

Focus Group Interviews: A New Feminist Method

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This paper shows how feminist qualitative research can be strengthened and broadened through the development of feminist focus group interviews. The interaction among participants in group interviews provides a valuable resource for studying issues of gender and sexuality. In addition, focus groups can be both consciousness-raising and empowering for the research subjects and for the researcher herself, and allow for a more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamic than other methods. Drawing on the author's study of the influence of popular culture on the construction and maintenance of "normative sexuality" for women, this paper addresses some of the practical and ethical issues that a researcher must confront when using group interviews. The author addresses different concerns in recruiting participants and making the most of the unique dynamics of a group interview and the kinds of data they produce for analysis. More than most other methods, group interviews provide feminists with the opportunity to conduct research that is consciousness-raising and empowering, research that does not merely describe what is, but that participates in shaping what could be.

Introduction

Focus groups have been a standard tool in marketing research for several decades. While social scientists long ignored them, there has been a recent surge of interest in their social scientific application (Krueger 1988; Lunt and Livingstone 1996; Morgan and Spanish 1984; Morgan 1988, 1993, 1996). Feminist researchers have occasionally used group interviews (Callahan 1983; Malhotra 1984; Mies 1983; Nichols-Casebolt and Spakes 1995), yet few provide detailed discussions of group interviews from a feminist perspective. In this article I describe how I came to use focus group interviews and why they are particularly useful for studying issues of gender and sexuality.

Feminist qualitative research can be strengthened and broadened through the development of feminist focus group interviews. Group interviews allow for a more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamic than other methods, and the interaction among participants produces a new and valuable kind of data. In addition, focus groups can be both consciousness-raising and empowering for the research subjects, as well as the researcher. In an effort to provide practical assistance to researchers at-

tempting to use this method, I also describe issues involved in recruiting participants and in maximizing the unique dynamics of and the data from a group interview.

The Available Literature on Focus Groups

Although use of focus groups has mushroomed among social scientists in the past decade, relatively few scholars specifically address the use of this method in social science research.¹ Many academic researchers who *have* used group interviews have done so simply because they found it more convenient to interview several people at once (Morgan 1988, 12). There is a widespread misconception that group interviews are an easy "shortcut" to data collection (Agar and MacDonald 1995, 85; and Lunt and Livingstone 1996, 80), a way to get more data faster than conducting several individual interviews. In such cases, the researcher is generally not interested in the unique characteristics of focus group interviews; consequently this method has not been given systematic attention (Morgan 1988, 12). Researchers who approach focus groups as simply several ethnographic interviews in one may be disappointed and overlook the unique and useful data that focus groups can produce (Agar and MacDonald 1995, 85).

The majority of the literature on the use of focus groups comes from the field of marketing research; however, the wide acceptance of the method in applied marketing has not carried over to academic marketing research (Morgan 1996, 132). Despite increased interest in focus groups among social scientists, researchers still see the need for "considerable borrowing and considerable innovation" (Morgan 1988, 10) and "careful adaptation" to make this marketing tool "appropriate for academic research" (Holbrook and Jackson 1996, 136).

Academic use of focus groups challenges the model that has developed in marketing research, including assumptions about the best ways to select participants, compose the groups, deal with potential problems of conformity or "groupthink," and use the data (Holbrook and Jackson 1996, 136-7). Unlike the applied marketing researchers, the academic researcher who uses focus groups is interested in the kinds of data produced by in-depth interviews, as well as the process of negotiation among participants. The academic researcher must elicit and analyze group interaction using discourse analysis, the way language structures common sense beliefs (a level of analysis not found in applied marketing research).

Although the marketing literature on focus groups is in many cases very detailed, it contains little information on academic or feminist methodological issues.² Few feminist researchers who have used group interviews (e.g., Callahan 1983; Malhotra 1984; Mies 1983) have provided

in-depth accounts of this method. Shulamit Reinharz's *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992), the most comprehensive volume on feminist methods, devotes only two paragraphs to feminist group interviews (222-3). These paragraphs contain only a very basic description of what a focus group is and why one feminist researcher (Callahan 1983) decided to use them. Reinharz asserts that while feminist group interviews are not derived from the methodology of marketing research, there is only one difference between the two; feminist researchers are more likely to grant the interviewees the status of "expert" on the topic of discussion, in keeping with the feminist principle that women are experts on their own experience.

Surprisingly, there has been little development of group interviews as a feminist method, even though such interviews have much in common with the consciousness-raising (CR) groups that were a staple of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Marjorie DeVault asserts that consciousness raising is a method that is at the heart of the women's movement, the source of feminist methodology (DeVault 1996, 30). Perhaps the prominence of focus groups as a tool of marketing research has alienated feminist researchers and prevented them from seeing the connections between this method and the concerns of feminist methodology. In any case, in order to conduct a feminist focus group interview, researchers will need more information than is currently available on such topics as recruiting subjects, constructing questions, arranging and running groups, and dealing with the data in ways that fit with feminist research principles.

Focus Groups and Feminist Research Principles

Feminist methodology is a field of inquiry united by membership in the overlapping research communities of feminism and social science, and feminist social scientists use the tools of both in a critique aimed at improving the ways we know society (DeVault 1996, 30). Feminist researchers use a variety of methods, and it is debatable whether there is such a thing as a "feminist method." Nevertheless, there is consensus that feminist research is characterized by researchers' striving to adhere to and achieve certain principles in their research. Many feminist researchers have found that some methods are more conducive to these principles than others. Cook and Fonow (1986) identify five basic epistemological principles that concern feminist researchers: 1) attention to the significance of gender; 2) the need to challenge the norm of objectivity and the rigid separation between the researcher and the researched; 3) the centrality of consciousness-raising as a methodological tool and "way of seeing"; 4) an emphasis on the transformation of patriarchal institutions

and the empowerment of women; and 5) concern for the ethical implications of the research. In the following sections I describe how group interviews conform to and even advance these principles of feminist research.³

Studying Sex and Gender

Attitudes and beliefs about gender and sexuality can be very difficult to study because they are commonly assumed to be simply "natural" attributes of an individual that are unconscious or taken for granted. However, a constructivist understanding recognizes that gender is not simply a natural attribute of individuals nor a social role that we play in certain circumstances. Rather, gender is primarily a social category that organizes our perceptions of the world. As Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman (1991) point out, gender is produced interactionally; it is an ongoing accomplishment available for production in every interaction (Dull and West 1991; Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 1991; West and Zimmerman 1987). It is important to study the taken-for-granted attitudes and beliefs about gender not as secondary phenomena, but as integral to the production of the sex/gender system itself.

Because discussion and representation of sex surrounds us, studying ideas about sexuality might seem easy. However, few people discuss sex often or intimately. My project on the influence of popular culture on the construction and maintenance of "normative sexuality" required that research subjects discuss sex in an unusually explicit way. I did not necessarily want my subjects to describe sexual acts explicitly (although some did), but I wanted them to state ideas explicitly that usually "go without saying," to articulate the beliefs and categories that underlie their conscious attitudes. It is very difficult for people to talk about these kinds of attitudes and assumptions in an individual interview. In a group interview, however, the ways participants respond to and interact with each other can provide richer and more complex data that can reveal taken-for-granted categories and beliefs.

Focus group interviews can be useful in providing qualitative information because they combine many of the advantages of participant observation with those of in-depth individual interviewing, while avoiding some of the drawbacks of these other methods (Morgan and Spanish 1984; Morgan 1988, 15-23). Participant observation allows the researcher to examine ordinary behavior and group interaction. However it can be a very inefficient method because of the difficulty of finding and observing informal interactions around specific topics as they naturally occur. For example, in my study it would have been difficult to simply observe "naturally occurring" conversation about sex and about how the media influence ideas about sexuality. Focus group interviews provide the op-

portunity to observe people's interactions, and they also let the researcher direct the interactions to the attitudes and experiences of interest (Morgan and Spanish 1984, 259). Although focus groups do not provide access to interactions as they would ordinarily occur in daily life (Agar and MacDonald 1995, 81), they do provide a valuable kind of data.

Individual interviews provide researchers with the ability to direct the interactions; however, this method had other drawbacks for my project. In order to construct a structured interview protocol on women's ideas about sex and the influence of the media, I would have needed to conduct many preliminary interviews to ascertain the categories and issues that are important to various groups of women. Especially in early interviews, my questions would necessarily impose my own categories on people's accounts; general and open-ended questions on this topic would be unlikely to produce useful responses. Such questions require people to consciously articulate what they usually assume that "everybody knows." A group interview can also be a better forum for getting at these issues because in individual interviews each question requires "an answer," while in group interviews the goal is instead to initiate a conversation. Vague or difficult questions elicit greater response because a group conversation allows people to feel more comfortable bringing up different ideas without the pressure to provide a definitive answer to each question. In a group interview, participants can build on the responses of others so that a short or obvious comment does not have to be a dead end as it might be in an individual interview, but can serve as a spark for another participant's contribution.

In each group interview that I conducted, for example, I asked such open-ended questions as "What is sexuality?" and "What is good sex?" and participants consistently expressed initial confusion over what I meant. In individual interviews I would have had difficulty getting in-depth and useful responses to these questions without imposing my own definitions or subtly directing the answers based on my own expectations. In each of the groups, however, one or more participants asked questions and offered tentative answers, and other participants were able to build on these responses to come to their own understandings of and answers to these open-ended questions. A group interview also allows certain topics to be explored in more depth than they might be in individual interviews, as contradictory ideas prompt women to elaborate on their original statements.

For example, in one group when I asked, "What is good sex?" Janet⁴ answered that sex can be good because "you're really present with the person and you're enjoying being with that person, or (else) you're like in fantasy land, way in fantasy land." I tried to prompt Janet to describe the differences between "being present" and "being in fantasy land," but she did not articulate her ideas in a way that clarified her meaning. Had this

been an individual interview I might have simply accepted Janet's categories and concluded that the primary issue for her was emotional connection that she seemed to prefer to the disconnection of "fantasy land." However, in the group interview, another woman, Rebecca, responded to Janet's statement:

Rebecca: What makes sex good? Well I guess you'd have to think about what makes sex not good, and I don't think I've ever had not good sex.

Eve: Go girl! (all laugh) She's my kind of girl!

Janet: You've never had bad sex? My god. Okay . . .

Rebecca: But I guess more narrowly defining sex and sexuality, I think physical pleasure is probably the major defining factor when I think about what makes good sex. Whether it's alone or with somebody else. Being present with the other person would not be number one on my list; physical pleasure would be the number one thing. (Interview #7)

This led the group to clarify the role of physical pleasure in defining "good sex," a brief exchange that culminated with Janet saying, "I was kind of assuming physical pleasure when I was talking about it, but yeah." Thus the group interaction allowed me to clarify different women's ideas and assumptions. In an individual interview, when the interviewee says something that fits with the interviewer's expectations, for example, about what is and is not important to women regarding sexual experiences, the interviewer does not always probe for other ideas or issues, and the interviewee is not always able to provide additional information and clarification. In a group interview, however, there is a greater likelihood that contradictory ideas will be expressed, and these can serve as prompts for discussions that address the issues in greater depth.

In a group, if even one person expresses an idea it can prompt a response from the others, and the information that is produced is more likely to be framed by the categories and understandings of the interviewees rather than those of the interviewer. Participants can help each other figure out what the questions mean to them, and the researcher can examine how different participants hear possibly vague or ambiguous questions. This is important in studying sex and gender because these issues are "naturalized" to such an extent that it is very difficult to recognize one's own preconceived notions, much less challenge others' taken-for-granted assumptions. The expansion of the roles available to women in a group interview, beyond the strict separation between "interviewer" and "interviewee," allows for interactions that are more likely to reveal and even challenge these taken-for-granted assumptions.

The Researcher/Subject Relationship

Feminists have long advocated the use of in-depth interviews because they promote a more egalitarian and less objectifying relationship be-

tween the researcher and subject than quantitative methods. Qualitative methods potentially allow women to be the "experts" about their own experiences. However, some feminists question exaggerating the value of women's experience as the standard of knowledge (Cancian 1992, 632; Millen 1997). One problem with treating each woman as an "expert" in this way is that this assumes that each woman is conscious of the forces that have acted upon her and can articulate her reaction to those forces.

In traditional interviews the interviewer and interviewee bring different kinds of authority to the interaction and they may also have very different goals for the interview and understandings of the topic. The interviewee may have expertise on the subject at hand but the interviewer has authority over the research process itself. Ironically, group interviews may allow the research subjects to be experts to a greater extent than one-on-one interviews. In a typical one-on-one interview, the interviewer is actually the expert, the one who frames the issue of study and composes the questions, while the interviewee is simply an "informant" who provides information about her particular experience. This different and unequal status influences the kind of information that is produced. This does not imply that all interviews are hierarchical and exploitative. Indeed feminists have often noted that qualitative interviews are far more egalitarian and collaborative than traditional quantitative research. But regardless of how open-ended the questions are, an interview is an interaction between two people who have different and unequal roles in the exchange.

"When women interview women, both researcher and subject act on the basis of understandings about interviewing, and both follow the rules (or negotiate a shared version of the rules) associated with their respective roles" (DeVault 1990, 101). One way to change these roles is to incorporate rather than deny the researcher's personal involvements. Although other feminists have noted the value of the researcher's personal involvement in interviewing, Marjorie DeVault argues that we need to "move toward a more disciplined use of the personal" (1990, 104). She calls for more visibility of the researcher as a resource rather than contaminant in the product of the research, although precisely how to do this most effectively remains unresolved (1996, 42). It is very difficult to negotiate the most productive balance between the researcher's personal experiences and professional role in individual interviews; group interviews are far more conducive to such a balance.⁵

A shift in focus from individual knowers to the perspectives of groups or communities is a theme of feminist epistemology that begins to move us out of the impasse around personal experience (DeVault 1996, 42). This idea is really not new because "the 'experience' so valued in early feminist consciousness raising was in fact a collective construction" (DeVault 1996, 42). Because knowledge and meaning are collective rather than

individual productions, focus groups can be an effective method for getting at this socially produced knowledge. "Focus groups give participants an opportunity to narrate their personal experiences and to test their interpretations of events and processes with others, and whether confirmed or disputed, the result is a *polyvocal* production, a multiplicity of voices speaking from a variety of subject positions" (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 116).

Group interviews disrupt the rigid dichotomy between interviewer and subject, providing the possibility of an equal exchange. Although group interviews still contain a relationship of "researcher" and "researched," and the researcher still asks the questions and frames the issues of the study, this dynamic is mitigated by the fact that in a successful group interview the main interaction will be among the participants rather than between each interviewee and the researcher. Each woman can not only tell her own story, but she can also question and challenge the other participants in an effort to gain understanding.

Group interaction can also lead to richer and more complex information on certain topics than is possible in individual interviews. Because of the researcher's authority, and because she requires accurate and "untainted" information, an interviewer is unlikely to directly challenge or contradict the interviewee. She may point out apparent discrepancies and ask the interviewee for further elaboration, but she is unlikely to volunteer her own opinions or beliefs because such opinions may bias the interview. In a group interview, however, people can and do challenge and contradict each other. They ask each other questions, provide examples from their personal experience, and collectively produce accounts that would be difficult if not impossible to elicit in individual interviews.

For example, in the second group interview I conducted, Connie stated that while she had no problem with the idea of masturbation, she had no personal need for it. Audrey responded skeptically to this, prodding Connie to elaborate. Connie then described an experience while talking with an ex-boyfriend on the phone, after which Audrey laughingly exclaimed "Oh, honey, that's masturbation!" Connie's further description of her experiences provided a more nuanced explanation of her ideas about masturbation. As an interviewer, I would have been unable to challenge Connie as skeptically as did Audrey, and I would probably not have elicited as much information. I also would be unlikely to state my own interpretation of a respondent's experience as definitively as did Audrey. As Jon Goss and Thomas Leinbach (1996, 122) caution, however, "focus groups do not eliminate the unequal power relationship between researcher and research subjects, because it is still the researcher who initiates the exercise and who determines the selection of participants, the identity of the moderator and the agenda for discussion." Focus groups "may give greater control over the research process to its subjects, but the

fact that the social dramas of focus groups are collaborative productions should not deny the responsibility of the researcher for the analysis and interpretation of data produced . . ." (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 122; Millen 1997).

Consciousness-Raising

In describing the difference between traditional and feminist one-on-one interviews, Bristow and Esper (1984) argue that while a traditional social science interview is a one-sided "interrogation," a feminist interview is more of a "true dialogue" that "better serve[s] the interest of both researchers and participants by maximizing the exchange of information and subsequently, the construction of knowledge" in a way that makes a feminist interview a consciousness-raising experience (Bristow and Esper 1984, 490). Yet the possibility for the give and take of self-revelation and questioning among several equal participants makes feminist group interviews potentially more consciousness-raising than individual interviews.

Other researchers have noted the consciousness-raising potential of group interviews. Mies (1983) suggested that feminists shift from individual interviews to group discussions not only in order to obtain more diverse data, but also to help women overcome their structural isolation and understand the social causes and shared nature of their individual sufferings. Malhotra (1984) came to a similar conclusion when she involved participants in small group discussions that allowed participants to influence the methods of the study. These groups also functioned as support groups for the participants. Callahan (1983) used group interviews because she believed that women's interactions with each other not only enhance the flow of ideas and information, but that these interactions are consciousness-raising in that they encourage women to recognize the patterns in their shared experience.

The discussions that participants have with each other in a group interview can be far more consciousness-raising than anything the interviewer could say. For example, the first interview I conducted was with members of an eating disorder group in which one of the participants was a young woman, Emily, whose primary experience of sex was that of being molested. (In a questionnaire I distributed, under "How would you describe your sexual orientation?" she answered "Bad.") Throughout the interview Emily talked about sex as a dangerous realm in which women are very vulnerable, asserting that the only "safe" and therefore good sexual relationships are those that are based on love and trust. Other women in the interview, however, expressed a far more casual approach to sex, arguing that it can be "just an action" and that "it could be just for fun or something; it doesn't necessarily have to have an emotional tie" (Keri, Interview #1). Emily later wrote in her journal about how the group discussion affected her. She wrote:

It was interesting for me to hear how other people's ideas about sex differed from mine. It made me question my own thoughts and views. This for me is good, as far as I am concerned . . . sex is pretty awful. I have only experienced it in a bad light; thus my stand is bitter and extremely fearful. It was good for me to hear that others have vastly different ideas from mine. (Emily, Interview #1)

Emily also wrote that she no longer feels that a deeply loving and committed relationship is necessary for sex to be good, and that satisfying the "human need to feel good through physical contact" can also be a good reason to have sex and provide a good sexual experience. I want to emphasize here that I did not consciously intend to convince participants of these ideas, and even if I had wanted to it is doubtful that I would have been effective. The reason that the interview had such a great effect on Emily's beliefs is that the challenge to her ideas came from several other ordinary women who spoke from their personal experience, rather than from the authority of the researcher.

This example also illustrates another aspect of the consciousness-raising potential of feminist group interviews, and that is the effect on the researcher herself. Goss and Leinbach's work suggests that "the main advantage of focus group discussions is that both the researcher *and* the research subjects may simultaneously obtain insights and understanding of particular social situation[s] *during* the process of research" (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 117). Bristow and Esper (1984) describe how they conducted informal group discussions with rape survivors in the process of constructing their structured interview schedule. Through listening to women whose experiences were both like and unlike their own, the researchers not only created a better and more comprehensive interview schedule, they also expanded their own awareness of rape as a social rather than individual experience (1984, 490-491). The research was thus consciousness-raising for the researchers, as well as the research subjects.⁶

Because they are similar in some ways to actual consciousness-raising (CR) groups, feminist group interviews can have the effect of raising the consciousness of all the participants, including the researcher. However, significant differences between actual CR groups and feminist focus groups in many ways reduce the consciousness-raising potential of the focus groups. CR groups are leaderless groups that meet over an extended period of time for the purpose of discussing personal experiences (Reinharz 1992, 220-221). "In these meetings, women attempt to articulate a political analysis that will facilitate change. . . . [The product of consciousness-raising is] a new way of thinking, relating, naming, or acting" (Reinharz 1992, 221). Focus groups, in contrast, have a leader, the researcher, and typically meet only once. Participants may or may not ever see each other again. While the primary purpose of CR groups is to affect the consciousness of the immediate participants, the purpose of feminist focus groups

is to produce data for analysis and publication in a research report. Any conscious-raising is a side effect rather than the primary goal. In both CR groups and feminist focus groups, however, the effects of the process are impossible to measure immediately. The question for both kinds of groups is to what extent they can influence and even transform the conditions in which they take place. What are the effects of raising women's consciousness or of producing a feminist research project? Both can be empowering and can participate in transforming patriarchal relations, although the immediate effect is likely to feel quite small and local.

Transformation and Empowerment

Tania Modleski (1991) argues that politically engaged feminist criticism should be *performative*. Rather than being content to uncover already existing meanings produced by already constituted subjectivities, feminist research should be aimed at "bringing into being new meanings and new subjectivities" (46). Bringing a group of women together to talk about issues that are important to them creates, even if only temporarily, connections and solidarity among women that contribute to feminist consciousness and social action. Group interviews, then, provide one of the best methods for a feminist cultural critic because they facilitate active transformations of consciousness. Alan Johnson makes a similar point when he argues that researchers can "overturn the marketer-consumer model for focus groups" and locate the research process instead in the "new politics of knowledge," in democratic social relations associated with the consciousness raising group, the strike committee, or the town meeting. Such an approach views the research process "as *itself* a 'transformational' intervention, at once scientific and political" (Johnson 1996, 525). Citing Raymond Padilla (1993), he argues that:

[G]roup discussions raise consciousness and empower the participants precisely because they "reveal to the investigator and to the subjects themselves the overt and hidden aspects of problematic experiences in everyday life." Group discussions can foster a collective identity among the participants because they can transcend individualism and connect up individual narratives, first to each other, and then to wider social, economic, cultural and political influences. (1996, 534)

In defining "empowerment," Bhavnani (1989), following Flacks (1983), defines "power" as "the capacity to influence the condition and terms of the everyday life of a community or society;" and "empowerment" as "the realization of this capacity . . . to create history" (Bhavnani 1989, 145, 149). Drawing on Grossberg (1987), I regard a practice as "empowering" to the extent that it enhances the conditions that enable people to engage in progressive practices and to live their lives in different and better ways. Like CR groups, research projects can be empowering to the extent that

they give women access to new information and new ways of thinking that enable them to question oppressive practices and try out alternatives. For example, Jon Goss and Thomas Leinbach (1996) note:

For many participants in our research the focus group was the first occasion on which they had spoken in public or had their opinion about an issue solicited. This was initially unnerving for some, but also empowering since their expertise and right to speak could be publicly established, and they began to develop new communication skills. (121)

In addition, research can potentially be empowering when research subjects have the opportunity to direct the research project itself. Reinharz (1992, 181–6) and Cancian (1992, 628) both describe participatory research projects in which the research subjects were involved in various stages of the study, including formulating the research questions and hypotheses, selecting participants, and analyzing the data. Although participants can become very involved in influencing the research process, I agree with those who question the idea that feminist research should be a truly collaborative process. "Fundamentally, the idea that the research relationship should be or ever can be equal in any sense is an illusion" (Millen 1997, 3.3).

It is we who have the time, resources and skills to conduct methodical work, to make sense of experience and locate individuals in historic and social contexts. . . . It is an illusion to think that, in anything short of a participatory research project, participants can have anything approaching "equal" knowledge to the researcher. (Kelly et al. 1994, 37).

Although involving the research subjects in all phases of the project is a laudable goal, it can slow down the process considerably. Additionally, few research participants can afford the time necessary, or even have the inclination, to participate in an academic research project to such an extent. Marjorie DeVault (1996, 38–9) questions feminist overemphasis on problems of power that place "excessive demands" on feminist researchers. But, as Cancian (1992) argues, we will not be able to conduct truly feminist research and feminist methods will not become widely accepted until we change the hierarchical, elitist structure of academia.

Although I do not want to overemphasize the idea of "empowerment" as the reason for involving subjects in research, it is true that by participating in research people can contribute significantly to the description and analysis of a social issue that is of great importance to them (Opie 1990), and this can be empowering. For example, in response to my statement that the goal of my project is to explore the ways that women define sex, one participant in a group interview agreed that this kind of research is needed because women have not had much opportunity to define sex for themselves.

Ingrid: Yes, because men are the ones that create those . . . out there in the advertising world, they create those images that are supposed to mean sex to us. I don't think women have really been able to put their input out there. We're not supposed to have an opinion on sex. We're supposed to just go along with it.

Angela: We're supposed to be ready.

Ingrid: But be ready, at any moment! (laughter) . . . No really, no wonder it's so hard for us to even say what it is to us, because we're not supposed to have an opinion. (Interview #6)

Along with validating the importance of participation in this research, Ingrid attributes the source of the interview group's inarticulateness about sex to some of the cultural forces that have silenced women's own perspectives.

In addition, research can empower those who have been seeking help for their own personal problems by enabling them to help others, such as the researcher, other group members, and people who may read the research report. The desire to help others in a similar situation is frequently the main reason people give for volunteering to participate in research (Bristow and Esper 1984, 494; Opie 1990, 64). If interviewers are responsive to individual concerns, then interviews can be therapeutic in a way that is empowering. This effect is heightened in group interviews because of the support such groups can provide. For some participants, reflecting on and re-evaluating their experience as part of the interview process can have important personal and political consequences (Opie 1990, 64).

Central to many discussions of feminist methodology is the notion that the purpose of knowledge is to change or transform patriarchy. . . . [K]nowledge must be elicited and analyzed in a way that can be used by women to alter oppressive and exploitative conditions in their society. This means that research must be designed to provide a vision of the future as well as a structural picture of the present. (Cook and Fonow 1986, 12-13)

While it is difficult to assess, a project will be empowering to the extent that a researcher is attentive to the ways her project can provide not only a critique of conditions as they exist, but also a vision of alternatives for the future. In my project I not only asked the women in my groups to critique the images and messages that surround them, I also asked them to describe alternative images and messages they would like to see and promote. Also, the women not only provided support for each other in dealing with particular personal issues, but the ways women described very different experiences and attitudes sparked the imagination about possible alternatives.

Ethical Considerations

Discussions of the ethics of a research project frequently focus on the project's results and the uses to which they are put. But feminist methodologists are also concerned about the ethical issues involved in the research process itself, particularly in the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects.

It is important that research about oppressed groups attempts to alleviate repressive and exploitative aspects of the research process itself. Oppressed and vulnerable persons . . . are frequently the objects of social research. Typically, such research is structured so as to reinforce an alienated relationship between "researcher" and "subject." That is, oppressed groups are involved in relationships with others, which benefit those in power to a greater extent than the oppressed group benefits. (Malhotra 1984, 469)

Feminist researchers rigorously try to avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women through their research, and ethical issues are heightened in feminist methodology (Reinharz 1992, 27). Anticipating the various needs of participants and reflecting on how people might benefit from participating in the research is one way to lessen exploitation. In my own project I was unable to offer participants financial remuneration, so I was very interested in the reasons women participated and the rewards they said they received. Their reasons included the expectation that the interviews would be fun or interesting, the desire to have a safe forum to talk about sex, interest in hearing what other women had to say, particular ideas that they wanted the research to include, and even their wish to help me out. It was important to consider the women's needs in order to effectively recruit research subjects, and to justify the commitment of time and self-revelation that I was asking of participants. Such considerations are especially important when conducting interviews with existing groups, where the researcher is usurping time people have set aside for their own needs.

In her one-on-one interviews with women with breast cancer, Kasper (1994) attempted to meet the needs of the interviewees, as well as her own needs as a researcher by making the interview less hierarchical. She did not ask direct questions about "sensitive and difficult topics" but only pursued such topics as "fears, body image, sexuality, and the like" if the interviewee herself raised the issue (Kasper 1994, 270). Kasper's sensitive approach assumes that discussing difficult topics is exploitative, benefiting the researcher at the expense of the research subject. However, many women do not have a safe environment for discussing certain personal concerns and might be relieved at the opportunity that the researcher provides. Open discussions of feelings might serve to demystify such issues as sexuality in relation to cancer and help other women resist the pressure to conform to standard medical practice, such as breast reconstruction surgery. Yet women might also need encouragement to talk

about these issues. It is difficult to negotiate these issues sensitively in a one-on-one interview. However, having another woman raise the topic or hearing another woman's response to questions on this issue could be a very beneficial experience and encourage an interviewee to share her experiences more than an interviewer alone could do. I am not implying that Kasper's research does not provide the opportunity for this kind of experience, only that a group interview is more likely to promote discussion of sensitive issues and provide more support and validation than a single interviewer is able to provide.

The potential to give something back to the interview participants lessens the likelihood that group interviews will be a one-way exchange and makes the relationship between researcher and researched less exploitative. However, group interviews may inhibit trust and confidentiality, so the researcher must explicitly address these issues and establish common ground rules.

Conducting Feminist Group Interviews

Recruiting Participants for Group Interviews

Finding and recruiting participants is a vital part of a research project. Many practical and ethical issues arise before the subject sits down with the researcher and is ready to provide data. Because sampling issues for focus groups are similar to those for other kinds of qualitative studies, I will focus on the purpose of the sample in feminist group interviews. In quantitative studies, the primary concern in recruiting subjects is obtaining a random sample from which the researcher can generalize to the population. The primary goal of focus group interviews, however, is to learn about subjects' experiences and perspectives rather than to test hypotheses. In selecting participants for focus groups, sample bias rather than generalizability is of concern (Morgan 1988, 44-5). While a quantitative study requires a random sample to best represent the population, a focus group study requires participants who can provide the best data.

Dorothy Smith (1987), in proposing a sociology oriented "from the standpoint of women" and based on "the everyday world as problematic," argues that the validity of findings should not refer to how well the research subjects represent some larger population, but rather to how well the data describe particular instances of larger social processes. Rather than a random sample, the participants in focus groups can be thought of as a collection of individuals whose experiences highlight the social relations of interest. Recruitment for focus groups does not try to represent the population in general but instead emphasizes theoretically chosen subgroups who can be expected to provide the best data (Morgan 1988, 44-5). Participants are chosen for their relevant experiences, as well as

their level of self-awareness and comfort in discussing sensitive issues in front of others. When recruiting subjects for focus group interviews, concern with sample validity in the quantitative sense might actually reduce the quality of the data if it produces groups that cannot generate good discussions. The researcher will also attempt to bring together participants who are as diverse as possible in terms of categories relevant to the topic of the study.

In my own study, for example, I wanted participants who represented a wide age range and varied sexual orientations,⁷ who had given some thought to sexual issues and would feel comfortable discussing these with each other. For this reason I began recruiting participants through therapists and facilitators of a wide variety of support groups to whom I gave information to pass on to interested members of their groups. I assumed that through such groups I would have a greater chance of finding women who had given some thought to sexual issues and who would feel comfortable talking about them in a group setting.

In general, one has several options in recruiting for focus groups. The first option, which is not very different from recruiting volunteers for individual interviews, is to recruit individuals and arrange them into groups. Alternatively, a researcher can ask a potential participant to recruit friends who might be interested in participating (similar to "snowball" sampling). Another option is for a researcher to interview members of already existing groups. A researcher need not necessarily choose one of these strategies over the others. I used all three of these strategies and each kind of group has its benefits and drawbacks (which I will discuss below in relation to group dynamics). I focus here on the third option, recruiting participants from different kinds of support groups.

To recruit participants from already existing groups, the process of gaining access will vary depending on whether the group is facilitated or leaderless. Leaderless groups are usually open and easy to attend, but gaining access to group members for research purposes is more difficult than with professionally facilitated groups because no one can authorize participation in the research for the whole group; approval has to be negotiated by consensus. The researcher seeking to recruit from existing groups should openly identify herself and her interests before attending group meetings to avoid the ethical issue of misrepresentation (Gordon 1987). Even though such honesty may prevent the researcher from attending a group, it is still possible to get a group member or facilitator to assist in recruiting people in such groups.

In groups that have a leader or facilitator, that person can act as a gatekeeper and unilaterally allow the research, or can be the researcher's advocate to group members. Group facilitators are very protective of group members, but also can be supportive of research that they perceive as important, especially studies of issues in which they have a personal

stake. Again, the most effective approach with group facilitators is for the researcher to be honest about her identity, the goals of the study, and the role of the group facilitator in gaining access to group members.

A word of caution is also in order. Group interviews are not a shortcut to conducting many individual interviews. Unless one already has a group or groups available for study, recruiting for group interviews can be much more difficult and time consuming than for individual interviews because of the difficulty of finding people who will discuss private issues in a more public setting (rather than just with the interviewer), as well as the need to coordinate several people's schedules. However, the researcher who can surmount the difficulties of gaining access to relevant groups, and can portray the research in ways that will appeal to potential volunteers, will likely be rewarded with a group of extremely helpful, enthusiastic, self-aware, and articulate participants in the research process.

Group Interview Dynamics

The dynamics of already existing groups and ad hoc groups can vary widely, and there are benefits and drawbacks to each. In already existing groups, participants are familiar and comfortable with each other, and they can provide the researcher with information about each other's experiences that each participant may not think to explain. A drawback to such groups is that participants can be too familiar with each other. A woman in such a group may not provide much description and explanation of experiences that the others have already heard about. In such cases the researcher needs to pursue information and explanations that may seem obvious to the others, and avoid getting swept along into an "Oh yes, I know what you mean" kind of response. For example, in one interview I conducted with an alcohol recovery support group, Leonore talked about how traditional messages about sex led her to feel so guilty that the only way she could enjoy sex was under the influence of alcohol. During the ensuing exchange, the participants got so caught up in a particular point that I was not able to pursue explanations of things that were of interest to me, but that they all already knew about each other. I asked Leonore if using alcohol to get over the guilt led to problems.

Leonore: Oh yeah, definitely. I hadn't had sex without alcohol for ten years.

Beverly: Yeah, that's what led to problems for me was not having sex without alcohol.

Jill: Me too.

Leonore: And I really think, in order to give myself permission to be—infidelity, was the alcohol. Without the alcohol I wouldn't have been capable . . .

FM: Of being with somebody besides your husband?

Leonore: Besides my husband, right. And I think that's what has happened more to the generation I know my daughters all lost their virginity because they had been drinking. . . . But I really feel that—

Jill: I definitely agree.

Leonore: It's a theory of my own, but I really feel that—

Jill: No, I agree honey, I agree, totally.

Leonore: That's been a big part. Alcohol and drugs have really changed people's outlook on sex.

Jill: And as far as being careful, as far as AIDS, everything else. Under the influence it's the pleasure of the time. (Interview #3)

The conversation continued on the topic of the effect of alcohol on sexual behavior and I was not successful in bringing it back to discussing the circumstances of Leonore's infidelity (and I forgot to bring the issue up at a later point in the interview). In this case the participants' enthusiasm for a particular topic overrode my interest in an event with which they were probably already familiar. On the other hand, sometimes participants' familiarity with each other's stories can be an asset to a researcher. This was the case in another interview with a group of close friends (two of the participants, Terry and Abby were also lovers). Before each interview I had the participants fill out a questionnaire in which one of the questions was "What is the most interesting, fun, or outrageous sexual experience you have heard of?"⁸ During this interview, the topic of this survey question came up, and Jacquelyn and Abby prompted Terry to tell certain sexual stories:

Jacquelyn: Oh, Terry, tell your stories! The fun thing—Can I just tell why I like your stories so much? Because they're all just by yourself. I mean, all the fun ones. (laughter)

Terry: No no no!

Abby: The Rain Gutter one is not by herself!

Jacquelyn: Maybe I need to hear The Rain Gutter over again.

Abby: Oh, you haven't heard The Rain Gutter? Oh yeah.

FM: (to Jacquelyn) Well tell the story that you like.

Jacquelyn: Oh, it's just "One Hammock and One Unicycle." But they're not fair, because they're her stories, so (to Terry) you have to tell them. I mean you don't *have* to tell them, obviously, but—

Terry: About sex with myself?!

Abby: Your kneecaps are starting to sweat. This is gonna be a good one. Terry has this wonderful barometer when she's starting to feel a little uncomfortable. She perspires.

Jacquelyn: Anyway, no, I don't think you should have to tell it. I'm sorry.

Terry: No, it's not really—

Abby: Tell the Rain Gutter story, that's a fun one; that's a good one.

Terry: That's actually just the most unusual place. It's obviously not the best sex I've had.

Abby: Well she asked about unusual, wild or outrageous. Not the best sex. . . .
 I don't think I want you to tell about the best sex you've ever had. [But]
 I would say that that was . . . it was certainly interesting, and hopefully
 it was fun, and I would say your mother would probably say it was
 outrageous.

Terry: Uh huh. She probably heard it. Sliding down the roof. . . . (Interview #8)

Terry then proceeded to tell both stories, and she was prompted and assisted by Abby and Jacquelyn who encouraged her with their reactions and provided additional details. This example shows that it is possible to use participants' familiarity with each other as an asset, but the interviewer will have to be diligent in following up on topics that the participants do not discuss fully enough.

Conversely, groups in which participants know each other may feel uncomfortable revealing certain information, particularly about sexual issues, in front of people they know they will see again unless a high level of trust has been established. Thus support groups or friendship groups where there is already a high level of self-revelation and trust are preferable to more casual groups of people who already know each other. In addition, if a support group's usual facilitator is present, her comments may carry more weight and greatly influence the discussion. In this instance, the researcher should speak with the group facilitator about these concerns ahead of time or include her in a different group interview. The group facilitator may even prefer to participate in a group where she can be anonymous and can play the same role as other participants. In my study I interviewed all the members, including the "leaders," of two groups, because these were peer support groups in which the leader was not seen as having a different status from the other group members. But in the case of another support group in which only the professional facilitator and one group member volunteered to participate in my study, I made sure to put them in different group interviews.

The dynamics of ad hoc groups composed of individual volunteers are somewhat different than groups in which the participants already know each other. In composing such ad hoc groups I have found that the best strategy is to maximize the connections among people by making the groups as homogeneous as possible in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relevant experiences. Not only do such groups facilitate discussion (Morgan 1996, 143), but homogenous groups also take the pressure off participants to "represent" their category, if, for example, one person in the group is the only person more than 40 years old, or the only lesbian, or the only member of any particular population. Other things being equal, anonymous groups that are more homogeneous will be more likely to foster a feeling of comfort and mutual understanding than anonymous groups in which participants are very different from each other. Participants in ad hoc groups need to introduce themselves more thor-

oughly and explain everything more carefully than they would with people they already know well. This obviously benefits a researcher who will get clearer descriptions and explanations of events and experiences. Nevertheless, the anonymity of such groups entails a trade-off: the participants may feel more comfortable revealing information to people who they do not expect to see again, but they will also require more time to develop trust in the group.

The dynamics of focus group interviews are very different from individual interviews. "The hallmark of focus groups is *the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group*" (Morgan 1988, 12, emphasis in original). The questions in a group interview should be designed to promote group discussion. A few open-ended questions (and a short list of topics that I wanted to make sure the group addressed) worked far better in fostering lively two-hour discussions than a detailed list of questions about each individual's experiences and beliefs. I organized the interviews like "brainstorming" sessions, oriented toward getting as many ideas expressed as possible while also developing some kind of a consensus. For example, in eliciting information about sexual norms I found it productive to ask group oriented questions such as "Let's talk about the definition of 'good sex'. What makes a sexual experience good?" This kind of question does prompt individuals to talk about their experiences, and it also facilitates group discussion of the topic.

The researcher may also need to explicitly encourage participants to respond to and interact with each other. This is especially important if participants have experience in self-help or support groups, particularly 12-step groups, in which "cross-talk" is not allowed. It can be helpful to tell the participants that you are interested in how they interact with each other and in hearing as full a range of opinions and experiences as possible, that they should feel free to question and respond to, and even to disagree with, each other. Once participants feel comfortable interacting, however, they will probably attempt to resolve any points of disagreement on their own. If one participant says something that contradicts others' experiences or beliefs, the others are very likely to challenge that statement, or at the very least ask for further explanation until the source of the disagreement can at least be understood if not eliminated. In feminist focus groups it is also quite likely that the interviewees have some interest in the research topic, and more often they have a great interest. Therefore it can be as important to the participants as it is to the researcher that they express themselves openly and challenge statements with which they disagree. The kind of exchange and negotiation that occurs when participants disagree or do not understand each other can be the most informative for the researcher and should be encouraged. The most I needed to do in this regard was to ask, "Does anyone have a

different experience or opinion on that issue?" and most of the time I did not have to prompt them even this much.

Analyzing Focus Group Data Using Discourse Analysis⁹

Interviews are used differently in discourse analysis than they are in traditional social science. Traditionally, social scientists use interviews as a source of information about people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. What people say in interviews is taken as evidence, with various degrees of reliability, of a reality outside of the interview itself. Similarly the researcher who uses focus groups in marketing research does want to know what each individual really thinks, what products they are likely to buy, what they really think about a particular advertising campaign. If the group dynamics prevent an individual from saying what she really thinks, then the researcher has failed to get accurate and useful data from that person.

These very issues that make the group interview difficult for getting consistent individual data make it ideal for exploring public discourse and taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. The research questions of discourse analysis are not about how accurately descriptions fit reality, but rather about discourse itself; not the individual beliefs and experiences, but the talk itself is the subject of interest (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 160). Discourse analysis assumes that talk is not neutral but is both evaluative and performative. Talk performs actions and has consequences. Discourse analysts examine "how description and explanation are meshed together and how different kinds of explanations assume different kinds of objects or supply the social world with varying objects" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 52). The interview data are not examined solely for what they reveal about the speakers' actual beliefs and activities. Instead the analysis concentrates on what people's talk reveals about the larger cultural discourse, the ways it is possible to talk in that culture, and the ways particular assumptions and ideas are connected. For example, Robyn Longhurst notes about her use of focus groups to study pregnant women's experiences, "When analysing the transcripts of the conversations I focused primarily on discourse—on meanings, narratives, explanations, accounts and anecdotes. That does not mean that I think that the material corporeal state of pregnancy is a simple matter of linguistic practice or of representation . . . but ideologies and social structures are intertwined with discourse" (1996, 145).

Group interviews create opportunities for a very productive level of analysis not available with individual interviews. The researcher can analyze not only what each participant reveals about herself, she can observe how people negotiate issues with each other, noting which ideas

the group accepts and which statements spark disagreement. Instead of simply aggregating individual data, the researcher can directly observe the extent and nature of agreement and disagreement among participants (Morgan 1996, 139). Goss and Leinbach (1996, 115) argue that the group discussion that occurs in a focus group interview "provides valuable insight into social relations and that the 'stories' produced in the collaborative performance of a focus group better reflect the social nature of knowledge than a summation of individual narratives extracted in interviews" (see also Agar and MacDonald 1995, 80, 82, 84). Further, group interviews allow the participants themselves to observe and comment on their differences (Morgan 1996, 139). These points of agreement and dispute illuminate participants' underlying assumptions and the extent to which they share a culture of common sense understandings. How did different people interpret different questions? What statements did they all agree with? What ideas were difficult to express or seemed to need extensive justification? How did the women respond when they were challenged? The answers to these questions can tell us which ideas have legitimacy, in that group at least.

For example, in one interview a discussion of gender equity led to a discussion of gender differences in communication and biological differences in brain structure. On each point, all the women expressed general agreement with each other, building on each other's comments rather than contradicting them. But when Connie asserted, "Women are the communicators," Beatriz immediately disagreed.

Beatriz: Well, I have a different hit on that right now that came out of doing this self-defense class because I got really angry at the woman who did the class, because she did what I call "male-bashing" and part of it had to do a little bit with what you're saying about men not communicating. [But] they just communicate non-verbally, and we define verbal as communication, and non-verbal is not. . . . And what I'm getting to about this self-defense class talking about, "Well women can wear what they want, they can go where they want, they can do what they want, they can wear high heels, dress up, and give all the non-verbal signals of 'Hi, I'm ready' and then say no." And I think that's true, but why are you doing that, and then mixing drugs and alcohol with this big mix of all those non-verbal signals to a non-verbal operating person?

Audrey: But you know, I'll tell you what. I was just mugged in August after years of doing street work all over this country (laughs) and I was with a guy, okay? I was with a guy and I got jumped by three teen-agers and beaten. We managed to get away and they caught the kids and they're in jail, but in terms of what I'm hearing you saying is like, I wasn't giving any message about anything—

Beatriz: No no no I wasn't talking about that.

Audrey: Well I just think you have to watch that whole thing about rape and

attack, it's a crime of violence and anger, it's not a sexual crime, from my point of view. I don't think you give a come-hither—

Beatriz: No, I'm talking about frustration and, well, I'm working on this. I feel that there is some assaultiveness with non-verbal cues that girls should be told that it just is inappropriate. I agree with "violence is not sexual" but there's other things going on with—

Audrey: Well you know, one of the things that was a big learning experience for me in that whole deal was that I had been acculturated to feel more safe when I was with a man—

Beatriz: Ooooh.

Audrey: That you're protected when you're with a man. First of all you're more protected than when you're alone, but certainly somehow a guy will keep you safe. And that was not the case, at all. (Interview #2)

As Audrey goes on to describe her experience and make her argument, the topic moves to the issue of "safety"; all the women agree that they need to be aware of these issues but not let them determine how they live their lives. This movement in conversation topics, from gender differences in communication, to female responsibility for sexual assault, to an experience of a non-sexual attack that is taken as evidence that women do not in any way invite sexual assault, shows the ways that the feminist idea that "rape is violence, not sex" has become widely accepted (although the precise connection between sex and violence is muddled). Interestingly, Beatriz was speaking specifically about rape, and maybe more generally about sexual misunderstandings, but Audrey associated Beatriz's remarks with a specific instance of non-sexual violence. When Audrey talks about it as a "learning experience," Beatriz's response indicates that she too assumed that women are safer when they are with men and that Audrey's experience has challenged this belief.

In this interview, the group accepted some statements about men and about sex differences, but challenged others. In almost all cases, however, the group eventually came to a consensus after a disagreement, indicating that they believed that any apparent contradiction between each other's ideas could be resolved. As this example illustrates, this does not mean that they resolved all issues of disagreement, only that in all cases they ended discussion of a topic on a note of consensus with the feeling that they had all come to an agreement.

I am not arguing that researchers who use feminist focus groups are unconcerned with whether women express themselves honestly or describe their experiences accurately, only that an accurate reflection of individual experience is not the focus of a discourse analysis. It is not individual perspectives but "the group point of view that is the goal of ethnographic research" (Agar and MacDonald 1995, 81). The point is not whether the data are likely to be more objective and accurate in either marketing or ethnographic group interviews, but rather that the goals and kinds of data obtained are very different for each.

Conclusion: Group Interviews and Feminist Research Principles

My goal has been to further the development of focus group interviews as a valuable method for feminist social scientists. This method not only conforms to feminist principles but offers the possibility of expanding and utilizing them in new ways. The distinctiveness of feminist methodology is located in a shared commitment to three goals: 1) to "bring women in," that is to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed in the standard focus on men's concerns; 2) to minimize harm, control, and exploitation in the research process, using research strategies that are more inclusive and less hierarchical than the standard practice of social research; and 3) to conduct research that will be of value to women and will lead to social change or action beneficial to women (DeVault 1996, 32-3). Group interviews provide a new way for feminist researchers to meet these goals. Focus groups provide the opportunity for studying issues of gender and sexuality with a more egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, and consciousness-raising and empowering interaction among participants. Rather than exploiting participants who may get very little in return, group interviews can provide support for participants and meet some of their needs.

Focus group interviews provide a way to study attitudes and beliefs, and more importantly can facilitate the kind of thinking that can lead people to question their previous assumptions. As Cook and Fonow (1986, 13) point out, "feminist research is . . . not research about women but research for women to be used in transforming their sexist society." Group discussions can identify "local theories and popular knowledge" while group members may generate new knowledge as they attempt to understand their situation (Cancian 1992, 633). Group interviews can advance the transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research (Cook and Fonow 1986, 5) and through their potential for consciousness-raising and empowerment.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Sociological Association meetings in Washington D.C., August 1995.

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Notes

1. Two recent volumes are Morgan 1993, and Vaughn et al. 1996.
2. This paper is concerned specifically with the application of feminist methodology to focus groups. For more general information on how to conduct focus groups, I recommend Morgan and Spanish 1984, Greenbaum 1988, Krueger 1988, and the articles in Morgan 1993, particularly those by Albrecht et al., Knodel, Krueger, and Zeller.
3. My comparison of focus groups to other methods is specifically in relation to the principles of feminist methodology. For a more general comparison of focus groups to other methods see Morgan 1996.
4. All of the names of participants that I use here are pseudonyms.
5. For example, most interviewers try to keep comments about their own experiences and ideas to a minimum, using them only to prompt the interviewee. In analyzing the interview transcripts, researchers usually ignore the parts of the interview in which they themselves speak because the interviewer is technically not a subject of the study and thus it is difficult to analyze this information in a systematic way. I do not have the answer to this problem here, I only point out that there is less need for such interviewer comments in a group interview because each participant can have this same prompting effect on the others.
6. When I began my research, like many feminists, I took it for granted that sex is a vitally important part of the human experience (Montell 1997). I had no particular critique about the importance we place on sex in our society, particularly for women, and how deeply conservative the connection between "love" and sex can be. Through listening to the women in my study discuss their ideas with each other, my own consciousness was raised about these issues. I also had my consciousness raised about my unthinking acceptance of ageist ideas about older women's sexuality and the idea that women who grew up before the sexual revolution are conservative and "repressed." Individual interviews would probably not have had as great an effect on my own consciousness because it would have been easier for me to isolate any surprising or challenging statements as coming from a few unusual individuals. When such ideas emerged as the product of consensus among a group of women, it was impossible for me to marginalize the ideas.
7. I also would have liked greater diversity in race and ethnicity, but I was unable to accomplish this.
8. I used the questionnaire as both a recruitment tool and as a way of getting certain consistent information about the participants. I included some questions that I thought would be "fun" to answer, as well as questions that provided standard demographic data such as age, occupation, sexual orientation, etc.

9. Discourse analysis is not the only, nor even the predominant, method of analysis for focus groups. An important factor in considering this kind of analysis is that it requires detailed transcripts from tape recordings of the interviews. I also found it impossible to distinguish speakers from each other without videotaping the interviews as well. If a videotape is used, it is imperative to inform participants beforehand. Although this may intimidate some potential participants, it is possible to reassure them that it is necessary to the project, that it will only be used for analyzing the data, and that their confidentiality will be absolutely respected. Some participants may still prefer to sit out of the frame or with their back to the camera, but I did not have any participants back out of the project because of the videotaping. See Bertrand et al. (1992) for a detailed description of alternative methods of recording the group interviews and analyzing the data. The methods they describe are based on, and are particularly useful for, international family planning and health research projects.

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