

# Fumbling in relationships across difference: the potential spiraling effects of a single racial identity reference at work

Sandra E. Cha

*International Business School, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA*

Stephanie J. Creary

*Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, and*

Laura Morgan Roberts

*Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Black people, as members of a historically underrepresented and marginalized racial identity group in the workplace, are often confronted with identity references – face-to-face encounters in which their race is referenced by a White colleague in a comment, question or joke. Identity references can be interpreted by a Black colleague in a variety of ways (e.g. as hostile and insulting or well-intentioned, even flattering). Identity references can derail the building of relationships across difference, but under certain conditions may open the door for deeper understanding and connection. The conceptual framework in this article delineates conditions under which an identity reference may elicit an initial negative reaction, yet, when engaged directly, may lead to generative experiences and promote higher connection and learning in relationships across difference.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This article builds theory on identity references by incorporating relevant research on race, identity, diversity, attribution and interpersonal relationships at work.

**Findings** – The framework identifies a common precursor to identity references and three factors that are likely to influence the attribution a Black person makes for a White colleague's identity reference. It then describes how, based on that attribution, a Black person is likely to respond to the White referencer, and how that response is likely to affect their interpersonal relationship over time.

**Originality/value** – By explicating how a single identity reference can have significant implications for relationships across difference, the framework deepens understanding of how race affects the development of interpersonal relationships between Black and White colleagues at work. In doing so, this article advances research on race, diversity, workplace relationships and positive organizational scholarship.

**Keywords** Workplace, Black people, African Americans

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Organizations are notoriously ignorant with respect to race and its sociohistorical impact on the nature of work and the people who perform it. Whether passively or actively, most leaders and members avoid naming, interrogating and learning about racial differences. In contrast to diversity and inclusion, which are often characterized as “happy talk,” people typically express discomfort, fear and anxiety around racial discourse (Bell and Hartmann, 2007). Yet, in recent months, a floodgate of thoughts, feelings and experiences of race in the workplace have opened: leaders have proclaimed that “Black Lives Matter” and rejected brutality



The authors thank guest editor Eddy Ng for guidance and support, and are grateful for the valuable reviewer feedback received. This work was enriched by thoughtful comments from Jane Ebert, Andy Molinsky, Belle Rose Ragins and Beth Schinoff, as well as participants from the Brandeis Business and Psychology Research Group and the Positive Relationships at Work Roundtable at Cornell University. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Academy of Management annual meeting.

---

toward and police killings of Black people; work organizations have espoused anti-racist aspirations; allies have championed new initiatives for racial justice and equity; and Black people have brought their experiences of systemic and interpersonal racism from the margins to the center of organization-wide forums and media channels. The long-standing silence about race in the workplace has been broken, at least for now.

In the wake of this moment, many Black workers are bracing themselves for the wave of missteps that are inevitable when White colleagues begin to inquire or comment about race. What do you do when somebody “fumbles the ball” in a conversation about race – when they say something that may be well-intentioned rather than malicious, but that nonetheless rankles, offends or deeply upsets you? What factors differentiate the outcomes of these conversations?

In our research on race, we have been struck by how often Black people experience *identity references*: face-to-face encounters in which their racial identity is referenced by a White colleague (the referencer), such as in a comment, question or joke about race. To illustrate, in our research on journalists, an African American journalist described how colleagues asked, “Do Black people tan?” These types of comments can derail the building of relationships across difference, but under certain conditions, may open the door for deeper understanding and connection. Recently, White people have increasingly made identity references related to news events, such as police brutality, racial harassment in parks, neighborhoods, schools and workplaces, and Black Lives Matter protests. For example, White people have said to Black colleagues, “I can’t believe what happened to George Floyd. Are you okay?”

In this article, we articulate how identity references can trigger both negative and positive relationship trajectories depending on characteristics of the Black person in question, their relationship with the White referencer, and their attribution for and behavioral response to the identity reference. Though characteristics of the White referencer also affect relationship formation, we chose to center the experiences of Black workers during identity references. We do so because Black employees, who are most often the targets rather than initiators of identity references, can respond to a White colleague’s identity reference in very different ways, and the way in which they respond strongly impacts the relationship. This observation goes against a dominant framing in the public discourse of Black people as disempowered in the workplace. Our critical perspective emphasizes greater agency for Black people. At the same time, we acknowledge that Black employees can face an arduous choice in deciding how to respond to a White colleague’s identity reference. Responding in a way that meets the needs of both relational partners is delicate and effortful, and it imposes a disproportionate “relational tax” on Black employees.

Black workers can respond to an identity reference in three different ways (disaffirming, going along or mindful correcting). Of the three potential responses, we propose that mindful correcting is the most likely to spiral into increased relational closeness over time. This article offers insight into how identity references, which may initially be experienced negatively by Black workers as a type of microaggression, can ultimately lead to generative experiences and promote higher levels of positivity in relationships across difference when viewed as a well-intended relational fumble. Mindful correcting can help to strengthen relationships through the deeper learning that occurs for both parties.

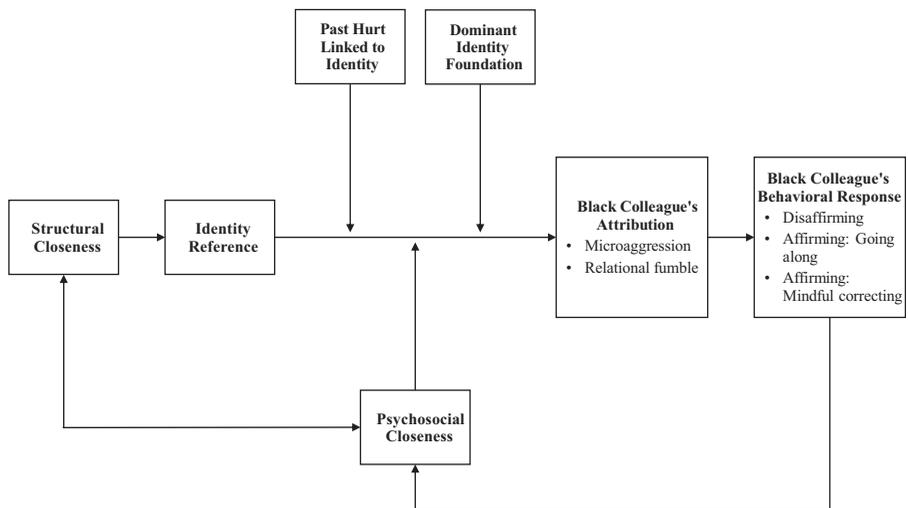
### **Relationships across difference: building and fumbling**

Relationships constitute the connective tissue and fabric of work organizations (Dutton and Ragins, 2007); they are conduits through which tasks are coordinated (Gittel, 2001, 2002, 2011), resources are generated or exchanged (Creary *et al.*, 2015; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Ragins and Dutton, 2007) and engagement is heightened or diminished (Kahn, 1990). In an increasingly global society, organizations are employing more workers from diverse

backgrounds. By 2040, over half of the US working-age population will consist of traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities (Broughton, 2008). Given this trend, workers will have to become more astute at building high quality “relationships across difference” (hereafter referred to as RADs) – interpersonal relationships with coworkers whose social identities differ from their own – in order to promote positive work, career, developmental and organizational outcomes.

According to Davidson and James (2007), the characteristics of high quality RADs include positive affect and rapport, ongoing learning, resilience, longevity, engagement, challenge and support. Despite the importance of developing high quality RADs, it can be tough to embody these characteristics across social identity-based differences. People are typically attracted to “similar” others in workplaces, such as people who belong to the same social identity group(s) and/or display similar cultural characteristics (Harrison *et al.*, 1998; Ibarra, 1995; Pfeffer and Fong, 2005). Although people from different identity groups are required to interact at work, such intergroup encounters are often seedbeds for conflict due to limited exposure, misunderstanding, implicit bias and overt discrimination (Blake-Beard and Roberts, 2004; Brewer and Brown, 1998; Dumas *et al.*, 2013; Dumas *et al.*, 2008; Phillips *et al.*, 2009; Ragins, 2008). This leaves an open question regarding how high quality RADs can develop in the face of such challenges.

This paper seeks to understand dynamics that affect the development of high quality RADs at work. Specifically, we develop a conceptual framework of identity references (see Figure 1 below). Our framework identifies a common precursor to identity references and three factors that are likely to influence the attribution a Black person makes for a White colleague’s identity reference. It then describes how, based on that attribution, a Black person is likely to respond to the referencer, and how that response is likely to affect their interpersonal relationship over time. By explicating how a single identity reference can have significant implications for RADs, our framework deepens understanding of how race affects the development of interpersonal relationships at work.



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual framework  
of identity references

---

### Identity references and microaggressions

The identity reference construct focuses on an observable behavior (making a verbal statement referencing a Black colleague's racial identity) on the part of a dominant racial group member. It does not limit its scope to only identity references that are interpreted in a negative light by a Black colleague. An identity reference could be interpreted by a Black colleague in a variety of ways (e.g. as hostile and insulting or well-intentioned, even flattering). As our framework reveals, a Black colleague's interpretation of (attribution for) the identity reference is likely to have a profound effect on the trajectory of a RAD. Conceptually, this is crucial; the identity reference construct enables us to explore variations in how Black workers interpret and respond to the incident, and to better understand the conditions under which we might see positive and/or negative outcomes, helping to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Black employees' experiences at work.

We do acknowledge that many identity references could initially trigger a negative reaction in Black workers – who may feel offended or concerned that they are being stereotyped or viewed solely through the lens of their racial identity by the referencer. This negative reaction aligns with experiencing racial microaggressions – defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 271). The microaggressions construct focuses on communications by dominant group members that have been interpreted by racial minorities as communicating “hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 271) and that increase stress and negative affect (Lui and Quezada, 2019).

On the other hand, many identity references could be viewed as “relational fumbles” – well-intentioned yet clumsy attempts to strengthen a work relationship by acknowledging, affirming or inquiring into salient identity differences. Below, we develop a process model and explore positive and negative trajectories that can ensue from a single identity reference in the workplace.

### A common precursor to identity references: structural closeness

Structural closeness refers to the extent to which a relationship between two people involves physical proximity, frequent interactions and multiplexity (Kelley *et al.*, 1983). Proximity refers to both an objective physical distance and a subjective sense of distance between people (Kiesler and Cummings, 2002; Wilson *et al.*, 2008). Frequency of interaction refers to the rate at which people connect within a given period of time (Berscheid *et al.*, 1989; Kelley *et al.*, 1983). Finally, multiplexity refers to the diversity of interactions between people (Hinde, 1997). Multiplex relationships are those in which individuals in a relationship engage in a diversity of behavior in the same context (Brajkovich, 1994; Hinde, 1997), such as the same organization or department, or across different contexts, such as personal and work domains (e.g. Methot *et al.*, 2015).

As shown in Figure 1, our model proposes that high structural closeness in a RAD increases the likelihood of an identity reference. Individuals who see and interact with one another more frequently are likely to view the other person as more familiar and their behavior as more predictable. As a result, they are likely to feel more comfortable and psychologically safe around one another (Jain *et al.*, 2016; O'Donovan and McAuliffe, 2020). Psychological safety – the belief that an individual can be open, authentic and direct in a particular setting or role (Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2011) – causes individuals to communicate more openly (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). As such, a White coworker in a structurally close relationship with a Black coworker may feel comfortable making identity references such as, “What do you think about those [Black Lives

Matter] protestors? It's a good thing we don't have those kinds of problems in our organization."

### **Factors that predict a Black person's attribution for an identity reference**

Our model also identifies three factors that are likely to have a strong impact on a Black person's attribution for an identity reference. Two factors (past hurt linked to the identity and dominant identity foundation) are characteristics of the Black person's racial identity. The third factor (psychosocial closeness with the referencer) is a characteristic of the relationship between the Black and White colleagues.

First, we propose that when a Black person has a history of experiencing hurt – facing negative stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination – as a result of their race, the identity reference is more likely to trigger identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011) by calling into question the extent to which their Black identity is infused with virtuous qualities, regarded favorably, regarded as capable of progress and adaptation, and/or integrated and balanced (Dutton *et al.*, 2010). Identity threat may increase the salience of the white referencer's potentially hostile intentions (Kramer, 1998) and make the Black colleague more likely to attribute the identity reference to the referencer's underlying negative dispositions (e.g. racism, unlikability, intention to harm) (Coleman, 2013; Ely and Roberts, 2008; Pettigrew, 2001), thereby experiencing the racial identity reference as a microaggression.

Second, we propose that a Black person who has a strong foundation of experiencing their race as a dominant identity in a different context will experience less identity threat and be less likely to make a negative dispositional attribution for the identity reference (i.e. to interpret it as a microaggression). For instance, a Nigerian male who grew up as a dominant group member in Nigeria and now works in the US may experience little identity threat when coworkers ask him about Africa or about African Americans. Dominant group members may not think much about their dominant group as a social category, or they may associate that identity with primarily/mostly positive feelings such as pride. As a result, an identity reference is unlikely to trigger concerns about other people's evaluation of that identity, and they may be less likely to experience an identity reference as a microaggression.

Third, we propose that psychosocial closeness – the extent to which a relationship involves high positive affect, low negative affect, high trust and low distrust (Ashforth *et al.*, 2016; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Dumas *et al.*, 2013; Hinde, 1997; Rusbult and Buunk, 1993) – is also likely to promote a more generous (rather than a negative dispositional) attribution for an identity reference. When a Black person and a White referencer are psychosocially close, the Black person likes and holds more positive views of the referencer. As a result, the White referencer's behavior is likely to be interpreted in a similarly positive light due to confirmation bias – the human tendency to pay more attention to information in the world that confirms one's pre-existing views (Robinson, 1996; Fiske and Taylor, 2008). In this case, a Black person may be more likely to interpret the identity reference as being a relational fumble rather than a microaggression.

### **How Black people's attributions affect their behavioral responses and relational trajectories**

How does a Black person's interpretation of an identity reference as a microaggression vs a relational fumble shape their behavioral response, and thereby alter the relational trajectory of psychosocial closeness? We propose, based on Wrzesniewski *et al.* (2003) model of affirmation and disaffirmation that occurs through interpersonal interactions at work, that Black people's reactions to a single identity reference can impact their relationships with White colleagues.

When experienced as a racial microaggression, the identity reference will likely result in a disaffirming response such as criticizing or complaining in a way that conveys “disregard, lack of caring or value, incompetence, or some other derogatory attribute” (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003, p. 108). Disaffirming responses are often intended to save one’s own face, by countering stigmatization and publicly claiming a positive identity (e.g. Ely and Roberts, 2008). For example, the Black employee described earlier could respond to his White coworker’s question about Black Lives Matter protestors and claim of no racism in their organization by saying, “Wow, you really don’t get it” in a cold tone, while not smiling, avoiding direct eye contact and leaning away from his coworker – nonverbal behaviors that communicate dislike (Burgoon and Le Poire, 1999; Palmer and Simmons, 1995). The focus in this response is on protecting or rebuilding the Black employee’s own identity as a forthright individual whose extensive experience of systemic racism in organizations has been disrespected or maligned.

However, disaffirming responses can threaten the referencer’s positive identity as moral, unprejudiced and likable (Bergsieker *et al.*, 2010; Ely *et al.*, 2006; Fiske *et al.*, 2002), and are likely to be experienced by the referencer as shaming (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003). A Black person’s disaffirming response thus increases negative affect in the relationship, thwarting the referencer’s desire for social validation and resulting in lower trust that the relationship will fulfill each person’s needs for social validation going forward. As such, the relationship becomes a less secure base of attachment for both relationship partners (Bowlby, 1973, 1980), who may then wish to interact less frequently or not at all. Less interaction may reduce feelings of familiarity and liking, resulting in a negative spiral of decreasing relational closeness (both psychosocial and structural) over time.

By contrast, viewing an identity reference as a relational fumble constitutes a less negative attribution, which may result in a more affirming response that “communicates regard, care, competence, worth or any attribute that implies that the act confirms the employee’s existence and endows the employee with some form of significance” (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003, p. 108). Specifically, an affirming response includes nonverbal behaviors that convey a Black colleague’s positive regard for the White referencer as likable and competent (Lim and Bowers, 1991) and may take one of two forms: going along (nonverbal behaviors and minimal verbal responses that endorse the referencer’s remarks) or mindful correcting (nonverbal behaviors and a careful verbal statement in which the Black person seeks to correct the referencer’s erroneous or stereotypical views related to their racial identity).

As an example of going along, the Black employee described earlier could respond to his White coworker’s identity reference by saying, “It’s great to see so many people supporting Black Lives Matter” in a warm tone while also smiling, making eye contact and leaning toward his coworker. The focus in this response is on addressing his coworker’s need to be perceived as likeable and competent through behaviors that communicate liking and respect. The Black employee’s response, however, does not challenge his coworker’s erroneous assumption that systemic racism does not exist in their organization. Further, although going along may smooth over an awkward relational fumble in the moment, it can result in the Black person privately experiencing resentment, which could ultimately decrease closeness over time.

Importantly, we note that a Black person may “go along” with affirming behaviors *even if they experience the identity reference as a racial microaggression*, if they feel it is necessary to maintain job security or social and political capital and want to avoid the relational costs of disaffirming responses. The costs of a disaffirming response may be of particular concern when the referencer is one’s supervisor or other powerful individual in the organization. Members of marginalized groups are often more constrained than their dominant group colleagues when it comes to authenticity in the workplace. They are often penalized when

they fully express their authentic selves – from wearing an Afrocentric hairstyle to wearing the hijab (Muslim headscarf) to raising their race-related concerns – in terms of their professional image and work opportunities (Cha and Roberts, 2019a; Cha *et al.*, 2019).

Mindful correcting may have a more positive outcome in select circumstances. We conceptualize mindful correcting as a type of heedful interrelating (Weick and Roberts, 1993), in which Black people attend to identity references and the myriad of reactions they invoke, and communicate in a way that is responsive to themselves as well as to White referencers (Stephens and Lyddy, 2016). By correcting an erroneous perception related to their identity, a Black person is responsive to their own need for self-verification (Swann, 1983), and by conveying continued liking and respect for the White referencer, they are responsive to the referencer's need to be perceived as likeable and competent (Bergsieker *et al.*, 2010). If these needs are met through the affirming response, the relationship becomes a more secure base of attachment for both relational partners (Bowlby, 1973, 1980), who may then wish to interact more frequently, in different ways, and in various settings. More interaction may increase feelings of familiarity and liking, resulting in a positive spiral of increasing relational closeness (both psychosocial and structural) over time.

Illustrating mindful correcting, the Black employee above could respond to his White coworker's identity reference by saying, "It's great to see so many people supporting Black Lives Matter. We are starting to see that systemic racism is everywhere – even in organizations with good intentions like ours. And I think we can all work together to make our organization even stronger" in a warm tone while also smiling, making eye contact and leaning toward his coworker. The Black employee would thus correct his White coworker's erroneous assumption that their organization is devoid of systemic racism, addressing his own need for self-verification – to be perceived by others as he perceives himself (a forthright individual with extensive experience of systemic racism in organizations). His nonverbal behaviors would also communicate liking and respect (Burgoon and Le Poire, 1999; Palmer and Simmons, 1995). This response reveals the Black colleague's vulnerability while demonstrating understanding and compassion for the White referencer's positive motives to show acceptance and engage in learning. In this respect, the affirming response can not only enhance the level of trust in the relationship but also signal to both partners that the relationship can serve as a secure base of attachment in spite of the relational fumble.

### Contributions

Our paper makes several major contributions to organizational research. First, our framework draws attention to how a single identity reference can be highly significant, affecting the subsequent trajectory of a workplace RAD. We thus contribute to research on work relationships, which has tended to adopt a more static perspective and examine the overall characteristics of a work relationship, averaged across interactions, rather than attending to important dynamics, transitions and meaningful single interactions (Ferris *et al.*, 2009).

Second, our framework describes how the valence of interactions in a relationship can transition over time: pathways through which identity references, which may often elicit initial negative reactions, can lead to generative experiences and ultimately promote higher levels of positivity in relationships (cf., Frederickson, 2001, 2003). For example, one of the affirming responses we describe (mindful correcting) increases the White referencer's understanding of the Black colleague's identity-related experiences, thereby supporting mutual growth-in-connection from social interactions (Jordan *et al.*, 1991; Miller and Stiver, 1997). This nuanced analysis, along with our theorizing of dynamics related to positive spirals of closeness in RADs, contributes to the literature on positive relationships at work (e.g. Creary *et al.*, 2015; Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Ragins and Kram, 2007; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997).

---

Relatedly, our framework contributes to the literature on microaggressions (e.g. [Lui and Quezada, 2019](#); [Offermann et al., 2013](#); [Sue et al., 2007](#)) by examining positive in addition to negative outcomes in work settings when identity references are viewed as well-intended relational fumbles rather than attacks. We emphasize that identity references are inevitable and that how Black employees respond can have an enormous impact on relational quality and dynamics thereafter. Our framework highlights conditions that increase the likelihood of negative vs ultimately positive trajectories. That being said, we are especially interested in understanding and increasing the frequency of ultimately positive trajectories that can and do occur. In that sense, we seek to shed light on effective recovery from, rather than total prevention of, relational fumbles. Our work uses the lens of positive organizational scholarship, which assumes that the potential for good exists, that nontraditional indicators of organizational performance (such as positive relationships) matter, and that the negative is still important (e.g. that good intentions can lead to bad outcomes and that bad incidents can be overcome) ([Spreitzer et al., 2019](#)). Accordingly, we acknowledge the negative aspects of identity references but also move beyond criticism to focus on finding a way to construct a more positive outcome.

Next, our framework makes evident the simultaneous power and disproportionate burden that Black workers carry in shaping the trajectory of relationships across difference, although they are often the target, rather than the initiator, of identity references. Dominant group members are often less aware of the impact of their actions on minorities ([Fiske, 1993](#)), such as the discomfort that a well-intended identity reference can cause. Thus, Black people must decide whether or not to call a relational fumble to the attention of the referencer. When presuming positive intent, and then leaning into the discomfort to “catch” the awkward identity reference that was fumbled in their direction, Black people may increase the possibility for deepening understanding and strengthening relationships across difference. However, the ambiguity of these identity references invokes taxing work of sensemaking and emotional regulation.

In addition, although our article centers the experiences of Black people, identity references are commonly experienced by other marginalized cultural identity groups in the workplace (e.g. women and other racial/ethnic group members). For instance, White people may reference the ethnic identity of their Asian American colleagues through comments such as “You’re Indian, right? I love Indian food” ([Cha and Roberts, 2019b](#)), placing the onus on the Asian Americans to catch the fumble and stabilize the relationship across difference. We hope that future research will explore the extent to which our framework broadly explains the identity reference phenomenon.

Finally, our work builds on and enriches critical race theory. Dominant group members may not realize that when the first, only or rare thing they say to a cultural minority colleague is an identity reference, the meta-message is that the minority colleague is viewed only in light of that minority identity (and its associated stereotypes), rather than being understood and appreciated as a unique and multifaceted individual. For this reason, an identity reference can represent a type of identity assault or abrasion and “diminish [the minority colleague’s] sense of how much others value and respect them” ([Ely et al., 2006](#)). The assumption that referencing a minority identity is an appropriate way to make small talk reflects white normativity ([Bell and Hartmann, 2007](#); [Bonilla-Silva, 2012](#)) – a lack of awareness that many minority identities are stigmatized in ways that other identities (e.g. those associated with one’s hobbies or travels) are not. When White people reference a colleague’s racial minority identity, based on the assumption that identity references are simple and solely positive ways to connect with and get to know colleagues, this ignores the fact that many racial minorities have a lifetime of experiencing identity references in conjunction with stereotyping, discrimination, threat and hurt.

### Practical implications

A host of studies over the past 20 years provides evidence that ignoring differences does not help to strengthen work relationships or work outcomes (e.g. [Creary et al., 2015](#); [Ely and Thomas, 2001](#); [Polzer et al., 2002](#); [Thomas, 1993](#)). Instead, stronger relationships and more positive work outcomes arise when people are motivated to learn about identity differences ([Davidson and James, 2007](#); [Ely et al., 2006](#)). The practice of building high quality RADs renders identity references inevitable.

Our hope is that White people will become more vigilant about the significant work imposed by identity references and relational fumbles, and carry their part of the load in racially-conscious work interactions. White colleagues may feel shocked to learn that their well-intentioned identity reference was experienced as offensive. To repair the relational damage done, White colleagues would need to overcome the instinct to react defensively (e.g. justifying their behavior and denying, dismissing or minimizing the Black colleague's experience). A different approach – consistent with restorative justice ([Opie and Roberts, 2017](#)) and involving empathy, apology and humility – may be important for White colleagues to learn more about why a particular identity reference was upsetting and how to improve their cross-race interactions going forward.

White colleagues should also take the time to get to know Black colleagues as multifaceted individuals, rather than making identity references the sole focus of their conversations. Otherwise, identity references could make Black colleagues feel like “informal tour guides” ([Dhingra, 2007](#), p. 146) responsible for explaining “the Black experience” rather than feeling valued as an individual. White colleagues sometimes treat racial minority coworkers like informal tour guides ([Dhingra, 2007](#)), just as cultural objects associated with people of color are seen as benefits of diversity for Whites' cultural enrichment ([Bell and Hartmann, 2007](#)).

We also contend that organizations can create conditions that help employees rebound from relational fumbles at work. Namely, leaders can promote effective approaches to difficult conversations ([Stone et al., 1999](#)) and use organizational practices around hiring, socialization and rewards ([Chatman and Cha, 2003](#)) to promote learning from mistakes, including relational fumbles. Equipped with a deeper understanding of the positive dynamics that can result from identity references, organization members may learn how to use identity references as triggers to engage in authentic conversations about difference. Such conversations could lead to learning on both sides, such as when a Black coworker and a White coworker learn about each other's experiences and work together to strengthen their organization for all employees. In this way, organizations and their members could draw on our model to help transform identity references from relational “dead ends” to opportunities for deeper – even if awkward or clumsy – learning and interpersonal engagement, thus strengthening the interpersonal relationships through which organizations function and thrive.

### References

- Ashforth, B.E., Schinoff, B.S. and Rogers, K.M. (2016), “I identify with her,” “I identify with him”: unpacking the dynamics of personal identification in organizations”, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 41, pp. 28-60.
- Baumeister, R.F. and Leary, M.R. (1995), “The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation”, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117 No. 3, p. 497.
- Bell, J.M. and Hartmann, D. (2007), “Diversity in everyday discourse: the cultural ambiguities and consequences of “happy talk”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 72 No. 6, pp. 895-914.
- Bergsieker, H.B., Shelton, J.N. and Richeson, J.A. (2010), “To be liked versus respected: divergent goals in interracial interactions”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 99 No. 2, p. 248.

- 
- Berscheid, E., Snyder, M. and Omoto, A.M. (1989), "Issues in studying close relationships: conceptualizing and measuring closeness", in Hendrick, C. (Ed.), *Close Relationships*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 63-91.
- Blake-Beard, S.D. and Roberts, L.M. (2004), *Releasing the Double Bind of Visibility for Minorities in the Workplace*, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management, Boston.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2012), "The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 173-194.
- Bowlby, J. (1973), *Attachment and Loss*, Hogarth, London.
- Bowlby, J. (1980), *Attachment and Loss*, Hogarth, London.
- Brajkovich, L.F. (1994), "Sources of social structure in a start-up organization: work networks, work activities, and job status", *Social Networks*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 191-212.
- Brewer, M.B. and Brown, R.J. (1998), "Intergroup relations", in Gilbert, D.T., Fiske, S.T. and Lindzey, G. (Eds), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, Vol. 2, pp. 554-594.
- Broughton, A. (2008), "Minorities expected to be majority in 2050", CNN.com, August 13, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/08/13/census.minorities/>.
- Burgoon, J.K. and Le Poire, B.A. (1999), "Nonverbal cues and interpersonal judgments: participant and observer perceptions of intimacy, dominance, composure, and formality", *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 66 No. 2, pp. 105-124.
- Cha, S.E. and Roberts, L.M. (2019a), "Leveraging minority identities at work: an individual-level framework of the identity mobilization process", *Organization Science*, Vol. 30, pp. 735-760.
- Cha, S.E. and Roberts, L.M. (2019b), "The benefits of bringing your whole identity to work", *Harvard Business Review*, digital article.
- Cha, S.E., Hewlin, P.F., Roberts, L.M., Buckman, B.R., Leroy, H., Steckler, E.L., Ostermeier, K. and Cooper, D. (2019), "Being your true self at work: integrating the fragmented research on authenticity in organizations", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 13, pp. 633-671.
- Chatman, J.A. and Cha, S.E. (2003), "Leading by leveraging culture", *California Management Review*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 20-34.
- Coleman, M.D. (2013), "Emotion and the ultimate attribution error", *Current Psychology*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 71-81.
- Creary, S.J., Caza, B.B. and Roberts, L.M. (2015), "Out of the box? How managing a subordinate's multiple identities affects the quality of a manager-subordinate relationship", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 40, pp. 538-562.
- Cropanzano, R. and Mitchell, M.S. (2005), "Social exchange theory: an interdisciplinary review", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 31, pp. 874-900.
- Davidson, M.N. and James, E.H. (2007), "The engines of positive relationships across difference: conflict and learning", in Dutton, J.E. and Rains, B.R. (Eds), *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York, pp. 137-158.
- Dhingra, P. (2007), *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Dumas, T.L., Rothbard, N.P. and Phillips, K.W. (2008), "Self-disclosure: beneficial for cohesion in demographically diverse work groups?", *Research on Managing Groups and Teams*, Vol. 11, pp. 143-166.
- Dumas, T., Phillips, K. and Rothbard, N. (2013), "Getting closer at the company party: integration experiences, racial dissimilarity, and workplace relationships", *Organization Science*, Vol. 24, pp. 1377-1401.

- Dutton, J.E. and Ragins, B.R. (2007), *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York.
- Dutton, J.E., Roberts, L.M. and Bednar, J. (2010), "Pathways for positive identity construction at work: four types of positive identity and the building of social resources", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 35, pp. 265-293.
- Edmondson, A. (1999), "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, pp. 350-383.
- Ely, R.J. and Roberts, L.M. (2008), "Shifting frames in team-diversity research: from difference to relationships", in Brief, A.P. (Ed.), *Diversity at Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Vol. 1, pp. 175-202.
- Ely, R.J. and Thomas, D.A. (2001), "Cultural diversity at work: the effects of diversity perspectives on work group processes and outcomes", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp. 229-273.
- Ely, R.J., Meyerson, D.E. and Davidson, M.N. (2006), "Rethinking political correctness", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 84 No. 9, p. 78.
- Ferris, G.R., Liden, R.C., Munyon, T.P., Summers, J.K., Basik, K.J. and Buckley, M.R. (2009), "Relationships at work: toward a multidimensional conceptualization of dyadic work relationships", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 1379-1403.
- Fiske, S.T. (1993), "Controlling other people: the impact of power on stereotyping", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 48 No. 6, pp. 621-628.
- Fiske, S.T. and Taylor, S.E. (2008), *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Fiske, S.T., Cuddy, A.J., Glick, P. and Xu, J. (2002), "A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 82 No. 6, p. 878.
- Fredrickson, B.L. (2001), "The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 56 No. 3, pp. 218-226.
- Fredrickson, B.L. (2003), "Positive emotions and upward spirals in organizations", in Cameron, K.S., Dutton, J.E. and Quinn, R.E. (Eds), *Positive Organizational Scholarship*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, pp. 163-175.
- Gittell, J.H. (2001), "Supervisory span, relational coordination, and flight departure performance: a reassessment of postbureaucracy theory", *Organization Science*, Vol. 12, pp. 468-483.
- Gittell, J.H. (2002), "Coordinating mechanisms in care provider groups: relational coordination as a mediator and input uncertainty as a moderator of performance effects", *Management Science*, Vol. 48, pp. 1408-1426.
- Gittell, J.H. (2011), "New directions for relational coordination theory", in Cameron, K.S. and Spreitzer, G.M. (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 400-411.
- Graen, G.B. and Uhl-Bien, M. (1995), "Relationship-based approach to leadership: development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 6, pp. 219-247.
- Harrison, D.A., Price, K.H. and Bell, M.P. (1998), "Beyond relational demography: time and the effects of surface- and deep-level diversity on work group cohesion", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 41, pp. 96-107.
- Hinde, R.A. (1997), *Relationships: A Dialectical Perspective*, Psychology Press, Hove.
- Ibarra, H. (1995), "Race, opportunity, and diversity of social circles in managerial networks", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38, pp. 673-703.
- Jain, A.K., Fennell, M.L., Chagpar, A.B., Connolly, H.K. and Nembhard, I.M. (2016), "Moving toward improved teamwork in cancer care: the role of psychological safety in team communication", *Journal of Oncology Practice*, Vol. 12 No. 11, pp. 1000-1011.

- 
- Jordan, J.V., Kaplan, A.G., Miller, J.B., Stiver, I.P. and Surrey, J.L. (1991), *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Kahn, W.A. (1990), "Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, pp. 692-724.
- Kelley, H.H., Berscheid, E., Christensen, A., Harvey, J.H., Huston, T.L., Levinger, G., McClintock, E., Peplau, L.A. and Peterson, D.R. (1983), *Close Relationships*, Freeman, New York.
- Kiesler, S. and Cummings, J.N. (2002), "What do we know about proximity and distance in work groups? A legacy of research", *Distributed Work*, Vol. 1, pp. 57-80.
- Kramer, R.M. (1998), "Paranoid cognition in social systems: thinking and acting in the shadow of doubt", *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 2 No. 4, pp. 251-275.
- Lim, T.S. and Bowers, J.W. (1991), "Facework solidarity, approbation, and tact", *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 415-450.
- Lui, P.P. and Quezada, L. (2019), "Associations between microaggression and adjustment outcomes: a meta-analytic and narrative review", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 145 No. 1, pp. 45-78.
- Methot, J.R., Lepine, J.A., Podsakoff, N.P. and Christian, J.S. (2015), "Are workplace friendships a mixed blessing? Exploring tradeoffs of multiplex relationships and their associations with job performance", *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 69, pp. 311-355.
- Miller, J.B. and Stiver, I.P. (1997), *The Healing Connection*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- Nembhard, I.M. and Edmondson, A.C. (2006), "Making it safe: the effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 27, pp. 941-966.
- Nembhard, I.M. and Edmondson, A.C. (2011), "Psychological safety: a foundation for speaking up, collaboration, and experimentation in organizations", in Cameron, K.S. and Spreitzer, G.M. (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 490-503.
- O'Donovan, R. and McAuliffe, E. (2020), "A systematic review of factors that enable psychological safety in healthcare teams", *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 240-250.
- Offermann, L.R., Basford, T.E., Graebner, R., DeGraaf, S.B. and Jaffer, S. (2013), "Slights, snubs, and slurs: leader equity and microaggressions", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 374-393.
- Opie, T. and Roberts, L.M. (2017), "Do black lives really matter in the workplace? Restorative justice as a means to reclaim humanity", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, Vol. 36 No. 8, pp. 707-719.
- Palmer, M.T. and Simmons, K.B. (1995), "Communicating intentions through nonverbal behaviors: conscious and nonconscious encoding of liking", *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 128-160.
- Petriglieri, J.L. (2011), "Under threat: responses to and the consequences of threats to individuals' identities", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36, pp. 641-662.
- Pettigrew, T.F. (2001), "The ultimate attribution error: extending Allport's cognitive analysis of prejudice", in Hogg, M.A. and Abrams, D. (Eds), *Intergroup Relations: Essential Readings*, Psychology Press, New York, pp. 162-173.
- Pfeffer, J. and Fong, C.T. (2005), "Building organization theory from first principles: the self-enhancement motive and understanding power and influence", *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, pp. 372-388.
- Phillips, K.W., Rothbard, N.P. and Dumas, T.L. (2009), "To disclose or not to disclose? Status distance and self-disclosure in diverse environments", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 710-732.
- Polzer, J.T., Milton, L.P. and Swann, W.B. (2002), "Capitalizing on diversity: interpersonal congruence in small work-groups", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 47, pp. 296-324.

- Ragins, B.R. (2008), "Disclosure disconnects: antecedents and consequences of disclosing invisible stigmas across life domains", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 33, pp. 194-215.
- Ragins, B.R. and Dutton, J.E. (2007), "Positive relationships at work: an introduction and invitation", in Dutton, J.E. and Ragins, B.R. (Eds), *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York, pp. 3-25.
- Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (2007), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Robinson, S.L. (1996), "Trust and breach of the psychological contract", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 41, pp. 574-599.
- Rusbult, C.E. and Buunk, B.P. (1993), "Commitment processes in close relationships: an interdependence analysis", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 175-204.
- Sparrowe, R.T. and Liden, R.C. (1997), "Process and structure in leader-member exchange", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22, pp. 522-552.
- Spreitzer, G.S., Myers, C.G., Kopelman, S. and Mayer, D.M. (2019), "The conceptual and empirical value of a positive lens: an invitation to organizational scholars to develop novel research questions", *Academy of Management Perspectives*.
- Stephens, J.P. and Lyddy, C.J. (2016), "Operationalizing heedful interrelating: how attending, responding, and feeling comprise coordinating and predict performance in self-managing teams", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 7, 362, pp. 1-17.
- Stone, D., Patton, B. and Heen, S. (1999), *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Penguin Books, New York, NY.
- Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L. and Esquilin, M. (2007), "Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 62 No. 4, pp. 271-286.
- Swann, W.B. (1983), "Self-verification: bringing social reality into harmony with the self", *Psychological Perspectives on the Self*, Vol. 2, pp. 33-66.
- Thomas, D.A. (1993), "Racial dynamics in cross-race developmental relationships", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 38, pp. 169-194.
- Weick, K.E. and Roberts, K.H. (1993), "Collective mind in organizations: heedful interrelating on flight decks", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 38, pp. 357-381.
- Wilson, J.M., O'Leary, M., Metiu, A. and Jett, Q.R. (2008), "Perceived proximity in virtual work: explaining the paradox of far-but-close", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 29, pp. 979-1002.
- Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J.E. and Debebe, G. (2003), "Interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 25, pp. 93-135.

**Corresponding author**

Sandra E. Cha can be contacted at: [cha@brandeis.edu](mailto:cha@brandeis.edu)