

Simulations



An Exercise in Social Inequality

Sociology



Overview

This simulation / game by **Chris Andrews** was originally designed for use with American Sociology undergraduates as a way of bringing home to them a range of ideas (from structural inequality to the significance of social networks and social capital) relating to social stratification and inequality. The title of his paper - "[Challenging the Gospel of Individualism: An Exercise in Social Stratification](#)" – reflects this general focus.

The ideas and lessons contained with the sim can, however, be fairly easily adapted to the requirements of A-level students and it can be used in different teaching contexts: while its application to *social differentiation and inequality* is probably, given the title, self-evident, with a bit of tweaking and a slight change of emphasis it can be applied to different aspects of *educational inequality* – particularly those of social class but also areas like gender and ethnicity.

In this respect one of the key features of the simulation, aside from being relatively easy to set-up and run, is that its simple premise and practice is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of teaching ideas depending on what concepts you want to get across to students and their current level of academic understanding.

If you wanted to run it as an **Education** sim, for example, debriefing and discussion following its conclusion could focus on concepts like:

- Equality of opportunity
- Educational organisation and stratification in the UK (such as public, grammar and comprehensive schooling)
- Social capital (conceived here in terms of friendship networks)
- Cultural capital.
- Habitus

Alternatively, if you just want to run the sim "as is", as part of a **Social Differentiation** lesson, [Andrews' original documentation](#):

1. Provides a general introduction to the simulation.
2. Describes how to run the game.
3. Raises number of interesting ideas and arguments for the debrief after completing the simulation about power, social networks and capital, arbitrary class groupings etc. You should familiarise yourself with this part of the document because it makes some interesting and useful points and suggestions for further teaching / reinforcement. This document also provides some useful pointers about what to cover, "teaching moments" that might arise during the simulation and the like.

However, if you simply want to know how to run the simulation (because you're intending to adapt it to your own class / student needs – see below for some suggested variations) Andrews original instructions are as follows:

Preparation

“Like Straus (1986), I believe that in-class exercises should:

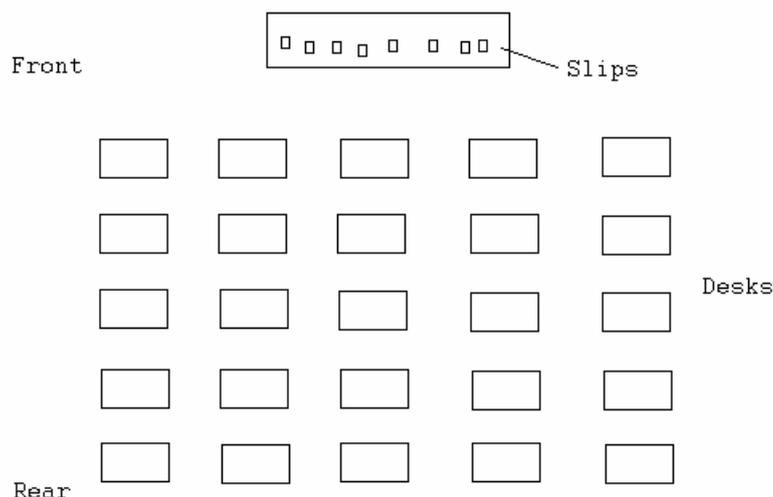
- 1) be simple and easy to learn,
- 2) sensitize students to central motifs or aspects of sociology versus specific theories or methods,
- 3) involve minimal preparation and resources, and
- 4) be usable within one-hour length class periods or less.

Accordingly, this activity requires few, if any, props (aside from conventional desks and a few slips of paper) and has been used with class sizes as large as 50 students. Likewise, students find the rules of this game simple and easy to follow, allowing them to spend a majority of the class time engaged in and discussing the activity.”

The Activity

“First, the instructor should (re)organize the desks into the 'traditional' series of rows and columns; if chairs or other forms of seating are used, arrange them so that students must sit in rows of equal distance. At the front of the room, you will need a small table upon which are set several slips of paper face down.

The precise number and value of the slips can be modified according to the class size and/or the instructor’s discretion but should generally number no more than 25 percent of the class so as to ensure that they are relatively scarce and limited in number.



Upon each slip of paper is written a number corresponding to a number of extra credit points ranging in magnitude (e.g., 1, 2, 3, etc.). It is important to note that even if the instructor for the given course does not provide extra credit, the practice of extra credit is both sufficiently familiar and attractive to students as to make the slips highly desirable. Instructors who do not wish to offer extra credit may elect to use similar forms of course credit (e.g., participation points) or other incentives (e.g., candy).

As class begins, I inform the students that we will be doing an exercise to illustrate several key points from the week’s readings. Students are then assigned to a desk by some arbitrary method (e.g., by name, height, date of birth, etc.), symbolizing the “arbitrariness” of their parentage and class origins and are then presented with a brief description of the exercise. Specifically, they are told that on the desk in the front of the classroom there are a several numbered slips of paper, face-down, each of which corresponds to a varying number of extra credit points. I then tell them that when the exercise begins, at my signal, the entire class may simultaneously rush to the front of the classroom and attempt to grab one of the slips of paper. Because there are fewer slips of paper than there are students, it is clearly implied that not everyone will be successful in earning points.

Finally, I present them with two rules.

First, each student is only allowed to keep one slip; they may handle or examine several, but may only retain one.

Second, and more importantly, they are told they may not use physical force or violent methods in obtaining a slip. For example, they are told they may not push another student out of the way nor may they forcibly take a slip from another student. I emphasize this point, noting that any deviation from this rule may result in points being deducted from their overall course grade and/or formal disciplinary action.

At this point, students are typically both anxious and excited; they are excited by the prospect of gaining extra credit and thereby improving their grade, but are anxious because they are still somewhat unsure about the nature of this game and how the outcome will affect them individually.

I then signal the students to begin. After a moment of puzzled disbelief and nervous giggling, the students rush upon the slips of paper. After this brief frenzy, they return to their seats and in an official manner, I take an inventory to see what each student received, collecting the slips of paper and noting the received value aloud to the entire class as I write it down upon a ledger.

Students are typically quite proud of their accomplishment and are very pleased and encouraged to see my meticulousness in documenting the results. This sends the message that the exercise is "for real", and the stakes (i.e., points towards their final grade) establish an incentive to actively participate.

It is critically important to sustain this definition of reality; if students question whether it is "real", the instructor needs to respond in a manner that upholds the formal definition. If it fails, or if students openly deconstruct the activity, it may become difficult to proceed further and the instructor may have to end the exercise and move straight to the debriefing and discussion of the activity's symbolic themes.

After this first round, I propose we do a second round; typically the results are the same, though I tend to see more positioning and preparation (e.g., leaning out of seats, crouching, etc.). Students may try to extend or modify their position as much as they can in order to maximize their chances within the existing structure imposed upon them. Thus, students in the front may strain to reach for the slips directly from their seat, or scrutinize the offerings for the highest reward, calculating the "best" strategy, while students in the rear of the class frantically search for some creative means of overcoming their greater distance to the front. In some cases, it may be necessary for the instructor to remind them of the two aforementioned rules to ensure that they are followed.

I typically conduct at least two rounds; in my experience, I have found that, generally, the more rounds one does, the more pronounced are the effects. Specifically, students closer to the front tend to accumulate more points, while those in the rear acquire few, if any slips. This pattern is relatively consistent as students' proximity tends to be the decisive factor."

Notes

The documentation makes reference to “extra class credits” which, while a valuable commodity in US Colleges, is largely meaningless in a UK School / College context. In place of these credits, therefore, you need to think of an incentive for your students to participate fully in the sim. Andrews suggests “candy” might be one such, although others might be something like a “Get out of homework free” card (the winning student doesn’t have to complete a piece of work you set for the rest of the class).

If you’re a fan of the [Cards, Cakes and Class simulation](#) you might want to continue the “cake reward” theme – the winner or winners get to have their cake and eat it in front of the losers...

In this respect, while there needs to be “winners” for the sim to work, you might want to think about rewarding the “top three” or “top five” students in a graded way, depending on the size of your class.

If you’re running this as an education sim you can use the “success” of the front row students to talk about **cultural capital** in the context of different types of school (the “front row” advantage symbolises an expensive Public School education, for example).

You might also want to add *incentives*, in the form of *punishments*, to the game to encourage those who have little or no chance of scoring any points to continue participating. This might involve something like “extra homework” for those who fail to score any points (or whatever relatively harmless “punishment” you want to include).

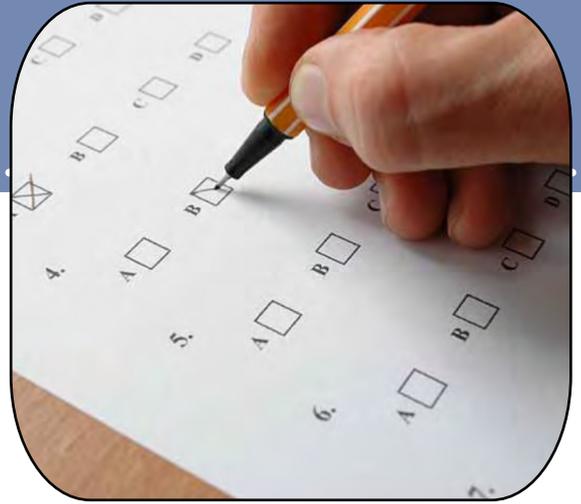
You may, however, actually want those who continually fail to score to “drop out” (fail to continue playing). They *go through the motions* a few times before coming to the realisation that they’re never going to score any points, so why waste effort trying?

If you’re running this as an educational sim these are the students who “self-select” themselves out of the system (they leave school as soon as possible, play truant, etc.). In addition, if any of these students actually start to complain that things are unfair you can always “expel them from school”...

Although Andrews suggests running the sim a “couple of times” you might want to think about running it a few more times if you’re incorporating the “fatalism” aspect related to areas like poverty or education in your debrief. The more times you run the sim (within reason) the more likely it will be that “those at the back” decide to give up because they have no chance of reaching the paper slips before those at the front.

The sim also lends itself effectively to student observations and discussions of “their experiences” during the simulation, both positive and negative, and how these might be applied to an understanding of particular sociological ideas, concepts and theories:

- As Andrews’ notes, for example, individualistic explanations of poverty might be attractive to those positioned at the front of the class (“those at the back just didn’t try hard enough), as might biological explanations (“those at the back just weren’t quick enough”). These types of explanation, however, are much less attractive to those at the back who quickly realise that changing their “behaviour / attitudes” (as opposed to changing their class position...) isn’t going to improve their chances of scoring points – the “system” (or *structure of society*) is rigged in favour of those “higher up the class structure”.
- If you’re looking at poverty, for example, you can explore ideas of fatalism / acceptance of inequality. Nothing they can do will change their unequal position so why bother to participate? Similarly if you’re looking at education you might want to explore these ideas in relation to differential achievement, labelling theory and the like.
- One way to cover **cultural capital** (or, more ambitiously **habitus** if this is something you teach) is to secretly brief the “front row students” prior to the first run of the simulation. You could, for example, tell them before the class assembles how the game will start and that that when you begin to explain to the whole class how the game is to be played they should start before you finish explaining – before the rest of the students understand “the rules of the game”. You could, for example, brief them on a trigger word you will use in the explanation that tells them they can start to collect the slips. Alternatively, write brief instructions on how to play the game on a piece of card handed out to every student. For the “chosen few” at the front, however, include something to the effect that they can start playing at whatever point they chose. If the “chosen ones” are paying attention (itself a test of cultural capital...) they will realise they can get a head start on the rest of the class and act accordingly. This will, of course, create some level of confusion among the “not chosen” but this is something you can explain in the debrief following the simulation’s conclusion (how those at the front “showed their initiative”, for example).
- Although the simulation is broadly designed to examine aspects of class inequality it can be adapted to cover something like gender by “randomly” assigning boys to the front position, with girls positioned at the back of the class.



Chris. Livesey, 2018

