

# RACISM IN ORGANIZATIONS

*an interview  
with Tilden Edwards  
by Maurice Prout of the  
Race Institute, Washington, D.C.  
a training organization  
specializing in assisting  
organizations to  
deal with racism*

TILDEN EDWARDS  
Race Institute  
Washington, D.C.

**Question:** How serious do you feel the problems of racism are today and could you speak specifically concerning the issue of racism in business and the community?

**Answer:** It is an extremely serious problem, not just in itself but because it is related to so many other problems that it becomes very difficult to deal with it as an isolated problem. Race is a kind of visible crisis point where you can begin. However, in our experience with business and community groups, race problems are tied up with societal value systems and organizational life. It's a part of the way people move in this society and our historical conditioning. It's all those things that define racism as a large, socio-economic cultural problem which can paralyze you. When we work with businesses, community groups and educational groups, we try to focus our race as a symptom of their structures and policies so that problem-solving can begin. I think one of the main problems with industrial and community educational groups has been making a distinction between personal and institutional racism. Personal racism is more difficult to deal with because it requires reexamination of values developed over long periods of time. On the other hand, institutional racism is more visible in the day-to-day activities.

We've often had the greatest success when we've helped a group go through a diagnosis of its various departments, structures and policies. Their own discoveries of how racist policies are structured in the company are important motivators for action planning. This is much more meaningful than if we had diagnosed the problems ourselves.

**Question:** Can you define more precisely how people define racism?

**Answer:** Two ways. One is what effect does racism have and that is one way that you could speak about the pervasiveness or the seriousness of the problem. The other part as I see it is the investment we have in maintaining racist systems. My experience is that people's

first concept is that they will have to deal with the alleviation of whatever exists. There is some kind of a vague notion that there is something we ought to be doing. You are really dealing with racism when people have to reevaluate their values and thinking, and by changing their definition of racism from a minor alienation of some workers to understanding the pervasiveness of institutional systems. The issue is do we really want to engage in that kind of analysis and action planning? The seriousness of the problem is underscored because very few industrial groups are doing anything approaching that kind of effort.

**Question:** What are the objectives of the Race Institute?

**Answer:** The objectives of the Race Institute are to provide technical assistance for groups that share the same institutional reference and want to commit themselves to diagnosing, making action plans, implementing those plans and evaluating them. We don't work with individuals unless they share the same institutional base because we think that's where we can be most effective. Company groups provide an accountability system with each other, a higher motivation if they have been working with each other, and a mutual support group.

The objective is to have the organization take a look at itself and see how it has incorporated the existing value system. Most institutional structures have excluded a segment of its population, the organization's population and the effect it has on other segments of society. You examine this, then ask the question "Is that the value system you want to maintain?" If it isn't, then what structural changes have to come about to reflect the changing value system?

**Question:** Do you work with individual clients or groups?

**Answer:** We work with a variety of clients. At this point, we work with voluntary organizations which include universities, associations and other educational groups, churches and denominational

staff. We have worked with industrial groups and government agencies. In each case, the institution asks for assistance in eliminating racism.

**Question:** How successful do you feel your activities have been?

**Answer:** Our success has hinged directly on how much we've dealt with institutional racism through examination of organizational structures and policies as opposed to personal attitudes. We began dealing with personal attitudes but in the last few months have eliminated that activity. There are lots of groups that enjoy examination of personal attitudes, but we feel it doesn't deal with the places where real change is needed.

**Question:** Do you feel you are making a significant impact on organizations and corporations?

**Answer:** We have done so with a couple of government agencies and with two businesses at least. We have worked with approximately 45 groups in the last year and one-half. I'm going to be very conservative about the degree of success. I don't like the blind success of a single experience rather than an assessment of the group's continuing effort. We've tried to develop long-term relationships with groups. The problems of racism are much too deep to resolve quickly. We worked in phases with groups over a period of months and ideally years. I think there's been some specific instances of groups changing practices such as testing policies for new employees, promotion policies and representation of minority groups in decision making. It's a long haul and we've got no magical expectation of quick results. It depends primarily on the stage of awareness and maturity of the organizations.

**Question:** In other words, you view yourselves as a catalytic agent that initiates the process?

**Answer:** The way I view myself and the way people at the Race Institute view themselves is that of a continuing consulting relationship with organizations. As with any major organizational change, this relationship involves top

management sanctioning the intervention as well as understanding it and believing in it. Successful effort involves a group that is basically secure and profitable, whether in terms of educational outcomes or financial gain. A marginal group has too much paralysis and anxiety to take the risks necessary to deal seriously with race. The group that is used to avoiding problems is probably likely to find a way of avoiding race. We would be less serious about working with a group like that.

**Question:** How were your trainers developed and what continuing experiences are provided for trainers and your clients?

**Answer:** The whole program began on the assumption there was no group of trainers in the country which had the capacity to do this kind of training and consultation. That's why we began with the trainer training program rather than just bringing together star trainers who have general ability and feel they have a transferable capacity for dealing with problems of racism. Race is a distinctive enough area that we will not allow a trainer to work with us unless he has special background in understanding of how to deal with racism.

We began with 35 people who were a combination of psychologists, organizational development specialists and religious educators who had some interest and skills for dealing with organizations, groups and social problems. Another group followed a year and a half ago. Since then, we've developed an ongoing series of workshop experiences for our trainers to continually upgrade their capacity to deal with the structure and group problems of race.

Because existing opportunities were simply not relevant, we've had to custom design our continuing training programs. The whole purpose of the Race Institute trainer network is to put together a group of people who would build each other's experience, be mutually accountable, work together in teams and avoid the fragmented every-

man-for-himself style prevalent in most training. We've been increasing the discipline this year even more by devising performance standards for the network. Everyone has a year to meet these or be dropped from our network.

**Question:** What are the costs for institutions using your service?

**Answer:** That depends on the service and the length of the service. Generally, the cost is between \$100 and \$150 a day for a trainer. It's hard to give a specific sum. We had a foundation subsidy for the whole thing but that's giving out very shortly, and that is what really has been paying for the part-time salaries of two staff persons.

**Question:** Are other groups in the country doing this type of training?

**Answer:** There are 20 ecumenical training centers across the country which focus primarily on social issues. We're attempting to organize enough resources to have full-time staff and develop specialized materials.

**Question:** Where do you see race relations heading in the future?

**Answer:** It is difficult to answer, but I feel a crisis situation must develop. Things will become more traumatic before people and institutions will invest energy in ending racism. At this point in time, racism does not constitute a significant threat to the status quo, hence, there is little direct involvement in their answering the issues of racism. As was seen during the riots in Watts, industry began to do something only after the riots had taken place, not before. To some extent, therefore, the riots worked. The riots produced enough trauma that business and government began to take a hard look at something that had been previously ignored. I'm not advocating riots or violence by any means, but I don't feel answers to racism will be forthcoming through altruistic motives. Things will have to get worse before they become better. I hope the future will bring about rational and humane answers to the problems of racism, rather than ones of repression.