

Dissent as a voice of support:
The influence of argument types in providing support
to those who have experienced racial discrimination

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Racial microaggressions are regularly experienced by people of color. We contend that effective support includes arguments that affirm recipients' social identity and refute claims about the threatened social group. We found that high quality social identity arguments had more valid reasoning and produced more social identity esteem than low quality arguments. High quality social identity arguments were also associated with more causal reattribution that linked to higher argument evaluations and social identity esteem.

KEYWORDS: argument quality, racial microaggressions, social identity, social support, speech acts

1. INTRODUCTION

Experiences of racial discrimination can have negative consequences for the well-being of people of color (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Paradies et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the role of argument for disarming the effects of racial discrimination has not been extensively examined by argument scholars, despite argumentation theory's potential for producing social consensus and change. Fortunately, the social support literature has documented a dissent and restorative function for individuals who have experienced forms of racial discrimination (e.g., Davis & Afifi, 2019; Mossakowski & Zhang, 2014). Thus, the purpose of our study is to examine the role of argument for providing support to those who have experienced racial discrimination.

2. RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS, ARGUMENT, AND SUPPORT

In the United States racial microaggressions are defined by Sue and his colleagues as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007, p. 273). Sue (2010) has identified three types of microaggressions: acts that degrade a person’s racial heritage, acts that invalidate or exclude the reality of a person of color, and acts that overtly convey racist attitudes and beliefs. From this typology three types of communicative acts can function as racial microaggressions: avoidance (acts that convey an unwillingness to engage in contact with people of color), derogation (acts that express the superiority of members of privileged social groups), and categorization (acts that convey stereotypical assumptions about a person’s race or ethnicity).

Researchers have found that these types of racial microaggressions are linked to various negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and emotional distress (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Racial microaggressions also pose a threat to an individual’s social identity, a part of one’s self-concept tied to membership in a social group (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Tajfel, 1981; Thoits, 2013). Social identity threats associated with racial microaggressions negatively affect an individual’s collective self-esteem and social identity worth (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Thai, Lyons, Lee, & Iwasaki, 2017; Turner, 1999).

2.1 *Racial microaggressions and argument*

To address racial microaggressions we turned to the line of argumentation theory and research that has focused on the normative pragmatics of speech acts and their role in argument. These analyses have produced insights about arguments involving acts of accusing, proposing and exhorting, among others (Kauffeld, 1998; Kauffeld & Fields, 2005; Kauffeld & Innocenti, 2016). Extending this work, racial microaggressions can be considered to be conversational exercitive speech acts that fix what is permissible in a certain situation to “confer or remove the hearer’s rights or privileges” (Austin, 1962, p. 120). We contend that racial microaggressions constitute a type of speech act that expresses a permissibility to maintain the dominance of privileged racial groups over racial minority groups, with an illocutionary force that casts individuals as inferior based on their race or ethnicity (Graumann & Wintermantel, 1989). Conversational exercitives are concerned with when it is permissible or conventionally legitimate in a

particular situation for a speaker to subordinate a hearer, based on situational conditions and beliefs about the speaker's rights (McGowan, 2003).

The normative conditions of exercitives likely influence the use of particular reasoning schemes to refute a racial microaggression. For instance, affirming the social identity of the person who has experienced a racial microaggression likely involves sign schemes that infer the essence of the recipient's character from his/her actions, causal schemes that infer consequences from the recipient's actions, and quasi-logical schemes that establish particular qualities of the recipient from general features (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Warnick & Kline, 1992). Particular configurations of these argument schemes may be warranted since particular patterns of reasoning likely influence specific attributions made about recipients.

2.2 Argument, social support, and aims of the study

The increasing evidence about the impact of racial microaggressions has prompted scholars to examine the communication competencies that can disarm racial microaggressions and their effects (Sue et al., 2019). To build upon this literature, we theorize about the role of high-quality argument to provide social support about racial microaggressions. We consider supportive communication to be a communal and coordination process in which support providers and recipients mutually constitute helpful responses to problematic situations (Goldsmith, 2004).

In the context of racial microaggressions providing social support is an important form of dissent, as speakers can offer alternative ways of reasoning about the situation than the view offered by the person issuing the microaggression. While social support researchers have mostly focused on understanding support messages in terms of their ability to address a recipient's emotional distress, support messages can also employ arguments that address a recipient's identity and beliefs. Considering the context of racial microaggressions, we analyze one type of argument relevant in this context, social identity argument.

Racial microaggressions are typically viewed as representing threats to one's social identity that are associated with reduced social identity esteem (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Sue et al., 2019; Thai et al., 2017). Thus, one function of effective argument and support in this context is to address the social identity threat by disarming negative beliefs about one's social group that are made salient by the microaggression, as well as affirming positive attributes of the social identity group. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) contend that making external attributions about discrimination and emphasizing the positive

aspects of one's social identity can address the social identity threats posed by discrimination incidents.

Social support in this context, then, may require restructuring cognitive attributions about one's social group and enhancing one's collective self-worth. Using reattribution theory (Weiner, 1986), social identity argument addresses social identity threats and affirms the value of the relevant social identity by changing attributions about the cause of the microaggression incident. These attributions are based on locus of control (whether the cause is internal or external), stability (whether the cause will/will not change over time), controllability (whether the cause is/is not controllable), and globality (whether the cause affects a wide/narrow range of situations). Arguments high in social identity affirmation are expected to cast racial microaggressions as external, unstable, controllable, and specific, while arguments low in social identity affirmation cast microaggressions as internal, stable, uncontrollable, and global. These argument elements also differ to the extent that they provide relevant, informative and accurate reasoning about the microaggression, which further enables message recipients to see the argument as valid and feel that their social identity worth is enhanced. Thus, a first aim of our study is to examine if the quality of social identity arguments affects recipients' evaluations of social identity arguments and their perceived social identity esteem. Specifically, we expect that:

H1: Argument recipients perceive high quality social identity arguments compared to low quality social identity arguments higher in (a) argument evaluations and (b) social identity esteem.

A second aim of the study is to determine if the effects of social identity arguments on social identity esteem are indirectly accounted for by causal reattribution and argument evaluations. Previous research on effective social support messages have found that causal reattribution mediates the effects of high-quality support on outcomes like self-esteem (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). Message effectiveness evaluations also mediate support message quality on message outcomes (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Bodie et al., 2012). By applying both of these lines of work to racial microaggressions, we contend that the effects of social identity arguments are related to causal reattributions and argument evaluations that are linked in a serial form to affect individuals' level of social identity esteem. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.

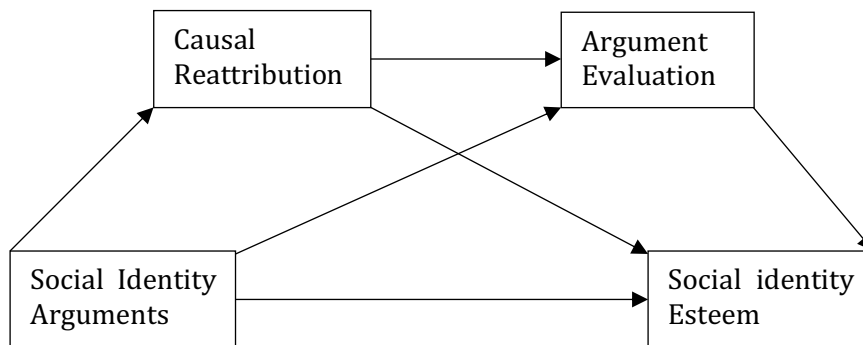


Figure 1. Serial mediation model

In the context of racial microaggressions high quality social identity arguments would enable recipients to reattribute the cause of the incident to affirm their social identity. Causal reattribution would allow support seekers to believe that racial microaggressions are caused by the perpetrator's ignorance or frame the problem as of no consequence to their social identity. Reattribution also functions as a serial mediator in that high-quality social identity arguments should engender causal reattributions that enable recipients to recognize the validity of these arguments that would produce higher social identity esteem. Overall, then, reattribution should enable high quality message arguments to influence argument evaluation and social identity esteem. Thus we expect that the effect of high-quality messages on social identity worth is mediated by reattribution and argument evaluation, with reattributions linked to higher argument evaluations that enhances social identity worth:

H2: High quality compared to low quality social identity arguments indirectly enhance recipients' social identity esteem through causal reattribution that are serially linked to argument evaluations.

3. METHOD

Participants were 256 adults (137 women, 119 men) recruited through the panel provider, Qualtrics.com, to complete an online questionnaire that included two attention filter questions. Participants were over 18 years of age, US citizens and self-identified as either Asian/Asian American ($n = 137$) or Black/African American ($n = 119$). They ranged from 18 to over 70 years of age, with 37.3% between 18-29 years, 27.8% between 30-49 years, 30.1% between 50-69 years and 5.1% who were 70 years or more.

After reporting their demographic information participants were randomly assigned to read one of three racial microaggression scenarios. Participants were cast as the target of specific discriminatory behaviors they later disclosed to a friend. They then read a message expressed by the friend whose picture was included with the message. Photographs were randomized for race and matched for gender. Participants last answered questions about the scenario and the message.

The study employed a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ between groups design that examined the quality of social identity arguments (high, low), type of racial microaggression scenarios (avoidance, derogation, categorization), and situations for each scenario type (two instances). We developed scenarios for the three types of microaggression scenarios and two situations for each scenario type; given their distinct stereotypes we created different *categorization* scenarios and situational instances for African American and Asian American participants.

After reading the microaggression scenario, participants read and evaluated one message that represented high- or low-quality levels of social identity arguments. Arguments high in social identity affirmed the recipient's social identity and reasoned that discrimination is an external problem, with the incident specific, transient and controllable. High social identity arguments used causal reasoning schemes, act-essence reasoning, and dissociation to separate the appearance of racial biases from the preferred reality of respect and achievement. Arguments low in social identity affirmation cast discrimination as an internal problem, with the incident typical and not controllable, and with behaviors generalizable to the participant's ethnicity. Low social identity arguments used schemes that fixed ethnicity as a causal factor in discriminatory behaviors. The messages and scenarios were pretested, revised, and were of similar length (100-112 words), with examples in the Appendix.

Following the message arguments participants assessed the realism of the scenario and completed measures of general argument effectiveness, social identity worth, and the mediator of reattribution. Participants completed all items on 7-point Likert scales (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree). The *realism* of the discrimination scenarios was measured with three items each that have been used in previous research (e.g., "This scenario is believable"; Feng & Burleson, 2008). Responses were averaged to form measures of scenario realism ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.88$, $SD = .994$). One ANOVA with scenario (3), argument quality (2) and situation (2) detected no significant differences for scenario realism across situational factors (at $p < .05$).

Participants next assessed the effectiveness and outcome of the support message and the proposed mediator. *General argument evaluation* was measured with four items that assessed argument quality (e.g., the message would reassure me that my perspective on the incident is correct; “the message validated my feelings about the situation”). Averaged responses formed the measure ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.51$). *Social identity esteem* was measured with four averaged items developed for the study that measured the extent to which participants perceived that the message reaffirmed their social identity and their belief that others respected and valued their race or ethnicity (e.g., “This message would make me feel proud about belonging to my racial/ethnic group”; “This message would make me feel that others respect my race/ethnicity” $\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.52$). Finally, participants rated the *reattribution* facilitated by the message with three averaged items adapted from Holmstrom and Kim (2012; e.g., “This message made me think that this incident can’t affect me”; $\alpha = .78$, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.44$). A measurement model specified the two mediators (Reattribution, Argument Evaluation) and assessed its fit with a confirmatory factor analysis using a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than or equal to .90, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than or equal to .06 (Holbert & Stephenson, 2008). Model fit was acceptable, $\chi^2(11) = 24.9$, $p < .01$, CFI = .994, RMSEA = .040 (90% CI = .019, .060), after correlating the error terms of two reappraisal and argument evaluation items.

Our analyses initially utilized analyses of variance to test if high social identity arguments were evaluated differently on general argument effectiveness and enhanced social identity esteem than low social identity arguments (H1). A second set of analyses examined if causal reattribution mediated social identity arguments and argument evaluations, and that also mediated social identity arguments on social identity esteem (H2). Mediation analyses were conducted using ordinary least square path analysis with the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2018). Model 6 was utilized with bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for indirect effects based on 5000 bootstrap samples. Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors are reported.

4. RESULTS

H1 predicted that social identity affirmation arguments are positively related to argument effectiveness and social identity esteem. H1 was confirmed, as high social identity arguments ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.37$) compared to low social identity arguments ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.37$) were evaluated as having more effective arguments, $F(1, 244) = 5.175$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .021$, and higher social identity esteem, $F(1, 244) =$

14.332, $p < .001$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .055$; $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.40$, than low social identity arguments ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.53$). There were no other significant effects for scenario types, situation instances or social identity arguments in these two analyses.

H2 predicted that the quality of social identity arguments used to address racial microaggressions would enhance recipients' social identity esteem through causal reattribution and argument evaluations. As expected, causal reattribution was positively correlated with both argument evaluations (.615) and social identity esteem (.586, each $p < .001$).

H2 was confirmed, as persons who evaluated high quality social identity arguments compared to low quality social identity arguments were more likely to engage in causal reattribution ($a_1 = 0.539$ (.17), $t = 3.02$, $p < .01$), which was serially linked to higher argument evaluations ($d_{21} = 0.634$ (.05), $t = 12.04$, $p < .001$), that were linked to higher levels of social identity esteem ($b_2 = 0.588$ (.05), $t = 11.25$, $p < .001$; $adb = 0.201$; 95% CI = 0.0691 to 0.3446; $c' = 0.42$, $t = 3.32$, $p < .01$). In addition to the serial mediation effect, the quality of social identity argument was also associated with causal reattribution ($a_1 = 0.539$ (.17), $t = 3.02$, $p < .01$); which was directly associated with social identity esteem ($b_1 = 0.212$ (.05), $t = 3.871$, $p < .001$; $ab = 0.114$; 95% CI = 0.0274 to 0.2340). However, the quality of social identity argument was not associated with argument evaluations ($a_2 = 0.150$ (.15), $t = .986$, $p = .986$); so while argument evaluations were linked to social identity esteem ($b_2 = 0.588$ (.05), $t = 11.25$, $p < .001$, the indirect effect was not significant ($ab = 0.088$; 95% CI = -0.075274 to 0.2697). While the total effect of social identity argument on social identity esteem was reduced ($c_{ps} = .541$, $t = 4.48$, $p < .001$; $c'_{ps} = .276$, $t = 3.32$, $p < .01$), the direct effect remained statistically significant, which indicate that other variables related to the relationship between social identity argument and social identity esteem remain to be identified.

5. DISCUSSION

Our analysis of social identity arguments determined that high quality social identity arguments were judged to be more valid and likely to increase social identity esteem than low quality social identity arguments. We found clear evidence that differences in quality were associated with argument validity and enhanced social identity esteem with no significant variation across discrimination scenarios or situations. There was also clear evidence of a serial mediation effect for social identity arguments on social identity esteem. That is, high quality social identity arguments were more likely to invoke more causal

reattributions about the microaggression scenario, which was linked to higher argument validity and enhanced social identity esteem.

Our findings are theoretically and methodologically significant in several ways. The findings were provided by Asian-Americans and African-Americans, two groups who experience racial microaggressions. These groups provided the reasoning that when the microaggression is viewed as external to the recipient, unstable, controllable, and specific, support providers are more likely to succeed in affirming their social identities. The serial mediation findings further suggest that arguments that invite causal reattributions are important for they facilitate judgments about the validity of the arguments provided that also lead to esteem enhancement. However, whether or not it is the particular set of argument schemes or the causal attribution factors that facilitate attributions about the recipient's ethnicity is unclear and needs to be studied further.

The study's findings contribute to both argumentation theory and interpersonal communication theory. For several decades, theorists have recognized that argument theory should involve the study of argument as both product and process. Yet few theorists have focused their work on understanding argumentation in everyday interaction, describing patterns of everyday argument and analyzing ways of engaging in argument across diverse interaction tasks, modalities and relationships. The Illinois argument tradition has emphasized the need for such empirical work. This study contributes to that tradition by linking examining systematic linkages in the use of argument schemes and attributional factors as they address the aim of exercitive speech acts. The analysis of exercitive speech acts could be probed further to determine the specific felicity conditions that enact the speaker's permissibility to subordinate a hearer, which would then provide the issues or stases for arguers to employ in response and rebuttal (Kline, 1979). The findings also establish an independent role for argument evaluation as affecting argument outcomes such as enhancing a recipient's esteem. It should also be noted that the findings we obtained were consistent across multiple situations and three different types of racial microaggressions.

The findings of the study also contribute to interpersonal communication theory. While there is an important literature on interpersonal conflict with implications for the study of argument, conflict researchers have typically not incorporated argument types and patterns systematically into their research programs. Differences in argument types, evidence use and argument schemes would be valuable additions to illuminate the conflict management practices between friends, co-workers, and family members. Our findings contribute to the interpersonal conflict literature because they show that conflict

situations often call for both dissent and support, with social identity arguments designed to bring about different ways of reasoning about a situation in an effort to help the recipient targeted in the conflict situation.

As with any study future research could improve upon our design. Instead of scenarios participants could provide recalled instances of their experiences with microaggressions, or be asked to produce messages to provide support to recipients of microaggressions. Other types of arguments could be theorized and differences in their quality could be examined as ways of disarming racial microaggressions. Longitudinal designs could be employed, too.

6. CONCLUSION

Argumentation theory can advance with more pragmatic analyses of argumentation and more study about the impact of everyday argument on people's lives. In the context of racial microaggressions, effective argument includes social identity arguments that refute claims about the threatened social group and affirm the recipient's social identity. Valid arguments can make a difference for those who experience racial microaggressions, for social identity arguments that engage recipients in more causal reattribution are viewed as more valid and hence more likely to enhance recipients' self-worth and respect. Thus, social identity argument can play a role in disarming the effects of racial microaggressions.

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APPENDIX

Examples of Social Identity Arguments for addressing Racial Microaggressions

High Social Identity Affirmation: You know this is not about you, right? It's not your fault that some people can't get past your ethnicity. Other people and I respect you for who you are. As a member of your ethnicity, you have so many achievements in your personal and professional life to be proud of. So, incidents like these won't harm your strong heritage and rich culture. Maybe if we explain to people that their actions can be seen as offensive, they might not

act that way again. I think things are changing because people are becoming more aware of such biases. Incidents like these might become less frequent in the future.

Low Social Identity Affirmation: Unfortunately, people tend to make so many assumptions about you because of your ethnicity. That's why some people might not sit next to you on the bus or socialize with you in other situations. I know that you can't easily succeed at work or even expect great service at a restaurant because of your ethnicity. People treat you differently because of your ethnicity all the time. But we can't change everyone's mindset and make them treat everyone equally. People will continue to behave like this because such biases don't go away quickly. I think such incidents will continue to happen in the future.