

STARPOWER: EXPERIENCING A STRATIFIED SOCIETY

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A similar version of this activity appears in the Teacher's Guide associated with the Companion Website for the American Anthropological Association RACE project.

Conceptual background material for this activity is found in Chapter 5, Mukhopadhyay, of the book *How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology*, (C. Mukhopadhyay, R. Henze, and Y. Moses). 2007. Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Years ago, Dr. Richard Stone (now deceased) asked me to attend his cultural anthropology class and participate in a simulation game. He told me nothing except that it would be interesting—and that he needed one more person for the game to work properly. I went and was introduced to “Starpower”, a totally engaging activity that I subsequently incorporated into my own classes.

First developed in the 1960s (Shirts 1969), Starpower creates a limited-mobility, three-tiered society based on differential wealth. Participants engage in “chip trading sessions” to increase their individual wealth and societal status. Variations in wealth are ostensibly based on “merit” [success at trading chips] but most members of each “strata” [squares, triangles, circles] unknowingly receive different resources [trading chips] at the beginning of the game and at each subsequent “trading session”. Thus most participants remain in their original group. To preserve the mobility premise, an occasional lower status person receives enough trading chips to allow them to change groups. After several trading rounds, the wealthy group (squares) “earns” the right to make rules for the rest of the game. Trading continues under the new rules. Shirts’ version assumes power inevitably corrupts and that the “wealthy group” will make unfair

rules that generate frustration and even revolt by other groups. My experience shows students respond in a variety of ways, sometimes opting to create an egalitarian society through rules that redistribute “wealth”. Perhaps their enrollment in a cultural anthropology class makes a difference! In any case, at some point the instructor ends the game and then facilitates a discussion of the experience.¹

Students’ emotional responses and behavior are generally linked to their social position in the simulated society. The “triangles” [lower class] become despondent, angry, self-blaming, self-critical, resentful, often giving up on playing the game...or sometimes simply cheat. Other groups also react in ways characteristic of the middle and upper classes. The game illustrates the complex processes of economic, social, and political stratification, linkages between wealth and political power, the ways in which stratification is maintained and justified, and how stratification is experienced on a personal level, by members of different “strata” and by different individuals within the same strata. Starpower is effective because it allows students to understand how stratified systems “work” structurally and to experience how they “feel”.

I find Starpower particularly useful for demonstrating the subtleties of “meritocratic” political democracies, like the United States, in which the rules seem “fair”. Yet the unequal distribution of wealth assures that most “squares” will end up “squares” and most “triangles” will remain “triangles” regardless of their individual merit and a set of equally applied rules for achieving “success” in society.

Starpower can also illustrate how race, ethnicity or other visible markers of social identity function in stratified societies. Participants in each group sit separately and wear a visual symbol of their group membership as squares, triangles, or circles. This offers an opportunity to

discuss the role of visual markers in stratified societies, as both internal and external symbols of one's identity that facilitate differential treatment. Such visual markers can become potent symbols of group membership, substituting for and masking the class basis of the hierarchical system.

Time and Player, Room and Material Requirements:

This is a complex game to set up and carry out—but well worth the effort. It's useful for any class that addresses stratification and systems of inequality. It can be tailored to particular types of inequality, such as race or gender. The game requires at least two hours—about 45min-1 hour for the “trading sessions” and at least that for the discussion and analysis. It can be used effectively in either one long class or in 2 separate class sessions in the same week. The game works best with from 25-35 participants although it can handle 18-45 students. If one reduces the “strata” to two groups, one can play with as few as 12 students.

Since each group must meet and confer between trading sessions, it is best to have a room with movable chairs unless there is sufficient empty floor space for the group to stand together or sit on the floor. During trading sessions, students move around the room seeking a trading partner and stand while they are making a trade.

More Detailed Description and Procedures

The description that follows is my “bare-boned” version. Over the years, I have modified the original game, changing chip values, sometimes altering trading rules to allow more or less mobility, sometimes going with the “flow” of the particular class, sometimes manipulating the class in a certain direction. Regardless, participants' reaction cannot always be predicted, especially after the “squares” are given the power to make rules. So....there is no

“template” for this game. Each session is excitingly different!²

Materials Needed

- Trading chips [or pieces of paper] of different colors representing 5 different point values (10, 5, 4, 2, 1). Gold, green, blue, pink, and white are often used for these values.
- Bonus Trading Chips: worth 5 points each. At the end of each trading round, each group receives 3 of these chips to distribute to 1-3 members of their group. The group unanimously decides who receives the chip. If they can't decide, they forfeit the chips.
- Envelopes containing the 5 chips each participant receives at the beginning of each trading session. I make enough envelopes for at least 3 rounds. Contents of envelopes depend on one's social “group. I discreetly mark envelopes but also keep each group's envelopes in a separate pile.
 - Square envelopes: 1 gold, 1 green, 3 other chips
 - Circle envelopes: 0 gold, 1 green, 4 other chips
 - Triangle envelopes: 0 gold, 0 green, 5 chips of other colors
- Several “mobility” envelopes. These contain at least 1 gold and 1 green chip. At least 1 triangle receives one each round. In early rounds, this allows them to move “up” to a square. Occasionally, I give a “square” a low value envelope. The impact varies depending on how far it is into the game. After several rounds, it has no mobility impact!
- Symbols (squares, circles, triangles) for members of each group to wear (around their neck, pinned to their shirts, etc.)
- A badge for the police officer (optional)

In addition to these materials, you can either create posters for game rules or simply write

them on the board.

- Scoring Chart listing values for each chip color and showing the number of additional points participants receive for having several chips of the same color: 5 of a kind =5 points, 4 of a kind=4 points, 3 of a kind =3 points.
- List of Trading Rules:
 - You must touch while you are trading.
 - You can only talk while trading. (note: this exclude talking to the director or police)
 - Once you initiate a trade, you must trade before going on to another trader
 - Players with arms folded do NOT have to trade.
 - All chips must be hidden at all times (except when exchanging chips)
 - One for one trades only
 - All rules will be enforced and penalties (deducing points) levied.
- List of Bonus Session Rules:
 - Each group receives 3 chips and each chip is worth 10 points
 - Chips can be given to 1, 2, or 3 group members
 - Chips must be distributed by unanimous vote
 - Undistributed chips (after 4 minutes) are forfeited.
- Scoring Card for Each Group or Create 3 Separate Sections on the Board for Each Group.

Procedures and Basic Stages in the Game.

1. **Divide students into three groups.** Have them sit in pre-arranged chairs, and distribute symbols for them to put on [squares, triangles, circles]. I sometimes say they are distinct ethnic, religious, or geographical communities.

2. **Introduce Purpose of Activity.** I tell students it is designed to illustrate how “exchange” works in small-scale societies. They will engage in several trading sessions. Each session they will receive a packet of 5 chips of different values, randomly selected. Their goal is to devise a clever trading strategy that will allow them to amass as many points as possible. They will accumulate points from each session. After several trading rounds, we will total the scores. Those with the highest number of points will “win” the game. You may want to tell them to draw upon their knowledge from the course. I sometimes attach a point value to the activity, saying it is a “test” of previous course material. I say “grades” on the activity will be based on individual point totals at the end of the game. This makes it more “serious”—but can also create too much tension among students.
3. **Explain Trading Sessions and Trading Rules (see above).**
4. **Begin Trading Session.** Distribute envelopes to each group (reminding them to hide their chips). Give them a few minutes to create a strategy. Then tell them they can now stand up and move around the room, looking for a trading partner. After about ten minutes, tell them the trading session is now closed and they should return to their seats.
5. **Calculate and Record Scores on Board or Chart.** Students individually calculate their scores and write their score in the appropriate space for their group (using their initials). Alternatively, appoint a recorder in the group to collect and write scores on the board.
6. **Distribute 3 bonus chips to each group.** Groups decide who will receive (3-5 minutes). Add the points to the scores of these people. If they can’t make a decision, take back the chips.
7. **Rearrange Groups.** With the whole group watching, tell them group membership will now

be based on “scores” and the top scorers will be squares, the bottom scorers are the triangles, and the remainder circles. This is an opportunity to reiterate the meritocracy rhetoric. You will have to decide the cut-off scores. Shift individuals between groups as appropriate, physically and in the group membership list on the tally board. Have switchers trade old symbols for new, appropriate ones.

8. **Begin Trading Session 2.** Use same procedures as above, including a few “mobility” envelopes. At the end of the trading session, add round 2 scores to round 1 scores for each student. Rearrange groups again—although there will be less movement. Unless time is limited, do a third trading session before proceeding to the next stage.
9. **Give Power to Squares.** At the end of trading session 2 or 3, use meritocracy rhetoric to justify giving rule-making powers to the squares. I often state their scores show they’ve mastered the course material on trading and exchange and they deserve to make the rules for the rest of the game. This is where you begin playing it by ear!!!
10. **Squares Make New Rules.** Have squares discuss what rules they want to make. Members of other groups can sit in on the process and you can allow them to make comments. However, the squares alone get to make the decisions. The content of these discussions is always significant and relevant for the post-game processing. I sometimes jot down snippets for future reference. This is the most fascinating, volatile, and unpredictable part of the game.....and one that you should monitor to make sure it doesn’t get out of hand. If you are playing the game in two sessions, you may want to wait until the second session to have the squares change the rules to minimize the out-of-class tension students sometimes experience.

11. New trading sessions, using the new rules. Squares now are in charge of the police officer.

The police officer need not administer the rules fairly. Nor are points always added up “accurately” by the scorekeeper, who may be the police officer, the instructor, or someone from the squares.

12. Play it By Ear....always monitoring the students and the situation so that it remains a positive learning experience. What happens next, especially the response of triangles and circles, depends on what kinds of rules the squares make as well as the class itself. Most often, squares initially try to preserve power, some more paternalistically than others. Some honestly think they “deserve’ to be squares...others are suspicious. Non-squares usually try to influence the squares. If the new rules are harsh, tensions increase and both squares and lower groups respond in a variety of predictable ways. If rules remain "fair", it takes more rounds for tension to build---and apathy can occur. Some students never realize the game is “stacked”! Sometimes squares with a commitment to social justice dominate and try to figure out how to redistribute chips (a fascinating process). It is impossible to describe the range and complexity of what occurs and the extent to which students replicate what we as social scientists know about human behavior and responses in situations of stratification. You’ll have to experience it yourself!

13. Stop the Game. Begin the Discussion. At whatever point you stop the game, it is important to allow students to process how they are feeling before beginning the more abstract discussion. You may want to have students write down their reactions and reflections, immediately or after class. Regardless, it is important to move beyond this. One way is by asking students to describe the strategies they employed in the game, then placing these

different strategies into the larger context of stratification and how one's class position affects one's strategies. I usually let the discussion take its own course but always try to make links between their experiences and the more abstract ideas and processes involved.

14. **Summarize What Has Been Learned.** At the end of the discussion, or the next time the class meets, I provide students with a more formal handout summarizing some key features of stratified societies (See appendix). I try to connect them, once again, with the Starpower simulation. The amount of time I spend discussing this handout varies with the class and the semester.

References Cited

Shirts, R. Garry. 1969. Starpower. La Jolla, CA: Behavioral Sciences Institute.

APPENDIX: STUDENT HANDOUT: STARPOWER: Key Points of the Game

1. Illustrates general features of stratified societies

1.1 Unequal distribution of and access to key resources and labor

- If groups being with different resources, it is almost impossible for them to compete equally even if the rules are fair and equally applied.
- Unequal resources produce inequalities in potential for authority/power, in the strategies one uses, in one's attitudes about the "system", in one's attitudes towards members of one's group, and in one's attitudes towards other groups.

1.2. Status Differentiation. From inferior to superior marked by distinct "cultural" symbols or markers of one's status

- Rights, duties, opportunities, and interactions are dependent on one's status
- Ascribed vs. Achieved Status. Is one's position "ascribed" (based on birth, what one is 'born into')? Or is it "achieved" (based on one's own actions rather than one's birth). Does it differ at the beginning of the game? Later on in the game?

1.3. Formal Political Organization

- Illustrates the emergence of the "state": the squares supported by the "police" or "military"
- Unequal access to and participation in decision-making by lower status groups

1.4. Ideology: variety of belief systems exist which justify (legitimize) stratification.

- Meritocracy: focuses on achievement and hence implies it is a "just" system. One gets rewarded in accordance with one's capacities and hard work (e.g. Horatio Alger)
- Some Mobility—those who "move up" demonstrate the system is "fair", based on "merit".
- Political Democracy emphasized—"equal rights" for all. Equal Opportunity laws.

- Luck. An alternative ideology: It's just a matter of luck [hiding that the system is "set up"]. Words like "unfortunate" imply it's "fortune" rather than the system.
- Blame the Victim—it's your fault. Get victims to also blame themselves.
- Secrecy and ignorance. "Hide chips from each other"...Cultivate individualism.

2. Illustrates People's Reactions and Strategies Reflect Their Class Status and Position.

2.1. Lower Class Strategies:

- Individualistic: break the rules, apathy, resentment, cheating, anger, depression, withdrawal, develop alternative things to do in class
- Collective: protest, non-cooperation; strike, social ostracism of upper groups

2.2. Middle Class Strategy: inaction, don't take sides, try to preserve one's chips

2.3. Strategy of Upper Class. Alternative strategies depend on values and goals. All emphasize group unity, however.

- Preserve power through paternalism, authoritarian rules, emphasizing "law and order", manipulate and alter rules when threatened. Each strategy produces different reactions in other groups. Uphold & reiterate legitimizing ideologies: emphasize "fairness" and "merit" and "equal opportunity" rules. Deny system is unjust.
- Prioritize social harmony—create a more just system and give up (some, all) power and privilege
- Prioritize justice [experience guilt]—create a more equal and just system and give up (some, most, all) power and privilege

2.4. Police Strategy: uphold rules but especially for lower status groups; bend rules for upper classes; identify with authority; maintain distance from lower status groups

2.5. Attitudes towards the “game” or “system”: who enjoys the “game”? Who would like it to continue? Who feels alienated? Who wants it to end—quickly!! How about those who “moved up”? Did that alter their view of the game? How did they feel about those “left behind”? What expectations did those “left behind” have about those who “moved up”? Were they disappointed? Did they feel betrayed? How did oldtimers feel about “newcomers”? What does this illustrate?

2.6. Alternative Group Strategies for Bonus Chips: share, give to low, give to high; long-term vs. short-term strategies.

3. How Systems of Inequality are Maintained. Use of informal and formal mechanisms of social control.

- 3.1. Paternalism is more effective than authoritarian regimes. Squares don't want to alienate lower groups. They want to maintain social solidarity and a feeling that “leaders” care about those under them. Cultivate “good intentions” and concern for “common good”, as if the “mother” or “father” of the people.
- 3.2. Divine sanction also legitimizes authority (e.g. The Instructor becomes “God” who ordains the squares)
- 3.3. Social Separation of Classes. Reduces social pressure from lower groups on upper classes; diminishes envy by lower classes, prevents empathy or guilt by upper groups
- 3.4. Constantly reinforce the idea of a “just” ideology: that the system is just, fair, natural-biologically rooted, or supernaturally sanctioned.
- 3.5. Why Do Lower Classes continue “to play”? hope, lethargy, a culture of obedience, waiting for someone else, self-blame (so try-harder)

4. Alternative Outcomes and Their Significance.

- 4.1. Trading off social good will and social solidarity against amassing wealth and political power. What are the plusses and minuses of each system? Why do some choose different alternatives? Does having wealth (for several generations-rounds of the game) make one more likely to share?
- 4.2. Complexities of trying to “restructure” the system: will simply making the trading rules “fair” help? Is “affirmative action” enough? Does the solution require equalizing wealth? At every round? Will some inequality still emerge?

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION:

- Discuss with students the complexities of trying to “restructure” the system.
- Ask, will simply making the trading rules “fair” help?
- Is “affirmative action” the solution? Will that be sufficient?
- Does the solution require equalizing wealth? At every round?
- Will some inequality still emerge?
- How does this relate to school achievement

¹ The current distributor of Starpower (Simulation Training Systems, markets the game as solely about power—its uses and abuse. The target audience is management training, cultural diversity, and classrooms.

² More detailed instructions for the original version can be found in Shirts (1969). Starpower originally came in a “kit” with trading chips, plastic symbols, etc. University Curriculum Libraries often purchased it and yours may still own it. Currently it is available for purchase (\$225) through Stimulation Training Systems at www.stsintl.com/schools-charities/star_power.html. I do not know if the recent version has been modified. However, one does not need the kit to play the game. I found it just as easy and effective to construct my own set, using pieces of colored paper for chips and string & tinfoil or stiff paper for group symbols.