

Hearing Girls' Silences: thoughts on the politics and practices of a feminist method of group discussion

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ABSTRACT *Many contemporary feminist research methods employed in the interest of realizing social justice advocate 'listening' to subordinated others, groups variously categorized and marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, age, and so on, in order to examine the sources and workings of knowledge construction and social power. Increasingly, feminist scholars are using group discussion or focus groups, in an effort to give subordinated others 'a voice.' Group discussions are seen as potentially empowering in exploring and enabling group members' social agency and knowledge production while at the same time diminishing the unequal power relations between the researched and researcher. In this article, I argue that the attention given to 'voices' in group discussions (dis)misses meaningful silences thereby limiting its political potential. There exists an 'epistemological messiness' inherent in a feminist group discussion method that makes it difficult to hear meaningful silences. Through reflection on my own research into the spaces of adolescent Latina gender identities, this article offers some insights into this messiness and recommends that a feminist group discussion method be guided by a politics of voice which includes 'silence within voice.'*

Introduction

Foundational to a universal concept of social justice, in the words of Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 37), is 'playing and communicating with others, and expressing our experience, feelings, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.' Many contemporary feminist research methods employed in the interest of realizing social justice advocate 'listening' to subordinated others, groups variously categorized and marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, age, and so on, in order to examine the sources and workings of knowledge construction and social power. With particular regard to research into the lives of young and adult women, 'listening' presupposes 'giving a voice' to or making public experiences which, conditioned by the loci of oppression and resistance (as well as privilege) framing women's lives, comprise the so-called 'private,' everyday, mundane and bodily. While both quantitative and qualitative methods are consistent with the goals of feminists engaged in analyses of knowledge construction and social power, 'listening' in a context of in-depth group discussions or focus groups has been gaining

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favor among geographers (see, for example, Burgess *et al.*, 1988a, b; Dwyer, 1996; Pratt, 1997; 2002).

Geographers have written and continue to write much that is insightful and valuable about the limitations and quandaries associated with 'giving a voice' to women and other marginalized groups in and through feminist research (see for example special issues: *Canadian Geographer*, 37, 1993; *Professional Geographer*, 46, 1994; edited volumes: Jones *et al.*, 1997; Bondi *et al.*, 2002; Moss, 2002). The debates most relevant to this article concern issues of power in the conduct of qualitative research. Specifically, how to contribute to effecting change in (and avoid reinforcing of) the uneven relations of domination and exploitation under study and how to accomplish more equitable power relations between the researcher and research participants. I, like others who have employed this methodology, have argued that group discussions are potentially empowering as they explore and enable group members' social agency and collective knowledge production; in other words, their 'voice(s)', and thereby constitute a space of resistance. This is based on *at least* two assumptions. First, that group discussion provides mutuality and engenders support and validation of shared ideas and experiences (Katz, 1992; Dwyer, 1996; González *et al.*, 2002). Second, that multivocality and members' 'safety in numbers' enable the group to establish its own agenda and not be continually guided or manipulated by the researcher and research agenda (Burgess *et al.*, 1988a, b; Burgess, 1996; Pratt, 1997, 2002).

The subject in this article is related to these debates about power, yet is largely absent from them. I suggest that the focus on listening to and making public 'voices' has neglected due attention to hearing silences. I question the assumptions about group discussions as potentially empowering, as offering spaces of resistance, in relationship to the silences of research participants and researchers alike. Drawing on my own research experience and the writings of scholars in geography, literature, linguistics, and psychology who have devoted attention to the subject of silences, I argue that there are epistemological tensions and concomitant conflicts in research goals mobilized in a feminist group discussion method that make it difficult to hear silences, and indeed, (dis)misses silences. The source of the problematic of hearing women's silences in group discussions (perhaps all interviews) is the complementary yet contradictory goal in a single research project of including women, and the foundational and transparent status of women's experiential knowledge which this implies, and of deconstructing 'woman,' the explicit goal of which is an analysis of the socially constructed and mediated status of experience (Nairn, 1997; cf. Cope, 2002). This article offers an account of such 'epistemological messiness' in my own research project, into the spaces of adolescent Latina gender identities (Hyams, 2001). In the facilitation and analysis of a group discussion method, in consideration of silences, the goal of including and empowering the subjugated 'voices' (read experiential knowledge) of adolescent Latinas complements yet contradicts the goal of analyzing their experiential knowledge as effects of power relations in constituting subjectivity. In what follows, I describe first several structural aspects of my research method, my initial goals and the underlying assumptions in its construction—planning messiness. In the second section, I discuss the conduct of data collection, the group discussions and the tensions which, I suggest are often muted and perhaps inevitable—making messiness.

What Counts as Adolescent Latinas' Knowledge? Planning messiness

What counts as knowledge in feminist inquiry has diversified over time. Regarding feminist geographical knowledge, this 'diverse and pluralist enterprise' is often delineated for heuristic purposes into three frameworks: rationalist/empiricist; anti-rationalist/standpoint; and post-rationalist/poststructuralist. Conceived as neatly (although loosely) bounded categorically and ordered chronologically, this framing suggests a slow but sure 'development' of feminist inquiry from documenting or including and valorizing women's experience-as-genesis of knowledge to deconstructing (gendered, racialized, sexualized...) experience-as-object of knowledge (see Rose, 1993). Indeed, the celebrated (r)evolution is from empiricist or Cartesian knowledge claims to an unmediated truth about the world accessible to all in principle through the application of rational, disembodied thought, to post-Cartesian situated, performative, subjugated and/or standpoint knowledges which share a notion of knowledge as an effect of social power: always partial, always mediated by a range of factors related to one's embodied social positioning in a particular place and time. There is moreover among geographers a notion of 'knowledges themselves having a spatiality that structures their inclusions and exclusions' (McDowell, 1993a b; Rose, 2002, p. 254). For the purposes of this article I draw from these sweeping epistemological categories to describe the particular complementary yet contradictory assumptions and goals manifest in the spaces of adolescent Latina gender identities. My intent is not to reproduce static, mutually exclusive epistemological positions but to point instead to how easy it is, in practice, to move between them and 'mess' them up (cf. Scott, 1992).

Epistemologically, my research is situated among poststructural investigations into the workings of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1978); i.e. how gender, race, class, age, sexuality and other divisive categorical knowledges inscribe unequal social positions and generate their material effects in a particular place and time. Specifically, my interest in the subject derives from the questions raised by feminist author Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and other Latina/o social theorists (e.g. Rosaldo, 1989; Gómez-Peña, 1991), who, in a concept of '*mestiza* consciousness' and the invocation of 'borders,' theorize spaces of ambiguity for blurring boundaries between myriad categorical oppositions. Anzaldúa (1987, pp. 78–79) writes:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures, and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war...The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision...The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

Apart from the more conceptual exploration of the issue by Anzaldúa and others, there is little research on the ways United States Latinas are engaged in the contestation of *el choque*, that is, the constestation of exclusionary and disempowering dualistic social and spatial positionings and the negotiation of 'new *mestiza*' subjectivities in their daily lives (exceptions include Zavella, 1997; Wright, 1998). The 'voices' of young Latinas are even less well represented, although knowledges about adolescent Latinas sexualized and racialized accordingly, both scholarly and

popular, abound, which locate these young women within dominant discourses of adolescence-as-problematic in the medical, social science (Griffen, 1993) and public policy literatures and the media (Luker, 1996). A Foucauldian conceptualization of power/knowledge which operates in and through discursive regimes and forms of disciplinary normalization offers a framework for an analysis of the Latinas' experience(s) of *un choque* (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 78–79), while a group discussion method provides insight into the social nature of knowledge construction (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and the dynamic, hierarchical and relational processes of social identity construction and contestation (Dwyer, 1996; Holbrook & Jackson, 1996; Pratt, 2002). As Pratt (2002, pp. 215–216) argues, in contrast to interviews in which ‘individuals tell us how they would behave or have behaved in certain circumstances; the promise of focus groups is that they provide a setting in which we observe how people behave and make sense of their world in relation to others.’ The case-study public high school, located in a low-income, highly segregated Latina/o neighborhood of Los Angeles, was chosen on the basis of its predominantly second-generation Mexican-descent student body¹. I solicited volunteers from among the students and brought together eight friendship groups ranging from groups of three to eight from among a total of 46 young people. The group discussions were conducted over a six-month period in 1997/98, and were held in a private room in the school. The research design depended principally upon the collection of data at five consecutive weekly in-depth group discussions during which members talked about their experiences and understandings around open ended themes regarding places and spaces in their day-to-day lives (Burgess *et al.*, 1988a, b). Data analysis was undertaken through grounded theoretical techniques in which the audio-taped group discussions and additional notations made regarding group dynamics were used to modify subsequent discussion topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the course of the group discussions, this refinement aimed at enabling the participants to establish their own agenda (Kitzinger, 1994). Ultimately, the discussions, transcribed verbatim by myself, became the basis for qualitative analysis of the interactive, intersubjective construction of meaning among the group members and myself.

The tension in my research project as I conceived of it and conducted it is the following. On one hand, implicit in both Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the ‘new *mestiza*’ and the way in which I have conceived of the object of my research, that is, ‘the adolescent Latina,’ is a notion of a common experience of both *el choque* and the possibility of ‘turn[ing] the ambivalence into something else’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 78–79). In other words, it was based on the assumption that a knowledge in which one's experiences as gendered, racialized, classed, sexualized and so on derives from a shared history based on a shared marginalized location in relations of power (Collins, 1991) existing *prior* to the conduct of the group discussion. What this implies for the group discussion process is a notion of experiential knowledge as already given, grounded in collective experience, requiring to be spoken and heard to give it full identity (Hazel, 1994; Jones, 1999). The implication for the researcher's orientation in the group discussion is listening for/abstracting from the members' shared experiences as explanation of their (given) collective behaviors and consciousness (Pratt, 2002). On the other hand, framed theoretically by a Foucauldian conceptualization of power/knowledge, a notion of the socially

constituted subject and of experience constituted in the relational and dialogical process of the group discussion implies a different researcher orientation. The researcher is engaged in listening to/participating in the production of meaning and an analysis of the knowledge produced in context and as an effect of relations of power. What I as researcher heard, spoken and unspoken, became contingent upon which assumptions and goals became mobilized in particular interactions (Jaworski, 1993; Jones, 1999).

What Counts as Silence?

Silence is most often equated with absence and voice with presence—literally and symbolically. The statement is borne out in the following example. During the first three consecutive group discussions some group members self-identified as Mexican-American. The following exchange took place during the fourth weekly meeting in a context of inquiring about what that subject position means to them. My interaction with the young women illustrates how, in practice, I as group facilitator (dis)miss silences:

Melissa: So what do you like about being Mexican American?

[Silence]

Melissa: Or what do you dislike about it?

[Silence]

Melissa: Somebody has to have an opinion about this? Why is everybody so quiet today?

Nena: We don't have Maria. [Maria is not present today]

Melissa: That's right. She's the most talkative. Let's see if we can make up for her absence.

My remark in this group interaction suggests that the participants present in the group discussion that day had to have and therefore had to express an opinion. The easiest explanation for the silence, as Nena suggests, was the absence of the group's most talkative member. The meaning-ful-ness of silences eluded me until thinking about this article. At the moment of interaction I did not consider that they could have or not have an opinion about their Mexican-American-ness or about the very question itself and could choose or feel compelled to remain silent. Nor within the original analysis did I seriously consider my role in the silences, nor the way in which the silences contributed to the flow and direction of the interaction and meaning-making process. In this case, their silence was recorded in the transcript but not analyzed.

This occurred even though my research goal was to consider the ways in which experience is constituted in language, aware that the struggle among discourses to shape that experience is ongoing in social interaction. This occurred, too, despite my commitment to the notion that I, as researcher, am implicated in the production of those experiences through my participation in those interactions and in 'giving voice' to particular interpretations of some experiences and not others. Reflecting upon this experience now, I suggest silences are full of meaning and that researchers as facilitators have a tendency to (dis)miss them.

As the above example clearly illustrates, silence can take the form of an absence of speaking in the context of group discussion when, at a minimum, talking is expected. Silences also come in different forms as illustrated in the

interaction between myself and Sorcha, Regina, Sabrina and Venessa (Deetz, 1992; Clair, 1998):

Melissa: What else can you tell us about the feelings you have about who you are?

Sorcha: I don't have any feelings about who I am. I don't know.

Melissa: [To the group] Is there anything you wanted to say or include or talk about or make sure that I don't forget to include that hasn't been talked about?

Sabrina: Venessa wants to know if it's dangerous to put—

Venessa: She's trying to put me wrong about a stupid tampon and how it feels and everything and I don't really care. I don't want to use one, period.

Regina: Me neither.

Sabrina: I've heard other people say it feels OK and it doesn't bug.

Melissa: We could talk about tampons if that's what you want. [I lamely concede]

In this interaction, claiming to 'not know,' not responding as expected, avoiding and/or changing the subject, communicates multiple forms of meaning-ful silence. For Jill McLean Taylor (1995) and her colleagues, the 'I don't know's' signal a process of psychological dissociation among adolescent girls, a silencing caused by increased uncertainty and lack of confidence engendered by negotiating between dominant discourses of womanhood and adulthood, the former constituted through selfless-ness, the latter, through independence. I suggest that even among young women silences are more complex than Taylor *et al.* (1995) interpret. Studies of young women's expressive behavior in classroom contexts, for example, demonstrate the ways in which social relations of race and class (Fordham, 1993) as well as gender (Nairn, 1997) are shaped by and give shape to practices of meaning-ful silences, subjectivities and space. Furthermore, 'I don't know's' and 'changing the subject,' interpretable as meaning-ful silence, cross-cut by multiple relations of power, can be expressed not as a lack of confidence, but as entitlement, that is, as resistance to the research agenda.

Indeed, resistance to the research agenda was how I interpreted the above interaction in my original analysis. Upon reflection, however, I question, not the girls' reaction to the research agenda but my (internal) reaction to their resistance. 'Changing the subject' is interpretable as silence when (a) talking about something in particular is expected, and (b) something from a particular perspective is expected (Jaworski, 1993). The research agenda looks different upon considering my reaction to and expectations of my interaction with the girls in this group. The logic of a poststructural analysis and group discussion-as-meaning making would dictate that 'anything goes.' Having met with silence from Sorcha and so invited discussion of 'anything [they] wanted to say or include or talk about' the young women took the conversation in a direction of their own choosing—tampons. Instead, as I intimate parenthetically, I am disappointed and 'lamely concede' to the direction they choose. My behavior in both of the above interactions suggests that I am listening for something in particular. I expect to hear, not silence, but their 'voices,' expressions of prior individual and/or collective subjectivity.

I want to make two comments about interpreting meaning before turning to a discussion of epistemological assumptions and methodological dilemmas. First, I want to argue, as does Adam Jaworski (1993), that silences are, even in the most familiar of circumstances, full of ambivalence: silence may signal assent or dissent; may heal or wound; may inform or conceal; may signal power or submission.

Second, the meaning of silences, as with words, can be deduced only by reference to socio-cultural norms, and is made more complicated when interpreting others' silences, that is, silences from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Tannen, 1985; Cheung, 1993).

When silence is equated with absence, it marks what should be present but is not. Such an interpretation often equates silence with oppression, (and voice with liberation) (Hazel, 1994). Neglecting silences and implicitly or explicitly treating them as absences, and failing to consider them as signifying something other than oppression is, in itself, an assertion of the power of interpretation (Hazel, 1994). Drawing on the formative works of Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich, Valerie Hazel (1994) posits meaningful silences as 'silence within voice' to insist on the signifying work of silence.

What Counted as Adolescent Latinas' Knowledge: making messiness

If, as researchers, we proceed from an understanding of 'silence within voice' some tensions in the social spaces of group discussions arise that require some consideration. I want to now take up the issues of group discussion as empowering and challenging power structures and how silences complicate a space of resistance.

An Assumption of Mutuality and Support

Some feminists advance a strong claim for the emotionally engaging and politically empowering spatiality of group discussions for marginalized groups, in particular for women of low socio-economic status and/or women of color (see edited collection by Fine & Weiss, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Madriz, 2000). Esther Madriz (2000, p. 843) argues that 'by speaking collectively, women of color not only reclaim their humanity but, at the same time, empower themselves by making sense of their experience of vulnerability and subjugation.' In the tradition of Paulo Freire (1970), group discussion allows participants to make sense of oppressive experiences of everyday lives and consider alternatives for action against oppression (see Gonzalez *et al.*, 2002). In practical terms, mutuality and support through emotional engagement is engendered, according to researchers as facilitators, through multiple, consecutive group meetings which have the benefit of time for the development of trust among the group participants and between them and the researcher. In the experience of Kathleen Burgess (1988b, p. 466) and her colleagues, the time is needed for individuals to 'begin to explore beneath those well-rehearsed phrases and feelings' often expressed in interviews and once-only focus groups. Additionally, Jenny Kitzinger (1994, pp. 103–105) has found that friendship groups which begin the process with a degree of familiarity and trust can enhance group interaction and dynamism (Kitzinger, 1994).

For researchers as group facilitators and analysts of group interactions empowerment is not the only possible interpretation, as suggested above, of mutuality and validation of shared experiences in group discussion. As my multiple interpretations of the following group interactions below suggest, the difference between an interpretation of group interaction as mutuality and support and in

turn empowering or, alternatively, as unequal power relations may depend on whether experiential knowledge is conceived of as a priori to the group discussion or generated *in situ*.

Among the young Latinas, the generation of mutuality and support among friends was borne out in several of the groups' discussions about ethnoracial identity. The following declarations by Lilliana and Michelle illustrate one way in which the discussion engendered a space of pride and the production of a discourse of resistance to degrading representations of Mexicans:

Lilliana: Well, yeah...some of them they try to hide that they're Mexican. Well, I think it's dumb. They should be proud of where...they [were] born. Like me.

Michelle R.: But sometimes like the gringos, they call us, like we're Mexican Americans, they call us wetbacks, too. I think that's sad [bad]. They tell us that we're wetbacks and that we should go to Mexico where we really belong. And well, they don't belong here either because the American-Americans they come from England or I don't know where. And the real Americans are the *Indios*.

In this group comprising four young Mexican-descent girls and one young woman of Salvadoran-descent, the question of how each self-identifies in ethnoracial terms elicited strong support for taking pride in 'where you're from,' that is, one's ethnic or cultural origins. During most of the hour, however, one member, Sandra, emphatically refused various solicitations to claim an ethnoracial identity:

Melissa So what I'm curious about is how each of you thinks of yourself in terms of ethnicity. OK? So if somebody asks you, 'Who are you?' And they want to know about this, what would you say? Sandra?

Sandra: I don't know. Don't ask me.

Melissa: Think about it.

Sandra: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

When the conversation shifted to the experiences of racism, Sandra finally declared that she was Salvadoran. It appears she did so in order to express her anger at her good friend seated next to her, Mexican-born Lilliana:

Sandra: I have a lot of friends that are Mexican than Salvi [Salvadoran] Yeah. That's cool having friends like that. Sometimes I don't like them...I have a friend [in another school], she always used to call me this kind of names and I told her, 'You know what? Don't be telling me that 'cause you gonna get me real pissed off and I'm gonna kick your butt'... And there's some girls who are Mexican that start making fun and there's someone right here who does that every single day [glancing at Lilliana]. I don't do those kind of bad things to Mexicans.

Melissa: Lilliana uses these names about you being from El Salvador and it hurts your feelings?

Sandra: No it doesn't, but I just don't like them to be calling me that. I mean, why? I mean they're just Mexicans, I mean, what's wrong with a Mexican and a Salvi girl?...They're the same thing. I have a friend, too, who her dad's from Mexico and her mom's from El Salvador and she thinks she's all this and that. And every time you tell [ask] her, 'Are you from Salvi?' She goes, 'No. I'm a Mexican girl, stupid.' I go, 'Well you have both bloods, you know. You have your mom's and your dad's blood, so you're a Mexican and a Salvi girl.'... So I don't know why they tease us.

Melissa: What do you think Lilliana?

Lilliana: Nothing.

Melissa: You two are friends, yeah? Or not?

Sandra: Yes.

Lilliana: Yeah. Well I tell her cause I like to fool around with her. But I don't make it in a mean way, you know.

I could argue that Sandra came to the group with her marginalized Salvadoran identity partially intact, made meaningful, by prior experiences of racism. Sandra's silence in the group could have been attributable to an experience of a lack of safety-in-numbers as Salvadoran or the lack of safety that comes from the anonymity denied her in my repeated requests for expressions of subjectivity. I could have interpreted her eventual identification as Salvadoran and her confrontation of Lilliana as the expression, made possible in the group discussion of racism, of an oppositional consciousness (Sandoval, 1991).

I can also consider this group discussion as having shifted between reflecting and sharing experiences to constituting experiences and subjectivities. It shifted between a space conceivable as one of mutuality and support engendering a sense of empowerment to one of unequal power relations. An analysis of the means by which the group dynamic generated subjectivities as variously privileged or marginalized reveals the workings of power in representations, discourses and practices to order bodies differentially, hierarchically and spatially.

In further consideration of Sandra's silences, however, as researcher I want to emphasize that speech is not simply conceivable as empowering, as resistance to domination and silence as a state of being dominated. Power is more entangled than that (Sharpe *et al.*, 2000). Just as both speech and silence can be construed as resistance within spaces of domination, so, too, can they be domination within spaces of resistance. A group discussion about ethnoracial self-identification engendered a space of pride and the production of a discourse of resistance to degrading representations while simultaneously engendering its own form of domination. How did I understand Sandra's initial silence in the discursive struggle? Did I construe it as a silence which represses one's own perceived difference or as one that resists contributing to one's own marginalization (Konradi, 1993)? Are the young women's words and silences reflecting and affirming their realities or constituting and contesting that reality? Or some combination? And, finally, what of my voice and 'silence within voice' among the multiple voices and multiple intersections of power? Interrogating the 'silence within voice' provides an opportunity to explore how silences compete with words in the discursive struggle for dominance in shaping social realities. 'Silence within voice' offers a framework for understanding how patterns of speaking and silence, in Linda Briskin's (1998, p. 2) words, 'are organized by, and saturated with power.'

An Assumption of Multi-Vocality and Safety

Multi-vocality is advanced by some feminists as generative of a more equitable relationship between the researched and researcher because the balance of power is tilted toward the group (e.g. Opie, 1992; Madriz, 2000; Pratt, 2002). A principal concern in the spaces of group discussion is the degree of researcher intervention. Practitioners' recommendations are multiple; they range from advocating a position of least intervention to active participation. Least intervention is advocated in order to allow the group to interpret the researchers' topics and articulate its own agenda (Burgess, 1988a; Pratt, 2002). Alternatively, researchers are urged to actively encourage different points of view as well as challenge taken-for-granted categories and the unchanging naturalness of one's own and others' experiences

(Kitzinger, 1994; Goss & Leinbach, 1996, p. 120; Cameron, 2000). These recommendations articulate contradictory strategies for challenging the hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched and among group members.

When the researcher's attention is shifted from voice to silence, the contradictory recommendations regarding the degree of researcher intervention present several challenges to the assumption of equity through multi-vocality. Researchers are advised in practising interview methods to 'tolerate silences,' not to jump in too soon with questions to fill the void. Irving Seidman (1998, p. 77) suggests that, 'If interviewers can learn to tolerate either the silence that sometimes follows a question or a pause within a participant's reconstruction, [we] may hear things [we] would never have heard if [we] had leapt in with another question to break the silence.' At the same time, as Seidman notes, too long a silence on the part of the interviewer can become embarrassing and silences are eventually filled with questions. In my experience, achieving this delicate balance was difficult and I filled these silences sooner rather than later. In so doing, as researcher I took increased control of the discussion and posed questions in search of particular expressions of experience. The following interaction about the young people's neighborhood is illustrative of what can happen when silences become uncomfortable:

- Melissa:* Anybody else have an opinion about where they live?
 [Silence]
Melissa: [to Pilar] Tell us your opinion about this place.
Pilar: I don't have one.
Melissa: You don't have an opinion about where you live? Do you enjoy it? Not enjoy it? It's fun? Feels good?
Pilar: I enjoy it.
Melissa: You do enjoy it. What do you enjoy?
Pilar: [Silence]
ALL: [laughter]
Melissa: You're not saying.
Pilar: I don't want to say.
Melissa: Anything you don't enjoy?
Pilar: [Silence]

Endeavoring to hear 'silence within voice' or, at a minimum, to tolerate silences can, ironically, pose more fundamental problems for feminist research: the imposition of the researcher's partial perspective through her own silences and voices.

In my discomfort with Pilar's silence, I took increasing control and became increasingly confrontational in an effort to elicit a response. In searching after words instead of endeavoring to hear 'silence within voice' listening can be forsaken or minimized as a means of hearing and interpreting girls' experiences and be substituted or complemented by seeing and feeling. In other words, I became reliant upon observable data and visceral experience from a particular and partial embodied perspective². In the above interaction, Pilar's refusal was conveyed to me verbally as well as viscerally as she stared me straight in the eyes in what I experienced as a challenge to me to desist in the line of questioning. This interaction between us in combination with the other members' knowing laughter sounded and felt to me, indeed, positioned me as an adult and/or outsider not privy, as I interpreted it, to some illicit activity enjoyed by Pilar. I was silenced on the subject and remained so.

I made a different 'choice' between voice and silence in the earlier discussion about ethnoracial identification among Sandra, Lilliana, Michelle R. and myself. In that interaction in which I observed Sandra's silent but accusatory body language directed toward Lilliana, I re-presented Sandra's silence to Lilliana and the rest of the group and named Lilliana in support of Sandra's voicing her anger. I did so in the hopes that Lilliana's offensive practices of ethnocentrism would be made public and these friends would begin to resolve their conflict. Should I have remained silent and allowed Sandra to confront Lilliana directly or not, as she chose? Wondering what position or stance a researcher should take when confronted with perspectives and opinions to which she objects, Daphne Patai (1991, p. 148) argues that:

to turn interviews with other women into opportunities for imposing our own politically correct analyses requires an arrogance incompatible with genuine respect for others...In addition, to utilize the interview as an occasion for forcing on others our ideas of a proper political awareness, however we understand that, is to betray an implicit trust.

Regarding the complementary, yet contradictory goals of including and empowering women, that is, making public their voices but offering one's own interpretation of their experiential knowledge, Katherine Borland (1991, p. 64) offers another perspective. She states, 'feminist theory provides a powerful critique of our society, and, as feminists, we presumably are dedicated to making that critique as forceful and direct as possible.' In considering the silences of group discussion constituting social relations of power, feminists' interpretations and interventions become part of the process of creating oppositional subjectivities, for example, the 'new *mestiza*.' However, by so doing there is a risk of containing and silencing the very people feminist scholars are dedicated to empowering (Fine & Weis, 1996).

One final point. In academic scholarship, the laudable goal of inclusion aims at redressing the absence of subjugated others, in particular women, inside the academy as well as addressing their absence as both subjects and objects of study. As Robyn Longhurst (1997, p. 494) notes, feminist transgressions in academia are redefining what counts as legitimate knowledge and who counts as a bearer of legitimate knowledge. Indeed, the ideas contained in this article were first presented at an academic conference devoted to the social experiences of teenage girls³. Such an academic forum is designed to make audible and accessible knowledge about teenage girls and, at the same time, it reinforces the very notion of 'teenage girl' knowledge as accessible to research. With an emphasis of feminist research so clearly on inclusion and access to knowledge, silences threaten to undermine the scholarly assumption that 'knowledge is available to the individual who reasonably seeks it' (Jones, 1999, p. 311). Attention to 'silence within voice' should give feminist scholars pause, not only to reflect on how we know and what we know, but on our prerogative to know.

Conclusion

In questioning my inability to hear silences in social interaction some fundamental contradictions come to light concerning a feminist group discussion method. In the context of group discussion posited as a space of safety, of mutuality and of more

equitable power relations, complementary yet contradictory research assumptions and goals, limit the group's political potential. In practice, researchers as facilitators of group discussions unwittingly valorize speech over silence, and consequently, overlook or underhear the silences themselves. Yet, hearing 'silence within voice' can offer insights into the dynamic, relational and hierarchical nature of knowledge construction and intersubjectivity, not least of which are insights into the binary construction of speaking over silence and its myriad social categorical associations.

As feminist scholars endeavoring to include the voices or experiential knowledge of marginalized others, hearing silence as absence, a mark of what should be present but is not, can compel researchers to ignore silences *in situ*, neglect their transcription, and to leave them unanalyzed. Further, the multiple meanings of silences, the way they contribute to the dialogic process, and the ways in which they give shape to and are shaped by experience may be partially or entirely ignored. It can also lead researchers as facilitators to fill the silences with questions, control the discussion and impose one's own research agenda and, impose one's own social critique. Endeavoring to interpret the ways in which that experiential knowledge is constituted and mediated in myriad, intersecting social relations of power, requires counter-intuitive efforts. In practice a group discussion method is messy. It requires hearing 'silences within voice,' behavior which might include listening to individual/group silences, respecting those silences and by so doing, staying silent as facilitators and feminists and finally, accepting that there are limitations to what any one of us as researchers can hear.

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Notes

1. The research reported in this article is drawn from my PhD thesis which considered both metaphorical and spatial 'borders' and 'border crossings' in an investigation into how adolescent Latinas negotiate *el choque*. In other words, it was an exploration into the processes and practices through which young Latinas negotiate multiple, shifting subject positions in and through multiple sites and discursive contexts in the daily lives. My interest in this derived from my years as a former Los Angeles high school social studies teacher—a middle-class, white, third generation, Jewish-American New Yorker—working with young Latinas and the questioning of the assumptions which constituted my knowledge, not of social studies, but of social relations as viewed from the front of the classroom.
2. I am grateful to my colleague Roderick Francis for this insight.
3. A New Girl Order? Young Women and the Future of Feminist Inquiry' November 14–16, 2001 hosted by the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research, Monash University, Australia with the support of the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Kings College, London and the Monash University Centre, London.

Abstract translation

Muchos de los métodos feministas de investigación que son empleados con el interés de obtener justicia social abogan por escuchar a las/los que han sido subordinadas/os; a los grupos que han sido catalogados y marginados, según el caso, por su género, sexualidad, raza, edad, etcétera, con el propósito de examinar las fuentes y los funcionamientos de la construcción del conocimiento y del poder social. Cada vez más, las estudiosas del feminismo están usando discusiones en grupo o grupos temáticos, con el intento de dar la voz a otras/os que son subordinadas/os. Se considera que las discusiones en grupo, potencialmente otorgan poder al explorar y posibilitar la agencia social y la producción del conocimiento de las/los integrantes del grupo, mientras disminuyen las relaciones desiguales de poder entre la/el investigada/o y el/la investigador/a. En este artículo, argumento que la atención que se le presta a las voces en discusiones en grupo deja pasar por alto y descarta los silencios significativos, así limitando su potencial político. Existe un desorden epistemológico intrínseco al método feminista de la discusión en grupo, el cual hace difícil escuchar los silencios significativos. A través de una reflexión sobre mi propia investigación dentro de los espacios de identidades de género de adolescentes Latinas, este artículo ofrece algo de comprensión acerca de este desorden y recomienda que el método feminista de la discusión en grupo sea orientado por una política de la voz que incluye al silencio dentro de la voz.

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