

Criticise Your Working Conditions!

—Focus Group Interviews on Sensitive Topics

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Received 2 February 2014; revised 2 March 2014; accepted 10 March 2014

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Abstract

The aim of this article is, through two case studies, to demonstrate that focus group interviews constitute a particularly useful method with which to examine topics which may seem sensitive to the informants. The central point of the article is that focus group interviews can help to establish a safe setting for the informants in which, they can create shared meanings, interpretations and understandings in relation to the topic on which the researchers wish to collect a group's accumulated statements, opinions and experiences. It is argued that this process possesses a politically democratic potential, as the framework for the focus group interview creates an arena in which critical statements may be made about the sphere of possibilities of working life. The focus group interview thereby becomes a free zone, which not only enables the sensitive issue to be subjected to the group's reciprocal interpretation process, but also generates emancipatory processes.

Keywords

Focus Group Interviews; Criticism; Emancipation; Working Life; Sensitive Topics

1. Introduction

This article is significant because it shows that even a topic as apparently uncontroversial as working life can constitute a sensitive area, especially when people are brought into a situation in which they consider their work in general and the conditions under which it is performed.

The focus group interview is a situation which can provide a framework for reflection upon one's work as well as problematisation of the working conditions. This is because focus group interviews can provide a safe setting for the respondents, within which, without fear of reprisal, they can create shared meanings, interpretations and understandings with respect to the subject on which the researchers wish to collect a group's accumulated statements, opinions and experiences (Merton et al., 1990/1959; Morgan, 1996: 1996; Kitzinger, 1995: 299; Halkier, 2010). The focus group interview is relevant in this context because it generates data originating from

group interaction in relation to the topic under discussion, and thereby uncovers phenomena about which the researcher wishes to learn (Morgan, 1996: 130). In this article, it is argued that this process also contains a politically democratic potential, inasmuch as the framework for the focus group interview creates an arena in which critical statements may be made about the possibilities of working life. The focus group interview thereby becomes a free zone, which not only enables the sensitive issue to be subjected to the group's reciprocal interpretation process, but also generates emancipatory processes.

This article will illustrate this with reference to two apparently different cases. The first of these deals with the possibilities of kindergarten teachers to criticise their working conditions, from the structural conditions to the psychological and physical environment of the individual institutions, while the second deals with the psychosocial working environment of school head teachers, including their working relationships and their opportunities to criticise them. However, the article begins with a discussion of what constitutes a sensitive topic, and the significance that this has for the study of such a topic. It then goes on to discussing the relationship between emancipation and focus group interviews. This will be followed by an analysis of the two case studies, and descriptions of how the focus group interview was used in each of them as a method of generating data. Finally, the article's key points are discussed.

2. Sensitive Topics

It is not necessarily self-evident that focus group interviews about people's working lives and conditions can be categorised as studies of a sensitive topic. In the literature, sensitive topics are usually associated with controversial subjects such as sex and sexuality, income and social status, religion, political and social standpoints, deviant behaviour, emotions, the body's (mal-) functions, violence, etc. (c.f. Mariampolski, 1989): Topics which are subject to taboos in specific cultural contexts and situations (Lee, 1993). It is argued that even studies of such a reasonably uncontroversial phenomenon as working life can be categorised as a sensitive topic when working conditions are articulated and explored.

The literature on research into socially sensitive topics operates with several more or less inclusive definitions which are relevant for our purposes (c.f. Kaye Wellings et al., 2000; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Joan Sieber and Barbara Stanley (1988) define socially sensitive research as "*studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research*" (Sieber & Stanley, 1988: 49). There are clear advantages in working with such a broad definition of sensitive topics, as this indirectly encompasses subjects which would not immediately be thought of as sensitive in research. While Sieber and Stanley focus on the consequences of the research, Norman Farberow (1963) equates sensitive subjects with areas of social life that are taboo. Farberow's definition is based on anthropological and psychoanalytical sources, in which taboo subjects are perceived as emotionally charged and awe and fear-inducing. Farberow also takes into account issues that relate to sex and death. This definition is however too narrow for our purposes, in that it does not take into account the possibility that the sensitive nature of the research may arise from situational circumstances (Brewer, 1990) or from a specific socio-political context (Rosstocki, 1986).

In a more ethical and political perspective, this definition also raises the question of the researcher's responsibility towards the participating informants, and towards society as a whole (see also Morgan, 1997; M. Smith, 1995). Although the ethical issues should never be underestimated, it is important to bear in mind that sensitive research may raise a host of other issues, particularly of a procedural and methodological character (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). The above definition could blind the researcher to these issues. In our experience, an operational definition must be able to encompass the procedural and methodological problems that arise in the study design, data collection and communication phases, since these may be decisive in determining whether a study of working life may be categorised as research into a sensitive topic. Lee and Renzetti work with a more inclusive definition, formulated as follows:

The threatening character of the research, and its potential consequentiality for both researcher and researched, suggests that a sensitive topic is one which potentially possesses to those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data (Lee & Renzetti, 1990: 512).

This definition is based on the assumption that the sensitive character of a specific topic is emergent (Lee, 1993), which implies that the sensitive nature of a research topic does not lie solely within the topic itself, but equally in the relationship between the topic and the social context in which the research is carried out. At the

same time, the authors also point out that for a topic to be defined as sensitive, the threat inherent in the subject should be of a moderate to serious nature. What may be perceived as problematic by one informant, however, may be quite trivial for another, which implies that any topic may potentially be sensitive, depending on the context. According to [Lee & Renzetti \(1990\)](#) several areas can be identified in which, due to their sensitive nature, research and the research process may appear more problematic and intimidating: where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience; where the study is concerned with deviance or social control; where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned. With such a definition of sensitive topics, it is our contention that even studies of working life can be categorised as sensitive research, especially when the themes of the focus group interviews relate to working conditions and include such areas as bullying, stress, lack of recognition, conflict and repression, but also less dramatic topics such as degrees of freedom, scope for action, and influence or lack of same over the organisation of the work. It is thus not the theme itself that makes it sensitive, but rather the informants' ability to articulate the negative aspects of their work and openly criticise their working conditions. At the same time, sensitive topics may have very real consequences for the informants, including psychological effects such as guilt, shame or embarrassment, or threatening effects, since participation in research may have unexpected and inconvenient consequences. Accordingly, this type of research requires a certain level of ethical awareness in the researcher, who must self-critically address his or her own role in the research process and the repercussions that may result from the investigation of sensitive topics.

Researchers, however, disagree about whether the focus group interview is an effective method of generating data on sensitive topics. This is due to a number of procedural and methodological problems, such as the fact that different combinations of moderators and informants may provoke different levels of perceived discomfort, even when the same theme is discussed ([Mariampolski, 1989](#)). In this article, we seek to demonstrate that the focus group interview is a very useful method when the theme is working life, and when the aim is to create a space in which the informants, despite any discomfort, uncertainty, fear or anger they may feel—but also with a sense of relief and freedom—can discuss and criticise conditions in this central aspect of human existence.

3. Emancipation and Focus Group Interviews

Just as focus group interviews are extensively used in connection with the study of sensitive subjects, there is also literature pointing to a correlation between participation in focus group interviews and participant emancipation¹, and the spectrum seems to be broad. In a study of the conditions of transmigrants in Indonesia [Jon D. Goss](#) and [Thomas R. Leinbach](#) demonstrated that the use of focus group interviews had an emancipatory effect on the participants, in that they apparently gave them a sense of increased freedom ([Goss & Leinbach, 1996](#)). [J.A. Smith](#) and his medical colleagues ([J.A. Smith et al., 1995](#)), in their study of the feasibility of patient involvement in hospitals in relation to initiatives for the improvement of patient conditions, show how focus group interviews had an emancipatory effect on the participants, in that they simply helped them to revise their perception of the power relationship between patients and the hospital system, which thereby created a series of hitherto unrecognised possibilities for action. [Bernd Stahl](#) and a group of IT researchers ([Stahl et al., 2009](#)) show in their critical research into the usability and quality of information systems how the use of focus group interviews had an emancipatory effect on the participants, in that the interviews changed (and improved) the participants' perspective on constructive communication. This brief list is merely intended to illustrate that the link between the use of focus group interviews and participant emancipation has been recorded within many academic disciplines, relating to very different structural conditions and groups of people.

That said, the literature also points out that some scientific traditions make more direct use of this link than others, with some even embedding emancipation in their use of method. As an example of a relatively aggressive, normative and ideological approach to the use of focus group interviews, one might mention Participatory Action Research, or PAR ([Chiu, 2003: 173](#)). In the PAR tradition, focus group interviews are used as a tool to promote emancipation among the informants, and from this perspective, it is not considered particularly relevant how the focus group interviews are organised, or how they are planned and implemented. The means is considered to be legitimate by definition, as long as it can help to achieve the desired end. A somewhat more muted,

¹Some studies even indicate that researchers, too, can experience a kind of emancipation when working with focus group interviews ([Stahl et al., 2009](#)). In this article, however, we will concern ourselves only with participant emancipation.

but nonetheless active approach to focus group interviews and the possibility of emancipation is found in certain parts of feminist literature. Here, emancipation through focus group interviews is naturally associated with a particular group of people, namely women (Wilkinson, 1999: 234-235). However, while it is one thing to assert a relationship between emancipation and focus group interviews, the definition of what emancipation actually entails is quite a different matter. The above examples do not operate with an unequivocal definition of the term—on the contrary, each of them makes use of separate definitions, reflecting their respective theoretical and analytical viewpoints. This obviously indicates something about the complex and abstract nature of the concept, as well as the difficulty of transferring a general conceptual definition to a specific subject area.

Those who attempt to do so tend to run into problems. Bernd Stahl and his co-authors experimented with a definition of emancipation which read as follows: “*Emancipation means that more people can achieve their potential to a greater degree*” (Stahl et al., 2009: 2). No-one, surely, could disagree with this? Nonetheless, the definition raises some important questions: Who decides what a person’s potential is? Who decides how they should achieve it? And so on. Because of these difficulties, they were forced to recognise that the definition was too loose and general in relation to their specific project, and they modified it to suit their context. We will do the same. Our overall understanding of the concept is close to that of Stahl et al., but our specific understanding of the emancipatory potential that focus group interviews bring to the participants is obviously different. This leads us to the following definition: Emancipation as a result of participation in focus group interviews implies a strengthened individual and collective awareness of the possibility and right to criticise one’s working conditions without reprisal. In the following, we will deal with how this definition is expressed in practice.

3.1. Case 1: Focus Groups with Kindergarten Staff

In the spring of 2009, one of the article’s authors conducted six focus group interviews with kindergarten teachers in Denmark, with an average of eight kindergarten teachers taking part in each interview². The focus groups constituted a follow-up to a previous study of the opportunities of kindergarten staff to criticise their working conditions. This study revealed the existence of a number of structural barriers, organisational obstacles, political hurdles and normative hindrances encountered by kindergarten teachers when they attempted to criticise their working conditions (Willig, 2009: 51-95). Frustration and irritation at the experienced circumstances led to feelings of helplessness, resignation, malaise and paralysis, which the kindergarten teachers, naturally enough, had difficulty accommodating. The common conceptual denominator that was used to sum up this situation is “disenfranchisement”. The kindergarten teachers were disenfranchised because they no longer had the possibility or opportunity to criticise their working conditions without restrictive consequences (Willig, 2009: 11). Such a conclusion naturally calls forth a reaction, one of which was the initiation of the six above-mentioned focus group interviews.

3.1.1. The Conduct of the Focus Group Interview

The research aim was to follow up on the study’s findings and give the participants an opportunity to advance a step further in their possible initiatives for change. What is interesting in this context is that the participants did not really fully understand what they were getting involved in. They knew only that they would hear something about the conclusions of the study, and then discuss them. They had no idea that they would be able to express and share criticism of their own working conditions and those of others, and that they would also have an opportunity to discuss possible solutions. When the purpose of the day was announced, there was an audible sigh of relief from most of the participants, showing that the foundation for an emancipatory space had already been cast in this initial phase. The next phase helped to reinforce this foundation.

As Hy Mariampolski (1989) and T. L. Greenbaum (1990), amongst others, have pointed out, when conducting focus group interviews on sensitive topics, it is a good idea to demystify the process and set as undramatic a scene as possible for the interview. A variety of tools may be used in this connection. Participants might for example watch a film on the subject and use this as a springboard for discussion, read a common text on the topic and talk about it, or listen to a presentation on the theme of the topic. The use of these tools should in no way be confused with an attempt to defuse the participants’ perceptions or interpretations of the topic in question, much less stem their enthusiasm for discussion. The purpose of the tools is to get people to relax in the situation, and hopefully further whet their interest in the overall theme. In this case, the latter tool was used. The

²The kindergarten teachers were mainly women between the age of 35-55, all work in the Middle Region Denmark.

moderator held one presentation of approximately 45 minutes' duration, covering the study's analyses and conclusions.

In the presentation, the kindergarten teachers were presented with a wealth of processes of disenfranchisement to which, according to the book's analysis, their colleagues were subjected. The processes of disenfranchisement in question encompassed everything from the way in which structural factors systematically disabled criticism by kindergarten teachers of their working conditions, the organisational and managerial measures that removed from the kindergarten staff all possibility for uttering relevant critique, and the sense of resignation that resulted from not being able to perform their duties satisfactorily due to certain normative processes of disenfranchisement (opaque work processes, the constant imposition of new duties, etc.) (Willig, 2009). The presentation was clearly intense and overwhelming for some of the participants, with the result that they could hardly wait to communicate their experiences to the group, and talked all at once. Eventually they allowed each other to make their statements uninterrupted, and the interview proceeded as more of a dialogue. This extract is from one of the typical opening statements that clearly found resonance among the other participants:

Else³: One of the things that frustrate me very much is that we have no clear way to express our criticism. All the criticism in the staff satisfaction surveys disappears, because we do not know where the surveys go. It is ultimately the management that evaluates, rather than the staff, because the time allowed is so short. It is like the Emperor's New Clothes.

Jette: Yes, and we are simply not given enough time to express criticism. Just five minutes is set aside at meetings for any other business and criticism, and that just isn't enough. For the rest of the time we have to be oh so positive.

Birthe: You are often seen as being difficult if you criticize.

Both uncertainty about the infrastructure of critique, i.e. its "traffic movements", and frustration that it was ultimately the management that set the time limits for the expression of critique, as Else states, were phenomena that many people could recognise, as Jette's follow up also indicates. Jette's expression of irritation about being positive instead of criticising is supported by Birthe who states how critique is looked down upon. The combination of opacity in the possible processes of critique, and the tight deadlines allowed for submitting desirable criticism, and the non-desired situation of those who wanted to criticise were experienced by many as a key problem

The material is full of such utterances, which were almost always followed up with accumulated (often caricatured) stories about how criticism of their working conditions was consistently being sidetracked, and how they were always expected to be positive—indeed almost gullible—employees, towards the children, parents and managers. The latter was closely linked with the rise of an critique-free culture among kindergarten teachers. All forms of criticism were equated with complaint. This gave rise to the somewhat bizarre situation in which critics were given the rather unflattering label of "grumblers"—by the municipal administration, the management, or even other staff members. In this way the criticism could be made to seem illegitimate, and its basic assumptions undermined. This extract is from one of the interviews:

Bjarne: We are quite frightful of the reaction from the parents, the municipality and from our own leader when it comes to critique.

Tove: Yes, this really stops us from criticising. This is really a way in which to make people stop uttering their critique.

Bjarne: Or, sometimes I feel our critique is stranded in the many layers that the system has—it kind of filters the critique hence making it much softer.

Helle: I would say, that critique of the most important aspects are being shut down by comments such as: "are you going into politics? In this place we are administrators"!

Bjarne: Yes.

The results are palpable, and at the individual workplaces, this culture has become so entrenched that it acts as a barrier to critical statements. That, at any rate, is how the kindergarten teachers described it. They also spoke of how their work, and thereby their meeting activities in connection with their work, had grown more distant from their main tasks, namely educational work with children. This extract shows this point:

Lise: I don't remember when we last talked about our children at the meetings. The agendas always come from outside, and they are not about children. We sometimes talk about where our job satisfaction went—it disappeared when we stopped talking about the children.

³All names are pseudonyms.

Inger: I agree, the children are no longer at the heart of our job. Now there is so much “red-tape” and the children are paying the price—that is for sure!

Lise: Sure.

The feeling of being controlled from outside, which Lise and Inger express, whether in connection with the right to determine their educational work with the children, or in the daily organisation of the tasks and their content, was something most kindergarten teachers mentioned repeatedly. In combination with the inability to criticise the conditions, this experience of lack of influence over their own work had some serious consequences. The kindergarten teachers spoke of everything from reduced job satisfaction and lack of energy to defend the children’s interests, to resignation with respect to the possibility of exerting a positive influence over their own work. Many even spoke of an increasing frequency of stress-related disorders (exhaustion, burn-out, etc.) and increased absence from work due to illness as a direct consequence of their working conditions. Seen from this perspective, it is hardly surprising that some kindergarten teachers had need of safety valves to express their criticism.

3.1.2. The Role of the Moderator

Most of the focus groups were fairly easy to administer. In purely practical terms, the moderator could concentrate on writing down what the participants said⁴. It was not, in other words, necessary to ask the participants to stick to the topic or to otherwise intervene in the flow of conversation, except to remind the participants not to interrupt each other. The atmosphere was relaxed and positive, and the moderator did not feel any need to interfere in the tone between the participants. Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, there was a great deal of laughter. Sometimes, however, the moderator was obliged to take on the role of prompting the participants to speak. What is important in this context is to avoid putting words into the mouths of the participants, while guiding them to provide their own input to the discussion. This usually took the form of the moderator rephrasing some of the points of the presentation—clothing them in different words—and asking the participants whether they could relate these to their everyday working lives. If this technique did not work, the moderator also made use of pauses. A pause can seem a little awkward and uncomfortable, and people feel the urge to interrupt it with talk. This talk can then lead to a relatively constructive discussion—which, at any rate, was our experience after these focus group interviews.

One could argue that our presentation and research design prevented participants from expressing positive comments to their work situation—that the research simply focused too much on the negative aspects. We are fully aware that this bias could constitute a methodological and an analytical problem. However, people were not encouraged from talking about positive aspects of their jobs—it simply did not come up during the focus groups. That is not to say that positive sides to their jobs were missing: There was no doubt about the fact that the participants liked their profession, but they were unhappy about the state it was in. Their dissatisfaction then was not grounded in the profession in itself. On the contrary. They liked their profession so much that they wanted to alter, what they perceived to be, its conditions to the better.

3.1.3. An Emancipatory Space

At first glance, the participants seemed to confine themselves to making broad proposals for corrections and adjustments that could make their daily lives easier—despite the fact that the participants had been encouraged not to allow their ideas to be limited by structural or economic conditions. Our initial analysis was hence that the kindergarten teachers experienced difficulties in formulating common pathways which could lead to the eradication of what they regarded as untenable working conditions. It is not hard to understand why one initially turned to this analysis. The teachers working conditions had become so ingrained in them that this may have blocked their ability to perceive radical solutions. Or, the participants did not reflexively understand the complex organisational and institutional structures and cultures of which they were a part, for which reason it was difficult for them to propose concrete initiatives for change.

However, a closer look at the material made us realise that the broad proposals that came up during the focus groups interviews actually constituted the backbone of creating what we call an emancipatory space. Let us ex-

⁴As Kitzinger (1995: 299) states, direct transcription of focus group interviews is one research possibility, as are audio and video recordings. There is, of course, some problems when it comes to direct transcription of focus groups. One being the fact, that the moderator could miss out on important aspects of the conversation. In order to avoid that from happening, we always made sure to read out loud the transcription to the respondents hence asking them if we had missed out on something.

plain by giving this extract:

Henning: There will be a reaction sooner or later against these developments, and then it is a question of being ready. The backlash will come, but the question is when. After thinking for a moment, he added: The very fact that we are sitting here may express such a backlash.

Ellen: Yes, and I would suggest that we make use of more civil disobedience to state our point and enlighten the public about these developments. Sometimes we need to put our foot down and say NO. I want to make our problems visible to the public in a non hippie way. I don't want to be called a hippie just because we are criticising our working conditions.

Frida: We need to be more cynical and cheekier in order to make our conditions visible. We need to know the rules of the political game better in order to play the game—we are lacking that knowledge now.

Ellen: Maybe we should make use of more academic concepts in order to fight the development. Make use of concepts such as responsibility, pedagogy, child psychology etc. That might change things.

Henning: I guess it might would. And maybe that kind of critique would prevent us from being labelled difficult.

What this extract show, is not only a consensus on the part of the participants on using one specific tool to alter their conditions. They want to use many tools—and they are actually quite creative. They wanted to come up with ways in which to present criticism of the prevailing working conditions, whether to the municipal administration, the management, parents, etc. All that arose from the focus group interviews. And, more importantly: the participants arrived at the collective perception that the possibilities for criticism should be provided with better support, in the sense that it should be possible to advance criticism of their work and conditions without being perceived as “grumblers” or “difficult”, and without fear of reprisals.

In this way, the focus group interviews undoubtedly functioned as a collective emancipatory space, both for the individual participants and for the group as a whole. The interesting thing was the emancipatory potential created by the whole process. The kindergarten teachers experienced participation in the focus group interviews as a possible turning point, in two different respects. Firstly, the focus group interviews served as a collective eye-opener for the participants. They experienced the ability to speak freely and criticise their working conditions together with others in similar situations, and this in itself gave them the feeling that things could actually change. Secondly, they viewed the focus group interviews as a starting-point for change in the longer term.

3.2. Case 2: Focus Groups with School Head Teachers

The second study described in this article (Antoft & Salomonsen, 2009) had an entirely different aim. The object of this study was to illuminate the psychosocial working environment of (private) head school teachers in Denmark, identify both problematic and positive aspects of their work, and provide a possible explanation for the apparently poor psychological conditions associated with the work. The study was carried out on the basis of the assumption that people's working conditions affected them in a way which could be stressful for some, but stimulating for others. It is therefore important to treat people's working conditions as a complex category. The study focused primarily on both individual and social, organisational and managerial factors which could have an impact on the psychosocial working environment. The tools used to explore the psychological working environment included focus group interviews.

3.2.1. The Conduct of the Focus Group Interview

Two focus group interviews were held in the form of two day-long working meetings with the total of 17 head teachers⁵. The focus group interviews revolved around three main points: a description of the school's organisation and its relations with partners and surroundings, an identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the school heads' psychosocial working environment, and the formulation of ideas for ways to improve the working environment. The main results of the focus group interviews, however, consisted of the identification of problem areas in relation to the respondents' perceived working conditions. The focus group interviews were organised with an entirely parallel content, and alternated between presentations and questions from the moderators, defined group work, and plenary discussions. The focus groups began by the moderators giving a brief presenta-

⁵The participants in the focus group interviews consisted of 7 women and 9 men in total. There were 8 participants in the first focus group (4 women and 4 men) and 9 participants in the second (3 women and 6 men). The participants represented different types and sizes of private (elementary) schools in Denmark (from 109 to 840 pupils) geographically spread all over Denmark and had different years of experience as head teachers (from 2 to 10 years). The focus group interviews were held at two different conference centres where we had access to a seminar room where the discussions in the focus groups unfolded and to smaller office spaces where the participants could do group work.

tion on general perceptions of working environment problems, and on stereotypes or everyday perceptions of relationships in organisations. The head teachers were then given the task: “Draw your school”. The object of the drawing exercise was to create a picture of how the head teachers saw and understood their schools as organisations, together with their boundaries and internal and external relations. Experience shows that even quite simple images can help to capture fundamental problems and issues concerning social relations and co-operation (Brousinne, 2008).

The drawing exercise and the presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of the participants’ psychosocial working environment created a foundation for a more general discussion of the more strenuous aspects of their working lives. As previously mentioned, it was above all the tasks in their management functions that the participants found affected them emotionally, and which they described as stressful or onerous. Such situations typically arose in relation to other actors in the school organisation such as School Board members, teachers, parents etc. This extract illustrates this point:

Frank: Relations with the school board have to be good. Managing co-operation with the board can be a bit like taking an exam. A board which includes self-employed people can be very focused on goals. I experience that as a form of surveillance, which can be very stressful.

Torben: The area where I experience problematic relationships is more in relation to the parents. If the goods on the shelves in the supermarket are not what you want, you go to another supermarket. This produces a lot of insecurity in relation to the parents. So we try to insist that we are not a supermarket, but an educational institution.

Frank: Yes, but if I stand by my principles the parents may move their child to another school. But if that’s the case, so be it. However it can be very demanding cases for the teachers and head teachers. But it is typically when your norms and values are put under pressure these issues becomes a work strain.

But it was not in these situations where the head teachers described experiencing the greatest stress, but rather when dealing with individual cases that had direct human consequences for other people besides themselves. Here the headmasters mentioned firing teachers, conflicts with parents, expelling students—either because of their behaviour or due to the inability of the parents to pay school fees—and interacting with resource-poor parents or parents with psychological disorders. These were issues which, by their nature, were emotionally stressful for head teachers. It was important for the participants to highlight these issues in the focus group interviews, as it was in these concrete situations that they often felt themselves isolated, with very few people they could rely upon for help.

Erik: I make use of the people I know best. My secretary is very good. She listens, and that is often what is most important. She listens to your frustrations behind closed doors, which is necessary sometimes.”

Niels: You can usually just go home and talk to your wife about it.

Some even went to psychologists, while others took part in professional networking with other head teachers, and used these communities to share their problems and obtain advice on how to tackle difficult situations.

3.2.2. The Role of the Moderator

As the introductory agenda for this focus group interview was to provide a kind of “lightning diagnosis” of the symptoms of potentially poor psychological working environments, the moderator’s role during the sessions was also relatively controlling. A daily agenda was laid down with general presentations on the working environment, together with pictures of organisations and “exercises and group work”, with the sole aim of quickly identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the head teacher’s psychosocial working environment. This also meant that the discussion themes were relatively fixed, since the moderators’ presentations largely guided the informants’ drawings, contributions and problem conceptions. Nonetheless, it was the stressful elements in the work of head teachers, in particular, which came to be the pivotal element in the focus group interviews. The moderators brought this picture into the focus group interviews, where it formed the basis of assumptions about the psychological working environment, which we continually sought to test in the process. This occurred not merely on the basis of our presentations, but also through the way in which the discussions were structured, supported by questions and summaries. It thus came as a surprise to the moderators to find that the starting-point for descriptions of the respondents’ work could be summarised under the heading: “managers in balance”.

Nonetheless, the moderators’ follow-up created a space in which the head teachers felt it was legitimate to talk about what afflicted them in their management functions, touching upon themes which had a sensitive nature and were emotionally trying. Here a special technique was applied, namely to use the coffee and lunch

breaks between the interviews to conduct informal conversations with the informants about their working lives, and follow up on stories that had not been elaborated in the actual interview situation. These dialogues helped to create a more relaxed and confidential atmosphere, as well as a closeness that encouraged more personal and emotionally charged stories to emerge.

3.2.3. An Emancipatory Space

It was when discussing the head teachers' working environment, when the participants were asked to identify, in groups, the factors which functioned as strengths and weaknesses, respectively, in their psychosocial working environments that the emancipatory space emerged. More precisely, it materialized when the moderators gave a brief summary of the overall problem areas presented during the day. This led to the final part of the focus group interview which concentrated, in "buzz groups", on the task: "Outline some proposals for improving your psychosocial working environment". To begin with, this final part of the focus group interview was analysed as almost an appendix, as the contents of the dialogues and stories quickly came to focus on producing a swift diagnosis of the psychosocial working environment. However, it occurred to us that this exercise really demonstrated to us how focus groups could be regarded as an emancipatory space. In the following sequence the interviewer asked what parts of their work the participant experienced as a strain on their working life.

Frank: It is the inertia in the development of the school organization. Creating change in a school is the art of seduction, and I am getting tired of seducing.

Poul: Yes, but where do we get the nourishment from then?

Helle: As a head teacher the option of coaching, education etc. is important. To have a sparring partner "outside the house" is imperative.

Henrik: Right. Taking the role as head teacher is nurtured from the relation with the kids, and from believing that one can make a difference. As a head teacher you actually create a lot. You actually create a lot for Denmark as a country. You should not fall into small scale thinking—after all it is the future we are creating.

Birthe: Sure-It is the relations to people in everyday-life, which is both demanding and rewarding. It is what gives the energy that makes it worthwhile to play the role as head teacher.

Frank: Yes.

Although the participants started this extract by pointing out the negative aspects of working life, they ended up by focussing on the positive sides to it. They seemed to reach an agreement on what really keeps them going—what they find pivotal in their work. This goes to show how the focus group situation created a particular space for the participants in which they could define and redefine the joyful aspects of their work life and hence re-establish the faith in their work as something meaningful.

The feedback received immediately after the focus group interviews, and in the written responses to the interview records, constitutes another important source to the understanding of how the head teachers experienced their involvement in the process. The general picture was that the focus group participants were open and engaged in the discussions, and that a space has been created in which they could talk about some of the difficult cases they had previously struggled with in their managerial positions, and which had imposed a strain on their working lives, and sometimes also on their family lives.

The focus groups thus enabled the participants to exchange stories about bullying, difficult student cases, sexual assaults, co-operation problems, poor finances, etc. It was made possible for the head teachers to relate the bad stories from their work to an audience of other head teachers who could tell similar stories, together with the two moderators, who had emphasised that the participants would be anonymous and would be able to subsequently edit their statements in the records if they believed that these might be compromising for them, or if they had for example breached their duty of confidentiality in relation to specific cases. Along with the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics, they could also criticise the possibilities for achieving a good working environment. Issues that the participants brought up in this context included the perception by parents of schools as being like shops in which the parents were customers who purchased various services, the focus of school boards on reaching targets and their direct interference in the educational work, the inertia of teachers in relation to creating change in both the school organisation and the educational work, and the ministries' documentation requirements and their seemingly arbitrarily imposed economic policies (read: cut-backs in school funding), etc.

But the criticism did not stop there. This study was conducted in collaboration with the head teachers' professional association, and the respondents also used the focus group interview as a platform for directing criticism at that same organisation. As previously described, a major issue for head teachers is that they frequently feel

that they stand alone in personnel matters. In this context, the participants stated that they were often railroaded and stood no chance against the staff and their unions, as they experienced a lack of support and understanding from their own professional organisations. A different type of criticism was thus made in this context than in the study of the kindergarten teachers' working conditions; the important aspect, however, is not the character of the critique, but its possibilities in the focus group interview.

4. Concluding Discussion

The main argument of this article is that the framework for focus group interviews can in itself generate a social space in which sensitive topics may be articulated, and where common meanings, interpretations and understandings may be generated. By extension, it is argued that this space creates a free zone for the informants which can both provide a basis for the participants' reciprocal processes of interpretation and generate an emancipatory potential, both individually and collectively. The question then becomes the methodological one of how this space may be created within the framework of the focus group interview. There is no doubt that the composition of the participant group and the interactions between the participants in the interview process play a central role in creating this space. In the following, we will however concentrate in the first instance on examining the moderator's role in the process, as it is our assessment that these actors play a significant role in this context. Finally, the form of the focus group interview and the impact of this on the interviews described is discussed.

The Role of the Moderators in the Process

In both the focus group interviews with the kindergarten teachers and those with the head teachers, it was possible to create a space in which difficult aspects of working life could be discussed. The sensitive nature acquired by the specific topics of the interviews can also be seen as a consequence of the moderators' theoretical and empirical preconceptions in relation to the topics, and the way in which the moderators presented the themes of the focus group interviews to the informants. In both cases, the point of departure was an analysis of the working lives of the professional groups under study. The study of the kindergarten teachers was based on a previous analysis of these groups' lack of opportunity to criticise their working conditions—an analysis which revealed feelings of frustration, irritation, helplessness and discomfort regarding the sphere of possibilities of the work. In the study of the psychosocial working conditions of head teachers, the initial approaches to the issue comprised an examination of dismissal cases, unstructured interviews with key players in the field, and study of other psychosocial analyses of the working environment of other kinds of managers. These preliminary studies drew a picture of some working conditions which were characterised by great insecurity, problematic relationships with other key players in school organisations, and many diverse sources of mental stress in connection with the managerial function.

These conceptualisations of research themes and specific subject areas influenced the researchers' approach to the design and planning of the focus group interviews, and thereby contributed to defining the themes as sensitive—despite the fact that the aim of both studies was to test these initial assumptions about the sphere of possibilities of the work.

The first clear indication of this was the effect of the presentations held by the moderators to present an exposition of the central themes of the interview and give direction to the participants' stories and joint processes of meaning formation. Another aim of the presentations was to demystify the interview process and defuse the relatively personal research themes. These presentations also included descriptions of the generally poor psychological working environment of head teachers and the inability of kindergarten teachers to voice open critique of their working conditions.

It is our assessment that these presentations played a central role in creating a space which allowed dialogue to take place on these sensitive issues. The moderators also treated the topics as sensitive throughout the entire interview process and in the subsequent reporting, as there was a clear awareness that the stories were highly personal and involved intimate aspects of the informants' work, leisure and family lives, and therefore also dealt with the impact of their working lives on the more private aspects of their everyday lives in general. The creation of these safe havens and confidence in the anonymity of what the individuals said in these contexts provided the impetus for the generation of an individual and collective awareness that the participants had been given an opportunity to take a critical attitude towards their working conditions—an opportunity which was perhaps created through the fact that the starting-point for the implementation of the interviews, the researchers'

preconceptions, the character of the presentations, and the moderators' methods of facilitating dialogue and narratives helped to create a space in which the possibility of expressing criticism was more or less explicitly present. It should however be strongly emphasised that this space was not just created by the moderators; this can only be done in interaction with the focus group participants. Only if the participants accept the stated terms, and if the knowledge and information with which they are presented seems meaningful in relation to their own perception of reality, will they take on the role of critics and be willing to bring up and discuss issues from their working lives of a psychologically and socially intimate character.

Another criticism of this way of organising the focus group interviews concerns the methodological argument. Firstly, it creates a space for storytelling and shared meaning formation and interpretation against the background of a particular view of reality, which does not encourage the participants to find room for stories about the positive aspects of their working lives: this may influence the validity of the picture drawn of the working lives of the two professional groups.

Secondly, there are methodological problems associated with the participants' experience of being part of a group which attempts to jointly articulate such an important element in their individual and collective biographies. The moderators were aware of the informants' fear that their participation and openness might have adverse consequences in terms of retaliation from management, or create problematic relations with colleagues, partners, etc. Accordingly, anonymity was also guaranteed in the reporting. Not all of the informants experienced participation in the focus group interviews as emancipatory, in the sense that they felt they could openly talk about and criticise the problematic aspects of their working lives. For some participants, merely sitting at a table with others from the same occupational group represented an inhibiting factor in itself.

In written feedback one school head teacher wrote:

"...on the way home, I was thinking that one reason for the positive view you have of being a manager in our line of work might be because it (the focus group interview) is a vulnerable forum for us to express ourselves in. It's not so easy to lay on the table all the things that you feel are problematic, to a group of people with whom, although you may have some acquaintance with them, you are not on close terms."

For this participant, and possibly for others, the mere presence of colleagues was thus experienced as a restraint which placed restrictions on their statements. By exposing themselves in this social context, they laid themselves open to being discredited by other participants in the future. The mere fear that other participants might discredit them in other contexts, or simply knowing that others could come to possess very personal knowledge about them, was enough to inhibit these participants in the situation from talking about the (problematic) factors they felt best characterised their working conditions. It is therefore important to be aware of these more hidden types of problem in the method, which could affect the validity of the data material.

Finally, emphasis should be put on the fact that merely talking about the possibilities inherent in the working conditions seemed to have a highly emancipatory effect on the participants in the focus group interviews, irrespective of whether or not the stories in themselves created a basis for change in their working conditions. Among the head teachers, in particular, there was however a more or less explicitly articulated expectation that their participation in the focus group interviews and the overall reporting of the study of their psychosocial working environment could create an enhanced understanding of their role as managers and the pressures they face in their work, and, by extension, lead to an improved working environment. The participants did not, however, hold expectations of an improvement in specific criticisable factors, but rather a hope for greater focus in future on the working conditions of the two professional groups.

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