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Using *Monopoly* to Introduce Concepts of Race and Ethnic Relations

Warren Waren[1]
University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816-1360

Abstract

In this paper I suggest a technique which uses the familiar Parker Brother's game Monopoly to introduce core concepts of race and ethnic relations. I offer anecdotes from my classes where an abbreviated version of the game is used as an analog to highlight the sociological concepts of direct institutional discrimination, the legacy of discrimination, colorblind racism, affirmative action, and reparations. I describe how, after playing the game, the participants spend a short amount of time debriefing in order to express their emotions and examine their motivations. Later, in a broader class discussion, I invite both participants and observers to explain the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of all players and connect these explanations to theoretical concepts in sociology. After debriefing and discussion, I refer to the shared experiences of the students from the game in subsequent lectures and readings.

Keywords: Teaching race, simulation, monopoly, symbolic racism, colorblind racism.

Undergraduate students often enter our classrooms convinced that the battles of the Civil Rights Era solved the issue of race in America. They are generally unacquainted with the long history of race in the United States and almost universally underestimate the structural forces which carry racial disparities into their new century. As sociologists and teachers, it is our responsibility to tell that story and explain those forces. Our new challenge is: How do we teach students the extent of racism in America when, from their point of view, the problem of the color-line has been solved?

One option is to use a game. Sociologists have used games or simulations to spark the sociological imagination (Dorn, 1989; Jessup, 2001; Fisher 2008), to stimulate critical thinking (Pence 2009), and to introduce social stratification (Ender, 2004; Waldner & Kinney, 1999). When students from relatively privileged backgrounds "experience" a temporary bout of unfairness in a simulated game, it creates the opportunity to change their perspective (Coghlan & Huggins, 2004; Haddad & Lieberman, 2002). The injustice of the situation, if directly connected to broader theory, can lessen a student's social distance from marginalized groups. A game may help a student to understand some of the previously inexplicable attitudes and behaviors of actors on either side of a power rela-

[1] Corresponding author's email: wwaren@yahoo.com

tionship. Also, as this paper demonstrates, a properly constructed simulation can give the student a sense of the structural nature and lasting legacy of racial discrimination—a fuller sense of the "history and biography" of race in the United States (Mills, 1959).

The great advantage of a game is that it is a completely controlled environment—there are no unexplained variables. In fairness to all the players, all rules are explicitly stated at the outset of game play and apply to all players equally (Waldner & Kinney, 1999). Ordinarily, in a competitive game this assumption of fairness supports an ideology of individualism.

However, a pedagogical game is concerned with learning, not winning. In order to disentangle a complicated issue, the instructor may purposefully introduce inequality into an otherwise "just" world. Again, because all rules are explicit (even unfair ones), the problem exists in the game without confounding effects. This simplification allows students to easily focus on the nature and development of the problem. By extension, it is hoped that the game encourages students to reassess similar problems in the real world.

Use of Pedagogical Games

Dorn (1989) identifies multiple criteria for games or simulations to be effective in the classroom as pedagogical tools. He argues the games must: reflect reality; motivate students through "experience"; develop awareness of personal values through moral and ethical implications of the game; connect abstract concepts with concrete experiences; create a shared experience from which the students can draw; offer a form of debriefing to both address emotional issues and to connect theory to experiences. In the technique I describe below, I try to incorporate these ideas with Straus' (1986) emphasis on simplicity for in-class games.

In teaching and learning, the goal of simulation is the "experience" itself. Jessup (2001) argues that simulation should be the "experiential anchor for the elaboration of conceptual tools" (p.108). Therefore, this game is created to offer a chance for relatively privileged students to experience the unfairness of structural inequality. After temporary exposure to an analog of racial discrimination, students with no prior familiarity of racial discrimination will have a deeper understanding of the effects of racism on many levels.

Pedagogical games are used to challenge our assumptions about how the world works (Waldner & Kinney, 1999). For example, the basic assumption of competitive games is fairness. This assumes that the world is fair (i.e., a meritocracy) and that individual effort or talent is the main factor in success (i.e., an ideology of individualism akin to Ross' (1977) fundamental attribution error). In competitive games therefore, groups are treated equally and the best players win. But a pedagogical game may challenge the assumption of fairness directly by having structural inequality built into the game. The experience of a good player losing an unfair game creates cognitive dissonance—that cognitive dissonance is our teaching moment. I assume that students as game players can easily identify games that are "unfair" based on unequal outcomes for equivalent behavior. As a peda-

gogical tool, I want it to be relatively easy for them to spot the explicit rules which cause the inequality.

There are two main limitations to the use of pedagogical games in the classroom. First, as with any analog, the challenge of external validity is ever present. By definition, a simulation is a simplification of a complex phenomenon. If the essential nature of the phenomenon is lost in the simplification, then the results of the simulation cannot be usefully extended back to the outside world. We should be aware that the game world in which we play is created especially to illustrate a point—and therefore is biased by its nature. For example, the reality of race relations in the United States is much more complicated that any one-hour game. Second, games are not value free (Breznia, 1996). Those who make the rules also make assumptions about how the world works. Students who have strong views on a topic may show resistance to games that overtly contradict their positions. The games may have little teaching value if the students feel that their views are not acknowledged. Although this critique is important, one of the strengths of simulations is that it temporarily suspends previous experience. Students are exposed to new sets of values surreptitiously through the play of the game. After the game, students can openly decide to consider or ignore the new sets of values.

Issues in Teaching Race in the 21st Century

Our students are confident that they are already familiar with racism before they enter the classroom. Students from the Millennial Generation feel they have been raised in an environment of racial tolerance—from the observance of Black History Month to the election of the first black American President. They can easily identify discriminatory practices and have been sensitized to the inappropriateness of prejudicial attitudes. Although we have made significant progress in terms of race in the U.S. in the last few decades—our students often presume that we have successfully solved the problem completely. A small amount of progress is claimed as evidence of a victory. Their understanding of racism is often limited to a historical treatment of the traditional American racism of the Civil Rights Era. That is, their understanding is forty years old.

In fact, attitudes towards race and ethnicity have changed dramatically over the last forty years (Krysan, 2008). A new type of prejudice—colorblind racism (Sears & Henry, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006)—has stepped in to fill the void left by the decrease in direct institutional discrimination. This new type of racism is rarely detected by students because of its emphasis on individual behavior and its dismissal of structural forces. Part of the insidious nature of colorblind racism is that it invites students to ignorance: to ignore the past; to ignore the effect of race-based structures; to ignore plight of their fellow Americans. There is little incentive to revisit the battles of the past.

How do we teach something our students can't see? In addition to highlighting the characteristics of colorblind racism and the legacy of discrimination in our lectures and readings, I propose that we give our students a chance to "experience" these phenomena directly in a simulated environment. A deeper, experiential understanding of these concepts will help our students understand the arguments of race-specific and race-neutral policies;

the opinions on reparations; the lasting effects of discrimination; and the subtle characteristics of colorblind racism.

Unfortunately, the use of games as pedagogical tools is not common in classes covering race and ethnicity (for a recent exception, see Harlow, 2009). Games are much more common in courses or lectures which focus on economic inequality (Breznia, 1996; Dorn, 1989; Jessup, 2001; Waldner & Kinney, 1999). In such classes, the games are often used to challenge the assumptions of meritocracy and the ideology of individualism. Sociology courses which focus on race and ethnicity also must confront notions of meritocracy and individualism. There are, however, distinct historic and economic structures which have created and perpetuated racial barriers. One difficult challenge for teachers of race and ethnicity is to create games which confront meritocracy and individualism, but at the same time recreate the oppressive social structure which dominates race relations.

Example from the Classroom

I have employed an abbreviated version of *Monopoly* to highlight issues of race and ethnicity in eight different classes over the last four years. I have used the game in classes of over one hundred students and in classes as small as ten. Because *Monopoly* is limited in the number of players, and because as a pedagogical tool I am not that interested in the strategy or game play of the students, I randomly select a small group of students (3-5) to take the roles as players at the front of the room while the rest of the students watch. I use *Monopoly* as a familiar construct, a safe place where everyone knows the rules. Then, I change the rules.

Monopoly is based on the assumption of equality of opportunity. This is the first rule I will break in order to highlight theoretical concepts related to race. Since the rules of games are usually explicit, my structural inequality will be explicit as well.

To set the scene for the game, I put a slide of the familiar game board on the screen for visual reference. I arrange my panel of players in front of the class. I am a player as well. We all introduce ourselves to the class, and I take note of the name of the last student in line (for my example here, let us assume her name is “Lydia”).

To illustrate this teaching strategy, I use italicized text for the role of the professor below; comments are in normal text.

> *Is everyone familiar with the Monopoly rule “Pass Go, Collect $200”? Everyone circles the board; everyone passes ‘Go’; everyone gets $200. However, anyone who is named ‘Lydia’ does not get any money as they pass ‘Go’.*

And thus, I have handily created “name-based” discrimination through the concept of direct institutional racism (since this is explicitly stated as a rule). Then, we quickly begin the abbreviated game. I give a narrative to the class to speed things along:

> *I go around once; pass 'Go'; collect $200. Jenny goes around once; passes 'Go'; collects $200. Mark goes around once; passes 'Go'; collects $200. Lydia goes around once; passes 'Go'; but does not collect $200. Is everyone clear how this game works? Okay, now we are going to go around the board 349 times. How much money does each player have?*

This question takes a little time to answer. I do not give the answer, so students take out their phones and start trying to do the math. I wait until more than one student arrives at the correct answer of $0 for Lydia, $69,800 for everyone else. In my role as professor, I act shocked at the outcome. I announce it's time to adjust the rules for a more equitable game:

> *Okay, clearly this is not working out for everyone [Professor gives a scolding look at Lydia for creating this new problem]. So now we'll change the rule: everyone who passes 'Go' gets $200. The next turn is our 350th. On that turn Lydia will get $200. But so will all of the other players. How much money will each player have then?*

It usually takes a little less time to answer this math question. The class informs us that Lydia now has $200 and everyone else has $70,000.

> *There now Lydia, don't you feel better this time around? This time we have equality, right?*

Lydia is typically pretty upset at this point. She has been singled out, through no fault of her own, and is being forced to lose this game in front of everyone. All she wants is a chance. The preceding question gives her an opportunity to share her concerns and needs—she needs more money before she will feel equal in this game.

> *[Professor adopts more patronizing tone] Now wait a minute! We just changed the rules to accommodate you. We, as the other players, didn't have to do that. It doesn't even benefit us because now there is one more person to buy stuff on the board. We didn't have to do that, but we did. And now you want more money? Where does this money come from? Surely you don't want to take the hard earned money of the other players. Or is it that you want more money for each time you pass 'Go'? A law that says, "People named Lydia get $300 each time they pass 'Go'." We just gave you $200, now you want more?*

Of course, as the instructor, I am not too harsh here. I do not want to hurt my students to make a point. But cognitive dissonance is always uncomfortable. I offer a compromise:

> *Why don't you just hold on for a few years? Maybe 25 times around the board and you'll feel better. Students, how much money would each player have after 375 rotations?*

Once again I give the students time to do the math. Not surprisingly, Lydia does not feel equal with $5,000 compared with $75,000 for everyone else.

At this point I terminate our abbreviated game and debrief each of the student players. Their emotions and experiences about this game are much stronger than their experiences in my more normal lecture classes. There is much more nervous laughter and more lively discussion in these classes than in my classes without simulations.

Application of *Monopoly* to Race Studies

In the class discussion which follows the game, I refer back to the interaction between Lydia and myself. That interaction, while not carefully scripted, is filled with detailed questions to illuminate specific theoretical concepts. I am confident my more advanced students of race would recognize these concepts the first time through. But for students from various majors in an introductory-level sociology course, these concepts crystallize during the discussion.

First, I ask the students to tell me what type of discrimination was used to create the inequality between the Lydias and the rest of the players. After some discussion, we arrive at direct institutional racism—an explicitly divisive legal system that is supported by a multitude of individual majority actors. This is "old school" racism and the students easily identify it.

Colorblind racism on the other hand is more difficult for them to spot. After some discussion of the game, however, the classes discover that colorblind racism starts when direct racism is stopped and equality is declared prematurely. Some discussions have touched on the fact that the so-called equality is declared by the majority, not the minority. Then, other characteristics of colorblind racism are illuminated (Sears & Henry, 2003): the minority seems impatient with new rules; the minority seems stuck on past problems; the minority might get too much in an effort to equalize; and that the differences will just disappear if the majority ignores the past. Each of these characteristics is discussed at length with a new understanding of the positions on either side of the Lydia-divide. The important point for emphasis here is that, these are feelings and motivations of *the majority*. It is the winners who feel this way, not necessarily the losers.

This short game of *Monopoly* also highlights the legacy of discrimination as well. Why circle the board 349 times? Because the first slave arrived from Africa in 1619, but blacks and whites were not legally allowed to live in the same neighborhoods until 1968—around 349 years (Feagin & Feagin, 1990). But wait. What if our former Supreme Court Justice was right? That we would no longer be subject to the legacy of race after the passage of time; say 25 more years (Krueger, Rothstein & Turner, 2005). The absurdity of her opinion is apparent in the face of 375 iterations around the board; separate 350 times; equal 25 times.

Usually the students have a passing knowledge of reparations and affirmative action—two radical solutions which most students have never considered. But in the game, these

two solutions to the "Lydia problem" are not radical at all. A dry definition of "reparations" comes alive for most students when they realize that this solution was mentioned in our game when Lydia was so far behind in funds and the other players were so far ahead. Why not share? Another solution, affirmative action, was also mentioned in our short game when we discussed giving Lydia extra income from circling the board until she reaches parity in wealth. In the simulation, it seems like a reasonable, efficient way to fix a structural problem. It allows everyone to continue playing and ultimately equalizes the playing field. Why does this seem so radical outside the classroom?

Discussion

Classes on race and ethnic relations are an open field for the use of simulations and pedagogical games. The advantages include giving students an "experience" with discrimination; helps students connect abstract theory with concrete experience; and it gives students a shared set of experiences from which they can directly draw to make informed, ethical decisions regarding race.

Using a game allows for a not-so-delicate treatment of a normally taboo subject. Addressing the "Lydia problem" is much easier for students to talk about than directly talking about the race problem in America. Pedagogical games can challenge individualistic assumptions and demonstrate the lasting effects of discrimination in a direct, but non-threatening way. The temporary and artificial nature of games lets the students join in without fear of ostracism. Particularly for relatively privileged students from the Millennial Generation, this game highlights some of the structural components of racial discrimination which would otherwise be hidden from view.

Also, games can be used to highlight many sociological concepts at once. I usually have the game *after* I have introduced all of the concepts in a previous lecture. Even then, my best students will usually fail to spot one or more of the concepts I am covering during the game. This demonstrates the complicated nature of race issues—that even in a simplified environment, there are many things happening at the same time.

In conclusion, I have found the discussions in these classes to be much better informed and richer—and more likely to be connected to personal experience. Students continue to refer to the concepts highlighted in the game throughout the remaining weeks of the semester. I invite other teachers to incorporate this approach and other games into their teaching preparations.

I would encourage two future developments to extend this technique. First, to add to the number of concepts introduced using *Monopoly*. For example, we have not addressed racial gaps in prison, occupations, or education. Also, residential segregation is a topic uniquely geared toward the *Monopoly* board. A second development would be the application of aspects of other traditional games to race concepts; such as chess (see Schelling's 1971 classic simulation of the role of preferences in racial segregation using the chessboard and the moves of the pieces as an analog to residential mobility); or card games.

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