



Examining Class and Race: An Exercise

by **Paul Kivel**

I GREW UP BELIEVING THAT ALL AMERICANS have equal opportunity to succeed because there is a level playing field and affirmative action was no longer necessary. Since then, I have found this exercise useful to challenge our common assumptions of equal access.

Everyone starts out standing on a line in the middle of the room facing one wall. Participants are told that the line is the starting line for a race to get some well-paying jobs, which they need to take care of their families. But before the race begins the starting positions will be adjusted via the following exercise. Participants are asked to silently take a step forward or backward, depending upon given instructions and if a statement of social status applies to them. They may decide for themselves whether the statement applies, and, as much as possible, keep their steps the same size throughout the exercise.

Explain that the exercise will be done in silence to allow participants to notice the feelings that come up during the exercise and to make it safer for all participants.

Begin the Exercise

1. If your ancestors were forced to come to this country or forced to relocate from where they were living, either temporarily or permanently, or restricted from living in certain areas, take one step backward.
2. If you feel that your primary ethnic identity is “American,” take one step forward.
3. If you were ever called names or ridiculed because of your race, ethnicity or class background, take one step backward.
4. If you grew up with people of color or working class people who were servants, maids, gardeners or babysitters in your house, take one step forward.



5. If you were ever embarrassed or ashamed of your clothes, your house, or your family car when growing up, take one step backward.
6. If you have immediate family members who are doctors, lawyers, or other professionals, take one step forward.
7. If pimping and prostitution, drugs, or other illegal activities were a major occupational alternative in the community where you were raised, take one step backward.
8. If you ever tried to change your physical appearance, mannerisms, language or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed, take one step backward.
9. If any women in your family, including yourself if you are female, were ever physically or sexually assaulted in any way by men in your family, take one step backward.
10. If you studied the history and culture of your ethnic ancestors in elementary and secondary school, take one step forward.
11. If you started school speaking a language other than English, take one step backward.
12. If your family had more than fifty books in the house when you were growing up, take one step forward.
13. If you ever skipped a meal or went away from a meal hungry because there wasn't enough money to buy food in your family, take one step backward.
14. If you were taken to art galleries, museums or plays by your parents, take one step forward.
15. If one of your parents was ever laid off, unemployed or underemployed not by choice, take one step backward.
16. If you ever attended a private school or summer camp, take one step forward.
17. If you received less encouragement in academics or sports from your family or from teachers because of your gender, take one step backward.
18. If you or your family ever had to move because there wasn't enough money to pay the rent, take one step backward.
19. If you were told by your parents that you were beautiful, smart, and capable of achieving your dreams, take two steps forward.



20. If you were told by your parents that you were beautiful, pretty or good looking and therefore what you thought or did wasn't important, take one step backward.
21. If you were ever discouraged or prevented from pursuing academic or work goals, or tracked into a lower level because of your race, class or ethnicity, take one step backward.
22. If your parents encouraged you to go to college, take one step forward.
23. If you were ever given less support than the boys in your family for going to college or pursuing work goals because of your gender, take one step backward.
24. If you grew up in a single parent household, take one step backward.
25. If, prior to your 18th birthday, you took a vacation outside of your home state, take one step forward.
26. If you have a parent who did not complete high school, take one step backward.
27. If your parents owned their own house, take one step forward.
28. If you commonly see people of your race or ethnicity on television or in the movies in roles that you consider to be degrading, take one step backward.
29. If you ever got a good paying job or a promotion because of a friend or family member, take one step forward.
30. If you were ever denied a job because of your race or ethnicity, take one step backward.
31. If you were ever denied a job, paid less for comparable work or had less qualified men promoted over you because of your gender, take one step backward.
32. If, as a white person, you ever worked in a job where people of color held more menial jobs, were paid less or otherwise harassed or discriminated against, take one step forward.
33. If you were ever paid less, treated less fairly, or given harder work than a white person in a similar position because of your race or ethnicity, take one step backward.



34. If you were ever mistrusted or accused of stealing, cheating or lying because of your race, ethnicity or class, take one step backward.
35. If you ever inherited money or property, take one step forward.
36. If you primarily use public transportation to get where you need to go, take one step backward.
37. If you generally think of the police as people that you can call on for help in times of emergency, take one step forward.
38. If you have ever been stopped by police because of your race, ethnicity or class, take one step backward.
39. If you ever felt afraid of violence directed toward you because of your race, take one step backward.
40. If, in general, you can avoid those communities or places that you consider dangerous, take one step forward.
41. If you ever felt uncomfortable or angry about a remark or joke made about your race or ethnicity but it wasn't safe to confront it, take one step backward.
42. If you or close friends or family were ever a victim of violence because of your race or ethnicity, take one step backward.
43. If your parents did not grow up in the United States, take one step backward.

After the last statement everyone is asked to freeze in place, without looking around, and to notice briefly where they are, who is in front of them and who they can and cannot see.

Then they are asked to look around and notice briefly where they and everyone else is. What feelings do they have and what patterns do they notice?

Then people are told that they are in a race to the front wall for some well paying, good jobs. They should imagine that they need one of those jobs to support themselves and their families.

When told to, they are to run towards the wall as fast as they can. The first few to the front wall will get those jobs. Quickly say, "Ready, set, go," to start the race—and get out of the way!



Group discussion

Have participants pair up and talk for a few minutes about whatever feelings came up during the exercise.

This exercise works well as a follow-up to the power chart to make concrete what differences exist in power means. It introduces class and race and the intertwining of both. And it can raise issues of individual achievement, "level-playing field," affirmative action, and the different reactions people have to an unequal system. (For example, given where they ended up in the room, how did that affect how hard they ran towards the front wall? Did they run at all?) The exercise is also a good setup for the economic pyramid exercise and a discussion of the economic system.

After the exercise it is important to point out that the race actually takes place in a stadium. The winners of the race were declared before the race started. The ruling class is sitting in the stands watching the whole event with amusement. They don't have to race because they've been awarded the very best, most high paying jobs before the race even began. In fact, they've been betting on who would run for those jobs the fastest. How does this added information affect people's commitment to the race? To how hard they might run? To their sense of justice?

Related Exercises

Helping Teens Stop Violence Allan Creighton with Paul Kivel
Hunter House, 1992.

Making the Peace Paul Kivel and Allan Creighton Hunter House,
1997.

*Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial
Justice* Paul Kivel New Society, 1996 rev. 2002.

*Men's Work: How To Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives
Apart* Paul Kivel, Hazelden, 1992/98.

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