



Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Survey of Minority and Non-minority Librarians

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ABSTRACT

There is relatively little literature on racism within the profession of academic librarianship. To investigate academic librarians' experiences of racism, this research project uses the framework of racial microaggressions, which are subtle, denigrating messages directed toward people of color. According to the results of an online survey, some librarians of color have had racial microaggressions directed at them by their colleagues. Non-minority librarians, however, are unlikely to recognize these disparaging exchanges.

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INTRODUCTION

Diversity has received increased attention in the library and information science literature over the past four decades. The articles, books, and conference papers on diversity in librarianship tend to focus on recurring themes such as depictions of racial/ethnic minorities in children's literature; developing and assessing multicultural collections; designing programming for various user populations; or recruiting, mentoring, and retaining a diverse workforce. There is relatively little in the LIS literature that explicitly addresses racism within the profession, however.

This research project is a preliminary attempt to address this gap. It uses the framework of racial microaggressions, which psychologists Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) define as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group" (p. 273). The project seeks to answer two questions: 1) Are academic librarians of color experiencing racial microaggressions from their library colleagues? 2) Do white academic librarians observe these derogatory exchanges directed at minority colleagues?

LITERATURE REVIEW

RACISM IN LIBRARIES

Racism and racial discrimination are seldom discussed explicitly in the LIS literature, despite the presence of works chronicling the experiences of minority librarians, such as *The Black Librarian in America*

(Josey, 1970), *In Our Own Voices: The Changing Face of Librarianship* (Neely & Abif, 1996) and "Tenure and Promotion Experiences of Academic Librarians of Color" (Damasco & Hodges, 2012).

The few LIS articles that do explicitly address racism discuss several themes that are consistent with the growing literature on racial microaggressions. Smith (1988), Curry (1994), and Preston (1998) all note the pervasiveness of racism in American society. According to Smith (1988), "It is always there. For a person of color, the final question they must ask themselves is, 'Was it my color?'" (p. 39). In addition to acknowledging the persistence of racism, Hall (1988), St. Lifer and Nelson (1997), and Josey (1999) all suggest that racism has become more subtle.

Smith (1988) also touches on another theme—that one's race or ethnicity can influence whether or not one notices racism. This theme was further supported in an article by two *Library Journal* editors, St. Lifer and Nelson (1997), who surveyed white librarians and librarians of color about their perceptions of racism in the profession. St. Lifer and Nelson (1997) concluded that "librarians of color see a major problem; whites do not" (p. 44).

Discussions of racism within the profession are important because as Curry (1994) has suggested, racism in academia can contribute to early burn-out among minority librarians and can make these librarians less effective at recruiting other minorities to the profession. Efforts to diversify the profession are unlikely to be successful if we do not address the persistence and prevalence of racism within academic libraries.

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

The term *microaggression* was coined by Chester Pierce, a professor in Harvard's education and psychiatry departments, to describe the more subtle expressions of racism that were becoming common.

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Pierce (1970) declared that these “offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression*, as opposed to a gross, dramatic obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching” (p. 266). In a subsequent work investigating racism in television commercial, Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez and Wills (1978) further define microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (p. 66). Subsequent research on racism in such work by Delgado and Stefancic (as cited by Solórzano, 1998), noted that victims had “become sensitized to its subtle nuances and code-words—the body language, averted gazes, exasperated looks, terms such as ‘you people,’ ‘innocent whites,’ ‘highly qualified black,’ ‘articulate’ and so on—that, whether intended or not, convey racially charged meanings” (p. 125). This led to an expanded definition of racial microaggressions by Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000): “microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60).

Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) noted that while literature on contemporary racism was abundant, the subtle nature of racial microaggressions made this form of racism “difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify” (p. 272). They further argued that “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). Because of this, Sue and colleagues developed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions, initially identifying three forms of racial microaggressions: *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. A *microassault* is “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the indented victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (p. 274). *Microassaults* tend to be blatant and easier to identify than either *microinsults* or *microinvalidations*. *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). For example, when a white person says to a person of color, “Wow! You’re so articulate,” he may intend this as a compliment. However, the person of color this statement is directed toward may interpret it as a back-handed compliment—the speaker assumed that I would not be well-spoken because people of my race are stereotyped as unintelligent or inarticulate. *Microinvalidations* are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (p. 274). Colorblindness, or professing not to see another’s race, is an example of a *microinvalidation* because it denies the experiential reality of people of color who are treated differently because of their race.

In addition to presenting a classification scheme for racial microaggressions, Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) also note that the subtle nature of microaggressions makes them particularly difficult to defend against. For example, a single microaggression can often be dismissed as a misunderstanding or rationalized with a non-racist explanation, which can make identifying a microaggression challenging. Even when a person of color determines that a microaggression has occurred, she may be trapped in a no-win situation—if she responds, she will expend energy educating someone who may respond defensively; if she does not respond, she may feel anger and guilt at herself or internalize the microaggression. Additionally, the pervasiveness of such subtle, denigrating messages and their cumulative effect has been connected to negative outcomes in a number of qualitative studies. In particular, research on the experiences of students and faculty of color report that being inundated with these negative messages, as well as the energy required to respond to racial microaggressions, leads to minority students and faculty experiencing self-doubt, frustration, isolation, anxiety, anger, and fatigue (Solórzano et al., 2000; Constantine, Smith, Redington & Owens, 2008; Griffin, Pifer, Humphrey & Hazelwood, 2011; Harper et al., 2011; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009;

Pittman, 2012). In addition to these emotional and psychological effects, racial microaggressions can create a negative campus racial climate (Solórzano et al., 2000), can lead to diminished academic performance for students (Yosso et al., 2009), and can have negative consequences for promotion and tenure for faculty (Griffin et al., 2011).

In addition to qualitative studies, several researchers have recently developed quantitative scales to measure the experiences of racial microaggressions. Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, Wallace and Hayes (2011) developed the Inventory of Microaggressions Against Black Individuals (IMABI) to measure African Americans’ experiences of *microinsults* and *microinvalidations*. The Racial Microaggression Scale (RMAS), created by Torres-Harding, Andrade and Romero Diaz (2012), focuses on several themes and categories identified by Sue and colleagues. The Racial and Ethnic Microaggression Scale (REMS) described by Nadal (2011) and also based on previous work by Sue and colleagues, focuses on measuring commonplace, everyday microaggressions that people of color encounter. The REMS contains 45 microaggressive statements that are grouped into six themes or subscales: 1) Assumptions of Inferiority, 2) Second-Class Citizenship and Assumption of Criminality, 3) Microinvalidations, 4) Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity, 5) Environmental Microaggressions, and 6) Workplace and School Microaggressions. Respondents are asked to indicate the number of times that they have experienced each stated microaggression in the past six months, with a 5-point scale: “0 = I did not experience this event in the past six months” and “5 = I experienced this event 5 or more times in the past six months,” (Nadal, 2011, p. 476). According to Nadal (2011), “results through two large samples provided evidence of reliability through satisfactory internal consistency estimates and evidence of validity through correlations with other scales, suggests that the REMS is an adequate measure of racial microaggressions” (p. 477).

METHODOLOGY

This research sought to answer the following questions: 1) Are academic librarians of color experiencing racial microaggressions from their library colleagues? 2) Do white academic librarians observe these derogatory exchanges directed at minority colleagues? Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that minority respondents would be more likely to both experience and observe racial microaggressions. The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference in the responses of minority and non-minority participants.

For this study, an online survey was used to collect data from both minority and non-minority academic librarians. Most of the survey items were adapted from the REMS described in Nadal (2011), with a revised version of at least one item from each of the six REMS subscales represented. The language of each survey item was modified to focus on librarian-to-librarian interactions. Also, since the survey sought to gauge both experiences and observations of microaggressions, the statements adapted from the REMS were used twice—once to ask participants about their experiences, and then again to ask about their observations. So, the REMS statement, “An employer or co-worker treated me differently than White co-workers,” was modified to read “A colleague treated me differently than White colleagues,” for the experience section of the survey, and further revised to “A colleague treated another librarian differently than his or her White peers” for the section of the survey focused on observations. Additional survey items were created based on themes identified by Solórzano et al. (2000) and Griffin et al. (2011). Unlike the REMS, which used a precise 5-point scale, this survey used a 6-point Likert scale with qualitative descriptors: 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Occasionally*, 4 = *Often*, 5 = *Regularly*, and 6 = *Frequently*.

After a series of demographic questions, the survey was segmented into three major sections. In the first section, participants were asked to respond to statements depicting racial microaggressions by noting the frequency with which they had experienced each. This section

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