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Sociology

Cards, Cakes
and Class

**Adapted by
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Simulations

Economic and Social Inequality

The sim is designed to sensitise students to the degree of inequality that exists in the UK in terms of the distribution of economic resources (wealth). While this can be an aim in itself the sim can be used as the basis for the exploration of other forms of social inequality that may flow from economic inequality (in areas like education in this particular example).

Materials

Index cards, string, blu-tac (or equivalent) and a cake (a nice, big, tasty, cake).

If you are going to run this as an **education sim**:

  20 IQ Test questions (preferably a mix of linguistic, mathematical and spatial questions). Students will be given a time limit of 10 minutes (or, depending on the difficulty of the questions, whatever you decide) to complete the test. This is just a *suggested length*. You can find ready-made IQ questions and answers on the web (or download the accompanying IQ test book for inspiration).

  The textbook they normally use in class. Devise 5 questions, the answers to which they can find in their textbook. Allot 1 minute to each of these questions and make them relatively simple, but not too simple that they can guess the answers. The idea here is to make the students search for the answers in their textbook (for reasons that will be apparent in a moment).

Procedures

Once you know exactly how many students are in attendance you need to do a quick and simple calculation with the index cards (let's assume you have 20 students).

Divide the cards into three piles:

  the first pile has 10% of the cards, mark these clearly with a large letter "T" (for "Top")
  the second pile has 40% of the cards, mark these clearly with a large letter "M" (for Middle)
  the third pile has 50% of the cards, mark these clearly with a large letter "B" (for bottom)

The piles represent different socio-economic strata in the United Kingdom based (roughly) on the distribution of wealth:

  Top 10% = 50% of UK wealth
  Middle 40% = 40%
  Bottom 50% = 10%

In this example there would be:

  2 cards marked "T"
  8 cards marked "M"
  10 cards marked "B"

Once the students are settled tell them today's class is based on a short test.

Then tell the students to put on their desk everything they think they will need to complete the test (you can prompt them if you want - pen, paper, textbook – but it's better if they're left to guess). Everything else should be put away in their bag.

Distribute the "T" / "M" / "B" cards randomly throughout the class – it doesn't matter to you who gets which card (but it is going to matter to them…).

Once all the cards are distributed, briefly explain that the letters represent 3 social class groupings in the UK based on the ownership and control of wealth.

Get the students to gather in their T / M / B groups and then explain that the class is going to divide up **all** the resources in the room according to the ownership of UK wealth for each social class.

   The "10%" T group get 50% of everything
   The "40%" M group get 40% of everything
   The "50%" B group get 10% of everything.

These resources include things like floor space, desks and chairs as well as anything you use in the class (such as textbooks). *Everything* they have left on their desks should also be distributed according to the percentages (also see *Variations* below for an alternative approach).

Begin by dividing up the floor space, using the string / blu-tac to create a physically divided room. This task should be done by the "B" group, supervised by those in the "M" group.

While this is happening give the "T" group the IQ test paper so they can study the questions in advance of the test. This simulates the extra test preparation this group might receive in real life.

The only stipulation here is that the *largest* ("T"group) portion of the room must include the *doors* from which to exit and the smallest ("B" group) portion of the room should include the wastebaskets (since this group is going to be clearing-up at the end…).

Next divide things like tables and chairs using the same principle and place them in their respective spaces (e.g. if you have 10 tables, 5 should be placed in the "T" area, 4 in the "M" area and 1 in the "B" area. Divide the chairs in the same way). It's a good idea if your room normally has spare tables and chairs to make sure these are moved out of the room before the sim begins (because, not to put too fine a point on things, you want to make things as uncomfortable and difficult as possible for the "B" group).

The students should place their bags in the "T" space. You can either apportion these in the same way (the "B" group get to keep two of their group's bags, for example) or tell the class that these are now under the control of the "T" group and if a student needs anything from their bag they will have to ask the "T" group's permission (this is where the "C" (Charity) cards come into play – *see below*).

Once everything has been divided tell the students to go to their respective spaces.

Once in these spaces **the "B" and "M" groups cannot leave them** for the duration of the lesson. They must remain in their allotted spaces (with one exception - *see below*)

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Charity cards

On a further set of index cards write the letter "C" (for Charity, Compassion or whatever you decide). If you have 20 students these cards will be distributed as follows:

"B" group gets 1 card between 2 students (i.e. if there are 10 students in this group they get 5 cards between them)
"M" group gets 2 cards per student
"T" group doesn't need charity…

The idea behind the Charity cards is that the "B" and "M" students can "play" them at any time during the sim, for whatever reason you decide. For example:

If a student in the "B" or "M" group needs to leave the room to go to the toilet they can't enter the "T" space to get to the exit door unless they play a "C" card (which, once played cannot be played again).

A "C" card can be exchanged for a resource (such as a pen, chair or a textbook), but only if the "M" or "T" group allow the exchange (and you can remind the "M" and "T" groups that since they will all be shortly taking a vital test that could decide their futures, it might not be in their best interests to allow other competing groups the resources they need).

You might want to display the "Charity" rules at the front of the class in some way as a reminder to the students.

Test

Give one copy of the test to each student and explain the rules (time limit etc.). You can make the test as easy / difficult as you like, depending on the type of class you're running. As a rule try not to make it so hard that those in the "T" group find it too difficult - one objective of the sim is to show how material deprivation can impact on achievement.

Explain that you will be available to each group / student to give them "personal coaching" during the test. In exchange for one "C" card you will tell an individual in the:

"B" group the correct answer to 1 question.

"M" group the correct answer to 2 questions.

With the "T" group you can *either* say that because money is no object to members of this group you will be available to give them *as much personal coaching* (i.e. tell them the correct answer to any of the questions) as they want. However, if you're going to include ideas about meritocracy here it might be better to give them a level of help that ensures they do well in the test without actually providing answers to every question.

If you are coaching a "B" or "M" individual and a "T" individual wants your help you must immediately go to them.

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The students should all do the test "under the same conditions" because success or failure will depend on their own individual abilities (you can give them whatever motivational justification you want here).

When the test is over get students to mark each other's test.

Based on their scores you can put them in rank order. If you've played your role as personal coach well:

the "T" group should come top (they're going to a top university)
the "M" group should come next (they're going to a lower-level university).
the "B" group will mainly fail (who cares where they're going?)

If anyone in the "T" group isn't at the top of the list tell them that with some intensive personal tuition (and perhaps a generous donation by their parents to a top university) they will be alright.

If anyone in the "M" group fails, tell them we live in a meritocracy and they should have worked harder…

If anyone in the "B" group scores near the top congratulate them and say this confirms we live in a meritocracy…

Cutting the Cake

The final part of the sim involves the cake (or some other "reward" that can be easily divided among the students – sweets, smarties, jelly babies…).

Either produce a large cake that you can cut into proportionate sizes (the "T" group get half, the "B" group get 1/10th to share) or something like 10 smaller cakes that can be distributed similarly. While a cake isn't essential, it does fit neatly with the "wealth distribution" theme and you will be rewarded by a couple of very happy smiling faces who've got half the cake and many more less happy, probably-not-smiling faces, who've only got tiny pieces of cake (and if you're playing with "very poorest" option – *see below* – someone who has, at best a few crumbs…).

Variations

1. If you want to be very cruel, ask for a volunteer from the "B" group.

As an incentive for volunteering they will receive an extra "C" card.

When you have your volunteer tell them to *stand* in the corner of the "B" group space. This person represents the "poorest 1%" in our society who own 0.05% of wealth. Give them a "charity pencil", a "charity piece of paper" and include them in the test.

2. Members of the "T" group can practice philanthropy if they wish. E.g. they can charitably distribute any resources (including the cake) they control to the "B" group without the need for the latter to play a "C" card (the "M" group are excluded from this – they don't need or accept "charity").

3. One variation in the **resource distribution phase** of the sim is that *everything* the students bring into the class (pens, paper, phones, etc.) is packed away and stored in the "T" group space. These resources remain *untouched* for the duration of the sim.

This means you will need to provide the resources the students need to complete the IQ test; in this instance 20 pens and 20 "answer sheets" (e.g. a single piece of blank paper). Making these essential resources scarce for the "B" group provides an extra layer of material disadvantage. If you want to make things even more difficult, make sure a small proportion of the pens (2 or 3 perhaps) are empty of ink. As with the other resources, the "T" group always gets first pick, the "B" group get whatever's left.

4. At the end of the class the "T" group will be able to pick-up their belongings and leave by the door because it's part of the space they own. None of the "B" and "M" group will, technically, be able to retrieve their belongings or leave by the door, unless they produce "C" cards that allow them to enter the "T" space, retrieve their belongings and leave. Most of the "M" group should be able to produce a "C" card but it's unlikely any of the "B" group will. Any of the "B" group left should be instructed to clean up any mess and return the classroom to it's normal condition.

Once this is done tell these students they are free to make alternative arrangements for leaving, such as through the window…
Please Note:
If you take the sim this far you need to **quickly** tell the students this is a weak attempt at "humour".
No-one is to leave the classroom in any way other than by the door.

While it's entirely up to you how you use this sim, some education-related applications might be:

material deprivation
class reproduction
IQ testing (particularly reliability and validity)
definition and measurement of "intelligence"
meritocracy

Source

As far as I can tell the original sim was created by Nancy Fischer, Department of Sociology, Anderson University.

It was modified by Jacqueline Simpson, McMurry University, Abilene, Texas for James Sikora and Teodora Amoloza (eds.) 2000. Introductory Sociology Resource Manual: American Sociological Association Teaching Resources Center

This version is one *heavily modified* by Chris Livesey (2016)

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