

## SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

### OVERVIEW

In this activity, participants will reflect on and discuss the identities that are most important to them. This activity will help participants get to know each other better and allow participants to express important parts of their identities that may otherwise not be known. Participants will also be asked to reflect on the value of their identities by considering which of those is most and least important to them and why that may be. Participants can expect to better understand how the world around them allows or does not allow them to make choices about what identities are most important.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Identity Wheel handout (1 copy per participant)
- Flip chart paper
- Markers

### TIME NEEDED

90 minutes

#### KEY

Plain text: Facilitator talking points  
*Italics:* Facilitator instructions

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### I. INTRODUCTION [1 MIN]

- *Welcome participants and introduce each facilitator. Distribute a copy of the Identity Wheel handout to each participant.*
- During this activity we will reflect on and discuss our identities and how they relate to our experiences in society. We will introduce new ideas and encourage you to explore your own identity in new ways, starting with some really juicy, in-depth topics. Since we have limited time together, we will be managing time from the front of the room to make sure that we touch on everything we need to. But we hope you will continue the conversations we start today after the session ends.

### II. COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS [7 MIN]

- *When exploring sensitive or personal topics, it's important to take steps to ensure that you create a safe space. Start this activity by setting community agreements. See the last page for more on community agreements.*

### III. PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL [5 MIN]

- We are going to start on the first page of the handout, labeled “personal identity wheel.” You will have five minutes to fill in your identity for each of the categories listed. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you. In the outer circle, record your other identities that are less important or salient to you but are still part of your identity.
- *Show your own personal identity wheel as an example. Point to one identity you put in the inner circle and explain why. Then point to one identity in the outer circle and explain why.*
- *Give them four minutes to silently fill out their personal identity wheels.*

### IV. PERSONAL IDENTITY WHEEL SHARING [5 MIN]

- *Break participants into pairs and encourage them to talk to someone they don't know. (If they are comfortable, they will talk to someone new. If they aren't, they will stick with a friend. Let the comfort level in pairing reside with participants.) Have each participant briefly share two of their personal identities with their partners.*

### V. DEFINING PERSONAL IDENTITIES [4 MIN]

- *In the full group, ask for a few volunteers to share what they think the definition of personal identities is. Then provide them with the definition.*
  - Personal identities are individual traits that make up who you are, including your hobbies, interests, experiences, and personal choices.
  - Many personal identities are things that you get to choose and that you are able to shape for yourself. Personal identities might determine whether or not you have a natural inclination to go in a certain personal direction.

### VI. SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL [10 MIN]

- *Now ask participants to turn their handout over to the side that says “social identity wheel.”*
- We are now going to talk about social identities. They are called “social identities” because our society strongly influences how we categorize other people and ourselves based on these identities in significant ways. Social identities influence the experiences we have as members of any particular group. They are shaped by common history, shared experiences, legal and historical decisions, and day-to-day interactions.
- Social identities also affect personal identities. For example, your social class may have a strong impact on the education you receive and the profession that you end up in.
- You will have a few minutes to fill out this wheel the same way you filled out the personal identity wheel. In the inner circle, record the identities that are the most important or salient to you, and in the outer circle record other identities that are less important or salient to you at this moment in time.
- *Again, show your wheel and explain a few of your identities and why you placed them in the inner or outer circle.*
- *Note: What you share from your own social identity wheel will impact how reflective participants will be about their own identities. Here is an example of how honest and reflective you are encouraged to be when sharing your own social identity wheel:*

*"In the inner circle I recorded that I identify as bisexual. This is a really salient identity for me for a few reasons. First, I know that if I were in a relationship with a woman, I would not have the same rights as I would in a relationship with a man. I also know that my LGBT friends and I experience prejudice on a daily basis. Second, people usually assume that I am straight, because I am in a heterosexual relationship. Because straight people assume that I am 'one of them' they sometimes make derogatory or bigoted comments in front of me about LGBT people. These experiences constantly remind me of what it is like to be outside of the dominant group with regard to sexual orientation.*

*"I also wrote 'white,' for my race, in the inner circle. I put this in the inner circle because while in this case I am part of the dominant racial group in our society, I also am constantly working to understand how my whiteness affords me privileges in my everyday life, compared with the oppression that people of color face. This is something that I think about and engage with a lot, so this identity is very salient for me.*

*"In the outer circle I listed my identity in the ability/health category as 'able and healthy.' I did this because I move through my day-to-day life with relative ease. I can go where I need to and do what I need to do without interruption based on disability or health concerns. Not only am I privileged in this regard, but in doing this exercise I also realized that this is something I take for granted and do not give a lot of thought to."*

- Give participants five minutes to silently fill out their social identity wheel.

## **VII. SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL SHARING [10 MIN]**

- Ask each pair to join another pair nearby. Have each participant spend two to three minutes sharing their social identity wheel in their group. They should only share what they are comfortable sharing but should be encouraged to reflect on identities in both the inner and outer circles. If they decide not to share aspects of their social identity or are uncomfortable doing so, encourage them to consider why this part of who they are is something they don't want to share.

## **VIII. GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

### **Small-group discussion, part one [15 min]**

- Either by getting the full group's attention or by walking to each group separately, tell them to turn to the final page in their handout and spend the next 15 minutes discussing the questions as a group. They do not need to answer them in order but rather should use them as a jumping off point for discussion.
- Discussion questions:
  - Which aspects of your social identity feel especially meaningful to you and why?
  - Which aspects of your social identity don't feel as meaningful to you and why?
  - Are there any that you hadn't thought of before today, and if so, why do you think that is?
  - What experiences have you had that make the identities in your inner circle more salient to you?
  - Why do you think more about some of your identities than others?
  - How do your identities influence your sense of belonging in AAUW and other groups that you're part of?
- During this time, move around the room to listen and answer questions.

### Small-group discussion, part two: dichotomies [10 min]

- Another way to think about both our personal and our social identities is to consider the amount of choice we have: Are they identities we chose, or can we change, share, or hide them as we wish? Some aspects of our identities can't be hidden, and some can't be changed. This is especially important when considering which aspects of our identities are socially more powerful and which aspects are socially more marginalized.
- *Have the following dichotomies written up on a flip chart.* Are each of your identities

Visible? or Invisible?  
Inborn? or Chosen?  
Permanent? or Changeable?  
Socially valued? or Socially marginalized?

- Turn back to your partner from earlier and share your reflections on these dichotomies. Where do your salient and less salient identities fall on this chart? How does that affect how you identify most strongly, and how does it affect your life?

### Large-group discussion [18 min]

- *Bring the full group back together and ask participants to share some of the big takeaways from their discussions. This section should prompt discussion about how our culture shapes how we are seen based on certain identities. Guide the conversation in this direction if it does not go there on its own, and touch upon the following points:*
  - Identities that are socially valued are seen as “normal,” while identities that are socially marginalized are seen as “other.” Because of this, individuals often experience their marginalized identities as more salient. People with marginalized identities may be constantly reminded by the world around them that they are different and by other people and situations pointing out that they are not “normal.” In other instances, people with marginalized identities may feel that an identity that is very important to them seems to be invisible and therefore not validated by other people.
  - As women, we are part of a group that, historically and presently, fights for our rights and for power in our society. In each identity category, there have historically been people who are the dominant group and who have economic, social, and political power, and there are one or more marginalized groups who have not had access to the many kinds of economic, social, and political advantages and power.
  - As people with many social identities, we sometimes find ourselves as members of dominant, more powerful groups and sometimes as members of groups that are more marginalized.
- *Below are some additional questions you can ask the group if the conversation is not moving forward on its own:*
  - Why is it important to be aware of our social identities?
  - How might our actions be perceived differently if we are members of a dominant group versus if we are members of a historically marginalized group?
  - When you are in a setting as a member of the dominant group, what specifically can you do to ensure that people from all social identities are welcomed, acknowledged, and valued?

## IX. CLOSING [5 MIN]

- *Ask participants to silently reflect on one specific next step they are planning to take as a result of this activity and then turn to the person next to them to share.*
- *Close by thanking everyone for their participation and for their honest and open reflection.*

# COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Whenever you are having conversations with your branch or board on topics of diversity and inclusion, it's important to ensure that the space feels safe for conversation and exploration. Start each activity or discussion by setting community agreements by following the steps below.

- *Before the meeting, prepare a flip chart sheet with "Community Agreements" written at the top and the bullets below written underneath.*
- In this activity we explore potentially sensitive topics. So I'd like to start by having us set a few community agreements, or "norms," to help make the space feel safe for conversation and exploration.
- The community agreements that we agree to are all things we are willing to honor for the duration of this session.
- To start, I have a list of a few community agreements that I think will be helpful. I will read through and explain each one and then ask for comments and questions on them. Then, I'll ask if you have any you would like to add.
  - **Speak from the "I" perspective:** Avoid speaking for others by using "we," "us," or "them."
  - **Listen actively:** Listen to understand, not to respond. Sometimes we are tempted to begin formulating what we want to say in response, instead of giving 100 percent of our focus to the speaker. So let's make sure we are listening 100 percent.
  - **Step up, step back:** If you usually speak up often or you find yourself talking more than others, challenge yourself to lean in to listening and opening up space for others. If you don't usually talk as much in groups and do a lot of your thinking and processing in your own head, know that we would love to hear your contributions, and challenge yourself to bring your voice forward in the conversation.
  - **Respect silence:** Don't force yourself to fill silence. Silence can be an indication of thought and process.
  - **Share, even if you don't have the right words:** Suspend judgment and allow others to be unpolished in their speaking. If you are unsure of their meaning, then ask for clarification.
  - **Uphold confidentiality:** Treat the candor of others as a gift. Assume that personal identities, experiences, and perspectives shared in this space are confidential unless you are given permission to use them.
  - **Lean in to discomfort:** Learning happens on the edge of our comfort zones. Push yourself to be open to new ideas and experiences even if they initially seem uncomfortable to you.
- *After you read through the list, ask if anyone has comments or questions about the community agreements overall. Then ask the group if anyone has anything to add to the list. Take responses and add them to the list. Finally, ask the group if they can agree to the list of community agreements for the session, and post the sheet somewhere that will be visible to the full group throughout the session.*