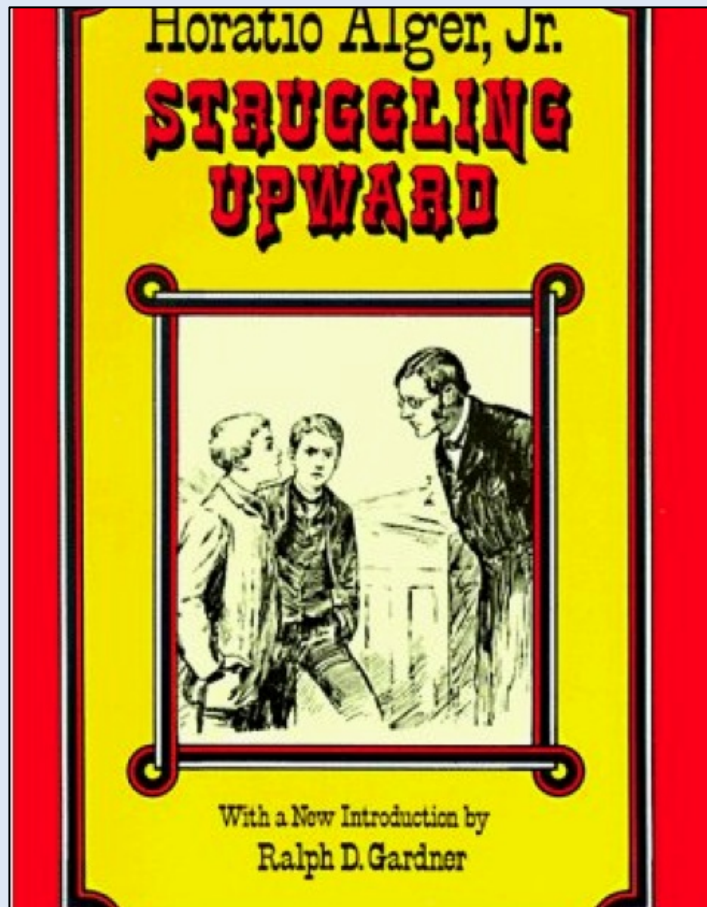


ON THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN HEALTH

RWJF Investigator
Award in Health Policy

Naa Oyo A. Kwate, Ph.D., & Ilan H. Meyer, Ph.D.

Rags to Riches



- Horatio Alger's stories are a great example of the tenacity of American cultural values around unbounded social mobility and the idea that the American Dream is within anyone's reach. Horatio Alger-type narratives permeate films, politics, sports, and so on. Americans love the idea that someone can go from rags to riches, to come from nothing build a prosperous life entirely an account of their individual moxie. In this 1890 text, Alger recounts the trials and tribulations of Luke Larkin, the poor son of a carpenter's widow. Suffering meager resources and many indignities, Larkin was still able, through perseverance, to "*struggle upward* from a boyhood of privation and self-denial into a youth and manhood of prosperity and honor... There has been some luck about it but after all he is indebted for most of his good fortune to his own good qualities"

Holding on to the American Dream

Now, in the context of the economic downturn, the American Dream is perhaps undergoing revision and rethinking about its tenability, but it still remains powerful in our national consciousness.

VANITY FAIR

THE WAY WE WERE



Closing a Summer Cottage, Quogue, New York, a 1957 Norman Rockwell art-directed Colorama by Ralph Amdursky and Charles Bakula. The article and photo are [Kodak Coloramas](#) that were exhibited at New York's Grand Central Terminal from 1950 to 1990. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

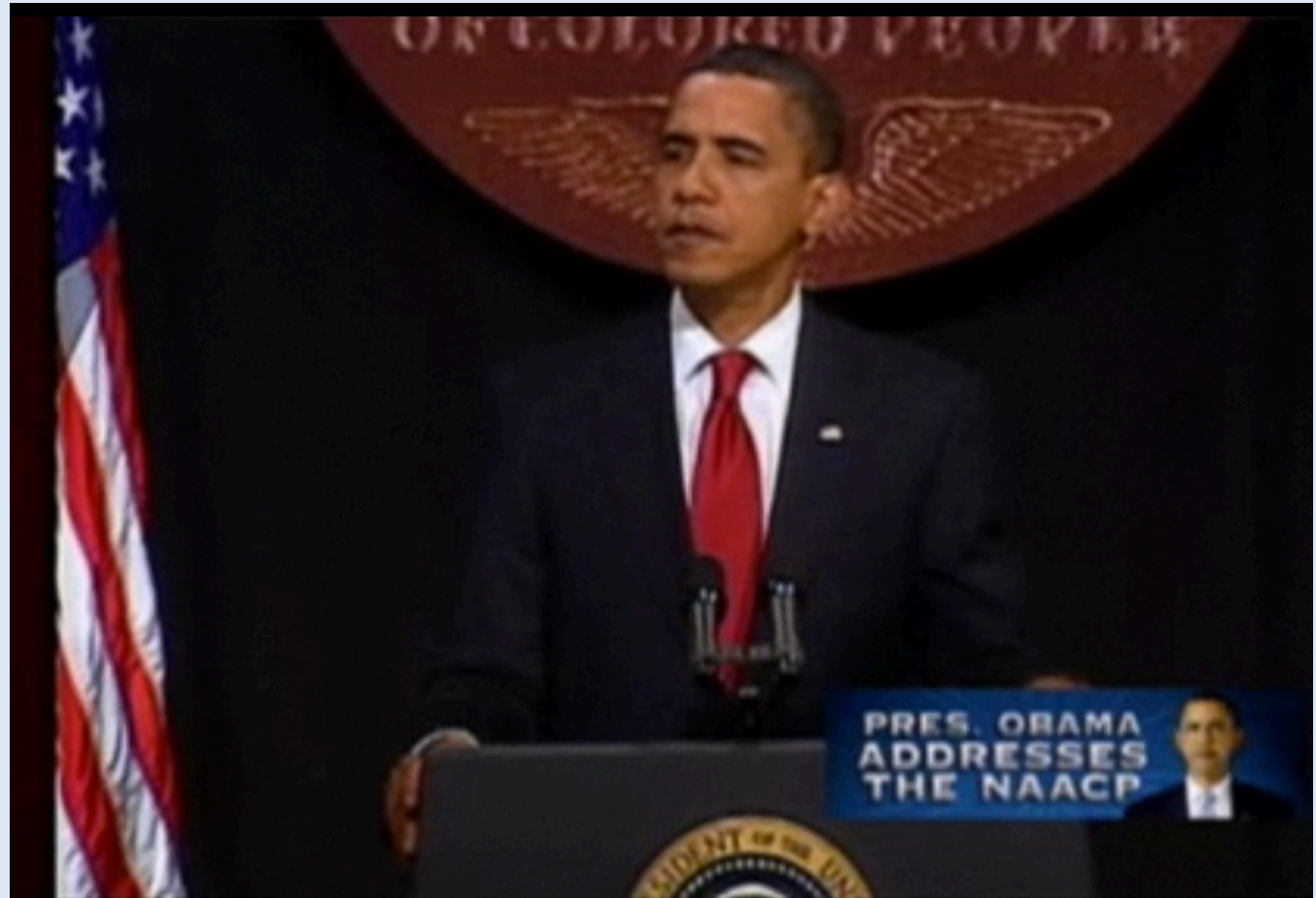
Rethinking the American Dream

Along with millions of jobs and 401(k)s, the concept of a shared national ideal is said to be dying. Has the dream been misplaced? Exploring the way our aspirations have changed—the rugged individualism of the '50s suburbia—the author shows how the American Dream came to mean fame and fortune, instead of...

by **DAVID KAMP** April 2009

The American Dream...No Excuses

Nowhere is this more evident than in President Obama's successful rise to become the first Black president of the U.S. His presidency appears to fulfill the promise of meritocracy. In the screenshot at right, he is giving a speech (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/us/politics/17obama.html?scp=1&sq=obama%20naacp%20speech%202009&st=cg>) to the NAACP on its 100th anniversary. In it, he argues that despite some barriers, there is "no excuse" for African Americans failing to achieve the American Dream.



Homeownership: the American Dream

So as Langston Hughes asks, what happens to a dream deferred? In May of 2009, an article in the NY Times, "Minorities affected most as New York foreclosures rise", (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/16/nyregion/16foreclose.html>) described the ways in which the foreclosure crisis disproportionately affected Black and Latino homeowners, shattering the dream of homeownership and the broader American Dream. Readers reacted in the comments section (see text at right) by arguing not only that America is essentially meritocratic but that failures to achieve and/or hold on to the American dream reflect African American characterological, cultural, and moral deficits.

□ May 15, 2009 10:09 pm

"this is what happens when you force loans on people whose culture does not celebrate the American values of hard work and diligence."

--STOEY, Columbus

□ May 15, 2009 11:09 pm

Financial literacy should be a core requirement for getting a high school degree. But, ultimately, common sense about saving and paying bills on time doesn't come from the government - it comes from parents. Own up to your responsibilities, folks. And, please don't blame others when you have to bear the consequences of your own mistakes.

--AL, Garden City, NY

□ May 15, 2009 11:30 pm

"Thank you Congressman Barney Frank for forcing lenders to make loans to minority borrowers who might not otherwise have qualified."

--John Clark, Tallahassee, Florida

□ May 16, 2009 10:28 am

"Special thanks to Clinton, Barney Frank, Maxine Waters, Chuck Schummer, Christopher Dodds and a bevy of Democrats who insisted that every minority is entitled a home, whether they can qualify or not. Renting and saving to buy a home LATER was never an option."

John Henryism

In our study we investigate the costs of attempts to strive unflinching for the American Dream. The story of John Henry is instructive here. Shown here in this painting (http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/04/13/books/review/downes-slideshow_3.html), Henry was a railroad worker in the 1870s who raced a steam powered drill and won, only to die thereafter. His story served as the inspiration for Dr. Sherman James' formulation of *John Henryism*. Defined as persistent high-effort coping in the face of adversity, in James' original work he found that John Henryism can lead to hypertension among African Americans from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Meritocratic ideology could act as a catalyst for John Henryism.


The New York Times

Sunday Book Review

MORE SLIDE SHOWS ▾

Photos From 'Ain't Nothing but a Man'

3 of 7 ◀ ▶



John Henry lies dead after beating the steam drill in this painting by the African-American painter Palmer Hayden. Born in 1890, Hayden grew up in Virginia where his father sang John Henry songs to him. In the 1940s, Hayden used his memories of the men he grew up with to craft a series of paintings about John Henry.

Photo: From "Ain't Nothing but a Man"; courtesy the National Archives

RELATED

- Article: John Henry Days

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Research Aims

- **Aim 1: Meritocratic Ideology (MI) distribution and variation in American society:** To describe variations in public endorsement of MI in the United States across historical periods, consistent with concurrent political-cultural climate; and across geographical regions.
- **Aim 2: MI, social inequality, and modern racism:** To investigate whether, among Whites, beliefs and values consistent with MI are associated with attitudes that support social inequality in the U.S.
- **Aim 3: MI ideologies/narratives & African Americans:** To describe, using qualitative interview data and Black media outlets, the quality and content of African Americans' expressed beliefs about meritocracy and how it affects their lives.
- **Aim 4: MI and African American health:** To investigate whether beliefs and values consistent with MI are negatively associated with mental and physical health and well-being.