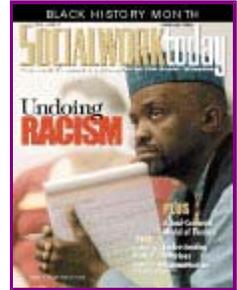


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Undoing Racism By Kate Jackson

In New York City and Westchester and Rockland Counties, NY, a growing group of social workers and other social service professionals have been meeting monthly and connecting through the Internet to plant the seeds of a movement that they believe will bring social work back to its roots. At the core of this gathering force are the principles, tools, and strategies that these social workers have learned through a unique training program called Undoing Racism—a 21/2-day seminar created and offered at venues across the country by some 30 core and regional trainers of The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, based in New Orleans.



Prominent among this passionate group is Sandra Bernabei, CSW, adjunct professor at Fordham University Graduate School of Social Services who was introduced to the training program in 1996. “If someone said to me back then that we need to do some antiracist work, I’d have said that I am a social worker and I am already doing that work.” But when her friend, Phyllis Frank, director of the VCS Community Change Project in Rockland told her that this seminar was something she absolutely must attend, Bernabei listened. “Out of respect for my friend, I signed on the dotted line, paid my \$250, and completed the program in Rockland County.” So began a profound shift in the way that she worked. “At that time, I wasn’t really in a position to act on it, nor was I really clear about what it was that I needed to do. Since then, I’ve completed the training seven more times, and I’m absolutely clear. My commitment has grown over the years, and I kept going back to it because it was something that empowered me to operate differently.”



The trainers, she recalls, were masterful and dedicated. They’d spent 22 years refining and delivering an analysis. “Their comfort, humor, humanity, and the whole fact that the analysis is really social and political and not one that needs to be taken personally made it possible for me to hear information that would otherwise have been very difficult.” The organizers, she recalls, were so good that they made it possible for everyone to stay in the room and really hear information that they’d heard before but with new clarity. “It’s so clearly grounded in history and culture—something that we all know, something that’s part of our history that none of us really wants to own up to.”

That something, she summarizes, is what created the power structure of contemporary America. “Our forefathers and mothers created a system that would enable them to prosper and benefit from all of the efforts that went into building a great country. This was done with the intention of advancing not necessarily all people, but themselves and their beneficiaries—their children, who happened to be me and people who look like me,” says Bernabei, who is white. The training examines the race-based society that arose and explores the disparities that the institute believes pervades all entities and social systems. Training about racism tends to focus on individuals, but this approach, says Bernabei, stresses that the problem is more systemic, political, and institutional. “Until we begin to see that,” she adds, “all our efforts for diversity and individual interaction never really get to the systemic problem, so racism in this understanding really speaks to a system that benefits some while leaving others out.”

The People’s Institute’s program made clear to her that this history “keeps replicating itself systemically and is interconnected with every institution in America.” The Undoing Racism training, she suggests, is based on the premise that as a collective of individuals, once we clearly know what’s been done, we can begin to undo. The institute offered a new kind of analysis of the racism that exists within systems and clarified individuals’ roles within that system. “Particularly for me as a social worker, I saw clearly what my role was, and for me, that was good news and bad news. The good news was that now I saw. And the bad news was, now what do I do?” Bernabei recalls. “It started me on a profound personal and professional journey that I’m still engaged in.”

The Beginnings of a Movement

In the late 1970s, Ron Chisom, now executive director of The People's Institute, was a medical research technician at Louisiana State University Medical School. He enjoyed his job but felt that something was missing in his work. He wanted to help people in the community, many of whom at that time were devastated by drug addiction. He began a civic organization with another young man and turned toward community organizing. On a trip to New York to gain funds for his organization, he met Jim Dunn, PhD, MSW. Dunn, says Chisom, was a graduate of Columbia University and had a great deal of theoretical knowledge. Chisom, on the other hand, didn't have a college background but had developed training skills. He'd been to training schools that taught people to become good organizers, Chisom says, but they worked from predominantly white training models, and they didn't talk about racism, culture, or history. "I realized that white people were trying to give people skills, but if you give someone skills and you haven't dealt with racism, they're going to become skillful racists. We had a lot of white folks who worked in primarily black communities—people with good intentions that add to the oppression because they hadn't dealt with their privilege or access."

Dunn, who taught at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH, and Chisom created The People's Institute in 1980 because they realized that people needed not only good skills and tools, but also an antiracist approach to organizing. Skills and tools, Chisom says, are the foundation of technical or mechanical organizing. "But, you've got to give people humanistic organizing, which is guided by antiracist principles. If racism dehumanizes, then antiracism gives humanity back." They began planning a curriculum and recruiting trainers and ultimately devised a 21/2-day training program that they began offering in Ohio, where Dunn lived. The program was designed, says Chisom, for anyone who wants to make a difference, whether a social worker, environmentalist, or philanthropist. The two codirected the institute until Dunn's death in 1989.

Explains Jane Wholey, an institute spokesperson, "Antiracism training is about understanding how it is that racism is constructed and how it exists as a systemic problem. It's about looking at racism from an analytic point of view." If individuals can understand that it was constructed, she says, then they can learn that it can be deconstructed.

"I took the training three times and have been extremely impressed with their analysis of racism and their attitude toward working with people across the board to undo this evil that has organized our society for so long," says Monica McGoldrick, MSW. "It's changed my thinking about how racism operates within society because it clarified so strongly the power of institutionalized racism to organize us all." She describes the training as a teaching tool based upon a power analysis of how racism has operated in the United States for the past 400 years. "It inspires people in the most positive way to think about their own position in society and work from that position to change the situation in whatever arena they can influence."

Social Workers and Social Change

According to Wholey, "Social work is all about helping people who are suffering and oppressed. That's what this profession was designed for in the beginning." Over the years, however, she explains, social workers have increasingly strayed from organizing and spend more time working in offices, leaving them more distant from solutions to the problems that social work was devoted to. While individuals from all over the country have attended and endorsed the Undoing Racism trainings, a nexus of antiracist activity arising from the training is found in New York City and New York's Rockland and Westchester Counties.

At the hub of the New York City groundswell of social workers, says Wholey, is Bernabei, who initially trained in Rockland and founded the Antiracist Alliance, a group of like-minded social workers and other social service professionals striving to achieve social change. Says Wholey, "Bernabei views The People's Institute as a tremendous beacon of light that can show social workers the way to do what their profession is all about." A key goal of that effort is to make the institute's analysis of racism a core component of social work education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Bernabei and other social workers from New York City and the counties on its north side have been coaxing social work educators to meetings and ultimately to participating in and inviting their colleagues and staff to attend the Undoing Racism seminars so they can bring change to their curricula. At this point, says Wholey, there are 30 professors of social work schools who have attended this training—from Columbia University, Fordham University, New York

University, and Hunter College, Yeshiva University and Rutgers School of Social Work. “The deans of all those schools of social work have all agreed to spend money to send more of their social work professionals to this training,” she adds.

Mary Pender Greene, ACSW, president of the New York City chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and chief of social work services at the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services in New York, met Bernabei at a winter roundtable on race matters in New York sponsored by Teachers’ College. A woman of color, she was unaccustomed to seeing a white woman speaking so clearly and passionately about issues of race, social justice, and institutional issues related to race. Bernabei invited Pender Greene to a meeting of social workers in New York to discuss the need for a common language with which to talk about race issues.

Pender Greene, who’s been a social worker for 30 years, was reluctant. She’d participated in too many discussions of diversity or multiculturalism that ultimately went nowhere or focused only on individuals and not institutions. “I felt as though something was missing, and I personally didn’t have the language to describe what it was.” Bernabei’s articulate presentation and persistence, however, piqued Pender Greene’s interest, inspiring her to attend a meeting at which individuals from Rockland County spoke in new ways and appeared to offer new ways of thinking. Then, in April 2003, the Anti-Racist Alliance went to Westchester County to attend the 21/2-day Undoing Racism training, which became a watershed experience for Bernabei.

“The workshop was really different and more useful than what I expected,” she recalls. “I learned very little that was new to me, but I came away with a language for things that I knew instinctively but did not have words to describe.” So impressed was Pender Greene that she later committed herself to recruiting social work educators and administrators to attend a training. Initially unsure that she could come up with 10 people, she recruited so many people that two trainings were required to accommodate them. She’s continued ever since to introduce colleagues to the Undoing Racism training programs, and she’ll continue to take the seminar herself. “I met people from Rockland who said they’d taken it 10 times, and I can understand it perfectly. I feel like I’ll take it 10 times.”

“The Antiracism Alliance has more than 200 people trained so far,” says Bernabei, “and we anticipate that within the first year and two months, we’ll have more than 400 people trained and part of this movement.” What’s needed, she says, is a critical mass—a core group of people dedicated to creating a movement. Through the institute, which has trained more than 100,000 people, and through the Antiracist Alliance and its electronic organizing Web site, says Bernabei, “we’re connecting with social workers to say that this is a return to our mission and our vision as agents of social change to dismantle systems of oppression and really impact systems that hold in place people in poverty while some advance.”

Doing No Harm

There’s no question in Chisom’s mind that social workers not trained in undoing racism can, with the best of intentions, do more harm than good. “They come in the community and they’re clueless,” he says, adding that he began in the same way. They come with only university training, but some of the universities, he charges, are “racist to the core.” So, when the social workers come to the communities of people of color, he explains, “they never talk about racism and they drain the culture out of the community. They talk about skills and social work as a do-gooder approach, a paternalistic approach—and that’s not social transformation, it’s a bunch of rhetoric. We say they’re adding to the problem.”

“Social workers always have the potential of doing harm,” observes Pender Greene. “Without this understanding, there are large pieces of the lives of people of color that don’t get addressed because people don’t know what they don’t know. And, if indeed you have as your mission the idea of helping people, then you also have an obligation to understand what their lives are like as best you possibly can,” she adds. Recalling something she heard at one of the trainings—that good intentions don’t prevent people from hurting—Pender Greene says, “You can have honorable intentions, but if you don’t have the necessary information, it can be harmful to people. If people can recognize that race and race matters are daily issues for most if not all people of color, social workers need to take responsibility and find out what those issues are.” It’s important, too, she says, not to make it

personal because it's not about personal issues but rather institutional issues. "Good people can be perpetuating destructive institutional patterns with honorable intentions."

As an example, Pender Greene points to the frequency with which social workers who have worked for years with clients of color claim that race has never come up in sessions. "That to me is truly telling," she says, "because issues of race come up for people of color every day." Many times, they may not bring it up in therapy for fear that the therapist is going to feel that the client of color is racist, she suggests, or, since they're in the lower power position, they may feel that the therapist is being helpful to them, and they don't want to bring up something that is going to make the social worker uncomfortable.

Other times, a client may discuss an issue of race and the social worker may suggest that the issue may not really have been about race. This, she indicates, may signal to the client that the social worker isn't prepared to talk about these issues. The client, she explains, needs permission to raise discussions of race, and the social worker needs to be prepared to understand them. "Clients may have terrible problems that systems don't help them with—whether it's social service, education, or mental health. The systems hinder their ability to do what they need to do to get better. It's unfortunate if a social worker only focuses on the person without looking at the systems that prevent them from being able to have access to things that would make life better for them, so it's an obligation to be able to understand the role that systems play in keeping people in their place," states Pender Greene.

To work with the community effectively, observes Chisom, guiding principles are necessary. According to The People's Institute, the crucial principles are understanding racism, culture, history, leadership development, networking, and accountability. "We think that anyone who does social work must organize in an antiracist way—a more humanistic way and not just a technical way—and they need training to understand the power dynamics." Anyone trying to make real social change working with people of color, he says, must understand what gets in the way of them being effective. "White people working in multicultural or multiracial settings must recognize the racial oppression piece." Social workers—individuals, he notes, who are in a privileged role in a community—must have the ability to assess the power dynamics within an agency or organization to make real change. With an antiracist analysis, he suggests, "they could bring humanity to the social work arena and be more effective, more accountable, and could truly help groups get a sense of their own power."

A Tool For All Social Workers

"The important thing for me is that as a social worker, I have some clarity about what it means to be a change agent, what it means to do antioppression and liberation work, and it allows me for the first time to have my hands on the levers and dials and some way for me to really move through the systems that I work with," observes Bernabei.

"It's perhaps the most powerful training experience to help social workers learn about how racism operates in our society—which is, let's face it, a core value within social work," suggests McGoldrick. She adds, "Without the kind of understanding The People's Institute training offers, white social workers are in danger of giving only lip-service attention to the issues of racism in our society, and people of color are at risk of being left with their rage and pain but without a power analysis, which would help them figure how to mobilize themselves for action in relation to racism."

— Kate Jackson is a staff writer for Social Work Today.

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