

Challenging the Gospel of Individualism: An Exercise in Social Stratification

Abstract: Social stratification is a difficult topic to teach to undergraduate students, especially given the popular American ethic of individualism. This paper describes an activity designed to simulate key aspects of social stratification, including the nature and impact of social structure. Discussion following the game often highlights not only the material and economic aspects of stratification, but also a variety of other related issues and can be used to sensitize students to the overall significance of social structure in understanding economic processes and outcomes.

Introduction

As has been frequently noted, social stratification is one of the more difficult topics to teach in undergraduate sociology courses (Coghlan and Huggins 2004; McCammon 1999; Eells 1987). Among the topics included within this broad subject, the issue of inequality is particularly problematic. While most sociologists tend to view inequality in structural terms, students customarily harbor a stubborn, “unshakable fervent belief” (Eells 1987) in what Feagin et al. (2006) term the “gospel of individualism.” Mirroring public opinion (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Feagin 1975), most students tend to view poverty as an *individual* failing – i.e., the result due to of a lack of effort, laziness, or immorality. Accordingly, students frequently adopt a ‘blame the victim’ (Ryan 1976) perspective which views the poor and lower classes as ‘undeserving’ of economic aid or sympathy (Katz 1989). Moreover, the few students who occasionally do challenge this prevailing view often have difficulty articulating or describing an alternative explanation or process, undermining the very notion of a valid alternative perspective.

To combat this problem, teachers have devised numerous activities and exercises designed to highlight structural factors that create and maintain systems of inequality, including the use of the popular board game ‘Monopoly’ (Coghlan and Huggins 2004), ‘Star Power’ (Dundes and Harlow 2004), household budgets (McCammon 1999), thought

experiments (Brezina 1996), social networks (Groves et al. 1996), and playing cards (Abrahamson 1994). Research notes that “simulation games make learning a matter of direct experience, relieve the tedium associated with one or more conventional modes of instruction, and demand 100 percent participation” (Dorn 1989, p.4).

For several years I have used an activity to help sensitize students to extra-individual (i.e., structural) factors that limit economic opportunity and help to perpetuate systems of inequality, as well as the topic of social stratification more generally. For lack of a better name, I simply refer to it as the ‘stratification game’*.

Using arbitrary classroom seating patterns and slips of paper with extra credit points to represent economic outcomes, student outcomes in the game derive largely from where they are seated rather than any individual effort or merit. Some students face structural barriers that are difficult, if not impossible, to overcome by the nature of their being seated in the rear of the classroom while others enjoy marked success simply because they are seated closer to the front. In short, where students are seated, i.e., their social class, has a far more decisive role in determining the game’s outcome than any individual trait or effort.

Specifically, students are arbitrarily assigned seats reflecting the arbitrariness of their class origins, placed into a position not by personal choice or preference but by chance. They are then asked to race in a competition to obtain scarce resources located at the front of the classroom. The results are both consistent and striking; students seated towards the front regularly “win” while those seated near the rear of the classroom rarely, if ever, succeed.

* Any suggestions for an appropriate name would be welcomed and appreciated by the author.

Accordingly, I use this activity to highlight the structural aspects of inequality as well as the fallacies and shortcomings of individualistic explanations commonly offered by undergraduate students in explaining economic inequality.

Preparations for Activity

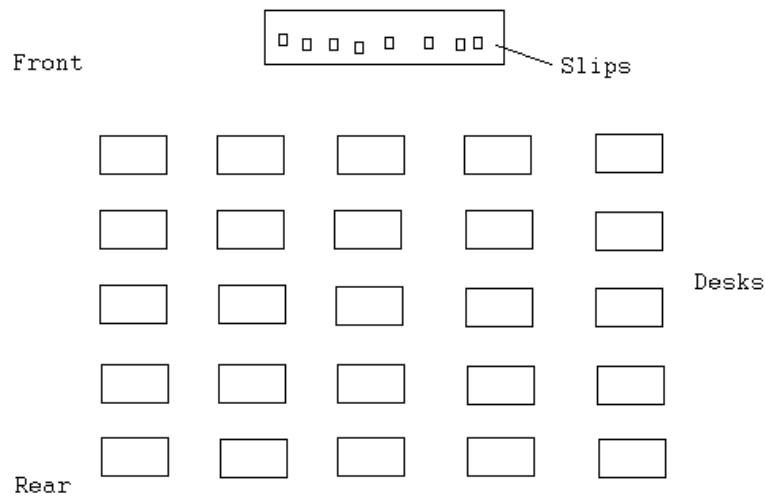
Like Straus (1986), I believe that in-class exercises should 1) be simple and easy to learn, 2) sensitize students to central motifs or aspects of sociology versus specific theories or methods, 3) involve minimal preparation and resources, and 4) be usable within one-hour length class periods or less. 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 (see Fig.1). 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).

Figure 1: Organizing the Activity



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 (see p.), 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 (see p. 8-13 for specific 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.

Students' Reactions

After several rounds and repeated inventories, I ask the class what they thought of the exercise. Students in the front rows tend to be exuberant, happy, and eager for another round; some occasionally ask for guarantees or similar formalities to ensure that the credit they received will in fact be validated. Students in the rear generally have negative views of the activity or qualify their response by proposing redistributing seats. In addition, those towards the rear of the room tend to complain, question the legitimacy of the activity, and/or attempt to 'cheat' by breaking the rules.

When students in the rear complain, I remind them that they have the same opportunity as everyone else. I often use statements similar to those expressed earlier in the course by students, such as '*You have the same opportunity as everyone else*', '*Everybody has to play by the same rules, isn't that fair?*', or '*Don't give up – try harder!*' While these responses typically evoke a degree of frustration and cynicism on their part, such sentiments make a useful illustration later when discussing the reality of 'equal opportunity' in the market and the experiences of the poor.

Depending upon the thoughtfulness and insight of the class, the instructor at this point may a) explain to the class the purpose and symbolism of the exercise or b) may choose to let the class actively deconstruct it with carefully placed questions and prompts (e.g., "what aspect of society do you think the desks represent?"). This is up to the instructor to decide and may depend upon the degree of insight in the class as well as the instructor's personal judgment and discretion.

Debriefing and Discussion

After the exercise, I debrief the students and explain to them that it was a simulation

of society designed to teach us about the relationship between social structure and inequality. Among the various topics addressed, I usually try to note the following themes:

1.) *The Arbitrariness of One's 'Class of Origin'*

First, I remind students that they did not get to choose where they were seated, how the desks were organized, or the number and/or value of the slips. In short, they were thrust into a situation not of their own making. Paraphrasing Marx ([1852] 1959: 318), I remind students that while they may make their own history, they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing but under circumstances which precede them. In other words, people do not get to choose their class position but are born into one – what Bettie (2003) terms one's 'class of origin' – and are confronted with a system of social relations and positions that existed prior to their emergence into the world. Students often find this unsettling, since they tend to view their arbitrary assignment to a particular desk as the paramount factor in obtaining a slip – a point further discussed below.

2.) *Competing Views on Inequality*

A second observation is that attitudes towards the exercise seem to vary according to one's position in the classroom (i.e., class position). This can be used to emphasize two points: 1) that the structure of the desks is a significant factor in determining who acquires slips, and 2) that a certain degree of conservatism is endemic among those who gain the most from the current arrangement. When students in the rear suggest changing the rules (e.g., redistributing seats, slips, etc.), students in the front tend to vocally

support the existing seating pattern. By randomly assigning students to different seats, they acquire – through no merit of their own – a certain degree or lack of privilege. Because students are loathe to admit being the beneficiaries of privilege (i.e., students often adopt an individualistic outlook which views accomplishments and outcomes as the product of individual behavior), students in the front may argue that everyone had a ‘fair’ chance since everybody had to play by the ‘same rules’, implying that the unequal outcomes reflect individual, rather than structural, failings and de-emphasizing the arbitrary but powerful influence of the ordered seating. This in itself is noteworthy; students in the rear (i.e., lower class positions) tend to see the structure of the activity as highly determinant, while those in the front (i.e., higher class positions) tend to overlook or minimize its significance.

3.) *Class, Politics, and ‘Class Action’*

This patterned variation in student attitudes also reveals a key dimension of social stratification, specifically the link between class and ‘party’ (Weber 1968). Those in the front have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, while those in the rear view the current structure as the primary reason for their failure to acquire slips. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that students in the rear tend to actively lobby for change while those in the front argue against it. The students up front use the ‘rules’ to justify their success, while those in the rear complain about the very nature of such rules, citing the inherent conservatism and inequality it produces (e.g., “*Maybe we should have a new rule, like everyone can only get up to five points. That way, at least everyone can get some points*”). This effectively models the ‘class action’ described by Weber (1968,

p.929), in which groups struggle to protect or advance their respective economic positions through ‘rational association’, forming political parties, voting blocs, and coalitions.

In some instances, students in the front have offered to pass back some of the lower value slips to students in the rear in order to mollify those complaining about the seating arrangements, creating what would appear to be a nascent form of ‘welfare’ given to suppress dissent (Piven and Cloward 1993). In other cases, students have suggested we be “democratic” and vote on whether or not to change seats (e.g., “Why don’t we vote on it – that’s fair, isn’t it?”).

4.) *Social Networks*

This leads to a fourth noteworthy aspect of the exercise, namely the significance of social networks. One key aspect of social networks concerns *proximity* or distance; for example, Milgram’s “small world” study in the 1960s concluded that most Americans were connected through “six degrees of separation”, a finding that has since been replicated using email and the Internet (Travers and Milgram 1969; Dodds et al 2003). Yet, the *strength* or the nature of the social connection matters, too; for example, research on employment finds that while “weak ties” may be the prevailing method used to identify potential job opportunities, personal or “strong ties” tend to be the most prevalent method of completing such transactions (Granovetter 1995).

In this activity, distance is a readily apparent factor in explaining individual outcomes. Proximity matters; students who are seated closer to the front of the classroom tend to enjoy better outcomes relative to their peers seated in the back. Yet, social ties among

classmates may be leveraged in ways that effectively bridge such physical distances, highlighting the role and importance of social networks.

For example, students in the front may grab a bunch of slips and, knowing they can keep only one, take the one with the highest value for themselves while selectively redistributing the rest to their friends. In other instances, students in the rear may ask friends seated closer to consider getting a slip of paper for them, using their social ties to bridge physical barriers and distances (e.g., “*Can I ask you to do me a favor? I really need the points and I would really appreciate it if you could get me one of those slips while you’re up there.*”). This helps students to appreciate the role and significance of social networks and underscores the pervasive conventional wisdom that people with the ‘right connections’, i.e., those with social capital, often have a distinct advantage over others in situations involving competition over scarce resources such as jobs (Granovetter 1995).

5.) *The ‘Culture of Poverty’ Thesis*

This activity also allows the instructor to critique the ‘ghetto-related behaviors’ (Wilson 1996) students frequently cite as a cause of poverty and to undermine the ever-popular ‘culture of poverty’ thesis (Lewis 1966). In discussion, I always make it a point to ask students what they thought was most important in determining the outcome of the activity. This question frequently results in students giving answers that contradict their previously shared views on the causes of poverty and inequality. When asked if a different attitude or cultural set of values would improve his chances, a young male in the back row told me,

“I doubt it. It doesn’t matter what I think or believe. What matters is that I’m back here and they’re up there. Attitude doesn’t have anything to do with it. It’s where you are, and I’m stuck back here.”

Accordingly, the exercise helps to illustrate not only the material, but also the social and psychological consequences associated with poverty and inequality.

6.) *Crime and Deviance*

When students break the rules, it makes for a good discussion on crime and deviance. Occasionally, despite warnings to the contrary, students in the rear will ignore the rules and attempt to bowl over and rush to the front in an aggressive and violent manner. These occurrences provide excellent opportunities for ‘teaching moments’, during which the instructor can highlight the illegality of such methods and underscore how certain forms of criminal behavior may in fact represent ‘innovative’ attempts to achieve legitimate goals through illegitimate means (Merton 1938).

7.) *Class-based Outcomes as Probabilistic, Not Deterministic*

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, students’ ability to acquire a slip is affected by their position in the class (i.e., class position), but it does *not* determine it. This reinforces the notion of the effect of one’s class position being *probabilistic* but not deterministic in shaping economic outcomes. Being in the front increases your chances of success, but does not guarantee it; similarly, students in the rear of the class may succeed in acquiring a slip. These instances help to highlight the probabilistic nature of class mobility (Blau

and Duncan 1967; Lipset and Bendix 1959), and can be used to discuss the actual documented rates of mobility amongst various class groups.

These are but a few of the topics which one might discuss following the activity, though instructors may choose to selectively focus upon particular aspects or themes (e.g., deviance and crime, economic inequality, social class, etc.). Additionally, student comments and insights may lead discussion towards topics not mentioned above but relevant to other aspects of inequality (e.g., subjective dimensions of inequality). Overall, the activity is quite flexible and open to interpretation, and can therefore be used to yield a variety of sociological insights into social inequality.

Assessment

One way instructors might assess the quality of this exercise would be to administer a pre-/post-test survey of student attitudes prior to and following the activity in order to assess whether it is effectively in changing students' self-reported attitudes and beliefs regarding inequality. For example, do students still cling to individualistic explanations following completion of the activity, or do they adopt new forms of reasoning and/or explanation? How durable are such individualistic ideologies when confronted with outcomes contrary to their assumptions?

Another method of evaluation might be to examine the extent to which students are able to independently make connections between the activity and course readings and/or concepts. For example, are students able to describe the desk assignments as comparable

to one's social class or family? Are they able to make connections between seating patterns and students' attitudes concerning the fairness of the exercise?

More advanced assessments might ask students to focus on a particular aspect of the exercise (e.g. social networks, class-based politics) and then locate and summarize existing research on the subject. Alternatively, students might be asked assess the extent to which the exercise accurately reflects measured and documented aspects of social stratification in the United States (e.g., rates of social mobility).

Conclusion

Popular opinion regarding inequality reflects a dominant ideology that is class-blind. In explaining outcomes, a focus upon individual characteristics tends to lead to individual blame, or what psychologists term the 'fundamental attribution error'. Simply put, what happens to people is a(n) (in)direct result of their actions. Wealth is achieved, rather than inherited; poverty reflects an individual failing.

As a result, sociology courses are often difficult to teach because they conflict with this prevailing view of methodological individualism. Yet, social structure is regarded as one of the most important concepts in the social sciences (Grusky 2003). Although sociology acknowledges the individual and individual action (e.g., agency), some argue that it is this primary concern with structure that distinguishes sociology from other disciplines (Mayhew 1980). Indeed, it is hard to imagine sociology as a discipline without social structure!

The utility of this activity is that it directs students' attention to extra-individual factors and sensitizes students to structural factors that create and maintain inequality.

Rather than being asked to be the obliging recipient of second-hand facts and figures, this exercise allows students to experience inequality first-hand. The sense of exhilaration and frustration that students experience is real in a way that textbooks cannot communicate; the first-hand experience lends it a certain credibility and authenticity. Most importantly, though, it allows students to ‘discover’ social structure, to see it emerge in their midst and to observe the effect of their actions within it.

Stratification Game vs. ‘Star Power’

Readers may note several similarities between this exercise and the game ‘Star Power’ (Dundes and Harlow 2004; Shirts 1969). There are, however, a number of important differences worth noting, including thematic flexibility, simplicity, and cost.

First, as is suggested in the name, Star Power is primarily concerned with the nature and distribution of *power*; indeed, much of the game focuses upon rule-making, the reproduction of an existing social and political order, and the status symbols associated with the distribution of power. My exercise is more concerned with the structural nature of stratification in general, and not any single or particular dimension. While it can be used to address power and politics, it can also be used to address the powerful yet arbitrariness of one’s class of origin, the probabilistic nature of social mobility, or various popular theories concerning inequality.

Second, because there are very few rules, the game is simple and easy to learn. These two factors minimize the time required to prepare for the exercise and therefore allow the class to spend the majority of the class engaged in and, afterwards, discussing the activity. Star Power, on the other hand, prescribes a much lengthier duration, suggesting

students play for over an hour followed by an additional period of time for discussion – somewhat impractical for typical introductory courses that last only an hour or less.

A third major difference concerns cost. My exercise is free and requires little to no equipment or materials; Star Power, on the other hand, is sold commercially for over two hundred dollars, and includes several different types of chips, envelopes of various shapes, and badges to reflect various social strata or status groups.

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