

The Running Game: Modeling Diversity of Inequality in the Classroom

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Abstract

How do you make students aware of the challenges that other people may face in the same situation given the diversity of treatment that societies create? How do you make them aware of how hard it is to be willing to take the risk that comes with challenging such inequalities that are likely to discourage people from doing so as well as why some people challenge such inequalities anyway? In this paper we present a class exercise that shines a light on these dynamics in a way that allows all students to feel- if only in an exercise- how structural inequality can affect people and their decision making.

Introduction

Material dealing with issues of structural inequality poses significant difficulties in the classroom, largely because the dynamics associated with challenging inequalities and decision making in the context of structural factors can be difficult for students to grasp in strictly theoretical terms. While advantages afforded by wealth and other environmental factors can often be grasped without difficulty, dynamics that seem to defy rationality, such as the challenging of inequalities in the face of extreme risks, can test both students and instructors. This issue can be alleviated somewhat through the use of in-class simulations which serve to make the concepts of structural inequality far less abstract and more 'real.' The simulation, which we call 'The Running Game,' uses physical obstructions in conjunction with theory to allow students to feel and experience the effects of structural inequality on decision making, and has shown to be a highly effective teaching supplement. In the sections below we lay out reasons for using simulations, a discussion of the literature on inequality that is relevant to the game, and a review of how to play the game. After this we provide an illustration of how the game can be applied theoretically by providing a verbatim final exam answer about the simulation by one of the co-authors, who was an undergraduate who took the course where the simulation was used. We also provided her after the fact assessment of what she saw as the utility of the simulation. Finally, we conclude the paper with a concise summary of how and why this simulation is a useful pedagogical tool in teaching how

structural inequality affects individual decision-making and leads to differing political outcomes.

Using Simulations

While simulations provide a number of distinct advantages as far breaking down and clarifying complex theories, they come with a number of distinct drawbacks. The largest cost that simulations demand is time, as they not only take away from conventional class activities such as lectures, but also require significant time to organize, prepare, and teach the simulation rules and parameters (Christopher 1999; Ellington et al. 1998). There is also the issue of coordination and focus, as many critics within the literature who advocate for traditional learning models in lieu of simulations argue that simulations all too often are a massive waste of time due to student groups devolving into “villages of idiots” (Raines 2003; Rochester 2003). These difficulties are rooted in the fact that simulations are essentially student-focused approaches to classroom instruction.

As a consequence, any successful simulation will require significant student motivation, interest, and leadership, otherwise even the most well designed simulations will fail to even get off the ground. Instructors therefore require a good understanding of their students, as it must be taken into account that some students will not gravitate towards an active learning or simulation based approach to teaching and prefer a more traditional passive learning model (Torney-Purta 1996, 95). What these critiques do not acknowledge, however, is that simulations need not be wholly collaborative and can also be built around frustration and conflict rather than teamwork, with the aim of teaching notions of failure and putting rules in place to impede students rather than assist them (Sasley 2010). Despite being potentially unpleasant, themes of conflict and failure are often critical for properly understanding many theories of international relations and comparative politics.

Despite these potential pitfalls, supporters of active learning techniques highlight a number of distinct advantages. First, simulations have the ability to animate and give life to material in ways that lectures and textbooks simply cannot, potentially giving a significant boost to comprehension, retention, and student motivation (e.g., Bonwell and Eison 1991; Brown and King 2000; Coffey, et. al. 2011; McCarthy and Anderson 2000; Smith and Boyer 1996). This is especially true in terms of teaching theoretical concepts that are often highly abstract. Simulations make the theories more real, more simple, and easier to remember (Chasek 2005; Asal and Blake 2006; Ip and Linser 2001). This is because simulations often produce memorable events or interactions, sometimes pleasant or unpleasant depending on the learning objectives, that students will associate with the material being taught, which will help students retain and remember key points and concepts later on (Jensen 1998). Along these lines, Shellman and Turan (2006) have found empirical support that simulations enhance “both substantive knowledge and critical and analytical thinking skills” in students. This stems from the fact that simulations allow students to metaphorically climb inside complex theories and experience them, aiding comprehension and potentially building analytical skills (Duffy 2001; Ellington et al. 1998, 7).

Second, the level of immersion provided by simulations also benefit from the fact that, if properly constructed, they will cause students to become far more invested in the

learning process, and as a consequence, learn and retain more by virtue of students having a 'stake in the game' (Lieux 1996; Newmann and Twigg 2000). This also presents a potential solution to problems of student participation, as the interest and investment generated by well-designed simulations can provide an outlet to students who resist or avoid participation in traditional classroom settings (Torney-Purta 1996:95; Asal 2005:361). In addition, while traditional lectures may be suitable or even necessary to convey class material to students, they will not be able to address the diversity of learning styles preferred by the full range of students (Brock and Cameron 1999; Shellman and Turan 2003). Simulations can help fill this void.

The literature on inequality

Inequality is a major focus of political science because equality is increasingly looked upon as a normatively favorable outcome in itself and because equality is believed by many political scientists to lead to increased economic and social development within societies and increased individual happiness.

Inequality in political science is most often broken down into two types of inequality: political inequality and economic inequality. Political inequality refers to the differing levels of influence individuals or groups have over how they are governed. Economic inequality refers to differing levels of individual and group control of material resources. There is often a strong correlation between the two types of inequality with economic inequality often leading to political inequality and vice versa.

We find that one way of improving student understanding of the concept of inequality is to break it down into the main paradigmatic influences that lead to or mitigate inequality. Lichbach and Zuckerman (1997, 2009) usefully split the study of comparative politics into the paradigms of structure, rational actor and culture and we find that using these paradigms is a useful way of helping students understand the causes of inequality and its potential outcomes from diverse perspectives. Additionally, as Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009) point out, each of the paradigms has strengths and liabilities. Knowing this necessitates synthesizing aspects of the paradigms or using them as foils against each other to arrive at a more rigorous and nuanced understanding of inequality. This simulation attempts to synthesize the paradigms of structure, rational actor and culture and to use these paradigms as foils against each other to enlighten students on how inequality can affect individual decision-making.

The structural paradigm's importance can be seen in explanations of multiple influences on inequality. Perhaps most famously Marx (1912) explained the economic inequality of his time in England on capitalism and industrialization. He suggested that these economic developments provided factory owners and their creditors with tremendous wealth while leaving the vast majority of people impoverished. Lenin (1917) and Hobson (1938) also suggested that capitalism and industrialization was leading industrialized states to colonize lesser economically developed areas of the world and leading to imperialism.

Dependency theorists like Prebisch (1982) suggest the economic links that developed during this time period solidified the economic gap between the colonizer and colonized countries. According to these dependency theorists the former colonizer countries largely continue to operate at the top end of the global economic system and the

former colonized countries continue to be sources of cheap material and labor. Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) also suggest that the legacy of extractive political systems that were installed during the colonial era continue to diminish the chances that former colonial states will achieve greater political equality, which they claim also hampers these states' economic growth.

Finally, structuralists point to environmental circumstances as causes for inequality. Examples of this line of theorizing are Hausmann (2001) and Diamond (1999) who point to how the geographic surroundings of societies lead to their relative strength or weakness. According to these theorists the ability to do things like get a head start on food production or avoid debilitating diseases like malaria – both of which are inherent advantages of societies' geographic location - provided some societies, like those in Western Europe, a structural advantage over societies in other regions of the world.

Overall, structuralists provide strongly supported hypotheses that explain why certain individuals and societies face inherent and tremendous challenges to their development. Consistent with these structuralists the presence or lack of structural challenges explains a large amount of the political and economic inequality that exists in the world. However, structural accounts of inequality lack the cultural influences and focus on the individual that explain other aspects of inequality. For instance, structural explanations do not clarify why some societies *have* developed more inclusive political and economic systems, why colonization ended, and why some countries like the Newly Industrialized Countries of East Asia escaped economic dependency.

The rational actor paradigm is often the paradigm that is used in conjunction with, and as a foil to the structural paradigm and fills in some of the deficiencies of the structural paradigm. Its biggest strengths are its parsimony and its leverage in explaining how individual choices sometimes lead to otherwise inexplicable results. The generalizability of the findings are favorable to social scientists like Bates (1997, 2007) who are looking to understand general principles of human interaction and macro outcomes from individual behavior. One of the most important aspects of rational choice in understanding structural inequality is explaining why individuals often are unable or unwilling to work together to overcome institutionalized structural inequality.

A prime example of this approach is Olson's seminal work (1965), which provides a plausible explanation for why collective action that benefits groups of individuals often does not occur. Olson assumed that individuals are self-interested and therefore also assumed that they are unlikely to join in collective action if they believe they will reap the benefits of the action even without specifically acting themselves. In fact, Olson shows that individuals who do not engage in collective action can make relative gains in time, money and effort relative to those that do act. Consequently, rational individuals often do not act because acting would likely not bring commensurate rewards. These assumptions and theorizing make sense of enduring and unequal economic and political systems and the lack of collective movement to change them.

From the other end of the spectrum Olson (1993) also examines the rational decision making of rulers of societies. He assumes they are self-interested with the main goal of maximizing their access to material wealth. As such, he believes that rulers that expect to hold territory for long periods of time are more lenient on the residents within their territory than "roving bandits" that pillage and move on to the next village. The idea behind this is that by allowing residents to keep a portion of their production the ruler

motivates the residents to produce more, thereby increasing the ruler's overall wealth and relative advantage in strength over other potential competitors. Olson speculates that greater economic wealth and prosperity can also lead to greater political freedom for the residents. Nevertheless, Olson also speculates that when rulers are fearful of losing control of territory they are likely to extract as much as possible from the residents to increase their security or enrich themselves before moving on to the next village.

While this rational choice approach is instrumental in understanding inequality it also has its problems. It is criticized for being too parsimonious, too deterministic, too wedded to neo-classical assumptions of individual self-interest and because it often does not account for the incomplete information that many seemingly rational individuals encounter when making their choices (Green and Shapiro 1994, Thelen and Steinmo 1992). Olson (1993, pp. 574) himself asserts, "Since human nature is profoundly complex and individuals rarely act out of unmixed motives, the assumption of rational self-interest that I have been using to develop this theory is obviously much too simple to do justice to reality." As a result, Merton (1965) pushes rationalists to thin out their rationality by including the contextual nature of situations and the limits on individual choice making that seemingly bounds rationality (Simon 1957).

Culturalists provide the important contextual understanding that is often the glue between individual actions and the structure they operate within. However, as Ross (2009), Bevir and Kedar (2008) and Johnson (1997) decry, the analysis of political phenomena from a cultural paradigm is often neglected in favor of the more generalizable and empirically testable structural and rational choice paradigms. Similar to structure, culture bounds the range of individual decision-making. It does so by focusing analysis on how societal norms and ideals shape the context in which individuals make their choices. Societal norms and values are notoriously difficult to ascertain because they are difficult to measure and often change over time and through the agency of charismatic individuals. For example, the seemingly irrational actions of selfless individuals like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Mohamed Bouazizi do not fit the structural or rational actor paradigms. They do, however, suggest that cultural influences are driving some exceptional individual actions, which in turn influence the actions and value sets of other individuals. Accordingly, as Lim (2013) explains, culture is often the cause and the effect of political phenomena, making it difficult to determine if changes in culture are causing an outcome or are the result of an outcome.

That being said, cultural influences are at least partly responsible for many of the events that either increased or decreased equality within and amongst societies throughout history. For example the Enlightenment cultural movement that occurred during the 17th and 18th century weakened the divine right of monarchs to rule in Europe and provided the normative foundation for the beginnings of capitalist economies to replace feudalism. Weber (1905) famously captured how the increased stress some Europeans societies placed on individual freedom, rationality, and the "Protestant work ethic" led to greater economic productivity in Europe compared to the rest of the world during this time.

Similarly, Marxist inspired revolutionaries in Eastern Europe and Asia changed cultural values and governing structures in the countries they led. Ironically, the command economies of these Communist states overwhelmingly put economic and political control in the hands of the relatively few. Some theorists, like Aron (2011),

believe that changes in cultural values, as much as the growing economic inequality between these states and “Western” capitalist societies, led to the collapse of Communism as an ideological underpinning for governance and economics within these states.

Furthermore, theorists have also used culture to explain how inequality can develop within societies. Lewis (1968) explains how a “culture of poverty” could cause individuals to reproduce and sustain conditions of scarcity in communities and cause self-perpetuating economic inequality within states. Putnam (1993) similarly pinned economic and political inequality within Italy on the presence or lack of social capital within communities that otherwise faced similar institutional settings.

Because of the power of culture to affect political outcomes, primarily rational choice and structural analysts have used cultural attributes to round out their analyses. For example, Bates et al. (1998) and Levi (2009) show how cultural context often affects rational individual action. Additionally, long-term historical analysis of phenomena like the evolution of the political economy of the Western world (North 1990), the success of democratic institutions (Putnam 1993), and the ability of some cultures to overcome collective action problems (Ostrom 1990) meld the cultural paradigm with the structural paradigm. Consequently, there is a general understanding that structure, rational choice and culture all influence political interactions and outcomes.

This literature review illustrates the ways in which the differing paradigms of rational actor, structure, and culture can be used to explain inequality. However, it is difficult to elucidate the importance of these paradigms to a concept like inequality to first year undergraduate students. Out of necessity we build on this literature and attempt to make the concept of structural inequality more accessible to students through the use of the Running Game simulation. This simulation clarifies the paradigms and the interactions that can occur between them. It also uses these paradigms to provide an observable and memorable experience for the students to help them fully grasp how structural inequality can keep many rational individuals from acting to improve their situation. Furthermore, it shows how cultural influences and individual attributes can motivate individuals to make risky decisions to improve their positions despite significant structural challenges and perhaps motivate similar responses within political and economic systems.

The game

The running game is designed to illustrate to students the impact of how inequality of outcomes may impact how people decide to participate in society as well as pushing them to think if a rational actor or a structural or a cultural model is the best way to explain the outcome of such structural inequalities. We believe the Running game shines a light on these dynamics in a way that allows all students to feel - if only in an exercise- how structural inequality can affect people and their decision-making.

We have used the running game in a class as small as 23 and as large as 150. Before the game is explained either Teaching Assistants or two student volunteers need to be selected as “TAs” or professor reps or whatever you would like to label them. They

represent the professor and are for the purpose of the game the professor's representatives in the game. At the beginning of the game the students are told the following:

- We will have a race to the front of the room (the TAs will participate as well).
- No one is required to be part of it. If you are part of it, and you are first, you get an automatic A on the next quiz and all students (whether they were in the race or not) get a half grade bonus.
- There are two more rules, but before we read those, if these were the only rules who would participate in the race?
- Why? Why not?

All the students who plan to participate are asked to stand. In our experience almost the entire class gets up to participate at this stage. As one student put it, "Why not? I have nothing to lose." It is important to have at least some discussion at each stage of the game so that when the game is over the students can reflect on how their thinking changed with the implementation of more rules as the game progressed. After the brief discussion it is time for the next of rules, which are:

- The TAs get to start in the middle of the room
- And if they win no one gets a bump in their grade.
- Who would participate in the race?
 - Why? Why not?

With the addition of these rules some students sit down. When asked why they usually say. What is the point? The TA's are going to win anyway." However, many students still remain standing. They figure they may lose - but they may win, so why not try. Then comes the final rule - which has a dramatic impact on who remains standing. This final rule is:

- If you participate in the race and you lose you get an automatic F on the next quiz.
- This is the last rule - who is going to run?
 - Why? Why not?

At this juncture of the simulation most students, and sometimes all students, sit down. It is not unusual for some of the students to actually be angry about the last rule and decry how unfair it is to them. With the large structural impediments of the rules of the game set against them and the high price for failure it is clear to most students that they have a slim chance to use the race to improve their standing in the class by this stage of the simulation. It is important and interesting to note that despite the long odds and adverse consequences for losing there are often some students who still insist on running and sometimes even win.

We then have a discussion of which theory best explains people's behavior - culture, structure or rational actor. There are often very heated discussions between the defenders of a structural approach and defenders of a Rational Actor approach as to which is the more decisive in understanding the majority of students' decisions to participate in the final iteration of the simulation. Although culture often is relegated in this discussion some students used the cultural approach in conjunction with the rational actor approach to explain why the outliers continued to participate in the simulation despite the increasing odds against them. One winner of the simulation pointed to his "competitive nature" - a trait he attributed to his upbringing and his participation in competitive sports - as a reason he attempted to buck the odds. However, he also suggested that he thought he had a reasonable chance at winning

because of his athletic prowess and long stride length. Furthermore, he already had a strong quiz grade and knew that the lowest quiz grade would be dropped, so he did not have much to lose if he did not succeed in the simulation.

A further twist on this game is to ask the students to analyze the professor's representatives' role in the game. For instance, what incentives do the representatives have to win that will make them give their full effort? And what structural, cultural and rational actor impediments do the representatives have against them - such as not being able to easily see how far behind them their competitors are, being slow, wanting to be liked by their students, or a cultural affinity for underdogs - that also constrain their ability to win despite an apparent head start?

After this analysis of the simulation we then ask the students to think about how we might apply this game to the impact of inequalities of power and opportunity in different societies and political systems. We ask them to analyze how inequalities may influence individual behavior and the outcome of events. The conversation is usually pretty robust and the students seem to get the argument about structure, rational actor behavior, and culture and how the three approaches intertwine in individual decision-making to lead to eventual outcomes.

Student processing and impact

To get a feeling for how students can benefit from the Running Game in thinking theoretically we have included here in full a paper by one of our co-authors who took the class as a student where the game was used that illustrates exactly how students are encouraged to apply theory to the running game and how it helps them to better understand and compare such theory. Our coauthor then provides her take as a student about the pedagogical value of the exercise in the class.

Paper from class

The Running Game and its various outcomes can be explained by both structural and rational actor theory. Structural theory focuses on how the game is played, whereas rational actor looks at why one should play the game. The rules of the game and the environment in which the game takes place are two very important factors to structural theory (Lim, 2010, pg. 80). On the other hand, a person's potential gains and losses in the game are the significant issues for rational actor (Lim, 2010, pg. 77). Where structure studies the construction of the game, rational actor studies the individuals playing it.

As we progressed through the game, new rules were introduced. The original rules were that if we raced and won, we would get an A on the next quiz, and all students would receive a half-grade bonus, regardless of whether they raced. From a rational actor view, there were no costs but large benefits. In this situation, everyone would win. Though there was no need to participate in order to gain at least something, racing could have potentially provided an extra benefit, at the extra cost of having to run very fast in order to win. A true rational actor would have raced for the chance of the A. Things are different from a structural viewpoint; looking at these original rules, it is impossible to lose, no matter if one

run or not. And, as we saw in class, if people don't have to run, they aren't going to. According to rational actor theory, this would be because, to some people, the cost of rising from one's seat and running across the room is not worth the small chance of earning an A, and one could gain either way. Structure bases its argument in the rules, however, and would say that the way the game is set up gives no incentive to run at this point, because the rules already provide for a half-grade bonus for everyone.

The game changed dramatically with the introduction of another rule: the TAs can start in the middle of the room, and if one of them wins, no one gets a grade increase. With this, a rational actor would say that there is no reason not to run, as there is now a cost to losing. Certain people believed themselves to be faster than the TAs and capable of winning, so they could still benefit themselves and the class by running and beating the TAs. Structural tradition argues the opposite. The fact that the TAs start out in the middle of the room puts all the students at a distinct disadvantage, one that discourages students from running because of how "unfair" it is. Although, it could have gone in the other direction and given students a greater incentive to run in order to outnumber the TAs and gain some sort of advantage that way, but in reality most of the class sat down at this because they asked, "What's the point?"

The last rule added had the greatest effect: if one participates and loses, he or she gets an automatic F on the next quiz. For rational actors, the costs here outweigh the benefits, so it would be extremely unwise to run unless absolutely sure of one's speed. The structural argument would agree that running was a terrible idea, as the odds were stacked very high against the students. Only two people ran: Alejandro and Robert. In a way they could be considered rational actors because they were comfortable with their current grades, so an F on one quiz was not a great cost to them, and they potentially could have earned a beneficial A. However, the majority of the class remained seated.

Of the two theories, the one that better explains the outcomes of the game is structure. Rational actor theory says that everyone should have wanted to participate in the first run and sat down in the last run, but this is not what happened, and structure accounts for this. With the original rules, people did not run even though they could have received an added benefit from winning, and this was because the rules made everyone a winner. The second rule turned the system against the students, so we refused to run even though we could have benefited by building up a numerical advantage against the TAs. The last rule was responsible for turning away all but two people. People in class were very focused on the "fairness" aspect of the rules, and rational actor cares not for fairness but for advantage. The fact that everyone was put at a distinct disadvantage by the structured rules of the game reinforces the role that structure plays in this game, as it was these rules that stopped people from running.

Student Assessment

The Running Game is effective at introducing the basic ideas associated with comparative political theories. As the rules change throughout the game, students are faced with disadvantages inherent to the structure of the simulation that make them

unwilling to participate in the race. With each new rule, the benefits of running decrease and the costs increase. Each particular student is forced to seriously contemplate the risks of running, since real-life grades are on the line. This characteristic of the game makes students think in terms of rational actor theory, performing cost-benefit analysis to determine if they should race or not. The emphasis on rules and built-in disadvantages teaches students about the structural theory of comparative politics and about innate inequality. By the end of the game, the rules are so hostile to the students' chances at winning that it seems useless to try, representative of the challenges facing those born or otherwise forced into discriminatory situations and systems outside of their control.

The original rules of the game allow for all students to win even if they do not race. At this point, the structure of the game favors everyone, and those running face no negative consequences. However, with the addition of the next rule, the game no longer grants everyone the advantage. The teaching assistants, who can now start the race in the middle of the classroom, are far more likely to win than the students at the back of the room. In terms of social and economic inequality, the TAs are privileged and given their advantage by birth. The students must work harder to have a chance at achieving the same goals not because they are necessarily less skilled than the TAs but because they were placed into a lower tier of society by forces beyond their control. The TAs' position represents the fundamental structural argument regarding poverty and social disadvantage, which is that existing hierarchies and structures, not individual actions, are responsible. Rational actor theory argues the opposite and focuses instead on individual choice, which is represented in the game by each student's decision to participate or not. The final rule added to the game emphasizes the structural view on the subject. On top of their current disadvantage at the back of the room, students are penalized for losing. Both structural and rational actor theory argue against running, as the system is completely opposed to the students' chances, and for most students the risks wildly outweigh the potential rewards.

Conclusion

Although some students remained passive and others derided the simulation's outcomes as unfair, we found that the Running Game simulation is a helpful pedagogical tool in the political science classroom. Significantly, the Running Game promotes student participation in an iterative fashion that subtly underlines how rules provide a structure in which rational actors make their individual judgments on how to act. The generality of the simulation allows the facilitator to link it to meta-theories of politics, and intendant middle range theories that explain the possible causes of inequality, making more traditional lecture and reading-based learning more tangible to the students. These benefits were highlighted in the active and heated discussion that took place during and after the simulation and in the insightful analysis papers the students produced after the simulations. Overall, the Running Game simulation was well worth the classroom time we invested in it and the majority of the students found that it greatly aided their understanding of politics and inequality.

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