

# Management Microaggression in the Workplace

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## Introduction

Most Americans know that, according to employment law, discrimination is “any workplace action such as hiring, firing, demoting, and promoting based on a prejudice of some kind that results in the unfair treatment of employees.” (“Discrimination in the Workplace,” 2016). But few people truly understand how “discrimination” and “a prejudice of some kind” are manifested during daily activity in the workplace. The practice can be subtle, disguised, and hard to recognize.

Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University, demystifies this social phenomenon by naming it “microaggression”—a newly brought-to-light form of discriminatory practice, a hidden mechanism often used to mistreat powerless people like minorities, women, and homosexuals. This hideous practice is pervasive in American society, and very common at the workplace. Professor Sue writes that “microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership,” messages “that demean them on a personal or group level, communicate that they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to a inferior status and treatment” (*Microaggressions and Marginality*, 2010, p. 3).

This practice, unfortunately, is sometimes treated in two extreme ways regarding problems experienced by Chinese workers in the American workplace. At one extreme, some writers claim that discrimination against Chinese workers no longer exists because they have become a model minority fully absorbed in the mainstream and respected by their colleagues and bosses. At the other extreme, it is claimed that any problems experienced by Chinese workers can always be attributed to radical racism. Reality, of course, exists somewhere between these extreme views and often consists of a mix of multiple forms of microaggression, hard to isolate and fully understand. This account will attempt to shed some light on those forms.

Professor Sue’s insightful statements helped put my own experience in a fresh perspective. I came to the realization that the unfair treatment inflicted on me by the repressive administration of the college library where I worked was a clear-cut case of covert microaggression. This awakening spurred me to write this article in order to serve several purposes: to expose the schemes and examine the tactics adopted by managerial perpetrators to abuse employees; to

demonstrate my differing responses to the differing challenges; to describe the psychological impact of confrontation and its aftermath; and to analyze the possible motives of the aggressors. I believe that my analysis may be relevant to other workplaces; if so, it may help other victims and other managers to recognize, deal with, and avoid this pernicious practice. And it can be used as a useful case study for researchers and practitioners in the field to illustrate the diverse manifestations of managerial microaggression.

### **Challenges and Responses**

Workplace discrimination can be expressed in many forms. It can take the form of “old-fashioned,” obvious personal attacks designed to cast out unwanted employees. But it can also be delivered in more subtle ways, by giving workers negative performance reviews and claiming their skill sets don’t match the workplace needs, by assigning them to do undesirable work, by reducing their responsibilities and dismissing them from important workgroups and committees, by promoting new employees at the expense of older workers, letting the younger workers head all committees and new initiatives while ignoring the older workers’ input in planning new projects, and by subjecting workers to unwarranted scrutiny. All these practices send a clear but disguised message that certain employees are unwelcome and unwanted.

The discriminatory treatment I experienced started with blatant verbal assaults that served as a preface to the more disguised forms of microaggression--a distorted performance review followed by alienation, marginalization and intense scrutiny. These techniques eventually pushed me out of the workplace. I use my example to reveal how these tactics operate and how their victims might respond.

#### **Challenge One: Verbal Assault**

Direct personal attacks can be done in different ways: some are blatant and others covert. One blatant practice some managers like to use is to tell the subordinates that their skills are outdated or irrelevant. This happened to me. One day my boss, who I will name Alan X, called me to his office and said, without preamble or explanation, “I couldn’t give you a good performance review this time. Your skill set doesn’t meet our needs any more. You should look for another job.”

I was dumbfounded by this unexpected, unexplained, and threatening remark, which was

in stark contrast with what he had stated in the previous year's review. For example, he had written that "Shaoping is one of the hardest workers I have ever known" and "she is one of the team members with a broad 'blended' skill set that spans both the instructional technology and library sides of the support we provide." Now out of the blue he suddenly changed his compliments to a sharply critical rebuke by orally claiming that my skills were no longer relevant and by telling me to leave. How did I fall from a model worker to a villain in such a short time? Feeling demeaned, insulted, and unwelcome, I was speechless.

Using direct attacks to intimidate and humiliate an employee seems to be a common managerial strategy. Alan's direct verbal assault reminded me of the nasty episode I had experienced in 1986 when China had just opened her door to the Western countries. I was an English teacher at the University of Nationalities in Beijing. Shortly after I married a Fulbright scholar from America I had a bitter confrontation with the President at his office when I asked his permission to apply for my passport, so that I could follow my husband back to the States. With the same intimidating tone that I was to experience years later at my American library, he flung the door wide open and ordered me to resign in dishonor in exchange for my passport.

However, that incident occurred in China, a country full of small-minded bureaucrats and petty tyrannies, when marrying a foreigner was deemed scandalous. The President forced me to leave because of my "disgraceful" marriage to an American, but now I was in America, a democratic country. It was hard to believe that someone was asking me to leave the workplace with an insulting accusation lacking any appropriate explanation.

### **Response: Request for Written Clarification**

As soon as I overcame the shock of the confrontation, I said to my boss firmly, "I would like you to explain in writing what I did wrong this year, and how my skills no longer meet your needs." This was my immediate response to the oral attack, one that others can employ in a similar situation.

### **Challenge Two: Distorted Performance Review**

If the verbal assaults don't push an unwanted employee out the door right away the managers may carry out their intent through the covert forms of microaggression, one method being a bad performance review. As we know, professional performance review is mandated in most

workplaces. It is intended to be a fair, unbiased assessment of an employee's job performance. A good manager often takes the time in a review to congratulate an employee on the aspects of the job that the person has succeeded at; to stress areas that need improvement; and to point out a positive direction for the employee to follow. Afterward, the employee should feel satisfied, energized, and clear-minded about forthcoming expectations.

However, an unscrupulous manager can use the procedure as a handy tool to discredit an unwanted employee by finding all kinds of faults, big or small, real or false. In the worst scenario the manager can even turn white to black, making the targeted employee's work seem futile and achievements nonexistent. Additionally, a bad performance review is often used as a convenient tool to begin the documentation process, building a paper trail as written proof to show that the employee has been at fault in order to justify the ultimate termination of that person.

In my case the blatant verbal attack soon led to a written evaluation about my performance. It focused on three things: discrediting the TEI<sup>1</sup> work I had carried out for several years, blaming me for a poor relationship with the leadership of Digital Services and Collections, and criticizing my "just-in-time" approach in collection development. It maintained a negative critical tone throughout the assessment.

My boss's evaluation was contrary not only to his previous commendations but also to my self-evaluation, my pride in achievements after a year's hard work on an IMLS National Leadership grant. I felt satisfied with the completion of both library work and TEI and digital projects. In fact I believed that I was at the peak of my career after receiving good performance evaluations for many years, especially after winning the grant. Therefore I was devastated and infuriated by the negative review because it was filled with distorted facts and one-sided criticisms. It dawned on me that by giving me the bad evaluation he intended to force me out. But his motive behind this malicious action was a mystery to me, so how to handle it constituted a major challenge—one of the biggest challenges at the workplace since I immigrated to America from China. How does one cope with this kind of assault?

### **Response: Written Rebuttal**

According to general procedure, an employee should sign the performance review docu-

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<sup>1</sup> TEI is a versatile technology tool for digital humanities scholarship. More info can be found at Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). <http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml>. (March 2016).

ments. If the employee disagrees with the evaluation, he/she may submit a written rebuttal to be placed in the personnel record. In the worst scenario he/she can file a complaint to the Department of Human Resources (HR). But many people who receive a negative review simply take the blame and sign the documents to avoid further disputes with the boss. They are afraid that making waves would offend their superiors, who might retaliate by inflicting even more harm.

This happened to my office mate, an older lady with a PhD in science serving as a library liaison to the science departments. In his review of her work our boss asked her to look for another job, blaming her poor communication style. He even put some job ads in her mailbox, urging her to apply. But she was a divorced woman in her late 60s with a sick brother to take care of and a son going through college. She felt that she could not afford to lose her job since it was impossible for her to find another one at her age, so she was willing to accept unwarranted blame and keep her mouth shut.

Should I do as my officemate did--swallow my pride by accepting the insults and blame, or should I stand up to defend my dignity? After consulting a Human Resource staff member about how to respond to an unfair performance review I learned that I had several options: 1. I could accept the evaluation by signing the documents. 2. I could document my disagreements, then leave it in my dossier with HR without making complaints. 3. I could write a rebuttal and bring my grievances to HR, which meant that I would openly challenge my boss for his prejudiced, unfair review.

At that time the atmosphere in the library was permeated by fear and low morale after a couple of older female workers had been fired in the prior two years. So the treatment I received was not isolated. If I didn't want to be fired like those female colleagues I had no choice but to stand up to defend myself. I made up my mind to write a rebuttal and bring my case to the HR; at the same time I wanted to use this occasion to expose the library administrators' mistreatment of older female employees. After all, America has First Amendment protections for freedom of speech and federal laws against discrimination at the workplace. Why should I take abuse?

Nevertheless, there is an art to answering negative performance evaluations. Poorly fashioned answers increase the employee's vulnerability and can hasten his/her eventual dismissal. So here are some important rules I followed in writing a rebuttal: Stick to the facts and avoid using emotive language; address the issues of contention point by point; and provide examples and details to illustrate the points. In addition, always remain professional, so the responses look

more thoughtful and reasonable than the evaluation report that provoked it. A neutral third party examining the rebuttal should conclude that you are knowledgeable, calm, competent, and rational. Following these guidelines I wrote a six-page comment on the review to dispute the three issues my boss raised with concrete evidence, facts, and examples.

First of all, I disputed his claim that “the list of Shaoping’s very commendable advances suggests that what is driving those projects is more related to her commitment to advancing TEI than a robust engagement with the faculty in her liaison departments and their teaching and library research needs.” I defended the TEI initiative at the college by reminding my boss that it was not only *my* “commitment” but rather one initiated by our Dean of Faculty and by the Provost at another small liberal arts college, as proved by emails between the two academic leaders that I happened to keep. I stressed that helping faculty integrate TEI in the classroom is by itself an act “robustly engaging faculty in their teaching and research needs since bring technology into classroom was part of the mission.” I also emphasized that the presentations given by the faculty and myself on TEI projects at several national and regional conferences, together with the IMLS leadership grant I had obtained with colleagues at two other colleges, validated our TEI-related work.

Furthermore, I cited faculty and students’ comments about how working with TEI improved pedagogy. For example, one senior French professor said, “the French department and myself have greatly benefited from our collaboration. Without your guidance, I would not have created these multimedia seminars in TEI/XML.” And a student in her class commented, “Encoding forced us to research the time period and get into text and context. It made us understand the themes and ideas in the text, and realize the connections with other books read in class.”

A junior faculty member in the English department, who published an article about TEI in an innovative journal about technology and pedagogy, wrote this about a completed project: “This will serve as a good document for my department, the college, and the administration to see how valuable TEI can be both in the classroom and in future research.”

I also stated in my rebuttal that besides the evident pedagogical value, exposing the students with cutting-edge technology equipped them with marketable skills. For instance, three tech mentors who supported the TEI projects in a number of courses were later hired, one by a medical journal and the other two by the technology companies, all because of their experience with XML/TEI technology.

To add power to my argument I raised a crucial question: “I am often puzzled by the fact that our accomplishments with the TEI initiative, which have been supported by academic leaders, utilized by faculty members, developed by peer institutions, presented at national and regional conferences, and recognized by the IMLS grant agency, have failed to be accepted by some colleagues.” Those facts and achievements should have demonstrated that they were not the results of my unilateral desire to advance the TEI initiative but rather the fruits of the collaborative efforts of faculty, staff and students at our college and a joint undertaking by several liberal arts colleges. All these individuals and institutions found TEI technology valuable and timely.

Secondly, I refuted the alleged relationship problem with the new manager of the Digital Services and Collections. My boss had criticized me one-sidedly: “it has been hard for Shaoping to trust the new leadership with taking on this large charge, given her own leadership for so long.” I pushed back his unfair criticism with facts and examples. I argued that I whole-heartedly supported the decision to establish the new department within the library to meet the challenge of rapid growth of digital assets; I had tried hard to support the organizational change by providing the new hire with all relevant documentations and introducing her to the digital tools and projects I had managed. Then I used two examples to illustrate how the new manager, not I, was difficult and uncooperative--rejecting my invitation to an IMLS grant meeting to plan the TEI publishing service, and taking away the digital project that I had worked on with a senior professor in Medieval Studies for many years. “We all know that every relationship involves two parties,” I wrote. “I could control only my own interaction in handling relations but not the reaction of the other party.”

The third issue Alan raised in his review was even more bizarre and unreasonable. He allegedly claimed, “Shaoping’s book and materials selection was well behind expected patterns much of the year, suggesting that needs may be going unmet,” but without specifying what the “expected patterns” were and whose “needs” were unmet. I responded with three points concerning selection procedures:

1. My “just-in-time” approach was different from that used by some colleagues, most of whom adopted a “just-in-case” approach in collecting materials, especially books.
2. Department chairs and faculty members supported my approach. Some even asked me not to waste money on selecting books not suitable for their courses, but offered to provide me

with a list of books to purchase. So I worked closely with faculty in those departments in selecting books and other materials to meet their teaching and research needs.

3. I admitted that the only drawback of my approach was that it often took more time to get the selection list ready for purchase since it depended heavily on faculty's availability to respond. However, I stated, "we were able to meet the deadlines of the budget cycle and the end results were fine since we had spent the funds on the most useful materials to support their needs."

Finally I justified my procedure: a competent superior should evaluate his/her subordinate by the usefulness of work and output of productivity, not judge by behavior that supports abstract traditional rules and "patterns." He should be evaluating practical output.

By standing my ground on these three issues I rebutted the evaluation in its entirety but arrived at a positive conclusion: "I appreciate the fact that Alan and I are able to communicate profitably on difficult subjects. Indeed, our discussions on these issues reveal that they might, after all, be NON-issues."

After reading my rebuttal, the HR interim director commented that it was professional, knowledgeable, and well written. Subsequently, to complete the rebuttal process the HR interim director conducted a mediation session between two of us. At the meeting when I asked my boss to specify what kind of work I couldn't do, why he claimed my skill set didn't match the library's needs, and why he asked me to look for another job, he denied making those points, saying that he couldn't remember what he had said. And when I questioned why he had suddenly changed his support for the TEI initiative he was speechless. So I penetrated through all the misleading verbiage to the truth with a single pertinent remark: "You and the library administration just want to push me out."

### **Response: Recruiting Allies for Support**

To make managers admit their misconduct is not an easy job, let alone persuading them to change their behavior and alter antagonisms in a department. Those goals need support from college leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff. For that purpose, I carried out a crusade on campus to expose the library administration's unethical practice. I tried to recruit allies in the college administration and to rally faculty support.

First of all, I brought my case to the attention of several important people on campus.

One of them was the Ombudsperson and the other Dean of Religious Life and Diversity. Since they both were black women, I believed that they were sympathetic to female workers and staff of color. I sent the Ombudsperson a letter listing my grievances, gave the names of the female employees whom the library administration had terminated and those they planned to get rid of, and also listed the strategies used in mistreating older female employees. When I met the Dean she advised me to seek litigation, but I explained to her that I was not fighting for financial gain, only wanted to alert the college leadership about the misconduct of the library administrators. Since the Dean's job function was to assure fairness to every member of the community, I hoped that she would bring my complaints to the president of the college. The Ombudsperson promised me that she would do that.

To rally faculty support, I approached the Chair of the Faculty Advising Committee, with three objectives: first, I wanted to alert the Committee that the library administration intended to dismiss both my officemate and me by giving us poor performance reviews; second, I made it clear that supporting TEI technology in teaching and research was an institutional decision, not my personal commitment; and third, I wanted my inaccurate performance review to be corrected. As the task of the Faculty Advising Committee was to help the library administration run the department, I hoped that they would investigate unethical behavior and reverse or at least modify any alleged offenses.

The Chair of the Committee did present the issue to the library management and questioned the library director about why she wanted two instructional technologists to leave. The director denied that she knew anything about it (a lie.) But to ask two senior staffers to leave was not a small matter; it was hard to believe that my boss didn't discuss such an important matter with the library director. However, I hoped the intervention of the Faculty Advising Committee would at least give the library administrators a warning.

Besides those interviews, I also informed several faculty members of the misconduct, including one in English and another in French who had used the TEI technology in their class projects. I also informed some senior faculty members; they all wanted to help with support letters. One senior professor was a member of the Faculty Advising Committee that year. As the strongest advocate for the TEI technology she forcefully defended the success of the TEI Initiative at meetings with the library management.

My convincing rebuttal and the faculty's strong support forced the library administrators to reverse their position on the issue of TEI. Shortly after the HR interim director's mediation, Alan sent out an email reassuring us, in contradiction to his earlier distorted statements, that he was "fully supportive of the existing and ongoing TEI-related work Shaoping is doing with faculty," "supportive of us doing additional outreach or other presentations on TEI-related projects," and "supportive of additional faculty interest in pedagogical uses of TEI generated through that outreach." Afterwards he even invited me to give a presentation on the TEI initiative at a library department meeting. I naively accepted his offer, hoping to use it as an opportunity to educate the library staff about TEI technology. Little did I know that he was making a two-faced deal. His temporary retreat was merely his strategy to put up a false front for his later retaliation.

### **Challenge Three: Retaliation through Marginalization, Alienation, and Unwarranted Scrutiny**

The federal employment law prohibits retaliation at the workplace; workers can enjoy full access to the protection of the Civil Rights Act so they will not be fearful or feel terrorized. An organization cannot function effectively when employees won't ask questions they should ask, when they won't report things they should report, and when they won't stand up to authority when necessary. Thus the prohibition against retaliation is not just a matter of law; it is not just a fair employment and civil rights issue. Making certain that employees feel empowered to voice their concerns is a test of organizational leadership. However, in reality at many workplaces the management often fails this leadership test.

Since the law prohibits retaliation, any obvious way of taking revenge on an employee could easily be defeated at court. Therefore, oftentimes if a supervisor fails to get rid of an unwanted worker through a bad performance review, especially if the employee fights back, the management may turn to other means of microaggressions to subtly push the person to leave. Three of their tactics include marginalization, alienation, and unwarranted scrutiny. The first strategy is to diminish the employee's work responsibilities or assign him/her to undesirable duties, so as to make the employee feel unimportant, less relevant, and easily replaceable; the second strategy is to isolate the employee from his/her team or the professional activity in which he/she would normally be involved, so as to make the employee feel socially estranged and professionally unsupported; and the third is to make the employee uneasy and insecure while carry-

ing out normal duties. Often the effects of those strategies overlap so the managers may use two or three tactics at one time to reinforce their total negative force.

In my case, the library administration failed the leadership test by launching retaliation through all three techniques. First of all, in order to marginalize me, the new head of Digital Services and Collections notified me that I shouldn't attend the Digital Initiative Committee meetings any more, thus excluding me from innovative digital activities on campus. Secondly, in order to lessen my importance, the staff in my department stopped referring me to the faculty for any potential project in their area of responsibility. As a result, my project work was drying up, my responsibilities were dwindling, and I was sidelined in my department.

To further sideline me, the library administration shrewdly withdrew its support for TEI-related work. For example, when a French lecturer asked me to help develop her translation project with TEI technology my boss bluntly questioned whether she was "not so much interested in the pedagogic applications of TEI" as "in the opportunity to have help publishing the translation in an online journal whatever their format." His dubious attitude not only prevented the faculty person from pursuing her project with the TEI technology but also discouraged other faculty from getting involved with the TEI initiative.

Soon afterwards, an IT staff member, who had often helped me design the XSLT style sheet, withdrew his support, leaving me the solo support person for the TEI initiative. Even worse, when the junior English professor was asked to give a teaching demo to the Board of Trustees Alan asked her not to show her TEI class project, although she insisted on demonstrating it at the meeting despite his deterrence. Then he told the Trustees that the TEI project was not sustainable. On one occasion after another, Alan withdrew his promise for his "full support for the existing and ongoing TEI-related work," revealing his true intent to abolish the TEI initiative and to diminish my position in leading and supporting the undertaking, making me less relevant in the workplace.

Being marginalized at work angered and devastated me since I worked hard in all my professional life, and now for the first time I was being made to feel relatively unimportant. To add salt to the wound, the library administration turned to alienation as their second strategy in retaliation by attempting to sever my tie with the academic department and faculty with whom I had worked for many years.

The most disturbing incident ensued when Alan asked me to consider changing my role as the library liaison to the French department, claiming that my French was not good enough for the position. This was a completely misleading excuse. I took French classes for two years at graduate school and got straight As in all the courses. To my knowledge no one in my department had a better command of French than I did. The truth was that I worked with a senior French professor on several TEI projects, and together we gave a number of presentations at conferences. Naturally she became a strong advocate for the TEI technology on campus. Because of that the library administration came up with this grotesque plan to switch the academic department I served, so as to cut off my faculty contact and support and thus isolate me.

Besides marginalizing employees' responsibilities and alienating them from their most useful contacts, another microaggressive approach adopted by some managers is to closely monitor unwanted employees, putting them under constant scrutiny, making them feel untrustworthy and unreliable. In my case, once the dust settled down after our dispute my boss changed our monthly meeting to biweekly. At each meeting he demanded to know the details of my professional activities: what materials I had purchased, which project I was working on, which faculty members I met and so on, thus intensifying a show of mistrust and suspicion. Even worse, one day he unexpectedly showed up at an English visiting faculty's poetry class when the students were demonstrating their group projects, while I was helping them mark up various imagery words and phrases with XML tags. I got a chilly feeling when he left with a sullen face without making any comments. It was obvious that he was stepping up his efforts in scrutinize my work looking for faults.

The succession of these subtle microaggressions made me keenly aware of the harsh situation I was facing--the library administration was striking back in reprisal. They wanted, first, to exclude me from important committee and high-profile digital activities, withdrawing their support for the TEI initiative and preventing its further development to make me less useful; second, to isolate me by switching my library liaison role in order to cut off faculty involvement; and third, to scrutinize my work extensively to make me feel like an incompetent outcast. They deliberately used those tactics to make me feel irrelevant, alone, and unwelcome so that, they hoped, I would leave voluntarily.

At the same time, I sensed that they were preparing a final strike. Sooner or later, they would find a “legitimate reason” to fire me. The writing was on the wall and the danger was imminent.

### **Response: The Psychological Impact of Retaliation**

I could find no feasible way of successfully combatting these insidious attacks. Should I complain to the HR again? And on what basis should I bring the case? Although it was clear to me that the succession of microaggressions carried out by the library managers was definitely their covert way of retribution, yet those incidents might seem trivial and elusive. If I complained to the HR or college administration they would claim that it was within their managerial rights to make those decisions and then cover their real intentions with a thousand false excuses. As a consequence of their tactics, some people might perceive me as “overly sensitive and paranoid,” making a mountain out of a molehill, discrediting my complaints.

Also, during my last round of protests it appeared that none of the college administrators I had contacted had real power to resolve the issue; they only offered some moral support but little practical help. Moreover, there was no union to bring the issue to since staff employees were not unionized, and the Staff Council wouldn't be of much help either.

As Professor Sue pointed out, “Microaggressions are often ambiguous, filled with double messages, and subtle in their manifestations. The overt message is often at odds with the hidden one.” Therefore, he concluded, this kind of subtle prejudice and discrimination “is insidious, psychologically and physically draining, often not definable, illegal, or open to redress” (*Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, Forward, p. 220). Consequently it was much harder to fight than blatant acts. I felt, as the old Chinese saying put it, that I was forced into a pair of smaller-size shoes, and the only person who could feel the squeeze of the toes was myself, while others wouldn't see anything wrong.

This situation taught me a harsh lesson: a targeted employee may win a battle here and there, but eventually he/she will usually lose the war because of the great power disparity. The library administrators would always have the upper hand over a powerless employee, and thus there was no way for me to win against mean-spirited officials who were supreme tacticians and double-dealers who disguised their real intentions.

This struggle between unequals had serious psychological consequences. I was grossly injured, feeling angry, devalued, and demoralized. I had lost control of my work, my position, and my responsibilities. I learned that this workplace was no longer meant for me. What's more, the negative impact of my experience affected not only my own mental health but also that of my colleagues. The battle I carried out against the library administration silenced some other people, and some even cut off contact with me, afraid of reprisals. At this point I realized that my options were very limited; I appeared to have only two hard choices. I could wait for the inevitable termination or I could quit and leave. To be tread upon like a doormat while awaiting my doom was against my character, so I decided to get ready to leave and started active job-hunting, even though I knew that finding a full-time job at age sixty was next to impossible.

In "Racial Microaggressions Directed at Asian Americans," Annie Lin (2010) writes that the cumulative effects of microaggressions might result in "diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence," because "such microaggressive conflicts are emotionally painful and can lead to distancing and even resignation" (p. 95). My frustrating situation eventually led to a decision to resign from my position in the library, the toughest decision I ever made in my career. But I never regretted taking up the good fight. I prided myself for raising my voice to defend my self-esteem and integrity, for standing up against injustice and unfair treatment.

### **Possible Motives for Microaggression**

The managerial microaggression I experienced in the library opened my eyes to certain harsh realities at the workplace in America, and I still carry pain from that incident. It is hard to believe that a hardworking Chinese immigrant could be victimized at a women's college that embraces the high values of "equality," "diversity," and "inclusion" in a land of democracy. I often wondered why I was singled out as the target person despite the fact that I had worked hard to assist the faculty and students, and accomplished much more than many of my colleagues by serving both as a librarian and an instructional technologist. Why did the library administrators try so hard to discredit the TEI initiative that I carried out for many years despite the fact that we were awarded a leadership grant for that effort?

These questions are difficult to answer because microaggressions often arise from fundamental human needs and drives, and they may operate in a confusing, contradictory mixture of

motives. For example, was my boss guilty of racism or ageism or sexism or classism? Or, most likely, was his dominant motive a blatant desire to advance his status and professional power? To clarify possible answers in my mind and perhaps to benefit others dealing with and trying to understand this kind of problem, I have come up with a number of possibilities for the motives of this particular offender.

### **Motive One: Racism or Classism?**

We can define classism and racism as the assumption that one social or professional class or race is superior to and privileged over another. Nowadays “equality,” “diversity,” and “inclusion” are buzzwords, constantly being promoted at the workplace. Every college works hard to recruit people of color to increase their representation on campus. But when my boss asked me, the only staff member of color in the department, to look for another job he sent me a series of loud and clear messages that conflicted with the high-sounding values the college endorses:

1. “You’re inferior because your skill set is not as good as your white colleagues’ skills.”
2. “You don’t belong here; you are out of place.”
3. “If you continue to stay you will be an outcast.”

These biased messages resonated with Professor Sue’s comments that “racial microaggressions are generally defined as verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual insults directed towards people of color in a subtle, automatic, or unconscious way, often with stunning impact.” (*Overcoming Our Racism*, 2003, p. 10). In my situation, Alan’s blatant verbal assault reminded me of the “old-fashioned” racial epithets “Chinks, go home!” often inflicted upon thousands of Chinese laborers by whites decades ago when they helped build the transcontinental railroads, developed agriculture and manufacture, and worked in the gold mines, making tremendous contributions to American economy. His remarks made me feel discriminated against, inferior, and unwelcome. Although he denied the factual evidence and their negative implications, his prejudiced words were imprinted on my memory. It was hard for me not to believe that his remarks did not carry an undertone of racial bias.

In addition to racial bias, there is very often a bias that favors the person in a higher position. When an incident involving personnel conflict arises at workplace, it can become a test case for the supervisor to be fair to both parties, so that the worker will not be penalized on the basis of his/her lesser status. According to the Legal Dictionary of U.S. Legal Forms, discrimination is

defined as “treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group, class or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit.” (“Discrimination,” 2016). But when Alan blamed me for the relationship problem between me and a manager, the preferential treatment was clearly given to the latter. The preferential treatment that person received was not because of her “individual merit” but rather because of her position, her professional class.

Although we will never know for sure whether my boss’s discriminatory remarks and distorted performance review were racially motivated and the preferential treatment he gave to the manager of the Digital Services and Collections was based on her status, yet intentionally or unintentionally his behavior did reveal a biased attitude towards an employee of color and lesser status. His one-sided criticisms can be viewed as a possible instance of racial or class prejudice.

That possibility is not far-fetched. My experience was not alone among Chinese- Americans. Research reveals the fact that “Asian Americans report significant more workplace discrimination than do their Caucasian counterparts.” (Bell, Harrison, and McLaughlin, 1997) Generally speaking, Chinese Americans, whose number amounts to a large percentage of Asian Americans, are diligent, hardworking, knowledgeable, and experienced. They are no less capable than Caucasian Americans. That’s why they are often regarded as “model minorities” in American society. Using myself as an example, a faculty member praised me highly: “You’ve set a very high-quality model for competence and service at the library, one that will be very difficult for your successors to match.” Nevertheless, even as a model worker I could still be attacked, victimized, and eventually pushed out of the workplace.

Therefore I want to use my example to correct the prevailing false notion that Asian Americans are “model minorities” whose “success demonstrates that they are immune to racial prejudice and discrimination, and thus must experience little or no discrimination” (Lin, 2010, p. 86). We must not overreact, of course, by finding microaggression present whenever a problem arises. But, in fact, Chinese Americans have suffered from racism throughout American history and they continue to face those issues in modern times. Because of invisible discrimination in the mainstream society, many have experienced criticism, harassment, exploitation, and subtle discrimination at the workplace. Usually they have remained silent for fear of losing their jobs, but swallowing injustice and mistreatment has made them unhappy and stressed out. I was one of those victims.

**Motive Two: Sexism or Ageism?**

During the reigns of two successive Library Executive Directors, several female employees were let go, including the head of Technical Services, a female programmer in Administrative Computing, a black woman in Circulation, and a senior Slide Curator in Digital Services and Collections. Therefore it became highly plausible that the library administrators had decided that it was time to get rid of older, more expensive and independent-minded workers, so they could hire younger employees who were much cheaper and easier to manage. Since all of those terminated workers were women, and since all of them were older employees who suddenly started having their work criticized or were told that their skills no longer matched the job, and since none of the younger staff or male workers were affected, those actions showed a clear-cut pattern of gender and age discrimination, or an intersection of both.

After I was pushed out, the oppression of women employees at the library continued. The most illuminating case was the "termination" of Nancy C., the senior Slide Curator, who was forced out after working at the college for thirty-eight years. What happened to her was not microaggressive at all, but rather insulting and abusive. The incident occurred in March 2015 when Alan X (now the new Library Executive Director) and the HR Director went into Nancy 's office, told her she was terminated without notice, gave her a few minutes to gather her personal possessions, took away her employment identification card and her keys, informed her about a severance package, got her signature on a "no negative publicity" statement, and told her to leave at once.

The callous treatment inflicted upon Nancy roused moral outrage among the faculty; consequently about fifty faculty members signed a petition to the president, protesting the mistreatment of an older female employee who had devoted decades of service to the college. Several faculty members confronted Alan directly, questioning him about this unethical conduct.

However, as he did with me, he denied any wrongdoing, even unashamedly claimed that Nancy was treated with "grace and dignity." Afterwards one senior professor commented angrily that "the faculty does not have the power to change the administration, which is acting as administrators always do--to protect its own power and diminish or eliminate any criticism or dissent. These managers are not ashamed of themselves when they are criticized in this way," believing it "a vindication of their management style and their striving for efficiency."

Even worse, when a faculty member took the issue of Nancy's dismissal to the Staff Council, the chair asked him, "why should I be concerned with this?" The group that was supposedly responsible for representing staff interests at the college turned out to blatantly favor the interests of the administration rather than the staff. As we know, in a private college faculty members are under certain protections, especially senior faculty who have tenure. But for a staff employee like Nancy, nobody stood up to protect her interests and job security. She was totally at the mercy of the bosses, defenseless and voiceless. As a result, voices of dissent among the staff were effectively silenced and a culture of fear was perpetuated on campus. Nancy's case proved that the oppression of older female employees at the library had not halted. Gender and age discrimination was sustained.

### **Motive Three: Conformity?**

Besides the possible motives analyzed above there might be a deeper issue related to major changes in the library field. Since the 1990s there has been a trend to merge the library and computer services in small liberal arts colleges. Following that trend my college library undertook several merging cycles: First, the library and technology support services were reorganized and put under the umbrella of the library, and then the reference librarians and the instructional technologists were combined into one unit, renaming it Research and Academic Technology Support.

The mission of our merged department was not only to provide reference services and research assistance but also technology support. The instructional technologists were expected to learn library skills, so that they would be able to provide both library services and technology support to faculty and students. And the expectation for the librarians was, in addition to their traditional role and responsibilities, to learn technology skills.

The merging of the two services might have brought some benefits in providing faculty and students with a one-stop-shop when they sought help in using library resources and technology support, but it also caused many problems. With rapid technology developments in both the fields of library and academic computing, those services needed to expand. But some traditional librarians felt threatened by that expansion, and they had no desire to join the tech revolution. Also, when you combined two groups of people with different cultures, mindsets, and work habits into one unit, you add a layer of complexity, increasing the chances of cultural clashes, per-

sonnel conflicts, and even power struggles. Inevitably, the two forces became more and more divided by a conflict between traditional library attitudes and innovative technology, both competing for resources and staff time.

I was hired in 2003 because I had skills on both sides that I had acquired through working for the library and academic computing at another college: I had a library degree and beat over 200 applicants to get my position. Plunging into the new job wholeheartedly, I worked strenuously on routine library procedures such as reference and collection development, but also on technology projects. I strongly believed that innovation at the core of academic computing would improve library services in the future, as well as helping faculty enhance their teaching and research and aiding them to generate new knowledge. Believing in the virtues of hard work, not only did I accomplish assigned library tasks and a large number of technology projects, but I also became a co-recipient of the IMLS funded National Leadership grant entitled “Publishing TEI Documents for Small Liberal Arts Colleges.”

As a result, however, my forward-looking mindset was at odds with some colleagues more inclined towards traditional library work. My persistence in working on novel projects might have caused resentment, and my strong work ethic and efficiency probably aroused some jealousy among those who preferred a more relaxed style.

Therefore, it was probable that Alan mobilized this resentment, picked me out as a target, and used the TEI initiative as an excuse to invalidate and diminish whatever contributions I had made. His objective was to get rid of a “foreign object” who was not only an “alien” from a different culture (“culturally unfit”), but also an independent person with a work style that didn’t conform to the prevailing practice in a traditional library. He wanted to reinforce conformity with conservative rules and procedures. Sure enough, he did accomplish his goal. Soon after I was gone a traditional librarian was hired to replace me; the TEI initiative vanished; and things returned to the “norm.”

#### **Motive Four: Self-interest?**

Each of the above motives, or a combination of them all, might contribute to the management’s decision to get rid of me, but to discover more about Alan’s personal motive we need to dig deeper into his psyche—his survival instincts as a new manager and his self-interest in advancing his career. Every workplace has its own culture that expresses the standards of a specific

group of people. Alan had worked as a PR person at a large national institute, so he understood the importance of the inner workings of an organization. When he came on board as the new Director of Research and Academic Technology Support in 2009 he sized up the complicated situation within the library and decided to side with the tradition-oriented librarians, who had the majority in the department and formed its dominant culture. As a manager who had no library credentials or experience, he realized that in order to survive in this world he must follow the historical procedures retained by most of our librarians and diminish the role of technology.

He did this by asserting control with an authoritarian management style. He imposed a top-down corporate culture by dividing the staff into two or three smaller groups to create more levels of hierarchy; and he stifled creativity in the department in order to cultivate passivity in the staff. Since many librarians lacked interest, ability, and time to acquire in-depth skills necessary to provide support for advanced technology projects, he limited their tech support to only “large-scale systems,” such as Sakai and Moodle, video conferencing, and some simple software like iMovie for creating video clips. And he hired a conventional librarian whenever an instructional technologist left.

As a result, on the surface our department seemed to maintain all required library services, but actually it became deficient in academic computing services. For example, when the Academic Computing Department at a nearby university organized a technology fair and invited us to join, our department couldn’t participate with any new technology undertakings except for one small TEI class project.

This strategy worked well to benefit Alan himself. His political skill and showmanship helped him win the favors of the college administration. He wasn’t harmed by my case; he also navigated shrewdly through the scandalous case of Nancy’s “termination” and remained unscathed. Each time he could get away with questionable tactics and continue to be favored and promoted because he was aligned with the majority and fit in with the dominant culture. He was handpicked as the interim library director when the previous director left the position, and became the next library executive director soon afterwards.

So Alan’s “success” was not accidental. His mentality and autocratic management style fit into the corporate culture promoted by the college administration because more like-minded people like him were appointed to key positions and more people with a different orientation were let go. One senior staff member observed bitterly, “I don’t know why the College keeps

making these BIG mistakes when it comes to selecting people for major leadership positions. Our college now has, in my estimation, some of the worst people in major leadership positions starting with the President, the Dean of the College, Dean of Faculty, HR Director, etc. Most of us now agree that this college has slipped badly and we are in very bad shape.”

Unfortunately, Alan’s conduct endorsed institutionalized discrimination. When prejudice against women and people of color became systemized, the campus climate became oppressive. “What should be a place of decency, respect, and fairness for women thus becomes a place of fear and exploitation,” a senior faculty member stated indignantly. “And this College’s famous concern for values of ‘equality,’ ‘diversity,’ and ‘inclusivity’ is thus revealed as hypocrisy when it comes to its own employees.” In 2015 about fifty senior faculty members (about one fourth of the full-time faculty) took the “incentive offer” for retirement, demonstrating their indignation toward the college administration and their discontent with the depressing climate.

But Alan’s “success” had indicated that the best stratagem for an ambitious manager to advance his career was to follow the power and eliminate differences with tight control. His strong desire to protect his own interests and to climb the corporate ladder at whatever cost to honest moral principles came to be more and more evident. Anyone who was not deemed to fit in with the dominant culture or advance his ambition was sacrificed to impress his superiors with his “efficient” management style.

### **My Purpose**

In this article I’ve given a brief account of my personal experience with managerial microaggression, I have tried to reveal some of the subtle mechanisms of microaggressive attacks and retaliation, and the psychological impact upon the victim. I’ve also described how I responded to the challenges and analyzed the possible motives of the perpetrators. I have discussed this issue only from the perspective of my own experience, but I’m sure that these tactics and many others are routinely employed by some managers to downgrade and humiliate employees or to get rid of unwelcome workers.

As Professor Sue pertinently commented, “In order to assure the continuance of the oppressor-oppressed relationship, and to keep such injustices hidden, therefore, it is desirable to perpetuate a ‘culture of silence’ among oppressed groups as well as perpetrators” (*Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 2010, p. 112). Therefore I want to raise my voice to challenge this social

phenomenon and to break the “code of silence.” My experience may help to expose the deceptive pretense that prejudice based on race, gender, and age or professional and social class no longer pose a problem at the workplace. My analysis may help to tear off the mask of those self-interested, unscrupulous bosses who call themselves “good, moral and decent human beings... so as to leave themselves guilt-free” (Sue, p. 112). Even though I have left the workplace I refuse to disappear without a voice.

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