

**Teaching about Oppression through *Jenga*:
A Game-Based Learning Example for Social Work Educators**

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Abstract

Educators, both novice and experienced, are presented with a formidable constellation of obstacles when attempting to teach the concepts of institutional oppression and unearned privilege. Educators must challenge years of socialization and internalized ideologies of superiority that make hierarchies of privilege appear to be the natural order (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006). In the interests of expanding and strengthening social work educators' repertoire of instructional tools on the topic of institutional oppression, the authors review the relevant literature on institutional oppression and game-based learning, and offer readers an original game-based learning exercise adapted from the popular family game *Jenga* as a tool for instructing on the topic of institutional oppression.

Teaching about Oppression through *Jenga*: A Game-Based Learning Example for Social Work Educators

The insidious mechanisms of structural oppression have surpassed the potency of one-on-one overt discriminatory acts. Today the most unyielding obstacles to social, economic and political equality operate more effectively within the institutionalized codes of private and public sector systems perpetuating disparities in health, education and wealth, than in the individual racist denying access to seats on the bus or space at the lunch counter. The pursuit of social justice embedded within the historical roots, as well the present day mandate, of the social work profession, obligates the discipline to prepare professionals to effectively address such assaults. Therefore, after reviewing the subtle but powerful mechanisms inherent in institutional oppression, the authors offer an overview of game-based learning exercises and introduce a modified version of the family game, *Jenga*, as a tool for instructing on the topic of institutional oppression.

Institutional Oppression

Institutional oppression refers to the way in which society is organized into predictable relationships. It's been defined as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers that tend to immobilize and reduce a group or category of people" (Frye, 1983). Van Voorhis (1998), describes it as that which originates in, and is maintained by, the dominate group through institutional and economic power and control over societal institutions such as schools, banks, legislative bodies, and policing or military forces.

The consequences of institutional oppression are often targeted as the subject of studies on racial or ethnic group disparities in income, assets, health, and so forth.

However, the reasons for these disparities are most often ascribed to attributes of the marginalized population, rather than the exploitative actions of the privileged groups. The literature on deficit thinking (Brandon, 2003), modern racism (Leach, 2005) and white racial framing represent examples of how vulnerable groups' subordinate positions are attributed to the group's values, choices, culture and/or perceived pathologies. This classic victim-blaming is aided by the ideology of equal opportunity and the myth of American meritocracy (Freeman, 1995), which present powerful obstacles to individuals of privilege re-conceptualizing what were historically viewed as personal or family achievements, into privileges illegitimately gained at the expense of oppressed groups.

While flagrant disparities are occasionally acknowledged as the consequence of institutional oppression, seldom are these disparities conceptualized in terms of institutionalized mechanisms generated and maintained by *individual members* of a privileged social group. When systemic injustice or structural discrimination are linked to grievous disparities, typically the discussion is positioned within a passive tense or the discourse is conducted in abstract language that removes individual agents from view, which serves to incriminate some "vaguely specified institution" (Feagin, 2006, pg.5). Nevertheless, institutions do not act; it is the people in them that do act, even though the individuals may be simply following routine rules and regulations (Feagin & Feagin, 1986).

This position of 'faultlessness' is regularly upheld by members of privileged groups for acts associated with structural oppression, because individual prejudice and discrimination, or the explicit intention of harm, are often not overtly present in

institutional oppression. It is often perpetuated through individuals who may believe they are simply adhering to organizational or institutional protocol. For example, the US courts have found no legal wrongdoing in: school district's vast disparities in the distribution of educational resources that result in high-poverty neighborhoods with lower scholastic performance (Podesta & Brown, 2008); or harmful loans by sub-prime lenders resulting in "the greatest loss of wealth for communities and individuals of color in modern history" (Rivera, Cotto-Escalera, Desai, Huezo & Muhammad, 2008, p.1); or with a criminal justice system with flagrant disproportionate rates of incarceration and execution of black defendants (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008). Critical theorists contend that the US legal system, although masked with the mantle of equality and neutrality, actually serves to create and maintain much race and wealth disparity. Moran & Wildman (2007) illustrate this position through the cynical comments of Anatole France who mocked the equality of laws that "forbid the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread." (p. 1,221)

As educators within a profession with a commitment to social justice and a mandate to "prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person" (NASW, 1999, p. 27), a vital step in combating structural oppression is to raise social work students' awareness of its mechanisms. However, in pursuing this endeavor, educators in general, and social work educators in particular, have long encountered multiple and substantial impediments to assisting students challenge years of socialization and internalized ideologies of superiority that make hierarchies of privilege appear to be the natural order (Abrams and

Gibson, 2007; Branscombe, Schmitt & Schiffhauer, 2007; Cohen, 1995; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Gillespie, Ashbaugh & DiFiore, 2002). Therefore, in the interests of expanding and strengthening social work educators' repertoire of instructional tools on the topic of institutional oppression, the authors briefly review the relevant literature on game-based learning, and offer readers an original game-based learning exercise adapted from the popular family game *Jenga*.

Overview of Game-Based Learning

The learning potential generated through games has been examined in university classrooms since the 1950s, particularly by business schools (Gros, 2007; Magney, 1990). Moreover, game-based education has been utilized as an instructional tool across disciplines ranging from international relations (Magney, 1990) engineering (Ebner & Holzinger, 2007) and biology, to nursing and social work (Moore & Dettlaff, 2005). It has been utilized in forms ranging from low-tech crossword puzzles (Franklin, Peat & Lewis, 2003) and Monopoly-type undertakings (Coghlan & Huggins, 2004; Magney, 1990) to high tech digital games (Deubel, 2006; Gros, 2007).

Game-based exercises not only offer the potential for students to learn more and retain it longer, but like textbooks, games also effectively serve to reinforce or fortify the student's new understandings (Magney, 1990). Furthermore, aside from the cognitive benefits of game-based learning, educators have long noted that games foster higher levels of student interest and promote positive attitudes towards the subject matter (Magney, 1990; Ebner & Holzinger, 2007). Ebner and Holzinger (2007) credit the 'joy' or 'fun' factor elicited through learning games as the potent contributor to its efficacy as a teaching tool.

In designing game-based educational endeavors, instructors are cautioned against creating a fragmented and isolated awareness-raising activity, disassociated from specific outcomes (Barber & Norman, 1989; Cruz & Patterson, 2005). To address this common obstacle, it is essential to incorporate opportunities for student reflection around the game (Cruz & Patterson, 2005). This reflection phase has been heralded as the most critical component in game-based learning (Kiili, 2007).

Description of Game-Based Exercise on Institutional Oppression

For over 6 years the following game-based, learning activity with various modifications has been a standard classroom practice by the author originating the exercise. He has employed it within a small undergraduate social work program at a private, catholic university with a primarily white, middle-class student body. The class size typically ranges from 12 to 25 students.

In presenting this game-based learning exercise there are three distinct phases, the Briefing Phase, the *Jenga* Game, and the Debriefing Phase. Ideally, these three distinct phases should be conducted in three consecutive classroom sessions. The general goal of the overall exercise is to increase participant awareness and sensitivity to the fundamental impact of the underlying mechanisms of oppression & privilege. Students encounter the limitations of their own individual skills and efforts as determinants of success, in light of the game's mechanisms of 'oppression'. The two specific objectives of this exercise are for students to be able to a) identify mechanisms of oppression and privilege, and b) articulate how mechanisms of oppression and privilege are sustained or challenged.

Briefing Phase. Prior to the Jenga exercise, the instructor assigns an introductory reading and introduces students to such terms as oppression, institutional oppression, privilege, meritocracy, and complicity. Numerous social work textbooks offer brief introductions to institutional/structural oppression and the classic McIntosh (1990) article can serve to acquaint students with the concept of privilege. Students prepare a two page reflection paper and participate in small group and class discussions facilitated by the instructor. These Briefing Phase assignments will subsequently be compared to the Debriefing Phase's reflection paper and discussion to assess the efficacy of the exercise.

Jenga Game. To conduct this game-based learning activity the instructor requires any version of the game *Jenga*, produced by either Milton Bradley / Parker Brothers (2006) or the current parent company Hasbor (2006). Although consisting of fewer blocks, the game *Tumbling Tower* by Cardinal Industries (1999) may also be utilized for this exercise. A stopwatch and a dry board or chalkboard and play money are the only other tools needed to facilitate the exercise. A slightly modified version of the Jenga game will be played to its conclusion five or more times throughout a single class period, one hour in duration.

Ostensibly, the purpose of this family game is to successfully extend the height of a tower of consecutively stacked wooden blocks. Players strategically slide out one of the tower's blocks, which is not a critical support, from somewhere within the tower and carefully position it atop the tower to increase the tower's elevation. This task is done with caution so as not to unbalance the structure and send all the blocks tumbling, which terminates the game. One point is awarded for each block

successfully added to the tower's top. Through the introduction of game rules that dictate new conditions under which the players must construct the tower, the instructor amplifies the game's dynamics of oppression and privilege. Examples of such rules are a requirement that players use only their left hand; an imposition of a ten second time limit; and the institution of game qualifiers (ex. Only students wearing athletic shoes can play).

Although only two teams will play against each other during any single Jenga game, students are instructed to create four or five different teams, each consisting of three members. Students are briefed on the game's rules prior to team selection. Teams select a name, which is written on the board for purpose of score keeping. The classroom instructor will record one point under the name of the corresponding team each time it successfully removes and stacks a block. A student, who is not a member of any team, performs the role of timekeeper. The timekeeper begins the exercise and monitors the time allotted for team members to complete their turn.

One student will be assigned the role of judge/rule enforcer. The role of the judge/rule enforcer is to interpret all the rules of Jenga, and render final decisions on the assignment of points, as well as the assignment of retribution or penalties for 'rule-breaking' i.e. missed turn, reduction in points, etc.... The instructor conspires privately with the judge/rule enforcer prior to class, instructing the judge to exhibit bias in their rulings.

With only 12-15 students comprising the teams, not every student in the class will actually be playing the game. Students who are not a member of a playing team and not assigned to the role of judge or timekeeper, therefore not directly engaged in

the game, are assigned to the role of observers. The observers record all note worthy occurrences, and share their observations with classmates after the game.

The game ends when a player makes the tower fall, which results in a loss for their team. The instructor announces each teams' 'scores' at the conclusion of the game. (Students rapidly realize that winning is independent of these 'scores'.) The winning team receives \$10,000 in play money and an opportunity to play again against another team to win additional play money.

Debriefing Phase. Students prepare a post-game reflection paper from a set instructor prepared questions. They are asked to critically reflect upon the perceptions of institutional oppression gained from participating in the *Jenga* exercise. Small group and class discussions offer opportunities for students to share ideas and consider the implications of this experience for social work practice.

Throughout the Debriefing Phase students are encouraged to consider the real world institutional mechanisms that ensure such things as a criminal record, a serious health diagnosis, poor credit report or other experiences can preclude individuals from future opportunities or a place in the 'game'.

Student Learning Opportunities from Game-based Activity

New and different observations and insights continue to emerge with each group participating in this exercise. However, the following observations from the Debriefing Phase focus on the exercise's two specific objectives of student identification of: 1) mechanisms of oppression and privilege, and 2) how such mechanisms are sustained or challenged.

Mechanisms of Oppression and Privilege. Most students quickly grasp the ‘disconnect’ between a team’s ‘scores’ (effort) and a team’s designation as winner or loser (outcome). Students are asked to contemplate how each individual player’s efforts, skills, motivation and luck contributed to their success in the game. The debriefing phase consistently illicit student comments similar to the following. “It’s difficult to win Jenga without some sort of luck. You can try hard and do everything right, but still lose. That’s frustrating (losing) because our points weren’t rewarded.”

Students have successfully made the real world connection, with different populations depending upon the assigned readings. An example of typical response from a student assigned a reading on poverty from Ehrenreich’s (2001) or Shilper’s (2005) was “I can appreciate the frustration of people trying to get out of poverty. They may work hard and follow all the rules, but still can’t change their economic position.” Students have also connected restrictions inherent in both the game’s and TANF time limits.

All team members play under the same set of rules, which creates an atmosphere of equality within the game. However, this game-based learning exercise is particularly useful in raising student awareness of the role that ‘rules and regulations’ play in advancing some individuals’ interests, while restraining others. One student stated, “The rules kept me out of game because I wore dress shoes instead of my Nikes.” Another student commented that “I never thought about the impact of rules. Rules are supposed to guarantee fairness. It never occurred to me that the rules were creating the oppression and privilege.”

The left-hand only rule, although applicable to all players, benefits “lefties” and one-handed dexterity. Students are asked to reflect upon how only a relatively narrow subset of physical abilities and mental abilities are rewarded. Instead of allowing all players to bring their unique, natural strengths and abilities to the game, the *Jenga* game privileged some skills over others. The time restraints, although applicable to all players nevertheless favor the rapid actor over the thoughtful planner. In addition, time pressures advantage spontaneity over pre-mediation or more deliberate thought. Insightful discussions are generated when students are asked to consider real-world examples of the exaltation of such competencies as mathematical or athletic abilities, along with examples of the devaluation of care giving, community building or relational skills.

Sustaining Mechanisms of Oppression and Privilege. Student reactions to the subtle and blatant preferential rulings handed down by the judge are surprisingly mixed. Reactions range from the observers’ allegations of foul play and the slighted teams’ anger and frustration, to the advantaged teams’ denial and irritation at complaints. Frequently, the advantaged teams express a conviction in the overall fairness of the judges’ rulings, or may concede only minor and insignificant aberrations that did not impact their win. “Cry-babies on the other (losing) team tried to challenge our win, but I think we deserved the win because we really were the better team.” This is remarkably consistent and collaborated by outcomes of other simulation exercises on structural inequality (Eells, 1987). It serves as an outstanding classroom illustration of the advantage group’s belief in meritorious of their rewards and the invisibility of oppression and privilege.

Did you consider challenging the rules or the judge? What do you think deters non-compliance with the *Jenga* rules? How could you redesign the game to institutionalize the values and ethics of professional social work? These reflection questions lead students to an understanding that essential to the perpetration of institutional oppression is privileged people's complicity with, if not their conscious protection of oppressive structures that preserve positions of advantage. The authors inform students that throughout the over 6-year span that this game has been developed and modified within various classroom settings, there has been almost a total lack of student dissent. There is unquestioned acceptance of arbitrary rules, acquiescence with judges' rulings, and silence among would-be protestors. We conclude this discussion with a talk about how this is parallel to real world experiences.

In the exercise's grand finale, students are asked, "Who was the *real winner* of this game?" After some guided discussion, the instructor urges students to consider that perhaps the *real winner* was not even in the classroom. Indeed, 'Milton Bradley' was the only one who actually profited from the purchase of the game. The exercise then culminates in contemplating how our single-minded participation in the game, maneuvering for individual advantage and debating the outcomes, obscured the identity of the game's true beneficiary, concealing our ultimate complicity in enriching the powerful player behind the scene.

Conclusion

The Jenga game-based learning activity has proven to be a powerful tool for facilitating students' understanding of the mechanisms underlying structural oppression. Game-based simulations, used correctly, can be a compelling experience

for students. Depending upon the student's prior learning and awareness, it often serves as either a central culminating or chief reinforcing education activity.

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