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Understanding how micro affirmations support multiply marginalized social justice school leaders to thrive

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper illuminates and amplifies enduring wisdom from the everyday experiences of thriving women of color social justice school leaders who receive and give microaffirmations as an essential part of their asset-based leadership praxis. This study contributes to the knowledge base that informs leadership scholarship and practice in service of creating the conditions that truly support and sustain a diverse educator workforce.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses a purposive case study of four women of color social justice school leaders. Information was gathered over multiple years based on four volunteers from a professional development support network. Sources include ten observations of affinity-based network meetings; eight in depth, semi-structured interviews, feedback surveys and written accounts of participants; descriptive and reflective field notes and artifacts including publicly accessible material.

Findings – Our analysis suggests that receiving diverse types of microaffirmations sustained participants' resilience in the face of persistent racial and gendered microaggressions. Their social justice leadership praxis touches various levels of school organizations, indicating how microaffirmations serve as a key strategy for coping with a singular paradox: being punished (i.e. microaggressions) for doing transformative leadership.

Originality/value – This paper makes an important contribution by centering rich insights from participants who are multiply marginalized leaders by focusing on microaffirmations as a response to microaggressions. This study connects concepts and constructs from different disciplines (leadership, race and gender).

Keywords Gender, Skills flexibility, Empowerment, Leadership, Social justice, Racial discrimination

Paper type Research article

Introduction and purpose of study

There is emerging evidence that racial, ethnic and gender diversity in educational leadership bolsters positive teacher outcomes and student achievement, particularly for historically underserved student populations (Bartanen and Grissom, 2021; Burkhauser, 2017; D'Amico *et al.*, 2017; Goldring and Taie, 2018; Grissom *et al.*, 2021; Hanushek *et al.*, 2004). Meanwhile leaders of color are more likely to leave the principalship, and/or change schools (Gates *et al.*, 2006; Tekleselassie and Villarreal, 2011). To understand associated factors more deeply, some researchers have focused on gendered racial microaggressions, such as those experienced by Black female leaders (Agosto and Roland, 2018; Capper, 2015; Krull and Robicheau, 2020; Sue, 2010; Weiner *et al.*, 2021). Although generative scholarship examines intersectionality within K-12 scholarship, less work has been done to understand the marginalization facing individual actors across various levels of an

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Note: The study detailed in this document has received approval from a federally recognized Committee for Protection of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at an accredited institution of higher education in the United States.



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ecological system, spanning micro to chrono (Cheung *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, little attention has been paid to gendered racial microaffirmations as an approach that supports leaders to thrive.

Researchers have studied the importance of microaffirmations in the practices of educators as a way to support K-12 and university students to cope with discrimination, implement culturally relevant practices and create more inclusive environments for learning (Boyce-Rosen and Mecadon-Mann, 2023; Pérez Huber *et al.*, 2021; Samuels *et al.*, 2020; Sue *et al.*, 2007). Researchers have identified asset-based strategies as essential to improving school climate and outcomes for marginalized students (Boykin and Noguera, 2011; Gay, 2023; Howard, 2003; Paris and Alim, 2014). However, little attention has focused on how microaffirmations intersect with social justice leadership (SJL) identities and practice. By using a case study, we examine how multiply marginalized public-school leaders disrupt gendered racial microaggressions by investigating the following questions: (1) What types of microaffirmation practices do social justice-oriented women of color school leaders employ across professional and personal systems?; and (2) How do women of color school leaders integrate racial microaffirmations into their leadership practice?

Theoretical grounding

We utilized three conceptual frameworks to examine the phenomenon: Microaggressions and Microaffirmations; Gendered Racism and SJL. Studying microaffirmations requires the identification of microaggressions within and across identity locations (Koch *et al.*, 2022; Pérez Huber *et al.*, 2021). Solorzano and Huber offer microaffirmations as “everyday strategies of validation and acknowledgement People of Color utilize with and among each other” in response to racial microaggressions (Solorzano and Huber, 2020:86). Recognizing the fact that the professional work of school leaders (and thus the accompanying microaggressions and microaffirmations) occurs within the nested organizational levels of schools, we also employed Boyce-Rosen and Mecadon-Mann (2023) Layered Framework for Implementing Micro Affirmations in Schools (LFIMS), which develops an ecological continuum with the implementation of microaffirmations to include personal, interpersonal and group action. In the LFIMS, microrecognitions are visual or verbal actions that recognize presence and/or identity. Microvalidations involve using active listening, appreciative inquiry and shared cultural intimacy to recognize presence and/or identity. Microtransformations are group level actions and/or decisions that create and facilitate a sense of belonging. Finally, microprotections involve disrupting and interrupting harmful practices and/or advocating on behalf of marginalized groups. Leveraging multiple articulations of microaggressions and microaffirmations enables a thorough rendering of the multiple facets of this phenomenon.

Scholars note the need to leverage microaggressions to account for conceptions of gendered racism and microaggressions (Burton *et al.*, 2020; Peters and Nash, 2021). Therefore, we incorporate the scholarship of Sue (2010) which offers additional layers by noting that microaggressions “communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership [including gender and sexual orientation]”. Sue’s articulation moves from identifying the presence of the aggression to noting what the act does; it adds a layer of material consequence that can mediate the connectivity of actors within the targeted membership. In turn, Sue’s articulation of this additional layer provides opportunities to consider how actors within marginalized groups might negotiate past the ways their agency faces challenges as a result of the hostility communicated through microaggressions.

We utilized SJL because existing frameworks highlight the enduring challenges and resilience of individuals through praxis. While SJL frameworks have excavated the contours of morality and ethical commitment (Capper and Young, 2014), the theories have struggled to illuminate the complicated nature of SJL as a reflective practice in response to persistent pressures at the hands of the systems in which SJL practice is wielded (Torrance *et al.*, 2020). Further, there remains a call to trace the structural and systemic pressures in the micro-interactions and practices, which mediate the overall subjectivity and subject

relations (Bacchi, 2012) within the field of SJL. Thus, this case study attempts to close the gap between SJL and racial microaffirmation as SJL praxis. We seek to contribute to the ongoing investigation into the everyday experiences of multiply marginalized leaders (Bogotch and Shields, 2014; Capper and Young, 2014; Dantley and Tillman, 2010; MacDonald, 2020; Stovall, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Wang, 2018; Young and Laible, 2000).

We first summarize our research methods. Then, we provide a profile for each leader, and common types of gendered racial microaggressions experienced. After, we describe the ways the leaders used microaffirmations to thrive including a review of key findings from the data in response to our research questions. We end the paper by exploring the significance of our findings as well as implications for research and practice.

Research methodology

Investigations that seek to highlight the ways that complicated processes are housed inside practices are effectively illuminated through case studies (Torrance *et al.*, 2020). This case study (Mills *et al.*, 2010) involved a purposive sample of participants from a professional development support network (PDSN) for leaders of color. The PDSN was an organized structure intentionally designed to support leaders who were othered in City District (anonymized). The primary author served as an action researcher for this project, participating in the facilitation and design of PDSN activities. The secondary author participated in sessions and conducted the interviews. Data collection included taking descriptive and reflective field notes; collecting artifacts and conducting two interviews with each participant within a four-month period. Data analyzed included: individual interviews; feedback surveys and written accounts of participants; descriptive and reflective field notes and artifacts including publicly accessible material.

Positionality

The lead author is an Asian American woman and former school and district leader who continues to support K-12 educational leaders in a university setting. As a scholar, she draws particular attention to underrepresented leaders including the multiple marginalization that happens for women of color leaders. Related, she focuses on how to empower multiply marginalized leaders to improve schools.

The second author is an African American male former teacher and school leader who is currently an advanced doctoral student. His interests focus on excavating and highlighting often hard-to-trace experiences of actors within public school settings. As a scholar, he draws particular attention to considerations of race and gender as mediating factors to the experiences of marginalized actors in school settings.

While our professional history in K-12 school systems affords an attunement to the phenomenon, it also presents the potential for bias. To account for this, we worked iteratively to check for potential biases within our analytical schema in a process that is more authentically reflexive while recognizing objectivity may not be reached with work meant to glean insight from participants who share the reality of complex identity locations (Ríos and Patel, 2023). Still, we worked with a diverse group of seasoned leaders and researchers to review our burgeoning analysis and conclusions across multiple sessions towards limiting bias (Roberts *et al.*, 2020). Our proximity (albeit removed in years compared to our participants) to the problem mixed with our distance as researchers provides a deep understanding of the particularities of the problem as well as the structures, systems and layers that undergird the problem. In doing so, we offer an analysis that works to encourage participants to bring their lived experiences in from the margins (Ríos and Patel, 2023). Thus, our participants offer an active and intentional act of leadership to bring the perspectives of women of color leaders to the center through participation in this study.

Setting

Consistent with educational research case study design, we note the context in which our participants operated as it helps to situate the phenomenon inside pertinent details that give rise

to rich, detailed understanding of the individual experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Mills *et al.*, 2010). All four participants worked in City District, a diverse medium sized urban K-12 system in California with student enrollment averaging 10,000 from preschool through high school. In 1968, City made national news for its decision to implement a voluntary desegregation plan that integrated all schools through an ambitious two-way busing plan (Kirp, 2024). Now, more than 50 years later, the city has experienced significant demographic change. In 1968, 42% of student enrollment was African American students. In the 2021–2022 school year 43% of the population is composed of a combination of African American, Latino and Asian students. Latinos represent the largest single group of students of color.

All participants voluntarily participated in the grant funded PDSN for underrepresented leaders in City District. Each session started with food and community building, followed by structured reflection activities accompanied by both small group and whole discussions. Each session ended with feedback to inform future sessions.

Data collection

Engagement with the leaders in this case began through the PDSN over the course of two years (10 meetings). Extensive meeting notes were taken during each session as well as during facilitator debriefings. Given that this study arose out of learnings from these meetings, we treated the notes from the PDSN meetings as focus group notes rather than ethnographic observations.

During the PDSN activities, we invited participants to volunteer to be interviewed about multiple marginalization (including gender) and SJL. We conducted two individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews, lasting 60–75 min each, with each volunteer within a four-month period (total 8). After each interview, we wrote analytical memos and contact summaries (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, we reviewed publicly available documents that further described many of the significant events that the participants discussed. The three sources of information enabled us to reach triangulation in the data analysis.

Participants

Maria describes herself as Latina, Chicana, female and bilingual immigrant. She served as the Principal of City Elementary which had a Spanish Immersion program. Her school was the only school in the study that had majority teachers of color serving majority students of color. During her tenure, Maria's school completed a multi-year process similar to one that occurred at UC Berkeley when the leadership removed the name of a white male scientist born in the 1800s who perpetuated "the evolutionary benefits of slavery" as well as the name of a professor who perpetuated that Filipinos had "an intrinsic inability for self-governance" and were an "illiterate and ignorant class to be brought into modernity through the benevolence of American rule" (Kell, 2020). After the study, Maria accepted a promotion at the county level. [Note-for purposes of anonymity we have chosen not to directly quote and cite news articles about our participants as those articles provide personally identifiable information and instead provide similar examples].

Carla describes herself as a Black Christian woman who was from the school community (she graduated from the school where she worked). During the study, she was promoted from Vice Principal to Principal at City Middle, a school with a majority white teacher workforce and majority students of color and led the school through a major attendance policy change that attempted to address the dynamics described by Oakes' (1985) seminal work entitled *Keeping Track: How schools structure inequality*.

Both Jasmine and Priti worked as Vice Principals at City High, a large high school with a majority white teacher workforce and majority students of color. Jasmine describes herself as a Black female who is also queer but that being Black and female is "hard enough", so she has chosen not to publicly identify by her sexual orientation. She was promoted from Vice Principal to Interim Principal and later Executive Vice Principal at City High when the

Principal returned from personal leave. Priti uses East Indian, immigrant, woman and mother to describe her identity. Ultimately, she accepted an out of classroom teacher leader role at a neighboring elementary school after working as a Vice Principal at City High citing the need to prioritize her family responsibilities after the completion of the study.

Data analysis

We began our analysis by transcribing and coding the semi-structured interviews. Upon initial review, we employed descriptive reflexive thematic analysis (Braune and Clark, 2006, 2019) by reviewing data multiple times with attention to salient themes across and within each type of information source. Data were analyzed through a five-step process: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding (Yin, 2011). The processes included, “familiarizing oneself with the data, initial code generation, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes” (Braune and Clark, 2006). In the reassembling process, we cross-analyzed connections between data collected in the PDSN meetings, publicly available documents and individual interviews to identify broader themes. Given the organic nature of the project which came out of authors’ reflections about the meetings, we approached the analysis of PDSN meeting content as we would for focus group notes. We then used then constructed a coding scheme which consisted of both etic and emic coding to account for cogent insights from the literature as well as nuances from within the experiences of the participants (Adair and Pastori, 2011). Once salient themes across all data sources were solidified and compiled into a codebook (Anfara et al., 2002), and agreed upon by both researchers, codes were applied by one researcher while being reviewed and corroborated by another researcher after each piece of data were analyzed. The resulting analysis includes nuance from patterns as well as the frequency of those patterns across sources of information.

Finally, as an intrinsic case, the leaders are actively practicing in the field. Therefore, all participant names have been anonymized for the purposes of this article. We have also chosen not to include excerpts from the publicly available documents in order to protect anonymity. Instead, where applicable, we paraphrase evidence from those sources.

Findings

This investigation sought to answer two research questions: (1) What types of microaffirmation practices do social justice-oriented women of color school leaders employ across professional and personal systems?; and (2) How do women of color school leaders integrate racial microaffirmations into their leadership practice? Our analysis highlights how SJL and multiple marginalization create a nexus of multi-directional praxis of affirmations and validations within and beyond affinity spaces. Simultaneously, there is a nuanced synchronicity in which the leaders internalize daily lessons related to their racialized and gendered social location while rebuffing the potential (re)production of the structure and systems that undergird their professional authority as a leader and administrator within a larger organizational system emerged. Notably, microaggressions undermine the success desired by both the leaders and the public mission of City District. In this section we provide evidence for three themes:

- (1) the Ubiquity of Gendered Racial Microaggressions; (2) Utilizing Gendered Racial Microaffirmations towards Leader Resilience and (3) Giving Microaffirmations Toward Mutuality.

The ubiquity of gendered racial microaggressions

To understand the powerful role of microaffirmations, we first summarize the ubiquitous gendered racial microaggressions that all four participants described as direct and indirect microaggressions, enacted at both individual and group levels (Table 1). Three of the four participants described those that were also hierarchically enacted. For example, while sitting at

Table 1. Sample of gendered racial microaggressions

	Direct	Indirect	Hierarchically enacted
Maria	Called a “fiery Latina” by white staff at district level as well as white parents	Parents direct questions of competence to district disproportionate to white colleagues	District officials and board members refusing to provide services for DLL
Priti	White female teachers openly ban together to question her decision	Reporting ever fully feeling respected in white spaces	District Admin overturning decisions disproportionality without adequate cause
Carla	White parents ask for the Principal while she sits in the Principal office, at the “Principal” desk	Parents openly demean and question her capabilities	*Not Mentioned
Jasmine	White man maintenance staff paternalistically refuses her entry to a room in her own school	Team members assuming she will “handle” the Black kids	District second guessing her leadership more often than white counterparts

her desk in the Principal’s office, Carla described white families who would frequently “come into the office, it says principal – I’m sitting in the principal’s desk, or the vice principal – and they just assume that that’s not me” (Carla, Interview 2). This frequent racial and gendered microaggression, as Carla noted, seems to be due to Carla not fitting their assumed “profile” of principal. Meanwhile, Jasmine described how members of the administration team would repeatedly assume that she, as the Black administrator, would address issues that involved African American students, an indirect racial microaggression. Priti described how many district administrators (often older males) would overturn her decisions disproportionately without adequate cause, evoking hierarchically enacted gendered racial microaggressions. Many of the direct microaggressions challenged their authority as leaders while indirect microaggressions often focused on competence and capacity. District leaders were named in many of the hierarchically enacted examples especially related to support or lack of support.

The participants described microaggressions and microaffirmations occurring simultaneously. Further in the text we offer a lengthier excerpt to illustrate the SJL praxis that rests at the nexus of racial and gendered aggressions, and the employment of affirmations. Maria describes an incident that occurred in the principals meeting with the other members of the PDSN where her known professional authority and positionality did not shield her from the long reach of racial microaggressions:

Maria: We were the only leaders of color at the meeting. I always get to principal meetings early. We became the early birds. After a few meetings, my supervisor had the nerve to say to me, “I observe you sitting with the same 2 people all the time.” She meant us two Chicanas and the one Black gentleman. She went on, “You are always sitting with them. What’s up with that?” I was like, are you kidding me? I let her go on, “You’re always talking to them, hanging out with them . . .” I called her out and asked, “Would you have the same conversation with the two veteran white principals? Is this the conversation you have with them too?” She was in shock and unable to respond. I continued, “You are supposed to be the equity lead for the district . . . I’m the first one here because I have the key to the building. I’ll tell you the order of what happens. We do what people naturally do. We sit together. We’re seeking support. We’re seeking loyalty. We’re seeking to problem-solve. These principal meetings are not structured for us to problem-solve. So that’s why we sit together. I cannot believe you are questioning my integrity. You would never do that to the veteran white principal. Would you do that to them?”

Facilitator: You’re still upset about this and it happened last year.

Maria: To this day, some of the principals will say, “don’t sit next to so and so or you will get called out on that!” I worked for my position here, I earned it.

Facilitator: What were the underlying assumptions that you were battling. What were the assertions being made?

Jasmine: That he was questioning why she was sitting with people of color. He wanted to know why isn't she stepping up as a leader and sitting with different folks.

Facilitator: What's the danger?

Leader C: You can't have too many people of color together.

Facilitator: It's a secret. They can't say that.

Leader C: No private spaces of color.

Leader D: Can I add. We always have the onus to be the one educating white folks. I need to be at this meeting and be next to the people I trust. All this fake equity – do you know what I mean?

(PDSN meeting, personal communication, October 7, 2019).

By sharing her inner dialogue, Maria highlights the significant internal resources she employs to respond to microaggressions – making clear the incursion while also enacting two key aspects of SJL: a determination to move from rhetoric to action, and a critique of marginalizing behaviors. Her process illuminates how this expertise is unique to underrepresented leaders and has hidden costs due to constant marginalization they face while working to enact their SJL praxis. Yet, Maria also employs microaffirmations within the affinity space that supports her stances.

This extended example, and several others, provided sufficient data for us to write a paper about microaggressions. Yet, the participants' consistent employment of microaffirmations as a way to navigate the constant barrage of racial and gendered microaggressions as a part of their daily work experience towards efficacy and resilience emerged as the most important focus of the study.

Utilizing gendered racial microaffirmations towards leader resilience

Everyday affirmations, validations and affinity spaces sustained the participants. Specifically, they described how receiving microaffirmations contributed to professional resilience that allowed them to compartmentalize so that they can protect themselves and fulfill their SJL goals – at times holding the tension of the two.

For example, Maria describes leading at City Elementary as “not as an act of will, but as an act of necessity for ‘doing the job [we] were asked to do’” (Maria, Interview 1). In other words, the District hired her to improve outcomes for underserved students, yet when she does it, there is a tax that can be emotionally painful and draining. In fact, the sentiment expressed in Maria's quote was shared among all four leaders and each described how the PDSN meetings were such a contrast, filled with countless examples of leaders exchanging microaffirmations and validations in the form of information and resource sharing (language and text), exchanges of warmth such as smiles, hugs and handshakes (physical gestures), as well as the appreciation for a confidential space that was exclusively for the purposes of connecting and supporting the underrepresented leaders in the district. Priti accents the point when the facilitator asks participants what types of support they need. She shares, “this meeting is wonderful support. I never thought that I could call on another [marginalized] admin to attend this meeting. I am learning to ask people on my team to help, so I can be in this space.” (PDSN meeting, personal communication, February 22, 2022). Priti describes the impact that the presence of other people of color has on her resilience and wellbeing. During the COVID-19 pandemic reopening, Carla responded to the continuous piling on of work by district leaders that resulted in collective exhaustion by remarking “I need groups like this. It helps to know others are having the same or similar experiences” (PDSN meeting, personal communication, December 14, 2021). By the end of the discussion on needing to rest in order to stay resilient, she remarked, “I'm also at peace. I don't do emails on the weekend. I will psych myself out by bringing work home but leaving it in the car. Things are building up, but I can't worry about that. I can focus on the things I can control.”

In the same meeting, Carla noted being “in the same position as [other participant] who explicitly names the racialized nature of the context of their work which is named as a partially

retorical question: ‘Am I questioned more or challenged more because of my color?’” This question is part of the consequences documented in the literature on racial microaggressions, in that the slights can cause a person of color to question the validity of their perception of events. Yet Carla’s responses to the discussions highlights the resiliency that can be conferred through affinity spaces such as the PDSN.

Jasmine’s interview went even farther when she acknowledged the immense toll of multiple microaggressions that snowballed and almost caused her to leave the profession. During this period, Jasmine was injured at work intervening in a physical altercation between students. Her reflections go beyond noting institutional and structural policies and practices that undermine her ability to deliver on the promise of her appointment as a social justice leader. Jasmine noted the nuanced and disruptive ways that racial microaggressions (in addition to other forms of dehumanization) work to erode a sense of agency and morale:

One month ago, I was really low and did not want to return. I spent time thinking about how other VPs operate and how they disappear when there are fights or angry parents. When I return, I don’t want to be the first line of defense. A win is that I have gotten to a place where I do want to return . . . How, as a leader of color, do I not become the person everyone comes to for support for Black and brown students? How do I not become the person everyone comes to every time . . . ? (PDSN meeting, personal communication, December 14, 2021).

In the same period Jasmine also described the powerful ways that the presence of other Black and Brown women inspired, comforted and empowered her to ultimately persist (and be promoted). Jasmine participated in PDSN meetings while on workers compensation leave. She chose to defy the draining effects of gendered racial microaggressions by voluntarily attending affinity spaces even when she was not required to go to work. She speaks to the crucial role of solidarity through microaffirmations as part of SJL praxis:

Yeah, it’s been tremendous, right? Just like, like being in a space that acknowledges that it’s different for us that it’s harder for us. And, you know, hearing the testimony of other, you know, Black women in this district. And, you know, building that community has been tremendous.

Jasmine’s reflections illustrate a broader paradox: underrepresented leaders are hired and then dehumanized for doing the very work for which their leadership appointments authorize them to do, causing them to reconsider how they might persist in their institutions—institutions that seem to deride these powerful social justice leaders through every day and structural marginalization at the micro and macro levels.

Giving gendered racial Microaffirmations toward mutuality

To add an additional layer of complexity, Maria, Priti, Jasmine and Carla support others who are marginalized in their school community as a way to mutually thrive. They create a more inclusive school environments by cultivating trusting relationships with marginalized groups, as well as deep knowledge of their contexts including the gendered and racialized dynamics of their workplaces. Layered acts of microaffirmations-microrecognition, microvalidations, microtransformations and microprotections – were woven into their leadership practice, requiring participants to imagine and enact organizational microaffirmations while safeguarding their own dignity and resilience.

In her interviews, Maria described microrecognitions for Latine families by honoring the promise and beauty of their shared culture and heritage:

. . . it’s their experience too. We’re all first generation Latina, from Chile, from Peru, from Mexico, from Guatemala – we all have similar experiences. So my experience is their experience. And it’s going to be [their] child’s experience, too. So we’re gonna pull [them] up, because we get it, we did that thing too. We’ve lived it, you know?

This type of recognition bolsters lines of solidarity and mutuality wherein social justice leaders can advance the goals of the community by putting forward a rhetorical rebuff of the otherwise

marginalizing rhetoric that Latine families may face—effectively enacting multiple SJL principles.

Meanwhile, Priti described how microrecognitions can be expressed nonverbally through calm, nods and the very non-disclosed presence of other women of color school leaders:

With a black principal, I can just breathe in the room a little bit easier. It's easier to relate to her and neither of us is trying to be a rock star. We're just really just trying to do our best with our lives, and with school and everything.

While Priti is explicit about the overall effect of the microaffirmation, there is also a recognition that the effect is contextualized by the presence and force of whiteness. Priti precedes this quote with a fuller critique of marginalizing behaviors and predispositions of schools and their leadership. The resulting insight is a praxis of SJL in the everydayness of microaffirmations in response to extant microaggressions.

Our participants all had their own way of engaging in microaffirmations ranging from showing up to public gatherings outside of the normal scope of job responsibilities (microvalidation), to working within the confines of school programming as ways to validate improved academic and behavioral standing for students of color. At the microtransformation level, all leaders in this study described multiple examples of advocating for the needs of students of color in the face of barriers from colleagues and district administration. Such was the case when Priti had to tactfully navigate white colleagues “trying to impose [their] white values and white ways onto [Latinx] population constantly as the right way” (interview 2). Here, Priti not only deftly navigates the everydayness of racialization, but does so by transforming the circumstance for all by brokering a bridge for inclusion between the white educators and the student. Priti's microaffirmation resulted in a macro shift for all involved. Their insistence on SJL can be seen in how these leaders navigated barriers with a keen recognition of the cultural, social and political contexts in which they were operating—all geared towards ensuring equity and excellence for the most marginalized students in their schools. Jasmine described herself as being “the person in the room that's going to advocate” for the overlooked needs of students of color. She described how she built affinity with a Black female student who was consistently criminalized and pushed out Describing her long-term, intentional approach as “. . . just slowly building a relationship with her, holding her accountable—for how she shows up. And [student thinking], ‘I trust [Jasmine]. I want [Jasmine] to help me with this situation.’ And so, could I do that if I wasn't black? I don't know.” Finally, each leader described how microprotections empowered both the students of color and themselves. Maria described how Latine families became part of her extended family, empowering her to continue to persist. In cases of Priti and Carla, both described the need to challenge a white educator's deficit belief about a student of color and their family.

These examples of praxis demonstrate how each participant improves schools by critically analyzing the context and stickiness of daily interactions related to their personal racialized and gendered social location while rebuffing the potential (re)production of the structure and systems that undergird their professional authority as a leader and administrator within a larger organization. Ultimately, our participants made clear that enacting microaffirmations is integrated into their practices because it benefits both the leaders and their students of color, helping them to mutually thrive.

Discussion

In seeking to systematically explore the challenging and distinct nature of the phenomenon, we posed two research questions: (1) What types of microaffirmation practices do social justice-oriented women of color school leaders employ across professional and personal systems?; and (2) How do women of color school leaders integrate racial microaffirmations into their leadership practice? Ultimately, Maria, Priti, Jasmine and Carla provide a window into how

multiply marginalized leaders can wield an array of gendered racial microaffirmations as a means of disrupting and potentially diminishing microaggressions at the individual and organizational levels.

The leaders in this case thrived, in part, by receiving and giving microaffirmations, validations and participating in affinity spaces on a consistent basis. To summarize our high level findings, [Figure 1](#) entitled MMSJL Microaffirmations in Action builds upon the work of [Pérez Huber et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Boyce-Rosen and Mecadon-Mann \(2023\)](#) by illustrating how microaffirmations create a sense of mutuality by sustaining the leaders and how the leaders enact them through their everyday work. While scholars have substantiated the nuance of microaffirmations in response to everyday racism ([Pérez Huber and Solorzano, 2014](#)), our leaders helped teach us that these seemingly small gestures ([Boyce-Rosen and Mecadon-Mann, 2023](#)) are anything but small when it comes taking consistent and thoughtful action to counter entrenched systems of oppression and inequity inherent in schools. In seeking to deeply understand the wisdom and experiences offered by our participants, the figure below illustrates not just how microaffirmations are a part of the role of SJL, but also how these actions, gestures and utterance flow, substantiating the leader as not just striving towards social justice as a goal, but embodying SJL as a practice of ameliorating the ways that systemic oppression and inequity are often inscribed into the work of leaders and schools ([Tekleselassie and Villarreal, 2011](#)).

Attention to the praxis of microaffirmations is critical towards understanding how multiply marginalized Social Justice Leaders navigate an important paradox: being punished (i.e. microaggressions) for doing the work of transformative leadership that is needed to meet the aims of educational equity and excellence for all students ([Tekleselassie and Villarreal, 2011](#)). Importantly, their hierarchical positions as formal leaders did not protect them from racial and gender-based microaggressions that exist of women leaders at multiple levels ([Burton et al., 2020](#)). In fact, it may have elevated the intensity because their positions provide them with authority over others and thrust them into the center of divisive issues in high stake forums. Our study opens new avenues of insight into how SJL is enacted through seemingly small, but profoundly impactful actions, thoughts and dispositions. Scholars assert that microaggressions can inscribe degrading psychological and physiological injuries that can be rebuffed through microaffirmations ([Boyce-Rosen and Mecadon-Mann, 2023](#)). In bringing these frameworks together, the field can imagine what transformational, multiply marginalized leaders do in order to navigate their experiences towards effective equity and excellence for all in their care at both the micro and macro level ([Agosto and Roland, 2018](#)).

Conclusion and implications

Our intent in focusing on microaffirmations is not to diminish the impacts of microaggressions and/or other forms of systemic racism, rather to focus on actionable ways of coping and

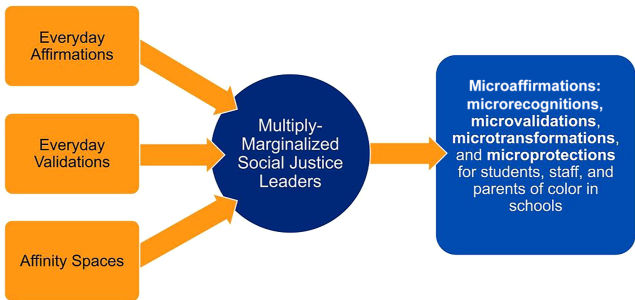


Figure 1. MMSJL microaffirmations in action

leading that attend to the harm at the individual and school level. As underrepresented leaders who have thrived, Maria, Priti, Jasmine and Carla are outliers in a white and male dominated profession. The study of how they navigate layers of systemic oppression through microaffirmations requires us to apply scholarship on race and gender to the study of leaders more deeply (Burton *et al.*, 2020). We capture the micro level decisions, experiences and labor required to navigate the multiple layers of SJL praxis (Agosto and Roland, 2018) as indexed through individual, interpersonal and group practices. Furthermore, positive experiences in networked structures designed for underrepresented leaders indicate the need to create systemic and targeted support for underrepresented leaders.

Scholars must establish long standing and trusted relationships with multiply marginalized leaders so that they can study micro level behaviors. Only then will researchers be able to amplify the unspoken labor and what Patricia Hill Collins notes as oppositional knowledge, or wisdom to counteract oppressive forces (2016). Finally, learning from multiply marginalized leaders can support researchers to identify the persistent and opaque aspects of sustaining leader diversity, a key priority to improving schools for underserved students.

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