

Learning activity

Mapping Mainstream and Margins in Movements

TIME: 90 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Understanding Mainstream and Margins dynamic
- Putting Mainstream and Margin theory into practice
- Applying the model to movement dynamics
- Developing foundations for conflict and tension resolution skills

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 10-50

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS: Draw model of mainstream and margins on flipchart (see below).

FRAMING:

The Mainstream & Margin framework has been developed to foster understanding of group dynamics. The mainstream and margins dynamic is part of every group's life. No matter how homogeneous a group or organisation, a close observation will show that some characteristics or qualities in the group are marginalised. Eg, in a group that has a reputation for having vibrant social events and throwing great parties, there may be a margin which loves quietness. As a group evolves over time, different qualities will shift between the mainstream and the margins, so the dynamic is always changing. Each person in the group might have some characteristics of the margins, and some characteristics of the mainstream, and that too will change.

The benefit of learning about this dynamic is to bring awareness, understanding and offer capacity to make choices about how we participate in the group. It allows us to better tolerate and even welcome some of the tensions that these dynamics produce. Without the mainstream a group wouldn't exist, however without the margins a group wouldn't grow. In the short term, a group can grow by increasing the size of its mainstream, but for long-term sustainability, a group will grow by supporting its margins to participate on their own terms. The margins (or 'edges' - if you're into permaculture) of the group can be the most fertile place for growth.

The mainstream is identified by the qualities, behaviours and values supported by and deemed worthy by the group. The mainstream sets the tone, communication style and way of working in the group. A mainstream doesn't necessarily mean a numerical majority.

Some characteristics of mainstreams:

- Feeling at home in the group

- Taking on more visible or 'responsible' jobs

- Using language like “we all think...” “everyone knows that...” “this is normal...” “that isn’t appropriate...”
- Perhaps not noticing that some people have different experiences or beliefs to them
- Talking confidently in the group, and being listened to by others
- Putting a lot of work into the group, and feeling invested in it.

The mainstream does essential work in holding the group together. Sometimes people in the mainstream can feel guilty for having this power. It's normal that the mainstream is 'clueless' to the existence of the margins. If the dynamic starts to shift, and the margins come into their power, the mainstream can feel confused, and feel like new opinions or behaviours have come out of nowhere.

The mainstream often tries hard to stay comfortable, and might reject challenges from the margins, feeling attacked and alienated. This *doesn't* mean they have suddenly become marginalised! They need to practise being with the discomfort of what is being pointed out, and listening. If a group's mainstream refuses to positively engage the margins, ultimately the group will fail to thrive, so the mainstream has a big opportunity (and responsibility) if it can develop its awareness of this dynamic.

The margins are the qualities, behaviours, and values that are pushed to the periphery of the group. When the mainstream of a group is unaware, and until the margins of the group find their power, the characteristics of the margins can look like:

- Leaving a part of their identity 'at the door' in order to fit into the group
- Feeling like they aren't included in decision-making (because they probably aren't!)
- Doing work that is undervalued, not noticed by others, or not taking on jobs at all
- Losing confidence in the group
- Feeling isolated and not listened to
- Expressing views that might seem 'irrelevant' or 'outrageous' to the mainstream.

Being on the margins of the group can feel alienating. However, as the margins get more empowered and demand to be more seen and heard, it is also a powerful place to be. The margins have a freedom that the mainstream doesn't have. As the current existence of the group doesn't depend on the margins, they have a freedom to participate or leave as they choose.

It is very common that the people on the margins have a much clearer understanding of the dynamic than the people in the mainstream do.

How does this dynamic relate to privilege?

There are many social factors that influence the power we have, or don't have, in society. However 'woke' a group is, these systems of oppression, many hundreds or thousands of years old, will undoubtedly influence how it interacts. It can be the case that the people in the mainstream of a group also have power in society in general, but this is not necessarily the case.

Don't assume that mainstream and margin dynamics in group will necessarily replicate those in the wider society. It's better to notice what's actually happening in the group than make assumptions about what you expect the dynamic to be.

Applying the model to social movements and networks

What can we learn about dynamics within our movements by looking at them through a mainstream and margin lens? Well, let's try it and find out.

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Familiarise yourself with the model

Look at this diagram and see if you can make sense of the model in terms of some groups you are familiar with.

You might find it useful to sketch a quick map of one of those groups, just to get the feel of the process (see example below)

Step 2. Draw a similar type of 'map' for a specific movement space

You might choose to apply this to the same movement you chose for either the mapping or the timeline activities in previous weeks, or choose something else. This could work well at a reduced scale, such as the way movement dynamics are showing up in a specific city or region. But just chose a special framing that makes sense to you.

Step 3. Reflecting on the mapping

We can ask:

- What is the relationship between groups/organisations that you might associate with the margins with others more easily situated in the mainstream?
- What are some of the mechanisms that can lead to unhelpful mainstream margin dynamics?
- What are some of the tools/approaches/practices we could use to help us notice, and better include some of the characteristics of the margins?

Step 4. Debriefing

What can we take away from this activity that suggests shifts in our practice? Are there ways to carry this reflection and analysis forwards in a useful way?

Conclusion and take aways

These dynamics are not about ridding our spaces of M&M dynamics, but about exploring how we can better ensure that our movement spaces can hold diversity with greater awareness and skill, as well as foster the quality of relationships needed to build power together. And remember... the model suggests that we need mainstreams to keep things

together and have a sense of group identity - it's not a simple binary of 'mainstreams bad, edges good'.

Frequently asked questions about this activity

SOURCE:



Margin

Needs regular breaks in meetings
Not able to overwork due to caring responsibilities
Shy and introverted

Mainstream

Hard working
Able to express emotions
Fit and sporty
Fluent in English