

An excerpt from “Safe(r) Spaces.”

**Power, Participation, Margins And Safety In An
Intersectional Feminist Perspective.**



Illustration by Camila Rosa

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2.1.3 Rank and groups

Arnold Mindell and Process oriented Psychology (Process Work) created a framework for understanding how rank works in groups, especially during conflict. Mindell's work sets out four types of rank and argues that we all hold multiple, intersecting rank identities, and a clearer understanding of how this appears can often help us to navigate conflict in groups, as well as better understand our own power to make change in the world. If we are able to see ourselves and others as powerful in multiple ways, not just through the structures offered to us by institutions, the opportunity to achieve social change becomes far more just and inclusive.

- **Social Rank.** This is the power you have (or lack) because of your race, gender, age, economic standing, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, education, health, or language. Social rank may be universal or may depend on context.
- **Structural Rank.** This is the power that belongs to your position in an established hierarchy. This is usually clearly identifiable and explicit - for example in an organisation, the director may outrank a manager.
- **Psychological Rank.** This is personal power which you acquire through your life experience. It includes how we move through and make sense of life events, and what we learn from them. A person who generally feels OK about themselves and their ability to navigate through the world might have a higher psychological rank than someone who feels depressed, lonely, or suffers a lot. Psychological rank can be acquired by overcoming difficult life experiences.
- **Spiritual Rank.** This is a sense of power that comes from feeling connected to something larger or transcendent. This might be a religious person, or someone who dedicates a large amount of time and energy to their spiritual beliefs.

The model outlined by Mindell can help us move away from seeing power as a zero-sum game that we have no control over, and towards conceptualising power as something we naturally all share and hold in various ways. Often when we are working with diverse groups, we only think about structural rank and sometimes social, as these are the forms that are most easily visible. Not only can this lead to us inadvertently reinforcing existing hierarchies that are oppressive or unhelpful, but they can also block us from being attuned to the different dynamics at play in a group or for the individuals we are working with. For example, we might assume that someone with a high structural rank like a manager feels powerful in the group and treat them accordingly, not taking into account that they may have low spiritual or psychological rank that makes it very difficult for them to participate. When working with someone with imposed low social rank, such as someone from a low income background, we might assume they will be viewed

as less powerful by the group, when in fact their high levels of spiritual rank mean they are the most commanding presence. **When we are able to view the groups we work with as made up of individuals with many, often conflicting rank identities, we can better attend to the needs of the group and understand the complex dynamics at play.** When doing social justice work, we can also use types of rank as a model for empowering the most marginalised in society to better organise for systemic change.¹

Mindell identifies² the following types of rank as relevant in conflicts across many cultures:

- Skin color: light skin is usually considered preferable,
- Economic class: the richer the better,
- Gender: men have more social power than women (and I would add cis-gender people have more rank than trans* people),
- Sexual orientation: heterosexual people generally have more rank than queer people,
- Education: higher studies confer more rank,
- Religion: in every country and culture, religion tends to have a relevance in terms of allowing more rank,
- Age: this varies across cultures. In the West, whilst youth is often admired, middle age often confers more leadership status.
- Expertise: the more prominent position in one's field, the more rank,
- Profession: jobs that require more education usually confer more rank,
- Health: athletic bodies without impairment rank highest,
- Psychology: in many Western countries, being less "emotional" and more "stable" is seen as a sign of trustworthiness. Struggling with mental health often provides lower status,
- Spirituality: similarly, seeming detached from passions and being more centered is regarded with more respect.

Occupying positions of high or low rank in groups is often accompanied by physical manifestations of such position, relevant for the way in which people behave with each other, with the extent to which they participate and the way they feel about the group. The IIFAC-E (Instituto de Facilitación y Cambio hacia el Elderazgo) outlines such signs as follows.³

¹ Neon (2015)

²Mindell (1995), p.61

³Curso básico anual de facilitación de grupos, Módulo 5 "Dinámicas de grupo, roles y rango", liface - Altekio - My translation.



Illustration by Caroline Tomlinson

Signs of high rank:

- Sitting back relaxed, comfortable, “at home”,
- Verbal and expressive ease,
- Tendency to initiating or guiding a conversation,
- Choosing the communication style, rejecting feelings or thoughts with comments such as “don’t take it personally” or “you are very susceptible”,
- Determining the moment and the time for a meeting or appointment,
- Feeling of being right or that an issue is someone else’s problem or fault,
- Assume that your own way of talking or acting is “normal”,
- Feeling superior,
- Detachment, withdrawal from worldly problems.

Signs of low rank:

- Lack of clarity and inability to think,
- Feelings of doubt, of guilt and insecurity, low self-esteem and inferiority,
- Adaptive behaviour: looking like you agree with others, feeling like you have to agree, tendency to say “yes” whilst your body says no “no”, resignation,
- Tendency to praising others, adulation,
- Sending double signs (for example, saying yes but your body language says the opposite),
- Signs of fear, like rubbing, sweating, inability to look others in the eye,
- Feeling misunderstood, desperate or insignificant,
- Practicing what you are going to say before saying it,
- Feelings of revenge,
- Feeling observed or ignored.

Participation as power: mainstreams and margins.

As introduced above and as further explored in the below sections on safety, the extent to which a member or a section of the group feel empowered to participate is dependent on many aspects. It might have to do with the objectives set for the group work, with the types of dynamics proposed for the day, with personal predisposition in the spectrum between introversion and extroversion, with the headspace available on the day and so forth. However, an important explanatory clue of group behaviour is also connected to how power and rank play out in groups.

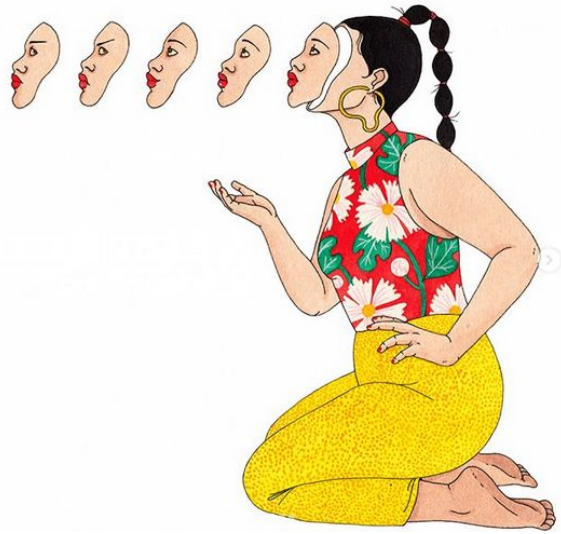


Illustration by Laura Callaghan

In the sections above we have sketched out what types of power might be operating at any given time in a group setting, generating often what we refer to as 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.”⁴

⁴ Training for change



Illustration by Genevieve Darling

Rank and social hierarchy operate in multiple ways and the possibility itself of participating in a group can be a sign of power. An example of this could be not having special requirements of accessibility (like wheelchair access or sign language interpretation) or for inclusion (not having to worry about being the only one in the group that belongs to a certain marginalised group). Another example could have to do with having enough self-confidence to express one's opinion in a group, for being native speaker of the shared language or for not having internalised oppression and low self-esteem due to structural inequalities.

Thus, individuals forming part of the Mainstream of the room are likely to benefit from being constructed as "normal" as opposed to being a minority or even "deviants", if their identity is somewhat opposed to the morals of the majority. **Not needing special treatment or safety in a group is, then, a sign of rank.** If systems of oppression are organised along axes of gender, race, sexuality and ability, then heterosexual, white, able bodied men often constitute the "default subject" with respect to whom all other identities are constructed. **What bodies matter in a group?** Who is the norm and who is the exception? Taking into consideration how structural inequalities and historical marginalisation affect participation is, therefore, key to facilitating a diverse group.

As Training for change organisers put it: *"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.*

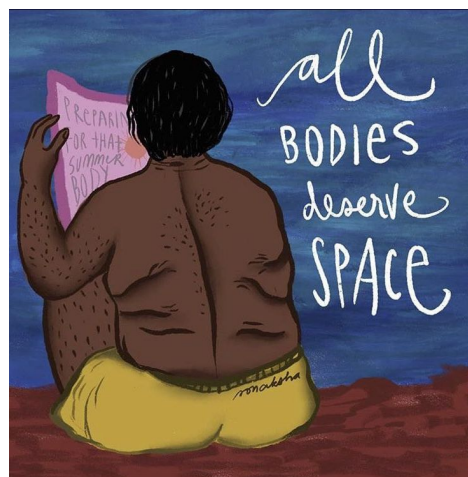


Illustration by Sonaksha

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.”⁵

Power of the oppressed.

As explored above when discussing intersecting forms of power, these coexist in one body and in groups: someone that lives one form of oppression can have a higher rank for other reasons. Inhabiting a subjugated position in some respects does not mean being exempt from exercising power over others. For example, a gay cisgender white man could be at the same time discriminated against by white straight cisgender men and be racist or transphobic against trans women of colour in the room. Our power is relational and contextual and in such a way should be critically examined, decoded, deconstructed and interpreted. Amongst other things, building alliances in an intersectional way also means being mindful of your own acts of power over others.

At the same time, when we inhabit a position of lower rank and might be struggling with the burden of discrimination or with mental health related issues caused by trauma, we can still exercise power over those with a rank higher than ours. This is the case especially with social justice-oriented groups, where a sentiment of guilt can pervade the atmosphere for those that are more privileged than others. This does not mean that less privileged people can be accused of “reverse” oppression⁶ (a very problematic concept that does not take into account how structural systems of power work). What this can help us consider, once again, is that power depends on a plurality of coexisting and contextual factors - that we inhabit at all times. Someone from a marginalised lived experience, is likely not to speak calmly when confronted with someone that represents their structural oppressor or by someone that has exercised power over them. As Mindell puts it, expecting someone that is oppressed to speak gently is a *“mainstream expectation born of exclusivity and privilege, since calmness is only possible when the issues at hand are not troubling”*.⁷ Working collectively on the violence created by accumulated oppression is only possible when recognising the wounds.

⁵ Training for change

⁶ Fabello, M (2015)

⁷ Mindell, A. (1995)



Illustration by Camila Rosa

If power is also what we call “personal ” and “psychological” power (see above), then experiencing and overcoming challenges of difficult experiences and going through life with low rank and living external and internalized oppression as a marginalised identity can help us empower ourselves. Experiencing life from a marginalised point of view can help us develop resilience and networks of solidarity and care. Embracing power in our low rank can help us be more mindful of what oppression feels like, and support us into not denying other people’s pain. It can help us in shrinking the blind spots in our own use of power and reduce the forms of abuse we can exercise.

2.1.4 What can a facilitator do about power?

As outlined throughout this thesis, the dynamics within groups are imbued of dynamics that are out there socially. Wider systems of power are represented in more or less visible ranks when groups are working together for productive purposes or decision making, in group cohesion activities, in emotional management etc. When we facilitate a group and accompany their activities, we are working on a personal and interpersonal level, but we are also working at a political level. As the famous feminist motto puts it “the personal is political”.

I argue that we need to be intentional about the culture we uphold in a group. Whether we are aware of it or not, power and rank are operating at all times and have consequences on the stratification of the group and on the extent to which some participate and some others participate less. How to make this intentional culture in the group live? As Arnold Mindell puts it, “*the facilitator’s task is not to do away with the use of rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see*”.⁸

The second part of this thesis attempts to provide some exploratory questions for facilitators and organisers of participatory spaces in order to support them to take into account issues of power and safety. For these purposes, however, it might also be relevant to reflect on two aspects of the role of facilitation with regards to power.

⁸Mindell (1995), p.37



Illustration by Costanza Coletti

Whose responsibility is it to balance power in a group?

Is it the facilitator's or does it belong to the group itself? This is a quite complex question that facilitators invested in working on power often find themselves struggling with and that has consequences on the *backlash* we can experience after a particularly heated or conflictive episode. Did I do everything that I could to balance power in that situation? Did I recognise everybody's pain equally? Have I taken the group too far in their exploration of their wounds?

Did someone's intervention trigger a trauma? What could I have done better? How do I operate differently with regards to power in a facilitation / social justice training / trauma healing process? Where does accountability lie? Answering these questions forms part of an ongoing process and can generate a great deal of internal backlash following sessions. However, as conversations with my research partner Leonardo Gómez Perea and with the Facilitacuir group have helped me understand, I think that as facilitators we are in a position to accompany groups in making power more visible and to take collective responsibility for creating safer spaces for all but we should not infantilize participants. Treating group members as adults, able to set their limits and boundaries and choosing how far to go in a conversation or exploration of triggering topics is important. I consider it is important both in terms of power dynamics (am I treating participants as less able to decide than I am?) and in terms of group responsibility for their participation and learning. It is clearly a facilitator's priority to treat participants with care, attention and do everything possible to prevent and be accountable for harm caused. However, I believe we should try not to take all the weight of responsibility on our shoulders. As explored in the section on safety below, developing safer spaces is an ongoing and collective process, one that cannot find easy crystallisation. Bottom line is: as facilitators we have an important role to play, but let's not infantilize the group.

Facilitators are not neutral. As explored at the beginning of this thesis, we facilitators are not neutral in our positions in groups. We carry with us our experiences, our privileges and our oppressions. We also carry with us our portion on trauma and unresolved issues. For us to be able to accompany groups, I believe that we need to be aware of our non-neutrality. We need to both be aware of what "wood" we still have to burn, as Mindell and Process work put it,

and to learn how to “metacommunicate” what we are feeling, in the possibility that this channeling helps the group visualise a dynamic or, if this was appropriate, help the group open a group process.

When Mindell refers to “**burning your wood**”⁹, he refers to potential fuel for anger or triggering that both participants and facilitators might carry. As Lucy Diamonds puts it, “*wood is all the issue we carry, the baggage that needs processing, the old wounds that need resolution. Burning your wood means working on these issues, understanding them, being mindful of the things that knock you off balance, and managing the emotions and the reactions that follow. Some issues are long standing and have roots not only in personal history, but also in collective history: matters such as racism, sexism, homophobia, abuse, and trauma. Coming to terms with the issues that affect us is not a one-off activity but a life-long journey*”.¹⁰



Photo by Ringku Singha on Sunsplash

Burning your dead wood means **processing, working on and transforming traumatic or oppressive experiences**. This can be done by remembering a time when you felt not important or oppressed or abused in public and exploring / discussing / enacting what that abuse was like. Recalling the story can provide you with information on what you felt, what you felt that others did (or did not do). Processing the experiences also helps identify ways in which you have brought the issue inside yourself since and how you made it “private”, hiding it or denying it.

According to Mindell, “*the crucial part of this work is to give permission for your pain, sadness, rage, fury and vengefulness to exist. Notice them, feel them and let them be. do not judge them or try to set them aside*”¹¹. By mourning the unfairness of what happened to you and being compassionate with your grief and sadness, you can give space and legitimacy with that experience. You can also work on recognising whether you have internalised public abuse (or

⁹Mindell, A. (1995), p.125

¹⁰Diamond, J. (2016), p.98

¹¹Mindell, A. (1995), p.127

oppression, I would add) and still carry that with inside you as excessive self-criticism. At the same time, exploring memories of situations in which we have sat on the side of the abuser is equally as crucial when processing our traumatic experiences. This is for a multitude of reasons. It is because as we have seen oppressions are intersecting, and so are our identities. We have possibly been privileged in some ways and enacted power over someone, whilst at the same time we can identify with having been oppressed and silenced in other circumstances. Reading both sides of us is crucial to being able to support the diverse roles and experiences in the room. It is also important for identifying spaces for resistance in occasions of oppression. By not only being the victim of a traumatic experience but also an active actor, we might be able to connect with our agency and being more compassionate with the lived experiences of others.

Within the queer feminist perspective adopted by this thesis, I share the vision that facilitating groups after having processed one's own experiences of wound, and specifically queer wound (for example having lived invisibilisation, lack of rights, historical erasure¹² or outright denial or violence) can help us empathise with other experiences of marginalisation in the room. Having endured and survived oppression or even violence can help us inhabit our psychological and personal power. We are in a position to make good use of our traumatic experience to create more welcoming and supportive worlds. Let's take care of ourselves, of each other and of our communities but let's also fight back and help build plural realities for the groups we are accompanying.

As facilitators, **we need to be aware of power dynamics that can be present in groups.** This has to do with reflecting on wider systems of intersecting oppression as outlined throughout this thesis, with reading signals and double signals expressed by participants, with catering for space requirements and accessibility in a mindful way, by structuring activities and agenda to support diverse participation, with critically selecting participants to a process, if we are in such a position. We are also in the position to provide support for care responsibilities, with suggesting group cohesion processes prior to accessing a space, if this was to help some participants, etc. We can be open to different feedbacks and reactions to our facilitation, being mindful that calmness is not an answer everyone is in a position to sustain. A lot of this can be carried out in more or less depth if we are working with a group for a larger process rather than in a one-off facilitation. It is also fundamental for the group itself to decide how far it wants to go in dealing with their internal dynamics and oppressive practices. Reference to this can be found in part two of this thesis.

We also need to be aware of **our power as facilitators in the group.** Our presence and voice are visible and are often granted legitimacy when we have been asked to facilitate a process or session. We are in the position to support or

¹² Gossett, R. (2015)

silence parts of the group, although this should not be present in our work. Being aware of our power is important in order to manage it and not abuse it. This is even more the case if we as facilitators form a (visible or not visible) part of social groups with systemic power. Are we a white facilitator in a group composed by people of color? Are we an able bodied facilitator accompanying a group with people with functional diversity? The awareness of our privileges is important for us to connect with the different parts of the group and with our decision to take a step back, for example when people in the room have expertise or experience that are being invisibilized or outright oppressed. We are in the position to identify the need for a more diverse facilitation team, one that could make the group feel more accompanied and less defensive if oppressive dynamics were to take place. Some of these issues are addressed in the second part of this thesis, where specific questions are formulated and resources are provided.

2.1.5 How are power and safety connected?

If group setups are always crossed by systems of power that intersect each other, how does this affect the extent to which feels like participating or safe enough to do so? How does the awareness of your own oppression affect the ways in which you identify oppressors in a room?

In a feminist and queer feminist perspective, I believe that when power over others is present in the room, the space is possibly no longer perceived as safe by those that inhabit positions with less power. This has to do with multiple issues: the greater access of those with power to self-confidence and occupying spaces; the bigger influencing capacity over others; the different chances for accumulated wounds to be re-opened... and much more. All these aspects are connected by one fundamental thread: where the more power, the less horizontality. If there is no horizontality and if group dynamics are dominated by a perverse use of hierarchy, people with lower rank might be afraid that their voices will not be heard, of being actively silenced, of being assaulted. As explored in the below section on Otherness, belonging to a social group with less rank and therefore needing special treatment at times (be it for space accessibility or for differential care practices) is another aspect that connects safety and power.

Further (...) people with identities forged from the wound (that is, with experiences of pain for their oppression) are likely to have a greater tendency to identify a space as insecure - either because the oppressor is present or because they quickly identify something as the oppressor. This could be both linked to internalised lower worth, to "baggage" with previous experiences of violence or exclusion or simply due to the higher chance of being oppressed in a space. One could also argue that, having experienced such wounds and being familiar with oppression, people with marginalised identities are more likely to empathise with experiences of oppression lived by other people. However, this is not necessarily

always the case, as the section of this thesis on the “power of the oppressed” explores.

2.2 Feminist understandings of safety

2.2.1 What does safe mean?

“Safe spaces” are a recurring phrasing in feminist and queer movements and organising and it has been over the last 50 years. It also played a critical role in pedagogical and academic communities throughout the globe. In feminist, queer, and civil rights movements an understanding of safe space has developed that is associated with keeping groups free from violence and harassment. This type of safe space also encourages “a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance”¹³.

The necessity of feeling safe, comfortable and welcomed in a group is quite likely to be a widespread human experience - one that I consider central in collective experience and that characterises an important aspect of my facilitation enquiry. I consider, nonetheless, that safety (as many other terms and categories used throughout this thesis) is not a neutral concept and talking about “safe spaces” is probably something different for every person we speak to. Safety is a concept that varies culturally, spatially and temporally, it’s socially produced and context dependent.



Image from Etsy

Although context dependent, it’s quite fair to say that “safety” is a gendered and racialized term, and it’s often connected with gendered and racialized experiences of society - experiences of fear and violence that shape daily interactions and negotiations. Put more simply: once again, your lived experiences of your gender, race (and sexuality and class and ability etc) will be very relevant for your perception of risk and your experiences of vulnerability. Power relations are connected to the experiences and expectations of safety, as introduced above.

The concept of safety from intersectional feminist points of view is inevitably linked to embodied experiences of violence, whether we are talking about

¹³ Roestone Collective (2014)

domestic abuse, rape, harassment or violence motivated by racism, homophobia, transphobia or ableism. Creating a space that is safer than others will mean reducing the possibility of receiving physical or psychological violence in that context. In this thesis, which is very concerned with experiences of power of the margins, the concept of safety often *“allude(s) to the processes of building spaces of ease and safety for subjects daily excluded from a series of possibilities of existence, but also to the reasons that innervate the filiation of the participants, and that make the feminist spaces different from other political experiences of self-management and reappropriation.”*¹⁴

What does it mean to feel safe in a group? What does mentioning safety activate in group processes? How are personal meanings and experiences connected to the idea of safety? As Arnold Mindell puts it *“Safety is an experience that interests everyone. We are all living human beings, and sensitive to life and death. Vulnerability makes us all interested in safety, fear for our well being and the wellbeing of others, (...) safety is a perception that depends upon the person’s individuality, race, age, health, gender, sexual orientation, culture, dreams, nationality, and so forth. For example, if something is marginalized or rejected by your conscious mind, you are constantly afraid and “in danger” of a reaction from that “something” within yourself, often projected onto the outside world.”*¹⁵



Illustration by Arte Mapache

Who gets to decide what is safe?

Although the aspirations to create a group setting that is safer for everyone is an aspiration that most people and facilitators could have, the meaning of what “safe” looks like can vary greatly. This will undeniably be connected to the positions of rank and power people occupy in the outside world and in the specific relational group context and, as explored below, it is very often a fluid and ever-changing feeling.

There will not be a recipe for safety that works for everyone at all times. Who defines what safety means in a group? What bodies and positions are allowed to set criteria for behaviours that create or endanger security? Again, the concept of safety is not neutral

Safer, not safe.

What is safe for someone might not be as safe for someone else. Different lived experiences co-exist and intersect in a shared space and group set up. We are

¹⁴ Bonu, G. (2019)

¹⁵ Mindell, A. and A.

aware that promising an absolute safety in a space or group set up would be false. If we follow Foucault's vision of power as a network of relations that is visible in our daily life (as explored in the previous chapter), then we might conclude that a completely safe space cannot exist because power relations will always be present in any group and that can put people at risk. This is why this thesis and many other resources out there, instead of talking about "safe" spaces, uses the term "safer" spaces. Although a collective dimension might never be 100% safe, we think that a lot can be done to strive and support everyone's participation and diminish harm. This will be a shared responsibility with the aim of each participant being mindful of their interaction with others and, at the same time, taking the initiative of maintaining their own boundaries. It will also be up to the group as a whole to sustain itself and defend its members. More on this can be read in the following section. The second part of this thesis includes a practical framework for facilitators and organisers of group spaces. The framework provides questions and tips on how to create more safety and it refers to five categories to understand power and safety in groups: Accessibility, No harm, Participating & Sharing space, Purpose and Self organisation.

Safety as not being the Other.

One of the nuances brought by intersectional feminist perspectives to the conversation on safety, is the experience of people that identify as queer, that belong to an ethnic group that is not majoritarian or privileged, that have functional diversity is the aspect concerning "special treatment". Safety in this sense, can be connected to creating alternative social contexts formed by people that have similar experiences to yours, where the burden and emotional labour of expressing your oppression or needs is not always on your shoulders. From this need, often emerge non mixed groups that organise along their gender, sexuality, race, ability, etc. An in-depth exploration of the beauty or limits of non-mixed spaces is outside the scope of this thesis. However, I consider it to be important to include in the conversation reflections of Otherness, on the weight of exceptionalism and on the need for different requirements to access or feel comfortable in a group setting.

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