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# Focus Groups and Ethnography

MICHAEL AGAR and JAMES MacDONALD

Focus groups continue to grow in popularity as a method of applied social research. The two authors, anthropologically trained ethnographers, show how a particular focus group with former LSD-using adolescents dovetailed with other ethnographic data. By looking at a focus group transcript using a simplified version of techniques in conversational analysis, and by interpreting the utterances as indexes of more comprehensive "folk-models" derived from other data, focus groups yield richer understandings than a simple stand-alone use can provide.

**Key words:** conversational analysis, drug use, ethnographic method, focus group

**F**OCUS GROUPS are sociological methods (Merton and Kendall 1946) that developed in advertising and marketing, but have recently mushroomed into a widely used method of social research. As anthropologists, we view this development with some skepticism. Our intuition is that a few hours with a few groups guarantees only that the "quality" in "qualitative" will go the way of fast food. At the same time, the senior author recently heard reports from several members of a national epidemiological panel that showed how focus groups turned quantitative researchers into fascinated listeners to human voices. Even if focus groups accomplish nothing else, this result alone suggests that they be taken seriously.

It is clear that focus groups are here to stay; it is also clear that they play an important role in the politics of social research that any anthropologist would support. We decided to explore how an interest in focus groups could be developed into a more elaborate interest in ethnographic research. What we want to show in this article is that there are two answers. First, ethnography provides broader frames of interpretation in terms of which focus group details take on added significance. Second, ethnographic methods of transcript analysis add depth to an understanding of what actually occurred in a particular focus group session.

In this article, then, we take a focus group and justify these two answers. We were handed an excellent opportunity for the exercise. Over several months we collaborated on a study of adolescent LSD users. Based on several ethnographic interviews with former users and parents, as well as news clippings and other written materials, we'd put together a report on what

we'd found (MacDonald and Agar 1994). We decided to do a focus group, with adolescents we hadn't interviewed, to check the role a focus group might play vis-à-vis other ethnographic data.

The key characteristic of focus groups, according to Morgan's *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 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" (1988:12). The difference, when compared to an interview, is that the focus group members talk with each other in addition to the interviewer. The difference, when compared with participant observation, is that the group is talking about a topic introduced by a moderator rather than one they generated in a natural situation.

Krueger, in his *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, says that: "a focus group can be defined as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (1988:18). The contradiction between "carefully planned" and "permissive" contains the same contrast that Morgan lays out when he talks of the groups as both "controlled" and "naturalistic." Even at this definitional level, some interesting problems appear, problems that will surface in the detailed look at transcripts to come.

This isn't the only hint of complications. For example, a focus group works to the extent that group members discuss the topic among themselves. But there is an outsider, the moderator, and probably an observer as well, who are responsible for the group and the topics to be discussed. Too much moderator control prevents the group interaction that is the goal; too little control, and the topics might never be discussed.

As another example, a "frequent goal" of a focus group is to "conduct a group discussion that resembles a lively conversation among friends or neighbors" (Morgan 1988:22). At the same time, the general strategy is to make up the group out of "strangers." But it is not automatic that a group of strangers will have a "lively conversation" about anything. In fact, a judgment as to whether a conversation occurred, lively or not, is a delicate matter that calls for some close analysis of transcripts.

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Before we talk about such issues, we need to tell the story of our focus group. To prepare for our focus group meeting, the two authors met and listed six topical “foci”—what Krueger calls the “questioning route”—issues that were pivotal in the original report. We decided that we both would moderate, and would talk with each other during the session as well, our goal being to reduce the role of the lone, authoritarian moderator figure—a naive goal, as it turned out. We rehearsed the opening lines, tossed the tape recorders into the car, and drove to the meeting that we had been reassured would be ready to go—even more naive, as you’ll see shortly.

In summary, the youths did talk about the topics we introduced, and what they said supported and complicated what we’d found in our analysis. But, as conversational analysts would have predicted, the structure of a focus group sets constraints on the interaction. Turns are usually short, moderator control is inevitable, a few group members dominate, and group formation sets up constraints on what can be said. And, as ethnographers would have predicted, only the prior qualitative work made interpretation of focus group results possible. Without that prior work, a naive adult would have learned that a lot of kids were using LSD, that the situation was much more complicated than he/she had thought, but little else. Such a lesson in itself has some value, since it is important to demonstrate that the kids had something interesting and intelligent to say about their drug use. The addition of broader ethnographic context and more detailed transcript analysis, however, offers more.

### *The Group*

The story of the formation of our focus group is a comedy of errors. We’d done our earlier ethnographic analysis with former LSD users in a treatment program and planned to do the group with the young clients as well. The program staff—we want to be clear on this important point—were praised by our interviewees, supported and encouraged our study, and spent time to help us out. At the same time, they are incredibly overworked, underpaid, mental health professionals with more kids to take care of than they can reasonably handle, given budget cuts, increasing demands for their services, and the LSD “boom” in the metropolitan suburb where they work.

From our selfish research point of view, they didn’t make the preparations for the group that we’d expected. We’d asked for a group of former LSD users, young people we hadn’t interviewed before, for a session to last from one-and-a-half to two hours. “No problem,” we were told. The date was set.

On that appointed day we arrived in the waiting room and talked with a group member. He had no idea who we were or what was about to happen. We met the counselor at the time the group was to have started, and he said he’d tell the participants what we wanted to do and say they could leave if they wanted. After he finished his discussion and we set up the equipment, he told us several of them would have to leave at seven, which left us roughly forty-five minutes of time.

The two authors entered the meeting room. The young people filed in, counselor in tow. He told them, sympathetically and accurately, who we were and what we wanted to do. Three of them walked out. We were left with four stiffly seated

youths who looked at us and the recording equipment as if they were in one of the circles of hell—not the ninth, but close.

Both authors, as they discussed at length after the event, felt like the situation was at this point already a disaster. But we pressed on. No sooner had we started than the counselor walked in with another participant, one who, he said “needed to be in this group.” The young man had no idea what was going on. His words are featured in an example to come, but for a long time he simply sat silently and stared at the tape recorder. With our group of five participants and two moderators, we launched off into the focus group.

The group history taught us two things. First, a focus group that started off under what we might generously call less than perfect circumstances produced something of value, though the value derived from its relationship to other ethnographic work. In retrospect this is no surprise, because even disasters—maybe especially disasters—count as ethnographic data.

Second, and most important for the focus group literature, every focus group has a story behind it. Where is it? Why isn’t it routinely reported in focus group accounts? Certainly the literature we’ve consulted emphasizes how critical the selection of group members is. And certainly we violated the “strangers” rule, since the youth all knew each other. But we suspect that many focus groups are drawn together through networks, that they are products of institutional processes that powerfully shape them. Such histories belong in the focus group data for, without them, it’s difficult to evaluate the scope of what was learned.

### *Robitussin*

One of the issues we’d tackled in the earlier report, logically enough, was, “why do kids use LSD?” We thought we’d come up with some answers, some good ones, from the kids’ point of view. Needless to say, we’d listed this as topic A in our focus group plan.

What follows is an excerpt from an early portion of the group. Some conventions of transcriptions need to be explained, since they are done in a style developed in conversational analysis.

Punctuation signals tone—a period is the “I’m done” falling tone; a comma is a rising “more to come;” a question mark signals the rising question intonation.

Pauses are indicated in several ways. An “=” signals a run-on, without the usual pause; a “+” indicates a longer than expected pause; if the pauses are longer than two seconds, the actual length is indicated in parentheses.

A colon after a sound indicates that the sound was stretched out, given how that speaker usually speaks; underlining means that a particular word was emphasized, through stress and/or volume, more so than what was expected.

The “//” marks indicate where two speakers overlapped.

Transcriptions can be much more detailed than this, and in some cases the use of the conventions is a close judgment call. But the conventions do allow us to ground some interpretations in ways that typical focus group transcripts don’t.

Here is the transcript. “MA” is the first author; “JM” is the second author; the other initials label the participants. The numbers indicate where we are on the tape according to the

counter on the recorder. We should note that turns 9 through 16 are an aside—C accidentally called T (“Ted”) by his real name rather than the pseudonym he’d chosen.

074.

1 MA. why do people use lsd. = what’s the advantages. = what do they get out of it. why//

2 T. //can can you compare it to robitussin?

3 MA. can I compare it to ro-can you compare it to//robitussin.

4 T. //yeah

5 MA. (2.6) can you compare it-are you sayin // it’s . . .

6 T. //no . . . .

7 C. //it’s totally different J.

8 T. no, // it’s no:t.

9 C. //I mean T. (laugh)

10 MA. (laugh) Ted. that’s Ted over there// Ted Koppel, We have Ted

11 C. //yeah. (laugh)

12 MA. Koppel // here.

13 C. //yeah.

14 T. Ted Nugent.

15 C. Ted Nugent. (laugh)

16 MA. Ted Nugent. +

17 T. no you you can’t compare it to like l—you know I mean you can’t compare lsd with like robitussin. +

18 C. they’re two totally different things T.

19 T. not necess-well//they’re two totally different things but

20 N. // . . . . same thing

21 T. they do the//same thing.

22 C. //well yeah but it’s still different. (2.7)

23 MA. you te-you te-you tell-this is news. Talk-tell me some more.

24 JM. how well how do they do the same thing?

25 T. you don’t know about robitussin?

26 MA. I know what it is, sure. but//uh

27 T. //you drink like a whole bottle of it, it’ll make you like + tri:p, see trai:ls and everything. +

28 MA. huh.

29 T. it’ll really mess you up.

30 C. (laugh)

31 MA. lesson number one. (laugh)

32 T. . . . heres done robitussin? You done robitussin?

33 J. only when it was safe.

(several laugh)

(3.19)

34 C. robo:, stay away from that. uch.

35 MA. So some folks would do would do//like

36 T. //mm hmm. lot of people, if they can’t get their hands on acid they’ll do//robitussin

37 MA. //they’ll do robitussin.

38 N. just go steal robitussin.

39 MA. for Christ’s sake. huh.

40 C. (laugh)

41 MA. du:h. I had no idea. And what is—so: what is it about those two. I mean let’s say for a sec those are equivalent. what’s—why do why do people—what is it doing for em. what’s—is it the trails? is it—what. what are—what//what’s the story, what’s the

42 T. //um hmm. . . .

43 MA. drive, what’s the what’s the interest?

44 T. the loss of + being able to think straight.

45 MA. sorry?

46 T. the loss of being able to think straight, feeling like a moron, I dunno.

47 MA. I do that for a livin.

48 C. (laugh)

cough

(4.8)

49 JM. so, m—is that i:t? Is that all there is about acid? (5.2)

50 C. //m:

51 ? //u:h

52 JM. //what—I mean + why would anyone m:ess with acid. robitussin you can get it at the drugstore.

53 T. well everyt—everytime I guess you do acid you you do + it’s—you know you don’t have //the same exact thing over again, like

54 C. //cause it doesn’t—right.

55 T. when you get drunk, usually, you get drunk on the same thing it’s gonna be—you’re gonna get drunk the same way. if you do acid everything’s + you know everytime you do acid something happens—different is gonna happen.

56 MA. huh. does that corres—does that make sense to the //

57 T. //cause

all acid’s different. all beer or whatever stuff like that, robitussin’s ma:de the sa:me. 122

This passage occurred early in the group discussion. Neither MA nor JM, after several interviews, had come across the use of Robitussin, a legally available cough medicine, as an LSD substitute. One interviewee had mentioned Robitussin casually, in passing, but neither of us picked it up as a significant topic worth further exploration.

There’s a reason Robitussin popped up as an issue early on, an obvious one upon later reflection. T, who introduced the topic, turned out to dominate the first phase of the group discussion. The pattern was already clear in this brief segment. T had never used LSD, though he had used Robitussin. T established his expertise, his right to talk, by pushing Robitussin onto the floor. He tried to dominate the talk by pushing his other topics onto the floor for the rest of the session. But whatever the personal motivation of one group member, the fact remains. The focus group immediately produced a surprise that nothing in our previous research had revealed. The possible use of Robitussin, “Robo” as C called it, as a substitute for LSD is a piece of the contemporary drug puzzle we hadn’t known much about.

We think this is one place where focus groups shine. Through group interaction, we learn that something we hadn’t noticed before is a significant issue for drug-experienced young people. This lively group interaction is obviously something that can’t happen in an individual interview. Turns 17 through 22 show one stretch where three youths engage the issue, as do 32 through 38, though with moderator comments in that segment as well. The structure of pauses and overlaps makes its lively nature explicit.

From the way the group takes up the topic, it is clear that something significant is going on, something significant to *them*. A new piece of the territory is revealed. The focus group won’t tell you where it fits in with other parts of the landscape, nor will it tell you much about how the new territory looks, but it will tell you that it’s there.

One reason why the information will be sketchy lies in the interactional structure of the group. (A second reason, the shared knowledge of group members, is discussed later.) What kind of structure is a focus group? It is somewhere between a *meeting* and a *conversation*. A meeting has a manager, someone who introduces topics and allocates turns to speakers, a person called the “moderator” in the case of focus groups. A conver-



sation is a looser structure, with turns and topics up for grabs among people with equal rights to the floor.

As a *meeting*, the focus group is called by somebody, for a reason. To the extent that group members participate, they look to the moderator to start it, guide it, and stop it. Going in we had in mind strategies to minimize our controlling role, because we felt that some earlier focus group transcripts we'd looked at showed too much control by the moderator. With a method that featured group interactions, we thought the moderator should keep his nose out of it whenever possible.

We might as well have started to drive by deciding it wasn't such a good idea to steer. Trace the initials down the left side of the transcript and see how long it takes until an "MA" or "JM" appears. Notice that at the pauses at 5, 22, 33, and 50, pauses that go beyond the two second limit that indicates that the silence has stretched on longer than usual (Chafe 1979), a moderator jumps in to fill in the dead air space with a comment or question. It was our group and everyone knew who was responsible for it.

Group members looked to us to guide where it was we wanted to go. This is evident in 2, where T introduces a topic by asking a question of the moderator, and throughout in the way the moderators' questions are taken seriously, that is, where the participants work to figure out some kind of response.

What this pattern means is that, to some extent, the *raison d'être* of focus groups is contradicted by their structure. Their great strength, says the literature, is that they allow group members to interact in ways that they would ordinarily do out there in their daily lives. But a conversation over coffee isn't the same as a meeting in a group. Conversations don't have alien moderators with questions on their mind that, for whatever reason, the group has decided to take seriously and to which they orient their discussion.

So, focus groups are, in part, meetings. In meetings, the manager runs things and asks questions and the participants respond. Our job, in this sample transcript, was to pursue the question, "Why do kids use LSD?" Suddenly "Robo" came up—it even had a nickname, a sure sign of its centrality. But we couldn't drop everything and scatter into a discussion of "Robo." We didn't know enough to ask questions yet. Given the group's disagreement, we didn't even know if it truly had a strong connection to LSD. We hadn't had time to digest the surprise, a surprise evident in MA's moderator turns at 23, 28, 31, 39, and 41. We had a limited amount of time and several topics to cover.

Another reason why focus group information is sketchy has to do with the *conversation* rather than the meeting aspect. In American conversations, turns are typically short, and a couple of members usually dominate. In this transcript, a pattern emerges that characterizes much of what was to come. At first T dominates; C comments here and there; the rest of the group wait in the background, and, when they do talk, it is often so light that the recorder barely picks it up. About two-thirds of the way through the group discussion the pattern changes. T struggles with J for domination and loses. J, a former heavy LSD user, takes over due to more personal experience with the designated topic, as will be shown in a section to come. Shortly after that struggle T leaves the group. By and large this conversational structure defines how the group goes.

What we're getting here in the example transcript are short verbal bursts from two group members out of five. This is not the focus group dream, which envisions all members speaking

with each other elaborately so that outsiders can get a sense of the details of their world. The focus group is, in part, a conversation, and conversations have dominant members and brief turns at talk. In an individual interview, the lone interviewee is dominant, with all the time he or she needs to develop a line of thought.

The focus group is an ambiguous beast, both meeting and conversation. The two moderators took different ways through the ambiguity. MA took on a more conversational role. The problem here is that moderator formulations and comments can be taken as conclusive, ending the flow of talk, rather than as invitations to continue the topic, as would be the case in actual conversations. JM plays a more directive role by asking questions. The problem here is that questions can highlight the authority of the moderator and place youths in a performing and evaluative mode.

In some cases such strategies work. But an excellent example of how *both* strategies can disrupt interaction appears at the end of the transcript. In 48 MA makes a self-deprecating statement as a group participant. C laughs, as she often does, but other than that the comment produces almost five seconds of dead time, a massive pause given the usual two second limit. JM comes next with a question, one that implies that the youths haven't told us enough, and this strategy results in another five second pause. The two moderator strategies represent conversation and meeting at their extremes. The long pauses show that neither "pure" strategy worked smoothly in this particular case. On the other hand, JM's question does elicit an important bit of validation of the earlier study.

This passage shows the focus group at its best. We learned something new and confirmed something old. The group context enables both types of results, since the reactions of others signal whether statements are significant from the group's point of view, and it is the group point of view that is the goal of ethnographic research. At the same time, the passage shows how the structure of focus groups, both as meeting and as conversation, limits the amount of information and sets up contradictory expectations for the moderator. The group offers evaluations of significance, something you don't get in individual interviews. But the individual interview opens large spaces for an individual voice to articulate the texture of his or her world, something that seldom happens in a focus group.

### *The Quiet Ones*

There *were*, however, a couple of moments in the focus groups that approached the nature of individual interviews. One moment in particular is worth showing, since it makes explicit how one voice was silent and why.

Earlier, we mentioned that one young man was brought in late to the group. He was told he "needed to be in this group" by the counselor. He had no idea what was going on and, for the most part, sat quietly while the others, usually T and C and the moderators, talked. His consciousness of the tape popped up at 283, when he agreed with something and was told that he had to talk because "We can't hear him nod on the tape." At 325 he raised his hand, and this exchange followed:

JM. no no no no, you're not (laugh) supposed to raise//your  
J. //I'm sorry  
who are these tapes for?

JM. hand. just talk. What?  
 J. who are these tapes for?  
 JM. oh you don't//know this stuff  
 T. //for your parents  
 MA. C. (laugh)  
 327

There follows a discussion of the study, who's paying for it, and who'll hear the tapes, a discussion that we don't reproduce here. Finally, at 345, JM asks J a direct question. J, it turns out, is the only group member with extensive LSD experience, and he launches into the kind of things we had heard in the interviews, fending off T's rude attempt to gain the floor along the way, rude because he interrupts mid-clause rather than at what the conversational analysts call a "possible completion point." We mentioned this struggle in the preceding section, when we noted that shortly after his loss of the floor, T left the group.

1 JM. and what's your experience.  
 2 J. oh it's nothing like what they all s—I mean + when I dosed it was like + my eyes were open, right, I could see, right, I saw—I could see everything. + it wasn't that I was seeing little men or seeing chairs moving, I was just awake, you know I could + I I could smell the flowers you know. I was just alive, I mean I wasn't like in a . . . . //  
 3 T. //wa—you could smell the flo:wers even like they're ten feet away?  
 4 J. I'm not saying like that. =I'm saying the air was fresh.  
 //I was appreciating the world more, and uh, I don't know,  
 5 T. //oh  
 6 J. and people that were nice seemed nicer and people that were rude seemed ruder and everything was just clear and straight ahead, //and everything was real honest and flat out and  
 7 MA. //huh  
 8 J. you could really understand the way everything worked, and you were just—your eyes were like opened, you know, you could you could understand, I mean it was just a good feeling just to have everything laid out fo:r you, and to under—to know to know the way things are and to understand the way things are, and like, you know and you could say, well that person has a little good in them, and that person doesn't have any good. I mean, you know, you can you know look at the trees and take nature in, . . . . , it's groo:vy, //I mean, but you know, that's like the past, . . . .  
 9 C. //(light laugh)  
 10 J. . . . . worry about it. I'll say, . . . .  
 11 MA. That's a nice description.  
 12 J. Well I mean it's just  
 13 MA. Well that sounds that sounds real positive. I mean that kind of //clarity and appreciation and stuff like that.  
 14 J. //yeah  
 yeah, and I mean emotions were a lot clearer and everything just everything was just + up there. just there you know. that's why + that was my experience.  
 15 MA. that was well said. (3.4) how about—does does that correspond with with what some of the rest of you have heard or experienced either way?  
 16 C. sounds right. (2.9)  
 17 N. some people see trails and some people + it's all different . . . .  
 18 J. you see, you sometimes have a little—go into a little daze for a couple of minutes. I'm talking about the overall experience. I'm talking about the overall attitude. not not really what you're seeing, but what you're thinking, what's going through your head, yeah.

it's not it's not I mean you might see trails, you might see things, you know, I mean that happens. but I'm saying that the overall experience is just very positive heavy kind of thing, it just lifts you up, most of the times, sometimes + it doesn't, but//you  
 19 MA. //uh huh  
 20 J. know, seven times out of ten you you go there. (4.2)  
 21 MA. huh (3.4)  
 20 JM. hhh. ss. so what kind of—this sounds great. So what kind of kids do acid?  
 21 T. anybody.  
 22 C. // . . . .  
 23 JM. //jocks? 381

To say that this segment contrasts with most of the meeting/conversation nature of the focus group is an understatement. J's descriptions resemble an individual interview, with other group members dropping back into an audience role. J is like most of our earlier ethnographic sample, an experienced, articulate LSD user who has positive things to say about his drug experience.

MA and JM play roles similar to those in the transcript segment we examined in the previous section. JM's question starts J into his description, and then MA plays a more participatory role with backchannel signals in 7, 19, and 21, and formulations in 11, 13, and 15. At 15, MA returns to a meeting orientation, after the long pause that signals that J is finished with what he has to say, and tries to restore group interaction. C confirms J's story and N adds a superficial comment, something that bothers J and leads him into another description of how what he's saying is more elaborate than N's summary. After J finishes, a long pause, followed by another long pause after MA's backchannel, leads JM to step back into his role as questioner, a move that reinitiates the T and C pattern already shown in the previous transcript segment.

JM's question is ironic, on reflection. J opened his description, in turn 2, by saying that what he's about to tell us is "nothing like what they all say." He's telling us he's different from the other members of the group. He doesn't take LSD for some general effect, the reasons the others have given for taking LSD in earlier parts of the focus group; instead, he takes it for clarity, clarity in perception of nature and the others around him.

After JM asks his question, the discussion centers on the traditional social categories that always come up—jocks, head bangers, and the like. The irony is that J may have just taught us how to ask the question better, that the kinds of youth who use LSD don't map onto the available social categories, but rather onto the different purposes they have in mind. This, like the topic of Robitussin, counts as a new idea that came out of the focus group, one deserving of further research.

In this segment we learned the power and importance—and beauty—of a voice we almost missed hearing. J finally asked a question about the tape that made explicit the reasons for his silence, reasons we dealt with that then led him to talk. But when he talked, he took us into a segment that was more ethnographic interview than conversation/meeting interaction. Statements were no longer brief; the moderator was no longer in control. The emphasis shifted from group evaluations of topic significance to a single person's voice articulating his experience.

The segment with J leads us to another question for any

focus group. Who are those silent voices in the group? Why aren't they talking? What do they have to say?

### *Indexed Talk*

Now we would like to show how the ethnographic research we did prior to the focus group enabled interpretation of the abbreviated focus group talk in a way that led to a productive interaction between both kinds of data. For our purposes here, the results of the earlier analysis will be called *folk models* (Holland and Quinn 1987), frames of interpretation that we assume group members share, frames that we as analysts attempt to partially model. The term "folk" is used to signal that the world of some group of people is of interest; it is *their* point of view rather than the point of view of outsiders. "Model" is meant to suggest an analyst's construct, with the assumption that they are models of group members' resources, from the analyst's point of view, that help outsiders understand what they tell us.

Different relationships hold between talk and folk models during a focus group and during an ethnographic interview. In interviews talk usually *explains* the folk model; in a focus group, talk usually *indexes* it. Ethnographic interviews typically involve two people, one, the ignorant interviewer, the other, the knowing interviewee. During a successful interview the interviewer mostly listens and the interviewee mostly talks. The interviewee tries to explain things fully and make motives and actions clear to the interviewer. The folk model is made explicit through narration, exposition, and description, genres of talk we will lump together here as explanation.

This interviewer/interviewee relation can also appear in focus groups, as we showed in the previous section, when a group member, J, took the floor and explained things to the moderators. But when group members interact among themselves, they generally share folk models, so in their own interaction they can briefly refer to things known in common rather than explain them. In the words of the ethnomethodologists, the folk models are being indexed rather than explained.

Consider the example of being "fried," or showing the signs of overuse of LSD. The fact that adolescents may quit using LSD because they have taken too much was brought up during both the interviews and the focus group, but the way "being fried" was talked about was different in the two contexts. During the interviews the adolescents explained the meaning of being fried by LSD to the interviewer. (Since we're no longer analyzing interaction, the transcripts are presented in a simpler form.)

Interviewer: What made you decide to try to quit? Was it that [bad] trip?

I was tired of doing it so much, you know. I couldn't—I wasn't sleeping at all during the night. I went to school the next day, you know I'd fall asleep in classes, I was failing a lot of my classes. I couldn't sleep cause I was you know eating so much of it, I guess I just got tired of it for awhile, take a break from it.

I know people and my friends know people that were just getting good grades, actively participating in school. I mean like going to school and had nice lives. Two years later after consistent using, their lives are shit and they don't care, and that seems like a typical oh, drugs are going to waste you, but it happens sometimes, it really does.

The adolescents explained being fried during the interview; but among themselves, during the focus group, they just made reference to it. Here's an example:

MA: . . . There were a lot of different reasons—possible reasons why a person would stop using LSD.

C. Brain would fry out.

T. They start getting burnt.

C. Yeah, really, remember Noah.

T. Really.

JM: What happened?

T. Burnt to a crisp.

C. Fried.

J. He can't remember his name sometimes.

C. Yeah, he is pretty bad, pretty bad.

When the general topic "possible reasons why a person would quit LSD" was introduced by the moderator, C quickly volunteered being "fried" as one possible reason. This idea was then reiterated and confirmed by T, and a shared reference, a friend known to both, was offered and accepted as an example of becoming fried and then quitting. During this exchange there were nods and sounds of agreement from other group members.

Being fried is a major reason for quitting LSD. The use of the term in the focus group, in ways that the analysis of interviews led us to expect, strongly confirms this part of the folk model, but there is no clear explanation in the focus group of what being fried actually is. A part of the folk model the authors had postulated based on a wealth of explanation in the earlier interview study was supported; but during the focus group there was no explanation, and therefore no possibility of building to that same conclusion from the focus group itself.

Another conclusion we reached after the earlier interviews was that one of the adolescent's main objectives in tripping is to transform his or her surroundings through a limited loss of control. The location, activity, social group, and drug dose of a trip are manipulated so that control can be lost without the user actually being in danger. Limited loss of control leads to a good trip, but if too much control is lost a trip can become very bad. This part of the adolescent LSD folk model was indexed many times and in many ways during the focus group interaction.

C, a non-LSD user, referred to this situation when she described how the outcome of a trip is sensitive to dose and location. Her comment specified why all trips are different:

C. Yeah, it depends on how much you take too or where you are. It's all kind of like a mind thing.

J, the frequent LSD user, made a less obvious reference to the same idea in these interview-style elaborate comments about bad trips:

I mean, where, if like—if like some cops start drivin by your house, I mean it's more than one, even if it is just one. You know, and you're gonna start talking to yourself, that's especially if you're like alone. If you're with a lot of people, and you know you're cool, and you know you're safe, then you just get your mind in that frame. But if you're not like by yourself, like in your house, and you're just like looking out the windows, and it's like I don't know, it's all the way you think. It's all in your mind.



An even less direct connection to control and situation is made in this comment by Cy about one aspect of an exciting trip (Cy only talked at the end of the session, after T had gone):

Cy. Adrenalin rush. Yeah, like if the cops find you and you're like runnin away from them or somethin like that, and they're chasing you or something. Cause I had friends that had been trippin and the cops found out they were—but it was just like one lady and they outran her. They said—they said it was like a rush, you know. They like jumped through bushes. They went through like a creek and stuff. They said it was fun.

A final example implies the same folk model. It also supports another inference we drew from the interviews. We suggested that LSD requires a safe, stress-free location to produce a good trip, and that this is one reason it was so popular in affluent suburban settings.

MA. What is it about this chemical that makes it more of a white suburban drug than any, than anything else? We can't figure it out. Got any theories?

J. It's probably kind of scary dosing in like a big city. You don't have the fresh air and you don't have the trees. Big buildings, toxic stuff in the air, you know it's just all dark, and I mean I'm sure it's done in the city too, but I'm saying it's a lot more people all around you, and like a lot more phobic, you know, a claustrophobic kind of thing, closin in on you. You know there's stuff everywhere around you and stuff. I mean so it's probably why people you know enjoy it more goin out a little bit, you know. That's just my theory. I've never heard that but if I were to think why.

These examples—being fried and a limited loss of control—show how focus group interaction supports a folk model constructed on the basis of qualitative interviews. The group understands the implied reference, accepts the utterances, and the talk moves on without the folk model itself ever being overtly stated.

But on other occasions, disagreements arise. The introduction of the idea that Robitussin is “just like LSD,” presented in an earlier section, was an example of this situation. It created a noticeable difference of opinion. Robitussin and its similarities to LSD were neglected during the earlier ethnographic interviews. Only one person mentioned it, and that person pointed out that the two drugs are not alike.

There was never much physical feeling in it, [LSD] it was all mental and I think that's how it differs mostly with the Nyquil or Robitussin or whatever you take.

In the focus group discussion, on the other hand, the reactions of group members to each other taught us that Robitussin is a well known and significant drug. It is likely that Robo and LSD are thought of as being similar in some ways. They are similar enough for the earlier interviewee to have used their differences to help define LSD; and they are similar enough for T to assert that they are the same. But they are also different enough for the other group members to strongly disagree with T's assertion.

The “robo” segment not only verifies a part of the adolescent LSD folk model we suggested (as the “fried” and “control” segments did), it also *complicates* it. The focus group transcript shows that within a folk model that includes agreement on the significance of Robitussin, different positions are taken on

what that significance in fact means. The transcript indicates variations within the folk model. This is something that the group interaction makes clearly visible, something that an individual interview can't reveal.

Another interesting discovery emerged when the focus group was compared with the earlier interviews. This discovery taught us that not all young people shared all folk models, that, in fact, some youths shared folk models with parents rather than other adolescents.

We had anticipated a group of six to eight adolescents with LSD experience. We ended up with a group of five, only two of whom had taken LSD; only one of those two, J, had extensive experience with it. The group members were similar in many ways. They were the same age, lived in the same suburban community, and all had extensive exposure to drugs. We assumed they would share similar opinions and beliefs about drugs, since they all knew the same suburban drug scene. As it turned out, some exchanges between the users and the non-users contradicted this assumption.

In an earlier interviews we had talked only with heavy LSD users and with non-using adults. These two kinds of interviewees were dramatically different when they talked about LSD. We anticipated that we would get responses from the focus group that were similar to what we had heard from the adolescent users. The surprise was that the non-using adolescents in the focus group were sometimes closer to the adults than they were to the adolescents who had taken LSD.

When the non-users in the group talked about the kinds of kids who take LSD or how being fried can lead to quitting, their statements were like those of the users. They were, in other words, operating with the same folk model. But when the non-users described the trip experience itself, or reasons for taking LSD, they sounded more like the adults had in the earlier interviews.

The non-users all described the trip experience in a way that trivialized it, as in these examples taken from the transcript.

T. [The] tree jumped out in front of me.

T. [See], like faces in the tree.

T. The buildings start walking.

C. [You] turn to jello.

N. [You] go to la-la land.

After listening to a number of these characterizations J, the only heavy user in the group, said, “I don't agree with what these others said.” He then went on to describe his trip experiences in the semi-poetic way characteristic of the heavy users we had interviewed, a passage that was quoted at length in the previous section. He talked of how LSD transforms the world into a fascinating place where common experiences become like mythic journeys. He spoke of himself being transformed and augmented by the drug.

In the earlier interviews, we'd concluded that understanding the trip experience is the key to understanding why a person takes LSD and why they quit. The parents' interviews lacked a model of the experience and, therefore, their explanations of why kids used LSD was dramatically different from that of the youths. The non-users in the focus group were similar. Their characterizations of tripping and their disagreement with the users on the subject suggest that they viewed the trip experi-



ence differently. They resembled the adults more so than the LSD-using youths.

The non-using youths in the focus group, logically enough, also share adult models about why people trip. The non-users mentioned two motivations for LSD use most often mentioned by the adults, peer pressure and escape.

T. Or just to do it to be social—socially do drugs. It's like a social drinker.

MA. why do acid?

C. To get fucked up.

N. To escape reality.

These are the standard “push” explanations expressed by the adults. People are pushed into LSD use by some force outside them. Heavy LSD users give a “pull” explanation. Their explanations assume that people are drawn to tripping by the attraction of the world created through the LSD experience.

The discovery of how the youth folk models differ around the nature of a trip and reasons for use counts as another surprise, but, once again it is typical of focus group results—discovery without explanation. Clearly something is happening but there isn't enough information to explain what. But we are left with a fascinating hypothesis. Perhaps the usual social labels—preps, headbangers, and the like—aren't important in understanding who uses and why. Perhaps different folk models around reasons for use separate users from non-users, models whose social distribution we only glimpse here.

### *Conclusion*

To sum all this up, focus groups and ethnographic research do stand in several interesting and important relationships to each other. First of all, the detailed analysis of the transcript yields more than their usual casual use in focus group summary reports. Among other things, the detailed analysis shows who was in charge, which parts were interview-like, meeting-like, and conversation-like, which topics were lively and which were flat, how well ratified topics were by the group as a whole, and who dominated and who was silent. The detailed analysis is time consuming and requires some training in conversational analysis, but we hope we've shown that the application of the method in especially significant portions of the transcript is worth the effort.

Second, we hope we've also shown that the availability of previously constructed folk models from other ethnographic data enables a richer and more significant interpretation of focus group data. In focus groups, participants should draw on shared folk models that were, in part, modelled during ethnographic analysis. Our examples show how sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't, both results being of value. In several examples, like being fried and limited loss of control, group discussion could be interpreted only because of the folk models we had constructed earlier. But in other examples, like Robitussin, the discussion suggested variations on the model, complications that further work must take into account. Finally, some discussions called into question the assumption that the youths shared the same folk model at all. In fact the line between LSD experience and lack of it suggested that non-

using adolescents shared some models with another outsider group, the parents.

All of these results are interesting and useful. We might have felt discouraged during and immediately after the focus group because we were anticipating the wrong kind of results. As individuals predisposed to consider ethnographic interviews as the most important kind of data, we were looking for explanations, not indexing. We both had committed to minimizing moderator involvement, and we also wanted to build on the explanations from the earlier interviews. In other words, we went into the group thinking of it as a group ethnographic interview. We were looking for exactly the kind of material that focus groups are not designed to produce.

We overlooked the fact that the focus group was producing results, but results of a different kind. Many of our earlier analyses were being either confirmed or complicated in interesting ways. This material was not in the form of explanations, but rather in the form of exchanges among group members, exchanges that indexed the folk models we had inferred from the prior ethnographic data. But without the prior folk models, we couldn't have interpreted what was being indexed.

We can't emphasize this critical relationship enough. The powerful validation and complication that we found in the focus group transcripts presupposes prior ethnographic work. In this research context, we believe the focus group can be a useful ally. Many of the users of focus groups, however, advocate them as a stand-alone method, a qualitative shortcut into the world of focus group members. As far as such an exclusive use of focus groups goes, we retain the skepticism with which we opened this article. Without prior knowledge of the folk models as a base, there's nothing to evaluate the group exchanges against, nothing in terms of which to register and interpret the surprises that occur. A focus group can show a researcher some new territory, but it can't tell you much about what it is you've just seen. Ethnography helps resolve this problem, first, by enabling a fine tuned evaluation of the focus group discourse, second, by providing the interpretive folk models necessary to understand indexed focus group talk in more significant ways.

We're not the only ones to have noticed interesting issues in focus group interaction and the ties between that interaction and more comprehensive ethnographic work (Swenson, Griswold, and Kleiber 1992; Fielding and Fielding 1986). At the same time, Owen Murdoch, an anthropology graduate student at the University of Maryland, reports that his recent review of the focus group methods literature shows that the principal issue of interest is the quantification of focus group data. We hope we've shown there's another way to think about things, one that maps more naturally onto the kind of resource that focus groups can represent.

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