

# Reclaiming All of Me: The Racial Queer Identity Framework



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*There is something powerful in the way we sustain and thrive in face of multiple forms of oppression ... this becomes part of who we are.*

You are born, you develop, you are shaped, and in the process, you begin to understand who you are. The process of becoming and claiming all of who we are is one of the most central yet complex tasks of human development—it requires us to grapple with, explore, and make decisions that fundamentally impact our lives. To borrow from our mentor, Dr. Joseph L. White, understanding who you are involves answering challenging but crucial questions: Who do you say you are? Who is the you that others see? Who is the you that you allow others to see and why? Who is the you that nobody knows?

Social scientists have attempted to provide answers to these four critical questions through various theories of identity. In psychology, identity theories predominantly focus on describing and explaining how individuals make sense of who they are. One of the most influential psychology theorists, Erik Erikson, proposed a theory of identity that depicts how people define and integrate various aspects of the self (e.g., intrapersonal, social) while synthesizing biological, psychological, and societal demands (Erikson, 1980; Lerner, 2002). Although less prominent, Erikson's work also emphasized development in context, underscoring how people's identities are influenced by the broader structures in society where individuals are embedded (see Syed & Fish, 2018). Oppression, both past and present, shapes the identity of people who are members of various structurally minoritized groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, women, queer). Thus, in psychology, personal identity refers to the adaptation of specific personal attitudes, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors about the self within a social context (Erikson, 1980; Lerner, 2002).

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Similarly, social theory describes identity as the process of connecting with a larger group of people with similar values, characteristics, world views, beliefs, and practices (i.e., social identity theory). Expressed differently a focus on the collective, rather than the individual falls within the realm of sociology. From this perspective, social identity is shaped by how individuals connect, disconnect, identify, or not identify with various social group categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) in which society structurally places them (e.g., Asian, African American, Indigenous, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). In other words, a person's ideologies, feelings, and behaviors are also shaped by their social group membership and the structural power that these groups have within a given society.

While psychological and sociological theories provide frameworks for us to understand identity, the emphasis on structural inequities and the complex relationship between privilege and oppression among minoritized people is seldom emphasized in identity models (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). In response to this underdeveloped area in identity studies, this chapter introduces the *Racial Queer Identity Framework* (RQI) which explicitly focuses on how racism, heterosexism, and cissexism<sup>1</sup> overlap and interlock to uniquely impact identity development among Queer People of Color (QPOC). The framework is grounded on theories of intersectionality, racial identity development, and collective history of oppression and resistance.

## 1 Queerness, Race, and Gender: Language Is Limited and Bound by History

Communicating our subjectivities with others confronts us with both intra and interpersonal questions to consider. As curiosity about our experiences begins to surface, we become inquisitive about our existence, what we are feeling, and whether to share our subjectivities with others. We use language to make sense of our intrapersonal world. We also consider the possible interpersonal dynamics and outcomes when we share who we are with others. In many ways, language can liberate us and connect us to others, but it can also limit us since language is bound by politics, context, and epistemology (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). For QPOC, the language we speak reminds us of the history of oppression, exploitation, and abuse that our communities have experienced. The words we use to describe ourselves and our subjectivities are often myopic and come from the people who enslaved, colonized, and exploited our Communities of Color. Words undoubtedly shape our collective and individual consciousness and ultimately how we answer the question of “Who do I say I am?”

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<sup>1</sup>These three terms describe ideologies and systems of oppression that dehumanize, disparage, and stigmatize (a) Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (racism) and (b) any nonheterosexual (heterosexism) and cisnormative (cissexism) form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community.

## 1.1 Naming Myopic Language

Academic definitions of commonly used constructs such as gender, sex, and sexuality have often been described in simplistic and narrow ways. To illustrate, sex has been used to describe the “(a) chromosomal composition, (b) reproductive apparatus, (c) secondary characteristics that are usually associated with these chromosomal differences, (d) the intrapersonal characteristics presumed to be possessed by males and females, and (e) in the case of sex roles, any and all behaviors differentially expected for and appropriate to people on the basis of membership in these various sexual categories” (Unger, 1979, p. 1085–1086). From this perspective, the term sex is understood to be binary, which fails to capture human variations in sex differences including individuals who are intersex (e.g., 46 XX Intersex, 46 XY Intersex, True Gonadal Intersex, Complex or Undetermined Intersex). Moreover, studies focused on sex differences often resort to using surface and dichotomous interpretations about men and women based on biological differences without considering the role of history, culture, and context. Given these pitfalls, Unger (1979) proposed using the term *gender* to define the social construct used to describe the sets of behaviors, traits, and expectations that a given culture assigns as men or women. However, Unger’s perspective was not well received by scholars in the late 1970s (see Maccoby, 1988). Instead, opponents to Unger’s framing argued that there is no difference between the concepts of sex and gender since the biological and social aspects of these two constructs are not entirely exclusive (e.g., Maccoby, 1988). These early arguments continue to reverberate today. For instance, we can observe how media continues to use sex and gender interchangeably impacting how we think about these concepts. Nonetheless, similar to sex, gender was initially defined within a binary framework.

Psychology has adopted a definition of gender similar to Unger (1979). According to the American Psychological Association (APA) *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, gender includes “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (APA, 2012, p. 11). From this lens, culture is understood to influence gender, including: (a) *gender norms* or the behaviors that are aligned with cultural expectations or (b) *gender nonconformity*, which underscores incongruence between cultural expectations and a person’s gender. APA and Unger’s definitions are complementary as they both conceptualize gender as a verb. Despite the importance of understanding gender from a behavioral lens, this perspective fails to explicitly capture people’s subtle and subjective sense of what gender means to them. As a result, *gender identity* is used to connote an individual’s internal sense of a gendered-self (e.g., man, woman, male, female, womxn, agender, gender non-conforming). APA (2015) describes gender identity as “a person’s deeply felt, inherent sense of being a girl, woman, or female; a boy, a man, or male; a blend of male or female; or an alternative gender” (p. 834). For individuals whose gender identity is aligned with their sex assigned at birth, the term *cisgender* is used (APA, 2015; Tate et al., 2014). Lastly, the term *gender expression* describes the way society interprets how

an individual conveys who they are through clothing, communication patterns (e.g., nonverbal communication, voice intonation), and other actions or interests. Hence, a person's gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles and may or may not reflect the person's gender and gender identity (APA, 2008, p. 28).

## ***1.2 Interplay Between Sex, Gender, Gender Expression, and Sexual and Affectional Orientation***

Sexuality is an influential and complex aspect of human development. Beyond the heteronormative realm of reproduction, sexuality also refers to how we see ourselves and relate to others. An important aspect of sexuality is sexual orientation, typically described by social scientists as “the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted” (APA, 2012, p. 11). Several taxonomies are used to categorize people into different sexual orientations, including: *gay* and *lesbian* for individuals who are attracted to members of their same sex, *heterosexual* for individuals who are attracted to people of a different sex from their own, and *bisexual* for people attracted to both sexes (APA, 2012; Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). While these categories begin to provide language to describe the intricacies of sexual orientation, a categorical approach fails to capture how sexual orientation exists on a continuum (Kinsey et al., 1953) and may be fluid for some people, particularly individuals who identify as women (Diamond, 2007; Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

While there has been an increasing understanding and appreciation for sexual orientation existing on a continuum, most of the literature continues to be saturated with reductionistic concepts that fail to capture the diverse lived experience of people. For instance, sexual orientation is often discussed in relation to attraction (e.g., same sex attraction, same sex marriage) based on people's sex (see APA, 2012). Similarly, albeit less common, Shively and De Cecco (1977) defined sexual orientation as a person's sexual and/or emotional attraction to another person. Theoretically, Shively and De Cecco's definition allows space for gender also to be considered when discussing attraction instead of solely sex (see also Battle & Harris, 2013; Parks, 2001). More recently, the American Psychological Association *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People* (2015) describes attraction in terms of gender (e.g., same gender loving relationships). Nonetheless, these notions of sexual orientation continue to be myopic. For instance, what exactly are we attracted to in others? Are we attracted to people's sex? Is it their gender? Gender expression? Is it the way that they talk, walk, dress, and communicate that romantically or emotionally draws us to others? Or can it be other aspects of the person's self that are appealing to us? Is attraction at first sight real?

### 1.3 What's Neuroscience Got to Do With It?

Using real-time, brain scans, neuroscience research provides insight that helps us theorize about the interplay between sex, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation. For instance, a study by Contreras et al., (2013) revealed that the first characteristics that people process when meeting others include their physiognomy (e.g., skin color, facial features) and perceived sex (Contreras et al., 2013). They describe how the brain simultaneously processes people's physiognomy and perceived sex before the person adds meaning to what they are observing. Building on this line of empirical work, we argue that when an individual comes in contact with others, they classify the person into a specific sex and make generalizations about the person's gender. However, such classification may or may not align with the person's biological sex and/or how they identify their gender. Instead, we posit that what the brain is processing is a person's gender expression which we are socialized to interpret as a person's sex and gender identity, but this may or may not be accurate. Continuing with this thinking, we propose that people are attracted to people's gender expression, and not exclusively the person's sex or gender identity since these aspects of the self are not immediately evident to us when we encounter others. Regrettably, we are rarely encouraged to pause, think, and consider the interplay between sex, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation—when we do, we may feel confused, conflicted, and at times scared given that we are born and socialized in a world that is structured and fueled by White, heterosexist, patriarchal, cissexist, and binary norms and values.

People who do not fit into the binary ways in which society is structured have always existed. For example, throughout history we have always had people (e.g., *muxe/muxhe*, *hijras*, *fa'afafine*<sup>2</sup>) who are intersex, transgender, gender expansive, or would otherwise not use binary pronouns (he, she). Unfortunately, the linguistic limitations of many languages prevent people from describing themselves in ways that accurately capture their internal experiences of sex and gender. However, not all languages are limiting. There are many languages throughout the world that are not gendered. For instance, many Latin American Indigenous languages allow for an expansive description and understanding of sex and gender (e.g., *Nahuatl*; see Bowles, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup>*Muxe*, also spelled as *muxe*, is a third gender or non-binary person among the Indigenous Zapotec Oaxacan People in Mexico (see Stephen 2002). Similarly, *hijras*, are non-binary people from India who have a recorded history of over 4000 years (see Kumar 2019). *Fa'afafine* are the third gender people from Samoa and the Samoan diaspora (see Schmidt 2010). For additional international queer perspectives and experiences see Nakamura, and Logie, C. H. (Eds.). (2020).

## 2 People of Color and Sexual and Affectional Orientation

Although research shows that people's brains simultaneously process the physiognomy and perceived sex of others, the literature often neglects the unique ways that sex, gender, and race overlap to create a unique gendered-sexuality experience that is simultaneously racialized. To illustrate, many of the concepts used to study sex, gender, gender identity, and gender expression do not consider race which may have different connotations for people depending on their racialized lives. For this reason, gender and sexual minoritized People of Color have created ways to better capture their racialized experiences. *Queerness* is one of the terms gaining popularity among many sexual minorities, given that the concept aims to capture all social parts of people, including their race and ethnicity.

### 2.1 Revisiting Queerness

Historically, the concept of queerness has been used as a pejorative term, with younger generations reclaiming queer as both a political stance and an umbrella term to describe sexual orientation and gender non-conforming folk. With regards to sexual orientation, queer is often used as a collective term by individuals who identify and/or are socially categorized as lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender expansive, and transgender (Mosley et al., 2019b; Newsweek Staff, 1991). Politically, queerness aims to disrupt binary thinking and socialization (e.g., men-women; gay-heterosexual; masculine-feminine) by centering and embracing the fluidity of gender, sexual orientation, behaviors, affection, and desires that come from such expansion. More recently, the concept of queerness has been embraced by many POC to communicate their racialized experiences as individuals with membership in multiple minoritized social groups. Milan and Katrin Milan (2016) powerfully capture the concept of queerness as lived, experienced, and described by many Queer People of Color. They explain, "Not queer like gay; queer like escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness all at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like, and to pursue it" (para 18).

### 2.2 Queer People of Color and Racial-Gendered-Heterosexism

While QPOC share many of the experiences and concerns of Queer White People (QWP; heterosexism, cissexism) they also face the toxicity of racism and ethnocentrism. Building on the tradition of Black Women and Black Queer Women (e.g., Collins, 2009; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) we are introducing the concept of *racial-gendered-heterosexism* to capture the unique

and interlocking ways that QPOC are systemically dehumanized and oppressed. To illustrate, QPOC in the United States (U.S.) are more likely to live in poverty and have poorer health outcomes when compared to QWP in general (Budge et al., 2016; Badgett et al., 2019). In addition, QPOC are impacted by the murders of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the criminalization of immigrants, and the increasing attacks on civil rights including voting suppression (see Adames et al., 2018; Cerezo et al., 2014; Cerezo, 2016; Mosley et al., 2019a). When we use frameworks that capture the distinct ways that QPOC are concurrently impacted by racism, heterosexism, sexism, and cissexism, we can better identify, name, and address the problems that uniquely affect this community. For instance, while 72% of victims of anti-LGBT homicide were transgender women, 67% percent were transgender Women of Color (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2014). QPOC are also negatively impacted by racism within the queer community. To demonstrate, when Proposition-8, a California ballot proposition and a state constitutional amendment that proposed to eliminate the rights of “same-sex” couples to marry was adopted, leaders of LGBT organizations vilified and blamed the African American community (see Kaufman, 2011; Kiesling, 2017). However, the reality is that African Americans voted for progressive Pro-LGBT candidates (Kaufman, 2011; Kiesling, 2017). There is also a history of QPOC being erased and excluded by the White Queer Community. To illustrate, while the 2009 *Hate Crimes Prevention Act*,<sup>3</sup> which expanded the federal definition of a hate crime, was motivated by the murders of Matthew Shepard (White gay male) and James Byrd Jr. (Black heterosexual male), the legislation is commonly referred to as *The Matthew Shepard Act* instead of its official name, *The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act*. This practice decenters race and the lynching of James Byrd Jr. while only centering the White gay male experience (Kiesling, 2017). The experiences of Women of Color and Queer Women of Color are further relegated to the margins. As an example, the Women’s March has been criticized for excluding and silencing their voices (Kiesling, 2017). Put succinctly, the experience of QPOC is not the same as their White queer siblings.

### 2.3 *The Gay Liberation Movement and QPOC*

The exclusion of QPOCs by QWP stands in direct contrast with the achievements made by the *Gay Liberation Movement*. As a result, the Queer Community of Color has not fully benefited from the progress made by the *Gay Liberation Movement*,

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<sup>3</sup>The 2009 *Hate Crimes Prevention Act* expanded “the federal definition of hate crimes, enhancing the legal toolkit available to prosecutors, and increasing the ability of federal law enforcement to support our state and local partners. This law removed the existing jurisdictional obstacles to prosecutions of certain race- and religion-motivated violence and added new federal protections against crimes based on gender, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019, para. 2).

including advances in civil and human rights such as the increase in the percentage of people reporting being more accepting of LGBT people (Pew Research Center, 2013) and the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* that guaranteed same-sex couples the right to marry (History, 2020). To this end, QWP have disproportionately benefited from the *Gay Liberation Movement* despite the fact that QPOC spearheaded the *Gay Liberation Movement* including Stormé DeLarverie, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy among others (Cruikshank, 1992; Tran, 2018). Sadly, the work of these revolutionary Queer Siblings of Color who organized and led the Cooper Do-nuts in Los Angeles in 1959, the Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, and the historic Stonewall protests in New York in 1969 (James, 2019) is often ignored and not acknowledged. In other words, QWP have erased the contributions of QPOC despite benefiting from their sacrifice, brilliance, and resistance.

Overall, the lack of an intersectional discourse separates race-from-gender-from-sexuality and consequently extrapolates racism from sexism, from heterosexism, which erroneously suggests that QPOC cannot possibly experience all these forms of oppression simultaneously as illustrated by the theory of intersectionality introduced by Black Feminist and Black Queer Women scholars and activists (see Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1989). This fragmentation of the self, and how QPOC are uniquely oppressed, leaves many individuals of this community often feeling like they can only, and “should only”, focus on one aspect of their identity at a time while negating other aspects of who they are. This framing and pattern are mirrored in the literature, where identity is predominantly described and studied in silos.

### 3 Models of Queer and Racial Identity Development

In the past half a century, several fundamental theories describing the identity development process for Queer People and People of Color have been developed. Below we briefly present and review some of the most well-known and widely used identity models. While each model describes the development of queer *or* racial identity, they all fail to capture how different aspects of the self develop simultaneously albeit in different ways (e.g., pace, direction).

#### 3.1 *Queer Identity*

One of the most notable and referenced psychological models of identity for queer people is the *Cass Model of Gay/Lesbian Identity Development*, created in the late 1970s. Like other frameworks, the *Cass Model* is based on the assumption that people go through a process where they develop an awareness about being different from others (Cass, 1979). In this case, the difference is based on being attracted to



people in non-heteronormative ways. Following some level of awareness, folx then begin to consider and explore what it means to be a member of a sexual minoritized and stigmatized social group. People may start to wonder what being part of the queer community might be like—and what it would mean if they acted upon their feelings and attraction. People may then rationalize their new awareness and deny what they are feeling (e.g., telling themselves that they are just going through a phase), which is often followed by some level of resolution and eventual acceptance where the person integrates their sexual orientation with other parts of the self (Cass, 1979). Table 1 provides the six stages of the *Cass Model* of identity along with ideologies that accompany each stage. Another well referenced model of queer identity is the *Inclusive Model of Sexual Minority Identity* (IMSMI; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger 1996). Similar to the *Cass Model*, the IMSMI describes a process of identity development for queer people. However, the IMSMI considers two levels where a queer development takes place, including: (a) at the personal level where individuals have an internal awareness and acceptance of self (psychological/intrapersonal), and (b) at the group membership level, which describes the extent to which an individual connects and relates with the queer community (social identity). Of note, neither models consider or address race or ethnicity in the identity development of Queer People of Color.

### 3.2 Racial and Ethnic Identity

Developed by Atkinson et al. (1989), The Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model was designed to describe experiences of discrimination among individuals from minoritized racial and ethnic groups in the United States (e.g., African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinxs, Native Americans, and American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North Africans). This conceptual framework seeks to outline the process that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color go through as they develop an understanding of their cultural heritage, the dominant culture, and the relationship between both. The R/CID is made up of five stages including: (a) conformity, (b) dissonance, (c) resistance and immersion, (d) introspection, (e) integrative

**Table 1** The Cass model of queer identity

Stages		Relevant ideologies
Stage 1	Identity confusion	Who am I
Stage 2	Identity comparison	I am the only one like this
Stage 3	Identity tolerance	I probably am
Stage 4	Identity acceptance	I know who I am and where I belong
Stage 5	Identity pride	This is my community and I like it
Stage 6	Identity synthesis	I am many things

*Note.* The stages were developed by Cass (1979). The relevant ideologies were created by the authors

awareness. In the *Conformity* stage, individuals prefer the values of the dominant group and may view members of their own racial, ethnic, and cultural group with disdain. Oftentimes, individuals in this stage have internalized the negative biases about their group and view their own group membership as unimportant. In the *Dissonance* stage, individuals experience an event that leads to questioning the beliefs, attitudes, and values held in the previous stage. In the *Resistance and Immersion* stage “there is an unequivocal all-encompassing endorsement of their racial and cultural groups’ attitudes and values along with an overall rejection of the values held by the dominant group” (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017, p. 147). In the fourth stage, called *Introspection*, people develop an understanding of themselves as members of their racial, ethnic, and cultural group. In this stage, people can differentiate between their perspectives and those of their group. They also no longer hold an idealized view of their racial and cultural groups. Lastly, the final stage is *Integrative Awareness* which is characterized by people being able to see both positive and negative aspects of different cultures and a commitment to ending all forms of oppression.

One note to keep in mind is how the concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture are used interchangeably in the R/CID model. Framing the three concepts synonymously has been critiqued since the consensus among scholars in the social sciences posit that race, ethnicity, and culture are distinct albeit closely intertwined constructs (Alvarez et al., 2016; Helms & Cook 1999). To illustrate, culture is described as the “complex constellation of [learned] mores, values, customs, traditions, and practices that guide and influence people’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral response to life circumstances” (Parham et al., 1999, p. 14). In other words, culture is what we do (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). Ethnicity describes an individual’s national, regional, or tribal lineage (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). Ethnicity is where we come from. Generally, race is described as a social construct (made up classification system) that groups and ranks people into superior and inferior categories according to their shared physical characteristics (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair texture) which then has social, political, and economic implications (Helms & Cook, 1999; Jones, 1997). Hence, race refers to how others perceive us and how society categorizes us based on our phenotype which has consequences (e.g., privilege). Several other identity models specifically focus on (a) the development of racial identity (see Cross’s Racial Identity Model; Cross Jr. & Vandiver, 2001; People of Color Racial Identity Attitude Scale, Helms, 1995), (d) ethnic identity (see Nadal, 2011; Phinney, 1992), and (c) both racial and ethnic identity while also considering the role of skin-color gradient (see The Centering Racial and Ethnic Identity for Latinxs Framework [C-REIL], Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). Although all of the identity development models presented in this section focus on different aspects of the self (i.e., race, culture, and/or ethnicity), they describe a similar process that results from three predominate phases including: (1) crisis/awakening, (2) exploration and experimentation, and (3) commitment or incorporation of culture, ethnicity, race and into the self. Similar to the queer models of identity, models of racial, cultural, and ethnic identity also fall short—that is, they do not consider or address the role of sexuality for People of Color.

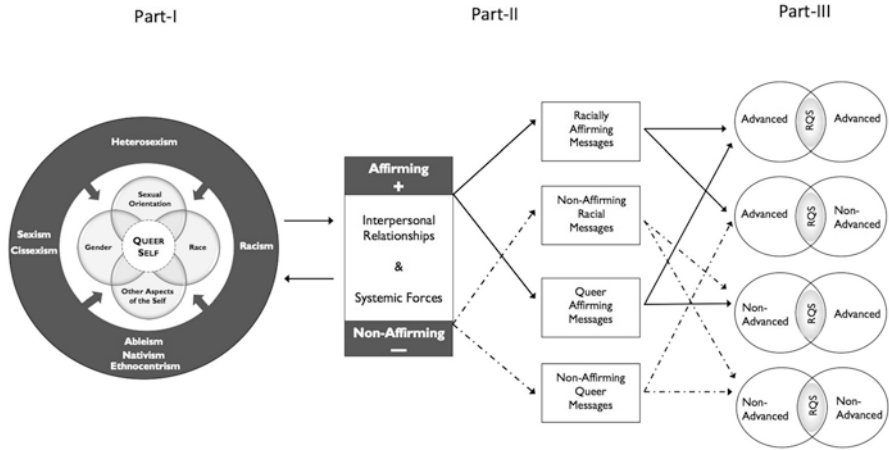
## 4 The Racial Queer Identity Framework (RQI)

As described in the previous section, most existing models on racial/ethnic and queer identity are unidimensional and discount (a) how various aspects of people's identity develop simultaneously and (b) how overlapping and interlocking systems of oppression add meaning to the self. To stimulate a nuanced and multidimensional description of identity development among QPOC we present the *Racial Queer Identity Framework* (RQI) in Fig. 1. Accordingly, the RQI framework consists of three parts that include: intersectionality (Part-I), affirming vs. non-affirming messages about queerness and race that people receive (Part-II), and four possible overlapping and interlocking *racial queer schemas* (RQS; Part-III), which are described below.

Overall, the RQI framework aims to evoke answers to the list of questions proposed at the beginning of the chapter: Who do you say you are? Who is the you that others see? Who is the you that you allow others to see and why? Who is the you that nobody knows?

### 4.1 Part-I: Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory, an analytical framework introduced by Black Queer Women and Black feminist social justice activists and scholars (Collins, 2009; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), was created to specifically name and illustrate how systems of oppression uniquely impact Black Women (e.g., gendered-racism; Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Essed, 1991; Lewis & Neville, 2015). Since then, Intersectionality theory has been applied to other groups of people who also experience multiple forms of oppression (e.g., nativism, heterosexism, cissexism; see Adames et al., 2020; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019). A classification system, introduced by Dill and Kohlman (2011), divides intersectionality into either (a) *weak*, which focuses on multiple identities or (b) *strong*, that centers and underscores how systems of inequity and oppression impact people who hold membership in different minoritized social groups. Traditionally, the study of social identities has predominantly focused on either the intrapersonal processes of identity development (e.g., psychology) or the process of acquiring a sense of collective group membership. (e.g., sociology), however, the interplay between both, and the role of overlapping forms of oppression, is rarely considered. Hence, to better capture and describe the identity development of QPOC, we need to consider (a) the individuals' internal subjective processes, (b) their social group membership, and (c) how historical and systemic forces (e.g., policies, institutional oppression) uniquely collide to shape a person's identity (see Adames et al., 2018; Chavez-Dueñas & Adames, 2020; Grzanka, 2020). Part-I of the RQI framework depicts all three. A queer person's internal subjectivity about their social group membership is illustrated by the constructs in the overlapping inner circles (i.e., sexual orientation,



**Fig. 1** The Racial Queer Identity (RQI) Framework. Note. *RQS* Racial queer schemas

race, gender, other aspects of the self). The external layer portrays the historical and current systemic forces (e.g., policies, laws, practices) that create, maintain, and fuel oppression (e.g., heterosexism, racism, sexism, cissexism, ableism, nativism, ethnocentrism). These systemic forces of oppression also impact and add meaning to the development of a queer self, as illustrated by the arrows pointing back to the overlapping circles (i.e., internal subjective processes). The use of intersectionality theory in the RQI framework allows us to generate an expansive and multidimensional understanding of QPOC using an analytical stance that synchronously considers an inside-out and an outside-in perspective. In addition, the RQI framework requires us to consider the affirming and non-affirming messages that QPOC receive from not only those they interact with (e.g., interpersonal relationships such as family, caregivers, peers) but also the narratives supported and reinforced by institutions (e.g., systemic forces such as laws, policies, media, educational and health systems). Part II of the RQI framework underscores the importance of these messages.

### 4.2 Part-II: Affirming Vs. Non-Affirming Messages About Queerness and Race

Socialization, the process through which children are introduced to their own culture’s expectations, norms, and customs, is a fundamental aspect of human development. Contained within the process of socialization are implicit and explicit messages about the rules, beliefs, and expectations associated with (a) specific gender roles, sexual behaviors, and sexuality, a process known as *gendered sexual socialization* (Gansen, 2017), and (b) race and racism (Neblett Jr. et al., 2008). From a very early age, children hear, learn, and internalize heteronormative and cis-gendered-racial messages. For instance, children are taught and expected to behave in accordance with the sex they were assigned at birth (Bos et al., 2012). In the U.S.,

children assigned female at birth are taught and reinforced to be more passive, quiet, obedient, cooperative, and caring. Alternatively, children assigned male at birth are socialized and encouraged to be more active, outspoken, aggressive, and are reinforced for not expressing what are typically considered vulnerable emotions such as sadness and fear (Wienclaw, 2011). In addition to gender-role socialization, children also “begin to make sense of heteronormativity and rules associated with sexuality through interactions with their teachers and peers in preschool” (Gansen, 2017, p. 255). Similarly, children hear, learn, and internalize negative messages about their racial group membership (Lesane-Brown, 2006) and witness how groups are treated differently. However, Children of Color can also learn and internalize positive racial messages from caregivers through verbal and nonverbal communication about racialized experiences, a process known as *racial socialization* (Lesane-Brown, 2006). While the first agents of socialization are typically primary caregivers, other individuals, groups (e.g., extended family, teachers, peers), and institutions (e.g., media, judicial, educational and health systems) also serve an influential role in this process. Hughes et al. (2006) describe four components of racial-ethnic socialization including: (a) instilling cultural pride, (b) preparation for bias, (c) promotion of mistrust, and (d) egalitarianism. Overall, Part-II of the RQI framework considers both the affirming and non-affirming messages that QPOC receive throughout their lives about race and gender from both systemic forces and their interpersonal relationships. These messages are depicted by the boxes labeled racially and queer affirming and non-affirming messages in Fig. 1.

### 4.3 Part-III: Four Racial Queer Schemas (RQS)

While the empirical literature on *gendered sexual socialization* and *racial socialization* is robust and growing, both processes are rarely described, discussed, and studied simultaneously. To this end, we use Helms’ (1990, 1994) description of racial schemas, which are the cognitive and affective “filters” that impact how people perceive and respond to racism, in the RQI framework. In Fig. 1, we illustrate and describe how QPOC interpret the world through one of four unique racial queer lenses. Each racial queer schemas (RQS) influence an individual’s ability to recognize, minimize, or deny experiences of *racial-gendered-heterosexism*, which ultimately impacts the self. In the following sections, we describe each of the four racial queer schemas.

#### 4.3.1 Advanced—Advanced RQS: Reclaiming All of Me

The first schema of the RQI framework is *advanced—advanced*. This schema is characterized by QPOC who consciously think of themselves as racial queer—not just a Person of Color or a Queer Person, but a person who is grounded and comfortable with the uniqueness of their whole self (advanced—advanced). QPOC using this schema have a nuanced understanding of who they are as a racial queer being

and what that means in a white-supremacy- heteronormative culture. Despite the overlapping ways QPOC are oppressed, people using this schema seek to belong and create communities where their whole selves are welcomed and celebrated. They view their social group memberships as a source of pride despite being dehumanized and impacted by multiple forms of oppression. They reject negative messages about their racial queerness and are able to counter these messages with a firm understanding of the unique strengths and qualities of their racial queer community. Individuals using an *advanced—advanced* schema also demonstrate a commitment to ending all forms of oppression by recommitting oneself daily to refuse and resist the invitation to use the norms and narratives created by white supremacy culture, patriarchy, and heterosexism to define oneself and one’s community.

#### **4.3.2 Advanced—Non-Advanced RQS: Reclaiming Race and Compartmentalizing Queerness**

The second schema of the RQI framework is *advanced—non-advanced*. This schema is characterized by QPOC that compartmentalize their race and queerness to minimize or avoid discomfort and anxiety associated with conflicting values, cognitions, emotions, and beliefs about being or questioning their sexuality. People using this schema consciously think of themselves as a racial or racialized being (advanced) but not a queer being (non-advanced). Similarly, they are comfortable with their racial group membership. Still, they may question their sexuality, experience attraction to people of the same gender, yet deny these aspects of themselves or believe that they are the only ones having these experiences. They have internalized negative and heteronormative messages about queerness, such as the idea that queerness does not exist in Communities of Color, queerness is a mental illness, follow the “love the sinner, hate the sin” ethos, and the like. While individuals using this schema have internalized messages about their queerness they can counter negative messages about their racial group with pride and understanding of the unique strengths of their racial community. They demonstrate a commitment to ending racism, but do not challenge heterosexism, cissexism, nor see how QPOC are uniquely impacted by racialized heterosexism. Instead, they may blame the oppression QPOC experience only on their queerness.

#### **4.3.3 Non-Advanced—Advanced RQS: Reclaiming Queerness and Compartmentalizing Race**

The third schema of the RQI framework is *non-advanced—advanced*. Individuals who use this schema attach low salience to racial issues (non-advanced) but are grounded and comfortable with their queerness (advanced). People using this schema are able to understand and identify heterosexism and heteronormativity; however, they deny or rationalize the impact of racism on their lives and those of their racial group. In turn, they internalize negative stereotypes about their own

racial group, experience self-rejection, and harbor prejudice towards members of their own racial group. They feel connected to the gay community and proud of their queerness. They are likely to identify with White people and believe that White people are superior to People of Color. Individuals using this schema may also see QWP as leaders in the gay liberation movement, believing that QWP are exemplary because they can “freely” be queer while simultaneously viewing Communities of Color as misguided or pathologized for not accepting their queerness. In turn, this dynamic could further strengthen a non-advanced racial identity.

#### **4.3.4 Non-Advanced—Non-Advanced RQS: Rejecting All of Me**

The fourth schema of the RQI framework is *non-advanced—non-advanced*. This schema is characterized by individuals who do not consciously think about themselves as a Person of Color (non-advanced), nor a Queer person (non-advanced), and let alone as a unique racialized queer person. QPOC using this schema may be questioning their sexuality, experiencing attraction to people of the same gender, yet denying it or believing that they are the only ones in the world having these experiences. Concurrently, they often do not see themselves as racial beings and understand themselves and the world through a color-blind paradigm. They are more likely to identify with White people, express preference for White people’s values and norms, and internalize negative messages about members of their own racial group. People using this schema may also deny or rationalize the impact of racism on their lives. Hence, they walk around with filters that cloud their ability to see and understand the multiple and complex ways in which white supremacy culture, patriarchy, and heterosexism are working in tandem to impact their existence and how they are answering the fundamental question of “who am I?”

### **4.4 Dominant Society Response**

While QPOC may use different RQS to view themselves and interpret the world, the dominant society in the U.S. has historically reinforced and upheld white supremacy culture, patriarchy, and heterosexism—a structural practice that continues to prevail today. Put differently, the dominant U.S. society has never welcomed racial queer individuals, especially those who challenge the power structures and resist oppression. Hence, the RQI framework assumes that there is a bidirectional relationship between the affirming and non-affirming messages that QPOC receive from (a) their interpersonal relationships, (b) the systemic forces in the society (e.g., school, media), and (c) the schemas that QPOC develop. In turn, the RQS that individuals develop will impact whether a QPOC challenges both interpersonal and systemic forces in society. For instance, a QPOC who uses an *advanced—advanced* schema will understand how racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism,

sexism, and cissexism uniquely overlap and impact their lives. As a result, they will work to challenge these oppressive forces instead of internalizing their interlocking forms of subjugation. Conversely, a QPOC that is using a *non-advanced—non-advanced* schema will have difficulty recognizing societal messages that are invalidating. Consequently, they will have difficulty understanding how toxic, pathologizing, and harmful societal messages, policies, and practices affect them. Moreover, QPOC using this schema fail to challenge racism, heterosexism, and cissexism. Instead, they are more likely to blame themselves for how society is structured to oppress their existence. Overall, understanding people's identity requires us to acknowledge and center the connection between systems of oppression and how we give meaning to our intrapersonal world.

## 5 Applying the Racial Queer Identity Framework: The Case of Yari and Angelica

Yari is a 23-year-old dark-skin Peruvian immigrant cis-woman who uses she/her/ella pronouns and identifies as a lesbian. She is completing her associate degree at a community college. Yari comes from a traditional Peruvian family who is very proud of their Indigenous Quechua roots. Although they speak Spanish at home, their values and traditions are closely connected to their Indigenous heritage. Yari loves her family but at times feels that they are “too strict y *cerrados* [closed minded].” However, she considers herself “one of the lucky ones” since her family is okay with her dating women, although they rarely talk much about her sexuality. Yari's gender expression can be described as what society would classify as “masculine.” She often uses self-deprecating humor with her queer friends, who are predominately White, as a way of connecting with them. She says, “Yeah, my parents knew I was gay the minute they saw me, look at me!” Yari often feels ashamed of her family. She wishes they were more like the parents of her White peers who just let them live their life. Instead, her parents are “*muy metiches* [nosy].” They call her daily to find out what she is up to and when she is coming over to visit. Yari feels that most of the difficulties she has experienced in life are due to her being queer. But she reports being proud of who she is and often wears queer affirmative emblems (e.g., rainbow flags). When asked about her race, Yari says she doesn't think much about being Peruvian and reports she is “not really experiencing racism.” She proclaims, “The only race I see is the human race.”

For the past five years, Yari has worked as a barista at a coffee shop where she met Angelica, a 24-year-old Mexican American cis-woman co-worker. Initially, Yari was annoyed by how Angelica would often talk about how People of Color are treated in this country and how the U.S. cages undocumented children at the border. Yari would usually roll her eyes when Angelica talked about politics, government, and White people. They would often get into heated conversations, although lately, they have turned into playful banter. Despite these differences, Yari and Angelica began to spend time outside of work and developed a close friendship over time. In



the last few months, Yari feels that her relationship with Angelica is deeper than a friendship. She is beginning to feel “some type of way.” At times, Yari thinks she is growing romantic feelings for Angelica and believes that Angelica may feel the same way about her. Yari wants to tell Angelica how she feels but worries that Angelica would reject her as Angelica has never dated a woman before. When Yari finally reveals her feelings to Angelica, she is surprised to hear Angelica say, “You’re dope. I really like spending time with you too, Yari, but I don’t want to make things complicated, but yeah, I cannot stop thinking about you. It’s all very confusing. I need to figure this out ... these feelings are somewhat uncomfortable.”

The case of Yari and Angelica illustrates how two Queer Latinx women can belong to similar social groups (e.g., gender, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation), be impacted by similar overlapping forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, nativism, racism), and yet still use different schemas to make sense of the world and their racial-gendered-queer identity or emerging identity (e.g., Angelica’s queerness). Using the RQI framework, we can begin to think of the affirming and non-affirming messages that Yari and Angelica have received from their interpersonal relationships and the systemic forces that add meaning to how they view themselves as racial queer women. Based on the RQI framework, we can see that Yari is using the *non-advanced—advanced RQS*. As described in the case, Yari feels disconnected from her Peruvian roots and her family. Her friendships are predominantly with QWP, race has a low salience in her life, and she does not seem to understand racial oppression and how it has affected her life. However, she is deeply connected with the Queer community and acknowledges the negative impact heterosexism has had on her. She internalizes being rejected likely due to racism, ethnocentrism, and nativism. Alternatively, Angelica is using an *advanced—non-advanced schema* to view herself and the world. Angelica is proud of her heritage can recognize how racial oppression impacts People of Color; however, when it comes to her sexuality, Angelica feels very confused about the feelings she has for Yari.

## 6 Conclusion

In closing, we welcome all of the Yaris, Angelicas, and QPOC throughout the world to reclaim all of who you are. Yes, nurture all of you. Reflect on how systemic oppression impacts your livelihood and well-being. Resist the toxic invitation from White supremacy culture, patriarchy, and heterosexism to internalize and embody their colonizing ideologies and practices. Together we can build and strengthen our communities by focusing on developing healthy identities and, equally important, by sustaining our collective struggle against structural oppression. Our resistance is an antidote to the poison in the harmful messages QPOC receive from society and its laws, policies, and institutions. Our resistance provides us with a sense of belonging and a pathway for building a healthy, meaningful view of ourselves. Only then can we materialize “a world where I can be, without having to cease being me, where you can be, without having to cease being you, and where neither you nor I

will force one another to be like either me or you” (Marcos, 2001, p. 169). We can, we must, and we will build healthy and viable worlds for all of our Queer Siblings of Color.

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