

NOTES

THE CHAIRS GAME— COMPETITION VERSUS COOPERATION: THE SOCIOLOGICAL USES OF MUSICAL CHAIRS*

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MY TEACHING APPROACH is *not* traditional “lectures-and-quietly-take-notes” where students are the passive recipients of knowledge. In recent years, I have become increasingly interested in active student-involved, process-based learning. Yvone Lenard reminds us that “Learning is messy. Performance is neat,”¹ which reflects the initial struggles that occur when students are problem solving or grasping a new sociological concept. Founded on the principles of cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1991), the taxonomy of learning (Bloom 1956), divergent production (Guilford 1967), and affect (Hall 1959), the Chairs Game demonstrates how students learn about competition versus cooperation as well as a variety of sociological concepts and theories. This process does not occur neatly or in a straight line progression. There are often frustrating detours, temporary setbacks, and latent learning. After all, “learning is messy!”

Always in search of innovative teaching

*Special thanks are extended to my students at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, and to the three reviewers for their helpful comments, especially Reviewer B for his or her suggested solutions in the potential difficulties section of this article. Parts of this paper were derived from “Races, Racism and Criminal Justice: Some Successful Teaching Techniques,” a teaching workshop conducted during the March 1996 meetings of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in Las Vegas, Nevada. Please address correspondence to the author at the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Parkside, Box 2000, 900 Wood Road, Kenosha, WI 53141-2000; email: takata@cs.uwp.edu

Editor’s note: the reviewers were Linda Scheible, Wendy Jean Harrod (Reviewer B), and Craig Eckert.

techniques to use in my classes, I accidentally came across one in Robert Fulghum’s *Maybe (Maybe Not): Second Thoughts from a Secret Life* (1993:117-21). As an ice-breaker in his high school philosophy classes, he presented two versions of musical chairs. The first version is the one we are all familiar with, but the second version has one rule change that demonstrates the value of cooperation. I use the same approach as Fulghum, which emphasizes competition versus cooperation, but I have expanded the focus of this teaching technique to include the application of a variety of sociological concepts. The Chairs Game is an excellent active learning tool, which becomes the focus of class discussions throughout the semester. This technique applies to a wide variety of courses within sociology; it can demonstrate many sociological concepts.

HOW TO PLAY THE CHAIRS GAME

In Introduction to Sociology and Sociological Theories courses, I begin with the Chairs Game for two main reasons: (1) I have found the Chairs Game to be the most effective way to demonstrate the value and importance of cooperation, and (2) the game becomes the focus of many class discussions on sociological concepts introduced throughout the semester.

In preparing for this teaching technique, you will need some music (Fulghum prefers “Stars and Stripes Forever,” but I use whatever will get students moving. I used the Rolling Stones’s “Start Me Up” in one class recently, but I am thinking of using the *Star*

¹ Yvone Lenard, personal communication with Jeanne Curran, UCLA Department of French, 1963.

Wars theme for spring 1997) and a tape recorder with a large speaker so that the music can be heard (I have made the mistake of using a compact tape recorder because it was easier to carry across campus, but the maximum volume was not loud enough, especially during the squeals and joking that go on during the game). In addition, you need a classroom or area large enough to play the game with movable chairs (I know some classrooms have chairs bolted down to the floor, which make the game quite impossible to play unless you and your students are extremely creative!). Based on my experience, this exercise and debriefing can fit within a 50-minute class session, but a 75-minute period is ideal.

Here are the rules of the game:

(1) Introduce the game of musical chairs to the class. Tell the class to get ready to play—everyone knows the rules. (At first, some students think I am “crazy” and wonder what this has to do with sociology. As noted by Fulghum, these are students who probably have not played this game since the first or second grade.) The students hesitate at first but eventually they decide that it must be acceptable to play the game. I refrain from speaking except to begin the music once the students have set up the chairs.

(2) When playing the traditional musical chairs, eliminate one or more chairs at a time. After some hesitation, students get involved in the game. It is fascinating to watch the mad scramble for a chair by some, while others opt to get out of the game early on. As the traditional version of the game progresses, things start to get a little rough.

(3) Finally, there is one winner who sits in the last chair. (This can become extremely competitive. During one teaching workshop, a woman took the chair out from under her male opponent in order to declare herself the winner. During my fall 1995 theory course, it came down to a battle between the star player on the women’s basketball team and a former professional rugby player.) Typically, the winner boasts, brags, and goes

through the victorious rituals comparable to the end zone celebrations after Super Bowl touchdowns are scored.

(4) Next, I ask students if they would like to play the game again (some will, others will not, but all eventually get into the second game). Then I explain that we are going to play musical chairs again but with one rule change: “Musical chairs as before, but this time, if you do not have a chair, sit down in someone’s lap. Everybody stays in the game—it is only a matter of where you sit” (Fulghum 1993:119).

(5) Chairs are reset and the music begins. When the music stops, students must find either a chair or a lap to sit on. (Such a paradigm shift alters the students’ attitude toward the game and leads to creative problem solving as a group. Students help each other and are much more polite.)

(6) As the game continues, with fewer chairs available, students become increasingly cooperative. When one chair is left, everyone must find a lap. (This is where the leaders emerge, trying to organize the classroom full of students among all the jokes, laughing, and shouting that is going on.) Once the class figures out how to achieve this feat, they think the game is over, but it is not.

(7) The final round: Remove the last chair. With no chairs left when the music stops, everyone still must find a lap to sit on. (Some believe this cannot be done. Others are challenged by the situation. This takes a little more thinking and coordination as a group.) Finally, the class solves the problem—they all sit—no chairs! And everyone feels victorious!

POSTGAME DEBRIEFING AND DISCUSSION

First, I obtain initial reactions to the traditional version, and then we discuss the second version of the game. I have students make comparisons. Together, we examine how they felt during the Chairs Game exercise. Students are fascinated to discover the different reactions and interpretations of the same event, which later leads us into discus-

sions of Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality and Becker's societal reaction.

We also discuss why no student ever objects to playing the Chairs Game and why so few students even bother to question why they have to play the game (which I relate, subsequently, to Weber's ideal types of authority). Why do some players eagerly fight for a chair while others more passively opt out of the game early on? (These questions can spark discussion of Merton on institutionalized means and cultural goals.) Why do some leaders emerge during the second game?

As Fulghum (1993) notes: "The experience is always the same. It's a problem of sharing diminishing resources. This really isn't kid stuff. And the questions raised by musical chairs are always the same: Is it always to be a winners-losers world, or can we keep everyone in the game? Do we still have what it takes to find a better way?" (p. 121). We begin to examine the strategies of competition versus cooperation, and how some of us have been socialized into the competitive spirit of "me first," and into the Vince Lombardi tradition of "winning is the only thing." To me, the main objective of this exercise is to get students to understand that there are other ways of accomplishing a goal, and not necessarily through a "dog-eat-dog" competitive drive, but rather through cooperation. This is a major paradigm shift for many students, who have been taught the idea of survival of the fittest. We then focus attention on cooperation as another way of interacting, and a different way of thinking. Students mention how they enjoyed the second round more than the first and how they felt better about themselves and their fellow students.

At this time, I go over the basic elements of cooperative learning—positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills, and group-processing (Johnson et al. 1984). We discuss group-processing skills learned from the Chairs Game; for example, how group consensus is

established by listening to the different strategies students use to accomplish the same goal. This leads us to the challenges of critical thinking, problem solving, and process-based learning. Students begin to realize that learning is a process of continual negotiations between students and teacher, which reminds me of what Hans Mauksch once told me, "teaching is the interactive sharing of power."

Finally, I have students relate the Chairs Game to the course. What does this have to do with sociology? What relevance does the Chairs Game have to this particular course?

SOCIOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

In my course on introductory sociology, the Chairs Game introduces sociology as a discipline and illustrates how fun the discipline can be in helping us to understand both global perspectives and our everyday life. For example, I demonstrate how this exercise relates to C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination (i.e., how each student brings to the classroom his or her unique cultural baggage that provides for a diversity of viewpoints on the game because of the intersections between personal troubles and public issues; biography and history; and the micro and the macro).

Because much of my theory course focuses on Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, I encourage students to come up with the connections between their theoretical concepts and the Chairs Game: Durkheim's *anomie*—at first, the students think I am "nuts" when I announce that we are going to play musical chairs. There is momentary confusion, which in a small way creates a sense normlessness. Schutz's *the taken for granted* also applies here when students assume that this is not a normal activity in the typical university classroom. When some students react to the game as being "childish," this leads us into discussions of Weber's *rationalization*—how the notion of "learning is fun" has been lost and how we have rationalized the present state of our learning and university life. Mead's *the*

I and *the me* is illustrated by how an individual might initially react to the game. The “I” saying, “Yes, let’s do it” without much thought to why—simply reacting to the situation without thinking of the consequences. On the other hand, the “me” saying, “This is not right. We should be listening to a lecture today.”

The traditional version of musical chairs also has affinities with Durkheim’s concept of *organic solidarity*. As resources (chairs) become increasingly scarce, the game becomes more competitive because there is increased specialization (i.e., more sophisticated strategies must be used to stay in the game). Some students are more suited for this game than others.

As round one of the Chairs Game comes to a close with a winner declared, Weber’s *ideal types* (in this case, “winners” and “losers”) can be applied—some students are “good sports,” while others are “sore losers.” We discuss how in today’s society everybody loves a winner. In addition, Weber’s *class, status, power* relates to the power and social prestige gained by the “winner” of round one and how that compares to the “winners” of round two. Perhaps one of the most effective demonstrations of Marx’s *false consciousness* is the strategy of “divide and conquer” that results in only one winner. In addition, Merton’s *manifest and latent functions* are discussed in terms of the initial purpose of the game and the unintended consequences—the stigma attached to the winner of the first game. Sometimes, the “winner” is treated differently by the rest of the class during the remainder of the course. Other related concepts to the winner/losers are Becker’s *labeling* and *societal reactions*—we compare students’ reactions during the game and after the debriefing as well as throughout the semester, noting how interpretations and reinterpretations of the events emerge when different sociological concepts are applied. Another related set of concepts are Goffman’s *presentation of self* (how we presented ourselves before, during, and after the game), and Goffman’s *stigma* (the posi-

tive and negative aspects of being the winner or being the loser).

Berger and Luckmann’s *social construction of reality* demonstrates how we can all have different interpretations from the same experience. In addition, students’ varying reactions to how the game is played can be applied to Merton’s *anomie* as we discuss the means and goals of the conformist, innovator, ritualist, retreatist, and rebel.

In the second round of musical chairs, there are a number of sociological concepts for students to apply. First, Durkheim’s *division of labor*—how the game is played or how the “work” gets done—can be illustrated through this activity. As there are fewer chairs and a greater need to coordinate the activities of each student, Durkheim’s *collective conscience* emerges as students realize “we are all in this together;” Durkheim’s *mechanical solidarity* is recognized as the game becomes an increasingly cooperative activity. Focusing on Marx’s *true or class consciousness*, individual students become “one” as they “celebrate” having met the challenge of the final phase of the second game. They realize the power of cooperation.

I am sure that as others try this teaching technique, they will discover their own applications of other sociological concepts to use in their classrooms.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

My main purpose for using the Chairs Game in my courses is to demonstrate the value of cooperative learning in an environment that has traditionally socialized students into a competitive atmosphere. It is an effective technique for shifting the classroom focus from competition to cooperation. In the second version of the Chairs Game, students demonstrate Guilford’s (1967) concept of divergent production, creating their own answers through critical thinking and problem solving, especially in the final two phases of the second game. During the Chairs Game, students are active learners, taking on a learning-by-doing approach

(Dewey 1938).

In addition, there are many emotions running through the Chairs Game—frustration, elation, fear, resignation, laughter. Some of the most vivid memories arise out of the affective component of learning—those experiences that brought us much pain or pleasure (Hall 1959; Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia 1964; Leonard 1968). As a result, several semesters later, students still remember playing musical chairs in my class and the significance of the game. Such a teaching technique leaves a lasting impression on students, reflecting the importance of affect in learning.

Learning how to get along with others is not necessarily a skill possessed by many undergraduates. Students learn to cope better with their feelings by learning what is appropriate and inappropriate classroom behavior. Respect and tolerance are cornerstones that are repeatedly taught in the cooperative classroom. Students learn about small-group dynamics as well as group-processing skills in activities such as the Chair Game.

Problems and Potential Difficulties

Since 1993, the major problem that I have experienced is an occasional complaint from neighboring classrooms (and sessions during professional meetings). The instructor in the adjoining classroom has dropped by to investigate the loud noise and sometimes even asked us to “quiet down” while wondering how any serious learning could take place when students are having such a good time.

Other problems and potential difficulties include:

(1) *Class Size*—Based on my experience, the Chairs Game works well with 20 to 40 students (I have not tried it with more than 50 students). The game also requires a large classroom with movable chairs.

(2) *Physical and Social Hazards*—I tell students with back problems or any other medical condition that might get aggravated while playing the Chairs Game that they may opt to observe the activity instead. Other possible warnings might be related to

the recent attention on sexual harassment and touching, but this has not been a problem with my students. They usually ask each other politely about sitting on laps, especially if they do not know each other. Most often in a small liberal arts university like mine, the students, especially sociology majors, know each other from previous courses.

(3) *The Traditional Learner*—On occasion, I have had a student who is a more traditional learner find this game to be child’s play. Such a student prefers a lecture format with very little openness to innovative learning techniques. Such a student believes that learning should not be fun and playful.

(4) *The Dangers of Overuse*—I try not to overuse this exercise because word gets around and students “wise up.” When that happens, this exercise loses its value as a teaching tool. When students have done this exercise in my previous course, I assign them the role of watchdog to detect any rule violations and to compare their observations with their own earlier experiences as a participant.

One of my reviewers provided a very workable solution to address these potential difficulties. This reviewer suggested asking for volunteers to play musical chairs in front of the rest of the class, rather than having the entire class play the game. This reviewer noted: “Using a small group of volunteers to perform in front of the class helps overcome a number of problems: (1) bolted down chairs (just drag a few loose chairs into the classroom), (2) huge class sizes (students really enjoy watching their peers perform), and (3) traditional learners, easily embarrassed, or touchy students (since these students never volunteer, you never run into trouble with them; my experience is that volunteers tend to be really good sports).”

Advantages

Like the old Chinese proverb goes, “Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand,” the Chairs Game is a memorable learning exercise that

actively involves all students. Students do not easily forget this exercise throughout the course and even beyond the semester. For example, some of my teacher certification students tell me that they plan to try this exercise with their elementary school classes. This exercise leaves a lasting impression on students, illustrating the difference between competition and cooperation.

The Chairs Game can be used in a variety of sociology (and other undergraduate) courses in which an array of major sociological concepts and theories can be demonstrated. I use the Chairs Game in my introductory sociology courses because it is a fun way of getting students interested in sociology and to demonstrate the application of sociology to something as everyday as a child's game. In addition, I begin my sociological theory course with the Chairs Game as a foundation for discussing various concepts such as division of labor, social construction of reality, mechanical and organic solidarity, labeling, collective conscience, norm emergence, class consciousness, and so forth. Courses on deviance, race and ethnic relations, criminology/criminal justice, and social stratification could also use the game. Actually, I cannot imagine a sociology course in which the Chairs Game is not relevant. This game is useful in many other undergraduate courses, especially those that take a cooperative learning approach.

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

I have not conducted any formal evaluations of the Chairs Game exercise, but through the years I have received very positive and enthusiastic student responses and reactions informally through their written assignments and formal course evaluations. I can only recall one student who noted in a course evaluation that the Chairs Game was childish and had no relevance to sociological theory (I suspect that this student was one of those extremely traditional learners who would have been better suited in a lecture

course).

When I used the Chairs Game during spring 1995, out of 29 course evaluations, at least one student mentioned the Chairs Game positively and two other students made indirect comments relating to group activities in the course. During fall 1995, out of 28 course evaluations, six students mentioned the Chairs Game as the "best-liked" aspect of the course while two others made indirect reference to it.

Much more informative student feedback came from the performance portfolio assignment submitted at the end of the semester. In this written assignment, students selected aspects of the course that best highlighted their learning. The following are excerpts from student portfolios:

The one most important factor I learned from this class is probably cooperative learning. With talking to people in class and my oral presentation group, I was able to share my ideas and thoughts on what we were learning....It is kind of like our musical chairs—if we all work together there can be more winners. Through working with my group, I got a better understanding of rationalization, specialization, and interdependency.

The first class, when the professor said let's play musical chairs! My first thought was "damn, another crazy professor!" But after you let us explain what it meant to us and then you explained the situation, it really made sense. Not everyone had the same ideas about the musical chairs, but nobody was wrong either, and this is what makes the class fun—to learn about different theories and how we relate it to our lives.

Originally I was going to write about friendships in my second submission, but after Friday's class of musical chairs and the discussion afterwards, I saw myself in many different aspects of my life.

I am a perfectionist and that can cause a lot of problems for myself and the people around me....I am the firstborn of my father, but the third of my mother. I am like a firstborn at least in the personalities described in a birth order book I read. I don't feel anyone can do

"it," whatever that may be as well as I can, and it has gotten me in a lot of trouble.

With experiments such as musical chairs, to prove the fight for the capitalist action. The winner gets all, and the competition gets harder as you get closer to the top...at first seemed childish, but taught me more than I could have learned through reading books.

CONCLUSION

With 20 years of undergraduate teaching experience, I have found that Fulghum's idea is the most effective way to begin a sociology course. The Chairs Game generates discussion and interest that sustains itself throughout the semester as students make connections between this lively exercise and new sociological concepts and theories introduced in class.

Each time I introduce the Chairs Game to a new class, I am never really sure what the reactions and responses will be, so I am learning from the students as they teach me "where they are coming from"—much is revealed during the Chairs Game. There is growth for both the students and the professor. In conclusion, Hans Mauksch used to tell me repeatedly, "Students must become our teachers in order for us to teach." During the Chairs Game, my students have taught me an awful lot!

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