Intergroup Monopoly is an action teaching game that modifies the classic Monopoly board game to explore the dynamics of group-based inequality. In Intergroup Monopoly, players begin with unequal amounts of money and are given individualized rules that reflect differing degrees of privilege or disadvantage. For example, a privileged player might receive $350 rather than the standard $200 for passing Go, whereas a disadvantaged player might be permitted to move only half the amount rolled on each turn. During this initial phase of the game, disadvantaged players quite often fall into substantial debt. In a second phase, "equal opportunity" is implemented and all players are permitted to play by normal Monopoly rules. What the players typically discover, however, is that even under conditions of equality, formerly disadvantaged players continue to decline and struggle with debt. This discovery leads to a classroom discussion about how to effectively address the enduring effects of prior group-based disadvantages.

Description

The most popular commercial board game in the world, Monopoly, has been played by more than one billion people, yet its early history is not widely known. Monopoly was originally based on "The Landlord's Game," a board game created more than a century ago by a Quaker political activist, Elizabeth Magie, who hoped that it would teach how monopolies unfairly concentrate wealth. In Magie's (1902) words, the game was:

"a practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its usual outcomes and consequences... It might well have been called the 'Game of Life,' as it contains all the elements of success and failure in the real world... [Let young people] see clearly the gross injustice of our present land system and when they grow up, if they are allowed to develop naturally, the evil will soon be remedied."

Although the Landlord's Game was played on some college campuses in the 1920s, its teaching potential was never fully realized, and despite Magie's claim and the best of intentions, her game left out key elements of "success and failure in the real world." Perhaps most obviously, the Landlord's Game and its descendant, Monopoly, both ignore the presence of past or present discrimination. Instead, all players begin these games with an equal amount of money and are treated identically by banks, businesses, and courts of law — an artificial level of equality quite different from the experience of many women and minority members.

To overcome this limitation, I developed Intergroup Monopoly — an action teaching game that modifies Monopoly to illustrate the systematic and structural nature of group-based inequalities. By playing Intergroup Monopoly, students come to see how the long-term effects of overt discrimination are not easily overcome by equal opportunity alone.

Intergroup Monopoly can be played by groups competing against each other (with individual group members taking turns playing on behalf of their group), or by individual students who differ in status and play against each other. Regardless, a hallmark of the game is that players begin with differing degrees of wealth and face differing levels of adversity when the game is played.
I have used the game for six years in a 30-student course I teach entitled The Psychology of Oppression. In the first half of the course, I discuss three interdependent institutions of upward mobility: income, housing, and education. Then, once this background context has been covered, I introduce the game as a tool for understanding interdependencies between the first two of these institutions. Most often, I divide the class into six teams made up of four or five students playing against each other as individuals.

Playing the Game

All that’s needed to play Intergroup Monopoly are a standard Monopoly game and a set of rule sheets for the players (see below for the rules I use). Intergroup Monopoly is played in much the same way as classic Monopoly, with two exceptions: (1) the rules differ from player to player, and (2) there are two phases of play rather than one.

The full exercise with instructions and game board materials is available online at the TRAILS website.

References: