

10 CHAIRS OF INEQUALITY

SOUL Manual: Building Power, Sharpening Minds!

Objective:

To begin to understand what unequal wealth distribution looks like in the United States

Time Needed:

30 minutes

Materials Needed:

Markers
Tape
10 Chairs

Handouts Needed:

None

Butcher Paper Needed:

Definition of "Wealth"

Exercise

Facilitator should have 10 chairs set up in the front of the room, and allow volunteers to sit in the chairs of their choosing.

Note to facilitator: Chairs without arms are best.

This exercise will show us the way that wealth is distributed among people in the United States.

I need ten volunteers. I encourage people who weren't in the front of the room for the last activity to volunteer for this activity. These volunteers should come and sit on the ten chairs – one person to each chair.

Before we begin, who can define "Wealth" for me?



Wealth: what you own.

This means the money that you have in the bank, but it is also broader than that. For instance, if you have a \$20,000 car, but you only have \$4,000 paid off, than you have \$4,000 worth of wealth. If you have a credit card debt that you have not paid off, you have negative wealth.

Does anyone have any questions about this?

Facilitator should take any questions.

10 CHAIRS OF INEQUALITY

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Okay, now let's get into the activity. Each chair represents 10% of the wealth in the United States. Each person represents 10% of the population. So, when the 10 people are evenly spread out among the 10 chairs, this means that the wealth is evenly distributed.

Note to facilitator: Make sure everybody understands the numbers. It is critical that they understand, or else the rest of the exercise will not make sense.

Do people think this is the way things are? Does everybody have an equal share of the wealth?

Facilitator should take 1-2 responses

Now I need 1 volunteer who is already on the chairs to represent the wealthiest 10% of the population.

Facilitator should take 1 volunteer, and ask for their name. Facilitator should continue using their name throughout the exercise, referring directly to them. The example we will use here is Angela: Angela represents the wealthiest 10% of the population.

In 1976, Angela owned 50% of the wealth in the United States. That means that Angela gets to occupy 5 chairs.

Facilitator should encourage Angela to stretch out on her five chairs.

This means that the people occupying 4 chairs need to get up and squeeze onto one of the other chairs with people already sitting on them. This will mean that you need to sit on laps, scrunch on, etc.

Facilitator should make sure the participants are scrunched onto the chairs while Angela is spread out.

That's not all, because with skyrocketing stocks and tax breaks, Angela is getting richer. Today Angela has 7 chairs – 70% of the wealth. That means that everyone else needs to be on the last three chairs.

Facilitator should encourage Angela to lie down and spread out. Ask her if she would like a little snack or a drink of water or anything.

So, the nine people on the three chairs how are you feeling? What are your lives like?

Facilitator should take several responses. Possible answers include being crowded, not having enough room, etc. Affirm those comments and push further.

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How do you think daily life is like for those people squashed onto the 3 chairs?

Facilitator should take several responses from people in audience. Possible answers might include: they work all day, they are tired, worn out, etc.

Angela how are you living? What is your life like?

Facilitator should take Angela's comment. Her answer will contrast with the previous answers.

Oh, there's more. Angela, hold up your left arm.

Facilitator should wait for Angela to hold up her arm.

I want everyone to look at her arm. Her arm represents the richest 1% of the population in the United States. In 1976, Angela's arm has two chairs all to itself. And in 1998, Angela's arm itself – the wealthiest 1% - has three chairs, 30% of the wealth.

Facilitator should invite Angela to stretch her arm over three chairs.

Remember, Angela's arm represents only 1% of the population. That means that 1% of the people in the United States have 30% of the wealth.

So, I have a question for the volunteers left on the three chairs: Why did you let this happen? Why did you allow things to be distributed so unevenly?

Facilitator should take several answers. Possible answers include I'm too busy to fight back, I come home from work too tired all the time, and I have to fight with these other people which keeps me from realizing that there are other people to blame.

In this exercise we direct our anger at Angela – the top 10%, but in reality, what often happens in our communities is that Angela is invisible to us and we fight with each other. We all blame and battle each other for more space on the few remaining chairs.

Now, Angela how do you justify your unequal share of the wealth?

Facilitator should allow Angela to answer. Make sure she mentions things like that she works hard, she is smarter, etc. (Things that are used to justify the wealth gap.)

Thank you volunteers; you can go back to your seats now.

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Facilitator should allow volunteers to be seated.

If we took all of the wealth in the United States, and put it in a pot and distributed an equal amount to each family, how much wealth do you think each family would have?

Facilitator should take different guesses.

The answer is \$250,000 in wealth. Imagine what it would be like for your family to have a \$150,000 home, a \$20,000 car, and \$80,000 in the bank. How would your families' lives be different?

Facilitator should take any thoughts.

In the next activity, we're going to talk more about how this unequal wealth distribution affects our families.