

CHAPTER

1

PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE FOR SURVIVAL AND BEYOND

*“If racism was constructed,
it can be undone.
It can be undone
if people understand
when it was constructed,
why it was constructed,
how it functions,
and how it is maintained.”*

PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE FOR SURVIVAL AND BEYOND

SUMMARY INFORMATION

ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS	Problem: Structural racism, white privilege, internalized oppression, institutional gatekeepers. Solution: Analysis of racism, social change, justice and equity, self-determination, accountable leadership, community organizing.
ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY & CONTEXT	Founded in 1980 by Ron Chisom and Jim Dunn. Rooted in community organizing and activism. Mission: "...to build a multi-cultural, anti-racist movement for social change."
THEORY OF PRACTICE	Anti-Racism.
ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY	Four regional offices. Ten senior trainers and thirty resource trainers. Publication on program's analysis of racism.
SERVICES	Two-day Undoing Racism training. Assessments, consulting and advanced training for community organizations when requested.
TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS	Primarily community leaders and activists. Community organizations, social service agencies, tenant welfare rights organizations, environmental groups, health groups, city planners, schools, parent groups, youth groups, women's groups, etc.
LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	Structural.
PROBLEM ANALYSIS	Institutional and systemic racism stem from historic systems of racial privilege and oppression, lack of self-determination in communities of color, institutional gatekeeping, internalized racial oppression and dehumanization and lack of a uniting analytical framework.
INTERVENTION PRINCIPLES	Creating a multi-cultural, anti-racism movement requires working from a common set of definitions and an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of structural racism that empowers communities and serves as the basis for organizing.
TRAINING METHODS	Standard training model rooted in communities of color. Presentation and large group discussion as primary learning tools.
INTENDED OUTCOMES	New understandings of structural racism. Accountable anti-racism leadership. Whites speaking out against structural racism. Self-determination in communities of color. Institutional and systemic change toward equity and justice.
THEORY OF CHANGE	Challenge and motivate people to change. Provide a common analytical frame work for community organizing. Develop new, accountable leadership.
CONTACT INFORMATION	Director: Ron Chisom 1444 North Johnson Street, New Orleans, LA 70116 phone: 504-944-2354

Mission & History

The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (People’s Institute) was established in 1980 by Ron Chisom and Jim Dunn with a mission to “...build a multi-cultural, anti-racist movement for social change.” The People’s Institute training model provides a common language, set of definitions and analytical framework to talk about and work against institutional and systemic racism in the U.S. Over two decades of experience organizing against racism in com-

munities of color have helped shaped the program’s Undoing Racism training model and its assessment, consulting and advanced training services for community leaders.

The program’s training model is rooted in community organizing efforts of the 1960s and 1970s that encouraged citizen activists to reclaim their role in and rights to self-determination. These models provided skills and tools for community action against injustice, but because they were designed and conducted primarily by white leaders, often did not take into account the significance of race, culture and history. The People’s Institute has developed an analysis that grounds community organizing and social justice efforts in cultural contexts and a focus on structural racism.

Organizational Capacity

The People’s Institute has four regional offices, including its headquarters in New Orleans, and additional offices in

Berkeley, CA, Brooklyn, NY, and Seattle, WA. Over the past twenty years, the People’s Institute has trained more than 35,000 people through their primary activity—a two-day Undoing Racism training model. The program has ten senior trainers and an additional 30 specialized trainers or trainers-in-training who represent a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural groups. The model explicitly focuses on racism

SETTING THE SCENE

IN A LARGE room of a community center in the heart of

an African American neighborhood of New Orleans, 32 people have gathered for a two-day Undoing Racism training. This regional training, one of four that the New Orleans headquarters of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond offers each year, has attracted a multi-racial group of participants from social service agencies and community organizations across the east coast of the U.S. Two trainers now stand at the front of the room quickly sketching a picture of the buildings and streets of an urban neighborhood on flipchart paper.

“What are the physical landmarks of poor neighborhoods in this country?” asks one of the trainers. Slowly the participants begin to call out answers: “out of business signs,” “cement playgrounds,” “liquor stores.”

The trainers quickly draw these suggestions into the picture with colorful markers...“cop cars,”

“pawnshops,” “churches,” “housing projects,” “billboards for cigarettes and liquor,” “people of color.”

The trainers pause for a moment and consider the brightly colored picture before them. Then they draw a big red circle around the picture and ask, “What institutions or systems have an impact on this neighborhood and the people who live here?” Outside the red circle they write up participants’ answers: “education,” “health care,” “criminal justice system.”

In an engaging voice, one of the trainers begins describing some of the connections between institutional policies and this neighborhood. Soon all of the participants are involved in an animated discussion about the relationship between race, poverty and institutional practices and policies, and the picture is quickly filled with a web of colorful lines connecting the institutions and the neighborhood. Over the next couple of days participants continue to explore this analysis of systemic racism that will help inform their future community activism and organizing efforts.

within the U.S., but the People's Institute has adapted it to conduct trainings in Japan, Puerto Rico and other locations around the world.

The program's training model emerged primarily out of activist work in African American communities and initially focused on black-white dynamics of racism. Both the model's focus and the organization's trainers have expanded to include many other people of color. The analytical framework remains binary with a focus on the dynamics between whites and people of color, rather than relations among people of color, and is still strongly influenced by its roots in African American communities and cultures.

The People's Institute's work has inspired the development of at least three other organizations that use a similar analytical framework of racism, but have developed unique methods and work with different populations. For example, Challenging White Supremacy Workshop in San Francisco, CA works almost exclusively with young, white community activists and organizers; Crossroads Ministry in Chicago, IL works with a variety of religious, educational and other institutions (see program summaries in this section); and *Changework* in North Carolina works with non-profit organizations and corporations (see Section Three). These programs occasionally cooperate and share materials with each other.

Types of Participants

The People's Institute offers trainings to a broad range of participants including community organizations, social service agencies, tenant welfare rights organizations, environmental groups, health groups, city planners, schools, parent groups, youth groups, women's groups, organizers, activists and leaders, as well as institutional gatekeepers—people in roles that determine access to institutional services. The trainings usually involve multi-racial groups, but the program also offers trainings exclusively for particular communities of color. The program

rarely works with all-white groups or with corporations because of their resistance to the model's analysis of racism.

UNDERSTANDING & INTERVENING AGAINST RACISM

Understanding the Problem

The People's Institute has a strong sociological, historical, and community organizing approach to understanding and addressing racism. The training model suggests that the problem of racism takes several forms, including: the normative behavior of individuals, the policies of institutions, the invasion of a dominant culture, the medium of language, and the military targeting and enforcement of oppressive policies against people of color.

The People's Institute asserts that modern racism is embedded in historic systems of oppression that sustain white wealth, power and privilege. The cumulative effects of institutional, cultural, linguistic, military and normative oppression of communities of color over time have been the widespread disempowerment, disorganization and perpetuation of poverty within these communities. The program's analysis suggests that racism and poverty are intricately linked because people of color do not have control over the institutions and policies that directly impact their lives.

The model suggests that when people learn that they are invisible and worthless, they treat themselves and others like them that way. Internalized oppression has resulted in serious social problems within and between communities of color such as violence, crime, drug addictions, health problems and political apathy. These dynamics also result in the separation and isolation of people of color by class, color and physical location.

The processes of internalized racial inferiority are mirrored in the interlocking dynamic of racial superiority. For many whites, the internalization

of superiority renders the systems of power, privilege and preferential treatment invisible. Reinforced by unexamined systems of individualism, competition and capitalism, a cycle of blaming the victim can be an inherent part of internalized superiority and inferiority.

“...effective community change cannot happen unless those who would make change understand how race and racism function as a barrier to community, self determination and self sufficiency.”

The model particularly focuses on the role of institutional gatekeepers—or those who speak for, describe, translate, interpret, count and determine institutional access for people of color—in the process of systemic oppression. Gatekeepers are typically accountable to their bosses in institutions rather than the communities that they serve, and usually help maintain rather than change the system. They contribute to depriving oppressed people access to the institutions that control their lives.

Finally, the program suggests that not having a common set of definitions and analytical framework for understanding racism is one of the primary obstacles to unified, anti-racist action. The unclear, fragmented and competing discourses about racism and lack of critical power analysis serve to divide people of color, poor whites and anti-racist activists, and prevent united social movements for equity and justice. The People’s Institute focuses on racism as the defining form of oppression in the U.S. that serves to maintain all other forms of oppression and acts as the most critical barrier to effective community organizing for social change.³

Addressing the Problem

The People’s Institute training model suggests that the best way to address these problems is to develop a clear understanding of them. This includes using a common analytical framework and set of definitions as the basis for community organizing. The model recognizes that community organizing and undoing racism are

inseparable and suggest that the technical or mechanical skills of organizing are simply not enough for developing a successful liberation movement. Community organizing efforts must be rooted in a common, critical analysis of structural racism in the U.S.

The training model provides education about disempowerment and systemic oppression, accountable leadership in communities and institutions, and organizing across racial lines for social transformation and self-determination. The program emphasizes humanistic values and recognizes the importance of bringing personal experience to understanding racism in order to counteract its dehumanizing effects. However, trainings remain focused on a structural analysis of racism rather than on emotional responses or the personal journey of anti-racism work. The model challenges all participants to be responsible, accountable and active in changing systems of oppression, yet avoids blaming individuals for consciously establishing or perpetuating them.

The People’s Institute model asserts that equitable communities and institutions can only be established and sustained by ethically sound organizers working together with intelligence, integrity and vision. The program requires all its trainers to struggle with and work through issues of racism and difficulties of organizing within their own communities. It also prides itself on being rooted in and accountable to communities of color.

Training Methods

The training model and analysis of racism is consistent across groups and situations, though trainers often use different examples to illustrate their points depending on the participant group. The trainings are clearly structured and use a format of engaging presentations

3. Chisom, R. & Washington, M. (1997). *Undoing racism: A philosophy of international social change*. The People’s Institute Press.

and large group discussion. The People’s Institute does not have a written manual or packet of materials for participants describing the goals and methods of the training model, however a publication outlining the Undoing Racism analytical framework is available.

“The way we structure our exercises and methodology comes straight from the street—straight from the community. We bring it with the spirit of the community.”

Initial training exercises help participants begin thinking “outside the box” and using a critical lens to examine social structures and dynamics. The training model uses the “foot of oppression” as a metaphor to describe the relationships between institutions, race and poverty. Trainers review important historical dates, legislation, people and policies that have impacted the development of institutional racism in the U.S. They talk about the role of institutional gatekeepers and the increased need for accountability to the communities that institutions serve. Internalized inferiority and superiority are also discussed as important factors maintaining community oppression and fostering social programs based on blame, punishment and denial. The training model explores language and definitions for understanding racism and examines how traditional views of intergroup relations such as “melting pot” theories and “colorblind” policies have ignored and denied racism in the U.S. Final discussions focus on community and institutional transformation and the leadership role of participants after the training.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The program fosters new understandings of racism by educating participants with a common analytical framework that can become the basis for a unified, anti-racism social movement.

Identifying and understanding structural racism is seen as the critical ingredient to successful community organizing against it. Communities are able to develop their own creative solutions, as well as practical methods for achieving them, once they have a clear problem analysis. Empowering participants, instilling hope, and developing accountable leadership are also important vehicles for establishing a multi-racial, liberation movement.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

The People’s Institute is one of the few existing programs in the U.S. that focuses on institutional and structural forms of racism. The model makes important distinctions between individual expressions of prejudice, bias and discrimination, and institutional or systemic forms of racism. It critiques the dominance of individual-level approaches that fail to address the more prevalent, less visible, systemic dimensions of racism. The model challenges whites and people of color alike to recognize and work against those systems that provide unearned privilege to some and impose undeserved restrictions on others. It also encourages a race-based analysis of important social issues and institutions.

Over the past twenty years, the People’s Institute training model has evolved based on experiences within communities across the U.S. The model is particularly strong in its grounding in and accountability to the communities it serves. The program is also both unusual and effective in providing both content and methods that are reflective of and appealing to many communities of color.

PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE FOR SURVIVAL & BEYOND

THEORY OF PRACTICE AND CHANGE FLOWCHART



