



02/15/2022: Walking the Tightrope: Surviving in Working Class America

Our pop-up discussion on February 15th centered around Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn's latest book, *Tightrope: American's Reaching for Hope*. In a moderated discussion, students shared their insights on the structural conditions that have maintained poverty and inequality in the country, as well as possible solutions to move forward.

Discussion Set-Up

To provide some context, we first looked at some of the historical trends highlighted in the book to answer the question: **how exactly did we get here?** We examined the positive and negative impact of **key policy choices**, and how shifts in policy priorities towards the end of the 20th century played a key role in creating this "grim reality of working-class America".

19th to Mid-20th Centuries

- Characterized by **significant government investments in the lives of ordinary Americans**
- Implementation of universal free education
- Increase in government welfare programs

From 1970s Onward

- **Cutting back of social safety net**
- Deregulation, pro-business, and anti-union policies prevail
- Wage stagnation that continues to harm working-class Americans to this day

For this Pop-Up, we wanted to focus on how to shift **the conversation from the individual to the institutional level**, and discuss the **possibility of structural solutions** that would address the challenges facing the working class today.

Student Discussion Summary

1. Does framing poverty and inequality as policy choices change the conversation? Does it change what we view as the root causes? And if so, how?

Participants strongly agreed that shifting the narrative **from personal responsibility to institutional policy choices** indeed changes the conversation.

One participant referenced **recidivism rates**, stating how some individuals may choose to commit crimes and go to prison in order to secure food and shelter, rather than starve on the streets.



This phenomenon points to policy gaps surrounding **basic food and housing security** in the United States.



Another student pointed out a Finland case study, in which the homeless were **given houses and rehabilitation resources through a national strategy**, significantly reducing rates of homelessness within the country.

The Finland case study shows how a national strategy with dedicated resources and services can provide holistic support to individuals and families in need.



2. The authors highlight a tension between recipients of government aid and their perceptions of others who receive these benefits. What do you think about these tensions, and why they exist?

Students discussed the **dominant anti-tax perspective** within the United States, the low tax rate on the wealthy in comparison to other advanced democracies, and the general **lack of awareness about** what exactly tax funds are used for.

One student brought up how **social safety nets have been stigmatized**, since these programs serve populations deemed “lesser” (ie. the elderly and the poor).



People hold less empathy for these populations, which in turn reduces advocacy for these programs, and an **“us vs. them”** mentality is created.

3. When thinking about individual blame vs. systematic failure, do you think there’s anything individuals can truly do to address the issues caused by structural inequality, or is it something that can only be addressed on an institutional level?

Participants generally agreed that institutional and structural change is needed to address these problems, but also discussed that it is difficult to imagine a new system when we have been living within the existing structures for so long.

One student brought up the consequences of America’s **two-party system**, which leads to a false dichotomy of options, lack of collaboration, and the loss of potential for improvement.

They also referred to the multi-party political systems of other countries, pointing out how they allow more room for **effective conversation and problem-solving**, instead of just pointing fingers.



Questions For The Authors

1. We had some students who were interested in pursuing a career path in professional writing and journalism. **What inspired you both to get into journalism, specifically reporting on issues of human rights and structural inequalities abroad? How does it compare to your work reporting here in America?**

3. We believe that Millennials and Gen Z are already fairly aware of the issues that you cover in *Tightrope*, given the generations’ increased political consciousness and participation in social justice activism. **Could you give us some insight on who the intended audience was for this book? What are some of the main takeaways that you wanted the intended audience to understand from reading it?**

2. *Tightrope* covers multiple stories from people you grew up with in Yamhill. **What was it like collecting private, deeply personal stories from people that you’ve known since childhood, given your privilege and positions now as successful journalists who were able to make it off the tightrope?**

4. Children are arguably the most vulnerable population in the country, and in the book you discuss a number of proposed institutional/policy changes, 7 out of 8 of these focused on children. **Why do you think there has been such little focus on children and stopping them from a lifetime of walking on the tightrope? How can the unique challenges children of color face be addressed on an institutional level?**