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ABSTRACT

In Los Angeles, racial demographics have changed radically in the past 30 years resulting in inevitable tensions in the school. This paper reports on a classroom simulation of ethnicity/race and class relations. Students adopted the roles of three polarized and rigid "color groupings": (1) Greens--ruling class, wealthy since birth; (2) Blues--working class, children and grandchildren of immigrants; and (3) Grays--extremely poor, lacking in education and marketable skills. Each student randomly selected a group, to mimic the "accident of birth," and memorized his or her group's behavior. Students then gave themselves a new name and attempted to find people of their own color group without asking another person to state his or her color. Participants quickly adopted their given roles while reflecting a splintered society. Emotions ran high and the project leader insisted that no one engage in physical contact during the simulation and that voices not be raised. Many students professed surprise at the intensity with which they felt their adopted position. Per student suggestions, adult supervision in such simulations should be kept to a minimum. Two appendices list each color group's behaviors and give detailed directions for simulation participants. (RJM)

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Simulating Society: An Experimental Approach to Teaching Race/Class Relations

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Communities like the Watts community in South-Central Los Angeles, site of the unrest in 1965 and 1992, have seen few social improvements in the intervening years. Indeed, Watts is suffering from many of the same problems which plagued it thirty years ago: racial tension and its resultant violence, severe overcrowding, low property values, and escalating delinquency,<sup>1</sup> as well as high unemployment, lack of locally owned businesses, little job training, and a dearth of life-enhancing opportunities. The loss of central-city jobs has further served to isolate people within economically disadvantaged inner-cities where unemployment rates are high.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the continuation and exacerbation of old problems, new issues have arisen. Los Angeles County has undergone tremendous demographic changes in the years between 1960 and 1990. In that thirty year period, the White population decreased by 50%, and the Latino population tripled. The African-American and Asian/American Indian populations grew by 3 and 8.6 percent respectively.<sup>3</sup> The high school within the Watts community at which I taught reflected this demographic change in a dramatic way: The African-American majority of the mid-1980s had given way to a solid Latino majority by 1990. Such radical demographic changes caused inevitable tension in the school, mirroring conditions within the community.

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Into such a climate, a classroom examination of ethnicity/race and class relations seemed not only natural but necessary. As a teacher at the high school, I coordinated a program in peer counseling, a successful and active program on campus in which, among other goals, I tried to help my students reach beyond racial and ethnic boundaries to find common ground. When it came time to give a final examination, I decided to try a 70s-style simulation to see what sorts of results would occur if the students were provided the opportunity to create their own society, given parameters which initially created a society strongly oriented around socioeconomic class. This focus on socioeconomic class was intentional. The "color line" is highly associated with socioeconomic status. By providing students with a class-based society, I would be able to assess how closely tied to their notions of wealth and poverty were issues of race and ethnicity.

The simulation format, which I initially used with my students and later used at conferences of the California Association of Peer Programs, is straight-forward and rather simple. As with all simulations, the outcome is unpredictable because once the structure of the simulation is initially set, the simulation itself becomes a product of the participants. I have discovered over the years of using this simulation that each event is dynamic and unique in its unfolding, although the results are surprisingly similar.

#### Simulation procedure

At the beginning of the simulation, the students are randomly assigned to three polarized and fairly rigid "color groupings". The "Greens" are the ruling class, wealthy since birth, well-educated, and cultured. The "Blues" are the working class, children and grandchildren of immigrants.

The "Grays" are the extremely poor people of the society, lacking in education and marketable skills. Detailed descriptions of these groups are printed and placed face-down in three stacks. Students in the simulation are asked to randomly choose one piece of paper from among three stacks, each piece of paper explaining in detail the qualities of "Greens", "Blues", or "Grays". (See Appendix A for the text of the three group descriptions.) In order to create a stratified society, only 25% of the students can end up being either Greens or Grays, and 50% can be Blues. This is accomplished through determining the number of participants prior to the simulation and printing only enough descriptions so that the "society" will end up with one-half of the participants being in the Blue group, and one-quarter each in the Gray and the Green groups.

Once students randomly select a group (the random selection helps to mimic the "accident of birth"), they read and memorize their "part" in silence. They then give themselves a new name fitted to their role, write up a name tag and attach it to their shirts, and attempt to find people of their own color group. They are allowed to ask three questions which could ostensibly lead them to knowing what color group the person is in, e.g., "What kind of car do you drive?" or "Where did you go to college?" or "What kind of work do you do?", but they are not allowed to directly ask the color grouping the person has selected, e.g., "Are you a Blue?". When they find someone who belongs to the same group, they are allowed to stay together. If the person is not of the same group, they have to separate, always remaining in character. The initial question-asking as students attempt to find others of the same group provides the students with time to take on their new roles. By the time they have found their like-group members, the simulation is taking place, and they are

spontaneously reacting to and creating their society. (See Appendix B for the text of the directions for the simulation and notes on coordinating the simulation.)

During the first run of this simulation with my own students, some surprising events occurred. Students took on their new personalities to the point that they seemed to shed salient characteristics of their old. Shy students who rarely uttered a word became strong leaders. Boisterous students became thoughtful and quiet. Normally sensitive, caring students said hurtful comments to others.

Another instructor and I functioned as observers during the simulation, taking notes and attempting to be as invisible as possible. Initially, as students struggled to find their own color group, the observers began to see an emerging dynamic. Students adapted their own knowledge base and experience to the assignment. Two Greens queried a Gray about where he went to school. When he replied with the name of our school, the Greens responded scornfully, saying, "You go to school in Watts. Get out of here. We don't associate with people like you." The Gray hung his head and walked away.

Students had been expressly informed that this society had none of the racial/ethnic groupings to which they were accustomed. The only "colors" which existed were Greens, Blues, and Grays. However, the students could not keep their own perceptions from impinging on the simulation. One rejected Gray muttered to Greens who were marching away with a superior air, "You Black-wanna-be-Whites. I'm going to find people of my own kind." He transferred perceived characteristics of his society onto the one which they were creating.

The Grays as a group began to steal. They managed to sneak up on the Greens and Blues as they stood haggling and actually took their purses, notebooks, and books. They simulated making a fire with the books and then huddled around it, rubbing their hands and holding them to the fire. They staged a sit-in and then began dancing in an aggressive fashion. They snake-danced through the room, over tables, clapping their hands, stamping their feet, and calling on the Blues and Greens to help them.

The Greens flaunted their wealth and even affected British accents, perceiving, as they later reported, that such accents sounded more "high class". They continually talked about something needing "to be done", but just as consistently put forward no concrete ideas.

The Blues became angry that the Grays wanted assistance because the Blues felt that they had worked so hard for everything they had. They attempted to create a small power base against the Greens by pointing out to the Greens that they needed the Blues for their work, but the Greens countered that they owned the companies where the Blues worked. The Grays, looking unhappy, began to bicker among themselves, and decided to sell back the items they had "stolen" from the Greens and Blues. Once they received payment for the goods, they simulated buying drugs and smoking or injecting them.

At one point, one of the Grays simulated going into labor and the other Grays attempted to get help in the form of money for medical attention from the Greens. When the Greens denied the assistance, the Grays placed the young woman on a table, simulated helping her to deliver the baby, soothed her, and then took the baby and left it for a Blue "social worker who will take care of it." They claimed they could not keep the

child since they had no money and that "this is a terrible environment to grow up in anyway."

The Greens, after much hand-wringing, finally asked the Grays what they wanted, and the Grays replied that they wanted jobs. The Greens told them they could work for them as janitors. One Gray said she could read a book, and all the Greens clapped in derision.

The Greens attempted to create a ghetto. One Green leader said, "Can't we just put them in their own little society somewhere? I don't want to have to look at them." They decided to give them food, money, and a place to live, and were baffled when the Grays rejected these, saying they wanted jobs, not hand-outs.

One Blue, in real life a Latina who was fiercely proud of her heritage as a result of several years of painful introspection, was confronted by a Gray who said, "You were one of us once. Your father crossed the border the same as ours." She stared at him in anger and said, "So what if he did? Now my name is Smith, not Sanchez."

One student out of the 30 who took part in the simulation tried to be a voice of reason. She saw the inequities in the society and attempted to change them. A Green herself, she argued with other Greens and listened sympathetically to the Grays. She was eventually ostracized from the Green group who viewed her as a traitor for wanting to share her wealth with the Grays.

During the debriefing, it was difficult for the students to let go of their adopted personalities, until finally as we sat in a circle one person spontaneously stood up and ripped off her name tag, threw it on the floor and stepped on it. Other students followed suit. The planned debriefing was superfluous as students led the discussion themselves.

The overwhelming emotion reported by the Greens was that they did not like who they were, that they acted in ways that they did not respect but felt like they had to in order to protect their wealth and property from the poor. Several students mentioned that even though they knew it was a simulation, it felt real, and they apologized to people whose feelings they were afraid they had hurt. Two students began to cry. The students who were rude to the Gray who said he went to school in Watts stated that they felt terrible because in real life, people tried to make them feel bad about where they live, and they had done the same thing the minute they had a chance. The Latina who changed her name from Sanchez to Smith confessed to feeling shame, "How could I say such a thing? Am I really proud of who I am if I could say that?"

The Grays claimed that they felt just as they feel now living in Watts and being on welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Several pointed out that the society that they had created was the mirror-image of the one in which they lived.

"Look," one Gray said, "the rich just wanted to buy us off, get us out of the way. No one wanted to give us what we really need for our self-respect like jobs or a good education. And we were no better. We continued the stereotype of the poor: When we got money, we blew it on drugs. That's just no different from the way things really are!"

Another Gray made the connection between socioeconomic status and race by saying, "It's true. It's how society is now. The Blacks and Latinos live in the ghettos. The Whites have the money. We separated it into the same divisions just now, even though we could have created any society we wanted!"

After analyzing what had occurred in the simulation, I

added two rules to the simulation to which all participants must agree as we begin. I noted in the original simulation that emotion tends to run very high, and I saw the possibility of violence occurring. Thus, I added the first rule which is that students will have no physical contact during the simulation. If they feel, within the context of what is occurring in the simulation, that they in their role would want to commit a violent act, they are allowed only to describe that act, not to commit it or to touch one another in any way. Second, students are to attempt to keep the noise level low. My observation was that as students raised their voices, their emotion also escalated, and the quality of the simulation decayed. I have found in the intervening years as I have used this simulation with young people that these two rules help to keep the simulation authentic, maintaining its integrity, while fostering an environment that is safe.

Later that same academic year, at the California Association of Peer Programs state-wide conference for both youth and adults, this same simulation, complete with new rules, was attempted with students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic/racial backgrounds. We aimed the workshop at students only, asking that adult participants neither participate nor attend. My students voiced strong opinions that this should be a student-led workshop in which the adult presence was minimal. They felt that adults participating in the simulation would completely change the outcome and that having adults observe would make students uncomfortable and keep them from participating in an authentic manner. Thus, we kept adult supervision to a minimum and utilized student-monitors to insure a safe environment.

As the workshop progressed, very similar patterns began to emerge as those we observed in the first simulation. The Greens again reacted with impotence rather than action, attempting to quell any disturbances by promises of money which never materialized. The Blues again identified more strongly with the Greens than the Grays, expressing anger that the Grays felt that society owed them anything. The Grays again were the most vocal, volatile, and active group, determined to find a way around the repression they perceived to surround them, and ultimately alienating everyone but each other. Again, their perceptions of the characteristics of ethnic/racial boundaries in their own society were manifested within the one they created: Greens (portrayed by the students as Whites) were powerful and rich, Grays (portrayed by the students as African Americans and Latinos) were poor, and the working-class continued to attempt to deny its heritage and to assimilate.

During the debriefing, students who came from wealthy families said that they had never thought about how it felt to live in poverty, that they had felt so frustrated, humiliated, and trapped, and they asked if that is how it felt to be poor. Students from Watts responded from their own experiences of living in poverty, and the dialogue among this diverse group of young people needed no adult to lead or direct it: It had a life of its own.

One young woman told the group she was from a racially mixed marriage, but she never told anyone at school. She said, "I am always with my White friends. I act White. We have money. They don't know I am half Black. They'd hate me if they knew...I feel so ashamed." A Latina, one of the students from Watts, walked to her chair, sat down next to her, and held her while she cried.

Many such moments existed in the 90 minutes allotted for the workshop. Afterward, students came up to the podium to thank the adults involved for having put on the workshop. Most had agreed at the end that the only way the world would change was if they, the young, were able to put aside such barriers of ethnicity, race, religion, and socioeconomic status, find common ground, and learn to care about and work for the well-being of all individuals within the society.

Every year when Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is celebrated, students all across the country hear lectures on the Civil Rights movement, prejudice, discrimination, societal inequities, racism, and classism. Throughout their public school career, they listen to lectures about the issues for which King fought and died; however, hearing does not necessarily imply knowing, and, as confluent education observes, the blending of the cognitive and the affective is where real knowledge takes place. The power of this simulation is that it offers just such an interaction to make the issues inherent in civil and human rights move from the abstract to the personal and come alive.

## Appendix A

## GRAYS

You are extremely poor. You do not work because you have had little education, and that which you have had is of poor quality. You feel you cannot participate in society. You feel anger toward the Greens (the wealthy) and the Blues (the working class) because of how much they have in comparison to you. You are often hungry, and you feel resentment that the Greens and the Blues have more than enough to eat. You own very little in life, certainly no luxuries like a television set or a car. You think your society is unfair because the Greens are born into wealth, and the Blues are able to work for what they have. Both of these options are denied to you. You know enough to realize that you need education and a chance for a decent job for your life to become better. You are angry that the options for you and your children are so limited.

## BLUES

You are one of the middle class, the child of immigrant parents. You have worked extremely hard to make a place for yourself within this society. Your most cherished dream is that your children will be completely assimilated into the society. You work long hours every day to be able to provide a decent life for your family. You have succeeded in achieving parts of your dream: You have a house in a nice neighborhood, a practical family car, and a television. You always have enough food to eat. You have to watch your money carefully and work very hard, but you are happy about your life. You spend your work life working for the Greens (the wealthy) in their homes and in their factories, and you feel some resentment toward the Greens because they were born in to wealth. It seems they have life very easy. You also feel some resentment toward the Grays who live in poverty because they do not work and seem to you to want society to fix their problems for them. If you could come to this society and succeed through your hard labors over the years, you wonder why the Grays can't do the same.

## GREENS

You are the wealthy people in your society. You were born into wealth and have come to expect that it will always be a part of your life. You went to the best private schools as a child and attended a very expensive university. You have had a new sports car every year. You own a very large, impressive home in an exclusive neighborhood, and you hire the Blues (working class people) as domestic help to do the housework and the gardening. You also employ Blues within your factories as laborers. They are hard workers, and you appreciate their work ethic. You do not have to work, although you do oversee the profits from your factories. Generally, you hire others to do your work for you. You are able to travel and take vacations around the world. You know nothing about the Grays who, because of their poverty, are far removed from your reality, and you know very little about the real lives of the Blues. Your life is good, and you are happy with it.

## Appendix B

Note: These directions are either printed on poster board and displayed on the wall in the case of a small number of participants or copied and handed out to participants as they enter the room in the case of a very large group. The moderator of the simulation should go over each step in the directions prior to beginning the simulation, as well as defining what simulations are and discussing with participants the utility of simulations.

## DIRECTIONS FOR RACE/CLASS RELATIONS WORKSHOP

## PROCEDURE

**NO TALKING UNTIL YOU COMPLETE STEPS ONE THROUGH FIVE.**

1. IN A MOMENT, YOU WILL BE ASKED TO SELECT A SLIP OF PAPER FROM AMONG ONE OF THE THREE STACKS YOU SEE HERE. THERE ARE THREE STACKS OF PAPER, AND YOU ARE ASKED TO CHOOSE ONE PIECE OF PAPER FROM ONE OF THE STACKS.
2. ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR PAPER, GO SOMEWHERE IN THE ROOM WHERE YOU CAN READ IT IN PRIVATE. DO NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO SEE IT. DO NOT GROAN OR LAUGH OR DO ANYTHING THAT WOULD HELP OTHERS FIGURE OUT INTO WHICH GROUP YOU HAVE BEEN PLACED. (BE NEUTRAL!)
3. MEMORIZE YOUR PART.
4. WHEN YOU HAVE MEMORIZED YOUR PART, GET A NAME TAG AND GIVE YOURSELF A NAME THAT FITS THE "NEW YOU". DO NOT WRITE YOUR COLOR ON YOUR NAME TAG.
5. REMEMBER: YOU ARE TO ACT **IN CHARACTER** UNTIL TIME IS CALLED.

**NOW YOU CAN TALK!**

6. ONCE YOU HAVE DONE ALL THE ABOVE, YOU MAY SPEAK. GO AND FIND PEOPLE FROM YOUR GROUP. YOU MAY ASK THREE QUESTIONS OF EACH PERSON, BUT YOU MAY NOT ASK PEOPLE THEIR COLOR. IF YOU BELONG TO THE SAME GROUP, YOU MAY STAY TOGETHER. IF NOT, YOU MUST SEPARATE. YOU MUST ALWAYS REMAIN IN CHARACTER.
7. ONCE YOU HAVE FOUND THE OTHER MEMBERS OF YOUR GROUP (ALL GREENS TOGETHER IN ONE GROUP, ALL GRAYS TOGETHER, AND ALL BLUES TOGETHER), TALK TO YOUR GROUP MEMBERS. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING A MEMBER OF YOUR GROUP? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO ABOUT IT? WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT, AS A GROUP OR AS INDIVIDUALS?

8. **YOUR ASSIGNMENT:**  
CREATE YOUR OWN SOCIETY. YOU DECIDE WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT. IT IS YOUR SOCIETY TO CREATE.

**REMEMBER:**

**REMAIN IN CHARACTER UNTIL THE SIMULATION IS OVER!**

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**RACE/CLASS RELATIONS SIMULATION  
SIMULATION COORDINATOR'S INSTRUCTIONS**

- I. Welcome
- II. Explanation
  - A. Define simulation.
  - B. In this simulation, you will be creating a new society. You will draw a slip from one of the three piles. The paper will tell you which of the three groups you belong to: the Greens, the Blues, or the Grays. The paper will explain some basic information about your group. You will be asked in a minute to get a paper, read it, and give yourself a new name which you will use throughout this simulation. The success of the simulation rests with you and how seriously you take this process. Think for a moment: You are being asked to create your own society. What will it be?
- III. Procedure
  - A. Go over procedure sheet.
  - B. Rules
    - 1. No physical contact.
    - 2. Noise level needs to remain low.
  - C. Questions?
- IV. Debriefing
- V. Validation
  - A. Prior to leaving the room, make a positive contact with someone in the room. It might be a work of praise or a hug, an acknowledgment of the person's contribution to the simulation, a word of gratitude for an insightful comment.

## Notes

1. Bullock, P., Ed. (1969). Watts: The aftermath. New York: Grove Press.
2. Kasarda, J.D. (1985). Urban change and minority opportunities. In P.E. Peterson (Ed.), The new urban reality. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, pp. 33-67.
3. "New Faces in the Neighborhood," ( 1992, May 11). Los Angeles Times, p. T9.