

What is a “Disadvantaged Group?”

By

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This paper is a new release of an old paper, written first in 1980 while the author was Executive Director of Rainbow Research, Inc. (www.RainbowResearch.org). It remains timely, and so we thought we would re-release it.

What is a “Disadvantaged Group?”

In August 1980, Rainbow Research, Inc. was commissioned by the Dayton Hudson Foundation to conduct a small research project that would yield an improved understanding of the term “disadvantaged group.”

Their request was prompted by an increase in grant requests from groups that are not traditionally defined as disadvantaged, but which claimed “disadvantagement” nevertheless.

Such groups might work in behalf of ex-prisoners, neighborhood development, alternative health education, incest victims, or nursing home residents. By what lines of reasoning could these groups be called “disadvantaged?”

The following conclusions result from analysis of 25 hours of interviews with 15 persons representing various groups, all from Minneapolis/St. Paul. What results is not a listing or prioritizing of disadvantaged groups, but a framework for describing disadvantagement and issues for social action. [Ed. This framework informed the Foundation’s grantmaking for the next 15 years.]

What is Meant by “Disadvantaged?”

1. Surprisingly, the concept of “disadvantaged” that we heard was not centered primarily on those causes traditionally cited: race, ethnic group, poverty, or sex.
2. Rather, the concept of “disadvantaged” was focused on “denied access to the tools needed for self-sufficiency.”

The term “disadvantaged” has been used traditionally as an adjective, as if to describe a quality inherent to the group. It is now also used as a verb, to describe a process in which mainstream society acts in a way that “disadvantages” a particular group.

3. People see themselves as disadvantaged to the extent they are denied access to and use of the same tools found useful by the majority of society. These include autonomy, incentive, responsibility, self-respect, community support, health, education, information, employment, capital, and responsive support systems.

4. A major feature of “disadvantagement” is the presence of “barriers to self-sufficiency.” These barriers are the ways in which people are denied access to needed tools, and include unavailability of resources, inaccessibility to resources, the society’s regard for a group, government and corporate practices, and certain conditions of the group itself.

5. A disadvantaged group is defined by the particular pattern of denied resources and barriers it faces (rather than the fact of race, or poverty, or sex). A disadvantaged group may face more than one barrier. Some barriers may be more easily surmounted or moved than others. Each group presents its own pattern of disadvantagement and barriers to self-sufficiency; the implied solutions would vary from group to group as well.

6. Overcoming disadvantagement, then, means overcoming or removing barriers to self-sufficiency. This can take many forms, depending on the pattern presented, but would include enabling or empowering the group’s own efforts to develop the tools or resources needed for its own self-sufficiency.

7. Noteworthy is what was not portrayed as central to the definition of “disadvantaged.” No one said that “more cash” would solve their problems; and no one said that “more government assistance” would fix what was wrong. While these deficiencies may make up part of the picture, they are not perceived as elementary.

Barriers to Self-Sufficiency

Barriers to self-sufficiency are the ways in which people do not have access to the tools needed for self-sufficiency. Barriers include:

1. *Unavailability of Resources.* Resources (employment, capital, etc.) may be unavailable in sufficient quantity to certain groups; opportunities might be limited.

Certain tools might be designed with the values and assumptions of one segment of society, but not others. To be useful, a tool must be appropriate to the culture of the group. Some available tools are not useful to various groups (e.g., most forms of public transportation are not useful to the “mobility-impaired” group of handicapped). Or, use of a given resource may be disliked or distasteful to certain groups, and may run counter to its own values.

2. *Inaccessibility of Resources.* If available, resources could still be inaccessible to certain groups, because of cost, poor design, locale or distance, or lack of publicity.

Tools may be made available selectively, to only the “deserving” of the group. Or they may be rationed in such little quantity as to preclude the full group’s access or participation.

The personal energy needed to develop such resources as self-respect, health, or incentive may have been diverted by an early injury (broken home, domestic abuse, retardation, harmful labeling) that has not been reversed. This can make for further stunted development, societal isolation and deprivation, which is inherently disadvantaging.

Also, the energy needed to develop or pursue other resources, such as education, information, or employment, may be unavailable due to other demands, such as raising a family or pursuing subsistence capital.

3. *Society’s Regard for a Group.* Disadvantaged groups are unappreciated, devalued, or derided by the larger society. If a group is seen as not being able to offer much, little is offered to it.

Little may be known by other segments of society of the disadvantage faced by a particular group. Some groups are invisible to the public. Some groups may be deliberately kept from view. There may be little public discussion of the group.

Some groups exist as negative stereotypes to other segments of society. Negative stereotypes of a group may be reinforced by the media, the schools, other institutions, and by other segments of society as well.

The contributions and culture of sole groups may be misunderstood, or held in contempt. The immediate plight of a group may be misunderstood or minimized.

Some groups have been undervalued and derided as matters of longstanding and institutionalized tradition. The disadvantage of one group may be serving as advantage to others. Some groups may be harassed or persecuted without protection by established authorities. There may be little support among advantaged groups for removing the barriers and making resources available.

4. *Government Practices.* Institutionalized responses (government, programs, agencies, systems) to the plight of certain groups may be inadequate or counterproductive.

There may be too few programs available, or they may be under-funded or otherwise inadequate.

Legislation may protect or assist a group, but the law may not be enforced, or the implementation effort may be insufficient.

The systems for treating unemployment, poverty, mental illness, and other social ills contain too many disincentives for becoming self-sufficient. Certain practices encourage dependency, and create a vicious cycle that robs people of needed vitality. Certain practices may inadvertently produce large negative side effects that create further disadvantage.

Institutional responses may be so bureaucratized or clumsy as to limit their value. The system may be working more for the people within it than for the people for whom the response is intended. Those working within the system may be uninformed, uncommitted, or ineffective.

5. *Corporate Practices.* The labor or other forms of contribution, of some groups may be undervalued in the marketplace.

If a group's labor is undervalued, the group receives too little capital and retains its disadvantage. With undervaluation, there is greater opportunity for exploitation, harassment, and other forms of inequitable treatment.

Large corporations can easily overwhelm, or ignore, small or local economies, effectively limiting the availability of certain resources, particularly capital, employment, and incentive.

6. *Conditions of the Group.* Certain features of the disadvantaged group itself may make it hard to access needed tools.

For some groups to use the particular tools offered them by the larger society would mean contradicting their own values or culture; these tools may be regarded as not helpful, or not a part of their own definition of self-sufficiency.

Individuals disadvantaged by a particular situation may not be organized as a group. Redressing the system, promoting effective leadership from within, or even appealing for support requires organization of a group, and is already a few steps removed from total disadvantage.

Tools for Self-Sufficiency

Several tools or resources are needed to become “self-sufficient”:

1. *Autonomy, or Non-dependence.* Autonomy does not mean isolation or non-support. Rather, it describes a state in which a group is allowed and encouraged to develop in ways that are true to its principles, ideals, and capacities. It implies recognition of worth, possibility, and basic freedoms. It suggests that people be empowered to create, use, and maintain the tools needed to overcome disadvantage.

2. *Incentive for Development.* People need support in their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. One has to believe in the promise of fulfillment. Too many existing resources, alleged to serve a disadvantaged group, in fact perform a disservice, by reinforcing dependency or by falling short of expectations, thereby thwarting the reality of self-development.

3. *Decision-Making Responsibility.* The opportunity to participate in decisions that affect one’s own livelihood and well-being, as well as the autonomy of the group, is unquestionably fundamental to the notion of self-sufficiency.

4. *Self-Respect.* To grow towards self-sufficiency, people require the sort of personal and emotional energy that comes from self-respect. People who are denied their own dignity and self-respect have difficulty accessing or using the tools for participating in society. Without self-respect, there is diminished energy and incentive to become self-sufficient.

5. *Community of Support.* People of like situation need each other to form a base of support for creating, using, and maintaining the tools for self-sufficiency. Communities of support are found in one’s own family, cultural identity, neighborhood, and common circumstance.

6. *Health.* Good health is vital to self-sufficiency. Energy is drained by poor health, such that access to or full use of available tools is limited.

7. *Education.* Education that enables self-sufficiency should enhance the values of one’s own culture, and be relevant to the values of other segments of society, to one’s own potential for development, and to employment opportunities.

8. *Information.* People need to know about opportunities and tools available to them, and to know how to use them to effect their own, and their group’s, development.

9. *Employment.* The mere fact of employment, at a subsistence-level income, is not sufficient for becoming self-sufficient. What is needed is “just” employment, which entails employment free from limiting, damaging, or self-fulfilling stereotype, meaningful work, safe work, exploitation-free workplace, career development and advancement opportunities based on merit, job security, and the freedom and means to pursue work.

10. *Capital.* While capital is obviously needed to be self-sufficient, certain groups are denied the opportunity to create or keep capital, or to play a self-serving role in financial institutions. Often, government or corporate practices serve to keep capital away from smaller institutions that could develop the self-sufficiency of various groups.

11. *Responsive Support Systems.* These include accessible transportation, safety and security, food and clothing, strong neighborhoods, social services, advocacy and influence, and social, recreational, and aesthetic opportunities.

End.

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