

Racial Microaggressions + Racial Microaffirmations Exhibit

CSREA ~ Fall 2014

Racial microaggressions happen when powerful and painful bigotry seeps into small personal interactions. Psychologist and microaggressions expert Derald Wing Sue defines them as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.”

It is important to note what is “micro” about microaggressions and what is not. Microaggressions are micro because they occur between individuals and not institutions or groups—but there is nothing small about the histories, structures, and inequalities that microaggressions conjure up. Microaggressions should be understood as intimate manifestations of destructive macro-level discrimination.

The purpose of airing microaggressions is not to shame the aggressor. Illuminating the work these microaggressions do and the effect they have is, instead, an important part of the transformational and healing process. This exhibit pauses, zooms in, and allows us to take a longer look at painful, lasting and sometimes shocking exchanges that may have initially lasted only seconds. The collection reminds us of the simple but often overlooked reality that all stereotypes take victims; they diminish and degrade actual, complex people.

In a so-called “post racial society” where racial categories are deemed meaningless or even extinct, many whites are oblivious to the effects of their racial assumptions and observations. “Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications,” Sue notes. This does not excuse microaggressions, but rather affirms the need for visual renderings of the damage they do along with a broader, more thoughtful conversation on their causes and consequences.

Microaffirmations, conversely, generate small, intimate exchanges of inclusion or the thoughtful consideration of different racial realities. Professor Mary Rowe defines them in part as “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening.”

Microaffirmations serve as an important reminder that, while many aspects of race are experienced visually and physically, one’s race does not necessarily determine one’s racial consciousness. These affirmations also remind us that anti-racist work does not have to only reject racism—it can also be a proactive and generative replacement that helps build more just spaces and narratives.

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