

SOCIOPOLY: LIFE ON THE BOARDWALK*

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IMAGINE YOURSELF SUPPORTING a family of four on \$16,530 a year. Sounds difficult, does it not? The reality is millions of people struggle at or below this level. The U.S. Census arbitrarily assigns \$16,530 as the poverty threshold for a family of four. In 1998, 34.5 million persons fell below the official poverty level, and although less than half the poor are African American and Latino, poverty rates for minorities are more than double compared to non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999a). Clearly, the lower the social class, the more difficult to secure appropriate housing and the greater the percentage of income for food and other basic necessities. Persons living at or below the poverty level are also at greater risk of crime victimization and have higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Hewlett and West 1998; Sider 1999). Moreover, the largest single block of poor people (43%) live in single-parent families with children.

Continued economic growth has led to a significant reduction in poverty. The poverty rate fell from 13.3 percent in 1997 to 12.7 percent in 1998. Likewise, between 1997 and 1998, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites dropped from 8.6 percent to 8.2 percent and the Hispanic poverty rate fell to 25.6 percent, down from 27.1 percent in 1997. The poverty rate for Blacks remained

unchanged at an all-time low of 26.1 percent. In addition, non-Hispanic white households had a significant increase in their median income and remains at an all-time high, \$42,400. Hispanic households had a 4.8 percent increase in median income between 1997 and 1998, rising to \$28,300. Income in African American households remains at record levels in 1998, \$25,400 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999b).

Although the U.S. economy is strong, the child poverty rate is high, particularly among young children in female-headed households. In 1998, 55 percent of related children under six lived in poverty in female-headed households (Jaffe and Bazie 1999; Greenstein and Jaffe 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999a). Among related Black children, 60 percent were poor, and among Hispanic children, 62 percent were poor.

Another disturbing trend is that income inequality continues expanding at record levels. The after-tax income gaps between those with the highest and lowest incomes have widened sharply since 1977 (Jaffe and Bazie 2000; Sharpe 1996). The average income of the richest 1 percent more than doubled (115%) between 1977 and 1999, when adjusted for inflation. The average income for middle-income households increased only 8 percent, and for those lower-income households, their average income remained about the same. Income disparities are now at their widest point on record, and incomes are climbing much faster for the richest 1 percent of the population (Forbes, May 17, p. 2; Jaffe and Bazie 2000; Shapiro and Greenstein 1999; Wright 1998). From 1989 to 1998, "income in the poorest fifth of households fail[ed] to increase despite the tremendous growth of the economy" (Jaffe and Bazie 1999:4). For many workers, particularly those in the bottom fifth, earnings

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have stalled and multiple job-holding is increasing, with more jobs offering limited or minimum wage income or insufficient opportunities for advancement (Jaffe and Bazie 2000; Shapiro and Greenstein 1999; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1996).

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Students in American colleges and universities, particularly incoming students, thinking about and discussing issues of social class, class privilege/oppression, and emerging economic trends. Bohmer and Briggs (1991: 154) observe:

It has been our experience that students from privileged class and race backgrounds are frequently hostile, or at best neutral, to presentations on race, class and gender stratification; often they respond with guilt, anger, or resistance.

Public discourse on issues of social class are frequently satirized, individualized, psychologized, or ignored altogether (Mantsios 1998). Hunt (1996), for example, reports that a lack of a proper work ethic, the lack of ability, and personality/character defects of the poor themselves are frequently perceived as the primary causes of poverty. Moreover, McCammon (1999) notes that many students have little awareness of stratification, accept numerous stereotypes about the disadvantaged, and find it difficult to go beyond individualist explanations of social inequality.

Whereas so many students enter colleges and universities believing that equality and fairness govern the economic system, they routinely underestimate the extent of racial and economic inequality. When teaching about social inequality, I want my students to gain enough sociological insight to recognize the structural explanations of inequality, have a greater awareness of the existence of poverty and homelessness, and acknowledge the economic realities of millions of Americans. So, the objectives of Sociopoly are to encourage our students to

think carefully, critically, analytically, and empathetically about social inequality, particularly social class and poverty, and to help them: (1) understand the structural constraints that govern economic choices; (2) recognize that economic failure is usually not linked to individual or character defects; and, (3) realize that social inequality is rooted in economic position, power, and the availability of resources.

LITERATURE ON TEACHING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Simulations are contests governed by rules that represent selected fragments of reality (Dorn 1989). Simulations are effective because they allow students the opportunity to interact with each other, process information immediately, and foster active participation in the learning process (Fowler and Mumford 1999). Simulations are also more effective than conventional teaching methods at emphasizing abstract concepts over factual information, engendering empathy, and serving as a reference for ongoing discussions regarding social inequality (Dorn 1989; Groves, Warren and Witschger 1996).

The sociological resources on creatively teaching inequality are diverse. Moran (1999) employs literature, particularly poetry, to convey sociological concepts and social inequality. For Corrado, Glasberg, Merenstein, and Peele (2000), students are divided into groups and assigned social roles based on race, class, and gender. These groups use Play Dough to construct objects of value, exploring the intersection of race, class, and gender, with work and production, the division of labor, power, and reward structures (see also Miller 1992). McCammon (1999) advances an active learning technique in which students create family budgets based on five income groups, then requires students to rework the national budget based on their group-constructed household budgets. Abrahamson (1994) uses playing cards to create metaphors to facilitate theoretical perspectives on stratification. Groves, Warren, and Witschger (1996) implement a networking simulation using

strings to demonstrate the distribution of resources, particularly information about jobs. In addition, Manning, Price, and Rich (1997) have students make detailed observations and reflective comparisons between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class shopping malls.

Similar to Sociopoly is *Starpower*¹, a simulation that reproduces social inequality by having players exchange resources of unequal value. The rules of the game favor the wealthy. Usually the upper-class use their wealth and advantage to enhance their own

position and power. Another simulation alternative is the board game *Anti-Monopoly*.² *Anti-Monopoly* begins where *Monopoly* ends. Players compete with each other to return the virtual economy to a competitive, free enterprise system. In a complex game of strategy, some players act like monopolists and others like competitors. Finally, Sociopoly provides sociologists an active, concrete, and relational simulation illustrating the discrete distributional nature of the social stratification system.

¹*Starpower*, developed by R. Garry Shirts, is available for purchase from Simulation Training Systems, P.O. Box 910, Del Mar, CA 92014.

²*Anti-Monopoly* is available for purchase (\$24.99) from Anti-Monopoly, INC., 202 Encina Avenue, Redwood City, CA 94061.

SOCIOPOLY: RESOURCES AND PROCEDURES

Playing Time: Approximately 90 minutes.

This simulation requires a *Monopoly* game, with at least four teams per game, which may be made up of one or more people.³ Although many students know how to play *Monopoly*, spending a few minutes at the beginning of the game to go over the new rules is required.

RULES OF SOCIOPOLY

- 1. Team Selection:** To begin, each team will roll the dice to determine their team number. The highest roll becomes Team 1, second highest, Team 2, third highest, Team 3, and fourth highest, Team 4.
- 2. Money Allocation and Passing GO:** The money is distributed in the following manner:⁴

Table 1. Distribution of Resources

Money Allocation	\$500	\$100	\$50	\$20	\$10	\$5	\$1	Pass GO
Team 1 Total = \$1,500	2	2	2	6	5	5	5	\$200 and two houses
Team 2 Total = \$1,030	1	3	3	3	1	2	0	\$150 and one house
Team 3 Total = \$960	1	2	3	4	2	2	0	\$125 and one free house
Team 4 Total = \$505	0	3	2	4	2	1	0	\$100

3. **Property:** Once a property has been purchased, the owner may buy houses or hotels for that property anytime. Owning all three properties of the same color to purchase houses or hotels is not necessary. The value of railroads and utilities does not change.
4. **Free Parking:** At the start of the game, the bank will place \$1,000 in Free Parking. In addition, all fees, penalties and fines incurred throughout the game (i.e., Community Chest and Chance cards and Jail fines) should be paid into Free Parking. Players can win the money on Free Parking if they land on that space, but only if their team chose at the beginning of the game to pay a \$20 parking fee each time they passed Go. If a team chose not to pay this \$20 parking fee each time they passed Go, they are not eligible to win the money on the Free Parking space when they land on that space. If a team chose to pay the \$20 parking fee each time they passed Go, but found that they were not able to pay the \$20 fee at some point, they would no longer be eligible to win the money if they land on Free Parking.⁵
5. **Jail:** If Team 1 rolls and lands in jail, they must pay \$200.00 to Free Parking, and may continue playing. Upon leaving jail, they may advance to their nearest owned property. If Team 1 receives a *Go to Jail* card, they pay \$200.00 to Free Parking, and roll again. If Team 2 goes to jail, they may get out by waiting three turns, throwing doubles on any of their next three turns, or pay a fine of \$50.00. If Teams 3 or 4 roll doubles, they must go directly to jail. To get out of jail, they must wait three turns, or pay \$100.00.⁶
6. **Bankruptcy:** A team that goes bankrupt must stand in the corner until the game is over. (During this time, the bankrupt team should come up with a new set of rules to make the game more equitable.)
7. **Record Keeping:** Each team must keep a record of assets and liabilities (income and expenses) and the number of times around the board.
8. **Rewrite Rules:** At the conclusion of Sociopoly, all teams must rewrite and negotiate the rules of the game to make it more fair and equitable.

DISCUSSION

In the game of Sociopoly, not everyone begins with the same resources which ultimately affects the game's outcome. How much money each team receives is not arbitrary, but proportionate to the median income for whites, Hispanics, African Americans, and female-householders with no husband present.

³For greater access, many residence halls have multiple copies of *Monopoly*. *Monopoly* is also available for purchase at most discount stores for approximately \$10.00. An effective variation to reduce the number of Monopoly games required could be adopted. Divide the students into teams with four players and place the board in the middle of the room. Each team has a recorder, property caretaker, banker, and runner (person who rolls the dice and moves the playing piece). This division of labor enables everyone to be responsible for something on each team and fosters decision-making and team work skills.

⁴To save time, I have the money counted and ready to disburse in advance, so the game can begin immediately.

⁵Free Parking is designed to control for varying degrees of social mobility, illustrate the role of luck/chance, and can also be used to explain regressive taxation (all teams pay the same amount of money regardless of resource inequity). Generally, the greater the amount of money in Free Parking, the greater the motivation for Teams 3 and 4 to participate in the game and contribute to Free Parking.

⁶This section is designed to illustrate the economic and class bias of the criminal justice system. Generally, Teams 3 and 4 spend considerably more time in jail.

Table 2. Teams and Income Distribution

Team	Median Income	Distribution
Team 1 \$1,500.00	\$42,400	Median income for non-Hispanic Whites
Team 2 \$1,030	\$28,300	Median income for Hispanics
Team 3 \$960	\$25,400	Median income for Afro-Americans
Team 4 \$505	\$23,040	Median income for female-householders, no husband present
U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999a		

The discussion begins by asking the following questions based on two levels of analysis. The general level questions are more effective when introducing a class to the subject of social inequality. The advanced level of questions can be used for students who have already been introduced to the major issues and theories of social inequality.

General Level Questions

1. Which team won this game of Sociopoly? Why? What factors predicted their success?
2. Which team went bankrupt? If a team went bankrupt, how long did it take?
3. Was everyone equally motivated to play? Why or why not?
4. Was everyone equally motivated to win? Why or why not?
5. Did those who lost lose because they were less skilled and motivated? (Notice that both luck and skill are still involved, but given the differing sets of resources and assets that each team begins with, they are much less significant in predicting the game's final outcome.)
6. Describe the criminal justice system ("Go to Jail"). Was it fair? Why or why not?
7. What does Free Parking symbolize?
8. Did the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Why or why not?
9. Why do so many groups agree to play

by the rules even when the rules are unfair or biased against groups of people?

10. Each team was to rewrite the rules of the game. Discuss with the class the new rules. Did the new rules reflect each team's economic position? Why?
11. How well does this simulation reflect economic reality?

Advanced Level Questions

1. How does this simulation contribute to your understanding of sociological theories of social inequality?
2. Is the system of social class experienced in Sociopoly based more on the theories of Karl Marx or Max Weber? How would Marx and Weber defend Sociopoly? How would they critique Sociopoly? Explain your answer.
3. According to Sociopoly, what is power?
4. What factors would contribute to higher levels of upward social mobility? Why?
5. When the team rewrote and negotiated the rules of the game, what strategies were followed (i.e., capitalist or cooperative models)?

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SIMULATION

I began using this simulation in 1994 at a medium-sized lower-middle-class state university, and later at a small, private liberal arts college, both in the Midwest. It was

tested in several courses, including social problems, introduction to sociology, ethnic and minority issues, marriage and the family, and classical sociological theory. The nursing department at a small private liberal arts college in the east has also tested Sociopoly. Most of the students who participated in the simulation were white, female, and either sophomores or juniors. At the conclusion of the simulation I asked the students open-ended questions about what they liked about the simulation, its limitations, and ended with a student-led discussion on how they could improve the simulation (n=156). The students also had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in writing to assess the utility of Sociopoly. The students' written comments were anonymous, reducing the chances of socially desirable answers.

Students' responses to the simulation were eventually coded into four basic categories: surprised (62%), angered (14%), liberated (13%), and frustrated (9%). First, in a society that downplays the significance of the larger social structure, many students were simply surprised by the pervasive influence of the economic and social structure. As one student stated; "Wow, I had never really thought about it." Another surprised student commented; "I just thought people who were poor were just...losers, but now I'm not so sure." Second, some students were angered at the injustice and inequity of the economic system; "It's simply not fair that some groups just don't get an equal start." "I don't like this game because it shows me how unfair the system is." Third, some students felt liberated, particularly first-generation college students; "I'm the first in my family to go to college, and now I know why it took so long." Similarly, another student wrote: "I find in this game some sense of release—it's not me, but other things outside of me which kept holding me down." A fourth group of students were frustrated; "I was frustrated because no matter how hard I tried, I knew I probably couldn't win." A few students, moreover, were also frustrated with the simulation (not

to mention the professor) for unfairly representing and challenging the sacredness of the capitalistic system. Included in the frustrated group were the negative responses, indicating those students who were cynical or simply unimpressed with the simulation. Despite the students' affective response to Sociopoly, most of them referred positively to the clarity with which the simulation illustrated social processes, and appreciated the opportunity for active learning. Numerous students' comments were also used to enhance the usefulness of this simulation. For example, it was the suggestion of students that free houses be distributed to the teams after passing GO to more clearly differentiate the teams and encourage students to play more competitively. It was also the students' suggestion to rewrite and negotiate the rules of Sociopoly to make it more fair and equitable.

CONCLUSION

Students who participated in Sociopoly responded positively to the simulation, learned about the structural nature of social inequality, empathized with each other and diverse social and economic groups, and experienced sociological concepts in action. It also allowed the students to actively engage in the learning process. A nursing professor from a private eastern college who helped test Sociopoly wrote; "My class of 16 played Sociopoly, and it was a rousing success. Real issues clearly come to the fore around a *Monopoly* turned Sociopoly game. It was a great wrap up at the end of a long semester of us wrestling with issues of poverty. It [Sociopoly] made it real in ways no other classroom exercise has done."

Sociopoly, however, has some limitations. There are often logistical problems—finding enough *Monopoly* games, and using a classroom where chairs and desks are mobile and amenable to face-to-face interactions. In addition, the simulation does not elaborate the ongoing theoretical debates regarding social inequality. Sociopoly, for example, does not explain continuous class models well, and

portrays the economic system as purely distributional in character. Sociopoly, however, is particularly useful as an experiential anchor for the elaboration of the conceptual tools and frameworks of social inequality.

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