Mainstream/Margin in Groups
a practical approach to anti-oppression work

Every group has a mainstream and margins

Every group has a mainstream: those qualities, behaviors, and values supported by the group. Other qualities and behaviors are put out of the center, to the periphery.

No matter how homogeneous a group or an organization believes itself to be, a careful look shows that some characteristics are marginalized.

A group known for vigorous and noisy debates has some quiet members. An organization which believes itself to be bureaucratically efficient has a couple of members who would love to cut corners. A solemn and highly disciplined group includes a few who, out of sight, love to party.

The mainstream of a group sets the tone, sets the communication style, and gets to have its own preferences accepted by the margins. Awareness of this dynamic creates choice points for organizers and facilitators who may or may not cooperate with the system.

> In a four-day workshop where one-fourth of the participants were women, men did all the talking in the whole group sessions for the first day and a half. The facilitator then did a public interview of the women, drawing them out about their experience in the movement, and their experience as women. After the public interview the women participated quite actively and raised their quality of the whole group discussions.

Not static, but a flowing relationship

The above example illustrates a basic group principle: *Mainstreams grow through becoming aware of, and changing their behavior in relationships with their margins.* Groups in which mainstreams refuse to do this do not grow and die. Groups and cultures grow at their edges.

Rather than viewing oppression as static (i.e. this group is always oppressed), organizers and activists can be aware of the complexities of *this* unique group. E.g. while society oppresses women in the larger society, an activist group might have a mainstream of women who unintentionally marginalize non-women in the group.

Thus mainstream/margin invites curiousity and flexibility, asking the question what is going on in *this* group *now*. Organizers then make thoughtful choices about when a mainstream needs assistance in recognizing and re-negotiating its relationship with one of its margins.
The mainstream is not about number – but it is about who has their interest recognized. So, for example, even in a group where most of the group has chronic medical conditions, the norm might be: we don't acknowledge our conditions.

In society, for example, a much larger number of people are poor than are rich. The difference is that the rich have their interests recognized due to the structures and cultures of society. We say that rich people are given rank.

Without the Shame and Blame

Anti-oppression work has suffered large societal backlash because of its shame and blame approach. Instead of approaching anti-oppression from the question *how can mainstreams and margins help move towards liberation* the task has been mainly oriented around identifying privileges and calling out and judging mainstream behavior.

If activists could accept that mainstreams are clueless, their job gets a lot easier. Instead of making value judgments about how oblivious the mainstream is, accept it as one accepts the law of gravity. Then go ahead assist the margins to express themselves and assist the mainstream to hear them.

Once the concept is understood, you can pick up this approach and use it to understand the dynamics of any group, subgroup, or society that you walk into. Instead of a checklist of diversity items to look for – e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation – you can look freshly at each group to see how is mainstream behavior playing out. For example, whenever an individual says in a group "In this group we all…" – you *know* a mainstream characteristic is about to be identified.

This is challenging to many activists (and non-activists), who are attached to their margin identities, and steadfastly refuse to acknowledge their mainstream role. In one international workshop US women of color had great trouble acknowledging their imperialism when challenged by Central African men. Only after letting down their defensiveness (it's sexism, internalized oppression) did they finally accept that even they, too, could be mainstream!

In this approach, margins that regularly are ignored by activist culture can be supported to find their voice: the Global South, disabled peoples, transgender peoples, survivors, elders, those living with visible or invisible chronic medical conditions, spirit of ancestors, celibates, non-English speakers, and the list can go on. (But instead of *making* a list, we can understand each group freshly.)

An Example: Mainstream Racism in the Workplace

Of course, mainstream and margin plays out in social dynamics all the time. We see it as racism, sexism, and other social oppressions. But the lens of mainstream/margin offers a way to understand both mainstream and margin behavior – and to be applied quickly across a range of issues.

For example, research on the work habits of black and white factory workers showed a marked difference in how blacks approach a task. When given the same time-limited task, white factory

workers tended to jump right into doing the job. Black factory workers, by contrast, spent the first period of time hanging out together and chatting. Only after this would the black workers start in on a job.

The result was approximately the same. The two groups tended to finish in the same amount of time, though the black workers tended to finish complex tasks faster. The cues by the social "greasing" from the black workers' hanging out allowed them to resolve disagreement about the task in their group faster than the white groups.

In mixed race groups this difference proved contentious, as white factory workers would accuse the black workers – who would try to initiate socializing – of being lazy. Black workers, meanwhile, experienced the white workers anti-social and uncaring of their situation.[1]

Underneath these accusations are cultural assumptions. Communities of various colors value how to get a task done differently. The question of how much relationship is needed to do a task differs with a strong racial component.

And bosses – almost entirely white bosses – operated out of mainstream cluelessness. When they saw black factory workers not working and made their judgments: lazy. And because that had institutional rank, they would use those judgments to oppress black workers, firing them in larger numbers than white workers – despite their equal effectiveness. Hence the notion that racism = *prejudice plus power*.

Conclusion

In the mainstream/margin perspective, we generalize by saying that: mainstreams have their interests institutionalized. That is, their perspective becomes the norm. They can do this because of the rank accorded mainstreams; and out of their cluelessness – not always prejudice – they make false judgments about margins, generally by assuming margins are *just like them.*

But instead of just condemning mainstream behavior, we can name it as such. Because each person experiences some marginalization, that can be used to build empathy towards when that person is mainstream. And rather than letting activists get stuck in self-marginalization, which harms our movements, this approach pushes us to acknowledge we play *both* roles – and in both roles we can move our groups forward. Now that's liberation!

By Daniel Hunter, 2009

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[1] For a deeper look at black and white styles of relating, see *Black and Whites Styles in Conflict* by Thomas Kochman, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981