

UNDOING RACISM

Undoing Racism: A Social Work Imperative

by Fred Scaglione

Race. Try as we might, we couldn't avoid it. Day after day, Katrina forced us to watch as poor black families remained stranded in the bowels of New Orleans, waiting for help from a government which seemed oblivious to their desperation. Why were they there? Why hadn't they evacuated when ordered to do so? Where were the helicopters? The water? The food? Why were they looting and shooting at rescue workers? Where were the troops to restore order and pluck people from rooftops? Why were they poor? Why were they all black?

One reason that Katrina has been so painful for the nation as a whole – aside from its complete devastation of a major city and much of the Gulf Coast – is that it forced us to confront and talk about issues of race and racism. Americans don't like to do that.

While these matters are vitally important for our society and the public at large, they are particularly and professionally important to social workers and others in the field of human services.

Ironically, for more than a decade, a small group of grass roots organizers from New Orleans has been helping New York area social service providers explore

and discuss the pervasive role of race and racism in our society. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond was founded in 1980 and first came to Rockland County for a workshop in the mid-1990s. Since then, they have been back regularly, spreading their faith in the power and possibility of "Undoing Racism."

Locally, more than 700 individuals have attended the People's Institute programs, many of them from local human service agencies. Over 100,000 have attended worldwide. These alumni have become the core of a movement to broaden popular understanding of the "Undoing Racism" principals and to incorporate these principles into the planning and delivery of social services.

Over the past decade or more, the social work profession's primary vehicle for dealing with issues of race has been training in cultural competency. "NASW has standards.

Ethical practice requires social workers to be culturally competent," says Robert Schachter, Executive Director of NASW – New York City.

While cultural competence implies a heightened consciousness and analytical grasp of racism, among the other "isms", it often is seen as highly personal. Workers develop their own sensitivity to the belief systems and needs of various ethnic or racial groups. They seek to clarify their own views of cultural differences to ensure that personal biases do not interfere with good practice. It involves communication skills, both linguistically and culturally, to improve a worker's ability to engage and assist clients of various ethnicities and backgrounds.

"Undoing Racism" takes a different approach. On the one hand, it seeks to depersonalize the issue of racism. There is an underlying assumption that those attending the workshop – and the population at large – are people of good will who harbor no personal biases or racist inclinations. "We are not talking about bigotry or evil intent," says David Billings, a Core Trainer with the People's Institute.

At the same time, however, the workshop presents a jarring historical and sociological analysis which says that race – and racism – are key underlying assumptions on which our society is organized. From the nation's very founding and settlement, a set of institutions and ideologies have developed which advance the interests and status of white, European peoples while denigrating and oppressing people of color. Beginning with slavery, the extermination of the indigenous Native American peoples and Jim Crow segregation, white society has constructed philosophical justifications for its own supremacy and the oppression of others.

Today's red lining in real estate financing, racial profiling, white flight, market-based residential segregation, property-tax driven disparities in education funding and racially disparate reali-

ties in criminal sentencing practices are all extensions of these underlying racist structures. "You can't look at any institution or system in this country – the health system, social services, education, business and commerce, the legal systems – that doesn't dramatically display racial disparities, with whites being the overwhelming beneficiaries and people of color and especially blacks being disadvantaged," says Billings.

ing white in a world run mostly by white people" explains Robert Jensen of the University of Texas School of Journalism in an article reflecting an anti-racist viewpoint. "When I seek admission to a university, apply for a job, or hunt for an apartment, I don't look threatening," he writes. "Almost all of the people evaluating me for those things look like me—they are white. They see in me a reflection of themselves, and in a racist world that is an advantage."

White people in America are born and raised with this positive view of their own place in society. U.S. history as we learn it is the history of white exploration, settlement, conquest, invention and success. When white Christians look at the cross, they even see a white skinned, seemingly blue-eyed Jesus, despite the ethnic and racial realities of the biblical Israel. Whites internalize this positive view of their own superiority relative to peoples of color.

African Americans, on the other hand, look back at a history of slavery, segregation, oppression and discrimination, which is reinforced by the daily indignities of poor housing, bad schools, inadequate health care, unemployment or underemployment. When they look to the media or as they live their day-to-day life, they overwhelmingly see whites in positions of power and respect and rarely witness any reports about life in their own communities which aren't negative.

To "Undo Racism," the People's Institute argues that whites must first come to understand the racially-based structure of society's institutions. They must also recognize their own White Privilege and acknowledge the unearned advantages which it confers upon them.

While the "Undoing Racism" message is stark and unsettling, it is in no way confrontational. The workshop offers a rare forum for whites and people of color to discuss race and racism in terms which are not personally threatening. "People are used to getting defensive about race," explains Billings. "The Institute says it is not personal. We just need to be able to understand that this nation was structured on the basis of race."

The implications of the Undoing Racism assumptions for social work practice and human service delivery in general are profound. They offer a framework through which practitioners can view the needs and circumstances of individual clients and whole communities.

"It is like getting glasses and having corrected vision," says Dr. Gail K Golden, Clinical Director at VCS which has striv-

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The combination of these systemic forces conspire against people of color, the workshop explains, creating the urban ghettos we saw in New Orleans. Similar ghettos exist in poverty-stricken pockets of New York City, Yonkers and the other racial enclaves throughout the metropolitan area and the country as a whole.

Whites, however, have little need to see or understand the impacts of these racial disparities. Studies show that the 80% of whites live in virtually all-white neighborhoods. Nine out of ten white suburbanites live in communities with less than 1% black population. As a result, whites generally have little understanding of day-to-day realities for black Americans. Once again, polls show that large percentages of whites – 40-70% – believe that there are no longer any significant disparities for blacks in employment, income, housing and health care, despite ample evidence that blacks live at a distinct disadvantage in each of these areas.

Perhaps most importantly, the People's Institute teaches the concept of "White Privilege" which supports the white population's advantage in all areas of society.

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UNDOING RACISM



David Billings, a Core Trainer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

en to incorporate Undoing Racism principles into its programming. "We are stepping back and taking another look at things we absolutely have taken for granted."

Mary Pender Greene, Chief of Social Work Services at Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, (JBFC) points to cases where children or family members may face racism-based stresses which are outside the experience of a white practitioner – fear that an adolescent will be picked up by the police, family strains as the result of unemployment or underemployment, loss of a mate due to incarceration. For example, 51% of men of color in New York City are unemployed. "If the world is not being just to this family and you are thinking that you don't have to discuss race, then there is a whole lot of struggle and pain you can't help them with because it is not on the agenda."

"Our counselors have to understand that a client may not trust them for some very good reasons," says Golden.

"There are some people who feel that unless you understand racism, you can not even engage in competent practice," says Schachter. "That is a tough line to take but we are beginning to see where that is coming from."

A key People's Institute principle calls for social service programs to be accountable to the communities they serve, which primarily made up of people of color. "Many times white people make decisions about services and products for people of color without having people of color in the room or obtaining their input," says Pender Greene.

Years ago, if people of color didn't take advantage of a program, providers would blame the clients, says Phyllis B. Frank, Director of the VCS Community Change Project. "Now, if people of color are not using the richness of services we have, we ask what we are doing to make them stay away. If that program doesn't work for that black community, then it doesn't work for anyone."

Social workers and human services providers have reacted passionately to the Undoing Racism workshop experience. "A lot of people are very, very moved by this," says NASW-NYC's Schachter. "People use the term 'transforming'."

"After the first 20 minutes, I was hooked," says Phyllis B. Frank, Director of the VCS Community Change Project, who attended a workshop in San Francisco in 1995 and then brought the People's Institute to Rockland County. Soon, VCS itself began sponsoring annual workshops. Two local school districts have offered the programs and Rockland County Executive Scott C. Vanderhoff has allocated funding to support the programs for those who live and work in the County. Over time, the word has spread and Undoing Racism workshops have also been held regularly in Westchester and New York City.

Many local providers have taken the workshop several times. "I have completed it 16 times," says Sandra Bernabei, co-founder of the Anti-Racist Alliance, who attended one of the first People's Institute workshops in Rockland County. It is a process more than a class, explains Schachter who has participated in four workshops. "It is something you experience," he says. "The more you start taking in what this is all about, the more you begin to see things differently."

"We are building a network and a movement," says Bernabei. "As social workers we must understand that we need to deliver service but we also need to be part of the transformation of the system that generates the problems that we treat." Bernabei has also developed Social Work Gatherings (socialworkgatherings.com), an electronic organizing website for local social work practitioners who have participated in the workshop.

"We have to come out of our offices and build relationships with other communities," says Golden, who co-chairs the Rockland Immigration Coalition and works with the NAACP, a day laborer center and two Haitian organizations. "It is putting the 'social' back in social work."

Several agencies have taken on anti-racism work as an organizational commitment. VCS has been active for years, says Golden. The agency provides ongoing training which incorporates regular and repeated work on race and racism.

In 1991, JBFC began a conscious effort to increase the diversity of its staff. Two years ago, it made anti-racism a key component of that effort. "We established a multi-cultural task force that is focusing on race in a variety of ways," says Dr. Alan Siskind, the agency's Executive Director. "We hired Drs. Anderson J. and Nancy Franklin as sort of visiting professors to work with us on the whole issue of race." JBFC now has anti-racist caucus groups for both men of color, women of color and whites. Dr. Ken Hardy, will be coming to the agency to help continue this work over the next few years. "You can't claim clinical excellence and culturally competent practice without understanding race and racism," says Pender Greene.

During the past few years, the momentum of this grass roots movement has picked up steam. NASW-NYC has become a strong supporter of the Undoing Racism workshops. Participants at a September Workshop, sponsored by NASW-NYC, included key leaders of local non-

profit community, including Joel Levy of YAI, Alan Siskind of JBFC, Ralph Dickerson, former President/CEO of United Way of New York City and Martha Sullivan of LESC. "We are going to make a concerted effort going forward to have more CEOs participate," says Schachter, emphasizing the importance of having organizational leadership engaging on this issue.

"I learned a lot and am planning to go again," says YAI's Levy. Siskind shares the sentiment. "I left with the feeling that I would like to go back as well."

NASW-NYC itself has demonstrated its leaders commitment through the workshop participation of the Paul Kurzman (current NASW-NYC President), Pender Greene, (Past President) and Rose Starr (President Elect). "We want to have consistency," says Schachter. "We don't want to be in and out on this."

The chapter is also putting together its own Undoing Racism Project in which three social work interns will work with the People's Institute, JBFC and the schools of social work to examine the ways in which former workshop participants are utilizing their newly found insights. Educators from all local schools of social work have attended the workshops. An educators group has been formed with belief that impact practice in education of social workers

In March, the local Undoing Racism movement achieved one of its most significant victories when representatives of

NASW-NYC were able to win approval for inclusion of three separate anti-racism agenda items among the NASW's 12 "Social Work Imperatives for the Next Decade." The three Imperatives are:

- Address the impact of racism, other forms of oppression, social injustice, and other human rights violations through social work education and practice.
- Promote culturally competent social work interventions and research methodologies in the areas of social justice, well-being, and cost-benefit outcomes.

As a follow up, Betsy Clark, Executive Director of the national NASW attended the most recent workshop held in New York City.

In the aftermath of Katrina, there is hope that tragedy will offer an opportunity for a frank and open discussion of race and racism both nationally and right here in New York. "People saw what they saw," says Bernabei. "There is no turning back."

For additional information about the the People's Institute and the Undoing Racism workshops, contact NASW-NYC (www.naswnyc.org), visit www.socialworkgatherings.com or go to The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (www.pisab.org).



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