

We aren't playing the race card; we are analyzing the racialized deck.

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

December 7, 2014

I would be rich if I got money for every time a white person told me that I was playing the race card. Well it happened recently. While I was lamenting the lack of indictment of Michael Brown compounded with the recent decision not to indict the police that choked the life out of Eric Garner, a white person charged me with playing such a card. Merely speaking about this incident *and* mentioning racism resulted in the common backlash accusation of playing this mythical item. It is used over and over again by some white people instead of engaging in dialogue through sharing and listening, the choice is made to stigmatize and scapegoat those that disagree that America is mostly a colorblind post-racial nation. There are certain scripts that the white majority learns and rehearses through subtle socialization in dominant culture. Rather than doing the hard work of careful in-depth investigation of the matter, quick cliché dismissals are used to uphold the status quo. The status quo is silence about racism other than pointing out the overt cases, as well as getting into extensive conversation about reverse racism. While I have often gotten frustrated by these little remarks that dismiss black experiences without doing the hard work of listening and wrestling with another perspective, I decided that from now on I was going to “play along” with their game.

Playing Cards This is how the game works. There is an incident that happens in which a large percentage of white Americans tend to interpret such event from a particular cultural and social vantage point while African Americans (and often the majority of other racialized groups) interpret that same moment very differently, in light of their own experiences, history, and context. Each of these moments or incidents must be interpreted. We'll say they are interpreted by playing a card of one's choosing that seems most appropriate. See, I am playing along with the given white definitions, so each incident is followed up with playing a card.

African Americans, having experienced hundreds of years of racialized oppression as a community, look at particular incidents and recognize the continuity of systemic oppression, which merely has mutated shape and form, often becoming more sophisticated and structural in nature along the way. With that observation we say that a particular situation is racist and needs to be addressed. **However, the**

moment that race is brought into the conversation, many from the white majority label this move as 'playing the race card'. By doing so, they suggest that race is being brought up inappropriately. The wrong card is being played. More foundational, and at the heart of the matter, it suggests that the African American interpretation is subjective or manipulative, and that by categorizing an event as racial in nature, it must be called out and dismissed.

What I would like to suggest, since I am playing along with the white dominant cultural linguistic system that dismisses racism in any given moment by the discernment of the dominant group, is that white folks are the only ones considering a single card. White folks typically are obsessed with interpreting the meaning of individual cards (incidents). They look at the isolated card, and then judge it by their whims and standards of acceptability, which no surprise always works out in a manner in which no one is ever racist. For 400 years, in any given era, white people always created a definition for their time that absolved them from charges of wrong doing and racism and reaffirmed their innocence amidst ongoing hegemony and oppression. The white dominant standard rarely spots white racism, while simultaneously deciding that the specific card played was falsely made into a "race card". An individual moment, event, or action is judged by looking for KKK rhetoric, or maybe the N-Word, or some cross burning in the yard, and if the hate crime prominent in the early and mid-20th century are not proven, then the racial component in this reasoning must be dismissed.

Unlike the dominant culture tunnel vision that is consumed with focusing on one card, the Black community is usually considering the entire deck (ongoing history and current widespread social patterns). We have laid out all the cards in front of us on the table. Rather than zooming in on one card, we have zoomed out and look at all the cards together. All of a sudden, just like any deck, you begin to pick up patterns. 4 Aces, 4 Kings, 4 Queens, and 4 Jacks. **Our definition of racism is not based on limiting our judgment to a subjective moment according to the standards of a definition that dominant society has created. No, we refuse to "play their game" even if we work with their cards.** Instead, it is only after looking at the reoccurring patterns, studying the whole pack, and then gathering the entire deck back in order, do we claim to make sense of any individual card. **We aren't playing the race card; we are analyzing the racialized deck.** It is this very phenomenon, the systemic racial components of our society that the majority of white America has refused to examine carefully, and patiently. Choosing to trust

their own intuitions based on their personal subjective assessments (which are socialized in dominant culture) of an individual card (incident), they attempt to make sense of how that card fits into a larger set of cards.

The English department definition of racism is insufficient. It is the common, taken for granted, dominant cultural definition. It is based on how the white majority defines and discusses race and racism. At the heart of it, the definition of racism from this vantage point is about personal prejudice or hatred of someone from another race. Of course, such a definition is an extremely hard thing to prove. Who can prove what someone believes deep down on the individual level? We might at times have a strong sense something is wrong if overt racial language is used, but ultimately someone's heart is not something measurable in the scientific sense. This definition protects both those who operate out of racial bias consciously and unconsciously. We must rid ourselves of this definition because it leaves us with nothing but subjective assessments of individual moments, in which people or incidents are rarely assumed to be racist (unless of course we are talking about reverse racism which apparently, according to many white people, is conveniently the only real issue that must be dealt with).

There is another definition of racism, and that comes from the Sociology department, rather than the English. Specifically, engaging in critical race theory, race is explored and analyzed as a social phenomenon. What is the meaning of race in a society? How is society organized by race? What are the origins of race and how does it function? From this view race is a systemic and structural reality that organizes society. Racism is about one group having enough power to organize society by its categories (legally or by voluntary choices) in such a way that it advantages *most* of the dominant groups members at the expense of another group's welfare. Backing up and looking at racial patterns (historical and sociological) a bigger entity than personal prejudice comes into view. Suddenly, through historical and sociological study, we can see that America is a highly racialized society that is dominated and controlled by the white majority.

With a sociological framework we can begin to see that white people live highly racialized lives, though they are often unaware of it. Patterns of self-segregation become clear. Where one lives is mostly among those of the same race. Same thing for Church, for intimate relational networks, for the majority of people in one's phone contacts, or who is invited around one's table for dinner. You can even see the racial distinctiveness of most people's book shelves and music. Through these social

patterns sociologists are able to reveal high levels of self-segregation among white Americans (more so on average than any other racial group). These patterns also begin to reveal what it means to live on the underside of our racialized society. Though white and black youth are using drugs at comparable rate (research suggests close to equal with white youth using slightly more than black youth), black men are disproportionately arrested for nonviolent drug offenses. 1 out of 3 African Americans will go through the system because the War on Drugs has focused on urban black and brown neighborhoods rather than the vanilla suburbs. Seeing the patterns around the common experiences of black people all over the country being profiled and often brutalized in their communities by police (and the statistics that verify this phenomenon), one can begin to compile all this together to make sense of a widespread problem that is not just about one individual moment.

This suggests that naming any moment appropriately requires helping people see those patterns. To do so we must be able to move back from viewing the entire deck to pointing out individual cards that fit into the pattern of the larger set. White people need to be able to have deep and wide conversations with the Black community. Typically, white people search out for the one black person that already holds to their position and then prop them up as verification and justification of their own beliefs, rather than allowing the entire community to speak into their lives. Taking this riskier and more teachable posture will ultimately result in us changing our operating definitions (from the English Department to the Sociology Department). Rather than making random definitions of our choosing (like personal prejudice which is impossible to prove), we must define individual incidents in light of the larger pattern of society. When we can be honest about how our entire society is deeply racialized we will be ready to move forward. Racial moments are the norm rather than the exception. What is spectacular? It's the individuals that buck the racialized system, rather than blindly being socialized and determined by them. To resist naming our racialized society is to create *an unfair game* in which players by the rules must never try to connect the dots between widespread patterns and individual events. Therefore they are always unable to address any individual situation because the operational definition is not compatible with what has been discovered in the larger structure.

So, you want to play cards? Well, the next time you suggest that black people are playing the race card, all I can say back is nope, dominant society has been the only group playing with a single card, the African American community has been working

with the entire racialized deck. ***And what we have always known is that the deck is stacked against us.***