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Multidimensional Models of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations

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Introduction

The chief vehicle for pro-racist behaviors are *microaggressions*. These are subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are "put downs" of blacks by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions. This accounts for a near inevitable perceptual clash between blacks and whites in regard to how a matter is described as well as the emotional charge involved. (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978; p. 65)

Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce, widely acknowledged as the original author of the microaggressions idea, saw it as an occurrence that surfaced in the everyday interactions of Blacks and Whites. It reflected the subtle ways in which whites gained, maintained or expressed their superiority over Blacks. For Pierce, these occurrences were subtle, automatic and aversive. Over the past nearly half century, the concept of microaggressions has evolved theoretically, empirically and practically and, yes, politically. Microaggression work has expanded from an account of black-white strained interactions, to a paradigm for interactions across multiple boundaries of social distinctions, all marked by status differences.

We approach this topic from two perspectives; multidimensionality of racism (MMR) (Jones, 1972; 1997) and critical race theory (CRT) (Bell, 1987, 1993; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The multidimensional model of racism, (Jones, 1997) is articulated by a scaffolding of influences that affect the lives of black people—culture, institutions, and individuals. Microaggressions, generally discussed in the context of interpersonal and intergroup interactions, are associated with individual behavior. However, individual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are significantly influenced by the institutions in which they are embedded and the culture that guides the values, practices and expressions of racial beliefs. Culture defines the meaning of race, situations implement those meaning in its philosophy and practices, and individuals act on them with or without awareness.

Critical race theory (Bell, 1987, 1993; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) evolved in the 1980s as a radical critique of the role played by legal processes in the failure of the civil rights movement of the 1950-60s to achieve the social justice and expansion of opportunity it heralded. CRT proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time, and argues for the need to transform the relationship between law and racial power, thereby achieving racial emancipation and anti-subordination. The basic tenets of CRT conjoin with the multidimensionality model of racism to provide a broad context for understanding the origin and manifestations of microaggressions. We argue that to fully understand microaggressions, you must place them in this multidimensional/CRT framework.

We first discuss the multidimensionality of racism and the role of CRT in it. Although what we present is relevant to many socially devalued groups in our society, for purposes of illustration, we focus on the example of Black Americans in relation to White Americans. We examine the idea of *counterstories* –narratives of the experiences of marginalized and “othered”

persons, in the context of a racial justice standard. We discuss why counterstories are important and what we can learn from them. We briefly review relevant constructs of microaggressions and how these are understood in the context of a multidimensional CRT framework. We also introduce a more robust conceptualization of microaffirmations, as a way to account for resistance and agency in the face of racism. Finally, drawing on examples from a storytelling project — *Tell it like it is* — currently underway at the University of Delaware, we use the counterstories approach to illustrate and better understand experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations. Using a multidimensional CRT framework to analyze the stories, we illustrate the insidious ways that racism is felt and lived through everyday acts; we also show ways that resistance to racism and efforts towards racial justice is also undertaken in the course of everyday life.

Multidimensional Perspectives on Racism

Multidimensional model of racism (MMR)

MMR argues that racism is normalized in U.S. culture, institutions and individual psyches. The Multidimensional model of racism is depicted schematically in Figure 1. The

Insert Figure 1 about here

model proposes that racism is a product of beliefs that supported the slave trade and rationalized the exploitation, oppression and dehumanization that accompanied it. These views were instantiated in all aspects of the culture, and gave meaning to racism through the cultural produces and practices of religion, worldview, emergent traditions, language, symbols and

mythology. A view of race emerged which, over time, informed the formation of institutions whose functions and practices sustained these meanings. Every institution of the United States reflected these racist beliefs and honed them in their everyday practices. Individuals, became socialized and acculturated to these beliefs, and their ubiquity and cultural depth penetrated individual psyches. Thus, racism continues to permeate every dimension of life in the U.S., and whether consciously practiced, or unconsciously manifested, the perversion of race results in the tentacles of racism, wrapped around U.S. society and psyches.

It is important note that the MMR model is both hierarchically and temporally dynamic. That is, the dynamics of racism penetrate across societal dimensions from culture to individuals, but also, evolve and influence life over the history of the country. Historical narratives provide meanings that create and sustain stereotypes of human groups.

Metastasized racism spreads throughout society and infiltrates thoughts, emotions and behavior both in overt and covert ways. Overt manifestations of racism are obvious—slavery, Jim Crow, Immigration acts, Chinese Exclusion Laws, Trail of Tears dislocation of Native Americans, lynchings, white riots and so forth (see Jones, Dovidio & Vietze, 2014, chapter 3). Beginning in 1790 with the principle that one must be White of European descent to be a citizen of the United States, all “others” were cast as lesser in varying degrees. The meanings of race were embodied in institutional actions such as the 3/5th compromise that apportioned Black slaves between humanity and property. *Race* became a way to stratify human groups (Smedley, 1993). The rationalization and embodiment of this idea evolved through *racialism*—beliefs that organize perceptions around racial categories and give rise to ideas and values associated with them—and *racialization*—transformation of racialism beliefs into active instruments of categorization and judgment. Once the race categories are created, racialism processes assign

them values, and racialization projects activate those values. This triumvirate of concepts and mechanisms results in a deep-seated belief and value system that perpetuates the fundamental notions of white supremacy, and “otherness.”

Critical race theory (CRT)

CRT, rooted in legal scholarship, provides another approach to racism. CRT seeks to explain why efforts to achieve racial justice may be thwarted by the legal approaches based on normative universal legal principles and their application. Five major tenets of CRT help explain the persistent racial inequality in America:

Normalcy of racism—because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to people in the culture;

Racist cultural mythology—racism is sustained by myths and pre-suppositions and received wisdom that make up common culture and render Blacks and others "one-down" from the beginning;

Interest convergence—White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks and other racial groups only [and especially] when they also promote White self-interest; and

Call to context-- the emerging facts of one's life render general legal doctrines or laws incapable of stipulating the manner in which racial justice can be achieved. These judgments about fairness are highly sensitive to these contexts, which are understood not so much by legal argument but by counterstories that emerge from individual experiences;

Challenges to dominant ideology—critique of individual rights, not group rights, challenge the efficacy of a colorblind ideology, normative standards for equal opportunity and meritocracy. CRT theorists argue that these claims obscure power and privilege of dominant

groups, and rationalize continued social inequality as normal—*system justification!* (Jost and Banaji, 1994).

Psychological CRT.

Psychological Critical Race Theory (PCRT) describes basic psychological processes that produce and sustain racial biases, which, in turn, explain the persistence of racial inequalities.

Five major themes describe the racial attitudes and judgements and their affective and behavioral consequences that produce and perpetuate racial inequality.

Spontaneous and persistent influence of race. Race is *spontaneously* derived from social information, and continues to affect the course and meaning of encounters and experiences; Normalization of everyday beliefs and stereotypes about race leads to unconscious processes that often influence behavior below awareness. Explicitly articulated good intentions, can mask underlying ambivalence or be undermined by implicit processes about how one's behavior will be interpreted. Thus, understanding each other across racial boundaries becomes more important than ever.

Divergent racial experiences require more complex approaches and policies. Fairness is not a natural consequence of abstract principles or logical judgments but is derived from the meanings that vary by our collective and individual social histories [hence the importance of counterstories]; Racial policies often have asymmetrical effects on different racial groups.

Racialized policies may have divergent racial effects. Racial groups diverge with respect to calculations of costs and benefits of racial policies—colorblind policies are evaluated negatively and multicultural/diversity approaches more favorably by majorities and minorities, respectively. Race is both less and more than it seems. Perceptions of out-group homogeneity

supports the social significance of race, yet psychological and behavioral facts attest to significant heterogeneity within racial groups;

Growing primacy of racial identity. Racial and other social identities are increasingly important. First, racial identity may serve a *self-protective* role. The greater perceived outgroup rejection, the stronger the likelihood of greater racial identity. Many measures of racial identity describe this linkage between in-group preference and outgroup rejection (e.g. Vandiver, et al, 2002; Cross, 1992). Further, for Blacks, increasing levels of academic disidentification are associated with higher self-esteem and fewer White friends (Steele, 1997). Second, because of increasing *salience* of racial identity, strategies for reducing intergroup conflict can no longer focus exclusively on Whites, but must consider the interpersonal dynamics of cross-racial interactions.

Critical race theory and its psychological counterpart both require a *multidimensional approach*. Each racial/ethnic group has a different place in American society that originated under different circumstances and has been maintained by different mechanisms of bias and conflict. Institutions have been shaped by the desire to maintain a socioeconomic order of control and self-interest. Individuals at times aid and abet that system and at times are victims of it. Differences reflect both divergent cultural origins and emergent cultural differences spawned by adaptation and coping in the United States.

Microaggressions reflect, generally, individuals' more subtle "learnings" about the systems of dominance and power, and often result in behaviors that appear to be normal and largely innocent of any malicious intent. The multidimensionality approach allows us to connect different levels of influence on psychological phenomena and social interaction. The simple question "Where are you from?" can be fraught with meaning at multiple levels with innocent,

insensitive and at times sinister effect. In later sections, we deconstruct some of this complexity through the experiences of individuals whose stories exemplify processes by which microaggressions are revealed and experienced.

Resilience and resistance. Individuals are not merely victims in the face of racism. Rather, they resist and enact behaviors to promote ideologies that support racial justice. Racial microaffirmations, which will be discussed shortly, also center the experiences of people of color, arguing that to promote racial justice we must understand how people of color develop a sense of belonging and how they are affirmed, included, and helped to succeed. If we address both individual acts and cultural elements of institutions through microaffirmations this will benefit all people.

Counterstories of microaggressions and microaffirmations

While a multidimensional model of racism and critical race theory lead to understandings of race as an ingrained feature in the fabric of institutional life, it is still often difficult to grasp how racism is manifested and resisted in the course of everyday life. Majoritarian stories and perspectives, which are largely told by dominant groups, downplay the significance of race and racism in current social arrangements, perpetuate cultural understandings of a fair and meritocratic society and naturalize conditions in which certain racial groups are at the top and others are at the bottom (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). Counter-storytelling emerges as a central part of a critical race methodology; it values the experiential knowledge of people of color as a way to reveal the themes underlying critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling offers a way to show, analyze, and learn about race, racism and their intersections with other salient social categories.

Counterstories provide distinctive knowledge of those who experience the most dire consequences of racialization and current racial arrangements or as Bell (1993) describes, by the “faces at the bottom of the well.” Unlike dominant groups whose reality is reflected in generalizations and interpretations made from scholarship; marginalized groups need the particularity and call to context that counterstories provide (Delgado, 1993). Counterstories focus on how racism is manifested and resisted in the course of everyday life and are told from the perspective of those racial others who have historically been omitted or misrepresented (Delgado Bernal, 2002). These alternative narratives of present social arrangements provide color-conscious understandings that disrupt notions of colorblindness, race neutrality, and linear racial progress. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The CRT literature is replete with various forms of counterstories that illustrate CRT themes including family histories, narratives, biographies, autobiographies, composite stories, parables, and chronicles (Bell, 1993; Delgado, 1989). In our counter-storytelling project we focus on collecting narratives that illuminate how race, racism and racial justice work is manifested in the lives of undergraduate students at a predominantly white university (PWI). As such, the project’s focus is on stories of microaggressions and microaffirmations because these concepts demand attention to racial acts, conversations and experiences that occur in the course of everyday lives.

Microaggressions are thoroughly described throughout this book. Our point is simply to situate microaggressions in a complex understanding of racism. In that complexity, understanding the occurrence of microaggressions requires multilevel analysis, and situating the analysis in institutional and societal contexts. In this accounting, the entire enterprise is embedded in an historical narrative that produces divergent meanings and manners of response.

Everyone within society is socialized within the context of culture and institutions that have racism woven into their fabric. Individuals are repositories for all of these functions and expressions of race – microaggressions are manifestations of this edifice in the ways we interact with each other.

Microaggressions are one way that people of color are racialized—their race is made the most salient thing about them. Racializing individuals is part of a pattern of racism with long historical roots. Microaggressions are related to racism in two ways. First, microaggressive behavior creates and perpetuates a hierarchy of status and social significance. As Pierce, et al., (1978) propose these subtle “put-downs” maintain a pro-racist hierarchy. In this regard, they are instruments of racism that sustain, in part, a racist status quo. Microaggressions can also be a consequence of racism—a manifestation of the infiltration of racism in our culture, institutions and psyche. Through racialization acts, meanings (and stereotypes and misrepresentations) of race and of particular racial groups are constructed in ways that perpetuate racism. The prevalence of microaggression experiences in an institution indicates the presence or even prevalence of racism in that institution. Like the canary in the coalmine (Guinier & Torres, 2002), they tell us that the context is toxic, that all are at risk and that vigilance is essential action is required. The toxic culture engenders a toxic psyche and between them, produce behaviors and experiences of racism. As cultural psychologists put it “culture and psyche make each other up!” (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993).

Microaffirmations are less detailed in the literature on everyday experiences related to marginalized social identities. Rowe (2008) defines microaffirmations 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” (p. 46). Building

on this definition, we advance the concept of racial microaffirmations. Racial microaffirmations occur through verbal and nonverbal acts experienced by minoritized racial groups in ways that account for their racialized reality or resist the impact of racism.

Microaffirmations, whether enacted consciously or unconsciously, have positive impacts on the lives of people of color by promoting their success, by affirming, recognizing, validating or protecting their identities, social positionality and experiences. Just as there are different types of microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015), there are different ways that microaffirmations are enacted and experienced including verbally (in both speaking and written form), kinesically (through body language) or visually (through images). Microaffirming experiences disrupt racialized institutional arrangements, cultural practices or policies that are corrosive to minoritized individuals or they may proactively seek to create new cultural norms or policies that promote racial equity and justice. In this way, microaffirmations display or nurture hope, agency and resistance in the face of systemic racism. Locating microaffirmations in a multidimensional/CRT framework, provides a rationale for focusing on the experiences of people of color because to promote resistance to racism and move towards racial justice, we must understand what facilitates the success, affirmation, validation and inclusion of racially minoritized individuals despite the presence of racism within institutions.

The *Tell it like it is* project

In this section, we provide two examples of counterstories from the *Tell It Like It Is* storytelling project at the University of Delaware. In this project, we use qualitative narrative interviewing to document microaggressions and microaffirmations that students experience or witness on UD's campus related to race and other socially significant categories (e.g. student generational status, international status, disability status). Through the storytelling project, we

are creating an archive of stories that illuminates the ways diverse individuals perceive and navigate their place and role in the campus community and the ways that campus climate perspectives are shaped in and through the students' experiences. These counterstories of race microaggressions and microaffirmations show how structural level racism understood through the multidimensional/CRT framework is manifested and resisted in the course of everyday lives.

We first invite you to listen to a story told by Shawna¹, an African-American female student who is part of an Honors program at the university, as she describes a conversation she overheard while studying in the residence hall lounge where students were gathered.

¹ All names in stories are pseudonyms.

“Do I belong here?”

Hearing some people's conversations would kind of be hurtful. [One time] I was just studying in the lounge and there was probably around 7 or 8 white men and women talking in the lounge. They weren't floor mates but they were from the honors program. I remember them having a discussion about the FASFA [financial aid] forms. They were talking about minorities and getting financial aid and how the only reason we're able to afford it is because we get handouts. They were talking about it and I kind of looked up from my books to listen and they were just saying, "Yes you have to be piss-poor or a minority to get any money. You basically have to be dead broke."

I was just [thinking], I've applied to a lot of scholarships and that's the reason I was able to come to UD but it's not because it was just handed to me. I was just thinking to myself, I don't consider myself piss-poor and even though I am a minority, I don't look at that as a negative thing and I don't look at us getting a handout. I work for what I get so it was frustrating to hear them describe it as a handout. It was frustrating for me to hear that because the reason why I am able to go to UD is because I get financial aid because my dad would just never be able to afford this on his own.

I don't think they even acknowledged the fact that I was there. I think that was probably even a little more frustrating just because I'm sitting right there. I don't think they really cared that I was there and I think they were just having their own conversation, they were going to talk about whatever they wanted to talk about no matter who was in the room.

Because they were making these accusations, I felt like I was always put in a place [that I needed to] defend myself or defend the reason why I was here at UD. I think it made me question even more than why I'm at UD, [it made me question] why am I in the honors program? Do I belong here? It makes you feel like... Did I earn my spot to be here or did they need to fill a diversity quota and get me here?

I think [in my Residence Hall] there was a lot of freshmen who were coming from hometowns where [their hometown] was all they knew; maybe they hadn't really met any black people before or had any black friends and then they were all coming together. They're moving away from home. They don't want to be uncomfortable so they find people who think like them, who act like them. That made me uncomfortable just living around that, around people who just weren't open minded to learning about anything else. When I came to college, I was forced to be uncomfortable and learn about different types of people just because that was who was around me. I think for them that wasn't their reality. They kind of got to stay in their bubble of being comfortable and being around people who were just like them.

In this experience, that lasts just a few minutes, we witness a microaggression that has both verbal and kinesic (nonverbal communications through gestures and movements) dimensions

(Pérez & Solorzano, 2015). Shawna is offended by the conversation as the students express simplistic assumptions about the financial package minoritized and low-income students receive. The incident also has a kinesic dimension as Shawna is rendered invisible by the students' lack of awareness or consideration of her physical presence in the room. An understanding of this microaggression through the multidimensional/CRT model of racism focuses on the racialisms (beliefs, ideas and values about racial categories) evident in the incident and it considers the judgments that follow based on those racialisms.

In this example, racialisms are activated to perpetrate principles of “whiteness as property”—the right of whites to exclude others from the privileges inherent in a white identity (Harris, 1995). In the past, this was done through laws and policies which prohibited people of color from attending universities such as the University of Delaware—which was desegregated by court order in 1951! In the present, “whiteness as property” is partially carried out through cultural mindsets that construct some groups of students worthy of the benefits and privileges inherent in belonging to the university; while others, described in this story as “piss-poor” and “minority,” are still rendered as outsiders who receive access to the benefits and privileges of the university only through an undeserved handout.

Furthermore, the impact of historically racist admission policies is not considered by the perpetrators of this microaggression in their judgments about the proper qualifications for financial aid. Instead, they develop a code for financial aid that rests on the assumption that financial aid is an ill-gotten gain received by less qualified students who cannot compete on the same level as those “legitimate” students. “We,” meaning White and middle class, students are here because of a presumptive meritocratic admissions policy—one that is fair and equitable.

Given that minoritized groups are no longer barred from entering the university doors, it is difficult for many individuals to notice the covert ways that racism is perpetuated and manifested in everyday life. In telling her story, however, Shawna is very explicit about how this incident challenges her sense of belonging at the university. The students in the lounge promote a mindset that perpetuates race and class based boundaries to belonging in the Honors community; their perspective is at odds with Shawna's experiences and mindset. In this incident, her voice and perspective are not considered – the white students in the lounge act as if they understand the reality of minoritized or poor students who receive financial aid. She explains that the remarks feel accusatory and lead her to feel that she has to defend and explain herself. Yet, these students do not seek out that explanation from her or from students like her. They act as if THEIR understanding of reality IS reality!

Shawna also challenges narratives of diversity, equity and inclusive excellence promoted by many institutions of higher education, including the University of Delaware, as laudable and central components of their mission and work with students. While universities may be quicker to respond to overt racist incidents that continue to happen across campuses, subtle microaggressive experiences can easily undermine the confidence that minoritized students have in their university's capacity to live up to these goals. Yet, Shawna's story illustrates how this everyday, unnoticed incident in her residence hall takes a psychological toll, allowing self-doubt to creep in about whether she belongs at the university.

As a result of the incident, she begins to speculate about how the university policies work, wondering-- "was the university just trying to fill a diversity quota?" She feels uncomfortable knowing that this is the mindset of some of the students in her residence hall as she observes their unfamiliarity and lack of experience with black people. The wedge between

her and these students is deepened through this microaggression and opportunities for creating a new reality of learning, engagement and productive dialogue across different life experiences is diminished.

The multidimensional/CRT framework reveals how microaggressions function to normalize racism, rendering it invisible to many. Shawna's presence at the university and her active participation as a successful student in many dimensions of university life, embodies the core meaning of inclusive excellence. A seemingly small, brief encounter with fellow students reflects a larger orbit of cultural beliefs, institutional policies and practices, and psychological effects that implicate the multidimensional nature of race and racism. As we have noted, microaggressions can be a manifestation or a consequence of racism. Regardless of its origin, addressing the effects of student's experience of microaggressions is crucial to a richer understanding of what is required to create equitable and inclusive environments that promote the success of minoritized students.

The multidimensional/CRT model of racism also includes attention to the ways that struggle, resistance and proactive efforts towards creating more racially just institutions are part of both individual and collective racial realities. Experiences that document microaffirmations provide a way to understand those efforts at addressing racism. In this second story from the *Tell it like it is* project, Joyce, an African American student, explains an experience that lead her to feel affirmed at the university.

“Affirms your Blackness”

I'm working on a project for a Living and Learning Community for African-American students. Yes, we have the Center for Black Culture, but you can't sleep there. You don't get to go home to that. It is a home away from home, but they close at five. Creating a space on campus where students can have that community 24/7 is really important. [We're] not saying it would be mandatory and just because you're Black you have to live there, but giving the students of color that option [would be] really instrumental.

Meeting with different people on campus to see if we can get this up and running has been extremely helpful. We actually competed in a competition to see who would get money and grants. We didn't win, but people still had interest. They were like, "How can we help you?" Having those people come together and realizing that there are disparities regarding race around this campus really affirmed my being, [it] affirmed my reason for being here. Having that affirmed that there is a need and they're willing to help was really crucial.

I've had support from Doctor Jennings who is in the administrative side of the university. She supports us. Her realizing that there is something to be said about race on this campus and that there is a need for this really affirmed my identity as a black student. I felt supported. I even felt loved. I was like, "Okay, she sees this as a need and she sees that we need to do this." I felt like they loved who I was as a black woman and they were willing to do whatever they could to help me feel that comfort and that community that I needed on a 24/7 basis.

I live at home with a black family so my blackness was always affirmed. Living in a residence hall with majority white students, my blackness isn't always affirmed. I can't always talk to other students about issues that I'm facing because they don't understand. The idea of feeling loved was like loving your blackness, Doctor Jennings was talking about that. She was talking about being in spaces that affirm your blackness, like looking on the wall and seeing something that reflects you, seeing a piece of African art or coming into a room or a home where there's a bunch of black and brown faces, seeing that is loving your Blackness.

Microaffirmations can come in the form of validating acts or words that recognize the ways race impacts lived experiences. Joyce details several ways that she was validated as she worked to establish a residential community that considers the benefits that African-American students can gain from living with each other. First, she mentions that she felt affirmed when other individuals on campus recognized that race is significant in shaping students' experiences; in this case, in the realm of how students experience their living situations on residence halls. More

specifically, she mentions that having an administrator recognize and respond to the specific housing needs of minoritized students helped her feel supported and loved as a Black woman.

Microaffirmations are manifestations of efforts to acknowledge, address or combat the normalized racism, at the institutional and psychological level. As outlined in the multidimensional/CRT model of racism, an analysis of racial microaffirmations considers how affirming everyday experiences acknowledge or disrupt institutional policies, cultural practices or ideologies that sustain racism. Alternatively, more proactive microaffirmations may establish a different norm of alternative ideologies guided by racial justice and by the lived experience of people of color.

In this story, Joyce and Dr. Jennings acknowledge that the racial demographics of the university residence halls have differential impact on the experience of black as compared to white students. For black students, the predominantly white residence halls create a context where they repeatedly experience solo status. The underrepresentation of students of color at the university sustain a norm for residence halls as spaces that more easily and unconsciously represent, affirm and validate the identities of white students. Joyce, however, expresses the added burden that black students need to overcome in order to experience the residence halls as a place of familiar belonging.

As outlined by Sue and colleagues, (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder & Nadal, 2007) microaggressions can be environmental in nature through the exclusion of visual artifacts that represent a particular racial group. Joyce questions how black students can love their blackness and feel at home in the absence of affirming environmental cues in the residence halls (her reference to African art) or given the minimal presence of other black and brown faces.

As a focus on the psychological elements of CRT suggests, divergent racial experiences require complex approaches and policies. Joyce suggests that an alternative living community for black students acknowledges that racial identities shape how students experience the residence halls. Joyce seeks to create a residence hall community that will serve as a counterspace for her and other students who share similar experiences because of their racial identities. Counterspaces can help students address the psychological impacts of being part of a predominantly white university by cultivating a sense of home, bolstering a sense of belonging (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) and fostering a positive racial climate (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000) for minoritized students. Dr. Jennings' support serves as an affirmation because it lends institutional power and support to the need for these counterspaces. These counterspaces are not separatists attempts on the part of minoritized students, but are ways that students can love their black identities and create a place of belonging. The institutional support offered by Dr. Jennings is critical to nurturing in Joyce, the hope that attention will be paid to her racialized reality as a black woman. This element of hope in microaffirming experiences is crucial in multidimensional/CRT perspectives on race because it illustrates concrete ways that individuals and communities do not simply surrender to pervasive, normalized racism. Rather, they continue to resist and engage in the struggle for social justice and a better life.

Conclusions and Implications

The multidimensional model of race, and critical race theory illustrate the pervasive ways that racism manifests itself in everyday life experiences—often through institutional practices and policies. Counterstories that center the lived experiences of minoritized individuals help us understand racism when they achieve any of the following: a) they illuminate the ways racialisms and cultural mythologies are expressed; b) they show how individuals are racialized;

c) they illustrate the harmful impacts of dominant ideologies or d) they point to institutional processes and policies that do not account for racialized realities. Furthermore, as we have shown, counterstories also help reveal the ways that racism is resisted and they reveal that efforts towards racial justice are always present in the face of racism.

Listening to counterstories of microaggressions and microaffirmations is important for individuals across racial groups. These stories help us understand what microaggressions and microaffirmations are, how they are perpetrated, how they impact the target, and can hopefully lead to efforts to minimize microaggressions and maximize microaffirmations. For the target of microaggressions, there may be benefits in constructing a narrative about the microaggressions they experience (Pennebaker, 2000) and for developing strategies for responding to and interrupting microaggressions. The experiential knowledge revealed through storytelling is readily available but it needs to be captured and utilized to better understand and address the problems of race in our country. In this chapter, we only highlight two stories and the lessons they teach; we believe there is additional insight and cumulative learning potential in listening to multiple stories.

We are not suggesting that a focus on microaffirmations is an easy solution to racism nor that microaffirmations are parallel to experiences of microaggressions in frequency, magnitude or impact. Pittinsky (2016) offers a helpful suggestion when he writes that “Understanding the full range of microbehaviors – both positive and negative – gives us a way to take them more seriously, realize their worth, and harness their strength (p. 80).” Our chapter illustrates that looking at microaggression and microaffirmation counterstories can lead to a broader understanding of the ways racism is perpetuated through daily encounters as well as the ways it is resisted. By including this range of everyday behaviors, we can more fully grasp the nuances

of everyday forms of racism as well as the practices we can engage in to create cultural and institutional norms that embody racial justice principles and ideologies.

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Figure 1: Multidimensional model of racism

