Valuing our Colleagues, Valuing Diversity: Addressing Microaggressions in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

In the last several years, the term 'microaggression' has become increasingly visible through mainstream news sources and conversations happening in higher education. Microaggressions are subtle insults, whether verbal, nonverbal, or visual, that are expressed towards individuals from marginalized communities, which can be based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, or ability. While these are seemingly insignificant or benign occurrences, the consequences for those on the receiving end range from discomfort to dismay, potentially leading to uncomfortable or hostile environments and feeling unsafe and excluded. In March 2014, the LIS Microaggressions project was created as an online space to begin having these conversations within the library and information science field. The website collects anonymous user-submitted stories about individuals' personal experiences with microaggressions at their institutions. This invited talk addresses the types of microaggressions that happen specifically within academic libraries, including microaggressions among colleagues or towards our users, and how storytelling and sharing experiences can lead to awareness, dialogue, and strategies for building more inclusive and safer environments in academic libraries.

Microaggression is a term we frequently see in the news these days, from mainstream news outlets to those specific to higher education. While microaggression seems to be a buzzword in higher education, the term itself is still not widely understood. The textbook definition of microaggressions are the "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, 2010, pg. 5). In addition, microaggressions can be inadvertently directed toward any marginalized group in society.

However, even with the definition of microaggression, it can still be hard to fully grasp what this term means. Therefore, I want to share my personal experience with microaggressions in my own life. While it is only fairly recently that I discovered the word microaggression, I have consciously experienced various forms of microaggressions from as early as age six. I grew up in Northern California, the daughter of a California-born Mexican-American father and mother from Japan. In school, I would beam with pride as I recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, even more so if the teacher asked me to lead the class in it recitation. And to this day I still get teary-eyed whenever I hear our national anthem. However, despite my strong sense of patriotism, I quickly learned that I lived in and loved a country that would always see me as a foreigner. This manifested in very small transactions. One of the most memorable of these experiences was on picture day in second grade, when the photographer took one look at me and said, "Do you speak English?" My head raced with thoughts, alternating between feelings of anger and frustration to anguish and disbelief. *Of course, I speak English. Why wouldn't I? I was born here.* While this was a seemingly small interaction, this is something that I vividly remember and that I continue to experience to date. I have been told by several individuals in a place of privilege, often who are non-people of color (POC), that this is an overreaction and that the perpetrator did not mean any harm. If you have been so fortunate to never have had your nationality constantly questioned, or any other form of microaggression, it is a terrible, sinking feeling. It lingers. It grows. Sue (2010) details the psychological implications of workplace microaggressions as including feelings of anxiety, paranoia, depression, sleep difficulties, lack of confidence, and loss of drive that can also manifest into physical problems (e.g. high blood pressure, migraine headaches). Another definition of microaggressions from The Microaggressions Project (2010) illustrates these effects:

> this project is a response to "it's not a big deal" - "it" is a big deal. 'it' is in the everyday. 'it' is shoved in your face when you are least expecting it. 'it' happens when you expect it the most. 'it' is a reminder of your difference. "it" enforces difference. "it" can be painful. "it" can be laughed off. "it" can slide unnoticed by either the speaker, listener or both. "it" can silence people. "it" reminds us of the ways in which we and people like us continue to be excluded and oppressed. "it" matters because these relate to a bigger "it": a society where social difference has systematic consequences for the "others."

> but "it" can create or force moments of dialogue.

Finding my way to the library profession has been incredible. I love the work that I do and the people I work with. However, I was surprised to discover that racial microaggressions are prevalent even in institutions of higher education. I found this less surprising when considering the demographics of the library profession's racial and ethnic homogeneity: the results of the most recent ALA Member Demographics Survey shows that the profession remains predominantly white (87.1%) with very small percentages of the membership identifying as Hispanic or Latino (3.9%), Black or African American (4.3%), Asian (3.5%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1.1%), and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (0.3%) (American Library Association, 2014). Alabi (2014) confirms the existence of racial microaggressions in academic libraries, stating that academic librarians of color experience being treated differently than their white peers and are more likely to perceive racial microaggressions than white librarians.

LIS Microaggressions Project

In addition to discovering the word microaggression and having that vocabulary to validate my experience as a woman of color, I have been involved with a number of library diversity programs, including the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Career Enhancement Program and the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups, and a member of associations, such as the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) and REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, in which I have met several incredible colleagues, collaborators, and friends. Through these channels, I developed a network of library professionals who I frequently turn to when I need to validate a microaggressive experience, talk through strategies for dealing with that experience, or simply vent. I realized that these conversations needed to include the greater library profession and be more transparent. Thus, in March 2014, I created the LIS Microaggressions (LISM) project, a website hosted on Tumblr that collects anonymous user-submitted stories about individuals' personal experiences with microaggressions at their institutions, opening up these conversations to the greater library and information science field. This project drew on the successes of student-driven documentation projects, such as I, Too, Am Harvard.

The project has generated over 100 user-submitted entries that tell the personal stories of microaggressions occurring to individuals working in libraries, archives, and other information fields. The use of narrative in the LISM project draws on critical race theory, in which counter-storytelling is used to illustrate and critique experiences of racial oppression and challenge the dominant narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The stories center the marginalized experience and can be used as a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the dominant story and add perspective to the overall discourse (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). This counter-storytelling approach challenges multiple dominant ideologies and is applied to all marginalized groups working in the greater library profession, which is represented by individuals across various

identities and experiences, including race, ethnicity, language, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and socioeconomic background.

Examples of Microaggressions in Academic Libraries

The stories below have been anonymously submitted to and featured on the LISM website.

Hiring practices

> My director has implied to me and the other POC working here that the fact that we are minority hires makes her look good to her colleagues and the rest of the college. So glad we could help you out.

> When a co-worker says "We should hire the best applicant, not one because of diversity," I wonder if s/he realizes that the unspoken framing means that any non-majority hire is somehow *not* the best applicant.

> Assigned to search committees because I'm the only Latina librarian.

> When encouraged to hire students who have federal work study awards (for part-time student positions), a library supervisor responded that they didn't think they would receive any qualified applicants.

Ascribing subject speciality or certain knowledge to librarians of certain groups

> I was asked to create a LibGuide on Holocaust Studies because I was one of the few Jewish librarians at my University….Why do they assume I am the expert on Judaism or Jewish history? I'm secular and my background is Sociology, not History.

> I got assigned all the ethnic studies programs.

> My supervisor pulled me to the side to ask me about how to properly talk about / ask about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). I am a U.S. born citizen, as is my other non-POC co-worker. Why the assumption I just know more about DACA than anyone else?

Professional title

> Earlier this week, I received an email from someone on campus. There was no text in the body of the email, except her signature. In the subject line was a question: "Are you a doctor?" Having recently been awarded my PhD, I've started using my new title,

hesitantly, in my email signature and certain other campus documents. As tempted as I was to respond, I decided not to dignify her "question" with a response. I took the time and energy I could have put into being catty with her and reflected on how American society is obsessed with putting people into boxes. You see, being in certain boxes comes with certain privileges. Obviously, in her mind, there is a limit on how many African American women can be in the "dr" [*sic*] box, so she felt the need to verify my status. Not only that, I'm amazed that she felt entitled to a response. I guess as a person of color, I'm supposed to justify my credentials to the dominate race on demand. Sort of like a slave showing their pass when off the plantation or someone in apartheid-era South Africa presenting their pass. The really sad part about it is that she's probably going to think that I just forgot to respond to her email. Sadly, she can float across campus, never having to be responsible or accountable for thinking and acting this way.

I am an elected university senator at my university and one of two senators elected from the library. I have been attending monthly senate meetings since the beginning of the academic year. At today's senate meeting, I arrived early, registered my name on the sign up [*sic*] sheet for elected senators and proceeded to my seat, as I have done for the 11 months. Upon sitting down, I was approached by the senate's secretary, who told me that "All visitors (non-senator guests) need to sign in here!" I replied, "I AM a senator and I already signed in. Thanks!" I sit in the same area each month, which is within shouting distance of the secretary. I know who he is and frequently see him on campus, although he never recognizes or acknowledges me. I am at a loss for how he could not know who I was or at least be familiar with my face. It was quite clear to me that in his mind, a caramel young woman with an afro puff couldn't possibly hold such a position of power at the university. He apologized, but the damage was done. I sat in the room for the rest of the meeting wondering if others wondered why I was there, too.

Pseudo-Diversity Initiatives

After some ugly anti-LGBT incidents in our community, the library held LGBT ally training.
It was mandatory for all librarians and staff—except for people who opted out due to "personal beliefs."

Right out of library school, I landed an awesome post-MLIS early career fellowship intended to promote diversity in the profession. Less awesome: being tasked with non-librarian work while our interns gained real librarian experience.

Communications

I come out to a trusted co-worker about my gender identity and am told that I will have to

constantly correct her for her to remember to use the right pronouns.

Co-worker asked me 'what are you' (ethnicity/heritage). Didn't expect that from a person who has been vocal about her dislike for being judged by her own physical appearance. Answer: I'm American, from the United States.

Despite the fact that I've been working at my library for four years, one of the staff members in the Circulation Department continues to call me by my Asian American coworker's name. She also gets offended when I don't respond (since it's not my name) or when I correct her.

Microaggressions in Academic Libraries

Strategies for Verbal and Nonverbal Microaggressions

In conversations about microaggressions, we tend to focus on mostly verbal or nonverbal (e.g. body language, more direct physical actions). In June 2015, the LIS Microaggressions Toolkit was created collaboratively by the presenters and attendees of the *"Where Are You Really From?" Dealing with Microaggressions in the Workplace* roundtable discussion at the APALA 35th Anniversary and Symposium. This is a living document and will continue to be edited. Below are some of the strategies and considerations that are included in this document that we can use to be excellent towards each other and model respectful and inclusive behavior at our institutions (LIS Microaggressions, 2015).

Strategies as the Microaggressed:

- Find allies and support groups in your library, on your campus, and/or in online spaces
- Practice self-care
- In the moment:
    - Take a step back and decide how you want to proceed
    - Feign ignorance and ask the person to clarify their words or actions
    - Turn the situation into a teaching moment (only if you are up for it)
- Sample responses:
    - "I don't think that comment was inclusive."
    - "What do you mean by that?"
    - "This makes me uncomfortable."
    - "I'm offended by that."
    - "Can I give you some feedback?"

Strategies as the Bystander:

- Acknowledge power dynamics! In a #critlib Twitter chat on microaggressions, one participant mentioned she nearly lost her internship after she spoke out against microaggressions. Another participant recalled a tenured colleague taking on an incident for a non-tenured librarian. If appropriate, use your privilege to support someone who has been the target of a microaggression.
- Sample responses:
    - "I don't think that comment was inclusive."
    - "What do you mean by that?"
    - "This makes me uncomfortable."
    - "I'm offended by that."
    - "Can I give you some feedback?"

Strategies as the Microaggressor:

- Check yourself: call yourself out and apologize immediately. Or whenever you realize it.
- Acknowledge your biases and be intentional about overcoming them
- Listen and reflect
- Do not fake apologize, e.g. "I'm sorry you were offended", "I'm sorry you feel that way"
- Do not dismiss or ignore
- Research and learn; do not rely on the microaggressed to teach you

Environmental Microaggressions

There is an incredible amount of work to be done in combatting environmental microaggressions. These are the "demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups" (Sue, 2010, pg. 25). These include visual cues, stated philosophies, and the overall campus climate. In academic libraries, there are several areas to consider when addressing environmental microaggressions:

- *Physical library space:* Who can access the library building (e.g. accessibility, hours)?
- *Online library space:* Who can access the library website (e.g. accessibility, internet access, computer access)?
- *Policies*: Does your library's mission reflect a commitment to diversity? Does it have a clear statement on diversity and inclusion?
- *Archives & Special Collections:* Who has access to these materials (e.g. credentials, age, hours, etc.)? Whose stories do your collections tell? Whose stories are under-told or unrepresented?
- *Recruitment, promotion, retention:* Does your library include a diverse administration, faculty, and staff? What measures are taken to hire, promote, and retain individuals from diverse backgrounds?

- *Collections:* Whose stories do your collections tell? Whose stories are under-told or unrepresented? Representation should extend beyond the dominant narrative.
- *Cataloging & metadata:* Who is carrying out the description of objects and collections? Whose narrative dominates our existing classification systems?
- *Users:* Who are the users at your campus? Who are the underserved populations on your campus (e.g. first-generation college students, students of color, working students, parents, active military and veteran students, international students)?
- *Relationship to the campus:* How does the library support programs dedicated to the recruitment, retention, graduation, and overall success of students from marginalized populations? How does the library support diverse curriculum?

On Privilege

Calling out and bringing attention to microaggressions tends to elicit defensive behavior from individuals from privileged groups. While privilege refers to a set of unearned benefits given to people within a certain social group, this does not mean those with privilege did not work hard or do not have to face any obstacles in their lives. However, life is more difficult for those living without that privilege (Ferguson, 2014). Through the LISM project I have had to confront my own privilege. While I often write from the perspective of a young woman of color in librarianship, I also have to recognize that I hold inherent privilege as a straight, cisgender, able-bodied person, among other identities. My status as a marginalized woman of color does not negate my privilege in these other identities. I have unknowingly committed microaggressions towards individuals at my campus. However, we are all learning from these incidents in how we can be more respectful and inclusive in our language and our practices.

Looking Forward

Microaggressions represent a shift in discourses and practices of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other oppressive structures to more nuanced, subtle, and indirect ways that continue to quietly communicate oppression. Microaggressions should not be ignored or dismissed, and academic libraries need to acknowledge their existence in order to create strategies to overcome them. While I believe it is safe to say that all college and university libraries would state that they celebrate diversity, how are we demonstrating this in practice? Our words, actions, and inactions also reflect our true commitment to diversity and there are many more conversations and changes to be had.

References

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Appendix 1: Recommended Resources

On the following page you will find a microaggressions and diversity resources mini-zine, which folds into a 6-page resource when printed out to fit a standard letter-size (8½ inch x 11 inch) piece of paper.

LIS Microaggressions Toolkit

http://toolkit.lismicroaggressions.com

The LIS Microaggressions Toolkit was created collaboratively by the presenters and attendees of the "Where Are You Really From?" Dealing with Microaggressions in the Workplace roundtable discussion at the APALA 35th Anniversary & Symposium. This is a living document that will continue to be edited.
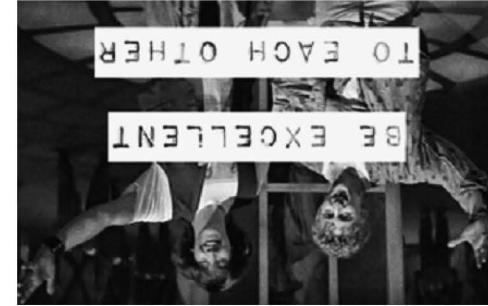

LIS Microaggressions

A space for those working in libraries, archives, and information fields to share their experiences with microaggressions

LISmicroaggressions.com

LIS Microaggressions Zine Project:
lismicroaggressions.tumblr.com/zines

Twitter: @LISmicroaggress

Email: lismicroaggressions@gmail.com

Valuing our Colleagues, Valuing Diversity: Addressing Microaggressions in Academic Libraries

Microaggressions & diversity resources mini-zine

Cynthia Mari Orozco
California Academic & Research Libraries
2016 Conference
March 31-April 2, 2016

BE EXCELLENT TO EACH OTHER

Blogs/Websites

microaggressions.com

"This blog seeks to provide a visual representation of the everyday of 'microaggressions.' Each event, observation and experience posted is not necessarily particularly striking in and of themselves…[T]heir slow accumulation during a childhood and over a lifetime is in part what defines a marginalized experience, making explanation and communication with someone who does not share this identity particularly difficult. Social others are microaggressed hourly, daily, weekly, monthly."

itooamharvard.tumblr.com

"A photo campaign highlighting the faces and voices of black students at Harvard College"

Blogs/Websites

racialicious.tumblr.com - *a blog about the intersection of race and pop culture*

colorlines.com - *magazine with articles concerning race, culture, and organizing*

poczineproject.tumblr.com - *making zines by people of color easy to find, distribute, and share*

everydayfeminism.com - *Learn how to apply feminism to your real life in order to work through issues, stand up for yourself, live your own truth, and take collective action*

disabilityvisibilityproject.com - *Recording disability history, one story at a time.*

Articles

Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Survey of Minority and Non-Minority Librarians – Jaena Alabi (*Journal of Academic Librarianship*)

The Many Faces of Homophobia: Microaggressions and the LGBTQIA+ Community – Maddie McClouskey (*Everyday Feminism*)

How Not To Be 'Manterrupted' in Meetings – Jessica Bennett (*Time*)

6 Ways to Respond to Sexist Microaggressions in Everyday Conversations – Aliya Khan (*Everyday Feminism*)

Books

Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (2010) – Derald Wing Sue

That's So Gay!: Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community (2013) – Kevin L. Nadal

We Should All Be Feminists (2015) – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (1999) – Eli Clare

Men Explain Things to Me (2008) – Rebecca Solnit

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994) – bell hooks