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Mainstreaming Equality: The Implications for Disabled People[1]

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Mainstreaming equality involves integrating equality considerations from the outset into how an organization operates, its policies and practices. Whether this works to the advantage of disabled people depends critically on the quality of understanding of equality issues for different groups. This paper begins by clarifying goals for social justice, social inclusion and equality and then considers the salience of disabled people as a social category. It briefly reviews different equality strategies, before focusing on mainstreaming and its potential to promote cultural change and socially just distribution. An analytical framework to support mainstreaming is outlined. The paper concludes by stressing the importance of disabled people's involvement with mainstreaming equality if outcomes are to promote social justice.

Introduction

> On meeting antipodal man one could marvel at his fundamental likeness to oneself or one could gasp at his immediately striking differences. One could regard these differences as of degree or of kind, as products of changing environment or immutable heredity, as dynamic or static, as relative or absolute, as inconsequential or hierarchical. (Stocking, 1982: 45)

Over recent years, 'mainstreaming' has become common currency in equality debates. Views about its usefulness diverge widely. For some, it is a means of changing organisational culture, integrating equality considerations from the outset, rather than as an afterthought (if thought about at all). It helps plug democratic deficits, giving a voice to people who would otherwise be excluded. This in turn promises better designed policies and practices, more closely reflecting needs as defined by those experiencing them, leading to greater equality and inclusion. Meanwhile others fear mainstreaming as a generalist approach, reducing important differences in experiences, needs and aspirations to their lowest common denominator. They foresee the emergence of a hierarchy of groups, where longer-established gender and race agendas have precedence, and hard-won ground to raise the profile of disability interests is lost.

Mainstreaming equality originated in the gender field as a strategy or mechanism fundamentally to change institutions and their practices. Although still associated with gender, and increasingly with race, there is no obvious reason why the same principles and techniques should not apply to inequality experienced by any or all groups, particularly in view of the similarity of theories originating in different fields about the structural nature of inequalities. Mainstreaming equality involves 'the incorporation of Equal Opportunities issues into all actions, programmes and policies from the outset'. (Rees, 1998: 3–4). Instead of merely trying to open up and equalise access and improve performance within

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organisations as they are, mainstreaming is concerned to transform their culture, values and operation. It tries to identify 'hidden, unrecognised and unremarked ways in which systems and structures are biased . . . and to redress the balance' (Rees, 1998: 189).

What is the truth about mainstreaming equality? Maybe it is one of those woolly terms, all too prevalent in social policy, which can mean anything, and consequently nothing. This paper aims to identify the implications of mainstreaming equality for disabled people by first clarifying the intended destination and who 'disabled people' are, then briefly assessing different strategies for tackling inequality, focusing particularly on the potential and the pitfalls of mainstreaming. This is not just an idle academic exercise. In the UK, the proposed new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (DTI, 2004),[2] alongside the disbanding of the existing Commissions, could itself be described as an exercise in mainstreaming equality. Furthermore, one reason given for this initiative is that it would 'promote good practice to business, service providers and others in mainstreaming equality across the breadth of their operations' (DTI, 2003: 19). In addition, the new public sector duty to promote disability equality in the Disability Bill (in draft form at August 2004) may well provide a vehicle for taking forward mainstreaming, if experience of a similar provision in the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 is anything to go on – another reason why it is important now to clarify what mainstreaming equality is and its implications for disabled people.

Defining the goals

According to the Council of Europe: 'Equality means an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of all people in all spheres of public and private life.' (1998, cited in see Bennett *et al*., 2001: 27). This definition implies strong links between equality and inclusion into mainstream society, confirming equal visibility, empowerment and participation as the basis *for* inclusion, or what inclusion should mean. Interestingly, it does not describe equality in terms of the distribution of resources, rights, outcomes or opportunities, despite the fact it is around such matters that distributive paradigms of social justice traditionally revolve (e.g. Rawls, 1971; Miller, 1999). While providing scope for diversity and choice (equal visibility of people with different characteristics, equal empowerment to participate in unspecified activities), it says nothing about the equal valuing of difference. However, it is on recognition and respect for cultural (or group-based) difference that more recent theories about social justice have concentrated (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Phillips, 1997).

What needs to be more equally distributed and what recognised if diversity is to be respected and maximised? Clearly, greater income equality is likely to be important for inclusion, particularly in societies where little is funded centrally or free at the point of use. However, if inclusion is to be on an equal basis, it can be argued that the focus should be on 'capabilities' (Sen, 1983), i.e. the functions which are socially necessary, acknowledging that different individuals may require differing resources to achieve the same thing. 'Capabilities' range from meeting nutritional requirements, having shelter, to more nebulous concepts, such as having self respect and avoiding shame. Greater equality may also, therefore, be necessary with regard to such factors as capacity to make lifestyle choices and the distribution of duties or responsibilities (having responsibilities is not necessarily negative). Crucially, there also needs to be greater equality of respect for different choices, and of status for different forms of responsibility.[3] Obviously this is not

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a matter of literal distribution or redistribution, as may occur with income through the tax and benefit systems. Instead it requires changes to attitudes, the recognition and valuing of alternatives, and policies to support them. That is not to say all can be included or that all alternatives should be equally respected. Some will be mutually exclusive, and those which harm others are unlikely to be acceptable. Furthermore, some forms of goods, must logically be scarce (Williams, 1969),[4] and in some cases value depends on scarcity. Nonetheless, there may be considerable scope to widen the mainstream.

Distinguishing disabled people

People have multiple aspects to their identity. A disabled person is not just a disabled person. In common with others, each also has a gender, a sexual orientation, an age, an ethnic origin and a place of residence. Furthermore, disabled people are far from a homogenous group even with regard to the forms of impairment each may have, and the barriers they confront. Whether characteristics are relevant, and which characteristics are relevant depends on the situation. Characteristics may even be defined or created by their context. A wheelchair user may, or may not, also be disabled, depending on the environment. A person can therefore both be the same as others and different to others at the same time. For example, a disabled person may be 'different' in that s/he uses a wheelchair, but simultaneously 'the same' in that s/he has the same ability, experience and potential required to do the job. To use disabilist terminology, the challenge is not just to avoid 'difference blindness' (Taylor, 1992), but also 'sameness blindness' (Witcher, 2003). What might seem to be a 'relevant' characteristic (e.g. wheel-chair usage) might well be rendered irrelevant by changing how or where the good in question (the job) is made available (e.g. adapting premises). Both the relevant and irrelevant characteristics of the job, as well as of the applicant, need to be distinguished.

Misrecognition, therefore, might distort the structuring and enactment of social, political and civil relationships too, bringing exclusionary consequences. If the goal is to maximise the inclusion of people with diverse characteristics, a more equal distribution of income, responsibilities, respect and status may both be practically required as well as morally desirable. It points to a widening of mainstream society to accommodate differences, a re-examination of the boundaries between sameness and difference, relevance and irrelevance, and the recognition that they can co-exist.

Tackling inequalities

Forms of inequality occur if people with the same characteristics are treated differently, or if people with different characteristics are treated the same. It should, therefore, be unsurprising if apparently opposite approaches have been taken in the name of promoting greater equality. Equal treatment measures exist to ensure that no person should have fewer human rights, or opportunities than any other (Rees, 1998). Conversely, positive action means treating people differently, targeting resources or specialist training on certain groups in order to redress disadvantage associated with a particular shared characteristic and help equalise starting points (Rees, 1998; Bennett *et al*., 2001). Positive discrimination focuses on equalising outcomes, e.g. through quotas, again based on particular characteristics like gender or disability.

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A major criticism of these approaches is that none acts fundamentally to change society's structures, hierarchies, or values (Rees, 1998). They focus on particular individual and group characteristics, not on the nature of barriers thrown up by societal structures. They help people overcome barriers rather than remove barriers. Moreover, programmes and legislation typically focus on just one characteristic (disability *or* gender *or* ethnicity). Fragmentation is further promoted by the unjoined-up nature of government departments, inflexible local authority budgets, the specialisation of academic disciplines and a voluntary sector where organisations typically devote themselves to a particular group or area of provision. This can result in individuals being obliged to accept one-dimensional labels and standardised responses to what are in fact multi-dimensional, fluid identities and needs.

Underpinning choices about equality strategies is the familiar debate about whether the aim is to change society or change individuals so that they 'fit' better with society as it is. The social model of disability argues that disability is caused by the way in which society is structured, not by impairments per se (Oliver, 1990). Similar concepts are to be found in the fields of gender and race theory (for example, see Malik, 1996 on race as a social construct). Androcentrism means that women experience barriers to equality because society is structured by the assumptions, norms and values of men. Likewise, Eurocentrism means that a society structured by white Europeans will inadvertently (and perhaps directly) operate to exclude those who are not white Europeans. Although there is no directly comparable term to describe a society structured by non-disabled people (Abicentrism?), the importance of societal structure is recognised in all three separate areas of study.

If we aim to change society and its institutions, rather than change individuals so that they 'fit' better, and if we want to acknowledge the complexities of identities and needs, approaches beyond equal treatment, positive action and positive discrimination are required.

Like mainstreaming, rights-based legislation requiring 'reasonable adjustments' or anticipatory measures also works to change practices rather than people. The two approaches are different but complementary. Arguably mainstreaming equality stands a better chance of tackling indirect or institutional discrimination through embedding equalities considerations from the outset. While legislation allows for the redress of wrongs experienced by individuals after the event, mainstreaming should prevent wrongs being experienced by 'classes of people' in the first place.

A closer look at mainstreaming

It seems generally agreed that the goal of mainstreaming is for organisations, their policies and services to achieve or promote equality, and that equality considerations should be integrated from the outset. There is less consistency about whether it also involves identifying areas where specialist measures are required because there are limits beyond which the mainstream cannot practically be reshaped (for examples of definitions see Equal Opportunities Committee, 1997 and web-site; SCVO, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2000; Equal Opportunities Committee, 2003). In the disability field, mainstreaming can specifically mean changing 'standard' provision to achieve equality and inclusion, in preference to additional 'special' measures and separate programmes. For example, a

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distinction is drawn between mainstream schooling and specialist schools for people with specific impairments.

Mainstreaming equality first requires careful exploration of the interests, needs and experiences of the disadvantaged group in question. If the aim is to mainstream equality across the board, it becomes necessary to explore boundaries between sameness and difference with regard to different groups, to identify what is to be mainstreamed.

Secondly, there needs to be analysis of how and where these equality (or, rather, diversity) considerations intersect with usual organisational processes, policies, practices, products and structures. Judgements can then be made about where these can be adjusted and where additional measures are required. Depending on degrees of sameness and difference, different degrees of mainstreaming may be appropriate, from full assimilation into one (where sameness is established and can be fully accommodated), through to more of a federal or 'umbrella' model, where different elements are connected strategically, or different strands or modules can be selected beyond a single point of entry. Where there is no sameness through which to interconnect differences, the co-existence of multiple 'silos' may be the answer (see also Jewson *et al*., 1995).

A major difficulty in assessing mainstreaming equality is that there is scant evidence of its impact. One of the few reviews (Mackay and Bilton, 2000), which explored gender mainstreaming in political institutions in the UK and abroad, found various positive outcomes. These included a firmer evidence base for policymaking, the exposure of unintended discriminatory consequences of proposed legislation, more transparent government, facilitation of sharing of good practice, greater participation of citizens in policymaking and the promotion of cross-sectoral collaboration. Interestingly, the pilot on mental health services carried out by the Women and Equality Unit (Westminster Parliament) found that a wider equality approach is more readily accepted. It may be that mainstreaming equality for all groups collectively provides a vehicle for diffusing stigma associated with any one group separately, opening up opportunities to educate about less 'fashionable' groups. Less positively, though, mainstreaming could become tokenistic ('everyone's responsibility and no one's job'). As with any ambitious change management exercise, it requires long-term commitment. Progress will be vulnerable both to external pressures and internal change of key personnel or priorities.

Whether conducted by national or local government with the aim of improving participation in policymaking and the quality of policy, or by organisations concerned to diversify their staff and better match services and products to needs, there are certain key features to successful mainstreaming (see Mackay and Bilton 2000, Bennett *et al*. 2001). As a starting point there needs to be equality legislation, structures and policy (the fact that different legislation provides differing rights to different groups may be unhelpful). External stakeholders need to be involved, like equality experts, social partners and disadvantaged people themselves. SCVO[5] has also highlighted the importance of community involvement. Organisational requirements include a central equality unit to co-ordinate action and provide expertise, equality champions in each department/team/Strategic Business Unit, a governing committee with strategic oversight, and mechanisms for external communication. Crucially there needs to be strong, sustained political and managerial commitment. Information, including disaggregated statistics,[6] is needed to establish baselines, monitor progress (equality audits), predict consequences of proposals (impact assessments), consult (databases) and raise awareness.

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Tool-kits can apply to most aspects of mainstreaming, but existing ones are often little more than general break-downs of organisational processes, highlighting where consideration of equality issues should occur. Training is therefore essential to raise awareness of equality issues.

Mainstreaming builds on theories of social justice, which stress the importance of recognition. The extent of awareness and quality of analysis are clearly paramount, if mainstreaming is to be meaningful and the appropriate structuring of it to ensue. Assumptions about sameness and the overlooking of differences risks leading to bland homogenisation and exclusion. Conversely, a focus on differences and failure to identify sameness risk leading to fragmentation and ghettoisation. There is nothing intrinsic to the practice of mainstreaming which guarantees accuracy of recognition and appropriateness of response. Herein lies one of its major weaknesses.

Implications for disabled people

Much has been done to develop conceptual models of disability, disability equality training, access audits and so on. All are potentially relevant to mainstreaming. Perhaps we are already working to mainstream disability without realising it. As a strategy to change environments, mainstreaming fits well with the social model, and might even be seen as a means of implementing it. However, so far, it has proved impossible to find analyses of the implications for disabled people of mainstreaming equality across the board for all groups at once. This has been brought into sharp focus by the advent of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

The disability movement, as a political group identity, is younger than women's and race movements. Anti-discrimination legislation on disability is more recent and, arguably, less robust. The Disability Rights Commission is a relative newcomer. There are, therefore, understandable reasons why disabled people and their organisations might fear losing out to longer established movements and agendas. An acknowledgement of the many different characteristics present in individuals making up the disabled population may go alongside a desire to hang on to collective group identity. Yet, given the diversity within the disabled population, it could be argued that it is impossible to provide truly accessible services for disabled people without addressing barriers confronted by all other groups. Conversely, much as it is important to ensure disabled people are not stereotyped and are enabled to live independent lives in the manner they individually choose, it is also important not to lose sight of where the experience of disabled people is basically the same; that there are attitudinal and structural barriers which affect *all* disabled people, whatever their other characteristics. It is debatable whether the differences and sameness among the disabled population have ever been adequately analysed, let alone the differences and sameness between disabled people and other groups.

An analytical framework

If the aim is to identify both differences and sameness, what might an appropriate analytical framework look like? This is an ambitious project, which it is only possible to outline here.

Given that discriminatory attitudes tend to underpin every other form of barrier it may make sense to begin by identifying the types of unwitting assumptions that lead to

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inequality and exclusion. Inaccurate assumptions might be made about the following:

- Physical capacity/incapacity/potential
- Mental capacity/incapacity/potential
- Communication methods
- Role/s
- Status
- Income levels
- Location/environment
- Timing
- Sexuality
- Household composition
- Beliefs/value sets
- Life-style/quality of life
- Behaviour/motivations
- Degree of agency/dependency/support needs
- Threat/need to protect

Such assumptions may find expression at the level of personal interaction, or through the culture and structuring of society and its institutions (see Thompson, 1998). In view of the importance in gender, race and disability theory of the structure of society as the cause of inequality and exclusion, it is worth considering whether it is possible to identify generic forms of structural barrier. The following provides a brief illustration:

Environmental barriers: Buildings or outside environments might be physically inaccessible to disabled people, people with small children in prams or frail older people. Environments may be (or feel), unsafe, or 'no-go' areas for different groups, perhaps including mental health service users, people with learning disabilities as well as for women, children, older people, gay or lesbian people, and/or people from minority ethnic communities.

Communication: Format will be important for people with visual impairment and/or hearing impairment. Complex language may be inaccessible to many, including people with learning disabilities or people for whom that language is not their first. Translation into other languages may be necessary, including ethnic minority languages or BSL. Images may be stereotypical, betraying assumptions about lifestyles, roles and sexuality.

Mobility/Transport: Transport may be physically inaccessible, dangerous (or feel dangerous) for women and others, or be non-existent in certain localities.

Organisational barriers: Inflexibilities in the timing of opening hours, appointments or working hours may have negative consequences for some disabled people and/or for people with child-care responsibilities.

Financial barriers: Disabled people may incur extra costs (e.g. for transport, personal assistance, equipment, extra heating, special diet) and have reduced access to earned income. Similarly, there are extra costs associated with rearing children and there may also be reduced access to earnings.

As a basic approach, the above might be developed into a mainstreaming equality tool-kit, to encourage people to challenge their assumptions, and identify barriers they

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may be creating. It has potential for adapting to different settings and groups, and to pick up on multiple discrimination. It could also be used to develop consistent frameworks for policy analysis.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recognition of differences and sameness, and their co-existence, is required for social justice, equality and inclusion. It has further suggested that recognition is intrinsically bound up with patterns of distribution, not just of material resources (where a focus on difference may obscure the co-existence of skills and potential to do a job) but of capacity to make life-style choices, responsibilities and status, and the equal valuing of alternatives chosen, where these are neither mutually incompatible, logically impossible or harmful. It has argued that mainstreaming equality offers both promises to sharpen awareness of differences and sameness, and threats that distinctions will be lost. Which prevails has less to do with different understandings of what mainstreaming is (although there are some discrepancies), and more with the quality of understanding of equalities issues and consequent implementation. Where the aim is to mainstream equality for all groups, recognition of samenesses and differences in experiences, needs and aspirations is critical, if barriers are to be fully addressed, appropriate actions initiated and structures established. This will not necessarily resolve competing claims, but should help identify whether they really are competing or compatible. It then becomes possible to identify where the mainstream can be adjusted and where positive action continues to be necessary, given that a range of strategies are likely to be necessary to tackle the many facets of inequality. The arrival of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights makes it imperative that such analyses are conducted, both to identify common ground and strengthen the joint call for action, while retaining sight of important differences in experiences and barriers affecting different groups. Without this, it will be difficult to make sound decisions on an appropriate structure for the new Commission.

If all people have multiple aspects to their identity, and disabled people can simultaneously be members of any other groups, it is questionable whether it is possible to design organisations or services which are accessible to all disabled people, without also dismantling barriers associated with other characteristics. Policy needs to address the structural barriers experienced by disabled people collectively and be flexible enough to respond to the great diversity of disabled individuals. Balancing group with individual identities is critical.

Given so much depends on how mainstreaming equality is implemented, its implications for disabled people could be either very positive, or very negative. Perhaps the most significant implication of this rapidly moving debate is that there are opportunities to be seized. The very nature of mainstreaming equality means opening up access to those who would otherwise be excluded. Through their involvement, disabled people and their organisations can influence the quality of mainstreaming exercises, the development of the new Commission, and how the new proposed public sector duty to promote disability equality is implemented. They have a vital role to play if social barriers are to be dismantled, understandings of group and individual identities enhanced and diversity respected, so bringing disabled people into the mainstream.

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Notes

1 This paper draws on work commissioned by the Disability Rights Commission Scotland.

2 The new Commission is proposed to build on the work of the Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Rights Commission and Equal Opportunities Commission. Additionally it would have powers to promote good practice and enforce new discrimination legislation (limited to employment and vocational training), covering sexual orientation, religion and belief and age. Action to tackle discrimination on specific grounds would be underpinned by powers to promote human rights for all, providing a unifying framework.

3 To argue for respect and equal valuing of diverse qualities, actions or goods resonates with Walzer's description of 'complex equality', which 'establishes a set of relationships such that domination is impossible'. Instead, 'personal qualities and social goods have their own sphere of operation . . . To convert one good into another, when there is no intrinsic connection between the two, is to invade the sphere where another company of men and women properly rules' (1983: 19).

4 Williams identified three types of goods which 'not all the people who desire them can have' (1969: 165), namely 'positional goods', such as positions of prestige, management, etc., which are limited by their very nature; 'goods which are "contingently limited"', where not all meet the criteria for access, although there is no intrinsic limit (university education may be an example – note: changing access criteria also changes the nature of the good); and goods which are 'fortuitously limited', where large numbers of people satisfy access criteria, but there just is not enough to go round (1969: 165, 166).

5 The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations is the umbrella body for the Scottish voluntary sector.

6 I. e. figures broken down to identify those which relate to women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, disabled people, etc.

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