CHAPTER

17   Focus Group Research: Retrospect and Prospect 🔓

George Kamberelis, Greg Dimitriadis

Abstract

This chapter is both historical and conceptual, first highlighting the origins, tensions, and continuities/discontinuities of focus group research and then arguing for how such research embodies three primary, related functions: inquiry, pedagogy, and political. The quasiunique potentials or affordances of focus group work are explored, including mitigating the researcher's authority; disclosing the constitutive power of discourse; approximating the natural; filling in knowledge gaps and saturating understanding; drawing out complexity, nuance, and contradiction; disclosing eclipsed connections; and creating opportunities for political activism. Contemporary threats to focus group work are described and new research frontiers are proposed, especially in relation to new information technologies. The chapter integrates historical, conceptual, and practical perspectives to fully explain the potentials of focus group research, with the goal of advancing a set of understandings about focus group work that attends to its relatively unique potentials for conducting qualitative inquiry across a wide range of topics and disciplinary contexts.

Keywords: dialogic interviewing, collective conversations, communitarian ethics, researcher positioning, focus group functions, focus groups, praxis-oriented research, innovative research practices, virtual worlds

Subject: Research Methods in Psychology, Psychology

Series: Oxford Library of Psychology

FOCUS Group Research: A Conceptual-Historical Introduction

The use of focus group research extends back as far as early media effects studies at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in the 1940s, particularly the work of Robert Merton. Of particular interest in the post–World War II era was the study of mass-mediated propaganda. Several new methods emerged from the bureau, including the focus group or *focused interview.* The focused interview had the virtue of expediency. As such, this interviewing strategy was rooted in positivist or postpositivist epistemologies, which assume that the Truth is "out there." In many respects, the empirical material that emerged could be analyzed with the same tools used to analyze one-on-one interviews. Although they took place in a focus group, the "unit of analysis" was still the individual.

In addition to highlighting the role of epistemology in research practice, this privileging of the individual had disciplinary implications as well. Specifically, by locating the truth in the individual, focus group research favored psychological approaches and explanations over sociological ones. Problems and explanations here tend not to be viewed in terms of class structure or gender inequalities or race and racism but in terms of the motivations, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals. In important ways, this one-on-one interview paradigm results in theory and research being underutilized.

With an eye toward broadening our understanding of the nature and functions of focus groups in research, we question some of the assumptions of early focus group work, offer a conceptual and practical introduction, highlight the fissures in the tradition of research that has used focus groups, and postulate some of their yet untapped potentials. Indeed, focus groups can encompass a wide range of practices and overlapping purposes—pedagogical, political, ↳ traditionally empirical. In this chapter, we explore focus group research systematically, not as an extension or elaboration of interview work alone but as its own specific, structured mode of conducting research.

This is a practical, strategic decision. The techniques and tools one uses to collect one-on-one interview data cannot easily be imported into focus group settings in ways that mine the unique and rich potentials for knowledge generation, pedagogy, and political work that focus groups can afford. But the differences between individual interviews and focus group conversations extend beyond technique to important theoretical and conceptual distinctions, such as functions and definitions of self that are both rooted in and generated through the process. One-on-one interviews are predicated on an Enlightenment notion of the *self.* The Enlightenment self is a transcendent consciousness that functions unencumbered by social and material conditions and that is the source of all knowledge and the agent of all action. In contrast, from a more sociological or social constructionist perspective, the self is seen as produced in and through historical, social, and material practices. The self is not reduced to an a priori mind, a social formation, or a sign. Rather, the self is a particular configuration of discursive and material practices that is constantly constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing itself and is always already social.

Madriz's (1997) study of women's fear of crime exemplifies how this way of thinking about the relations between the self and the social can play out in focus group work. Albeit in slightly different terms, she clearly treated the "group" as the unit of analysis and saw the self and the social as constituting each other. This allowed her to understand fear as a collective phenomenon—something to be understood and addressed as a social, not psychological, issue. A *sociology of fear* supplants the all-too-often evoked *psychology of fear.* The "reality" of fear is thus challenged as a normative concept. Once challenged, fear can be responded to differently and perhaps more productively, because research and its application can now be directed toward solutions.

Focus groups are especially fertile sites for empirical investigations of these new theoretical formulations of self. In particular, they give us opportunities to see whether and how self, *other*, and *context* seem indeed to

be co-emergent phenomena, getting to the very heart of the social processes social theorists argue constitute reality. Our approach to focus groups embodies this emergent and ecumenical character. As such, it has particular consequences for how we think through and utilize data in focus group research.

Throughout this chapter, we try to develop a workable set of theoretical and practical distinctions that mark focus group work as quasiunique and sociological. As noted, focus groups can be group interviews or collective conversations. Most are situated somewhere along that continuum. Key here is the degree to which groups are "managed" by the researcher or allowed to develop in more self-organizing ways. When they are allowed to be more free-flowing, focus groups can mitigate or inhibit the authority of the researcher, allowing participants to "take over" or "own" the interview space. Although this is not a "natural" occurrence, focus groups allow researchers to create better approximations of natural interactions than do individual interviews or even observations. Finally, focus groups can allow for what we call *memory synergy* and *political synergy* among participants. These knowledge-generating affordances are, in many ways, unique to focus group work; they are extraordinarily important for understanding certain kinds of social phenomena.

We turn now to the earliest work on focus groups, teasing out some key continuities and discontinuities that continue to pepper the landscape of qualitative inquiry.

The Idea of Focus

The researcher determines the *focus* in focus group research. In their most controlled forms, individual interviews imply a dyadic, even clinical, relationship between interviewer and interviewee. In their less controlled forms, the interviewer negotiates with the interviewee. Interview protocols are relatively open ended, the interviewee is encouraged to introduce topics, and the conversation is allowed to move in unstructured directions.

In a seminal article published in 1946 in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall discussed the focused interview as an important new methodological innovation, allowing interviewers to gather specific information from participants around delimited topics. Merton and Kendall envisioned the focused interview as a space tightly defined by the researcher: "Equipped in advance with a content analysis, the interviewer can readily distinguish the objective facts of the case from the subjective definitions of the situation" (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 541) and thus tightly control the content and flow of group talk accordingly.

The authors went on to provide several practical examples of the focused interview. The examples draw largely from (then contemporary) World War II propaganda research, with a goal of eliciting responses free from the directive influence of the interviewer. That is, the interviewer set the stage and delimited the context. But the goal was to excavate specific, targeted responses from the interviewees. The interview was posited as an "informal listening-post or 'clinic' or 'laboratory' "—not a "debating society or authoritarian arena in which the interviewer defines the situation" (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 547). One sees a concern here with *data contamination* or a *Heisenberg effect.* According to Merton, the focused interview should avoid these problems as much as possible—another indication of the positivist epistemological impulses that motivated this project.

In terms of method, the goal was to integrate quantitative and qualitative work. Using focused interviews, researchers could develop hypotheses that could later be systematically tested (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 557). Alternatively, the focused interview could be used to interpret material gathered from experimental studies (p. 557). Merton and Kendall were indeed pioneers, and the world of research methods would not

catch up to them for more than 5 decades, with the emergence of *mixed methods* research (e.g., Creswell, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2008).

Indeed, Merton and Kendall's seminal 1946 article was groundbreaking, later becoming the book *The Focused Interview* (Merton, 1990), a founding text for focus group research. Rereading the article and book in the early 21st century is instructive; these focused interviews were not concerned with group processes or collective understandings. The key was the focus of the interview. The number and kinds of participants involved were secondary. *The Focused Interview* does address the question of *the group*—but only briefly (in Chapter 7). Even there, Merton was tentative, pointing to potential affordances of conducting the focused interview in a group. An obvious noted advantage is the diversity of responses. But, he added a caveat:

> Little enough is firmly known about the systemic differences between the types of data provided by interviews with individuals and with groups. It is not at all certain that the private interview is uniformly preferable to the interview with groups. It may even develop, on ↳ further study of this problem, that the group interview is preferable to the private interview for certain types of problems.

(Merton, 1990, pp. 135–136)

This last point is worth emphasizing. The pioneers of focus group work were not particularly concerned with the advantages of studying the group. Rather, they were concerned with the role of the interviewer and the focus of the interview—the ability to define a situation objectively and gather the responses of many individuals to that situation.

Yet a closer examination reveals an abiding positivist orientation that would remain the legacy of much of this work. According to Merton and Kendall (1946), focus groups could generate *hypotheses* that could later be "submitted to systematic tests." Alternatively, focus groups could help "interpret previously ascertained experimental findings" (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 557). In both cases, developing the focus in the focused interview allowed for commensurability and dialogue with experimental work. Merton provided researchers a functional, epistemological blueprint for getting at deep and irrefutable truths.

The Idea of the Group

The original meaning and use of the term group in focus group was highly specific. These groups had no identity outside the research context. In fact, the term focus group only emerged during the 1960s in the field of marketing, probably from the everyday practice of professional marketers (Lee, 2010). Its history is scarcely documented, embedded in the archives (if at all) of corporate sponsors. Lee also gestured toward the supposed cost-efficiency of focus group work. This would long be an attractive element of focus group work—but one with significant drawbacks as well.

As Lee (2010) made clear, focus groups were heavily utilized by marketers and other corporate types with commercial interests. The applied nature of their work appealed to researchers and practitioners in the fields of "social marketing" and health promotion. Here, as well, focus group work blurred the line between research and application. For example, if the goal of early cigarette studies was to understand attitudes toward smoking to perfect their advertising and sales, then we see the group treated as a *target market*—gauged for their attitudes, targeted for seemingly positive, social ends. Focus group research would continue to flourish in these fields. Both areas are largely "applied"—that is, they define their goals and outcomes a priori. The use of focus groups in these fields is not dialogic or co-constituted by facilitators and participants. Instead, facilitators control topics and flows of talk.

From the early 1980s, focus group work continued to flourish, but the interest in the group proliferated, especially in "audience" or "reception" research studies. The primary goal of these studies was to understand the complexities involved in how people understood and interpreted media texts. To accomplish this goal, researchers focused on group dynamics themselves because they believed that both the meanings constructed within groups of viewers and the viewers themselves were largely socially constructed.

In a groundbreaking study along these lines, David Morley (1980) attempted to chart the various responses of viewing groups from different social and economic classes to the popular television show *Nationwide*. Working from within a social constructionist framework ↳ (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966), his use of focus groups was strategic: "The choice to work with groups rather than individuals ... was made on the grounds that much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context" (p. 97). In contrast, for Morley and other scholars interested in audience reception practices, focus groups were invaluable because they afforded insights into how meanings are constructed collectively and in situ.

Morley and others reconceptualized the construct of the group in focus groups. While drawing on the tools of early propaganda and other research, Morley and others also broadened the scope and use of these tools, with the audience treated not as a target market but as a collective, having its own particular autonomies and dynamic potentials. The goal of audience reception studies was to create situations that were as close as possible to how people actually interacted with fellow viewers of particular media. Underpinning this orientation is a social constructivist epistemology—one that views the reception process, both of individuals and of groups—as dynamic and emergent.

Another trajectory of work also challenged narrow notions of applied social research—the literacy "study circles" of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire. Conducted in poor, rural areas of Brazil in the 1970s, Freire (1970/1993) organized collective discussions meant to elicit words fundamentally important to the lives of illiterate adults. He called these words *generative words*. The words were then used as starting points for literacy learning, deployed in the service of social and political activism. Importantly, this use of focus groups differs considerably from uses we have discussed so far. The topics for discussion come from the stakeholders themselves. The facilitators are nondirective. The truth is not considered out there to be discovered, but a phenomenon that emerges through dialogue or collective conversation. This empirical material demands a different set of analytic tools that cannot be imported from one-on-one interviews. We will return to this issue later.

So, the nature and functions of focus groups have proliferated in several directions at once. In some versions, the focus has been dictated tightly by the interviewer. In others, the focus has been constructed in dialogue among the participants. In some versions, the group has been irrelevant. In others, it has been constitutive. In some versions, the audience has been constructed as a market segment. In addition, focus groups have been used across considerably different domains of inquiry: corporate marketing, anthropology, sociology, media studies, health sciences, education, and many more. Focus group research has also moved across various epistemologies, from positivism and postpositivism to social constructivism and poststructuralism. Finally, it has been used by a variety of stakeholders, from the military to the corporate world to medicine to the academy. Given this complex and variegated inquiry landscape, the researcher is forced to fundamentally reimagine his or her role in focus group work.

Focus Groups and/in Applied Fields

There are many books on focus group research. These include *Doing Focus Groups* (Barbour, 2008), *Focus Groups in Social Research* (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001), *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Krueger & Casey, 2008), and others. These texts are largely "how-to" guides. Although

useful, they ↳ typically lack historical and theoretical grounding. One goal of this chapter is to situate focus group inquiry within broader historical and theoretical lines. To accomplish this goal, we treat the use of focus groups as a methodological strategy with its own historical and theoretical specificity.

Focus groups have gained considerable purchase in applied fields. In most healthcare fields, their use has increased dramatically in recent decades. The idea that focus group research allows health practitioners to gather critically productive information is echoed in journals such as *Journal of School Nursing, Nurse Researcher*, and *Qualitative Health Research*. In fact, Nurse Researcher devoted a special issue to focus groups in 2007. The issue's editorial introduction contextualized articles in the issue, calling focus groups useful but noting their limitations, especially their small sample size and the attendant dangers of generalization without adequate warrant (Parahoo, 2007). Echoing Merton and his colleagues, Parahoo also noted that focus groups may be used "to develop tools such as questionnaires or interview schedules, to clarify and explore the findings from other methods" (p. 5). A clear subtext of his breezy introduction is that focus groups are subordinate to more systematic modes of data collection. Nearly all the other articles in this issue also advocate this cautious approach to focus group work, noting its limited uses for gauging attitudes and beliefs.

Focus groups have also been widely used in counseling and counseling education (e.g., Kress & Shoffner, 2007). According to Nabors (2001), focus groups are an "effective method for examining stakeholders' perception of mental health programs for children and their families" (p. 243), assessing client needs, and developing programmatic interventions.

In addition, focus groups are used to research sensitive topics and vulnerable populations in counseling-type settings. Supplementing survey work, for example, Hopson and Steiker (2008) used focus groups to explore drug abuse prevention programs in alternative schools. Similarly, Nelson-Gardell (2001) used focus groups to explore survivors of childhood sexual abuse. And Briller, Myers Schim, Meert, and Thurston (2007/2008) used focus groups in a study of bereavement. Like most such studies, this study was largely concerned with implementing focus groups effectively and sensitively.

Marketing has primarily drawn on focus group research to determine the needs and desires of consumers and clients. More academic uses of focus group research in marketing have often involved comparing focus groups to other methods. York, Brannon, Roberts, Shanklin, and Howells (2009), for example, compared survey research to focus group research in studies designed to assess employee beliefs and practices around food safety. Other academic marketing researchers have sought to understand technical or pragmatic aspects of focus group work. Tuckel and Wood (2009), for example, investigated the ways respondents are (or are not) "cooperative" in focus group processes.

Focus groups have also been widely used in education research. Peters (2009), for example, demonstrated how focus groups were used to revise the master's level public administration curricula at Western Michigan University. Similarly, Hall, Williams, and Daniel (2010) used focus groups to assess the effectiveness of an after-school program for disadvantaged youth. Importantly, focus groups are central to the pedagogical interests of other applied fields—counselor education, nursing education, medical school education, business education, and the like.

This brief introduction shows that theory and research around focus groups continue to revisit many of the

conceptual and practical issues raised by the earliest researchers to use ↳ focus groups. Despite their

widespread use in many fields for many decades, focus group research remains undertheorized and underutilized. One goal of this chapter is to redress this situation. To do this, we focus on three interrelated key functions—pedagogical, political, and empirical. These dynamic relations, again, tend to occur more often with focus groups than with many other data collection strategies.

Multiple, Interrelated Functions of Focus Group Work

Focus groups enact at least three primary functions most of the time: inquiry (research), teaching and learning (pedagogy), and social activism (politics). Within any given project, these different functions of focus group work emerge and interact, with one function being dominant in each group.

Different insights about focus group work tend to flow from each of these three functions. The *pedagogical* function foregrounds the dialogic nature of focus group interactions, as well as the possibility for transformative encounters. The *political* function highlights the sources of collective support that occur around social and political issues. The *empirical* (or inquiry) function alerts us to the deep epistemological issues and concerns around "the research act," including the complex negotiations between self and other in inquiry. Here, we provide accounts of research endeavors in which one or another of these functions has been dominant.

The Pedagogical Function

The work of Paulo Freire (1970/1993) in Brazil illustrates the pedagogical function especially well. Among other things, we like Freire's work because he worked *with* people and not *on* them, thus modeling an important praxis disposition for contemporary educators and qualitative researchers (e.g., Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). Additionally, although pedagogy was clearly the dominant function in Freire's work, inquiry always nourished pedagogy.

Freire's work was intensely practical, as well as deeply philosophical. His most famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993), can be read as equal parts social theory, philosophy, and pedagogical method. Throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued that the goal of education is to begin to name the world, part of which is to recognize that we are all *subjects* of our own lives and narratives, not *objects* in the stories of others. As particularly powerful ideological state apparatuses, schools play a big role in this process.

In this regard, Freire argued that most education is based on the *banking model.* This implies an Enlightenment worldview, in which subject and object are a priori independent of each other and where subjects are objectified and thus dehumanized. In other words, "the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing" (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 54). As problematic as it is, the banking model provides the epistemological foundation for most contemporary educational institutions and practices.

p. 487   To supplant a banking model of education, Freire (1970/1993) offered a model based on the elicitation of words that are fundamentally important in the lives of the subjects. He called these words generative words. The primary goal of these activities was to help people use words to exercise power over the material and ideological conditions of their own lives. Thus, Freire's pedagogical programs were designed to raise people's critical consciousness (*conscientization*) and encourage them to engage in *praxis*, or critical reflection linked to political action in the real world. He clearly underscored the fact that praxis is never easy and always involves power struggles, including violent ones.

The fact that Freire (1970/1993) insisted that the unending process of emancipation must be a collective effort is far from trivial, especially because of its implications for focus group work. Freire believed that

dialogue, fellowship, and solidarity are essential to human liberation and transformation, and only dialogue is capable of producing critical consciousness and praxis. Thus, all educational programs must be dialogic.

Within Freireian pedagogics, the development and use of generative words and phrases and the cultivation of conscientization are enacted in the context of locally situated study circles (or focus groups). The goal for the educator within these study circles is to engage with people in their lived realities, producing and transforming them.

To illustrate this kind of problem-posing education rooted in people's lived realities and contradictions, Freire (1970/1993) created what would now be called collaborative action research or participatory action research (PAR) programs, including one designed around alcoholism. Because alcoholism was a serious problem in the city where Freire lived and worked, he and his research team showed assembled groups a photograph of a drunken man walking past three other men and asked them to talk about what was going on in the photograph. Alcoholism was "read" as a response to oppression and exploitation. This example of problem-posing pedagogy is quite different from (and we would argue much more effective than) more didactic approaches that would more likely involve "sermonizing" to people about their failings. Problem-posing education is proactive and designed to allow people themselves to identify and generate solutions to the problems they face.

In sum, focus group work has always been central to the kinds of radical pedagogics advocated and fought for by intellectual workers like Paulo Freire and his many followers (e.g., Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe, Jonathan Kozol, and Peter McLaren). The impulses that motivate focus groups in pedagogical domains have important implications for reimagining and using focus groups as resources for constructing "effective histories" (Foucault, 1984) within qualitative research endeavors.

The Political Function

Here, we offer descriptions and interpretations of focus groups in the service of radical political work designed within social justice agendas. In particular, we focus on how the consciousness-raising groups (CRGs) of second- and third-wave feminism have been deployed to mobilize empowerment agendas and enact social change.

Whereas Freire's primary goal was to use literacy (albeit broadly defined) to mobilize oppressed groups to work against their oppression through praxis, the primary goal of the CRGs of second- and third-wave feminism was to build theory from the lived experiences of women who could work toward their own

p. 488 emancipation. In our discussion of CRGs, we ↳ draw heavily on Esther Madriz's retrospective analyses of second-wave feminist work and her own third-wave feminist work. In both, Madriz focused on political (and politicized) uses of focus groups within qualitative inquiry. Importantly, as forms of collective testimony, focus group participation has often been empowering for women, especially women of color (Madriz, 2000, p. 843), for several reasons. Focus groups decenter the authority of the researcher, allowing women safe spaces in which to talk about their own lives and struggles. These groups also allow women to connect with each other collectively, share their own experiences, and "reclaim their humanity" in a nurturing context (p. 843). Very often, Madriz (2000) noted, women themselves take these groups over, reconceptualizing them in fundamental ways and with simple yet far-reaching political and practical consequences. Perhaps the most striking realization that emerges from examining some of the original texts of second-wave feminism are the explicitly self-conscious ways in which women used focus groups to deploy theory and thereby enact political change. Second-wave feminists persisted in building theory from the "standpoint" of women's lived experiences, and their efforts eventually became a powerful social force in the struggle for equal rights.

In many respects, the CRGs of second-wave feminism helped set the agenda for the next generation of feminist activism. As Hester Eisenstein (1984) noted, these groups helped bring personal issues in women's lives to the forefront of political discourse. Abortion, incest, sexual molestation, and domestic and physical abuse, for example, emerged from these groups as pressing social issues around which public policy and legislation had to be enacted. By finding out which issues were most pressing in women's lives, CRGs were able to articulate what had previously been considered individual, psychological, and private matters to the agendas of local collectives and eventually to social and political agendas at regional and national levels.

Working within the movement(s) of third-wave feminism, Madriz herself used focus groups in powerful ways, some of which are evidenced in her 1997 book, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives*. In this book, Madriz discussed all the ways in which the fear of crime works to produce an insidious form of social control on women's lives.

With respect to research methods, Madriz called attention to the fact that it is hard to get people—women in particular—to talk about sensitive topics in uninhibited and honest ways in the context of oral or written surveys completed alone or in relation to a single social scientist interviewer. This general problem is further complicated by differences in power relations between researchers and research participants. To work against the various alienating forces that seem inherent in survey research, Madriz used focus groups, noting that these groups provided a context in which women could support each other in discussing their experiences of and fears and concerns about crime. Focus groups afford women safer and more supportive contexts within which to explore their lived experiences with other women who will understand what they are saying intellectually, emotionally, and viscerally. This idea of safe and supportive spaces ushers in the importance of constituting groups in ways that mitigate alienation, create solidarity, and enhance community building.

In relation to this point, CRGs of second-wave feminism suffered from essentializing tendencies that ended up glossing different and even contradictory experiences of many women under the singular sign of "White middle-class women." Acknowledging the need for variability in this regard, third-wave feminist researchers refracted and multiplied the standpoints from which testimonies and voices might flow.

p. 489 Although many held onto the ↳ postpositivist ideal of "building theory" from lived experience, researchers like Madriz pushed for theory that accounted more fully for the local, complex, and nuanced nature of lived experience. In the end, a primary goal of focus group activity within third-wave feminist research is not to offer prescriptive conclusions but to highlight the productive potentials (both oppressive and emancipatory) of particular social contexts (with their historically produced and durable power relations) within which such prescriptions typically unfold. In this regard, the work of Madriz is a synecdoche for third-wave feminist work more broadly conceived—particularly, work conducted by women of color, such as Dorinne Kondo, Smadar Lavie, Ruth Behar, Aihwa Ong, and Lila Abu-Lughod.

Another key emphasis of focus groups within feminist traditions has been the discovery or production of *voice*. Because focus groups often result in the sharing of similar stories of everyday experience, struggle, rage, and the like, they often end up validating individual voices that had previously been negatively constructed within and through mainstream discourses. Because they foreground and exploit the power of testimony and voice, focus groups can create a critical mass of visible solidarity—a necessary first step toward social and political change.

Focus groups within feminist traditions have also mitigated the Western tendency to separate thinking and feeling, thus opening up possibilities for reimagining knowledge as distributed, relational, embodied, and sensuous. Viewing knowledge in this light brings into view the relations between power and knowledge and thus insists that qualitative research is always already political—implicated in social critique and social change.

Finally, the break from second-wave to third-wave feminism called into question the monolithic sign of "woman" that characterized much of second-wave thinking and also highlighted the importance of creating focus groups that are relatively "homogeneous" because such groups are more likely to achieve the kind of solidarity and collective identity requisite for producing effective histories (Foucault, 1984).

Politicized forms of focus group work are perhaps best evidenced today in various PAR projects. In the United States since 2010, Michelle Fine has helped form various "research collectives" with youth at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Fine, Roberts, and Torre (2004) brought together multiethnic groups of suburban and urban high schools for *Echoes of Brown*, a study of the legacies of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Originally a study of the so-called achievement gap, the framework soon shifted, largely a result of the focus group–like sessions that drew the participants together. After discussion, the framework changed from one of *achievement gap*—a construct the youth felt put too much of the onus on themselves—to *opportunity gap*.

These research collectives opened spaces for youth to challenge themselves and others in ongoing dialogue—a key affordance of focus group work. Torre and Fine (2006) noted, "As we moved through our work, youth were able to better understand material, or to move away from experiences that were too uncomfortable, or to make connections across seemingly different positions" (p. 276). Ultimately, these youth were able to both carry out empirical projects around "push-out rates" and disciplinary practices in schools and produce powerful individual and collective testimonies about their own perspectives on and experiences of schooling, 50 years after *Brown*. See Cammarota and Fine (2008) for additional examples of this PAR principle at work.

p. 490　We have highlighted here the political function of focus groups—the ways these groups allow participants to coalesce around key issues, coproducing knowledge and strategies for ↳ transcending their social, economic, and political circumstances. The interactions among participants in CRG and other feminist groups, for example, are deeply pedagogical because knowledge is co-created in situated and dialogic ways. And, of course, the PAR work we mentioned continues to extend the productive linkages among pedagogy, politics, and inquiry.

Michelle Fine's notion of *strong objectivity* is helpful in this regard. According to Fine, we must work toward new forms of objectivity informed by the insights and advances of critical scholarship—particularly scholarship about the "situatedness" of all knowledge.

Such an approach helps researchers become more aware of potential blind spots that they may import, albeit often unwittingly, to their work. Such work can be most usefully done collectively with others. Such collectives seem to share the best impulses of focus group work because participants forge new kinds of understandings and try to avoid premature closure. These impulses allow us to interrogate how focus groups can foster approaches to political work that challenges the notion of *collectivity* itself.

The Inquiry Function

At least since the work of Merton and his colleagues, the inquiry function has been foregrounded by most scholars. Working within the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University, Merton and colleagues recruited groups of people to respond to radio programs designed to boost "morale" for the war effort (e.g., Merton, 1987, p. 552). Originally, the pair asked participants to push buttons to indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the content of the radio programs and used focus groups as forums for getting participants to explain why they responded as they did. Importantly, Merton's use of focus group strategies for data collection always remained secondary to (and less legitimate than) the various quantitative strategies used.

In philosophy of science terms, the early use of focus groups as resources for conducting research was highly conservative in nature. This is not at all surprising when we consider that the work of Merton and others was funded by the military and that the goal of most of this work was to use knowledge about people's beliefs and decision-making processes to develop increasingly effective forms of propaganda—inquiry in the service of politics.

Although both the goals and the techniques merit harsh criticism (especially from progressive and radical camps), two key ideas from Merton's work have become central to the legacy of using focus groups within qualitative research: (a) capturing people's responses in real time and space in the context of face-to-face interactions and (b) strategically generating interview prompts in situ based on important themes that are generated in these face-to-face interactions.

The kind of focus group research conducted by scholars such as Merton continued as a powerful force within corporate-sponsored market research, but all but disappeared within the field of sociology in the middle of the 20th century. When it did re-emerge in the 1980s, it was no longer wed to (or used in the service of) predominantly quantitative-oriented research.

Criticisms notwithstanding, audience analysis research has become interpretive and increasingly dialogic and emancipatory. Its primary goal is to understand the complexities of how people understand and interpret media texts. For example, Janice Radway used focus groups to great effect in her pioneering research on the reading practices of romance ↳ novel enthusiasts that resulted in her 1984 book, *Reading the Romance*. The research took place in and around a local bookstore, and Radway's participants included the storeowner and a group of 42 women who frequented the store and were regular romance novel readers. Radway developed a mixed methods research design that included text analysis and focus group interviews, "formalizing" some of their ongoing social activities. She read all the books that her participants read. She talked with many of them informally when they were at the bookstore together. And she conducted formal focus groups.

Among other things, Radway (1984) came to understand how important belonging to a reading group was for mitigating the stigma often associated with the practice of reading romance novels:

> Because I knew beforehand that many women are afraid to admit their preference for romantic novels for fear of being scorned as illiterate or immoral, I suspected that the strength of numbers might make my informants less reluctant about discussing their obsession.
>
> (p. 252)

She also learned that how she positioned herself within the reading groups was crucial. She noted, for example, that when she was gently encouraging and when she backgrounded her own involvement, "the conversation flowed more naturally as the participants disagreed among themselves, contradicted one another, and delightedly discovered that they still agreed about many things" (p. 48).

All the various strategies that Radway (1984) deployed helped to generate kinds of data that are difficult, if not impossible, to generate through individual interviews and even observations. Radway concluded her book with a call to praxis, noting that "it is absolutely essential that we who are committed to social change learn not to overlook this … legitimate form of protest … and to learn how best to encourage it and bring it to fruition" (p. 222).

If Radway's (1984) work began to outline the political, ethical, and praxis potentials of focus groups within qualitative inquiry, Patti Lather's work attempted to push the "limit conditions" of such work even further. In their book, *Troubling the Angels*, for example, Lather and Smithies (1997) explored the lives, experiences, and narratives of 25 women living with HIV/AIDS through 5 years of focus group interviews conducted

within different "support groups" in five major cities in Ohio. Lather and Smithies met and talked with their women participants at birthday parties and holiday get-togethers, in hospital rooms, and at funerals, baby showers, and picnics. In both "strategic" and "found" ways, more organized occasions for "collecting data" constantly blurred into the "practices of everyday life" (deCerteau, 1984). Yet Lather and Smithies were careful to work against the tendency to sentimentalize or romanticize their roles or their work. Their participants, for example, wanted to produce a collection of autobiographies or autoethnographies of "lived experience." Lather and Smithies were more interested in theorizing their participants' experiences and foregrounding the political (especially micropolitical) dimensions and effects of these experiences. According to Lather, these competing goals were constantly negotiated in focus groups. This pedagogic and political activity resulted in a book that embodies a productive tension between the two competing goals.

Although much of Lather and Smithies's (1997) book is devoted to troubling the waters of ethnographic representation, the experience of conducting fieldwork primarily through focus groups also troubled the waters of research practice. In this regard, Lather and Smithies integrated sociological, political, historical, therapeutic, and pedagogical practices and discourses into their work. One of the most interesting sections
p. 492 of the book for our ↳ purposes is one in which Lather and Smithies cultivated what they call a "methodology of getting lost": "Here we all get lost: the women, the researchers, the readers, the angels, in order to open up present frames of knowing to the possibilities of thinking differently" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 52).

Although these reflections refer to the book itself rather than to the process of conducting the research that led to it, they apply equally well to working with research participants in the field. For example, Lather and Smithies (1997) refused to position themselves as grand theorists and to interpret or explain the women's lives to them. Additionally, Lather and Smithies acknowledged their impositions and admitted that a different kind of book might have pleased their participants more. But such a book would have taken Lather and Smithies outside their own predilections and perhaps competencies as researchers.

More than most, Lather and Smithies's (1997) work offers us ways to think about research that transcends and transforms the potentials of using focus groups for revisioning epistemology, interrogating the relative purchase of both lived experience and theory, reimagining ethics within research practice, and enacting fieldwork in ways that are more attuned to its spiritual, even sacred, dimensions.

Summary of Focus Group Functions

Focus group work has a long and chaotic history in various domains of research. Here, we have tried to offer another kind of approach—one of overlapping genealogies of functions. Each of these functions allows us to mine the unique potentials of focus group activity. Hopefully, our accounts of these three functional trajectories of focus group work showed how each primary function is unique and foregrounds certain potentials of focus group work and that all functions are almost always co-present and co-constitutive in most research projects. The pedagogical function of focus groups highlights the deeply dialogic and transformative nature of such work while showing us that it has no guarantees. The political function shows us focus groups as deep sources of collective support around important social issues while alerting us to the dangers of naive notions of collectivity. The inquiry function highlights the ways inquiry can open deep philosophical questions about the research act itself, including the relationship between self and other. Each of these functions provides unique insights about how we (and our research participants) can benefit from the legacy of focus group research. Each also offers a partially unique set of ideas, strategies, and practices that can be brought to bear on research today across a variety of domains.

Focus Groups from a Performative Perspective

Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2012) posed three important insights on performative social science. First, they noted that social science research is concerned with communicating ideas to others. Second, they emphasized the performative nature of language. Echoing J. L. Austin (1962), they noted that language is never simply about communicating information. It is also about expressing, sustaining, and extending relations. Third, they claimed that ↳ performance itself "expands our scope and sensitivities as social scientists" (Gergen & Gergen, 2012, pp. 11–12). We look to extend this discussion here. Performance has recently emerged as a basic ontological but inherently contested concept. Such a notion of performance gives us nowhere to hide in our responsibilities for the work we do, forcing us to see the routine as potentially ambiguous, foreign, and contentious.

The performative turn has opened up powerful spaces for thinking about emergent methodologies that "explore new ways of thinking about and framing knowledge construction," while remaining conscious of the links among epistemologies, methodologies, and the techniques used to carry out empirical work (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, pp. xi–xii). From this perspective, inquiry (especially qualitative inquiry) is no longer a discrete set of methods we deploy functionally to solve problems defined a priori. Instead, we must question the reification of particular methods that has marked the emergence of qualitative inquiry as a transdisciplinary field (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

Because the performative turn has decentered the research act, reimagining qualitative inquiry largely involves seeing it more as a matter of asking new questions that are not definitively answerable. In this regard, our orientation to focus group work encourages a new angle of vision on the politics of evidence. Mindful of the best impulses of the sociology of knowledge and the attendant co-implication of knowledge and power, a new politics of evidence, we believe, must attend to the specificity and autonomy of evidence in new ways. Recognizing that evidence never speaks for itself, a key task is finding ways to challenge our thoughts and practices.

Because focus groups have some quasiunique affordances compared to other data collection strategies, they are especially useful in disarticulating and rearticulating what we mean by evidence and the politics of evidence. Focus group work includes some very important and powerful affordances. Focus groups can (and often do) mitigate or inhibit the authority of the researcher, allowing participants to take over or own the interview space. The leveling of power relations usually also allows researchers to explore group dynamics and the constitutive power of discourse in people's lives. Another affordance of focus group research is to draw out complexities, nuances, and contradictions with respect to whatever is being studied. The intensely social nature of focus groups tends to promote a kind of "memory synergy" among participants and bring forth the collective memory of particular social groups or formations (e.g., African Americans, wounded war veterans, former cult members). Finally, focus groups can (and often do) become democratic spaces for solidarity building and political effectivity. Because of these quasiunique affordances, the use of focus groups often allows researchers to generate richer and more complex and nuanced information, especially in relation to certain topics or domains of inquiry. With savvy, responsive facilitation, focus groups can draw out several information-gathering affordances in especially powerful ways.

Next, we unpack each of these affordances in greater detail and provide examples of some ways they have played out in practice.

Mitigating the Researcher's Authority

Focus groups can mitigate or inhibit the authority of the researcher, allowing participants to take over or own the interview space, which can result in richer, deeper understandings of whatever is being studied. A

key challenge is working against premature closure to avoid ↳ succumbing to the temptations of weak evidence; with skillful, responsive, empathic facilitation, focus groups can go a long way toward democratizing interactional spaces, allowing participants a sense of safety and ownership of the activity and thus generating deep, rich, complex understandings of the issues under study.

We thus see "mitigating authority" and "generating deeper understandings" as twinned phenomena. Several studies have demonstrated the power of mitigating the researcher's authority in focus groups. We highlight one such example here—Marc Lamont Hill's (2009) *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life*. We chose this study because it offers an example of group discussions that draw on the affordances of focus groups without being marked as such. In this study, Hill developed a "Hip-Hop Lit" class in a relatively poor, urban Philadelphia high school, along with a teacher at the school, Mr. Columbo. Hill did not call the discussion sessions that happened in the class focus groups. However, they clearly bear a strong family resemblance to what we have described as focus groups throughout this chapter. The discussion groups conducted by Hill and Colombo represent an excellent example of studies that help us push both conceptual and pragmatic understandings of the potentials of focus group work.

Across several of the chapters in *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life*, Hill (2009) documented the ways he discussed complex personal and social issues with his students through the lens of hip-hop. In an early discussion of hip-hop and "the real" with his students, Hill came face to face with some of his own presuppositions about hip-hop. He noted,

> My choices were reflective of a broader tendency within my HHBE [hip hop-based education] contexts documented in the research literature. Typically, HHBE educators choose texts that they deem politically, intellectually, or culturally sophisticated or relevant. While appropriate, such moves often lead to the development of curricula that respond to the interests, experiences, and generational orientation of the teacher rather than the student.
>
> (Hill, 2009, p. 39)

Hill's insights about the need to back away from his own interests and preferences was largely afforded by the "performative" space he and Mr. Columbo constituted with these youth—a space in which the notion of hip-hop itself was open to contestation. Importantly, Hill made himself vulnerable during these discussions as well.

During a discussion of fatherhood, for example, Hill revealed that he was soon going to be the father of a daughter:

> I have a baby on the way right now that I didn't expect. Her mom is six months pregnant, and I'm really stressin' about it. I ain't worried about money or nothin' like that. It's just … I wasn't expecting this, and she and I not together and she [the mother] gotta be in my life forever.
>
> (Hill, 2009, p. 86)

The students "cosigned" (to use Hill's term) his experiences, and a discussion started about the role of parenting and gender roles. Some of the students had had similar experiences and shared them: "I feel you. My baby moms be trippin' " (p. 86). Hill made himself "vulnerable" here and opened a safe space for his participants.

Interestingly, part of becoming vulnerable and mitigating his authority required that Hill negotiate a particular kind of role in the classroom—a role different from that of Mr. Columbo, who was a formal

teacher in the school. Because of his official role as ↳ teacher, Mr. Columbo did not "self-disclose." The group noticed this and discussed why Mr. Columbo was so reticent in discussions, providing both racial and status explanations for his behavior. One young man commented, "He just, y'ah mean, he can't relate 'cause he from, you know, a different culture so he don't want to say nothin'. " A young woman responded, "Other people can't relate too but they try … And he *a teacher*" (p. 89). Although Hill and Columbo worked out their roles in the classroom in different ways, each was aware of how mitigating and negotiating his authority made a difference in the work he did. In the democratized, interactional space of their classroom, students were increasingly willing to share personal issues, which, among other things, yielded data that were very rich indeed. Key here was the focus group affordance of negotiating one's role in relation to authority and power relations.

Excavating the Lifeblood of Social Activity

The leveling of power relations between researchers and research participants usually also allows researchers to witness something close to "natural" group dynamics. In this, the power of discourse in people's lives is revealed. At least since the Chicago school of sociology emerged in the early part of the 20th century, the constitutive power of talk has been widely acknowledged and exploited within the interpretive research community. The Chicago school included many of the 20th century's most brilliant sociologists and social theorists, including Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, William Foote Whyte, and Frederic Thrasher. Many Chicago school scholars were interested in understanding how natural areas such as the Jewish ghetto (Wirth, 1928), hobo jungles (Anderson, 1923), hangouts and gathering places (Whyte, 1943/1993), and areas that housed gangs (Thrasher, 1927) came to be. All grounded their work in the everyday lives of the people they studied, and all found that patterns of talk and social interaction were central to what one might call the lifeblood of the social formations or communities in which their participants lived and worked.

Mitchell Duneier's (1994) *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* is a powerful example of the ways in which talk brings communities into being and is responsible for how they remain the same or change over time. Rooted in the ethos and worldview of the Chicago school scholars, Duneier studied the lives and stories told by a group of African American (and some White) men who hung out together in a neighborhood eating establishment called Valois on the south side of Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Duneier, too, ate and hung out at Valois, listening to conversations and stories, entering some conversations, and eventually conducting individual and group interviews with some of the cafeteria's regulars. Although some of the regulars showcased in Duneier's book were White and/or middle class, most were older, Black, working-class men living in or near the neighborhood where Valois was located. Rooted in the African American cultural tradition of "care" for others in conditions of violence and oppression, the bonds between and among these men were wrought from their commitments to compassion, loyalty, and personal integrity. Their moral compasses are unwavering; as they share all their dreams, hopes, frustrations, and losses with each other, they reveal themselves to be men of extraordinary substance and character at a time when such attributes have become both scarce and undervalued. Were this not the case, they would not

remain in the circle of regulars. Their talk ↳ and social interaction would not be sanctioned because it would contaminate the lifeblood of the group.

With respect to our purposes in this chapter, Duneier's (1992) work is exemplary for a variety of reasons. It clearly demonstrates the blurry boundaries of what has traditionally been considered focus group work, thus allowing us to imagine the boundaries of focus groups in increasingly wider ways. Perhaps more than any other study with which we are familiar, Duneier's work also demonstrates how the lifeblood of any group or community is constituted (both habitually and ritually) through everyday talk and social interaction. Finally, in the spirit of William Foote Whyte's insights about the lineaments of fieldwork,

Duneier's discussions of how he entered into conversations at Valois underscore the fundamental importance of building and sustaining relationships in the research process. Only when one is successful at doing this does one begin to yield data that truly reflect the rich and variegated fabric of the social life one is studying.

Approximating the Natural

Although not entirely natural, focus group activity can afford a closer approximation to natural interaction than do many other data collection strategies and activities. As noted earlier, our approach to focus group work is rooted in the performative turn in qualitative inquiry. From this perspective, the line between focus groups and everyday interaction becomes blurry. We highlight here another example of research that utilized focus group strategies in complex and expansive ways—the *Echoes of Brown Project* that Michelle Fine headed up with several students and colleagues (Fine et al., 2004). The *Echoes of Brown Project* had its roots in the Educational Opportunity Gap Project, which involved scores of youth in documenting and understanding the so-called achievement gap from *their* point of view. The project ran from 2001 to 2003 and involved a series of "research camps" where more than 100 youth from urban and suburban schools in New York and New Jersey met with researchers from the City University of New York Graduate Center to "study youth perspectives on racial and class based (in)justice in schools and the nation" (Torre et al., 2008, p. 28). The participants became familiar with a host of techniques, including developing and administrating surveys, interviewing, and conducting focus groups. They also developed and conducted creative theater workshops to learn more about *Brown v. Board of Education* legislation and to create a performance "that brought together political history, personal experience, research, and knowledge gathered from generations living in the immediate and the long shadow of *Brown*" (p. 33). Also, some segments chronicle the development of several written texts and dance pieces. Although these workshops were ostensibly led by resident artists and scholars, much of the "pedagogy" that happened within them ended up being dialogic and democratic, with the students teaching as much as learning.

In the Educational Opportunity Gap Project, politically powerful spoken word poetry and dance emerged from focus group activities. Invoking insights from the performative turn in social science research, Fine and her colleagues shared their acute awareness that data never simply speak for themselves but must always be made relevant to audiences. Invoking the pioneering work of Mary Louise Pratt (1991), Fine
p. 497 referred to her focus group ↳ formations as *contact zones*, "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1991, as cited in Torre et al., 2008, p. 24). The projects Fine and her colleagues initiated did indeed bring together youth from different classes, races, and ethnicities. As one participant noted,

> Participating in something like Echoes and the Arts and Social Justice Institute was the first time where I had to work as closely and as intensely as I did with people who were so different from me. The project brought youth from very different racial, economic, academic, and social backgrounds into one space to be creative and to most importantly just be themselves. The comfort and safety that was established in the very beginning was instrumental in allowing for the work to get done and the performance to be shaped and constructed.
>
> (Torre et al., 2008, p. 24)

Thinking about these various speech events as contact zones allows us to see broad continuities in both form and function across them. And the insights that emerge from this process allow us to reconceptualize the natural as a diverse set of spaces and practices shot through with potential problems and possibilities.

Saturating Understanding

Focus groups are particularly useful for filling in gaps in understanding derived primarily from other methods. Although we have been critical of deploying focus groups as subordinate to other forms of data collection strategies (particularly in relation to quantitative data), they do pair nicely with other modes of data collection in certain research contexts. In particular, focus groups can be used strategically to saturate understandings of key issues disclosed in partial or understated ways during the research process. For example, Getnet Tizazu Fetene of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia used focus groups to understand how young college students understood HIV/AIDS (see Fetene, 2009). As Fetene found, the source of the problem of HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia has been constructed primarily as a kind of knowledge gap (see Fetene & Dimitriadis, 2010, for a more in-depth discussion of this issue). For example, a government report framed the problem as one of understanding preventative measurements—the more, the better. According to the Ministry of Health (2004),

> Measuring comprehensive knowledge of the respondents by taking those who knew all three preventive methods and with no misconceptions was found to be low (less than 20 percent), which is in agreement with UNAIDS reports. Comprehensive knowledge seems to increase along with increase in educational level.
>
> (p. 38)

Fetene (2009) wanted to understand the phenomena in more depth. In addition to administering a survey, he deployed several qualitative data collection strategies, including ethnographic observation and document analysis. With the assistance of a co-researcher, he conducted focus groups with 10 young men and 10 young women. Several new and provocative findings emerged from these groups related to contemporary understandings of HIV/AIDS.

p. 498 Many of Fetene's (2009) participants reported that they were weary of being inundated with information about HIV/AIDS and that such information no longer had any educational or preventative effectivity:

> **kaleb:** HIV/AIDS is a subject that I have known since I was a kid. Let alone talking about it with my friends seriously, I don't even want it to be mentioned. I think this is the overall feeling here. Suppose one announces to talk about HIV even at a time when there are no exams, in a situation where students have nothing serious to do, nobody would bother to attend the talk. On the contrary, we would say, "What the hell is he talking about? If he wishes, let me give him a lecture on it! *Sira fetual*? ["Doesn't he have anything to do?"] Students feel they know every thing about AIDS.
> **minyichel:** He [Kaleb] is right. The subject of AIDS has become boring. If one says let us talk about AIDS, every one would say, "Fuck you!"

As Fetene demonstrated, the young people in his study were facing something like a perfect storm. They were saturated with information about HIV/AIDS and long-standing mores around sex and sexuality are changing, yet puritanical and patriarchal ideologies about sex prevail. All these social facts help to explain why knowledge about condoms and condom use does not always translate into practice.

In form, at least, Fetene's (2009) focus groups were probably the most prototypic kinds we have discussed in this chapter. Like the less prototypic kinds of groups we have discussed, however, they were extremely effective at revealing the kinds of information that would have been less likely to surface using other data collection strategies. For example, his participants did not respond well to discussing sensitive topics related to sex and HIV/AIDS in one-on-one interviews. Indeed, when the authority of the researcher was

diluted and the discussions were "owned" by groups of peers, participants were both comfortable and forthcoming about sharing the abundance of information they had related to major social problems.

We will return to this study later in discussing other affordances of focus group work.

Drawing out Complexity, Nuance, and Contradiction

Another affordance of focus group research is to draw out complexities, nuances, and contradictions with respect to whatever is being studied. The intensely social nature of focus group work often elicits subtexts and cognitive and emotional "breakdowns," which, among other things, index sensitive issues and problems that research participants may have alluded to but not addressed directly.

Focus groups were used effectively to draw out complexity, nuance, and contradiction in Michelle Fine and Lois Weis's work with poor and working-class young adults in Buffalo, New York, and Jersey City, New Jersey. This work resulted in *The Unknown City* (Fine & Weis, 1998) and other publications (e.g., Weis, 2004). Fine and Weis conducted interviews and focus groups with African American, Caucasian, and Puerto Rican men and women around issues of domestic abuse, the police, and schooling experiences. *The Unknown City* presents a kaleidoscopic view of how the general loss of public safety nets was understood ↳ differently by different groups. For example, Caucasian men tended not to implicate larger structural forces in explaining their social and economic circumstances. In contrast, African American men provided sophisticated structural explanations for their circumstances.

Additionally, Caucasian women had different perspectives than African American women on many social issues. Both African American and Caucasian women discussed domestic violence. Discussions of domestic violence were more frequent among Caucasian women, yet they were reluctant to name White men as perpetrators, typically locating cause elsewhere (Weis, 2004, p. 41). In contrast, African American women held Black men responsible for domestic violence. Weis (2004) noted, "It is striking that White women are reluctant to name domestic violence as a problem in the community, although obviously it is, whereas Black women speak openly and directly about violence in their homes" (p. 41).

The role of focus groups was crucial for unpacking these differences and the reasons behind them. Caucasian women tended to understand and explain their experiences in highly personal, psychological terms—as secrets not to be shared with others (or at least not with many others). They did not like to discuss them in focus groups. For the Caucasian women, there was a clear disjuncture between the individual interviews and the focus groups. In the former, abuse was shared as an individual, private problem. In the latter, abuse was avoided as a whole.

In contrast, in both individual interviews and focus groups, African American women tended to talk more publicly, and their stories included more structural, sociological explanations.

> Unlike White women, African American women spoke in focus group as well as in individual interviews, where they shared experiences of pain and suffering as well as strength and hope. They [told] and [retold] stories of abuse to one another, with sympathetic nods all around.
>
> (Weis, 2004, p. 45)

More generally, Weis (2004) found that domestic violence is more likely to spill out into the public domain in African American communities than in White ones. Domestic abuse is experienced publicly and addressed publicly. Coming to understand the experiences of domestic violence among both African American and White women happened largely as a function of the focus group component of Fine and Weis's work. Their focus groups became key public sites where complexities, nuances, and contradictions related to ostensibly similar experiences could be brought to light and understood within and across racial lines. These groups

were also crucial for understanding the ways that men of different races understood and explained the reasons for their social and economic circumstances. Thus, the focus groups in this study became staging grounds for understanding how social phenomena such as poverty and domestic violence are experienced, understood, and explained in different ways for different groups. These are, again, unique affordances of focus groups.

Disclosing Shadowy Connections

We use the somewhat unusual term *disclosing* intentionally here. The term was coined by Martin Heidegger (e.g., 1927/1962, 1971, 1993) to talk about how we engage in genuine modes of being and saying to "bring

p. 500 forth" the essence or organization of experiences and their ↳ contexts. Such disclosing activity has become particularly relevant in the complexly connected, globalized environments in which most of us now conduct research. Responding to this social fact, George Marcus's (1998) insights about postmodern, multisited ethnographies are especially relevant. In these ethnographies, relevant comparative dimensions develop as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites. As the researcher maps an object of study, she often finds herself needing to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among several real or virtual sites. She must attend to comparisons that emerge from putting questions to an emergent domain of inquiry or object of study whose lineaments are not known beforehand. She recognizes that most objects of study are mobile and multiply situated. She draws lines of connection in the process of research that have previously been thought to be (or have been conceptually kept) "worlds apart." There is, then, an inherent metaphoric character to the research process. The global is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations and flows (of culture, ethnicities, economic capital, etc.—see Appadurai, 1990). Interpretive accounts are thus created in a landscape for which there is not yet a map—an "accepted" theoretical or descriptive model. Researchers and their participants contribute to shaping the objects they study in the absence of reliable models of macroprocesses for contextualizing referents of research such as "the world system," "capitalism," "the state," or "the nation."

In many ways, focus group work often involves and integrates Heidegger's disclosing activity and Marcus's postmodern ethnographic strategies in powerful, albeit often tacit, ways. Emily Martin's (1995) work, which is reported in the book *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*, is an exceptional example of how research can involve such an integration. She began this work interested in how the body's immune system was constructed within multiple intersecting discourses: the media, the scientific community, traditional and nontraditional medical practitioners, the public imagination, and the like, and also recognized its mimicry of social and political structures.

This led Martin (1995) to design a study that would allow her to understand this connection (and other related connections) more fully. Martin and her colleagues engaged in many kinds of data collection. To ensure that they crisscrossed diverse cultural terrains, they entered the social worlds of their participants— living in many different kinds of neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland, "joining neighborhood associations, attending community meetings, block parties, and festivals, and volunteering to work on neighborhood projects"(Martin, 1995, p. 9). Additionally, these researchers conducted open-ended conversational interviews with individuals, pairs, and small groups of people. Finally, in what we might call postmodern focus group practice, they developed qualitative data analysis software that—at least metaphorically—allowed the content of each conversational interview and focus group to interact with the content of all others. In other words, all transcripts—whether from interviews with individuals, pairs, or small groups—were treated analytically as a

> collectively produced text, a kind of encyclopedia of what a diverse population thinks is sayable, imaginable, or thinkable about health, illness, the body, and society…. The open-ended nature of

> the conversations allowed issues and ways of thinking that we could not anticipate, to emerge and be heard.… Both [researcher and research participants] explored issues of ↳ mutual concern and interest interpretively.… The range of community settings in which we worked ensured that they [the participants] would make up a broad cross-section of the society.
>
> (p. 10)

Their context-sensitive and very inventive research design and data collection and analysis strategies allowed these researchers to see, from different angles, aspects of how health or illness was constructed in many realms of life and work.

From her many and varied findings, Martin (1995) was able to develop an argument for the emergence of a post-Darwinian public imagination in the United States. Participants from across diverse social contexts, cultures, and occupational settings consistently constructed health and illness in terms of a kind of social–cultural–racial survival of the fittest. For example, many people made "comparative estimates about the quality of different people's immune systems" (Martin, 1995, p. 240) as a function of race or social class. In the end, Martin argued that "what is at stake in our understanding of 'health' are the broadest issues of the survival and death of the social order itself" (p. 240).

Disclosing connections thus constitutes a powerful way to suture sites of cultural production previously unconnected and to create empirically grounded new accounts of intersecting social landscapes and their effects. Additionally, Martin's (1995) individual and collective conversations, along with her prescient reflections on these conversations, surfaced synergistic linkages among inquiry, politics, and pedagogy. As we have argued throughout, these linkages are always latent within focus group work, and they often end up disclosing complexities, nuances, and contradictions embodied in lived experience.

Prompting Solidarity and Political Activism

In an age when spaces for democratic interactions and communally enacted social justice agendas are becoming increasingly eclipsed and atomized, focus groups can become transformative democratic spaces for solidarity building and political effectivity. Perhaps the clearest example of focus groups and their role in politically charged work is through PAR and collaborative action research. A particularly good example of this kind of research is represented in Eve Tuck's (2008) *Urban Youth and School Pushout: Gateways, Get-Aways, and the GED*. According to Tuck, "rather than a set of methods, PAR is best described as an ethic, as a set of beliefs about knowledge, where it comes from, and how knowledge is validated and strengthened" (2012, p. 4). Participatory action research typically involves participants in the entire research process—from the definition of the problem through the research itself to the dissemination of results. Perhaps not surprisingly, focus groups have been used in many PAR projects. Again, Tuck's study is a good example.

In this study, Tuck examined the GED degree and what it means to the young people who flock to it year after year as an alternative to a traditional high school degree. Among other things, she highlighted the inexhaustible search for "dignity" that pushes many young people out of high schools and into the Byzantine world of this testing apparatus. To frame her work conceptually, Tuck drew together two contemporary bodies of theory and research with obvious political valences—the postcolonial work of indigenous scholars and the poststructural work of Deleuze and Guattari (e.g., 1987). Using the postcolonial

construct ↳ of *repatriation* allowed Tuck to see how and why her participants were so bent on carving out some sense of dignity. Using Deleuze and Guattari's insights about the fundamental importance of desire in all human activity, Tuck was able to see and explain how desire was the key motivational mechanism operating in the lives of the youth with whom she worked.

Of particular interest to us here is how Tuck used focus groups in inventive ways. A fundamental part of Tuck's work was to involve her participants in "mapping" projects. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) made an important distinction between *tracing* and *mapping.* A tracing is a copy and operates according to "genetic" principles of reproduction based on an a priori deep structure and a faith in the discovery and representation of that structure. Tracings are based on phenomenological experience that is assumed to be essential, stable, and universal. Defined thus, the findings from most research projects are tracings. Deleuze and Guattari used psychoanalysis as an example of a historically powerful regime of truth within which tracings are always at work—forever recreating Oedipus. In contrast to tracings, maps are open systems—contingent, unpredictable, and productive—attending both to the actual and to the possible.

As such, maps exceed both individual and collective experiences of what seems naturally real. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggested that after constructing maps, one may then place more apparently stable tracings back onto them, interrogating breaks and fissures where one finds them. Ultimately, a map produces an organization of reality rather than reproducing some prior description or theorization of it.

In one mapping activity, Tuck (2008) worked with her participants to create "problem tree" maps. This activity was designed to explore and document the ways young people understood complex phenomena, like the GED, in their lives. They represented their emerging knowledge in terms of roots and branches. Their problem trees were ways for young people to think through three levels of analysis in looking at a problem —the leaves, or the "everyday symptoms of the problem"; the trunk, or the "common beliefs and assumptions that support the leaves"; and the roots, or the "ideologies that structure the whole tree" (Tuck, 2008, p. 49).

Importantly, these connections and the map that produced them were collectively generated in focus groups, and Tuck attributed much of the success of her work to the intellectual and political synergy they afford, even demand. Tuck's PAR work, then, is a telling example of how PAR and collaborative action research—which pivot on political synergy becoming political activism—often depend on focus group activity for their success.

Summary of Focus Groups' Quasiunique Affordances

In this section, we focused on the key affordances of focus group work. These include mitigating the researcher's authority and generating deeper understandings; disclosing the constitutive power of discourse and the lifeblood of social activity; approximating the natural; filling in knowledge gaps and saturating understanding; drawing out complexity, nuance, and contradiction; disclosing eclipsed or invisible connections; and creating opportunities for solidarity building and political action. Taken together, these affordances highlight many of the reasons why the specificities and autonomies of focus group work allow ↳ researchers to excavate information from participants that they would never be able to excavate using other data collection strategies.

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We would like to offer some thoughts on these affordances and the relations among them. First, the affordances we discussed can and do overlap each other. For example, mitigating the researcher's authority often helps to generate deeper understandings that can and do draw out complexity, nuance, and contradiction. Second, these affordances underscore the expansive and ecumenical definition of focus groups that we have tried to develop throughout this chapter. We have emphasized neither the form of focus groups nor the procedures for conducting them; instead, we have emphasized their potentials—what they afford in terms of unearthing rich data sets that most other data collection strategies do not afford (or afford as well). This shift in emphasis has allowed us to think through studies that have not been marked specifically as focus group research as traditionally defined. Third, emphasizing affordances has allowed us to highlight the inherent multifunctionality of focus groups—the ways they allow for outcomes that are

simultaneously pedagogical, political, and research oriented, as well as how lines connecting these three functions are blurred at best in actual practice. For example, mitigating the authority of the focus group facilitator or drawing out nuance, complexity, and contradiction are very much a part of research, pedagogy, and political activism. Finally, using the word *affordance* itself is a matter of hedging our claims. None of these affordances is "inherent" to a particular research strategy or approach. Conceivably, for example, some of these affordances could play out using one-on-one interviews or even surveys. Still, based on our review of the literature and our own research experience, we are confident that the affordances we have discussed emerge much more often and in more powerful ways in focus groups compared to most (perhaps all) other modes of data collection.

Contemporary Dilemmas and Horizons of Focus Group Research

We have attempted in this chapter to develop a more expansive understanding of the nature, functions, and affordances of focus groups and focus group work than currently exists in the extensive literature on this general topic. Although this chapter has been primarily conceptual, we reject the notion that conceptual work can easily be distinguished from the gritty practicalities of research in the field. Because the two are always of a piece, we have interleaved practical advice for researchers and real-world examples throughout. Importantly, this material has not been added in an ad hoc fashion. Rather, we have tried to demonstrate how and to explain why the conceptual and the practical are always inextricably intertwined. We extend this impulse to pair the conceptual and practical in this final section, as we look at contemporary threats to—and future possibilities for—focus group work.

Key here are the analytic categories particular to this work. As we noted throughout, focus group work performs the three primary functions of inquiry, pedagogy, and political action. Focus group work also has some quasiunique affordances, which we unpacked in considerable detail. Because of the quasiunique

p. 504 affordances, particular rich, complex, and ↳ nuanced kinds of data often emerge from focus groups that seldom emerge from other data collection strategies, including observations and one-on-one interviews. Additionally, particular understandings of self are drawn out in focus groups work that are different from those drawn out in individual interviews—selves in dialogue, social selves, selves in community.

In what follows, we deploy these ideas to animate discussions about pressing contemporary issues in qualitative inquiry (generally) and focus group work (specifically). These include contemporary threats to focus group work and strategic responses to these threats, research ethics and the public–private split, and problems and possibilities for focus group work in Web 2.0.

Contemporary Threats to Focus Group Work

Institutional review boards (IRBs) are university and college committees that oversee the protection of all subjects participating in research by university personnel. These committees must ensure that all such research is compliant with the principles and policies of the federal government (more on this later). Although primarily targeted toward research funded by federal grants, most universities and colleges require all faculty members and students to comply with their guidelines and principles. Recently, some argue that universities have begun to use these policies to protect against and derail potential lawsuits (e.g., Christians, 2011, p. 67).

Interestingly, many professional organizations had already developed codes of ethics similar to those of IRBs during the 20th century. The central role of the U.S. federal government in research regulation only became pronounced in 1978 with the publication of the *Belmont Report*, which outlined ethical principles

and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research. This report came in response to past abuses of federally funded research.

The *Belmont Report* focused on biomedical and behavioral research. In time, though, its principles were brought to bear on all natural and social sciences, and its influence persists. To this day, IRBs are often made up of medical and behavioral scientists who, for the most part, conduct experimental research and know little about the assumptions, practices, and purposes of qualitative research.

One central concern IRBs often have with focus group research is ensuring "anonymity," or protecting the rights of participants to be anonymous in formal or informal public presentations of research. Using pseudonyms and eliminating all identity markers in data sets are the typical ways the identities of research subjects are protected. The very public nature of focus groups problematizes the issue of anonymity. By their very nature, focus groups generate public data, and the facts that focus groups are social and socially intense is a primary reason for their unique power in getting at the *hows* and *whys* of whatever is being studied. This means that the most appropriate unit of analysis for focus group work is the collective. This conceptual/operational shift raises some practical concerns about safeguarding the anonymity of individuals within groups. Some examples will help here.

Author G. D. has served as major advisor and committee member for doctoral students who used focus groups as a primary tool for collecting empirical material. We already discussed the work of one of his students, Getnet Tizazu Fetene, who studied attitudes toward ↳ HIV/AIDS among college-aged youth in Ethiopia. This project was flagged by the university IRB as a potentially "high-risk" endeavor, and the question of anonymity remained central among the IRB's concerns. Although Fetene's and other students' proposals all required strict confidentiality among participants, there was no real way to guarantee it. As a result, some members of the IRB suggested doing large numbers of one-on-one interviews instead of conducting focus groups.

What was really at issue became clearer when G. D. talked with the IRB. Unfamiliar with focus group work, some members echoed vestigial elements from the history of focus group research; the earliest proponents of focus group work stressed that "focus" could allow for a larger number of people to be interviewed simultaneously. That is, focus groups were an efficient way to conduct research. Because the IRB members who reviewed Fetene's proposal did not understand the logics, functions, and affordances of focus group work, they flagged their use as a problem with the research design.

On behalf of Fetene, G. D. met with the IRB and provided historical and conceptual information about focus groups relevant to their concerns—including the fact that participants often feel more comfortable talking about sensitive topics in peer groups. He also explained that some kinds of information are more likely to be shared in focus group discussions that would almost never be shared in one-on-one interviews. In doing so, he used language and concepts that were familiar to typical IRB members. The IRB found his arguments compelling and approved the proposals.

The validity of G. D.'s arguments was clearly borne out in Fetene's study. Participants supported and responded to each other in very productive ways in their focus group conversations. Finally, Fetene's study brought into high relief the fact that the *collective* is the most appropriate unit of analysis for focus group work, as well as the fact that anonymity is a problematic construct.

Indeed, participants in Fetene's study formed a contingent, collective identity—challenging the notion that they did not "know" about HIV/AIDS. They constantly built on and extended each other's knowledge and experiences and lodged a far-reaching group critique of HIV/AIDS education programs in Ethiopia. They took ownership of discussions and used them for their own purposes. It seems highly unlikely that similar data would have emerged had Fetene conducted many one-on-one interviews.

To put it differently, G. D. had to argue for the practical and theoretical specificity of focus group work and make this explicit to IRB members. What is most important for our purposes is the fact that getting approval for this research required educating powerful administrators about the benefits of a data collection strategy about which they had almost no knowledge. They knew nothing about the history of using focus groups in research, and they had little familiarity with the method's unique functions and affordances.

Our discussion of this experience with this IRB is worth underscoring. As is well documented, IRBs can be problematic gatekeepers for qualitative researchers because, by and large, they still operate from within a positivist epistemological orientation and evaluate all research against the standard of the medical model. Moreover, ethically grounded in the *Belmont Report*, they are fundamentally concerned with assessing the tensions and tradeoffs of means–end/risk–reward ratios. In the current political climate—perhaps more than ever before—researchers must educate IRBs about how potential benefits of unfamiliar data collection strategies outweigh their potential risks.

Research Ethics in the 21st Century

An even more vexing conceptual issue is indexed by G. D.'s experience with the IRB at his institution. Institutional review boards function to protect individual subjects. However, one argument we have made throughout this chapter is that the most appropriate unit of analysis for much qualitative research (and especially focus group research) is the group. In many respects, this shift provides a challenge to how guidelines for the ethical conduct of research are constructed. So, it would be useful to step back a bit and talk about the philosophical and institutional foundations on which IRBs rest.

As Cliff Christians (2011) argued, the history of ethical deliberations about research in the West has been grounded in the Enlightenment tradition. Within this tradition, ethical guidelines are generated outside particular communities and operationalized as a series of disconnected rules. The individual remains the unit of analysis, marginalizing the role and importance of community. Similarly, the means–ends ratios are created to balance potential risks and benefits to individuals (and, ultimately, the public). These are logics that Christians and others see as increasingly unable to address contemporary ethical challenges. Even more troubling is the fact that IRBs currently function more to protect institutions from lawsuits than to protect individuals from physical or psychological harm (e.g., Christians, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2011).

Christians (2011) also highlighted the particular limitations of current IRB policies and practices for thinking about the privacy of the individual. "Codes and ethics," he noted, "insist on safeguards to protect people's identities and those of the research locations" (p. 66). Such safeguards are built on the assumption of the autonomous self, a problematic legacy of Enlightenment thinking, in which the "self became essential to the construction of a unique personhood" (p. 66). This conception of the self precludes other more social, communal, and democratic conceptions of the self and has proven difficult to sustain. Christians noted, "Despite the signature status of privacy protection, watertight confidentiality has proven to be impossible…. Encoding privacy protection is meaningless when there is no distinction between the public and private that has consensus any longer" (p. 66).

In the face of this dilemma, Christians (2011) proposed another form of ethics—one that "presumes the community is ontologically and axiologically prior to people…. We are born into a sociological universe where values, moral commitments, and existential meanings are negotiated dialogically" (p. 70). This form of ethics is ground zero for focus group research as described in this chapter. And the most appropriate unit of analysis for such an ethics is the group. Thus, this epistemological orientation opens up possibilities for emergent group norms becoming the basis for new forms of ethics.

Christians's (2011) ruminations about the ethics of research echo a recent, powerful trajectory of thought in cultural historical activity theory built on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin has long been appropriated

by social science scholars, primarily in considering the dialogic nature of discourse. Indeed, his theories of the *utterance, heteroglossia, social languages*, and *speech genres* have been widely discussed and applied. His dialogic theories of the self received much less attention, but are particularly relevant here.

According to Bakhtin (1990, 1993), dialogue is fundamentally a matter of answerability, or being ethically responsive within social relationships, and individual selves develop in response to and affiliations with collectives through relationships of care, empathy, and ethical ↳ responsibility. How individual selves appropriate socially shared texts and practices—the dimension of Bakhtin's work most commonly discussed—always and only happens within meaningful engagements with specific others. Any philosophical anthropology, Bakhtin argued, must pivot on the real histories of real individuals engaged in relations of "answerability," wherein each individual owns her responses to others and "intones" them with both her own meanings and those compelled by the other in dialogue. This claim was predicated on Bakhtin's insistence that the other is essential to the formation of the self—the individual's "absolute need for the other, for the other's seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity" (1990, pp. 35–36). And, for Bakhtin, this need has affective, valuational, and cognitive dimensions. How the self develops in and through its relationships with other selves always involves care, compassion, mutual responsibility, and love.

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Crucial for our purposes here is that Bakhtin insisted that such a practical philosophical anthropology could never be adequately constructed in relation to any form of Enlightenment ethics. Bakhtin saw chains of caring and ethical answerability as fundamental to social life and social justice. Without attention to its emotional-volitional dimensions, human interaction becomes susceptible to rationalist objectification. It loses what makes it qualitatively different from the more objective, determinate kinds of relations that constitute the natural world. Only within relationships of answerability can individuals (with others) embrace or resist the historical or cultural realities in which they find themselves. Reason is most rational when one is morally and ethically answerable to oneself and others. "The actually performed act in its undivided wholeness is more than rational—it is *answerable*. Rationality is but a moment of answerability ... like the glimmer of a lamp before the sun" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 29).

Living a meaningful, ethically responsible life, then, means living responsively with others, which is largely a matter of paying attention and being willing to be moved to action by the particulars of others' actions, feelings, thoughts, and evaluative responses. "Life can be consciously comprehended only in concrete answerability.... A life that has fallen away from answerability cannot have a philosophy; it is, in its very principle, fortuitous and incapable of being rooted" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 56). From the point of view of Bakhtin's dialogic philosophical anthropology—and the theory and research it has spawned in the human sciences—conceptions of ethics that motivate the policies and practices of IRBs seem woefully inadequate indeed. It is high time to develop new conceptions—ones that take seriously the ways in which the self is always already social.

Like the work of Christians (2011) and recent invocations of Bakhtin's (1990, 1993) philosophical anthropology within social scientific theories of the self, focus groups and focus group research have motivated the need for rethinking the constructs of *public* and *private*, as well as the consequences of operating with particular versions of such constructs. This point is worth underscoring. Politics has traditionally assumed a split between private and public spheres. The public sphere has been assumed to be the realm of "official politics," where one leaves one's private interests, assumptions, and biases behind. The "public voice" in politics is logical and designed for collective persuasion (e.g., Levine, 2008). Drawing on Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's (2004) work, Levine argued that "when in the public sphere, one must advance arguments that any rational person can accept. The public figure is an ethical and rational legislator, addressing an assembly of peers on matters of public concern" (p. 121).

Focus groups—as we have (re)defined them in this chapter—are extraordinarily fertile sites for rethinking this public–private split. Paradoxically, they are public spheres of potential collective action, but they do not ask us to leave behind the personal. In fact, focus groups are spaces where the personal can (and often does) become political. Like the various social movements discussed earlier, focus groups challenge normative notions of ethics grounded in Enlightenment notions of the self and the relations between the self and the social. As such, focus groups can help us reimagine aspects of the *Belmont Report* principles using the group (rather than the individual) as an organizing trope.

We would like to make one final point about the question of anonymity in research. Institutional review boards have traditionally been concerned about protecting the identities of individuals. We find it anomalous—and telling—that the participants in all of our focus group studies have often wanted their identities made public. In short, for both individuals and groups, anonymity is often low on their list of concerns—it is trumped by the desire for and prestige of public recognition. We might speculate why this is the case, invoking constructs like the conversationalization of public discourse (e.g., Fairclough, 1995) or new media forms such as talk shows, Facebook, and Twitter. These speculations notwithstanding, a reconfigured approach to research ethics would put the problems and concerns we have raised here more squarely on the table.

When Focus Groups Go Virtual

The modulation of the public and the private is at the heart of emerging Web 2.0 technologies. As such, we can reflect on some of the issues being raised about Internet research through the conceptual tools of focus groups as discussed throughout this chapter. As Marilyn Lichtman (2011) noted in *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*,

> As the Internet becomes more widely available and as high speed connections link many people to the Web and potentially to each other, conducting focus groups online offers a new alternative to the traditional type of focus group setting.... I believe there is great potential for online focus groups. It is too early to say what methodological issues may arise.
>
> (p. 159)

The nature and effects of differences between asynchronous and synchronous discussions have been addressed by many scholars. Among other things, these scholars have noted that asynchronous discussions are akin to listservs, blogs, or email discussion threads and that synchronous discussions are more like instant messaging or other chat group formats, in which conversations unfold in real time. In this regard, Bruggen and Williams (2009) emphasized that "the boom in online marketing research" is one of the "fastest growing" research segments in the field. The authors highlighted the advantages of online work, including "shorter project lead times, shorter field times, greater access to busy professionals, and international reach" (pp. 363–364). However, in the same journal issue, Tuckel and Wood (2009) sounded a cautionary alarm, suggesting that "the visual anonymity provided by computer-mediated communication (CMC) may lead to deindividuation" and the cultivation of "anti-normative behavior." They went on to say that computer-mediated communication group members may "feel freer to find fault with others' ideas, leading to more disagreement and criticism." At the same time, "the visual anonymity provided by CMC can lead to lowered self-awareness (as others cannot see you) and heightened private self-awareness (as one can reflect on one's own thoughts and how to type them), leading to increased self-disclosure" (p. 134).

Fox, Morris, and Rumsey (2007) discussed the implications of online focus group work for heath research. In particular, they explored the use of online focus groups for drawing together participants with visible skin ailments. Here, too, questions of anonymity were paramount. They were particularly interested in the potential consequences of bringing together people who might be self-conscious about their appearance.

Still, the authors voiced familiar enthusiasm for the practicality of online focus groups, "including reduced time and cost in terms of venues and traveling. It is also beneficial in eliminating transcription time and error" (Fox et al., 2007, p. 545).

In another article, Stewart and Williams (2007) compared online focus groups to "3D graphical environments," such as *Second Life*. They noted that "features of Internet interactions such as perceived anonymity, reduced social cues, and the realization of time–space distanciation may lead individuals to reveal more about themselves within online environments than would be done in offline equivalents" (p. 399). They also suggested that users may perceive "computer mediated interactions as somewhat ephemeral: unguarded 'conversations on a train' in an uncensored unpoliced environment" (p. 399). The question of the importance of capturing and analyzing multiple social cues was extended in their comparisons between online focus groups and three-dimensional virtual reality environments.

The rush to online focus groups has raised several interesting and important questions. For example, the idea that virtual reality environments might "nullify" the concerns of earlier work typifies the utopic thinking that often accompanies discussions of computer-mediated social spaces. One is reminded of the fantasies that accompanied distance education—that it would be just as good as "the real thing." Yet, as many have come to realize, the communicative functions of the subtleties of bodily cues and other nonverbal elements of face-to-face interaction are not so easily recreated in virtual reality environments. Whether and how much the limitations of online focus groups are nullified within virtual reality environments thus remains an open question.

Utopian thinking is evident even in the language of most articles about the interactional and communicative affordances of new information technologies. Face-to-face interactions are even subtly recast as happening "offline"—as if the default were otherwise. Utopian impulses notwithstanding, all these articles also insist that to understand the logics and affordances of online focus group work in richer, more sophisticated ways will require much more conceptual and empirical work.

Indeed, one great outcome of the advent of social media and other kinds of computer-mediated communication is that they force us to engage with persistent questions on fresh terrains, each of which might be usefully thought of as a particular "modality" of interaction and communication with its own unique enablements and constraints. Many practical questions emerge from having multiple new modalities of interaction and communication available to us. Can technologically mediated forms of communication draw out the complexities and nuances encountered in face-to-face communication? How might online interactions allow for groups to take over in ways that mitigate the role of the researcher even more than we have discussed in this book? What might *subtexts* and *breakdowns* look like within these new modalities? Can they and in what ways might they motivate the radical modes of self-interrogation that can (and often do) happen in traditional focus group ↳ conversations? What else might they spawn? Answers to these and other questions partially depend on how we conceptualize the group in technologically mediated contexts. Although we agree with Lichtman (2011) about the need for further research on the nature, affordances, and functions of online focus group work, we also think that much conceptual work must be done with respect to units of analysis that motivate such research, differences in the specific constitutions of different interactional/communicative modalities, and our understandings of private and public, as well as the relations between the two.

Musings and Conjectures

The future of focus group research is wide open. New uses and affordances will emerge as new conceptual breakthroughs are made with respect to qualitative inquiry, as researchers explore and exploit their affordances, and as new tools and environments for conducting research proliferate. As focus groups are increasingly opened up in new ways, their mediation across time and place will create a host of new possibilities for research. As Stewart and Williams (2007) argued,

> the advent of Internet and networked communications has resulted in the proliferation of new social spaces, devoid of physicality. Adapted and adaptive social science research methods more generally allow for the collection and analysis of data from these diverse populations. These reengineered methodologies and methods can take advantage of these social worlds.
>
> (p. 413)

Indeed, there is a great deal of conceptual and methodological work we must do to develop tools that will allow us to explore and understand these worlds and their potentials fully.

Conducting focus group work in virtual worlds also raises new questions and reinflects old ones. Take the question of anonymity, for instance. The disembodied nature of social media allows participants to take on new roles and identities. This could help participants engage more openly and honestly when discussing potentially embarrassing or sensitive topics. It could also allow participants to speak more freely and honestly than they would in face-to-face settings. Yet, the reverse could be true as well. The disembodied nature of social media could allow participants to act in ways unconstrained by social conventions. Increased anonymity could also allow people to deceive others about their identities. How might talk and social interaction unfold, for example, in a study of racial differences in a social media context, if participants' racial backgrounds were only known through self-report? And how would we make sense of data gathered in such a study?

Anonymity is only one of the many issues we must (re)consider as new information technologies proliferate. The issue of *community* is another. The disembodied nature of social media allows participants to create new forms of community—affinity groups, clusters, and spokescouncils, for example. Participants from across the globe can now communicate with each other instantly, in real time. Yet, whether and how the interactional dynamics (and effects) possible in virtual environments will be the same or different from those in proximal interactions remains almost completely unknown. How important, for example, is embodied, face-to-face presence in the creation of community? Can community itself be ↳ mediated? Will the glue that binds community in virtual landscapes be weaker or stronger than the glue that binds community in more traditional social landscapes?

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As Sherry Turkle and others have made clear, mediated communication often has a striated or formatted feel to it: "The simple clarities of our globalized computer worlds depend on their virtuality. The real world is messy and painted in shades of grey. In that world we need to be comfortable with ambivalence and contradiction" (Turkle, 2004, p. 112). Do social media environments reduce complexity and contradiction, thus affording only more superficial connections among people? If so, what might be the consequences for research of conducting focus groups in these environments?

These questions all have ethical implications as well, some of which we have already broached (e.g., protecting anonymity and detecting deception). Other implications with respect to issues such as privacy, trust, transparency, control of content, and public welfare are relevant as well and will need to be addressed.

Considering ethical questions with the collective (rather than the individual) at the center of things provides another perspective on these questions. And when the idea of the collective (or community) itself is troubled

and expended within social media landscapes, more perspectives are likely to emerge. If, as we have suggested, focus group research has already challenged the Enlightenment self and the public–private split, then focus group research in virtual worlds is likely to challenge them even more.

These issues (and many similar ones) are indeed pressing. One can read the so-called Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movements through them. On the one hand, these and other worldwide protests and revolutions were enabled by social media like Facebook. New forms of community were imagined and created. Private concerns became public. Regimes fell, and new concerns around inequality came to the fore. On the other hand, lasting political movements and interventions depend on deep and abiding social connections and ties. The fates of these new forms of community are indeed unknown. Will they last? If so, what will account for their stability? Will they transmogrify? If so, how? And what will account for their shape shifting? These are very much open questions, the answers to which have important consequences for focus group research in the future. Suffice it to say that with the world changing as fast as it is, imagining how the forms, functions, and affordances of focus groups and focus group work might change in the wake of this changing world is dizzying indeed. Would that we had a crystal ball.

Conclusions

We would now like to offer some final thoughts. We discussed the history of focus group work. Typically, the goal of focus group work in these contexts was to gauge the effects of prescribed and delimited messages, products, and practices. Recall that focus was the methodological breakthrough in the earliest focus group work—a move that allowed for a particular kind of scaling up that often ignored the role of the group. Whereas most other books and treatises on focus groups have attempted to think through the nature of focus groups or to outline procedures for conducting them, we have attempted a more systematic historical and conceptual interrogation of the nature, functions, and affordances of focus group work in relation to contemporary debates about inquiry and method.

p. 512 Although we did not intend this article to be a how-to guide—a point we are sure is evident by now—we do think it is practical in many ways. Because, all too often, we have seen questions of method reduced to questions of technique alone, we have tried to provide an antidote to this tendency. We have done this by arguing that an informed, principled use of research strategies and methods requires in-depth understanding of the coevolution of theoretical, historical, and practical dimensions of any technique or strategy one might use—focus groups, for example. Additionally, interrogating the conceptual foundations and histories of method allows one to interrogate our epistemologies.

We hope this chapter has provided some tools for doing this kind of intellectual work. We also hope it can be used for practical purposes, but practical purposes enacted in sophisticated rather than simple ways. In this spirit, we end by posing some questions and offering some musings in relation to them.

How does one begin to frame a research project? Novice researchers are often cautioned against letting method drive research topics and questions. In many ways, this is good advice, but it is not airtight. For some projects—ones that pivot on naturalistic, dynamic social interaction and where the collective is clearly the unit of analysis—a researcher may know that focus groups are essential to the project even before research questions are finalized.

How will you puzzle through the ways research questions and research methods might play out in your own work? Where or to whom might you appeal for help in this process?

How does one choose a site for conducting focus group work? As we implied throughout, location matters, especially with respect to issues of safety, comfort, and community building. Focus groups can be held

anywhere. One must decide whether the setting and the study are of a piece, as was the case in Janice Radway's (1984) study of romance novel enthusiasts. Even if setting and study are not of a piece, most studies cannot simply be conducted anywhere, with the expectation of generating the same findings. Holding focus groups in spaces that are familiar, safe, and comfortable to participants is fundamentally important.

What space or spaces do you think might work best for your focus group study? Why? How might these spaces help you make the most of the functions and affordances of focus group work?

Who will your participants be? We have advocated for exploiting preexisting networks because they tend to encourage collegiality and solidarity building. In most of the studies we discussed, including our own, groups were homogeneous. However, Michelle Fine and her colleagues in the Echoes Project (Fine et al., 2004) chose to assemble groups composed of young people who did not normally interact with each other—people from across the ethnic, economic, and racial spectrum. Their hunches paid off in the sense that very dynamic, contested conversations occurred in their focus groups. Additionally, these groups produced very rich data, especially with respect to how participants understood the perspectives of others very different from themselves, interacted with those others, dealt with apparent contradictions, negotiated differences when they arose, and resolved conflicts.

Who will you recruit to be in your focus groups? Why? What advantages and disadvantages do you see in having more homogeneous versus more heterogeneous groups? Why?

How will you recruit your participants? Again, there are many ways to answer this question. In her 1984 study, Janice Radway enlisted the help of Dot, the bookstore owner whom the women she wanted to recruit knew, admired, and trusted. The participants in Mitchell Duenier's *Slim's Table* (1992) were, in a way,
"found art"—friendship circles at the restaurant ↳ where he conducted his study. As we argued, sometimes decisions about samples can be made strategically and in advance. Sometimes what seem to be principled, sensible recruitment plans do not pan out and you must develop new ones.

What kinds of recruitment strategies do you think might be most effective for your project? Why? What problems or issues or do you think you might encounter in recruiting participants? How might you work through these problems?

What about facilitation strategies? Facilitators operate on a continuum from more active and directive to more participatory to more passive and nondirective. We think that a more hands-off approach to facilitation results in drawing out the unique and powerful functions and affordances of focus groups more fully. Some researchers, especially novice ones, find more nonautocratic approaches uncomfortable and difficult to maintain. Our suggestion for these researchers would be to ease into a more nondirective approach to facilitation slowly and deliberately, paying close attention to the effects of different ways of facilitating participants' activity.

We have also advocated keeping notes, following up on key themes and gaps, listening for *breakdowns* and *subtexts*, and asking for elaboration on issues that remain. One could choose to be more focused and directive from the outset, although this would likely constrain the range of participants' responses; we also realize that a more directive approach may work better in some projects and contexts. Exactly how to facilitate focus groups is something only discovered in the thick of things and often in collaboration with fellow researchers and research participants.

So, on the continuum from structured interviews to collective conversations, where do you think you should position yourself for your project? Why? What changes do you anticipate making as your research unfolds? Why do you suppose these changes will enhance the research process?

When is it time to end a focus group study? This is a difficult question to answer and often depends on a host of factors, from funding to time availability (both of the researchers and of the research participants) to impasses in the process of discovery to data saturation to disruption by unexpected and even traumatic events, to name a few.

Under normal circumstances (i.e., there are no traumatic reasons for ending), the standard response is to end a study when one reaches data saturation. However, there are a variety of reasons why one might want to continue a study or introduce a new angle on the study beyond this point. As we have argued throughout, focus groups are complex human affairs. They can and do develop a life of their own. The best focus groups are perhaps best thought of as eventually dissolving into the flux and flow of everyday human affairs. In this sense, deciding when to end a focus group study is akin to deciding when to end a conversation—and when to begin a new one.

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