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Sue Wilkinson

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## Focus group methodology: a review

SUE WILKINSON

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This paper introduces and reviews the use of focus group methodology across the social sciences, identifying three different research traditions within which it has been used. It examines some key considerations affecting the use of focus groups, and highlights three central features of focus group research: providing access to participants' own language, concepts and concerns; encouraging the production of more fully articulated accounts; and offering an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making in action. Finally, the paper outlines some of the issues in the analysis of focus group data—an area with considerable potential for future development.

Focus groups have been used by sociologists and psychologists for well over half a century (c.f. Merton and Kendall 1946, Merton, Fiske and Kendall 1956),<sup>1</sup> but it is only in the last decade that they have become a widespread and popular method of social research. Relatively few focus group studies were published before the late 1970s, and only 10 years ago it was possible for a leading focus group researcher to comment that focus groups had 'virtually disappeared from the social sciences' (Morgan 1988: 11). However, such is the contemporary 'resurgence of interest' in focus groups (Lunt and Livingstone 1996: 79) that the *same* researcher now reports (in a recent handbook on the method) that over 100 focus group articles a year are currently being published in academic journals (Morgan 1997: 2). Focus groups also feature large in contemporary opinion polling—as a 'strategic reality' for political parties on both the left and right (Wring<sup>2</sup> 1998: 49). Indeed, focus groups are apparently now so widely familiar on the political scene that, in spring 1998, a British national newspaper reported that 'Focus groups tested tax plans' (Elliott 1998: 3) and that a Member of Parliament 'consults a focus group in an attempt to improve her image' (Longrigg 1998: 7) without offering readers any explanation of the term 'focus groups'. This article introduces focus group methodology; reviews its use and some of the factors affecting

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*Sue Wilkinson* is Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK. She is the founding and current editor of the international journal *Feminism & Psychology*, and also edits the *Gender and Psychology* book series (both Sage publications). Her most recent books include *Feminist Social Psychologies* (Open University Press 1996) and (with Celia Kitzinger) *Representing the Other* (Sage, 1996) and *Feminism and Discourse* (Sage, 1995).

its use; highlights some key aspects of focus group research; and ends by considering the analysis of focus group data.

### **What is a focus group?**

A focus group is, at its simplest, 'an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics' (Beck *et al.* 1986: 73). It may involve, for example, friends discussing a film they have just watched together, residents of a housing estate comparing their experiences of vandalism, middle-aged men talking about the risk of heart attacks, or potential consumers evaluating a new product line. Although there are many possible variations on the basic method (c.f. Kitzinger 1990, Krueger 1998a), centrally it involves one or more group discussions, in which participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher, and presented to them (most commonly) as a set of questions, although sometimes as a film, a vignette, a set of advertisements, cards to sort, or a 'game' to play. The participants (usually 6–8, and rarely more than 12) may be pre-existing groups of people (e.g. family members, work colleagues) or they may be drawn together specifically for the research—in which case it is usually recommended that groups are relatively homogeneous, particularly in relation to 'prestige' or 'status' factors such as occupation, social class, or age (Carey 1994: 229).

Discussions between group participants, directed to a greater or lesser degree by the group 'moderator', are usually audiotaped (sometimes videotaped) and transcribed. These data are then subjected to the usual types of qualitative analysis. This most often entails some form of content or thematic analysis, sometimes computer-assisted with the use of data management programs, such as NUD.IST or THE ETHNOGRAPH (c.f. Morgan in Krueger 1998b: 89–93). More rarely, rhetorical, discursive or conversation analysis is undertaken (e.g. Agar and MacDonald 1995, Frith and Kitzinger 1998, Myers 1998). The method is distinctive not for its mode of analysis, but rather for its *data-collection* procedures, and for the nature of the data so collected. Crucially, focus groups involve the interaction of group participants *with each other* as well as with the moderator, and it is the collection of this kind of interactive data which distinguishes the focus group from the one-to-one interview (c.f. Morgan 1988), as well as from procedures which use multiple participants but do not permit interactive discussion (c.f. Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). The 'hallmark' of focus groups, then, is the 'explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (Morgan 1997: 2).

There is now an extensive methodological literature on the practical details of conducting focus groups, and I will not repeat such details here. The information available is comprehensive and up to date, with several new handbooks, as well as second editions of a number of 'classic' manuals, published in the last year or so. Information about, for example, the selection and recruitment of participants, the setting in which they meet, the development of a question 'guide', the specific focus of the group, the

role and technique of the moderator, 'ground rules' for the conduct of the group, the structure and dynamics of the discussion, and the practicalities of recording and note-taking can be found in Krueger 1988, 1994, Morgan 1988, 1997, Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, Vaughn *et al.* 1996, Morgan and Krueger 1998. This last is a six-volume *Focus Group Kit*, designed, say its authors, to 'help guide both novices and experts' (Krueger and Morgan in Morgan 1998a: xii), although perhaps better suited to the former. 'Experts' are also well served by two recently edited collections, which more comprehensively address issues raised by the use of focus groups, and offer a range of examples of focus group research in applied settings: Morgan 1993, Barbour and Kitzinger 1998.

### **Which disciplines have used focus groups?**

*Evaluation and marketing.* Before the late 1970s, focus groups were used predominantly as a market research tool, and most published studies were in the field of business and marketing—indeed, this area has its own (specific) manuals and 'readers' available (again with some now in second edition): Bellenger *et al.* 1976, Higginbotham and Cox 1979, Goldman and McDonald 1987, Templeton 1987, 1994, Greenbaum 1988, 1998, Hayes and Tatha 1989. The evaluation and marketing of products and services remains a substantial area of focus group research today, spanning both non-profit-making organizations and commercial contexts. For example, focus groups are often used to evaluate the success of health education or social action programmes: see Basch (1987) for a review. They are also used to assess consumer satisfaction with available services, such as community services (Collins *et al.* 1991) or an abortion clinic (Flexner *et al.* 1977); as well as more generally in service evaluation and public relations, such as programme evaluation in mental health (Richter *et al.* 1991) or PR for hospital administration (Hisrich and Peters 1982). And, of course, focus groups are used in a wide range of political and market research contexts—both to survey consumer opinion and to increase the acceptability of products, from political candidates (Diamond and Bates 1992) to contraceptive implants (Zimmerman *et al.* 1990), from new cars (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990: 129–138) to breakfast cereals (Templeton 1987). In the USA, research consultancies offer focus group services on a large scale, using purpose-built facilities (Goldman and MacDonald 1987), and there are now a number of these in the UK (Miles 1997). In the marketing tradition of research, focus groups are used essentially either to change opinion, or to assess opinion change. However, the longer-term objective is behaviour change.

*Health education and health promotion.* In the 1980s, health researchers pioneered the use of focus groups in social action research, particularly in the fields of family planning and preventive health education (e.g. Folch-Lyon *et al.* 1981, Suyono *et al.* 1981, Knodel *et al.* 1984); and they have subsequently used the method extensively in the field of sexual behaviour and attitudes, particularly concerning HIV/AIDS (e.g. Joseph *et al.* 1984, Flaskerud and Rush 1989, Nymathi and Shuler 1990, Brown 1993, Hoppe

*et al.* 1994, Vera *et al.* 1996). Health education and health promotion remain major areas of contemporary focus group research, especially in relation to safer sex in the context of HIV/AIDS (e.g. Kline *et al.* 1992, Lupton and Tulloch 1996), and in relation to contraceptive use, particularly among young women and in developing countries (e.g. Kisker 1995, Okonofua 1995). Health-related social action research has utilized focus groups in a number of other areas, including screening facilities (Naish *et al.* 1994), education about high blood pressure, the cessation of smoking, and weight control and exercise (c.f. Basch 1987). There is also a large body of focus group work in this tradition that studies responses to health-related media messages (e.g. Aitken *et al.*, 1986, Kitzinger 1990, Philo *et al.* 1994). In all of this work, focus groups are used primarily to promote awareness and to facilitate behaviour change.

*Other disciplines - the contemporary scene.* In the 1990s, the pattern of use of focus groups has become much more diverse. The burgeoning popularity of focus group research over the last decade has now created a substantial literature on the method across a much wider range of disciplines. Recent reviews have surveyed the use of focus groups in education (Flores and Alonso 1995); communication and media studies (Lunt and Livingstone 1996); sociology (Morgan 1996); feminist research (Wilkinson 1998a, 1999); and health research (Wilkinson 1998b). Focus group research is also frequently conducted in anthropology, development studies, evaluation, linguistics, nursing, oral history, planning and political science; and there have also been three special issues of journals devoted to the method – in the areas of family planning (Schearer 1981); health (Carey 1995); and social gerontology (Knodel 1995). I will turn, next, to the main ways in which focus groups have been used, across the disciplines, before moving on to review some of the main considerations in deciding to use focus groups.

### **How have focus groups been used?**

Focus groups have been used in three main ways. First, they have been used as an adjunct to other methods, as part of a multi-method research design. Second, they have been used as a primary research method in their own right, perhaps most commonly to conduct phenomenological research on people's own views and understandings. Third, they have been used as a form of participatory action research, with the aim of empowering participants and promoting social and political change. I will briefly consider each of these in turn.

*Focus groups as an adjunct to other research methods.* In a sizeable subset of the research literature, focus groups are used as an adjunct to other research methods (usually quantitative methods), rather than as a self-contained or stand-alone tool. The two most common research designs involve: (a) using focus groups in an initial exploratory or hypothesis-generation phase, prior to developing a more structured and systematic interview schedule or questionnaire; and (b) using focus groups in a final follow-up phase, to pursue an interesting finding from a large-scale survey,

or simply to add richness and depth to a project. Examples of the former include using focus groups to compile an appropriately worded questionnaire for gay and bisexual men at risk for AIDS (O'Brien 1993); to develop a survey instrument on environmental risk factors, such as overcrowding (Desvouges and Frey 1989); and to adapt such an instrument for use with new, and very different, populations (Fuller *et al.* 1993). Examples of the latter include using focus group data to investigate previous survey research findings on widowhood (Morgan 1989); and the use of focus groups in conjunction with analyses of census data on changing fertility patterns in Thailand (Knodel *et al.* 1987). In either case, the use of focus groups permits the design and conduct of research based on a more detailed and sensitive understanding of the topic under consideration. For more indepth discussion of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, see Fielding and Fielding (1986) and Brannen (1992).

*Focus groups as a primary method.* It is now, perhaps, almost as common to use focus groups as a research tool in their own right as it is to use them as part of a multi-method project. As a self-contained method, focus groups can be used either to explore new areas or research questions, or to examine existing areas or research questions from research participants' own perspectives. While often used in the former way (i.e. as an exploratory device), the particular strengths of focus groups lie in the latter use (i.e. as a tool for explicitly phenomenological research). I am using the term 'phenomenological' inclusively here to encompass a wide variety of types of research concerned primarily with people's own experiences, meanings, understandings and viewpoints. Within this tradition of phenomenological focus group work, some studies seek to develop broad understandings of individuals' lifeworlds: e.g. women's experiences postpartum (DiMatteo *et al.* 1993); the experience of residents in a nursing home (Brody 1990); or the experience of living with multiple sclerosis (Lyons and Meade 1993). Others seek to develop more limited understandings of specific aspects of these lifeworlds, such as perceived 'quality of life' (Wyatt *et al.* 1993) or the development of 'feeling norms' (Simon *et al.* 1992). Perhaps the largest subset of this work, however, looks at individuals' attitudes, opinions, knowledge or beliefs. For example, focus groups have been used to study the traditional beliefs of black women about breast cancer (Duke *et al.* 1994); working-class women's modes of reasoning about abortion (Press 1991), young people's knowledge about menstruation (Lovering 1995), and employed people's views about current political issues (Gamson 1992). In all of these variants of phenomenological research, focus groups are used to facilitate the grounding of the research in participants' own understandings of the issue(s) under question, and the results of the research are intended, from the outset, to stand on their own.

*Focus groups as participatory action research.* Some researchers have suggested that focus groups are particularly useful for accessing the views of those who have been poorly served by traditional research (Plaut *et al.* 1993: 216), or whose 'voices' would not otherwise be heard (Jarrett 1993, 1994)—even that focus groups can effectively be used with radical intent 'to empower and to foster social change' (Johnson 1996: 536). The method has therefore proved popular as a tool in participatory action research projects,

in which it is used (implicitly or explicitly) as a catalyst or agent of change. Examples include action research to enable Hispanic students in a community college to overcome barriers to success (Padilla 1993); participatory action research aiming to make practical provision for battered women (Mies 1983); community health work in well-women clinics (Orr 1992); and participatory research on sexuality with poor women in Bombay, in collaboration with an NGO (George 1996). Several more examples of feminist focus group research of this type are provided by Brems and Griffiths (1993) and de Koning and Martin (1996), while Krueger and King (1998) provide a practical guide to conducting community-based focus group research. Used in this way, focus groups enable the development of collective understandings of shared problems – and (often) solutions to these problems.<sup>3</sup> In participatory action research, focus groups may be used either in combination with other methods or as a stand-alone tool: it is the avowedly political *purpose* of the research (i.e. the intention to create change) which is distinctive here.

### **When is it appropriate to use focus groups?**

In this section, I will outline some of the main advantages and disadvantages of focus group methodology, and review some of the main considerations in deciding to use focus groups. One of the main strengths of focus group methodology lies in its flexibility – and consequent potential breadth of use. Focus group research is not tied to a particular epistemology: the method can be used either within an essentialist or within a social constructionist framework.<sup>4</sup> Focus group research conducted within an essentialist epistemological framework implies an assumption that individuals have their own personal ideas, opinions and understandings; and that the task of the researcher is to access or elicit such ideas, opinions and understandings. Within this framework, the particular advantage of focus groups is the more comprehensive elicitation of individuals' views. Focus group research conducted within a social constructionist epistemological framework does not utilize the notion of pre-existing ideas, opinions, and understandings, located inside the heads of individuals, but, rather, presupposes that sense-making is produced *collectively*, in the course of *social interactions* between people. Within this framework, then, the particular advantage of focus groups is the opportunity they offer for researchers to observe how people engage in the process of collective sense-making: how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others. I will provide illustrations of these different uses in the following section.

Because – in addition to their flexibility – focus groups can appear cheap, quick and easy to run (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990), they are often seen as a method 'for all seasons' (Tuck 1976). However, there are a number of disadvantages to the method, including (within a traditional research framework) limited reliability and validity, and various forms of moderator and respondent bias (Drayton, Fahad and Tynan 1989). In

addition, methods of data analysis and interpretation are often insufficiently specified or poorly formulated (I will return to this point in the final section of this paper). Here, I suggest that in deciding whether to use focus groups in any given research project, there are three key considerations: the purpose of the research; the kind of output desired; and the practical aspects of conducting focus groups. I will briefly discuss each of these in turn.

*Purpose of research.* Above all, the use of focus groups should be considered in relation to the type of research question. Focus groups are a particularly *good* choice of method when the purpose of the research is to elicit people's understandings, opinions and views, or to explore how these are advanced, elaborated and negotiated in a social context. In particular, focus groups enable the researcher to gain a sense of the texture of talk: whether this talk is conceptualized as a 'window' to underlying beliefs and opinions (i.e. within an essentialist framework), or seen as a form of social action in its own right (i.e. within a social constructionist framework). If, by contrast, the purpose of the research is to categorize or compare types of individuals and the views they hold, or to measure attitudes, opinions or beliefs, focus groups are less appropriate—although they are, of course, sometimes used in this way, e.g. Geraghty (1980), Press (1991). Some researchers (e.g. Morgan and Krueger 1993) suggest that focus groups should not be used for purposes *other* than research, e.g. conflict resolution, team building or therapy.

*Type of output desired.* A second consideration is the type of output or end product wanted from the research. The data generated by focus groups are interactive and qualitative—and therefore best suited to qualitative analysis, although some (limited) quantification may be undertaken (see Morgan 1993, Krueger 1998b). Focus group data are best reported with extensive illustrative extracts, which are often vivid and compelling to readers—and reports may consequently be lengthy. In particular, the data offer considerable potential for the analysis of interactions—unfortunately, though, this is a potential which is all too rarely realized (I will return to this point). Focus groups are unlikely to be the method of choice when statistical data and generalizable findings are required: samples are usually small and unrepresentative, and it is difficult to make a good theoretical case for aggregating data across a number of diverse groups, or for making direct comparisons between groups. Also, focus group results do not readily lend themselves to brief or summary reporting—although, again, this is often undertaken, particularly in marketing contexts, e.g. Flexner *et al.* (1997), Seals *et al.* (1995).

*Practical aspects.* Although focus group research may appear simple and straightforward, the practical aspects of focus group methodology should not be overlooked or minimized. As with any qualitative method, the focus group researcher must pilot the question guide and test the procedure; spend time recruiting, briefing and debriefing participants; check and re-check the recording equipment; and pass many painstaking hours in transcription and analysis. However, there are also practical considerations *specific* to focus group methodology. Recruitment is one: it can be difficult to get groups together (particularly professionals with over-stretched or



inflexible work schedules) and impossible to run them if several people fail to turn up (it is always necessary to over-recruit). Moderating a focus group requires very different skills from one-to-one interviewing (c.f. Krueger 1998c), and is difficult to juggle with the practicalities of operating recording equipment and/or taking notes (a co-moderator or assistant is highly desirable). Finally, co-ordination of activities 'on the day' (e.g. organizing room layout, materials, name badges, refreshments; managing staggered arrivals and departures; dealing with the specific needs of particular individuals without neglecting others) is typically a challenge – and another good reason to have an assistant.

Provided, then, that the purpose of the research is appropriate, that primarily qualitative results are desired, and that the practicalities do not seem too daunting, focus groups may well be the method of choice. In my own experience, focus group methodology is flexible, (relatively) user-friendly, and fun to work with – but it *is* demanding. I will now turn to a consideration of some of the key features of the methodology, before concluding with a discussion of issues specific to the analysis of focus group data.

### **Key features of focus group methodology**

In this section, I will highlight three key features of focus groups as a method, making points of comparison, where appropriate, between focus groups and one-to-one interviews. These key features are: providing access to participants' own language, concepts and concerns; encouraging the production of more fully articulated accounts; and offering an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making. All three derive specifically from the *interactive* nature of focus group data. Although, as noted earlier, such interaction is definitional to focus groups, it is relatively rarely reported, and seldom constitutes the focus of analysis. In this review (and elsewhere: Wilkinson 1998a, b, 1999), I have deliberately sought out and presented examples of interactive data, and have drawn attention to interactional features which are not addressed by the authors themselves. I will return to this issue in the final section of the paper.

#### *1. Providing access to participants' own language, concepts and concerns*

Some familiarity with the language habitually used by research participants is important both for effective communication and in order to develop an adequate understanding of their experiences and beliefs. Like one-to-one interviews, focus groups enable the researcher to listen to people talking. However, in focus groups, the research participants talk primarily *to each other*, rather than to the researcher, and they talk in a way which is more 'naturalistic' or 'ecologically valid' (Liebes 1984, Albrecht *et al.* 1993) than a one-to-one interview.<sup>5</sup> The relatively free flow of discussion and debate between members of a focus group offers an excellent opportunity for

hearing 'the language and vernacular used by respondents' (Bers 1987: 27). Focus group researchers have seen the method as providing an opportunity for 'listening to local voices' (Murray *et al.* 1994); for learning the participants' own language instead of imposing the researcher's language upon them (Freimuth and Greenberg 1986, Mays *et al.* 1992); and for gaining an insight into participants' conceptual worlds, on their own terms (Broom and Dozier 1990).

Listening in on focus group discussions – or 'structured eavesdropping' (Powney 1988) – enables the researcher to become familiar with the way research participants habitually talk, the particular idioms, terminology and vocabulary they typically use, the ways in which they joke, tell stories, construct arguments, and so on. Focus group interactions reveal not only shared ways of talking, but also shared experiences, and shared ways of making sense of these experiences. The researcher is offered an insight into the commonly held assumptions, concepts and meanings that constitute and inform participants' talk about their experiences.

Researchers often work with respondents across differences of age, culture, 'race'/ethnicity, (dis)ability, and so on (c.f. Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996), and focus groups are particularly useful in enabling researchers 'to observe people who may be very different from themselves' (Bers 1987: 26). Female academics have described, for example, how their focus group research has revealed the terms used by male ex-prisoners for oral sex (Kitzinger 1990: 328); and by black gay men for anal intercourse (Mays *et al.* 1992: 427–9).

Sometimes, the participants even offer the researcher a 'translation' of unfamiliar terms or concepts. In the following extract from a 'girls' group', an adult female researcher (Michelle) explores with three young women the ways in which they – and their male peers – talk about sexual desires and experiences:

*Michelle:* Now do you think guys at [your school] brag to each other about this stuff?  
*Janet:* Yes [giggles]. Oh yeah, in a major way.  
*Shermika:* [simultaneously] Girls brag, too.  
*Sophie:* All they *talk* about is what they're getting.  
*Michelle:* Is that their language, 'What they're getting?'  
*Sophie:* 'Fly girls' and what they're getting off them.  
 [All laugh while Pat and Michelle say, 'Wait a minute!']  
*Shermika:* 'She *all that!*' ... I *hate* that!  
*Sophie:* 'All that and more.'  
*Janet:* 'Fly' is, like, totally hot, she's the most gorgeous woman on the earth.  
*Sophie:* Then there's, like, 'good to go', meaning she's, like, all over you.  
 (Macpherson and Fine 1995: 193, emphases in original)

The young women offer both an account of the practice of sexual 'bragging', and a translation for the researchers of specific terms they use: 'fly girls' and 'good to go'. Further examples of 'translations' or clarifications provided by participants during the course of focus groups are provided by Press (1991: 432), Schlesinger *et al.* (1992: 138) and Simon *et al.* (1992: 37).

Simply by virtue of the number of participants simultaneously involved in the research interaction, focus groups inevitably reduce the researcher's

power and control, making focus groups a relatively 'egalitarian' method. It is this feature of focus groups which has proved especially attractive to feminist researchers: c.f. Wilkinson 1998a, 1999. Compared with a one-to-one interview, it is much harder for the researcher to impose her or his own agenda in the group context. As focus group researchers have pointed out, the researcher's influence is 'diffused by the very fact of being in a group rather than a one-to-one situation' (Frey and Fontana 1993: 26) and focus groups place 'control over [the] interaction in the hands of the participants rather than the researcher' (Morgan 1988: 18). Indeed, reduced researcher influence is seen as a *problem* in much of the focus group literature, which typically offers the researcher a range of techniques for constraining participants and reasserting control (e.g. Krueger 1988, Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, Vaughn *et al.* 1996).

However, reduced researcher influence can be seen as a *benefit* of focus group research for researchers who are primarily interested in participants' own meanings and understandings, and who encourage participant-directed interaction, rather than constraining it. Reduced researcher control gives focus group participants much greater opportunity to set the research agenda, and to 'develop the themes most important to them' (Cooper *et al.* 1993). These may diverge from those identified by the researcher and participants may challenge—or even undermine—the researcher, insisting on their own interpretations and agendas being heard in place of the formal requirements of the research project. For example, one researcher changed her analytic focus to include social class as well as gender after the insistence of young women in her focus groups in talking about this issue (Frazer 1988: 344). Other examples of challenges to the researcher's agenda are offered by Griffin (1986: 180), Green *et al.* (1993: 631) and Zeller (1993: 174–175).

In sum, then, focus groups provide access to participants' own language and concepts. They also maximize engagement with participants' own concerns and agendas, in ways that may enhance the research project or generate new and perhaps unexpected findings (e.g. Agar and MacDonald 1995: 80).

## 2. *Encouraging the production of more fully articulated accounts*

Many focus group researchers comment on the extent to which interaction between participants generates accounts which are more fully articulated—in extent and detail—than are often achieved through a one-to-one interview. In focus groups people typically disclose personal details, reveal discrediting information, express strong views and opinions. They elaborate their views in response to encouragement, or defend them in the face of challenge from other group members: focus groups which 'take off' may even, like those run by Robin Jarrett (1993: 194) have 'the feel of rap sessions with friends'. This is particularly likely to occur when pre-existing or naturally occurring social groups are used, such as friendship groups (Liebes 1984), work colleagues or members of clubs (Kitzinger 1994a, b), family members (Khan and Manderson 1992), or simply people

who have experienced the same problem (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Participants who already know each other may recall common experiences, share half-forgotten memories, or challenge each other on contradictions between what they are *professing* to believe in the group and what they might have said or done outside the group. In a focus group study conducted as part of the AIDS Media Research Project, for example, challenges to professed safe practice included 'how about that time you didn't use a glove while taking blood from a patient?' or 'what about the other night when you went off with that boy at the disco?' (Kitzinger 1994a: 105).

Even when focus group participants are *not* acquainted in advance, the interactive nature of the group means that participants ask questions of, disagree with, and challenge each other, thus serving 'to elicit the elaboration of responses' (Merton 1987: 555). It is an often-commented feature of focus groups that they 'allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members' (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990: 16). In this way, focus group interactions encourage the production of more articulated accounts. This may occur either in response to *disagreement* or to *agreement* from other group members.

In the following extract, three 14 year olds are discussing the likelihood of contracting AIDS through being tattooed:

*Child 1:* Unlikely to get AIDS.

*Child 2:* AIDS is possible if you share needles.

*Child 1:* Yes, but you would have to share the needles very quickly 'cause AIDS virus is volatile and dies within seconds when it gets out of the body.

*Child 2:* Yes, but still possible.

*Child 3:* Yes, but you wouldn't just tattoo someone and then just switch over very quickly. The only thing possible, not in professional tattooing studios, but in any amateur or backyard tattoo and they are doing friends or something like that, there would be a chance—they just use compasses.

(Houghton *et al.* 1995: 977)

Here, Child 1 initially offers the kind of risk assessment ('unlikely') that could have been recorded in a structured interview (or even via a rating scale). Child 2's challenge (suggesting a circumstance in which contracting AIDS through tattooing is more likely) prompts the first speaker to defend her original assertion, and to offer additional information about her understanding of the AIDS virus. This fuller articulation of her viewpoint is very much a product of the group context. Child 2's subsequent defence of her position (as 'still possible') enables Child 3 to enter the discussion, developing the argument in terms of different risks in different contexts.

In the following discussion between young heterosexual women about sex, the support and agreement of others is crucial in encouraging Jane to tell her story. It is in the context of other young women's talk about 'guys' reactions to their partners' orgasms that Jane feels able to say that she sometimes fakes orgasm:

*Jane:* Oh yeah, did you get off, did you get off, did you get off.

*Megan:* Yeah.

*Jane:* 'Cause otherwise it says something about them I think.

*Liz:* Yeah it does.

*Jane:* And if I say 'No,' then that means like he wasn't good or...

*Megan:* Yeah, they feel inadequate.

*Jane:* So in a sense they're more worried about themselves. And so you think they're worried about you enjoying it but, I mean (they're not) it's sort of, they're more worried about if they were good or not.

*Megan:* Yeah.

*Alison:* That's why I think girls fake it, so that they can sort of like get it over with.

*Jane:* I fake it sometimes.

(Roberts *et al.* 1995: 529)

In this extract, Jane is first parodying men's need to be told whether or not she has had an orgasm ('did you get off'), and Megan, Liz and Alison support and encourage her, such that she is able to begin articulating a theory of why men say this: if a woman doesn't have an orgasm, 'it says something' about her male partner ('like he wasn't good'). With Megan's support, Jane more fully articulates her argument: that men are 'more worried about themselves' than about their female partners, and Alison introduces the idea that this is why 'girls fake it'. At this point Jane has apparently received sufficient support for and agreement with her views to treat this as a cue to reveal specific (and potentially risky) personal information to the group ('I fake it sometimes'), and she goes on to talk about her experience in doing this.

Contrary to the commonly accepted view that intimate or sensitive information is more likely to be elicited in a one-to-one context, focus groups typically facilitate disclosure of personal—sometimes discrediting—experience (c.f. Zeller 1993) as accounts are articulated. Issues of confidentiality arise for the group as a whole, not just the researcher, and need to be addressed in any focus group project. Typically, the 'ground rules' for a focus group will include the stipulation that personal information should not be discussed outside the group context, but it is difficult—if not impossible—for the researcher to ensure that this stipulation is met. Other ethical issues in focus group research stem from group dynamics, insofar as participants can collaborate or collude effectively to intimidate and/or silence a particular member, or to create a silence around a particular topic or issue, for example. In such cases, it falls to the group moderator to decide whether/how to intervene, and it can be difficult to balance such conflicting goals as ensuring the articulation of accounts, supporting individuals, and challenging offensive statements.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, then, a key feature of focus groups is that interaction between participants results in the production of more fully articulated accounts. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this in interviews: it is a product of the *interactive* nature of focus groups. Other examples of *agreement* or *disagreement* between focus group participants producing more fully articulated accounts may be found in Frazer (1988: 349), Schlesinger *et al.* (1992: 146), Lyons *et al.* (1995: 24–25), Fine and Addelston (1996: 131–132), Gough (1998: 34), and Frith and Kitzinger (1998).

### 3. Offering an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making

Focus groups also offer an opportunity for researchers to see exactly *how* views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified during the course of conversations with others, i.e. to observe the *process* of collective sense-making in action. This is likely to be of particular interest to researchers working within a social constructionist framework, who do not view beliefs, ideas, opinions and understandings as generated by individuals in splendid isolation, but rather as built in interaction with others, in specific social contexts: as Radley and Billig (1996: 223) say, 'thinking is a socially shared activity'. In a focus group, people are confronted with the need to make *collective* sense of their individual experiences and beliefs (Morgan and Spanish 1984: 259). Even though focus groups are not entirely 'naturalistic', the data they generate nevertheless share many of the features of ordinary social interaction through which sense-making is achieved (Albrecht *et al.* 1993). A focus group is itself a social context; its participants are members of a social group in interaction; and it is this interaction between people which constitutes the primary data. In a focus group, then, the social process of collective sense-making is open to the researcher's scrutiny.

I will illustrate how collective sense-making can be observed in focus groups using data from my own current research on breast cancer. In the following extract, in which three women with breast cancer are talking about possible causes of the disease, we see how an opinion is advanced, elaborated, negotiated and defended in the face of dissent. The extract is particularly interesting because the view defended is one that is labelled 'fatalism' in the cancer literature (e.g. Greer *et al.* 1979, Greer and Watson 1987). Such an outlook is often assumed to result in passivity and loss of control—an individual 'cognitive schema' which, according to some studies (e.g. Pettingale *et al.* 1985), correlates with poor prognosis, cancer recurrence, and risk of disease progression, especially for women (Di Clemente and Temoshok 1985).

*Gina:* We've just got it haven't we, I mean no matter what, what you eat drink or whatever, if you're going to get it you'll get it won't you, same as if it's in your genes [inaudible]

*Hetty:* [talks over] I think it's in, I think it's in your stars when you're *born* actually, it-it's gonna be there and it'll be there

*Gina:* The only thing that I'm glad of is there's lots of things they can do about it now (*Hetty:* yes) whereas they couldn't before

*Hetty:* Well they didn't before, no, no. I mean it's, when he blows that trumpet that's your day's *ready*, you know (*Gina?*: fate) just hope, just hope he misses the mouthpiece when it's my day [laughs]

*Irene:* Mm. I mean why I really don't know how to think is because (pause) there was never any sort of erm, there's no *information* erm, from the past

(*Gina?*: mm) how many women in the *past* died from breast cancer. I mean we don't know do we, *really*

*Gina:* Quite a lot I think

*Irene:* Erm, so, is it something that's sort of erm, just happening more and more *today*, is it something in the *environment* erm, er d-do you see what I mean

*Hetty:* I think we hear more *about* it today

*Gina:* [cuts in] When you're younger you don't know about these things, you don't even think about them, do you

*Hetty:* [talks over] You're not interested really, are you

*Gina:* No

*Irene:* But erm, but I mean, they haven't any figures or anything have they from erm, you know, sort of-

*Gina:* [cuts in] I think a lot more died years ago than now

In this extract, Gina and Hetty actively collaborate to tell a story in which the causes of breast cancer are outside human control. Fate determines who does and who doesn't get breast cancer: 'no matter what ... you eat drink or whatever, if you're going to get it you'll get it won't you' (Gina). There has always been breast cancer and there will always be breast cancer: 'it's in your stars when you're *born*' (Hetty), 'same as if it's in your genes' (Gina). They evoke the dark image of the angel of death: 'when he blows that trumpet that's your day's *ready*, you know'. But Gina and Hetty are optimistic that death can be evaded, that the angelic trumpeter will 'miss the mouthpiece' when he comes to call them at the appointed hour of doom. For these two women, the hope of cheating their predetermined deaths from breast cancer lies in modern science: 'there's lots of things they can do about it now', says Gina, and Hetty quickly agrees, 'yes'. Science has triumphed over death and 'a lot more died years ago than now' (Gina). Contrary to the pessimism and resignation one might expect from women who speak of cancer as an inevitable 'fate' written in the 'genes' or in the 'stars', they are actively and collaboratively engaged in telling an upbeat and positive story about treatment and cure.

This view is challenged by Irene, who—tentatively in the face of the clearly expressed agreement between the other two—advances an alternative perspective: that cancer is caused by 'something in the *environment*' and that it 'might be happening more and more *today*'. In Gina and Hetty's story, the onward march of medical science overcomes the predestination of 'stars' and 'genes'. In Irene's story, it is the modern world that produces carcinogens, causing the very disease for which the other two see progress as cure.

In this brief extract, we can observe the intricacy with which Gina and Hetty manage Irene's opposing opinion. Countering Irene's claim that more women today are dying of breast cancer, Gina insists that 'Quite a lot' died in the past, a 'a lot more ... than now'. If Irene thinks otherwise, that may be because she is comparing the number of people she knows with cancer now with the number she knew when younger—an unfair comparison because 'When you're younger you don't know about these things, you don't even think about them, do you' (Gina). Hetty supports Gina, adding that in youth 'You're not interested really, are you'. Irene's claim of an increase in the number of women with breast cancer is reduced to the status of an illusion which has more to do with her own increasing awareness of breast cancer than with any real increase in incidence. As Hetty says, 'we hear more *about* it today'—implying that the apparent increase is an artefact of increased information and knowledge. For Gina and Hetty, fatalism is not a resigned shrug in the face of the inevitability of death, an 'attitude of passive acceptance' (Moorey and Greer 1989: 10), but

an actively constructed and vigorously defended argument that offers 'hope' (Hetty). Traditional psychological notions of fatalism (as a potentially damaging and dangerous 'cognitive schema') do not provide a sufficient explanation for the ways in which these ideas are constructed, expressed and managed in interaction with others. Moreover, the collaborative construction of a positive and optimistic story is somewhat problematic for those who advocate psychological therapy to alter the (purportedly harmful) cognitions of individual cancer patients (e.g. Moorey and Greer 1989).

In sum, then, a third key feature of focus groups is the opportunity they offer to observe the process of collective sense-making as it actually happens, within the focus group interaction itself. Other examples of this are provided by Billig (1992: 159); Frith and Kitzinger (1998); and Wilkinson (1998b, 1999).

### **Issues in the analysis of focus group data**

Compared with the extensive advice available on how to *conduct* focus groups, there is relatively little in the focus group literature on how to *analyse* the resulting data. Data analysis sections of the focus group handbooks are typically very brief, and most commentators suggest (or imply) that the techniques suitable for analysing one-to-one interview data are equally applicable for use with focus group data. In published focus group studies, researchers often omit, or briefly gloss, the details of exactly how they conducted their analyses (categories are 'identified' or themes 'emerge'). Many researchers treat one-to-one interview and focus group data interchangeably. In this final section of the paper, I will specifically address some of the issues in the analysis of focus group data.

Morgan (1988: 64) identifies two main approaches to analysing focus group data: 'systematic coding via content analysis' and 'strictly qualitative or ethnographic' analysis. The former produces a summary description of the data, usually incorporating a quantitative element, while the latter relies primarily on direct quotation from the group discussion. The two analytic approaches relate, of course, to two different types of research question. The distinction can clearly be seen in a project on heart attack risk factors, which utilizes *both* types of analysis (Morgan and Spanish, 1985). In this project, a content analysis addresses the question of how *often* different risk factors for heart attacks are mentioned, while an ethnographic analysis addresses the question of *how* (and could also perhaps address *why*) risk factor information is introduced and discussed in the focus groups. I will look briefly at some of the key issues relating to each analytic approach in turn.

*Content analysis.* It is, of course, a matter of debate whether qualitative data should be quantified at all (as is typically the case when it is subjected to some form of content analysis). However, the main advantages of content analysis are to allow for a relatively systematic treatment of the data and to enable its presentation in summary form. Assuming that the decision has been made to content analyse focus group data, the researcher has first to



decide on the unit of analysis: this could be the whole group, the group dynamics, the individual participants, or the participants' utterances (Carey and Smith 1994, Morgan 1995). The unit of analysis provides the basis for developing a coding system, and the codes are then applied systematically across a transcript (or across several transcripts if more than one focus group has been run). Once a coding system has been developed, the application of it throughout the data set can readily be computerised, if desired. Morgan (1997) proposes three distinct ways of coding focus group data: noting whether each group discussion contains a given code; noting whether each participant mentions a given code; and noting all mentions of a given code (i.e. across groups or participants). Once the data have been coded in one (or more) of these ways, the question of whether to quantify them is a further issue. Morgan (1993) argues the value of simple 'descriptive counts' of codes (stopping short of using inferential statistical tests, whose assumptions are unlikely to be met in focus groups), and provides examples of this kind of 'qualitative content analysis' across a series of studies on caregivers of those with Alzheimer's disease (Morgan and March 1992, Morgan and Zhao 1993, Duncan and Morgan 1994). Others (e.g. Albrecht *et al.* 1993) favour more extensive quantification of coded focus group data.

*Ethnographic analysis.* By contrast, ethnographic analysis is rarely systematic, in the sense of ranging across the full data set—it is much more selective and limited in scope. Its main advantage is to permit a detailed interpretative account of the everyday social processes of communication, talk and action occurring within the focus group. The key issue in ethnographic analysis is how to select the material to present (whether this is framed up as 'themes', 'discourses', or simply as illustrative quotations), without violating the 'spirit' of the group, and without losing sight of the specific context within which the material was generated. Unfortunately, researchers are rarely explicit about the criteria they use for making such decisions. A particular challenge is how to preserve the interactive nature of focus group data: a surprising limitation of published focus group research is the rarity with which group interactions are analysed and reported (c.f. Carey and Smith 1994, Kitzinger 1994a). Extracts from focus group data are most commonly presented as if they were one-to-one interview data, often with no indication that more than one person is present; still more rarely does interaction *per se* constitute the analytic focus. As noted earlier, in documenting the key features of focus groups for this review, I deliberately selected (rare) examples of interactive data, and gave particular emphasis to the analytic possibilities of its interactional features. A further issue in the ethnographic analysis of focus group data is transcription method. Although it seems that discourse and especially conversation analytic methods may hold great promise for fine-grained analyses of talk-in-interaction (c.f. Myers and Macnaghten 1998, Kitzinger and Frith 1999), relatively few researchers are willing to undertake sufficiently detailed transcription to enable their use. Indeed, some researchers have explicitly argued that the time and expense entailed in preparing such transcripts is not justified by the substantive analyses it is subsequently possible to produce (e.g. Gamson 1992). Of course, such arguments about methodological choices (and the

level and type of analysis they permit) are inescapably bound up with researchers' theoretical and epistemological affiliations.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper I have reviewed the main disciplines in which focus groups have been used, and have outlined three distinct ways in which the method has been deployed: as an adjunct to other research methods, as a self-contained research method, and as participatory action research. I have looked at some of the key considerations affecting the use of focus group methodology, and have highlighted three key aspects of focus group research: providing access to participants' own language, concepts and concerns; encouraging the production of more fully articulated accounts; and offering an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making in action. Finally, I have briefly outlined some of the key issues in the analysis of focus group data.

Focus groups are now widely used within and beyond the social sciences. The continued rapid growth of the focus group literature, and the current popularity of focus groups in social research, suggests that the use of focus group methodology is likely to continue to increase as we move into the new millennium. In the future, it would be interesting to consider whether (and how) the growth of interest in focus groups as a research tool is linked—among other things—to broader trends in the conceptualization of social research and how we can understand the social world.<sup>9</sup> In addition, there would seem to be considerable potential for developing new—and better—methods of analysing focus group data.

## Notes

1. Sociologist Robert Merton, together with colleagues Patricia Kendall and Marjorie Fiske, is usually credited as the 'inventor' of focus groups—although social psychologists Emory Bogardus and Walter Thurstone had used group interviews to develop survey instruments in the 1920s (c.f. Bogardus 1926). Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld initially used group interviews to develop propaganda during World War II.
2. With thanks to Dominic Wring for drawing my attention to a number of specific examples of this, particularly the British Labour Party's bid for women's votes (Hewitt and Mattinson 1989) and its analysis of the 1992 election defeat (Wybrow 1992, cited in Wring 1998).
3. It has been suggested that, used in this way, focus groups have an affinity with the feminist practice of 'consciousness-raising': see Wilkinson (1998a) for examples and counter-examples.
4. Although focus group researchers rarely offer a clear epistemological statement, it is evident (a) that essentialist epistemologies predominate, and (b) that there is a great deal of slippage between essentialist and social constructionist epistemologies in focus group research.
5. Of course, focus groups are not 'naturalistic' to the extent that they are organized as part of a research enterprise, rather than constituting everyday social contexts, and there are some important differences between 'naturally occurring' talk and talk in focus groups (c.f. Agar and MacDonald 1995, Myers 1998).
6. Of course, while focus groups are egalitarian in some senses, in others they are not: for example, lack of representativeness when used as an instrument to develop policy, tendency for forceful and/or articulate members to dominate the discussion, and so on.
7. There is little discussion in the focus group literature of ethical issues: for exceptions see Kitzing (1994a: 118 fn), Smith (1995) and Wilkinson (1998a).
8. Space does not permit substantive engagement with these arguments here, but readers may be interested in recent (and ongoing) debates in the journal *Discourse and Society* about the conceptualization of 'context': e.g. Schegloff (1997), Wetherell (1999).
9. With thanks to the editors for this suggestion.

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