

“Asset-based” or “Guilt-based” Anti Racism: Unitarian Universalism Needs a Better Anti-Racist Strategy¹ Anne.schneider@asu.edu

Social and behavioral researchers have been studying anti-racist strategies for decades and the overwhelming conclusion is that “nothing works.”² These same studies, however, have numerous suggestions about what is wrong with the anti-racist strategies and what works better.³ Unfortunately, the Unitarian Universalist Association continues to ignore the advice from research, and continues to promote the “guilt-based”--“shame and blame” strategies that have been found ineffective.

In spite of the discouraging results from research, we have not given up. We do, however, advocate for a significant change in the UUA strategy away from the guilt-based, shame and blame strategies toward “Asset Based Anti Racist (ABAR).”⁴

Asset-Based Anti-Racism is a strategy that lifts up human dignity, compassion and unity. This strategy draws on ideas from the Unitarian Universalist 7 Principles, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, William Barber’s [Poor People's Campaign](#), and decades of social, behavioral research. Asset-based strategies are relatively new to anti-racist work but have been found effective in improving opportunities for disadvantaged populations in other fields including education, community development, and public health.⁵

¹ Originally drafted by Anne L. Schneider with assistance from many others. These ideas are based on the insights and ideas of Kenneth Christiansen, a long-time UU who has used the asset-based approach in his classwork. See his website for outstanding essays on asset-based anti racism <https://assetbasedantiracism.com/>.

² Why Diversity Training Doesn’t Work, and What Might Work Better, by Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev. Harvard Business Review, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail> Also see (See Chapters 6 and 7 of “(Dis)Continuing Racism: Essays on Race in America,” by Anne L. Schneider, 2021. Available from Amazon.

³ Roberson, Quinetta ., “Diversity in the Workplace: A Review, Synthesis, and Future Research Agenda,” Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 2018. Villanova School of Business, Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania 19085, USA; email: Quinetta.Roberson@Villanova.edu, 2019. Also found in Oxford Handbook of Diversity and Work, Chapter 19, Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁴ See Kenneth Christiansen’s web site “asset-based anti racism” and his excellent essays with his own experiences using asset-based approaches in his teaching. <https://assetbasedantiracism.com/> . This approach is “unity based” such as that promoted by the Unitarian Universalist Multi-racial Action Council (UUJAC) with its slogan “black, brown, and white together.” <https://www.uumuac.org/mac-arrows>

⁵ For results of asset-based anti-racism in education, see “An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What It Is and Why It Matters,” Steinhardt, New York University; For asset-based approaches in community development, see Russell, Cormac, “Asset Based Community Development (ABCD): Looking Back to Look Forward: In conversation with John McKnight about the heritage of ABCD and its place in the world today Amazon, 2021. For results in public health see Cassetti V, Powell K, Barnes A, Sanders T. A systematic scoping review of asset-based approaches to promote health in communities: development of a framework. Glob Health Promot. 2020 Sep;27(3):15-23. doi: 10.1177/1757975919848925. Epub 2019 Jul 18. PMID: 31319777.

Asset-Based Anti-Racism encourages people of all identities to bring their ideas, courage, energy and outrage about racism to the task of reducing racism within themselves and wherever it might be identified. Asset-based anti-racism allows all people who want to combat racism to see themselves as assets who can contribute to that goal rather than too fragile to help; too guilty to participate; or shunted to the sidelines and told to sit down, shut up. Asset-based anti-racism provides tools to enable those who still harbor racial prejudice strategies to overcome their prejudice.⁶ ABAR is positive rather than negative. It utilizes the strengths and assets of the people involved. It is grounded in what people are doing right to reduce racism rather than what others of their same racial identity have done wrong in the past. It provides an honest history, which includes both the bad (slavery) and the good (eliminating slavery). It provides accurate data on how racism has been reduced, and what remains to be done.⁷ It offers praise for anti-racist work rather than guilt and criticism for not having done enough.

Here are some of the “best practices” identified in the dozens / hundreds of studies of anti racist projects.

- **Positive incentives work better to change behavior than negative**
- **Praise for doing something right works better than punishment for doing something wrong**
- **Mobilizing people of all identities in changing their own behavior and environment works better than “outsiders” doing it for (to) them**
- **Increasing contact across racial categories reduces racist attitudes and behavior**
- **Focusing on people as members of the human race works better than focusing on them in identity-based categories**
- **Appeals to collective pride work better than appeals to collective guilt**
- **Research on “habit-breaking” and “cognitive biases” (such as racial prejudice) is useful for strategies to rid oneself of racial prejudice**
- **Breaking down barriers across racial groups works better than hardening them**

What’s Wrong With the UUA Anti-Racist Strategy?⁸

⁶ For example, ridding oneself of prejudice is difficult, but ideas from research suggest treating prejudice as one would a “habit” and use similar strategies to overcome it. This type of tool can be included in asset-based anti racism. See Devine PG, Forscher PS, Austin AJ, Cox WT. Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *J Exp Soc Psychol.* 2012 Nov;48(6):1267-1278. doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2012.06.003. PMID: 23524616; PMCID: PMC3603687.

⁷ See Anne Schneider, (Dis)Continuing Racial Inequality: Essays on Race in America, 2021. Available from Amazon.

⁸ Over the past several decades, the UUA has asserted that UUs are racist; all congregations are racist; and UUism itself has a white supremacy culture. found in the “dismantle white supremacy culture,” strategy or others that require white people to “confess your racism,” or engage in self-flagellation with activities such as “the white privilege” walk, or the blue eye3s, black eyes activity.

UUA anti-racist strategies focus primarily on collective guilt rather than collective pride.⁹ Typically, the anti-racist programs of the UUA accuse all white people of being racist; of being complicit in a “white supremacy culture,” and that “whiteness” must be decentered.¹⁰ The slogans such as “dismantle white supremacy culture” attributes to all white culture – and white people – a supremacy that white people may not feel at all. UUA strategies typically say to dismantle white supremacy culture within ourselves, our congregations, and our society, but their strategies provide no tools with which to do this. UUA strategies often include activities that require white people to confess their racism and promise (covenant) to dismantle racism in themselves, their congregations, and society (see the revised Article 2 proposal). Beginning in about 2017, the UUA President and Board actually claimed that the UUA has a “white supremacy culture” (WSC). Following closely the ideas of Robin DiAngelo, these strategies assert that “there is no such thing as a positive white identity” and that people who deny they are racist are delusional. Ibram Kendi, the Ware lecture featured speaker in 2022, argues that there is only racist and anti-racist, with the latter implying political action by every individual otherwise they are racist. The idea to “dismantle white supremacy culture” has an implicit underlying assumption that “whiteness” whether in skin color or in ideas, values, and institutions are racist and work to the advantage of white people and the disadvantage of people of color. This idea of a white supremacy culture has been broadened to include most of the enlightenment values as being racist, including reason, logic, tolerance for ideas, freedom of belief, right of conscience, free press and speech, and others. This anti-racist approach has produced numerous collateral damage to traditional UU values of freedom of speech and press.¹¹

As Unitarian Universalists, we all want to reduce racism and oppression. We want to live up to the 7 principles: respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person; work for justice and compassion in human relations; believe there are connections across boundaries that unite us all in a web of interdependence. When we see energy being put into anti-racist strategies that research has shown do not work and that violate important principles such as respect for all persons, then we will object and suggest a better way.

⁹ A recent and highly influential article shows that appeals to collective pride work better to encourage “helping others” than appeals to collective guilt, especially for “high identifiers.” van Leeuwen, E., van Dijk, W., & Kaynak, Ü. (2013). Of saints and sinners: How appeals to collective pride and guilt affect outgroup helping. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 16(6), 781–796 2013.

¹⁰ See personal reflections on the Savethe7Principles web site; the 1999 essay by black UU Minister, Thandeka, “Why Anti-Racism Will Fail,” and this UU World Article on how a black man was treated at GA. UU World,

¹¹ See Todd Ekloff, *The Gadfly Papers*; Jay Kiskel and Frank Casper, *Used to be UU*; David Cycleback, *Illiberal Liberalism*; Anne Schneider, “A Self Confessed White Supremacy Culture,” and “(Dis)Continuing Racial Inequality. All books are available from Amazon.