Dominant and Subordinate Group Membership

(Though written by Louise Diamond, this piece builds on the work of many others, especially Elsie Cross, of Elsie Cross Associates).

In intergroup relations, the power dynamics usually revolve around those on top and those on the bottom. Another way of saying this is, people who belong to the group with more power, by virtue of their identity, are said to have Dominant Group Membership. Those who belong to the group with less power, by virtue of their identity, are said to have Subordinated Group Membership. This does not mean that, for instance, if I am a white person in the U.S., I am dominant over any African-American, or black, person, and they are subordinate to me. It means that my group – whites – have dominance in the relationship with blacks, and that African-Americans, as a group, are subordinated in social status and access to whites.

Let’s explore that dynamic. Take for example those who are right-handed and those who are left-handed. Which group is considered ‘normal’ and which is considered ‘different’ or ‘deviant’? Many left-handed people in the U.S. (and other cultures as well), in fact, are considered so ‘deviant’ that they are forced as young children to try to be right-handed (and are even punished if they are unsuccessful). Which group is the world arranged for? If you are left-handed, and you want to play the guitar, or play golf, or sit at a school writing desk, for instance, you are disadvantaged, because the articles needed to do these activities are designed for right-handed people. You are the ones who have to adapt.

Simply put, those with Dominant Group Membership (from here on called simply Doms) share the following:

- They are considered normal.
- The world is organized to benefit them, and suit their needs.
- Their life of privilege is considered ‘just the way things are.’
- They make the rules, and determine what is right and wrong, good and bad, normal and abnormal.
- They are able to limit access to resources or the behavioral options of others.
- They have advantages and privileges that they did not earn by their deeds, but merely by virtue of their group identity.

Those with Subordinated Group Membership (from here on called simply Subs) share the following:

- They are considered abnormal, different, deviant, or somehow less than Doms.
- The world is not organized to benefit them or suit their needs, and they have to find a way to accommodate themselves to the world the way it is structured.
- Their life is that of the underprivileged.
- They adapt to the rules, or face serious consequences.
- They may be or feel invisible.
- They have a harder time having access to resources, or controlling their own behavioral options.
They have to work extra hard to have the same status or advantages that Doms take for granted.

Some of the common characteristics of Doms and Subs are:

**Doms:**
- Are unconscious of their privilege and how it is structured into the various norms and institutions of society;
- Do not know much about Subs, think about them, or see and understand their everyday reality – and feel no need to;
- Do not think of themselves as oppressors;
- Have myths or culturally-accepted stories about why they are superior, and deserve the advantages and benefits they have.
- If the relationship with Subs is particularly oppressive, may resort to overt force and violence to keep Subs ‘in their place.’

**Subs:**
- Are extremely, often painfully, conscious of their lack of privilege and the structures, norms, and institutions of society that are not as easily available (or not open at all) to them;
- Need to know the language, behavioral norms, and everyday reality of Doms – in order to survive;
- Have a sense of solidarity from shared struggle;
- May share myths or culturally-accepted stories based on their collective trauma or victimhood.
- If the relationship with Doms is particularly repressive, may resort to violence or collective struggle to gain their rights.

Because everyone has multiple and sometimes changing group memberships, many (but not all) people have both dominant and subordinated group membership experience somewhere in their life. For instance, in the U.S., I have Dom experience as a white person (vis a vis people of color), as a heterosexual (vis a vis gays and lesbians), and as an upper middle class professional person with a Ph.D. (vis a vis poor or working class people, or those with little formal education.) However, I have Sub experience as a woman (vis a vis men), and as a Jewish person in a primarily Christian-identified country. Interestingly, though, if I move to Israel, that same Jewishness puts me in the Dom category, vis a vis Palestinians, be they Muslim or Christian. Most of us have a Sub experience as little children, and many then go on to have a Dom experience as parents.

Of note: Dominant Group Membership does not necessarily go along with being in the majority. In the Apartheid system in South Africa, the Doms were definitely in the minority, numbers-wise, but dominant in the relationship.

Dom-Sub relations can be relatively benign (as in right- or left-handedness), or extremely oppressive (as in the relations, say, of the British to native peoples in their Asian and African colonies, or of Nazis to Jews) – or anywhere in between these two poles. The
more the relationship is toward the oppressive end of the spectrum, the more there is likely to be ongoing power struggle. At the farthest end, with the most repressive systems, both sides may resort to violence. All of the ‘isms’ of modern society – colonialism, racism, imperialism, sexism, ageism, etc. – are systems in which we play out the dom-sub relationship dynamics.