

# Horatio Alger Exercise

## 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 affirmative action.

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. 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 most white people have many advantages and opportunities which they take for granted.

Because of this system of white 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, since the percentage of African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans in poverty is much greater than for white ethnic groups, people of color deserve their fate. They are blamed for their poverty and victimization.

It is quite common in prejudice-awareness workshops for white people to assume they have started on a level playing field with people of color. 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 whites 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 of color to blame themselves and/or be blamed by whites for their victim status fosters a sense of inferiority and powerlessness which can lead to hopelessness.

## Exercise: "Teaching Whites About Racism"

### 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.

**Number of Participants:** any number (restricted by room size)

**Age level:** adult

## Directions

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.
  - 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 went to a private school, take one step forward.
  - d. All those who were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians and government workers were not of their ethnic or racial group, take one step back.
  - e. All those who commonly see people of their race or ethnicity as heroes or heroines on television programs or movies, take one step forward.
  - f. All those who commonly see people of their race or ethnicity on television or movies in roles you consider degrading, take one step back.
  - g. All those who come from racial or ethnic groups who have ever been considered by scientists as "inferior," take one step back.
  - h. All those who have ever been harassed by the police because of their ethnicity or race, take one step back.
  - i. All those whose ancestors were slaves in the U.S., take one step back.
  - j. All those who have ancestors who, because of their race, religion or ethnicity, were denied voting rights, citizenship, had to drink from separate water fountains, ride in the back of the bus, use separate entrances to buildings, separate restrooms, were denied access to clubs, jobs, restaurants, were precluded from buying property in certain neighborhoods, take one step back.
  - k. 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.
  - l. All those whose parents spoke English as a first language, take one step forward.
  - m. 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.
  - n. All those who have read about history of their ancestors in history books provided by their K-12 school, take one step forward.
  - o. All those who have ever been denied a job because of their race, ethnic group, religion or gender, take one step backward.
  - p. All those who were raised in homes with libraries of at least children's books and some adult books, take one step forward.
  - q. All those who were raised in homes where the newspaper was read daily, take one step forward.
  - r. All those who have vacationed in a foreign country, take one step forward.
  - s. All those who have been taken to art galleries or museums by their parents, take one step forward.
  - t. All those who have an immediate family member who is a doctor or lawyer, take one step forward.
  - u. 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.
  - v. All those whose ancestors lost a war with the U.S. and whose land was made part of the U.S., take one step back.

4. Say: "Now from wherever you are in the room, race to the wall you are facing when I say 'go.'"
5. In debriefing this exercise, the facilitator can elicit responses from the group about the following questions:
  - a. What did this exercise teach you?
  - b. What is the point of this activity?
  - c. What does this have to do with prejudice?
  - d. Do we all start off equal in life?
  - e. What does holding hands, then becoming so distant that you can't hold hands anymore, represent?
  - f. Is it possible to be the fastest runner and still lose the race?