Assimilationist, reformist, and sociopolitical phases of school belonging research: A critical race and optimal distinctiveness review

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Abstract

Sense of belonging has long been recognized as a fundamental psychological need and essential component of achievement motivation and socioemotional thriving. However, research on school belonging has only recently begun to examine the barriers to, supports for, and experiences of belonging among racially marginalized students of color within U.S. schools and universities. Further, motivation science has a limited understanding of what belonging means, how it is internalized, and what shapes it for such students of color. In this article, we evaluate the developmental trends in school belonging research conducted with racially marginalized student populations. Through our review, we identify and describe three distinct and consecutive trends of school belonging research: *assimilationist*, *reformist*, and *sociopolitical*, as well as the ideological and methodological characteristics of each trend. Further, we employ critical race and optimal distinctiveness theories as conceptual guides to assess the affordances and limits of each trend and how the literature has evolved across these three trends. Finally, we offer insights for responsibly advancing school belonging research in ways that authentically address the needs of racially marginalized student groups and honor the cultural and contextual nuance of their lived experiences.

1. Introduction

The concept of belonging has been studied for decades across various social science disciplines, particularly within psychology and education. Broadly conceptualized as an innate psychological drive, Baumeister and Leary (1995) underscored how humans strive to satisfy the need to belong by cultivating "frequent, affectively pleasant interactions" (p. 497) and stable contexts of mutual care for one another's welfare. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (1985, 2000) theorized the role of interpersonal relationships (i.e., relatedness) for positive social development and well-being. Given these initial ideas, Goodenow (1993a, 1993b) identified *schools* (K–12 and postsecondary) as such contexts where individuals need frequently pleasant interactions and mutual care, given the rapid cognitive and social development typical of the school-age years. Thus, Goodenow and Grady (1993) offered the notion of school belonging,[1] which they defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by teachers and peers at school. Soon thereafter, scholars

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[1] Our review of the extant research revealed "school belonging" was most often applied in research on K–12 school contexts, whereas "sense of belonging" was often used regarding research done in postsecondary contexts. In the current paper, we used these terms interchangeably and indicate K–12 or postsecondary contexts as needed.

increasingly turned their attention toward investigating the role and impact of school belonging, particularly for racially marginalized students (e.g., Anderman, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Prior to the emergence of school belonging research in the 1990s, much of psychological research conceptualized motivation as derived from internal drives or extrinsic determinism (for a historical review see Ryan, Bradshaw, Deci, Sternberg, & Pickren, 2019). These perspectives often translated into pejorative perceptions of racially marginalized students, where their academic difficulties were typically ascribed to innate cultural deficiencies, ultimately reinforcing pernicious racial-ethnic stereotypes. Conversely, early school belonging research focused on how school environments and the culturally biased interactions therein often created conditions that threatened students' academic and social well-being, thus hampering sense of belonging (e.g., Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This paradigm shift marked the beginnings of a motivation science that moved beyond intrinsic-extrinsic binaries and framed racially marginalized students' self-perceptions as existing within school environments that have historically thwarted opportunities for feeling accepted, respected, and included.

Nevertheless, these early school belonging studies maintained a limited purview of the ways learning environments can impinge marginalized students' sense of belonging, focusing mainly on teacher and peer relationships but neglecting other dimensions of students' racialized school experiences. Further, the universal need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) gave way to assumptions that belonging holds the same meaning for students across diverse racial-ethnic groups. Given how U.S. academic institutions were originally designed to restrict equitable education opportunities for Black and Brown students (e.g., *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896; *San Antonio ISD v. Rodriguez, 1972*; *Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974) in ways that endure still today (e.g., de facto segregation, culturally irrelevant curricula), the meaning of belonging for such students likely transcends the universal need for "affectively pleasant interactions" and instead is linked to a historical struggle to have their intellectual worth recognized, receive cultural affirmation, and obtain high-quality resources for success. Therefore, the scientific study of school belonging must also transcend race-evasive notions of belonging and become critically oriented toward understanding and disrupting the multifaceted sources of marginalization against students of color.

Since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of research attempting to address these concerns. In this article, we evaluate the developmental trends of school belonging research that have focused on the academic and social experiences of racially marginalized youth. Although important strides have been made to better understand how racially marginalized students experience school belonging and how educators can better support them, the rapidity with which the field has expanded and the inconsistency of approaches toward studying belonging have produced a body of work that often suffers from undertheorizing, oversimplicity, and disparate fragmentation (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Slaten, Ferguson, Allen, Brodrick, & Waters, 2016). Given the burgeoning interest in school belonging, in tandem with contemporary racial reckoning around entrenched inequities within U.S. education, this review allows for a critical assessment of the state of school belonging research for racially marginalized students and the directions toward which the field can turn moving forward.

2. Looking back: an analysis of school belonging research among racially marginalized student populations, 1990s to 2022

Our team used ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Academic Search Complete to conduct a search for peer-reviewed journal articles post-Goodenow (1993b) thru 2022 on "school belonging" and with application to equivalent subjects such as "school connectedness" or "school bonding". In cases where "school belonging" was not directly invoked in an article resulting from the search, we reviewed whether the article substantively engaged concepts concerning psychological, emotional, and/or social affinity toward the school context. Articles that focused on elements related to school belonging (e.g., teacher social support, peer social exclusion) but did not underscore perceived psychological, emotional, and social belongingness in school contexts were pruned. Next, we assessed and selected articles that reflected an acute focus on racially marginalized youth through (1) a discussion of race or racial hierarchies within the article, (2) a sample that largely included historically underserved racial groups, or (3) a discussion that invoked racialized constructs in schools (e.g., achievement gaps, microaggressions).

Our review of the past three decades of school belonging research among racially marginalized student groups revealed three distinct and consecutive trends post-Goodenow (1993b): *assimilationist*, *reformist*, and *sociopolitical* belonging research. Each trend was characterized by a unique set of ideological and methodological approaches toward understanding and supporting the belonging experiences of marginalized students. Across these trends our examination revealed an increasing sensitivity to the complex issues that have historically impacted marginalized students' psychological and emotional safety in schools. Specifically, each trend transition has brought a richer quality of (1) critical race theorizing (Crenshaw, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and (2) optimal distinctiveness theorizing (Brewer, 1991).

Critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 2010) positions race and racism as social constructs that permeate institutional structures and systems in ways that perpetuate a racially unjust social order. While such structures and systems are often perceived as neutral, "colorblind", or even beneficial for minoritized groups (e.g., education as "the great equalizer" across race; Mann, 1997), CRT identifies how they insidiously produce and maintain inequitable opportunity gaps and outcomes for already marginalized people groups (Crenshaw, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Across the three trends of belonging research, we recognized scholars' progressive attention to issues of race embedded within school systems and the ways that implicit and explicit racism have adversely affected marginalized students' belonging experiences. However, we also detected inconsistency toward examining how race potentially shapes what belonging means for students of color and how racism in the broader social world can shape in-school experiences.

Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) underscores how sense of belonging may entail more than just marginalized students' integration into dominant culture; rather, it involves an intricate balance between "fitting in" (i.e., being valued for likeness) and adaptively "standing out" (i.e., being valued for distinctiveness) across the dynamic and diverse social settings they navigate[2] (Gray, 2014, 2017). Thus, ODT conceptualizes belonging needs as multidimensional and contextualized,

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[2] In Brewer's original work, she notes the need for reconciliation between "assimilation" and "differentiation" needs. However, given the way we use "assimilation" in the current manuscript as well as the multiple culturally influenced meanings laden within that term, we discuss ODT in terms of "fitting in" and "standing out", which was advanced by Gray's (2014, 2017) discussion of ODT.

where racially marginalized students' desires to both fit in and stand out are meaningful and varied depending upon environmental and situational factors. Across the three stages of school belonging research, we recognized scholars' emerging attention to fitting in versus standing out needs, especially when examining contexts where students of color are minoritized. However, we also observed that most belonging studies failed to fully embrace distinctiveness (i.e., adaptively standing out) as an essential contributor to school belonging. Overall, scholars' attention to and integration of these two theoretical frameworks (i.e., CRT and ODT) guided our evaluation of the ideologies, methods, and findings across the three trends.

3. School belonging research as individual assimilation

Around the mid–2000s, a new wave of researchers began building on the seminal belonging work of the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Anderman, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This first trend of belonging research has largely prioritized two foci: (1) acknowledging the barriers to and supports for belonging across diverse students broadly and (2) designing interventions to rebuff the effects of social adversity on the psychological processes that undergird sense of belonging for racially marginalized students in particular. Despite the attention to racial-ethnic diversity and marginalized students' school experiences, this work has mostly advanced assimilationist perspectives on belonging (Stokes, 2021), which we further elaborate on below, suggesting the solution to achievement disparities and belonging concerns for marginalized students of color resides in adapting their thinking and social perceptions to emulate the psychology of their White peers. Thus, we dub this trend *assimilationist belonging research* and identify three prevailing patterns that characterize it. First, this research has heavily focused on social, psychological, and achievement comparisons between White students and students of color. Second, the messaging and design of this trend's intervention work has often sidelined the unique racialized adversities that mark many marginalized students' school experiences in lieu of underscoring universal adversities confronted by all students. Finally, this trend's emphasis on assimilation has neglected the import of distinctiveness in supporting racially marginalized students' school belonging (Brewer, 1991; Gray, 2017). We expound on these patterns below.

3.1 Comparative designs

Assimilationist belonging research has mainly consisted of correlational and experimental studies, both of which have heavily leveraged racially comparative designs. Correlational studies have often assessed differences in self-reported sense of belonging between students of color and their White peers (e.g., Gopalan, Linden-Carmichael, & Lanza, 2022; Shnabel, Purdie-Vaughns, Cook, Garcia, & Cohen, 2013; Wang, Willett, & Eccles, 2011) or have examined the moderating effects of race-ethnicity on associations between belonging and other psychosocial or academic variables (e.g., La Salle, Parris, Morin, & Meyers, 2016; Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2010). By identifying disparities across different racial-ethnic groups' schooling experiences, these studies have aimed to illuminate inequitable processes and outcomes in motivation research. However, despite these intentions, such racial comparisons often position the social and academic patterns of middle-to-upper-class White students as normative (Graham, 1992) and thus a benchmark to which racially marginalized students should strive. Further, such comparisons often neglect marginalized students' unique psychosocial experiences with racism, discrimination, and segregation. Consequently, when social or academic disparities materialize in comparative research, these discrepancies can subtly signal internal deficits within students of color versus the effects of them operating within systems where they have historically been excluded.

In addition, comparative studies typically use rudimentary categorical variables to measure race, which may miss profound intra- and intergroup nuance. For example, in a nationally representative sample of undergraduates from diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds, Gopalan and Brady (2020) found that underrepresented minority students (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and Native American) reported a lower sense of belonging at four-year institutions compared with their White and Asian peers. While the design and findings were consistent with a large body of research, this work situates diverse students' social experiences at four-year universities as monolithic and impervious to context, neglecting how institutional differences (e.g., racial-ethnic composition; institutional vision/mission; strength of cultural affinity groups) introduce considerable variance to each group's belonging experiences at their respective institutions. Further, like much assimilationist-comparative research (e.g., Mello, Mallett, Andretta, & Worrell, 2012; Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012), this study combined multiple marginalized racial-ethnic groups into a composite

variable (i.e., "underrepresented minority"), which not only assumes universality of experiences and values *within* marginalized groups but *across* them as well. Although merging multiple marginalized groups is considered common practice and "underrepresented minority" is now popular terminology in postsecondary research, such conflation neglects how these diverse groups' experiences of immigration and disenfranchisement have varied considerably across U.S. history and institutions, thus impacting their perceptions of school belonging across time and context.

Overall, the comparative nature of assimilationist belonging research prioritizes a focus on disparities in ways that can fixate on "achievement gaps" and position belonging as simply a lever to reduce gaps versus a fundamental need unto its own merit. Such gap-gazing can have precarious consequences for the ways social scientists understand the lived experiences of racially marginalized groups. Gutiérrez (2008) discusses these dangers by highlighting how achievement gap studies, even those that are successful in eliminating disparities, rarely attune to the history or social context of said gaps, typically reinforce deficit notions about marginalized students' skills or values, and often advance one-dimensional solutions (e.g., adapt mindsets to foster belonging) to address complex social phenomena. In addition, positioning belonging as a means to an (achievement) end can reinforce superficial notions of learning (i.e., test scores) and equity (i.e., equal achievement between groups).

3.2 The emergence of belonging interventions

The second prevailing pattern of assimilationist belonging research followed from the correlational studies described directly above. To address psychosocial and academic discrepancies between marginalized and socio-economically privileged students, social psychology researchers began to create brief (often-called *wise*) interventions that prime students with subtle messaging to help untether their sense of belonging from the social adversities they face in school. Typically, these adversities are framed as non-racialized academic or social challenges, such as a poor grade on an exam or difficulties bonding with peers. One of the most cited studies in this vein is Walton and Cohen's (2007, 2011) social-belonging intervention. Walton and Cohen (2007, 2011) primed first-semester college freshmen with messaging that social adversity during the first year of college is "common" and "transient" and thus shouldn't be perceived as a threat to belonging or a signal of personal deficits. The study proved large longitudinal effects over three years, with Black American students

(compared to their White peers) demonstrating increases in GPA, self-reported physical health, and subjective happiness as well as decreases in belonging uncertainty, self-doubt, and remembrance of negative racial stereotypes. At the secondary level (i.e., middle and high school), similarly designed studies have also demonstrated impressive effects for low-income Black and Latine students (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; Mello et al, 2012; Shnabel et al., 2013). These effects, while notable, are not surprising given how research has shown that greater identification with the dominant culture (i.e., what assimilation is intended to promote) predicts behavioral adaptation to schooling structures that embody that culture (Flores, Navarro, & DeWitz, 2008; Kiang, Andrews, Stein, Supple, & Gonzalez, 2013; Schotte, Stanat, & Edele, 2018).

Despite their benefits, a CRT perspective underscores the limits—and potential harm—of race-evasive intervention messages that risk trivializing racism and discrimination across U.S. academic institutions. While these studies acknowledge the existence and implications of racial barriers to school belonging, their messaging can neglect how individuals from marginalized groups often face adversity that is neither "common" to all people (rather disproportionally confronted by students of color) nor "transient" (rather persistent and systemic). Socializing students of color to disregard these realities and conceptualize their experiences as universal (e.g., "all students struggle") can stunt their racial identity development, engender internalized racism, and foster self-doubt if their difficulties persist (Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes, 2005). The design and content messaging of these interventions mirror decades-old psychological interventions validated among predominantly White college students (Wilson & Linville, 1982, 1985), further underscoring how this work was not designed with racially marginalized students in mind despite it being used to remediate their perceived deficits [see similar critiques of Tinto's (1993, 1997) theories of student persistence and integration by Guiffrida (2006) and Metz (2004)]. While recent adaptations of these interventions are more sensitive to differences between students' college-generation or immigration status (e.g., Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Townsend, Stephens, Smallets, & Hamedani, 2019), they likewise ignore or only superficially consider students' racial–ethnic identities and promote notions of cultural pluralism in ways that can lead to greater racial essentialization (Covarrubias & Laiduc, 2022; Wilton, Apfelbaum, & Good, 2019).

Such race-evasive intervention messaging subtly orients students of color toward White-normed assimilation in ways that can discount their racial identities and experiences (Kubi, Byrd, & Diemer, 2022; Stokes, 2021), thereby perpetuating their own marginalization. Further, embedding race-evasive intervention messaging within racially comparative designs can be contradictory, especially considering how this work aims to close racial achievement gaps despite discounting the racialized adversities that contribute to these gaps and frustrate a sense of belonging for many students of color. Such interventions also place the onus on students of color to find belonging by reframing their perceptions of social adversity, thus decentering the role of school systems, policies, and programs that have historically excluded them. Scholars have begun to highlight these discrepancies and identify their social, psychological, and academic consequences. For example, Covarrubias and Laiduc (2022) argue that by encouraging individual (versus structural) attributions for belonging uncertainty, race-evasive interventions can lead students of color to minimize and negatively internalize their personal experiences with discrimination at school (Neville et al., 2005).

3.3 Inattention to student distinctiveness

The emphasis on assimilation in this body of research may neglect the potential to understand how students' individual distinctiveness can provide opportunities for enhancing their sense of school belonging. Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) provides a conceptual alternative, suggesting that individuals may not only seek to "fit in" with the dominant school culture but also celebrate the distinctive identities, skills, and contributions that allow them to adaptively "stand out" (Gray, 2014, 2017). Here, marginalized students' unique cultural values and individual strengths can fulfill that desire to stand out, particularly when these differences are understood as assets that contribute to or make the school community stronger (i.e., positive distinctiveness) versus deficiencies that need to be modified (i.e., negative distinctiveness) for them to fully fit in. Supporting students of color in recognizing and celebrating these assets can enhance their school belonging and buffer the consequences of negative distinctiveness in school or on campus (e.g., being singled out or mistreated due to their race-ethnicity). Thus, assimilationist belonging research may miss a key condition for supporting marginalized students' school belonging by overemphasizing fitting in within culturally incongruent school spaces and neglecting the ways that students' unique assets allow for value-added contributions.

Altogether, we acknowledge the valuable insights that assimilationist belonging research has contributed while also recognizing its limitations. Focusing on supporting students' assimilation into the predominant culture can provide certain affordances (e.g., academic and professional knowledge/skills) that are needed for children across all racial–ethnic backgrounds to thrive. However, such assimilation must not come at the expense of students' cultural identities, values, or aspects of their personhood that support self-dignity or distinctiveness. Nor should students have to disregard the existence of unique race-based stressors they commonly face. Historically, academic institutions have encouraged—if not coerced—marginalized students of color to assimilate to norms, standards, and expectations that align with and reinforce White Western supremacy (Martin, 2019). Such practices have bottlenecked many marginalized students of color into sacrificing elements of their cultural identities in order to achieve academically and advance socially, thus vexing their sense of self-worth and adversely affecting their emotional and cultural health. Overall, these limitations underscore our need for more race-sensitive approaches toward supporting marginalized students' school belonging.
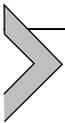
4. School belonging research as institutional and instructional reformation

Around the mid-2010s, psychology and education scholars began pursuing empirical approaches that more authentically centered race-ethnicity and culture as essential factors in understanding students' experiences of school belonging. Despite retaining long-standing definitions of school belonging (e.g., Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), this research trend has acknowledged the ways that aspects of U.S. schooling (e.g., Eurocentric curricula, emphasis on high-stakes accountability) and implicit biases among teachers and school staff can reproduce racial–ethnic oppression that continues to alienate students of color. Consequently, scholars in this trend have advocated for school and classroom reforms to better support marginalized students' psychological safety, agency, and belonging. Thus, we label this trend *reformist belonging* research and identify three patterns that characterize it: (1) locating student belonging within racialized contexts, (2) advocating for culturally responsive school and classroom reforms, and (3) emerging attempts to integrate students' distinctiveness needs into belonging theorizing. We delineate these patterns and their implications below.

4.1 Locating belonging within a racialized context

Reformist belonging research has largely integrated a race-focused approach toward examining marginalized students' belonging experiences. DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz (2014) describe race-focused research as that which positions racial-ethnic constructs as a central focus of study design and data interpretation, particularly within academic domains that have historically neglected the role of race (e.g., psychology). To accomplish this, reformist belonging studies have typically recruited samples largely of students of color or have centered marginalized students' culturally informed identities, experiences, and values in their conceptual framing, methodologies, and analyses. Doing so has allowed studies in this trend to frame marginalized students' sense of belonging within racialized—versus race-evasive—school contexts.

Reformist belonging studies have applied race-focused constructs in diverse ways. Some have explored how students' sense of belonging is adversely affected by implicit and explicit racism at school (e.g., Lewis et al., 2021; Montoro & Ceballo, 2021; Niwa, Way, & Hughes, 2014). Others have evaluated how ascribing high importance and positive perceptions to one's racial-ethnic identity (i.e., centrality and private regard; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) can buffer school belonging from race-related stressors (e.g., Griffin, Gray, Hope, Metzger, & Henderson, 2022; Medina, Rivas-Drake, Jagers, & Rowley, 2020). Still others have adopted a critical qualitative approach to understand how students of color internalize sense of belonging within racialized school contexts, including White-dominated STEM programs (Allen, Gray, Baumeister, & Leary, 2022; Cain & Trauth, 2022), PWIs (Foxx, 2021; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2016), and Black-male initiative programs (Brooms, 2018, 2019, 2020). Although these qualitative studies have not explicitly integrated a priori race-focused constructs given their inductive nature, they maintained a focus on students' culturally informed identities through theoretical frames that foreground racialized perspectives (e.g., intragroup relationships, racial-ethnic prejudice). For example, Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) conducted a critical race analysis of an urban commuter school, explicating racism embedded within the school's programs and policies to contextualize why students of color perceived underrepresentation, a lack of care, and a constricted belonging. Overall, these diverse approaches to race-focusing have exposed *how* racialized school environments can support or thwart racially marginalized students' belonging.

Despite locating belonging within racialized contexts, however, many reformist belonging studies have continued to conceptualize belonging itself in distinctly race-evasive ways, which can reflect an internal contradiction at worst or misalignment between conceptualization and operationalization at best. These studies have typically employed conceptualizations derived from seminal school belonging research described in the introduction (e.g., Goodenow, 1993b; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), which emphasize perceptions of acceptance, inclusion, respect, support, and safety. While these conceptualizations certainly include important aspects of student belonging, they underscore generalized belonging perceptions that can neglect unique dimensions of belonging that may be most relevant for students of color (e.g., affirmations of racial-ethnic identity; desire for communalism within school; Louie et al., 2022).

Race-evasive conceptualizations of belonging presume an equivalency of experience between racially marginalized and White students, as well as across diverse racial-ethnic groups. For example, reformist belonging studies have often used the same long-standing measures of belonging across both racially marginalized and White student samples (e.g., Morales–Chicas & Graham, 2021; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Voight et al., 2015), which assumes that students of color, despite experiencing unique barriers to belonging historically, actually perceive, make meaning of, and internalize belonging in similar—if not identical—ways to their White peers. While generalized notions of belonging are important to understand, research designs that assume implicit equivalency of belonging disregards how it can hold unique meaning for marginalized students (Harper & Newman, 2016; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), whose encounters with racial-ethnic oppression have excluded them from physical structures as well as social opportunities in ways that many White middle-to-upper class students may not identify with (Stokes, 2021). Even in studies that have exclusively sampled students of color, the use of generalized belonging measures may conceal important distinctions regarding how they make meaning of their own belonging. For example, undocumented Latine students may internalize belonging in ways that are consistent with broader social conversations of deservingness, legality, and language (Arriaga & Rodriguez, 2021), whereas Black American students may conceptualize belonging as collective identity and actively resisting anti-intellectual and inferiority stereotypes (Carter, 2008; Matthews, 2018; O'Connor, 1997). Further, belonging for Native/Indigenous students may have meaningful expression through "land" and "place" (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003) as well as

combatting cultural disconnection (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017).

Overall, while we acknowledge clear limitations in how reformist belonging studies have conceptualized belonging, the use of race-focused designs, constructs, and analyses has initiated an important advancement in school belonging research. By attuning to the environmental and contextual forces that can affect students' internal psychology and social experience, this research has challenged deficit perspectives derived from and perpetuated by racially comparative studies. Further, recognizing how school systems, policies, and programs can affect belonging suggests that they can be reformed to minimize discrimination and leverage students' cultural assets to better support their inclusion.

4.2 Advocating for culturally responsive structural reforms

Given the environmental forces that shape racially marginalized students' experiences of school belonging, reformist belonging studies have investigated and advocated for culturally responsive reforms across institutions and classrooms. Some have suggested reducing racially-biased policies (e.g., zero-tolerance discipline, ability tracking; Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Saleem, Legette, & Byrd, 2022) or training educators to improve cultural competence for mitigating microaggressions and stereotyping (e.g., Brown & Tam, 2019; Cain & Truth, 2022; Mwangi, 2016; Rozek & Gaither, 2021). Others have endorsed ethnic studies courses (e.g., Brannon & Lin, 2021; López et al., 2022; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2018) or culturally responsive interventions (e.g., Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, 2016) to affirm students' cultural assets. Finally, some studies have advocated for the integration of culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) to build classrooms that honor and sustain the identities and values of students of color (e.g., DeNicolo, 2019; Matthews, 2020). For example, Froiland et al. (2016) aimed to enhance Native Hawaiian students' school belonging through autonomy supportive teaching, which honors their cultural preferences for overlapping speech, acceptance of differences, and a welcoming environment (i.e., the *Aloha* spirit). Regardless of whether these studies have taken an anti-bias or culturally responsive approach, their emphasis on reforms that are sensitive to marginalized students' cultural identities indicates a departure from previous belonging interventions that only target students' internal psychology or endorse race-evasive school reform.

However, the reforms suggested throughout this trend of school belonging research have occasionally suffered from underdevelopment or under-specification. Many reformist belonging studies have proposed school or classroom changes that lack precision or practicable action steps, ranging from broad calls to support multiculturalism or campus diversity (e.g., Aggarwal & Çiftçi, 2021; Brown & Tam, 2019) to general propositions for improving faculty's cultural competence (Boston & Warren, 2017; Montoro & Ceballo, 2021). While a degree of inexplicitness can be valuable when proposing reforms, as it allows educators to tailor such reforms to their unique contexts, overly vague suggestions can be problematic, given how educators—despite supporting the spirit of cultural competence—often struggle to effectively implement culturally responsive classroom and school reforms (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Fernandez, Loukas, Golaszewski, Batanova, and Pasch (2019) provide an instructive alternative approach, pointing educators toward specific resources (e.g., the Colorado Department of Education's equity toolkit) that they may use when designing school and classroom reforms to better support racial equity, cultural competence, and marginalized students' sense of belonging (also see Peña, Ruedas-Gracia, Cohen, Tran, & Stratton, 2022 for supporting first generation students in STEM).

Further, reformist belonging research has often advocated reforms that focus exclusively on what educators can do to *directly* support racially marginalized students' sense of belonging while overlooking students' voices and input. Direct "top-down" approaches (e.g., modifying institutional policies without student feedback) reflect only one avenue for meeting students' belonging-related needs. An alternative approach would focus on *indirectly* fostering belonging for students of color by creating opportunities for their empowerment and agency (i.e., "bottom-up" approaches). Gray, Hope, and Byrd (2020) suggest one such alternative where schools invest in culturally responsive leadership programs that provide students of color with skills to operate as consultants on issues related to their own school belonging. This provides opportunities for students—in partnership with administrators and teachers—to provide suggestions that better meet their culturally-informed needs (Warren & Marciano, 2018), while also allowing them to make distinctive contributions that highlight the unique perspectives/experiences they bring to their schools. Thus, bottom-up approaches allow for students to stand out as well as fit in, which can be integral for their sense of school belonging (Gray, 2014, 2017).

4.3 Emerging integration of optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT)

Belonging research that foregrounds differences across students' cultural experiences has allowed for an emerging attentiveness to the ways racially marginalized students' distinctiveness relates to their sense of belonging, a core tenet of ODT (Brewer, 1991, 2011; Gray, 2017). Here, reformist belonging studies have extended the focus of school belonging research beyond students' capacity to fit into the dominant culture and toward how standing out (as a function of positive and negative distinctiveness) can support or thwart their psycho-social wellbeing. For example, Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2017) found that Black students attending schools where they were disproportionately disciplined perceived themselves as being singled out due to their racial-ethnic group (i.e., negative distinctiveness), leading to greater school adjustment problems (i.e., not fitting in) and lower feelings of belongingness. Conversely, Brannon and Lin (2021) found that Black and Latine undergraduates who participated in courses and affinity groups that celebrated their unique cultural heritages (i.e., positive distinctiveness) perceived a stronger sense of ingroup closeness (i.e., fitting in), which predicted their sense of belonging to the wider university. Although these studies did not explicitly invoke ODT in their theoretical framing, they leveraged it in spirit by highlighting how standing out could be a pathway to supporting students' desires to fit in at school.

Despite the budding attention to racially marginalized students' distinctiveness at school, reformist belonging studies have generally neglected how students' desires to fit in and stand out shift across varied—and often competing—contexts. Many racially marginalized students must reconcile the tension to fit into (1) broader U.S. society, (2) their school environments, and (3) their ingroup communities, which all maintain distinct and at times incongruent value systems. The salience of context, along with the importance students of color ascribe to their identities, can shape the degree to which they prioritize fitting in or standing out. For example, Black students may prioritize fitting into racial-ethnic affinity groups (e.g., Black fraternities–sororities) at PWIs particularly if they feel estranged or a lack of fit at the institution level. These groups celebrate Black cultural heritage and provide communal support to cope with social identity threat common in predominantly White settings (Badea, Jetten, Czukor, & Askevis-Leherpeux, 2010). However, at HBCUs (i.e., Historically Black Colleges and Universities), where the threat of racial-ethnic discrimination or

cultural marginalization is less likely, Black students may select into the same affinity groups (e.g., Black fraternities-sororities) as a way to primarily stand out among their peers across the institution. Thus, identical decisions (e.g., selecting into an affinity group) in differing contexts reflect different needs and motives as is cultivated by the cultural nuances of the context. These illustrations underscore how marginalized students' needs to fit in and stand out are complex, existing at multiple levels (e.g., school, ingroup community) and shifting according to context. However, reformist belonging research has often missed this nuance by focusing exclusively on these needs at the school level, independent of the broader sociopolitical context.
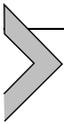
5. School belonging research as sociopolitical resistance

Around the mid-2010s (see Fig. 1) and building into the early 2020s, some researchers began integrating sociological perspectives toward examining school belonging among racially marginalized students. While maintaining a focus on racial-ethnic identity and cultural experiences that characterized reformist belonging research, this distinct trend extended conceptualizations of school belonging beyond individual psychology and the school-based interactions that shape it and into students' broader social and cultural worlds. Sociological belonging work by Yuval-Davis (2011, 2016) and others (e.g., Nagel, 2011; Stratigos, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014; Sumsion & Wong, 2011) frames belonging as fundamentally political, an act of inclusion/exclusion by hegemonic forces based on social categories (e.g., race-ethnicity, nationality) that comprise the "idealized" national community. While much of this work has focused on belonging at the national level, education researchers adopting this third approach have positioned school and national belonging as dialectical, where students' sense of belonging emerges from the tension between their school and broader social experiences. We coin this third trend as *sociopolitical belonging research* and identify three patterns that characterize its current emergence: (1) (re)conceptualizing school belonging as political and inextricably linked with broader social systems of marginalization; (2) reimagining schools as sites of social and political resistance; and (3) attending to contextual variations for fitting in and standing out.
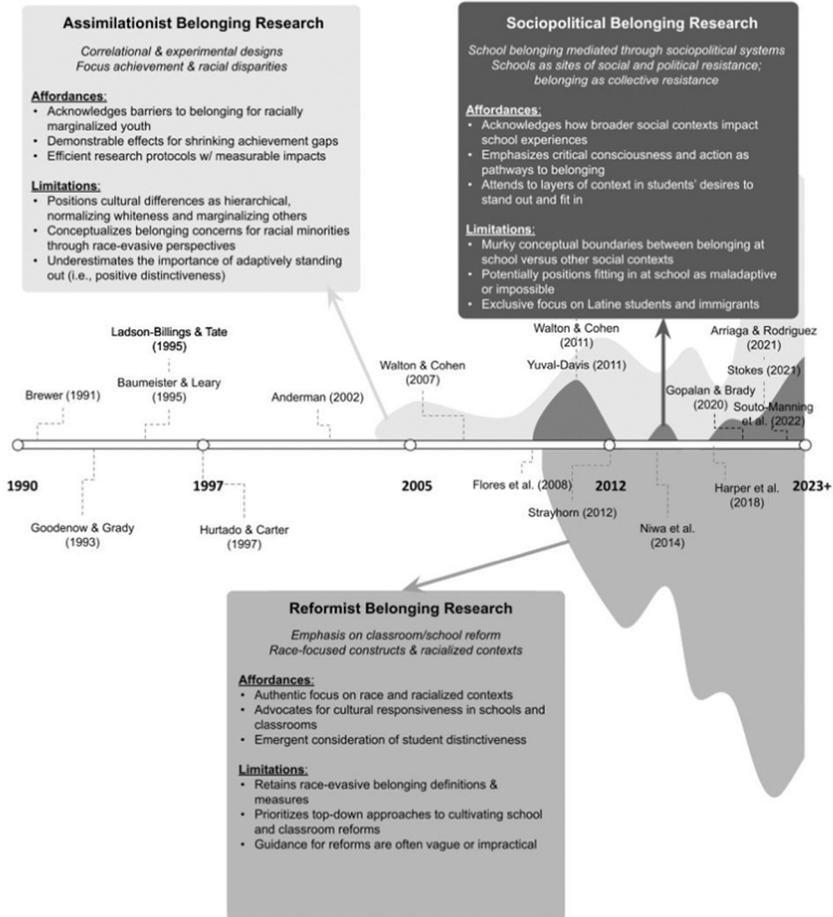
Fig. 1 Trending of the three phases of school belonging research.

5.1 (Re)conceptualizing school belonging as a political

While the aforementioned trends of belonging research have specifically focused on students' experiences within their academic institutions, sociopolitical belonging research has acknowledged that broader social contexts can also affect school processes as well as students' psychological wellbeing. Brezhica (2018) leveraged Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological theory of development to frame students as existing within a complex matrix of hierarchical social systems including their schools (i.e., the microsystem), their neighborhoods (i.e., the exosystem), and the U.S. more generally (i.e., the macrosystem). Since these systems overlap, Brezicha (2018) contends that students' contextualized experiences in one cannot be

entirely isolated from those in another. Thus, sociopolitical belonging research has explored how students can carry threatening experiences from out–of–school contexts into their school lives. Russell and Mantilla–Blanco (2022) found that marginalized students' perceptions of restricted rights and opportunities in the U.S. predicted lower self-reported school belonging. Rodriguez (2020) likewise observed that undocumented students' fears of deportation or criminalization, rooted in vicarious experiences of local community members and national social discourse regarding their "illegality", remained salient at school, thus undermining their sense of safety and security. Even when students of color feel connectedness with peers or receive culturally responsive supports from educators, lingering concerns about broader social marginalization can result in feelings of exclusion and non–belonging within school (i.e., belonging "in limbo"; Arriaga & Rodriguez, 2021, p. 1). Thus, Russell and Mantilla–Blanco (2022) described marginalized students' school belonging as being mediated by their broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

Further, several sociopolitical belonging studies have examined how prevailing systemic forces in the U.S. shape educational systems and policies, thus affording an additional pathway for social systems to affect students' school experiences. Souto–Manning (2021) argues that schools' embeddedness within a White supremacist national culture perpetuates education systems that reflect that ethos. Thus, students who do not align with the values, behavior, language, or standards of predominantly White and Western culture may never achieve a sense of belonging and will likely have school encounters that undermine their wellbeing. Arriaga and Rodriguez (2021) likewise contend that social discourses regarding undocumented students' "deservingness" to receive state support—or even exist within the state—produce policies that limit eligibility for financial aid, in-state tuition, and other valuable academic and economic resources. Such school policies, which can have significant implications for students' sense of belonging, do not exist within a vacuum; instead, they are designed for the preservation of predominantly White cultural values (Bondy, 2015; DeNicolo, Yu, Crowley, & Gabel, 2017).

Given the layered contexts that affect school belonging, several sociopolitical belonging studies have positioned marginalized students' expressions of agency when confronting threat and discrimination as an indispensable element of their school belonging experiences (e.g., Louie et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2022). Stokes (2021) argues that belonging within his Latine student sample was best understood as collective resistance to

oppression within their schools and communities. This (re)focus on liberation and solidarity may help avoid the erasure of students' cultural identities, values, and heritages that assimilationist notions of belonging can propagate. Further, Souto-Manning (2021) argues that failing to acknowledge the ways that students of color empower themselves and their communities to disrupt inequity would position them as passive recipients of subordination, prohibiting them from experiencing a sense of belonging entirely. These notions of belonging as *collective* resistance and empowerment echo across much of the sociopolitical belonging literature (e., Arriaga & Rodriguez, 2021; Santa-Ramirez, 2022a, 2022b) and highlight hitherto underexplored conceptualizations of school belonging.

Overall, sociopolitical belonging research has problematized prior belonging research trends by recognizing the complexity and multidimensionality of marginalized students' lived experiences. This research has challenged an overemphasis on assimilation as well as the limited scope of institutional and instructional reforms. However, as with prior trends, several limitations exist within this emergent body or work. First, many studies failed to explicitly define belonging (Bondy, 2015; Rodriguez, 2020), which obscures conceptual precision and limits future research in operationalizing their constructs. Relatedly, many sociopolitical belonging studies have not delineated the boundaries between school belonging versus belonging to one's community or the U.S. more generally (Arriaga & Rodriguez, 2021; Bondy, 2015), despite them being unique—albeit interconnected—ecologies. Louie et al. (2022) provides an instructive alternative by operationalizing clear distinctions between social, academic, and democratic belonging, which allows for a more precise examination of ecological bidirectionality and influences. Finally, excluding a handful of studies (e.g., Louie et al., 2022; Souto-Manning, Martinez, & Musser, 2022), the majority of this work has focused exclusively on Latine and/or undocumented immigrant students. This critique may be premature given this trend of belonging research is still only emerging. However, future work should extend the multi-level and sociopolitical conceptualizations of belonging to Black, Indigenous, and other racially marginalized students, who likewise encounter cultural erasure, forced assimilation, and various other forms of oppression in their social worlds that follow them into their school lives.

5.2 Reimagining schools as sites of social and political resistance

Given this trend has understood school belonging in light of racially marginalized students' broader sociopolitical experiences, it has also

advocated for sociopolitical solutions for supporting their inclusion. Some studies have emphasized preparing students of color for liberatory political activity, prioritizing instructional programs that develop their sociopolitical awareness (Stokes, 2021) or build solidarity across racial-ethnic lines (Louie et al., 2022). Others have focused on supporting students' critical action (Freire, 1970) within their communities. For example, Santa-Ramirez (2022b) and DeNicolo et al. (2017) encouraged partnerships between students, schools, and grassroots organizations to engage in joint advocacy work or create curricular projects that foreground the interests of students within their local communities. Finally, several studies have enumerated pedagogical frameworks that could support such critical motivation and action. Souto-Manning et al. (2022) pedagogy of communicative belonging aims to abolish English-language idolization in literacy class-rooms by delineating transformative action steps for teachers at the intra-personal (e.g., developing cultural humility and appreciation), interpersonal (e.g., using translanguaging and addressing microaggressions), organiza-tional (e.g., building schoolwide critical consciousness), and communal levels (e.g., developing a shared commitment toward justice and equity). Collectively, this work reimagines schools as sites of sociopolitical action that challenge marginalized students' exclusion in their schools and in the U.S. more broadly.

Sociopolitical belonging research has envisioned opportunities for students of color to exercise voice and agency. This approach is an important corrective to previous belonging research, which has prioritized reforms that are isolated to students' school environments or pursue belonging as a means to an (achievement) end. However, these advances were not without their limitations. While nurturing marginalized students' socio-political development and activism can certainly support deeper feelings of belonging, doing so while ignoring their needs for inclusion in formal academic spaces can undermine their sense of belonging during school and academic preparedness for life after school. Some scholars have begun to bridge the gap between the political and academic by encouraging specific instructional practices (e.g., translanguaging; Souto-Manning et al., 2022) or collaborative curriculum planning between schools, students, and individuals within the local community (DeNicolo et al., 2017); however, these are the exceptions. Predominantly, this trend has either sidelined students' formal academic experiences or only minimally supported them. This critique does not suggest that proposed sociopolitical reforms cannot supplement students' academic experiences (e.g., as after-school programs)

or be infused within them (e.g., using mathematics or ELA classrooms as sites for cultivating critical consciousness or lobbying legislators). Rather, it highlights the need for this trend to better theorize on bridging between students' sociopolitical and academic needs.

5.3 Attention to contextual variations in students' needs to fit in and stand out

The sociopolitical framing of belonging has propelled school belonging research forward by acknowledging the ways students' belonging-related needs are informed by multiple contexts. Whereas reformist belonging studies have generally limited their examinations of fitting in and adaptively standing out within school environments, sociopolitical belonging research has recognized that the thwarting of these needs outside of school can affect how students seek them within school. For example, several studies identified that when students of color encounter systemic and interpersonal racism beyond school walls, they may engage in political action within their schools to strengthen ingroup solidarity and underscore their opposition to the unjust status quo (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Louie et al., 2022; Stokes, 2021). Similarly, Rodriguez (2019) found that immigrant youth of color who encountered racism and linguicism within their schools chose to participate in an after-school library program as a place for them to build social bonds and safely develop their identities. In both examples, students' experiences with negative distinctiveness (e.g., racial–ethnic discrimination, racism, and linguicism) at one level of their social experience encouraged them to meet their belonging needs by fitting into intragroup communities and engaging in activities where standing out was positioned as a means to affirm self-identity and resist injustice and marginalization.

Despite featuring several ODT principles (e.g., the fluidity of belonging-related needs across social systems), several studies within this trend have positioned fitting in at school as maladaptive or impossible for racially marginalized students. Stokes (2021) argues that because schools embody the broader U.S. culture of White supremacy and have persistently marginalized students of color, Latine students fitting into that culture will result in self- and cultural erasure. While Stokes' concerns about the psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences of assimilating to White supremacist institutions are valid, his positioning of marginalized students' desires to fit in at their institutions as universally and invariably negative may neglect the complexity of their social experiences and school preferences. Scholars have identified that students of color may seek to fit

in—to varying degrees—at school to access the tools, skills, and comradery needed to succeed academically and grow socially (Carter, 2008). Further, there is noteworthy variation in the degree to which academic institutions embody White supremacist values or enact exclusion against students of color. Fitting in at institutions designed for and by marginalized communities (e.g., HBCUs) can yield adaptive outcomes that satisfy cultural, social, or psychological needs for students of color, a point that can get lost in Stokes's (2021) positioning of schools as universally exclusionary. Thus, outright rejection of the desire to fit in—or school belonging generally—can limit the spaces within which students of color may feel included and restrict their agency, mobility, and thriving at schools and society.
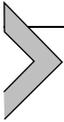
6. Looking forward: future promise in school belonging research

The past three decades have shown a prolific increase in school belonging research. In examining peer-reviewed articles following the seminal work of Goodenow (1993b), the 2000s yielded approximately four school belonging articles per year, the 2010s around 15 articles per year, and the early 2020s roughly 40 articles per year, a clear multiplicative trend. In contrast to the various "hot topics" (e.g., learning styles, zero-tolerance discipline, high stakes accountability) that have saturated education research in recent decades, the current trending of school belonging in education discourse may reflect stakeholders' attunement to the foundational elements of human functioning that can allow for optimal student flourishing. The rapid growth of this literature has afforded clear opportunities for understanding the schooling experiences of racially marginalized students. Over recent decades, we've learned the value of school belonging for mitigating achievement disparities between privileged and disenfranchised student groups (Cook et al., 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). We've also discovered the ways that culturally responsive reforms to school curricula, pedagogies, and programming can impact school belonging (Niwa et al., 2014; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2016). Additionally, we've realized how prevailing sociopolitical systems that propagate inequity against marginalized groups can infiltrate schools and school policies in ways that impact school belonging (Louie et al., 2022; Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022). Overall, the field has begun extending universal conceptions of belonging by recognizing how it exists within racialized contexts (i.e., schools and

universities) and is itself racialized (i.e., students of color experience, perceive, and internalize belonging in ways that are entangled with their racial identity).

However, despite these rich learnings over recent decades, known and unknown challenges remain. The field is only beginning to understand what belonging means, how it is internalized, and what shapes it for students of color specifically. Our review suggests several insights toward addressing these shortcomings. First, we must enhance our understanding of how the need for racially marginalized youth to both "fit in" and "stand out" mutually informs their school belonging and attend to the equilibrium between these needs as they vary according to context, ideas which remain virtually unstudied empirically. Second, the field must better integrate racial identity and racialized experiences (e.g., microaggressions, communalism) into the theorization and operational definitions of school belonging. Finally, we must reimage and refine the conceptual and methodological limits that constrain our understanding of what belonging-supportive classrooms and schools look like. Considering how structural reforms are often guided by empirical studies, such reforms will only be as refined as the empirical and conceptual knowledge from which they emerge.

If the aforementioned limitations persist amidst the continued proliferation of school belonging research, lingering social inequities will become further entrenched while reforms remain superficial. In other words, *belonging* risks becoming a slogan system apt for pop-psychology yet limited for understanding and addressing systemic inequity in education. Apple (1992) describes three qualities of a slogan system: (1) a penumbra of vagueness that allows powerful organizations and marginalized individuals who would otherwise disagree to find common ground (*see* interest convergence; Bell, 1980); (2) yet enough detail to warrant a course of action for stakeholders to effect change; complimented by (3) a charm or charismatic draw that is an energizer for action toward change. Many of our current conceptions of school belonging possess these very qualities. (1) Belonging theory is overly simplified and sufficiently acontextual to unify the interests of elite universities, the U.S. K-12 education enterprise, and racially marginalized student groups. However, (2) school belonging research offers enough detail to suggest brief psychological interventions (*see* assimilationist section) or larger school reforms (*see* reformist section) as one-size-fits-all "fixes" for stakeholders to adopt. Finally, (3) the concept of belonging as a fundamental human need often resonates powerfully with

stakeholders, compelling a sense of imaginative possibility for what schools could be if individual or structural reforms were reliably successful. However, when ideas that represent complex social phenomena are reduced to slogan systems, they often engender one-dimensional solutions that rarely sustain themselves and stifle the intellectual development of the concept.

In response to addressing these lingering dangers, we call for researchers to develop CRT- and ODT-inspired definitions and measures of school belonging. In this vein, Alejandro, Fong, and Yvonne (2020), Louie et al. (2022), and Gray et al. (2018) all offer such culturally informed conceptualizations of school belonging that we admire and can be transformational for future research in the field. Alejandro and colleagues (2020) resist colonizing perspectives and instead offer an understanding of belonging derived from American indigenous cultures that emphasize humanizing mutuality, respect for cultural assets, and the connection between spirituality, land, and identity. This reimaging blends relatedness (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) with positive distinctiveness (ODT; Brewer, 1991) by elevating ancestral culture above White cultural normativity (CRP, Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2008). Similarly, Louie and her colleagues (2022) underscore racism as endemic in U.S. schools (CRT; Crenshaw, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and thus offer a definition of radical belonging that integrates social (e.g., critical care, mutuality, solidarity), academic (e.g., epistemic agency, cultural responsiveness, non-hierarchical collaboration), and democratic (e.g., critical consciousness, participatory action toward justice) components. Finally, while Gray and colleagues (2018) do not offer a precise definition of school belonging, their attention to the dual desires of students to "fit in" and "stand out" (ODT; Brewer, 1991) within racialized school structures (CRT; Crenshaw, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) allowed for an analysis of *opportunity structures* that afford or thwart Black American students' sense of school belonging. Understandably, these three conceptions of school belonging vary according to their respective research contexts and cultural groups, yet they align in the ways they affirm students' diverse needs, values, and identities while also accounting for cultural history and sociopolitical systems.

Considering the promise and perils described above, in this final section below, we outline ideas for responsibly advancing school belonging research.
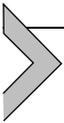
7. Advancing school belonging research: embracing complexity over complicity and convenience

Chinua Achebe, a prominent Nigerian novelist, is well-known for having quoted the proverb, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (Brookes, 1994). This proverb underscores the importance of foregrounding the authentic voices and lived experiences of the marginalized, as their perspectives and (hi) stories have often been excluded from both scholarly and popular discourse. The proverb also remains salient for school belonging research, a field that has predominantly embraced complicity to White cultural normativity and convenient theorizing and reform efforts that favor the voices and perspectives of the privileged over that of the marginalized (even if framed as to advocate for the marginalized). One manifestation reflecting this may be the advancing of research that is not authentically informed by the researched, particularly when the researchers are distanced from the lived experiences or cultural knowledge of the researched. While many survey and experimental methods, by design, construe participant experiences through a constrained predefined lens, qualitative research, despite the guise of inductive process, can also settle into prioritizing the ideological lens of the researcher above the researched (e.g., cherry picking quotes to support a predetermined position, neglecting thoughtful analysis of discrepant cases/themes). As an alternative, we highlight three conceptual and methodological scaffolds that invite complexity for advancing school belonging research that centers racially marginalized students' experiential knowledge: (1) grounded theory, (2) critical counternarratives, and (3) leveraging ODT for intersectional assets.

7.1 Grounded theory

Above, we noted how school belonging studies—and the reforms derived from therein—have largely retained ahistorical and acontextual definitions of the term (e.g., Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), which typically miss the unique significance belonging can hold for students who have been historically marginalized within U.S. schools. Further, many reform attempts, despite good intentions, are driven by top-down theorizing from powerful stakeholders who are disconnected from the day-to-day experiences and challenges that students face, ultimately resulting in surface-level school and pedagogical reforms that only cursorily support their belonging needs (if at all). Therefore, reforms that honor

contextualized conceptions of belonging and the lived experiences of racially marginalized youth will likely result in more thoughtful and higher-quality changes to school structures, systems, and curricula.

Grounded theory is both a method for and product of excavating "mid-range" theory from raw data (typically interviews or unstructured observations) to provide focused conceptual reasonings that explain local phenomena (Charmaz, 2009). Although rooted within a qualitative interpretative tradition, it combines the depth, richness, and nuance of qualitative methods with the model-oriented logic of quantitative methods (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), minus the use of inferential statistics. Given our arguments for the contextualized, historical, and racialized nature of school belonging, grounded theory may be an apt approach for unearthing latent facets within our understanding of school belonging while also rethinking current school belonging conceptualizations that advance the worldviews of researchers and policymakers over those of racially marginalized students.

Matthews et al. (2021) used a modified grounded theory approach to understand what sense of belonging meant for Black and Latine adolescents in urban secondary mathematics classrooms. Drawn from a previous study, Matthews (2018) interviewed thirty-seven Black and Latine secondary students (typically in their own math classrooms after school) for four consecutive years, resulting in approximately 250 hrs of interview data. Here, students discussed their self-beliefs about mathematics; perceptions of their math teacher; issues of race, identity, and classroom dynamics; and what belonging in mathematics meant to them. Through constant comparative analysis of these interviews, Matthews et al. (2021) identified themes reflecting how math teachers cultivate or thwart opportunities for student belonging in the classroom, which were negotiated with patterns of belonging-supportive teacher-practices observed within video-recorded math classrooms across several large urban districts nationally. Altogether, two domains and seven subdimensions were conceptualized, refined, and coined as Belonging-Centered Instruction (BCI), defined as teachers' provision of social and pedagogical supports that mitigate student alienation and dehumanization in mathematics by providing opportunities for active inclusion, achievement, identification, and empowerment. Finally, in a randomized experimental design with $n = 133$ math teachers,[3] multiple

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[3] teachers randomized to classrooms

BCI subdimensions predicted student effort, standardized math achievement, math agency, and behavioral engagement, among other outcomes (Boomhower et al., 2022; Matthews et al., 2021). This work highlights how taking a grounded perspective toward understanding students' experiences can provide key insights toward informing pedagogical (and potentially structural) reforms.

We recognize grounded theory is labor-intensive and not suitable for everyone's skillset or project circumstances. However, we offer a few "grounded considerations" for researchers who predominantly rely on standardized measures (e.g., survey-questionnaires, structured observation protocols). (1) Research the context the measure was designed within and the people it was validated on. Too often, highly cited measures that were created in university laboratories and validated among White and privileged university students are misappropriated to assess culturally incongruent qualities in marginalized children and communities for which they were never designed. (2) Recognize that measurement invariance of factor structure is a necessary but insufficient condition for measurement use across cultural groups. Factor structure reflects that participants may have answered question items in consistent ways (which is promising!) but not whether the items possess similar meaning across groups (e.g., while research shows the presence of self-esteem across cultures, the meaning and value of self-esteem is culturally nuanced; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Baumeister et al., 2003). (3) Address the previous concern through cognitive interviewing (Karabenick et al., 2007). Cognitive interviewing provides a window into participants' meaning-making processes regarding key ideas within a measure. (4) Consider these three recommendations in earnest when the study population is under-researched or marginalized.

7.2 Critical counternarratives

The use of grounded theory can lead to the emergence of critical counternarratives. Critical counternarratives (also known as counter-narratives, counter-storytelling, or critical storytelling) are a sub-tenant of CRT that position the experiential knowledge of marginalized people groups as valid data toward understanding, analyzing, and ultimately addressing racism and oppression in U.S. culture (Delgado, 1990; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical counternarratives are important for counteracting majoritarian voices that have dominated the stories told about marginalized groups, which complicitly reinforce White and Western cultural superiority while

denigrating minoritized cultural norms. Thus, the exchange of counter-narratives from teller to listener can serve two functions: (1) helping listeners (e.g., researchers, theorizers, and policy makers from predominant cultural groups) overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconsciousness of viewing the world through a singular lens; (2) helping the storytellers process and affirm their experiences (Delgado, 1989) for developing a greater sense of agency.

Despite their potential value, counternarratives (and storytelling broadly) have typically been maligned in positivist traditions, particularly in motivation research (Zusho & Clayton, 2011). Some perceive counter-narratives as lacking objectivity and methodological soundness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), especially given their use of curated fiction, parables, and revisionist histories derived from participant interview data (Delgado, 1995). Instead, psychological interventions are often lauded as the gold standard for social science research, given their utilization of randomized controls for determining precise causal effects. However, these approaches may not necessarily be antithetical to one another, as many psychological interventions leverage stories to reframe participant cognitions and self-construals. For example, Walton and Cohen's (2011) social-belonging intervention involved college-freshman reading stories from more senior students describing themselves struggling with fitting in at the university and eventually overcoming those struggles. These stories encouraged the research participants to interpret belonging concerns as common and transient, a message they self-reinforced by developing their own stories on the commonness and transiency of belonging uncertainty. Here, the use of participant data to tell curated stories that emphasize a targeted message mirrors the process and structure of developing critical counternarratives, minus the "critical" elements (see Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002), suggesting (at least some) conceptual overlap between social-belonging interventions and counternarrative research. Thus, the most meaningful difference between these two traditions may lie less in their methodological practices and more in the types of stories they advance. Whereas social-belonging interventions foreground stories that typically support cultural assimilation and pluralism, critical counternarratives harness the power of participants' authentic lived experiences to defy prevailing cultural stereotypes and deficit narratives.

Covarrubias and Laiduc (2022) support critical counternarratives in motivation science and discuss opportunities for their integration within psychological interventions. They note how critical counternarratives

provide opportunities for students to restore self-integrity by critiquing structural inequity and fostering solidarity between cultural in-group members at institutions where they may experience cultural dissonance. They also note how psychological interventions can be adapted to enhance self-integrity and solidarity when they draw deeply on students' authentic stories within their unique contexts, versus race-evasive or decontextualized interpretations. For example, Ramirez, Covarrubias, Jackson, and Son (2021) video-recorded stories from students of color at a minority-serving institution that portrayed how their marginalized identities shaped their experiences, goals, and motivations while at the university. These stories were then paired with explicit instruction on how to navigate the university's "hidden curriculum" (i.e., tacit knowledge for navigating university social, academic, and political systems) and ultimately curated into an intervention embedded within the university's first-year seminar and summer bridge programs. Ramirez et al. (2021) found that leveraging culturally and contextually relevant stories from older peers to support participants in navigating the university from a marginalized positionality improved various outcomes for participants (e.g., GPA) beyond explicit instruction alone. These findings suggest authentic stories that foreground students' cultural identities and underscore their experiences of marginalization may help them to better unpack and internalize instructional support for bolstering their success and wellbeing at school.

Despite their promise, cultivating authentic counternarratives requires care, criticality, and contextual sensitivity. These facilitative elements may conflict with the brevity and scalability that social-belonging interventions have traditionally celebrated. However, we are not advocating for interventionists to abandon their craft, rather reconsider their approach to better embrace complexity over complicity to White cultural normativity and convenient methodological choices. Considerations for embracing cultural complexity and contextual sensitivity in intervention research are: (1) Pause and reflect on your central theoretical frame and reasons for adopting it. Examine where the theory comes from (not just what it proclaims) and how it engages cultural, contextual, or historical factors for the population it will be applied to. (2) Consider whose worldview is centered in the conceptual framing of the study (e.g., Is it the researchers'? That of a theorist from a different time/culture/context? That of the participants?) and whether the study design allows for the discovery of worldviews that may differ from the researchers'? (3) Reflect on your own positionality and ability to recognize cultural, contextual, or historical factors that shape

participants' lived experiences. (4) Create authentic partnerships with people who hold the lived experiences and shared values of your participants and position yourself in a posture to learn from them in ways that potentially challenge preconceived notions. Answering these questions may lead toward soliciting/integrating critical counternarratives into your intervention design, or they may not; regardless, the value that this option can provide should be thoughtfully considered.

7.3 Leveraging ODT for intersectional assets

Alongside critical counternarratives, intersectionality is a key facet of CRT (Crenshaw, 1991; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2019; Gillborn, 2015). Each individual occupies multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, ability status) and is positioned within a relative hierarchy of those categories (e.g., within U.S. history, the welfare of Whites has been systemically prioritized above the welfare of people of color). Therefore, considering the intersection of multiple social identities for any individual may reveal multiple positions of subjugation (e.g., Black and poor), multiple positions of privilege (e.g., man and able-bodied), and various combinations in between. Scholars have argued for intersectionality as an antidote to cultural erasure and essentialism by complicating overly simplistic conclusions that can emerge when examining a group from a singular social identity lens (e.g., gender). Cole (2009) illustrates this by explaining how psychology's empirical knowledge about women has been predominantly derived from White women samples and thus systematically underrepresents the unique experiences of women of color (e.g., different notions of femininity, feminism, body image, and experiences in the world). In line with this perspective, we also believe that taking an intersectional lens to issues of school belonging can disrupt monolithic inferences about historically marginalized student groups.

Despite the promise of employing an intersectional lens in school belonging research, two critiques must be acknowledged and addressed. First, as intersectionality has grown in popularity within psychological discourse, the socio-ecological embeddedness of intersectional identities has subtly become under-appreciated. Mahalingam (2007) described intersectionality as the "interplay between person and social location, with particular emphasis on power relations among various social locations" (p. 45). Thus, as with any singular identity, intersectional identities are afforded interpretative meaning based upon the social contexts in which they reside (e.g., the social dynamics of a classroom may prime the salience

of certain identities but not others). Yet, intersecting identities are frequently discussed at macrosystemic levels (e.g., racism and sexism in the U.S.) but often aren't grounded enough within local layered contexts (e.g., a low-SES Black woman majoring in mechanical engineering at an elite predominantly white university). However, a developmental systems perspective would argue that isolating an analysis of people from an analysis of their layered social contexts is artificially contrived and likely to neglect the roles of diversity, plasticity, and bidirectionality in human development (see Lerner, 2007 for more detail). A second critique of current intersectional research is a hyperfocus on multiple marginalized identities framed predominantly from deficit perspectives (e.g., double jeopardy, double discrimination) versus also recognizing the unique assets and affordances of those identity intersections despite their challenges. Ultimately, the first issue may mask opportunities to recognize asset-based alternatives for the second. Again, in line with a developmental systems approach (Lerner, 2007), shifting social contexts can interact with individuals' shifting identities in ways that can allow for diversity and the development of contextually specific assets (aka positive distinctiveness) that researchers/practitioners can leverage for supporting belonging.

ODT's emphasis on positive distinctiveness (i.e., adaptively standing out) as a key aspect of belonging may underscore the value of attuning to (1) social context and (2) intersectional assets for introducing complexity into school belonging research. While an intersectional lens can prime researchers to recognize difference within difference for racially marginalized students' school experiences, further attuning to social context and intersectional assets can help them realize the specific social situations in which youth with intersecting marginalized identities have unique insight (and thus unique potential for powerful contributions) toward rectifying socially unjust education practices and systems. We acknowledge this idea of intersectional assets as aspirational and without ample empirical support to date. However, we discuss one study with promise.

Cooper and Newton (2021) examined the holistic college experiences of Black female athletes and how they managed their multiple identities at an HBCU. While several emergent themes reflected instances of "fitting in" better at an HBCU, other themes suggested how professors recognized participants' positive distinctiveness in negotiating their student, athlete, woman, and Black identities simultaneously, providing greater care and support for them in courses and thus increasing the athletes' sense of

belonging. Further, for the athletes who played predominantly white sports (e.g., swimming, softball, bowling) at their HBCU, having an entire team of Black women felt especially unique and empowering (particularly when competing against PWIs), revealing instances of collective distinctiveness. The unique affordances of the HBCU context allowed opportunities for individual and collective distinctiveness in ways that would likely not be realized at a PWI, given the challenges Black women athletes have faced due to lack of scholarships and recruitment in White-dominated sports and universities (Cooper & Newton, 2021). However, the authors could have provided an even deeper contextual analysis by investigating how these students' belonging needs and social identities shifted across academic versus sporting contexts. For example, racial and student identities may have signaled "fitting in" during classes whereas their intersecting gendered and athlete identities may have provided opportunities for "standing out" in other venues across campus, highlighting their unique contributions to the school community. Further, their racial (and potentially gendered) identities may have also signaled adaptively standing out during sporting competitions and in ways that might have enhanced their school belonging if they perceived their identities and athletic talents as positively representing their university and an act of resistance motivation (Carter, 2008) against PWIs that didn't recruit them.

In our third and final set of considerations for researchers to center complexity over complicity and convenience, we begin with Cole's (2009) recommendations for intersectional research. She advises three foundational questions, two[4] of which we provide here for belonging researchers. (1) Who is included in this category? And (2) What role does inequality play? The first question encourages researchers to explore diversity within categories (e.g., differences within race-ethnicity) given how different identity categories depend on each other for meaning (Gillborn, 2015). The second question guides researchers toward recognizing that identities are more than a static set of personal experiences or beliefs but also have a relationship to privilege and power that impact how they (and the world) make meaning of those identities. We provide one additional question to build on these foundation ones offered by Cole (2009). (3) In what ways and within what layered contexts might the intersection of marginalized social identities allow for adaptively standing out? This final question can

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[4] We neglect to share the third recommendation as it may be more apt for political organizers and potentially less relevant for school belonging researchers.

help researchers situate their population of interest within the multiple and interacting contexts they navigate in ways that can reveal intersectional assets beyond the perceived deficits of possessing multiple marginalized identities.

8. Conclusion

The advances in school belonging research over the past two decades have been remarkable and have provided valuable insights into the experiences of racially marginalized students. However, we are still in the early stages of recognizing and addressing the multifaceted sources of racialized stress and disenfranchisement that such students experience in U.S. schools. Our review and proposed considerations invite functional complexity into the study of school belonging, recognizing that such complexity requires more than just a reliance on conventional motivation methods perpetuated within the last few decades of school belonging research. Instead, we must move toward humanizing research approaches that authentically center and seek to understand the lived experiences of the people our research ultimately seeks to serve. By foregrounding complexity in the study of school belonging, we can move closer to creating an equitable education system that acknowledges and celebrates the identities and stories of all students.

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