
“The Academic Game” as a Frame Game

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“The Academic Game” is a “frame game” focusing on problems of sex, status, and organizational development. It is a specific model of a generic game that has differential consequences for men and women, and is easily adaptable to other organizational settings, including public administration and industry. The game provides experiential learning about organizational politics, leadership, and decision-making; it specifically explores the social-structural barriers, intrapsychic pressures, and ethical dilemmas confronted by women in academia and other organizational settings. Twenty-three role players with names such as Bob Chief, George Plodder, Carol Feminist, and Sally Swinger interact, reward each other, and record on a large scoreboard their efforts to advance in rank and status.

This article provides a brief explication of the frame game concept, summarizes the goals and procedures of the game, and shows how the “EAG” debriefing model facilitates adapting it to other organizational settings.

Introduction

“The Academic Game” [1] is a “frame game”—that is, a game that can be adapted for a wide range of purposes, and is applicable to a diversity of needs or interests of the participants. It is an “academic” model of a generic game that focuses on problems of sex, status, and organizational development. As a generic type, it can be employed in a variety of settings that are ostensibly different from the world of academia, but have

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similar organizational structure. We have used it with good results in workshops for personnel in nursing, social work, counseling, public schools, industry, government bureaus and agencies, and women's groups of various sorts.

Transference to other institutional settings is facilitated through the debriefing process. Thus, players can learn through playing a game with an academic model how to analyze and articulate the different specific components of situations or organizations in which they function. They do this by discussing the game's transferability and researching the problem areas they confront. A further step might be to design a game representing a "reformed" system, which has the presumed "flaws" or "obstacles" removed, and then test this revised model. In this instance "The Academic Game" is used as a "priming" game—that is, a game used to initiate design of a game appropriate for another setting by devising different specific components built into the same skeletal model. (See Duke and Greenblat [2] for more on "game-generating games.")

Our purpose here is to describe "The Academic Game" and, through application of the EIAG debriefing model [3], show how the game can be utilized to facilitate transferring it to other settings and/or to initiate design of a new game.

Purpose of "The Academic Game"

"The Academic Game" is an interaction game that emphasizes the differential impact of status and authority structure for men and women with different personality styles as role-players. Within the game, access to higher status is determined by an individual's ability to be competitively successful. Based on research done by a Task Force of Division 35 (Psychology of Women) of the American Psychological Association [4], it incorporates systemic obstacles to women's advancement by means of barriers built into role profiles, chance cards, starting scores, assigned ranks, and differential reward power. In general, the objectives of the game are to:

1. Increase knowledge about how the academic system functions and the nature of its organizational politics.
2. Identify social-structural barriers to women's assumption of leadership roles within the system.
3. Increase sensitivity to the decision-making dilemmas and conflicts to which men and women are differentially exposed when vying for rank and status.
4. Identify specific ambivalences, complexities, and role conflicts attending women's frequent need to integrate familial, occupational, and professional commitments.

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5. Enhance understanding of the dynamic interaction between system demands and personality need-dispositions.
6. Identify specific avenues and strategies to enable women to become more effectively goal-directed.
7. Identify institutional change strategies that will facilitate sex equity.

Game Description Role Description

The twenty-three roles in "The Academic Game" include a department chair (Bob Chief), two full and two associate professors (the organization's "top brass"), four assistant professors ("middle-level" management), and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, six advanced and eight beginning graduate students (the rank and file). The twenty-third role is that of "Spouse," a no-reward no-penalty role. Table 1 lists the name and rank of each role for competing players.

As Table 1 indicates, roles are stereotypes; e.g., John Politico is a full professor trying to take the Chair from Bob Chief; Alice Tuff is Politico's female competitor. Mary Pert, an assistant professor, has extra reward power because of her research expertise. George Plodder and Martin Loner are serious graduate students, while Steven Grin, an associate professor, is a bit of a womanizer, chasing graduate student Helen Diligent. Sally Swinger doesn't mind using her sex to get ahead, while this route to upward mobility offends Carol Feminist. Since every organization has at least one Ded Wood, we anticipate the introduction of this role in later models!

Game Equipment

Each player has a role profile card and name tag, color coded to denote rank. Full professors have gold tags and cards; associate professors, blue; assistant professors, red; advanced graduate students, dark green; beginning graduate students, light green. Players are also provided the necessary instructions, score sheets, pencils, and name tags.

Role profile cards provide a "personality" caricature and information about the person's commitments, work and personal values, and reward power. They give general guidelines for behavior, but leave room for individual interpretation and improvisation.

Game Play

Table 2 illustrates the sequence of game play. The game opens with a "Beginning of the Year" party, during which players get acquainted and try to find out who can help them most in fulfilling their professional

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tasks. Following this "no-reward, no-penalty" interaction, players learn how to interact for professional points, reward one another, and calculate their scores. Rewards and costs, in this sense, are conceived of as the outcomes of any interaction and as such we presume can be measured [5].

In successive rounds, players act out their roles in interaction with one another, and reward or punish role partners according to personal and professional needs. Higher status roles have more reward power than lower status roles. Males have more reward power and higher starting scores within their ranks than females. Each round lasts from 5 to 10

Table 1
Roles and Academic Ranks

Role	Rank
<i>Senior Faculty</i>	
Bob Chief	Full Professor, Chair
Alice Tuff	Full Professor
John Politico	Full Professor
Steven Grin	Associate Professor
Ivan Smart	Associate Professor
<i>Junior Faculty</i>	
John Academic	Assistant Professor
Joe College	Assistant Professor
Carol Feminist	Assistant Professor
Mary Pert	Assistant Professor
<i>Graduate Students</i>	
Michael Scholar	Advanced Graduate Student
Allen Competitive	Advanced Graduate Student
Jim Friendly	Advanced Graduate Student
Bob Industrious	Advanced Graduate Student
Jane Egalitarian	Advanced Graduate Student
Liz Mature	Advanced Graduate Student
George Plodder	Beginning Graduate Student
Martin Loner	Beginning Graduate Student
Eddie Cool	Beginning Graduate Student
Ellen Hassled	Beginning Graduate Student
Susan Committed	Beginning Graduate Student
Sally Swinger	Beginning Graduate Student
Helen Diligent	Beginning Graduate Student

Table 2
Game Play in "The Academic Game"

Sequence of game play in "The Academic Game"

1. Beginning of the year party
2. Committee meetings and elections
3. Round one interaction
4. Interround break: score calculation, committee meetings, committee reports, advancement records
5. Rounds 2-6 interaction and interround breaks (repeats activities in steps 3 and 4)
6. Postgame discussion

minutes, during which time players seek as many interactions as they can obtain from significant others. Chance cards taken at the beginning of each round add an element of luck to the action and scoring, while a "word skills" optional game can be played between rounds to simulate the publish or perish policy in academia and increase players' scores.

A large pyramid-shaped scoreboard (see Figure 1) indicates the increasing competition for a few spaces. Players' name pieces are color coded to correspond to name tags and role profile cards, and are advanced according to points earned. However, approval of the Department Chair and the Promotions and Tenure Committee must be obtained before a name piece can be advanced to a higher rank. It is thus possible to earn points but remain in the same position, unable to get promoted.

Over several rounds, players acquire skill in the behaviors that help them get ahead. Progress can be interrupted by domestic conflict (provided by a role player named "Spouse," who cannot award points but can interact with all married players, male and female), or by structural problems within the system (e.g., freezes of tenure, budget cuts), which can be introduced by the Game Director.

Men usually come out ahead of women, although some women manage, in the game as in the real world, to get ahead despite the built-in obstacles. For instance, Alice Tuff sometimes moves ahead of John Politico. As a Full Professor, her starting score is the same as his. While Politico's progress can be impeded by "Spouse's" demands on his time, Tuff is divorced. (It should be mentioned that Spouse can do nice things too.)

The optimal amount of time required for play and debriefing is 3 hours. The game manual details activities that can be included or deleted, varying the time for game play from 2 and a half to 4 hours. However, the game need not be played in a single block of time. It can be played over several periods, or in three or four 1-hour blocks, a schedule that allows time for between session "lobbying" and politicking.

The Debriefing Process

There is consensus among simulation gamers that the debriefing process provides a critical aspect of learning. Too often, regrettably, the debriefing aspect is either ignored or treated in a trivial manner with general questions such as, "How did you like the game?" or "What did you learn from the game?" The assumption is that learning will occur in any such experience. While it is true that some kind of learning occurs, it is plau-

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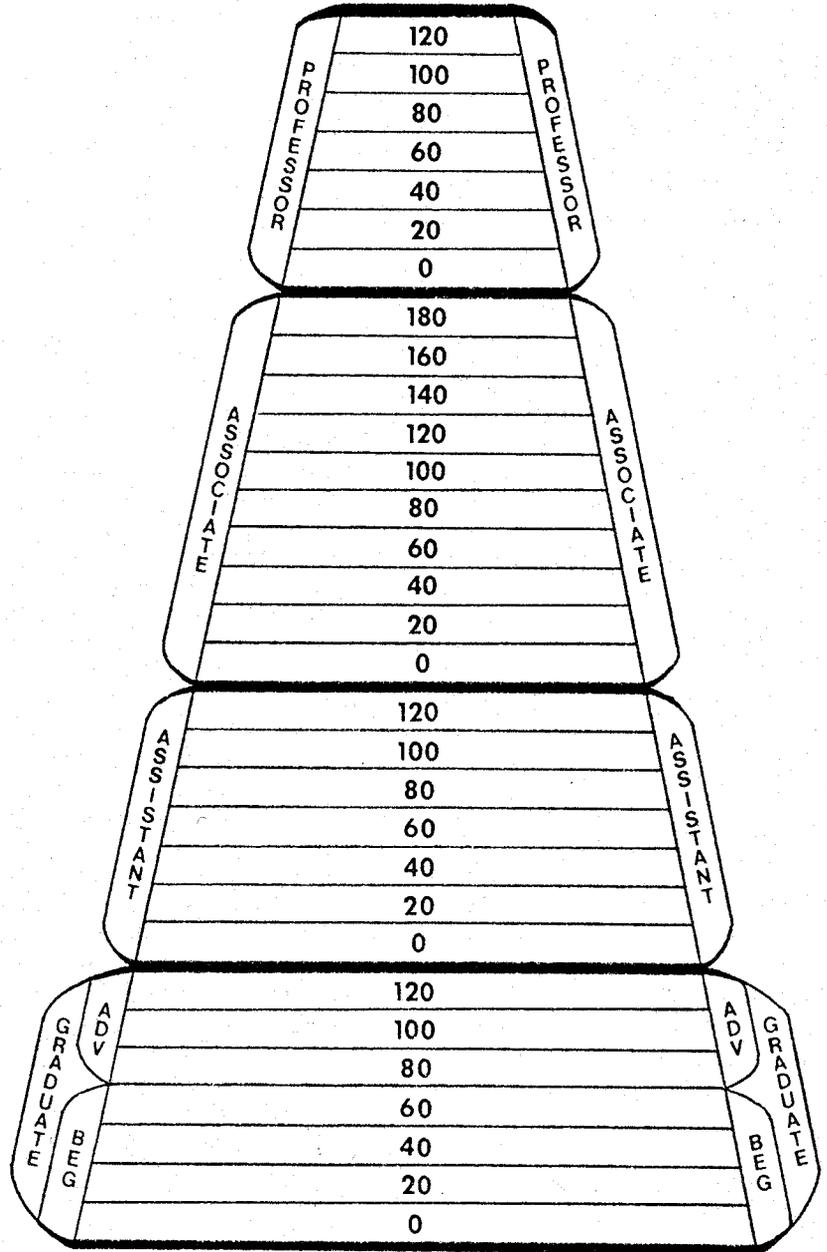


Figure 1.
"The Academic Game."

sible that the learning is erroneous as frequently as it is correct. Indeed, many people go through experience after experience in life learning the wrong things or nothing because they have not learned to analyze their experiences, draw conclusions, and modify behavior accordingly. It is difficult for the unskilled player to sort out all the data the game generates and draw logical, well-supported conclusions. The more sophisticated the game, the more difficult this is to do. It is also vital to the

learning process that the game experience provide the player with some means of checking the validity of conclusions against the real world.

The EIAG experiential learning model provides a basic debriefing structure that facilitates generalization and validation of conclusions [3]. We shall outline the model and then illustrate its application in debriefing “The Academic Game.”

The EIAG Debriefing Model

- A. EXPERIENCE—“Do”—Have the game experience.
What were you trying to do?
- B. IDENTIFY—“Look”—Be descriptive
How did you feel when . . . ?
What did you say when . . . ?
What did he do when you . . . ?
What do you think this represents?
- C. ANALYZE—“Think”—Be analytical.
What problems did you face and how did you attack them?
How were you affected by this happening?
Why did this result in . . . ?
What relationships do you see between . . . ?
- D. GENERALIZE—“Learn”—Draw conclusions.
What parallels do you see between the elements of the game and the “real world?”
How do you know that the conclusions you are drawing from this experience are valid?

Applying the Model to “The Academic Game”

Experience

The experience of the game is what is going to be debriefed. Throughout debriefing, players will be articulating their experiences in the game. They will talk about their goals; how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel in a particular role; what they worried about; what frustrated them; who frustrated them; when they were happy; how they handled their discomforts, worries, frustrations, joys, and triumphs; how it seemed to them that others were faring and coping in those respects; and so forth.

The next three stages of debriefing attempt to move participants toward using these experiences in analysis, toward “decentering their thoughts from their perceptions,” as Piaget and Inhelder [6] describe the essential step in mature thinking. They are asked to focus on the three great questions of intellectual analysis: What is it? How come? So what?

Identify

In the second stage (“What is it?”), participants are asked to specify exactly what happened, in objective, descriptive terms. What did you see or hear in the game? What happened? What was the distribution of scores? What were the activities of the high scorers? What lucky break or chance card seemed to contribute to the player’s success? What happened to the lowest scorer? What were the general relationships between where people started out and where they finished? Who spent how much time with whom, doing what?

When asked what happened in the game at this stage, a player might say, “Professor Tuff got mad at me.” “Got mad” is a judgment, however. Players should be guided in separating observation from inference; what did Tuff do that caused the players to say she was mad?

Further, what did the various aspects of the game symbolize? In some

situations, it is desirable to distribute to players a list of the game's symbolic elements (e.g., players' names) in advance, with the instruction that they should be prepared to interpret these elements at the end of the game. If time restrictions do not allow debriefing of the game the day it is played, the list might be included with a homework assignment to do a "reaction paper" to the game. Such quiet reflection often produces novel and creative thinking about the game. However, it is best, if possible, to elicit some reactions while the impact of the game is most immediate and memories are most accurate, and to supplement with the homework assignment if time is short.

The "symbolic elements" in "The Academic Game" are too numerous to detail, but include players' names, their "reward power," the "chance cards" and "entree cards," the "word skills game," the "scoring sheets" and other artifacts. It is important to identify the factual meaning and significance of these game elements.

Analyze

There are two major foci of this "how come" debriefing stage. One is the interaction of the structure of the game and the personality stereotypes (or "reputations") as independent variables. The first asks, given the relationships between the game demands and personality structures; what behavior results?

Focusing on the game and its personalities as independent variables, participants can be led to analyze role demands. Players should consider how different "personalities" affected players' characterizations within each rank, particularly in terms of competitiveness. Further issues relate to game structure, especially those of rank. These include, for example, how the possession of different power leads people to act—toward equals, toward those with more power, toward those with less power? What conceivably can a player do who has little power in the game and wants more? What might deter him or her from engaging in those behaviors? Does power generate increased power, and when do power failures occur? Given the structure of the game, what behaviors or events are perceived as threats? In what way do role demands and personality interact to cope with threats? Is sexuality always a ploy for women in that game? What determines this? Is it ever a ploy for men?

Still concerning the game structure as independent variable, participants' attention might further be directed to the effects of the structure on the manifest functions of the simulated organization. What is the purpose of that organization? How much of the actual activity of role players is directly functional for that mission? How much is dysfunctional? How much is irrelevant? To what extent do the role structure, mobility patterns, power structure, and reward system lead to functional versus dysfunctional actions? Can participants think of any changes in structure that might shift the proportions? What would be their disadvantages?

Concerning the structure as dependent variable, the basic question, of course, is what factors determine the existing organizational structure (e.g., task, size, etc.). To what degree does the larger system of which it is a part impinge on it, preventing change or directing it? What events (e.g., the economy) contribute to people being in this subsystem in the first place, and, once there, affect their roles? Are there any character-

istics of the larger system that, if changed, would permit or require structural change and/or change in the behavior of persons, or affect relationships?

Generalize

At this point, participants are asked to draw conclusions about their world from the game based on identification of the facts and analysis of cause and effect relationships. We divide them into groups and first give them the instruction to complete this paragraph in as detailed a fashion as possible:

"Anyone playing this game is likely to draw the following conclusions:"

Participants are asked also to put their generalizations on newsprint for presentation to the large group, and to prepare to defend them. They must now address the question, "Are the conclusions you are drawing from this experience valid?"

The four-stage validation process is as follows.

1. **Conclusions.** Identify the conclusions you have drawn from the game experience about which there is consensus.
2. **Game Data.** What happened in the game to bring you to those conclusions?
3. **Judgment.** Is this conclusion real or unreal? (Is it true or not true in the real world?)
4. **Life Data:** Identify specific happenings from real life that support your contention that the conclusion is correct or incorrect, realistic or unrealistic. Identify cases in real life that do not support your conclusions and identify the conditions or contingencies that account for the difference.

Conflict Resolution Process

When the groups come together, we put the newsprint on the wall and have the large group discuss the generalizations of each small group. Groups must be prepared to defend their generalizations. They do not need to write out their validating arguments, but merely to have supporting arguments ready in case they are challenged.

Clearly, the effort to validate conclusions will lead to uncertainties and differences of opinion. Reconciling these will require more knowledge than participants presently possess. Individuals and/or groups often challenge one another on one or more of the validation criteria. As the discussion moves toward conflict resolution, it usually becomes apparent that much of the conflict results from problems of communication. The remainder, where the real differences lie, are issues that require a search for accurate data. Thus, conflict resolution usually involves three problem areas, the first two of which can often be resolved through a clarifying discussion:

1. **Definitional Hangups:** Do we mean the same thing when we use the same concepts? For example, suppose the conclusion is that "cheating pays;" the argument may be resolved when players examine together what they mean by "cheating," or "pay."
2. **Modifying and Qualifying Conclusions:** Are there circumstances in which the generalizations hold and other circumstances in which they

do not? Can they agree that cheating may "pay" in some circumstances, but not in others?

3. Fact Explanation Issues: Do the differences of opinion result from different beliefs about what the facts are? Is there in fact a difference of opinion about whether or not "cheating" occurred?

Further Use of "The Academic Game"

This is the strategic point at which to get participants to view "The Academic Game" as a "priming" game, either to make what they think is a more accurate model of the academic game or to construct a simulation of another real-life game. We shall focus in the rest of this article on the latter approach.

Suppose we have run the game for a conference of nurses who work in a variety of settings: hospitals, nursing homes, public schools, etc. It will be recalled that we have initiated the game by suggesting to players that the game setting both resembles and differs from their own work environments, that it includes universal, generic dynamics and specific systemic characteristics, and that the advantage of the *differentness* from their worlds is that it provides sufficient *distance* to enable them to compare and contrast with objectivity. They have been told that the most valuable learning occurs as they share and analyze their experiences and attempt to generalize from the game system to their own system.

We have asked our nurses to play academicians in the game, but we want now to focus on health care systems. We divide them again into small groups and ask them to view "The Academic Game" as a "priming" game, and to recreate from it the content for "The Nursing Game" (or "The Agency Game," "The Government Game," etc.) They will need to identify the relevant statuses or ranks they want to include, how much differential they should have between ranks and, within rank, between the sexes. What should their chance cards include? Should they have structural components paralleling the committee and the "word skills" game?

An important and stimulating part of the redesign process is the creation of new role profiles. "Martin Loner," "Alice Tuff," "Eddie Cool," and the rest of "The Academic Game's" cast of characters are both stereotypes and universal types. The names can be the same for the new cast; profiles, substituting content relevant to the nursing world, will have to be developed. Professional tasks will be different and reward power may change. Players will ask themselves: What real life role player is their "Bob Chief?" "Sally Swinger?" etc. What are their counterparts to the "Promotions and Tenure Committee?" What counterparts to "chance" cards exist? How does the hierarchical structure and reward system of the game differ from and resemble their own system of authority and payoffs?

The Game Board will similarly be examined; new titles will replace "Professor" and "Graduate Student;" differentials between ranks may change; and the number of points needed to advance to the next rank will be decided and entered on the Game Board and the role profile cards.

How far the redesign process can be carried depends, of course, on the time available. In a two to three day workshop, players can make considerable progress toward designing their own game, identifying problem areas, and using the validation model to resolve conflicts and

to identify the further information they need. Research needs and plans can be specified, assignments given, and follow-up plans formulated to synthesize findings and complete the new model. Playing the new game can lead to further refinement, and so on, as players create, recreate, and analyze microcosms of their own systems.

Short of this ideal goal, the most important thing to be accomplished is that players leave the game experience with the conviction that they understand more than they did before about how their system works, about the universality of problems they may previously have considered idiosyncratic to themselves (or others), about their commonalities with other occupational groups, and with some concrete ideas about both coping strategies and change strategies.

The academic model will, of course, be experienced as different in many important respects from the players' real-world settings. As suggested earlier, it is important at the outset to emphasize the players the values of a new milieu. The game's fresh setting enables them to get "distance" from the cluttered, confusing complexities of their realities by having them play roles in a new system that has similar dynamics and applicable conclusions.

In educational and industrial training, games are increasingly recognized as an effective alternative to the traditional lecture format. Their value as a stimulus to research deserves more attention; participants learn more research skills through designing a game than through its play. Nevertheless, they must play the "model" game before they can design another based on it.

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