Vancouver Centre of Excellence

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

Working Paper Series

RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

Studying Immigrants in Focus Groups

by

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December 2000

Abstract: I read closely from focus group transcripts drawn from a research project on immigrant settlement in Surrey, British Columbia, in order to consider some potentials and limitations of focus group methodology. Focus groups offer a safe space in which the authority of the researcher can be challenged and negotiated. They provide an opportunity to observe directly the process of meaning generation in social interaction. Researchers should consider and more fully analyze, however, the complexity of focus groups as conversational events: what is said depends on where the focus group is held and who participates. Social hierarchies of gender, age, and class, for instance, are ever present, and participants present themselves in carefully edited ways. In some circumstances, the privacy of an interview may be more appropriate. A focus group should not be thought of as a cost-effective way of collecting attitudinal data; it is a particular methodology with specific strengths and limitations, and one that requires a particular mode of analysis.

Introduction

When I collaborated on a research project with the Philippine Women Centre in 1995, we chose focus groups as our methodology for studying domestic workers' experiences. Our strategy was to break participating domestic workers into three groups of four to six women each. Well into the process, on the second full day of focus group discussions, I joined a group of four women with whom I had not yet spent time alone, apart from Centre organizers. At one point, a woman turned to me and asked, "How about you, Gerry, do you have a nanny?" I told her no, and she noted "That's a personal question." Another offered: "Do you want a nanny? Take me as your nanny." I answered that my child went to daycare. With a joking, but pointed appraisal, a third woman judged: "She will be one of the good employers." The first studied me and said: "You can see in her facial expression. My employer is good but a little bit Tupperware [plastic]." Much was accomplished in this short exchange: the research gaze was turned on me as a potential employer, the focus of questioning was temporarily altered, and a momentary crisis in the possibility of our relationship was voiced and resolved. Declaring me as non-Tupperware signified to me a willingness to continue as research collaborators.

This exchange offers an entry into a discussion of the attractions of focus group methodology for feminist researchers. One attraction is precisely that the relations between the researcher and researched are more open and ambiguous than in one-on-one interviews or survey research. The recent popularity of focus groups arises, in part, out of concerns about hierarchical power relations between researcher and researched, and the limitations of predetermined, closed-ended survey and interview techniques. In the safety of their group, domestic workers could investigate my personal politics and, as a 'non-directive' methodology, the focus group afforded considerable freedom to direct the discussion to topics that were important to them and to interpret the researchers' topics in their own terms.

The attractions of focus groups go beyond this, and I elaborate on them in the first part of this paper through detailed examples, mostly drawn from a research project on immigrant settlement in Surrey, a suburb of Vancouver. In this project, separate focus groups were held with service providers, recent Indo-Canadian immigrants, a multicultural group of recent women immigrants to Surrey, and second-generation Indo-Canadians in their twenties.[1] For a discussion of some of the substantive themes that emerged from the focus groups, see Hiebert, et al. 1998.

This paper is not a manual for conducting focus groups. Several such manuals already exist, as for example, Krueger (1994), Morgan (1997, 1998) and Barbour and Kitzinger (1999). Rather, this paper takes up Wilkinson's concern (1999) that feminists have yet to fully realize the potentials of focus group methodology. My hope is that a close reading of several focus group transcripts will encourage feminist researchers to engage these potentials and to think more creatively about the particularity of the information produced through focus groups. Developing a specific analysis of the potentials of focus groups also involves considering their limitations; in the second half of the paper I turn to some of the challenges that I have encountered running focus groups among recent immigrants to Vancouver.

Focus Groups as Process

Focus groups potentially offer a safe space – literally safety in numbers – in which to discuss issues and experiences, and one in which the authority of the researcher can be challenged and negotiated. They also assume and produce a less individualistic mode of knowledge production. Focus group methodology is premised on the notion that we develop knowledge in context and in relation to others. One of the claims that is made of focus groups is that they provide an opportunity to observe directly the process of meaning-generation: "how opinions are formed, expressed and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others" (Wilkinson, 1999,

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[1.] The process was also carried out by collaborating researchers (Gillian Creese, Isabel Dyck, Dan Hiebert, Tom Hutton, David Ley, and Arlene McLaren) in four other areas in Vancouver. I thank Dan Hiebert for participating in the service providers focus group in Surrey, and Margaret Walton

67). In interviews, individuals tell us how they would behave or have behaved in certain circumstances; the promise of focus groups is that they provide a setting in which we observe how people behave and make sense of their world in relation to others. Those who recognize this distinction between interviews and focus groups have tended to be disappointed by existing analyses of focus group transcripts, arguing that the process aspect of focus groups is typically ignored. Researchers pay little attention to group interaction, tend to abstract attitudes from discussions, and focus on the content of particular individual's statements rather than the process of meaning creation (Myers and Macnaughten 1999; Wilkinson,1999).

I want to present two segments of transcripts from focus groups in Surrey, with an eye to what emerges through the interaction between focus group participants. The first involves a brief extract from an extended exchange between two service providers who had not previously met, a Chinese-Canadian male and an Indo-Canadian woman. The sociality of the process is evident, and as the two individuals find common ground through an analysis of their organizations, they develop a critique of Vancouver-based service organizations. Eventually (although not included here) this extends to a critical analysis of the way that the federal government regulates non-profit service organizations.

> Dan: So, does an immigrant arriving in Surrey have approximately the same scope for assistance as an immigrant arriving in East Vancouver?
>
> Male Service Provider (MSP): Vancouver has more services for refugees.
>
> Female Service Provider (FSP): I would say that Vancouver societies, if I am not wrong, are more mainstream, for example, [names agency]. So, as compared to [the agencies of MSP and FSP], we are more community based. Do you find the difference?
>
> MSP: Well, [the Vancouver agency] is close to us. They are similar to [his agency]. …Possibly they are both big enough that people find it a little

difficult to get to where they want, where they need. It's a matter of them learning about the system.

FSP: I would say that the community organizations over here [in Surrey]…and I have seen yours and mine … I would say they are more flexible because most of the staff members have gone through the same experience. If somebody's late: 5 minutes, 10 minutes, we say that the person has the right.

MSP: We are more in touch with the community.

FSP: Community. Yes. We are more in touch. We identify ourselves more with the community, and community needs. I am talking on behalf of my society. Just a small example. We have Job Seekers Club programs. Three-week programs. But given their needs, we allow our clients to come another 6 months, providing extra services until they get a job. That I find a bit different from [the above-mentioned Vancouver organization]. Once the program is over, they stop. But over here, looking into the community needs, we are going deep down into the community. We know their needs more. So then we are more flexible….

MSP: I think I tend to agree. We …tend to go the extra mile.

FSP: Extra mile. We go the extra mile.

At first, MSP aligns his agency with the Vancouver one but, as the conversation develops, he refines his position, agreeing that the two agencies in Surrey are more community based, flexible and accommodating. They come to this common position through a process of repeating the same words (community, extra mile) and affirming each other's position.

The next transcript segment does not work in the same way but the formation of opinion through the medium of the focus group is just as evident. The transcript comes from a focus group of recent Indo-Canadian immigrants, one that was in fact organized with the help of 'FSP' and took place at her service organization. The exchange involves two Indo-Canadian men, one (M1) is older and of higher status. I first interpreted this heated exchange as an instance of the censoring that can go on at

the public occasion of a focus group. I understood M2 to be censoring the issue of racism. I now think that the exchange is more complex, and that it has little to do with diverting the conversation from the issue of racism in Canada. The disagreement reflects and allows M2 to articulate his criticism of multiculturalism as a mechanism for the classification and segregation of individualism by ethnicity. I quote the transcript at length; this is necessary to convey the movement within the discussion.

> M1: And secondly, you feel more comfortable in a particular community you belong to. For example, if you stay in an area where people from your community are not there, you feel like an intruder. Some of those people are not polite sometimes. Sometimes I am going to Vancouver downtown. I have heard people shouting at me: "You Turban! Go back to India!"

> FSP: No! Have you?

> M1: Many times.

> Gerry: In Downtown Vancouver?

> M1: Yeah.

> M2: I would like to oppose that.

> M1: I am…

> M2: My experience is that…

> M1: Wait a minute. I have my experience. I am telling you my experience.

> M2: Yeah, that's okay. No, I just told…

> M1: Depends on….No, not many. You don't have, er, you don't encounter certain people.

> FSP: It's part of Vancouver.

> M1: Actually, it depends on the time, place for example.

> M3: Sometimes it happens.

> M1: Yeah. [Others agree.] It depends on the time. Firstly, in the evening time, when all those drunk people are there.

> F1: Teenagers or something.

M1: At the same time, certain other people stopped by, and said "Not worth it. He's drunk." I have seen that consolation also. This is, I am telling you my experience. You don't have to agree with it or not.

M2: No, I don't say that.

M1: I have not told that all people are like [this]. Certain people at certain times do behave like I am an intruder.

M2: No. Like I would like to only say my….I am not saying that you don't experience that. But my feeling is that these things may happen. But there it is. I can tell you, you go to Delhi and you are from Punjab…

M1: I also say that I am telling you an experience. Please let me go.

M2: Okay.

M1: This experience is not a generalization. This is, at certain times, certain places, for example, on Granville Street in the evenings. I did go. Some people did shout. I am referring to [the fact that] if you are in a homogenous atmosphere, you are not felt like an intruder. [Tells example from Punjab.] It's not against the culture here. People are happy. In downtown Granville, when somebody shouted at me, other people stopped. He said "Don't bother. He's foolish." So I am telling the other side also at the same time.

M3: Yes, segregation is there.

FSP: Segregation is there.

M1: For example…I can give one more. Let's say immigrants come in bundles. More people in one particular area. Immigrants have come. The other people, let's say, I'll call, I don't normally call them whites…the, or the..

M2: Euro-Canadians, Euro-Canadians.

M1: Eurasian people. They move out because the Indians have come here. So they don't feel like, not a homogenous group. They moved out. That's why most of the immigrants are here in Surrey. When an influx of immigrants came to this side, the white people moved out from the area.

Gerry: In Surrey?

M1: In Surrey, yes. People are moving. In an area where more Indians come, the whites move out because they don't feel like staying in that area.

M3: Maybe feeling segregated. [General laughter.]

M1: So this study's aim is to? Integration of….So you will be sending proposals about segregation? [Short discussion in which M1 remarks: "Good thing this. Very good topic. In need of this." And then M2 draws us back to earlier discussion.]

M2: No, I am…this..I am only asking you a question. I don't understand that. I mean everywhere you see people treat ethnic groups…group wise. Why don't they make it like respect the other individual? Forget what his….Suppose I respect you. I don't bother what your other personal life is. Here I feel its more like a group-wide treatment. Like here immigrants. That's also the group. …I mean, why is it group-wise? I mean I am asking you that. Why…I mean in schools and anywhere. It's mostly like they treat as groups. Group as in, "Okay, tolerate this group. Tolerate that group". I mean, why not respect the individual? ….

F1: In schools?

M2: I am not able to make myself clear.

Gerry: I am just wondering…is it something about the way that multiculturalism…

M2: Ah, yeah, multiculturalism. I mean multicultural. What is it? Multiculturalism is: you have made the groups one culture….what my feeling is, it becomes…then it is a group. So it gives in my mind: "Look at that group" That group, right? Multiculturalism. Okay. Indo-Canadian. One group. Rather than one man. That's it. I don't know to which one you [Pratt] belong to. You are Canadian. That's it. Ends.

FSP: I think for policy issues, they have to make some categorizations.

M2: It's like in India. Also they have made categorizations. Like we have some people in older times. Untouchable people and all those things. When

you start treating them as untouchables, you bring them together. You made a group. Then other groups oppose that group, rather than individuals. Then the group becomes the target.

M1: It's that particular groups have got different needs. That why they have to grade it.

FSP: Resources are different, you know.

M2: That's okay. But when you say tolerate, the word tolerate. It's like, "Okay, I tolerate you. Stand there." [General laughter.]

M1: Anyway, that's a different story.

M2: Respecting is something else.

Gerry: Yes.

M1: Anything else you like to know?

Gerry: I think that's it. Is there anything else you would like to know? [Silence] It's hot too. I can feel it. [Laughter.]

M2: Maybe more than that?…I can only say it was a good discussion. Maybe we can thank you for allowing us to blow out some of the..

FSP: Our frustrations, our anger, our tensions. [General laughter.]

M2: I like that, see.

FSP: Now that we have given all these frustrations to you, now you look after them! [Laughter.]

M2: It's your responsibility now.

Gerry: Well, thank you very much!

This is a complex conversational event, which begins with M1 explaining his discomfort when he moves out of the ethnic enclave in Surrey. M2's resistance to this perspective causes M1 to qualify his statements about exposure to racist comments in downtown Vancouver, while M1's refusal to let M2 speak forces M2 to expand his analysis beyond an argument against spatial isolation to a fuller criticism of classification by ethnicity. Drawing parallels to the caste system in India, M2 comes

full circle and cautions about the way in which these classifications can lead to the victimization of groups of people, a victimization that M1 seeks to avoid by staying within these social and spatial boundaries. M1 also draws on and finds support in FSP's bureaucratic understanding of the necessity of ethnic classification for efficient administration of resources. The focus group provided a space to argue, and through this argument we see complex and important ideas being deployed, for example, the bureaucratic discourse being aligned with a defensive approach to the ethnic enclave. But it is also unclear whether M1's persistent unwillingness to let M2 voice his reticence about generalizing racist experiences in downtown Vancouver causes M2 to express more strongly individualistic feelings than he might otherwise; it is M2, after all, who produces the category of Euro-Canadian when M1 searches for a category other than 'white.' The arguments of individuals, then, are situated and have to be assessed within the context of others' views.

Wilkinson (1999) interprets this contextual aspect of focus groups as congenial to a feminist perspective; it also moves us toward an understanding developed by Visweswaran (1994) through her historical ethnography of women's involvement in India's independence movement. Through a series of triangulated conversations, Visweswaran discovers that she has been deceived by a number of key informants. In trying to understand the lies and betrayals that led to these discoveries, she moves her attention from a focus on the truth or falsity of informants' statements to the issue of why she is being told particular statements in particular circumstances.

This suggests a fuller contextual engagement than I have thus far suggested, and one that is peculiarly geographical. It indicates the need to be attentive to the sites in which focus groups (and interviews) are held, and the value of multi-site analyses to assess the context of discourse. This goes beyond concerns about site selection expressed in how-to-do focus groups texts (that one find a comfortable, accessible, private and neutral space); I am urging geographers to more fully explore the geography of discourse, the ways that focus group conversation change depending on where they occur. In a study of 7-11 year old children, for example, Green and Hart (1999) find that the rules of discussion vary depending on whether the focus group is

held in a school or play group. The researcher's role was more ambiguous and more open to negotiation in the playgroup; within the school the researcher was firmly situated as teacher. The play group conversations were less orderly and rule bound, and more extreme stories of risk-taking emerged. This is not to say that the focus groups conducted in playgroups were more accurate or more truthful (indeed, there may have been more bravado displayed there), but that they differed depending on the formality of the institutional context. The geography of story telling, and of opinion formation and expression within focus groups deserves far more attention.

Focus groups are processual in the sense that they offer a glimpse into social interactions; there is a further sense in which focus groups may be useful to a feminist commitment to the process of social transformation: conversations in groups can serve the purpose of consciousness-raising and devising plans for action. I think that Baker and Hinton (1999) are right in cautioning that focus groups do not inevitably lead to participatory action research and that change comes through additional practical acts. Nevertheless, when individuals are brought together in a focus group they can discover shared experiences. This offers support, can lead to an analysis of structures that condition these common experiences, provides opportunities to share information and strategies, and devises new strategies.

In the focus group with service providers in Surrey, information was shared. For example, the planner in attendance gained knowledge about a multicultural coordinating committee of which she was previously unaware. Participants traded knowledge about existing research relevant to immigrant settlement in Surrey and thought collectively about what further research would be of practical use to them.

The activist potential of the focus groups with domestic workers at the Philippine Women Centre was perhaps clearer. For example, sharing knowledge led one woman to discover that she was not covered by a medical insurance plan, a discovery that precipitated her individual action to remedy this. In telling her story among peers, another domestic worker realized that her employers had paid at least twice her salary for the tasks she does (childcare and housecleaning) when she went on holiday because they had hired two individuals to do them; it was through the telling

that this became evident to her. And because these focus groups took place within an activist organization, the transcribed evidence has been used in reports to governments.   As a collective activity, the possibility of collective action following from focus group discussions may seem more obvious than in one-on-one interviews.

Challenges

Focus groups offer the possibility of collecting data that shows how ideas are deployed in social interaction in ways that can be put to use for social change; this is not to say that they are without their problems and challenges. Though I have argued that they offer the potential for less hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched, other hierarchies are ever present. These must be carefully negotiated within the focus group, and assessed when interpreting focus group evidence.

If we return to the transcript from the focus group with recent Indo-Canadian immigrants, it is clear that M1 is exerting the privileges of age and status. He repeatedly claims his right to tell of his experience, remarks upon the utility of the study, tells M2 when he is off-topic ("Anyway, that's a different story"), and declares when the focus group is over ("Anything else you like to know?"). Returning to the focus group transcript, it is fascinating to see how quickly he establishes his dominance. He is the first to speak. He quickly establishes that what distinguishes Indian from Canadian society is respect for elders. When 'FSP' invites a young non-English speaking woman to participate, M1 establishes that he, rather than FSP, will translate. The following transpires:

> M1: I will translate.
>
> F2: (Speaks quietly in Punjabi.)
>
> M1: She says she has been here for four years, and she came on married basis.
>
> F2: (Speaks quietly in Punjabi.)
>
> M1: She first came to Kelowna, where her husband was. And later they came to search for jobs here. In search of jobs. …We can ask her questions. (M1 asks her a question in Punjabi.)

F2: (Speaks quietly in Punjabi.)

M1: They didn't have any problems regarding housing. They found a house.

Gerry: How? Through friends or relatives?

M1 and FSP ask her questions in Punjabi.

F2: (Speaks quietly in Punjabi)

M1: From, err, through their relatives. They got information and they got contacts. And, err,

(M1 asks question, FSP clarifies and F2 provides answer that elicits laughter).

M1: Let's elaborate a bit. She, um, gradually, she says she doesn't have any good remarks. (General laughter.) But we like to elaborate. (M1 and FSP ask her questions in Punjabi).

F2: (Elaborates in Punjabi, speaking a little louder.)

M1: She says she has got frustrated because she couldn't attend school. Because it was too costly. And, um (asks question in Punjabi).

F2: No

M1: She wanted to further her studies. She could not pursue those.

F2: (Speaks in Punjabi)

M1: Yeah, she had a young kid. Nobody was there to look after that kid. So she has to babysit for him. That's why she couldn't go for her studies. (Asks question in Punjabi.)

F2: (Answers in Punjabi)

M1: She was in last year of graduation. So pretty well educated. She came from India. So she got married. She got involved with family life. So what else?

FSP asks question in Punjabi to which F2 answers, laughing.

M1: She says when she was in India, she had heard about Canada's garden side, or better side.

Gerry: What about Canada?

M1: Good side of Canada.

FSP: Very bright picture.

M1:   Good stories about Canada. The way of life, mobility, no scarcity…..In India, for example, there… the light service goes out, failure of light system. (General laughter.) Here, electricity doesn't fail. India, there's no day when it just (General agreement from the group). So these were good things. So she was very pleased to come.

FSP: But over here….

M1: Other difficulties sprout here. And she is not happy. What else questions?

Gerry: Because of the education, and help with caring for her child?

M1: Yeah. She has said that due to childcare, she had to baby-sit, she didn't have time and er financial… (Asks F2 a question in Punjabi).

M1: She has no financial problems. (Further discussion in Punjabi.) Okay, I have a comment for you. Here, my daughter when she came here, she was having Masters degree in Science in India. She was good, brilliant. She came here, married here. She had child here. Then they decided, she and her husband, since you can study, go in for medicine. She applied for medicine. She took the entrance exam. She was top of the list. And after 4 and a half years she became a full- fledged doctor. So that way, she has now two kids by the time she is a doctor. She has two kids. That's why actually we came in the picture. We had to look after those kids. (Laughter.) You can still (translates for F2 in Punjabi) study here up to any age. It is no….

FSP: Every family has different circumstances.

M1: Yeah. But no, financially, she doesn't have problems. So when you are to continue, you can continue. (General laughter.) So any other question you would like to ask her?

Gerry: What kind of childcare would help now.

M1 asks question and F2 answers in Punjabi.

M1: You don't have father-in law? Mother-in-law?

F2 answers in Punjabi.

M1: She doesn't have any arrangement with any family to look after those kids, so (asks question in Punjabi). Suitable.

FSP: But, you know, it is not easy to pay. I think $400 a month for day care. Every family can't afford this much.

M1: So, since you are focusing on integration of immigrants, I think this point can forcibly be put in – that if childcare system is adapted to situation like her, then they can pursue their aims and studies…childcare arrangements suitable to them. The childcare system are already prevalent here but will not be suitable to her or me, let's say, because of high cost, secondly, their method of handling.

Gerry: Could you talk about that, the method of handling?

M2: (To M1) You are putting on your own answers.

M1: No, I'll tell them. I've got to….

M2: No. You suggested them, rather than her. The way you want the system changed. I mean, what is the problem handling, what is the problem handling?

M1: Firstly, the children

FSP: If you don't mind…(Discussion between FSP, M1 and M2 in Punjabi)

M2: (Pointing at Pratt) She is the boss!

M1: You are the boss.

Eventually we ascertained that finances were not the issue, but that F2 had been upset by Indo-Canadian woman in Kelowna who babysat her child along with her own; she judged that this babysitter treated the children unevenly. One pressing issue here is the difficulty of working in translation, to which I return below, but another is the tendency for young women to be spoken for. 'Listen' to what happened when another woman, who could speak English, is introduced.

FSP looks to F3

M1: She came five years ago.

FSP: She is taking ESL classes. She should try with it.

M2: Yes, she should try.

F1: Yes, she should try. It's informal, yeah?

F3: (with fluency) Okay, I came here five years ago. August 1992. I married in August 1992. And I came here. My husband lives here and he sponsored me. I got baby in 1993. I got educated, no I...

FSP: No. You got less education. Because she has 10th grade.

F3: I studied in Afghanistan. I came from Afghanistan. And I study here to tenth grade. And after that, like my parents are strict... and don't want me to go out alone like that. So I didn't go anywhere in India. Like study more. I came here and I stay at home. I don't have a babysitter. I didn't go back to school for two years. Two and half years. And I came here to [the agency] and I did volunteer work for a couple of hours.

Gerry: Why did you start coming here?

F3: Because I came here for ESL classes. My husband is working part time, like night shift. So he take care of my baby. And then I came for ESL classes. And then she told me to ...

FSP: Apply for a daycare bursary.

F3: I applied there. And I got the subsidy and how he is going to a babysitter and I'm...

This is the last time we heard from F3 although three other people (FSP, M1 and M3) describe her great success in some detail. (M1 describes her progress as a miracle.)

Status hierarchies do not disappear in focus groups and Mitchell (1999, 45) cautions "against a headlong rush into adopting focus groups in an unreflective way if this means further disenfranchising those at the bottom of the social hierarchy."

Certainly, as Michell notes, sensitive group composition (in above case, a woman only group – although note FSP's role in speaking for F3) can help. But for some people – particularly stigmatized ones – being brought together as a group can be further stigmatizing. Michell writes from the perspective of a study of 11-13 year old boys and girls. For the lower status girls in particular, there was a marked difference between what they said in focus groups (basically very little) and personal interviews. It was only in the latter that stories of extremely stressful circumstances, particularly at home, came out. She asks that we consider which voices might be silenced in a focus group setting.

Some circumstances may dictate the privacy of an interview. Michell argues that the distinction between the privacy of the interview and the public nature of the focus group is particularly acute when the participants of the focus group are drawn from a relatively closed social world, as was the case in her study conducted within schools. Any statements made within such groups surely circulate beyond them. In these cases, focus groups have the potential of being exploitative because participants are persuaded by the artificiality of the context to reveal intimate details in front of peers with whom they will interact long after the research is over and the researcher is gone (Green and Hart, 1999).

But all focus groups are public performances and, even among strangers, it is unclear where the line between private and public should be drawn. In the focus group with recent Indo-Canadian immigrants, I began to feel that questioning F2 about her childcare was intrusive, especially given the confusion about her financial circumstances and the invidious comparison to M1's own daughter. But if some participants seem vulnerable to over exposure, the other part of the public nature of focus group performances is that disclosure is selective. From the segments of transcripts quoted, one gets a sense of M1's representation of his daughter. But his glowing presentation of his daughter was typical of every parent in the room: all of their children were the brightest, the most brilliant in their class. Certainly, one of the parents did not reveal that part of their child's pleasure in coming to Canada is that they can live their homosexuality more comfortably, an insight communicated to us by

their 'child' in a subsequent interview. At the focus group we heard only about their satisfaction with the educational system and success at university. The academic success is beyond dispute, but my point is that disclosure at the focus group was selective. We are now well acquainted with the idea that all social identity is performative (Butler, 1989) but it may be that it is more self-consciously, more cautiously performed on the public occasion of a focus group, especially when participants are acquaintances within a circumscribed community.

A final challenge is also clearly evident in the quoted transcript from the Indo-Canadian immigrant focus group: that is the difficulty of working in translation. It is clear from M2's protests that the translation provided by M1 was less than faithful. M1 also gently subverts F2's concerns about childcare, trying to comfort her with the possibility of returning to her education when her children are older. M1 is no villain here; he simply instantiates a tendency.

The same tendency was apparent in a multicultural woman-only focus group in Surrey; this case involves a woman translating for four Spanish-speaking women. When a woman from Mexico expressed concern that her son was learning Punjabi because they live in a predominantly Indo-Canadian neighbourhood, the translator – who was not a recent immigrant – responded in the following way: I am telling her, "Don't see it as a liability. See it as an advantage. The kid is going to have another language." The Mexican woman responded and the translator noted: "Plus she thinks it is difficult for her child to learn two languages. And when they are learning two, I don't think children learn very quickly. Mine speak three."

This intermingling of translator's and participants' experiences in ways that undermine those of the participants no doubt reflects the inexperience of the translators involved, as may a second concern: the bland nature of the translated responses. Reflecting on their experiences working with bilingual moderators, Baker and Hinton (1999, 105) note the disjointed nature of discussions that are interrupted by the need for an interpreter to translate, and describe the outcome as "matter-of-fact and prosaic responses" in which "emotions and feelings are edited out". Certainly, my experience at the Philippine Women Centre has been my most successful experience of

working in translation. This was because the bilingual moderators shared a culture and had an established rapport with the focus group participants. In this project, we defined our objectives together in English, but the focus groups were held in Tagalog (or a mixture of Tagalog and English for the ones in which I participated). The tapes were transcribed in Tagalog and then translated to English. Acknowledging the problems that attend any translation, this method kept the richness of emotion and detail (more or less) intact.

Recounting Potentials

I hope that I have conveyed some of the potentials of focus groups. I have used focus groups at different moments in the research process. The Surrey study group was used in the first stage of research to get a sense of what research would be useful to service providers and community groups, and to identify key themes and concerns among recent migrants to Vancouver, themes that we pursued in more depth through longitudinal interviews with a small number of households (some of which were recruited from focus groups), as well as a broadly based community survey. In the domestic worker study, the focus groups were the main source of data and I have collaborated with the Philippine Women Centre on a number of papers and reports (Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1998, 1999; Pratt 1999).

I hope as well to generate some enthusiasm for the *unique* potential of focus groups. They offer something other than a way of collecting interview material efficiently (six to ten interviews at once!). They offer a vantage point from which to observe social interactions. By bringing people together to share experiences, the researcher creates a small group that may generate ideas and plans for action. And although I have not discussed in depth the 'how-to-do' aspect of focus groups, part of appreciating the particularity of focus groups is recognizing that it is a methodology, and not just a loosely-organized conversational event. Careful thought must be given to sample selection (its appropriateness determined in relation to the research question), and the moderator must be trained to probe effectively and to lay down the rules that create a permissive environment for fair and open discussion. The focus

group is a single event and not equivalent to interviews with the same number of individuals. This means that a single focus group is insufficient; at least three or four should be done to evaluate the consistency of the emerging themes. Krueger (1994) suggests the principle of 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to determine sample size. That is, you conduct focus groups until the themes stabilize and no new significant information is obtained.

Focus groups are public performances, and although interviews are no less performative, they are certainly more private and usually more appropriate for engaging individuals in detailed discussions of their 'private' lives. As with any methodology, focus groups are not appropriate for answering all questions; they are extremely useful for sharing experiences and assessing how ideas circulate in a given cultural context.

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