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“This Actually Happened”:

An Analysis of Librarians’ Responses to a Survey about Racial Microaggressions

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Abstract:

Racial microaggressions are subtle, derogatory messages conveyed to people of color. While often delivered unconsciously, these persistent and pervasive negative messages can have devastating effects on individuals and organizations. In an effort to investigate academic librarians’ experiences and observations of racial microaggressions, a survey was sent to three ACRL listservs in the spring of 2011. In a preliminary analysis of the 129 comments left by survey participants, seven themes were identified: microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, environmental microaggressions, uncertainty or racism not observed, being excluded or isolated, and implications for recruitment and retention.

Keywords: racism, racial microaggressions, academic libraries, diversity

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The topic of racial microaggressions—subtle, derogatory messages conveyed to people of color—has received increasing attention in the education and psychology literatures over the past decade and a half. A number of studies have investigated the experiences of minority students and faculty and report that both groups experience a variety of racial microaggressions on college campuses. It is reasonable to assume that if students and faculty of color encounter racial microaggressions, academic librarians of color do as well, even though the term racial microaggressions is just starting to appear in LIS conference presentations and poster sessions. Existing research on racial microaggressions shows that they can lead to a number of negative outcomes, including an unwelcoming organizational environment, decreased productivity of employees, and in some cases increases in turnover. With the increasing attention and resources being directed toward recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce of librarians, it is important for library leaders and managers to understand the role racial microaggressions may play in undercutting their organizations’ existing diversity efforts.

In an effort to highlight racial microaggressions being experienced by librarians, this paper presents a preliminary analysis of comments received on a survey of academic librarians conducted in the spring of 2011. It is an expansion of an earlier analysis presented as a poster session at the 2014 American Library Association Annual Convention.

Literature Review

Chester Pierce, a Harvard professor of education and psychiatry, coined the term *microaggression* in the 1970s to describe “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, &

Wills, 1978, p. 66). The authors further state, “The cumulative weight of [microaggressions’] never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions. This accounts for a near inevitable perceptual clash between Blacks and Whites in regard to how a matter is described as well as the emotional charge involved” (p. 66). More recently, education and psychology researchers have used the concept of racial microaggressions as a framework for qualitative investigations into the experiences of people of color. In particular, the research of psychologist Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007) has been influential in recent studies on racial microaggressions.

Sue and colleagues (2007) developed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions because “without an adequate classification or understanding of the dynamics of subtle racism, it will remain invisible and potentially harmful to the well-being, self-esteem, and standard of living of people of color” (p. 272). In addition to specifying and defining three forms of microaggressions—*microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*—Sue and colleagues (2007) identified several themes of messages conveyed through these forms of microaggressions. A *microassault* is “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (p. 274). *Microinsults* are “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color” (p. 274). Themes conveyed through microinsults include ascription of intelligence, second-class status, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, and assumption of criminal status. The third form, *microinvalidations* are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person

of color” (p. 274), and typically convey the following themes: alien in one’s own land, color blindness, myth of meritocracy, and denial of individual racism. Sue and colleagues (2007) also identified environmental microaggressions as a theme, and noted that they can occur in any of the three forms of microaggressions. Sue (2010) gives an example of an environmental microaggression and why it is problematic: “When people of color see an institution or organization that is primarily White [...] the message taken away by people of color and women is quite unmistakable and profound; the chances of doing well at this institution are stacked against them” (p. 26).

Examples of Racial Microaggressions

Research into the experiences of college students of color and minority faculty members shows that they face a number of racial microaggressions in the academy, including having their intelligence/ability questioned, alternating between being invisible and hypervisible, and feeling isolated and excluded because of a campus’s lack of diversity.

Students of color repeatedly report feeling that their professors have low expectations of them (Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010; Tara J. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), while their classmates assume that they were admitted to the university because of affirmative action rather than because of their academic qualifications (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2011). Minority students also described being ignored, excluded, or having their contributions overlooked (McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Torres et al., 2010). When topics of race arise in class, however, students of color are often put on the spot and asked to represent their race (McCabe, 2009; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Additionally, African American male students specifically noted that they routinely experienced increased scrutiny by both campus and local police (McCabe,

2009; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). According to Minikel-Lacocque (2013), being one of very few minorities on campus can also lead college students to feel isolated and unwelcome.

Faculty of color are not exempt from these types of encounters. In particular, they report that their qualifications and authority are often questioned, by both White colleagues and White students (Griffin, Pifer, Humphrey, & Hazelwood, 2011; Pittman, 2012; Sue et al., 2011).

Minority faculty also note that while they are generally ignored by White colleagues and administrators, they are often asked to take on a disproportionate amount of race-related service commitments, such as mentoring minority students and recruiting faculty of color (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Griffin et al., 2011; Pittman, 2012).

Effects of Racial Microaggressions

Experiences such as those mentioned above can lead students and faculty of color to feel out of place and marginalized and can contribute to a hostile campus climate (Constantine et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2011; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Lin, & Rivera, 2009; Tara J. Yosso et al., 2009). When faced with persistent challenges to their intelligence or ability, students and faculty of color can feel the need to constantly prove themselves and to disprove stereotypes about their race (Griffin et al., 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000; Torres et al., 2010). Griffin and colleagues (2011) note that this response can be a form of a resistance, but that it can also have negative consequences—“those who grow weary of the strain associated with resistance in fact may convince themselves that academic success is not really important” (p. 519).

The stress of combating feelings of isolation, anger, frustration, and self-doubt that students and faculty of color experience because of racial microaggressions can be psychologically and emotionally draining (Constantine et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano

et al., 2000; Tara J. Yosso et al., 2009). Decreased academic or professional achievement (i.e., lower grade point averages or lack of progress toward promotion and tenure) can also be a consequence of the energy spent processing and responding to racial microaggressions (Griffin et al., 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000; Tara J. Yosso et al., 2009). Research shows that some students and faculty of color respond to hostile environments caused by racial microaggressions by choosing to move to another institution (Constantine et al., 2008; Rivera et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2011).

Methods

An online survey was created with items based largely on the statements in Nadal's (2011) Racial and Ethnic Microaggression Scale. Additional statements were created based on themes noted in Solórzano and colleagues (2000) and Griffin and colleagues (2011). After a series of demographic questions, the survey was split into three sections. The first section included 20 statements and asked participants to note how frequently they had experienced each stated racial microaggression. The second section contained the same 20 statements, but the wording was changed so that participants were asked to note how frequently they had observed each stated microaggression being directed toward a colleague. The survey's final section asked respondents to note the degree to which they agreed with several statements about the prevalence of racism. After each section of the survey, an open-ended text box asked participants if they wished to comment on any of their responses. For an analysis of responses to the survey questions, please see Alabi (in press).

The survey was distributed via select ACRL listservs (ILI-L, LES-L, and EBSS-L), and academic librarians of all races were invited to participate. The survey was completed by 139 participants of various races/ethnicities. For the purposes of analysis, respondents were divided

into two groups: those who selected only White/Caucasian for their race are classified as “non-minority,” while those who selected any race other than or in addition to White/Caucasian are classified as “minority.” Fifty-five non-minority participants provided 86 comments, while 25 minority participants left 43 comments. A total of 80 participants left 129 comments.

Comments were initially grouped together based on the three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Additional categories were created based on the themes identified in the existing literature on microaggressions: racism not observed by Whites/uncertainty of whether a microaggression occurred; being excluded or isolated; recruitment and retention implications; environmental microaggressions; and, issues other than race/racism. Approximately 20 comments were not easily categorized and were left in an “additional/uncategorized comments” group.

Themes of Comments

Microassaults

Six respondents provide examples of direct or blatant racism that can be categorized as microassaults. One minority respondent noted that she had heard statements against Latinos, such as when “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’.” Another librarian of color stated, “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.” A minority librarian provided this example:

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.

Nonminority survey participants also gave examples of microassaults, such as when a librarian was told “that photos of African Americans should be limited to February Black History month.” Another non-minority librarian noted, “My male colleagues have insulted other male colleagues of another ethnicity by saying ‘strong back, weak mind,’ which is racist.” Additionally, a White librarian who worked at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) “was told they should have hired a black librarian rather than me.”

Microinsults

Five comments from minority respondents and four comments from nonminority participants can be grouped under the heading of microinsults. One minority participant said, “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.” Another participant of color noted, “Most colleagues I have encountered have been wonderful, but there are about three (out of hundreds) in my experience that have made some racially insensitive comments or had some assumptions.” Two participants noted that a colleague had made an assumption about their intelligence or the quality of their education—one person noted that they were assumed to be intelligent “because I belong to a race that is traditionally viewed as hard working and intelligent;” another respondent noted that her colleague “could not bring himself to believe” how well-educated she was. Another respondent said, “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.”

Another respondent who identified as White/Caucasian commented, “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.”

Another non-minority participant suggested that her colleagues do not give their dean, who is an African American, the respect she deserves, while another noted that “much of the micro-aggression appears in what is not said when an issue with a clear racial dimension is raised.”

Another non-minority participant provided the following: “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.”

Microinvalidations

Six comments demonstrate microinvalidations. One comment from a minority participant includes two examples of microinvalidations that are common in the literature—assumptions that people of color have been given unfair advantages and that Latinas/os do not speak English well: “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...’.”

Another participant who identified as White/Caucasian noted, “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.”

One participant who identified as White/Caucasian and “other” made the same comment three times: “Race is a social construct and does not exist.” While race is a social construct, saying it does not exist can be considered an invalidation because it denies the racialized experiences people of color face on a daily basis.

Comments from two non-minority participants also touch on color blindness and the myth of meritocracy. One participant noted, “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.” Another nonminority respondent said, “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.”

Another nonminority participant commented, “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?’).”

Racism Not Observed/Uncertainty of Whether a Microaggression Occurred

Five minority respondents noted that they had not knowingly experienced racism or racial microaggressions. One respondent noted that her “appearance is racially ambiguous so I never assume that people know I’m not white.” Another minority respondent hypothesized, “Perhaps my reason for not encountering anything like these instances is because I work at an HBCU and I [would] probably pull someone over and have the conversation about appropriate language and

behavior in an academic environment.” Another participant suggested, “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.”

Two participants, one minority and one nonminority, suggested that they had not experienced racism because of the environments in which they worked, “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,” and “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.”

Nine other nonminority librarians noted that they had not witnessed racial microaggressions or overt racism directed toward minority library colleagues. One participant, though, did note:

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.

Being Excluded or Isolated

Eight comments from seven participants specifically mentioned being (or seeing colleagues be) excluded or isolated. One minority respondent said, “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.” Another participant of color noted, “I think these are situations [in the survey questions] 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.” Another minority reported, “[I] 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.” Another minority participant explained:

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 appearance’s 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 to participate in things that would build collegial relationships.

A non-minority respondent commented that she had observed certain minority colleagues being ignored:

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).

Another nonminority participant noted that in her library, “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.”

Comments from one nonminority respondent show how she felt excluded in her workplace: “Being white in [a] predominately black college -- my colleagues rarely speak to me” and “Again I don’t interact with ‘colleagues’ because I’m excluded.”

Recruitment and Retention Implications

Eight comments focused on issues related to recruitment and retention. One nonminority respondent said, “I think there needs to be a bigger push for minorities to enter library school and encourage librarianship as a career,” while another White participant detailed how their library had been unsuccessful with its diversity recruitment efforts: “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]).”

A White participant stated, “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 from two minority respondents confirm that racism is an issue within librarianship and that it can affect diversity recruitment and retention:

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[...]. 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.

Environmental Microaggressions

While comments from two nonminority participants noted the diversity of their work environments, 18 respondents commented that their libraries lacked racial/ethnic diversity—all or almost all of the librarians (and sometimes all of the library staff) at their institutions were White.

Issues other than Race/racism

Fourteen respondents left comments that pointed to issues other than race or racism. These issues included gender or sexism, socioeconomic status or class, age or generational status, size, and being from a different state/region of the country.

Discussion and Implications

Comments made by participants of this survey illustrate a broad range of racial microaggressions. In addition to microassaults, which are blatant and obviously racially-bound/motivated, minority and non-minority respondents also noted more subtle examples of racism in the forms of microinsults and microinvalidations.

The microassaults described by participants may be shocking to some readers as such explicit racism is generally considered inappropriate. As one participant noted, though, librarians of color may, unfortunately, be less surprised by such incidents. As troubling as these examples are, however, Sue and colleagues (2007) suggest that the overtness of microassaults may actually

make them easier to identify and respond to than either microinsults or microinvalidations, which are much more subtle.

Comments from some minority participants illustrate a tricky issue about microinvalidations and microinsults—it is hard to know if something has occurred because of one’s race because there can often be some other explanation for an encounter (Sue et al., 2007). Indeed, the notion of questioning—of asking, “Did this happen? Was it because of my race?”—is commonly reported in the literature on racial microaggressions (Kevin Leo Nadal, 2011; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; T. J. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009).

Many nonminority participants commented that they had not seen any instances of racism in their libraries. While it may be possible that these librarians work in organizations where racism is not tolerated or does not exist, it may be more likely that these respondents are not sensitized to issues of racism. As Sue (2005) notes, racism is more common and pervasive than we may want to believe: “Racism is deeply embedded at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. It acts as an invisible veil making it difficult for well-meaning White people to see how they or their institutions discriminate” (p. 109). This invisibility of racism, and racial microaggressions in particular, makes it difficult to identify and address individual biases and systemic inequities.

The lack of diversity in libraries was one of the most frequent comments from both minority and non-minority participants. The overwhelming Whiteness of librarianship can serve as an environmental microaggression, signaling to people of color that their presence is neither wanted nor welcomed in the profession. Sue (2010) notes that such environmental microaggressions may discourage candidates of color from applying to positions at certain organizations. It is possible, too, that minorities may not consider pursuing an MLIS if they only encounter Whites working as librarians. This may seem to put libraries in a catch-22: How can we recruit more

librarians of color without already having more racial and ethnic minority librarians? However, Sue (2010) suggests two steps organizations can take to address microaggressions and be more inclusive: adopt a multicultural philosophy (rather than a color-blind one) and evaluate performance appraisal systems for bias. A color-blind philosophy can emphasize acculturation and negate employees’ racial identity; a multicultural philosophy, on the other hand, can send a message to current and future employees that differences are acknowledged and the organization benefits from the diversity of its staff. Additionally, Sue (2010) notes that criteria used to assess an employee’s performance may be based on heterosexual, White male norms, which can “prevent certain groups from moving up in an organization” (p. 226).

Conclusion

Comments provided by participants of this survey illustrate that libraries and librarians are not exempt from the biases and prejudices of the larger society in which we operate. The adverse effects of racial microaggressions—negative emotional and psychological reactions, decreased productivity and increased desire to leave an organization—may be hampering our profession’s efforts to recruit, retain, and promote librarians from underrepresented groups. Becoming aware of racial microaggressions and their effects is a first step in creating a more inclusive environment, one in which our diversity efforts may gain more traction.

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