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Understanding Implicit Texts in Focus Groups from a Systems Psychodynamic Perspective

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Abstract

Many researchers have been inquiring into focus groups as a qualitative data collection method (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999; Krueger 1998; Morgan, 1998), but only a few have been able to analyse the different levels of understanding in focus groups, which we focus on in this article. The guiding research question is how do focus groups offer deeper levels of understandings from a systems psychodynamic perspective. Research participants were purposively sampled using maximum variation (Patton 2002). Data were collected during the focus group, and group data were analysed during data gathering. Meaning making and interpretation of data was done from the systems psychodynamic perspective. The main theme of inclusion and exclusion is evidence of hidden texts in focus groups.

Keywords

Focus Groups, Systems Psychodynamic Perspective, Inclusion and Exclusion, Race, and Diversity

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Understanding Implicit Texts in Focus Groups from a Systems Psychodynamic Perspective

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Many researchers have been inquiring into focus groups as a qualitative data collection method (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999; Krueger 1998; Morgan, 1998), but only a few have been able to analyse the different levels of understanding in focus groups, which we focus on in this article. The guiding research question is how do focus groups offer deeper levels of understandings from a systems psychodynamic perspective. Research participants were purposively sampled using maximum variation (Patton 2002). Data were collected during the focus group, and group data were analysed during data gathering. Meaning making and interpretation of data was done from the systems psychodynamic perspective. The main theme of inclusion and exclusion is evidence of hidden texts in focus groups. Key Words: Focus Groups, Systems Psychodynamic Perspective, Inclusion and Exclusion, Race, and Diversity

Introduction and Background

Many researchers have been inquiring into focus groups as a qualitative data collection method (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Krueger, 1998; Morgan, 1998), but only a few have been able to analyse the different levels of understanding in focus groups. Our broad purpose was to build on research already done regarding focus groups, adding to a deeper and nuanced understanding, using the systems psychodynamic lens (Colman & Geller, 1985; Corey, 1995) to explore and explain more complex issues pertaining to this data collection method. In particular, we report on empirical implicit data elicited from a focus group, which we conducted.

The main research question of this inquiry is how can focus groups offer deeper levels of understandings from a systems psychodynamic perspective? We believe this inquiry is particularly beneficial and important for researchers wishing to deepen their understanding of the added potential of focus groups in interpretive and critical research, and more specifically for those working in the field of organizational and educational change. This perspective of focus groups may add to a comprehensive and process-dynamic knowledge base, contrary to the content levels of knowledge.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We look at what focus groups are, state the research problem, and discuss the theoretical framework; the systems psychodynamic perspective. After that, we describe the research methods, data collection

and analysis, and interpret the findings. Lastly, we offer our concluding summarised thoughts.

Description of a Focus Group

A focus group can be defined as a carefully planned and organized discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment by a selected group of participants sharing and responding to views, experiences, ideas, feelings, and perceptions (Krueger, 1994; Litosseliti, 2003; Morgan, 1998; Morgan & Collier, 2002). The purpose of a focus group is to gain information, perspectives, and empirical field texts about a specific research topic. The rationale for the method is to provide a socially-oriented interaction, similar to a real life situation, in which participants freely influence one another, build on one-another's responses, and thus stimulate collective and synergistically generated thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The group typically consists of four to twelve participants. The size of the group is a variable that influences opportunities to participate as well as the ease or complexity in managing the event. Focus group data may also be influenced by purposive sampling. For example, biographic and demographic information such as age, gender, race, level of expertise, class, social-and-economic status, and identity need to be carefully considered for group composition.

Depending on the key research question, participants are chosen in terms of biographical and demographic variables to create homogenous or heterogenous groups. The method is applied in the context of the primary task of the research, and the aim is to produce field texts and to co-construct meaning. As such it has advantages compared to other data gathering methods, such as interviews and participant observation, in the sense that it offers a more natural environment to study behaviour. Technically, as a method of data collection, the focus group is located between in-depth observation and participant observation (Litosseliti, 2003). The group is planned by a moderator who has the primary task of guiding the discussion (Morgan, 1998). The technique includes using a number of interventions in the form of open-ended questions. The moderator observes the group constantly to ensure its consistent focus on discussing the key questions. This role requires planning, management, and interpersonal skills.

Researcher Context

The researchers are academics working in the fields of education (a white female) and organizational psychology (a white male) respectively. Both have been trained and have extensive professional experience in consulting groups in schools and organizations from the group relations training model (also called the systems psychodynamic stance and the Tavistock approach) (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Furthermore, both researchers have a wide experience in focus groups. The white male took up the role of moderator, and the female was the observer in this project. Over the last 10 years the content of their consultations focused increasingly on South African diversity issues around race and gender, as the country is finding its new democratic identity. The research reported in this study referred to their experiences as consultants in the role of moderator and observer to diversity events, which are attended mostly by employees in

private organizations. The researchers had no previous knowledge of the participants, except for their biographical background and their willingness to participate in the investigation.

Problem Statement and Research Question

In their focus group experiences in the roles of participants, observers, moderators, and researchers, the researchers have become aware of how the assumptions about unconscious group behaviour and related constructs such as power, leadership, and authority lead focus group outcomes in surprising directions. This resulted in the reasoning that the interaction of the two levels of behaviour, namely the verbatim focus group text (or work group/primary task behaviour) and the manifesting unconscious dynamics (or basic assumption group) (Bion, 1996), were underplayed and not adequately explored or optimised. In order to grasp the full meaning of the participants as individuals, as well as their interactions in the collective group sense, the researchers started to use their experience as systems psychodynamically informed consultants to gain insights into the shared understandings and communal constructions of meaning (Gibbs, 1997). This argument links with the description of a focus group as an endeavour in which the individual's experiences are integrated to make "collective sense" of their understandings, which can be viewed as a collective psychodynamic view as proposed by Jung (1986).

If the above mentioned manifesting unconscious dynamics (or basic assumption group behaviour) could become part of the interpretation of focus group outcomes, the result could enrich the understanding of the researched phenomenon. Enrichment in this sense refers to linking the group's overt content behaviour to the covert and unconscious behaviour towards understanding the researched phenomenon fully (Koortzen & Cilliers, 2002). No previous studies could be found that researched the impact of systems psychodynamic assumptions and constructs on focus groups and its participants.

When using the systems psychodynamic perspective in understanding focus groups, the epistemological assumptions include unconscious behavioural manifestations as a vehicle of "access" to other peoples' knowledge, views, and attitudes. One example would be a participant's representation in the group, and how that position is used to legitimize authority, which impacts the process and the dynamics of the focus group interaction. We would also look at how positional power is opposed or supported by personal power; and we ask what this may mean or how this may influence the data. For example, consider an individual who is seen by others as insignificant in an organization, but is bestowed with admiration (as a form of power) because of strong personal connections to people in authority.

Therefore, we argue that in managing the mechanics of such a focus group event, the moderator also needs to deal with the dynamics of the group. We claim that such demands require training in diverse levels of awareness in order to make sense of the collective layers of meaning constructions. Also, the role of power and authority are issues to which the moderator must be sensitised. Particularly significant are the skills of qualitative data analysis such as discourse and conversation analysis. This means the moderator has to pay attention to issues that are revealed beyond the level of content. The rationale for this is that understanding discourses allows researchers to construct meaning

beyond the levels of content concerning the process and the dynamics of the here-and-now of the focus group. Questions regarding what underpinnings of discourse are at play, at any given moment are appropriate to ask and investigate (Cheek, 2000). Observations beyond obvious group behaviour become critical, particularly in deciding what to observe and how to observe.

In sum, the mental preparation and attentiveness to a variety of levels of data gathering, from the systems psychodynamic perspective, requires a unique and sophisticated use of research talents. Having stated the research problem, we now pose the key research question: How can focus groups offer deeper levels of understanding when conducted from a systems psychodynamic perspective? The aim of this inquiry is to study the awareness of systems psychodynamic behaviour and its inclusion in the focus group outcomes, which can lead to deeper levels of understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, this inquiry explored and explained the split and pairing dynamic (Bion, 1996, 2003) and its patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as evidence of hidden texts in the focus group (which is made clear in the following section).

Theoretical Framework: The Systems Psychodynamic Perspective

The conceptual origins of the systems psychodynamic perspective stems from classic psychoanalysis (Freud, 1921), group relations theory, and open systems theory (French & Vince, 1999; Miller, 1993). This perspective is based upon the following five assumptions that are the cornerstones for studying relationships in systems (Hirschhorn, 1993; Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996; López-Corvo, 2003; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994).

1. Dependency, referring to the group's unconscious projection for attention and help onto an authority figure as parental object.
2. Fight/flight, referring to defence mechanisms in trying to cope with discomfort involving the authority figure. For example, management or leadership.
3. Pairing, referring to the unconscious connection with perceived powerful others such as the leader, or splitting the authority figure(s) as an individual or as a pair in order to be able to identify with one part as a saviour (Bion, 1970, 1996; Lipgar & Pines, 2003).
4. One-ness or me-ness (Turquet, 1974), referring to the individual's escape into his/her own fantasy and inner safe, comfortable, and good world, whilst denying the presence of the group, seen as the disturbing and bad part.
5. We-ness, referring to the opposite of me-ness, the unconscious need to join into a powerful union with and absorption into an omnipotent force, surrendering the self in passive participation (Lawrence, 1999).

The systems psychodynamic perspective is a developmentally focused, psycho-educational process for the understanding of the deep and covert behaviour in the system. In working from this perspective, one's primary task is to push the boundaries of awareness to better understand the deeper and covert meaning of organizational

behaviour, including the challenges of management and leadership (Koortzen & Cilliers, 2002; Miller & Rice, 1976). In addition, one engages in an analysis of the interrelationships of some or all of the following: boundaries, roles and role configurations, structure, organizational design, work culture, and group processes (Miller, 1993; Neumann, Kellner, & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997). The consultant focuses on the covert and dynamic aspects of the organization and the work group that comprises it, centering on relatedness, representation, and how authority is psychologically distributed, exercised, and enacted overtly and covertly in the here-and-now, in contrast to how it is overtly and formally invested in the there-and-then of the system's official structure.

In practice, the consultant will focus on the covert aspects in terms of how people and objects relate to, and what they represent for one another; how authority is exercised and distributed among people and objects in the here-and-now (in contrast to how it is overtly and formally spoken about the system's official structure). An example would be the group that overtly declares a value system of "we are all the same/equal," while the consultant has here-and-now evidence of a pecking order or an inclusion/exclusion dynamic in the conversation. Thus, the consultant notices behaviour such as attitudes, beliefs, fantasies, conflicts, core anxieties, social defenses, patterns of relationships, and collaboration as well as how these in turn may influence task performance, and how the individuals take up their roles as group members. Another example could be when unwanted and negative feelings and experiences (for example, exclusion) are (mostly unconsciously) experienced as painful, then defended against, then split off and projected onto someone else in the group. It is believed (Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Lee, 1993) that the person receiving these projections and unconsciously identifying with them may have a specific "valence" (an unconscious preponderance) to receive these projections, and carry them on behalf of the system. This is referred to as the individual's projective identifications and process roles, as distinct from their formally sanctioned roles.

The consultant will monitor movement by being aware of how the group is initially functioning in its basic assumption (see dependence, fight/flight, etc. above) and paranoid-schizoid position; towards interdependence, characterized by work group functioning; and the depressive position, characterized by an openness to and acceptance of differences (Czander, 1993; Gabelnick & Carr, 1989; Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001, 2004; Shapiro & Carr, 1991; Stapley, 1996; Wells, 1985).

The stance studies the emotional task of the system, which may be filled with chaos, a lack of control, and difficult experiences such as competition, rivalry, jealousy, envy, hate, hostility, and aggression (Miller, 1976, 1993). As a result, leadership becomes difficult (if not impossible). Furthermore, relationships and relatedness between subsystems as well as the containment of these within boundaries become increasingly complex. As a result, mistrust and distrust increase (indicating the prevalence of paranoid fear as well as a lack of meaning and hope in the system). Because leaders seem to find themselves de-authorised to negotiate new roles within their organizations directly, the system creates new mechanisms as a defensive compensation for the loss of control (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle, & Pooley, 2004). An example could be when a working team who does not trust its designated leader uses an informal leader to create a shadow leadership to (at least on a fantasy level) serve the group and satisfy needs for nurturing and caring.

Method

Participant Selection

The particular focus group that we used for study in this inquiry was formed for the purpose of understanding how diversity was experienced in the workplace. Permission for participants' attendance was given by their individual managers. The 12 participants were purposively sampled, using maximum variation or heterogeneity sampling (Patton, 2002). They represented diversity with respect to professional background, ages, and racial groups. In general, the participation of focus group members is important in order to optimize the research data gathering. Research participants consented to take part in the focus group after they had been informed about the broad topic, diversity in the workplace. We did not, however, distribute the focus group questions beforehand.

Ethical considerations in focus groups differ somewhat from other data collection methods in terms of consent, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and voluntary participation. What was important and different in stance, was the responsibility of individual focus group participants' code of conduct regarding confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and disclosure. The moderator had thus another set of ethical ground rules to which all had to adhere. Focus group data were collective group data and had to be treated as such. The ground rules and reciprocal trust were negotiated up front for the shared protection of all participants. This was particularly crucial, if not critical, because the topic under investigation, diversity in the workplace, was of a sensitive kind. With that said, ethical clearance was granted in 2003 by the university ethics committee from the University of Pretoria 2003.¹

Data Collection

The assumptions underlying the data gathering were that focus group data reflect collective notions of understandings of the topic, which are shared and/or negotiated by group participants, as opposed to interview data, which reflect views and opinions of an individual. It is also assumed that group data do not necessarily imply group consensus. The male researcher acted as moderator, and the female researcher as observer. The moderator role consisted of being psychologically present in the moment, and responding to the content, feelings, and processes, and the group dynamics, while the non participant observer took copious field notes. Examples of these dynamics were dependency, fight/flight, pairing, me-ness, and we-ness. Additional dynamics such as silences, turn-taking, and anti-task behaviour were noted. The observer made notes of the conversations, and wrote field notes of the observation. For instance, we listened to what had been said and more specifically, *how* something was said, and most importantly, why it was said.

Data Analysis During and After Data Collection

¹ The University of Pretoria was the previous employer of Prof Smit.

Empirical data from the focus group discussion, and field notes of observation, including the overt and the covert, were manually analysed for content and discourse. During the content analysis we elicited some themes, which are later discussed as our findings. Thereafter, we used a variety of analytical questions and analysed the texts for discourse. The assumptions underlying the data analysis were that we took little for granted.

- Why were these words chosen and not others?
- On which discourses do participants draw to position themselves?
- Or, which discourses were afforded presence, how and why?
- Who had voice to speak and who not?
- Who was silenced by whom and who broke the silence?
- Who needed to speak louder to be heard and who had a silent voice?
- At what levels were the discussions; on cognitive rational or emotional levels and at what depth?
- What was promoted and what was underplayed?
- What was marginalised (on the peripheral) and what was mainframe in the discussion (Cheek 2000)?

Although most of these guiding questions were employed during data analysis, one could also use them as a conceptual frame during data collection in order to make sense of the focus group in the here-and-now. It is helpful to study the use of language in terms of discourse. For instance, what discourses were afforded presence, and which were marginalized? At times participants use jargon or rhetoric to distance themselves from the discussion. Also, highfaluting language is used to define and legitimize position (e.g., “if you look again, I will be president”). The levels at which participants were communicating were studied (e.g., the superficial, game, defensive, or authentic levels). We studied these levels of discussion in which language was used differently because language has the potential of perpetuating division and splits, most visibly on issues such as inclusion and exclusion. This manner of interpretation corresponds with Schafer’s (2003) description of the systems psychodynamic consultancy stance. We interpreted the data in their object relations and relatedness. For example, an object can: (1) be an individual from a specific race and gender, (2) speak from a specific positional space in the group, (3) be about an issue, and (4) address another individual representing his/her own race, gender, position, and stance. The overt level content and the relationships between group members was then linked with the covert processes, dynamics to ascertain the (unconscious) relatedness between objects.

Trustworthiness of the Inquiry

The notion of trustworthiness (i.e., credibility and validity) in our inquiry is based on craftsmanship with precision, care and accountability, open communication throughout the inquiry, together with ethical conduct (Henning, van Rensburg, & Smit 2004). We claim that this inquiry yielded believable evidence, which was peer reviewed, and checked by one member of the group. Methodologically, we collected data from various sources, interviews, observations, and non-verbal behaviour, and analysed data

for content and discourse. The thick descriptions add to enhanced and deep understanding, beyond the surface, to create a rigorous, believable scholarly product. To sum up, we used multiple ways to establish trustworthiness, multiple methods of data collection, analysis, (also referred to as triangulation of methods) two researchers, peer review, member checking, and thick descriptions.

Findings: Diversity in the Workplace

What follows is a succinct discussion of some properties of inclusion and exclusion (as the most prominent split dynamic that emanated from the data), and a clarification of how these became observable and evident in the focus group. Thus, the theoretical assumptions of the systems psychodynamic approach, described earlier as a suitable lens to shed light on specific behaviour in the group, were used in order to gain deeper understanding of various levels of discussions and elicit hidden texts in focus groups.

Projections Around Age

To begin with, age differences lead to inclusion and exclusion of participants in the focus group. Older participants used age to label younger participants as ruthless, arrogant, and impatient. Furthermore, they were accused of not taking the time to engage in the process, and not contributing meaningfully. This acquisition was extended into the political realm, saying the younger people do not honour the political struggle and the sacrifices by older citizens. In defence, younger participants described themselves as youthful, with energy and adaptability, and not caring about the past, which added to the hostility amongst the older group participants. The working hypothesis offered was that the older participants were rejecting and splitting off their bad parts (in this case being ruthless, arrogant, impatient, non-engaging, not interested, and non-participative) and projecting that onto the younger ones. The dynamic continued when the younger participants identified with the projection, which meant that the older participants' projection was now not only onto but also into the younger participants as a subsystem of the group. This projective identification (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994) implied that the younger participants were acting out the older participant's bad parts, leaving the older to behave as old people traditionally do. If these unconscious behavioural dynamics are not noted by the researcher, the findings may reflect only the conscious meaning given by individuals. By interpreting the group dynamics, the findings become so much richer in the interpretation that age is used by the group to manage its anxiety, and that it can only engage with diversity issues by splitting of its younger and older parts and letting its subsystems contain its parts. Ideally, the group should meet over a longer time, if participants can work through their defences, become aware, and own them, then they can become responsible for their own individual opinions.

Projections Around Age and Gender

Next and closely related, the role of gender added tension to the dynamics, particularly in terms of age. For instance, young women were seen as too independent

and not obedient enough (especially amongst blacks). On the one hand, some men saw younger women as dominant, but without authorisation, as if older people have to give the younger the permission and authority to act in an adult manner. On the other hand, women saw men as coercing the process and the discussion. This often resulted in conflict and resistance, noticeably in flight reactions by shifting the discussion from the here-and-now focus to outside and safer topics. Furthermore, the male and female fight for dominance, visibly in assumed roles of father and mother, were directly opposed by the younger participants in the group. Some openly articulated that they did not need a mother or a father in this context, or to be told how the group should proceed or work. It was as if a true family dynamic was playing itself out; the children fighting with the parents about rules for behaviour. The working hypothesis offered was that an intergroup dynamic (between subgroups) had developed, which was characterised by stereotyping, blaming, and suspicion (or paranoia). This is known as the paranoid-schizoid position (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004), which indicates the disintegration of the system where the group functions as a split system. If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the findings may indicate that some individuals have serious issues around age and gender as diversity dimensions, and the group's role in projecting parts of the self onto and into others will be denied.

Splits Caused by Language

Also, the male and female dominance had a tendency to shift from time to time. The working hypothesis was offered that this related to the levels of energy at any given time as well as to the content of discussion. Often, when the discussion was male dominated, the content was by and large at cognitive levels and less personal. Once the level of discussion reached a deeper level of consciousness, emotion, and sensitivity, the women seemed to authorise themselves into the leadership roles. It appeared as if they believed they could handle such conversations better, which the group allowed them to do. The hypothesis was that men did not trust their inner selves to participate on those levels. Furthermore, age and gender difference, and the associated dominance thereof, turned into discourse competition manifesting in different levels of discussion. A variety of discourses, which resulted in the inclusion and exclusion of participants in the group, were seen. For instance, language had the potential of perpetuating division amongst participants through the levels of discussion as well as the content and the usage of language. The dominant language of the group was English. At times this was problematic, particularly when the discussions became highly emotional. During such periods, when some group participants found it difficult to express their feelings in English, which was their 2nd, 3rd and 4th language, they switched to their vernacular. This led to further divisions and exclusions. This behaviour indicated how the group split itself according to gender, age, and language as a defence against the anxiety of working together as a system. If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the assumption may be that individuals are passionate about their language origins, which denies the role of the group using language as an object to split the system, and to thus manage its anxiety. It would, for example, help to follow up this focus group with groups of only males/females and blacks/whites to hear the opinions of the "purer" configuration and then compare this with the mixed format.

Splits Caused by Status

Another issue concerning language usage was linked to the levels of discussions. Some used their academic status and performed intellectual “gymnastics” in an attempt to apply the rhetoric to exclude and withdraw from other participants. This type of conversation, in which rhetoric was used to bore some in the group, resulted in severe segregation of other participants. Unfortunately though, only few participants made an effort to understand why such discourses did take place, and what that meant for the focus group discussion. The impression was that the complexity of the behavioural dynamics created so much anxiety that it was impossible to engage with the content on an equal level. The working hypothesis offered to the group was that status was used to split the system into more manageable and safer parts. It can also be interpreted as flight reactions into status issues as a defence against linking with opposites. As in many of the above examples, this could indicate a lack of safety, trust, and support in the group, making it difficult for the moderator to distinguish between a participant’s real answers to the focus group question and the collective and unconscious dynamic anxiety. There was also evidence of boredom as a defence mechanism, meaning that all participants were not involved in the focus group, again devaluing the outcomes. If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the findings may exclude the role of intense anxiety around differences, and the idea that boredom may mean on the content level “I’m not interested” as well as “this is making me so anxious, that I must disengage” on the unconscious and dynamic level.

The Continuous Splitting of the System

There were times when it seemed as if some participants were not capable of engaging at an emotional level: The commitment felt too risky. It was as if the anxiety levels were so high that they had hoped by using complex language they would be able to cope better with the anxious situation: a flight reaction. It was fascinating to observe how some white men used such highfaluting discourse to remove themselves from the process. This was done at times in a hostile manner. This behaviour was interpreted as a distancing phenomenon in defence of linking with opposites. Conversely so, some black men took up the roles of the mature traditional leader, using their “words of wisdom” to tell others in the group what to do and how to keep on with the process. This led to more splits in the group and added to yet more black and white male confrontations, much to the frustration of the women in the group. These behaviours offer evidence of how the group, as a collective, projected different objects (including feelings) onto its different parts; for example, hostility and distance onto the white male and tradition, and leadership onto the black male. This split the males in the group with the females carrying the frustration. The psychodynamic interpretation was that a classic war dynamic was created in which the men fight and the women stay at home deprived and frustrated. This indicated the group’s lack of creativity (or procreation). If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the findings may indicate that the group is divided around some issues, but with no idea of what the causes are. This stance elevated the nature of the underlying dynamic of competition and how that can

marginalise some individuals who can then not engage with the discourse or the processes.

Hostility Between the Generations

As opposed to the black and white male domination, the older black men often frustrated the younger white females. It appeared that some black younger women were labelled as less “obedient” towards older black men, while the older black women appeared more accepting of older black men. Young black men were at times less opposing or confronting to the elder, while the white women, both young and old, frankly expressed their frustration and disagreement to the older black men. Often the black men dominated the discussion attempting to assume power. This was directly opposed, particularly by younger women, both white and black. The older black women were less challenging or resistant. This became evident in the long speeches by black men, as attempts were made to position themselves; voices were raised in an attempt to be heard, yet they had only a few followers. This was interpreted as a generation split involving the genders in different positions. This was followed by hostility and threats to the group participants, particularly by one black male, who shouted, “if you look again, I will be president.” This is a powerful speech act, which ironically, elicited lots of laughter that contributed to added disempowerment and disrespect. It may have been a matter of trying too hard, and only a few really heard him. It could be interpreted as a competition to be the chosen one in the ultimate role of authority, which the group was withholding, and even ridiculing. If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the findings may not include the power play in the system in coping with its splits.

Splits Around Identity

Lastly, the issue of race and colour, as objects of inclusion and exclusion, showed fascinating dynamics, particularly in terms of acceptance and/or the denial of blackness and whiteness. For example an Indian woman expressed her confusion, “Part of me feels black, part of me feels white.” Interestingly, the reactions from some group participants, particularly white men, were to deny seeing her blackness and as such, her identity. The working hypothesis offered was that the anxiety about who belongs where and with whom, and in what identity, was so intense that participants become pseudo colour blind as a defence against really working with difference between race and gender. If this unconscious dynamic is not noted by the researcher, the findings will not include the dynamics around inclusion/exclusion and denial as a defence against diversity. These behaviours are especially important towards understanding a construct such as diversity with its emotionally charged content.

In this inquiry, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were highlighted because it played such a huge role in the focus group participation. In making use of the systems psychodynamic consultancy stance, and interpreting the covert here-and-now group behaviour, it became clear that diversity in the organization was filled with extreme levels of anxiety, which were manifested in all kinds of defensive behaviours. When these data are added to the verbatim focus group information, the research results become extremely rich and add comprehensible colour to the empirical data. This process calls

for a reflexive, critical stance, and necessitates a repositioning beyond the obvious or the visible.

Limitations

To begin with, before we draw our conclusions we also make explicit what we did not intend to accomplish, and what the design of this inquiry inherently did not allow. The limitations are those characteristics of design, methodology, and our roles as researchers, which can be regarded as the parameters of the application of interpretations of the data, the constraints on generalisability, and utility of findings. Then, the most obvious limitations would relate to the ability to draw descriptive generalisations. This implies that our particular findings are not representative, and that our identified themes are typical of all. Furthermore, we do not claim to have identified all the possible themes of diversity. Lastly, the theoretical frame in itself, the systems psychodynamic perspective, which assumes understanding covert behaviour as a vehicle of “access” to other peoples’ knowledge, views, and attitudes, could be restricting field text interpretations, and ultimate findings of this inquiry.

Conclusion

The above findings illustrate that unconscious behavioural dynamics play a part in focus group functioning, as is believed in the systems psychodynamic perspective. Evidence was given for splits and all kinds of defence mechanisms such as projection, intellectualisation, and denial which adds richness and complexity to the experience of the focus group around diversity.

If these behavioural manifestations were not noted by the researchers, they may stay unaware in the social unconscious (Hopper, 2003). The researchers may interpret the behaviour on the content level, and further refer to the specific group as “being difficult” without knowing why. This means that the findings could represent a constraint towards understanding the social and communication nature around diversity.

We suggest that focus group teams are systems psychodynamically trained observers, to note and interpret the unconscious behaviour in order to ascertain the deeper meaning of the group’s experience.

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