

21st Century Students Respond to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail

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Abstract

This research examines student responses to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 50 years after its publication, fourteen non-black students in an upper division university class were asked to imagine that the letter has been sent to them and to compose a response. Although Dr. King's letter, addressed to white ministers, was about racial justice in the Civil Rights Era, students were asked to reflect on the relevance of his words to their lives. These students made personal connections to their experiences of racial, gender and sexuality based oppression. All themes cited by King had relevance for the students with the themes of oppression and dominance being most commonly cited. Taking action was correlated with positive feelings.

Keywords: Civil Rights, Injustice, Racism, Pedagogy, Social Activism, Martin Luther King Jr., Transformation, Emotions and Action, Teaching for Transformation, Homophobia.

INTRODUCTION

We found seven themes within Dr. King's letter: time, love, dominance, nonviolence, oppression, equality, and privilege. These themes all had specific relevance and meaning to the struggle for African American Civil Rights, but can also be applied to contemporary issues of injustice and social activism. The continued importance of these themes and of Dr. King's letter more specifically can be seen in the work of artist, scholar and creative figure Anne Deavere Smith, who has recently put his work to music (Smith, 2015). This paper examines how a younger generation of college students interprets this letter more than 50 years after it was written, and explores the multiple meanings and relevance to contemporary experiences and struggles that they identify. The seven themes we identified serve as focal points for this research.

METHODOLOGY

Coding

The fourteen students' letters contained a total of 150 paragraphs addressing the themes mentioned above. Each paragraph was coded according to its theme and coded for whether it confronted social injustice or was passive. In addition, paragraphs were coded to reflect whether students reported having taken they had taken action on a social justice issue either in the past or as a result of reading the letter, or whether no action was described in conjunction with understanding or reflection. Paragraphs were also coded according to emotional responses expressed by students in their writing. Four major feelings taken from the book *Intentional*

Interviewing & Counseling (Ivey et al. 2010), were mad, sad, glad, and fear. These emotions serve general categories that of course encompass subcategories, included in Appendix A. In sum, each paragraph was coded for: its theme; whether there was action taken by the student or not, and the emotion expressed by the student.

Reliability Check

Two independent coders analyzed the 150 paragraphs using the three different coding categories. Of 450 possible codes there was only disagreement over 34 cases, giving us a reliability rate of 92.24%. Discrepancies were resolved by alternating the choices of the two coders.

Findings

A: Frequency and Distribution of Themes

Table 1: Frequency and Distribution of Themes

Time	Love	Dominants	Nonviolence	Oppression	Equality	Privilege	N/A
31/150	13/150	19/150	9/150	26/150	8/150	9/150	35/150
20.67%	8.67%	12.67%	6%	17.33%	5.33%	6%	23.33%

Table 1 indicates the frequency and percentage of student responses to what they felt were the salient themes in Dr. Kings letter. The table reveals that the two most frequently mentioned themes for students were time (20.67%) and oppression (17.33%). The three least cited themes were nonviolence (6%) and privilege (6%) and oppression (5.33%).

B: Action or Inaction

Paragraphs that were coded as action or inaction are presented below. In this first paragraph, a student who identified as Latina, describes speaking out against a poster she found offensive, this experience was coded as “A: Action.”

Moreover, I find it hypocritical that Birmingham has the highest number of unresolved bombings of Black homes and churches in the nation yet community leaders question the validity of your efforts to bring justice to the city. For me, these unresolved bombings are a direct example of the segregation and racism you mention in your letter. I understand you have tried to negotiate with political leaders but nothing has happened. In addition, I also realize that you have talked with local merchants in order for them to take down their racial signs, but they have also been unresponsive. I have a personal experience of this as well. I was deeply troubled when I went to eat at the Cafe 50s diner on Santa Monica last year. The cafe has movie posters on the wall, and one in particular was titled “Wet Back.” I was upset and told the waiter that I found the poster very offensive, so he brought out the manger and I shared my concern with him. He said he would share this with the owner in order to take it down. However, they never did take it down, and it continues displayed on the wall. I have never eaten there again. I am still angered about this, and I might just write a letter to the owner in order to protest this poster once again because it is promoting racist language. *Latina Female 204075284*

This next paragraph is coded as an example of inaction. A white male student demonstrates his understanding of injustice but does not refer to taking any action.

I will close by saying that social justice is a perpetual process. We cannot place our faith in the magnanimity of time’s passage, but rather our own intuition and humanity. We must shelter and foster the precious human spirit, and exhibit nothing but patience and love. Although the fight

against segregation has concluded, the fight for equality rages on. Your letter from Birmingham jail has proved both timely and timeless, I hope this response occupies a similar place in your heart and mind. *White Male, 903942673*

The frequency and percentage of action or lack thereof is shown in Table 2. Although there was a great deal more inaction (80.67%) than action (19.33%), it is important to note that a total of 29 actions were taken by this sample of 14 students with 6 of the students reporting no action at all while 8 of the students did indicate that they were taking action against social injustice.

Action	Inaction
29/150	121/150
19.33%	80.67%

C: Emotional Response

Where students explicitly expressed one of the four major emotional responses, or the subset of feelings that accompany these four, their response was coded accordingly. Paragraphs that did not contain emotional references or implied feelings were coded “Neutral.”

Table 3 presents the feelings expressed in the 150 paragraphs and reveals that the most prevalent feeling was gladness and its possible equivalents of pleased, excited, and confident (see Appendix A). The great majority (65%) of paragraphs did not explicitly indicate an emotional response were neutral.

Glad	Mad	Sad	Fear	Neutral
16%	5%	11%	3%	65%

D: Action and Feelings

Since the assignment instructions did not specifically call for an emotional response we sought to see if the expression of feelings might be correlated with social action. In examining the relationship between action and feeling, we provide the reader with a biracial male’s positive feelings of gladness accompanied by his decision to take action. The student who is excited and hopeful of the journey ahead of him in fighting social injustices after confronting individuals who made homophobic remarks. This paragraph was given “A” for action and “Glad.”

Through your letter from Birmingham jail, you have called me to action. Through class discussions in my honors collegium course this quarter, I have also been called to action. I am confident that I will make a greater effort to stand up for what I know is moral. I know I have allies. I have spent a considerable amount of time with my honors classmates outside of class, eating dinner and carpooling together. When we are together, I feel a deep connection; we all have a common understanding. We are all making great efforts to be accepting and inclusive. I know that I can turn to them for advice on how to deal with certain situations; I have already started to do this already. In these past few weeks, I have found the courage and voice to stand up to friends who used hurtful words, such as “stupid fob” and “faggot” in my conversations with them. I have explained to them that I am not comfortable with them using these tactless and wounding words that hold negative connotations. I have noticed that these confrontations have caused my friends to feel uncomfortable as well and realize that their use of these phrases in their daily language is indeed hurtful and morally wrong. I am striving to make a conscious decision about racism. I realize that my transformation has just begun, but I am excited and hopeful about my journey. *Biracial Male, 803915043*

Table 4 presents the frequency and percentage of feelings and action expressed by students. We may note that most students expressing the positive feeling of glad (34.45%) had the largest number of actions (10). None of the other emotions showed anywhere near as much connection to action. It is impossible to determine whether the action led to the positive feelings or vice versa, but there does appear to be a correlation.

Table 4 The frequency and percentage of Feelings and Action Expressed by Students

Action and Feeling				
Action and Glad	Action and Mad	Action and Sad	Action and Fear	Action and Neutral
10/29	2/29	3/29	1/29	13/29
34.45%	6.89%	10.34%	3.45%	44.82%

CONCLUSION

This research documents that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter resonates to a younger generation 52 years removed from his writing. While the fourteen students responded to all seven of the major themes we identified in his letter, the themes that were most frequently cited were dominance and oppression. We also found that the emotions most frequently expressed by students were positive. These positive feelings correlated with students including references to taking action in their own lives on a social justice issue important to them.

Theorists who have been concerned with understanding how individuals can be transformed into opposing injustice include Freire (1970), hooks (1994), Mezirow (2000) and Howard (2010), Rabow, et al (2014). A major component leading individuals to establish identities that oppose social injustice involves positive feelings that accompany social action. It is with some confidence, therefore, that we believe that the positive feelings expressed by students in this research lend credibility to their reported actions. In our last example a white male student illustrates the dialectical relationship that can exist between positive emotions, such as “caring,” and social action:

Amidst this inner turmoil though, I was also able to gain a stronger sense of empathy for those I thought I understood. You articulated in your letter that society couldn't understand your struggles. You are right, how could we? We have never lived an honest day in your shoes or viewed the world through your eyes. For me, this small pink triangle [a badge worn by the student in support of gay rights] was the lens to see the world differently. For two weeks, I understood the struggles of the homosexual community. What was interesting though was this hatred was inflicted not by words or actions, but by silent stares. These stares pierced my soul and left me unable to look at others. In my own house, I often felt like an outsider – someone who didn't belong. The desire to take off the pin was significant, since doing so would relinquish me from this pain. But what about those who couldn't simply take off the pin? They didn't have this alternative. They were forced to carry their identity around day after day. I mentioned before that I would not accept the passing of time. By keeping the pin attached to my shirt, I made a commitment to stop time from ticking for a brief moment in order to take a stand against oppression. **White Male, 303818148**

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Appendix A

List of Subcategories Feelings from Ivey(1994).

Sad- unhappy, depressed, tearful, uninterested, blue, bored, cheerless, dismal, dispirited, dull, gloomy, grief, grieving, miserable, anguished, sorrow, regret, sorry, guilty, deplorable, devastated, devalued, pitiful, derided, joyless, melancholy, melancholic, dejected, desolate, heavy-hearted, low, spiritless, rejected, woebegone, falling apart, wistful, wretched.

Mad- angry, annoyed, insulted, irritated, indignant, irate, hostile, offended, ripped, displeased, aggressive, furious, ferocious, rabid, stormy, inflamed, infuriated, hatred, strongly opposed, antagonistic, uncompromising, dislike, animosity, distaste, threatening, dissatisfied, undesirable, unfair, unreasonable, rude, insensitive.

Fear- scared, fretting, fright, frightened, threatened, anxious, anxiety, apprehension, dangerous, concerned, worried, worrisome, agitated, alarmed, dread, horror, panic, terror, trepidation, distressed, troubled, tormented, angst, disquieted, unease, nervous, brooding, moping.

Glad- happy, relaxed, sage, comfortable, calm, at ease, pleased, feeling of "wholeness," valued, accepted, "together," interesting, excited, confident, cheerful, spirited, joyful, heartfelt, appreciative, grateful, cheery, pleasure, bright, contented, satisfied, delight, delighted, enjoy, thankful, relieved, fascinating, lovely, light, cared for, caring, pleasing, eager, compliant, festive, tickled, merry, fortunate, lucky, chipper, lighthearted, esteemed, respected, honored, cherished, welcomed.

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