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*FEMINIST RESEARCH***FOCUS GROUPS IN FEMINIST RESEARCH: POWER,
INTERACTION, AND THE CO-CONSTRUCTION
OF MEANING**

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Synopsis—Despite a theoretical emphasis on understanding the person-in-context, individualistic research methods have dominated feminist psychology, and feminist research more generally. I suggest the need for more socially situated methods, and argue that group interviews, or focus groups, are of particular value in conducting, and developing, feminist research. The historical development of focus groups is briefly outlined and examples provided of their use in contemporary feminist research projects. I demonstrate that the particular benefits of focus groups include: addressing feminist ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning; generating high quality, interactive data; and offering the possibility of theoretical advances regarding the co-construction of meaning between people. The potential for future development of focus group theory and methodology in feminist research is argued, and illustrated, in particular, with reference to the dynamic negotiation of meaning in specific social contexts.
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If you really want to know either of us, do not put us in a laboratory, or hand us a survey, or even interview us separately alone in our homes. Watch me (MF) with women friends, my son, his father, my niece, or my mother and you will see what feels most authentic to me. (Fine & Gordon, 1989, p. 159)

Feminist psychology is about understanding the person within a social world. Rejecting the atomistic individualism of much mainstream psychology, feminist psychologists have highlighted the influence of social context (e.g., Weisstein, 1968/1993; Sherif, 1979/1992); the relational aspects of self (e.g., Jordan, Kaplan, Baker Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1996); and—most radically—the construction of meanings and knowledges through interaction (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Morawski & Agronick, 1991). Although there are theoretical debates about the nature and interpretation of data, particularly between “essentialists” and “social constructionists,” from *both* of these perspectives, research

methods which isolate individuals from their social context should clearly be viewed as inappropriate.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising, then, to find that within feminist psychology, individualistic research methods have been more the norm than the exception, at least until recently. The traditional dominance of quantitative research methods has only recently been eroded, and it is still the case that when qualitative research *is* undertaken, the individual interview is probably the most widely used method. Many of the classic qualitative studies in feminist psychology use the one-to-one interview as their only or primary research tool (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chesler, 1972; Gilligan, 1982; Walker, 1979) and of the 77 empirical reports published in the first six volumes (1990–1996) of the international journal, *Feminism & Psychology*, 56% rely exclusively or primarily on data collected through one-to-one interviews. Given the extent to which the individual interview dislocates the person from her social context, it is particularly ironic to note

that it is precisely those feminist researchers who have made the most insistent claims for women's collectivist, sociocentric, communal, or connected selves who have relied on individual interviews to substantiate these claims (Benkeny et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

The aim of this paper is to suggest that *group* interviews of various kinds (generically designated *focus groups*) offer an important opportunity to explore issues relevant to the person-in-context—so providing a valuable methodological tool for feminist psychology, and for feminist research more generally. My main aim, then, is to illustrate what focus group methods have to offer to feminist research; it is not my intention here to address the parallel question of what feminist research may have to offer to focus group methods (a different task, less appropriate for a feminist readership). I will first outline the contemporary use of focus groups in relation to their historical development, and will then discuss their advantages. In particular, I will show, first, how—compared with one-to-one interviewing—the focus group obviates many ethical concerns raised by feminists about power and the imposition of meaning (while introducing others). Second, I will illustrate the power of focus groups to yield high quality data. Third, I will suggest the potential of focus group data, particularly when viewed from within a social constructionist framework, to inform us about the co-construction of realities between people, the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context. I will end with some suggestions for developing the use of focus groups, both as theory and as method, in feminist research.

FOCUS GROUPS: HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS

As researchers point out, "what is known as a focus group today takes many different forms" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 9), but centrally it involves group discussions in which participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher and presented to them in the form of a film, a collection of advertisements, or a vignette to discuss, a "game" to play, or simply a particular set of questions. The groups (rarely more than 12 people at a time, and more commonly 6 to 8) can either consist of preexisting clusters of people (e.g., family members, Khan & Manderson, 1992; Billig, 1992; col-

leagues, Kitzinger, 1994) or of people drawn together specifically for the research. Many aspects of focus groups (e.g., the role of the moderator, the specific focus of the group, the setting in which they meet, and the value of pre-existing versus "artificial" groups) are discussed in detail in the various "how to" books that address this method (e.g., Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), and it is not my intention to rehearse those discussions here. Discussions between group participants (usually audiotaped and transcribed) constitute the data, and conventional methods of qualitative analysis (ranging from content analysis to rhetorical or discursive techniques) are then applied. The method is distinctive, then, not for its mode of *analysis* but rather for its *data-collection* procedures. Crucially—and many commentators on the method make this point—focus groups involve the interaction of group participants *with each other* as well as with the researcher/moderator, and it is the collection of this kind of interactive data that distinguishes the focus group from the one-to-one interview. Focus groups involve the "explicit use of the group interaction as research data" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 103), and "the hallmark of focus groups is *the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group*" (Morgan, 1988, p. 12, his emphasis).

However, despite the fact that interaction between participants is supposed to be a defining characteristic of the method, one reviewer comments that, in over 40 published reports of focus group studies, she "could not find a single one concentrating on the conversation between participants and very few that even included any quotations from more than one participant at a time" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 104). For this article, I reviewed well over 200 focus group studies ranging in date of publication from 1946 to 1996, with the same result. Focus group data is most commonly presented as if it were one-to-one interview data, with interactions between group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed. Where interactions between participants are quoted, they are typically used simply to illustrate the advantages of focus groups over other methods, and analysed solely at the level of *content* (rather than in terms of their *interactional* features). For example, Lewis (1992) uses interactive data to illustrate that group inter-

views “help to reveal consensus views”; “may generate richer responses”; “may be used to verify research ideas of data gained through other methods”; and “may enhance . . . reliability,” while Denscombe (1995, p. 137) reproduces an interaction in order to “offer some data on shared perspectives” and to illustrate its potential “to check the truth of participants’ statements.”

My presentation of focus group data in this article is not typical of the way in which this data is normally reported. I have deliberately sought out (rare) published examples of *interactive* data in order to make the best possible case for the use of focus groups—and I have quoted these examples in full, as given in print. In addition, in presenting these data extracts, I have often moved beyond *content* to draw attention to *interactional* features of the data which are *not* commented upon by the authors themselves.

Use of the focus group method has been reported in the social science literature for more than half a century. Although Bogardus (1926) used group interviews in developing his social distance scale, the invention of the focus group is usually attributed to sociologist Robert Merton who (along with his colleagues Patricia Kendall and Marjorie Fiske) developed a group approach (“the focussed group-interview”) to eliciting information from audiences about their responses to radio programs (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946). Focus groups have not been widely used in psychology (partly because “they did not fit the positivist criteria extant in the dominant research paradigm,” Harrison & Barlow, 1995, p. 11), but nor have they been widely used in other social science disciplines, and only a decade ago it was possible for one researcher to comment that focus groups had “virtually disappeared from the social sciences” (Morgan, 1988, p. 11). This neglect of focus groups is clearly evidenced within feminist research, too: for example, “interviews”—but not “focus groups”—are referenced in Miller and Treitel’s (1991) annotated bibliography of feminist research methods, and Nielsen’s (1990) collection of “exemplary readings” of feminist research methods does not include any research using focus groups.

It is only in the past 5 years or so that the focus group has been described as “gaining some popularity among social scientists” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 364), so the current “resurgence of interest” (Lunt & Livingstone,

1996, p. 79) in focus groups is a very recent phenomenon. In my review of over 200 studies using group interviews (whether or not these were formally designated as “focus groups”), I found only a couple of dozen conducted by feminists. Recent feminist research that extends the one-to-one interview to a group setting includes focus groups with men talking about sex (Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1994); group interviews with punks talking about their appearance (Widdicombe, 1995); semi-structured discussion groups (Lovering, 1995) and “joint” or “group interviews” (Kissling, 1996) with young people at school on the topic of menstruation; an exploratory discussion group with educated working-class women (Walkerdine, 1996); and the use of “girls’ groups” to explore young women’s experiences of sexual harassment (Herbert, 1989) and other gendered inequalities (MacPherson & Fine, 1995). The recent publication, in the international journal *Feminism & Psychology*, of student “work in progress” suggests that many new researchers, in particular, are drawn to focus groups as a research method: see, for example, Barringer’s (1992) focus groups with incest survivors; Raabe’s (1993) use of focus groups to explore the ways in which young people construct their identities in relation to inequalities between women and men; and Lampon’s (1995) focus group research on lesbians’ perceptions of safer sex practices.

One unfortunate consequence of the historical neglect of the focus group within social science research is that those social scientists who are now beginning to use group interviews, group discussions, or “focus groups” in their research often lack a clear theoretical framework within which to locate their method of choice. Where these researchers have sought to defend or to justify their use of method, they have tended to do so in relation to norms of quantitative or positivist research, and not in relation to alternative *qualitative* approaches to data collection; for example, the following researchers provide no rationale for the use of group as opposed to individual interviews: Frazer, 1988; Griffin, 1986; Lovering, 1995; Walkerdine, 1996; Widdicombe, 1995. There has, in fact, been a tendency for researchers to use *both* one-to-one interviews *and* focus groups in the same study, and to present the data derived from each method as commensurate, with no discussion of the relationship between them—indeed,

often with no indication of which quoted extracts are derived from which source (e.g., Espin, 1995; Press, 1991). The picture is further complicated by the fact that some researchers are clearly working within an essentialist framework, and others within a social constructionist framework—yet the framework is often not made explicit, and/or there appears to be slippage between frameworks. I will return to this point.

FEMINIST RESEARCH ETHICS AND FOCUS GROUPS: ISSUES OF POWER AND CONTROL IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Feminist social scientists (e.g., Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981) have expressed many concerns about the ethical issues involved in one-to-one interviewing, particularly in relation to the potentially exploitative nature of the interaction in which the researcher controls the proceedings, regulates the conversation, reveals minimal personal information, and imposes her own framework of meaning upon participants (although they have also identified limits on the researcher's power due to the constraints of research interviews per se, cf. Ribbens, 1989). Also, the interviewer's control is sometimes eroded, or even overridden, by the power of the research participants: for example, when interviewing those in positions of institutional power (cf., Scott, 1985; Smart, 1984), or in cases of sexual harassment of a female interviewer by male interviewees (cf., McKee & O'Brien, 1983; Taylor, 1996).

These ethical concerns do not, of course, simply disappear when the one-to-one interview is replaced with the focus group (in particular because the researcher retains a powerful role in the analysis and writing-up of the data), but in the *data collection* stage at least, the researcher's power and influence is reduced, because she has much less power and influence over a group than over an individual. Indeed it is possible to conduct self-managed focus groups in which there is no preconstructed interview guideline, so effectively removing the researcher's perspective from the interaction altogether (Morgan, 1988, p. 18). Although this seems rarely to be adopted, the key point here is that focus

groups tend, in practice—and simply by virtue of the numbers of research participants involved—to shift the balance of power during data collection, such that research participants have more control over the interaction than does the researcher. This shift in the balance of power can, in fact, expose researchers to harassment and abusive behaviour from their research participants. Green, Barbour, Bernard, and Kitzinger (1993), a group of four women researchers involved in four different studies about HIV-related risk behaviours, comment that:

Harassment was more overt in the public setting of a group discussion. Often, in a group situation men were displaying to other men attempting to humiliate the researcher. Whilst this was unpleasant in itself it also led to anxiety that the badinage might escalate and become out of the researcher's control:

Another kind of "sex-talk" was sexual "pick-up" comments directed at me, or sometimes simply whispered into the tape recorder in my absence. These varied from requests for my phone number or questions about boyfriends to the suggestion that I should provide sexual services in return for participants' co-operation with my research. [. . .]

On one occasion one of the participants took the microphone off the table, placed it between his legs at an angle of approximately 45° and jerked his hand up and down it.

In face-to-face interviews, the respondents' behaviour during "sex talk" tended to be less threatening, rarely straying beyond oblique or straightforward signs of sexual interest looking for consent, which we would not necessarily describe as harassment. (Green et al., 1993, p. 631)

More positively, the relative power of research participants in a group discussion is manifested through their taking control of the topic of conversation. Feminist sociologist Elizabeth Frazer (1988) met regularly with seven groups of teenage girls over an extended period in order to talk about gender: "I didn't ask questions about class as such, but the public school groups

frequently brought it into the discussion" (p. 344)—eventually forcing her, as researcher, to consider the role of class in these girls' lives. Feminist psychologist Christine Griffin also reflects upon the way in which she was guided by the young women in her research as to what the appropriate questions might be:

The informal, semi-structured nature of the group interviews in schools meant that young women sometimes began to discuss particular issues amongst themselves, without waiting for my next question . . . these discussions did not always fall within my list of pre-selected topics, and I was able to amend this list as the research progressed. (Griffin, 1986, p. 180)

In a study of women's reactions to violent episodes on television, Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, and Weaver (1992, p. 29) also saw the group discussions as an opportunity for women to "determine their own agendas as much as possible."

Perhaps in part as a consequence of the fact that participants in focus groups exercise a considerable degree of control over the discussion process, many respondents are reported to enjoy the experience of participation. Janet Finch (1984, p. 75) comments that "almost all the women in my two studies [one with clergymen's wives, the other with women whose children belonged to the same playgroup] seemed to lack opportunities to engage collectively with other women in ways which they would find supportive," and so found the group discussions a supportive environment in which to explore their experiences. Women participants in a study of media images of violence against women also expressed positive views about the experience. "Other people spark you off thinking," and "It's interesting to get other people's point of view and to actually discuss what you've seen. I mean, I don't get a chance to discuss things you know, with being on my own with my little boy" (Schlesinger et al., 1992, p. 27). According to Harrison and Barlow (1995, p. 12): "Such active participation empowers group members who feel that their views and experiences are valued." These latter researchers also cite the work of Denning and Verschelden (1993), who used a phased program of focus groups to identify and categorise the training

needs of child welfare workers, and then to reflect upon the efficacy of the training provided; this, they say, offers "an interactive technique, which empowers the respondent and demonstrates respect and concern for their views" (Harrison & Barlow, 1995, p. 12).

Group discussions were used by feminist Maria Mies (1983) as part of an action research project aiming to make practical provision for battered women. She wanted to implement a nonhierarchical egalitarian research process, to ensure that the research served the interests of the oppressed; to develop political awareness in the oppressed; and to use her own relative power as a feminist and as a scholar in the interests of other women. Mies (1983, p. 127) argued that in order to do this, "interviews of individuals . . . must be shifted towards group discussions, if possible at repeated intervals." She also states that "this collectivization of women's experience is not only a means of getting more and more diversified information but it also helps women to overcome their structural isolation in their families and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes" (Mies, 1983, p. 128).

The similarities between focus group discussions and the "consciousness raising" sessions common in the early years of second-wave feminism have fuelled the interest of several feminist researchers. Noting that it was through consciousness raising that Farley (1978) came to identify and name the experience of "sexual harassment," feminist sociologist Carrie Herbert (1989) combined participant observation and diary writing with "the more unorthodox use of group meetings, devolved power and reciprocity" (Herbert, 1989, p. 41) in her work with young women in schools on their experience of sexual harassment. Researchers using focus groups in this way hope that through meeting together with others and sharing experience, and through realising group commonalities in what had previously been considered individual and personal problems, women will develop a clearer sense of the social and political processes through which their experiences are constructed—and perhaps also a desire to organise against them. It is indeed possible to find snippets of dialogue in the literature in which women could be said to be "raising their consciousnesses" through sharing experience. In the following extract, women are discussing a

video they have just watched in which a woman was raped:

Researcher: You were saying you think she should have stood up for herself more?

Speaker 2: I think she should've done.

Speaker 3: Yeah, but we don't. I lived with a man for ten years, and everyone thought it was a wonderful marriage. You don't say "I'm not standing this" for years.

Speaker 1: I put up with having his girlfriend living in my spare room for ten months. You don't stand up and say—you say you would, and you say people ought to, but you don't. It takes something to really get you like "This is it. I can't take it."

Speaker 4: Suddenly you think, "What the hell's happened to me?"

Speaker 3: There's got to be a better life. (Schlesinger et al., 1992, p. 124)

Chronicling a set of conversations with adolescent girls, Michelle Fine (1992, p. 173) claims that, "through a feminist methodology we call 'collective consciousness work,' we sculpted . . . a way to theorize consciousness, moving from stridently individualist feminism to a collective sense of women's solidarity among difference."

It has to be said that other researchers using focus groups are less sanguine about their consciousness raising potential—and indeed, there may even be a conflict between researchers' often stated desire to relinquish power in relation to the group, and the hope that the group will achieve feminist goals of consciousness raising. Jenny Kitzinger's (1994) focus groups' discussions of HIV risk offer salutary counterexamples of the alleged "consciousness raising" benefit of group discussion. In several groups, she says, "any attempt to address the risks HIV poses to gay men were drowned out by a ritual period of outcry against homosexuality":

ITM: Benders, poufs

ITM: Bent bastards

ITM: Bent shops

ITM: they're poufs, I mean I don't know how a man could have sex with another man it's . . .

ITM: It's disgusting

ITM: Ah, Yuk!

(Kitzinger, 1994, pp. 108–109)

Her (footnoted) comment on this and other similar material is that such materials:

. . . raise ethical dilemmas for any researcher. These may be particularly acute for the group facilitator if such comments are directed at other members of the group and take the form of bullying or intimidation. Such ethical problems can be addressed through (a) thinking about the composition of the groups prior to running any such sessions and (b) using dissent within the group to challenge and debate such attitudes. Looking through the transcripts it is also clear that, on a few occasions, I simply intervened to silence discussion, or at least "move it along" because of my own discomfort with what was being said or the perceived discomfort of other members of the group. (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 118, f3)

Amongst the plethora of material extolling the benefits of focus groups for participants (the empowerment of self-expression in a supportive environment, the consciousness raising effects of group discussion), this is a rare and valuable comment on some of the ethical difficulties that may arise precisely because of the (relative) lack of control exercised by the researcher over group interactions. It is interesting to note that the desirability of debriefing research participants is nowhere suggested in the focus group manuals, and that this research team is one of the very few to offer "the opportunity for people to make comments in confidence either on paper or to the researcher alone" (Kitzinger, 1990, p. 333).

To some extent, of course, the ethical issues arising in the conduct of focus groups are the *same* as those arising in one-to-one interviews (although exacerbated by the group context): for example, whether—or how—to challenge racism or heterosexism. In a group, however, the issues are wider-ranging and more complex, insofar as group participants can collaborate or collude effectively to intimidate and/or silence a particular member, or to create a silence around a particular topic or issue, in a way that could not occur in a one-to-one interview. It requires particular skill on the part of the researcher/moderator to decide whether/how to intervene; and a need to balance the goals of

relinquishing power/control against goals of supporting individuals, encouraging "fair play," broadening out the discussion, or exploring an apparent taboo. This is an area little addressed in the focus group literature—and one much in need of further discussion and development.

OBTAINING HIGH QUALITY, INTERACTIVE DATA: THE VALUE OF FOCUS GROUPS FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH

The relative power possessed by research participants at the data collection stage of focus groups, compared with interviews, is not simply an ethical issue. It also improves the quality of the data. As Jenny Kitzinger (1994) argues, group work ensures that priority is given to the respondents' hierarchy of importance, *their* language and concepts, *their* frameworks for understanding the world. "In fact, listening to discussions between participants gives the researcher time to acclimatise to, for example, their preferred words for speaking about sex and prevents the researcher from prematurely closing off the generation of meaning in her own search for clarification" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 108). In the following extract from a "girls' group," one of the researchers (Michelle) learns the language used in the school context of three 17-year old girls, Janet, Shermika, and Sophie:

Michelle: Now do you think guys [at your school] brag to each other about this stuff?

Janet: Yes [giggles]. Oh yeah, in a major way.

Shermika: (simultaneously) Girls brag, too.

Sophie: All they *talk* about is what they're getting.

Michelle: Is that their language, "What they're getting"?

Sophie: "Fly girls" and what they're getting off them.

[All laugh while Pat and Michelle say, "Wait a minute!"]

Shermika: "She *all that!*" . . . I *hate* that!

Sophie: "All that and more."

Janet: "Fly" is, like, totally hot, she's the most gorgeous woman on the earth.

(MacPherson & Fine, 1995, p. 193)

Learning the language (and the relevant concepts) of the people being researched is a prerequisite for sensitive understanding of their lives. One of the problems with tests, scales, and questionnaires has often been their lack of (sub)cultural sensitivity to people's own vocabularies. In researching women's responses to violence on television, Schlesinger et al. (1992) used both questionnaires and focus groups. The following focus group interaction illustrates how the group data revealed to the researchers a problem with the wording of one of the questionnaire items, which asked women to indicate the extent to which they found a video clip "entertaining":

Speaker 1: Even though I said—what I meant by "not entertaining," I just think it's the wrong word. . . . I enjoyed it in a way, but entertainment's not the right word for it.

Speaker 2: Gripping?

Speaker 1: No.

Speaker 3: Enthralling?

Speaker 4: Riveting—something like that?

Speaker 1: No, I just don't know. But it's not entertaining anyway.

Speaker 3: Because entertaining sometimes is something that's humorous, amusing, jovial.

Speaker 1: Yes . . . that just grabbed you. (Schlesinger et al., 1992, p. 138)

Many researchers have also commented on the extent to which interaction between participants leads to the production of high quality data. Participants ask questions of, disagree with, and challenge each other, thus serving "to elicit the elaboration of responses" (Merton, 1987, p. 555). According to the authors of a textbook on focus groups, a major advantage is the fact that they "allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members," creating a "synergistic effect" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 16). This may be a particular advantage in the use of preexisting groups who (in the AIDS Media Research Project) "often challenged each other on contradictions between what they were *professing* to believe and how they actually behaved (e.g., 'how about that time you didn't use a glove while taking blood from a patient?' or 'what about the other night when you went off with that boy at the disco?')" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 105).

Another example of the way in which partici-

pants' prior knowledge of each other can add depth to their discussion is illustrated in this brief extract between two women (Marlene and Rebecca) who were asked to comment on a television drama dealing with abortion as a moral issue. We have here an interviewer who apparently misunderstands Marlene's initial response to a question (hearing Marlene's "eloquent" as "awkward") and who subsequently seeks clarification as to the referent of her comment. Rebecca intervenes with a shared memory which both she and Marlene understand as contradicting Marlene's earlier statement, and a detailed discussion of that particular experience develops out of Rebecca's intervention. One has to suspect that the quality of the data would have been diminished if the interviewer and Marlene had been left alone together in a one-to-one interview: the conversation is enormously enhanced by Rebecca's participation in this group setting:

- Interviewer: So what did you think? In general.
 Marlene: Parts of it were kind of unrealistic. . . . I think the pro-life people [. . .] They're not that eloquent and I don't think they're that knowledgeable.
 Interviewer: Not that awkward . . .
 Marlene: Eloquent . . . and not that knowledgeable and also every . . .
 Interviewer: The pro-life people?
 Marlene: Yeah . . . and everyone I've talked to basically told me a lie, so . . .
 Rebecca: But remember the um, the false clinic that we went to . . .
 Marlene: . . . that one woman . . .
 Rebecca: That one woman was so eloquent. (Press, 1991, p. 432)

Whether or not focus group participants know each other in advance of the group, they often assist the researcher by asking questions of each other (perhaps more searching than those the researcher might have dared ask); by contradicting and disagreeing with each other (in a manner which, coming from the researcher, might have seemed authoritarian); and by pointing to apparent contradictions in each others' accounts (often in a manner which the "empathetic" and "sensitive" researcher might feel to be inappropriate coming from her). It is not too difficult to find examples of this in the literature. Feminist psychologist Christine Griffin quotes

from a group discussion between four teenage girls:

- Treena: But if a bloke asks you for sex, what do you do?
 Brid: I'd tell him to go off and have a wank!
 Stella: You dirty thing!
 Kate: It's wrong, you ought to get married in a white dress.
 Stella: But I don't think it is—if you like the bloke why not? Why wait until you're married?
 Treena: She's talking—I bet she's done it!
 Kate: You ought to sleep with a bloke if you love him and he asked you to.
 Stella: But you just said that you have to get married in white!
 (Griffin, 1986, pp. 182–183)

Frustratingly, the extract ends there. Stella has challenged Kate's apparently contradictory statements (in a manner in which Christine Griffin, as a high-status adult, would probably have felt uncomfortable doing), and Kate is left with a job of explaining *do*. It is precisely in the work of explaining and justifying statements about sex and marriage in conversations with peers that interesting data about the way in which young women construct their sexual identities and ideologies can emerge.

The presence of other group members with contradictory opinions often leads to elaborated presentations of particular points of view. After viewing a televised reconstruction of the rape and murder of a young female hitchhiker, one participant in Schlesinger et al.'s (1992, p. 146) research responds to another member of the group—who had expressed the opinion that "she was leading them on, [. . .] and her clothes as well . . . her top, her shirt"—with the unequivocal statement that "Her clothes have got nothing to do with it." She adds, "I didn't want to say anything because my views are totally clear on this . . ."—and she then expounds them at some length. The provocation of the earlier speaker ensured that this woman's views were elicited and elaborated. Similarly, Elizabeth Frazer (1988) quotes a discussion between three teenage girls who identify themselves as "upper class." One of them (Caroline) queries whether the class system is really as oppressive as some of the others have suggested, and is then forced to defend her (implied) view that the behaviour of the working class is at

fault, while another participant (Candida) finds herself explaining the problems of the class system:

Caroline: but is it that bad? is there any need to reduce the classes

Candida: of course it's bad

Cressida: look at how we patronise them, they resent us

Caroline: I think they're jealous, they want our money

Candida: of course they resent, their families were our grandparents' servants, of course they resent . . .

Caroline: they wouldn't say that though, would they? they'd say it's because we're rich.

(Frazer, 1988, p. 349)

In the following focus group extract, from work by Michelle Fine and Judi Adelman, male and female law students are discussing why a disproportionate number of women at an elite, private, equal access law school graduate with much poorer academic credentials than their male counterparts. A male student responds to a female speaker (M) with a comment incorporating the phrase "making a mountain out of a molehill," and is challenged by two other female students, who support M's version.

Female student: You're not listening to what M said. She said, It entirely shook my faith in myself. I will never recover. Some of us just sunk deeper and deeper in a mire, and just keep sinking lower and lower.

Another female student: That's right. I used to be very driven, competitive. Then I started to realize that all my effort was getting me nowhere. I just stopped caring. I am scarred forever.

(Fine & Adelman, 1996, pp. 131–132)

This extract not only illustrates the extent to which "personal" information is revealed in a group context; it also shows how one participant may challenge another, and be supported by a third; and how the "meaning" of being a woman student in this institution is co-constructed in a group context.

However, many researchers have expressed a concern that it is precisely this quality of focus groups—their interactive form, the challenges, and disagreements to which they give rise, in

short, their social nature—which may also result in distortion and bias. This is in part through the loss of (sensitive) material, which people are unwilling to make public, and in part because individual opinions may be biased or "contaminated" by the group context so that people simply conform to majority opinions, or express "socially desirable" ideas: "the responses from members of the group are not independent of one another, which restricts the generalizability of results" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 17). In fact, it seems not necessarily to be the case that less "personal" information is revealed in focus groups. Instead, it may be found that the less inhibited members of the group "break the ice" for shyer participants or one person's revelation of "discrediting" information encourages others to disclose similar experiences. According to Kissling (1996), for example, it is actually easier for an adult researcher to collect young people's talk about menstruation in a group context: the "solidarity among friends" seems to "decrease their discomfort with the topic"; and Kitzinger (1994, p. 111) cites data in which focus group members enable and encourage one of their participants to talk about oral sex, as an example of the *facilitation* of the expression of difficult or taboo experiences in a group context. Whatever the effect of groups on the contribution of individuals within them, what these concerns reveal is a thoroughgoing individualism, rooted within an essentialist framework, and fundamentally at odds with the potentially radical use of focus groups to understand the person as situated in, and constructed through, the social world—and for which a social constructionist stance is necessary.

BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM: THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF REALITIES IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Underlying concerns about "bias" and "contamination" is the assumption that *the individual* is the appropriate unit of analysis, and that her "real" or "underlying" views (conceptualised as the views she would express "in private") represent the "purest" form of data. For these researchers, the challenge in any kind of qualitative data collection is to overcome social desirability, self-presentation, self-deception,

and, of course, the individual's presumed reticence in talking openly about intimate or personal matters to a complete stranger. In the context of interviewing, it is feared that features of the interviewer (gender, appearance, ethnicity, manner of questioning) will "bias" the answers given—and of course these problems are exacerbated in a group interview context, in which individuals are exposed to an unpredictable combination of people arguing, telling stories, cracking jokes, and in other ways interfering with the "pure" expression of an individual point of view. The presence of other people (including the interviewer herself) is always seen as a potentially contaminating influence from within this individualistic perspective.

Within this (broadly "essentialist") theoretical framework, focus group methods can nevertheless be seen as offering an important corrective to the study of the individual in isolation. Instead, they offer the opportunity to study "the individual in social context" (Goldman, 1962; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 95)—a social context which is relatively "naturalistic" (Press, 1991, p. 423). Insofar as individual opinions are formed and shaped through talking and arguing with families, friends, and colleagues about events and issues in everyday life, focus groups tap into ordinary social processes and everyday social interchange. Indeed, focus group researchers often maximise this by studying pre-existing or naturally occurring social groups, such as friendship groups, work colleagues, family members, or members of clubs and organisations. Such researchers may well argue that focus group data are more "authentic," or "closer to the essential meanings of women's lives," than data elicited by other methods (such as the one-to-one interview).

An alternative (broadly "social constructionist") theoretical framework, however, goes much further: such a framework challenges the view of qualitative data (whether or not collected within a "naturalistic" social context) as revealing individual opinions. Rather, it highlights the extent to which what people say is actually constructed in specific social contexts, the extent to which any given utterance is "a discursive production" serving a particular function in the context of a given interchange (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). What is (and what is not) expressed in the context of a one-to-one interview is as social a pro-

duction as what is (and what is not) expressed in the context of a group discussion: although the two may well be different in form and function (as well as in content). Differences between what is said in interviews and what is said in focus groups (and there is precious little empirical research to indicate what those differences might be) cannot be used to indicate the superiority of one data collection method over another—although, as Jenny Kitzinger (1994, p. 117) points out, "it is a predictable sign of the dominance of the interview paradigm that when researchers have found differences between data collected by interviews and group discussion, they have sometimes blithely dismissed the latter as 'inaccurate'."

It is increasingly recognised, across the social sciences, that the interview is not, and cannot be, a sterile instrument through the careful use of which "truthful" reports and "honest" reactions can be extracted from inside the heads of research participants. The effect of the interviewer upon the data collected is, from this perspective, not a *problem*, but a *feature* of interviewing, and many researchers have rejected the stance of the objective interviewer, and insisted on the fundamentally interactive nature of the interview (cf., Burt & Code, 1995, p. 9). Social constructionist (and, more recently, discursive or postmodern) researchers, in particular, have attempted to expose and openly acknowledge the role of the researcher as a means of exploring how knowledges are constructed in interaction between people. For example, Crapanzano describes his interview-based study of Tuhami, his Moroccan Arab subject:

As Tuhami's interlocutor, I became an active participant in his life history, even though I rarely appear directly in his recitations. Not only did my presence, and my questions, prepare him for the text he was to produce, but they produced what I read as a change of consciousness in him. They produced a change of consciousness in me too. We were both jostled from our assumptions about the nature of the everyday world and ourselves and groped for common reference points within this limbo of interchange. (Crapanzano, 1980 cited in Fontana & Frey 1994, p. 372)

As Fontana and Frey (1994, p. 372) comment, "No longer pretending to be faceless subject and invisible researcher, Tuhami and Crapan-

zano are portrayed as individual human beings with their own personal histories and idiosyncrasies, and we, the readers, learn about two people and two cultures.” What is said in interview is always derived not simply from the mind of the interviewee, but from the interaction between interviewer and interviewee: interview data, as much as that from focus groups, is constructed by its context and yields “context-specific understandings” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995, p. 10).

A key *difference* between interviews and focus groups lies in the fact that, while interviewers have historically been able to assert that their data are decontextualised and have an existence independent of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, focus group researchers have typically been forced, by the messiness of their data, to recognise the fundamentally *social* nature of talk. It is hard to avoid this recognition when a group of people are telling stories, cracking jokes, arguing, supporting one another, and talking over one another. Whether researchers choose to *interpret* such data in essentialist terms (as indicating “the influence of social context on the formation of individual opinions”) or in social constructionist terms (as “an instance of the co-construction of meaning in action”) is likely to depend on prior theoretical allegiances. In either case, for researchers committed to understanding the person in the context of a social world, focus group methods afford that social world a key role in the data collection process. However, the potential of focus groups may be seen as further-reaching, and as more radical in what it offers, for social constructionists than for essentialists.

From the perspective of feminist psychology, and indeed feminist research more generally, it is particularly frustrating to find that it is precisely the *social* nature of focus group data that is often obscured or glossed over in research reports. Most reports of focus group data simply quote extracts from the talk of a single individual, taking it out of the context of that individual’s interaction with others in the group. As noted earlier, when interactions *are* reported, they are typically analysed simply in terms of content, and not in terms of their *interactive features*, that is, the processes of interaction and the functions these may serve. So, for example, the conversation between Marlene and Rebecca (cited in Press, 1991), which I used earlier to illustrate how Rebecca’s intervention, contrib-

utes to the development of Marlene’s narrative, is used by Andrea Press (1991, p. 432) only to illustrate the (alleged) “resentment” of her pro-choice participants about a relatively positive depiction of pro-lifers. In other words, a brief exchange that could be analysed in terms of the construction of meaning through interaction is instead presented merely in terms of its supposed content. Similarly, Stella’s challenge of Kate (cited in Griffin, 1986), which I quoted as an example of participant interaction through argument, is described by Christine Griffin (1986, p. 183) merely as an example of the “complexity” of her data and is not analysed for its interactive properties.

Contrast this with Michael Billig’s (1992) analysis of group discussions about the British Royal Family—admittedly not a feminist study, but one that incorporates theoretical and methodological approaches that feminists may usefully adopt in analysing the interactive features of focus group data. One part of Billig’s analysis is concerned with the way in which some people are constructed as gullible, uncritical consumers of the media, and are used as “Contrastive Others” to illustrate the speaker’s own critical powers. Such “Othering” is very much a contemporary concern within feminist psychology (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996), and in Billig’s presentation of his data, one can see the *process* of Othering at work. He describes a group discussion between four people, aged between 59 and 66 and all related, plus the mother of one of them, aged 87, whose “contributions to the conversation were often interruptions, as she told jokes or reminisced about poverty before the war. She even broke into song once: ‘I’m ‘Enery the Eighth I am,’ she sang. For periods, she remained mute, while the not-so-elderly got on with their nimble conversational business” (Billig, 1992, p. 159). It is this woman (rather unfortunately designated “the old lady” by Billig) who is constructed as the gullible Other by her relatives, and Billig analyses the mechanism through which this Othering is achieved. The woman’s daughter comments that “what they write in the papers today is a load of rubbish”:

She added, with a little laugh, and with the voiced agreement of her husband, that “mother believes everything.” The old lady said nothing.

Later on, the topic was raised again. . . . Were women more interested in royalty than

men, the interviewer had asked. "I should think so, Mum you read all about the Royal family don't you?" called out her daughter. "Yeah," said the old lady. Her daughter continued: "In the *Sun* and the *Mirror* [national British tabloid newspapers], and it's all true," she said with ironic emphasis. This time the old lady was not invited to reply. Nor did she. She was being presented as a specimen object, the Contrastive Other.

The irony in the speaker's remark was heavily stressed to ensure that the other listeners, especially the interviewer, received the message. She was distancing herself from elderly gullibility (Billig, 1992, p. 159)

This distance, this marking of her mother as the gullible Other, is achieved, says Billig (1992, p. 159), in part through "an act of collective deafness." Before the exchange quoted above, the "old lady" had spoken of her past:

Years ago she used to work in the print-works for the *Argus* [a local British newspaper]. Yeah, it was terrible, "all lies they used to tell down that paper," she laughed. She worked for four shillings a week to start off, during the First World War: "That was only a penny then, it was very cheap, the *Argus* was; they still do it now, but they tell more lies than ever." She laughed again. It was the turn of the younger generation, the not-so-hard-of-hearing, to show deafness. None of them asked her about her first-hand experiences of the press—experiences which, for all their confident judgements about newspapers, they did not possess. No-one appeared to notice that she had switched from her past to the common present: today the papers tell more lies than ever, she was saying.

The daughter persisted in presenting her mother as the gullible Other, helplessly unable to sort out today's fiction from fact. Was this how she wanted her mother to be seen, a helpless object beyond her time? How they all wanted to see the old lady? And did their deafness to her words arise from this desire? There can be no definite answers, only interpretations. (Billig, 1992, p. 160)

In this example, the researcher has made full use of the interaction between people—indeed, it is this interaction that forms the basis of the analysis.

Perhaps the failure adequately to address in-

teractions between group participants derives from researchers' lack of familiarity with the appropriate theoretical concepts—or even vocabularies—for so doing. As social constructionist psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1987) points out, given that for over 2,000 years the prevailing form of understanding in Western culture has been an individualist one (with the individual person standing as the subject of enquiry, and attributes of individuals consistently looming large in explanations of human nature):

The auspicious question is whether we can replace individualized theories of self with relational theories. It is as if we have at our disposal a rich language for characterizing rooks, pawns, and bishops but have yet to discover the game of chess. (Gergen, 1987, p. 63)

While feminist psychologists—and other feminist researchers—have rejected the rampant individualism of mainstream psychology (e.g., Kitzinger, 1992; Morawski, 1994), they have yet to develop a full range of theoretical and methodological alternatives adequate to the pursuit of their social and political goals. Research methods that isolate individuals from their social contexts are clearly inappropriate, and the potential advantages of focus groups—in mitigating ethical concerns about the power of the researcher in data collection; in yielding high quality, interactive data; and in addressing the role of social context (for essentialists) and/or the co-construction of meaning in social interaction (for social constructionists)—are readily apparent.

Of course, there are also disadvantages to focus groups, both in terms of practical considerations in running them, and in terms of the theoretical limitations of focus groups as a method. *Practical* disadvantages include the following: it can be difficult and time consuming to recruit appropriate participants and to bring them together; some prior training (and practice) in the skills of moderating a group is highly desirable; specialised equipment (particularly a 360° microphone) is necessary for good-quality recording; ideally, the moderator needs an assistant to operate the recording equipment, to keep notes on the group process, and to deal with practical matters (such as latecomers, interruptions, and refreshments). Perhaps the most significant practical problem, however, is that both the transcription of the tapes (however good the record-

ing quality), and the subsequent analysis of hundreds of pages of transcribed data, are *extremely* painstaking and time-consuming processes.

Theoretical limitations of the method include the fact that focus group data is ill-suited to quantification, or to use in making broad generalisations. It is difficult to make a good theoretical case for aggregation of data across a number of diverse groups, for example, or for direct comparison of groups defined by the researcher as "different" on a single dimension: "work-ing-class" and "middle-class" women, for example. Further, focus group researchers (in common with other researchers using qualitative methods) rarely offer a clear theoretical warrant for the interpretation of their data, and, even when they do, there is a great deal of slippage between essentialist and social constructionist frameworks. One of the most common problems is for avowedly social constructionist researchers to infer "underlying" attitudes, opinions, feelings, or motives from individuals' talk (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995 for further theoretical discussion and examples of this).

However, despite these practical and theoretical disadvantages, focus groups have already shown their value, both as theory and as method, for feminist psychology. Focus groups can address ethical concerns about the power of the researcher in the data collection process; can yield high quality, interactive data; and can offer a route to studying the person in the context of a social world. In particular, when interpreted within a social constructionist framework, focus group data offer considerable potential for exploring the co-construction of meaning through an analysis of interactive processes. Sensitive analysed, such data can offer insights into the relational aspects of self, the processes by which meanings and knowledges are constructed through interactions with others, and the ways in which social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through talk. Viewed in this way, I suggest that focus groups have the potential for future development into an approach *par excellence* for feminist research.

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