

*“The participants
in a focus group
are not
independent of
each other, and
the data collected
from one
participant cannot
be considered
separate from the
social context in
which it was
collected.”*

THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF FOCUS GROUPS

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This article argues that focus group discussions are shaped by multiple social contexts, a fact that is often ignored by researchers. Using data from a focus group study of the effects of violence on everyday life, this article provides an analysis of four such contexts: the associational, status (especially gender), conversational, and relational contexts. These multiple and overlapping contexts foster both problematic silences (lack of disclosure) and problematic speech (strategic shaping of comments) in group discussions. These processes limit the usefulness of focus groups as a tool for understanding individual thoughts, feelings, or experiences. However, they make focus groups an excellent site for analyzing the processes of social interaction. The article concludes with suggestions for improving the implementation and interpretation of focus groups in light of this analysis.

Keywords: *focus groups; methodology; interaction; violence*

Several years ago, I conducted a focus group study about the role of violence in everyday life. Participants completed a survey about many issues related to violence, including their own experiences of violence and fear, and then participated in a group discussion of violence and its effects on their everyday lives. The groups were a tremendously rich source of information; I considered them very successful and counted myself a convert to the focus group method.

A year after the completion of the research, I attended a friend's wedding. One of the other guests looked familiar to me, and after puzzling over her identity for some time, I introduced myself and asked whether I knew her. She said I, too, looked familiar, and together we solved the mystery: she had been a participant in one of the focus groups I had conducted two years earlier. Once we had established this, a funny look came over her face. "I've thought about that group a lot," she said. She told me that although she had enjoyed participating in the group, she had felt unsettled by it because there were things she wanted to say but felt she couldn't because of the composition and context of the group: a mixed-sex (but male-dominated) group of employees from the large company where she worked.

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This encounter reminded me of another conversation I'd had while conducting the original study. I was describing preliminary findings to a male friend who had asked about my research. I told him that I was finding some pronounced gender differences: women participants tended to say they were quite afraid of violence, while men tended to say they were unafraid. In particular, I described one group of young men who, when I asked them how violence affected their lives, looked completely blank and eventually agreed that violence was not particularly relevant to them. My friend looked skeptical. When I asked why, he said, "Of course men aren't going to say they're afraid in front of other men! I certainly wouldn't." He proceeded to share with me his own experiences as a boy and young man, describing a number of situations in which he had been quite fearful. Yet, he said, he would feel uncomfortable confessing these fears to other men. This conversation had caused me to rethink my preliminary conclusions. How could I be sure that these male participants were not keeping silent because they feared appearing "unmanly" in front of other men?

These two conversations disturbed me greatly, and set me wondering about how much confidence I could have in the data I had collected. If one participant had not felt free to share her true thoughts and if my friend was certain that he would not have been honest in a similar situation, could I trust any of the information from the focus groups? What were the group conversations telling me, if anything?

These questions prompted me to reanalyze the data, comparing what participants had said in the group discussions and on the surveys they had completed prior to the discussions. Although I was unable to reinterview the focus group participants (because their contact information had been destroyed after the original study), I did interview the participant I had met at my friend's wedding. These new analyses have suggested to me that *the social contexts of focus groups—that is, the relationships among the participants and between the participants and the facilitator, as well as the larger social structures within which the discussion takes place—affect the data that are generated in ways that have not yet been widely acknowledged by focus group researchers*. In the end, I still concluded that these focus groups were very successful, but they succeeded at a different task than I had originally anticipated.

These issues are not, of course, unique to focus groups. All qualitative methods and, indeed, all methods that rely on individuals' self-

reports of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, or beliefs face the dilemma that internal states are knowable only to the individual, who may or may not choose to share them with others. *All* such methods of data collection are employed in social contexts and are subject to social influences. However, practitioners of other qualitative methodologies have, ironically, paid more attention to the socially situated nature of their data than have focus group researchers. Although some recent work on focus groups has begun to explore some of these issues (e.g., Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Matoesian and Coldren 2002; Puchta and Potter 2002), these critiques have not yet entered the mainstream of focus group methodology.

Moreover, it is worth noting that although the *methodological* literature on other methods has paid considerably more attention to social context than the focus groups literature, in practice many researchers do not seem to attend to these issues. To this extent, this article is relevant to research using other methodologies (interviews, surveys, participant observation, and so forth) as well as focus groups. It could be argued that focus groups differ from these other methods because they are artificially formed for the researcher's purpose and therefore produce contrived speech, while interviews, participant observation, and the like capture more "natural" speech. However, all research situations are instances of social interaction. "Naturally occurring" speech is subject to the same kinds of interactional and contextual constraints as the "contrived" speech that takes place in focus groups. Thus, the issues discussed here are more widely applicable beyond focus group studies, to understanding the results of other methods and, indeed, to understanding everyday interaction. Analyzing the role of social context is crucial to understanding what we can—and what we cannot—learn from all of these methods.

This article provides a preliminary analysis of the social contexts of focus groups and their influence on discussion participants, both individually and as a group. I use two conversations—my interview with the participant described above and an exchange among male participants in a different focus group—as what Hochschild (1994) calls "magnified moments"—that is, "episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out, it is metaphorically rich, unusually

elaborate, and often echoes [later]" (p. 4). These two conversations, by pointing out what may have gone "wrong" with the focus groups, bring the interactional dynamics of the group discussions into sharp relief.

This article advances our understanding of focus groups in two ways. First, it takes a sociological approach to the method, applying our knowledge of the effects of social context to the focus group situation. In doing so, it moves beyond past critiques of focus groups, tying these critiques not to psychological processes (groupthink, conformity) but to the explicitly social dynamics of small groups. Second, this article identifies and analyzes the several different types of social contexts that impinge on focus groups and their participants. Although these contexts are overlapping and mutually influential, each exerts a distinct influence on focus group participants. By disentangling these various effects, we can better understand the dynamics and usefulness of the focus group method.

I begin by reviewing the conventional wisdom on the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups. I then use examples from my study to argue that focus groups are deeply affected by the social contexts within which they occur. Although these contexts have not yet been adequately understood or analyzed by focus group researchers, they have implications for both focus group methodology and the interpretation of focus group data. I conclude with suggestions for how focus groups should and should not be used.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups involve small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic (Krueger and Casey 2000). Generally, they include four to twelve participants, facilitated by a moderator who poses questions for discussion. The ensuing conversation is often audio- or videotaped for later transcription and analysis.

Originally, focus groups were developed as a method for gathering individual information quickly and efficiently in a group context. First used primarily by survey and marketing researchers, focus groups were adopted by Merton and Lazarsfeld in the 1940s to examine reactions to wartime propaganda (Merton, Fiske, and Kendall [1956] 1990).

Currently, focus groups are used in fields as diverse as marketing, communication, evaluation research, health education, and social work.

In sociology, focus groups have gained tremendously in popularity during the last several years (Morgan 2001). Although most writers acknowledge that the group interaction is an important feature of focus groups, in practice, they are most frequently used as a tool for collecting individual-level data, albeit in a group setting (Morgan 1988; Ward, Bertrand, and Brown 1991). For example, the most recent edition of Krueger's textbook on focus groups begins by defining focus groups implicitly in terms of individual perspectives: "The purpose of focus groups is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service" (Krueger and Casey 2000, 4). As Kitzinger (1994b) observes, focus groups are "often simply employed as a convenient way to illustrate a theory generated by other methods or as a cost-effective technique for interviewing several people at once. Reading some reports, it is hard to believe that there was ever more than one person in the room at the same time" (p. 104; see also Frith 2000; Wilkinson 1998a). More rarely, focus groups are used to explore the interactional processes that take place among group members. For example, some researchers have used focus groups as a site for observing the collaborative processes of meaning construction (Kitzinger 1994a, 1994b; Lunt and Livingstone 1996) and cultural performance (Jordin and Brunt 1988), or for exploring taken-for-granted cultural assumptions (Montell 1999).

Proponents argue that focus groups have several advantages over other research methods. For example, some suggest that they reduce experimental demand because the researcher can fade into the background and let the participants control the discussion (Kitzinger 1994b; Merton, Fiske, and Kendall [1956] 1990; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Some authors have also argued that focus groups are high in external validity because compared with other methods, they mirror the kinds of conversations participants might have in their daily lives (Gamson 1992; Sasson 1995; Wilkinson 1998a; Lunt and Livingstone 1996), although they are not identical to these conversations (Myers 1998; Agar and MacDonald 1995; Myers and Macnaghten 1999). Finally, focus groups elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people's thoughts and experiences (Kitzinger 1994b; Wilkinson 1998b).

Despite these advantages, some writers have raised concerns about the usefulness of focus groups. These concerns often focus on the issue

of honesty: Do participants share their “true” thoughts and beliefs in the discussions? According to the existing literature, there are two ways in which participants’ contributions can fail to match their underlying thoughts; I use the terms *problematic silences* and *problematic speech* to describe these patterns. Problematic silences occur when participants do not share their relevant thoughts or experiences with the group. Problematic speech, in contrast, occurs when participants offer opinions or information that do not represent their underlying beliefs or experiences. Of course, those who raise both of these concerns assume that there is some underlying truth to be told; in my discussion below, I suggest that this assumption is itself problematic.

PROBLEMATIC SILENCES: THE ISSUE OF DISCLOSURE

One frequently raised concern centers on the issue of disclosure—namely, how to encourage participants to divulge the information in which the researcher is interested. Krueger and Casey (2000) describe this as the primary goal of focus groups: “The intent of focus groups is to promote self-disclosure among participants. We want to know what people really think and feel” (p. 8). Arguments run in two contradictory directions. Some writers suggest that participants may be reluctant to disclose personal information in a group situation, especially when trust is low (Carey 1995). Others suggest that the anonymity of a group of strangers, or, alternatively, the presence of supportive others disclosing similar ideas, might make candid responses more likely. According to Kitzinger (1994b),

Depending on their composition groups can sometimes actively facilitate the discussion of otherwise “taboo” topics because 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. . . . Not only do co-participants help each other to overcome embarrassment but they can also provide mutual support in expressing feelings which are common to their group but which they might consider deviant from mainstream culture (or the assumed culture of the researcher). (p. 111)

The focus group context may benefit participants because it allows them to break silence, understand that their experiences are shared by

others, and validate their feelings and opinions (Madriz 1998; Frith 2000; Wilkinson 1998b). For some participants, an open, supportive group context may be more comfortable than one-on-one interviews. Indeed, some writers have argued that focus groups can serve an empowering, consciousness-raising function (Wilkinson 1998a, 1999; Montell 1999; Johnson 1996). Not all focus groups, however, have this kind of atmosphere, a fact that is rarely acknowledged in writings on focus groups.

The issue of disclosure is believed to be especially problematic for groups that focus on sensitive topics, although this issue requires more research (Morgan 1996). Some writers have argued that the focus group method may make disclosure of some sensitive information more likely because it can stimulate memory or provide a sense of community (Kitzinger 1994a). Others have suggested, however, that a focus group context may also make disclosure less likely if disclosing would threaten the participant's safety, comfort, or presentation of self (Wellings, Branigan, and Mitchell 2000).

Morgan and others suggest that disclosure is encouraged by segmentation, or "the sorting of different categories of participants into separate groups" (Morgan 1995, 519; see also Morgan 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). According to Morgan (1995), segmentation ensures that "the participants have enough in common to speak and share freely. An active discussion may be facilitated by similarities in background characteristics such as age, gender, class, and ethnicity or culture" (p. 519). Morgan also suggests that choosing moderators "whose background will put the participants at ease" is important for sensitive topics. For example, a moderator "who shares similar characteristics with the group participants" will promote "rapport, trust, or both" (p. 521). The same assumption underlies both recommendations—that is, similarity among group participants will ensure openness. As I will show below, this assumption is not always warranted. Even in segmented focus groups, participants may choose to remain silent.

PROBLEMATIC SPEECH: ISSUES OF CONFORMITY, GROUPTHINK, AND SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

Other critiques focus not on participant withholding of information but on the possibility that their contributions may not represent their

“true” underlying beliefs (Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993; Morgan 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Most of these concerns have applied the findings of psychologists to the focus group situation. For example, conformity pressures may lead participants to adjust their own contributions to match those of others (Asch 1956). “Groupthink” (Janis 1972) involves a “bandwagon effect,” where people endorse more extreme ideas in a group than they would express individually. Social desirability pressures induce participants to offer information or play particular roles, either to fulfill the perceived expectations of the facilitator or other participants (Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, and Gonzales, 1990) or to present a favorable image of themselves (Goffman 1959). In each case, the group context keeps participants from expressing their “real” thoughts during the focus group discussion (Carey 1995; Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993).

In general, proponents of focus groups have minimized the dangers of these group pressures. For example, Morgan and Krueger (1993) argue that the stated goals of focus groups, together with competent group leadership, make such pressures unlikely:

Instead of such conformity-producing goals as making decisions and reaching consensus, focus groups emphasize the goal of finding out as much as possible about participants’ experiences and feelings on a given topic. A good moderator will strive to create an open and permissive atmosphere in which each person feels free to share her or his point of view. When there is some fear that pressures toward conformity may limit the discussion, the opening instructions to the group can emphasize that you want to hear about a range of different experiences and feelings, and subsequent questions and probes can follow up on this theme by asking for other points of view. When participants see that the researchers are genuinely interested in learning as much as possible about their experiences and feelings, then conformity is seldom a problem. (pp. 8-9)

Perhaps as a result, little focus group research explicitly discusses the effect of group context.

Both sets of concerns—about disclosure and about “contaminating” social influences such as conformity and social desirability—are most troublesome for studies that use focus groups as a way to measure individual attitudes or beliefs. This approach to focus groups, like the concerns themselves, stems from an essentialist perspective. As Wilkinson (1998a) writes, “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" (p. 119).

In this view, individuals possess "real" beliefs and opinions, and the most important issue for focus groups is simply how to best access these ideas. In contrast, a social constructionist perspective suggests that individuals do not have stable underlying attitudes and opinions; rather, these ideas are constructed through the process of interaction (Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Delli Carpini and Williams 1994). In this view, conformity, groupthink, and social desirability pressures do not obscure the data. Rather, they *are* the data because they are important elements of everyday interaction. The tension between these two perspectives underlies many of the divergent uses of focus groups in the social sciences (Cunningham-Burley, Kerr, and Pavis 1999; Wilkinson 1998a).

FOCUS GROUPS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

My post hoc doubts about my focus group study included questions about both problematic silences and problematic speech, as well as about the usefulness of these concepts for understanding focus group participants' talk. Below, I discuss my findings on these questions. First, however, I provide a brief description of the original project.

THE ORIGINAL STUDY

The original study consisted of thirteen focus groups and included seventy-six adult participants recruited through churches, community centers, workplaces, clubs, apartment buildings, university classes, and other preexisting groups in the Seattle area. Several considerations suggested that groups be segmented based on gender. Women and men tend to have very different levels of fear and different experiences of violence, in terms of both quantity and type (Gordon and Riger 1989). Moreover, in the types of violence that women most often experience, sexual violence and battering, women and men have different roles: the aggressors are overwhelmingly men, while the victims are likely to be women (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995). These factors suggest that

single-sex groups might be more comfortable for the participants. On the other hand, some focus group researchers have suggested that heterogeneous groups foster disagreement and thus encourage richer discourse as participants attempt to explain themselves to other group members. To explore these possibilities and allow for the advantages of both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, one-third of the groups were all female, one-third were all male, and one-third had participants of both sexes.

Other factors that might affect exposure to violence or the fear of it include race, social class, sexual orientation, and age. While segmenting groups on all these dimensions was impractical, I made an effort to maximize the diversity of the sample by recruiting participants from a variety of different locations. However, I retained as much homogeneity as possible within each group to facilitate disclosure and discussion (Morgan 1988; Merton et al. [1956] 1990; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990).

At the time the research was planned, most focus group manuals suggested that groups should be composed of strangers, but a few researchers had begun to use groups of friends and acquaintances, a strategy that has since become increasingly popular. Because this study was exploratory, I included groups with different types of relationships (friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and strangers). Groups ranged in size from four to eight participants.

Each group met once for approximately two hours.¹ Because I was primarily interested in how the participants understood and experienced the issue of violence rather than their responses to specific questions, I followed Morgan's (1988) strategy of "self-managed groups." In this variant of focus groups, the moderator provides an initial introduction to the general themes and ground rules of the discussion; subsequently, the participants themselves help to facilitate the group discussion, while the facilitator says very little. The discussions were audiotaped with the participants' consent, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

This set of focus groups provides an excellent opportunity to explore issues of silence and speech. Violence is a sensitive topic in the United States today; the perception of violence as a social problem has grown tremendously in recent years (Glassner 1999). More importantly, violence is a real and personal issue for many Americans; many individuals have experienced or committed violence, and many others feel

threatened by violence.² Both perpetration and, in some cases, victimization are stigmatized, however. Thus, focus group participants may have had both personal experience to contribute and compelling reasons for not disclosing such experience.

PROBLEMATIC SILENCES: THE EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE SIMULTANEOUS CONTEXTS

Focus groups, like all research situations, are social contexts. Participants interact with each other, with the facilitator, and with others who are not present but whose imagined presence affects the participant. Focus groups are also multidimensional contexts. Depending on the composition of the group, participants may be concerned about their relationships with other participants or with the facilitator, with the consistency of their comments with what they have said (or anticipate saying) in other contexts, with the interpersonal dynamics of the group, with their role in the conversation, and so on. As Matoesian and Coldren (2002) write, "People engage in any number of activities when they talk, and talk on or about a topic is only one of them" (p. 472). Each of these concerns may have a distinct effect on the individual's participation and on the direction of the group conversation; teasing apart these effects is not simple.

To illustrate the potential effects of these multiple contexts, I return to the example with which I opened this article: the research participant whom I met unexpectedly two years later at a friend's wedding. After we talked briefly at the reception, I asked if she would be interested in talking with me later in an interview context to further discuss her reactions to the focus group. She agreed, and several months later we sat down to continue our conversation.

I began by asking Christine³ to describe what she remembered about the focus group and about what the dynamics of the discussion were like for her. She replied,

I remember that it was at work, like in a conference room. That was a little . . . [*laughs*] odd, like usually I'm in here talking about [work-related topics]. But that was okay. The main thing I remember about it is it was almost all men; there might have been one or two other women, but it felt like it was predominantly a group of men, and my most vivid and personal experience with violence is rape, and . . . they were talking a lot

about protecting their property. . . . I got the feeling that not very many of those men had had personal experiences with violence. They hadn't been victims of violence or violent men themselves, and so I just felt that what I had to say would have been uncomfortable for me because it was in another league in my mind. . . . So I felt this chasm, and I thought maybe they would be uncomfortable with me talking about it, just because. . . . it wasn't part of their experience, and maybe they'd be ashamed, or defensive or something, because they seemed like nice men. . . . [So] I was a little bit [protective] of them, and I was also a little bit protective of me, and I just thought oh, I don't think I can just broach this subject in this group, and so I didn't participate very much at all. I remember feeling like I wasn't very helpful, and . . . I wonder if I should have said something, or maybe it would have been a good forum, but I guess it wasn't, they were strangers.⁴

This long and thoughtful comment illustrates the multiple contexts in which this participant was acting during the focus group.

Associational Context

Christine begins by noting that the focus group took place at her workplace. Although it was conducted after working hours and although the participants in the group did not work together directly, the location of the discussion clearly had an unsettling effect. Thus, the *associational context*—the common characteristic that brings the participants together—influences the group conversation and dynamics.

The associational context can affect the discussion in several ways. Most concretely, if the physical surroundings are related to the associational context, they may affect the participants (Krueger 1993; Green and Hart 1999). Christine notes that she was accustomed to talking about work-related topics, not personal experiences and feelings, in the room where the focus group was held. These patterns might bleed into the focus group interaction, encouraging habitual topics or modes of conversation.

The substance of the participants' common characteristics may also affect the course of the discussion. Participants may emphasize topics related to their commonality—for example, in a conversation among coworkers about violence, participants might talk about workplace violence or the security of their work arrangements. Were the associational context church membership, shared day care arrangements,

participation in a drug rehabilitation program, or residence in a small neighborhood, the conversation might be quite different: the shared characteristics might prompt different topics, and participants might feel more or less comfortable sharing personal experiences. Indeed, the type of workplace is also likely important: in this focus group, had the coworkers been social workers rather than high-technology workers, for example, the discussion might have had a different tone.

Perhaps most important, the associational context may affect the course of the discussion because of its long-term ramifications for the participants. Although a focus group discussion will end, a participant's relationships with others in the group may be more enduring, and comments made during the discussion may have consequences for the participant within those relationships—and indeed, within other relationships in the associational context. For example, comments made during a focus group conducted with coworkers may not only affect a participant's relationships with these other coworkers but may also be conveyed to a participant's supervisor or employees. This is perhaps especially true for disclosures of stigmatized conditions (Goffman 1963). Had Christine disclosed her rape experience to the other participants, her workplace relationships might have been irrevocably altered. In other associational contexts, a participant's comments might be conveyed to friends, acquaintances, partners, or children. This can occur despite the researcher's assurances of confidentiality; neither the researcher nor the individual participant can fully control information disclosed during a discussion. Participants are likely aware of these risks and modify their participation accordingly. While the advantages of conducting focus groups with participants who know each other have been addressed in the focus group literature (Gamson 1992; Sasson 1995; Montell 1999), these long-term risks have been virtually ignored (Michell 1999).

Status Contexts

The second context Christine mentions is the *gender context*: she perceived the group to be mostly men (in fact, it was composed of four men and two women, plus the female facilitator), which inhibited her from disclosing her own sexual victimization. The gender context is one type of *status context*, which refers to the relative positions of the participants in local or societal status hierarchies, such as workplace

authority, gender, race, age, sexual identity, or social class. Because Christine focused her comments on gender, I analyze the gender context here. However, similar analyses could be made for other status contexts.

Expectation states theory (Berger, Fiske, and Zelditch 1977; Ridgeway 1993) tells us that those with higher status in a task-oriented group (an apt description of a focus group) tend to talk more and assume more leadership roles in the group. Status, of course, will vary depending on the composition, context, and purpose of a group. In a mixed-sex group, for example, men will tend to dominate unless the task at hand is perceived to be specifically linked to women (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). In a workplace group, managers will tend to dominate.

Rape is a deeply gendered experience: it is estimated that 91 percent of rape victims are women (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995), and 99 percent of those arrested for rape are men (Craven 1994). Rape and other forms of violence against women, including the threat of such violence, are one way that men control and dominate women, both individually and as a group (Sheffield 1987). Even when men are raped, their victimization is perceived to feminize them; this, too, shows the gendered nature of rape. In a context that is mostly male—and where male participants are verbally dominant—bringing up the experience of rape may be uncomfortable or frightening. Christine worried that the men might be “ashamed, or defensive or something.” This fear is certainly justified based on what we know about reactions to rape victims (Ullman 1996). Disclosing victimization might provoke difficult reactions from others, might heighten the salience of gender in the discussion, and might result in an increased sense of vulnerability for the speaker. Indeed, Christine’s desire to emotionally protect the male participants by refraining from discussing rape is also gendered (Fox 1977).

In a differently gendered context, however, the focus group discussion might have taken another shape. For example, I asked Christine if she thought she might have been more willing to speak about her rape experience in an all-female group. She replied:

I think probably it might have been, because I think that [the topic of sexual assault] would have come up. I think my feeling is that women experience violence personally, even though I think men have to deal with

aggression a lot, like as boys getting beat up, and that sort of thing, which I never did as a kid. But I think sexual assault and harassment and just unwanted attention, and even if it doesn't happen just being fearful of it, I think women are just more conscious of violence in general, even though they're not as often the perpetrators, it seems. . . . So I think that it probably would have come up and I probably would have felt more comfortable talking about it, yeah. Just feeling like I was the only one in the room. Although there was another woman, and I also thought, well maybe if I say something, maybe she might be thinking this too, or have had experiences, but I just couldn't go past everything.

Although Christine's analysis of her behavior is of course post hoc and speculative, her insights about the gendered nature of violence are provocative. In fact, the other female participant in Christine's group *had* indicated on her survey that she had been raped. However, she did not disclose this experience during the group discussion. The gender dynamics of this group clearly affected the conversation and therefore the results of the study. In this group, sexual assault was never a topic of conversation and thus could be interpreted as unimportant to the participants. In a different gender context, however, Christine might have felt comfortable disclosing her rape experience, and her disclosure may have prompted others to disclose their own experiences.

It is important to note that the gender context does not refer solely to the relative numbers of women and men present at a focus group discussion. Rather, it includes the expectations attached to being male or female in a particular context (West and Zimmerman 1987). Thus, groups with the same sex composition may have very different gender expectations (Connell 1995). For example, the gender dynamics present in a group of young musicians might be quite different than those in a group of older business people, even if both groups were all male.

As noted above, many focus group writers suggest "segmenting" groups by status—for example, conducting separate groups with supervisors and their employees, or teachers and their students (Krueger and Casey 2000; Knodel 1993). With respect to gender, this is often taken to mean that conducting single-sex groups will remove gender constraints and expectations. According to Morgan (1996), for example, "segmentation facilitates discussions by making the participants more similar to each other. For example, even if the behavior of men and women does not differ greatly on a given topic, discussion may flow more smoothly

in groups that are homogeneous rather than mixed with regard to sex” (p. 143). This argument, however, misses a fundamental point about gender and other social identities. Gender, like race and sexuality, is not a characteristic that is present only when in the presence of the opposite sex. Rather, gender expectations are activated in any social situation and, symbolic interactionists would suggest even when one is alone but mentally interacting with symbolic others. Gender expectations are likely to be different in a same-sex context, but they are unlikely to disappear. Moreover, even in single-sex groups, other status differences among participants are likely to remain. While segmentation may indeed make discussions more comfortable, it does not necessarily mean that participants will readily disclose their thoughts or experiences.

Moreover, focus group practitioners have tended to base their recommendations for group composition on assumptions about group dynamics, assumptions that are often grounded in stereotypes. For example, it has long been assumed that women would be more likely to disclose sexual assault to a female rather than male interviewer because violence against women primarily occurs at the hands of men and because women are believed to be more sensitive listeners and to have a history of sharing personal information with other women (Kitzinger 1994b). Indeed, it is clear from the quote above that Christine shares this assumption. Currie and MacLean (1997), however, report results from the Islington Crime Survey, which analyzed disclosures of sexual assault and domestic violence by sex of interviewer. Contrary to these assumptions, they found that disclosure of both sexual assault and battering was higher with male interviewers. Currie and MacLean explain these counterintuitive results by arguing that

patriarchal ideologies about male violence place the blame for woman abuse on women, and there is no reason to believe that many abused women will not subscribe to this view. . . . Following from this, it is possible that an abused woman may relive feelings about her abuse that include anger, depression, and guilt, and may experience the interview as testifying to her failure as a “good woman”. . . . If abused women have internalized patriarchal ideologies that blame women, they may be reluctant to disclose to other women that they have failed in one of the most important missions in a woman’s life: to “catch a good man.” Regardless of how “sisterly” a feminist researcher may feel toward other

women, there is no guarantee that respondents perceive other women as necessarily supportive. (pp. 177-8)

The present study provides further evidence that gender-segmented groups do not automatically lead to disclosure. There were four all-female groups in this study, composed of twenty-one participants. Ten of these women acknowledged on their surveys that they had been raped, including all participants in two of the four groups. In addition, these women reported a variety of other kinds of physical assault on their surveys, including forced sexual contact, domestic violence, and physical assault. However, *none* of these participants disclosed a rape experience during the focus group discussions, and only three female participants disclosed any type of victimization at all (one disclosure each of domestic violence, physical assault, and forced sexual contact). The hypothesis that women will disclose sensitive, stigmatized, and gender-related experiences in all-female groups is clearly not supported by these data.

All types of interactions, including those between women, are subject to gender dynamics, and these dynamics cannot necessarily be predicted from gender stereotypes. The same can undoubtedly be said for other types of social positions, including race, class, and sexual identity. How gender and other status contexts affect focus group discussions cannot simply be assumed, but must be empirically examined.

Conversational Context

The third context Christine invokes is the *conversational context*. She notes that the conversation focused mainly on property crime and property protection. Because her most salient experience with violence involved a personal assault, she felt "this chasm" between herself and others in the group. In this conversational context, speaking of her own experience seemed incongruous. She remained silent because of, in her words, "the degree of violence they were talking about. I mean . . . I think I felt kind of sad, because they seemed kind of naive, it was kind of sweet in a way. It was like, oh, I've had this horrible violence, personal violence and these guys haven't. That's good, I'm glad they haven't, but . . . they just struck me as kind of naive." This reaction occurred despite the fact that as suggested by many manuals on conducting focus groups, I (as facilitator) had specifically emphasized at the outset of the

discussion that I hoped to hear about a range of experiences and opinions and that participants should speak up if they had something different to add to the discussion.

What determines the conversational context? The first person to speak, or to speak at length after participants introduce themselves, often sets the tone and direction for the subsequent discussion. Again, this goes back to issues of status and power. Those who have more status and power in a conversation tend to contribute more “successful” topics—that is, topics that are taken up by others in the conversation (Lakoff 1990, 49). In mixed-sex groups, men’s preferred topics (and styles of discussing these topics) tend to dominate conversation, making those conversations similar to those in all-male groups. Conversations in all-female groups, however, tend to be quite different (Tannen 1990, 236-7).

Another influence on the conversational context is cultural conversation norms. These norms include both topic and tone: What kinds of topics is it acceptable to speak about in a public context? What kind of tone is considered appropriate—serious, joking, personal, abstract? These norms also include ideas about the degree and type of emotion considered appropriate in a particular context. In this focus group, for example, Christine’s comment suggests that she felt that speaking of her rape would violate the emotional expectations of the group.

Within a culture, conversational norms may vary by specific social context; the norms for a family dinner differ from those for a classroom, group therapy session, or professional meeting. In each setting, however, speakers choose from a cultural repertoire of conversational norms. Because focus groups are an unusual social experience for most participants, they may interpret them in different ways; for some participants (or groups), the situation may seem similar to a group counseling session; to others, it may resemble a professional meeting. These different interpretations may produce different types of talk.

Relational Context

The final context Christine mentions is the *relational context* of the group, or the degree of prior acquaintance among the participants. This is clearly related to the associational context, but it refers to the level of intimacy already established among the participants, not the substantive connections among them. Christine told me that the fact that others

were strangers mattered because of “the trust thing . . . to tell a personal story, it [knowing others] helps a little bit.”

Traditional views of focus groups suggest that groups composed of strangers may actually encourage disclosure of sensitive topics because participants do not expect to see each other again and therefore have little at stake in talking freely (Morgan 1988). Other writers have argued that groups with prior acquaintance are more effective because of their greater ease with each other (Gamson 1992; Sasson 1995), and indeed, there has been a shift toward naturally occurring groups in social science research (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). As Kitzinger (1994b) notes, studying preexisting groups help us “explore how people might talk . . . within the various and overlapping grouping within which they actually operate. Flatmates, colleagues, family and friends—these are precisely the people with whom one might ‘naturally’ discuss such topics” (p. 105). I asked Christine whether she felt the stranger context allowed her to speak more freely, and she replied, “For some people it might be more freeing, because of the anonymity factor. . . . But I didn’t feel that.” Even a minimal degree of prior acquaintance might have fostered greater disclosure: she noted that “had it been maybe a series of talks, or not just one time, I mean I may have been more forthcoming in later sessions, because I think we would have gotten around to more personal [topics].” Again, this is a post hoc, speculative response by one participant. It is difficult to predict for which issues, groups, or individuals anonymity might foster disclosure. I would hypothesize that this depends on many factors, including the commonality of the experience to be disclosed, the degree of stigma associated with it in the particular context of the group, the type of association (if any) among people in the group, and the degree of rapport established by the facilitator and participants, including the degree of disclosure by the facilitator. In any case, the effects of the relational context are not straightforward; again, this is an issue that requires empirical research, not assumption.

Each of these social contexts influences the course of the focus group discussion and the responses of individual participants. In Christine’s focus group, the associational, gender, conversational, status, and relational contexts (and of course these contexts overlap and shape each other) combined to keep her from contributing fully to the discussion. This silence was not trivial. The original purpose of the focus group was to explore how violence affects the participants’ lives. It was clear from our later interview that Christine’s experience of rape had profoundly

affected her life, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and behaviorally. This information—precisely what I hoped to hear in the group discussion—was invisible, and in this regard, this focus group could be considered a failure. As a vehicle for collecting data about all participants' life experiences, it was inadequate.

However, in other respects, this focus group was profoundly successful. The discussion told me a great deal about public discourse on violence, and this became the real focus of the project. The focus groups demonstrated that at least in some contexts, discourse is dominated by men and men's concerns about property violence and that women's concerns about sexual and personal violence are silenced—in this case, by women themselves. Indeed, one of the few times sexual violence was mentioned in this focus group was when a male participant recounted a past experience when a female hitchhiker threatened to falsely accuse him of rape; the point of the story was his fear that such an accusation would damage his reputation. The actual experiences of the two female participants with rape were invisible. However, I did not recognize these silences at the time of the discussion. It was only later, when Christine and I talked at length about the group, that the absence of her contribution came into focus. It is important, then, that focus group analysts consider not only what is said in focus group discussions but also what is *not* said. As Agar and MacDonald (1995) ask, "Who are those silent voices in the group? Why aren't they talking? What do they have to say?" (p. 83) These silences can be as telling as the discussion itself.

PROBLEMATIC TALK: SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE SHAPING OF TALK

As discussed above, lack of disclosure is not the only "problem" that can occur in focus groups. A second type of potential problem involves a participant's invention or exaggeration of experience or opinion. An example of this dynamic occurred in another focus group in the same study. This group was composed of six members of a university fraternity, who all lived together, interacted daily, and knew each other well. The group discussion took place on the university campus, although not in the fraternity house itself.

This discussion began like the others in the study, with participants introducing themselves and speaking for a minute about why they had

decided to participate in the study. The facilitator (a male graduate student) then asked, "How do you feel violence affects you personally, or affects people you know?" The first participant to respond talked about several types of violence he had experienced, including family violence between his parents ("it was a really bad relationship, and there was a lot of physical abuse going on between them. And I remember hearing stories from my grandmother, about my dad hit[ting] my mom, and my mom throwing my dad against the wall") and between his two stepfathers. The bulk of his talk, however, involved two stories about violence in which he had been personally involved:

Rob: And as far as me and my dad, my dad's a really hard-nosed kinda guy, and violence between us, we've always gotten into like word fights, and I only once got into a fist-fight with him, and that was last year, and we were out doing a window-washing job and just got angry at each other and kinda went at it. I almost fractured his arm, and sent him to the hospital, so that kinda sucked, cause I had to pay for it. But that's my personal [history] of violence. The only other fight I've ever been in was with the school bully. And that was pretty fun, cause I won.

This first participant set the tone for the subsequent discussion. When the other participants spoke, they began by detailing the violence they had been involved in. For a few, this involved recent events, but others had to reach far back into their past—or into their friends' pasts—to find an incident that would fit with the pattern that had been established:

Sean: I don't have that much experience with violence. I guess I come from kind of a pacifist background or something, [laughter] but I had one experience, or I heard actually, one of my friends came out of his house and was just walking down the street not a block away from his house, and these ten or fifteen gang members came out of some apartments and just beat the you-know-what out of him, and he was in the hospital and stuff. So that was my worst experience of, as far as my friends with violence and stuff.

Charlie: Well, I mean, I've been pretty sheltered, I've never had big fights with anybody. I've been the person who happens to miss all the fights. But I had one of my friends who told me about how he had a friend that was in a gang, and he had him, this guy, beat up this kid for I can't remember what reason.

Tony: When I was in kindergarten, first, and second grade, I was in a private school. And, I don't know, I was a bully there, because kids just used to taunt me, and I didn't like that? So I used to beat them up.

Kevin: The only time I ever armed myself, is when I'd go cruising down in Vancouver, in a bigger town. We'd go cruising, and there'd be lowriders, gangbangers around, so pretty much the norm was to keep at least a baseball bat or a good size knife in your car with you, just in case, in case your friends got into a fight and you had to back them up. And fights were pretty common at parties. People would get drunk and get courageous and get arrogant and start shoving each other and . . . people would get arrogant, blows would start dropping, and so the whole party would pretty much crash. [laughter] Party pretty much ended there, after bodies were scattered around.

These stories were dramatically different from those told in all other focus groups: in every other group—including those that were all-male—participants discussed victimization, fear of victimization, or strategies used to protect themselves from victimization. In one group of men, two individuals recounted past acts of violence but in the context of their later commitment to nonviolence. Only among this group of young men did commission of violence become a group theme.

What is even more interesting about this exchange is that *none* of these incidents were mentioned on the participants' prediscussion surveys. Indeed, only one participant admitted to even shoving someone on his survey; the rest said they had committed no physical violence. Rob was the only one to disclose being a victim of physical assault; Sean disclosed being a victim of sexual assault (having someone use force and threat of force to obtain kissing or petting) but never mentioned this experience during the group discussion.

What happened here? Why did these men focus on the commission of violence, and why did they dredge up incidents from their distant pasts to contribute to the focus group? One possibility is that they believed the facilitator was asking for these kinds of stories. However, because facilitators followed the same script in every focus group, I suggest that another explanation is more plausible—namely, that a combination of gender (status) context, associational context, and conversational context encouraged the men to exaggerate their violent exploits and mute their experiences of victimization and fear. For men, normative gender expectations include strength and dominance: men are expected to be tough, aggressive, and able to defend themselves and

others. They are expected to differentiate themselves from women, who are believed and expected to be soft, fearful, and in need of protection (Hollander 2001; Kimmel 1993). These expectations may be especially salient for young men as they attempt to establish their masculinity, and may also be especially salient in an all-male, heteronormative context such as a fraternity (Martin and Hummer 1989). Under pressure to demonstrate their masculinity in this domain, these men produced stories to validate their boldness and fighting ability—or at least their experience, however tangential, with violence. The fact that the focus group's associational context was all male and highly masculinized probably increased the gender pressures present in the group.

My point is not that these participants fabricated their stories. Rather, they strategically selected these narratives from amongst the multiple possibilities to fit the perceived demands of the situation: "Even though it is common practice to speak as if each individual possesses a 'life story,' in fact there would appear to be no one story to tell. People appear capable of adopting multiple perspectives and selecting events so as to justify the selected narrative" (Gergen and Gergen 1984, 183). The contexts of the focus group described above encouraged narratives that would boost the participants' apparent conformity to hegemonic masculine expectations and discouraged narratives that would call their masculinity into question (Goodey 1997). Other researchers have found that male research participants are more likely to behave in stereotypical ways when in group contexts; for example, they are more likely to express highly masculinized attitudes with a male researcher or to sexually harass a female researcher (Wight 1994, Green, Barbour, Barnard, and Kitzinger 1993). Even in single-sex groups, gender expectations affect participants' interactions.

The conversational context of this group also encouraged these kinds of stories. The first participant to speak was my initial contact and had organized the group, which gave him a privileged, host-like position within the group. When Rob began with several stories of considerable violence, a precedent was set. This precedent included both topic and emotion: stories of violence and bravado became normative, while experiences of vulnerability and fear were silenced. Would the other participants have told the stories they did in a different conversational context—for example, in a mixed-sex group where the first speaker was a woman who described her fear of violence. Although it is impossible

to be certain, I suspect that the ensuing conversation would have been very different.

How did the relational context affect the group discussion? The men in this group were well known to each other and could anticipate extensive future interaction. This close connection may actually have worked against truthful disclosure. Whereas in Christine's group, the fact that the other participants were strangers kept her from disclosing a stigmatized experience, in this group, the high degree of prior and, importantly, future acquaintance may have fostered the men's conformity to traditional masculinity. Because they had shared experiences and information in the past and knew they would interact again in the future, they could be held accountable for anything they said during the group discussion. If they disclosed an experience that did not meet the group's standard of masculinity, it could be used to discredit them in subsequent interactions. Similarly, disclosure of experiences that boosted their masculinity could gain them status in their everyday lives. The incentives for honest disclosure of fear or victimization, in other words, were minimal, and those for disclosing stories of courage and violence were high. These contexts worked together to produce the discourse that characterized this group and their corresponding silences on other topics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY AND USEFULNESS

The discrepancies between survey reports or interviews and focus group discussions I describe above suggest that what individual participants say during focus groups cannot necessarily be taken as a reliable indicator of experience. Participants may exaggerate, minimize, or withhold experiences depending on the social contexts. (Indeed, they may do the same things when completing a survey, participating in an interview, or talking informally with a researcher; all research situations are social contexts and subject to social pressures, although not all researchers take these pressures into consideration [Lunt and Livingstone 1996].) Moreover, I have looked only at reports of past experiences here. I expect that if I examined reports of participants' attitudes, emotions, or plans for the future—all likely to be less stable and more open to interpretation—the discrepancies would be even greater.

If the social contexts of focus groups frequently preclude or exaggerate disclosure of pertinent information, should we then abandon the focus group method? And if not, how can we conduct and analyze focus groups to better understand the group processes I have described above? In general, I suggest we must think carefully about how participants' responses are being shaped by the context, composition, and facilitation of the group. Moreover, we must rethink what focus groups are actually teaching us.

COMPOSITION AND CONTEXTS OF FOCUS GROUPS

The discussion above suggests that it is important to consider the diverse contexts of focus groups and the kinds of disclosures these contexts facilitate or discourage. Who has status or power in the situation? Who speaks first in the discussion? What kinds of thoughts, feelings, or experiences might be expected in the context, and what kinds might not be expected? Are these expectations the same for all participants? What are the consequences (both immediate and long term) for individual participants of disclosing sensitive information? What are the potential rewards for conformity or nondisclosure?

The conventional wisdom on focus group composition suggests either that disclosure is unproblematic given an adept facilitator or that segmentation is the best way to ensure disclosure in focus groups. While it is possible that facilitators may be able to reduce some conformity pressures through clear instructions to the group and careful probing to assess the nuances of participants' opinions, it is naive to suggest that even superlative facilitation will remove social desirability and self-presentation pressures. As I have discussed above, a focus group is a social context where participants may extend or develop interpersonal relationships. These relationships affect participants' presentation of self. For example, in groups made up of prior friends or acquaintances, participants may feel compelled to appear consistent with earlier expressed beliefs or to monitor their statements to forestall future awkwardness. In focus groups made up of strangers, participants' desires to make a good impression may outweigh any sense of obligation to the researcher. In other words, the interests of researchers and participants do not necessarily coincide in the focus group context (see also Matoesian and Coldren 2002). While focus groups are a good place to

study these processes of self-presentation, we should not assume that participants will always tell us “the truth” here or elsewhere.

Moreover, even if participants are inclined to tell the truth, there may not be *a* truth to be told. Calls to segment focus groups to encourage “honesty” presuppose that there exists a single truth that participants will disclose if only they can be made comfortable enough to be honest. But recent conceptualizations of the self posit not a unitary self but a situational one that shifts according to the demands of the interactional context (see for example Goffman 1959; Skrypnek and Snyder 1982; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Gergen 1991). If this is the case, what does it mean to be “honest” in a focus group? “What people think and say depends in part on who is asking, who is listening, how the question is posed, and a host of related details” (Sasson 1995, 19). Indeed, one recent conceptualization of attitudes suggests that they are not stable, internal traits, but are produced interactionally within specific contexts (Puchta and Potter 2002).

What focus groups tell us is how people communicate with others. This vitally important point is often ignored in focus group research. As discussed above, some writers have suggested that focus groups composed of people who know each other well will produce better data. While groups based on existing networks are likely to be more representative of people’s actual daily interactions, they are not necessarily more likely to be indicative of people’s underlying thoughts or feelings. People who know each other talk about actual experiences they have shared in the past, and sometimes challenge each other’s statements if they perceive them to be inaccurate. However, people’s daily lives often include secrets, exaggerations, and half-truths, and these are also likely to be replicated in focus groups that mimic people’s everyday social contacts. While focus groups can be modified to increase the external validity of the *group* conversation, increasing the validity of *individual* contributions is more problematic. Focus groups can tell us what people say in particular social contexts and how group meaning, consensus, or dissensus is constructed (Kitzinger 1994b); they do not reliably tell us what individuals think or feel. Therefore, no group composition can ensure “honest” disclosure. Instead, practitioners must analyze the particular social contexts of the group and how they affect group dynamics and individual incentives to disclose. Perhaps the most appropriate use of focus groups is to obtain a window on face-to-face interaction and discourse, which is always contextual.

TRIANGULATION

If the researcher is interested in understanding individuals' past experiences and interpretations, multiple methods of data collection may be necessary (Manfredi, Lacey, Warnecke, and Balch 1997; Agar and MacDonald 1995). For example, in the study I have described above, participants completed a survey before attending the group discussion. This strategy produced individual-level data that could be compared with participants' contributions to the focus group discussions. Because they were confidential and completed before the group convened, these survey responses were not subject to the group pressures present in the later focus group.⁵ This is not to say, of course, that the survey responses were free of social pressure; surveys as well as interviews and focus groups are social interactions, although with different audiences.

Another approach involves collecting individual data after the discussion, either through a survey or a face-to-face interview. This strategy may allow participants to elaborate on comments made during the discussion, fill in gaps in their contributions, describe thoughts or memories evoked by the discussion, or share their reactions to the discussion, including their comfort with disclosing their experiences and feelings (Morgan 1996; Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacey, and Flay 1991; Kitzinger 1994a). For example, Michell (1999) found that in her research with schoolchildren, the lowest status girls were withdrawn in the focus group discussions but discussed their feelings and experiences in subsequent interviews, information which was crucial to answering the research questions. The ordering of the various types of data collection may affect (and therefore illuminate) the responses. For example, Wight (1994) varied the ordering of focus groups and interviews in a study of adolescent boys' sexual experiences. He found that boys who participated in individual interviews first often gave different responses during the group discussions, while those who participated in focus groups first tended to give similar responses when later interviewed. In a study of HIV issues, Kitzinger (1994a, 1994b) found similar differences between interview and focus group responses, but only for heterosexual men. This issue clearly requires further research.

Of course, none of these strategies ensures that a participant shares "the truth" with the researcher. Triangulation of methods may provide more nuanced information about the participants, but it cannot ensure "honest" disclosure. Each method is essentially a different social

context for the participant (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). Comparison of responses to each method can provide clues about how the context affects response—which, after all, may be the most important thing learned in social research.

CONCLUSIONS

In his introduction to *The Soul of Mbira*, ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner ([1978] 1993) tells a story of field research in Zimbabwe. Over the course of several years, he repeatedly asked Bandambira, an elder musician, to tell him the names of the keys of a particular type of musical instrument. The first time he asked, the musician said the keys had no names. Berliner chanced to ask again, and this time, Bandambira said four of the keys had names. The third time he asked, they all had names, but the names were different from those Bandambira had provided the second time. The fourth time, they all had names, but again those names were different from the previous times. The fifth and sixth times, the names were again different than the previous times. Finally, as Berliner was giving up hope of ever understanding the naming system, the old man announced, “Well, it seems to me that this young man is serious after all. I suppose I can tell him the truth now,” and proceeded to describe the naming system simply and clearly. Berliner concludes, “I will long remember the lesson that Bandambira . . . taught me about field research technique and about the nature of knowledge as privileged information.” Informants “do not treat their knowledge lightly” and “give only the amount of information they believe to be appropriate to the situation and to the persons involved” (p. 7). Even when there is a “truth” to be told, people may choose not to tell it. And when the information the researcher hopes to uncover is less concrete—such as people’s thoughts, feelings, and beliefs—issues of silence and disclosure become even more complex.

Many methodological discussions of focus groups treat them as fairly simple research sites: in some cases, as efficient means of collecting data from multiple people at once; in more nuanced understandings, as social situations in which basic psychological pressures such as conformity and compliance complicate data collection, but where these forces can be overcome by judicious preparation and facilitation.

This article has focused not on the psychological processes of the focus group participants but on the social dynamics of the focus group situation. I have argued here that focus groups are more complex social situations than has been generally acknowledged. Research participants are not uncomplicated information storage facilities who need only the proper instructions from the facilitator or a comfortable group composition to open their hearts and minds to the researcher. Instead, they are complex, often contradictory mosaics of history, experience, motivation, and interests. Focus groups, like other methods, provide one window on these mosaics. The participants in a focus group are not independent of each other, and the data collected from one participant cannot be considered separate from the social context in which it was collected.

Focus groups may be best conceptualized as a research *site*, not a research instrument—a place where we can observe the processes of social interaction, not a tool for collecting data about individual thoughts, feelings, or experiences. This does not mean that focus groups, and group methods more generally, are not useful. Rather, they may provide a different window on social interaction than individually focused methods. Solano (1988) makes this point in her plea for group-based methods:

Influenced by the individual perspective of psychology, social psychology has been studying the equivalent of monologues. Research has been concentrating on self-centered acts and speeches and ignoring the effect of other people. Ultimately, this approach is limited. A thorough understanding of monologues does not help understand the dynamics of a conversation. Conversation involves a developing sequence of behavior that is not predictable from one person alone. Two monologues are not the equivalent of a conversation. One person might have the same monologue or lecture with two separate groups of people. Yet no one is likely to have exactly the same conversation with two different people, even if it is on the same topic. (p. 37)

Thus, what is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the contexts of focus groups, not an abandonment of the method.

How then should focus groups be conducted? First, the researcher must pay careful attention to the composition of the group—what the various relationships are amongst the participants, how the setting and

facilitator might affect these relationships, and what kinds of talk might be encouraged or discouraged in this context. Then, it is crucial to pay attention to and report the group dynamics of the conversation, including the relative status of the various participants and the order in which they speak (Carey 1995). Finally, triangulation of methods will help the researcher to untangle participants' responses and their relationship to the social contexts of the focus group. The combination of survey and focus group in my study allowed me to see the slippage in some participants' talk about these different topics. Had I followed up my focus groups with individual interviews—or even a second survey that asked participants to reflect on the groups—I would know much more about their individual responses and how those were played out in the focus group context.

If we understand focus groups as a site for analyzing the collaborative construction of meaning, then concerns about “honesty” and disclosure become much less problematic. As Kitzinger (1994b) argues, “Differences between interview and group data cannot be classified in terms of validity vs. invalidity or honesty vs. dishonesty” (p. 173). Or, as Morgan (2001) has written, “It is certainly true that the same people might say different things in individual interviews than they would in a group discussion, but that does not mean that one set of statements is distorted and the other is not” (p. 151). The focus of our attention should not be on how to best extract “the truth” from focus group participants but rather how to understand and analyze the multiple, complex interactional forces that lead participants to share some truths, withhold others, and manufacture new versions of reality in a given context. In this article, I have begun to dissect some of these interactional forces and contexts; further research is needed to analyze them fully. Attention to these contexts in both the design and analysis of focus groups will result in a richer and more accurate picture of what participants—and focus groups—are really telling us.

NOTES

1. Before arriving at the discussion, participants completed a fourteen-page survey, which they received and returned by mail. The survey included questions about a range of experiences, beliefs, and emotions related to violence. As the survey data are not the focus of this analysis, I do not discuss the survey methodology in depth here. A fuller discussion of this part of the project can be found in Hollander (1997).

2. It is important to note that participants were *not* directly asked to disclose their own experiences of violence during the focus group discussions.

3. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms; other identifying details have also been changed to protect confidentiality. Quotes have been edited for readability but are otherwise transcribed verbatim from audiotapes of the interview and focus group discussions.

4. Although participants in this group worked for the same company, the large size of the company meant that they were all strangers to each other.

5. These surveys may have affected what participants later said in the focus group discussions, however, if they knew that the researcher could compare their survey and focus group responses.

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