



# “Playing Your Hand” Identity Cards

## INTRODUCTION

The word *trump* is a corruption of a 17th century card game called triumph. In triumph, trump cards temporarily outranked other cards and the trump suit was selected at random by cutting the deck. Selecting the right suit to match one's hand was an advantage in the game so “coming up trumps” became synonymous with success.

Our personal identity is comprised of a unique combination of social group affiliations including race or ethnicity, age or generation, gender identity and expression, class, disability, spirituality or religion, sexual identity and political beliefs. And like a card game, many of these affiliations are assigned to us randomly. The identity cards provide participants with an opportunity to imagine their multiple identities as their “hand” in a card game, allowing us to discuss how our individual affiliations impact “game play,” or our ability to be successful.

## EDGE Rating

When on the edge of our comfort zone, we are in the best place to expand our understanding, take in a new perspective and stretch our awareness. Pay attention to your internal reactions to activities or other people (Signals: feeling annoyed, angry, anxiety, surprised, confused or defensive). If we retreat to our comfort zones by dismissing what we encounter, we lose the opportunity to learn. The challenge is to stay on our learning edge with the discomfort we are experiencing to see what we can learn.

This workshop is rated moderate to somewhat challenging.



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## MATERIALS

You will need to create one set of identity cards per participant. The master PDF includes eight primary identities and two “wild” cards that represent other identities. This PDF is designed for use with Avery® Printable Business Cards. Please be sure to download the appropriate version for the size stock you will use (USA 5871; EUROPE C32026).

## OBJECTIVES

1. **Create** an environment where participants can openly discuss identity for the purpose of getting to know each other better,
2. **Become aware** of how membership in different social groups impacts how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us,
3. **Recognize** how our social group memberships carry with them benefits and deficits, and
4. **Embrace** our own vulnerability and be brave.

## FACILITATION

This activity can be facilitated in multiple ways. The original design is as follows, but we encourage you to get creative and explore how the cards might be most useful for your group.

1. You may choose to use **GUIDELINES** if necessary. I recommend covering some if you think the risk level might be challenging for the group. I've attached the guidelines I usually use.
2. Distribute a set of cards to each participant (one sheet) and explain that each card represents a different facet of their identity: Race/Ethnicity, Disability, Age/Generation, Class (SES), Gender Identity/Gender Expression, Spirituality, Sexual Orientation and Political Beliefs. Spend some time reviewing each of these social group identities by asking the participants to come up with terms or labels for each category. For instance, you might say, **“The first card represents race and ethnicity. What are we talking about here? Can you give me some examples?”** Have the group generate a list of racial or ethnic categories such as Asian, African American, American Indian, European American/White/Caucasian, etc. You might also engage the group in a discussion about race versus ethnicity, **“Are these the same or different? How do you differentiate between the two?”** Facilitating this discussion may be kept fairly simple or can go rather deep, it is entirely up to the facilitator. After generating some examples, ask the participants to choose a label that describes themselves and to write it down on the space provided on the card. As an



example, I usually share that my mother was a white European and my father was ethnically Japanese although he was born and raised in Hawai'i. As their child, I identify racially as "bi-racial" so that is the label I would use on my RACE/ETHNICITY card. Continue in this manner until you have covered each of the identity groups represented on the cards.

3. The last two cards on the sheet are marked as "WILD" cards and can represent other social identity groups that may be important to participants. Ask the group to identify possible other groups not included on the sheet. Some common identities that often come up include Birth Order, Primary Language, Relationship Status, Parental Status, Athlete, Artist, Musician, Recovery Status, etc. Acknowledge that the primary set of eight cards does not encompass all possible identities and if they would like to include a "WILD" card identity into their hand, feel free to fill out a "WILD" card; however, if they wish to include their "WILD" card identities in their hand, they must discard one of the other identities; they can only have eight cards in their "hand." Any unused identity cards should be set to the side face down.
4. *"In most card games, when players receive their cards, the first thing they do is organize their hand. I encourage you to review the identities represented in your hand and organize them in whatever order makes the most sense to you. For now, please keep your hand private (do not show anyone how you organize your cards)."*  Participants may ask how to order their cards. In a regular card game, some people order their cards by value or suit or pairs, etc. There is no right or wrong way to order their cards, they get to choose.
5. Next, ask participants to partner with one other participant and share the following instructions: *"You're going to be given the opportunity to discuss your hand with your partner. However, this is an exercise in listening so there are some guidelines... decide who will share first and who will listen. Each of you will have a chance to share your identity hand for three minutes; however, if your role is to listen, you must sit silently for the full three minutes. No commentary, no 'Me too!', no 'That reminds me about that time in band camp...' Your job as listener is to listen silently. If you are the speaker, you have three minutes to talk about your cards (I will provide a prompt). If you finish in 30 seconds, you will have 2.5 minutes to stare meaningfully into the eyes of your partner in silence. It's entirely up to you how you use the time allotted to you, but it is your time. When the three minutes has expired. I will let you know that it is time to switch roles."* Ensure everyone is clear on the instructions and that everyone knows who is speaking first. Put three minutes on the clock and provide the following prompts: *"Share how/why you ordered your cards the way you did. If you included any WILD card identities, how did you decide which identity cards to discard?"*
6. After both partners have had a chance to share their hand, bring the focus of the room back together and begin processing. I usually start with the question, *"How did it feel to do this exercise?"* The idea is to get people to access the affective impact of not speaking. We often fill silences with commentary meant to help us join our partner but occasionally, the unintended impact is that we don't always hear what is being said. Someone always says it was hard not to encourage with their partner. I usually point out that I never said they should be stone-faced, they just couldn't be verbally encouraging. Sometimes, participants will share that they felt truly heard in this exercise because their partner could not speak.
7. Continue processing and ask what people noticed about other people's hands. Did anything surprise them? This usually leads to some good conversation. Naturally, some people feel the need to explain themselves ("I'm still a good person"). I allow this, but also encourage people to challenge each other by role modeling. In other words, I don't let people off the hook, but also don't railroad them and drive them into a corner. This is a good time to remind people to hold brave space for one another. Ask about "WILD" card identities and how people decided which of the primary identities they chose to discard. It is not uncommon for participants to report that they discarded a particular identity because they "don't have a disability" or "don't think about their race." Unpack this briefly, *"What might it mean if someone doesn't think of race or gender identity or class very often? Could it be because they have 'enough' in terms of financial resources?"* Often, participants will recognize they have some privilege.
8. *"Social Justice educator Tim Wise points out in his essay, 'What Kind of Card is Race?'<sup>1</sup> that the frequency with which white people respond to charges of racism by calling those charges a ploy suggests that the race card is equivalent to the two of diamonds. In other words, 'playing the race card' is a really bad play and next to worthless. This suggests that some identities are more 'valuable' than others. Consider which of your cards are most valuable..."*



9. Ask people to review their hand and determine which identities help them in our society and which may have a cost associated with them... here we are differentiating between “target” identities (as in, “targets of oppression”) and “agent” identities (as in, “agents of oppression”) **“Social groups are afforded different status based on a multiplicity of factors. Agent group members are afforded advantages (privilege), whereas target groups are disadvantaged (oppressed) based on their social group membership.”** This portion of the workshop may be more challenging for some, usually those with agent identities. Often, participants may express concern labeling privileged identities as “agents” of oppression. That’s appropriate and intentional on my part. I usually respond with, **“If you are uncomfortable with others identifying your social group as agents of oppression, consider this: as an agent you can either leverage your privilege to support the status quo and be an agent of that oppression or you can choose to leverage your privilege to challenge the status quo and be an agent of change.”** It might also be good to be prepared for someone with agent identities to suggest that they don’t “feel like” they are privileged (e.g. Christians who feel like they cannot express their faith or even Whites who grew up in poverty and were followed around in stores—an experience often experienced by people of color). This is an excellent opportunity to acknowledge that everyone’s personal experiences are just that, *personal*, and in some ways unique to them; however, while anyone can experience discrimination based on any group identity, systemic oppression operates beyond personal interactions and operates on institutional and cultural levels as well. This distinction is why I might say there is no such thing as reverse racism but agree that Whites can be discriminated against. Again, this begins to go much deeper and the facilitator must be well-versed in systemic oppression *and* have significant experience engaging others in this discussion. Otherwise, acknowledge the complexity of power and privilege and try to keep the conversation at a level appropriate to the group: **“Generally speaking, when we discuss race, which group is “on top?” (Whites) And which groups are not? (POC) When discussing gender identity, which group is preferred? (men) And who is not? (all other genders)...”**
10. OPTIONAL: If power and privilege are important topics to discuss, consider asking small groups to weigh-in on who they think has the “strongest” hand among them and why. What cards trump other cards? It is important to remember that how one may perceive the relative “strength” of someone’s hand is entirely independent of how they might perceive themselves. For instance, although two participants may share the same gender identity (“male”), to a gay man the strength of this card may differ depending on how it is combined with other cards: a “male” identity combined with a “straight” identity and a “parent” identity makes for a much stronger hand than “male” and “gay.” However, to a woman in the room, the “male” card may trump “female” any day.
11. No one actually “wins” or “trumps” someone else’s hand. The cards are a mechanism to engage in the conversation and learn about how others view themselves and other people. This is a nice place to make a comparison to “real life.” **“Does our identity ensure we ‘win’? How does who we are—or who we are perceived to be—impact how we come to the table? How does our identity influence our experience working here, going to school here, or living here? Remember that strength in one card is impacted by weakness in another: I may be white, but I am poor; I am a man, but I am gay; I am the director, but I am a woman in a male-dominated leadership group; etc. This is a great opportunity to listen to one another’s experiences: ‘I never thought about how your gender changes the way you experience being in charge... What does that mean (to me, to you, to us)?’ ”**
12. Finally, it is important to recognize that we are never just one of our cards. We have multiple identities and the interplay between all our identities represents who we really are. **In the Santa Clara Law Review, Stephanie Wildman, wrote “Societal efforts at categorization are dynamic in the same way as the Koosh ball is, changing, mutating, yet keeping a central mass...[Our] tendency to label with categories [obscures] our vision of the whole Koosh ball, where multiple strands interrelate with each other. No individual really fits into any one category; rather everyone resides at the intersection of many categories.”** [emphasis added].

## CITATIONS

1. Wise, Tim J. (2008). What kind of card is race? The absurdity (and consistency) of white denial. *Speaking treason fluently: anti-racist reflections from an angry white male* (pp. 24-36). Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press.
2. Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Dais, *Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible*, 35 SANTA CLARA L. REV. 881 (1995)



## GUIDELINES for Holding Brave Space

Rather than a traditional set of guidelines I like to share “words of wisdom” I’ve gathered from a variety of sources. Each contribute to holding brave space:

*“True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are.”*

Brené Brown, Researcher Storyteller

When Brené Brown talks about true belonging not requiring you to change who you are, I believe she is speaking about bringing our authentic selves to the table. That means being brave enough to be real and to possibly look foolish. We often don’t know what we don’t know and if we aren’t honest about our ignorance, then we get stuck in our ignorance.

*“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”*

James Baldwin, Novelist, playwright and activist

When we discuss oppression, we are inviting pain to the table. As a social species, we are hardwired to feel discomfort when others are in pain. This discomfort is multiplied when we discover we may be the cause of the pain or are contributing to another’s pain. In spite of this, it is important for us to hold space at the table for pain as well as joy. If we cannot acknowledge another’s pain, we can’t create space for grace and forgiveness,

*“Being a good person is not a state of being but a practice, requiring us to stay in touch with our imperfection.”*

Jay Smooth, Hip Hop DJ, cultural commentator and video blogger

I love this concept! By shifting being good from a state of being to a practice, it becomes an active process, one we must commit to over and over again. And one that we will likely fail to do perfectly. What becomes more important is not that we fall, but how we pick ourselves up and try to improve. One of the best ways for us to learn from our mistakes is to receive feedback about our performance. That means hearing how we have failed to be our best selves and committing to doing better. We need to receive feedback as a gift: an opportunity to improve...

*“Deliver and receive feedback as a gift.”*

Ann Marie Houghtailing Business development and storytelling expert

That being said, my mother always taught me that if you’re going to give someone a gift, don’t throw it at their head. How can I deliver my feedback in a way that it can be heard by the other person and acted upon? Feedback should always be delivered and received as a gift. As Mother Teresa said, “It’s not how much we give but how much love we put into the giving...”