

Equal Opportunity Racism? Review of Cards Against Humanity, created by Josh Dillon, Daniel Dranove, Eli Halpern, Ben Hantoot, David Munk, David Pinsof, Max Temkin, and Eliot Weinstein, distributed by Cards Against Humanity LLC

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Cards Against Humanity describes itself as “a party game for horrible people” (cardsagainsthumanity.com n.d.). Despite the description, the card game has received a significant amount of success. The game is often referred to as an R-rated version of the popular card game *Apples to Apples*. The rules of the game are fairly simple: one player acts as the dealer and reads from one of the black cards, which poses a question or requests a response to a “fill-in-the-blank” statement. The other players submit a white card with words or phrases that respond to the black card question or statement. Examples of black cards are “Daddy, why is mommy crying?” and “In L.A. County Jail, word is you can trade 200 cigarettes for _____.” Examples of white cards are “Chunks of dead hitchhikers” and “Firing a rifle in the air while balls deep in a squealing hog.” The white cards also include provocative statements regarding, but not limited to, topics of race, class, and gender; such as “My Black ass,” “The American Dream,” and “Hormone injections.”

Max Temkin and seven of his friends from high school, all straight White men, created the game and took it public in 2008 (Lowenstein 2014). Since then, the game has generated millions of dollars in sales, one estimate placed it at US\$12 million as of 2013 (Lagorio-Chafkin 2014). *Cards Against Humanity* has a large presence in

Table 1. Racial Analysis of Cards.

Category	Neutral cards	Cards with a connotation		Total
		Not charged	Charged	
Blacks	4	2	9	15
Whites	20	13	4	37
Asians	0	1	4	5
Hispanics	0	2	3	5
Native Americans	0	0	2	2
Nativism	0	0	5	5
A racial group ^a	4	0	0	4
Racially coded	0	0	12 (7 toward Blacks)	12
Racialized religion	0	0	5	5
				90

^aThere were four cards with just a racial group listed: “Italians,” “Black people,” “Brown people,” and “White people.” These cards certainly *could* be used in a negative way but are not overtly negative, so we put them in the neutral category.

the gaming community and has received thousands of reviews on sites such as Board Game Geek, Shut Up & Sit Down, and Steam. As of April 2016, the game ranked #1 in both the Bestseller Game and Bestseller Card Games categories on Amazon.com; it had 30,620 Amazon reviews of which 91 percent were at the highest rating of five stars (Amazon.com 2016). The game has garnered wide popularity; it was even highlighted on an episode of the popular *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, when cast members of the famed television series *Glee* played it.

As scholars who study race and racism, we were particularly intrigued by this game, which has immense popularity and a purpose to *offend*. We did a content analysis of the standard card deck to evaluate for racial bias (see Table 1). First, we collected all cards that had some reference to race (including the names of celebrities). Next, we coded the card as either “neutral” or “with a connotation.” A card was coded neutral if it had only a person’s name on it (e.g., “Justin Bieber”), while other cards were coded as having a connotation. Cards with a connotation were then coded into “not charged” or “charged.” A card had no charge if it referred to a general event or idea such as “David Bowie flying in on a tiger made of lightning” or “Morgan Freeman’s voice.” Cards were coded as charged if they spoke to a historical or contemporary oppressive event or stereotype, for example, “The hardworking Mexican” or “Poorly-timed Holocaust jokes.” Overall, we found three main themes: (1) there is a strong racial pattern among the cards, (2) the cards that speak to communities of color are negatively charged, and (3) the cards generally focus on Blacks and Whites.

In analyzing the card deck, we found that there is, indeed, a racial theme to the game. Approximately, one-fifth of the cards have some sort of tie to race; this tie includes a reference to a person such as “Emma Watson,” who is White, or “Kanye West,” who is Black, as well as more explicit cards such as “White Privilege” and

“A sassy Black woman.” Given the intention of the game, these references to race are not that surprising; however, the ways in which those cards are particularly negatively biased toward people of color is more disturbing.

Our second theme is the ways in which White cards are more likely to have neutral racial connotations compared to cards that address people of color, which are highly charged. Cards coded as charged were easy to categorize. For example, a white-charged card is “The KKK,” a black-charged card is “3/5 Compromise,” an Asian-charged card is “Asians who aren’t good at math,” and a Hispanic-charged card is “8 oz. of sweet Mexican black tar heroin.” Approximately, 11 percent of white cards were charged compared to the significantly higher 60 percent of black cards, 60 percent of Hispanic cards, 80 percent of Asian cards, and 100 percent of Native American cards. There were an additional five charged cards that addressed nativist issues such as “Not giving a shit about the Third World” as well as another five charged cards that addressed the intersections between race and religion such as “The unstoppable tide of Islam.” Such negatively charged connotations speak strongly to the ways in which the game has a derogatory bias toward people of color; thus, even though there are more white cards in the deck, there are proportionately many more cards that provide the opportunity to deride the oppression of people of color.

Finally, we found the race cards largely speak to either Blacks or Whites, thereby highlighting the Black/White binary in the United States. There are 37 white cards and 15 black cards but only five Asian cards, five Hispanic cards, and two Native American cards. This count alone shows bias toward White and Black cards, but if we also include cards that are racially coded, then there are another seven Black racially coded cards plus another two nativist cards that also reference Black communities, making a total of 24 black cards (an example of a racially coded black card is “Selling crack to children” or “Rap music”). Of a total of 90 cards that we counted as race cards, 68 percent of those target either Blacks or Whites. We don’t believe this bias is a coincidence but rather a reflection of the continuing animosity and structural racism that disproportionately affects Blacks.

The racial bias in this game matters, as it provides players a means to normalize personal bias and structural racism. We connect this idea to Picca and Feagin’s (2007) discussion of “backstage racism,” or the ways in which Whites use particular language in all White spaces to communicate racially oppressive thoughts and actions. *Cards Against Humanity* brings this backstage racism to the frontstage by allowing Whites to laugh openly at oppression of people of color—and if called into question, their “get out of jail free card” is that it is all a game. This game relies on racialized comedy, which Picca and Feagin (2007) also specifically address: “Telling racist jokes frequently, and by insisting they are *only* jokes, Whites promote their own acceptability, persistence, and harmful impact on an already racist society” (p. 96). Furthermore, because there are some cards that target Whites (albeit benignly), Whites can more easily rationalize and excuse their thoughts and behaviors.

We hypothesize that the game allows for Whites to have an outpouring of racially charged thoughts, actions, and behaviors while it silences people of color who may

feel uncomfortable or even angry. It empowers White players in the group to say and do things that are unacceptable in virtually any other setting; explicitly racist speech is almost always sanctioned; however, *Cards Against Humanity* bypasses this norm. The increasingly worrisome factor is that millions of people have bought into this industry of racist humor, an industry that adds to the decades of discrimination and fuels the denial of contemporary racial inequality. So, while the creators and even arguably some of the players may deny it, *Cards Against Humanity* is more than a party game and has established itself as yet another way to ignore racially oppressive implications of speech, or in this case, cards.

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