

STARPOWER: EXPERIENCING A STRATIFIED SOCIETY

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A similar version of this activity appears in the Teachers Guides associated with the American Anthropological Association RACE project, at <https://understandingrace.org/>

Conceptual background material for the activity is found in Part II. Culture Creates Race, especially Chapter 7, in *How Real is Race? Unraveling Race, Biology, and Culture*, 3rd ed. , Mukhopadhyay, Henze and Moses.2026. Rowman & Littlefield.

Years ago, the late Dr. Richard Stone 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 in the game for it to work properly. I went and was introduced to “Starpower,” a totally engaging activity that I subsequently modified and 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” (called “Squares,” “Triangles,” and “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 throughout the game. To preserve the mobility premise, an occasional lower status person receives enough trading chips to allow a group change. 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 that 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 A version of this activity appears in the Teacher’s Guides associated with the American Anthropological Association public education project, RACE: Are We So Different (www.understandingrace.org).

Student's 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, and often give 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, gender, or other visible social identity markers 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 will offer you 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 Players; Room and Material Requirements

This is a complex game to set up and carry out, but well worth the effort. I have used it in introductory cultural anthropology classes, but it would be perfect in upper division economic and political anthropology classes that emphasize wealth and power or any class that addresses stratification and systems of inequality. The game requires at least two hours or about 45 to 60 minutes for the "trading sessions" and at least an hour for the discussion and analysis. It can be used effectively in either one long class or in two separate class sessions in the same week. The game works best with from 25 to 35 participants, although it can handle a range from 18 to 45. If you reduce the "strata" to two groups, you 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.

Procedures

The description that follows is my “bare-bone” 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 a particular class, sometimes manipulating the class in a certain direction. Regardless, participants’ reactions 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!

Materials You Will Need

- Trading Chips (or pieces of paper) of different colors representing 5 different point values (10, 5, 4, 2, 1), e.g., gold, green, blue, pink, and white.
- Bonus Trading Chips that are worth 5 points each. At the end of each trading round, give each group 3 of these chips to distribute to 1 to 3 members of their group. The group unanimously decides who receives each chip. If they can’t decide, they forfeit the chips.
- Envelopes containing the 5 chips that each participant receives at the beginning of each trading session. Make enough envelopes for at least 3 rounds. Contents of the envelopes depend on one’s “social group.” Discretely mark envelopes but also keep each group’s envelope in a separate pile.
- “Square’s” envelopes: 1 gold, 1 green, 3 other chips.
“Circle’s” envelopes: 0 gold, 1 green, 4 other chips.
“Triangle’s” 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, 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! This is a key point.
- 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).

Game Rules

In addition to the above materials, you can either create handouts or posters for game rules, or simply write them on the board:

- Scoring Chart that lists the values for each chip color and shows 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.
 - Talk only while trading; this applies **even** to the director or police.
 - Once you initiate a trade, you must trade before going on to another trade.
 - 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 levied as in deducting points.

- **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 are forfeited after 4 minutes of play.
- **Scoring Card For Each Group** or create three separate sections on the board, one 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 “wear” (squares, triangles, circles). You can tell them they are distinct ethnic, religious, or geographical or any other type of communities.

(2) **Introduce Purpose of Activity.** Tell students the game is designed to illustrate how “exchange” works in small-scale societies. They will engage in several trading sessions. At each session, they will receive a packet of 5 chips of different values, randomly selected. Their goal is to devise a clever trading strategy for amassing as many points as possible. They accumulate points from each session. After several trading rounds, scores will be totaled. Those with the most points “win” the game. You may tell them to draw upon their knowledge from the course. I sometimes say the activity is a “test” of previous course material and “Grades” will be based on student point totals at the end of the game. This makes it more “serious,” but it can also create tension.

(3) **Explain Trading Sessions and Trading Rules** (see above).

(4) **Begin Trading Session.** Distribute envelopes to each group (remind 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 10 minutes, tell them the trading session is closed and they should return to their seats.

(5) **Calculate and Record Scores on Board or Chart.** Students individually calculate their scores and write it in the appropriate space for their group (use only 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 which members will receive the chips. This can be 1, 2, or 3 people. Add points to these students’ scores. If the group can’t decide (3 to 5 minutes), take the chips back.

(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 “Triangles,” and the remainder are “Circles.” This is an opportunity to reiterate the meritocracy rhetoric. You will have to decide the cut-off scores. Physically shift

individuals between groups and in the group membership list on the tally board, as appropriate. Have switchers trade old symbols for new appropriate ones.

(8) **Begin Trading Session 2.** Use the same procedures as above, including a few “mobility” envelopes. At the end of the trading session, total the scores for both rounds 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.”** After trading session 2 or 3, use meritocracy rhetoric to justify giving rule-making powers to “Squares,” i.e., their scores show they’ve mastered 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, only “Squares” make 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. Monitor closely to make sure it doesn’t get out of hand. If playing the game in two sessions, waiting until the second session to have “Squares” change the rules may 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.** But always monitor students and situation so it remains a positive learning experience. What happens next, especially responses of “Triangles” and “Circles” depends on what kinds of rules “Squares” made as well as the class itself. “Squares” often 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 “Squares.” If the new rules are harsh, tensions increase and both “Squares” and lower status 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 social justice oriented “Squares” 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 social scientists know about human behavior and responses in situations of stratification. You will have to experience it yourself!

(13) **Stop the Game and Begin the Discussion.** At whatever point you stop the game, students must process how they are feeling **before** beginning the more abstract discussion. You may have them write down their reactions and reflections immediately or after class. But, it is important to move beyond feelings. One way is to ask students to describe strategies they employed in the game, then place 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 student experiences and the more abstract ideas and processes involved.

(14) **Summarize What Has Been Learned.** At the end of the discussion or at the next class, give students a more formal summary of key features of stratified societies (See Appendix A handout). Connect, once again, with the Starpower simulation experience.

Reference

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

APPENDIX A: STUDENT HANDOUT

STARPOWER: KEY POINTS OF THE GAME

1. **Illustrates general features of stratified resources and labor**
 - Unequal distribution of and access to key resources and labor.
 - If groups begin 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 toward members of one's group, and in one's attitudes toward other groups.
 - Status Differentiation. From inferior to superior marked by distinct "cultural" symbols or markers of one's status.
 - Rights, duties, opportunities, and interactions depend 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). Does it differ at the beginning of the game? Later on?
 - Formal Political Organization
 - Emergence of "State:" "Squares" supported by the "police" or "military."
 - Unequal participation in decision-making by lower status groups.
 - Ideology: variety of belief systems exist that justify (legitimize) stratification.
 - Meritocracy: focuses on achievement and hence implies it is a "just" system. One gets rewarded based on one's capacities and hard work (e.g., Horatio Alger).
 - Some mobility: those "moving up" demonstrate the system is "fair," "merit based."
 - 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 is "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 Position**
 - 2.1 Lower Class Strategies:
 - Individualistic: break rules, apathy, resentment, cheating, anger, depression, withdrawal, develop alternative things to do in class
 - Collective protest, non-cooperation, strike, ostracize upper groups.
 - 2.2 Middle Class Strategy: inaction, don't take sides, try to preserve one's chips.
 - 2.3 Upper Class Strategy: alternative strategies depending on values and goals. All emphasize group unity, however.
 - Preserve power through paternalism, authoritarian rules, "law and order," manipulate and alter rules when threatened. Each strategy produces different reactions in other groups. Reiterate legitimizing ideologies: emphasize "fairness," "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 group.
- 2.5 Attitudes toward “game” or system: who enjoys the “game?” Who wants 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? Feel betrayed? How did old timers 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. **Maintaining Inequality: Informal and Formal social Control Mechanisms**

- 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 other groups. Cultivate “good intentions” and concern for “common good,” use “family” metaphors (the “mother” or “father” of the people.)
- Divine sanction also legitimizes authority (e.g. the instructor becomes “God” who ordains the “Squares.”)
- 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.
- Constantly reinforce “just” ideology: system is just, fair, natural, or supernaturally sanctioned.
- 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**

- 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?
- Complexities of restructuring the system: will simply making trading rules “fair” help? Is “affirmative action” enough? Does solution require equalizing wealth? At every round? Will some inequality remain?