Project Name: The development and assessment of an activity designed to teach about structural inequality

Date: April 23, 2015

Submitted by: Kosha Bramesfeld

Year of Funding: 2014-2015

Project Abstract (max 200 words)
Your abstract of your findings should include enough detail so that rationale, methodology and outcomes are clear. Use plain language as this abstract will be posted on the LTO website.

The Game of Social Life is an experiential, role-playing activity designed to teach students about structural inequality, privilege, oppression, and intersections of social class, race/ethnicity, nationality of origin, citizenship status, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. The game focuses on the consequences of inequality in relation to poverty, educational achievement, and health outcomes. The purpose of the funded project was to assess The Game of Social Life across three pilot studies. The first study involved the qualitative analysis of the reflection papers of 25 students after they played the game. A second pilot study examined the use of the game amongst 16 staff members of a non-profit agency. A third pilot study involved the quantitative analysis of 55 content-coded student surveys collected before and after students played the game. Across all three pilot studies, participants found the game to be engaging, realistic, and effective. Analyses also revealed that after playing the game, participants reflected on issues of structural inequality, on the role of privilege and oppression in their own lives, and on possible solutions to social problems.

Summary of Work Accomplished (max 1500 words)
Describe the study rationale (including supportive literature), project methodology, outcomes and potential application of outcomes.

Introduction and Literature Review
Students need the opportunity to engage in difficult dialogues about privilege and oppression in order to unlearn attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors that contribute to social inequality (Watt, 2007). Privilege occurs when individuals receive special advantages or rights based solely on their membership in a dominant group based on “race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, [socioeconomic status], age, differing degrees of ableness, and
religious affiliation.” (Black and Stone, 2013, p. 245). Privilege contributes to systems of oppression when those in positions of power deny their own privilege, adopt a sense of entitlement over others, or exert their power “unchecked and unchallenged” (Black & Stone, 2013, p. 244). Denial of one’s own privilege does not always stem from bigotry or feelings of prejudice. Instead, privileged individuals may not “have the social comparison information to recognize the discrimination they do not experience, the poverty they don’t experience, and the prejudice they do not experience” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 31; see also McIntosh, 2012).

Simulation activities may offer this “social comparison information”, as they allow participants the opportunity to experience aspects of a phenomenon in a neutral environment, prior to examining underlying explanations (Dorn, 1989; Kolb, 1984). Simulation activities have been shown reduce prejudice, promote perspective taking, and increase self-reflection (Beelman and Heinemann, 2014; Dorn, 1989; Kolb, 1984; Patrick and Connolly, 2013). Still, as noted by Brezina (1996) and others (Dorn, 1989; Coghlan & Huggins, 2004) many of the existing simulation activities focused on inequality are too simplistic to be effective, as they often downplay the role of personal agency (Brezina, 1996) or fail to capture the intersection of multiple forms of privilege (Collins, 1990; Samuels, Ferber, & O’Reilly, 2003). Existing activities that do focus on intersections of privilege are often quite complex (e.g., Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010) or time consuming (e.g., Simpson & Elias, 2011).

The goal of the current project was to assess a simulation activity that I created. This activity, called The Game of Social Life, was designed to be complex enough to capture multiple dimensions of privilege and oppression, but simple enough that it could be completed in approximately three hours of class or workshop time.

**The Game of Social Life**

Materials for a board game version of The Game of Social Life have been published with the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology (TRAILS; Bramesfeld, 2015a). Materials for a PowerPoint strategy game version of the activity (which can be used in larger group settings) has been published with the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP; Bramesfeld, 2015b). Links to these resource materials appear in the reference list.

In the most recent version of the game, students pick at random a unique character profile and then use that character’s resources to play a strategy game. The profile describes
the character’s race/ethnicity, nationality of origin, citizenship, voting status, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. The character’s socioeconomic status is represented by the starting amount of money credits. Each character also receives zero to seven bonus credits. These bonus credits represented the privileges, extra favors, resources, and collective knowledge granted to some groups of people, but not to others (Black & Stone, 2013). Characters with more privileged identities (e.g., White, male, heterosexual, no disability, citizen, capable of voting, and a socioeconomic status of wealth or middle class) receive the most bonus credits.

Players then make decisions during a strategy game that results in the gain (or loss) of money, bonuses, experience, and wellness for their character. Each decision in the game carries with it consequences that affect other aspects of the game. For example, early in the game students choose housing from different neighborhoods. The choice of neighborhood affects wellness and school choice. School choice then affects educational opportunities, which later affects access to employment opportunities, which also affects access to quality health care. Likewise, each of the other decisions require players to make a trade-off between money, bonuses, experience, and wellness. The range of decision options and severity of the consequences are also impacted by the characters membership in privileged or marginalized social groups (based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status).

The trade-offs in the game, and their interaction with the character’s demographic characteristics, are meant to highlight the complex, and often subtle, ways that systems of privilege serve to maintain systems of oppression (Black & Stone, 2013; McIntosh, 2012). They are also meant to highlight the cumulative effects of oppression on financial stability, wellness, and achievement (Cohen & Syme, 2013; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Prilleltensky, 2008; Van Laar & Sidanius, 2001). Consistent with principles of intersectionality (Robinson, 1999), consequences within the game had compounding positive effects for characters with multiple privileged identities and compounding negative effects for characters with multiple oppressed identities. The game is used to generate an active discussion amongst participants about systems of privilege and oppression, social determinants of success and well-being, and intersecting identities.

**Assessment Methodology and Outcomes**

The grant from the Teaching about Diversity Fund was used to hire a graduate research assistant (Arla Good) who helped me to oversee a team of undergraduate research
volunteers in the spring and summer of 2014. During that time, our research team analyzed the data from three pilot studies (all three studies had received Research Ethics Board approval prior to the collection of data). The first study involved the qualitative analysis of the de-identified reflection papers of 25 social science students from mostly privileged backgrounds enrolled at a private university in the Midwestern United States. Students wrote reflection papers after they played a board game version of the activity. Our team qualitatively analyzed the reflections by identifying illustrative text related to four themes: (1) evidence of student engagement and perspective taking, (2) reflection on inequality and explanations for poverty, (3) self-reflection about privilege and oppression, and (4) reflection on solutions to the problems. This thematic analysis of the essays revealed that 76% of the student found the game engaging, 80% noted that the game was realistic, 88% mentioned that the game helped them to adopt a new perspective, 44% reflected on structural factors that contribute to inequality, 48% reflected on their own lives/privilege, and 60% considered solutions to social inequality.

A second pilot study examined the use of the board game version of the activity as a training exercise for 16 staff members of a non-profit agency located in Toronto, which provides services to individuals with intellectual disabilities. After the workshop, the staff members completed a short assessment survey. Quantitative analysis of survey ratings revealed that the staff members perceived the board game to be engaging, realistic, effective, worth the time, worthy of recommendation and successful in getting people to reflect on themselves and others. In their written comments, staff members also described the game as, “excellent”, “highly effective”, “well done”, “interesting”, “thought provoking”, and a “good exercise to change and expand thinking patterns”.

A third pilot study involved the analysis of 55 surveys of study volunteers collected before and after students played The Game of Social Life as part of two Winter 2014 Ryerson University courses: PSY 124 Social Psychology and PSY 808 Community Psychology. The research volunteers from these two courses represented a wide range of diverse backgrounds. Nine outcome measures were assessed at pretest and again at posttest using rating scale items and three open ended questions. For each of the open ended responses, two undergraduate research assistants independently content coded the responses (the independent ratings established acceptable interrater reliability of the codes).

Quantitative analyses of student ratings revealed that the participants found the task to be engaging, effective, and realistic. Pretest-posttest comparisons of the data also
revealed that after playing the game, as compared to before, students were significantly more likely to acknowledge their own categories of privilege and oppression, less likely to report being disadvantaged relative to others, less likely to attribute personal successes entirely to their own actions, more likely to acknowledge structural causes for social problems. Participants’ own demographic characteristics did not moderate the effects, suggesting that the game was effective in generating reflection amongst privileged and non-privileged students.

**Discussion and Potential Applications**

The utility of *The Game of Social Life* was assessed across three pilot studies using three very different samples. Across all three pilot studies, participants found the game to be engaging, realistic, and effective. Analysis of students written and rating scale responses revealed that the game also appeared to be effective at generating reflection about structural inequality, privilege, and oppression. These results suggest that the game may have utility for use in a variety of contexts and amongst a diverse range of participants. As such, *The Game of Social Life* appears to be an important addition to the growing collection of activities that engage students in discussions of privilege and oppression. So far, the results of these assessments have been published in *Teaching Sociology*, presented at the 2015 National Multicultural Conference and Summit in Atlanta, GA, and will be presented at Ryerson University’s 2015 Faculty Conference.

**Evaluation of Project’s Success (max 600 words)**

*Explain how you know that the project was successful (Include evidence of rigorous evaluation.)*

Results from Study 1 and Study 3 were abstract-reviewed and presented as a poster presentation in January 2015 at the National Multicultural Conference and Summit in Atlanta, GA (Bramesfeld & Good, 2015a). More recently, the results of Study 1 and Study 2 have been published in *Teaching Sociology* after undergoing extensive double-blind peer review (see Bramesfeld & Good, 2015b). A summary of the results from the three studies will also be presented at Ryerson University’s 2015 Faculty Conference (Bramesfeld & Good, 2015c). Below, I highlight the key findings from each of these studies.

**Study 1**

Study 1 involved the qualitative analysis of reflection papers from 25 social science students from mostly privileged backgrounds enrolled at a private university in the Midwestern United States. Reflection essays were qualitatively analyzed by myself and my
co-author, Arla Good, to ensure consistency in the themes that emerged. These analyses revealed that 76% of the student found the game engaging, 80% noted that the game was realistic, 88% mentioned that the game helped them to adopt a new perspective, 44% reflected on structural factors that contribute to inequality, 48% reflected on their own lives/privilege, and 60% considered solutions to social inequality.

- “An utterly fascinating experiment that evoked significant emotional response from participants as well as stimulated reflection on real life circumstances.”
- “This game was able to let me step into their shoes and understand how these individuals feel on a day-to-day basis”.
- “What's important is that I acknowledge the tremendous advantage that I have, and that I make efforts toward giving back, toward reducing the imbalanced distribution of wealth and educational resources, toward leveling the playing field for all.”

**Study 2: Non-Profit Staff Members**

Study 2 involved the analysis of a short assessment survey completed by 16 staff members from a non-profit agency. On a rating scale of 1 (not at all) to 6 (very), the board game was perceived by the staff members as engaging (M = 5.50), realistic (M = 5.12), effective (M = 5.19), worth the time (M = 5.44), worthy of recommendation (M = 5.56) and successful in getting people to reflect on themselves (M = 4.19) and others (M = 5.31). Staff members also described the game as, “excellent”, “highly effective”, “well done”, “interesting”, “thought provoking”, and a “good exercise to change and expand thinking patterns”.

**Study 3: Ryerson University Students**

Study 3 involved the analysis of pretest/posttest surveys collected from 55 student volunteers enrolled in one of two courses (PSY 124 or PSY 808) at Ryerson University. At least two research assistants content coded each students’ responses from three open ended questions (interrater reliability, Kappas > .72). Five other outcome variables were measured using rating scale items. The analysis of the three content coded responses revealed that after playing the game, as compared to before, students were more likely to acknowledge their own categories of privilege (Ms = 1.49 vs. 10.9, p < .001) and oppression (Ms = 1.04 vs. 0.80, p = .004). And, were more likely to focus on structural factors when discussing the causes of social problems (65% of students at posttest, as compared to 45% of students at
pretest, \( p = .002 \)). On a rating scale of 1 \((\text{disagree})\) to 6 \((\text{agree})\), students were also less likely to report being disadvantaged relative to others \((M_s = 3.47 \text{ vs. } 3.78, p = .025)\), less likely to attribute personal successes entirely to one’s own actions \((M_s = 4.81 \text{ vs. } 5.30, p < .001)\), and more likely to make external attributions for social problems \((M_s = 5.13 \text{ vs. } 4.86, p = .031)\).

**Transferables (max 500 words)**

List and describe knowledge gained in this project and how that knowledge could benefit faculty members in the Ryerson community

To truly understand issues of diversity and oppression, people need the opportunity to discuss and acknowledge unearned privileges. Unfortunately, educators are often at a loss as to how to start these conversations. *The Game of Social Life* is designed to provide educators with a tool that they can use to start these difficult dialogues. The current project facilitates this process by providing evidence from three pilot studies that help to establish the utility of the activity in different contexts. Already, the response from other faculty and facilitators regarding *The Game of Social Life* has been positive:

- “Dr. Bramsfield's game was an excellent exercise for my class that brought out the real implications of privilege and opportunity using experiential education. My 200 person class was riveted for the entire 3 hours. I will definitely ask her back again, and enjoyed the experience immensely.” – Dr. Laurie Petrou, Media Studies, Ryerson University.

- “Kosha's game provided our staff with an intimate experience of role playing characters in various levels of social class, race, gender and disability… I was quite amazed at how people really identified with their character and the passion that came out in developing that understanding of intersections of class, race gender. I do look forward to more work from Kosha and hope we get to see the game continue to grow. I know I would love to bring it back to larger groups of staff in my work setting.” – Community Support Coordinator, Community Living Toronto.

- “Wow! What a fabulous resource. It clearly took a lot of time to develop… I think this exercise would do a really good job of helping students understand how all of the profile characteristics influence people’s lives, and what many people perceive as a choice may not be a choice for others. Often times we must rely on token members of a group speaking up and sharing experiences, which can be difficult and marginalizing for that person. This game provides an opportunity for students to learn about this content without putting anyone on the spot.” – OTRP reviewer.

- “I can't tell you how much I enjoyed meeting you and discussing your poster at the conference this week! Of course I did not get the chance to look at them all, but I'm so glad yours caught my eye. Your work on a new way to teach the concept of privilege is amazing. I hope that we'll be able to keep in touch and that I'll get to meet up with you
for an update on your work in August!” – Instructor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

• “I just wanted to let you know how much I like your game and I can’t wait to use it in my class. I teach a course on social justice as well as multiple policy analysis and advocacy classes. It’s a great idea - I just wanted you to know it’s getting wide reach.” – Faculty member, Graduate School of Social Services, Fordham, Bronx, NY.

Media or Publication (max 500 words)
List any media attention your project has received internally from Ryerson or externally. List any publications or conferences you have attended where data from this project was presented. Confirm that you acknowledged or will acknowledge the grant’s contribution to your work in media, publication or conference presentations.

Presentations and publications arising from grant supported activities, for which we have (or will) acknowledge the grant’s contribution to our work:


Bramesfeld, K. D. & Good, A. (2015, May). *It's all fun and games until the discussion turns serious: Using a game approach to engage individuals in difficult dialogues about privilege and oppression.* Concurrent session to be presented at Ryerson University’s Faculty Conference.


Other published resources related to the game (which were initiated prior to the grant), which supplement the grant supported activities:


## Financial Summary

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## References


Bramesfeld, K. D. & Good, A. (2015c, May). *It's all fun and games until the discussion turns serious: Using a game approach to engage individuals in difficult dialogues*
about privilege and oppression. Concurrent session to be presented at Ryerson University’s Faculty Conference.


