

Identity Matrix Activity Workbook

A Self-Exploration of Identities, Pain, Privilege, & Power

By:

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Identity Matrix Activity

Critical Race Theorists stress the importance of examining our experience of identity and power specifically regarding race (more theoretical detail and explanation of the Identity Matrix can be found at [this link](#)). Race is only one of our many social identities. This Identity Matrix Activity Workbook is a self-exploration tool for personal development regarding our social identities.

The Identity Matrix is a way of visualizing and reflecting on our own identities. It is a model of identity intersection, dimension, and reflection that helps us locate our own experience of power, privilege, pain, joy, oppression, and opportunity in relation to our identities. In this workbook, you will write down and explore your various social identities.

We all experience several different social identities at once. For example, in the category of Sexual Orientation, someone may enter **Gay, Lesbian, Heterosexual, Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer**, etc. In a category of Religion, someone may enter broad religions **Jewish, Hindu, Christian** (or more specific denominations), **None, Atheist**, etc. These are just examples. Be sure to write in what fits for you.

This activity will be divided into 4 main parts. You will need a way to make a grid: a computer program, a pen and paper, markers and a dry erase board—whatever works for you. We will start small, and then expand your identity matrix as you see fit.

After each time we develop the matrix, there will be some self-reflection questions you can sit with and ponder. This means you can take the time to think about them in more detail. The more time you spend considering these identities, the more likely you will get something out of this workbook.

The reflection questions are for you to learn about *yourself*. You get to use your own words to describe these feelings. After you do this activity, consider talking with others about it and see if they have anything to add—after all, sometimes people close to us can tell us something we never knew about ourselves.

Ready? Let's go!

Filling in the Identity Matrix

Let's start with some common categories in identity work. We will consider the categories of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, dis/ability, and citizenship. Line these up along the bottom and left side of a table, forming a grid. Then fill in the identities that you hold.

An example might look something like this:

Gender Cisgender Woman						
Sexual Orientation Bisexual						
Race Black						
Religion Christian						
Dis/Ability Able-Bodied						
Citizenship U.S. Citizen						
	Gender Cisgender Woman	Sexual Orientation Bisexual	Race Black	Religion Christian	Dis/Ability Able-Bodied	Citizenship U.S. Citizen

If it helps, you can fill in the boxes in the center of the matrix too. Something like this:

Example:

Gender Cisgender Woman	Cisgender Woman		
Sexual Orientation Bisexual	Bisexual Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	
Race Black	Black Cisgender Woman	Black & Bisexual	Black
	Gender Cisgender Woman	Sexual Orientation Bisexual	Race Black

You can include identity components that feel relevant to you. For example, under dis/ability, you may want to include that you have asthma by putting something like “Mostly Able-Bodied (mild asthma).” Or perhaps you want to include asthma and your mobility (the way you get around) in different categories. You can just enter what feels good for now—we will get to those complexities in just a bit.

Fill in the following grid. You can put your identities along the left column and bottom row, and if you’d like, continue to fill in the BLUE boxes (where the same identity intersects with itself) and GREEN boxes (hold off on filling in the WHITE boxes for now):

Gender						
Sexual Orientation						
Race						
Religion						
Dis/Ability						
Citizenship						
	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Religion	Dis/Ability	Citizenship

Reflecting on These Identities

After you've filled in the grid with your identities in each category, we will look at three aspects of this matrix before we build in more identities.

BLUE BOXES:

The blue boxes in this matrix will be where these identities meet, making a singular identity dimension. Look at each of these categories. These are singular dimensions of who you are. Sometimes it is important to look at each one individually, especially if we need to develop them, grow into or around them, or if we are hurt and need to heal them. Consider the following questions about the identities in the BLUE BOXES:

1. Which do you know the least about?
2. Which do you know the most about?
3. Which do you have the most pride in?
4. Which are you most uncomfortable with?
5. How important does this identity feel to you? (Do other people also think it is important? How so? Or why not?)
6. Do some identities feel more important than others? How so?
7. Is there an identity that feels most impactful to the way you interact with the world? How so?
8. Are these identities ones you associate with privilege or oppression, both or neither?
9. Which are you most interested in growing around?
10. Which have you grown most around?

GREEN BOXES:

Now let's take a look at the GREEN boxes of the matrix you filled in on page 4. In this grid, there are 15 green boxes representing identity intersections. Look at each of the GREEN boxes and consider these questions about each:

1. What joy do you experience at the intersection of these identities?
2. What ways do you experience pain, discrimination, or oppression at the intersection of these identities?
3. Do you feel empowered at this identity intersection? How so?
4. How do each of these communities treat you based on this intersecting identity?
5. What, if any, feelings come up around this identity intersection?
6. How do you see this identity intersection reflected in the world around you? How do you feel about these reflections?
7. Do you have role models, peers, or mentors with these intersecting identities? Reflect on your feelings about this.
8. How has this identity intersection impacted the way you interact with the world?

WHITE BOXES:

Now look at the WHITE boxes. After thinking about all of the GREEN boxes, consider the opposite side of the matrix in the WHITE boxes. The WHITE boxes correspond to the GREEN boxes, but switch which identity comes first (e.g., religion and gender, then gender and religion—a Hindu woman, and a woman who is Hindu). Look at each intersection—write it out to make it more concrete for you to consider. Does it matter to you which one comes first? Look at each one. You may want to do this part quickly now and come back to it later. Write some of your initial thoughts here. Come back for some deeper consideration later.

1. How, if at all, do your feelings change when the order is switched? Why do you think that is?

Expanding Your Identity Matrix

Filling out the matrix, even with these few categories, can give us a lot to think about. This activity can be as big as you want it to be, filling in identity categories that are important to you or your communities. The possibilities of the size of your Identity Matrix is endless. Consider all of the identities you hold and consider putting them in a matrix as big as you'd like to make it. A matrix of 17 categories might look something like this:

i1	█																	
i2	█	█																
i3	█	█	█															
i4	█	█	█	█														
i5	█	█	█	█	█													
i6	█	█	█	█	█	█												
i7	█	█	█	█	█	█	█											
i8	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█										
i9	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█									
ia	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█								
ib	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█							
ic	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█						
id	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█					
ie	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█				
if	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█			
ig	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█		
ih	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	
ij	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	
	i1	i2	i3	i4	i5	i6	i7	i8	i9	ia	ib	ic	id	ie	if	ig	ih	ij

Make your own matrix as big as you'd like. Some identities to consider in addition to those above might be:

- Gender Identity
- Gender Expression
- Sex
- Age
- Class
- Language
- Skin Color
- Fertility
- Level of Literacy
- Housing Status
- Romantic Orientation
- Ethnicity
- Nation of Origin
- Relationship Status
- Relationship Orientation
- Education
- Geographic Location/Residence
- Family/Parental Status
- Addiction Status
- Mental Health/Neurotypicality
- Occupation/Profession
- Appearance/Attractiveness

Add other identity categories that you feel fit here—feel free to divide, separate, and create new categories. Create your Identity Matrix here, adding in rows and columns as you see fit:

I.D. 1										
I.D. 2										
I.D. 3										
I.D. 4										
I.D. 5										
I.D. 6										
I.D. 7										
I.D. 8										
I.D. 9										
I.D. 10										
	I.D. 1	I.D. 2	I.D. 3	I.D. 4	I.D. 5	I.D. 6	I.D. 7	I.D. 8	I.D. 9	I.D. 10

Thinking of Others:

9. Are there people who are hurt by any of your intersecting identities? How so?

10. Which identities do you think people first perceive about you? Which are the most hidden from others?

Thinking of You:

11. What is it like to see all of your identities grouped in this way?

12. Were there identities you chose to omit from this exercise? Why?

13. Has your performance of/relationship to these identities or intersections changed over time? How so?

14. Which identity intersections would you like to learn more about or grow around? Why?

Thinking of Context:

15. In which contexts are you *most aware* of these intersections?

16. Does your performance of these identities or intersections change depending on the space? The people you are around? Other factors?

17. What is it like to have any of these identities in spaces/interactions where it's not the majority? Are there times it feels better or worse?

18. Are there contexts in which you feel *most seen/validated* in one or all of your identities or intersections?

(NOTE: Sometimes, it may feel difficult to think of just two intersecting identities without bringing a third identity into the mix. For example, if someone might examine their identities as a white atheist, they may struggle discussing themselves without adding their gender into the intersection. If this happens, consider why this would be the case. Try substituting a different label to see if different thoughts arise (e.g., if I entered white and atheist, might someone who is an atheist with a non-white racial identity have a different experience?) What have I not considered before at this intersection that might give me a different experience than others?)

Bonus Reflection: Thinking Outside of You

For an expansion of this activity, consider replacing one of the identities, imagining having the experience of someone with that identity. For example, if you have ‘gay cisgender man,’ consider changing the orientation to ‘bisexual’ or the gender to ‘transgender man.’ How might that change someone’s experience? Might you experience more or less privilege in different contexts? What about types of discrimination? Entertain this imaginative exercise as a way to explore what it would be like if one of your identities were different. Consider expanding this activity by talking with/reading about people of identities that are not your own to gain a broader perspective.

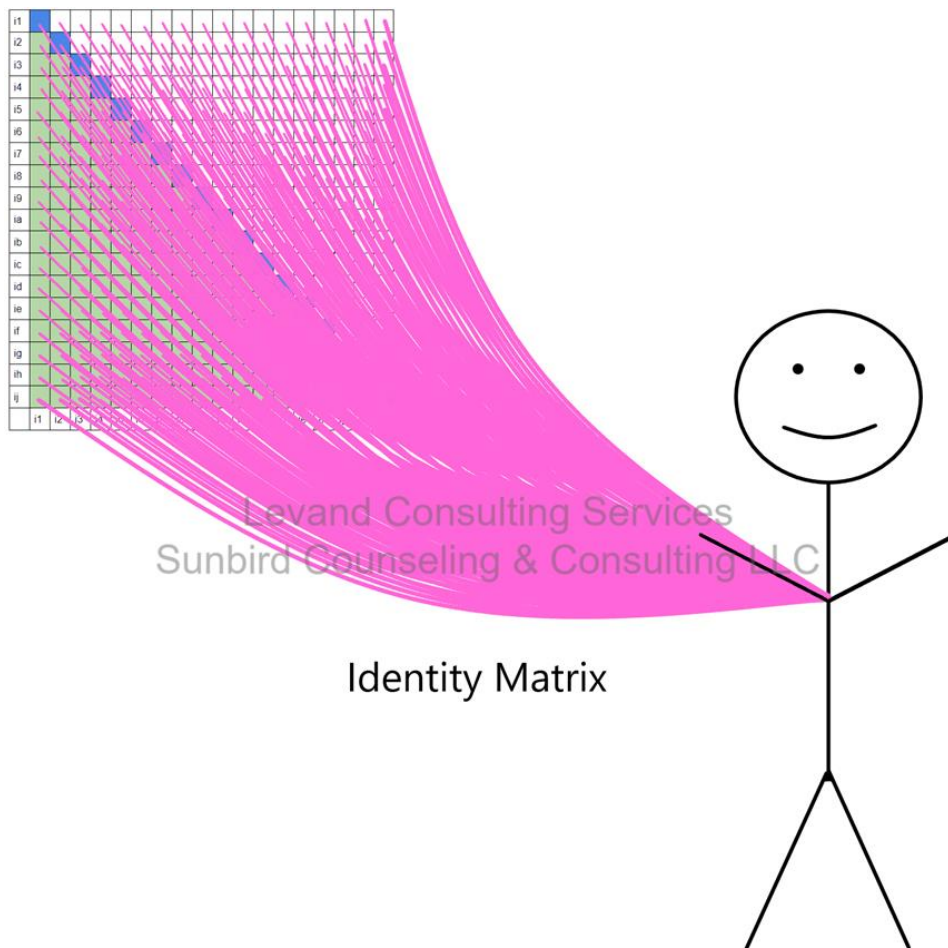
Wrapping Up:

After all of that reflecting, take a deep breath.

This might have been a lot to think about and reflect on. Of course, this is the entire point—while we have each of these identities (blue cells), and each of these intersections (green cells), we are also ALL of these intersections together. We may have different autonomy or control over how they are disclosed or what we do with these identities, but we are unique people as a sum of these intersections (and more!).

We each sit uniquely at the convergence of *all of these intersections*.

Take a moment to appreciate all of the things that have occurred to create the multifaceted YOU.



So remember...

An activity like this could take an hour, a couple hours, or you could keep returning to it over a series of days as a self-reflective practice.

In learning more about yourself, consider coming up with a statement of intention about how you will operate around some of the most important identities or intersections that you have.

Remember that our identities matter, and we make up not just one identity, and not just one intersection, but many.

Further Reading and Resources:

If you would like to continue growing or learning about identities, you can:

- Begin therapy or talk to your current therapist about issues of identity
- Become involved with communities related to an identity or intersection
- Read or explore books about identity
- Attend workshops from organizations dedicated to work around identity
- Listen to podcasts about navigating identity interactions

Feedback

We are always interested in hearing about your experience of this tool and learning more from you! Feel free to let us know about your experience with the Identity Matrix at our [Feedback Survey](#)

About the Authors

Contribution: *If you are in an economic position to help support the authors in this work, please contribute at the links provided below.*

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