

REVIEW OF THE CLAIM THAT BLACK PEOPLE, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE HARMED IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ORGANIZATIONS THAT IS MADE IN THE REPORT “WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF CONCERN¹”

Allan Pallay, 5 April 2021

Introduction

In the report called “Widening the Circle of Concern” from the Commission on Institutional Change, the claim is made that Black people, Indigenous people and people of color (BIPOC) are harmed by biased behaviors by Unitarian Universalists (UUs) or by UU cultural features; and the report implies that this harm is both substantial and common in UU organizations. This statement will subsequently be referred to as the claim. This claim is based on data collected from BIPOC on self-perceived oppressive treatment in UU organizations. This review evaluates the degree to which the presentation of these data supports this claim.

The claim is the reviewer’s summary based on a variety of statements in the report. The following are a sample of some of those statements: “The vast majority of people of color and others from identities marginalized within Unitarian Universalism had experienced discriminatory and oppressive incidents...” (Page xxv); “... gathering spaces for people of color are essential to help counter the ignorance and aggression these beloved UUs encounter within so many of our congregations” (Page 60); “...Black people, Indigenous people, people of color and members of other historically marginalized groups are injured over and over again.” (Page 129); “... this report has endeavored to gather data on the current inequitable and oppressive treatment of people of color within Unitarian Universalism...” (Page 117); “Religious professionals of color experience these conditions alongside aggressions, disregard for their authority, and outright discriminatory and racist conditions...” (Page 72); “Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color encounter ignorance and aggression in many Unitarian Universalist organizations...” (Page 37).

The word “substantial” in the claim summarizes the words oppressive, aggression, discriminatory and racist used in the report to describe harm. The word “common” in the claim is used to summarize the assertion that a “vast majority” of BIPOC are harmed in “so many of our congregations.” It also relates to the assertion that BIPOC are “harmed over and over again”, and to the phrase “current and inequitable oppressive treatment.” Those phrases imply each BIPOC experiences multiple incidents of harm.

It should be noted that the aim of the study was to “... oversee an audit of racism within UUA practices and policies and set priorities and make recommendations for anti-oppression strategies...while holding the Association accountable ...” (Page xxvii). This review evaluates only a narrow aspect of the report that is related to the characterization of racism: is the claim defined above consistent with the presentation of the data that came from the audit of racism? The review also briefly comments on the anti-oppression strategies.

Assumptions of Commissioners

It was not the aim of the study was to determine whether the claim was true. It appears that the commissioners believed it to be largely true at the beginning. This can be seen in two of the “premises” that the commissioners stated at the start of the study: 1) “The covenants that bind us together, both within our own faith and to our partners in the world, are frayed and broken by the domination of white supremacy culture among us”; 2) “To keep Unitarian Universalism alive, we must center the voices that have been silenced or drowned out and dismantle elitist and exclusionary white privilege, which inhibits connection and creativity.” (Page xviii).

The work of any researcher is influenced by their preconceptions. Thus, it is possible that the commissioner’s prior beliefs affected the methods and the analysis techniques used to characterize the extent and severity of racism in UUism. Therefore, the strength of the case for the claim is partly related to whether enough detail about the methods of data collection and analysis techniques are given to enable their evaluation.

¹ Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the Commission on Institutional Change. Unitarian Universalist Association. Boston. June 2020

Assessing Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Specifically, in order to assess whether BIPOC commonly experience oppressive treatment, we need to be able to assess whether the participants in the study were a reasonably representative sample of the 19,000 BIPOC members of Unitarian Universalist congregations¹. Thus, we need to know the details related to how the participants were recruited. We also need to know how information was solicited. In addition, it would be necessary for the report to show clearly described summary statistics to back up verbal summaries. This is particularly important since the commissioners decided that the raw data will not be available for review for the next 5 years.

Three Sources of Data

The report used three sources of data to characterize the harm done to BIPOC by UUs.

Call for Testimony

The first source of data was referred to as a “Call for Testimony.” These calls were issued repeatedly on the commissioner’s website and other venues throughout the three years of collecting data. Testimony took the form of individual interviews and submitted statements. The testimony was solicited as follows: “The commission ask you to respond to the following question with specific examples. In what ways have you or your group or community been hurt by current racist and culturally biased attitudes and practices within Unitarian Universalism?”(Page xxiv). Clearly, this method did not produce a representative sample of the opinion of BIPOCs. It only included data from those who felt themselves harmed.

Focus Groups

The following is a quote from the report that defines the second source. “Focus Groups—For the first two years of our work, we convened focus groups in a variety of settings, including the 2018 and 2019 General Assemblies, regional and district meetings, meetings of professional associations, Finding Our Way Home (the annual meeting of religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color), and online. These were designed to elicit feedback from a variety of groups. In 2019, we also extended invitations to those who had voiced concern about anti-oppression work. At the 2018 General Assembly, all participants were invited to take part in focus groups.”(Page xxi)

As indicated above, at the 2018 General Assembly (GA) all attendees were invited to participate. It should be noted that at this GA the speakers and workshops (on the topic of race), the prior communications from the UUA (e.g. the UU World) and the commissioners all promoted the white supremacy culture paradigm. In this atmosphere it is a reasonable possibility that some of the attendees at GA who disagreed with the commissioners might have felt uncomfortable participating in the focus groups. To help evaluate this, it would have been helpful if the wording of the invite were given. At the 2019 GA the commissioners decided to “also extend invitations” to those who had concerns about the commission’s anti-oppression work.

No information was given on how people were recruited in all the other focus groups; particularly how BIPOC were recruited. It is therefore not possible to evaluate whether the methods used were likely to produce a representative sample of the population of BIPOC. However, we do know that at the beginning of the study the commissioners stated a number of “commitments” that guided their work. One of them was “to... collect stories of those who have targets of harm or aggression because of racism within existing UUA culture” (page xviii). That is, the commissioners were committed to find the stories of harm. There was no mention of a commitment to collect a representative sample. This is consistent with the premises of the study described in the last section.

Taken as a whole, based on the information given, it is unclear whether the participants in focus groups were a reasonably representative sample. But there is a reasonable possibility that it was biased toward those who felt harmed.

Finally, the wording that was used to solicit responses from participants in focus groups was not described. We therefore can not evaluate how it might have influenced the reports given by the participants.

¹ Number 19,000 is based 158,186 members of UU churches in 2014 given in the UUA website <https://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>; and 12% of UUs identifying as non-white in a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center shown in the website <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/unitarian/>. Note that the estimate is not precise. The margin of error is +/-8 percentage points.

Surveys

The following is a quote that defines the third source. “Surveys—We conducted several surveys at General Assembly, one through the GA app, which was accessible to all General Assembly participants.” More will be said about this in the results section.

The Interests and Knowledge of Participants: the Accuracy of Testimony

We would expect under-reporting of racism from white participants because those who have acted or spoke in racist ways or were racially insensitive are likely to rationalize or deny that behavior. In addition, we would expect that white participants would be unaware of all the racism BIPOC suffer. We would expect some degree of over-reporting by BIPOC due to the recognition that reporting racism could encourage special programs from which they could benefit (as do exist in the commissioner’s recommendations).

Results of Study

There were 3 types of data presentations that were used to illustrate and support the claim.

Avatars and Other Testimonies

The Commissioners report that they collected many stories of harm. The main way they report these stories was by the creation of what they call avatars. Each of the avatars reads like a story from an individual. However, the commissioners state, “The avatars are composites of the testimonies that were submitted and also those that came out of the focus groups.” (Page xxv). There were approximately 30 discrete incidents across the five avatars. Three of the avatars related to BIPOC. They also reported incidents that directly quoted testimonies from about 11 respondents. Almost all the incidents involved BIPOC.

Some of the incidents were clearly racist. Two examples include: a member of a church told a participant that they “liked coming to a place where almost everyone was white.” (Page 60). “During seminary, I was called a quota filler, was told it would be easier if I were not there.” (Page 66). Some that have resulted in distress could possibly have little to do with race or culture. Examples included differences of opinion: one respondent was distressed because, “my ideas on how to accomplish the objectives...” were not accepted (Page 76). Or mistakes: one respondent writes, “I was invited to preach at a colleague’s church and he put a fellow woman of color colleague’s picture on the front cover with my name.” (Page 66). Or differing political philosophies: one respondent was distressed because her suggestion that the church should work on “ending white supremacy culture” was not accepted (Page 46). However, the majority of the incidents appeared to this reviewer to have a negative a racial/cultural component. But the reviewer can’t judge whether the incidents amounted to substantial harm. Finally, it is likely that for some of these incidents the offending party would tell a different story.

There are a number of problems with this presentation of data; 1-With regard to the avatars, we can’t assess how accurately they reflected the testimony actually given by the respondents. 2-The commissioners could not assess the accuracy of the testimonies. 3-We do not know how many BIPOC are represented in these stories. However, this data shows that some number of BIPOC felt themselves harmed (and some multiple times) by biased attitudes and behaviors by some UUs. This is a significant finding.

Statistical Table From a Survey

The report presents results from the following survey question. It was asked at one or more General Assemblies. “Has your community experienced an incident of tension around race or other forms of oppression?” The responses were: 56% yes; 21% no; 23% I don’t know. There were 621 respondents.

There are several things that need to be considered in evaluating this result. The question in the survey asks about “communities.” Since there are usually multiple attendees from each congregation we don’t know how many communities were involved. Nor do we know how many BIPOC were involved. We don’t know how many incidents are associated with each “yes” response since the question asked whether “an incident” was experienced and the number of incidents was not requested. Also, there was no time frame was given. Finally, since the question highlighted the word “tension,” it is unclear how consistent an answer of yes is with the claim that uses words like aggression, racist and discriminatory.

In addition, we don’t know how representative the 621 respondents to this survey were, given that thousands attend a single GA (2,814 attended the 2018 GA). Therefore, it is important to be able to assess whether the wording used to invite participants seemed to encourage those who had views consistent or inconsistent with the claim. Minimal information on this was presented in the report. Also, we don’t know how the opinions of people who attend GA are representative of the

larger population of UUs. Clearly, to determine the opinion of white and BIPOC UUs in general, a total or random sample of all UUs would need to be surveyed (say based on the mailing list of the UU World).

Nevertheless, 348 people reported an incident in their community. We can therefore infer that some number of BIPOC felt themselves harmed in these incidents. This is a significant finding since even a single incident of harm is reason for concern.

Summary Statement Supporting the Claim

The following statement was made in support of the claim. “The vast majority of people of color and others from identities marginalized within Unitarian Universalism had experienced discriminatory and oppressive incidents or cultures within Unitarian Universalist circles.” (Page xxv).

The word “majority” in the above statement implies a proportion: some number of BIPOC who experienced discriminatory and oppressive incidents in UU circles divided by the number in a sample. To assess whether the proportion implied by the above statement is informative about whether discriminatory and oppressive incidents were common in UU circles we need know who was in the sample. This is needed to enable us to assess whether the sample was likely to be reasonably representative of BIPOC in general. This information was not given in the report. However, we can consider each of the 3 sources of data to evaluate whether they could be used to support the above statement.

First, participants who submitted testimony of harm: Unless this group’s number approached the total number of BIPOC (about 19,000) it would not support the assertion of a vast majority since it only included those who experienced harm. However, it would be informative in assessing the magnitude of the problem. Unfortunately, this number was not revealed. Next the focus group participants: It is unclear whether the participants in focus groups were a representative sample. But there is a reasonable possibility that it was biased toward those who felt harmed. (see: Focus Groups section).

Finally, the survey: The report shows the response to two questions. One was uninformative about the statement we are considering. The other question (Has your community experienced an incident of tension around race or other forms of oppression?) was partly informative. Note that it highlights the word tension and refers to the respondent’s community. That question only partly relates to the assertion of discrimination and oppression of individual BIPOC. In addition, it was not clear that the sample in the survey was reasonably representative (See section: Statistical Table from a Survey). Thus, the data given in the report give only very weak evidence in support of the assertion stated above.

Harm to BIPOC Due to Specific Policies and Practices

The report asserts that a number of specific practices or policies cause harm to BIPOC. For the assertion of harm by a practice or policy to be demonstrated as true, a necessary condition for this review is that at least one participant report that they feel harmed by it¹. For the harm caused by a specific policy or practice to be considered widespread or common, a reasonable case needs to be made using presented data, that most BIPOC feel the same way. The data to enable such cases to be made is not given in the report for any specific policy or practice. Therefore, this review does not consider specific policies and practices in evaluating the claim.

Conclusion

The report documents that some number of BIPOC felt themselves harmed by behaviors by some number of UUs or by some UU cultural features. The commissioners imply that this is a large number. I therefore conclude that biased behavior or cultural features that are harmful to some BIPOC exist in some UU congregations. We don’t know the numbers of people involved since numbers were not given in the report. On the other hand, the report provides only very weak evidence that the harm was both substantial and common. The reasons include: The commissioners assumed that oppressive treatment of BIPOC was a major problem before the study began; the report lacked detailed descriptions of the

¹ An example to clarify this point is related to the following quote from the report: “The differing practices and levels of commitment [to anti-racism programs] from structural entity to structural entity within our Association is one of the ways Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and members of other historically marginalized groups are injured over and over.”(Page 129). In this case data to back up the assertion that the injuries are connected to the existence of “differing practices and levels of commitment” are not given. Therefore, for the purposes of this review, injury due to “differing practices and levels of commitment” is not considered.

methodology used to recruit participants and solicit testimony; the inability of the commissioners to investigate the accuracy of the reports of harm; the inability to know the perspective of the alleged harmer; the non-representativeness of the sample; and the lack of clear and well defined summary statistics to back up the claim. Note, I am not asserting that the claim of substantial and common harm is untrue. I am asserting that the information and data presented in the report did not demonstrate it to be true. Among the problems with the study noted above the most difficult one to overcome to reach a definitive conclusion is the inability to know perspective of the alleged harmers. Nevertheless, it is possible that the presentation of additional information on methods or data from the study or more complete data analysis could change this conclusion.

Commentary on Implications of the Conclusions: Transformation, Truth and Reconciliation

The commissioners write, “The time for reconciliation may be passed. What may be needed is a ... truth and transformation process ...” (Page 167).

Truth: I agree with the need for “truth”, although in this case, I would say accuracy. I believe we need to be very careful not to minimize the harm experienced by BIPOC in UU circles. At the same time, we need to be very careful not to overstate the racism of white UUs or racism in the culture associated with white UUs. It is simply unfair to do otherwise. The report has not been careful in its use of words since it implies that harm to BIPOC by white racism or racism in cultural features associated with white UUs is both substantial and common; when it is unclear how common it is.

Transformation: In the report the commissioners propose many changes aimed at transforming UUism’s alleged white supremacy culture to one that they believe is more equitable and inclusive. It is beyond the scope of this review to evaluate the merits of the specific proposals. But it is fair to say that many of them will increase the importance of identity in UU life. This increase has the following potential implications: more of a focus on what divides us and less on what unites us; more of a focus on judging people based on their group identity and less on their character and abilities; more of a focus on evaluating policies based on the interests of identity groups and less on their overall merit. Some UUs, may see these implications as problematic. If racism in UU circles is common the argument for general transforming policies is strengthened despite these potential downsides. But if substantial bias is limited to a relatively small number of UUs in a relatively small number of congregations then policies that focus on these problematic congregations and emphasize reconciliation may be of greater value. Below I consider this point of view.

Reconciliation: This review concludes that the report shows that some number of BIPOC were harmed by biased behaviors by some UUs or by some UU cultural features. It is unclear how many, but any number is too many. The racism that our fellow black brother and sister UUs face in society at large makes their lives, on average, more difficult than whites. Our standard should be that all UU churches are places of complete welcome and comfort. Therefore, below I outline an approach that has the following values: it supports BIPOC and at the same time is respectful of white UUs; it is likely to be useful regardless of whether white bias is common or not; it will improve our understanding of the nature of the problems since the alleged harmers will have a chance to tell their side of the story; and most of all, it aims at reconciliation.

I suggest that UUs should be encouraged to bring up any problem related to race or identity at their churches and try to work them out between the parties involved. If either side in a dispute feel that it is not getting resolved to their satisfaction (be it a BIPOC or a white person) the UUA should have trained mediators that can be brought in. The job of a mediator is to attempt to fairly evaluate the point of view of both sides. If racism is clearly the source of the problem, it should be called out; but it should not be assumed a-priori that whites are oppressors and BIPOCs are victims¹. If racism is not involved, or there is ambiguity about whether racism is involved, the mediator should encourage understanding, compromise and reconciliation. Importantly, mediators should be trained to understand both the white supremacy culture ideology and alternative ideologies (example: traditional liberal ideology), but should not view problems solely through the lens of any particular one. I recognize that this requires a mediator to have a nimble flexible mind and there are times when a compromise can’t be reached; but I think it should always be tried. Always tried because I believe that the only way UUism can thrive as a multiracial multicultural organization is by working toward a meeting of hearts and minds across identity groups.

¹ I recognize that differing ideologies may define racism differently. If the reason for a conflict comes partly from the differing ideologies of the parties involved, then the job of the mediator would be to point this out and then try to work out a compromise solution to the specific problem despite the differing ideologies.