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## **Culturally Responsive Focus Groups: Reframing the Research Experience to Focus on Participants**

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### **Abstract**

Focus groups are a frequently employed and valued method of data collection in the Social Sciences. This article specifically addresses maximizing the benefits of focus groups through the framework of culturally responsive research practice. Discussion of authors' research projects which utilized focus groups are presented in order to illuminate the advantages of using culturally responsive focus groups (CRFGs) in data collection. Three types of focus groups are discussed: traditional focus groups, CRFGs, and naturally occurring CRFGs. Focus groups are a powerful qualitative research method which, especially when designed to be culturally responsive, facilitate collection of rich and authentic data. Culturally responsive research practice will enhance work with a wide range of populations but is particularly important when facilitating groups with persons who have been traditionally marginalized. Methodological and ethical concerns of CRFGs are discussed.

**Keywords:** children, culturally responsive, focus groups, interviews, Latina, marginalized naturalistic research

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## **Introduction**

Within the past two decades, focus groups have gained popularity as a research method within social science research (Morgan, 1997, 2002; Morgan, Fellows, & Guevara, 2008). It has been said that, “at the broadest possible level focus groups are collective conversations or group interviews” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 887). Initially subject to a high level of criticism with regard to their reliability and validity, focus groups are now recognized and valued as an important data gathering technique (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The literature on focus groups is unfolding similarly to the way interview research emerged. As interview techniques gained popularity and prominence as a valid and reliable data collection method, a discussion of “distinctive respondents” and techniques designed for particular groups ensued (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). The current literature regarding focus groups is likewise attentive to new techniques and strategies for specific populations of participants including the value of focus groups with the following: lower socio-economic class Latina women (Madriz, 1998), the Bangladeshi community (Fallon & Brown, 2002), shy women (Minister, 1991), children (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002), the poor (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010), those with physical disabilities (Balch & Mertens, 1999; Woodring, Foley, Rodo, Brown, & Hamner, 2006), the incarcerated (Pollock, 2003), health caregivers (Moody, Webb, Cheung, & Lowell, 2004; Wilmot, Legg, & Barrett, 2002), and persons who identify as gay and lesbian (Allen, 2006).

Morgan (2002), in an article on the development of focus groups, stated, “the goal should be not only to use [the focus group] method, but to develop it as well” (p. 157). Therefore, our purpose in this article is to illuminate the importance of using culturally responsive research practices (Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, & DeRoche, 2011) to guide qualitative methodology and, in particular, for focus group development. Borrowing from the context of teaching and learning, the term culturally responsive, refers to instructional strategies which center “equitable social power or cultural wealth” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 23) within the learning environment. For example, instruction is culturally responsive when the diverse cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, strengths, and performance styles of students (Gay, 2000) are central to pedagogy. A culturally responsive stance, acknowledges how dominant culture paradigms limit the ways in which knowledge is created and provides an alternative framework as to how knowledge can be constructed and understood (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). When considering research as culturally responsive, cultural referents and perspectives are used to acknowledge and connect participants' multiple cultures and social identities within the inquiry process, providing relevant lenses through which participants interact with researchers in the co-creation of knowledge (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lahman et al., 2011).

In this article we will provide a brief history of focus groups and an overview of the emergent research using focus groups with traditionally marginalized communities. Through original research we conducted intentionally designed focus groups as a method for data collection, we describe examples of traditional focus groups, culturally responsive focus groups (CRFGs), and naturally occurring CRFGs. Finally, methodological and ethical considerations of CRFGs will be discussed.

## **Theoretical Framework**

For this article, our shared perspectives on constructivism, feminism, and critical race theory frameworks, as well as our understandings of culturally responsive practices, informed our

research. Janesick (2000) advocated the use of multiple theories in research as a primary way for researchers to broaden their understandings. Constructivists assume reality is socially constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Schwandt, 1994). People's ways of knowing come from their own mental derivations due to their particular experiences and contexts, and, as a result, acknowledging multiple realities is essential in the interaction between the researcher and participants (Baxter Magolda, 2001). By design, constructivist focus groups allow participants and researchers to co-create knowledge together within the specific focus group context rather than uncover the one singular *Truth* about a research question.

Similarly, feminists typically do not hold a single epistemology (Schwandt, 2001). Olsen (2005) characterized feminist work as "highly diversified, enormously dynamic, and thoroughly challenging" (p. 235). However, there are fundamentals which feminist researchers share: 1) a focus on gender and power; 2) a goal to conduct empowering research; and 3) an emphasis on alternative ways to conduct research (Olsen, 2005). Feminist researchers have been central to deconstructing the power dynamic between those researched and the researcher (Creswell, 1998). Further, feminists place at the center of their research the voices of those who have typically been marginalized, most often women's voices (for example, Minister, 1991); however, feminist research has extended its' scope to include advocacy for and understanding of groups such as children persons with disabilities, and those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered (Olsen, 2005).

Some of the research portrayed in this article is informed by a Chicana feminist epistemology, another dimension of the feminist frame. Chicana feminism creates methodological strategies and techniques that create a space for the construction of knowledge through the experiences, lives, and voices of Latinas (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Elenes, 2001; Gonzalez, 2001). This epistemology challenges traditional paradigms by relocating Latinas' lived experience to a central position in the research and by viewing this experience at the intersection of the social identities of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Gonzalez, 2001). The Chicana feminist framework distinguishes Latina participants as co-researchers in the meaning making of the emerging data.

Focus groups have been noted as a method compatible with a feminist epistemological frame as it allows researchers to minimize the distance between themselves and the participants. This allows multivocality (multiple voices are heard) during the research process (Madriz, 2000). Thus focus groups afford participants more influence in the research setting (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006; Madriz, 2000). As researchers, we believe the act of conducting research can be a transformational process in which we challenge assumptions and make meaning of new information (Creswell, 1998; Crotty, 1998). Our work with CRFGs allowed us to honor the experiences of participants and to create research environments that were welcoming and supportive of participants' social identities.

Considering focus groups from a culturally responsive perspective is also grounded in critical theories (Freire, 1970; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) and, in particular, critical race theory (CRT). A critical frame emphasizes researchers work "*with* people and not *on* them" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 889). The specific goal of CRT is to 'trouble' conventional ways of conducting research by addressing intrinsic racism, which is enmeshed with society and frequently invisible to dominant powers (Ladson-Billings, 2000). CRT researchers attempt to "speak explicitly back to the webbed relations of history, political economy, and everyday lives of women and men of color" (Fine & Weis, 2005, p. 66) and challenge conventions for viewing and conducting research (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). At the heart of this challenge is the need to acknowledge that research involves power, is conducted by "raced, gendered, classed, and

politically oriented individuals” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 66), is interpreted at an intersection of one’s race, class, age, sexual orientation, and gender, and has historically pathologized marginalized groups (Liamputtong, 2007).

We believe the facilitation of focus groups can be fostered in a culturally responsive manner. In the sections to follow, we will briefly discuss historical and contemporary focus groups, the current discourse on conducting focus groups, and finally, reflections on the development of CRFGs.

### **Historical to Contemporary Focus Groups**

From the earliest documented focus group studies (Bogardus, 1926) to WWII war morale research (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956/1990), the group interview, or the focus group, developed out of one-on-one interviews. In the 1950’s, focus groups on management problems in the military were conducted (Frey & Fontana, 1993) and market researchers also began to use focus groups. In academic arenas, researchers largely ignored the early work on focus groups until the 1970s (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 2002). By the 1980’s, focus groups began to be used more broadly in the social sciences (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Greenbaum, 1988; Krueger, 1994; Templeton, 1994) including critical groups such as Marxists, feminists, and literacy advocates (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Contemporary focus group research has broadened into discussions of computer mediated focus groups (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006; Turney & Pocknee, 2005), ethics (Hofmeyer & Scott, 2007), and emergent novel methods (Morgan et al., 2008; Propst, 2008).

In recent literature, researchers have initiated conversation about the use of focus groups with distinctive participant populations (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Hennick, 2008; Madriz, 2000; Moody et al., 2004). Intentionally constructing focus groups with participants who share similar characteristics, experiences, and identities has been acknowledged as having important benefits in regard to the data gathered and the comfort of the individuals present (Fallon & Brown, 2002). This is particularly true for focus group researchers seeking to work with participants who have been traditionally marginalized (Allen, 2006; Fallon & Brown, 2002; Madriz, 1998; Woodring et al., 2006). For example, Madriz (1998) described focus groups with women as “a form of collective testimony” (p. 116). Further, she touted the benefits of focus groups for women in general, and in particular, for those who have been additionally marginalized by their socioeconomic status or racial/ethnic identity. Madriz (1998) stated,

Communication among women can be an awakening experience and an important element of a consciousness raising process, because it asserts women’s right to substantiate their own experiences. The discovery that other women face similar problems or share analogous ideas is an important tool...in women’s realization that their opinions are legitimate and valid. (p. 116-117)

Similarly, in a study of the Bangladeshi community, Fallon and Brown (2002) concluded that creating focus groups with participants who share a common culture “can be highly advantageous...especially where ethnic minority groups are concerned” (p. 206). Participants in the study felt especially comfortable engaging in the focus groups, because facilitators shared participants’ culture and experiences. A shared experience and identity with the focus group facilitator can provide additional opportunity for authentic sharing among focus group participants.

When constructed intentionally, focus groups can be developed to reflect an environment that seems natural, comfortable, and affirming for participants. However, Madriz (1998) noted that although focus groups are a legitimate and well-utilized data collection strategy, “discussion on culturally sensitive methodologies are virtually absent from the literature on qualitative and ethnographic methods” (p. 125). Farnsworth and Boon (2010) argued the need for focus group research to be problematized. Indeed focus groups are classically seen as a quick and easy way to collect data. Time and patience are required to respectfully attend to participants’ cultural backgrounds (Balch & Mertens, 1999). Furthermore, Hennick (2008) called for transparency in methodological decision-making in cross-cultural research settings in order to provide researchers who are new to cross-cultural and/or international research settings with strategies for conducting research. Building on Madriz (2000), Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) focused on conscious raising groups: “...the primary goal of the CRGs [conscious raising groups]...was to build “theory” from the lived experiences of women that could contribute to their emancipation” (p. 893). Through this article, our intent is to join in community with those who have attempted to address this gap in the literature, to make transparent the methods we have used in conducting our own focus groups, and to contribute to the conversation on culturally responsive research practices (Lahman et al. 2011) and focus groups.

### **Elements of Culturally Responsive Focus Groups**

As researchers, we began to craft the notion of culturally responsive research practices through the exploration of culturally responsive teaching practices that focus on creating classroom environments that best meet the needs of all students and allow for new ways to understand and co-construct knowledge (Farmer, Hauk & Neumann, 2005; Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Through their research in high school contexts, Villegas and Lucas (2002a) describe six aspects of a culturally responsive educator. Informed by the culturally responsive teaching scholarship, we advance six parallel elements which describe the culturally responsive researcher (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Six elements of culturally responsive research informed by culturally responsive teaching (modified from Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, 2002b).**

<i>Culturally Responsive Researcher</i>	<i>Culturally Responsive Teacher</i>
Is socially conscious	Is socially conscious
Operates from an asset-based model seeing participants’ perspectives and stories as opportunities for understanding reality and co-constructing knowledge	Operates from an asset-based model seeing all students’ backgrounds as opportunities for learning
Sees self as a change agent responsible for creating comfortable environments allowing for authentic sharing of experience	Sees self as a change agent responsible for creating environments for all students to be successful
Is aware of participants’ social identities and acknowledges these identities throughout the research process	Is able to creatively navigate various learning styles
Is reflexive about researcher’s own personal story and how it impacts the research experience	Utilizes individual student stories to expand and to build student knowledge base.
Utilizes participant stories to expand and enhance participants’ ability to co-construct knowledge within the research setting.	Acknowledges students personal stories

Both culturally responsive educators and researchers recognize the limitations of dominant social and cultural paradigms and provide an expansive context with respect to ‘knowledge’ and how that knowledge is created and understood. The notion of being culturally responsive specifically emphasizes the critical need for educators and researchers, to “know who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach [and conduct research], and questioning their knowledge and assumptions” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181). By recognizing the power dynamics inherent in our roles as researchers as well as our own social and cultural identities, we seek to minimize the intimidation and discomfort that may be experienced in traditional research methodologies and enhance the participants’ ability to co-construct knowledge within the research setting. These tenets are important for all researchers using focus groups and are particularly salient when considering CRFG facilitation. As a concrete suggestion, CRFG researchers should ask themselves the following questions to check their assumptions and reflexivity:

1. What are the participants’ social and cultural identities?
2. How do the participants’ social and cultural identities inform their unique communication and/or relationship characteristics that are important for me to acknowledge within this research?
3. What are the naturally occurring environments the participants already share?
4. How can I create and/or join a context that feels comfortable and affirming to participants?
5. How do I best acknowledge my own social and cultural identities and minimize the distance between myself and participants?
6. How do I best elicit the rich information these participants can share about their storied lives that in turn will make the research story most rich and representative of their experience?

As researchers answer these and other questions particular to their unique setting, appropriate CRFG strategies emerge and allow the researcher to create a setting focused on participants,’ rather than researchers,’ ways of communicating and storytelling.

### **Researchers’ Reflections on Focus Group Methodology**

Reflections in this article are based on our experiences as researchers conducting focus groups. While attentive to placing participants at the center of inquiry, these focus groups ranged from traditional to naturally occurring and culturally responsive. Brief descriptions of the studies used to inform this article are presented. The focus group methods are discussed in the context of traditional focus groups, CRFGs with Latina participants, and naturally occurring CRFGs with children.

#### **Traditional Focus Groups**

Monica, conducted traditional focus groups in the area of qualitative evaluation. As part of a program evaluation, a series of eight focus groups with students in an Interpreter Preparation Program at a community college in the U.S. were conducted. Half of the focus groups consisted of current students in the program, while the other half was conducted with graduates from the program. The questions asked of these groups were related to strengths and weaknesses of the program and included suggestions for improvement. Monica also conducted several focus groups as a part of course evaluations. In these focus groups, she facilitated end-of-term discussions about college courses, again with the overall goal of improving the courses. Finally, Monica

facilitated several focus groups with community college students as part of a research project whose purpose was to understand what makes successful college students. Based on criteria that characterized successful students, students self-selected to participate in these focus groups.

Monica's focus groups were conducted according to standard focus group methods (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and involved four to twelve participants. In the program evaluation, a few of the students were acquainted with fellow participants; however, for the most part, these students did not know each other. In the second set of focus groups (course evaluations), the participants knew each other as classmates. And in the focus groups related to success, the participants did not know one another.

As Monica began to work in the area of culturally responsive research and conducted focus groups with youth regarding reduction of risk-taking behaviors she wondered how the focus groups might have been conducted differently. While the new research topic clearly would benefit from the use of CRFG due to the sensitive nature of the research she began to see the application of CRFGs to all of the focus group research she had conducted. For example, elsewhere Monica has argued that community college students comprise a unique culture that is marginalized in the field of higher education (Geist, 2007). These students are often representative of marginalized groups reflecting diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds, women, first-generation college students, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and are typically older than traditional college students (Mohammadi, 1994; Summers, 2003). While traditional focus groups allowed Monica to provide the university with relatively quick and inexpensive evaluative information, this approach did not provide Monica with a way of eliciting deep or meaningful data. CRFGs that emphasized the unique culture of community college students might have been particularly useful for the research question regarding what makes a successful college student.

### **Culturally Responsive Focus Groups with Latina College Students**

Katrina and Jana directed an extensive case study exploring transformational leadership development with non-traditional aged college women at a public university in the U.S. southwest (Rodriguez, Schwartz, & Graglia, 2007). The students selected for this study were participants in a leadership program which operated from a strengths-based philosophy of leadership development for women, particularly Latinas. Program participants took part in a shared leadership development curriculum which focused on re-defining leadership from a non-hierarchical and inclusive perspective. In this study we explored how the curriculum had an impact on participants' understanding and beliefs about leadership and how the process of redefining leadership as non-hierarchical and inclusive influenced participants' behaviors, particularly their ability to seek additional leadership experiences.

As a part of the leadership study, Katrina and Jana hosted a focus group for eight Latina participants designed specifically to address the areas of connection between cultural identity and leadership development. In the spirit of community, the focus group was held at Katrina's home. The atmosphere was intentionally designed to reflect the space students had experienced within their leadership program, which frequently included discussions over a meal in a comfortable setting. According to Hennick (2008), who worked with international and cross-cultural focus groups, context and culture of study participants will influence the research venue; therefore, focus groups may be held in locations relevant to participants, such as the home of a community leader.

In this case, Katrina served dinner, traditional homemade Mexican food, by candle light. The environment was festive and many participants commented it was like being at home for a family

celebration. As the focus group wrapped up, participant Sylvia (pseudonym) commented on the interaction:

...thank you. It's so inspirational...to come and take a break from life to experience life. It's motivating. Because times get tough and I think [our conversations] all feed off of each other, so thank you ladies. It's been good [for] me.

Similarly, in another study, Katrina collected individual life histories from five Mexican-American women and then, over a festive meal, facilitated a focus group in her home (Rodriguez & Lahman, 2011). Instead of seeing the focus group solely as a validity tool to corroborate the one-on-one interview data, Katrina felt that the focus group was a natural extension of the research that expressed the culture and context of Mexican-American community, celebration, and relationship. During the CRFG, Katrina explored the feelings and beliefs Latina college women had about body image and beauty standards, specifically the familial and cultural messages received about their bodies and physical appearance. To provide context for the focus group conversation, Katrina unveiled a print of the painting, *Las Comadres*, by Latino artist Simon Silva (1991). Centering discussion on artwork has been called El Arte elicitation (Lahman, Mendoza, Rodriguez, & Schwartz, 2001). In this case, as participants examined the image of two Mexican women whispering to each other over a brick fence, they interpreted what they saw in the painting and the cultural connections the artwork and its title had for each of them. The El Arte elicitation process created a culturally appropriate segue to the discussion on culture and beauty standards.

As a second component of this focus group, Katrina shared preliminary findings with participants, inviting them into the data analysis process. In traditional inquiries, the researcher generally claims sole authority in the analysis of participants' lived experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998). As the participants in Katrina's study made meaning of the data, they also became co-creators of knowledge (Sandoval, 1998), rather than objectified 'subjects' of the research (Villenas, 1996), a critical element of Chicana feminist methods. Throughout the focus group session, the dialogue triggered ideas and thoughts from other women around the table. Much like Madriz's (2000) study participants, the women in Katrina's focus groups disagreed with each other or spoke from opposing perspectives when their experiences differed, denoting a freedom within the group to express authentic perspectives and experiences.

In both of these studies with Latina college women (Rodriguez & Lahman, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2007), the focus groups were important within the context of their respective inquiries because they allowed for storytelling and sharing of collective wisdom in ways that were culturally salient for participants. This produced data and insights that might be less accessible otherwise (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In this way, CRFGs created space for these women of color to "write culture together" (Madriz, 2000, p. 836) by sharing the forms of oppression they experienced as well as the resistance strategies they used in daily settings. These were important contexts for participants' meaning making around leadership and body image for each study respectively. Stories (data) emerged more freely because the group setting was supported by a culturally and contextually familiar environment (Hennick, 2008) which allowed participants to give "their testimonies in front of other women like themselves" (Madriz, p. 847). By making explicit the cultural context of the research, an important backdrop emerges for understanding the issues and implications of the study.



### **Naturally Occurring, Culturally Responsive Focus Groups with Children**

Childhood represents a distinct culture which adults may never fully rejoin (Lahman, 2008). Even the most skilled and patient adult is accepted, at most, into a child culture as an adult friend, with most adult researchers being accepted by children in the role of teacher, parent, observer, or even enemy (Wolcott, 2001). Although there are notable exceptions (including Corsaro's (1985) study of preschool society, Fine's (1987) exploration of Little League baseball, and Thorne's (1993) examination of children's play at school), research has historically overlooked and or neglected children as a culture (Holmes, 1998). Therefore, it is of little surprise that focus group research with children is not a developed methodology.

Using knowledge garnered from early childhood education and early childhood research, Maria, determined that, when at all possible, children should be asked questions in small groups that naturally occur in the children's contexts. Joining a pre-existing or freely formed 'naturally occurring' group of children helps diminish the adult's power and allows the children to feel more comfortable. One-on-one questioning of children may evoke the question and response sessions children have with doctors, teachers, parents, and other authority figures (Graue & Walsh, 1998). A classic example of a naturally occurring type of children's group would be a teacher's or librarian's circle, meeting, or group time. Lather and Smithies (1997) exemplary study of women living with HIV is a hallmark for how naturally occurring focus groups may be conducted with adults. Morgan, Fellows, and Guevara, (2008) discuss repeated focus groups which are similar to recurring natural focus groups.

Over the course of one academic year, Maria took part in over 60 naturally occurring snack time conversations with five-year-olds in a public school, half-day kindergarten classroom. Children self-selected into Maria's focus groups by choosing their own snack time seat. Groups ranged from four to six children and lasted 10 to 20 minutes. The entire class ate snack at the same time. Typically, children left the snack group as they finished their snack. At the beginning of the year, the children engaged in conversation as they normally would and Maria only participated when asked direct questions. As she began to develop a rapport with the children and when it seemed appropriate Maria would introduce topics of conversation or build on existing topics to elicit data. While the children ate and chatted, Maria transcribed conversations onto a laptop computer. This data collection technique yielded rich, contextually relevant information in areas as diverse as disability, nutrition, friendship, reality/fantasy, and family life. The following is an example of children naturally preparing others for a developmental milestone: losing a first tooth.

Meg brought a little film canister to the snack table and opened the lid reverently to display a tiny white tooth. John, who was busily eating, stopped to admire the tooth and started to speak in excited tones. "You should put it under your pillow!"

Meg said, "I already did. I left the Tooth Fairy a note that said, 'Please leave my tooth. Please don't take my tooth. Leave money and a little stuffed kitty.' The tooth fairy did it all. She left five gold dollars."

John, seeing that Meg was a voice of experience posed an important question, "Did it hurt when your tooth came out?"

While Meg did not think it hurt too much Madeline interrupted shaking her head dramatically, "Yeah, it hurts super bad. They pull it and it bleeds. It really hurts because either you have to pull it out or your mom has to."

Ama, a tall girl, added, "I have five grown up teeth. You can't see the holes

anymore."

Curious about the children's conceptions of the tooth fairy, Maria asked John, "What happens when you put a tooth under a pillow?"

"You'll get millions of dollars so I can get a Jurassic Park toy," he answered.

Although Maria posed the questions in several different ways the children did not question the existence of a tooth fairy.

### **Constructing Culturally Responsive Focus Groups**

Focus groups have been shown to be effective data collection methods for children (Morgan et al., 2002) and for Latina women (Madriz, 2002). Through our experience as researchers, we concur and have come to appreciate the valuable information elicited through our focus groups. In this article we specifically address the benefits of being culturally responsive in research practice when utilizing focus group methods, whether creating a unique focus group or joining a naturally occurring group. In particular, we believe the success of the focus groups we have conducted is directly related to the environments created in each of the settings.

In the following section we will discuss how CRFG may help validate participants' identities, the role of the researcher, traditional focus group concerns, and ethical and methodological considerations.

### **Validating the Identities of Participants**

Several authors have acknowledged that focus group data collection is most effective when participants share similar social identities and experiences and are in a comfortable environment (Breen, 2006; Fallon & Brown, 2002; Madriz, 1998). However, these authors have stopped short of distinguishing the importance of designing the focus group to validate the identities of participants. For focus groups to be culturally effective, the environment must either be chosen or intentionally designed to value and affirm the participants (Hennick, 2008). Simply inviting participants with similar characteristics will not be sufficient (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006). While there is value in having similar participants share a focus group experience, our research demonstrates the depth of information which may be garnered from CRFGs designed specifically to value and uphold the participants' identities.

In the community college evaluation study, for example, two traditional focus groups were held with the participants of the Interpreter Preparation Program. Participants in this study were highly connected to each other and had an intimate shared experience; however, when brought together for a traditional focus group, the research setting felt contrived. Trustworthy and important information emerged from the traditional focus group. However, data with greater richness and depth surfaced when gender and cultural identity were put at the center of the research experience in the CRFGs of Latina participants. Madriz (2000) suggested the multivocality of a group setting focused on gender, ethnic culture, and socioeconomic background, validates and empowers participants and their collective experiences within the research process. This is supported by Maria's focus group experience. Joining children at their chosen snack tables allowed access to ways of communicating and issues that typically arise but which may go unnoticed in a focus group established outside the naturally occurring environment.

Facilitators of CRFG are also cognizant of the physical cues that exist in an environment. Morgan

(2002), for example, shares that he learned about being responsive to culture through an understanding of the British 'living room discussions'. In Britain, focus group participants are less likely to sit around a table, a configuration which is frequently present in focus group literature from the United States. British focus groups were developed through marketing research in Britain, which utilized living room conversations held after the viewing of a commercial or other advertisement. When conducting focus groups in Britain, a culturally responsive focus group facilitator would be conscious of this information and be more likely to conduct focus groups in someone's home or in a comfortable, informal setting – and without a table (Morgan, 2002). Allen (2006) was also mindful of the physical environment in which she conducted focus groups with gay and lesbian youth. She chose a location that had posters, reading material, and other visuals affirming lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. She knew she wanted an environment reflecting positive and supportive messages as the youth participants were taking the risk to share personal information about their sexual identity with her.

Similarly, studies conducted by Madriz (2002) and several of our focus groups centered on the sharing of food. Traditionally, researchers used food as a way of attracting participants to focus groups or as tokens of appreciation for participation. It is important to note that culturally responsive researchers utilize food to celebrate participants' culture or identity and/or preferred method of interacting and conversing. A CRFG environment is developed to reflect the naturally occurring discussions which happen over a shared meal with families or friends, not as a contrived way to lure participation.

When deciding to use focus groups as a means for data collection, researchers need to be reflective of the best environment for their participants. CRFGs require an awareness of participants' cultural identities and natural ways of communicating, and an ability to place those identities and communication styles at the center of one's research. We argue that, when possible, researchers should join pre-existing groups. The safety of a pre-existing group will allow participants to feel most comfortable in sharing their unique story with an outsider researcher. If it is not possible, great attention must be given to creating a space that feels culturally natural and affirming to the participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Culturally responsive focus group researchers and facilitators must value and respect the experiences of the participants, beyond the context of the research question. Facilitators must also be attentive to their own multiple social identities, (for example, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age) and how these identities might impact the experience of the participants. If, for example, Maria was unaware of how her identity as an adult impacts children's play and conversation, the data she gathered would have been less meaningful. Similarly, Jana identifies as a white woman and having white women present during a discussion on Latina leadership was acknowledged by the participants. Using a welcoming sense of humor, the participants decided to accept Jana as a Latina for the night, as one participant, Nancy, suggested, "You...are Latina... because we adopted you." These remarks, however, can be interpreted as evidence that the subsequent conversation would typically not have happened in the company of white people. It was important for Jana to be aware of and comfortable with this dynamic in order to maintain the safety of the space for the participants. The values, beliefs, and comfort of the participants must be central to the process of CRFGs to allow for the most valid and reliable information to emerge.

Most importantly, researchers must be truly interested in and have an appreciation for participants' cultural identities and the stories being shared. Fallon and Brown (2002) indicate that the selection of facilitators for their focus groups was a vitally important task; both

facilitators and participants in their study indicated that having facilitators who knew and valued the story being shared was central to the effectiveness of the focus groups. Researchers must be cognizant and attentive to who moderates focus groups (Hennick, 2008) as participants will quickly become aware of facilitators who do not value and demonstrate interest in the experiences and stories of participants. The identity of the researcher is, therefore, imperative to the design of CRFGs.

### **Addressing Historical Focus Group Concerns**

We firmly believe that all research endeavors will benefit from an understanding of culturally responsive research practices. We address some of the historical concerns of focus group researchers' in this section. A current controversy in focus group research is that even though focus groups should be designed to feel natural, some researchers suggest that focus groups validity may be compromised because participants mask their true feelings and beliefs to fit in with other focus group participants (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006; Morgan, 2002). Culturally responsive researchers may have a different orientation toward issues of validity as they take the view that trustworthy data can be elicited in relational, community settings. Culturally responsive researchers operate under the assumption that there is no single 'true' version of a person's life that can be captured. Instead, there is the person who is a participant personified in a group and the person who is a participant personified in one-on-one settings; both are valid representations of is the participant. CRFGs address the traditional validity concern by creating environments in which participants may easily take on roles and perspectives familiar and comfortable to them, and thus communicate in natural ways, which minimize or eliminate masking behavior.

As Maria interviewed children in their classroom, she joined tables that were already familiar and naturally occurring. While her presence certainly changed the dynamic of the group, it is likely she obtained trustworthy information as she joined and adapted to a naturally occurring group rather than gathering information in a contrived research setting. The children were more likely to communicate in a relatively normal manner as they were in an everyday context. Similarly, Minister (1991) found that when working with women who are shy for a variety of reasons related to social identities, focus groups were more comfortable and reflected a more natural communication environment than did individual interviews. In the focus group context, these women felt more open to share freely and comfortably about their unique experiences. CRFGs, then, are more likely to represent authentic and rich information, because participants are communicating in natural ways in an environment that affirms their experience and ways of sharing information.

Debate also exists regarding whether focus groups yield more valuable information from friends/acquaintances versus from strangers participating in a group together (Fallon & Brown, 2002). While we believe there is value for participants interacting in a naturally occurring group environment, the established relationship between participants appears to be less important than is designing environments that speak to the cultural context of participants' identities and ways of knowing. In a study of 7-11 year-old children with asthma, Morgan et al., (2002) separated the boys from the girls, thus acknowledging that, at this age, gender is a salient characteristic and discussions with both boys and girls present could inhibit authentic sharing. It was important to recognize the ways in which children at this age communicate in order to create a supportive environment. Likewise, in one of her CRFGs, Katrina's participants did not know each other; however, as these women gathered in an environment that placed their Latina identity at the center of the focus group experience, they were able to engage in authentic and meaningful communication. For many women, collective story-telling about their experiences can feel more natural than traditional one-to-one settings (Madriz, 2002). The focus group reflected the

women's identities and ways of storytelling, and thus created an environment to which they could communicate authentically despite their lack of prior acquaintance. CRFG allows rich data to emerge in situations which are culturally familiar and affirming, whether or not participants know each other prior to the focus group experience.

### **Ethical Considerations**

CRFGs are not without ethical considerations. Research always has ethical tensions and feminist research, even in its desire to affirm and validate marginalized voices, is no exception (Patai, 1991). CRFGs can be viewed as highly manipulative and researchers should carefully consider the following questions: (1) If environments are created to feel like home or a gathering of friends, is the process deceptive? (2) Can participants be 'friends' with researchers? (for example, Ellis, 2007) (3) Will CRFGs induce participants to share more freely and result in participant discomfort with data use? (4) Has the research process been explained adequately so that participants fully understand how the data will be used and who might be interested in what is perceived as their 'living room' discussion? It is important for researchers to keep these questions in mind and to be transparent with participants about the research process. Steps, such as transcript review by participants and full explanation of data use, should be taken to insure research transparency.

Most importantly, researchers must be continuously and consistently reflexive in their research practices and seek to conduct the most ethical research possible. Creating focus group environments that are meaningful, welcoming and safe for participants is good practice; however, it does not eliminate the possibility of ethical dilemmas surfacing. It is the culturally responsive researcher's job to be proactive and reflective in the development and design of focus groups, creating environments that best meet the needs and respect the rights of the participants.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Focus groups are not effective in every situation and with every group (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006) and can be time consuming, costly, and difficult to arrange, facilitate, and transcribe. Facilitating CRFGs adds an additional layer of challenge. Transcriptions may be more time intensive and costly due to overlapping talk, emotional noise (joy/sorrow), and background sounds from food and drink consumption. Additionally, in international or cross-cultural groups where there is a difference in language among participants and researchers, attention must be given to finding and training facilitators and transcriptionists with appropriate language skills (Hennick, 2008).

While not every researcher will wish to use CRFGs (especially due to time and money constraints) an understanding of culturally responsive tenets will aid their work. Balch and Mertens (1999) emphasized the time consuming nature of this approach. In some research situations, traditional focus groups will be most effective and appropriate. Researchers and participants may find CRFGs affirming and meaningful, but the appropriate use of CRFGs must be carefully considered in the same manner one would consider the use of any research method.

### **Final Reflections**

Focus groups exist on a continuum, from traditional focus groups to naturally occurring CRFG. We argue that when a rich, storied experience is desired from participants, the best setting is a CRFG. Culturally responsive research practice necessitates creating a natural, empowering, and validating setting for participants. Traditional focus group methods should be adapted to

participant culture, just as individual interviews are tailored to meet the needs of distinctive respondents (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). CRFGs are valuable for the fertile, trustworthy data that emerges, and they allow researchers to demonstrate concern and respect for participants who are sharing their intimate stories.

We encourage researchers to utilize focus group methods which are attentive to the cultural identity and ways of knowing of their participants. Being culturally responsive in research practices, and specifically in focus group development, provides an atmosphere in which participants will feel valued and understood. Researchers will garner rich data because participants will be more likely to share authentically in a research environment that reflects their cultural contexts.

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