

5-2019

“Don’t Touch My Hair or But You Don’t Seem Gay!/: Microaggressions in the Library Workplace”

Lori Thompson

Marshall University, thompson39@marshall.edu

Lindsey M. Harper

Marshall University, harper166@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/lib_faculty

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Lori and Harper, Lindsey M. “Don’t Touch My Hair or But You Don’t Seem Gay!/: Microaggressions in the Library Workplace.” Keynote address presented at the West Virginia Northern Library Network Annual Meeting, Morgantown, West Virginia, May, 2019.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries and Online Learning at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Librarian Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu, beachgr@marshall.edu.

Don't Touch My Hair or
But You Don't *Seem* Gay!:
Microaggressions in the
Library Workplace

Lori Thompson & Lindsey M. Harper
Marshall University

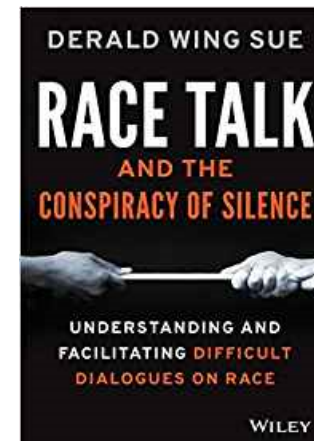
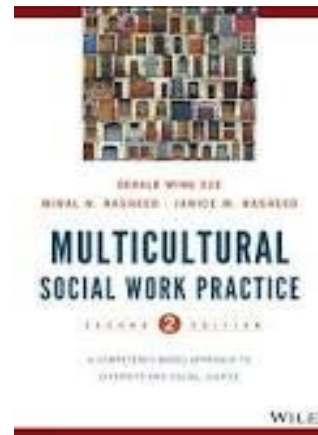
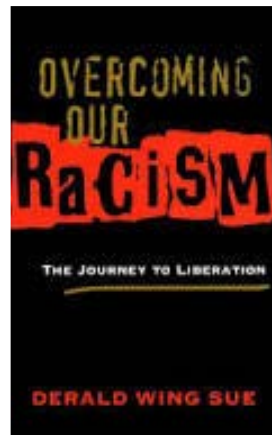
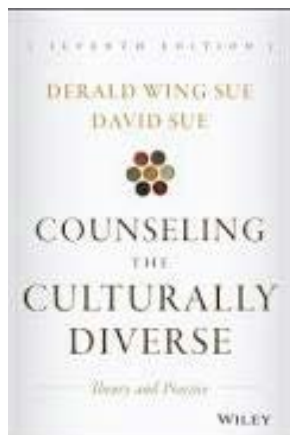
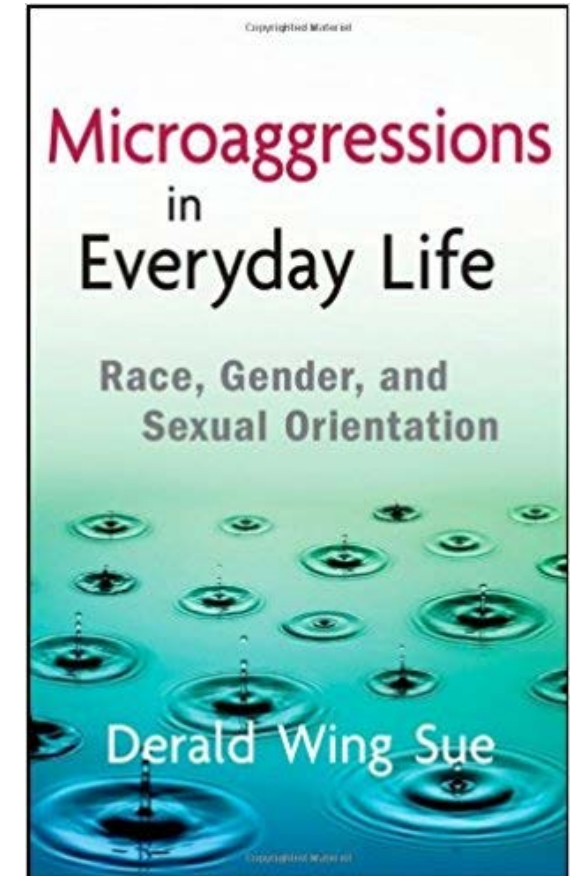
Keynote presented at the West Virginia Northern Library Network Annual Meeting in Morgantown, West Virginia on May 17, 2019

Overview

1. Discuss the history and background of microaggressions, including
 - a. defining relevant social psychological terms
 - b. defining microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations
2. Overall impact microaggressions have on individual on receiving end
3. Microaggressions activity
4. Microaggressions in the LIS Profession.
5. Reactions to experiencing microaggressions
6. How to address microaggressions
 - a. Communication approaches
 - b. What if I've microaggressed?

History and Background: What are Microaggressions?

- Originally coined by Dr. Chester M. Pierce (1970).
- Dr. Derald Wing Sue is today's expert on microaggressions research.
- “Brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to People of Color because they belong to a minority group” AND “subtle snugs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).





Relevant Terms

Stereotype

- What you **think** about groups of people.
- Cognitive-based

Prejudice

- How you **feel** about groups of people.
- Affective-based

Discrimination

- How you **behave** toward groups of people.
- Behaviorally-based

*Implicit Bias

- Relatively unconscious thoughts, feelings, or behaviors about or toward groups of people



Microaggressions also include...

- **Microassaults:** Explicit verbal and nonverbal attacks intended to hurt or offend. “Traditional” hate speech (Sue et al., 2007).
- **Microinsults:** Implicit or covert means to communicate racist or prejudicial beliefs (Sue et al., 2007).
- **Microinvalidations:** Statements that negate someone’s experience(s) as a member belonging to an underrepresented group (Sue et al. 2007).
 - Stop invalidating the experiences of librarians from underrepresented groups; when they talk about an experience with racism or microaggressions in their lives, believe them (Alabi, 2018; Vinopal 2016).

The impact of microaggressions

- Creates feelings of isolation, exhaustion, loneliness, and tokenism.
- Lowers the individual's work productivity and problem solving skills.
- Undermines and questions the individual's qualifications & credentials.
- Commits individual to excess service on many diversity-related initiatives.
- Results in feeling ignored, unappreciated, overworked, and devalued.
- Excludes individual from professional development opportunities (i.e. team teaching, grant writing, research projects, conferences, etc.).
- Subjects individuals to biased annual reviews, which effects contract renewal, promotion or tenure, merit pay, and teaching awards.
- Produces physical and mental health problems.
- Creates an unwelcome, hostile, and invalidating climate which is alienating, polarizing, and risky.



Who is affected by microaggressions?

- Early research primarily examined microaggressions as it pertains to race and ethnicity, but recent research examines this concept in groups and individuals with singular and intersectional identities, including: race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, gender (and gender identity), SES, age, sexual orientation, religion, & educational attainment (Nadal, 2015).

What does the research tell us?

- Nadal et. al. (2015) (not library specific)
 - Qualitative study found seven themes related to intersectionality (intersections of identity including race/gender/sexual orientation/religion)
 - Examples include:
 - biased compliments on appearance, “You are very pretty for a dark skinned girl”
 - gender-based stereotypes for Lesbians and Gay Men, being surprised when a Gay Man is athletic
 - assumption of inferiority of people of color, assuming that an African-American is attending school on a sports scholarship
 - assumption that Muslim women are wearing a hijab because they are forced to rather than as a personal choice
 - assumption that people belonging to a race or ethnic group can speak for all members of their race

Examples of Microaggressions

“Where are you *really* from?”

“You don’t *sound like* you’re from West Virginia.”

“When I look at you, I don’t really see color.”

“Your name is too hard to pronounce. Can I call you Mary?”

“You’re so well spoken.”

“You’re too pretty to be gay.”

“You play good for a girl.”

“Your hair is so cool! Can I touch it?”

“You’re not like *those* people.”

“Hey, you’re Latinx. What’s the Latinx perspective about this?”

Microaggression Activity - Match Statement to Possible Interpretation

Statements
“You are a credit to your race.”
“Don’t be a sissy.”
“You speak English very well.”
“You don’t even seem gay.”
“You can succeed if you try hard enough.”
“I don’t see color.”
“Where are you really from?”
“The only race is the human race.”

Possible Interpretations
You don’t fit the stereotypes of your group.
You are not American.
You are lazy.
Your experiences as a minority are no different from anyone else.
People of your background are unintelligent.
Everyone from your group acts the same.
Feminine traits are undesirable.
Your experiences as a minority are invalid.

What does the research tell us?

Microaggressions in libraries (selected sources)

- Alabi (2014)
 - Lack of research on racism in the profession
 - Minority respondents reported experiencing and observing microaggressions at a higher rate than their white peers
- Alabi (2015)
 - Librarians responding to survey experienced a broad range of racial microaggressions
 - Often ask: “Did that really happen?” “Was it because of my race?”
 - The overwhelming whiteness of librarianship is seen by some as an environmental microaggression

Reactions to the Microaggression

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviors
Did what I think happened really happen? Was this deliberate or unintentional? How should I respond? If I bring it up how do I prove it? Is it worth the effort or should I drop it?	You may feel: Angry Confused Sad Hurt Misunderstood Worried Offended Surprised Scared Or many other emotions	You may: Withdraw Shut down Ignore it Take Action

How to Address Microaggressions -

- What are the risks?
 - Make sure you are safe from physical or emotional abuse
 - Are there consequences for responding?
- Is it worth the time or effort?
 - Is this someone you interact with often?
- What do you want to achieve?
 - Encourage respectful communication
 - Destruct -isms and stereotypes
 - Educate, Empower, Inspire

Interrupting Microaggressions -

What is an interruption?

- Not the concept of talking over someone but the opportunity to have a dialogue by interrupting the thinking, mindset or dominant paradigm.

Provides opportunity to -

- Educate, Empower, Inspire & Deconstruct those -isms

Communication Approach

- Inquire
- Paraphrase/Reflect
- Reframe
- Use impact and “I” statements
- Use preference statements
- Redirect
- Use Strategic Questions
- Revisit

Interrupting Microaggressions

Microaggression	Third Party Intervention Example	Communication Approach
<p>Alien in One's Own Land To Latinx American: "Where are you from?"</p>	<p>"I'm just curious. What makes you ask that?"</p>	<p>Inquire Ask the speaker to elaborate -</p> <p>"Say more about that." "Can you elaborate more about that?"</p>
<p>Color Blindness "I don't believe in race."</p>	<p>"Can you tell me what you do believe in?"</p>	<p>Paraphrase/Reflect Reflecting the essence of what the speaker said. Reduces defensiveness in you and speaker.</p> <p>"So it sounds like you think..." "You're saying...You believe..."</p>
<p>Myth of Meritocracy "Everyone can succeed if they work hard enough."</p>	<p>"So you feel that everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough. Can you give me some examples?"</p>	
<p>Pathologizing Cultural Values Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud?"</p>	<p>"It appears you were uncomfortable when ___ said that. How can we honor all styles of expression?"</p>	

Interrupting Microaggressions

Microaggression	Third Party Intervention Example	Communication Approach
<p>Second-Class Citizen Female colleague frequently interrupted in a meeting</p> <p>Pathologizing Cultural Values To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed you were a scientist?"</p>	<p>"___ brings up a good point. I didn't get a chance to hear all of it. Can ___ repeat it?"</p> <p>"Would you have said this to a white man?"</p>	<p>Reframe Create a different way of looking at situation</p> <p>"What would happen if...." "Could there be another way to look at ..."</p>
<p>Second-Class Citizen Saying: "You people..."</p> <p>Use of Heterosexist language Saying: "That's so gay."</p>	<p>"I was upset by that remark and I shut down and couldn't hear anything else."</p> <p>"I am offended when I hear that statement because it marginalizes an entire group of people that I work with."</p>	<p>Use impact "I" statements Focus on oneself rather than on the person speaking. Avoids blaming and reduces defensiveness</p> <p>"I felt ___ when you said or did ___ and it (describe impact it had)."</p>

Interrupting Microaggressions

Microaggression	Third Party Intervention Example	Communication Approach
<p>Second-Class Citizen A woman who is talked over</p> <p>Making a racist/sexist/homophobic joke.</p>	<p>She responds: “I would like to participate, but I need you to let me finish my thought.”</p> <p>“I didn’t think that was funny. I would like you to stop.”</p>	<p>Use Preference Statements Clearly communicate one’s preferences rather than stating them as demands or having others guess.</p> <p>“What I would like is....” “It would be helpful to me if ...”</p>
<p>Color Blindness “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</p> <p>Myth of Meritocracy “Of course he’ll get tenure, he’s black.”</p>	<p>“So you don’t see color... or So you believe he will get tenure because of his race...”</p> <p>Let’s open this up to see what others think.”</p>	<p>Re-direct Shifts focus to a different person to topic (helpful if someone is asked to speak on behalf of their race)</p> <p>“Let’s shift the conversation...” “Let’s open this question to others...”</p>

Interrupting Microaggressions

Microaggression	Third Party Intervention Example	Communication Approach
<p>Myth of Meritocracy “Gender plays no part in who we hire.”</p> <p>“Of course she’ll get tenure - she’s a minority”</p>	<p>“How might we examine our implicit bias to ensure a fair process?”</p> <p>“How does what you said honor our colleague”</p>	<p>Use Strategic Questions Creates motion and options. Allows for difficult questions to be considered.</p> <p>“What would happen if you considered the impact on....”</p>
<p>Traditional Gender Roles Adviser asking a female student if she is going to have a child now that she is married.</p>	<p>To advisor: “I wanted to go back to the question you asked ____ yesterday about her plans for a family. I’m wondering what made you ask that question and what message it might have sent to her.”</p>	<p>Revisit Even if the moment of microaggression has passed, go back and address it.</p> <p>“I want to go back to something that was brought up in our conversation/class/meeting...”</p>

Reminder -

- What are the risks?
 - Make sure you are safe from physical or emotional abuse
 - Are there consequences for responding?
- Is it worth the time or effort?
 - Is this someone you interact with often?
- What do you want to achieve?
 - Encourage respectful communication
 - Destruct -isms and stereotypes
 - Educate, Empower, Inspire

What if I have microaggressed?

“The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient (Sue, 2005).”

- Try not to be defensive
 - Take stock of your feelings, thoughts and behaviors but remember this is not about your embarrassment
- Recognize your implicit bias
 - Take responsibility for your comment
 - Increase your understanding of your privileges and prejudices
- Acknowledge the others person’s feelings
 - Apologize (avoid but statements such as “I’m sorry you feel that way but...”)
 - If appropriate open respectful communication - be educated, empowered, inspired

References

- Alabi, Jaena. 2018, "From Hostile to Inclusive: Strategies for Improving the Racial Climate of Academic Libraries." *Library Trends* 67 (1): 131-146.
- Alabi, J. (2014). Racial microaggressions in academic libraries: Results of a survey of minority and non-minority librarians. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41, 47-53.
- Alabi, J. (2015). "This Actually Happened": An analysis of librarians' responses to a survey about racial microaggressions. *Journal of Library Administration*, 55(3), 179-1991.
- Berk, R. A. (2017a). Microaggressions trilogy: Part 1. Why Do Microaggressions Matter?. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 31(1), 63.
- Berk, R. A. (2017b). Microaggressions trilogy: Part 2. Microaggressions in the academic workplace. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 31(2), 69.
- Clay, R.A. (2017). Did you really just say that?: Here's advice on how to confront microaggressions, whether you're a target, bystander or perpetrator. *Monitor on Psychology*, 48(1), 46. Retrieved on April 04, 2018 from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/01/microaggressions.aspx>.
- Fiske, S. T. (1998). Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 357–411). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

References Continued

- Johnson, K. (2017). Minority Librarians in Higher Education: A Critical Race Theory Analysis. Retrieved April 04, 2018 from <http://mds.marshall.edu/etd/1019/>
- Luka, V. & Eck, S. (2016). Spotting and Addressing Microaggressions. Retrieved on April 02, 2018 from <https://www.pdx.edu/diversity/sites/www.pdx.edu.diversity/files/Spotting%20and%20Addressing%20Microaggressions%20Workshop.pdf>.
- Mayes, T. R. (2016). Recognizing and Addressing Microaggressions. Retrieved on April 02, 2018 from <https://vpge.stanford.edu/resources/recognizing-and-addressing>.
- Nadal, K. L. et. al. (2015). A qualitative approach to intersectional microaggressions: Understanding Influences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2), 147-163..
- Pierce, C. M., Carew, J. V., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Wills, D. (1977). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. *Education and Urban Society*, 10(1), 61-87.
- Sanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2015). Implicit bias. Retrieved on March 30, 2018 from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/>.

References Continued

- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*, 271-286.
- Vinopal, Jennifer. 2016. "The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. Retrieved from <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>
- University of California Santa Cruz Academic Affairs (2014). Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions. Retrieved on April 04, 2018 from https://academicaffairs.ucsc.edu/events/documents/Microaggressions_InterruptHO_2014_11_182v5.pdf

Questions?

Please email us!

Lori Thompson: thompson39@marshall.edu

Lindsey M. Harper: harper166@marshall.edu