Racial Microaffirmations:
Learning from Student Stories of Moments that Matter

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Never in my life have I had an African-American teacher in a Science class. My very first time having a Black man teach me biology was this past year. I took this class with Dr. Foster[2] and his class was very different because he was a very different kind of teacher. He's just very personable to me. He makes me feel like I matter… I remember I'd be walking to different classes and I'd see him. Every single time he saw me no matter what I was doing, no matter what he was doing, he would stop and make sure he'd ask, "How are you doing? Have you studied for your exam?" He was truly invested in my well-being as a student and as a person, it wasn't just in his class. He was asking, "Okay, well, how's History? Have you looked into Chemistry lately? Are you going to pick up the minor?" It was things like that ... He was more than just a teacher, he was also kind of a mentor. He motivated me.

1. Introduction[3]

Sophia, an AfroLatina[4] student, told this story when asked to share an experience when she felt affirmed in relation to her racial identity. Stories told by students of experiences in the course of their everyday lives provided foundational data to help us understand the ways racial identities and racialized experiences are tied to microaffirmations and to describe different types of affirmations experienced by students. Drawing on these stories, we define *racial microaffirmations* as behaviors, verbal remarks or environmental cues experienced by individuals from minoritized racial groups in the course of their everyday lives that affirm their racial identities, acknowledge their racialized realities, resist racism or advance cultural and ideological norms of racial justice. Racial

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[2] Names are pseudonyms.

[3] The authors are grateful to James Jones and Maryam Hussain for their insightful suggestions to this brief.

[4] We use the terms students used when asked to describe their race or ethnic identities.

microaffirmations, whether enacted intentionally or unintentionally, have positive impacts when they lead people of color to feel that their inclusion, well-being or success is promoted.

Microaffirmations are important for students because they can offer hope, enable agency or resist racism within campus settings. For faculty, professionals and staff that are part of university settings, racial microaffirmations offer a conceptual tool to understand campus climate in ways that more comprehensively address the impact of race as well as a tool that can be applied to promote racial justice.

2. Conceptualizing Microaffirmations

Our approach to microaffirmations situates them in relationship to microaggressions and within the boarder frameworks of Critical Race/Latinx theories (CRT/LatCrit). This section elaborates on these approaches.

Microaffirmations and Microaggressions in Relation to Campus Climate
Our exploration of the microaffirmation concept is situated in a broader study, "Tell it like it is[5]," focused on everyday ways that race impacts students' experiences within the higher education context. Chester Pierce, a Harvard psychiatrist, coined the term microaggressions in the 1970's to explain the cumulative, racialized, often subtle, putdowns, insults and indignities that black individuals experience in the course of their everyday lives (Pierce, 1970; 1974). The study of microaggressions in university settings is a helpful entry point for understanding how racism manifests itself in the course of students' everyday lives. CRT scholars (Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera & Giraldo; Harper et al., 2011; Harwood, Browne Huntt, Mendenhall & Lewis, 2010; McCabe, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009) applied Pierce's microaggression concept to higher education settings and revealed the nature of microaggressions in university settings and their negative impact on campus racial climate.

We understand campus racial climate through a multidimensional model (Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen & Milen, 1998; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005) that focuses attention on the nature and quality of interactions (behavioral climate) and on perceptions of intergroup relations, racial conflict and institutional responses to diversity (psychological climate)[6]. Microaggressions undermine both behavioral and psychological dimensions of campus climate. Our study explored the nuances of microaggressions in our particular campus. We also wanted our study to capture affirming everyday experiences related to racial identities and wanted to understand their relationship to both microaggressions and campus racial climate. Mary Rowe, developed the concept of microaffirmations because she was interested in understanding how individuals from underrepresented groups succeeded despite all the obstacles they faced. She defined affirmations as "apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed" (2008, p. 46). Our study allowed us to extend Rowe's definition, explore different types of

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[6] The multidimensional model also includes attention to the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, compositional diversity and the organizational and structural dimensions of campuses.

microaffirmations and situate racial microaffirmations within understandings of campus climate grounded in Critical Race/Latinx Theory (CRT/LatCrit).

Critical Race Theory as the Foundation for Racial Microaffirmations
There are several key ideas central to CRT/LatCrit that help explain why racial microaffirmations are needed and that helped us identify and define racial microaffirmations. First, CRT/LatCrit understands race and racism as a foundational element of U.S. society; racism is ingrained and normalized in our structural fabric including in higher education institutions. Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) developed a CRT racial microaggressions model that illustrates how microaggressions reflect institutionalized racism and the race based mindsets and assumptions that support it. This connection to institutional structures, processes and ideologies is important if we are to understand what is racial about both microaggressive and microaffirming experiences. LatCrit is complimentary to CRT and illuminates the ways that ethnicity, language, immigration, citizenship status and other experiences relevant to Latinx populations intersect with and inform raced experiences (Espinoza & Harris, 1997; Valdes, 1998). In our study, LatCrit is helpful in understanding the stories of Latinx students.

CRT/LatCrit scholars also argue that the experiences and perspectives of racially minoritized groups provide distinctive knowledge on race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This knowledge is likely to challenge common ideologies that construct institutions as operating in fair, neutral, objective ways for all racial groups. In terms of racial climate, racially minoritized students report experiences that reveal problematic aspects of campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007) and are less likely than white students to report satisfaction with diversity and racial elements of the campus environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Our study conceptualizes microaffirmations in the foundational elements of CRT/LatCrit outlined above. We situate the need for microaffirmations in the CRT understanding that race and racism continue to powerfully shape mindsets, structures and daily lived experiences. And we ground the development of the racial microaffirmation concept in the experiential knowledge provided by students of color because this knowledge provides a distinctive perspective that disrupts ideas of campus climates as fair, neutral or color-blind spaces. In our definition of racial microaffirmations, we prioritize the perspective of the affirmation recipient. While the context of the affirmation and the motivations of the person enacting the affirmation deserves attention; our goal is to ground our understanding of racial microaffirmations in the experiences of racially minoritized groups. Next, we draw on the study's initial data set to identify and describe the different types of microaffirmations that students experienced. These definitions were produced through careful reading and analysis of the stories shared by undergraduate students from racially minoritized groups.

3. Types of Microaffirmations

Convenience sampling was used to invite students who had studied at least one year at the university, were on campus during the summer of the pilot study and identified as members or

racially minoritized groups underrepresented on our campus.[7] We used an interview protocol to elicit stories of microaggressions and microaffirmations[8] experienced by seventeen students on campus. The 20-45 minute, audio recorded interviews were conducted by research team members trained on qualitative methodology. Interview transcripts were edited to create succinct narratives of each story participants told. We used narrative analysis (Freeman, 2016), because it allowed for a holistic understanding of the situations students described, the sequence of events and the context where they happened. We compared stories looking at both similarities and differences in the experiences that lead students to feel affirmed and in the different ways that they felt affirmed.

We defined *microrecognitions* as actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues (e.g. art work, signage and symbols) that lead the recipient to feel that their presence, identity, experiences as a member of particular race-based [9]social identity group(s) or experiences of the group they belong to are made known, made visible, appreciated or included. In a story called, "Unapologetically Black," Precious, a Black female, described a class where Black artists and Black texts were centered. She retold her experiences learning about Dave the Potter.

> It was the first time I'd ever heard of something like this. He was a former enslaved man who wrote poems on the jugs that he threw. We're talking about a person who was enslaved, but we are talking about a person who displayed amazing resiliency and amazing artistry. I had never thought that a person who was enslaved could be so creative. To really work through those topics, I think that really affirmed my existence at the university. Asking scholarly questions about people who were not necessarily scholars or people who were not necessarily doing what they did to reach a level of fame or even people who were activist in their own sort of way was really cool. I think those are the sorts of things that affirmed my ability to express myself unapologetically as a Black writer, without feeling any sort of reservations.

This story excerpt illustrates how the inclusion of Black artists in the curriculum affirmed Precious as a student, both in terms of her belonging at the university but also her identity as a Black writer. From a CRT perspective, the classroom context disrupted whiteness as a curricular norm.

Students also told stories that we call *microvalidations*, which are actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues that lead the recipient to feel that their thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviors associated with their race-based social identity(ies) or those of a group they belong to are accepted, corroborated, legitimized or given value. Microvalidations acknowledge that a person's identity and lived experiences provide worthy contributions to understanding of phenomena or social reality. Sasha, a Hispanic student, explained her experiences with her Latina sorority in "A Different Kind of Confidence."

> When I joined the sorority, I felt like I belonged somewhere, like I had purpose. I can talk to someone about just anything in my sorority. Literally, I have a Mexican sorority sister up in Pennsylvania and she was telling me about how she feels about Donald Trump and just being able to talk on the cultural side too about immigration things, it's just nice being able

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[7] Students who conducted interviews were members of the McNair Scholars Program, a federal TRIO program designed to prepare students for doctoral studies. They were easily able to recruit students from this programs and from their own personal networks within the Black student community on campus.

[8] We did not assume that all students were familiar with these terms. Rather, the concepts were explained in language more familiar to students.

[9] I use the term race-based to refer to both racial and ethnic identities that may be salient for minoritized groups.

> to have open conversations with people that understand things. The sorority gives me a group of females who support me and then back me up and encourage and are understanding and listen. It makes me feel like everything I've been through, I haven't been through it alone because other people have experienced it too.

In her sorority, Sasha had experiences such as her conversation with a sorority sister that nurtured solidarity and a sense of community. A LatCrit perspective connects issues such as immigration to race-based identities. Microvalidations illustrate the importance of feeling like one's reality is heard, taken seriously and given value as it was in this case for Sasha.

Some actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues lead the recipient to feel that they, as a member of a particular social identity group(s), or the group they belong to are further integrated into the university; or that their capacity for success or some facet of social or academic life is enabled, enhanced or increased. In these *microtransformations*, recipients may describe everyday ways that a process, policy, or initiative is beneficial to them as a member of a particular social identity group.

In "Cohort Connections," Daniel, an African American student, described his participation in a research group which studied prejudice, race and racism from a psychological perspective.

> This [cohort] is where I've had the most exposure to productive intellectual conversations about race. We all have prejudice and here in this research cohort, it was good to learn about that in whole different realm, because you get a platform to teach, to learn, to study it, and I think that's powerful. Being in that cohort is one of the only experiences that I've found where not only personal experiences are shared, but it's facilitated by one of our professors. He could add on, he could intensify our conversation, get us to think more critically about it, poke our buttons, challenge us. To be around that type of honest, open, intellectual conversation, having tons of different opinions, controversial opinions at that, people admitting their prejudices, that strengthened my connection towards a whole bunch of different groups.

In this story, Daniel pointed to ways that the cohort provided something different and transformative because it allowed students the opportunity to share their experiences with prejudice, microaggressions and racism. He described the ways that a professor created an environment where personal experiences could contribute to opportunities for teaching, learning and studying thus enhancing his academic experience. Furthermore, he also explained that his social sense of connection to various groups was enhanced through this experience. From a CRT perspective, the students' experiential raced knowledge was brought into the work of the cohort and this allowed the content of the cohort work to challenge ideologies of neutrality and fairness in the students' lives.

The final type of affirmations we found in our data were *microprotections* which occur when actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues lead the recipient to feel shielded or protected from harmful or derogatory behaviors, practices and policies tied to their identity. In these affirmations, we heard students describe experiences when they were offered support or when others advocated for them when they experienced duress related to their identity. Erin, a Nigerian American student, illustrated a microprotection as she recounted the ways she found comfort and protection following an offensive and racially charged incident on campus.

> There was this big thing on campus with the nooses. People of the Black community, and other people as well, thought White people hung up nooses on trees. [That night] a lot of

people were enraged. A lot of people were out of their rooms, going places where they thought they could talk about what just happened. I'm part of Warriors. It's a Bible study. That night, the president of Warriors got everyone together, we talked about it, and then we also prayed about it. That was something that was good because I felt like I had people who were on the same mindset as me that I could go to talk to. After we all gathered together, talked, prayed, we had made a hashtag with the Bible verse we read. Being with the black community made me feel better, made me feel like we could do something about it, and made me feel more connected.

Because they occur in response to harmful incidents, microprotections often reveal the persistence of racism in the course of student's lives. At the same time they are helpful in highlighting ways that this racism is resisted through everyday acts.

4. Extending and applying racial microaffirmations

Countering the everyday ways that racism manifests and presents a barrier in the lived realities of racially minoritized students is a monumental challenge. Microaffirmations provide one entry point for becoming aware of and enacting actions, behaviors and environmental cues that disrupt the impact of racism. We suggest a few key ideas to guide future work on microaffirmations.

First, racial microaffirmations need to be understood in relation to microaggressions. Microaggressions are daily manifestations of racism that have cumulative harmful impacts (Pierce, 1970; 1974). Across educational institutions, microaggressions powerfully influence the experiences of minoritized individuals (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Solorzano, 1998). To understand and enact racial microaffirmations we must first acknowledge the permanence of racism, and its manifestation through microaggressions within our institutions.

Second, microaffirmations must be understood from the perspective of minoritized individuals; this requires the CRT call to rely on the experiential knowledge of minoritized group members. Dominant group members will only maintain their perceived superiority if they use power to decide what is best for people of color (Pierce 1970). In our study, listening to students' experiences helped us better understand how microaffirming experiences offered hope and nurtured a sense of agency.

Third, unlike microaggressions, which are often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator, microaffirmations require us to consciously learn and incessantly enact actions, comments and environmental cues that promote inclusion, equity and racial justice. Microaffirmations are countercultural because they push back against the everyday, often invisible ways that racism is normalized within institutions. Ongoing, intentional efforts to speak and behave in ways that affirm minoritized students can have cumulative impact on the practices, policies and structures that guide daily life within higher education institutions.

Finally, our work on affirmations begins with race because of the indelible nature of race in structuring higher education. But racial microaffirmations also reflect ways that intersecting social identities shape students' experiences with race. Scholars and practitioners across fields may find the guiding ideas and typology of microaffirmations helpful in exploring other forms of

marginalization and may consider adapting this work to reflect the ways other social identities impact microaffirmations in their contexts.

5. Conclusions

The "Tell it like it is" study revealed a range of experiences that are microaggressive or microaffirming for students and provided a useful means of understanding and addressing the psychological and behavioral dimensions of campus racial climate. In our study, we found that microaffirmations are not parallel to experiences of microaggressions in frequency, magnitude or impact (Jones & Rolón-Dow, in press). However, adding microaffirmations to understandings of campus climate helped us better grasp what students found helpful as they navigated campus racial dynamics. Microaffirmations display or nurture hope, agency and resistance in the face of normalized systemic racism. In this way, microaffirmations are one strategy for working in countercultural ways to create the campus climates that are now commonly described in diversity and mission statements of universities.

The storytelling approach facilitated holistic understandings of the conditions and contexts that are part of microaffirming experiences. Furthermore, the stories students told were central to the development of our microaffirmation typology grounded in experiential knowledge of minoritized students. Future research on microaffirmations grounded in CRT/LatCrit understandings of campus climate dynamics can further illuminate the words, actions and environmental cues that students find helpful to their inclusion, validation, success and protection; can illustrate practical ways to promote the enactment of microaffirmations on an ongoing and systemic level; and can integrate microaffirmations in campus climate models.

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