

Health Equity Metaphors for Effective Communication

Reorientation of health systems towards health equity is essential for reducing health inequities. In the five-year CIHR-funded project, Equity Lens in Public Health (ELPH), we found that communicating about health equity is challenging and can act as a barrier to supporting shared and accurate understandings of health equity.¹ Metaphors that use images or phrases to communicate complex concepts are powerful tools. Metaphors can be used to increase understanding and facilitate discussion of how to promote health equity and remove barriers that produce health inequities. In this resource, we offer a guide for using metaphors as a tool to enhance communication about health equity to effect changes.

Effective Use of Metaphors

There are many metaphors that have been created to represent health equity concepts. To use metaphors to effectively communicate about health equity with a group, it is important to use these metaphors critically. When choosing metaphors to work with, consider if the intended meaning is consistent with the messages you want and if they will resonate with your particular audience (Figure 1). The process of critical appraisal of these metaphors, outlined in the steps below, can then be used to promote active learning and reflection about health equity when planning or facilitating such sessions.

Health equity means all people (individuals, groups and communities) have a fair chance to reach their full health potential and are not disadvantaged by social, economic and environmental conditions.

NCCDH Glossary of Essential Health Equity Terms
<http://nccdh.ca/resources/glossary/>



Figure 1: In Alberta, after trialling different metaphors, a power grid was identified as effective in that province to communicate that health depends on access to resources, and the need to collectively 'monitor the grid' to ensure that all communities have access to resources that improve health.

Frameworks Institute <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>

1. Frame the Conversation

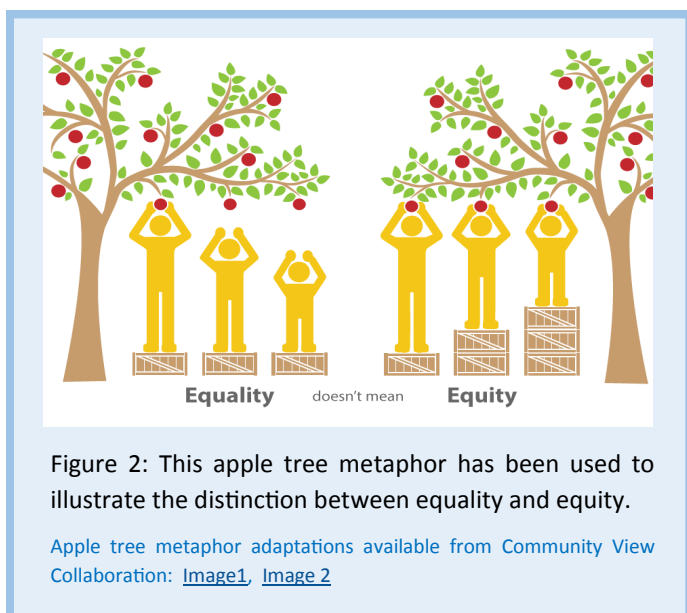
The first step for facilitating effective communication about health equity is to frame the conversation by defining health equity and the underlying values of social justice. A shift to social justice values means challenging power and privilege, as well as socially constructed inequalities that result from systematic patterns of disadvantage.³ The intent is to reflect on values and encourage thinking beyond individual behaviour or characteristics to understand that differences in health are due in part to unfair historical, social, economic or environmental conditions. This is the frame for considering actions to promote health equity.

Market Justice ²	Social Justice ³
Seeks to ensure fair protection of engagement in the market	Places urgency on inequalities that result from systematic patterns of disadvantage
Aims for Equality, fairness in means	Aims for Equity, fairness in outcomes
Inequalities in health and wealth are acceptable, as long as people have equal access to opportunity	Inequalities are socially constructed, and lead to unacceptable inequities
Naturalizes power and privilege	Problematizes power and privilege

2. Assess the Intention

For any metaphor, first assess the intended meaning. What is the metaphor trying to communicate about health equity? Is it effective at drawing attention to social conditions, or does it focus primarily on individual characteristics?

The apple tree metaphor in Figure 2 and the bicycle metaphor in Figure 3 have been used to communicate that equal treatment doesn't necessarily result in equal access. However, each framing can lead to different interpretations and conclusions. What does each figure say about equality versus equity? What does each say about who has access to resources for health? Do the metaphors focus on historical, economic, social or cultural factors that produce health inequities?



3. Deconstruct the Metaphor

Now carefully consider what each piece of the visual might represent for the audience. For the apple tree metaphor, what might the tree represent? What about the trunk, leaves and apples? Who can access the tree? Who might need help to access the tree? What type of supports could help people access the tree? Does the visual communicate ideas about social justice?



4. Critically Appraise the Metaphor

Next delve deeper and critically appraise the construction of the metaphor. For the apple tree, consider: Should everyone be able to access the tree? Does everyone need some level of support to access the tree? Does everyone need the same kind of support to access the tree? Why do some need support? Can you identify social forces that have created unfair conditions and inequity in the construction?

These questions facilitate conversations about social determinants that influence health, such as living conditions like housing and income, age, sex, gender, and ethnicity. These determinants position people to have more or less access to resources for health.^{1,3}

5. Reconstruct the Metaphor

Now that you have critically examined these images and their construction, what would you change to better reflect understandings of social justice? How could you reconstruct the metaphor to reflect this perspective? What are the challenges? Figure 4 is one example of an activity that can be used to encourage people to think about reconstructing metaphors.

6. Envision Effective Action

What strategies could be used to promote health equity and effectively create change? Are they the same as what you first concluded? Do the strategies target action at the individual level or do they start to address some of the structural factors that create inequities? What else would be needed to create change at this level?

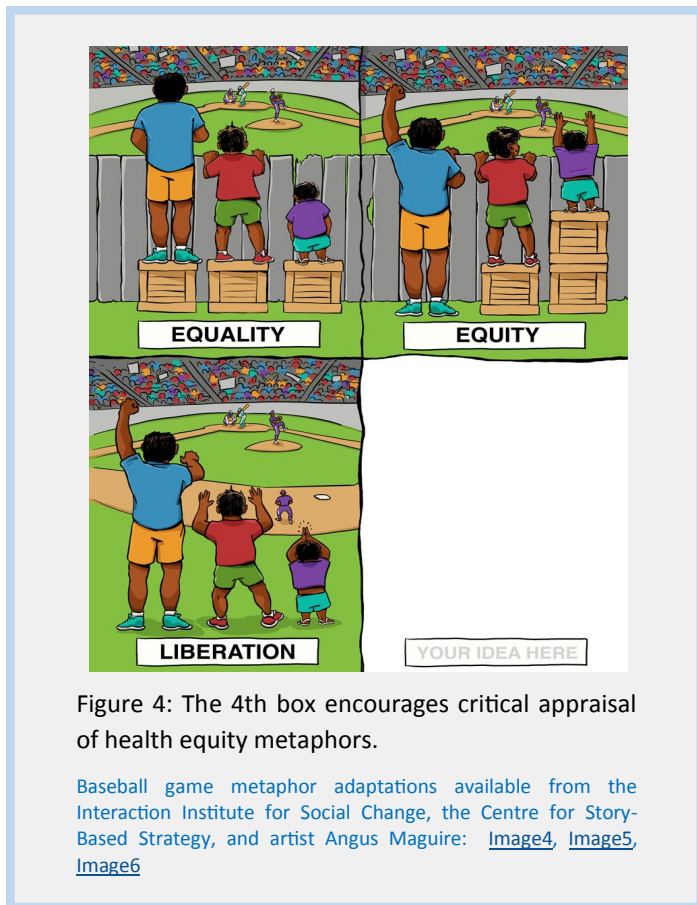


Figure 4: The 4th box encourages critical appraisal of health equity metaphors.

Baseball game metaphor adaptations available from the Interaction Institute for Social Change, the Centre for Story-Based Strategy, and artist Angus Maguire: [Image4](#), [Image5](#), [Image6](#)

Rigour not 'Right Metaphor'

While there are many metaphors available, there is no single 'right metaphor' to communicate health equity. It is important to critically appraise these metaphors to ensure they work with your audience to enable learning about health equity concepts. These metaphors can be a powerful tool or 'equity lens' (another metaphor!) to facilitate deeper understanding and develop effective strategies to promote health equity and remove barriers.

Want to Learn More?

ELPH partnered with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH) and [Lesley Dyck](#) to create a workshop on using images and metaphors to create understanding of health equity, it is available [here](#)

For more information on ELPH:

<https://www.uvic.ca/elph/>

elph@uvic.ca



References

1. Pauly, B.M., Shahram, S.Z., Dang, P., Marcellus, L. MacDonald, M., [Health Equity Talk: Understandings of health equity among health leaders](#). AIMS Public Health 2017. 4(5): p. 490-512.
2. Rawls, J., *A theory of justice*. 1971, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
3. Faden, R. R., & Powers, M. (2008). Health inequities and social justice. *Bundesgesundheitsblatt-Gesundheitsforschung-Gesundheitsschutz*, 51(2), 151-157.
4. Whitehead, M.M. and G. Dahlgren, *Levelling up (part 1): a discussion paper on concepts and principles for tackling social inequities in health*, in *Studies on social and economic determinants of population health*. 2006, World Health Organization: Copenhagen.

Please cite this document as follows: Shahram, S. Z., Dyck, L., van Roode, T., Strosher, H.W., Revai, T., Dang, P., MacDonald, M. & Pauly, B. (2017). *Health Equity Metaphors for Effective Communication*. Victoria, BC: The Equity Lens in Public Health (ELPH) Research Project.