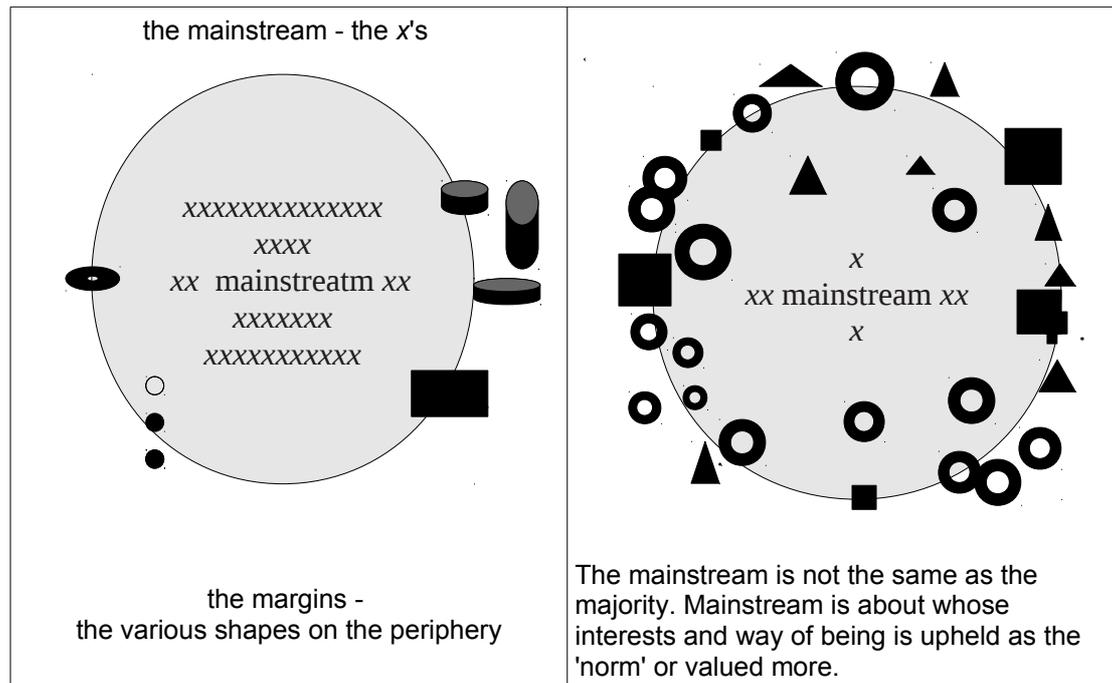




Mainstreams and Margins in Groups

Every group has mainstreams and margins.

- mainstreams = qualities, behaviours and values supported by and deemed worthy by the group
- margins = other qualities, behaviours, and values pushed to the periphery, away from the mainstream of the group



- No matter how homogeneous a group or organisation, a close observation reveals that some characteristics are marginalised.
- The mainstream sets the tone, communication-style and way of working. The mainstream's preferences often are the dominant way of doing things. Change usually comes from the margins.
- When trainers/facilitators are aware of this dynamic, we have choice points. We can cooperate with (or go with the flow of) the mainstream preference, or notice and invite the group to reflect on the dynamic and its significance and impact on the group's way of working.

A mainstreams/margins story

In a 4-day workshop, ¼ of the participants were women, but men did all the talking in the whole group discussions for the first day and a half. The facilitator decided to do a panel discussion and interviewed the women in front of the whole group about their experiences, asking them to share their contributions and stories of involvement in this particular movement and their experience as women activists. After that panel discussion the women participated more fully, which raised the quality of the workshop experience for everyone.



Not a static, but an ever-changing relationship

This example illustrates a few basic group principles.

- Mainstreams grow through becoming aware of, and changing their behaviour in relationships with their margins.
- Groups in which the mainstream refuses to positively engage the margins, ultimately will not grow and they die or fail to thrive.
- The growth of groups and cultures originates at the margins.
- A trainer/facilitator with curiosity and flexibility about the mainstream and margins can ask 'what is going on in *this* group right *now*?' With that observation then make thoughtful choices and help the mainstream to recognize and re-negotiate its relationship with its margins.
- 'Oppression' or 'marginalisation' is not a permanent and unchanging situation. Awareness of the complexities of the mainstream/margins dynamic coupled with action to address the situation can bring about change. For example, in society at large mainstream forces oppress women and the mainstream of the 4-day workshop story had absorbed and reproduced that dynamic, perhaps unintentionally. The facilitator's decision to address the dynamic with the panel interview allowed the group to change the way it related to one another.
- The mainstream is not about numbers. Mainstream is not synonymous with 'majority'. Mainstream is about who has their interests or values esteemed or held up as the 'norm'.

Without Shame or Blame

'Anti-oppression work' or 'multiculturalism' or 'diversity training' until the present moment (the mainstream of anti-oppression work/multiculturalism/diversity training work) has tended to focus on identifying, calling out and judging mainstream behaviour. A more effective approach focuses on helping the mainstream develop awareness of their own internalized oppression and work towards their liberation.

As activists our efforts are best directed towards helping the margins express themselves and getting the mainstream to listen to and understand the margins. Awareness of our own always-flowing and changing mainstream/margins role is also important.

~isms Surround us, and so our Opportunities for Liberation

Sexism, racism, tribalism, classism, imperialism, regionalism, able-bodism ... and on and on surround us and play out in social dynamics all the time. But the lens of mainstreams/margins offers a way to understand this behaviour across a range of issues. And because all of us experience some form of marginalization every day, the opportunities to build empathy and break down these systems, practices and habits abound. As activists we need awareness of our own roles in the mainstream and margins of our lives and the skills to help groups move towards their own awareness of the dynamic. Now that's liberation for all!

Adapted from a Training for Change hand-out by Daniel Hunter, 2009