



"Ladder of Fortune" - 1875 lithograph

Gk En UI/Br Ideals of the American Dream

(Text demonstrating) Influence of Horatio Alger Myth

Poverty placed Richard Hunter at risk of poor social outcomes. He left a rural environment to come to the city where he was dirty, poor, and homeless. Dressed in ragged clothes, he swore, smoked, and was careless with the little money he earned. Nonetheless, he had personal strengths that made him (to cite the titles of two classics on resilience) "invulnerable" (Anthony & Cohler, 1987) and "invincible" (Werner & Smith, 1998). Richard "was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straightforward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults" (Alger, 1868, pp. 18-19).

Richard Hunter was "Ragged Dick," the hero of a novel by one of the most popular novelists of the last third of the nineteenth century, Horatio Alger. At a time when most successful business leaders came from middle- or upper-class families, when few wage earners moved up to the middle classes, when unemployment and a lack of social support placed many poor people at risk of ill health and early death, and when social Darwinists contended that the success of the rich and failure of the poor reflected a genetic survival of the fittest (Berkin, Miller, Cherny, & Gormly, 1995; Hofstadter, 1945), Alger's novels suggested instead that poor individuals with the right genetic makeup would, with luck, escape poverty and rise to the top.

Generations of children grew up on Horatio Alger stories. The heroes pulled themselves up out of difficult conditions "by their own bootstraps" to become successful and triumphant adults. Although this story line has been our traditional model of resilience, the research literature presents a more nuanced picture of how resilience comes about and includes in its models the presence of "social buffers" from risk. For example, Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1998), in the summary of their longitudinal Kauai, Hawaii, study of individuals exposed to biological risk, poverty, family instability, limited parental education, and parental mental disorder, stated that "it is the balance between risk, stressful life events, and protective characteristics in the child and his caregiving environment that appears to account for the range of outcomes encountered in our study" (p. 5). Nuance aside, the popular conception of resilience retains Horatio Alger's individualized themes: resilience is understood to be essentially dependent upon individual characteristics such as good temperament, intelligence, or the ability to form healthy relationships.

Source: <http://www.air.org/cecp/resources/journals/RTY/individualresilience.htm>