

“Race is a social construct and does not exist”: What Academic Librarians Have to Say about Racism in the Profession  
Jaena Alabi

2014 American Library Association Annual Conference Poster Session  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
July 28, 2014

\*Due to space constraints, only a few, selected comments appear on the poster. All comments received on the 2012 survey are listed below.

### **Microinvalidations**

**Definition:** “Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274)

Most of the questions I have to say never, but I have heard comments that reflect an ideology of colorblindness in the workplace. It is not always explicit, but sometimes it is about what people do not say in public forums and what librarians do not openly recognize.

Race is a social construct and does not exist.

Working as a librarian in a college setting has its challenges because the people who have the power of influence on issues of diversity see this as not worth the effort.

I've been told how lucky I am to be a minority because I get my degree paid for (assuming the scholarships I earned were not competitive). I've also been told "WOW! You're Hispanic? You speak great English..."

As I am white, racist comments aren't directed towards me personally. But I do see some resistance to the idea that we should make a point of purchasing books by black authors or of interviewing candidates of different races for an open position. The resistance is not to interviewing black candidates per se, but of using that as one of multiple factors in deciding whom to talk to.

I think we've become more aware of race, racism, and discrimination, but that's unfortunately lead to a backlash ("racism is over. why do we need affirmative action?").

while these comments didn't come from colleagues, I have heard some of these from other people of my acquaintance, eg that I am too sensitive about race.

As a white Jew, I sometimes feel like a minority and sometimes not. It matters to me to see people of my own ethnic background in positions of authority and to have my needs (mainly for time off for holidays) taken into account. I am occasionally hurt when people assume that because I am from a group that is often well educated and successful that there is nothing special they need to learn about being inclusive of my culture.

### **Racism not observed (here) or not sure if it's occurred to me/here**

As a White person, I probably didn't notice if these things were happening. I might have noticed if it happened to a colleague with whom I was close, some of whom are people of color. Yet I don't recall

any particular incidents or language that implied this kind of racist thinking/behavior towards colleagues. Towards (public, non-university affiliate) patrons is another story - that's where I noticed racist language and behavior.

I feel that racism is less overt than it was in the past, though I'm sure it's still an issue, even if I've not knowingly experienced it.

Perhaps my reason for not encountering anything like these instances is because I work at an HBCU and I probably pull someone over and have the conversation about appropriate language and behavior in an academic environment.

Much of this is of limited applicability for me because I was hired for a diversity position at a school with a largely diverse student body. I know this stuff happens quite a bit in other places, but where I was, the faculty was very progressive

I can't know exactly if any negative behavior toward me has been motivated by racial prejudice. Outwardly, my appearance is racially ambiguous so I never assume that people know I'm not white.

We have only one non-Caucasian librarian and once non-Caucasian library staff member, but I have never observed any kind of special treatment or discrimination based on their race.

I haven't observed or experienced any racism at my job, but a colleague--a sociology professor at this institution--told me that she had her students post informational posters about being a minority in this town (ability to find ethnic foods or beauty products etc.) and these posters got torn down by disgruntled students.

While I'm sure that racism still exists in society, in my experience in academic libraries on the west coast of Canada, I've not observed it or heard about it.

I have heard some of these statements in online discussions, but not by library colleagues and not directed towards me.

I haven't been working here long enough to see any of these; there's a possibility I overlooked some of the less obvious scenarios, though.

I honestly haven't noticed any of these in my workplace, but since I am white, it's possible that I simply haven't caught on to it. Then again, I also work in a very diverse environment.

Belonging to the hegemonic racial group in the US, I've not experienced any dismissal because of my race in my workplace. My perception is that coworkers in my library have not said anything that would indicate another person would experience this in my place of work, and my supervisor, at least, is pretty dedicated to anti-racism work which percolates its way down in terms of expectations for behavior. Obviously, this perspective is affected by my background and probably only holds true for my immediate work team rather than the whole library (and certainly not for the whole university).

We have one Black woman working for us and to my knowledge she has never encountered any of the issues described above while on the job.

"racism is less prevalent" - don't know, really haven't seen much of it where I've worked (10 libraries, mostly northern colleges)

I'm just guessing that there is some racism that occurs in higher education, in and out of libraries, and that it has likely improved over the past 15 years. I only entered the profession four years ago and I have never witnessed overt racism to my knowledge.

I have not personally experienced or heard any of the categories/statements on the previous survey pages. But that doesn't mean it doesn't happen.

I'm sure there is lingering, latent racism but it is not very out in the open.

As a minority, I get the feeling that had any of my colleagues exhibited any negative behaviors based on race, they would have done so away from me or any other minority colleague.

### **Microassaults**

I have experienced some of the most overt mistreatment of my life within my academic library. I've had people standing in front of me telling me I don't belong in higher education, mocking my economic background, telling me I was only hired because of Affirmative Action. I don't mind that they hold these thoughts, I just don't understand why they choose to communicate them so frequently. I think the most painful part is having people I respect minimize these painful (and possibly illegal) comments as the norm, something I must learn to deal with.

I want to share this critical incident that happened less than 5 years ago. I was library director at a private, all-girls' high school. I had a part-time clerk as my assistant; she was an older (mid 60s) white woman who had never been to WalMart (to give you an idea of her socioeconomic outlook). One day I came out my office and was complaining about arthritis in my knees. To which the clerk said, "Your people are supposed to be walking on all fours anyway." Whompwhomp! I just feel as though - whoever is doing this study - y'all should know this actually happened, Spring 2007. You might not feel it fits with the "academic librarian" focus of this study, but if you can use it - by all means, please do so.

Last semester, a librarian colleague warned me about "Mexican Nationals" stealing books from the library on a particular day. I asked him how he knew the ethnicity of that person and he responded-"he looked like that". This colleague is a product of living only in [this state] and then going to an online program for his MILS. He has worked at the same institution for over 15 years-since he was a student. This lack of diversity is very evident to me as [someone from a different state] and as a person of color.

I feel that other minorities on campus & in the library have experienced more signs of racism than me. Lately, I have heard anti-Latino sentiments.

My male colleagues have insulted other male colleagues of another ethnicity by saying "strong back, weak mind," which is racist.

I made a slide show of students and was told to narrow my focus and that photos of African Americans should be limited to February Black History month.

I formerly worked at a HBCU. I was routinely discriminated against by black librarians and my opinions discounted. Talk about reverse discrimination. I was told they should have hired a black librarian rather than me.

### **Microinsults**

**Definition:** "Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color." (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

These questions assume that I may have been viewed as inferior or uneducated due to my race. But what about the opposite? I have had people assume I am smarter or extremely intelligent because I belong to a race that is traditionally viewed as hard working and intelligent. I still found this to be very racist.

Besides being a Black woman, I think the way in which my colleague treated me was because I'm a young woman and he was an older White man, so although my education was stellar, he could not bring himself to believe it.

Although a colleague has rarely accused me of being aggressive because of my race--because I sometimes express my annoyance or anger about an issue-it is perceived as "angry" rather than passionate about issues of inequality and/or blatant double & triple standards.

Many of the experiences I encountered would fall under the "microracism" category. Assumptions and inappropriateness was much more subtle and implicit than the above questions would suggest. It was not until I acted "out of character (stereotype)" when I started experiencing workplace hostility.

In regards to "A colleague said that all people in a particular racial group are all the same," while I haven't heard anyone say that exactly, I have heard White colleagues make "positive" stereotypical comments about people of particular racial groups, saying things like, "my son must have a touch of African American in him, he's such a good dancer." The tone is sort of jokey and sort of not.

Most colleagues I have encountered have been wonderful, but there are about 3 (out of hundreds) in my experience that have made some racially insensitive comments or had some assumptions.

Now my supervisor, one of the Dean's, is an African American lady that I respect very much. Other Caucasian's do not give her the respect she deserves, but she also seems a little uncomfortable in her position. She probably hasn't had the mentoring opportunities that I've had.

Many of the negative experiences that I have witnessed around race were in graduate school (at a major institution in the Midwest). There were some direct and explicit forms of discriminatory language used as mentioned above, but much of the micro-aggression appears in what is not said when an issue with a clear racial dimension is raised.

I am Jewish, and while some people do not consider it a race, it is an ethnicity that mainstream society knows little about. Many people here have odd perceptions, beliefs, and reactions toward Jewish people.

### **Comments about being excluded, ostracized, or isolated**

Again I don't interact with "colleagues" because I'm excluded. [white librarian at a predominantly black college]

I don't care to work collaboratively with my colleagues as they don't care to work collaboratively with me. I hate them as much as they hate me.

People naturally gravitate to others who are similar to them and with libraries lacking in diversity the "majority" are never really challenged on these issues. Most of the time people of color come into these organizations and are accepted but only for appearances sake. In order to look benevolent and progressive some academic librarians play like they accept you in order to not appear as being overtly racist, however they don't ask you participate in things that would build collegial relationships.

It's important to remember "racism by omission", i.e. structuring workplace communication and culture so that entire ethnic groups are ignored and forgotten. It's the same sort of racism that permits "a crowd" or "pedestrians" in a film to exclude Asian and South Asian faces.

I think these are situations are a bit too specific for me to answer definitely that I have experienced them. However that is not to say that I have not felt moments of isolation and exclusion because of my race.

have rarely experienced blatant racism as suggested by your research questions. My feeling of exclusion have been more subtle and I cannot honestly state that it was specifically racism or just academic cronyism.

The only people of color that work here are in staff positions, like night supervisor. They are often not invited into meetings where we discuss the circulation desk and policies.

Some of my (Asian immigrant) colleagues are "ignored" because they don't speak up at meetings. It seems that there are two reasons that they don't participate: lack of confidence in their ability to speak English and discomfort with a different communication style. They are "treated differently" and "ignored". In contrast, fluent English speakers of Asian ancestry are not ignored or treated differently. (As far as I can tell: I'm not a member of either group)

Being white in predominately black college -- my colleagues rarely speak to me.

For instance, our new library sign, which has pictures of our students & was published in-house, has only white students pictured, even though our student body is over 15% students of color. I pointed this out to some of my colleagues, and while they understood the issue and admitted it was an oversight ("I just never thought about it," one said.), they did not hurry to make a new sign. So it's both awareness of issues & motivation to make changes that's a challenge.

### **Comments related to recruitment and retention**

I think there needs to be a bigger push for minorities to enter library school and encourage librarianship as a career.

The HR librarian told me that in an attempt to diversify the staff, they tried to select candidates for interviews that had names that sounded like they might be a person of color. They were surprised at

how unsuccessful they were at this tactic. In my experience, attempts at "increasing diversity" are still quite superficial (at least in [my state]).

There are times in my library when administration looks to provide opportunities for minority librarians that are not equally provided for Caucasian librarians because of the need to address diversity issues.

The reason that many African Americans and Latino Librarians leave this profession is because of the constant lack of emotional intelligence that is needed in the work place today. What Whites fail to realize time and time again, is that the "New Black--New Minority--aka Latino" really care or look for validation from them as professionals. Our campuses are diverse within diverse; all African Americans are not conservative, liberal, straight, married, 2.5 children, etc. The same for Latino Librarians. Our campus populations don't feel the connection to the White, Anglo-Saxon anymore.

Academic Libraries are very poor examples of pushing forth Diversity candidates for positions at the administrative level for Minorities. They want a homogenous version of themselves within the administration. They want a "Barak Obama-esque" candidate as AL, UAL, Director of their academic libraries.

I did not expect some of the blatantly disrespectful behavior from educated people and especially from administrators that I report to, in a so-called learning environment in the 21st century. - Because of this I am almost sorry that I entered the profession in academe-- however, I know that I do make a difference in terms of student learning outcomes- and that is what has kept me going.

On a search committee, HR told us specifically to give more consideration to minority candidates because we had too many white people here.

Racism is a major issue in libraries. We've closed it off as a viable career path because it relies on shared cultural values and access to cultural and material capital.

### **Comments that point to issues other than race/racism**

I think class and upbringing have more impact at this point. Having the manners and etiquette ingrained when you are middle class (I'm not, or was not raised so), make more difference in the workplace than anything else, I feel. Still a problem, since race/ethnicity in this country are still an economic barrier.

Sometimes it is unclear if these scenarios are due to race, gender, or generational status.

When we were interviewing candidates for a new position last year, a couple of people on the hiring committee were excited to interview diverse candidates. When the candidates came to campus for the interviews, we realized that by "diverse" they meant male. All interviewed candidates were white.

I know your survey is focused on a fundamentally important issue, racial understanding and tolerance, but if you changed race for gender my answers would be much different.

I feel that gender is a bigger issue at my library. We have some Native American's and a couple of African American's, but the most overt "-ism," in my experience, is sexism. My male colleagues have insulted other male colleagues of another ethnicity by saying "strong back, weak mind," which is racist.

Though the worst interactions tend to be the miscommunications and the lack of cohesion between men and women at my current library.

I have experienced some of these things due to my age, but not race.

I have been informed I was surprisingly articulate despite being a woman, by a male colleague.

diversity for my library is defined more by sex than by race.

I'm a middle-aged white woman - I've never experienced racial bias. Gender? You bet!! And this profession is female dominated.

Gender and size are also intimidating to others.

If you had put gender in place of race then I would have experienced some of the comments that you mention above. But I realize that being White/Caucasian privileges me in many ways.

I have been treated differently because I was not born in the state I work in. I was raised and educated outside this state.

I am more observing sexism and gender bias

The most offensive thing I have heard in my 27 years as a librarian? Last year we were interviewing for a professional position and a candidate, an African-American man in his mid- to late-30s, commented in an open presentation that students related better to him since "he wasn't a middle-aged white woman." Ummm ... not something you want to say when your potential boss and colleagues are middle-aged, white/Hispanic women.

### **Comments about Assumptions, Motivations, Intentions**

It's hard to answer because I'm never exactly sure what people are thinking or what they are meaning when they act a certain way or do a certain thing. It's hard to know what their motivations are- race related or otherwise.

I won't be answering the questions that ask me to comment on other peoples' assumptions. How can I say how many times someone assumed something about me? I recommend you keep the questions that ask about what has been said or done rather than what has been assumed.

Most of the n/a's could not be answered because they ask for knowledge of one else's state of mind.

"Colleague assume that I would not be intelligent because of my race" - How do I know what my colleague assumed? This is another assumption.

### **Comments about the survey**

I'm overweight - not sure how you could have controlled for that in the study.

These statements are all biased towards minorities.

I was not working in libraries or academia 15 years ago (I was still in high school), so my answers for those questions are not valid.

I'm unclear about the category "complained too much about race"--I interpreted this initially as complaining about racism, perhaps because that is my experience. I'm not sure what is meant about complaining about race, though

Your questions are so narrow, using specific word choice, for example, that I'm not sure the "never" responses are really accurate.

The color blind question... I have heard someone say that they are red-green color blind. That question as phrased includes people who are actually color blind.

Without any data, I have no idea on the not answered ones above.

This is very invisible knapsack...

I've read Derald W. Sue's book on Microaggressions in every day life

Thanks for doing this survey.

Again, I'm White and therefore not a target of this survey apparently.

I wasn't involved with librarianship or higher education 15 years ago, so I'm not sure I can answer those questions.

Thanks for doing this important research.

I am white, so I answered from that perspective.

I can't imagine anyone of any ethnicity encountering these statements "frequently" they are too extreme.

Though I checked off 2 races in the first part of the survey, I really only identify with one race (a non-white minority). This could really affect your study if not accounted for.

I answered this as if "colleagues" were not only librarians in my library/branch but also librarians I worked with, or collaborated with in professional organizations. (National, statewide & local, part of larger university system.)

### **Additional/Uncategorized Comments**

I noticed here in [my state] there has been no library school in this state or most neighboring states. I find that many [people from this state] are going to online programs and working in-state, often where they are working as paraprofessionals. This is not a good practice as the same stereotypes and practices are then followed. It is always good to have outside blood and have a different outlook on the profession.



At my institution we are considering offering cultural sensitivity training.

Just taking this survey as a white person highlights my own privilege because I am sure that some of these comments and micro-aggressions are directed towards people of color in academic libraries. Most of the questions I have to say never, but I have heard comments that reflect an ideology of colorblindness in the workplace. It is not always explicit, but sometimes it is about what people do not say in public forums and what librarians do not openly recognize.

As a librarian with a background in multicultural education, I often work to make the library more open to different cultures which runs counter to the environment of this library, which prompts other librarians to make comments that I think about race too much, etc.

The only uncomfortable racial interaction I had was with an African-American colleague. I was asking her opinion on an unsuccessful student interaction I had had (it was my first month on the job and she's been at this institution for 5 years). I mentioned the student had said she was interested in Black History. My colleague accused me, in very venomous tones, that I was asking her these questions because she was black. I felt incredibly uncomfortable and it was obvious that she has issues with her race.

I am surprised you didn't include questions about colleagues/patrons who were the same race as you assuming they could express opinions/generalizations about others of different races based on your shared heritage. Speaking as a white person this happens a lot.

People are insufficiently socialized to abrogate their racist culture

I am glad this survey is being done and hope that it results in further dialogue. As a white person I often feel as though I have no right to bring the issue up, but I do care about how I am coming across with and treating my colleagues of different ethnicities. I'm sure there's a lot I have never experienced, but would like the opportunity to try and empathize and better understand. I don't want race to be an issue, but to the extent that it is for those who experience discrimination I would like it to be addressed more openly and of course, with compassion & civility between all involved.

The topic of race is pretty much avoided altogether at my place of employment, which I think is too bad. I mean, I'm certainly glad no one is overtly racist, but I wish that more could be done to make things better. I don't think avoiding the topic completely is enough.

Again, I am glad to see this issue being addressed. Although I am white, I am interested in seeing and participating in more dialogue about this.

We (library staff) are homogenous in my library in terms of race (all white). I suspect that my colleagues simply don't think about things in terms of race very much. I am the white mother of black children, so I am much more likely to view things through the lens of race than others in my workplace. [...] My position has also occasionally made me the "go to" person for diversity (like being asked to recruit students of color for a promotional video). While I am happy to help my colleagues become more aware of diversity issues, as I continue to do myself, I am wary of diversity being seen as something white people don't need to address. This is a big hurdle to overcome, to help all of our colleagues see the value of diversity, not just those who are racial minorities. I suspect I have many years of teachable moments ahead. Thank you for your research & I hope it can help the profession better understand

challenges faced by librarians of color. (I also hope we can recruit a much more diverse workforce to the profession, too - I'll start with my kids.) :)

I have had some experience with a colleague who would pull the "race card" when things didn't go her way (even though most of us thought she was being treated completely fairly), and it was something that other colleagues would comment on (in confidence).

I responded to this as asked- about my workplace(s). If these questions had included librarianship as a whole (especially librarians I've met at library conferences) there would have been more "oftens."

I have been treated differently because I was not born in the state I work in. I was raised and educated outside this state.

I haven't really encountered any workplace discussions of race.

If you have to state that there is no difference between the two of you, then maybe there is. Just saying.

I am currently employed as part of a Title III grant at an HBCU, and I am white. While no one has ever commented on my race, black co-workers, especially the student workers, have commented on some poor management and communication practices, saying "That's what you can expect at HBCUs." When I told them I had seen similar practices at majority-white institutions that I had previously worked at or attended, and suggested that the problems may just be with poor schools (as in not rich), they didn't really have a response. Not that I really wanted one, I just wanted to point out that there are socio-economic factors that affect everyone. I have discussed these lowered expectations with other colleagues, though, as we try to change them.

It's rare that we have discussions about race at my institution. Comments made tend to be in support of equal treatment/against public figures perceived as racist.

I have only been in my position for a year and a half. Out of this time, I have only experienced one comment which I felt had a slightly racial nuance. It also could have just been my perception.

I am assuming you wanted everyone to fill in the responses honestly. I am a middle aged white woman working at a college with a very mixed race staff and a primarily minority student population, and yes, issues of race do come up, but generally my colleagues here have a very healthy respect for what everyone brings to the table.