

## A Reflection on Inequality in South Africa and Beyond: Perceptions on Politics, Poverty, and the Patriarchy

Jacob Alspaw  
Learning Summary Final Essay  
IES Dialogues On Diversity – Tessa Moll  
1 July 2017

Students will write a 6-8 page learning summary that is due at the end of the course. This assignment will reflect upon the progress made by each participant toward the course learning outcomes (please see syllabus in regards to learning outcomes). They will want to reflect on how their views toward diversity and identity in South Africa have changed over the term, and they should contrast with their previous and new (if any) viewpoints as they relate to U.S. and other cultures and identities. Please write this as a formal paper complete with introduction, main supporting points and a conclusion. Include at least 3 references to readings used in class. References does not mean merely citing a work, but using that work as part of your analysis. Please make sure your work is edited properly before submission.

Nearly two years ago, I volunteered for an international nonprofit organization called Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC). The semester I spent donating my time offered me the chance to give back to the greater-Cleveland community and develop an understanding of the impact that some organizations have on the lives of millions. I was once told an inspiring story about one child's Christmas miracle that epitomizes the charitable work that my community made possible.

Seven-year old Micah Muller was not expected to live through the New Year. With his rare heart condition, hypoplastic left heart syndrome, he was mere days away from death when his Christmas wish became a Christmas miracle. The Canton, Ohio child and his family were relieved to hear that Micah was approved to receive a new heart and would begin to live a normal life if Cleveland Clinic surgeons could successfully perform a transplant (Tempesta; 2015). With their rising medical bills, the family, like many others with the misfortune of raising a medically challenged child were hard-pressed in their financial situations. The financial turmoil these families face is detrimental to the families' stability. They already have the stress of sick children and any additional stressors take time away from focusing on their children's healing process.

Since his birth, little Micah Muller was living a life of pain and misery in the hospital. The family stressors in tandem with his disability trapped Micah in an unfair predicament for a majority of his childhood. The story of Micah and his family is an unfortunate example of social inequality. Social inequality is the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society. At the ripe age of seven, Micah was already experiencing lack of equal opportunity compared to his peers. While the physically-limited Micah wait inside the confining walls of a hospital, his peers ran about the playground, attended school, and embraced a healthy childhood (Tempesta; 2015).

Micah experiences an advanced form of life inequality, whereby Micah has limited access to healthcare opportunities that could improve the quality of his and his family's lives. There are four additional recognized systems of social inequality; political inequality is the lack of equality with regards to the law, income and wealth inequality is the lack of equality in the earnings of individuals, treatment inequality is the lack of equality in privileged, and membership inequality

is the lack of equality in belongingness (Mount; 2008). This paper will analyse global examples of social inequality such as racial disparity, gender inequality, and social class that disturb South African and international communities and then will go on to examine the public and governmental perception surrounding these issues.

## **I. RACIAL DISPARITY**

The first form of inequality this paper will discuss is a direct result of racism, racial disparity. Racism is insidious social problem wherever differences in race exist. It is the belief that members of one or more races are inferior to members of other races. Usually these beliefs are projected onto the minority or disadvantaged group by the advantaged group. Likewise, the term racial disparity refers to a difference that may or may not be related to discrimination. Racism in the United States and South Africa has been directed primarily by the white majority against racial and ethnic minorities. Historically, the white majority has singled out ethnic minority groups for differential and unequal treatment in the areas of housing, employment, education, and criminal justice. Particularly in South Africa, unequal treatment is additionally seen in the country's history with slavery, apartheid and post-apartheid conflict, land ownership, and suffrage rights.

The lasting effects of racial disparity, as Tess Foster and Don Salusbury allude to, is that the advantaged group becomes increasingly normalized while disadvantaged groups become increasingly abnormal: "'white' people are constructed as 'just normal'. While 'white' ideology and culture thus becomes normative, those who are constructed as 'ethnic' become increasingly marginalized." Whiteness is considered normal while any color is abnormal. There is a belief that being apart from the norm is to be inferior, substandard, or unfavorable. To be abnormal is thus detrimental to one's self-worth and shameful. By this logic, to be non-white is shameful. According to Francis Nyamnjoh and Divine Fuh in *Africans Consuming Hair*,

"black women's bodies and their associated traits such as hair, big lips and round buttocks were often represented as inferior<sup>16</sup> objects of spectacle and ridicule... Hair is a platform from which African women seek to participate in and contribute to the global economy of meanings and things" (Nyamnjoh & Fuh; 2014).

Hair is one aspect of a black women's physical identity that could be stylized into society's conventional beauty norms. To some black women, hair acts as a way normalize oneself, to transcend the limits that trap us in our own social boundaries and categories, and to wipe away shame that is brought about by being different.

There is no doubt that institutionalized racism damaged South Africa. After the 1948 general election, the white supremacist National Party implemented a program called apartheid. Apartheid was a legal system of political, economic, and social separation of the races intended to maintain and extend political and economic control of South Africa by the white minority who were less than ten percent of the country's population. During the Apartheid era, people of color were segregated according to race and were forced to move from their homes to racially segregated townships (SAHO; 2016). The South African government, the country's largest institution, was directly responsible for the oppression of a vast majority of its citizens. It wasn't until as late as 1986 that the South African Dutch Reformed Church repented and acknowledged that apartheid or rather the segregation of people by skin color is a sin (SAHO; 2011). And despite prolonged public outcry and political activism by the disadvantaged community, it wasn't until 1995 that apartheid officially ended when a new constitution was finally agreed upon (SAHO; 2016).

There is no doubt that institutionalized racism still damages South Africa. Even today, colored and black South Africans still struggle to get equal opportunities as compared to their white counter-parts. The University of Cape Town's student protests highlighted the subtle racism present on the campus; considering opportunities for higher education, it was clear that many South African institutions neglect the under-privileged community—primarily nonwhites—who have equal merit for acceptance, but lack the necessary capital to afford student fees (EWN; 2016).

Even though the UCT community seems to be in agreement over recent issues of race on campus, I don't feel as if I am part of the in-crowd. I don't identify with the disadvantaged group by skin color and it makes feel as if I am a disconnected third-party taking a look through a glass window of sorts. My situation mimics an observation by Salusbury and Foster: "'Whiteness' in South Africa differs from Western context in that is more obvious in its potency: self-conscious

rather than deliberately obscured, and accepted rather than veiled as a site of privilege.” My whiteness is exaggerated by issues of race in the UCT community. I have become fully self-aware that in this community I have substantial advantages and inherent privilege that had previously gone unacknowledged in the United States.

The United States’ history has led to the creation of a similar Afrikaner societal consensus on racial disparity; the country’s past has, in a way, normalized racism through centuries of slavery, segregation, scientific racism, and racism in the religious South. These past actions have perpetuated generations of intolerance and discrimination such as “all blacks are suspect, regardless of nationality, gender, rank, character or behavior history.” On the other hand, the persistent racism in American culture has inspired a recent national revolution against discrimination in favor of a new politically-correct culture. From my “advantaged group” perspective, it seems that racism in the United States is stagnant, although I am sure many would disagree. Some might point out that the recent need for the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent election of President Trump are evidence that racial disparity is increasing in the United States.

## **II. GENDER INEQUALITY**

The second form of inequality this paper will discuss is gender inequality. Gender inequality is that men and women are not equal. Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals wholly or partly due to their gender. It arises from differences in socially constructed gender roles. Gender systems are often dichotomous and hierarchical; gender binary systems may reflect the inequalities that manifest in numerous dimensions of daily life. Gender inequality stems from distinctions, whether empirically grounded or socially constructed.

The most common occurrences of gender inequality occur in places where the patriarchy dominates: in the workplace, at home, in various sources of media, and in the criminal justice system. In the work place, there is the wage gap and unequal opportunity for promotion. At home, women are assigned traditional gender roles associated with parenting and marriage, and women have historically unequal opportunity for property inheritance. In various sources of media, women

are increasingly sexualized as compared to men. In the criminal justice system, women can often be left subject to the effects of the patriarchy. For instance, the rape trial of Jacob Zuma “expressed the normativity of gender inequality and patriarchal morality within the forum of a court of law” (Waetjen & Mare; 2009). From what I understand about the class reading, Jacob Zuma cited parts of Zulu culture which described telltale signs of sexually aroused women and how Zulu culture equates sexual arousal to consent. Under these grounds, the court found his actions justifiable and held his rights to culture over the victims rights to gender equality. The court was twistedly preserving the Zulu culture

There is a common misconception that women only experience gender inequality, but men actually experience gender inequality in the criminal justice system and in the workplace. For example, a study conducted in the United States found that the prison sentences that men serve are on average 63% longer than those that women serve for similar crimes (Starr; 2012). Men also face discrimination in the workplace. Where women will receive some form of parental leave after having a child, a father will not get nearly as much time off, if any at all. New fathers usually will not get enhanced pay during parental leave like women do. Many employers will work with women when it comes to schedule changes, but men will rarely enjoy that same benefit. Moreover, Under the Equality Act 2010, sex discrimination is not solely defined as a man harassing a woman; male employees have also faced sexual harassment in the workplace, though it is rarely, if ever, discussed (Starr; 2012).

Considering my experiences during the semester abroad, I have noticed that gender inequality often opposes non-white South African women. The gender roles that a majority of South African women are subjected to, objectify their being. During the class field trip to the Khayelitsha township and other township experiences in Langa, I observed women abiding by traditional gender roles with parenting, house cleaning, and obeying a sense of male guardianship that accompanies traditional South African marriages. This male guardianship is acquired through lobolo, a custom whereby the provision of marriage payments of property or cash is exchanged from the groom’s family to the parents of the bride. Before the lobolo negotiations take place between the groom and the bride’s parents, some bride’s take virginity tests to test their purity. A virgin bride represents great purity and has greater worth in this South African custom (Mofokeng;

2003). I can respect tradition, but from a Western perspective lobolo is simply objectification of women. A process by which any man or woman is evaluated and then given a price that defines his or her worth for which they can be bought and sold within their family must be limiting.

Many Middle Eastern countries have similar unofficial male guardianship rules. In some Middle Eastern countries, a woman's life is controlled by a man from birth until death, such that every woman must have a male guardian, normally a father, husband, brother or son, who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf. In many Middle Eastern countries, governments have deemed women incapable of making many decisions on their own equating them to children in South Africa and the United States. It wasn't until May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017 that Saudi Arabia announced to end its archaic male guardianship system to let women work and study without a man's permission (Sharman; 2017). I am unsure if similar male-guardianship systems exist in the United States, but personal experience and quick research would suggest that it does not.

With the recent growth in PC culture found in the United States, feminism has also rose in popularity as means to fight global gender inequality. The United States almost achieved a great win for feminists worldwide in the 2016 presidential election. Instead, the world received a grim reminder that the patriarchy still holds a majority of power when misogynist Republican candidate Donald Trump was democratically elected into office by the American public. At the time, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was the leading feminist icon of the free world—now replaced by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Trump's election is a strong indication that gender inequality in American politics still favors men.

### **III. SOCIAL CLASS INEQUALITY**

The third form of inequality this paper will discuss is a result of the stratification of social classes. Social classes are the systems in which people are grouped into a set of hierarchical social categories. The most common categories are the upper, middle, and lower classes, but can also include separation by race, age, wealth, education, nobility, and even disability. Social inequality is found in almost every society and occurs when resources in a given society are distributed

unevenly, allowing for unequal sharing of opportunities. Social inequality can encompass racial disparity when social classes are defined by race.

Those targeted by this form of inequality tend to be those with limited access to resources: the poor, minorities, the young, the old, the sick and disabled, the uneducated, commoners, etc.. Each of these groups are limited in capital, social power, and/or physical power. Social class inequality on the disadvantaged side of the spectrum often exists in poor or non-white communities, where healthcare is limited. On the advantaged side, social inequality exists in high resource communities like Hollywood and high-ranking government officials.

Social Classes act like a pyramid where a majority exists at the base to hold up the apex. Those who have the most resources—social and economic capital—reside at the top of the pyramid, while those with the least stay at the bottom. The more capital under your ownership, the higher you move up on the pyramid. It is easy to go down the pyramid by losing capital, but is challenging to gain capital to move up the pyramid. This is very true of South Africa and the United States. A majority of the public is found at the base and we tend to idolize those in a higher category than our own.

In South Africa, the end of apartheid marked a hopeful point in South African history where it seemed like progress was being made to close the gap that predated apartheid and divided social classes for centuries. It seemed like South Africa was making large strides for positive change, yet some would argue that many post apartheid promises have gone unfulfilled. So little meaningful change has been achieved to close the social class gaps in South Africa, especially when twelve million people still live in extreme poverty twenty years post apartheid. One study in 2011 shows that even with outside aid from the World Bank, poverty might actually be increasing in South Africa. For example, Statistics South Africa reports that poverty in 2011 may have increased from 20.2% to 21.7%, a calculated increase of 825,000 people (Nicolson; 2015).

In the United States, the gap between the poor and the rich is widening. According to CNN's Money publication, the income gap is quickly increasing: "today, the top mega wealthy—



the top 1%—earn an average of \$1.3 million a year. It's more than three times as much as the 1980s, when the rich "only" made \$428,000". While the rich get richer, the pre-tax income for the lower fifty percent of the American population has seen little change since 1980. In 1940, 92% of Americans earned a larger pre-tax income than their parents compared to the 50% of Americans in 1980 (Long; 2016). The redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor has and is diminishing.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

All in all, inequality is inescapable and differs only on micro-level details while macro-level details are relatively constant across societies. What I have learned from this course is entirely relevant to my family, self, community, IES community, and professional career. Talking about and addressing these issues promotes a sense of human decency. This course's learning components allows me substantial time for self-reflection and to acknowledge that I'm privileged in the United States and even more so in South Africa. These life lessons will carry over to all aspects of life because inequality is felt everywhere and the first step in fixing inequality is identifying it. If I could rename this course, I would change the name to "Meaningful Discussion on Social Injustice in South Africa and Abroad." Injustice and inequality were one of the major learning components and themes of this course. What creates more meaningful dialogue than talking about how to fix what's wrong with the world?

## Bibliography

- EWN. UCT Suspends Classes Following Student Protests. (2016, September 20). Retrieved June 28, 2017, from <http://ewn.co.za/2016/09/20/Classes-suspended-at-UCT-Maties-Tygerberg-Campus>
- Foster, D., & Salusbury, T. (n.d.). Rewriting WESSA Identity. Retrieved June 28, 2017, from [https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/bec9ad27-25c2-4df5-a41b-1530639b30b5/Session%205/Salusbury%20\\_%20Foster%20Rewriting%20WESSA%20identity.pdf](https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/bec9ad27-25c2-4df5-a41b-1530639b30b5/Session%205/Salusbury%20_%20Foster%20Rewriting%20WESSA%20identity.pdf)
- Long, H. (2016, December 22). U.S. inequality keeps getting uglier. Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <http://money.cnn.com/2016/12/22/news/economy/us-inequality-worse/index.html>
- Mofokeng, L. (2003, July). The lobolo agreement as the “silent” prerequisite for the validity of a customary marriage in terms of the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act. Retrieved June 29, 2017, from [http://learning.ufs.ac.za/RPL224\\_OFF/Resources/1%20RESOURCES/3.Additional%20material%20and%20court%20cases/11.%20%20The%20lobolo%20agreement%20as%20the%20%E2%80%9Csilent%E2%80%9D%20prerequisite/The%20lobolo%20agreement%20as%20the%20%E2%80%9Csilent%E2%80%9D%20prerequisite.pdf](http://learning.ufs.ac.za/RPL224_OFF/Resources/1%20RESOURCES/3.Additional%20material%20and%20court%20cases/11.%20%20The%20lobolo%20agreement%20as%20the%20%E2%80%9Csilent%E2%80%9D%20prerequisite/The%20lobolo%20agreement%20as%20the%20%E2%80%9Csilent%E2%80%9D%20prerequisite.pdf)
- Mount, F. (2008, December). Five Types of Inequality. Retrieved June, 2017, from [http://equality-ne.co.uk/downloads/337\\_FivetypesofInequality.pdf](http://equality-ne.co.uk/downloads/337_FivetypesofInequality.pdf)
- Nicolson, G. (2015, February 3). South Africa: Where 12 million live in extreme poverty. Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-03-south-africa-where-12-million-live-in-extreme-poverty/#.WVWLvYiGOuk>
- Nyamnjoh, F., & Fuh, D. (2014, June). Africans Consuming Hair, Africans Consumed by Hair. Retrieved June 28, 2017, from [https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/bec9ad27-25c2-4df5-a41b-1530639b30b5/Session%205/Africans\\_Consuming\\_Hair\\_Africans\\_Consume.pdf](https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/bec9ad27-25c2-4df5-a41b-1530639b30b5/Session%205/Africans_Consuming_Hair_Africans_Consume.pdf)
- SAHO. A history of Apartheid in South Africa. (2016, May 06). Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa>
- SAHO. (2011, March 30). Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/dutch-reformed-church-drc>
- Sharman, J. (2017, May 06). Saudi Arabia to let women work and study without man's permission. Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-male-guardianship-relax-women-work-study-gender-equality-a7721641.html>

- Starr, S. (2012, August 1). Estimating Gender Disparities in Federal Criminal Cases. Retrieved June 29, 2017, from [http://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1164&context=law\\_econ\\_current](http://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1164&context=law_econ_current)
- Tempesta, Erica (2015, February 04). Critically ill seven-year-old who asked Santa for a new heart is finally recovering after receiving life-saving organ transplant . Retrieved June 29, 2017, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2938741/Critically-ill-seven-year-old-asked-Santa-new-heart-finally-recovering-receiving-life-saving-organ-transplant.html>
- Waetjen, T., & Mare, G. (2009, March). Tradition's Desire: The Politics of Culture in the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma. Retrieved June 28, 2017, from <https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/group/bec9ad27-25c2-4df5-a41b-1530639b30b5/Session%206/Traditions%20Desire%20the%20politics%20of%20culture%20in%20the%20rape%20trial%20of%20Jacob%20Zuma.pdf>