfortable position with one arm stretched over four chairs. To engage Sue in clowning and playing up her role, I might offer her food or drink. I ask the other nine students who are crowded around three chairs what life is like at their end of the line. "We're pissed and tired of working all the time." "I want a revolution." Working class students tell stories of financial stress they have experienced. "My mother had to work two jobs to support us." "My family was really poor when my dad was laid off. We lived on macaroni and cheese." Often one student, usually a white male, will say he has hopes that he can work hard and join Sue.

Students' knowledge of how inequality is rationalized erupts when I ask, "what do those in power tell us to try to justify this gross inequality?" "They work harder than we do." "They create jobs." "The U.S. stands for equality and justice for all." "It's our fault if we don't make it." If students do not mention scapegoating, I bring it up: I select one student from the group of nine to represent the poorest 10% and ask, "wouldn't there be more money for the rest of you if he or she weren't ripping off the system for welfare?" "Why would Sue want us to blame welfare moms, immigrants, gays and lesbians, or bad schools?" The arrangement in the room makes answers obvious that are difficult to teach didactically: "If we're mad at welfare moms, we don't see the fortune Sue has."

To draw out the connections between the grossly skewed distribution of wealth and political power I pose the question: "But since we all have one vote in our democracy, couldn't we elect politicians who would tax them and give us tax breaks and social services?" All students know "they'd never let that happen," and they can begin to articulate why. When asked to explain how the superrich could stop a movement to close the wealth gap, they bring up campaign financing, lobbyists, and corporate ownership of the media.

If the nine students grouped around the three chairs are asked why they don't get organized to force a redistribution of the wealth, they offer a variety of answers. "We're too busy working to organize." "We are told we can't change things." "We don't get along with each other." "They'd call out the army to stop us."

At some point I ask the class to describe who the superrich are. College students are able to offer examples from their experiences. A junior high coach described a local billionaire who offered to write the coach's school a check of any amount in order to get his child on the school baseball team. Another student worked as a waiter in an elite club where "you had to be elected to be able to have lunch there." The club was all white and only recently began allowing women on the premises. Some of the older men refused to let her serve them because they resented her presence. Another student described doing carpentry in a mansion of the Dupont's: "The faucet in the kid's bathroom cost \$3000."

The athletes and entertainers whose salaries are hyped in the media, and newly rich entrepreneurs like Donald Trump and Bill Gates are always mentioned. I point out, "these are people who are upwardly mobile, who moved from the three chairs up to Sue's chair. How often does this happen? Why do we hear so much about them?" Students understand that the exaggerated publicity about these rags to riches icons perpetuates the myth that anyone who tries can make it.

Most texts and teachers stop after they have taught about the unequal distribution of wealth, but this is only half the picture. We need to go on to ask why wealth is so unequally distributed. Where does wealth come from? Why does our system concentrate wealth in the hands of so few people? The simulation creates a foundation for these later lessons.

More teaching resources are available from United for a Fair Economy, 37 Temple Place, Fifth Floor, Boston, MA 02111. (617) 423-2148. Fax: (617) 423-0191. E-mail: [STW@stw.org](mailto:STW@stw.org). Web site: <http://www.stw.org>. STW stands for Share the Wealth Project.

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