# "Race is a social construct and does not exist" What Academic Librarians Have to Say about Racism in the Profession

Racial Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges (often delivered unconsciously) that convey denigrating messages to people of color.

- Microassaults are explicit and most similar to "old-fashioned" racism
- Microinvalidations exclude, negate, or nullify feelings/experiences of a person of color.
- Microinsults convey rudeness and insensitivity (i.e., subtle snubs)

Sue et al., 2007, pp. 271, 274

### **Spring 2012 Survey**

- Online survey largely based on Nadal's Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale
- Distributed via selected ACRL listservs: ILI-L, LES-L, and EBSS-L
- 139 participants (minority & non-minority) completed the survey
- Approximately 130 comments received

### **Selected References**

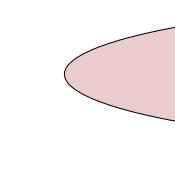
- ◆ Nadal, K. L. (2011). The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58(4), 470-480. doi:10.1037/a0025193
- Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 271-286.

**Contact Information**: Jaena Alabi, jma0019@auburn.edu

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.

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

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

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

Race is a social construct and does not exist.

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 exit, but sometimes it is about what people do not say in public forums and what librarians do not openly recognize.

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 ereotype)" when I started experiencing workplace hostility.

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)

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

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.

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.

> 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.

Belonging to the hegemonic racial group in the US, I've not experienced any dis-

missal because of my race in my workplace. My perception is that coworkers in

perience 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

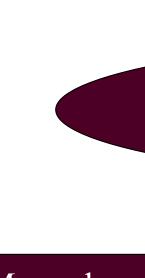
only holds true for my immediate work team rather than the whole library (and

my library have not said anything that would indicate another person would ex-

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

I want to share this critical incident [...] 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." Whomp whomp! I just feel as though - whoever is doing this study - y'all should know this actually happened, Spring 2007.

Microassaults



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

Last semester, a librarian colleague warned me about "Mexican Nationals" steal-

ing books from the library on a particular day. I asked him how how he knew the

a product of living only in [this state] and then going to an online program for his

dent. This lack of diversity is very evident to me as [someone from a different

MILS. He has worked at the same institution for over 15 years-since he was a stu-

ethnicity of that person and he responded-"he looked like that". This colleague is

### **Racism Not Observed**

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.

Microinvalidations

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 interiewing black candidates per se, but of using that as one of multiple factors in deciding whom to talk to.

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 m 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 requently. 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.

Being white in a predominantly black college – my colleagues rarely speak to me.

ertainly not for the whole university).

I think we've become more aware of race, racism, and

("racism is over. why do we need affirmative action?").

discrimination, but that's unfortunately lead to a backlash

It's important to remember "racism by omission", i.e. strucuring 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.

tate] and as a person of color.

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.

Microinsults

I have heard White colleagues make "positive" stereotypical mments 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.

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.

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.

## Jaena Alabi, Auburn University

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.

My answers may be skewed because everyone working in my library, not including student workers, is white.

Since I work at a small private college there are rarely any other librarians of color around therefore race talk rarely if ever comes up in my presence, but it still has a cloud around, since I am the only professional librarian of color at my library.

I have only worked in libraries that are completely staffed by white people, so while no one ever said any of those things to colleagues of different races, have no doubt that had I worked in more diverse vironments, it would have come up

> I have met less than 10 librarians who are not white. It may be because of the institutions and geographical locations in which I work, but there are just very very few librarians who are minorities. I knew one African American in my master's program, and that's it.

### **Environmental Microaggressions**

there is only one non-white librarian at my university (besides me) and he's the dean of the library...

work at a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI), yet I can count on one hand how many Latinos/Latinas are in administrative positions/leadership positions. There are NO Latinos/Latinas (or any person of color) in leadership roles in our library!

All of the librarians at my college are white.

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

There are times in my library when admin ration looks to provide opportunities for nority librarians that are not equally provided for Caucasian librarians because of

the need to address diversity issues.

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]).

### **Additional/Uncategorized Comments**

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 vould build collegial relationships.

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 ing himself to believe it.

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 Working as a librarian in a college setting has its challenges because the people who have the power of influence on issues of said she was interested in Black History. My colleague accused me, in very venomous diversity see this as not worth the effort. [...] I don't care to work collaboratively with my colleagues as they don't care to tones, that I was asking her these questions because she was black. I felt incredibly uncomwork collaboratively with me. I hate them as much as they hate me; what I find amusing is the fact that they think their fortable and it was obvious that she has issues with her race. "passive-aggressive-subversive behavior" holds any weight with me any longer. Its sad to watch the "old guard" of backward thinking librarians wither away from my institution and see newer white librarians seeing them as not being relevant in our "new economy." Diversity, therefore, does work.

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.

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.

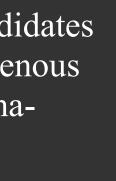
I am glad this survey is being done and hope that it results in further dialogue. As a white person I often feel as though I have no right to bring the issue up, but I do care about how I am coming across with and treating my colleagues of different ethnicities. I'm sure there's a lot I have never experienced, but would like the opportunity to try and npathize 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 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 liverse; 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.

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 naterial capital.

think there needs to be a bigger push for minorities to enter library school an courage librarianship as a career.

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



#### **Connections to Recruitment/Retention**

Racism-although sometimes covert---has been a topic of discussion among many of my colleagues as "librarians of color." I did not expect some of the blatantly disrespectful behavior from educated people and especially from administrators that I report to, in a socalled 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 butcomes- and that is what has kept me going.

I am surprised you didn't include questions about olleagues/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.

have had some experience with a colleague who vould 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).

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

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.