

The Horatio Alger Exercise

(Adapted for F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby)

Rationale:

The purpose of this exercise is to teach about advantages and disadvantages in our lives and the effects they have on opportunities and successes. This exercise can also be used to enhance understanding about privilege and the culture of power.

Many people believe that the reason a person is poor or rich is principally related to a person's character: "poor people are lazy and stupid" while "rich people get rich because they are smart and work hard." This belief in the equality of people in the U.S. discounts or ignores the fact that many people have a variety of advantages and opportunities which they take for granted. Because of this system of privilege (which was begun centuries ago), United States citizens are not playing on the proverbial level playing field.

One of the underlying beliefs that is fostered by the principle of individualism taught in the United States is that people deserve their fate. They are blamed for their poverty and victimization. It is quite common in prejudice awareness workshops for people to assume they have started on a level playing field with people of other backgrounds. They believe, as in the story of Horatio Alger, that one's own abilities and superiority earn wealth and success. Yet unemployment is so much a part of the economic system in which we live, as well as competition for jobs, education, benefits and limited resources, that "success" often depends on external factors. These external factors, such as informal rules, often provide members of the culture of power with competitive advantages.

One should not misrepresent the importance of taking responsibility for one's own life and the importance of struggling for a better world and a better life. Simply recognizing oneself as a victim is often not productive. However, it is important to understand that for people to blame themselves and/or be blamed by others for their victim status fosters a sense of inferiority and powerlessness which can lead to hopelessness.

Requirements:

- **Materials (for facilitator only):** Copy of "Horatio Alger" questions
- **Time:** 45-60 minutes
- **Space:** A room large enough to accommodate the participants standing shoulder to shoulder in a single line or an outside area
- **Number of Participants:** Any number (restricted by room size)
- **Age level:** Adult

Directions/Disclaimer:

- 1.) Instruct participants to form a line in the middle of the room and hold the hand of the person next to them.
- 2.) Indicate that you will read a list. As a category is identified to which a participant belongs, he or she will either step forward or backward or stay stationary as appropriate.
- 3.) Instruct participants to keep holding hands until it is no longer possible. When a person gets too far away, participants will have to let go of each others' hands.
- 4.) Instruct students to answer the questions to the best of their abilities. If they do not feel comfortable publicly "sharing" information, they do not have to.
- 5.) Instruct students that they need to maintain a level of *respect and maturity* during this activity.
- 6.) Read through the statements on the following page.

Activity Questions:

- a.) All those whose parent or parents have completed college take one step forward.
 - b.) All those who have a parent who never completed high school, take one step back.
 - c.) All those who have attended a private school, take one step forward.
 - d.) All those who have had a family member immigrate to the US from the past two generations (during the time of parents or grandparents), take a step back.
 - e.) All those who have access to a computer at home, take a step forward.
 - f.) All those who have ever felt sexually harassed, take a step back.
 - g.) All those who have *always* lived in a house (not an apartment), take a step forward.
 - h.) All those whose parents work in the service industry or do physical labor, take a step back.
 - i.) All those who are currently working a job of more than eight hours a week after school or on weekends, take a step back.
 - j.) All those whose parents have never divorced, take a step forward.
 - k.) All those who have a parent born in a foreign country, take a step back.
 - l.) All those who look around them in this class and see more than three people “like you,” take a step forward.
 - m.) All those who have experienced a death in their immediate family, take a step back.
 - n.) All those who have *school* holidays that reflect their *religious* holidays, take a step forward.
 - o.) All those who do not feel safe leaving their front door unlocked while they are at home, take one step back.
 - p.) All those who were “given” a car without having to pay for it with their own money, take one step forward.
 - q.) All those who can walk into a store without having clerks assume by your appearance that you are going to steal something, take one step forward.
 - r.) All those whose parents spoke English as a first language, take one step forward.
 - s.) All those who have never been told that someone hated them because of their race, ethnic group, religion or sexual orientation, take one step forward.
 - t.) All those who were raised in homes with libraries of at least children's books and some adult books, take one step forward.
 - u.) All those who were raised in homes where the newspaper was read daily, take one step forward.
 - v.) All those who have vacationed in a foreign country, take one step forward.
 - w.) All those who have been taken to art galleries or museums by their parents, take one step forward.
 - x.) All those who have an immediate family member (parent, sibling, etc.) who is a doctor or lawyer, take one step forward.
 - y.) All those who went to or currently attend a school where the majority of the teachers are of your same race or ethnicity, take one step forward.
 - z.) All those who have had an immediate family member (yourself included) suffer from a serious, life-threatening illness, take a step back
 - aa.) All those who have heard derogatory, offensive remarks made about their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., take a step back
- 7.) Say: “Now, from wherever you are in the room, race to the ‘finish line’ when I say ‘go.’”
- 8.) In debriefing this exercise, the facilitator can elicit responses from the group about the following questions:
- a.) What did this exercise teach you? What is the point of this activity?
 - b.) What does this have to do with prejudice?
 - c.) Do we all start off equal in life?
 - d.) What does holding hands, then becoming so distant that you can't hold hands anymore, represent?
 - e.) Is it possible to be the fastest runner and still lose the race?
 - f.) How does this relate to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, The Great Gatsby?