

## One man's social psychology is another woman's social history

You gotta say this for the white race – its self-confidence knows no bounds. Who else could go to a small island in the South Pacific where there's no poverty, no crime, no unemployment, no war and no worry – and call it a 'primitive society'?

(Gregory 1962: 110)

We have looked at how the generation of hypotheses and investigative practices are embedded in the particulars of cultural and temporal context and are further filtered through the 'voices' of individual researchers. The same can be argued in the case of the presentation and interpretation of research findings. Even the best-known research is embedded in the 'stubborn particulars' of time and place which prompts us to question the trans-historical nature of the conclusions drawn from that research. One of the examples of the historically situated aspects of research interpretation involves a well-known study by Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter and Kurt Back – published in 1950 as a book, *Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing* – and a lesser known piece of research, 'The study of rumour, its origins and spread', published as a journal article in 1948 by Leon Festinger and his associates (Festinger *et al.* 1948, 1950). Both studies took place in American post-Second World War housing projects at a time when housing was scarce.

The first study (referred to as the Westgate study) was conducted in 1946 by the Research Center for Group Dynamics that was then located at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The study was commissioned by the Bemis Foundation, which believed that industrialists involved in post-war mass-produced housing could learn from social scientists some of the social factors relevant to creating more than technically sound houses. As stated by the Bemis Foundation's director, 'People may buy houses, but they make them homes, and they live in neighborhoods' (Kelly 1950: vii).

Festinger, however, looked at social psychology as an opportunity to learn about the general processes of social communication. At the time of

writing about the Westgate studies, Festinger *et al.* seemed to have two goals in mind. He and his co-authors wrote that 'While the selection of research problems in this study was guided primarily by basic theoretical interests, we do believe that some of our findings should contribute to a better understanding of the phenomena with which many practitioners must deal' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 178).

In fact, in the published book that followed from the study, 'two outstanding practitioners in the field of housing' (p. 179) were asked to explore the application to housing of the Westgate study and their essays followed the presentation of empirical findings in *Social Pressures in Informal Groups*. However, Festinger's research is not remembered for its application to housing issues but rather for its theorizing about interpersonal attraction and social communication processes within the domain of social psychology.

Some years later in an interview (Patnoe 1988), Festinger spoke differently about the intent of the Westgate studies:

I have always wanted to go back and forth between laboratory studies and studies in the real world. Field studies, if you will. The field studies were not being done for a practical purpose. They were being done to clarify theory and get hunches . . . The Westgate studies have no practical purpose. We did later studies, like *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger *et al.* 1956) for the same kind of reason. But again, there is no practical orientation, that isn't what fascinates me.

(Patnoe 1988: 255)

What intrigued Festinger about Westgate was the possibility of developing general theories of social behaviour. His work directed social psychology in the 1950s towards abstraction and the study of functional relationships and away from experientially based theorizing. To achieve this goal, he adeptly capitalized on naturally occurring situations in which he could introduce experimentation that might have given his work more applied focus than was his apparent intent. For my purposes, what is significant about the Westgate study is the abstractness of its authors' intent and the questions this poses for research interpretation. When we read the book, the 'subjects' recede into the background and what becomes foremost are the generalized processes of friendship formation, social communication and influence. Schachter, when interviewed by Patnoe (1988), corroborated the importance of theorizing and attested to the decontextualization of the research:

Leon [Festinger] had a grant to study this housing community called Westgate and we simply got these interviews and combined sociometry with a set of questionnaires. It was presumably to be a study of housing satisfaction which couldn't have interested any of us

less, but it was the basis on which I think the grant was given to him . . . [w]e started finding all these nice relationships and took off. That particular study led to Leon's whole theory of pressures to conformity and social influence, which in turn led to dissonance.

This group, which was in essence 'Leon's boys,' simply worked out the whole theory of pressures to uniformity. We each did – starting from the Westgate book and later theorizing about it – we each did a thesis related to part of it, which Leon then integrated and had this rather nice theoretical scheme, which I think, led him into all his other work.

(Patnoe 1988: 192)

Westgate and Westgate West were new housing projects built just after the war for married students returning to study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (see site plan of Westgate and Westgate West in Figure 6.1).

People moved first into the Westgate project with its '100 pre-fabricated, single-family houses . . . grouped in nine distinct court units' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 15) in the spring of 1946, and the study began in July of that year. The Westgate project looked as follows (see Figure 6.2).

The occupants were described as a relatively homogeneous group of 'married veteran engineering students' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 9). Over half of Westgate's 100 families had small children and it was that central fact that prompted me to question whose reality this study reflects and how I might reinterpret the findings.

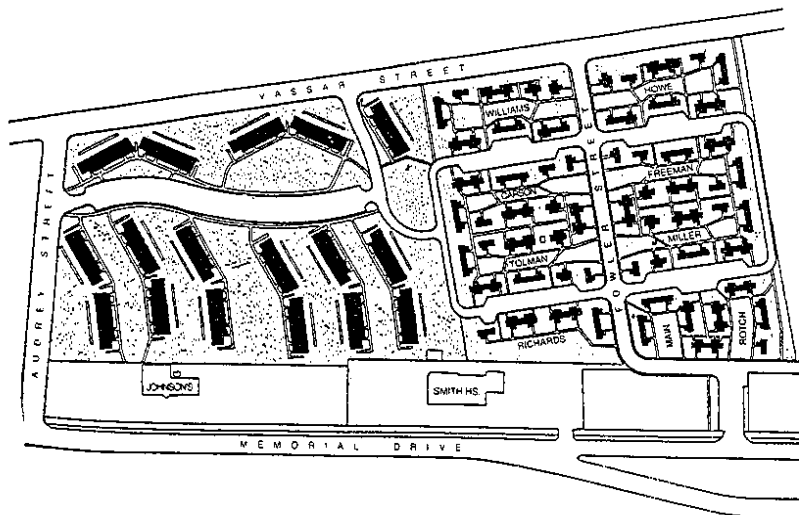


Figure 6.1 Site plan of Westgate and Westgate West  
Source: Festinger, Schachter and Back 1950: 14

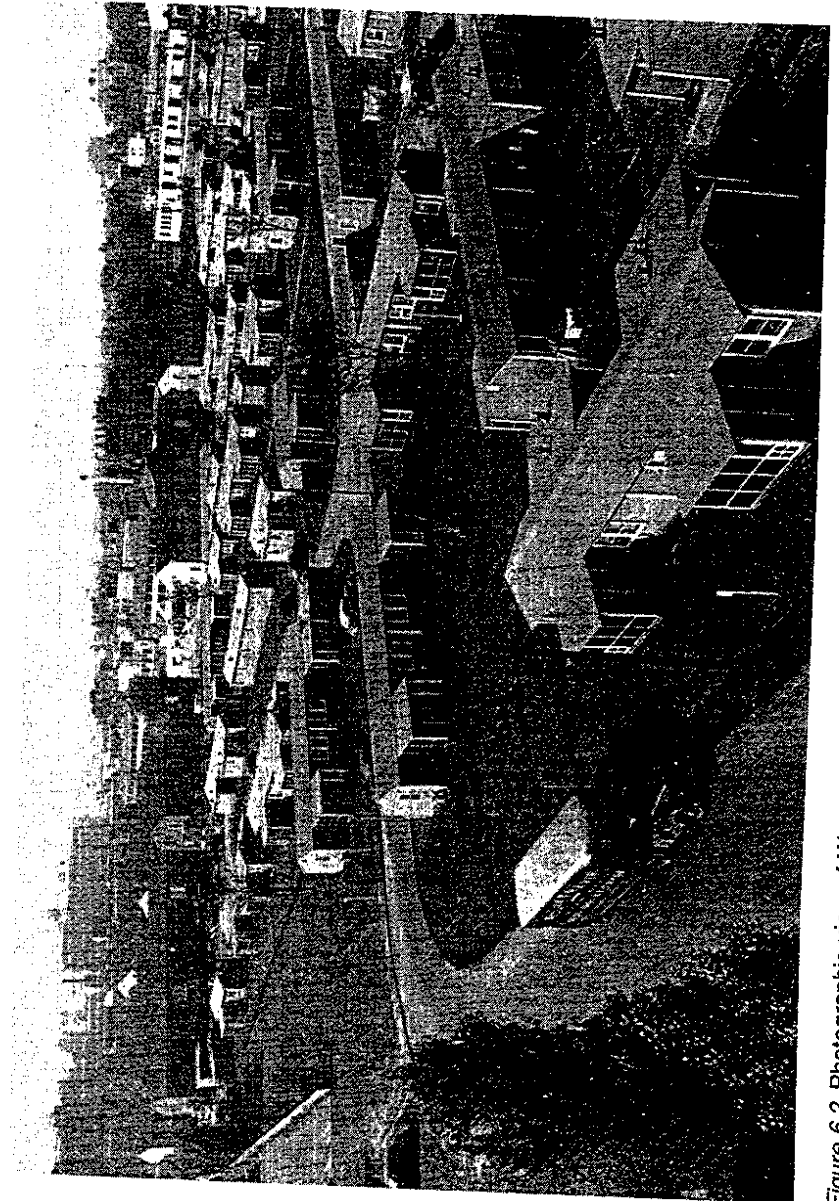


Figure 6.2 Photographic view of Westgate  
Source: Festinger, Schachter and Back 1950

I thought about what a mother of small children would have experienced living in a housing project in which 'the nearest shopping district or store of any considerable size was about two miles away and the closest transportation system, a somewhat erratic trolley and bus line, about 3/8 of a mile distant' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 14). From the researchers' point of view, this 'relative isolation' was thought to be 'a distinct advantage' (p. 14) for the study. The researchers were interested in how the group influenced individual members and how outside contacts would have less chance to have an impact on the development of relationships given this isolation. But I couldn't stop thinking about what it must have been like for a young mother whose husband was busy with studies to be living in this place.<sup>1</sup>

As I started to read the brief excerpts of interviews with forty women in the project, it occurred to me that I was reading the social history of a particular group of American women whose voices were muted with the domesticity of the late 1940s into the 1950s. In 1946, the respondents were an average age of 26, from upper-middle class backgrounds, who 'had almost all attended college or some kind of professional school' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 19). They were that generation of American women who might well have raised their families and abandoned their professional aspirations in the post-war era. They were also that generation influenced by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Possibly several had abandoned their relatively comfortable lives in favour of some form of starting over in mid-life, be that divorce, remarriage, living alone or re-entering the labour force. If you are in your twenties, they would be the age of your grandmothers, an average age of 74, were all of them still living in 1994. It occurred to me that there was a story here other than the one presented by the researchers, but lost in the abstractness of the language of social psychology as it was then developing.

According to the text, what these women hoped for out of life at the time was to 'own their own homes in the near future . . . with three or more bedrooms . . . in or around a large city' and to have their husbands hold 'successful careers in industry' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 19–20). While nowhere to be found in the text, Kurt Back, in a later interview, remembered them this way:

They were all upper middle class kids. The women were rebels because you weren't supposed to get married to a student – somebody who clearly couldn't support you. The women came out in the interviews saying that their mothers were all very upset and would look at where they were living and cry and things like that. Having other couples in the same boat – living below their traditional standard and being attacked by their parents – gave the couples in Westgate a common feeling.

(Back, cited in Patnoe 1988: 74)

It was at this point that I took my fluorescent pink highlighter and worked through my personal copy of the book with a 'gendered' reading of the text. That is, I read the book for what it could tell me about women of that time, not for what it could tell me about the generalized laws of social communication. It was particularly legitimate in this case, because the study was based exclusively on interviews with wives. The researchers tell us their reasoning:

Since the men were all deeply engrossed in their studies, careers, and part-time jobs, the women of the family usually bore the burden of social life; the women would be easier to contact than the men who were busy in their classes and labs at all hours; to interview the woman in one family and the man in another would almost certainly introduce variables which we could neither control nor identify; to interview the man and woman in each family would have hopelessly complicated the interviewer's task.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 226–7)

In all fairness to historical context, at that time the central assumption stated explicitly by these researchers was acceptable in research practice:

If the data from these interviews are to be taken as giving a picture of the entire community, it is necessary to assume that the family can be reasonably regarded as a unit and that this unit can be studied by interviewing only one of its members . . . in all cases that could be checked . . . the data obtained from interviewing the wife did adequately give data about the whole family unit.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 227)

Indeed, it might be the case that in that era, women made the social contacts not just for themselves and their children but for their husbands. As the authors noted later in the text:

All the men living in these houses went to the same school and consequently had many opportunities for meeting each other outside the housing project, yet these physical and functional proximity factors operated strongly.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 160)

That is to say, when wives were asked 'What three people do you see most of socially?' their responses did not follow a pattern that might be based on the friendships their husbands made at MIT. The pattern was rooted in the community in which these women lived their daily lives.

But let us reject the assumption that wives can represent husbands and see what can be learned about women's social history from *Social Pressures in Informal Groups*. Let us ask how the life circumstances of these women might have affected the formation of friendship groups rather than, or in

addition to, simple physical arrangements of houses. What does physical location mean to women? What does it mean to women with and without children?<sup>2</sup> What does 'socially' mean when the following question – 'What three people in Westgate or Westgate West do you see most of socially?' – is asked of women with and without children?

Festinger and his colleagues looked at how small *physical* distances accounted for the formation of friendships through what he called passive contacts. He argued that *functional* distance – for example, where one picks up mail, where there are staircases – also influences the possible contacts and therefore the friendships; but, for the most part, the conclusion is that small distances form the basis of the formation of friendships in homogeneous groups, with the greatest choice being made of next-door neighbours.

A 'gendered' reading of the text takes as its starting point the constraints on women at home with young children. A 'gendered' reading is a challenge to research that interprets findings out of context of the 'particulars' in which the findings are embedded. First, we are told early on that 'the assignment of houses or apartments to particular people had not been made on any kind of selective basis' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 74). Furthermore, we are told that

The individuals who moved into this housing project did not choose the court or building in which they would reside. They were assigned to houses in rotation, and after the project was filled initially other occupants moved in only as vacancies occurred without any selection on the part of the new residents.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 174)

However, we know that 'fifty of these one hundred houses were designed for occupancy by married students without children' and that the remaining fifty houses each had an extra bedroom and 'were intended for married students with children' (p. 15). And while a 'first come, first served' principle operated, it was also the case that 'the only expression of preference permitted was between one- and two-bedroom houses' (p. 17). Thus, families could be assigned in rotation without seeming bias, because the bias was already built into the construction of the houses.<sup>3</sup> It can be seen from an enlarged site plan of two Westgate courts (Williams and Howe) which of the houses were intended for married couples with children and which are for couples without children.<sup>4</sup> A schematic diagram of the arrangement of these two courts looked like Figure 6.3.

Researchers at this time obviously did not see the selective gender-linked bias in their study. Since having children or not having them was not considered a 'variable' of any significance to the study of social communication or friendship formation, they could write that there were

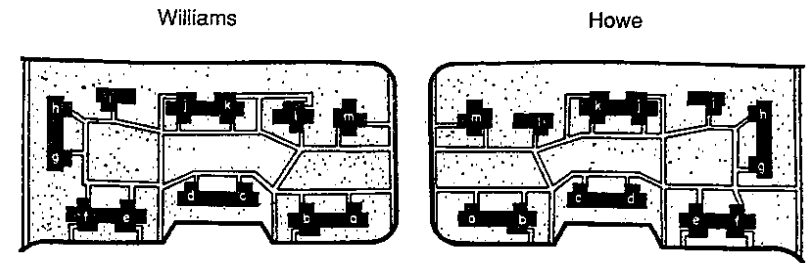


Figure 6.3 Williams and Howe Courts: schematic diagram of the arrangement of the Westgate Court

Source: Festinger, Schachter and Back 1950: 42

no 'selection' biases operating. Moreover, since friendship choices were theorized in this research as representative of trans-historical and trans-situational behaviours, the placement of homes with and without children would have made little difference in the interpretation of findings.

Yet, looking back one can see that the matter of having children was very likely of importance. In the matter of friendship formation, we are told that 'The greatest proportion of possible choices is made to next-door neighbours' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 42). This might be so but the choice is confounded by the fact that there is a greater probability that the next-door neighbour will be similar to oneself with regard to having or not having children. While the authors described the layout of each court as 'identical', from the point of view of having children, this is not the case. Looking more closely at Williams Court, for example, houses were assigned a letter, *a* to *m*, and sociometric choices received from court neighbours were analysed accordingly. As can be seen from the schematic, houses in any position, *a* to *m*, are not identical with respect to having or not having children in them and one has a greater than 50 per cent chance that the next-door neighbour is in similar circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that a 'gendered' reading of the text provides more evidence that it is the experience of mothers at home with small children that is central to the meaning of this study. Mothers had to create a culture of childcare that included an adaptation to lessened mobility and extreme isolation. In Westgate and Westgate West, women were most likely to rely on others nearby, in the same court and next door. Small children increase the probability that one will not stray too far. One can check on a child or hear her waking from a nap one door away but that's about as far as one might want to stray. The authors were perplexed by greater than expected social choices of individuals in the lower-floor middle apartment (no. 3) from upper-floor residents in Westgate West. A schematic diagram of a Westgate West building is provided (Figure 6.4).

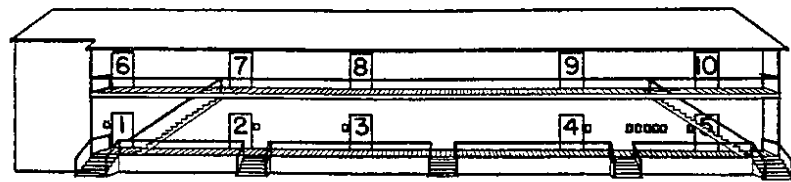


Figure 6.4 Schematic diagram of a Westgate West building  
Source: Festinger, Schachter and Back 1950: 36

Looking at the layout of a Westgate West apartment building, it occurred to me that one could understand this finding, again if one took into account the responsibilities of women with small children at play. Mothers with small children might have sat around the staircase outside Apartment 3 watching children play in the area in front of the building, given that there was at this time no formal play area for the children.

My reinterpretation of findings from Westgate and Westgate West suggests that choices of nearby individuals for social contact are influenced by the physical circumstances of having to care for very young children. We cannot ascertain this with any certainty from the data as they were presented. However, given the confounding in the site plan of the Westgate courts and the puzzling choice of Apartment no. 3 in Westgate West, we are at least alerted to a loss of detail that cautions us about interpreting the data out of their context. Rather than interpreting the results as generalized social patterns, I find myself making sense of them as a unique contribution to women's social history.

What else is to be learned about women's lives from this study? From the forty Westgate women, selected at random for interviews in the summer of 1946, parts of two of the transcripts were reported and they provide a more detailed understanding of the life circumstances of women with and without children in the housing project. One woman recounted her experiences as follows:

My husband wanted to come back to school and being able to find no other place, we came here . . . It's the first place of our own, so we're thrilled about it. What I did like was the idea of having a place of our own and room of her own for the baby. She's never had that before . . . I think we'll never again have a chance to live in a place like this where everyone has the same interest and everyone is so friendly.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 21)

When asked about the difficulties for Westgate women who work, she replied

Well, I don't work but I would like to. The greatest problem I've heard about from the working girls is shopping. I don't know what else - of

course, trying to get their housework done. For those who'd be willing to leave their children and go to work, it would be wonderful if Tech would set up a nursery.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 21)

This woman said she wanted to join a university social club for women (MIT Dames) but 'the meetings aren't at a convenient time' (p. 22). She also said:

I feel we need an organization. Also we ought to have a little place for the girls to gather in the evenings so we don't have to sit here, not saying a word while our husbands study. Just sit! Very few of us know outside friends and we can't invite Westgate friends in while our husbands study.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 22)

And of the contacts with neighbours, she said:

[d]uring the day we keep running in and out of the houses - for no excuses, for no reasons, my husband says it's just like living in a dormitory. Then bridge in the evenings - some place close so I can listen to the baby.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 22)

This woman was delighted when management seeded the grass and was hoping that they would fix the leaky roofs. She thought complaining as a group might bring better action. She said:

I think a lot could be accomplished by organizing - recreation, nursery, getting things done. The management has been very good but some girls are still lacking pieces in their refrigerators and have iceboxes.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 23)

Anticipating the study's results, she mentioned that because of the way the houses were arranged at Westgate 'everyone gets acquainted with the people in their own court' (p. 23). In Westgate, the social hub of activity was the court where most of the women spent their time and social life.

The second interview was from a working woman without children. This woman found people friendly but was looking forward to leaving. Her only tie to Westgate was her husband and her furniture. She told the interviewer that 'the only great difficulty' (p. 24) she experienced holding her job, as a secretary to an insurance man, was shopping. As for involving herself in community activities in Westgate, she said:

It would be hard for anyone who works to talk about that. I just don't have the time. I presume those girls who stay at home would like bridge clubs and teas occasionally. I imagine things like this would

serve to bring the wives together especially. I don't know anyone outside this court. Boys seem to get around and know more people ... there is no central meeting place.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 25)

Her social contacts were on weekends out on the porch and dinner with her husband's classmates and their wives. These two interviews stand in marked contrast to one another because of one being a woman at home with a child and the other being out working with little time to spare for social activities.

The researchers did not totally overlook the impact of children on the lives of their respondents. They noted that there were restrictions imposed on leisure-time activities by student life and by 'limited finances or having to look after the baby' (p. 30). However, children were not a central focus. They interpreted the circumstances of these women, 'the isolation of the community, their relative maturity in the college community, the absorption in study, the large proportion of families who had small children, generally meager financial resources and congenial neighbours' (p. 30) as contributing factors to the 'modest, though pleasant, manner of life within the community' (p. 30) and to a homogeneity that predisposed people to the influence of ecological factors in friendship formation. The centrality of children was, however, more apparent from descriptions of the community's attempts to organize.

During the period of the study, a tenants' organization was created that did not have the initial strong support of the community. It was spurred on by a fire in a Westgate West building. As described by the authors, 'Men rushed home from their classes ... Westgate came alive that evening. Petitions were circulated through the project requesting M.I.T. to provide fire alarm boxes inside the project ... This was the immediate stimulus to the founding of the organization' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 62).

About fifty of the 200 people in the Westgate community attended the first meeting. Despite the greater involvement of women in the Westgate community, three men, Rob, Sid and Milt, directed the organization and 'the meeting developed into a somewhat ineffectual discussion, top-heavy with parliamentary procedure' (p. 63). Despite some resistance, meetings continued and twenty projects were started. After Westgate West was completed an invitation was extended to its residents to join the tenants' organization and the purpose of the organization was stated more explicitly: 'Mainly to get better acquainted among ourselves, to set up committees to handle employment for wives (including baby-sitting problems etc.), to act as a unit when making recommendations to M.I.T., and to sponsor social events, sports events, etc.' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 68-9).

Among the twenty projects undertaken, the four that were dropped, 'a nursery school, a co-op grocery, a community laundry, and a community

recreation building' (p. 65), were the very ones that could have facilitated the lives of women at home with small children.<sup>6</sup> Some plans went forward, most of which were social activities, and 'in its four months of existence, the Westgate Council had succeeded in three things - a directory of Westgate, a moderately well attended exercise class, and a block party' (pp. 65-6). It is further noted that 'only a handful of people asked for any help from the employment bureau' (p. 65) which had been set up for Westgate wives. The council was run by a small group of individuals while many others resisted organized activities. It is difficult to know how men and women shared the tasks of the organization, or how they encouraged or interfered with projects relevant to women's lives.

In a section of the book that delineates attitudes towards the Westgate Council, four husband-wife cases are described, two of which provide information on what drew or propelled women to a tenants' organization. For example, Marie L, according to the authors: '[f]elt that this attempt at group action was a valuable experience in the one-sided training for engineers. She was also enthusiastic about the projects the Council could undertake, "everything the members want, laundry, financial aid, nursery school, a cooperative store" ...' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 77). Both Marie L and her husband Jack L participated actively in the council as council clerk and a committee chairman respectively. On the other hand, Winnie S did not feel she had time to participate in the council although she was not unfavourable towards it. In keeping with the primacy of children as organizers of women's lives, it was mentioned that she 'kept busy with a vivacious three-year-old daughter' (p. 78). Moreover, the text further specified that, for Winnie S, a friend 'with a child of the same age who lived in a nearby apartment house often came over to have the child play in the yard. She formed few friendships within the project' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 78).

From this point on, the text becomes more abstract and mathematized and further removed from the experience of the residents. The authors tested out ideas about sub-group formation and cohesiveness. They offered generalized statements such as 'The more cohesive the group, the more effectively it can influence its members' (p. 100). In statements like this and those that run throughout the remainder of the book, women's experiences in forming friendships and their participation in a tenants' organization are further decontextualized. Despite the use of women's experiences and choices as the data base, the language of 'the group' is used to discuss pressures to uniformity and consequences for deviation, and how rumour is communicated through friendship networks. The authors have already accepted that 'women' will represent the couple, and having done so, they introduce increasingly abstract constructs:



By the use of some of the standard and relatively simple manipulations of matrix algebra we are able to analyze such things as subgroup formations, cliques, and indirect chains of influence from one person to another.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 133)

In the final chapter, 'A theory of group structure', the language reverts to the 'generic' male. Statements are made that are not consistent with my own knowledge of how women, brought together through their common responsibility for small children, actually experience their lives. For example,

It is relatively rare that one person, on his own initiative, goes out of his way to meet someone socially.

People generally hesitate simply to introduce themselves to someone new. It is only after two people have seen each other several times that they will start to nod to each other from a distance and only after some time will it seem appropriate to communicate verbally.

(Festinger *et al.* 1950: 154)

While these statements sound reminiscent of my experience as an academic in the workplace, they don't sound particularly descriptive of the experience of women who are thrown together with other women because of 'having children'.

I take this first study to be about the 'stubborn particulars' of women's friendships in post-war America. Festinger *et al.*'s slightly earlier study<sup>7</sup> published in 1948 as 'The study of rumour, its origins and spread' can also be reinterpreted as a study of women's struggles to organize early childhood education and daycare. It was intended to be a study of several aspects of group organization in a low income housing project that had been built during the war for shipyard workers in Weymouth, south of Boston. After the war when housing was scarce, the resident profile of the project began to change.

In 1947, the housing project under study was no longer exclusively inhabited by shipyard workers. Unemployment was low with the majority of the men working at skilled labour or supervisory positions. Ninety-seven per cent of the families had children, with 73 per cent having more than two children and with 83 per cent of the children under 10 years of age. There were no nursery or after-school facilities. The research report tells us that the group felt ashamed of living in low-cost housing and that a tenants' committee existed that consisted of a few women who were quite frustrated by failed attempts to organize. Kurt Back described the intent of the researchers in this way:

It was a downward sort of mobility and nobody felt socially like a shipyard worker so they hated the place. They tried to make it a whole

community-action research study. Community workers came in and it became this big inchoate kind of research which might have been great but then Lewin died.

Lewin was very involved in the Weymouth study. It was to have been 'the great study'. The idea was to change them, to make them a cohesive group – to make them believe in the group, to believe, 'Our project is good, we have good people here, we can do things, we can communicate'.

(Back, cited in Patnoe 1988: 74)

It is the published article, interpreted through the particulars of gender, that tells us something about women's attempts to organize in historical context. We learn that the community worker/researcher (J. Fleischl) met with a group of five women. These residents were chiefly concerned about developing nursery, school-age recreational and adult educational and recreational facilities. This small group grew to number fifteen women as the intervention progressed. The first general meeting was attended by forty women and three men and plans for developing the above-mentioned concerns were begun. For example, many of the women organized to raise funds for starting a nursery school and for hiring a teacher.

At this point we are told that the researchers wanted to study various aspects of groups but that the women were becoming suspicious of all the experts in their community. It is important to know that the women involved in the organizing in this community were never advised of an ongoing study so they did not know of the dual role – community worker/researcher – that some of the people in their midst played. This proved fatal and might have undermined a potential alliance among women for social action and change. Kurt Back saw the consequences to Festinger and his associated researchers this way: 'The best thing they got out of it was that we were almost kicked out because people thought we were communists. And they wrote one article about rumour' (Back, cited in Patnoe 1988: 75).

A resistance developed to placing children in the nursery school. Two things were clear from the report. First, that the resistance focused on the outsiders or 'experts' and second, that the secretary of the tenants' committee was instrumental in creating some of this backlash. She joined forces with Mr M, described as a 'commie hunter', to accuse another member, Mrs C of being an 'avowed communist' along with some of the outside 'experts'. The nursery school project stopped and community activities were halted. The 'experts' were at a loss to rectify the situation because they had already bypassed the community.

Mrs C, who had done much of the organizing, was linked with one of the community workers and this fuelled the rumour that Mrs C was a

communist. It was known that she had dinner at the home of the community worker and it was the latter who had picked out a temporary teacher for the nursery school who was willing to work without pay to help. In a meeting to discuss the nursery school a movie had been shown that had music in it that 'sounded Russian' and when the film projector broke down, it was interpreted as intentionally limiting discussion. Mrs C was scapegoated and only later were matters clarified.

Intended changes in the community never came to fruition but, as Back noted, a published description of the spread of rumour did come about (Festinger *et al.* 1948). The description is equally interesting from a 'gendered' perspective because it reveals the risks to women working collectively in their communities after the Second World War and during the 1950s' period of anti-Communism in American life.

The two studies I have discussed are examples of the caution that must be exercised in the interpretation of research findings. In these studies, the privileged voice is that of the researcher who, through his report to us, has framed our interpretation of the findings as the social psychology of friendship formation and rumour transmission. The researcher's choice to report what happened at Westgate and Weymouth in this way mutes the particular voices in the study. The voices of the women and the disappointment of some in failing to create change in their communities can only be intuited. The interviews with women at the beginning of the text become an abstract and impersonal voice of scientific respectability. A potential source of understanding women's struggle to create social change in the post-war American era is diminished by a seemingly 'scientific' text.

Festinger, Schachter and Back's study of the Westgate housing project (Festinger *et al.* 1950) has been cited over the years primarily for the assertion, provided in Chapter 3 of *Social Pressures in Informal Groups*, that 'the most striking item was the dependence of friendship formation on the mere physical arrangement of the houses. People who lived close to one another became friendly with each other, while people who lived far apart did not' (Festinger *et al.* 1950: 10). While later sections of the text examined the formation of a tenants' association and the spread of rumour within the community, social psychologists tend to report this study for its assertion that physical proximity or propinquity influences attraction and friendship formation. The effect is sometimes explained by the enhanced liking that arises with increases in familiarity to those close by.

As we look back at both these studies in their historical context, the particulars of the research can help us to shift the context in which we might want to make interpretations and systematic generalizations. The shift is from the generic 'subject' to the lives of women. What more do we know or can we find out about the history and development of women's

friendships? How do friendships among women differ when we take children and housing arrangements into account? How do class, ethnicity and race interconnect with these factors to limit our abilities to generalize about women as a group? How did women organize in the post-war years to facilitate their children's early education and their own continued education? The two studies that I have discussed are, when viewed from a 'gendered' interpretation, just a glimpse of women's social history although they remain part of mainstream social psychology's decontextualized analysis of interpersonal relationships and social communication.