

Inequality Multiplied: Socioeconomic Inequality Times Racial Inequality Equals More  
Than Any One Solution Can Balance

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### **Abstract**

I am an anomaly. Within the framework of most widely accepted, contemporary, and standard sets of expectations, I should not be in college, be gainfully employed, or even be able to read. This is due to a variety of circumstances I will outline in the analysis that follows. The reason I aim to outline something as personal and self-examining is to highlight the differences, connections, and conclusions I have drawn to my own circumstances after thorough review of a number of social science research pieces on inequality in socioeconomic and racial applications. Inequality, sadly, has been an ongoing peripheral dimension of my entire college experience. In my review, I will examine Marsh's (2011) assertion that the United States' operates under a flawed focus on education as a solution for decreasing poverty and inequality, highlighted with the class inequality issues of the occupy movement. I will mostly support his assertion while examining some important exceptions, evidenced by my own experience within the constructs of the system itself. And I will also look at inequality within the focus of racial application after the highly-publicized deaths of several unarmed black men were unfairly handled in the justice system that disproportionately discriminates non-white suspects thereby creating a multiplying effect on the socioeconomic form of inequality.

## Introduction

I actually love it when someone near me goes off on an angry rant about giving people government welfare—the way that the United States wants to just “...pay for people to be lazy, laying around all day so they could do nothing.” I love it because I happen to take very specific issue with that kind of sentiment; it gives me a *reason* to call out those people with that terribly shortsighted, uninformed, and often blatantly racist opinion. The fundamental issue that I have with that kind of view is that *I was raised on food stamps*. As the sole source of income, for many years, my family had a hot-dog cart that we would bring out to the streets and library parking lot to try and sell food. Soda, candy bars, and chips for ‘the cart’ were strictly off limits to my brothers and I; we ate the same thing every single night—a scoop of macaroni and cheese, one hot dog with no bun, and one small serving of broccoli or some other frozen vegetable cooked in a small pan. We had to ask to turn the TV on and to go into the refrigerator. We took cold showers between March and October, as my father would turn off the water heater in warm months to save money. I took a lunch ticket to school and would hang out with my neighbor, doing anything she wanted, even playing Barbies with her, just to get her to bring out some snacks. My parents worked, and yet we still needed welfare just to sustain a very meager existence. Neither of my parents went to a four-year college. My father was a veteran of the Vietnam war who got an associate’s degree afterwards on the G.I. bill, and my mother took a vocational dog-grooming course with which she would later supplement some of her income by grooming dogs in her own tub. When I consider inequality, I have a very clear perspective on the issue, specifically with what makes it different, and in some ways the same, when it is contrasted as an issue of race to an issue of class. My family is an all-American mix of many things. I am part Jewish, Filipino, Portuguese, Sicilian, Dutch, and English. On a census form though, that all

boils down to, “Caucasian”. And I know that the small mix of President Obama’s own ethnic heritage would then lead him to check an altogether different single box that reflects very little of his own ethnic diversity, just like myself. Despite all the diversity in both of our ethnic heritages, and unlike the complexity of inequality itself, we are both considered either black or white in this country.

A look at inequality, where it matters in terms of class, and in terms of race, and how those two movements converge in being the two most active social issues during my college experience, is of value coming from the unique perspective that I have. My experience through college is, statistically speaking, is very atypical. Coming from the poverty I came from, the lack of resources, and formal education of my parents, I am an anomaly for having worked my way up through the ranks in technical business work, having gained enough technical expertise in my own work experience to allow me the ability to quit full time work, market my abilities, go back as a consultant, and afford to go to school full time. That perspective on inequality, the way that it can be overcome by one individual in terms of class, is something much different than the inequality in terms of race. However there are points at which the two are inextricably mixed. I believe that a black man with all things equal—economic shortcomings, lack of parental example, lack of parental college investment, and an equal passion for hard work, would most likely have been required to handle an additional set of hardships just to reach the same point as me because of the intense distraction in policing based on racial inequalities. In short, my rise out of poverty was self-made and not easy; however it would’ve been even more difficult if I were black.

### What is Class Inequality and What is the Solution?

Reading John Marsh's *Class Dismissed: Why we Cannot Teach or Learn our Way out of Inequality* (2011), there was certainly an initial resistance to accepting the idea that the college education that I have worked so hard for and now will begin to have to pay for, is essentially worthless. I left a very secure position in a very fairly salaried job that I acquired with no college education at all. Coming up through the ranks in working the front end of claims processing, to moving into the technical development of those very systems as a business analyst, I realized in 2011 that I had a lot more to offer the world than just working on and then building claims software. I decided that I could use these talents to pursue business work in the environmental sector, but only with a bachelor's degree. Early chapter explanations about Marsh's Odyssey Project, the schooling of low-income individuals to get more access to cheap college courses, and Marsh's almost defeated attitude about how little it would actually help anyone, elicited a gut reaction in this reading. It made me feel as if there was very little inspiration that this kind of reading was going to give a graduating senior. Coming from all that I have been through, how is hearing that I've just *wasted* my time and money any hope for a more fulfilling future in my continued climb out of the poverty from which I was raised?

I was happy to find it did the opposite. As the introduction led way to more of an examination, it was clear that Marsh's findings would not ultimately assert that education *itself* was worthless, that focus on individual interest in liberal arts degrees are not in and of themselves worthless, rather that educational *focus* is not the sole answer as it is often presented as in terms of a remedy for class inequality and poverty; it is not to say that it has no value, but rather that it is being too heavily emphasized as a solution when there is something other than education that actually does serve as a more substantial solution. As Marsh (2011) stated,

“Reluctantly, I conclude that education bears far too much of the burden of our hopes for economic justice, and, moreover, that we ask education to accomplish things it simply cannot accomplish” (p. 18). Marsh’s statement that there are things that education cannot accomplish, a suggestion, “...that we may need to dismiss the belief that all or even most of our economic problems can be solved from the classroom” (p. 19), is highly substantiated in the rest of the examination. Moreover, my own anxiety and reflex instinct to be overly critical of his assessment lessened when he stated, “Nor, as other critics have begun to argue, do I believe that a college degree has ceased to offer a good return on a young person’s investment of time and money” (p. 19). In other words, his book did not seek to argue that college has no value, rather that the wrong value is being placed on it.

It is not very hard to see the correlation between Marsh’s poignant take on this topic upon this book’s release in July 2011 and the heightened sense of urgency that was running through the American public right around the same time that the Occupy Wall Street movement took over in the Fall of 2011, only coincidentally when I quit work to go back to school relying only on savings I had accumulated with the intent on going back to school full time to change careers. This was a point in time where inequality, the structural scale and enormity of the issue, was on the television almost all-day-every-day. I remember a friend of mine talking to me about my quitting work then, going to school to pursue a more fulfilling career in environmental work, and the Occupy Wall Street movement itself. Her perspective was a unique and somewhat scary one to me at the same time. She was a major in music, her degree in Saxophone playing, who then ended up working on the floor as an admin at the Chicago Board of Trade. She was one of the many people I had come to know over many years possessing a degree in one thing and a job in something totally unrelated. Her thought was, “What are they even protesting about? I have

come to terms with the fact that the education I paid for isn't going to get me a job playing music. It was basically pointless. I've seen some of them out there saying 'I owe all this money for my Liberal Arts degree and now I can't get a job' I'm like, what did you think you would get a job in?" She wondered whether I'd fall into the same trap of going to school for something that seemed important to me just to find no environmental work in the field when I graduate—something that's certainly entirely possible. But, I explained effectively that, "The movement, from what I understand, is mostly about reconfiguring this country's profit system so that everyone who is contributing to a company's success gets to share in a substantial percentage of that return. Right now, you may work for a place for a decade, see it grow in billions of dollars of profit, and never see an additional penny per year." She understood but wondered how I envisioned change like that ever happening. I said, "Now that I don't know—how you could get legislation that would actually fix this is beyond me. But in order to solve this thing, you would really need to require that a percentage of every company's profits are then required to be invested *back into* the company itself instead of being given off to multi-million dollar bonuses to CEOs and bonus payouts to the hands of shareholders doing nothing but incentivizing that company to squeeze more blood out of its employees even harder for less money." I explained, "It's not just more jobs, which we do need, but jobs that can actually pay the people who work there when those companies make money." Coming full circle, these years later, Marsh's explanation of the situation today is as relevant to her question then. Why even go to college? Well, as Marsh (2011) stated:

Our high-tech, post-industrial economy demands workers with college degrees, while workers without a college degree are, frankly, the lowest common denominator.

Consider, for example, the almost unbelievable fact that in the early 1970s, the U.S.

economy had more jobs for high school dropouts (32 percent of the workforce) than for all college graduates (28 percent of the workforce).<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, the economy looks quite different today. Whereas one out of every three jobs used to be open to high school dropouts, only one out of ten are now.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, according to a study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 42 percent of jobs require a college degree, and an additional 17 percent require some college.<sup>10</sup> (p. 68)

Marsh (2011) cited a Georgetown Center on Education and the Workplace report called *Help Wanted* that verbalized the issue even more succinctly when it stated, “Post-secondary education has become the gatekeeper to the middle class and the upper class,” and as Marsh expanded, “...that gatekeeper is not a forgiving fellow” (p. 90).

Here is the point where I sneak in *through* that gate a bit and can see both sides. Working my way up through the ranks from a minimum-wage front-end claims processing job, applying after six years of experience to become a technical business analyst that would develop those very systems, giving requirements to the programmers, testing the enhancements in a pseudo-environment until it was ready for production, quitting work only to be called back as a consultant due to that company’s need for my unique expertise, *was very unusual*. I got up where I was because of talent, persistence, and a need for my expertise which I gained through years of operating that software as an end-user. However, as far as Marsh’s assertion that the degree is seen as a fundamental requirement in the United States, I will contend that it *mostly* is. My peers and managers who hired me, who are mostly women and minorities, even into very high level executive levels, *mostly all went to college*. When I consider my need to change careers in order to fulfill my passion, the need for a college education for myself was evidenced even further.



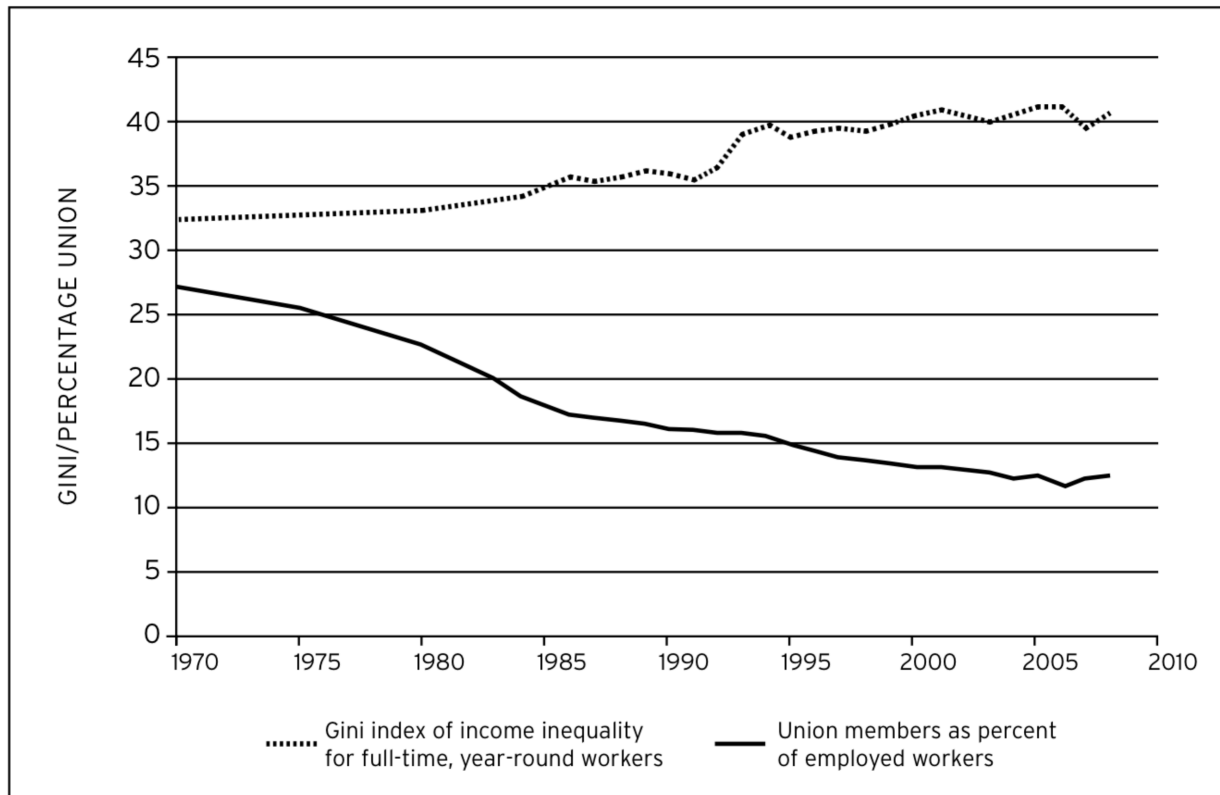
Nearly all of the many jobs I looked at prior to quitting and going to school *would* require a bachelors and some experience to even apply for. Marsh (2011) explained:

Within the past few decades, the United States has made more and more economic rights—the right to a useful and remunerative job, the right to adequate food and clothing and recreation, the right to a decent home, the right to adequate protection from economic fears—more and more dependent upon one right in particular, the last, the right to a good education. Today, the right to a good education is less a right than a requirement, the requirement from which many if not most of the other rights flow. The problem, however, arises in that as soon as you make one right dependent on another right, or the outgrowth of another right, the dependent or secondary right ceases to be a right. (p. 176)

From my own experience, what Marsh does *not* capture here is the small window that a person like myself can climb through. After operating as an end-user in claims adjudication work for many years making essentially minimum wage, I was able to get a high-paying position in the development side—I sometimes tell friends that I *already* went to college. I went to a six-year college of first-hand experience. That position paid very well, proportionally an almost unheard of salary for someone who was not college educated. It had little to do with race, going upwards in the org chart from myself, to my boss, to my boss's boss, to the CEO, the majority is women of color. But, there is still much more room for that little window that I climbed through to grow. Marsh's dissection of the solution is the most valuable offering of the entire book. Here he explains how *lack of education* is not the root of the problem, rather it is the lack of the bargaining power of the worker. The most effective thing that the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protestors could have done would have been to demand a mandate of the mobility of the unionization of all working class jobs. As the figure below shows, it is the most clearly

proportional visualization of the actual cause for economic and class inequality since 1970:

FIGURE 5.3: As Union Membership Declines, Inequality Rises



Source: Author's analysis of Kaufman and Hotchkiss, *The Economics of Labor Markets*, Table 3 and U.S. Census Bureau, "Measures of Individual Earnings Inequality for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers by Sex: 1967 to 2008," Table IE-2.

In short, workers would be able to effectively *demand* the kind of increases in pay as companies rake in record profits. Workers could demand more pay increases, bonuses, vacation, 401k security investments, insurance benefits, pensions, and promotional opportunities, instead of just *hoping* that the employer would be nice enough to offer those. They could bargain effectively instead of simply hearing the common sentiment, 'It's a free country. If you don't like it here, go work somewhere else.' In 2007, already having moved in from the front-end claims processing side, I certainly felt the pinch of the economic downturn. The company I worked for clearly had

the upper hand. Everyone there basically felt ‘lucky’ to even have a job, hardly in a position to demand anything better. Much more work was put on to much less people when older workers began to retire before their 401k funding and pensions would totally disintegrate right before their eyes. I do not doubt for a moment that the power to unionize would have provided compounding benefits for the average worker. I was part of a union in the front-end processing world, but there was so little capability even of the union itself; it was more or less a threat-organization, holding on, collecting dues just for the sake of being there in case something *really awful* ever went down. When asking what services they would afford me when I first joined, they were hard-pressed to even make something up. When I asked why I’m paying union dues starting on day one when I’m not even protected under the union structure for the first three months, the probationary period, the union steward said to me over the phone, “You just do. That’s just how it is.” I didn’t see meaningful wage increases, investments, incremental benefit increases even after that period. Essentially, as Marsh asserted, even the unions that are operating are not doing so in a very meaningful way. Moreover, the percentage of union protection per worker’s who *are* enrolled is substantially down in the last third of the twentieth century.

All and all, it is a combination that I can see from both sides because I’ve worked through both sides. Most often, secondary education is necessary when people want to lift themselves out of poverty, but it is not *always* necessary. One way or another, Marsh made a great analogy that, “Like highways, schools could get you where you needed to go, and you had to take them in order to get there, but they could not change your destination” (p. 204). The most important thing is then to “...refocus debates about poverty and economic inequality back where they belong, on economics and politics and not on education” (p. 207). Greater proportion of unionization, increasing the bargaining power of the working force as a whole, will lower the rate of class

inequality by a substantial amount. These things being those that I can speak on directly from direct experience have a tie-in with other things, which I can speak on only from a peripheral perspective—the issue of injustice based on racial inequality.

### **What are the Implications of Racial Inequality and Does it Have a Multiplying Effect?**

The first day I attended Roosevelt University, just outside of the Auditorium building's 3<sup>rd</sup> floor window where I then took classes, I would see protestors marching about the economic inequality of the 99.99% that do not receive a fraction of the wealth of the top .01% that does in the United States. It is not ironic as much as it is just sad, that years later, in the same building, on the same floor, looking out the same windows, I would see a new protests and a new discussion on inequality of a similar but different kind—the treatment of black Americans by law enforcement in an ongoing surge of frustration with the killings of unarmed citizens. The discussion at hand today is how there is a hugely disproportionate system of policing occurring between black and white Americans, both in an institutionalized system of discrimination in housing, public funding, and societal mechanisms, and in a number of individual cases where black men such as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown have all been killed, while holding no weapons, only for the respective state legal apparatuses to either acquit the vigilante assailant of charges, or refuse to even indict the offending police officers altogether. As Goffman (2014) explained in her own first-hand evaluation of racial discrimination in a hyper-police state:

So many Black men have been imprisoned and returned home with felony convictions that the prison now plays a central role in the production of unequal groups in US society, setting back the gains in citizenship and socioeconomic position that Black people made during the Civil Rights Movement” (p. 3).

While Goffman's analysis mostly focused on the perpetual oppression of black youth in a constant state of police surveillance, it does tie in to the current issues of when that constant oppression can lead to involvement within a system that is undeniably geared towards inequality for young men of color. That constant oppression can stem from an age-old inequality in stereotyping based simply on the color of a person's skin. Even as Miah (2013) explained in reiterating President Obama's own words on the matter of racial stereotyping inequality, there are:

...very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store" or "the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off." "That," he said, "includes me." (p. 3)

It is a sad state of incredible disproportion when a society holds completely unsubstantiated opinions, now almost proving totally legal, against young men of color. Kurtz (2013) explained it clearly that, "...black boys and men can unwittingly and without warrant provoke fear and consternation when encountered in spaces in which they are viewed by others as not belonging" (p. 248). In the event of police interaction, that aspect of 'not belonging' can have consequences that become fatal. In all three cases of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, the vigilante or police officer that killed the unarmed suspect was of a different race. The trial jury or grand jury was predominantly of another race. In short, the legal system is setting up a structural dichotomy within itself, one that applies to black men one way and non-black men another way. This combined with socioeconomic inequality, has a multiplying effect that makes each become proportionately worse.

Seeing inequality, the consequences, exceptions, and destructive power of it first hand, is something that is measurable in my own experience. I have come from very little, to a point where I have made an exception to the rule. Overcoming economic inequality by some degree through hard work, persistence, and experience was not easy by any stretch, and not something that is fundamentally built in to the American system in its current configuration that focuses incorrectly on lack of education. Stories like mine are small exceptions to the rule that are rarely considered in social science because those exceptions are so small that they are fundamentally null. Most people that I have I have worked with or worked for, *are* college graduates. I don't believe that my opportunities in career advancement were directly linked to any *preferential treatment* based on my own race because those hiring me at all phases of advancement were women of color. But as explained above, having seen the broad effects of racial inequality, in the terrible rash of current events and contemporary analysis of them, I see even more contrast in my own experience and in that of the young person of color.

### **Conclusion**

A man with the same family educational shortcomings, roots in poverty, drive for hard work, would have all opportunities equal to mine, but his would be a life fraught with many different levels of policing that I cannot begin to imagine adding to the complexity of my own rise out of poverty. In other words, my parents did not pay a dime for my college; they did not go to four-year-college themselves. I worked, worked, worked, and created a career for myself without school so that I could go to school. Would I have been able to do that if the same level of policing and racial inequality that surrounds young men of color was burdened upon me throughout? I do not know for certain, but believe that the struggle would've been amplified by a very high degree. Young African Americans appear to be falling through another crack in the

social construction of an unfairly leveled playing field that does make it harder for them to find an equal footing. That inequality creates a multiplying effect on any other socially constructed forms of inequality that the United States is dealing with now in the socioeconomic sense.

Fundamental changes are needed on both fronts and that is without a doubt. Therefore, the extent of the damage of *one* form of inequality should not be considered without an equal look at the multiplying factor in the *many* variable applications of inequality. Just like multiplying any unimaginably large number by zero, still equals zero—when one form of inequality is examined without the examination of the implications of the other forms of it, no single solution can then lead to meaningful mitigation of the negative consequences of the phenomenon in *any* form.

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