

Knowles, L.L. & Prewitt, K. (1969). [Institutional Racism in America](#). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

OVERVIEW

This book is the result of a Stanford "work-study" group from the University Christian Movement who lived in the predominantly black community of East Palo Alto and worked with the Mid-Peninsula Christian Ministry, a white, church-funded organization committed to dealing with racism in the urban setting. In addition to serving the Ministry, students met with their instructors for a credit seminar on institutional racism during the 1967-68 school year. Concurrently, the team members involved themselves politically in various aspects of the white community. As a result of their experience with the ineffectiveness of white planning, their constant contact with the black community's struggle for power, and their ongoing discussions, the team condensed and generalized their study of institutional racism into this report.

This book is intended as an "analytic tool" for those struggling to bring about changes in societal institutions. It assumes that there is a problem of institutional racism in all spheres of American society, a "white" problem which no recitation of black "conditions" will eliminate. The book's main goals are to expose the covert systems which skirt equality and offer suggestions for responding to institutional racism.

The book begins by noting that institutions hold "great power to reward and penalize" individuals and groups and that this power works underneath and through the institution's stated policies. For no other reason than color, American society has refined systems to penalize people by withholding power. Concepts such as "manifest destiny," "white man's burden," and "social Darwinism" have yielded covert policies that remain entrenched even after the disappearance of their overt counterparts.

In the economic arena, black consumers are exploited and blacks are excluded from free enterprise, indicating that reforms are only effective in so far as they move control of resources back into the community. Education—particularly in standardized testing, "ability grouping," and "teacher attitudes"—is another area in which self-determination continues to be denied and the cycle of despair among black students increases, as

communities are not allowed to control the selection of curriculum or to create policy. Furthermore, white children are denied the most representative histories, both American and foreign, receiving instead a dishonest picture of the sins of their country while also assimilating ancient racist attitudes.

Judicial and political systems also display institutional racism in the relationship of the black community with police and in the dependence of justice on money rather than law or morality. The same focus on monetary contribution is cited as the source of exclusion from national political parties. At the same time, the American practice of preventing blacks from voting, participating in local government, and being sufficiently represented in the national government is attributed to a deprivation of power. Statistics in the field of health also indicated that financial resources—not need—determine quality of care, level of preventative education, and access to facilities.

The team concludes by analyzing the traditional responses of white groups to the inequalities inherent in their institutions: noncompliance to the civil rights laws, tokenism, paternalism, and assimilation. They note that the perception of steadily improving conditions within black communities and the reliance on programs which are directed at the ghetto are two illusions which continue to prevent institutions from changing their racist habits. Racist tendencies themselves (i.e., maintaining the status quo) must be addressed within the white community before any program begin to make a difference. The team suggests that individuals working alone cannot effect appreciable change because the nature of group pressure is such that dissenting individuals, black or white, will be marginalized. Instead, whites need to commit together to apply steady pressure against the status quo within their particular sphere of influence.

QUOTATION

...Racism [is] a 'white problem' and as such must be solved in the white community. Racism will not be ended by the normal working of institutions whose very normality is itself the foundation of the racial problem. If racism is sustained by the status quo, and if the status quo is in turn sustained by a 'business as usual' mentality, then only something unusual will reverse the direction our nation is bent upon.

Something 'unusual,' we believe, must take place in the institutions of white America. (p. 126)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Is this book, now thirty years old, still pertinent today? Explain what has and has not changed.
- What are social Darwinism, white man's burden, and manifest destiny?
- How do these theories continue to thrive in your school or place of work?
- Is it fair to assume institutional racism before proving it exists in any particular American group? Why or why not?
- Is there any institution in which institutional racism has been successfully eliminated? How has this been done or why can it not be done?
- Is institutional racism intentional?
- Why does institutional racism flourish even when people disapprove of it?

IMPLICATIONS

Institutions, like teen peer groups, wield much subtle power. Individuals are obliged to conform to institutional standards or risk exclusion from the benefits of belonging. Everyone must belong to at least one group to be fulfilled. Because institutions, by nature, exclude people on the basis of race and because they resist individual attempts to change them, people work within those institutions must commit together to study, resist, and change the habits of racism in their spheres of influence so that all members, present and future, may relate to that institution and its members with dignity, self-determination, and fulfillment.

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