Racial Microaffirmations as a Response to Microaggressions

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Critical race researchers have theorized and documented the varied ways that racial microaggressions are used to keep those at the racial margins in their place (Pierce, 1970). Racial microaggressions are (1) verbal and/or non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms, (2) layered, based on race and its intersections with other subordinated social identities and, (3) cumulative, taking a psychological and physiological toll on People of Color when experienced over a lifetime (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Naming racial microaggressions disrupts the normalized existence of racism and white supremacy, and recognizes the structural inequities and collective pain they cause (Freire, 1970). Equally important, is theorizing and creating a language for the everyday strategies of affirmation and validation that Communities of Color engage as a response to racial microaggressions. This brief seeks to begin this theorizing.

WHAT ARE RACIAL MICROAFFIRMATIONS?

> Last summer, I sat at a sidewalk café in Italy, and three or four "black" Italians walked casually by…Each spoke to me; rather, each nodded his head slightly or acknowledged me with a glance…It felt so good to be acknowledged by the Afro-Italians who passed my table at the café in Milan…Above all, I enjoy the unselfconscious moments of a *shared cultural intimacy*, when no one else is watching, when no white people are around…And I hope you'll understand why I continue to speak to colored people I pass on the streets [emphasis added].
> Love, Daddy
>
> -Gates, 1995, p. xi.

In the preface of his memoir, "Colored People" Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1995) writes a letter to his daughters responding to their question about why he speaks to other Black people he passes in the street. In the excerpt from his preface, Gates explained the brief exchanges of recognition, what he describes as a "shared cultural intimacy" with other Black people that contributes towards a collective sense of acknowledgement. Indeed, there are many other examples of what Gates describes in his preface. The subtle nods, smiles, embraces, and use of language shared within Communities of Color, in both public and private spheres, that can express acknowledgement, affirm self-worth, and engender support. These interactions are *racial microaffirmations— the often subtle verbal and/or non-verbal strategies (moments of shared cultural intimacy) People of Color*

consciously engage that acknowledge and affirm each other's value, integrity, and shared humanity (Solórzano, Pérez Huber, & Huber-Verjan, in press).

Racial microaffirmations are a response to systemic everyday racism, such as racial microaggressions, in that they provide commonplace strategies to resist the subjugation of Communities of Color within the context of white supremacy. Similar to the ways that racial microaggressions have been theorized, racial microaffirmations are (1) verbal and/or non-verbal affirmations exchanged between People of Color, (2) layered affirmations based on race and its intersections with other subordinated social identities and, (3) cumulative affirmations that have positive psychological and physiological effects when experienced by People of Color over a lifetime.

THEORIZING RACIAL MICROAFFIRMATIONS

Recently, my co-authors and I began to theorize racial microaffirmations (Solórzano, Pérez Huber, & Huber-Verjan, in-press). Although the language of racial microaffirmations is a relatively new term in critical race research, other researchers have examined similar concepts that would support the definition we provide here. Specifically, self-

affirmation theory in psychology has been particularly useful.

In 1988, Claude Steele defined self-affirmation theory as a "self-system that essentially explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves…activated by information that threatens the perceived adequacy or integrity of the self " (p. 262). Steele led a series of psychological experiments that examined the "coping process" used by individuals to maintain their self-integrity when exposed to a threat of their self-adequacy. Steele found that when an individual's self-integrity was challenged, they engaged strategies to reduce the perceived threat and maintain integrity. One of the most prevalent strategies were "self-affirming actions" that validated self-integrity by affirming characteristics important to one's identity. However, Steele concluded that those self-affirming actions did not directly respond to a particular threat, but to one's broader self-concept. Steele's findings suggest that People of Color who engage racial microaffirmations may not be directly responding to the threats imposed by racial microaggressions, but serve as a strategy to maintain self-integrity in other ways.

In more recent work, Sherman and Cohen (2006) extend Steele's self-affirmation theory to examine

how group social identities (i.e. race, class, gender) can be affirmed to cope with threat to self-worth. They explain that individuals will engage in affirmation strategies that reflect "collective aspects of self" (i.e. racial or gender group membership). Further, researchers have found that collective self-affirmations can mitigate negative health outcomes related to stress (such as that caused by racial microaggressions), and can improve academic outcomes for Students of Color (Layous et. al., 2017; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This research shows the potential positive effects of racial microaffirmations in the lives of People of Color.

A MODEL FOR RACIAL MICROAFFIRMATIONS

Similar to models of racial microaggressions, racial microaffirmations can be explored within the dimensions of types, context, and effects (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). The model in Figure 1 can be used to understand racial microaffirmations in the experiences of People of Color, showing three distinct components:

Types: How one experiences a racial microaffirmation. Verbal microaffirmations can be subtle reminders of intelligence, strength, and/or beauty that

challenge dominant stereotypes of one's racial group (i.e. cultural proverbs, *dichos*, or music). Non-verbal racial microaffirmations can be kinesic (i.e. eye-contact, head-nod) or visual (i.e. images in art, books, and film/television).
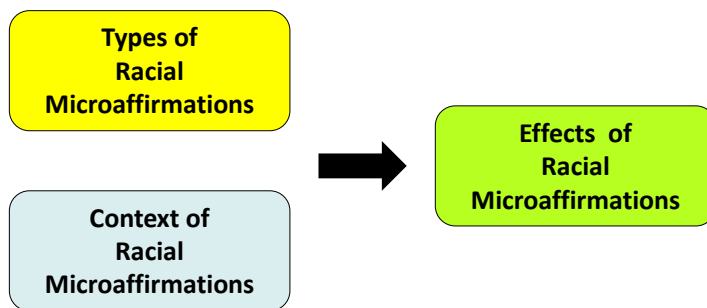
Context: How and where the racial microaffirmation occurs (i.e. street, classroom, meetings).

Effects: The physiological and psychological advantages of racial microaffirmations that may lead to improved health (i.e. decreased stress levels, healing) and/or academic outcomes (i.e. increased sense of belonging, improved GPA).

provides a language for the ways People of Color share in the strength of each other, to affirm and validate individual and collective humanity within the context of racial realism—the endemic permanence of racism in U.S. society (Bell, 1991). Racial microaffirmations acknowledge the resiliency shared within families and communities, made possible through the collective hope for better futures. Future research on racial microaffirmations would empirically explore the multiple strategies utilized by People of Color to affirm each other. Further research would also examine similarities and

specifically. Thus, Gates description prompts other research questions such as, *are there culturally-specific racial microaffirmations used in other Communities of Color?* Thus, Gates description prompts other research questions such as, *are there culturally-specific racial microaffirmations used in other Communities of Color? Can whites also engage in racial microaffirmations with People of Color?* Finally, further research should explore whether the presence of People of Color (within a space, within texts, within history, etc.) serve as a racial microaffirmation. These future research areas would have important implications for Students of Color in education. At the K-12 level for example, educators who understand racial microaffirmations can ensure children's books are incorporated into their classrooms and libraries that affirm the ethnoracial and cultural backgrounds of their students. In higher education, racial microaffirmations could be used to explain why ethnic studies departments play a crucial role in empowering Students of Color. Across the educational pipeline, racial microaffirmations could serve as a powerful tool to enrich and improve the experiences of Communities of Color in schooling institutions.

Figure 1. A model for analyzing racial microaffirmations

WHY RACIAL MICROAFFIRMATIONS?

We are in a historical moment where racism, racist nativism, and white supremacy are on full display, contesting the dignity and humanity of People of Color, everyday, all over the globe.[1] The concept of racial microaffirmation

differences in how microaffirmations are engaged among intragroup and intergroup[2] (between whites and Communities of Color) settings. For example, Gates (1995) racial microaffirmation (provided earlier) is described as one shared within Black communities,

NOTES

[1] See Pérez Huber, L. (2016). Make America great again!: Donald Trump, racist nativism and the virulent adherence to white supremacy amid US demographic change. *Charleston Law Review*, 10, 215-248 and Garza, A. (2015). A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In J. Hobson (Ed.). *Are all the women still white? Rethinking race, expanding feminisms* (pp. 23-28). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, for examples within a U.S. context. See Lombardi-Diop, C., & Romeo, C. (2015). Italy's postcolonial 'question': Views from the southern frontier of Europe. *Postcolonial Studies*, *18*(4), 367–383, for examples within an international context.

[2] Exploring intragroup settings would mean examining how racial microaffirmations are experienced within Communities of Color, within and between ethnoracial groups. Intergroup settings would mean exploring how racial microaffirmations are experienced between People of Color and whites.

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