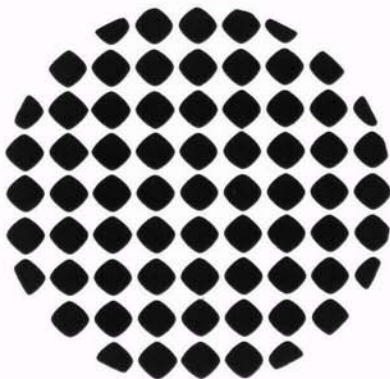




Games—and the Ghetto

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THE playing of simulation games is as serious an enterprise as child's play—but child's play can be a very serious business indeed. Erik Erikson contends that through play children "try on" adult conduct. Socioeconomic reality, growing out of historical forces, may be built into the structure of simulation games. Thus games are significantly more life-like and encourage more meaningful "play" than do the less structured sociodramas or role playing situations from which they are in part derived.

Play also is viewed by the cognitive theorist as the practicing of problem-solving techniques so vital to the survival of mankind. Games have in common with role playing and sociodrama the presentation of an opportunity to solve problems particular to man: role conflicts. Games, however, are superior teaching devices in the arena of social reality because they place conflicts within the institutional and historical framework which both define and on occasion cause human antagonism.

Conflict and Role Behavior

In considering "Conflict and Role Behavior," Jacob Getzels contrasted nomothetic and idiographic dimensions of social behavior, which he defines respectively as "two classes of phenomena, the publicly mandatory and the privately necessary."¹ These two forces interact within a social system to produce social behavior.

¹Jacob W. Getzels. "Conflict and Role Behavior in the Educational Setting." In: *Readings in the Social Psychology of Education*. W. W. Charters, Jr., and N. T. Gage, editors. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1963. pp. 309-18.

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In sociodrama and role playing the players bring the needs-dispositions which characterize the idiographic dimension of role behavior. Naturally, these techniques have been useful both therapeutically and for teaching psychological understanding through empathetic projection. If one wishes to teach social understanding, however, simulation games are superior because they also employ the parallel normative or prescribed dimensions of role.

This addition alone increases realism. Games, however, also can reflect what Getzels has called "the imperative functions that are carried out in certain routinized patterns." What makes these functions imperative, what makes this pattern routine is attachment to and derivation from historical forces. As Getzels shows, these dimensions are enclosed within the larger cultural framework. Especially in social studies simulation, games can present the restrictions and opportunities caused by those forces acting historically both over time and over cultures. Players bringing to the game their own (or simulated) need-dispositions find that conflicts develop with stinging personal reality as they confront the nomothetically structured dimensions of role. Individual ideals strain against the necessity of party loyalty while playing at national politics.² The movement of troops across borders dismays the peacemakers in "Dangerous Parallel," a simulation based on the Korean crisis.³

This heightened reality is desirable for three strong pedagogical reasons:

1. Research would seem to indicate that the more similar two situations are, the easier the transfer of training (or the easier to generalize the concept). Especially in teaching social behavior, the influence of models is more important than the learning of data and so the reliability of the model to the larger reality outside the classroom becomes crucial.

2. An unstructured role playing situation presents an open and therefore both threatening and unrealistic option to students whose individual "control beliefs" cause them to retire from challenge. If one believes he cannot control his future, he collapses into numbing ennui. By a careful structuring for reality and security, such boys and girls may be led slowly along a continuum of simulations providing at once increasingly greater and more realistic control over their own destinies.

3. Conflict appears to be a necessity for Twenty-First Century man. We live on our increasingly crowded planet, with increasingly different life styles growing out of an increasingly complex technology. Yet conflict, for those who know how to cope with it, need not inevitably be an evil. Students who learn to deal with the conflicts induced in simulation, who learn to test methods of competition and cooperation under various reality conditions, can be citizens more able to cope with the stresses and strains of human life. It is not only the static mirror of reality which games present as content models: the dynamic interaction of roles also presents a model of process.

² "Napoli." Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, Charles E. Merrill, Inc., 1300 Alum Creek Drive, Columbus, Ohio 43216.

³ "Dangerous Parallel." Foreign Policy Association, 345 East 46th Street, New York, New York 10017.

A Pertinent Application

Consider the application of games to "the ghetto" and the problems symbolized by that word. Here conflict and control beliefs are essential elements of the reality situation.

It is not enough that black and white say of each other "Why don't they . . . ?" Each needs to understand the nomothetic pressures built into particular cultures that prevent individual action whether or not persons desire change. The rich confronted with the model of reality of what Michael Harrington calls "the cycle of poverty" can better evaluate how a call to individual enterprise sounds when heard in the slums. The poor, playing at allocating tax resources, may appreciate the rationale for middle-class housing in urban redevelopment areas.

Children who are economically deprived are those children who most need "control belief" building experiences. The sense of helplessness (a quite rational response considering the probable futures of these boys and girls) which leads to social and personal alienation can be mitigated by sequential simulation games (if the society simultaneously provides a more promising macrocosm). Control upon systems structure provides a method for graded exposures to reality, matched to the degree of freedom within which players can operate comfortably.

Dangers

As suggested parenthetically above, an important caveat must be raised here. The strength of simulated games utilizing public mandation or role ascription derives from the two particular characteristics in which games differ from techniques which emphasize the idiographic dimension. These are: first, the verisimilitude of the game structure to the social macrocosm of which it is the analog; and second, the degree of structure built into the learning situation. From just these two characteristics, however, two dangers arise.

The selection of simulation variables is made upon certain assumptions of the nature of reality and of the significance of individual parts of that reality. Unless these assumptions are sought and discovered, the creator of a simulation game may be teaching one concept while he believes he is teaching another. For example, in "Dangerous Parallel," the rejection of the option that peace might break out was made in order to facilitate the computerization of game dynamics. Playing this game may in fact be teaching children the inevitability of world conflict. This is not, however, because of a basis in social reality, but because of game convenience.

The second danger lies on the cutting edge of one of the strengths of simulation. By limiting the number of variables involved, simulation games gain control of situations which are potentially dangerous to individuals or groups. Especially in areas where conflict may lead to violence (as in the consideration of ghetto problems), such control is desirable. Yet if controls are not "phased out" as a sequence of simulations is developed, a false sense of understanding or power may result. So when transfer to a real life situation is called for, frustration and increased bitterness may result.

If these dangers are kept in mind, the technique of simulation games enables educators and community workers to approach the problems of conflict with safety, reality, and relevance. Individuals may gain a greater sense of the reality of the nomothetic expectations of players in roles complementary to themselves, as well as a greater sense of the rights and responsibilities devolving upon themselves as role players. At the same time, the practice of resolving conflicts in situations of increasing similarity to reality can provide skill training in areas of imperative demand.

What gives the technique of simulation games its special strength for meeting today's "peculiar" challenge of the ghetto is also what gives it its unique strength in studying other social issues. Human interaction takes place at the intersection of then and now, of others and self. Simulation may reflect the larger social context within which individual decision is made. □

Coming Events

January 8-11, 1969. "The Unstudied Curriculum: Its Impact on Children." A conference sponsored by the ASCD Elementary Education Council and the Department of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Education, NEA. Sheraton Park Hotel, Washington, D.C.

January 22-25, 1969. "The Nature of the Learner's Reality." A conference sponsored by the ASCD Educational Media Commission, NEA. Sheraton-Palace Hotel, San Francisco, California.

April 16-19, 1969. "Student Unrest: Threat or Promise?" A conference sponsored by the ASCD Council on Secondary Education, NEA. Regency Hyatt House, Atlanta, Georgia.

April 24-26, 1969. "The Ecology of the Classroom." A conference sponsored by the ASCD Research Council, NEA. Thunderbolt Hotel, San Francisco, California.

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