Published in final edited form as:

J Prev Interv Community. 2013 ; 41(2): 113–120. doi:10.1080/10852352.2013.757988.

Star Power: An Experiential Learning Exercise to Foster Ecological Perspectives on Power, Privilege, and Oppression

Nkiru Nnawulezi, Christina Campbell, Kalleigh Landstra, Se'ara Davis, Cortney Vandegrift, and Amanda Taylor

Michigan State University

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the utility of Star Power, as an experiential learning exercise applied in a community psychology undergraduate course. This exercise simulates systems of power, privilege, and oppression while fostering an ecological perspective that raises students' awareness and knowledge about power differentials within society. The simulation of trading and lawmaking works best with 18 to 35 students and takes approximately 80 minutes to conduct. This paper highlights three representative student perspectives concerning their participation and experience with Star Power. Strategies for facilitating class discussion are also discussed.

Keywords

Star Power; community psychology; diversity; privilege; oppression

Many students have limited exposure to community psychology within psychology departments (Stoloff et al, 2010). As a result, students are not consistently exposed to using an ecological framework to understand social problems from a multilevel perspective (i.e. individual, micro-, exo-, and macro level). Thus, students typically focus on simple, individual level explanations to understand complex social problems.

The failure to incorporate an ecological framework also leads to the adoption of worldviews such as "belief in the just world" (Dalbert, 2009) and the meritocracy myth (McCoy & Major, 2007). These individual worldviews suggest that society is fair, that hard work results in greater access to social resources, and that people are solely responsible for their destiny. Unfortunately, these worldviews perpetuate social problems, and in turn, lead to victim blaming practices (Furnham, 2003). Community psychologists' commitment to combating status justifying worldviews that maintain systems of oppression inform their desire to integrate ecological perspectives into the classroom. A critical, ecological perspective raises students' consciousness about the social, historical, and political processes that collectively influence individual wellness.

Community psychologists' focus on addressing social problems from an ecological perspective also promotes a social justice ideology (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2006). One of the major components to addressing social justice is through a comprehensive understanding of macro-level phenomena like oppression. To understand oppression from an ecological perspective, students have to be open to understanding the function of power within systems of privilege and oppression. Power and privilege can be difficult concepts for some students to embrace, yet an experiential learning exercise such as Star Power allows students to hold various socially privileged or oppressed identities that could be different from their real life experiences, thereby increasing awareness about inequitable systems and their roles in such systems (Dundes & Harlow, 2005).

This paper provides some preliminary qualitative evidence regarding the use of Star Power, an exercise that aims to increase student's knowledge and awareness of ecological perspectives on oppression. The purpose of this article is to describe and discuss the benefits of Star Power. We share undergraduate student reflections about the simulation. This article concludes with recommendations for facilitating Star Power within the classroom and discussion about how facilitators could draw connections between the simulation and the larger social world.

Overview of Star Power Simulation

Shirts (Simulation Training Systems, 2011; see also online instructions and to purchase Star Power: http://www.stsintl.com/schools-charities/star_power.html) created Star Power to raise individuals' awareness about unequal distribution of power in society. The Star Power exercise is a representative simulation of the three major social classes in society: triangles (poor/lower class), circles (middle class), and squares (upper class). The simulation focuses on the act of trading chips that represent different numerical values. Facilitators inform students that the person with the highest score in the simulation wins a prize. Students have an opportunity to exchange chips with other students in order to enhance their scores. Depending on class size, the average simulation involves five trading rounds. In the first two rounds, students followed preset rules about trading. Detailed information concerning trading rounds can be found in the Appendix.

As the trading rounds progress, poor individuals (triangles) become "poorer" because they have limited access to chips that have a high point value, while the rich (squares) get richer. After the second trading round, squares, who should represent about 10% of the group, create and modify rules around trading and bartering that all of the other groups (triangles and circles) must follow. This shift in rule making allows students to observe and experience how the privilege of one group lessens the social power of other groups and the lower groups' ability to get the resources necessary to "win the game".

Student Reflexive Accounts

The following reflections were based on experiences of three undergraduate students who participated in Star Power in a small undergraduate course focused on systems of privilege and oppression using a community psychology perspective. The first-named author taught the course and it was comprised of fourteen students who were mostly juniors and seniors

with majors or minors in Psychology or Women Studies. A majority of the students were women approximately between the ages of 19 – 22. About twenty-nine percent of the students were visibly Black and Latino, while the other 70% were visibly White. In this course, the first and second-named author co-facilitated Star Power prior to giving a lecture on classism and class privilege. Based on general feedback after completing the course, students generally felt more knowledgeable about how systems of privilege and oppression affects people's lives and the importance of dismantling these systems. The first and second co-authors have also facilitated Star Power numerous times in “Community Psychology” and “Human Service Internship” courses, typically before a lecture on privilege, oppression, or human diversity. The reflections described below are representative of most students’ experiences with Star Power.

Kalleigh

Participating in the Star Power simulation turned out to be much more insightful about the realities of class and social power than I had initially expected. I drew the handful of chips blindly, I felt somewhat confident about my trading abilities, even though I started out with chips that had point values that fell into the triangle category (lower class). I expected to end up in the circle category (middle class) by the end of the first round. But, once the trading began, I was confused as how to acquire higher status chips, when squares (upper class) were protective over their more valuable chips. I watched how the system was working. I saw two groups of students; those who desired to keep trading in hopes of gaining higher value chips, and those who were content with the “wealth” they already had. Despite a few feeble attempts to appeal to the charity of the square group, and one success story of a triangle moving up to the square category, everyone's position at the beginning of the simulation essentially ended up the same.

Although this simulation was a simplistic comparison to the complicated process of moving up in social status given ‘the cards you were dealt,’ the feelings of confusion and hopelessness really stuck with me. Whether the chips represented the neighborhood I grew up in, my parent's education, my family income, my race, my gender, or any number of variables, it was easy to believe that I could use these experiences in my favor despite the obvious obstacles that stood in my way. However, when reality sets in, and I came to understand that the people with the power had the power from the very beginning, and could make up the rules of the game, my optimism began to subside.

I learned a few things from this exercise. First, people have no control for the circumstances with which they are born. Individuals should not be punished for something they had no power over in the first place. Second, based on our current system, square status is nearly unattainable, little opportunities and assistance was available to reduce hardship. Third, it is obvious that in order for change to happen, there has to be collective improvements made on a systematic level that increases the potential for people to thrive.

Se'ara

Power keeps the rich wealthy, while the poor become poorer due to lack of resources, money, and opportunity. Power separates the oppressed from the non-oppressed. The Star

Power activity provided a clear example of how power operates in our society. I initially started as a square (upper class) and ended the activity as a circle (middle class). This was frustrating because the facilitator reminded me that there was only one winner in the game. I knew in order to win; I had to be a square. As the rules continued to change and inflation occurred, the value of my chips decreased and I had very little opportunity to be promoted. After a few rounds of trading, I knew I would never become a square.

I do remember a moment of hope. The facilitator announced a rule change and that the triangles (low class) and the circles (middle class) would have an opportunity to meet separately and then share with the entire group how the squares should conduct the final trading round. The squares were then going to consider our pleas, and make a decision about how trading happened the next round. The facilitators told us that squares got this opportunity because they were 'good traders' and they had 'earned' so many points. I met with my group (circles) and we discussed the frustrations that we experienced. Even before we had a chance to announce to the squares how we wanted the next trading round to go, I noticed that the squares were already making the rules for the next round. They had not even heard our thoughts yet! Each group chose a representative and shared with the squares about how the next trading round should go. As expected, squares set up the trading round to make sure both triangle and circle groups would be at a disadvantage. Now, there was no opportunity to become a square.

I realized that I had no control of my position in the groups, and I gave up on trying getting back with the squares. Sadly, this is how many people live their lives daily. Many people work hard and struggle to get ahead, only to find out that the 'rules change.' These rules do not always benefit groups. If you are not a part of the dominant groups that are making the rules in society, similar to the simulation, you are not able to participate in making the big decisions that impact your well-being and quality of life.

Cortney

It began with blind distribution of chips. Similar to real life socioeconomic status, your rank in the beginning of the simulation was pure chance. It was at this point in the simulation when I felt lucky. One other student and I had randomly pulled good chips. These gold chips were worth the most points in the simulation! After the first round of trading, facilitators placed us in the highest point group (squares). Throughout the simulation, the facilitators praised us for our hard work and repeatedly announced how hard we had worked to order to gain our status and skill. Facilitators even asked the class to applaud us throughout the simulation. This put me in an interesting situation because deep down, I knew that I had not traded at all. I pulled golden chips and tallied up my score without trading. I felt conflicted because part of me felt I did not deserve the praise, but I was excited to be the 'winner' of the simulation.

By the end of the simulation, I was able to see the connection to American society. It made me think of the link that is often made between the "hard-working" wealthy people and how they are often congratulated for 'hard work' versus being told that their position is a reflection of privilege. I was completely unaware of the amount of frustration and discontentment that had built up in the lowest point value group. Sectioning off groups

based on socioeconomic status is one dynamic of society that is often over looked in the discussion of economic inequality. Like American communities, our Star Power groups were disconnected in physical space, allowing us to speak and interact only to those in our own group. The separation I found became very important in the next stage of the simulation when rule changes began.

The turning point in the simulation came when facilitators gave the squares power to make the rules. The rule change brought increased greed and self-interest. Reflecting on my actions, I was unfortunately a part of the oppressive group. We wanted to win and we made sure the points ensured that we would win. Even though we had the opportunity to listen to the experiences of other groups (circles and triangles), we had already decided on the new rules to the game. What started off as a ‘silly game’ opened my eyes to classism, power, and oppression.

Teaching Recommendations

Star power can be a useful technique for the community psychology classroom, especially for instructors who are interested in finding a method to increase students’ ecological perspectives about the cause of social inequity. Outside of the manualized instructions, we recommend the following for instructors who are interested in conducting the simulation:

1. Facilitate with three people. The main facilitator provides instructions throughout the game and manages the bonus rounds. The timekeeper keeps the time for each of the rounds and assists with scoring. The scorer manages inflation and records the scores of the group on a white board visible to all participating in the simulation.
2. Inflation is the key to students’ feelings of disparity. Inflation keeps the proportion of squares to a minimum. The score keeper should determine the highest possible score a student can receive within the triangle and circle groups and adjust brackets so that less than 5% of that group has the opportunity to move up to the next group. Inflation creates opportunities for individuals to be promoted or demoted in their group status.
3. Facilitators should discourage and encourage. Throughout the game, facilitators should engage in phrases that are grounded in foundations of “belief in a just world” and meritocracy myths. For example, we often encourage that people applaud squares that have the highest points at the end of each trading round, and make explicit that these students are particularly talented at trading. We tell triangles throughout the game that they need to work harder if they would like a chance at winning the prize. These encouragers and discouragers often arise in the follow up discussions as points of frustration and guilt for students. This allows the facilitator to make an explicit connection to the system justifying, victim blaming worldviews that permeate society in the discussion.
4. Facilitators should utilize both small and large group discussions to draw connections between the simulation and the real world. The ‘think-pair-share’ discussion method fosters both types of discussion and provides students with an opportunity to think about the simulation independently, but also exchange their

thoughts with the classroom. In the think-pair-share technique, students first independently reflect on discussion questions for a few minutes, and then discuss their responses within a small, mixed status group. Examples of ‘think-pair-share’ discussion questions include: (1) what was your initial reaction to the Star Power simulation? (2) How does Star Power mirror what occurs in the real world? (3) How did you participate in the system of oppression? How did you alleviate the system of oppression? Once students exchange reflections within small groups, instructors should direct students to share their responses with the larger group (i.e., other groups in the class). This promotes the exchange of various ecological ideas in relation to the simulation, including oppressive systems that occur beyond classism. Facilitators should carefully direct students to draw specific links concerning their own privilege (or “gold chips”) and social group status (agent/target) while encouraged to discuss their position in relation to larger oppressive systems. After discussing individual level interactions, discussion on rules and/or policies that affect all groups should be followed, leading into conversation about exo- and macro- level barriers that influence students’ ability to become “winners” in the game.

Overall, Star Power is a perspective taking simulation that can advance critical thinking and help students situate themselves within the larger social world. The simulation has worked as an excellent prerequisite for course lectures about human diversity, and students consistently report that they appreciated the interactive engagement with the professor and other classmates. Instructors of community psychology, or similar courses, should strive to utilize multiple tools to promote ecological thinking about social injustice. Star Power is a powerful method that instructors could use to meet that goal.

Appendix

Table 1

Abbreviated Star Power Instructions

Before the Simulation: Remove all tables. Create three circles that are similar in size with ample space for students to walk around the room. Hang Star Power posters in an easy to see location and prepare white board for scoring.	
STEPS	DESCRIPTION
Round 1	Students randomly select chips. Facilitators explain trading rules.
Trading	Students trade with one another and report final score. Scorer records first name and # of points students attained in the round on the whiteboard. Students are assigned a group based on score and sit in their respective circles.
Bonus	Facilitators give students bonus chips to distribute to members within each of the three groups. Groups must decide who in the group will receive these chips. The value of the chips are added to the students overall score. Scorekeeper performs inflation.
Promotions	Facilitators announce who moved into a higher group based on the additional bonus points. Scores of the highest students are announced.
Instructors to facilitators: Timekeeper should strictly enforced time limits. Encouragers and discouragers should be used during the trading round and promotion announcements. Trading rounds shorten as simulation progresses. Redistribute chips into separate bags at start of round two.	
Round 2	Students randomly select chips. Facilitators explain the redistribution of chips and that all points earned in the second trading round will be added to their existing scores.

Before the Simulation: Remove all tables. Create three circles that are similar in size with ample space for students to walk around the room. Hang Star Power posters in an easy to see location and prepare white board for scoring.	
STEPS	DESCRIPTION
Trading	Same as before. Students add their scores to the previously posted scores.
Bonus	Same as before. Scorekeeper performs inflation.
Promotions	Same as before.
Lawmaking	Facilitators announce that squares can make the next trading round rules. All three groups discuss recommendations for next round. The triangles and circles each provide their recommendation to the squares. Square deliberate and announce trading rules.
Round 3: Facilitators can choose to stop at this round, or continue with another round.	
Trading	Same as before.
Final Scores	Facilitators announce winner of the simulation.
After the simulation: Facilitators should put students in groups of 2 or 3 who all occupied different status groups in the simulation. This small group discussion should be followed up with larger group discussion.	

Note. See also Dundes & Harlow (2005) for more detailed descriptions on Star Power in the classroom. Star Power materials and directions are available for purchase at: http://www.stsintl.com/schools-charities/star_power.html.

References

- Dalbert, C. Belief in a just world.. In: Leary, MR.; Hoyle, RH., editors. Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior. Guilford Publications; New York: 2009. p. 288-297.
- Dalton, JH.; Elias, MJ.; Wandersman, A. Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities. 2nd ed.. Wadsworth; Belmont, CA: 2007.
- Dundes L, Harlow R. Illustrating the nature of social inequality with the simulation star power. Teaching Sociology. 2005; 33:32–43.
- Furnham A. Belief in a just world: research progress over the past decade. Personality and Individual Differences. 2003; 34:795–817.
- McCoy SK, Major B. Priming meritocracy and the psychological justification of inequality. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. 2007; 43:341–351.
- Simulation Training Systems. Star Power. 2011. Retrieved from http://www.stsintl.com/schools-charities/star_power.html
- Stoloff M, McCarthy M, Keller L, Varfolomeeva V, Lynch J, Makara K, Smiley W. The undergraduate psychology major: An examination of structure and sequence. Teaching of Psychology. 2010; 37:4–15.