

# Figuring the current cost for past injustices against the 'socially invisible' leads to a realization of the **Impact of Discrimination**

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Numerous theorists have analyzed the impact of discrimination.

There are extensive links addressing the psychological cost or impact of racism on individuals, as discrimination has been known to adversely impact the health, morale and self-esteem of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Unfortunately, to this day discrimination allows us to hear the cries of oppression from people often overlooked, categorized by the majority as insignificant.

The impact of being "socially invisible" is glaringly evident, illuminated for me during extensive travel with the Directorate of External Training.

Within an eight-month period, I traveled to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tenn. I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and Robben Island in Cape Town, South Africa, where I saw the prison that held former President Nelson Mandela for 28 years.

During these trips and many others, the ravages of oppression were easy to identify. Regardless of the varied means of oppression manifestation, the pain was not lessened from one coast to another.

In museums I saw vivid moments in Civil Rights history, such as the photograph captured by Ernest Withers of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last march. Hundreds of marchers held billboards proclaiming: "I AM A MAN!"

I remember thinking that it is a sad testament of our country's history that such a statement would be necessary at all. The question that we must answer today, given our history, is the current cost and impact of past injustices.

During turbulent times in both the United States and South Africa, strategies such as violence, segregation and assassination of significant leaders were used to maintain the status quo.

Some social scientists have hypothesized that such "fight or flight" tactics are a response theory for racial stress, where Caucasians, who do not migrate from interethnic contact (the flight response), have a natural tendency to feel threatened and resort to the fight response with racially charged assassinations and violence.

Unfortunately, there are also many examples of flight, such as the creation of "suburbia" and racially segregating schools with "separate but equal" policies.

Of course, such programs simply served as a means to rationalize substandard facilities and education, but the impact was significant and long lasting.

In both the United States and South African systems, people of color were either physically or verbally warned to "keep in their place." The impact of such legacies still lingers though they are no longer institutionally condoned.

Although the United States experienced Civil Rights in 1964 and South Africa's "Transformation" from apartheid occurred in 1994, the years of oppression have taken their toll.

Overt racism of the past is no longer in place, but the subtle, covert racism that has replaced it is just as harmful—more so, many believe, because they do not see it coming.

Although the ravages of the past continue to impact many today, there is hope.

A diversity workshop recently gave a projection that I could not readily accept—that it would take 20 years to break the chains of discrimination.  
<http://www.pafb.af.mil/deomi/Reflections/01-00/impact.htm>

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That figure was difficult to accept considering that 20 years encompasses the rest of my employment years and the formative years of my children. The facilitator could speak as a theorist not directly impacted by the "daily grind" of racism, but I was committed as one who was (often daily) impacted by racism to search for change.

As disturbing as the thought of 20 years was, the movement that I saw in South Africa reinforced my optimism for the future.

Consider the fact that Nelson Mandela was released after 28 years in prison to become President of South Africa. In less than six years the entire system and government were overturned.

The difference, of course, is power. The changes from the top down provided the support necessary for a new regime. There were, and continue to be costs, of course, to such a massive undertaking.

Although decisive actions have been established and enforced to level the playing field, the country still struggles with new challenges daily.

Many South Africans experience dissonance due to the realization that South Africa will never again be as it once was. Blacks and Coloreds want immediate change, while Afrikaners struggle to maintain power and identify their niche in the country's future.

Both sides realize, as eloquently stated by President Nelson Mandela: "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another, and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world."

The work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was proven tantamount to moving forward in South Africa's healing process; possible applications have been addressed for the United States.

In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the "unspeakables" or racially motivated assassinations were admitted with heart wrenching detail.

Some questioned the validity of these hearings, but Bishop Desmond Tutu noted that people needed to know *what* happened to their loved ones and *why* for closure.

Of course, the reasons will never be good enough...hate never is. In the United States, very little is openly admitted concerning racism. As a recent article stated, "Racism is alive and well, but there are no racists."

Without conceding the discrimination of the past, many cannot see the present impact that still continues.

It is prudent for those who work in the field of human relations and equal opportunity to be cognizant of the impact of specific acts of discrimination, as well as the stronghold that discrimination can continue to place on one's mind either by subconscious beliefs of superiority, apathy or internalized oppression.

Until we believe it, it will never be true. Nelson Mandela provides a guideline for personal mental security, as well as a challenge to continue to break the chains of discrimination:

*"I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended."*

We have come a long way, but our walk has not ended. Unless we are willing to make the journey together, the chains of discrimination will be ever present.