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# Displaying opinions: Topics and disagreement in focus groups

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ABSTRACT

Focus group discussions are now widely used for gathering data, in social science as well as in commercial marketing and public opinion research. One appeal of focus groups is that in some ways they seem like everyday talk, but their effectiveness depends on a tension between the moderator's constraints and participants' interaction. The moderator introduces and defines topics, but participants can shift, close, and interpret them. The moderator elicits disagreement in a way specific to focus groups, but participants manage their disagreement. Thus we see not simple control by the moderator, but a complex collaborative project operating under the shared assumption that the purpose of the discussion is to display opinions to the moderator. These findings extend the analysis of conversation in institutional settings and contribute to a methodological critique of the reification of attitudes and opinions in some social science research. (Focus group techniques, conversation, discourse analysis, interaction, agreement, topic, laughter, environment.)*

Focus group discussions are now widely used to gather data, both in social science and in commercial marketing and public opinion research. Typically, a trained moderator leads a group of five to ten people through a two-hour discussion focused on a topic of interest to the researcher, e.g. attitudes to safe sex, responses to a soap-opera episode, feelings about local open spaces, weekly shopping habits, or the experience of buying a car.[1] One handbook gives the following definition: "A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger 1994:6).

There has been a great deal of attention to the ways groups should be conducted, and to the linking of their results to those from approaches using surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation. There has been relatively little attention to the process of analyzing the tape recording or transcript, beyond suggestions for efficient content analysis (Bertrand et al. 1992). But researchers in several fields have called for attention to the discussions as forms of interaction (Burgess et al. 1988, Kitzinger 1994, Agar & MacDonald 1995, Holbrook & Jackson 1996,

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Catterall & Maclaran 1997). In this article I follow the lead of these researchers, looking at the sequence and form of turns in focus-group transcripts to show how participants orient to topics and manage disagreement. The similarities and differences between the patterns in these groups and those in ordinary conversation make sense if we assume that participants act as if the main point of the event is to display opinions for a moderator and tape recorder.

I draw on conversation analysis (CA) to show some of the sequential organization of focus-group interaction. CA began as part of a sociological approach to the study of how people organize their everyday worlds.[2] More recently, researchers have compared the regularities that CA finds in everyday talk with talk in social institutions (Agar 1985), such as the courts (Atkinson & Drew 1979), political rallies (Atkinson 1984), broadcasting (Heritage 1985. Greatbatch 1988, Scannell 1991, Hutchby 1992), and in interactions between professionals and clients (Boden & Zimmerman 1991, Drew & Heritage 1993, Antaki & Rapley 1996). The detailed analysis of conversation has also proved useful to discourse analysts dealing with one kind of talk that is crucial to social science methods – the research interview (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984, Potter & Wetherell 1987, Silverman 1993, Potter 1996). Goodwin & Goodwin (1992:182) argue for the relevance of such analysis to the aims of qualitative studies: "Particular interpretations of events in the world may be far less important than the structures used to accomplish such congruent interpretations as a social activity in the first place." In this article I extend this line of methodological reflection on qualitative research to focus-group transcripts.

Looking at how utterances emerge and are developed between participants, and at how the moderator might be caught up in this development, goes beyond the usual analysis of focus group transcripts, in which "there is typically little attention to either the microdynamics of the interaction process or the contextual constraints of the focus group setting" (Morgan 1988:26). In most studies, analysis of the transcripts tends to be limited to various forms of content analysis, marking passages that deal with categories of interest in the study. Market research studies may give even less attention to the interaction; the moderator may just write a report based on his or her impression of the key issues and attitudes. Of course, the content analysis and the interpretation, if done by the moderator, may draw perceptively on a complex intuitive sense of what went on in the session (that is why moderators are encouraged to write detailed notes soon after the session). But there is little attention in either handbooks or reports to the bases for these intuitions – compared to enormous attention to the selection of participants, the design of stimulus materials and exercises, the various ways of moderating discussions, and the linking of focus groups to surveys or ethnographies. Kitzinger notes that, in a survey of 40 focus group studies, she could not find a single one concentrating on the conversation between participants (1994:104). The hundreds of pages of transcripts routinely produced by any focus group study are left as a black box; we have to take the output without asking too much about the machinery that has produced them.



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To open this black box, we must consider what sort of interaction goes on in a focus group discussion. The key to this analysis is the comparison of focus group discussions to other forms of talk. Handbooks and reviews on focus groups typically place the technique as intermediary between ethnographic observation of groups (with little interference but little control) and research interviews (with much tighter control, but also with less opportunity for unpredictable responses).[3] Agar & MacDonald 1995 point out that the definition I have given from Krueger ("a carefully planned discussion ... in a permissive, non-threatening environment") contains an implicit tension between "carefully planned" and "permissive." Proponents of the approach argue that this tension is part of the strength of focus groups; the constraints of the situation, the intervention of the moderator, and the frame of the topic guide can be explicitly defined and accounted for in analysis, while some of the exciting and unpredictable play of everyday talk remains. The assumptions of a necessary tension between the moderator's control and the group's lively interaction, and of a necessary collaboration between the moderator and the group, provide the basis of my analysis.

It is not enough simply to acknowledge the constraints of the focus-group situation on participants' talk, just as any social science researchers should acknowledge their intervention in the research. Talk provides both the material form and the persuasive power of focus-group studies; the sense that focus groups give of overheard everyday talk is the key to their impact, both for market research clients seeking realism and for academic researchers seeking validity. Clients of commercial research firms often watch the group from behind a one-way mirror, and the effect is one of overhearing the real thoughts of ordinary consumers.[4] Even in the relatively dry presentation of transcripts used in academic research, the liveliness of the personalities and the interplay can give a sense of immediacy, e.g. in the studies by Burgess et al. 1988. Thus this source of social science data depends for its effect on its form, and especially on the way that form seems like everyday talk.

Nevertheless, focus-group transcripts are not records of everyday talk. In most studies, the people are strangers;[5] so they are not passing the time of day, and they are not thinking about the consequences of what they say for their mutual relationships. There is both more and less time to talk than in ordinary conversation – more time in that participants are present for one or two hours; less in that they may be hurried on to new topics. Three features of most focus groups particularly affect turn-taking:

(a) The moderator introduces topics and closes them, following a plan.
(b) The moderator can intervene to control turn-taking.
(c) The moderator elicits and acknowledges responses.

Participants treat certain kinds of utterances as appropriate in the focus group setting, and certain ways of responding to these utterances; and they respond when their expectations are not fulfilled.



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It might seem that participants talking within these constraints would produce opinions that were relevant only within this setting, thus making it impossible to draw on focus groups for wider implications.[6] My analysis in fact shows that the moderator has enormous and sometimes unacknowledged influence on what is said – by introducing and interpreting topics, by acknowledging responses to them, and by eliciting and labeling disagreement. But I also find that participants are involved in these processes in complex ways, collaborating with one another and with the moderator to shape topics and manage disagreements, within their own assumptions about the event and purpose of a group. Focus groups show highly constrained, collaborative development of topic (as in broadcast interviews, but with different assumptions) and constrained, collaborative management of disagreement (as in arguments, but with different ends) that allow us to explore mechanisms of continuity and difference. Tracing these processes can help us understand what sort of thing these participants take opinions to be, and how they can be displayed in public.[7]

## THE FOCUS GROUPS

This article draws on transcripts from seven focus groups conducted for a study of how people talk about issues related to environmental sustainability.[8] These studies are typical of the methodological uses of focus groups, in that they sought to explore the sorts of meanings within which participants interpreted these issues, and how participants related these issues to their daily lives and concerns. They were also typical of many, though not all, focus-group studies in several respects:

(a) The number of participants: Eight in a group, while other studies may have from about five to about twelve.

(b) The selection of participants: Selection was conducted by a professional recruiter on criteria of age, gender, urban or rural residence, newspaper readership, and socio-economic class – variables relevant to the theoretical categories of the study.

(c) The homogeneity of the groups in terms of the theoretical categories of the study: Four in the northern UK, four in the south, with two groups of mothers aged 20–30, two groups of men 35–45, two groups of rural middle-class men and women 55–65, and two groups of urban professionals 25–35. Most handbooks suggest that homogeneity within groups encourages discussion.

(d) The structure given by the topic guide: A section of introductions, in which participants said where they lived and what environmental issues concerned them; a central section of discussions of given statements about sustainability and environmental actions; and a brief closing section of responses to leaflets.

(e) The length: Two hours, which many handbooks say is the limit for such a group; other groups may be as short as an hour.



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(f) The role of the moderator: There were three moderators in the course of the eight groups, all trained in a style of intervention that emphasizes constant minimal response with occasional probing and no evaluation.

(g) The audiotaping and transcription of the discussions: Orthographic transcriptions by a typist were checked and further annotated by another listener. Some studies use videotape, while others may rely on the moderator or an observer to take notes.

Thus, for the purposes of my analysis here, these groups can stand for a wide range of focus groups following fairly standard procedures.

It is important for the analysis of disagreement to note that we selected participants in each group to be fairly homogeneous with respect to the issues under discussion. (This has become standard, though not universal, in focus group practice; moderators have noted that participants in groups that are too heterogeneous tend to stick to superficial statements, or not to talk at all.) This homogeneity could have affected the way participants expressed agreement and disagreement – not so much because they had something in common, but because they soon SAW THEMSELVES as having something in common. Handbooks stress the practical importance of this commonality: "It is not the actual differences among participants, but whether they perceive each other to be different, that determines their willingness to discuss a topic together" (Morgan 1988:47). In our groups, as in most others (Krueger 1994:14), this sense of something shared was emphasized by the moderator in the introduction to the group. Even without this emphasis, participants would be aware of some aspects of the group from the recruiter's selection questionnaire, which asked about residence and newspaper readership.

In any focus group, the moderator follows the topic guide to make sure that the various groups in a series are comparable.[9] Even those who seek to resist this planning and control find that it is essential. As Agar & MacDonald say (1995:81), "We thought that a moderator should keep his nose out whenever possible. We might as well have started to drive by deciding it wasn't such a good idea to steer." Our experience similarly shows that the development of topics is more complex and interactive than is suggested by the handbooks' emphasis on topic planning and on the moderator's control. In the central section of our topic guide, taking up most of the session, participants were responding to short statements printed in large letters on cards. For instance, the first statement on the first card was drawn from a leaflet put out by the UK government's Energy Efficiency Office, and was included with other statements focusing on the general idea of environmental limits:

> Every time we use gas, electricity, coal, or central heating in our homes, we are damaging our other home, the earth.

Participants were first asked to attribute these statements to someone or some organization that might say them, and then to agree or disagree. This is important because, as we will see, responses to these statements by anonymous and distant



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spokespersons differed from those to statements made by other participants present in the group.

All groups began with a similar introduction; whoever was moderating followed a written list of points to cover. This introduction gave signals to the participants that are relevant to the issues of disagreement and topic that I will analyze in the transcripts. (Here I take my examples from Phil Macnaghten's introduction to a group in Manchester.) First, the moderator marked the discussion as an example of an established genre of talk: "Has anyone been to a group like this?" He encouraged people to follow patterns of everyday talk, and tried to avoid the frame of a test: "It works by people just speaking freely, saying what they really think about things, and there's no right or wrong answer."

The moderator explicitly welcomed disagreement, implying that in other settings they might not be so willing to disagree with strangers: "So please feel free, and if you disagree with each other well that's fine." He also stated a very general, but still bounded, topic for the discussion: "We are going to be talking tonight about the environment, environmental issues." Although the moderator said nothing about the particular responses the researchers were looking for, he assumed throughout that there would be responses, that people have opinions and need only be encouraged to reveal them: "We are just asking people to be really open, and to talk about their opinions ... each viewpoint is as valid as another one ... all we are interested in is your reactions, your responses to these things."

Just as there are ways in which the focus group method constitutes the participants as a group (of young mothers, or *Telegraph* readers, or residents of a small town), so also it constitutes them as individuals bearing opinions. Thus the introduction, repeated in all groups, marked out the event both from everyday talk (where people are not constrained to talk on a topic, or to express any opinion at all) and from institutional discussions that have an end other than expression of opinions (e.g. meetings or tests). That is how the moderator's introduction defined the event. The following two sections aim to define what sort of event the participants and moderator made it, in their treatment of topic and disagreement.

## SHAPING THE TOPIC

A main strength of focus groups as a research tool is that participants develop topics in the course of interaction (Kitzinger 1994), rather than having them already formulated and bounded as they are in a questionnaire.[10] Here I consider both the moderator's control and the participants' collaborative extension and shaping of topics. The moderator introduces topics and monitors responses; participants acknowledge this role and apologize if they challenge it by their own contributions. But participants interpret topics, move to close them, and reopen them, always with the moderator and setting in mind.

It is hard to define what conversational topics are (Brown & Yule 1983); however, it is much easier to trace where they shift (Schegloff & Sacks 1973, May-



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nard 1980, Jefferson 1984a, Schiffrin 1987, Beach 1990, Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1992), because participants mark shifts and closures, and comment on them, as part of the normal coordinating work of conversation. The participants in our focus groups come to monitor when turns are on topic, and they apologize when they are not. The moderator always has the final say and can cut off a topic (or try to) and move on to another; but the steering is usually done by working with the dynamics of the group. (This underlying orderliness may surprise anyone who has had to transcribe an apparently disorderly discussion, but it is there.) Analysts must understand these dynamics to identify, link, and interpret topics.

*Introducing and acknowledging topics*

The participants in our groups responded to unattributed statements on cards, so the topics might seem at first to come from nowhere. For instance, the moderator might show a card containing these statements:

- Never underestimate your power as a consumer. You can effect change with what you buy.
- A man is rich by the number of things he can do without.
- As consumers, we are all responsible for the behaviour of the companies we give our money to.

But as the moderator shows the cards, he also steps in to define what makes these statements a topic. In one particular group, he begins as if these statements arose from their own talk: "But since we're talking about consumers all the time – how about some quotes about consumers' consumption – which follows from a lot of things people have been saying."

After the statements, the moderator formulates a question to which they were to respond:

> Now just following on from the consumer thing – first – this idea of consumer power which seems to make a difference – I mean we've had a lot of talk about how consumer demand is actually pushing you know – what industry produces – this sort of thing – how about the idea that consumers can use that power to change that.

This is at once apparently open (*how about the idea*) and highly constrained (*just following on from the consumer thing*); he formulates these statements as being about consumer power, and he also raises a question about effectiveness.

In the course of the discussions, the topic often seems to shift from that in the topic guide, even as participants acknowledge the topic and justify each of their contributions in terms of what they take to be the topic at that point. That is how sessions devoted to environmental sustainability came to talk about such issues as make-up, CDs, arts festivals, football, and stamp collections. In ex. 1, the participants have responded to the typical introduction of a topic quoted above, and one has said that a boycott of cars is different from a boycott of tuna.

(1) Mod but what does that affect – or who does that affect
M2 well – it does affect it perhaps quicker than –
M4 the company will take more notice of it – quicker – in that daily or weekly purchase than long term purchase like a car or – something



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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | M1 | [count it up] most car companies are saying now that 85 percent of their cars are – recyclable / |
| | M? | /mm |
| | M1 | but – you know – I mean= |
| → | M2 | =I think with cars as well you've got to look at who the consumer is – you look at who buys the cars – companies buy most of the cars / |
| | M1 | /that's right |
| | M2 | /they don't give a damn – they don't give a damn about the environment (1.0) you know and and individuals that may you know – care – you know don't affect anything – you know because it's the the companies that are putting in the orders to the / car |
| | M1 | /we're buying diesel cars at the moment because they're more economical |
| | Mod | right |
| | M2 | yeah – you buy whatever suits your /company |
| → | M3 | /yeah but going on from that – I'm sorry - I slightly disagree – because people caring for the environment they said right – pollution – right let's get diesel cars= |
| | M1 | =yeah, but now they've been proved /to be worse than |
| | M3 | /that's right the cadmium the cadmium in diesel – right – so it's all this on-going process of right – I know someone who bought one and said I bought diesel I'm green |
| | Mod | right |
| | M3 | now I'm not green – you know – so it goes around – I mean – where are you learning these facts from – these people – as I said before – these people know about them – scientists or whatever and they're finding these things out – so why aren't they then – directing – us as a more aware sort of society now to say – right – |
| | M2 | they perhaps need to be given the authority to direct somebody – to direct somebody else – if you like |
| | M3 | yeah |
| | Mod | right |
| → | M2 | like – as you were saying – who's going to give authority /to do it |
| | Mod | /yeah – yeah yeah [7.32] |

A content analyst coding this passage might list the following topics: consumer boycotts, recycling of cars, risks of diesel cars, and the unreliability of scientific information. But we could also start with the points at which participants mark the topic of their turn as related to that of the last turn, when they say *I think with cars as well* or *but going on from that* or *as you were saying*; or by echoing words and forms from the previous turn, as in *it affects it perhaps quicker* and then *the company will take more notice of it, quicker*, or *why aren't they then – directing us* followed by *they need to be given authority to direct somebody*. At each stage the speakers tie in to something from the previous turn, while introducing some new element as in some way related. In doing so, they show the sense that they must remain on topic and account for shifts.

For the moderator, there is always a practical question of whether to cut off such extended chains. Here he encourages this line of development with back-channel utterances. He says *right* at three points at which one participant has interrupted another and reached a possible turn transition:

we're buying diesel cars at the moment because they're more economical



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I know someone who bought one and said I bought diesel I'm green

they perhaps need to be given authority to direct somebody – to direct somebody else – if you like

In each case, the moderator confirms this new speaker as having the floor, and this contribution as relevant. In each case, the participants are also making an evaluative statement; the moderator's *right* acknowledges it has been made (without his agreeing, the way M1 or M3 do when they say *that's right*). The constant stream of backchannels confirms that the moderator is the audience for this talk, and that the talk is on topic.[11]

*Closing a topic*

Moderators can intervene to introduce a topic; they can also determine when a topic is to be closed, just by stepping in and introducing a new topic. But a close look shows that topic closure is usually collaborative; participants can signal their willingness for a topic to come to a close, using minimal responses (Maynard 1980), or jokes and laughter (Jefferson 1984b, Jefferson et al. 1987). They also use COMMONPLACES, a rhetorical term for "general ideas applicable to a great many subjects" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1783 citation; see Myers & Macnaghten 1997a). Since the moderator's intervention typically follows such signals, moderators seem to be drawing on some of the same expectations that they would have in everyday conversation. But instead of the usual closing pattern (as in, say, telephone conversations), in which participants check each other's willingness to close, we find the moderator stepping in. Exx. 2–5 illustrate, respectively, a minimal response, a joke, laughter, and a commonplace.

(2) M1 ... so looking at the whales, why is a progressive nation like Norway – way in advance of places like Britain with regards its responsibilities and its social responsibilities – why is it still going out there and blowing whales up out the water=
M2 =why doesn't it say scare Japan?
→ M3 um
→ M4 um um=
M5 =well why Norway / (on what xxx)
M6 /stopping buying prawns stopping whaling what's the connection there =
Mod = (xxx) could I could I focus – before we leave this one could I focus on ... [2.51]

(3) M ... personally – I want to be wealthy
Mod right ((laughter)) OK
F I just want to be healthy
Mod right ((laughter)) OK that's interesting there [4.39]

(4) F1 no you only give them the information so that they can do something about it – you're not actually ringing up and saying that's their sheep in their river are/you
F2 /no – no
(3.0)
F2 (I'd think) well – somebody else has seen/ it! ((laughter 3 seconds))
F1 /(it's not) reporting
F1 I say hey look at that dead sheep!
((Laughter F1 and F2 ten seconds))
Mod OK (3.0) right – so... [1.50]



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(5) M so that second last one is the – in theory spot on /
Mod /great great but (involves a lot of skepticism)
M but in practice =
Mod =could I move on to some other kinds of suggestions for action [2.48]

In each case, the moderator gives a receipt (*OK, right*) or refers explicitly to a new topic, suggesting his control. But in each case this move follows turns by participants that allow possible closure. Minimal responses suggest that a participant has nothing further to contribute on the topic (they are part of the presequence for closings in dyadic conversations; see Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Commonplaces and jokes rely on implicit shared understandings. Laughter is in many cases shared around the table; it overcomes attempts to speak next, and ends with a pause (Jefferson et al. 1987). The moderators most often break in when the group has first signaled the end of a topic this way.

The participants do occasionally re-open a topic that the moderator has closed, but in these cases the participants acknowledge the control of the moderator:

(6) M1 what's got better=
Mod =has anything got better – yeah =
M2 =not a lot
M3 can I say something a little=
Mod =yes please go on=
M3 =about the safety problem ... [5.45]

(7) F1 can I just interrupt?
Mod yes – go ahead.
F1 don't you find that interesting this – out of us group – three people here who the children suffer with asthma [6.8]

In 6–7, the participants request permission, acknowledging the moderator's role (*can I say something a little, can I just interrupt*), in a mitigated form, and they also state explicitly the relation of their topic to previous topics (*about the safety problem, don't you find it interesting this*).

*Interpreting topics*

I have argued that while the moderator sets up topics from a topic guide, the topic for the participants emerges in the turn-by-turn interaction as it is extended, linked, exemplified, and reinterpreted. Ex. 8 is a striking example of divergent interpretations of the topic being discussed.[12] The participants are responding to this prompt from the moderator: "I'd like to ask people to think of thirty years' time, into the future. Think of when your grandchildren are – thirty years' time". A participant refers to "this nuclear stuff"; a simple content analysis of this passage, and others parallel to it, might categorize "nuclear stuff" among the kinds of worries the group had about the future.

(8) F1 will we all be here in 30 years' time
Mod why why why not
F1 all this nuclear stuff I I don't like it I=
Mod =OK – OK so so so if we think in 30 years our first thought is are we going to be here=



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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | F1 | =yes yes= |
| | Mod | =is that a serious thought= |

I omit 16 turns in which various people agree with this worry. The moderator then categorizes this worry for the purposes of writing it on a flip chart. In doing this he is performing a complementary function to that of introducing and interpreting a topic on a card to generate talk; here he is formulating the talk to write it down, setting down a definite version of the ongoing talk. This leads to further discussion:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Mod | so we'll put that down /as nuclear anxiety |
| | F2 | /like some – crackpot might get hold of a |
| | F1 | no |
| | F2 | bomb and set it off |
| → | F1 | (that wasn't meaning no) |
| | F3 | I mean the sun will collide with the earth |
| | F? | /well it couldn't |
| | F3 | /or something |
| → | F1 | no – oh no no – all this nuclear stuff – um yeah I just think something could happen |
| | F2 | yeah all it needs /is one idiot to start the ball rolling |
| | F? | /something could happen yes something could be |
| | Mod | yeah |
| → | F1 | all this nuclear stuff they are burying now |
| | Mod | right |
| → | F1 | all this nuclear stuff |
| | Mod | right right |
| | F1 | is it going to kill everything off |
| | F? | no |
| | Mod | right |
| | F1 | are they going to grow food? I don't know |
| | Mod | it's a worry – right – what else? [Thornton retired group 1] |

The issue of *this nuclear stuff* is named as if it were a single unambiguous issue on which other participants have an opinion. Other participants categorize the statement: F2 responds to the phrase as referring to a nuclear holocaust (*some – crackpot might get hold of a*), and F3 responds to that by raising another threat as in some way parallel (*the sun will collide with the earth*). F1 tries twice to correct this interpretation (*that wasn't meaning no, no – oh no no*), and finally says *all this nuclear stuff they are burying now*. F1 does not take the moderator's *yeah* and *right* as indicating understanding; she keeps repeating her meaning as he responds. Finally he gives an evaluation (*it's a worry*) and moves to a new item on the list. Why does F1 have such difficulty repairing this misunderstanding? The responses to her statement, from turn to turn, have taken *this nuclear stuff* to refer to nuclear weapons. Displays of opinion on common issues can normally be given in just such shorthand form. The mechanisms for confirming that one is on topic are so strong that it is hard to show that any contribution has misinterpreted another. The disentangling here of nuclear power and nuclear weapons requires the unpicking of several minutes of conversational work.

These patterns show how participants orient to the moderator in acknowledging, shifting or closing topics, reinterpreting them, or framing them. On the one hand, participants acknowledge the moderator's role in assigning topics and turns, by asking permission and apologizing. But they also modify those topics, pre-



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senting each new addition as relevant to the last; and they signal in their interaction which topics they have exhausted, and how they are interpreting them. The content analyst who divides the transcript up into topics (e.g. Bertrand et al. 1992) is mimicking the work of the participants; but such analysts typically consider only the lexical content of the talk, not the sequence and packaging of turns. The analyst who simply codes such an utterance, removing it from its context, would assign *this nuclear stuff* to one category or another – waste or weapons – and would miss an important message of the passage, that for these people the two topics are intertwined.

## MANAGING DISAGREEMENT

One of the most fundamental and well-attested patterns in conversation is a preference for agreement in the second turn of an adjacency pair. That is, when one person asks a question, makes an assertion, or performs some other conversational action, a response that is to be taken as agreeing will typically be immediate and unmarked; but a response to be taken as disagreeing will typically be delayed, prefaced, or modified. Sacks (1987:57) put it in the characteristically sweeping and informal fashion of his lectures: "You know perfectly well that zillions of things work that way – a next turn (e.g. answer) is in "agreement" with the preference of the prior (e.g. question)." (Sacks's statement itself indicates what the preferred response of his listeners is to be.)

A particular adjacency pair that shows this preference for agreement consists of an assessment – an evaluative statement – and the second evaluative statement that typically follows it. Pomerantz 1984 has traced these patterns and variations in great detail.[13] Goodwin & Goodwin (1992:166) identify assessments as a key focus in interpretation of qualitative data: "Assessments reveal not just neutral objects in the world, but an alignment taken up toward phenomena by a particular actor." Of course, such evaluative statements, and responses to them, make up much of a typical focus group transcript. But if a preference for agreement with assessments dominated focus group discussions, they would not serve their purpose of exploring a range of different attitudes and responses. Morgan & Krueger (1993:7) say that a good introduction to the group will go against this preference and will explicitly encourage expression of disagreement (as ours did). The moderator elicits disagreement at the beginning, notes disagreement, and acts as a buffer.

In some ways, participants in focus groups follow what we would expect from CA accounts of everyday conversations, marking disagreement as dispreferred, but there are also responses that suggest they see disagreement as allowable and encouraged within this setting. They respond differently to statements made by other participants (for whom disagreement is nearly always mitigated) and those presented by the moderator (which can be attacked without mitigation). They manage this sanctioned disagreement by marking the disagreement as dispre-



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ferred, by addressing it to the moderator, and by using structures of concession and repair. The common element in these devices is that they allow for disagreement while retaining a background of consensus and shared understanding.

*Encouraging disagreement*

One of the key functions of the focus group moderator is to intervene to avoid closure on a narrow set of opinions. The moderator can do this by saying that disagreement is normal, by asking directly for differing opinions, by noting implied disagreement and making it a topic, or by serving as a buffer between participants. Moderators are typically prepared with a range of stock phrases intended to encourage further discussion while not directing it too heavily:

(9) Mod so how about other people – do they think there's some responsibility for – the companies when they give them their money (2.0) so not really? [1.31]
(10) Mod no no I can see your point but (2.0) (any) other reactions? how does anyone else feel about that (xxx) [3.27]
(11) Mod how about yourself then/
M /yeah I think
Mod /is that something we all do? [4.39]
(12) Mod what do other people feel on this [7.19]

More subtly, the moderator can license differences of opinion by commenting on them directly, making the differences of opinion themselves a topic, usually just before moving on to another topic:

(13) Mod OK – we've got a difference of opinion that's all right – now um [4.20]
(14) F1 ... to stick them in the car is so much quicker and so much cheaper=
F2 =well I disagree with /you
Mod /(I tell you what) – I think yeah actually this issue about possessions and materialism is quite interesting one – but (quite) we can come back to this a bit later on because there will be an opportunity in a while – but yeah it would be nice to pick up on that because I think /
F /mm/
Mod /it's something several of you obviously feel quite strongly about [5.10]
(15) Mod this is quite a live issue down here then [6.49]

Like the opening remarks, these responses set up a situation in which differences are expected and can remain unresolved, without any threat to the ongoing discussion.

We have seen that the moderators of these groups offer various printed prompts intended to encourage discussion. These texts, and the moderators' own formulations, seem to have a special status as positions without persons. These are treated as occasions for talk, not as turns that get responses. (In semantics terminology, the quoted statements are mentioned, not used.) So, in contrast to the muted disagreements we have seen with participants, disagreements with the statements on the cards can be presented emphatically. Participants say things like *I disagree with that* and *it's wrong, isn't it* and even *load of bollocks* in the first turn after being shown a card. In our data, they never respond to another participant this baldly.[14] Statements by the moderator can be treated with the same



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abruptness when they are taken as prompts within the conventions of the focus group, not as the views of that person.[15]

Disagreement can also be marked with the apologies and hedges predicted by the literature on conversational politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987). For instance, in ex. 16, the way that F1 disagrees baldly and rudely with a statement on a card contrasts with the mitigated way that F2 then disagrees with F1.

(16) Mod so so if they say that to you – what would you think?
F1 )load of bollocks(
Mod ((laughs)) yeah do we have any agreement there – or –
((3 seconds laughter))
→ F2 I don't know – I might look up – from the point of view – if they are saying the resources are going down – and we're going to put your costs u::p – I mean – they could get more money – from pro promoting a view like that
Mod right [1.20]

After laughter, F2 expresses agreement with the statement on the card, and by implication disagreement with F1's comment (*load of bollocks*); F2 hedges, beginning with *I don't know* and *I might*, mitigating her threat to the face of F1. (Her use of *from the point of view* signals an attribution, which I will discuss later.)

*Markers of dispreferred disagreement*

Ex. 16, while showing how easy it is to disagree with the moderator, also shows how participants have to work hard when they disagree with each other. As we would expect from the findings of conversation analysis, an evaluative statement by a participant is usually followed by agreement in the next turn:

(17) [after talking about dog mess on the Downs]
Mod yeah so=so so it's not just a problem on the streets/
F1 /oh no /no it's
Mod /locally it's a=
F2 =yeah
F1 and in the parks as well – they're not so bad=
→ F2 =parks are better=
F1 =but better the parks are better – but they still could be=
F3 =the Downs are particularly bad actually – now you've said that it's almost as if the owners think – ah – you know=
→ F1 =yeah=
F3 =long grass – leave it /
F1 /that's right
F3 but it's (2.0)
F1 um – but it – always happens – especially (out there) – and sea pollution ... [6.6]

The preference for agreement is shown by the fact that it comes first in the turn, without delay (*they're not so bad* followed by *parks are better*), sometimes even interrupting (*leave it* interrupted by *that's right*). If there is any further comment or disagreement, agreement comes first in the turn (*the parks are better – but they could still*). One of the key findings of Pomerantz 1984 is that second assessments do not just repeat the first assessment, but typically upgrade it – as in ex. 17, where two people say the parks are not as bad as the Downs, and then the third



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says *the Downs are particularly bad actually*. These patterns of agreement are particularly common in the first stage of our focus-group transcripts, where the moderator is going around the circle asking the participants each to introduce themselves and to give one environmental issue that concerns them. It is as if individuals were each treated as having the floor for their introduction, and other participants would support but not challenge the problem they offer.

This preference for agreement would seem to conflict with the encouragement of disagreement that we have seen is characteristic of focus groups. In the following examples, I will consider how participants manage disagreement using markers of dispreferred turns, hedges, concessions, and attributions. The notion of a preference for agreement does not just say that people will typically agree, but that, when there is disagreement, it will typically be delayed or marked, or it will be presented in the form of weak agreement followed by disagreement. Thus any delay or modification in dyadic conversation is routinely taken as disagreement. In 18, *well* serves as a preface to a qualification on the agreement with the moderator's formulation:

(18) Mod so so er – so the important thing is to have green spaces which are close to the cities is that right (1.0) is that=
→ M1 =er well yeah – yeah=
Mod =so you've got the difference – you've got the urban and then=
→ M2 =well – I would argue for green spaces in cities too
[4.11]

The moderator offers a formulation of the previous discussion and asks *is that right*. When there is no response, he begins to repeat or rephrase the question (*is that*). The beginning of M1's turn (*er well yeah*) would indicate a dispreferred response, but he goes on to repeat the *yeah* without the hesitation. The moderator, however, does not seem to take this as indicating agreement, because he gives another formulation, beginning with *so*, which usually marks a gist or summary. This time he starts to put it in terms of some alternative possibilities (*you've got the urban and then*). But M2 now interrupts to disagree explicitly (marked by *well* and *I would argue*), disagreeing not with what the moderator has just said (*you've got the urban*), but with what he said earlier and seems about to say (*to have green spaces which are close to the cities*). By saying *green spaces in cities too*, M2 explicitly marks this as an alternative to the moderator's formulation, not a part of it. The result is an addition to or extension of the view first formulated by the moderator. My point is that the moderator, at the time, took M1's *well* as a preface to a disagreement and reformulated his summary before continuing.[16]

### *Disagreement within a shared view*

Even where there is a direct disagreement between participants, it is often presented as agreement with one aspect of the previous turn, by repetition and reformulation of key phrases, concession structures, or repair. Many instances of apparent disagreement are presented like those in 18, as extensions or rephrasing



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of a consensus. In 19, M2 disagrees with one aspect of the statement (wind farms shouldn't be in Shoreham), but she puts it in a form in which participants can agree on the underlying principle (wind farms shouldn't be located in residential neighborhoods) by recategorizing the site as *derelict* rather than *residential.*

(19) M1 but it's not it's not for residential areas /
M2 /nah nah
M1 although I don't live by where the wind farm was going to be – I would object if I lived here – I would object to it – yes – should be in non-residential areas – and pipe it into the national grid / (and I think)
→ M2 /but if you see what's – if you see what's over there at the moment – I mean it's – it's like a derelict site anyway – so I mean something's (1.0) I would would have said is better than – than nothing [7.15]

M2 first appeals to the shared experience (*if you see*); her use of *I mean* (twice) marks transitions between three parts of her statement (Schiffrin 1987): from what *you see* there now, to her evaluation (*it's like a derelict site anyway*), to a familiar saying or commonplace (*something's . . . better than nothing*). However, M2 offers the commonplace with two interpolated markers that it is just her view (*so I mean* and *I would have said*). A potential disagreement is positioned both as her view and as reflecting a consensus.

One very common pattern, both in everyday talk and in these focus groups, is a turn in which weak agreement leads to disagreement, i.e. a preliminary concession (Pomerantz 1984, Kotthoff 1993). In 20, the participants disagree about the candor of the nuclear reprocessing industry:

(20) F I think they don't admit that the when /
M / they they
F they've had problems – they seem to / – they do cover them up
→ M / no they don't like to admit little problems when they know they'll be blown up into big ones/
F /you know like the the
M but on the other hand I'm not saying that /(xxx)
F /like the houses where the dust was very high in radioactivity... [3.28]

Here F says *they don't admit that the when they've had problems*, and M responds, echoing this statement, *no they don't like to admit little problems*. M goes on to say *when they know they'll be blown into big ones*, modifying what he took F to mean. But as F continues, he makes another concession, *but on the other hand*. The transcripts are full of the kinds of phrases that mark this concession structure, such as *no . . . but* (as we see in this example), *yes, but*, and *having said that*. Kotthoff 1993 has noted the crucial role that concessions play in extended sequences of disagreement between pairs of speakers. Here, with a relatively large group, the concessions seem to work in a different way – functioning like the tag question and redefinition considered in exx. 19–20, stating a view while claiming a larger consensus.

In some cases, disagreement is handled using mechanisms of repair. Logically, these are different ways of responding to a difference between participants. To treat it as disagreement focuses on differences between positions; but the treat-



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ment of apparent disagreement by repair presents it in a less face-threatening light, attributing the difference to some miscommunication. In 21, a participant questions whether Greenpeace is the same as the Green Party. I present a long passage because the persistence of the attempts at repair is itself of interest:

(21) M1 I think they blew it when they went political – because I would see them as wasting my money on trying to become an MP – when they've got no chance of becoming an MP – you know and I think that's where
→ M2 what's that Friends of the Earth?
M1 Greenpeace=
M? =Greenpeace=
M? =Greenpeace
M1 /(xx give me)
→ M2 /have they gone political?
M1 oh – yeah / (that's right)
M2 /I don't know that
M1 on the loaf on the last Euro elections – you know – huge campaign – they spent millions – well – they've got to get that money from somewhere=
Mod =right=
M1 =and they've obviously got that from from us=
Mod =right=
M1 =you know and if they're going to blow it =
→ M2 =what Greenpeace /have (turn)
M1 /but they've lost their deposits all over the place
Mod right
→ M2 do you mean the Green Party – or Greenpeace? (3.0)
M1 well – Greenpeace – Greenpeace effectively funds/
M2 /uh/
M1 /the Green/
M2 /uh/
M1 / Party – you know=
M2 =uh
M1 it's a spin off isn't it? (2.0) from Greenpeace=
→ M2 =no – no – not necessarily – no
M1 well they're I think/
M2 /they're in the same school but I don't I don't think they fund each other=
M1 = (I'm not sure about that) [7.51]

Here M2 asks questions three times (*what's that*; *have they gone political*; *do you mean the Green Party – or Greenpeace*), pointing with increasing explicitness to the error of M1. Only when M1 does not acknowledge an error does M2 disagree explicitly (*no – no*). Through the exchange M2 maintains the possibility of miscommunication rather than disagreement; his *I don't know that* can mean either that he doesn't know or that he disagrees. When he finally disagrees directly, he hedges (*not necessarily*), makes a concession (*they're in the same school*), and hedges again (*I don't think*). This example may seem different from the other examples of disagreement that I have discussed, because it seems to involve a simple error of fact (the campaign organization Greenpeace is not in fact financially linked to the UK Green Party). But in this and other cases, the repair is linked to larger areas of disagreement (here, about the political effectiveness of



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Greenpeace). Participants' awareness of this disagreement may account for the indirect form of the correction – the insistence on maintaining consensus as far as possible.

We have seen that the moderator encourages disagreement, and that there are instances of unmodified disagreement in participants' responses to the moderator's quoted prompts. But even in this context, participants in focus groups draw on many of the devices used in everyday conversation: Responses showing agreement are unmarked, while responses showing disagreement are marked with delay and particles like *well*. They use devices such as reformulations, concessions, and repair that present disagreement against a background of larger consensus or shared knowledge.

*Addressing the moderator*

Participants do not just respond to the moderator. They also draw on the presence of the moderator as a resource through whom they can express disagreement in a much more direct form than they would use immediately after the turn of another participant. The moderator can serve as an audience, as a sort of buffer, by his or her presence. Participants address the moderator, and acknowledge the wider use of their talk, by playing devil's advocate, attributing opinions, and accounting for disagreement. In 22, the group has been agreeing on the need for business to clean up its processes, and on its evasion of its responsibilities. The moderator makes a general probe for different views, and one participant disagrees directly.

(22) M1 ... and you know – it's all these things are happening because big corporations like money – and the reason they're chopping down the forest is big corporations want the wood
Mod right
M1 to sell – and and – make money – and whatever the politicians do – you know if they start getting too restless up there, the people that have got the money – will pull the rug (2.0) you know
Mod um – what do other people feel on this? I mean =
M2 =well you can be you can be as green minded as you like – but if it actually affects you in a business where you have to use certain products for your business to survive – then I'm afraid that goes out the window ((laughs)) – [7.19]

M1 has offered a chance to disagree, and it is followed by a two-second silence. His *you know* presents this utterance as a statement of a generally known truth (Schiffrin 1987:276), but this does not prompt either agreement or disagreement. Finally, the moderator explicitly calls for a comment; his *I mean* suggests he will back up his question with a restatement of what it is they are responding to. At that point M2 interrupts; his statement is in the form for dispreferred responses (*well*) and is addressed to an impersonal *you*, not to M1, but it is presented as an explicit disagreement: *you can be as green minded as you like – but*. The moderator's intervention seems to give a target for such disagreement.

Participants sometimes address direct disagreements to the moderator, as if he or she were chair of a meeting. The effect is that the two turns are presented as



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parallel to each other, juxtaposed with each other, without the second turn being presented as a response to the first:

(23) F1 don't you find that interesting this – out of us group – three people here who the children suffer with asthma
F2 I was just going to say – that at Christmas I was diagnosed with asthma and it seems to be such a – you know everyone I speak to – someone within that that family has got asthma
Mod right
F2 and years ago asthma was unheard of – when I was a kid/
→ F3 /can I just (xxx)
((laughter))
→ Mod yeah go ahead
F3 when I was a baby I was born with a heavy fluid on my lung – and I had bronchitis and that left me with a very weak chest – and the doctor said I was an asthmatic, and the doctor said um (1.0) that I would grow out of it by the time I was seven and I did and – there's your proof /
F? /that it's not all /
F1 /but . . . [6.8]

Here F2 addresses the moderator to ask for the floor, and notes the recent increase in the number of children with asthma.[17] F3 then offers a turn disagreeing about the significance of this increase. She parallels the end of F1's turn, repeating *when I was a kid* as *when I was a baby*, displaying the relevance of her contribution to the previous turn. There is no direct indication that her turn is disagreeing with the previous one until she says *and – there's your proof.* This is not necessarily a statement of disagreement with F2 (depending on what it's a proof of); but when another participant continues this statement with *that it's not all*, she is interpreting F3's comment as direct disagreement with F2 – the explanation implied for the increase in asthma cases may not be the right one. Then, when F1 interrupts to respond to this, she marks her turn as adversative (*but*). I am arguing that the moderator's intervention allows the disagreeing participant (F3) to address him, presenting the new view as parallel to rather than contradictory of the previous view. This way of addressing the moderator to disagree (as in some chaired meetings,[18] or university seminars) is less apparent in the transcript than it is in videotapes, where participants may look steadily toward the moderator and orient their bodies toward him, even when their words link to those of another participant.

The moderator serves as an audience in more subtle ways. Even when he or she does not intervene and is not directly addressed, the participants still adapt their interaction to his or her presence and the situation of the focus group (Myers & Macnaghten 1998). The participants themselves ensure that, as a group, they display a range of opinions – by playing devil's advocate, attributing opinions, and accounting for disagreement. These moves show their orientation to making the group work in terms of what they have been told is its purpose: to display opinions, not to pass the time, develop relationships, arrive at consensus, or make decisions. One way in which participants can display opinions is by attributing a particular view to some particular person or group rather than presenting it as their own.



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(24) F ... so there's nothing you can do about it
M the only one thing there is there is one (1.0) school of thought – that if it weren't for Sellafield the need to keep the line open – they wouldn't have the line at all (the first time they could close it we'd lose it) [3.9]

The view is presented as *one school of thought* – a possible view, one the participant seems to think needs to be presented. No one in the group commits themselves to the view that the nuclear waste reprocessing plant (Sellafield) has the beneficial effect of keeping the local railway line open; in raising it, M speaks not for himself, but for some community with a range of opinions (cf. 19).

A frequent pattern, once discussions have gotten going, is that some of the more vocal participants present themselves as devil's advocates – deliberately presenting their views as different from those of other participants, as an addition to what the group has presented so far. Ex. 25 is elicited by the moderator after the group seems to agree with a statement about environmental limits:

(25) M1 I would I would go with whoever said that=
Mod =right – that's interesting because – Warwick you said you didn't agree? (1.0)
→ M2 no – I I'm being quiet – going to be deliberately contentious here – I think er, as much as we are all saying as much as it's nice to look at the environment and looking at concerns – we have a cozy middle class attitude here – oh yes I conserve electricity but we still have our fridges – oh yes I turn the light bulbs off but we still have light bulbs ... [5.22]

M2 can be *deliberately contentious* because the group accepts that contention is part of the purpose of the group; he can address this as a metacommunicative comment to the moderator. M2's comment also suggests the idea that there are always diametrically opposing views, not just a range of views. Rather than play down disagreement, as we might expect in everyday conversation, the devil's advocate makes it explicit. But in doing so, he or she also shifts the terms in which the opinion is offered, as if it were something that has to be part of the record and that could encourage further argument. These moves suggest the sort of "sociable argument" discussed by Schiffrin 1984, in that they include what she calls a "preference for disagreement" as indicated by the unmitigated form in these examples.[19] In some groups, there is clearly an element of playfulness in the back-and-forth.

When disagreements emerge, participants account for them. Differences of opinion are not a problem in the focus group as they are in scientific discourse (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984), but the fact of disagreement still needs to be explained and legitimated (Potter 1996). Typically, members of the group explain different opinions in terms of different interests or experiences:

(26) F1 there's always a sort of clash between the environment and people's lives isn't there – this is the things /
M1 /mm
F1 you can't come down one side or the other
Mod right=
M1 =if you ask people in if you ask people at Sellafield whether they want /(xxx) to stop it they certainly don't



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F1 / exactly
→ F2 well we used to live up at Whitehaven and it was just the factory – and everybody was for it, they were for Nirex up there – because it was jobs ... [3.9]

In this context, participants present opinions as attributes of people like age, gender, or region.[20] This conception of opinions underlies their use of attribution and devil's-advocate devices, as well as their accounting for error. The accounts make sense as addressed to an observer who is the audience for opinions, rather than to other participants.

Moderators and analysts of focus groups may draw on their expectations of everyday conversation to interpret these processes. Just as the moderator hears *well – yes yes* as a preparation for disagreement (not the agreement it might seem to be), the analyst looks to such everyday patterns in deciding whether the transcript shows a consensus emerging. The situation of the focus group constructs participants in this role as bearers of representative views; that is how they are addressed in the moderator's introduction, and that is how they treat each other's contributions.

## CONCLUSION

This article has looked the collaborative development of topic and assessments. The moderator introduces topics, but participants shift, close, and interpret these topics. The moderator encourages disagreement in the introduction, in eliciting further comments, and in making disagreement a topic; participants manage disagreements using conversational devices and by using the moderator as an audience, acting as if their purpose as a group is to display opinions.

The processes of display, if observed closely, can lead the group to make links that are crucial to researchers. In our particular study, we were interested in how people talked about issues related to environmental sustainability, so that we could compare this language to that of leaflets and policy documents. We anticipated two problems: Surveys suggest that people are not much interested in environmental issues, and experience suggests that they quickly agree with environmental slogans. We suspected that underlying this indifference and apparent consensus there were more complex and ambivalent meanings. How were we to get around this conversational block? Instead of focusing on one topic, we needed to see how one topic led into another, to see how people link the environment to issues that they said were central to their lives. We also needed to pay close attention to the processes of agreement, to see how ambivalences were developed or elided in conversation. So these linguistic issues led back to the social issues that concern our study (see Myers & Macnaghten 1997).

The simplest methodological implication of these findings is that reports on focus groups could present more details of how they work. One handbook suggests editing participants' contributions to convey what they intended to say (Krueger 1994:154). Our findings suggest that researchers should go the other way, following Kitzinger's advice (1995) and including some extended illustrations of



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interaction. They could also go further to ground the interpretation in the responses of the participants; e.g.,

(a) Researchers might use an understanding of participants' topic shifting and closure devices to reflect critically on their own segmenting and analysis of transcripts (see exx. 1–6).

(b) One might see, only over the course of several pages, how a speaker was interpreting his or her own statement (ex. 8).

(c) Researchers might use an understanding of how agreement and disagreement occur to reflect on their own intuitive analyses as observers (e.g. ex. 18).

(d) If participants routinely upgrade the strength of agreement when agreeing in the second turn, then a strongly worded statement may have more to do with its position than with depth of commitment to the statement (see ex. 17).

(e) If participants disagree in the form of concessions, then the first part of a statement may be only a prelude to the main issue that they intend to emphasize (ex. 20).

(f) Participants can define consensus positions and exclude devil's advocate positions in the ways they address each other and the moderator (ex. 25).

(g) Researchers might use an understanding of interaction to reflect on the moderators' roles in leading the group – as indicated, for instance, by whether they intervene before or after signals of topic closure from the participants (exx. 2–5), how they use backchannels (exx. 1, 8), how they present formulations and how participants respond to them (ex. 18); and how they serve as recipients (ex. 24).

Of course, this sort of detailed analysis takes a great deal of time, for transcription and for analysis. Closer analysis seems to expand the already voluminous transcripts of focus group studies; the aim of most researchers, however, is to reduce them to a few digestible findings, by doing content analysis and choosing illustrative sample passages. Such reduction may certainly be effective for some clients. But if focus groups are to stand up as a technique in social-science arguments, alone or in conjunction with other techniques, then researchers need to be able to show how something was said, and in what situation, as well as what was said (Myers & Macnaghten 1997b).

Focus groups have been used as a way of finding opinions and underlying attitudes, but they can also lead us to reflect critically on what opinions are, and what people do with them. Focus groups can be seen as experiments in constituting a public forum, one that is new for many of the participants. The moderator's introduction stresses that all people have opinions, and that this is where they can express them freely. The small moves of turn-taking – adding an example, giving a gist, disagreeing or attributing – are part of what defines a statement as an opinion about an issue. As we look more closely at these moves, we begin to question the existence of opinions and attitudes as pre-existing attributes of individuals, ready to be elicited by social science methods (Billig 1987, Potter &



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Wetherell 1987, Edwards & Potter 1992, Antaki 1994, Burningham 1995, Potter 1996, Myers & Macnaghten 1997b, Edwards 1997).

The key issue for discourse analysis in all this is the complex relation of focus-group talk to everyday talk. Agar & MacDonald doubt whether a group of strangers can have the "lively conversation" called for in the focus group handbooks: "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" (1995:78). Robert Merton, one of the originators of the technique, doubted whether the collections of strangers thrown together could be called groups "in the sociological sense of having a common identity or continuing unity, shared norms, or goals" (Merton 1987:555). Yet focus groups do produce an interaction in which participants respond collectively and collaboratively, are aware of a common purpose, and reflexively act in terms of that purpose. As with talk in clinics, in news interviews, in the classroom, or in research interviews, focus-group talk is in some ways based on the expectations of conversation. The constraints on such talk do not invalidate focus-group findings; in fact, it is these constraints that make them practicable and interpretable. The moderator relies on cues to step in and move to another topic; the participants rely on cues to know whether their contributions are heard, and are on topic; and the analyst relies on cues to assign each turn to a category. But these analyses are inherently provisional, tested by the participants' response in the next turn.

My analysis has drawn on approaches that are often seen as incompatible: conversation analysis (e.g. Pomerantz 1984), linguistically based discourse analysis (Schiffrin 1987, 1996), and study of argument (Antaki 1994, Billig 1987). I have found, as have other researchers, that a detailed analysis of the form and sequence of turns can link to larger questions of social theory and discourse (in our case, the relation of policy language and participants' language concerning sustainability). If one started instead with what we think we know about society – with the focus-group situation as an activity type or genre, making assumptions about the researcher's power or the moderator's control – then one might arrive at a simpler account, but one that did not cover much of what we see in focus groups. I would argue, then, that conversation analysis, for all its strictures, provides a cautious starting point for such broader studies.

Further detailed studies of focus groups could provide the basis for wider possible applications. I have argued that participants in focus groups draw on knowledge of conversational structure and use many of the same devices. In this, my conclusions support those analysts of talk in other institutions (broadcasting, professional encounters, or education) who have moved toward seeing a range of situations for talk, rather than a simple opposition of the institutional and the everyday, the artificial and the real. If we take focus groups as another kind of talk, we can use them to test our knowledge of how people interact – e.g. how they shift topics, attribute views, and account for disagreement – in a situation where the researcher determines and understands the constraints. The apparent artifici-



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ality of the situation – the moderator's intervention, the topic guide, the time limit, the tape recorder – stop being weaknesses for which we apologize, and start being features that we can use to begin our analysis of the talk.

## NOTES

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| | |
|---|---|
| (1.0) | timed pause |
| – | brief untimed pause |
| / | beginning of overlap |
| = | no interval between turns |
| (( )) | description of sound |
| ( ) | uncertain transcription |
| (xxx) | unintelligible words |
| underline | speaker's emphasis |
| > < | quieter talk |
| ... | part of a turn deleted |
| → | feature referred to in discussion |
| [6.22] | reference numbers identifying the group and the transcript page |

[1] The examples used are from Kitzinger 1994, Seiter et al. 1990, Burgess et al. 1988, Holbrook 1996, and Rothenberg 1994.

Focus groups have a complex history, from origins in social-science research interviews on audience response to propaganda films (Merton & Kendall 1946, Merton 1987), to widespread use as a market research tool, and back into academic social science, especially in audience studies (Höijer 1990, Morley 1992, Macgregor & Morrison 1995), social-problems research (Hughes & Dumont 1993), and public-health studies (Bertrand et al. 1992). Standard introductions to focus-group techniques include Morgan 1988, 1993, and Krueger 1994. The best short introduction for researchers and for users of focus-group findings is in the review for doctors by Kitzinger 1995.

[2] For accessible introductions and examples, see Psathas 1979, Atkinson & Heritage 1984, Button & Lee 1987, and Boden 1994. For consideration of CA analysis in its broader intellectual context, see Heritage 1984, Maynard & Clayman 1991, and the classic lectures of Harvey Sacks from the 1960s, now published (1992), which remain the most intellectually exciting presentation of the approach.

[3] There is much debate about whether focus groups must necessarily be combined with other approaches in the same study, or whether they can stand by themselves as a source of data (Morgan & Krueger 1993, Krueger 1994, Kitzinger 1995). The issues I am raising are not resolved by triangulation with findings from a different approach, because they concern just what sort of object the methods make available for study.

[4] Merton 1987 quotes a comment on these lines from the advertising researcher Leo Bogart. For a good journalistic account of advertising researchers at work, and their use of focus groups in dealing with clients, see Rothenberg (1994:389–97).

[5] Holbrook 1996 argues for the use of groups involving participants who are already acquainted, and gives examples of how this affects the dynamics of the groups.

[6] Antaki & Rapley 1996 have made this argument in relation to social services interviews that assess "quality of life."

[7] I choose the word "display" because it does not presuppose either that the opinions were already out there, or that they were constructed in this situation. I am following the usage of Clayman 1991.

[8] Since the locations and compositions of these groups are not relevant to my argument, transcripts are referred to only by a group number and transcript page. An eighth group was held, but the tape



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recorder failed. The study aimed to explore how people responded to and used commonplaces of sustainability drawn from environmental leaflets. See Macnaghten & Urry 1997, Myers & Macnaghten 1997a, b.

[9] Of course the moderator can take on various roles. Burgess et al. 1988 model their groups on those of group therapy, and they provide a striking analysis of the effect of the moderator's intervention at one point. Jenny Kitzinger (p.c.) points out that focus groups can be conducted without a moderator's control; the transcripts would be quite different from those I analyze here.

[10] For instance, notions of "environment" in our groups were left open to redefinition by participants (see Burningham & O'Brien 1994).

[11] Greatbatch 1988 notes the lack of backchannels in news interviews; he interprets this as an acknowledgement that the interviewer is not the primary audience for this talk, and that the interviewer must avoid the appearance of involvement.

[12] This example is from a study of sustainability indicators funded by Lancashire County Council and conducted by the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change; see Macnaghten et al. 1995. My thanks to the LCC and Grahan Pinfield.

[13] Conversation analysts do not mean their use of the term "preference" to suggest that there is any psychological desire to agree, but rather that there is an ordering of turn and response on which participants draw in their interpretations (Levinson 1983, Bilmes 1988). However, Taylor & Cameron (1987:113) argue that the concept makes sense only as a functional explanation of participants' behavior.

[14] Jenny Kitzinger (p.c.) notes that her data contain examples of bald disagreement with other participants; Holbrook & Jackson 1996 quote some examples from groups involving previously acquainted participants. But we did not find such examples.

[15] However, it is notorious among marketing researchers that groups tend to identify the moderator with the product, and withhold negative views (John Scott, p.c.). Thus experienced researchers devise ways of eliciting any negative views.

[16] My analysis of this example draws on suggestions from an anonymous referee.

[17] My analysis of this example has benefited from very detailed comments of an anonymous referee.

[18] On chaired meetings, see Boden (1994:99–102) and Larrue & Trognon 1993.

[19] Lee & Peck 1995 have criticized Schiffrin and have shown that these features of social argument can be found in "serious" arguments. My point does not depend on there being a clear dividing line.

[20] One of our findings in the focus group study was that the statements that we showed to participants were interpreted by them in terms of financial interests, narrowly conceived; then they developed more complex accounts (Myers & Macnaghten 1997a.

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