“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](https://mds.marshall.edu/lib_faculty) 

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](https://mds.marshall.edu/lib_faculty), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](https://mds.marshall.edu/lib_faculty)

Recommended Citation

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.”
- “Your hair is so cool! Can I touch it?”
- “You’re so well spoken.”
- “You don’t sound like you’re from West Virginia.”
- “When I look at you, I don’t really see color.”
- “You’re too pretty to be gay.”
- “You’re not like those people.”
- “Your name is too hard to pronounce. Can I call you Mary?”
- “You play good for a girl.”
- “Hey, you’re Latinx. What’s the Latinx perspective about this?”
Microaggression Activity -
Match Statement to Possible Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Possible Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You are a credit to your race.”</td>
<td>You don’t fit the stereotypes of your group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t be a sissy.”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You speak English very well.”</td>
<td>You are lazy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You don’t even seem gay.”</td>
<td>Your experiences as a minority are no different from anyone else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You can succeed if you try hard enough.”</td>
<td>People of your background are unintelligent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t see color.”</td>
<td>Everyone from your group acts the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Where are you really from?”</td>
<td>Feminine traits are undesirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The only race is the human race.”</td>
<td>Your experiences as a minority are invalid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selections taken from Microaggression Activity http://breakingprejudice.org/teaching/group-activities/microaggression-activity/
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

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

Luka & Eck (2016)
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

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

Examples taken from University California Santa Cruz Academic Affairs (2014)
Interrupting Microaggressions

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

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

Examples taken from University California Santa Cruz Academic Affairs (2014)
## Interrupting Microaggressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Third Party Intervention Example</th>
<th>Communication Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Myth of Meritocracy**                              | “How might we examine our implicit bias to ensure a fair process?”                                | Use Strategic Questions  
Creates motion and options. Allows for difficult questions to be considered.  
“What would happen if you considered the impact on...?” |
| “Gender plays no part in who we hire.”               | “How does what you said honor our colleague”                                                    |                                                                                        |
| “Of course she’ll get tenure - she’s a minority”      |                                                                                                |                                                                                        |
| **Traditional Gender Roles**                         | 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.” | Revisit  
Even if the moment of microagression has passed, go back and address it.  
“I want to go back to something that was brought up in our conversation/class/meeting...” |
| Adviser asking a female student if she is going to have a child now that she is married. |                                                                                                |                                                                                        |

Examples taken from University California Santa Cruz Academic Affairs (2014)
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

Luka & Eck (2016)
What if I have microaggressed?

“\textit{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

References Continued


References Continued


Questions?

Please email us!

Lori Thompson: thompson39@marshall.edu
Lindsey M. Harper: harper166@marshall.edu