

Cross-Racial Microaffirmations: Concepts and Applications^Ψ

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Abstract

In contrast to the burgeoning body of work on microaggressions, microaffirmations have been under-theorized, under-researched, and under-emphasized in anti-racist efforts. To address this imbalance, we highlight the relevance of cross-racial microaffirmations (CRMs). CRMs are brief, everyday allyship-based social actions and messages, extending beyond social conventions and occupational requirements, that proximally enhance or protect people of color's sense of mattering linked to their personal or racial identities. We expand on this definition, outline the conceptual boundaries of CRMs, and identify concepts from positive psychology (mattering), as well as multiculturalism and social justice (allyship), that delineate CRMs' conceptual foundations. We then elucidate a typology of CRMs comprising

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microrecognitions, microtransformations, and microprotections. Practical implications involve incorporating CRMs into anti-racist efforts across diverse fields, including education, psychotherapy, healthcare, and organizational settings. Future research could develop a CRM scale, assess the effectiveness of CRMs in anti-racist training, and evaluate applications of CRMs in diverse settings.

Keywords

racism, race, positive psychology, multiculturalism, racial justice, allyship, mattering

Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

In contrast to microaggressions, microaffirmations have been under-theorized, under-researched, and under-emphasized in anti-racist efforts. Hence, this article highlights cross-racial microaffirmations, which are brief, everyday allyship-based social actions and messages that directly enhance or protect people of color's sense of mattering. We argue that cross-racial microaffirmations deserve greater attention in anti-racist work.

Psychologists increasingly recognize racism in the United States as the inequitable allocation of race-based advantages to White people and disadvantages to people of color, spanning systemic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021; Haeny et al., 2021; Sue, 2003). Although counseling psychologists have led anti-racist initiatives addressing systemic (Pieterse et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2024) and intrapersonal issues (e.g., internalized racism; Speight, 2007), more work is needed at the interpersonal level (i.e., racism occurring between individuals). Anti-racist efforts in this area have mostly focused on exposing and dismantling racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007, 2019), with less work on cross-racial *microaffirmations* (CRMs)—brief, everyday allyship-based social actions and messages that proximally enhance or protect people of color's experience of mattering. Indeed, scholarly work on microaffirmations is sparse compared to microaggressions. A Google Scholar search conducted on June 1, 2024, unveiled 3,070 hits for “microaggressions” but only 53 for “microaffirmations.” Likewise, a 2018 content analysis of 51 counseling psychology articles found no mention of microaffirmations among eight

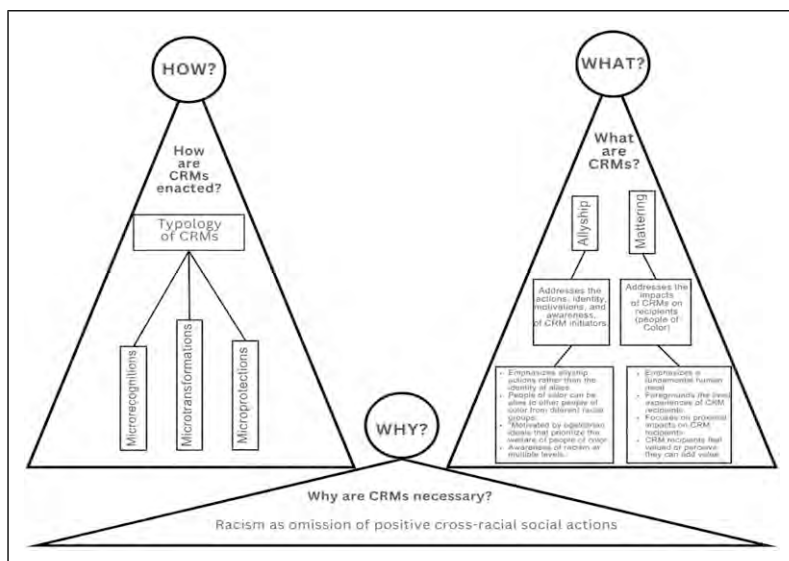


Figure 1. A depiction of the core concepts in cross-racial microaffirmations

strategies addressing racism (Miller et al., 2018). In sum, microaffirmations have been under-theorized, under-researched, and under-emphasized in anti-racist efforts.

This article spotlights the relevance of CRMs to anti-racist efforts by providing greater conceptual clarity to this construct. Figure 1 summarizes our key ideas. By arguing that omissions of positive social actions reflect racism, we articulate why CRMs deserve attention and are a necessary component of anti-racist work (the *why* question). We then explicate the meaning of CRMs, outline their conceptual contours, and identify relevant concepts from multiculturalism and social justice (allyship), as well as positive psychology (mattering), that delineate their conceptual foundations (the *what* question). Next, we offer a typology of CRMs and discuss how CRMs can be enacted (the *how* question). Finally, we conclude with practical and research applications.

Before continuing, we clarify the scope of this article. We focus on CRMs within the context of race relations in the United States. And although microaffirmations can be applied to people with diverse collective identities (Sterzing & Gartner, 2020), we only address CRMs displayed in cross-racial relationships. The nascent work on racial microaffirmations has mostly emphasized positive actions provided by and to people of color (e.g., Rolón-

Dow & Davison, 2021). Although people of color often microaffirm others in their own racial group, we worry that a lack of scholarship on CRMs—those enacted by White individuals and people of color from different racial groups—sends the implicit message that microaffirmations are limited to people of color taking care of their own racial group. Hence, by addressing CRMs, we shine a spotlight on allyship (De Souza & Schmader, 2024) and, consequently, emphasize the critical role that White people and people of color from diverse racial groups play in anti-racist work.

The Why Question: Omissions of Positive Social Actions as Expressions of Racism

To understand why CRMs warrant greater attention, we examine the interpersonal dimensions of racism and anti-racist efforts. On this point, APA (2021) states that interpersonal-level racism occurs when advantaged groups “behave in ways that diminish and harm people who belong to other racial groups” (pp. 2–3). We argue this harm-centric definition is inadequate, as it overlooks the omission of positive social actions (including CRMs) as a component of racism.

Our contention is not simply that CRMs are meaningful actions, but that omitting such actions is an expression of racism (Fryberg & Eason, 2017; Wong & McCullough, 2021). According to social identity theory, people practice ingroup favoritism because they desire to boost their self-esteem by enhancing the status of their ingroup (Verkuyten, 2021). Importantly, ingroup favoritism can occur even without actively causing harm to outgroups. Indeed, in a review of decades of empirical studies, Greenwald and Pettigrew (2014, p. 670) concluded that “discrimination occurs more often as differential favoring than as differential harming” in contemporary U.S. society. If racism is the inequitable distribution of disadvantages based on race (Haeny et al., 2021), then one way U.S. people of color are disadvantaged is when White people withhold favors from them that they extend to other White individuals. To illustrate, a meta-analytic study found that although teachers directed a comparable amount of negative verbal behavior (e.g., criticism) to students regardless of race, they directed less positive and neutral speech (e.g., encouragement) toward African American and Latino/a students than European American students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007).

The omission of positive social actions is a particularly insidious form of interpersonal racism. Research suggests people are less likely to view actions that favor one group, thereby omitting favors to another group, as discriminatory, compared to actions that actively disfavor a group (Phillips & Jun, 2022). This reflects a broader cognitive phenomenon known as the *omission*

bias—the tendency to prefer harmful inaction over harmful action because people (falsely) perceive the latter to be a more direct cause of negative outcomes (Baron & Ritov, 2004). Research also shows that people view omissions as less morally blameworthy than harmful commissions (Yeung et al., 2022). Likewise, a recent study found that U.S. individuals considered failing to intervene when witnessing racial harassment (an omission) as less racist than other forms of race-based discrimination (E. Warren & Valentino, 2023). Collectively, this body of research indicates that people are less likely to recognize and condemn the absence of positive social actions, such as CRMs, as a form of racial discrimination, enabling interpersonal racism to persist in subtle yet impactful ways that evade scrutiny.

What, then, are the consequences of framing interpersonal racism, not just as the commission of harm but also as the omission of positive social actions? A key implication is that CRMs deserve far greater attention in anti-racist efforts because they help undermine the disadvantages people of color face, resulting from differential favoring practiced by White people. That is, CRMs are acts of resistance against racism, particularly interpersonal racism. For instance, in both workplace and academic settings, a common concern of people of color is that they are rendered invisible, not just because of others' racially insensitive actions but because they are overlooked altogether (De Souza & Schmader, 2024; Steele, 2018; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019; Wong & McCullough, 2021). Hence, CRMs may be a key anti-racist strategy emphasizing positive social actions that convey to people of color that they matter.

The *What* Question: The Meaning of Cross-Racial Microaffirmations

In the present article, CRMs are conceptually contextualized through linkages to the multicultural and social justice literature on *allyship* and the positive psychology literature on *matter*ing. The allyship literature highlights the actions, identity, motivations, and awareness of CRM initiators, while mattering informs the intended impacts and the basis for a CRM typology.

The concept of microaffirmations was coined by Mary Rowe in the 1970s. Tasked with improving the workplace environment for minoritized groups, including women and people of color, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, (Rowe, 2008) observed that effective mentoring often involved microaffirmations, which she defined as “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening” (Rowe, 2008), p. 46). Although later, scholars adopted similar definitions (e.g., Demetriou et al., 2024), we build on Rowe's (2008) pioneering work by clarifying what qualifies as a microaffirmation. For instance, it is unclear what standards of caring or inclusion

must be met for an act to be considered a microaffirmation. We, therefore, define microaffirmations as brief, everyday social actions and messages, extending beyond social conventions and occupational requirements, that proximally enhance or protect people's sense of mattering. This definition applies broadly to people from all backgrounds. By contrast, CRMs are a specific type of allyship-based microaffirmation that proximally enhances or protects people of color's sense of mattering linked to their personal or racial identities. In what follows, we elaborate on this definition of CRMs.

Brief, Everyday Actions and Messages

CRMs are race-based brief, everyday social actions (i.e., what someone says or does that is communicated to at least one other person) and messages (i.e., visual displays encountered regularly; e.g., artwork, symbols, monuments, yard signs). The emphasis on everyday actions and messages underscores the quotidian nature of CRMs. Opportunities to practice CRMs potentially abound every day, whether in interacting with a cashier, sending emails, conversing with colleagues, or deciding whom to socialize with on weekends. This emphasis on brief actions clarifies what falls outside the ambit of CRMs. Although teaching a class or developing a mentoring program are social practices, they are not brief actions, whereas smaller actions within these contexts (e.g., inquiring about a student's well-being) could be considered microaffirmations.

Importantly, although CRMs refer to everyday actions or messages, they go beyond what is required by social conventions. Some scholars have included head nods and being greeted with a smile as examples of microaffirmations (Demetriou et al., 2024), yet these are arguably polite gestures that reflect U.S. social norms. If the bar for what counts as microaffirmations is too low, they cease to be a meaningful construct. Likewise, behaviors required by law or by one's occupation should not be considered microaffirmations. For instance, counselors are expected to convey empathy to clients; hence, merely saying something empathic to a client of color does not exceed the call of duty and is not a microaffirmation. Likewise, if a manager is instructed by their superior to write gratitude notes to their supervisees as part of an instituted employee appreciation program, this task should not qualify as a microaffirmation because the manager is merely fulfilling a duty imposed on them.

Allyship

By conceptualizing CRMs as allyship-based actions and messages, we draw on the growing literature on allyship to enhance CRMs' conceptual foundation

(De Souza & Schmader, 2024; Radke et al., 2020; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). We outline several implications of viewing CRMs as a type of allyship. De Souza and Schmader (2024) recently called for a shift in conceptualizing allyship from an identity-based view (determining who is an ally) to a practice-centric view that focuses on behaviors that support and are perceived to be supportive by disadvantaged groups. In this view, “people are not allies; people *do* allyship” (De Souza & Schmader, 2024, p. 3). Unlike the identity-oriented view, which allows people to claim allyship without actively challenging oppression (Sumerau et al., 2021), the practice-centric view addresses the positive impact of social behaviors on disadvantaged groups (De Souza & Schmader, 2024). For example, when a White employee acknowledges their Black colleague’s concerns about workplace racism and is perceived by the latter to be supportive, they are engaging in allyship—specifically, a CRM.

Several studies demonstrate that allyship behaviors, when thoughtfully enacted, yield positive outcomes for recipients. To illustrate, Black women reported greater trust and stronger feelings of belonging in an organization when they perceived a White female employee as an ally (Johnson & Pietri, 2022). And experiencing effective forms of allyship correlated positively with a sense of psychological safety among racially diverse adults (Collier-Spruel & Ryan, 2024). In the same vein, research with college students demonstrated that microaffirmations—which we conceptualize as a form of allyship—foster hope, agency, inclusion, respect, resistance, resilience, belonging, empowerment, joy, and well-being among students of color (Pérez Huber et al., 2021, 2023; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021).

There is debate concerning who can enact allyship behaviors (Louis et al., 2019). Some scholars assert these are actions taken by advantaged groups (e.g., White people), whereas support between disadvantaged groups (e.g., a Latine individual supporting a Native American) is best defined as “solidarity” due to shared experiences of inequities (De Souza & Schmader, 2024). Others contest this view, arguing that allyship can exist between different racially minoritized groups, as their experiences are not identical (Patel, 2011; Stone-Sabali et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). We agree with the latter view, recognizing that although all people of color experience racism, its nature varies across diverse racial and social identity groups (e.g., Black and Asian American women and men encounter different gendered racial stereotypes; Lewis & Neville, 2015; T. Liu et al., 2018; Schwing et al., 2013).

Another implication of conceptualizing CRMs as a type of allyship is acknowledging that supportive behaviors toward people of color can arise from nonaltruistic motives, such as White saviorism, promoting the interests of advantaged groups, or enhancing one’s personal image and self-esteem—

none of which count as allyship (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Radke et al., 2020; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). By contrast, scholars have emphasized that allyship—and, by extension, CRMs—are rooted in egalitarian ideals that center the welfare of disadvantaged groups (De Souza & Schmader, 2024; Radke et al., 2020). When motivated by a genuine commitment to racial equity, individuals demonstrating CRMs are more likely to act privately, avoid seeking credit, and engage in costly behaviors that may involve personal risk (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022; Williams et al., 2023).

Construing CRMs as a form of allyship also highlights the importance of understanding racism at multiple levels (De Souza & Schmader, 2024). Although CRMs primarily address interpersonal racism, effective allyship also requires awareness of intrapersonal and systemic racism. White individuals are most effective in enacting CRMs when they recognize their White privilege, not just abstractly but in practical, everyday contexts (Hinger et al., 2023; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). A White individual who is aware that White people—especially White men—tend to be taken more seriously in group conversations is better equipped to spotlight the views of people of color in such conversations. For people of color practicing CRMs toward other racially minoritized groups, awareness of intrapersonal racism in the form of their own internalized racism (Speight, 2007) may help them resist reenacting Whiteness in their interactions with other people of color. Likewise, recognizing systemic racism can inform the practice of CRMs. Understanding how structural and institutional racism (e.g., unjust policies) systematically disadvantage people of color (APA, 2021; Haeny et al., 2021; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021) enhances awareness of the day-to-day inequities that CRMs can address.

Mattering

To qualify as a CRM, a social action or message must proximally enhance or protect a person of color's sense of mattering. Scholars have variously explained that the purpose of microaffirmations is to affirm people's dignity and value (Koch et al., 2022; Pérez Huber et al., 2021), foster feelings of inclusion and belongingness (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2023), validate people of color's racialized realities (Pérez Huber et al., 2021; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021), and promote the success of others (Shapiro, 2023). What do most of these outcomes have in common? We contend it is the enhancement and protection of people's sense of mattering, which refers to feeling significant in the eyes of others (Flett, 2018). Prilleltensky (2020) further clarified that mattering comprises two dimensions—feeling valued and perceiving that one can add value. Experiences such as feeling supported, validated,

recognized, and taken seriously by others fall under the broad rubric of feeling valued, whereas opportunities to contribute to an organization and influence others, the knowledge that others rely on them, and the experience of self-efficacy, empowerment, and success in one's contributions belong to the dimension of adding value (Prilleltensky, 2020). The psychology of mattering is a growing area of research within positive psychology (Flett, 2018). Mattering is also important in counseling psychology due to its implications for racial justice (see subsequent discussion) and because many presenting concerns clients bring to counseling can be conceived as interpersonal problems, including the feeling that one does not matter to other people (Teyber & Teyber, 2016).

Research indicates a robust, positive relationship between mattering and salutary outcomes, such as well-being and relationship satisfaction (Flett, 2021). Conversely, a lack of mattering has been linked to several negative outcomes, such as suicidal ideation (Deas et al., 2023). More recently, researchers have applied the concept of mattering to issues of multiculturalism, racial justice, and anti-racism (Carey, 2019; James et al., 2022; Prilleltensky et al., 2023). Prilleltensky et al. (2023) argued that experiences of fairness (which expresses notions of social justice) enable people to experience mattering; conversely, people do not experience mattering when they encounter social injustices, such as racism, because they do not feel valued by society. It is, therefore, not surprising that mattering is embedded in the name of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, which arose as a response to protest the repeated killing of unarmed Black people and the devaluation of Black lives (Carey, 2019).

Incorporating the mattering experiences of people of color in our definition of CRMs bolsters the conceptual foundation of this construct in two key ways. First, mattering underscores the relevance of CRMs to anti-racist work by recognizing that people of color may experience marginalization not through overt harm but through omission of positive actions (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014; Wong & McCullough, 2021)—a point discussed earlier in this paper. In other words, a lack of mattering can stem from neglect rather than direct harm. Hence, anti-racist work at the interpersonal level and amplifying people of color's sense of mattering requires proactive positive behaviors, best expressed as CRMs.

Second, the concept of mattering casts a positive vision of the aims of CRMs by foregrounding the lived experiences of people of color. The goal is not simply to fulfill a moral mandate or an abstract concept of justice but to ensure people of color feel valued and capable of adding value (Prilleltensky, 2020). Actions like donating to racial justice causes, signing petitions, or attending anti-racism workshops may reflect allyship (De Souza & Schmader,

2024), but do not qualify as CRMs unless they directly enhance or protect a person of color's sense of mattering. On this point, we agree with [De Souza and Schmader \(2024\)](#) that allyship actions (and CRMs) must be recognized as supportive by the recipients of such actions. That is, people of color are the best judges of whether a social action or message has affirmed their sense of mattering ([Hinger et al., 2023](#)). This view aligns with critical race theory's focus on valuing people of color's experiential knowledge of race and racism ([Delgado & Stefancic, 2023](#); [Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021](#)). To this end, we distinguish between CRMs and *attempted CRMs*. If an initiator of an affirming social action or message is unaware of whether it has successfully enhanced or protected the intended recipient's sense of mattering, it remains an attempted CRM.

Moreover, the requirement that the social actions or messages should proximally enhance or protect people of color's sense of mattering underscores the quotidian nature of CRMs, and helps distinguish them from other types of long-term allyship actions. By *proximally*, we mean the effect of a social action or message on the recipient's sense of mattering should be immediate or almost immediate. For instance, advocating against state legislation that disadvantages people of color (e.g., laws restricting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives) is a good example of system-level allyship work that could protect people of color's sense of mattering in the long term ([De Souza & Schmader, 2024](#)), but it is not a CRM if it does not proximally address their sense of mattering. Given the requirement of proximal impact, most CRMs are likely to be actions that involve direct contact with people of color (see [Table 1](#)).

Additionally, to qualify as a CRM, the enhancement or protection of people of color's sense of mattering could be linked to either their personal or racial identities. For instance, a Native American person might experience enhanced mattering related to their personal identity (e.g., sensing their coworkers appreciate their work) or racial identity (e.g., perceiving their concerns about Native American issues are taken seriously). Put differently, not all CRMs address a person of color's race explicitly. Although CRMs can and often do address race-related issues (e.g., checking in with an Asian American friend about how they were coping with the recent spike in anti-Asian hate crimes; [Cheng et al., 2022](#)), we also identified several studies on racial allyship and CRMs, in which people of color recounted other people's meaningful demonstration of support and validation not explicitly linked to race ([Hinger et al., 2023](#); [Stone-Sabali et al., 2023](#); [Wilkins-Yel et al., 2024](#)).

Table 1. Typology of Cross-Racial Microaffirmations

Microrecognitions	
Supportive race-based visual messages (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2023)	Authentic (rather than performative) display of racial justice symbols, particularly when there may be a cost to one's social standing for displaying them. Example: Displaying a symbol at one's home or business to communicate support for one's Arab American colleagues and friends.
Expressing genuine interest in racial and cultural perspectives (Koch et al., 2025)	Expressing genuine interest in understanding a person's race-based and cultural experiences and perspectives. Example: Inviting a multiracial person to share about their identities and experiences, rather than demanding and attempting to categorize them (e.g., "would you be open to sharing about how you identify, culturally or racially, and what that means to you?" instead of "what are you?")
Validating racial and cultural perspectives (Jones & Rolón-Dow, 2018)	Validation of a person's racial and cultural identity, perspectives, and experiences. Example: Validating a trans woman of color's excitement around representations of their intersecting identities (e.g., "Thanks for sharing about Clean Slate [a TV series featuring a Black transgender woman lead]," and "good representation is so crucial. I can't wait to start watching it this weekend!")
Autonomy support (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2024)	Showing support for a person's choices even when they differ from those of mainstream White norms. Example: Supporting one's Latine American friends for prioritizing their parents' preferences ahead of their own, instead of criticizing or pitying them for not taking an individualistic approach by disregarding their parents' wishes.
Positive feedback (Ellis et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2024)	Expressing genuine gratitude or praise to another person. Examples: Complimenting someone on their contributions to an organization or writing them a letter of gratitude.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Celebration (Brick et al., 2023)	Celebrating accomplishments and major events with a person. Example: Organizing a lunch celebration for a coworker who won an award conferred by the Black staff council in one's organization.
Relationship initiation and enhancement actions	Taking the initiative to get to know a person or to deepen an existing relationship. Example: Inviting a new neighbor to one's home for dinner.
Emotional support (Powell et al., 2013)	Active listening and providing empathy and care to a person experiencing a stressful situation or taking the initiative to check on how a person is doing.
Instrumental support	Providing practical help or meeting a person's physical needs. Example: Giving a person a ride to the airport.
Companionship	Accompanying a person to attend a stressful conflict-resolution meeting or showing up to support a person conducting a workshop for the first time.
Microtransformations	
Encouragement (Wong, 2015)	Providing an affirmation to increase a person's motivation to address a challenging situation or to realize a potential. Example: Providing reassurance or expressing confidence that a person can succeed.
Advice seeking	Seeking and following the feedback or advice of another person signals to the person that they can influence and contribute to others. Example: "Soo-jin, I would love to hear your suggestion on how to delegate tasks in this project."
Sponsoring (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2024)	Increasing a person's professional and social capital to enhance their capacity to contribute. Examples: Encouraging a person to attend a conference, introducing a person to an expert, offering to nominate a person for an award, and advocating for a person's promotion within an organization.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Informational support (Ellis et al., 2019)	Providing advice to expand a person’s capacity to contribute in professional and academic settings. Example: Explaining the unwritten rules for success within an organization.
Microprotections	
Idea spotlighting (Snyder, n.d)	Spotlighting a person’s ideas during a meeting or conversation when they are ignored or when someone takes credit for a person’s ideas. Example: “To be clear, Ana was the first person to propose this idea, so let’s give Ana the credit she deserves.”
Strength highlighting (M. A. Warren et al., 2022)	Defending a person by highlighting their strengths or the strengths of their ideas when they are criticized or marginalized. Example: “We shouldn’t dismiss Peter’s idea. I Think there’s a lot in what he said that makes sense.”
Disrupting interruptions (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021)	Intervening in a conversation as it is occurring to acknowledge when a person of color has been cut off or talked over to return the attention to them. Example: “Hey, this is the second time LaRicka has been interrupted. We should allow her to complete her sentence.”
Confrontation (Sue et al., 2019)	Directly addressing a harmful behavior or microaggression in the presence of the recipient of such behavior. Example: “I’m wondering if you’re assuming Amir is dangerous because of the way he looks. We want to be careful about not stereotyping based on race.”
Advocacy (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2024)	Offering to advocate for a person who has experienced a harmful action. Example: Writing on behalf of another person, with their permission, to a supervisor to complain about the inappropriate behavior of a coworker.
Validation of harm	Validation of the harm experienced by a person, including their encounters with racism. Example: “What just happened was wrong! He shouldn’t have spoken to you in that tone.”

Note: The recipient of the CRM in each of these examples is a person of color.

The How Question: Typology of Cross-Racial Microaffirmations

Just as the concept of mattering stipulates the purpose of CRMs, it also provides the conceptual basis for a typology of CRMs (see Table 1). A typology that meaningfully categorizes different types of CRMs can help people expand and diversify their practice of CRMs by reflecting on which types of CRM they typically engage in and overlook in their daily lives. For instance, some individuals might be adept at providing social support to people of color (e.g., offering practical assistance and empathy) but less so at defending people of color when acts of racial microaggressions are committed, or vice-versa. Additionally, a typology can inform future scale development projects that could measure diverse dimensions of CRM.

Although several microaffirmation typologies exist (e.g., Ellis et al., 2019), we selected and adapted the typology of racial microaffirmations, originally developed by Rolón-Dow and Davison (2021) based on the qualitative findings of college students of color who described their experiences of microaffirmations. We chose this typology because it aligns with the conceptual foundation of CRMs in this article. That is, Rolón-Dow and Davison's typology distinguishes between two categories of microaffirmations (*microrecognitions* and *microtransformations*) that correspond, to some extent, with the feeling-valued and the adding-value dimensions of mattering (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). This typology is also congruent with the allyship literature by addressing both reactive expressions of allyship (challenging proximal threats to people of color's sense of mattering) and proactive forms of allyship (promoting mattering in the absence of proximal harm; De Souza & Schmader, 2024). However, we made two modifications to Rolón-Dow and Davison's typology. Although Rolón-Dow and Davison developed four categories of racial microaffirmations, our typology consists only of three because the definitions of two of their categories are so similar that they could not be meaningfully distinguished from each other.¹ Additionally, in line with the centrality of mattering in the conceptual foundation of CRMs, we modified the definitions of the remaining three categories to address more explicitly the mattering experiences of people of color. For each type of CRM, we propose a few nonexhaustive examples from the literature of allyship, microaffirmations, and positive social actions. We also add the caveat that, given our definition of CRMs, the actions and messages described in Table 1 qualify as CRMs only if they exceed the requirements of social conventions and occupational expectations, and are successful in proximally enhancing or protecting people of color's sense of mattering.

Microrecognitions

Rooted in the feeling-valued dimension of mattering (Prilleltensky, 2020), cross-racial microrecognitions are actions and messages that enable people of color to feel valued by others—that is, to feel respected, cared for, taken seriously, validated, and appreciated (Flett, 2018; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021). Cast in this light, cross-racial microrecognitions could be particularly useful in contexts where people of color experience marginalization—namely, where they are rendered invisible, taken for granted, lack a sense of belongingness, or feel unappreciated (Steele, 2018; Wong & McCullough, 2021). Table 1 outlines 10 microrecognition strategies that address diverse facets of the feeling-valued dimension of mattering. Among these, supportive race-based visual messages, expressing genuine interest in racial and cultural perspectives, validating racial and cultural perspectives, and autonomy support for choices that differ from mainstream White norms are microrecognition strategies that explicitly affirm people of color's racial or cultural experiences and perspectives. Rolón-Dow and Davison provided a good illustration of validating racial and cultural perspectives in their study: after a Black college student voiced concerns about limited racial diversity on campus, a White classmate supported this viewpoint by acknowledging the hegemony of Whiteness on campus, the privileges White students enjoyed, and the difficulties these created for Black students. Beyond these four microrecognition strategies that explicitly address race and culture, we present six additional microrecognition strategies. Positive feedback and celebration are microrecognition strategies that enable people of color to feel appreciated, whereas relationship initiation and enhancement actions, emotional support, instrumental support, and companionship convey care and enable people of color to experience a sense of belonging.

Microtransformations

If microrecognitions address the feeling-valued dimension of mattering, microtransformations, by contrast, tackle the adding-value component of mattering (Prilleltensky, 2020). Cross-racial microtransformations are the actions and messages that enable people of color to perceive they can add value to others—these include actions that increase people's capacity for success and a sense of confidence and empowerment (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021)². These include encouragement, advice seeking, sponsoring, and informational support (see Table 1). The key difference between microrecognitions and microtransformations lies in their focus. The former focuses relatively more on the interpersonal relationship between the CRM initiator

and recipient (e.g., the recipient perceives that the CRM initiator cares for them). By contrast, microtransformations extend beyond this relationship to address how recipients can enhance their capacity to make a meaningful contribution (e.g., the recipient perceives they can make a greater impact in their career). For example, whereas emotional support (e.g., empathy) and instrumental support (e.g., offering a ride to the airport) are microrecognitions that enable people of color to feel valued, informational support, a microtransformation strategy, involves advice in professional and academic settings (e.g., advice on attending a workshop to improve one's skills) that improves their ability to contribute.

Microtransformations may be especially meaningful in academic and professional settings in which people of color may lack role models, experience the imposter phenomenon, and doubt their capability for success (Cokley et al., 2024; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2024). Of the four microtransformation strategies, sponsoring and informational support address the practical aspects of adding value (e.g., opportunities to improve one's skills and gain experience), whereas encouragement and advice-seeking relate to the psychological elements of adding value. For instance, seeking and following the advice of a person of color on a professional issue signals confidence in their expertise on this issue, thereby strengthening the person of color's perceptions that they can make a meaningful contribution. Likewise, encouragement is an affirmation that instills hope, confidence, or perseverance in a person (Wong, 2015). Encouragement differs from other positive social actions, such as praise, gratitude, or empathy (which could be microrecognitions), through its focus on boosting another's motivation to engage more deeply in current actions, believe in future possibilities, or explore new opportunities. Examples of encouragement include conveying confidence in one's capacity for success, urging them to stay the course when they feel discouraged, and suggesting that they aim higher to consider new opportunities—collectively, these affirmations amplify the recipient's capacity to add value. Encouragement could be a particularly salient cross-racial microtransformation for students of color (Wong et al., 2020). Indeed, two studies found that encouragement, in the form of assurances that students were capable of success, exerted a more positive impact on African American students' academic outcomes than on White students (Cohen et al., 1999; Yeager et al., 2014). To summarize, cross-racial microrecognitions and microtransformations both enhance people of color's sense of mattering in the absence of any explicitly harmful actions or messages. By contrast, the next category of CRMs addresses threats to one's sense of mattering.

Microprotections

Cross-racial microprotections are actions and messages that proximally safeguard people of color's sense of mattering when they encounter a harmful action or message (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021). Microprotections resemble Sue et al.'s (2019) concept of microinterventions, although a key difference is that microinterventions are responses to racial microaggressions, whereas microprotections could apply as a defense to any harmful interpersonal act that threatens people of color's sense of mattering. In Table 1, we outline six microprotection strategies—idea spotlighting, strength highlighting, disrupting interruptions, confrontation, advocacy, and validation of harm. As an example of idea spotlighting, Snyder (n.d.) suggested that, during meetings, when women's ideas are ignored or someone else takes credit for them, others could highlight their ideas to draw attention back to them (see Table 1). Similarly, spotlighting can be used in cross-racial microprotections to defend against threats to a person of color's sense of mattering when their ideas are overlooked or inadequately acknowledged in meetings. As an example of advocacy, Wilkins-Yel and et al.'s (2024) study described a situation in which a Native American woman felt supported by her mentor who collaborated with her to draft an email to her supervisor addressing a racist comment directed at her by another person.

Finally, we acknowledge that there is potentially some overlap among the three categories of CRMs because the different dimensions of mattering are related to each other. For instance, informational support is classified as a microtransformation, but a person of color who receives information about new professional opportunities (e.g., a workshop to enhance their skills) might not only increase their capacity to add value but also feel grateful to and valued by the CRM initiator, which is the focus of the CRM category of micro-recognitions. Despite this overlap, we believe the three categories of CRMs can be distinguished by the relative saliency of their impact on people of color. Using the same illustration, although a person who receives informational support might feel valued by the CRM initiator, we argue that the primary impact is an increase in the person's experience of being able to add value (i.e., an increased capacity for success). Ultimately, we view the distinctions among the three CRM categories as an empirical question, which can be addressed in future scale development and factor analytic research.

Practical Recommendations

Having described a typology of CRMs, we now discuss the factors that might predict when CRMs are likely to be effectively enacted and how people who

demonstrate allyship behaviors can improve their practice of CRMs. Much of our earlier discussion on the meaning of allyship applies here. That is, CRMs are more likely to be successful when the initiators of CRMs have a deep understanding of racism at all levels—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). We would add that understanding the intersectional nature of oppression (Crenshaw, 2017) will likely augment the practice of CRMs. To illustrate, recognizing that Black women's experiences of gendered racism (Lewis & Neville, 2015) are qualitatively different from those of Black men (Schwing et al., 2013) and women from other racial groups can help individuals be more discerning about how to tailor their CRMs to address the needs of specific minoritized groups.

We posit several additional factors that may be salient to the success of CRMs, relative to other forms of allyship actions. To reiterate, the success of a CRM is assessed from the perspective of the intended recipients. If a well-meaning person does something intended as a CRM but it is not experienced by the recipient as protecting or strengthening their experience of mattering, it remains an attempted CRM. This recipient-centric view of CRM mirrors Sue's (2017) experiential account of microaggressions, which prioritizes the phenomenological experience of harm rather than any objective standards concerning what constitutes a microaggression. Given this recipient-centric stance, people are likely to improve their effectiveness in practicing CRMs by (a) asking their intended recipients about how they can best support them (Koch et al., 2025), (b) paying attention to how their intended recipients respond to their CRM, (c) genuinely seeking feedback about the impact of their actions (Hinger et al., 2023), and (d) reflecting on what they could have done differently. This attitude of avoiding assumptions, practicing openness to continuous feedback, and engaging in critical reflection essentially encapsulates the multicultural orientation of cultural humility (Hook et al., 2017). Hence, we surmise that people who strongly embrace cultural humility in their interactions with people who are racially different from them are likely, over time, to be successful in enacting CRMs.

As earlier discussed, CRMs do not necessarily involve saying or doing things explicitly tied to race. Indeed, research on microaffirmations indicates that people from minoritized backgrounds value individuals who recognize cultural differences without overemphasizing them (Hinger et al., 2023; Koch et al., 2022). Hence, the successful practice of CRMs involves striking a delicate balance between using CRMs that explicitly address race and those that do not. On the one hand, some people of color might not be particularly interested in conversations about race and may benefit more from practical expressions of support not explicitly tied to race (e.g., borrowing a car). On the other hand, some scholars have observed that White Americans have been

socialized to avoid discussions of race, especially with people of color (DiAngelo, 2022; Williams et al., 2023), and, as such, completely leaving out race from the practice of CRMs is neither helpful nor affirming of people of color's experiential reality.

How, then, can one know when to raise issues of race when enacting a CRM? We offer no easy answers, except to propose that this requires the virtue of cultural wisdom, which is "the ability to critically integrate multiple perspectives on culture and race and apply them with situational optimality" (Wong et al., 2024). We further suggest that one of the best ways to hone one's cultural wisdom is to develop close, authentic relationships with people of color from diverse racial groups (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Such cross-racial relationships not only enable CRMs to arise organically within the context of everyday interpersonal interactions but may also increase people's comfort in using CRMs that involve explicit conversations about race (Davis et al., 2018). As these cross-racial relationships develop, people may become more knowledgeable about their neighbors', friends', and co-workers' racial experiential realities and racial identities, which helps them discern when an explicit conversation about race (e.g., "As an African American man, how do you feel about what our boss just said?") could meaningfully enhance people of color's sense of mattering.

Implications for Education and Training, Counseling, and Organizations

Our conception and typology of CRMs provide practical insights that can advance anti-racist efforts across many areas, including counseling, education, healthcare, and organizations. Traditionally, diversity training has focused on raising awareness of microaggressions and implicit biases, yet research suggests that such training alone is only modestly effective and does not translate into behavioral change (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Schmander et al. (2022) further emphasize that effective training should focus on imparting practical skills that directly influence interpersonal interactions rather than rely solely on increasing awareness of bias. CRMs offer an actionable alternative by shifting the emphasis from identifying harm to fostering meaningful engagement that affirms people of color's sense of mattering.

In education, CRMs can be integrated into teacher training and professional development programs. Teachers play a key role in shaping the experiences of students of color, and the inclusion of CRMs in education can enhance these efforts. For instance, teachers can use microrecognitions to validate students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences, microtransformations to mentor and encourage students and microprotections to intervene when students'

contributions are ignored. Such training can be embedded within teacher preparation and professional development programs to ensure that CRMs become a standard part of pedagogical practice.

Counselors and other health professionals can also incorporate CRMs into their practice to support people of color seeking their services. When implemented with genuine intent to enhance or protect a person's sense of mattering, which is linked to their personal or racial identities, CRMs can be valuable healing tools. For example, a counselor could ask their clients of color about how they are coping with national race-based events, or a physician might acknowledge a patient's concerns about racialized healthcare disparities. Of course, as we stated, these behaviors must be distinguished from those expected as part of one's professional role, such as the mere expression of empathy. As health professionals become adept at using CRMs, these actions can be seamlessly integrated into their practice, enriching their relationships with the people of color they serve and supporting their sense of mattering.

CRMs could also be incorporated in the training of professionals, whereby educators and supervisors offer CRMs to trainees and model how CRMs may be enacted. Incorporating CRMs into healthcare training could be achieved through case-based learning, standardized patient interactions, and reflective practice exercises. In counseling training, CRMs can be introduced alongside core microskills, such as active listening and reflection of feelings (Hill, 2020). Role-playing exercises and case vignettes can be used to help trainees recognize opportunities for CRMs and respond authentically and appropriately. These methods can help trainees and even more seasoned practitioners develop the awareness and skills necessary to integrate CRMs into clinical interactions. In the [online supplemental file](#), we provide several vignettes that illustrate the negative consequences of omitting CRMs and the positive impact of practicing them. These vignettes, alongside the examples in [Table 1](#), can be used as resources for training purposes.

Finally, leaders of organizations can benefit from our conception and typology of CRMs. Although mandating CRMs as part of organizational requirements may be counterproductive, leaders can play a crucial role by modeling these behaviors. Leaders who consistently demonstrate CRMs set the tone for the entire organization. Such modeling can encourage others to adopt similar behaviors, fostering a climate of inclusivity and support. Leaders can facilitate this sort of organizational culture by openly recognizing and valuing the contributions of employees of color (microrecognitions), providing opportunities for employees of color to thrive in the organization (microtransformations), and spotlighting their ideas during staff meetings when they are ignored or marginalized (microprotections). As these behaviors

permeate the organizational culture, they can deepen employees of color's experience of mattering.

Future Research

Building upon our proposed typology, future counseling psychology research can examine the factor structure of CRMs (e.g., hypothesizing a three-factor solution) to test the proposed typology of microrecognitions, micro-transformations, and microprotections. In scale construction, the development of scale items should tap into recipients' perspectives (i.e., people of color's experience of receiving CRMs) to be consistent with our recipient-centric definition of CRMs. It might also be possible to develop scales that address the initiators' perspectives (i.e., self-reports of the frequency with which people exhibit social actions and messages intended to enhance or protect people of color's sense of mattering). However, based on how we define CRMs, such instruments should only be conceived as assessing potential or attempted CRMs because there is no guarantee that individuals who display such actions successfully amplify people of color's sense of mattering. Additionally, qualitative research exploring CRMs from both initiators' and recipients' perspectives may provide insights to aid in the construction of CRM measures and the understanding of how CRMs foster and protect people of color's sense of mattering.

After developing CRM measures, a valuable next step for research could be to examine whether the experience of receiving CRMs is associated with mental health outcomes. Research could also examine whether and how CRMs may be associated with organizational outcomes, such as students' first-year experiences in college or workplace climate. The experience-sampling method may be especially suitable to study the quotidian nature of CRMs by allowing researchers to tap into real-world, daily occurrences of CRMs.

Future research could also identify constructs that predict the effective use of CRMs. Factors discussed in the previous section of this paper (e.g., cultural wisdom, cultural humility, friendships with people of color) may not only be useful for supporting the validity of CRM measures but also help identify profiles of individuals who use CRMs effectively. If certain identified factors can meaningfully differentiate between successful and unsuccessful applications of CRMs, research findings can inform the development of CRM skills training.

Relatedly, researchers could evaluate whether CRM skills training can complement traditional anti-racist training (e.g., increasing awareness of microaggressions and implicit biases) to produce behavioral change (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Future studies can also examine whether CRM training enhances professionals' competencies when working with people of

color across counseling, education, and healthcare. Specific research questions might include assessing its potential to improve therapeutic alliances, increase academic engagement, and boost patient treatment compliance. For example, researchers can assess whether adding CRM training for physicians enhances racially minoritized patients' trust in their physicians and the healthcare system, ultimately leading to better treatment adherence and follow-up care.

Another direction for future counseling psychology research is to test whether CRMs may reduce an individual's microaggressive behaviors, as Rowe (2008) posited that the use of microaffirmations could be inversely correlated with harmful behavior. If evidence supports such speculations, a promising direction for intervention research is to assess whether CRM skill training will reduce the frequency of microaggressions. Future research could also explore which types of CRMs (i.e., microrecognitions, microtransformations, and microprotections) may be easiest or most difficult for initiators to apply, as well as which might be most strongly correlated with positive outcomes for recipients, such as an enhanced sense of mattering. Relatedly, future research can examine if the types and motivations underpinning CRMs displayed by diverse demographic groups (e.g., White and people of color) are different or similar.

It is also important to examine how CRMs may help repair fragile alliances among people of color (Demanařig et al., 2024). Historically, some communities of color have been pitted against each other (e.g., Asian Americans vs. Black Americans) through White supremacist racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). Therefore, it is important for future research to examine how interminority group tension may impact openness to and the effectiveness of using CRMs in interminority contexts.

Additionally, future research should investigate how intersectional minoritized identities (e.g., gender and religion) influence the delivery and receipt of CRMs. For example, could pronounced experiences of marginalization in one aspect of a person's minoritized identity (e.g., sexism) make them more or less likely to promote and deliver CRMs? Another promising future research direction is to evaluate the impact of CRM training on the mattering experiences of people of color in organizations. Future research can evaluate whether and how specific types of CRMs (i.e., microrecognitions, microtransformations, and microprotections) may be especially effective in helping organizations change how individuals interact with one another. Finally, although this paper focuses on CRMs, future research, building upon our typology, could examine microaffirmations for people with other marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ microaffirmations (Sterzing & Gartner, 2020).

Conclusion

In this article, we highlighted the relevance of CRMs to anti-racist efforts at the interpersonal level. We emphasized that interpersonal racism includes the omission of positive social actions and that this core idea constitutes the conceptual basis for why CRMs are necessary in anti-racist initiatives. We defined CRMs, explicated their conceptual foundation by drawing from the allyship and mattering literature, and articulated a typology of CRMs. Lest anyone misunderstand our stance, we are not suggesting psychologists focus on CRMs at the expense of anti-racist work at the intrapersonal and systemic levels. However, we also caution against assuming anti-racist efforts at these levels automatically result in more frequent use of CRMs. Indeed, some people who do impactful, systemic anti-racist work may be less committed to anti-racism in their daily interactions with people of color.

Perhaps, CRMs have been given far less attention in the field of counseling psychology and the discipline of psychology because the types of social actions and messages reflected in CRMs are less glamorous, less high-profile, and simply less visible than those of system-level anti-racist work. CRMs are practiced within the everyday social milieu, away from the klieg light of public attention. Yet, that which is brief, simple, and ordinary—an offer to nominate a colleague for an award, an expression of genuine interest in getting to know a person better, or organizing a baby shower for a neighbor—can be immensely meaningful to people of color when we consider that the cumulative omission of CRMs may be a salient feature of how people of color experience marginalization (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014; Steele, 2018; Wong & McCullough, 2021). We hope our article will ignite interest in CRMs, which will, in turn, contribute to a more nuanced, inclusive, and comprehensive vision of racial justice.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Rolón-Dow and Davison (2021) define microrecognitions as actions and cues that enable people to feel “made known, made visible, appreciated, or included,” while microvalidations are those enabling people to feel “accepted, corroborated, legitimized or given value (p. 8).” We are concerned that these two definitions, and the examples supporting them, are too similar and cannot be meaningfully distinguished to develop separate subscales in a scale development project. Hence, we retained microrecognitions, but not microvalidations, in our typology.
2. Our definition of microtransformations differs slightly from that provided by Rolón-Dow and Davison (2021). Whereas their definition includes actions that instill a sense of belongingness in recipients, we exclude this aspect in our definition as it overlaps with the concept of microrecognitions.

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