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Doing  
Focus  
Groups

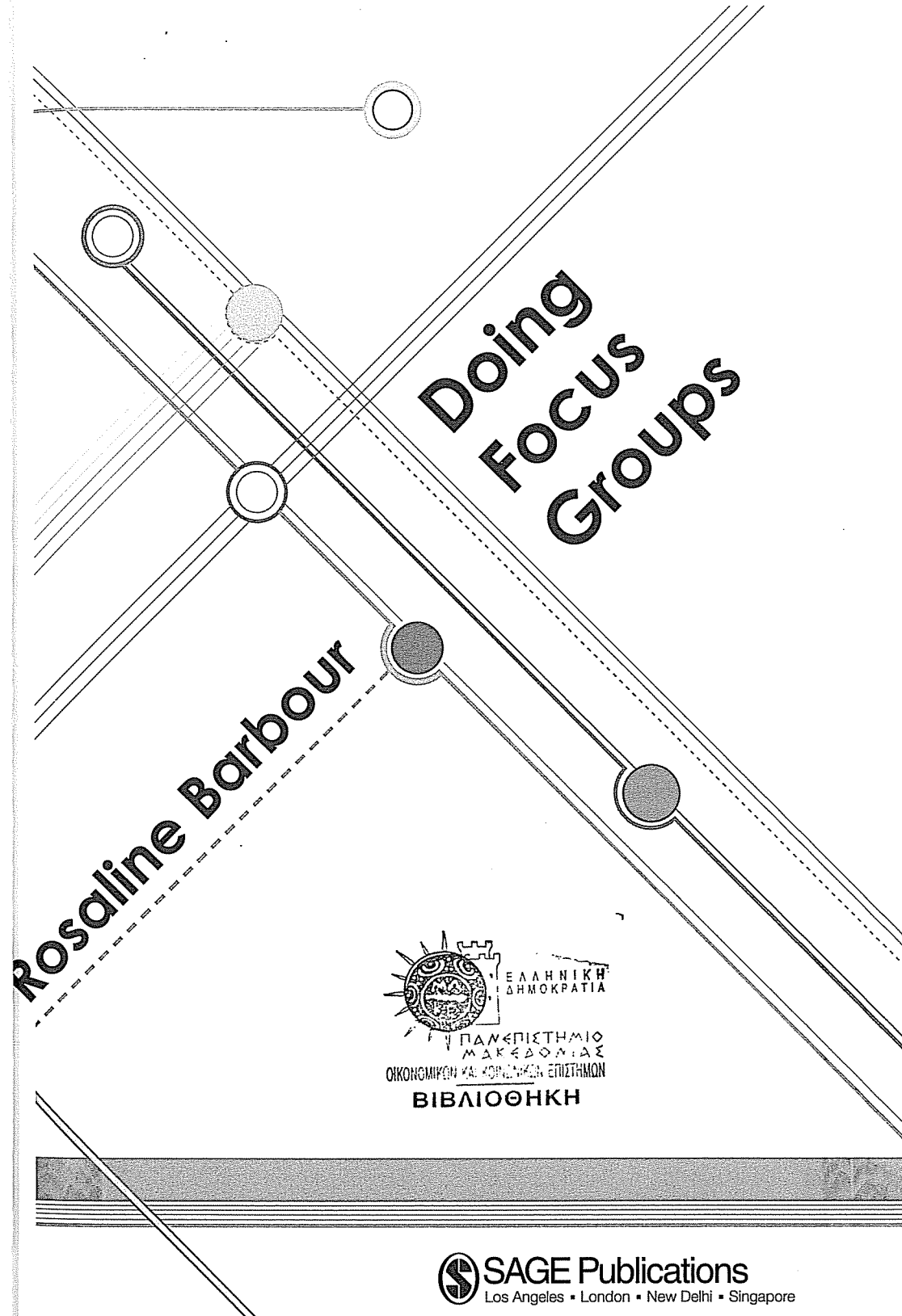
*Doing Focus Groups* (by Rosaline Barbour) is the fourth part of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*. This *Kit* comprises eight books and taken together the *Kit* represents the most extensive and detailed introduction to the process of doing qualitative research. This book can be used in conjunction with other titles in the *Kit* as part of this overall introduction to qualitative methods, but this book can equally well be used on its own as an introduction to Conducting focus groups.

#### Complete list of titles in *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*

- *Designing Qualitative Research Uwe Flick*
- *Doing Interviews Steinar Kvale*
- *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research Michael Angrosino*
- *Doing Focus Groups Rosaline Barbour*
- *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research Marcus Banks*
- *Analysing Qualitative Data Graham R. Gibbs*
- *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis Tim Rapley*
- *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research Uwe Flick*

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## Editorial introduction

### Uwe Flick

- Introduction to *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*
- What is qualitative research?
- How do we conduct qualitative research?
- Scope of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*

### Introduction to *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*

In recent years, qualitative research has enjoyed a period of unprecedented growth and diversification as it has become an established and respected research approach across a variety of disciplines and contexts. An increasing number of students, teachers and practitioners are facing questions and problems of how to do qualitative research – in general and for their specific individual purposes. To answer these questions, and to address such practical problems on a how-to-do level, is the main purpose of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*.

The books in *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit* collectively address the core issues that arise when we actually do qualitative research. Each book focuses on key methods (e.g. interviews or focus groups) or materials (e.g. visual data or discourse) that are used for studying the social world in qualitative terms. Moreover, the books in the Kit have been written with the needs of many different types of reader in mind. As such, the Kit and the individual books will be of use to a wide variety of users:

- *Practitioners* of qualitative research in the social sciences, medical research, marketing research, evaluation, organizational, business and management studies, cognitive science, etc., who face the problem of planning and conducting a specific study using qualitative methods.
- *University teachers* and lecturers in these fields using qualitative methods will be expected to use these series as a basis of their teaching.

- *Undergraduate and graduate students* of social sciences, nursing, education, psychology and other fields where qualitative methods are a (main) part of the university training including practical applications (e.g. for writing a thesis).

Each book in *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit* has been written by a distinguished author with extensive experience in their field and in the practice of the with methods they write about. When reading the whole series of books from the beginning to the end, you will repeatedly come across some issues which are central to any sort of qualitative research – such as ethics, designing research or assessing quality. However, in each book such issues are addressed from the specific methodological angle of the authors and the approach they describe. Thus you may find different approaches to issues of quality or different suggestions of how to analyze qualitative data in the different books, which will combine to present a comprehensive picture of the field as a whole.

### What is qualitative research?

It has become more and more difficult to find a common definition of qualitative research which is accepted by the majority of qualitative research approaches and researchers. Qualitative research is no longer just simply ‘*not* quantitative research’, but has developed an identity (or maybe multiple identities) of its own.

Despite the multiplicity of approaches to qualitative research, some common features of qualitative research can be identified. Qualitative research is intended to approach the world ‘out there’ (not in specialized research settings such as laboratories) and to understand, describe and sometimes explain social phenomena ‘from the inside’ in a number of different ways:

- By analyzing experiences of individuals or groups. Experiences can be related to biographical life histories or to (everyday or professional) practices; they may be addressed by analyzing everyday knowledge, accounts and stories.
- By analyzing interactions and communications in the making. This can be based on observing or recording practices of interacting and communicating and analyzing this material.
- By analyzing documents (texts, images, film or music) or similar traces of experiences or interactions.

Common to such approaches is that they seek to unpick how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight. Interactions and documents are seen as ways of constituting social processes and artefacts collaboratively

(or conflictingly). All of these approaches represent ways of meaning, which can be reconstructed and analyzed with different qualitative methods that allow the researcher to develop (more or less generalizable) models, typologies, theories as ways of describing and explaining social (or psychological) issues.

### How do we conduct qualitative research?

Can we identify common ways of doing qualitative research if we take into account that there are different theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches to qualitative research and that the issues that are studied are very diverse as well? We can at least identify some common features of how qualitative research is done.

- Qualitative researchers are interested in accessing experiences, interactions and documents in their natural context and in a way that gives room to the particularities of them and the materials in which they are studied.
- Qualitative research refrains from setting up a well-defined concept of what is studied and from formulating hypotheses in the beginning in order to test them. Rather, concepts (or hypotheses, if they are used) are developed and refined in the process of research.
- Qualitative research starts from the idea that methods and theories should be appropriate to what is studied. If the existing methods do not fit to a concrete issue or field, they are adapted or new methods or approaches are developed.
- Researchers themselves are an important part of the research process, either in terms of their own personal presence as researchers, or in terms of their experiences in the field and with the reflexivity they bring to the role – as are members of the field under study.
- Qualitative research takes context and cases seriously for understanding an issue under study. A lot of qualitative research is based on case studies or a series of case studies, and often the case (its history and complexity) is an important context for understanding what is studied.
- A major part of qualitative research is based on text and writing – from field notes and transcripts to descriptions and interpretations and finally to the presentation of the findings and of the research as a whole. Therefore, issues of transforming complex social situations (or other materials such as images) into texts – issues of transcribing and writing in general – are major concerns of qualitative research.
- If methods are supposed to be adequate to what is under study, approaches to defining and assessing the quality of qualitative research (still) have to be discussed in specific ways that are appropriate for qualitative research and even for specific approaches in qualitative research.

## Scope of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*

- *Designing Qualitative Research* (Uwe Flick) gives a brief introduction to qualitative research from the point of view of how to plan and design a concrete study using qualitative research in one way or the other. It is intended to outline a framework for the other books in *The Sage Qualitative Research Kit* by focusing on how-to-do problems and on how to solve such problems in the research process. The book will address issues of constructing a research design in qualitative research; it will outline stepping-stones in making a research project work and will discuss practical problems such as resources in qualitative research but also more methodological issues like quality of qualitative research and also ethics. This framework is spelled out in more detail in the other books in the Kit.
- Three books are devoted to collecting or producing data in qualitative research. They take up the issues briefly outlined in the first book and approach them in a much more detailed and focused way for the specific method. First, *Doing Interviews* (Steinar Kvale) addresses the theoretical, epistemological, ethical and practical issues of interviewing people about specific issues or their life history. *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research* (Michael Angrosino) focuses on the second major approach to collecting and producing qualitative data. Here again practical issues (like selecting sites, methods of collecting data in ethnography, special problems of analyzing them) are discussed in the context of more general issues (ethics, representations, quality and adequacy of ethnography as an approach). In *Doing Focus Groups* (Rosaline Barbour) the third of the most important qualitative methods of producing data is presented. Here again we find a strong focus on how-to-do issues of sampling, designing and analyzing the data and on how to produce data in focus groups.
- Three further volumes are devoted to analyzing specific types of qualitative data. *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* (Marcus Banks) extends the focus to the third type of qualitative data (beyond verbal data coming from interviews and focus groups and observational data). The use of visual data has not only become a major trend in social research in general, but confronts researchers with new practical problems in using them and analyzing them and produces new ethical issues. In *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (Graham R. Gibbs), several practical approaches and issues of making sense of any sort of qualitative data are addressed. Special attention is paid to practices of coding, of comparing and of using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Here, the focus is on verbal data like interviews, focus groups or biographies. *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* (Tim Rapley) extends this focus to different types of data, relevant for analyzing discourses. Here, the focus is on existing material (like documents) and on recording everyday

conversations and on finding traces of discourses. Practical issues such as generating an archive, transcribing video materials and how to analyze discourses with such types of data are discussed.

- *Managing the Quality of Qualitative Research* (Uwe Flick) takes up the issue of quality in qualitative research, which has been briefly addressed in specific contexts in other books in the *Kit*, in a more general way. Here, quality is looked at from the angle of using or reformulating existing or defining new criteria for qualitative research. This book will examine the ongoing debates about what should count as defining 'quality' and validity in qualitative methodologies and will examine the many strategies for promoting and managing quality in qualitative research. Special attention is paid to the strategy of triangulation in qualitative research and to the use of quantitative research in the context of promoting the quality of qualitative research.

Before I go on to outline the focus of this book and its role in the *Kit*, I would like to thank some people at SAGE who were important in making this *Kit* happen. Michael Carmichael suggested this project to me some time ago and was very helpful with his suggestions in the beginning. Patrick Brindle took over and continued this support, as did Vanessa Harwood and Jeremy Toyne in making books out of the manuscripts we provided.



## ||| About this book

### ||| Uwe Flick

The use of focus groups has become a major approach in doing qualitative research in different areas from market research to health research. In these areas we find more pragmatic and more systematic forms of using this method for data collection. Often focus groups are used as a stand-alone method, but in many cases they are integrated in a multiple methods design with other qualitative methods and sometimes with quantitative methods. They are also seen as a strong alternative to using single interviews as the data basis for qualitative analysis. The advantage here is that they not only allow analysis of statements and reports about experiences and events, but also of the interactional context in which these statements and reports are produced. This method comes with specific practical and methodological demands of documenting and analyzing the data.

This book, *Doing Focus Groups*, examines the most important problems of using this method. Practical issues of sampling, of documentation and moderating in focus groups are addressed as well as more general reflections about ethics and about the adequate use or misuse of focus groups as a method. Special problems of making sense of focus group data and of assessing their quality and that of their analysis are also discussed. After reading this book, you should not only know more about how to do a focus group but also why and when to use this method.

Thus, in the context of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*, this book complements the one on *Doing Interviews* by Kvale (2007) and the one on *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research* by Angrosino (2007) by outlining the third of the major ways of collecting data in qualitative research. This book also mentions special ways of analyzing the data produced in focus groups. But it is complemented by the books on *Analyzing Qualitative Data* by Gibbs (2007) and by the one on *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* by Rapley (2007). The same is the case for the issues of *Designing Qualitative Research* (Flick 2007a) and *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research* (Flick 2007b). This book addresses the specific problems linked in this respect to focus group research, whereas the others provide the more general framework in addressing the problems more generally for qualitative research. So you will find additional suggestions here, for example, about how to sample in focus group research and what that means for comparison, findings and generalization and what the ethical implications are in this context.



# 1

## Introducing focus groups

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- have a definition of focus groups;
- understand the plan of the book;
- know the historical antecedents of the current use of focus groups;
- and
- see the claims that are made in focus.

Although this book is intended as a spur to creative and thoughtful use of focus groups in research, there is always a danger that one ends up contributing, instead, to the 'pedagogical half-truths' (Atkinson, 1997) that continue to plague the dual endeavours of empirical research practice and research training. The advice that follows is offered within a context that views qualitative research as a 'craft skill' (Seale, 1999) and that recognizes that what works for one exponent of focus groups may not work for another – perhaps on account of their own characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity), or disciplinary predisposition (which depends on their original training and theoretical leanings), or conceptual approach (i.e. how individuals go about learning, theorizing and reasoning). Likewise approaches developed to address the requirements of a specific research project may not translate well to another, where the data are being generated for a different purpose or which is engaging with another group of people. Nevertheless, in much the same way as qualitative research itself hinges on the ability of the researcher to draw instructive parallels, this volume hopes to present and reflect on my own and others' experiences of using focus groups for

research, in the hope that the reader will be able to glean some guidance and suggestions that will assist in developing her or his own reflective and reflexive focus group practice. It is not intended as a manual, but aspires to encouraging thoughtful and imaginative use of focus groups. Through contextualizing issues and illustrating dilemmas with reference to real-life research projects, it aims to offer potential – sometimes partial – solutions and, at the very least, cautions against employing ‘quick fixes’.

Just as focus groups, as a research tool, elicit multi-faceted accounts, so too do focus groups, as a research choice, give rise to impassioned and potentially contradictory methodological debates. These conflicting views stem from the distinct disciplinary backgrounds and assumptions of researchers, who tend to approach focus groups in different ways, using them for a variety of purposes. However, the inherent flexibility of focus groups and their potential for use in myriad contexts has, inevitably, given rise to considerable confusion, with attempts at clarification often resulting in overly prescriptive advice.

### Definition of a focus group

This has resulted in confusion even with regard to the definition of what constitutes a focus group, with the terms ‘group interview’, ‘focus group interview’ and ‘focus group discussions’ sometimes being used interchangeably. One of the earliest and most frequently cited texts (Frey and Fontana, 1993) uses the term ‘group interviews’ but describes an approach that is more commonly referred to as ‘focus group discussions’, relying on generating and analyzing interaction between participants, rather than asking the same question (or list of questions) to each group participant in turn, which would be the approach favoured by what is more commonly referred to as the ‘group interview’. Appearing most frequently in grant applications and practice-focused journals, ‘focus group interview’ is an intriguing hybrid term and suggests, at least to me, that the object of the exercise is to interview a group, which is seen as holding a consensus view, rather than the process of creating this consensus via interaction in a ‘focus group discussion’. There is, as always, a danger of being swamped by these conflicting definitions when talking about a remarkably similar research process. The definition that I wish to apply is suitably broad to encompass all of the aforementioned usages: ‘Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction’ (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999, p. 20).

Being actively encouraging of group interaction relates, most obviously, to running the focus group discussion and ensuring that participants talk amongst themselves rather than interacting only with the researcher, or ‘moderator’. However, it also relates to the preparation required in developing a topic guide and selecting stimulus material that will encourage interaction, as well as decisions made

with regard to group composition, in order to ensure that participants will have enough in common with each other to make discussion seem appropriate, yet have sufficiently varying experiences or perspectives in order to allow for some debate or differences of opinion. Likewise, although being attentive to group interaction refers to the process of moderating discussions, with the researcher picking up on differences in views or emphasis of participants and exploring these, it also relates to the importance of paying attention to group interaction: to group dynamics and to the activities engaged in by the group – whether this be forming a consensus, developing an explanatory framework, interpreting health promotion messages, or weighing up competing priorities. Later chapters in this book are concerned with providing advice on all of these aspects of research design, the running of focus groups and analyzing the data generated.

### Outline of the book

The chapters roughly follow a linear layout, considering research design issues, the planning and running of focus groups, the art of generating data, the stages involved in analysis, through to writing-up. However, it should be emphasized that this does not mean that the craft of using focus groups in research should be viewed as consisting of a series of stages; rather, the process, in common with all qualitative research, is an iterative one. Theorizing begins with the formulation of the research question, and sampling decisions are also theoretically informed, anticipating the comparisons that it will be possible to make. Tentative interpretations and analysis begin even as the data are being generated, and analysis and writing progress hand-in-hand.

The first three chapters contextualize focus group research. Chapter 1 traces the historical antecedents of the method and highlights several separate, but potentially contradictory, models. It sets the scene by providing a brief history of the development of focus group research, looking at the legacy of the various research traditions involved. Chapter 2 critically examines the uses and abuses of focus groups, including their use both in the context of mixed methods and ‘stand-alone’ focus group studies. This chapter highlights both inappropriate expectations on the part of some exponents of focus groups and the particular strengths of this method. The next chapter (Chapter 3) addresses the often overlooked question as to the underpinnings of the focus group approach and its place within the qualitative research tradition.

The middle section of the book deals with planning and setting up focus group studies. Research design is the subject of Chapter 4, which looks at the decision as to whether to use one-to-one interviews or focus groups and the potential and challenges of using focus groups within mixed methods studies. It then discusses the practicalities concerned with selecting research settings, matching moderator and group, and recruiting participants. Effective sampling is key to the success of focus groups and to determining their comparative potential, and Chapter 5 is devoted to

this topic. It considers group composition, number and size of groups, sampling frames, second-stage sampling and the potential for comparison. Examples are provided from previous and ongoing studies and the role of serendipity is also acknowledged. The advantages and disadvantages of using pre-existing groups are debated, as are ethical issues involved in making and operationalizing sampling decisions. In Chapter 6, advice is provided with regard to setting up the room for focus group discussions, making decisions about recording and transcribing and running focus groups, including dealing with potentially problematic group dynamics, developing effective topic guides and selecting appropriate stimulus materials.

Whilst ethical issues are inextricably bound up with practical issues throughout the research process, this topic merits separate attention and Chapter 7 is concerned with ethics and engagement. It looks at the reciprocities involved in the research endeavour, the impact of participation and the importance of debriefing. Particular attention is given to the issues involved in engaging with vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly and the disabled, and to the challenges of cross-cultural research.

Drawing on a cumulative dataset generated through a series of focus group workshops over the past ten years, the following chapters invite the reader to try generating some data, and to attempt to produce and refine a provisional coding frame. Chapter 8 sets the scene by providing a flavour of the sort of interaction or data that focus groups elicit. It shows how people may reformulate their views and debate issues. Examples from focus groups held at workshops and arising from recent studies are presented in order to demonstrate the capacity of focus groups to access cultural frameworks. This chapter also provides more detailed hints for the moderator with regard to seeking clarification, maintaining the focus or steering the discussion, and picking up on cues. It also highlights the importance of thinking comparatively and anticipating analysis, even as data are being generated. Chapter 9 starts to address the process of data analysis, by providing an opportunity to develop and refine a provisional coding frame. Some examples of coding frames arising from workshop sessions are presented, together with suggestions as to how to ensure that participants' insights are reflected in codes, and how to capitalize on distinctions to produce a richer, more analytically informed coding frame. Chapter 10 addresses the analytical challenges of analysis, including the issue of utilizing interaction and group dynamics to analytic advantage. The focus group researcher is encouraged to systematically make both inter- and intra-group comparisons. Again, these processes are illustrated by examples drawn from focus group workshops and discussions held within the context of specific funded studies. It considers how to harness the insights of focus group participants and discusses their potential role as 'co-moderators/analysts'. The importance of identifying and interrogating similarities between groups is also stressed, as are the use of personal and professional backgrounds as resources in analysis.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 11, is concerned with realizing the full potential of focus groups. It begins by summarizing their limitations and possibilities and their potential to move beyond the purely descriptive in order to produce theorized accounts. Issues involved in presenting focus group findings are outlined and the transferability of focus group findings is discussed. Finally, the potential for new developments is explored – in particular, the possibilities afforded by the Internet.

## Historical antecedents

This first chapter locates the origins and rise of this method within work relating to broadcasting, marketing research and public relations and then moves on to consider the contribution of organizational research and development. This chapter provides examples of the many ways in which focus groups have been used across a range of disciplines and research topics. Focus groups are continually evolving and, with some modification both in terms of the component parts of topic guides, stimulus materials, question content and style of moderators, and the nature of involvement of participants, can be utilized effectively to address an almost endless list of substantive research topics. Excitingly – but perhaps confusingly for the novice researcher – considerable cross-fertilization has occurred with the resulting impossibility of defining 'pure' focus group research. Community development and participatory approaches have influenced the use of focus groups in other contexts and have fuelled important debates about the relationship between researcher and researched and the ultimate use to which focus group findings are put. Along the way, some extravagant claims have been made about the capacity of focus groups to empower people and to provide more authentic data – all of which need to be subjected to critical examination. Not surprisingly, the various disciplines that have embraced focus groups have put their own 'spin' on the method and this can severely limit the usefulness of the frequently context-specific advice that has resulted.

Although focus groups have now become a household term, due largely to their pervasive use by marketing research companies and government departments, this has, interestingly, been accompanied by increasing confusion in the arena of academic research. It is not unusual to come across researchers – sometimes very experienced qualitative researchers – who display a marked diffidence when it comes to focus groups, often hesitating to claim that what they have carried out were, in fact, 'proper focus groups'. This reluctance to embrace the term stems, I would argue, both from the prescriptive nature of many of the existing texts on using focus groups and from several conflicting models or research traditions, each of which advocates using focus groups in a particular – even distinctive – way, since data are actually being generated to a different end.

### **Broadcasting, marketing and public relations**

Focus groups are generally seen to have emerged in the 1940s when they were first used by Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton and colleagues at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University to test the reactions to propaganda and radio broadcasts during the Second World War. Referring originally to what they termed 'focused interviews' (Merton and Kendall, 1946), and using these methods alongside quantitative techniques, their approach did not distinguish sharply between individual and group interviews. However, they did acknowledge that group interviews can produce a broader range of responses and elicit additional details (Merton, 1987).

In the period that followed the Second World War, focus group methods became 'mainstays of broadcasting, marketing and public opinion research' (Kidd and Parshall, 2000), but were largely neglected in mainstream academic and evaluation research. Whilst the marketing research sector has produced many helpful manuals, these deal almost exclusively with generating data relating to public perceptions of specific products or marketing campaigns. Marketing research is a client-focused enterprise and, as such, involves researchers in making recommendations as to whether a particular marketing strategy should be employed or whether it is advisable to launch a new product. Focus group discussions held for these purposes frequently involve the client (i.e. a representative of the company that has hired marketing research experts) observing the interaction from behind a one-way mirror. Sometimes there is perceived to be no need to produce a transcript of the discussion, and even if this is provided, it is generally not subjected to detailed analysis of the kind likely to be engaged in by the social science researcher. The most common methods of analysis involve note-taking, reports from moderators and memory-based analysis. Although these approaches may be appropriate for certain limited research applications (Krueger, 1994), they are clearly unsatisfactory for academic research (Bloor et al., 2001; Kidd and Parshall, 2000).

### **Organizational research and development**

Focus groups also enjoyed considerable popularity within organizational research and development – particularly as practised by staff at the Tavistock Institute in London during the 1940s. Again this research was predominantly client-focused, with companies defining the problems – i.e. doing the initial trouble-shooting – and only then calling in the experts to address the issues they had identified. Hart and Bond (1995) describe this approach as enabling companies 'to work through conflict by a therapeutic process underpinned by action research' (p. 24).

Thus – with the possible exception of the independently funded researchers at the London School of Economics (Hart and Bond, 1995) – this consultancy-focused research approach remained largely reactive, concentrating on solving

technical problems and colluding in the 'illusion of manageability' (Anderson, 1992). Perhaps not surprisingly, it did not result in development of a research agenda or significant refinements to method. The aims of the business sector are, inevitably, somewhat different from those of academic research (Kevern and Webb, 2001).

Focus groups can also be a powerful public relations tool. Festervand (1985) cautioned that focus groups can be used to justify decisions that have already been made and the researcher must be mindful of the potential to be co-opted by powerful lobbies. Nevertheless, some large companies or government agencies do genuinely seek to engage in dialogue with their respective constituencies. The Home Office, for example, commissioned focus groups with young offenders to elicit the views of children and young people in custody and used the findings to inform policy and practice (Lyon et al., 2000). During the passage of the Adoption and Children Bill the Nuffield Foundation independently funded a series of focus groups with foster carers in order to redress the lack of consultation with this important stakeholder group (Beck and Schofield, 2002).

### **Community development and participatory approaches**

Community development generally seeks to employ the sort of 'dialogical research methods' advocated by the Brazilian educationalist Freire (1970). Padilla argues that 'the essential role of the investigators in dialogical research is to facilitate the production of knowledge for and by the subjects' (Padilla, 1993, p. 158). Participatory methods have also been employed by health services researchers, particularly in relation to health needs assessment, and frequently involve participants in developing the research design and, even, data analysis (Cawston and Barbour, 2003). Some focus group work has explicitly sought to give voice to marginalized groups, such as HIV-positive women (Marcenko and Samost, 1999; Morrow et al., 2001).

Although the community development approach has worked with and has sought to empower the disenfranchised, there is no reason why focus groups cannot be used to advantage in working with more privileged sectors of society (Barbour, 1995). Research and development projects have used a variety of group methods, including 'expert panels' to develop consensus guidelines and protocols in areas characterized by professional uncertainty. A good example of this is provided by the work of Fardy and Jeffs (1994), who developed consensus guidelines for the management of the menopause in family practice. Other popular variants include 'nominal groups', which commonly involve a ranking exercise used to access participants' concerns and priorities, and 'Delphi groups', which usually involve a panel of experts responding to results from complementary research – most often a survey (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). However, as the

focus is on developing practice, much of the work involving 'Delphi groups' is likely to form part of the grey methods literature.

A number of researchers have utilized focus groups in order to explore problematic areas of professional practice, and although they have not explicitly placed their work within the community development tradition, and their work could equally be categorized under the general heading of 'health services research', the emphasis on understanding barriers and using this information to inform professional practice certainly involves a 'nod in this direction' (e.g. Berney et al., 2005; Green and Ruff, 2005; Iliffe and Wilcock, 2005).

### **Health services research and social science research**

One of the areas that has most enthusiastically championed the use of focus groups has been health services research, where there is a large body of focus group research that is concerned with providing insights into the experience of people with a range of chronic conditions. This is a consequence of qualitative research's ability to illuminate subjective experience. Recent examples involve the use of focus groups to provide insights into the experiences of people with sickle cell disease (Thomas and Taylor, 2001) and multiple sclerosis (Nicolson and Anderson, 2001), women with endometriosis (Cox et al., 2003), and patients with chronic bronchitis (Nicolson and Anderson, 2003).

Some other focus group work carried out under the broad umbrella of health services research aims to access perspectives in order to plan appropriate and effective interventions, and focus groups are especially well suited to informing the development of health education programmes (Branco and Kaskutas, 2001; Halloran and Grimes, 1995) and in developing culturally sensitive interventions (Wilcher et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2006).

Whilst much of this work is clearly prompted by perennial clinical concerns, such as low uptake of services or the lack of success of health promotion initiatives, focus groups afford a novel way of augmenting the existing evidence base. A by-product of the involvement of practitioners and clinicians in focus group research has been the extent to which this has necessitated working in close collaboration with qualitative researchers from other disciplines (mainly medical sociology, health psychology and medical anthropology). Although the spur for setting up multidisciplinary research teams, in many cases, has been the recognition that methodological expertise is required, such collaborations have also benefited from the fresh insights provided by alternative theoretical frameworks at the disposal of these new colleagues. This certainly reflects my own experience of working with primary care clinicians on a study of GPs' views and experiences of sickness certification (Hussey et al., 2004) and with a GP and philosopher-ethicist on a project concerned with professionals' views on living wills (Thompson et al., 2003a, 2003b). Edwards et al. (1998) – another multidisciplinary team – carried out focus groups

with a range of primary care professionals to study how risk was interpreted and communicated.

An examination of the sometimes lengthy author lists in recent health services research publications testifies to the active involvement of social scientists drawn from a variety of disciplines. However, interdisciplinary research is notoriously difficult and certainly benefits from explicit discussion at an early stage in the project with regard to the main focus and potential outputs of the research (Barry et al., 1999).

There is also a body of research that starts from problems defined by practitioners or clinicians, but which is overtly sociological in focus. Crossley (2002, 2003) used her study of women's views of and responses to health promotion to explore how women constructed health and health-related behaviours as moral phenomena. A more recent example of such work is that of O'Brien et al. (2005), who used focus groups to explore the role of constructions of masculinity in explaining men's help-seeking behaviour in relation to medical care.

The vast array of focus group studies in a large number of social science-based disciplinary journals presents something of a challenge in terms of singling out specific studies for comment, and the examples chosen, inevitably, also reflect my own idiosyncratic interests, both enduring and fleeting. However, in order to give a flavour of the spread of substantive topics addressed by sociologists, criminologists and psychologists, I have concentrated on a few studies that are used in later chapters to illustrate particular issues. These examples include work on how identities are formed and maintained, such as a study of how young men manage masculinity (Allen, 2005); one on girls' perspectives and experience of violence (Burman et al., 2001); and research into work-family matters in the workplace (Brannen and Pattman, 2005). More esoteric, but nevertheless intriguing work, which has utilized focus groups, includes a study of the meaning for women of Princess Diana (Black and Smith, 1999) and research into the musical identities of professional jazz musicians in the UK (Macdonald and Wilson, 2005).

The latter two examples bring to mind the heady days of the Chicago School – or, at least, its second wave, following the Second World War, which was based on ethnographic approaches employing 'symbolic interactionism' (see Chapter 3). Although it is, of course, easy to overstate the amount of academic freedom involved, sociological research at that time was carried out in a somewhat different political and academic climate, with greater potential, perhaps, for research focus to be dictated by theoretical concerns, and did not rely on significant external funding on a project-by-project basis. Much of the innovative work involving focus groups continues to be carried out without significant funding – for example, Allen (2005), who revisited data generated as part of an earlier study – or as part of PhD studies (O'Brien et al., 2005). It is, of course, easier to attract funding for focus group work within some disciplines than it is within others. It will be particularly interesting to

see whether the availability of online data (as discussed in Chapter 11) and the relatively low costs involved nurture more research that addresses disciplinary concerns, since this facility potentially frees the researcher from funding constraints, which have, particularly of late, driven much research by social scientists.

### ***Disciplinary engagement and debate***

Here it is useful to look at the debates on using focus groups within different academic disciplines. Each has used the method in a slightly different way, taking account of intradisciplinary debates and concerns and building on existing areas of expertise, such as group work within social work (Cohen and Garrett, 1999). Linhorst (2002) also reflects on the potential of focus groups for developing social work research. For discussion on the use of focus groups in psychology, see Wilkinson (2003), and for an overview of the use of focus groups in educational research, see Wilson (1997). Other disciplines that have explored the possibilities afforded by focus groups include occupational therapy (Hollis et al., 2002), family and consumer science research (Garrison et al., 1999), community practice (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2002) and paediatric health research (Heary and Hennessy, 2002).

Focus groups have provided insights into a huge variety of research questions, including public perspectives on recycling (Hunter, 2001), ministry to new members of an episcopal congregation (Scannell, 2003), and understanding ethical investment decision-making (Lewis, 2001). Focus group research has been published in the field of business studies in order to provide insights into the succession strategies of small and medium-sized business owners (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000). In short, whatever your topic area, chances are that somebody, somewhere, will have run a focus group on the subject.

Depending on the way in which groups are already utilized within disciplines, each is likely to approach focus groups in a slightly different manner, in terms of the sort of research questions posed, the content of topic guides, the questioning style of the moderator, the approach to data analysis, the way in which findings are presented and the use to which findings are put. Returning to the myriad possibilities afforded by advice deriving from the many contexts in which focus groups have been employed, each of these traditions potentially has something to offer the researcher. However, uncritical acceptance of advice dispensed in different contexts can serve to merely exacerbate some of the tensions and challenges involved.

### ***Utilizing advice***

Marketing texts provide useful hints on encouraging reluctant participants to talk and on selecting exercises to stimulate discussion. However, advice about sampling should be treated with some caution (see Chapter 5, which is devoted

to the topic of sampling), as it is important to bear in mind the very different purpose, that underpins the marketing research enterprise. Marketing research is big business and is frequently carried out on a national scale, with the potential for convening many groups in different locations over a very short period of time. Sampling depends on identifying target markets for advertising and aims to recruit a sample that is broadly representative of this target population. In this tradition, focus groups are prized because of their capacity to provide up-to-the-minute responses and thus to anticipate market trends rather than their capacity to provide detailed information of the sort generally required by health services researchers and social scientists.

However, there is a body of academic work that uses focus groups to explore public attitudes on highly contested issues such as animal experimentation (Macnaghten, 2001) or even national identity (Wodak et al., 1999). In contrast to marketing research or the more conventional approaches to using focus groups to gauge public opinion, such work frequently uses conversation analysis techniques and draws extensively on theoretical frameworks in making sense of the data. The degree of detail involved in the analysis is, of course, likely to depend on who has commissioned the research and for what reasons. As Macnaghten and Myers (2004) point out, the background to the project and the time-scale determine many of the choices involved in using focus groups. (These and related issues are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 10.)

The community development tradition has generally used focus groups alongside other methods, encompassing observational fieldwork, key informant interviews, surveys, and further analysis of secondary data sources. Although this approach might, at first sight, appear to resonate with the anthropological research tradition, there are tensions between the two, as Baker and Hinton (1999) acknowledge.

Much time and energy has been devoted by researchers to seeking advice from texts produced by these various traditions, but, I would argue, they have frequently become caught up in some of the internal debates within these specific disciplines and have sometimes lacked the courage to sift through these critically, selecting what fits their own study and purpose and rejecting that which does not. There is no right or wrong way to go about doing focus group research: rather the researcher is free to adapt, borrow and combine any approaches that take her or his fancy, and the development of hybrids is entirely acceptable – provided that the approach can be justified in the context of the specific study (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

### **Claims in focus**

Some researchers have waxed lyrical about the potential of focus groups to empower participants. Johnson (1996), for example, who published a paper on focus groups entitled 'It's good to talk', considers that focus groups can stimulate

significant changes and can lead participants to redefine their problems in a more politicized way. However, a word of caution is appropriate, as the context in which such ‘empowerment’ is being sought is of crucial importance. Verbalizing and sharing their experiences may very well be cathartic for the ‘chattering classes’. However, I suspect that the benefits of focus group discussions are less tangible for those whose lives and possibilities for effecting change are more strictly governed by structural constraints.

The view that focus groups engender inherently more equal relationships between researchers and researched has also led some commentators to claim that they are a feminist method. A thoughtful discussion by Wilkinson (1999b), however, concludes that although focus groups are suited to addressing feminist research topics, their use does not necessarily constitute ‘feminist research’. Focus groups with women may certainly provide an excellent forum for discussing and questioning gendered aspects of their experiences and can transform ‘personal troubles’ into ‘public issues’, as did Pini’s (2002) work with ‘farm women’ involved in the Australian sugar industry. This echoes the claims made with respect to the ‘consciousness raising’ that characterized the early feminist movement, both in the UK and US context. However, as Bloor et al. (2001, p. 15) point out, focus groups are ‘not the authentic voice of the people’ and whether or not focus groups actually ‘empower’ anyone depends on what happens *after* the group discussion.

Focus groups have been a key component of the ‘sociological intervention’ approach developed and advocated by the French sociologist Alain Touraine (1981). The role for the sociologist, as envisioned by Touraine, reflects the now somewhat outmoded Marxist notion of the intelligentsia as heralding social change – even revolution – through spearheading social movements. This approach involved bringing people together in groups over a considerable period of time and relied on an ‘epistemology of reception’ that stresses the importance of feedback from participants elicited by presentation of sociological theory to the relevant audience. Some commentators, such as Munday (2006), have criticized Touraine’s approach as privileging the perspective of the sociologist over those who are participating in the research. However, the interests of researcher and ‘researched’ are not necessarily all that different. Touraine’s position is similar to that taken by Johnson (1996), who argues that focus groups can access uncoded knowledge and can stimulate the sociological imagination in both researchers and participants. Hamel (2001) argues, however, that there are many methodological and practical issues raised by endeavours such as Touraine’s: ‘Group discussions ... cannot give participants the status of sociologists. Participation in the focus group does not automatically transform them into researchers capable of building sociological knowledge’ (2001, p. 352). There may also be ethical issues involved in using participants’ time and energies to produce theorized accounts that are of little practical relevance for them: indeed, this may be the ultimate betrayal of our respondents’ confidences (Barbour, 1998b).

There are, then, likely to be limits to what can be achieved, even by the most overtly participatory research, and we should perhaps be mindful of the temptation to equate our own disciplinary interests with the political interests of those we research, whether we see ourselves as researching ‘on’ or ‘with’ them. Some versions of participatory approaches, moreover, appear to sidestep the issue of the researcher’s responsibility, through co-opting research participants via appeals to ‘respondent validation’. Although ‘respondent validation’ may sound politically correct and inherently attractive (Barbour, 2001), as Bloor (1997) points out, feeding back preliminary findings or even inviting participants to become involved in data analysis, is likely to have limited potential for sociological theorizing. Ultimately, it is the researcher who has been commissioned to undertake the research and only the researcher or research team generally have access to the whole dataset and reading of relevant background literature. The ‘inverted academic snobbery’ of many attempts at ‘respondent validation’ in the end may do our respective disciplines a disservice through failing to acknowledge the valuable skills that we bring to the research enterprise. This debate, of course, raises important questions regarding the role of the researcher and the political possibilities and consequences of doing focus group research.

### ==== Key points

This chapter has described separate and potentially contradictory models of focus group application:

- broadcasting, marketing and public relations
- organizational research and development
- community development and participatory approaches
- health services and social science research.

To simply record that all of the above sectors of the research community have utilized focus groups is to deny crucial differences. Professional and disciplinary focus and concerns have shaped the ways in which focus groups have been developed and employed within different professional and academic circles. Details of focus group application vary, depending on the nature of engagement with clients and those being researched, the services provided, professional models used and theoretical frameworks employed. Usage also differs according to the extent to which interaction itself or group work is central to the practice of a profession or theorizing, as is the nature of involvement with the wider society, including funding sources and government bodies.

Requiring little in the way of props or preparation (at least in some applications), focus groups are a readily accessible method – see, for example, the exercise that you are invited to carry out in Chapter 8 with regard to



generating data. They are also an inherently flexible method and these are good reasons for borrowing elements from each of these usages outlined here, in order to develop an approach appropriate to the research topic in hand. However, the differing aims and assumptions reflected in these approaches have given rise to much lively debate and often, where these differences are not appreciated, to considerable confusion on the part of researchers seeking guidance from texts that dispense advice in relation to context-specific applications. The sometimes bewildering array of studies utilizing focus groups located in a wide range of academic disciplines has led to a situation where much focus group research – according to commentators such as Catterall and Maclaren (1997) – lacks a sufficiently clear appreciation of method and approach to analysis. Chapter 3 locates focus groups within the major research traditions and within the qualitative research paradigm, while Chapter 2 takes a critical look at the uses and abuses of focus groups, arguing that it is just as important to decide when this approach is not appropriate as it is to promote the method.

### Further reading

The following works will extend the first introduction to focus groups given in this chapter:

- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Cunningham-Burley, S., Kerr, A., and Pavis, S. (1999) 'Theorizing subjects and subject matter in focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 185–99.
- Kitzinger, J. and Barbour, R.S. (1999) 'Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 1–20.
- Macnaghten, P. and Myers, G. (2004) 'Focus groups', in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 65–79.

## 2 Uses and abuses of focus groups

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- understand when and when not to use focus groups;
- see particular reasons for using them; and
- understand that you should weigh advantages and costs of this method.

This chapter critically examines the uses to which focus groups have been put, including the use of focus groups during the exploratory phase of mixed methods studies. This discussion considers the often overlooked role of the researcher's predispositions and interests in determining the way in which focus groups are used. Taking a measured look at the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, it compares appropriate and inappropriate uses of focus groups and highlights some common misconceptions and pitfalls, both for the novice and the more experienced focus group researcher. It goes on to consider the appropriateness of focus groups for researching 'sensitive' topics, accessing narratives or 'attitudes', engaging with 'reluctant' respondents, accessing the 'hard to reach' and providing insights into experience. The next section weighs up opportunities and costs of focus groups and highlights their suitability for responsive and timely studies, their capacity for addressing 'why not?' questions, and, lastly, their

comparative potential. Notwithstanding their impressive pedigree, focus groups are not always the most appropriate method. Not only does inappropriate use of focus groups result in poorly designed research; as Krueger (1993) pointed out, overzealous and inappropriate use threatens to discredit the method itself.

### Use of focus groups in the exploratory phase of mixed methods studies

One of the most common uses to which focus groups are put is in the exploratory phase of a research project. Although focus groups have most frequently been used within the context of quantitative studies for the purpose of developing and refining research instruments, some researchers have also used exploratory focus groups alongside other qualitative methods. This was the approach taken by Lichtenstein (2005), who used focus groups with women in the Deep South of the USA in order to develop a definition of 'domestic violence', which was subsequently used in one-to-one interviews.

There are many examples of focus groups being used during the preliminary phase of studies in order to develop items for inclusion in questionnaires (O'Brien, 1993; Amos et al., 1997; McLeod et al., 2000; Wachterbarth, 2002; Stanley et al., 2003). Focus groups have also been used to advantage to adapt surveys for other populations (Fuller et al., 1993) and to formulate contextually relevant questions (Dumka et al., 1998). They have been employed to provide a basis for designing culturally sensitive survey methodology (Hughes and DuMont, 2002) – often for minority ethnic groups (Murdaugh et al., 2000; Wilcher et al., 2002).

Many researchers have used focus groups to inform development of survey instruments, since they allow the researcher to harness the insights of participants as they peruse draft questionnaires. However, this exercise is not recommended for the faint-hearted: in my experience, focus group participants do not mince their words and are particularly adept at criticizing questionnaire design. Provided the researcher is prepared to go away and lick her or his wounds and reformulate questions, however, this approach can pay huge dividends.

The example in Box 2.1 describes our experience of using focus groups to develop specific items for inclusion in a survey and demonstrates the added value of using preliminary focus groups. Although many quantitative researchers have utilized the potential of focus groups for developing instruments, focus groups held for this purpose are not always recorded or subjected to detailed analysis. This may, however, be a missed opportunity in terms of providing data that might prove to be helpful, for example, in furnishing explanations for anomalous findings or surprising statistical associations (Barbour, 1999b).

#### Box 2.1 Using focus groups to develop a questionnaire

We convened three multidisciplinary focus groups to inform development of a self-completion questionnaire to be sent to a range of health and social care professionals involved in providing care to women with mental health problems, whose children were on the child protection register. In particular, we used the focus groups in order to test the wording of two questions and to ensure that we had provided an exhaustive list of potential professionals with whom people were likely to come into contact. One question related to the frequency of difficulties in co-ordinating work with other professional groups and the other to the frequency with which confidentiality problems were experienced.

It was not feasible to hold single professional groups, as so many were involved – the three focus groups included child care social workers; health visitors; adult psychiatrists; mental health social workers; community psychiatric nurses; children's guardians; practitioners from voluntary organizations serving mental health service users; voluntary organizations dealing with children; and middle managers from both community health and social services.

... there was some discussion concerning how perceived levels of risk might affect a practitioner's ability to refer mothers with mental health problems to other services. One child care social worker noted that 'It's getting your particular client higher up on the priority list', while a mental health social worker commented on the way in which mothers with mental health problems could be excluded from services. ... While mental health needs were perceived as excluding some women from mainstream services, some professionals acknowledged that they had, on occasion, over-emphasized the degree of risk to a family in order to access services. It was decided, therefore, to include this as a fixed-choice question in the survey. (Stanley et al., 2003, pp. 52–3)

Personality disorder is also a label that is frequently applied to difficult and hard-to-engage patients that services wish to place outside their remit. There is considerable uncertainty about the extent to which personality disorder responds to treatment, with variations in defining the condition making evaluations of intervention particularly difficult. ... The focus group discussions produced widespread agreement about the imprecise use of the term 'personality disorder' and its function as a label that could exclude women from services.

We therefore decided to include a vignette relating to personality disorder in the questionnaire, which presented a series of hypothetical scenarios and asked respondents to indicate, on a scale of 0–10, the level of risk considered to apply to each case.

## 'Sensitive' topics

Sometimes researchers argue that focus groups are not suitable for eliciting experiences with regard to sensitive topics, but this is a questionable assumption. As Farquhar and Das (1999) point out, the sensitivity of a topic is not fixed – rather it is socially constructed with one person's or group's 'no-go area' being perfectly acceptable for another.

Despite the scepticism of some researchers, focus groups have been used to address topics considered 'sensitive' in a wide range of 'difficult' situations with groups viewed as potentially vulnerable. Focus groups have proved to be a mainstay of research into sexual behaviour (Frith, 2000), often utilizing peer groups, as did Ekstrand et al. (2005) in their study of the sexual behaviour, views of abortion and contraceptive habits of Swedish schoolgirls. Focus group researchers have also sought the views of those with serious mental health problems (Koppelman and Bourjolly, 2001; Lester et al., 2005) and have explored topics such as end-of-life care with those who are terminally ill (Raynes et al., 2000; Clayton et al., 2005). The ethical issues and challenges of recruitment and running of focus groups with such 'vulnerable' participants are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 under the heading 'Special Considerations and Challenges'.

## When not to use focus groups

### *Accessing narratives*

There are, however, certain situations where the use of focus groups would be ill-advised. They are not, for example, the method of first choice when the concern is to elicit individuals' narratives. The issue is not so much that people will be reluctant to share their experiences in a group setting, as that having several participants competing to tell their individual and detailed stories is likely to produce 'noise', that is, data that it is hard to order and attribute to speakers. The nature of focus group discussions means that stories are unlikely to unfold sequentially, as they can do in a one-to-one interview, and hence the picture presented will be confusing and attempts to analyze data will be frustrated. Ong (2003) reports on a study of experiences of back pain, where the initial focus group allowed participants to tell their individual stories with later groups focusing more explicitly on the research questions, suggesting that a series of focus groups may be more appropriate, where the intention is to build up a detailed picture of individuals' experiences. Côte-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy (1999) suggest, however, that it is possible to elicit narrative through focus group discussions, provided that the researcher uses smaller groups. Cox et al. (2003) did successfully use focus groups to elicit women's narratives about diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis, but I suspect that the extra work

required to extricate individual stories and sequences of events may cancel out any benefits of using focus groups in preference to one-to-one interviews.

### *Accessing 'attitudes'*

Nor are focus groups an appropriate method if you want to measure attitudes. Puchta and Potter (2002) argue that attitudes are the end result of a series of analytic decisions, which suggests that we should be wary of thinking that there is any such thing as an 'attitude'. They remind us that attitudes are 'performed' rather than being 'pre-formed' (Puchta and Potter, 2004, p. 27). The implications for the process of analysis and use to which focus group findings can be put are further discussed in Chapter 11.

Whilst marketing researchers tend to focus on using focus group data to make inferences regarding the attitudinal stances or preferences of the wider consumer body, within social science research this is generally not the preferred end product. Nor are results generally required so speedily as with marketing research and there is a venerable survey tradition within the social sciences that serves this requirement much better. If you want to make statistical generalizations from your data, then focus groups are not the method of choice. 'Focus group samples are usually both unrepresentative and dangerously small' (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p. 14).

## Accessing the 'reluctant'

Morgan (1988) advocates using focus groups in preference to one-to-one interviews in situations where respondents might find face-to-face interaction intimidating. In comparison to one-to-one interviews, focus groups may also encourage participation of individuals who may otherwise be reluctant to talk about their experiences due to feeling that they have little to contribute to a research project (Kitzinger, 1995). The selection of one-to-one interviews or focus groups is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

In some instances, focus groups may allow the researcher to engage with respondents who are otherwise reluctant to elaborate on their perspectives and experiences (see Box 2.2).

### **Box 2.2 Eliciting data from the potentially 'recalcitrant'**

I took over supervision of a PhD student who had been attempting to use interviews to elicit data about men's concepts of health (Brown, 2000). She had found, to her dismay, that although men were generally willing to agree to be

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

interviewed, their responses to her questions were often monosyllabic and they appeared to find it very difficult to focus on this topic. She explained that she feared that this was indicative of the reluctance of men in the North-East of England – a notoriously taciturn bunch – to discuss personal issues. We came to a joint decision to carry out some interviews with men who had experienced the ‘critical incident’ of a heart attack, which produced data that illuminated their previous assumptions and expectations now thrown into sharp focus by this illness event.

However, the student was still interested in eliciting the views of men who had not experienced this specific occurrence and we decided that she would also attempt to convene some focus group discussions. This was achieved through contacting significant employers in the locality, and resulted in 12 workplace-based groups (with separate groups for white- and blue-collar workers) being convened in a variety of settings, including Hull City Council, the fire service, the police, and two big pharmaceutical companies. One further church-based community group was carried out.

Unfortunately, attempts to hold groups with members of sports clubs were unfruitful. Men were receptive to overtures made via their workplace, with recruitment being aided by the holding of the sessions in work time. Moreover, discussions in the focus groups provided a marked contrast to the earlier interview attempts, with men engaging animatedly with the subject, whether or not they, personally, had experienced periods of illness. The focus group format allowed men to compare their perceptions and experiences with those of their colleagues and to draw on common knowledge, for example, about media and sports personalities who had experienced heart attacks. The inclusion of men of varying ages also made for illuminating discussion with regard to the influence of the different stages of the life-course – and related responsibilities and possibilities – on perceptions of health and health-related behaviour. Most importantly, perhaps, the focus groups avoided putting individual men on the spot and allowed them to join in the discussion as and when they wanted, stimulated by the reflections of their peers.

### Accessing the ‘hard to reach’ or marginalized and providing insights into experience

Because of their perceived informality and growing public acceptability (perhaps due to the ubiquitous use of focus groups by marketing researchers and those interested in accessing public opinion), focus groups have earned a reputation as something akin to the ‘method of last resort’ in terms of their capacity to engage with those who may otherwise slip through the net of surveys, or studies that rely on recruiting those who are in contact with services. As we have seen, this strength has frequently been exploited for developing culturally sensitive survey instruments. With regard to qualitative studies, focus groups have regularly been

the method of choice for researchers attempting to access groups viewed as ‘hard to reach’, such as members of ethnic minority groups (Chiu and Knight, 1999), urban youth (Rosenfeld et al., 1996) and migrants (Ruppenthal et al., 2005). Some groups, of course, may be marginalized in respect of several of their attributes, such as the drug-using gay men living in an environment characterized by high rates of HIV infections studied by Kurtz (2005). Focus groups can encourage greater candour (Krueger, 1994) and give participants permission to talk about issues not usually raised, especially if groups have been convened to reflect some common attribute or experience that sets them apart from others, thus providing ‘security in numbers’ (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

The method has often been selected as especially appropriate for eliciting the perspectives of women, perhaps due to the idea that focus groups more closely resemble ‘feminized’ patterns of interaction and exchange. However, of late, researchers studying men have begun to rely more heavily on focus groups, either to access men who belong to a minority ethnic group (e.g. Royster et al., 2000), or who tend not to use services (O’Brien et al., 2005). Although men tend not to be viewed as likely to be marginalized – unless they belong to an identified minority group – eliciting their views on more sensitive topics can present a challenge. Recent focus group studies have explored men’s perspectives and experiences with regard to several ‘difficult’ topics, including the ‘impotence’ drug, Viagra (Rubin, 2004), and body image (Grogan and Richards, 2002).

A particular popular usage of focus groups in health services research has been to provide ready access to the perspectives of a specific group of people – frequently those whose voices have otherwise been muted. There is certainly a venerable tradition of writing that seeks to ‘bear witness’, but to limit focus groups to simple reporting is to underplay the potential of focus groups: they can do much more than simply provide a window onto subjective experience – a task at which biographers, ghost writers, novelists and pressure groups already excel. Illustrating his argument with reference to the large body of work on the experiences of chronic illness, Atkinson (1997) cautions against falling into the trap of romanticizing respondents’ accounts, taking them at face value and failing to subject these to critical scrutiny, as we would do with other arguments. Chapter 4 on research design (which shows how to ensure that the comparative potential of a study is maximized) and Chapters 9 and 10 on producing analytically informed analyses, provide advice on how researchers can transcend the pitfalls associated with focus group work aimed at accessing experience (through identifying patterns in the data and systematically interrogating these).

However, focus groups have added potential – particularly for the practitioner-researcher – for use in overtly action-research-oriented projects. Crabtree et al. argue that ‘it is possible to use focus groups as a data collection tool and an intervention simultaneously’ (Crabtree et al., 1993, p. 146). This is, in essence, not dissimilar to the approach advocated by Touraine (1981) but with the notable difference that practitioners – unlike the academics whose role Touraine emphasized – are likely to possess skills that focus group participants value (and

which may be exercised even during group sessions) and may also, importantly, have the capacity to influence service provision and allocation of resources.

### Weighing up opportunities and costs

One of the most common myths surrounding the use of focus groups is that they allow for research to be carried out more quickly and more cheaply than do other methods. Morgan and Krueger (1993) have attempted to dispel this myth and others, such as Jackson (1998), Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) and MacLeod Clark et al. (1996), have provided details of the additional costs likely to be involved, including travel, room hire, refreshments and transcription. There may be further costs in terms of the researcher's time spent telephoning participants to ensure that they are to attend and simply dealing with the logistics of matching the required characteristics for group composition and availability of potential participants. (This aspect is discussed in Chapter 5, which is devoted to sampling.)

David Silverman (1992) made the observation that researchers sometimes select a qualitative approach not so much for what it will allow them to achieve but, rather, because of what they imagine it will allow them to avoid. For some researchers – and, indeed, for some funders – the appeal of focus groups lies chiefly in their assumed economy in terms of time and effort. Such benefits, however, are largely illusory, as focus groups – if their full potential is to be realized – require the investment of more time and effort during the planning stage. One of the most common misconceptions about focus groups is the idea that they can provide a 'back-door', cheaper equivalent to a survey. Should researchers wish to recruit a representative sample – which is essential if the intention is to make statistical generalizations – then focus groups are not the most reliable way of either selecting participants or procuring information regarding their attitudes.

There is, undeniably, a large opportunistic element in some focus group research. Kevern and Webb (2001) criticize this approach and highlight how the 'focus group' label may even be applied after the event.

Although it is, of course, possible to utilize pre-existing meeting slots (rather than recruiting and allocating participants to groups on the basis of researcher-defined criteria), it is important to ponder the gaps that may be involved by virtue of the composition of such groups; that is, they are unlikely to convey the whole story, unless, of course, the research question is concerned with these specific groupings alone. It is also possible to hold brainstorming sessions (without having developed a topic guide or having selected stimulus material), but, as with any other research method, the adage 'Rubbish in, rubbish out' applies.

### Timeliness and relevance

One great advantage of focus groups, however, is their capacity to capture responses to events as these unfold. Economies of scale mean that, in certain circumstances, a

study can be mounted fairly rapidly and it is perhaps for this reason that the method has found such favour amongst marketing researchers and journalists. An example of timely use of focus groups is provided by the study carried out by Black and Smith (1999) following Princess Diana's death. Having noted that 80 percent of the signatories in books of condolence were women, they confined their study to women, and conducted three separate focus groups (with Australian women of different age groups and social backgrounds). Focus groups were held during the period between two weeks of Diana's death and three weeks after her funeral (see Box 2.3).

#### Box 2.3 An example of responsive and timely focus group research

Black and Smith explain that they needed a flexible methodology that allowed them to go into the field immediately, allowing a short time from conceptualization of the research issue to completed data collection. In the period following her death Diana became 'a topic for talk, reflection and self-reflexivity' (Black and Smith, 1999, p. 265), both in the Australian context (in which this study was carried out) and throughout most of the rest of the world.

Among the mass media and her biographers, Diana was relentlessly depicted as a deeply meaningful sacred symbol – particularly for women. ... Charm, good looks, charisma and glamour were claimed to be at the heart of her status as 'the people's princess'. Others focused attention on her social roles and the ways that these intersected with a changing world. Such discussions depicted a saint-like Diana devoted to charity work and contact with marginal and minority citizens. (1999, p. 264)

Commentators identified a suffering, resilient 'feminist' Diana with whom other oppressed women could form a solidaristic bond. (1999, p. 264)

We reasoned that feelings and attitudes that may have been hard to retrieve or justify prior to her death, were more likely to be discursively available to ordinary people at that time. (1999, p. 265)

Black and Smith took as their research question the claim that women organized their identification with Diana through biography and life history. Therefore they made the decision to organize focus groups around the variable of age, which, they reasoned, would facilitate the triggering of cohort-specific memories. They conclude:

Limited in scope as it may have been, at least our study was flexible and fast enough to collect data at a critical moment that will never be repeated. (1999, p. 267)

## 'Why not?' questions

However, for those situations where, in formulating your research question, you find the words 'Why don't ... ?' creeping into your thoughts, focus groups are the ideal approach. On one occasion I provided advice to a dentist who wished to carry out some research to explore why people do not visit their dentist at 6-monthly intervals in accordance with dental health advice. I reasoned that one-to-one interviews with such a theme were likely to result in putting people on the defensive and would, thus, probably elicit entirely negative responses, which would give little indication of the extent to which individuals might, in practice, actually take cognizance of other recommended dental health promotion messages. Following our discussions she opted, instead, for focus groups and located questions about the relevance of 6-monthly check-ups within a broader discussion about the importance to accord dental health and how best to achieve this.

Because of their capacity to explore such elusive 'Why not ... ?'-type questions, focus groups have frequently been used to investigate non-take-up of health care services or 'non-compliance'. Studies have looked, for example, at barriers to screening (Lagerlund et al., 2001; Jernigan et al., 2001) and several studies have employed focus groups to illuminate immunization behaviour (e.g. Keane et al., 1996). Focus groups have also been used to provide a greater understanding of apparently illogical health-related behaviours, such as smoking whilst pregnant (Hotham et al., 2002) and lack of adherence to asthma management protocols (George et al., 2003). All of these studies are characterized by a focus on the importance of lay understandings and take, as their starting point, the notion that apparently illogical beliefs and practices, once viewed from the perspectives of the people involved, are likely to display a coherent and possibly highly sophisticated logic. This, however, only becomes apparent when focus group participants are given scope to justify and expand on their views in a non-judgemental environment.

C. Wright Mills, writing in 1959 about what he called 'the sociological imagination', exhorted researchers to employ a 'sociological playfulness of mind', which involves, amongst other approaches, turning research questions on their head. Thus, in attempting to understand why people do *not* do something, it may also be useful to problematize the behaviour that we view as desirable or, at least, not requiring an explanation; for example, why *do* people take professionals' advice?

Embedding the 'Why don't ... ?' questions in a wider discussion also serves the useful function of not singling out for potential criticism those who have failed to take up services or follow advice. It therefore avoids the resultant 'sampling by deficit' (MacDougall and Fudge, 2001), which threatens to alienate potential participants and renders problematic the description of the research to be provided when negotiating access. This approach has the additional bonus that it makes it easier for participants to account for their actions in a broader context,

joining the researcher in comparing and contrasting responses. This was the approach that we took in a study of patients' responses to and experiences of cardiac rehabilitation (see Box 2.4).

### Box 2.4 Understanding contrasting experiences of cardiac rehabilitation

Having been invited to run a series of workshops on qualitative research for a small group of 8 sports medicine students, I decided to involve them in a mini project (Clark et al., 2002, 2004). They had expressed an interest in examining the reasons for failure to attend and attrition from cardiac rehabilitation programmes. A colleague (Alex Clark) assisted in subsequent workshop sessions and provided practical support to students who were charged with the task of carrying out focus groups (in pairs) with patients identified by hospital records as having experienced a heart attack within the previous 2 years, with two students also running focus groups with professionals involved in providing care to cardiac patients in a variety of settings in the community and within the hospital.

Patients were contacted by the hospital records department in order to ensure anonymity and were invited to attend one of six focus groups, with separate groups being convened for those who had completed the programme, those who had dropped out part way through the programme and those who had not taken up the invitation to attend. We considered it important to avoid the potential awkwardness that might be occasioned by pitting 'star' patients against those who had failed to take health promotion advice. Holding separate focus groups allowed us to explore non-attendees' views about the sort of people who take part in cardiac rehabilitation and went some way towards explaining why they considered this an inappropriate course of action for themselves. Not only were such individuals, and those who dropped out, unlikely to volunteer for one-to-one interviews; interviews, through putting the spotlight on their failure to take on board health promotion advice, would have risked alienating them even further.

In carrying out such a project the researchers tread a narrow line between preaching to the unconverted, on the one hand, and condoning unhealthy behaviour, on the other. Patients may have been encouraged to participate because this project was being carried out by medical students in a learning capacity. This may have helped to reassure patients of the value of students hearing the views of all patients and gave them an opportunity to have an input into training future professionals.

The key to producing research findings that transcend the purely descriptive and begin to be analytical lies in the study of the patterning in our data. This is possible, provided that close attention is paid to research design (see Chapter 4)

and selecting participants in order to maximize the potential for comparison. Analysis then becomes more than simply plucking themes out of the data and involves a process of interrogating the data, contextualizing comments, developing tentative explanations and subjecting these to further interrogation and refinement (see Chapters 10 and 11).

Within the arena of research into patients' experiences, those that provide most detailed recommendations for health promotion practice, however, are – once again – those that most thoroughly interrogate the data generated (see Box 2.5).

### Box 2.5 Harnessing the comparative potential of a focus group study

Evans et al. (2001) compared the views of parents who had accepted MMR immunization and those who had refused. The data highlighted the anxieties of parents who had opted for immunization and showed that very few approached MMR with complete confidence. Even the immunizers 'chose compliance rather than making an informed positive decision' (pp. 908–9). This study was able to access the reasoning and weighing-up behind parents' decisions, but demonstrated the complex way in which this was overlaid by other attitudes and psychological processes. These researchers capitalized on opportunities for further comparison within groups and observed that, interestingly, many of the non-immunizers had had their older children immunized, but had changed their views over time as they came to feel more confident about questioning professional recommendations and exploring alternatives. The study findings highlighted key information needs of parents: regarding 'why the MMR schedule has changed, the importance of immunizing both boys and girls, the duration of protection and the rationale for boosters, the limited transfer of immunity in breast milk, and why immunization is important at a young age' (2001, p. 909).

Bloor et al. (2001) argue that focus groups are the method of choice only when the purpose of the research is 'to study group norms, group meanings and group processes'. They are particularly well suited to studying decision-making processes, for example, and the ways in which people weigh up competing priorities or the ways in which they qualify their views to take situational and circumstantial factors into account.

As Wilkinson (1999a) suggests, focus group discussions can provide a window on processes that otherwise remain hidden and are difficult to penetrate. She argues that, during focus group discussions, typically: 'Collective sense is made, meanings negotiated, and identities elaborated through the processes of social interaction between people' (1999a, p. 225).

Herein lies the key to focus groups' potential for therapeutic use, or – less ambitiously, or perhaps less contentiously – their capacity to provide insights to participants as well as researchers. Crabtree et al. observe: 'People can recognize previously hidden parts of themselves in others. They can also reconstruct their own life narrative from others' stories' (1993, p. 146). Whether this is used to therapeutic effect or whether it is simply used by the researcher to illuminate similarities and differences in experiences and accounts depends, ultimately, on the purpose of the research and the predispositions and expertise of the researchers involved. Before we turn to considering in more detail the sort of data that focus groups can elicit and how this can provide a basis for interpretation and development of theoretical explanations, however, it is important to locate focus groups in the wider methodological and epistemological debates that continue to be a feature of the research endeavour. This is the subject of Chapter 3.

### Key points

- Focus groups are useful for informing design of survey instruments and culturally appropriate methodology.
- They can be used in a wide variety of circumstances, including topics conventionally regarded as 'sensitive' – provided that adequate forethought is given both to research design and ethical considerations.
- Focus groups are not the method of first choice for eliciting narratives.
- Focus groups may encourage greater candour and may be more acceptable to participants reluctant to take part in one-to-one interviews.
- They should not be used as a 'back-door' route to collecting survey data, as they do not offer a means of measuring attitudes, nor do they provide data amenable to statistical generalization.
- Focus groups can be useful in accessing the 'hard to reach' and the potentially recalcitrant.
- This approach can illuminate the concerns of those whose voices are otherwise muted.
- Focus groups also lend themselves to action research approaches.
- Data elicited in focus groups can be used to provide a window on subjective experience – but this is the least of what this approach is capable of doing.
- Opportunistic use of focus groups results in improvised research design and impoverished data.
- Focus groups excel at accessing responses to events as these unfold.
- They are particularly appropriate for addressing 'why not ... ?' questions and for accessing perspectives on topics to which participants may previously have accorded little consideration.

### Further reading

In the following articles and books you will find examples for the ways of using focus groups discussed here outlined in more detail:

Clark, A., Barbour, R.S. and MacIntyre, P.D. (2002) 'Preparing for secondary prevention of coronary heart disease: a qualitative evaluation of cardiac rehabilitation within a region of Scotland', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 39(6): 589–98.

Clark, A.M., Barbour, R.S. and McIntyre, P.D. (2004) 'Promoting participation in cardiac rehabilitation: an exploration of patients' choices and experiences in relation to attendance', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 47(1): 5–14.

Kevern, J. and Webb, C. (2001) 'Focus groups as a tool for critical social research in nurse education', *Nurse Education Today*, 21: 323–33.

Stanley, N., Penhale, B., Riordan, D., Barbour, R.S. and Holden, S. (2003) *Child Protection and Mental Health Services*. Bristol: Policy Press.



## 3

# Underpinnings of focus group research

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- be able to locate focus groups in the broader framework of qualitative research;
- see the different traditions as a background of using focus groups; and
- see the value of using focus groups in more detail.

This chapter interrogates the 'epistemological' underpinnings of the various usages of focus groups and attempts to locate focus group research in relation to the major philosophical and methodological traditions. 'Epistemology' refers to 'what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world' (Mason, 1996, p. 13). Although it is argued that focus groups fit within the broad tradition of qualitative research, they cannot be neatly assigned to any one of the many – and potentially contradictory – qualitative approaches.

Reviewing the history of the use of focus groups, Kidd and Parshall (2000) argue: '... focus group methods developed and [have been] maintained outside of the major methodological traditions of qualitative research, and they are thus relatively agnostic in terms of the methodologies attending them' (2000, p. 296). Although this has sometimes led to something akin to a methodological free-for-all, there are particular features of focus group discussions that lend themselves to a qualitative approach and it is argued that it is only in the context of such use



that focus groups realize their full potential. Moreover, many of the problems that researchers raise in relation to generating and analyzing data using focus groups, reflect veiled assumptions that reveal inappropriate expectations of focus groups. Once focus groups are placed within their rightful context of qualitative research, many of the problems and frustrations encountered by focus group researchers and perceived weaknesses of the method can actually be shown to be advantages.

### **Focus groups as a qualitative research method: capacity and challenges**

Focus groups, in common with other qualitative methods, excel at providing insights into process rather than outcome. This, however, is sometimes overlooked by researchers who employ focus groups as a method. A common usage is the so-called 'nominal group technique', which has proved so popular in health services research (see Chapter 1). Literally meaning 'a researcher-convened rather than naturally occurring group' – a group in name only – the most common variant of 'nominal groups' involves employing a ranking exercise in order to encourage participants to determine their priorities. Whilst I would contend that important insights can be gained by paying detailed attention to the discussion generated during the process of debating and weighing up competing priorities, many proponents of this approach concentrate their efforts, instead, on the outcome of such deliberations. Depending on the use to which such information is put, this may not only detract from the contribution that can be made by focus group methods, but can seriously mislead – particularly where such data are used to inform resource decisions. In the real world such decisions do have to be made, however, and it would be churlish not to acknowledge the often genuine attempt involved to access and respond to 'consumers' voices'. It is important, though, to separate such considerations from discussions of the potential of focus groups as a method, since any advice gleaned from publications arising from this use of 'nominal groups' is unlikely to provide a useful template for focus group research *per se*.

A frequently debated issue in the use of focus groups is the extent to which the focus group researcher should seek both to elicit and attend in analysis to individual as opposed to group data. If the objective of the research is to compare the themes and issues raised by members of groups that have been expressly selected to facilitate comparisons along particular lines – for example, locality or gender – then a case can certainly be made for concentrating on differences between groups. Although many focus group discussions arrive at a consensus, there are difficulties involved in summarizing a 'group view'. With approaches designed to develop consensus guidelines, for example, this is not a problem, but this raises

a challenge for research that aims to understand differences in emphasis and understanding of various groups. Also, as Myers and Macnaghten (1999) point out, many groups do not develop such a consensus and it is the interchange between participants that is the valuable data for the researcher attempting to gain insight into group processes, not the outcome of the discussion.

In analyzing group interaction it is important, therefore, to examine individual voices within discussions. Each focus group participant can be described with reference to many related characteristics: a focus group of women may include individuals of varying age, social class and sexual orientation, for example (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). It would be a pity to follow an approach that did not allow the researcher to take advantage of additional insights that such intra-group comparisons might yield – especially since focus group participants may, themselves, engage in lively debate, drawing on differences in individual circumstances and experiences as they 'worry away' at the questions and tasks that we, as moderators, have set them. Moreover, it is this attention to further differences that alerts the researcher to the possibilities afforded by second-stage sampling (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), whereby additional groups may be convened to explore further any such hunches developed during initial focus group discussions and preliminary analysis. This, however, is a far cry from utilizing focus group discussions to access individuals' attitudes, which is a more problematic use of the method.

All comments made during focus groups are highly dependent upon context and are contingent upon group members' responses to others' contributions and the dynamics of that particular group. As Billig (1991) reminds us, views expressed in focus groups are highly specific and are 'bound up in the argument [that is] happening'. It is misguided to attempt to extrapolate from focus group discussion to attempt to measure individuals' attitudes. Although not explicitly utilizing focus groups as a 'back-door' route to survey data, some researchers nevertheless may express frustration regarding the perceived elusiveness of views throughout focus group discussions. Participants frequently change their minds about issues in the course of discussion, particularly where focus groups address a topic to which they had not previously paid a great deal of attention. This is highlighted in the title of Warr's (2005) paper: 'It was fun ... but we don't usually talk about these things.' Researchers are in danger of treating views as if they exist independently of our focus group discussions, when it would be more helpful to regard the research encounter itself as a 'site of performance' (Brannen and Pattman, 2005, p. 53). Virtually without fail, close analysis of focus group discussions highlights inconsistencies and contradictions. This is only a problem if one views attitudes as fixed. Focus groups excel at allowing us to study the processes of attitude formation and the mechanisms involved in interrogating and modifying views. If we really want to unpick the process of individual attitude formation, then perhaps we would be better advised to run a series of focus group discussions in order to monitor shifts over time.

In a study of public views on priority setting in health care, Dolan et al. (1999) carried out, at different time points, two sets of focus groups with the same patients in order to examine the impact of discussions on their views. Having had the opportunity to discuss complex decision-making processes, many of the participants changed their minds, becoming more sympathetic towards the role of managers and more reluctant to make clear-cut decisions. This, they conclude, casts doubt on 'the value of surveys that do not allow respondents the time or opportunity to reflect on their responses' (Dolan et al., 1999, p. 919). Rather than castigating focus groups for their failure to provide reliable measures of participants' views, then, focus groups should be valued for their unique capacity to provide an understanding of how such views are formed. David Morgan (1988) has observed: 'Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do' (1988, p. 25).

Whilst the context-specific nature of focus group data might be seen from a positivist position as constituting a weakness, a shift in focus allows this to be viewed, instead, as a virtue. Those who agonize, during the process of analysis, about the difficulty of 'pinning down' participants' views are missing the point and are making the mistake of viewing focus groups as a 'back-door' route to collecting survey-type data: this is not the forte of focus groups, or of any other qualitative method.

Involving often lengthy and in-depth consideration of open-ended questions and stimulus materials, focus groups have the capacity to reflect issues and concerns salient to participants rather than closely following the researcher's agenda. This means that the resulting data can yield surprises. For example, participants may take factors into account in their deliberations that researchers have not anticipated and this may highlight the relevance for the researcher of alternative explanations for perceptions or behaviour – or even of new theoretical frameworks that can usefully be brought to bear in analysis. For example, in our study about making decisions about medication, we had not anticipated that the impact of switching medication (and the associated increased cost to patients) would emerge as a factor that discouraged them from reporting side effects and led them to continue with medication that, although not ideal, at least did not incur further expenditure. Following up on our observation (from focus groups involving patients with a mixture of conditions) that this appeared to be a particular problem for patients who had experienced a heart attack, we subsequently convened two focus groups with patients involved in cardiac rehabilitation, and this generated more data around what was a highly salient issue for this group of people. Sometimes the surprises yielded by focus groups can be discomfiting for researchers who, through exposure to the relatively uninhibited discussion that tends to be a feature of focus groups, may be offered a glimpse from the first time into the life-worlds of people from very different walks of life from their own. This has led Umaña-Taylor

and Bámaca (2004) to advise that, when undertaking cross-cultural research, we prepare research staff for the eventuality of encountering derogatory remarks about ethnic groups, including their own.

The semi-structured nature of topic guides (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion) allows the researcher to focus on issues salient to those being studied, rather than emphasizing the researcher's preconceptions or agenda. In this way, qualitative research in general – and especially focus group research – seeks to illuminate the insider's or 'emic' perspective (Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). Since focus groups afford insights into how people process and make sense of the information with which they are provided, they are also especially well suited to uncovering participants' misconceptions and how these can arise. It is for this reason that focus groups have been used so frequently, to good advantage, in gauging the impact of health promotion campaigns (Halloran and Grimes, 1995). Keane et al. (1996) carried out research into African-American beliefs about immunization for infants, conceptualization of illness and efficacy of vaccines. Interestingly the focus group discussions in the context of this study revealed that, as parents viewed fever as a primary indicator of illness, vaccines were seen as causing rather than preventing illness. Focus groups excel at identifying and exploring such misconceptions and their consequences for behaviour.

Another challenge frequently issued to focus group researchers is that of demonstrating that participants are telling us 'the truth' (see Box 3.1). Again this concern arises from the positivist approach with its heavy reliance on measures designed to ensure validity, such as the potential for inclusion in a questionnaire of items that allows for cross-checking of responses. The qualitative tradition, by contrast, acknowledges that truth can – and, indeed, perhaps *should* – be perceived as relative. Rather than seeking to record one definitive view, qualitative research recognizes the existence of 'multiple voices' and often seeks to capture these, by, for example, illuminating the differing concerns and assumptions of professionals and the laity.

### Box 3.1 Can focus groups access 'the truth'?

I had produced a video for teaching purposes of a focus group discussion about people's use of general practice services 'out of hours', i.e. outside of office hours. Somewhat to my surprise – given that the participants were all volunteers from amongst my colleagues, rather than having been selected on the basis of having a particular axe to grind in relation to this topic – three of the four group members recounted what I subsequently termed 'horror stories'. One participant told of her experience of having been prescribed penicillin (to which she was allergic) in error and her dramatic reaction to this, which culminated

(Continued)

(Continued)

in her 'arresting (i.e. her heart stopping) and having to be brought back to life by a paramedic team'.

I later showed this video at a workshop attended by several health care professionals, one of whom had evidently had some involvement in the episode to which the focus group participant alluded. This professional informed the group that she had inside knowledge relating to this incident and that the focus group participant had 'not told the truth', adding that this showed how 'subjective and unreliable' focus group data are. My response to this was to stress that my concern, as a researcher, was not with whether or not people were telling the truth, but with trying to understand *why* people tell particular stories, or present their experiences in a certain way; that is, the task of a qualitative researcher is to look beneath the content of stories to uncover the functions that such storytelling accomplishes for participants. I argued that 'horror stories' serve to throw into sharp focus the often unspoken or taken-for-granted assumptions – in this case, with regard to the responsibilities of health care professionals. What is, then, of interest is not whether a story is true, but why someone chooses to tell it in a particular way.

I also pointed out that there was a rehearsed air to the story as recounted to other group members: in particular the pause before the storyteller added the carefully worded understatement, '... so that did upset us', suggested to me that this story had been told – presumably to good effect – on previous occasions. We all, I added, embellish stories as part and parcel of social interaction and some people relish more than do others the role of raconteur. My argument also stressed that, were I to generate an account from the health care professionals involved, then that is just another story, told to make another point and not, inherently, any more 'trustworthy' or 'authentic' than this participant's presentation of events. I'm not sure that I convinced this workshop participant, but, then again, I suspect that she has not gone on to carry out research using focus groups.

All researchers have to face the possibility that respondents are simply telling us what they think we want to hear. This problem may be exacerbated by focus group research because of the additional fear of peer group disapproval (Smithson, 2000). However, this is good news for the researcher with a particular interest in studying the impact of the peer group on attitude formation.

Views expressed in focus groups may also be different from those expressed outside of the research context. However, holding focus groups with pre-existing teams may facilitate more rounded or reasoned responses. For example, during one focus group session with a primary care team, one member explained in some detail (in response to a vignette) how he would go about assessing a patient and deciding upon a course of action. He was challenged by a colleague, who

commented, 'Who's just swallowed a textbook?' (Barbour, 1995). An extra bonus for the researcher is the possibility of participants openly challenging each other's accounts of mutually accessible situations. In another focus group held during the same project, one member laughingly contradicted a similar 'textbook response' by saying, 'That's interesting. That's not quite what you did in relation to Mrs McGregor last week!'

We will never know what respondents might have revealed in the 'privacy' of an in-depth interview but we do know what they were prepared to *elaborate* and *defend* in the company of their peers. (Wilson, 1997, p. 218)

We have seen, then, that some criticisms of focus groups and the data they can elicit arise from a lingering attachment to quantitative research assumptions, which are inappropriate when considering the potential of qualitative methods. Even where focus groups are used appropriately, a lack of appreciation of their full capacity can lead to them being employed in an overly casual fashion, to carry out brainstorming exercises, for example, which, although potentially illuminating, are the very least of what focus group research can achieve. Lack of preparation, piloting and refinement of topic guides have the same consequences as lack of attention to developing instruments in the quantitative tradition – suboptimal research. (This is discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to planning focus groups.) Turning to those who *are* persuaded of the value of focus groups, perhaps it is, again, the enthusiasm with which those new to qualitative methods *per se* have embraced this approach that has led to a degree of self-consciousness that is evident in many of the attempts to locate focus group methods once and for all within a particular identified paradigm, such as 'phenomenology'. Many of these enthusiastic new converts to focus groups do not fully appreciate the extent to which qualitative research is characterized by disagreement and debate between proponents of a variety of approaches, each with its own distinctive set of assumptions as to what constitutes data or knowledge and how best to go about studying this – the 'epistemological underpinnings' of similar but separate qualitative traditions (Barbour, 1998a).

### Which qualitative tradition?

Located midway between observational fieldwork and one-to-one interviews, focus groups have been described as involving 'structured eavesdropping' (Powney, 1988). However, there has been some spirited debate with regard to exactly where focus groups fit on the continuum between structure and spontaneity. This depends, in part, on how active the researcher is in directing discussion, but many early commentaries on focus groups highlighted concerns about the artificiality of a group convened for research purposes (Barbour, 1995).

Although some commentators, such as Silverman (1993), consider that neither artificial nor naturally occurring groupings and data are inherently superior, others clearly view focus group research as a 'poor relation' of the established traditions of anthropology and ethnography. The latter argument hinges on the notion – perhaps, even, the myth – of a non-directive researcher, but conveniently overlooks the use made of supplementary interviews by anthropologists working in the classical tradition and employing observational fieldwork methods.

Kidd and Parshall (2000) contend that focus groups are no substitute for phenomenological or ethnographic research. In a similar vein, Brink and Edgecombe (2003) argue: '... the purpose of ethnography is to chart, graph or describe a people ... Ethnography's signature is the study of naturally occurring human behaviour through observation ... If the researcher; "creates" a population, then the research is no longer ethnography' (2003, p. 1028). However, this distinction may be laboured too much: even an anthropologist working in the classical tradition asked occasional questions (even if interviews, as such, were not always used), and capitalized on insights provided by key informants. It is possible that the very presence of the researcher could have had an impact on group membership, thus calling into question the extent to which any group that includes a researcher – even as a non-participant observer – can be assumed to be entirely naturally occurring.

Focus groups may even have some advantages over the more laborious and opportunistic aspects of observational fieldwork. Anyone who has been an observer will recall the many hours spent waiting for incidents relevant to the research to arise. Whilst such 'hanging around' can be useful in terms of providing background context, it can, nevertheless, be frustrating. By way of contrast, Bloor et al. (2001) maintain that focus groups provide:

... concentrated and detailed information on an area of group life which is only occasionally, briefly, and allusively available to the ethnographer over months and years of fieldwork. (2001, p. 6)

They continue:

In late-modern societies where identity is reflexive but behaviour remains normative, albeit subject to a widening range of influences, focus groups provide a valuable resource for documenting the complex and varying processes through which group norms and meanings are shaped, elaborated and applied. In the access they provide to norms and meaning, focus groups are not just the time-pressed researcher's poor substitute for ethnographic fieldwork, they are a mainstream method to address those study topics in increasingly privatized societies which are less open to observational methods. (2001, p. 17)

In other words, it is the capacity to inject some structure that affords focus groups an edge – in terms of thinking strategically about settings and group

membership and the various insights it is possible to elicit (in contrast to the practice of carrying out more opportunistic observational work). Moreover, if the task of phenomenology – and, indeed, to an extent all qualitative research – is 'rendering the familiar strange' (Seale, 1999), focus groups can absolve the researcher of this as a singular responsibility, as it undeniably is for the lone anthropologist or ethnographer. Inviting participants to unpick their perceptions and experiences can allow them to share this work, by harnessing their insights and commentaries as they engage in generating data. Perhaps, indeed, it is the researcher who is being empowered – or, at the very least, being given a helping hand by respondents.

### Added value through using focus groups

Focus groups provide an opportunity to generate data that are amenable to analysis within the symbolic interactionist approach, which emphasizes the active construction of meaning. As Seale (1999) points out, Symbolic Interactionism was associated with early versions of the qualitative approach, which emphasized the active aspects of human social life. This approach, according to Blumer (1972), supposes:

... that human society is made up of individuals who have selves (that is, make indications to themselves); that individual action is a construction and not a release, being built up by the individual through noting and interpreting features of the situation in which he acts; that group or collective action consists of the aligning of individual actions, brought about by the individuals' interpreting or taking into account each other's actions. (1972, p. 184; parenthesis in original)

This was the approach developed by what has come to be hailed as the 'Chicago School' of sociologists. Working in the United States in the period following the Second World War, they were committed to the idea of human actions as arising through the active construction of meaning through interaction in groups with significant others. It was through interaction that concepts were interrogated, concerns aired, meanings conferred and rationales for views and behaviour developed. Symbolic Interactionism has gone somewhat out of fashion in more recent years, having been supplanted by an emphasis on 'phenomenology'. Both, however, concentrate on the process of interaction and active construction of meaning. Viewing language as a form of social action (Burr, 1995) and paying even closer attention to the sequence and structure of talk, conversation analysts also view interaction as a site for study that affords the researcher access to the construction of meaning and social action being performed. Puchta and Potter (2004) explain: 'Conversation analysts in particular

have argued that ordinary talk, mundane talk, the kind of everyday chat we have with one another is fundamental to understanding all kinds of more specialized interaction. ... Talk is ... something we use to perform an enormous variety of the practical tasks of living' (2004, p. 9).

Symbolic Interactionism and conversation analysis have both been subjected to criticism (by Giddens, 1993, amongst others) for privileging ideas of agency (the capacity of individuals to effect change and action) over structure (the wider context and constraints that affect or limit the possibilities of action) (Callaghan, 2005). That is, they have been criticized for concentrating on the 'micro' to the exclusion of the 'macro' whilst ignoring the relationship between the two. Thus, such approaches have sometimes been seen as affording detailed insights into the trivial without the capacity to offer an explanation of how these processes impact on society at a higher level than that of the small group. Seale (1999) continues:

For the most part, the qualitative alternative has been presented as a vehicle for answering questions about *what* is happening in a particular setting or *how* realities of everyday life are accomplished. The issue of *why* things happen in the way they do is more rarely addressed as an explicit project, though a place for this in qualitative research is increasingly argued as the threatening shadow of determinism (or the search for underlying causes and rules) appears to have receded. (1999, p. 39; comment in parenthesis added)

I would argue that focus groups, if used judiciously, can effectively address this important gap in understanding. Notwithstanding the many projects that restrict analysis of focus group data to the purely descriptive, a more rigorous and theoretically informed approach can also, potentially, provide an explanation. Seale's language and statement of the problem recalls Morgan's frequently quoted assertion: 'Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do' (1988, p. 25). However, this higher level of understanding does not just come about magically through some inherent property of focus group discussions: for focus groups to make the fullest contribution possible requires the active engagement of the researcher. A broadly social constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) holds most promise for bridging the gap identified by Seale, since it allows the researcher to combine the micro attention to interaction advocated by Symbolic Interactionism and more macro elements (taking into account the social, economic, political and policy context) in which data are being generated and with regard to which they should be analyzed. This is in line with the approach advocated by Gergen (1973), who highlighted that phenomena are specific to a particular time, place and culture, arguing for what he called a 'historical social psychology'.

Research design – and, in particular, sampling – provides the mechanism through which this becomes possible (see Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of sampling strategies). Thoughtful sampling can render focus groups a particularly effective tool for interrogating the very relationship between agency and structure. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the objective social world is mediated by significant others who 'modify [this world] in the course of mediating it. They select aspects of it in accordance with their own location in the ... social structure and also by virtue of their individual, biographically rooted idiosyncrasies' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 151). In addition to arguing that people together create social phenomena, Berger and Luckmann also referred to these being sustained through social practice.

Other writers (such as Burr, 1995), exploring the potential of social constructionism have proceeded to emphasize the role of ideology in linking the individual and group interaction processes to wider social concerns and processes, thereby locating subjectivity in its social context. Callaghan (2005) argues that focus groups can afford participants the opportunity of simultaneously managing their individual identities and making a collective representation to the researcher, thereby providing valuable insights into the construction of meanings and their impact on action. She further explains that 'carefully selected focus groups, can access knowledge which embodies the "habitus" of the wider community'. The term 'habitus' was coined by Bourdieu and refers to 'dispositions' or lenses through which individuals view the world, which are 'socially constituted' and 'acquired' (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu further elaborates on the 'generative', 'creative' and 'inventive' capacities 'of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999), emphasizing the flexibility of the concept. According to Callaghan (2005), the processes involved in this creative endeavour can be further illuminated through strategic sampling to allow the researcher to explore the patterning in relation to social and cultural categories, such as age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

The use of theoretical models may, of course, be limited by the way in which data are recorded and/or transcribed. Conversation analysis, for example, requires that transcripts be produced according to specified conventions (see Silverman, 1993; Myers and Macnaghten, 1999; Puchta and Potter, 2004; Rapley, 2007). Decisions about transcription are further discussed in Chapter 4, which considers research design. Again, it is essential that this is a matter to which the researcher gives thought at the planning stage of the research; it is important not to leave the matter of theoretical approach until later, while one waits to see what data are generated and which themes 'emerge'. As Miller points out, 'Some of the most important interpretive possibilities of qualitative studies are established prior to data collection' (1997, p. 6). This relates, in particular, to sampling decisions, which provide the key to the comparisons that can be made (see Chapter 5) and also, importantly, to the extent to which it will be possible to understand patterns identified during analysis (gaining analytical purchase – see Chapter 10).

### Key points

- Focus groups fit within the broad paradigm of qualitative research.
- Differences between the various approaches to qualitative research are sometimes over-emphasized – for example, in relation to the debate about naturalistic as compared to artificial research settings and data.
- Focus groups are a versatile method and can be utilized in different ways, depending on the particular qualitative tradition informing the study in question.
- If used to full advantage, focus groups have the potential to transcend the more limited goal of providing description and can furnish explanations, provided that due attention is paid to planning and research design and, in particular, sampling.

Focus groups have enormous promise with regard to bridging the perennial gap in social science between agency and structures. They have unique potential to combine structure and spontaneity, provided that they are used judiciously, with due attention to research design and sampling. It is to the first of these issues – research design – that the next chapter addresses itself.

### Further reading

These works will lead you deeper into the contents of this chapter:

- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Kidd, P.S. and Parshall, M.B. (2000) 'Getting the focus and the group: enhancing analytical rigor in focus group research', *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(3): 293–308.
- Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

## 4 Research design

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- understand the rationale behind deciding between interviews and focus groups;
- see the advantages and problems of using focus groups in mixed methods approaches and in triangulation; and
- know about planning issues like recruiting participants and matching moderator and group.

This chapter outlines the various design choices (see Flick, 2007a, for more details) involved in planning research studies, including whether to use focus groups or one-to-one interviews, and whether to use focus groups as a stand-alone method or as part of a mixed methods approach. It provides guidance on how to weigh up these alternatives and critically examines both the strengths and weaknesses of mixed methods designs. Claims regarding 'triangulation' are also investigated and it is argued that a combination of methods produces parallel data, which should be used to illuminate differences in focus or emphasis, rather than being prized for their capacity to corroborate findings produced using various methods of generating data. Again, the capacity of focus groups to facilitate comparison and afford insights that would not be provided by other methods is seen as their main contribution. The focus of the chapter then turns to planning focus group sessions and the second half of this chapter considers the importance

of research settings, provides hints on recruitment and discusses issues, including ethical considerations, concerned with matching moderators and groups.

### Deciding whether to use one-to-one interviews or focus groups

There are no hard-and-fast rules that determine whether focus groups or one-to-one interviews are most appropriate and, once again, the answer lies in carefully weighing up the pros and cons in relation to each new project. Some respondents, if given the choice, will say that they feel more comfortable talking to a researcher one-to-one and would be reluctant to attend a group session. For others, however, there may be safety in numbers and coming to a focus group discussion may allay concerns of some individuals that they may not have 'anything of interest' to contribute to the research. Focus groups may also be an attractive option for those who are otherwise isolated, or who crave the opportunity to talk to other people in the same situation as themselves – especially when there are no relevant support groups available. Whilst it is obviously important not to capitalize on people's insecurities and unmet needs, we should be mindful that research participants have all sorts of reasons for agreeing to take part, and it almost certainly does no harm if focus groups provide much-needed support, albeit as a by-product (Jones and Neil-Urban, 2003).

I have discussed earlier the tendency for some focus group researchers to employ this method in the mistaken belief that it provides a shortcut to survey data. Similarly, focus groups are often used where it is thought that one-to-one interviews would be too onerous or time-consuming. Such a view of focus groups, however, does not take into account the additional time and effort required to convene groups according to sampling requirements and the logistics of planning sessions. This usage becomes apparent when we look at the ways in which focus group data are sometimes presented as quotes from individuals. Whilst this may, in part, be a result of the strict word limits employed by some journals, it frequently reveals an attempt to press focus groups into service as 'fall-back' interviews.

Within the research tradition that seeks to provide a window onto the subjective experience of respondents, it is not uncommon to find researchers who have used focus groups to elicit narratives, e.g. Côte-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy (1999) and Cox et al. (2003). However, I would argue that one-to-one interviews are generally better suited to eliciting detailed contextualized histories. If the focus of the research is on how people construct and reconstruct their stories, however, focus groups are likely to facilitate discussion and unpicking of the rethinking involved. Whether the researcher chooses focus groups or one-to-one interviews in this latter context will depend, to a considerable degree, on his or her 'take' on the research process and the role of the researcher within this.

Although part of the researcher's task is to 'problematize', or bring a critical perspective to bear on accounts produced in one-to-one interviews (Atkinson, 1997), rather than simply taking these at face value, focus groups, almost inevitably, encourage such questioning discourse. This is because, even allowing for the observed tendency for focus groups to culminate in consensus (Sim, 1998), it is highly unlikely that participants will agree from the outset on definitions and responses. That focus groups gravitate towards producing consensus is irrelevant if the researcher's focus is on the process of arriving at this consensus, which is where focus groups are most fruitful.

The best advice is to carefully consider what you are hoping to achieve through using focus groups or one-to-one interviews – to visualize the likely style and content of the exchange. This will help you to decide which is the most appropriate method. Here it is important not to be intimidated by other researchers' choices. Simply because others have favoured one-to-one interviews does not mean that focus groups are inappropriate; indeed, using a different method may allow you to make an original contribution to the knowledge base of your discipline, through highlighting previously unexplored aspects of the issue at hand by, for example, unpicking the reasoning behind certain types of behaviour or beliefs.

When conducting a study of patients' views and experiences of obesity management in one general practice, we opted to use one-to-one interviews in preference to focus groups (Guthrie and Barbour, 2002). This choice was informed by our concerns that participants, many of whom had taken part in commercial slimming programmes, might go into 'Weightwatchers' mode' when presented with the group situation. This could, of course, have been very useful had we been particularly interested in examining the role of group processes in weight management. However, our focus on this occasion was on the situational constraints experienced by individuals as they attempted to integrate obesity management into the context of their daily routines and we considered that interviews were the method most likely to elicit the type of individualized accounts that we were seeking.

In weighing up whether to use one-to-one interviews or focus groups, it is important to remember that focus groups elicit data that are also different in content from that generated by one-to-one interviews.

In summary, there are no universal guiding principles, save the exhortation to weigh up the pros and cons of focus groups and one-to-one interviews for each new project and context (see also Flick, 2007a, 2007b; Kvale, 2007). Crabtree et al. summarize:

... the choice of research style for a particular project depends on the overarching aim of the research, the specific analysis objective and its associated research question, the preferred paradigm, the degree of desired research control, the level of investigator intervention, the available resources, the time frame, and aesthetics. (1993, pp. 139–40)

## Mixed methods approaches

Some researchers have successfully combined one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions. This was the approach taken in a study of professionals' views and experiences of the highly contentious issue of 'living wills' or 'advance directives' (Thompson et al., 2003a, 2003b). Our rationale stemmed from an acknowledgement of the practical barriers for some individuals in terms of attending focus group sessions when they might be on night duty, for example. However, there were also certain individuals whose views about this topic were already known to the researchers and their professional peer group, since they were enthusiastic proponents of arguments either for or against this approach. Whilst including such people in the group discussions would undoubtedly have stimulated debate, it was highly likely that the contribution of zealous individuals would overshadow that of others and that some participants might feel intimidated with regard to expressing their own views, which were probably not so clear-cut or well rehearsed.

Again, there are no hard-and-fast rules regarding when it is appropriate to mix interviews and focus groups; it is simply a matter of weighing up the constraints and possibilities of the specific research project. Pollack (2003), however, helpfully suggests that 'a mixture of focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews is most appropriate in cross-cultural or cross-racial research and in correctional institutions, where issues of power and disclosure are amplified' (2003, p. 472).

Despite generally being positioned on opposite sides of the positivist-interpretivist/constructionist divide, several researchers have argued that focus groups and surveys are useful complementary methods and should not be seen as mutually exclusive approaches (e.g. Wolff et al., 1993). The recent emphasis on patient-based evaluation of health care has led to a rapid growth in Quality of Life (QoL) measures (Bowling, 1997), which attempt to assess the concerns that are identified by patients as most important, rather than concentrating on those issues judged by health care professionals to be important (Thomas and Miller, 1997). Examples of this use of focus groups include work on developing patient-centred outcome measures with regard to postpartum health (Kline et al., 1998) and on developing a Quality of Life measure for adolescents with epilepsy (McEwan et al., 2003).

However, as might be expected, there is disagreement as to the acceptability of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in this way. Nicolson and Anderson (2001) describe their use of qualitative methods to provide a sociological understanding of the patient's experience, 'demonstrating the ways in which individuals engage with and negotiate a meaning for their experiences of the disease [in this case, multiple sclerosis] within the context of their own biographies as well as sharing common experiences with others in similar situations'

(Nicolson and Anderson, 2001, p. 268). They distinguish between this sociological approach and studies that seek to use such findings towards an 'end point in which that material is narrowed down to become valid, reliable and measurable factors or dimensions (a positivist, reductionist model)' (Nicolson and Anderson, 2001, p. 255), viewing these approaches as incompatible. Such arguments inevitably touch on the boundary disputes that characterize the fraught arena of interdisciplinary collaboration. Whilst there are many who may share the view presented above, there is also a strong case to be made for mixed methods approaches in health services research (Barbour, 1999b). Moreover, the two approaches need not be mutually exclusive: a focus on the ultimate goal of informing development of a QoL scale need not compromise the depth or theoretical sophistication of the qualitative component of the study. This is demonstrated by the work of McEwan et al. (2003). (This study is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 with regard to developing and refining coding frames during the analysis process.)

There are also examples of mixed methods approaches that use focus groups following the quantitative phase of research to illuminate results, that is, to transform these into 'findings' by furnishing explanations, particularly with regard to surprising or anomalous associations identified in the first part of the study (see Box 4.1).

### Box 4.1 An example of imaginative use of mixed methods

Wilmot and Ratcliffe (2002) report on their experience of using focus groups to illuminate survey findings. Their study related to principles of distributive justice used by members of the public with regard to the allocation of donor liver grafts for transplantation. In common with other studies in this area quantitative data had been collected by survey, which had used hypothetical choice contexts in order to investigate informants' preferences with respect to allocation of donor organs. However, Wilmot and Ratcliffe acknowledged the limitations of such data, which do not 'allow the investigator to identify the way informants explain and justify their particular choices' (2002, p. 201). Through focus group discussion they sought to provide an in-depth understanding of the arguments and explanations used in 'determining and justifying allocation decisions and the ethical and moral arguments expressed' (2002, p. 201).

Drawing on a list of patient criteria (expected prognosis following the operation; age of the patient; patient's responsibility for their illness; length of time on the waiting list; and whether the patient is being transplanted for the first time or is being re-transplanted) shown by quantitative research to be significant factors in determining public attitudes to donor allocation, these researchers designed five hypothetical scenarios, which were used to generate discussion in focus groups. Following this the focus group members were provided with

*(Continued)*



(Continued)

further information concerning the social background of the hypothetical individuals presented in order to explore the impact of additional circumstantial information on their responses. The findings highlighted that the relationship between participants' reasoning and the three main principles of equity, efficiency/utility and desert was more complex than anticipated. Although they were more receptive to some criteria than to others, they identified difficulties in applying each of the criteria studied. The study provided insights into how members of the public engaged thoughtfully and flexibly with the criteria.

## Triangulation

A reason frequently advanced – at least in grant proposals – for employing a mixed methods design is the goal of 'triangulation' (see also Flick, 2007b). However, this is fraught with difficulties, even when working exclusively within either the quantitative or qualitative tradition (Barbour, 1998a, 2001). The idea behind 'triangulation' is that data produced through applying different methods can be compared in order to confirm or disconfirm each other's results. The problem, however, arises with regard to how to explain discrepancies or contradiction. The notion of 'triangulation' – borrowed from navigation and surveying – relies on the idea of a fixed point of reference, involving a hierarchy of evidence, and assumes agreement between researchers as to which method is accorded most status in terms of producing the most 'authentic' or trustworthy findings.

Interestingly, within the qualitative paradigm, this status of 'gold standard' tends to have been accorded one-to-one interviews (Silverman, 1993), against which the data produced by focus groups are generally compared. It is interesting to note, in passing, that one-to-one interviews involve a somewhat rarefied exchange (seldom encountered outside the research encounter and perhaps more akin to a therapy session or the first stages of courtship), and if one were to make a judgement as to which type of data is most likely to afford privileged access to the 'real-life' social constructions of meaning, I would tend to put my money on focus groups. Rather than becoming caught up in irresolvable debate as to which dataset is most 'authentic', it is helpful to view focus groups and one-to-one interviews – or, indeed, any other forms of qualitative or quantitative data collection – as producing parallel datasets. Such an approach allows the researcher to capitalize on the comparative potential of various datasets, rather than being caught up in attempts to establish a hierarchy of evidence.

Whilst the concern for quantitative researchers appealing to 'triangulation' is to corroborate or confirm results produced using different methods, qualitative research thrives analytically on differences and discrepancies. It is through focusing on these that we can benefit most from comparing data from parallel datasets. Rather than agonizing about contradictory findings as a problem, we should be engaged in using these as a resource. As Morgan (1993) argues, '... if research finds differences between the results from individual and group interviews, then the methodological goal should be to understand the *sources* of these differences' (1993, p. 232; *my emphasis*).

Focus groups provide insights into public discourses (Kitzinger, 1994) and the views expressed in focus groups may, of course, be different from the 'private' views that would be expressed in one-to-one interviews (Smithson, 2000). Michell (1999) compared 'public' and 'private' accounts of young people's experiences of their social worlds produced through interviews and focus groups and interrogated differences, using the two datasets to afford alternative lenses through which to look at the issue in hand. She utilized comparison of parallel data to explore experiences of the hierarchical structure of peer groups in school and in the neighbourhood. She highlights the 'added value' of using these two complementary methods to provide insights into both the process and experiences of bullying and victimization.

This is the approach favoured by Richardson (cited by Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), who argues for the use of the term 'crystallization' in preference to 'triangulation'. She prefers this imagery, she explains, because it emphasizes the value of looking simultaneously at the same issue or concept from a variety of different angles. Qualitative methods are especially adept at capturing the multiple voices of different actors engaged in some aspect of social behaviour (e.g. patients, carers and professionals). If we are intrigued rather than worried when accounts from these various 'players' illuminate the very different situations in which they find themselves and the different concerns they bring to bear in discussing topics, then why should we react any differently when complementary methods produce additional insights?

As well as thinking about how to use complementary methods to advantage in ensuring that important voices are not muted in our research endeavours, giving careful thought to selecting our methods also gives us an opportunity to anticipate analysis. If we see complementary methods as producing parallel datasets with potential for instructive comparison, then there is some merit in working backwards from this point to consider which complementary methods might provide most opportunity for such comparison. Although I have discussed here, at length, the advantages of combining focus groups and one-to-one interviews (which are close cousins and stem from similar epistemological approaches), we have seen that there is a much wider range of possibilities, some of which include combining focus groups with quantitative methods (see Flick, 2007b).

## Research settings

Focus group researchers also need to be flexible with regard to where they hold focus groups in order to maximize participation. There is probably no such thing as a setting that is universally acceptable to all of the people one might like to involve in the research. It is important to bear in mind the partial view that can be reflected by utilizing too narrow a range of locations.

Sometimes the choice of settings is limited, due either to the availability or cost of suitable premises, and the researcher may have to compromise. It is important, however, to give some thought as to the likely impact of specific location on participants and the focus of the data likely to be generated. Whilst clinical researchers may scarcely notice the presence of trappings such as somewhat gruesome posters, the impact on patients should not be underestimated. However, there is much that the researcher can do to compensate for a less than ideal setting, such as ensuring that specific questions and stimulus material are included in the topic guide in order to steer discussion away from the associations suggested by the chosen setting onto the topics most relevant to the research. Ice-breakers, such as presenting cuttings from tabloid newspapers or excerpts from television 'soap operas', can also be helpful, particularly in situations where participants may, for example, be coming to a university department for the first time. The use of such accessible materials can reassure them that discussions will not be couched in 'ivory tower' concerns, and gives permission to draw on the rich resources provided through their daily lives and interests.

In a paper published in the *British Medical Journal*, Jones et al. (2000) reported that patient focus groups to discuss guided self-management plans for asthma were held in a variety of convenient locations, including schools, surgeries, pubs and the local community hospital. This gave rise to some spirited discussion in the letters pages of the same journal, with Cleland and Moffat (2001) arguing that holding focus groups in a pub is a dubious practice and likely to influence the content of discussions. However, this suggests that there is such a thing as a neutral or ideal location, which is illusory (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Of course, the location has an influence on the discussion, and it is important to consider the connotations that a particular location may have for participants. Bloor et al. (2001, pp. 38–9) acknowledge that a pub would not be an advisable location if one was seeking to recruit participants with alcohol problems. It would be unusual, though, for a study that utilized a creative range of settings not to give participants some choice over this matter. To return to the issue of the impact on the data generated, rather than the connotations associated with specific locations being seen as necessarily problematic, awareness of these can make a significant contribution to the analysis. Experienced researchers should be able to use this constructively as a resource in analysis, and surely, discussing issues that impact on one's daily life in the context of the local pub is highly likely to produce data relevant to those individuals who have, after all, opted to attend

such a session. Holding focus groups in different locations can afford additional possibilities for comparison – and, hence, illumination of the processes we are seeking to understand.

Again, rather than being viewed as a limitation in focus group research, building a variety of settings into the research design can strengthen its comparative potential, with the differences to which this strategy gives rise becoming a resource in analysis, rather than a problem.

## Matching moderator and group

The researcher's persona does impact on the form and content of data elicited using focus groups, as indeed it does with all other qualitative methods. It is to this aspect of the research endeavour that commentators are appealing when they refer to the concept of 'reflexivity', which involves acknowledging the ways in which the researcher actively contributes to the data she or he is generating. There is a danger, of course, in overemphasizing accounts that detail the researcher's responses and feelings throughout the research project, which can give rise to the 'spiralling reflexivity' discussed by Barbour and Huby (1998) and which does more to assuage the researcher's uncertainty or discomfort than it does in terms of contributing to theoretically informed analysis. However, used to provide another window on the research encounter and the resulting data, 'reflexivity' in terms of critically examining the nature and impact of research relations can be a valuable tool in analysis. (Reflexivity and the analytical purchase it affords is discussed more fully in Chapter 10.)

A particular problem for researchers who are identified as health care professionals is that respondents may seek advice from them, which can pose ethical questions. This can usually be resolved by giving participants the opportunity to address specific questions at the end of the session or, indeed, by handing out information leaflets, which is good practice when researching any situation where there may be gaps in people's knowledge or support networks. However, respondents' expectations and reasons for taking part in the research can be complex. Revisiting their experience of running focus groups about end-of-life care with vulnerable elderly people, Seymour et al. (2002) acknowledge, 'using a clinical background as an identity was valuable for setting our research in context and for building rapport and trust with potential participants, but caused some difficulties' (2002, p. 520). They reported that some of the frail elderly participants who were lonely tended to regard members of the research team as potential caregivers.

Different moderators can generate data that are different in content and form. For example, Edwards et al. (1998) comment that the use of a general practitioner as moderator in a nurses' focus group may well have given rise to 'textbook-like' responses, due to the power imbalance in primary care teams, and which may

have led to nurses feeling intimidated by such questioning. Thus, it is important to take into consideration the likely impact of a particular moderator and the match between this individual's characteristics – or perceived characteristics (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) – and the group to which she or he is to be deployed. We cannot always anticipate all of the roles that participants may assign to researchers, but we can go some way towards minimizing potential damage or benefiting from certain advantages.

Some researchers choose to work in pairs to capitalize on the characteristics of the various members of the research team, as did Burman et al. (2001), whose research team spanned a wide age range. Since their research on violence involved studying adolescent girls, the presence of a young female team member who wore 'trendy' clothes was invaluable in establishing rapport and credibility in the eyes of the girls, whereas the involvement of an older researcher probably served to remind participants that this was a serious piece of funded research. Other researchers, such as Gray et al. (1997), who carried out research with schoolchildren on the topic of smoking, have reflected on the impact of gender of the moderator on the content of the data generated. Considering the extent to which a female moderator may have contributed towards a portrayal of 'hyper-masculine forms of identity' by the men who took part in her research project, Allen (2005, pp. 51–2) concludes that the impact of gender on the data generated is far from straightforward, since other even more important factors come into play, such as demonstrating sensitivity and a genuine interest on the part of the researcher. This topic is revisited in Chapter 8, where detailed consideration is given to the co-production of data in focus groups, with the moderator playing an active role.

However, just as it can be counter-productive to select a group that is too homogeneous, so, too, can it be unhelpful to choose a moderator who is an 'insider'. Hurd and McIntyre (1996) point out that there can be 'seduction in sameness', whereby the researcher shares too many of the group's taken-for-granted assumptions and is therefore unable to expose these to critical scrutiny. However, the use of a moderator who is, in some respects, an 'outsider' can help to elicit explanations and can serve to contextualize the data being generated. The group situation, too, can offset the effects of this mismatch between moderator and group members' characteristics. Reflecting, in the context of a European-wide study of young people's expectations of the future, on her own experience of moderating, as a young white woman, a focus group comprising young British-Asian women, Smithson (2000) concludes:

... one white woman and one Asian woman would be unlikely to produce as detailed a picture of young British Asian women's lives and debates. Here the group is collectively 'powerful' in that they have access to shared knowledge of which the moderator is ignorant. Rather

than being constructed by the researcher as the other, these Asian women use the focus group to position themselves between two cultures at 'intersecting axes of identification'. (2000, pp. 111–12)

As with many other aspects of research design, there is no such thing as a perfect match between moderator and group. What is crucial, however, is that the impact of the researcher on the data is taken into account in the analysis, that is, that this is used reflexively to analytic advantage (see Box 4.2). The example in Box 4.2, however, also serves to highlight the duty of care that grant-holders have towards the researchers they employ. Interestingly, this same issue was flagged up by Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) in relation to carrying out cross-cultural research. This is further discussed in Chapter 7, which is concerned with ethical issues and engagement with focus group participants.

#### Box 4.2 Taking account of the impact of the moderator on the data

In the context of our study into the reasons for under-reporting of racist incidents in the Strathclyde area, we tried, wherever possible, to match moderator and group – not least because of requirements for fluency in the language of group members. We also considered that this was likely to be a sensitive topic and that group members were more likely to 'open up' with someone who was perceived as trustworthy, by virtue of shared cultural background. This was not always possible and, in practice, we found we had to compromise – particularly where the group members did speak fluent English, but we had not been able to recruit a moderator from that particular ethnic group. Thus, we ended up in the situation where a young Scottish-Asian woman was moderating an African-Caribbean group.

This led to insights regarding focus group participants' perceptions of the 'pecking order' amongst ethnic minority groups in the Strathclyde area, with Asians being seen as – and, indeed resented on account of – receiving preferential treatment, by virtue of their long-standing involvement in the area and strength in numbers. The moderator had been blissfully unaware of these feelings and was quite shocked to learn of such views. However, her presence as moderator led to data that would otherwise probably only have been hinted at. Although the project team were mindful of their responsibility to discuss fully with the moderator her own response to this distressing incident, on reflection this was something that we perhaps should have anticipated and for which we perhaps should have sought to prepare her.

## Recruitment

In common with the other components involved in carrying out focus group research, recruiting focus group participants is not an exact science; instead, it involves making a number of pragmatic and ethical decisions. Gatekeepers can play a particularly important role with regard to recruiting participants for focus group studies. MacDougall and Fudge (2001) describe the difficulties they encountered in trying to recruit non-professional men of post-retirement age for a study of social health. A combination of announcements and interviews on local radio stations, poster displays and pamphlet distribution failed to attract any participants, and targeted advertisements and press coverage resulted in only three men volunteering. However, an approach to local health service providers was much more productive, since they agreed to promote the study to men with whom they were in contact. Large industries in the area also proved a fruitful recruitment source.

Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) make the interesting point that children often acted as gatekeepers for their Latina mothers, since their study design involved recruiting women by means of repeated telephone calls. In Spanish-speaking households children might screen out calls made in English, and the researchers soon discovered that speaking Spanish was more likely to result in help from this quarter. Madriz (1998), who also studied Latina women of lower socioeconomic status, reports using her own personal networks and recruiting by word of mouth, via friends of friends – a strategy likely to be inclusive of people with limited literacy, in contrast with the more common methods of using adverts, posters or letters.

Familiarity with cultural or subcultural behaviour patterns can also help with regard to the practicalities involved in organizing focus groups. In the context of our study into the health care needs of asylum seekers in Glasgow we had distributed flyers for a planned Somali group stating that the session would run from 2 to 3 p.m. This resulted in people turning up at any time during the allotted hour time-span, reflecting cultural norms, as one of the participants later explained to the white Scottish researchers, who ruefully acknowledge that they had inadvertently assumed that their own 'rules of engagement' would apply. Similarly, Strickland (1999) found that individuals from tribal Indian communities often arrived for meetings over a period of 15 to 30 minutes and seldom at the designated time. However, they also observed that they came expecting to stay for 3 or 4 hours. The issue would appear not to be about availability and time constraints but, rather, one of differing expectations and cultural norms concerning visiting.

Yelland and Gifford (1995) observe that the status of the recruiter may be particularly important for some ethnic groups, and this suggests that the potential for recruiting via respected members of the community may be a fruitful strategy. However, this may not be the case for all ethnic groups or, indeed, for all individuals or subgroups within an ethnic minority population. The converse

probably applied in our study of cardiac rehabilitation, which involved medical students as focus group moderators and possibly achieved a high level of participation by virtue of the way in which these individuals were perceived as 'legitimate learners', whom patients wanted to assist.

It is important to bear in mind that input from gatekeepers such as managers or those involved with participants in a professional capacity can sometimes be problematic. Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) highlight the importance of making use of local community organizations – including, somewhat unusually, consulates – to make contact with members of the various Latino populations in a US context. Although they do not elaborate as to their precise reasons, they also caution against allowing members of organizations to recruit people for focus groups. However, Jonsson et al. (2002) not only used gatekeepers for recruitment but also included them as participants in focus groups that were exploring the experiences and perceptions of food of Somalian women living in Sweden.

Barrett and Kirk (2000) stress the importance of over-recruiting for focus groups with elderly participants, having found, as did Owen (2001) in relation to women with serious and enduring mental illness, that such groups are especially prone to 'no shows' on the day. Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) also highlight this as a challenge with regard to recruiting Latina mothers and recommend over-recruiting by at least 50 per cent for groups who may find it difficult to attend focus groups due to the nature of their other family commitments.

### *Ethical issues in recruitment*

The issue of payment to focus group participants is highly contentious. Interestingly, many researchers – and ethics committees – appear to regard as unproblematic the reimbursement of general practitioners in terms of providing locum fees to secure their attendance. The less prestigious the group, however, the greater is the likelihood that concerns will be expressed with regard to the effect of financial incentives – peaking with regard to respondents who are known to be illicit drug users. Sometimes ethics committees are willing to accept payments of small amounts, provided that these are itemized as reimbursing travel or respite care expenses. Many researchers have opted, instead, to give gift tokens as an expression of their gratitude to focus group participants. This has the added advantage of not impacting on the issue of taxable income, which could be a powerful disincentive for low-paid workers. With respect to our study on the health care needs of asylum seekers, we were heavily reliant on the goodwill of those members of the asylum-seeking community whom we trained to carry out focus groups, as those who were still awaiting a decision and had yet to secure refugee status were barred from earning. Rather than introduce inequities, we made a blanket decision not to offer payment to anyone who contributed to this study, but sought, instead, to provide meals, training, which – hopefully – helped individuals to develop transferable skills and build their confidence, and small

items of stationery (a welcome perk as many of the people involved were students in some capacity). The significance of providing traditional food is also highlighted by researchers involved in carrying out work with minority ethnic groups (Strickland, 1999; Jonsson et al., 2002; Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca, 2004). An important point to bear in mind is that when finances are involved, many university accounts departments will require personal details of recipients (for their own internal procedures). However, when dealing with groups where some may be illegal immigrants or who are sensitive about their immigration, employment or tax status, vouchers may be a more acceptable option for everyone involved, (Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca, 2004). Such ethical issues are further explored in Chapter 7.

However, ethical issues do not arise only in relation to groups perceived as 'vulnerable' or 'disadvantaged: we need to be mindful, for example, with regard to the demands we make of people such as busy professionals and that time spent taking part in our research means time out from providing patient care. When seeking to recruit professionals to take part in focus groups, it is also worth exploring the possibility of holding group discussions under the auspices of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Particularly if held at that time of the year when individuals are looking for suitable activities to add to their portfolio, this can be an especially successful recruitment strategy, and is also a means of reciprocating. Of course, to run focus groups in tandem with a CPD-certified event involves considerably more work as there must also, not unreasonably, be an educational component. The capacity of focus groups to encourage individuals to take a critical perspective with regard to their own practice, however, does suggest that, in many contexts, they can mesh fairly easily with the goal of CPD sessions.

### Key points

Despite the somewhat opportunistic use to which they are sometimes put, focus groups, like all approaches, benefit from careful consideration of research design. The advice on designing focus group studies provided in this chapter can be summarized as follows:

- The decision as to whether to employ focus groups or one-to-one interviews has to be weighed up in the context of each study. Whilst interviews excel at eliciting 'private' accounts, focus groups give the researcher access to the interpretations and arguments that participants are willing to present in group situations, whether these are peer groups or researcher-convened groups of strangers.
- Focus groups can be usefully employed either as a stand-alone method or as part of a mixed methods approach. In mixed methods studies, focus groups have potential for developing more structured

'tools', such as questionnaires, but they can also be used to advantage in illuminating quantitative results.

- Whilst triangulation is a problematic concept, focus groups can provide parallel data and, hence, facilitate interrogation of contrasting datasets through comparison – particularly with regard to exploring and seeking to explain discrepancies.
- There is no such thing as a 'neutral' setting for a focus group. Instead, it is important to anticipate the effect of different possible locations on the content of the data generated and to plan accordingly. Using more than one setting can provide comparative data.
- Although it is not always possible – or even desirable – to match moderator and group, careful consideration should be given to the impact of the moderator on the data generated and this should be used as a resource in the analysis. Some research teams make strategic use of moderators' personal characteristics to generate data for comparative purposes.
- It is important to acquire background information about the group being studied, either through preliminary fieldwork or by accessing the knowledge held by local organizations.
- Try to be creative with regard to identifying potential recruitment sources, but remain alert to the emphasis and gaps in coverage that may result from involving gatekeepers in recruitment of your sample. Both top-down and bottom-up recruitment strategies can result in certain voices being unrepresented or muted.
- Paying focus group members can help with recruitment – and hence, in some contexts, can ensure wider participation. However, this option is not always appropriate and it may be wise to explore alternative means of recognizing people's input, such as providing vouchers or even through getting sessions accredited, by awarding CPD points.

### Further reading

Issues of planning focus groups and of combining them with other methods are outlined in more detail in the following books and articles:

- Barbour, R.S. (1999b) 'The case for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in health services research', *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 4(1): 39–43.
- Crabtree, B.F., Yanoshik, M.K., Miller, M.L. and O'Connor, P.J. (1993) 'Selecting individual or group interviews', in D.L. Morgan (ed.), *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 137–49.

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- Flick, U. (2007a) *Designing Qualitative Research* (Book 1 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Flick, U. (2007b) *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research* (Book 8 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Green, J. and Hart, L. (1999) 'The impact of context on data', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 21–35.
- Michell, L. (1999) 'Combining focus groups and interviews: telling it like it is; telling how it feels', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 36–46.

## 5 Sampling

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- understand the issues involved in sampling and group composition in focus groups;
- see the advantages and limits of using existing groups;
- know about sampling techniques; and
- be aware of ethical considerations linked to this.

This chapter focuses on the crucially important component of sampling strategies, emphasizing that these provide the key to the comparisons that it will be possible to make. It also provides advice on group composition and using pre-existing groups and considers ethical issues and the need to take these into account in developing sampling strategies and convening groups. No text on focus groups would be complete without giving due attention to sampling. Although much qualitative work has traditionally relied on convenience samples, there is much to be gained by taking a more strategic approach. Whilst a study involving one-to-one interviews can, arguably, build a sample incrementally, considerable effort is necessary in order to convene groups in the first place and it is just as well, at the outset, to think carefully about the purposes of grouping particular individuals together.

## Principles of qualitative sampling

Sampling is crucial, as it holds the key to the comparisons that you will be able to make using your data (see also Flick, 2007a, chap. 3; 2007b, chap. 3). Both Kuzel (1992) and Mays and Pope (1995) stress that the purpose of qualitative sampling is to reflect the diversity within the group or population under study rather than aspiring to recruit a representative sample. Thus, such sampling will capitalize on any 'outliers' identified and seek to incorporate these individuals or subgroups rather than dismissing them, as would be done if sampling quantitatively. An example might be seeking to include parents of home-educated children or travellers in a study that looked at parenting, using routes other than schools for identifying a sample, or making an effort to encourage men with primary childcare responsibilities to participate in the study. The issue here is not the number of such individuals in the population at large, but rather the insights that can be provided through including these exceptions, and their potential to throw into sharp focus some of the taken-for-granted assumptions or processes that are otherwise unremarked upon. The implications of sampling choices and their potential to facilitate theoretical analysis are further discussed in Chapter 9.

Qualitative sampling is generally referred to as involving either 'theoretical' (Mays and Pope, 1995) or 'purposive' (Kuzel, 1992) sampling. Whatever term is used, it refers to essentially the same process: theorizing – albeit at an early stage – about the dimensions that are likely to be relevant in terms of giving rise to differing perceptions or experiences. Such decisions already anticipate analysis; 'purposive' sampling relates to the anticipated use of the selected criteria in making comparisons once the data have been generated. In other words, purposive sampling allows for the data to be interrogated purposefully, that is, in order to carry out systematic comparison (Barbour, 2001). It is here that preliminary fieldwork can pay dividends in terms of sensitizing the researcher to the criteria that are relevant and that should inform sampling decisions. Even where it is not practicable to carry out an extensive 'scoping' exercise, researchers can benefit from the knowledge of community groups, which can play an important role in educating the researcher as to the diversity, nuances and sensitivities involved – as is pointed out by Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004), who found that consulate staff, as well as those employed in community organizations, were a valuable source of information with respect to the differences between subgroups of Latina women of Colombian, Guatemalan, Mexican and Puerto Rican nationality, with contrasting profiles and experiences in terms of reasons for migration, length of residency, housing locality, incidence of poverty, educational levels and income.

Giving thought to the comparative potential also increases the likelihood of including groups who might otherwise be overlooked, perhaps because of

their lack of visibility or the problems they present in terms of recruitment. Macnaghten and Myers (2004) point out: 'Whatever the dangers for the research of a rigid scheme of categorization of identities, it is useful in planning the groups, because it pushes researchers beyond the voices that are most familiar, most obvious, most articulate, or easiest to recruit' (2004, p. 71).

## Group composition

Since the group will be the main unit of analysis in focus group research, it makes sense to convene these to facilitate comparison, by ensuring that group members share at least one important characteristic. Not only does this make good sense in terms of research design; it can also encourage people to attend and may facilitate discussion on difficult topics, such as those where participants share some stigma (Bloor et al., 2001).

Morgan (1988) provides the useful reminder that focus groups should be homogeneous in terms of background and not attitudes. Although some commentators on focus groups, such as Murphy et al. (1992), view differences of opinion as potentially disruptive, these are what lend 'bite' to focus group discussions. Provided that we are not cavalier about mixing together people who are known to have violently differing perspectives on emotive issues, a little bit of argument can go a long way towards teasing out what lies beneath 'opinions' and can allow both focus group facilitators and participants to clarify their own and others' perspectives. Perhaps, in some contexts, this can even facilitate greater mutual understanding. In terms of generating discussion, a focus group consisting of people in agreement about everything would make for very dull conversation and data lacking in richness. Fortunately, however, this is unlikely; even where the researcher misguidedly attempts to bring together like-minded people, they are unlikely to be as one-dimensional as, undoubtedly, are our approximate and somewhat crude sampling categories.

## Number and size of groups

As to the question of how many focus groups to hold, this is determined by the comparisons that the researcher wishes to make. There is no magic number and more is not necessarily better, although holding two focus groups with groups with similar characteristics may place the researcher on firmer ground in relation to making claims about the patterning of the data, since it would suggest that the differences observed are not just a feature of a one-off group, but are likely to be related to the different characteristics of participants reflected in selection. Since each individual participant possesses a constellation of characteristics

(age, gender, socioeconomic and educational background), it is likely that it will be possible to engage in some inter-group comparisons, since for example, a woman's group may well comprise individuals with a range of ages. It is always prudent, however, to leave some leeway for adding other groups, as further potential comparisons occur.

Another frequently asked question relates to the number of participants who should be recruited to each focus group. Many of the earlier focus group texts echoed the advice that tends to be given in marketing research that the ideal size of a group is 10–12 people. The number of people who can readily be accorded an equal voice in proceedings will depend not only on the skill of the moderator (as the marketing research texts suggest) but also on the level and complexity of the desired discussion. In social science research we are generally more interested in exploring in depth participants' meanings and the ways in which perspectives are socially constructed. In comparison to marketing research, where many discussions are summarized – either verbally or in note form – the focus of social scientists is usually a verbatim transcript, which is then subjected to detailed and systematic analysis. Both in terms of moderating groups (picking up on and exploring new leads as these emerge) and in terms of analyzing transcripts, I would argue that a maximum of eight participants is generally quite challenging enough. The requirements of the researcher to identify individual voices and seek clarification and further exploration of any differences in views that emerge make larger groups, if not impossible, then exceedingly demanding to moderate and analyze. In terms of a minimum number, it is perfectly possible to hold a focus group discussion with three or four participants (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Bloor et al., 2001), and for some topics this may be preferable – for example, with terminally ill older people (Seymour et al., 2002). Additionally, the size and layout of the room that is available for a group session may also dictate the size of the group, as this may also impact on the capacity to record the discussion – particularly if a video recording is required. If wheelchair users are to be accommodated, space will be a prime consideration (assuming that the issue of accessibility has been addressed) and it may not prove possible to accommodate more than a couple of such participants in any one group.

### Sampling frames and the potential for comparison

In some applications of focus group research, however, full use is not made of the capacity to convene groups to afford comparison. This happens particularly when random sampling strategies are employed, which reflects continuing – and inappropriate – adherence to a quantitative approach. The comments of

researchers (such as Lam et al., 2001, who opted for random sampling in their medical education focused study in order to allay the concerns of one faculty member who was particularly wedded to the quantitative research paradigm) serve to remind us of the organizational and academic context in which we carry out our research. Ethics committees and funding bodies also often play a big part in developing the final research plan.

Imaginative use of focus groups can even afford comparison in an international context. Strategic sampling allowed Green et al. (2005) to study public understanding of food risks in people belonging to four different stages in the life cycle in a variety of settings in Finland, Germany, Italy and the UK, involving a relatively small number of focus groups. A common misconception is that purposive sampling necessarily inflates the number of participants required. However, if you realize that each individual may potentially meet several of the desired criteria in terms of diversity (everyone having a gender, age, social class, etc.), then it becomes clear that multiple comparisons can be made on the basis of fewer participants than a first consideration of the approach to sampling might suggest.

The process of recruiting a sample to fit the desired sampling frame can, however, be time-consuming. The extent of work involved is illustrated by the experience of Lagerlund et al. (2001) in exploring Swedish women's rationales for attending or not attending mammography screening. They report that they sent out 321 letters in order to recruit a total of 31 women to three focus groups. McEwan et al. (2003) also utilized pre-existing databases – from two Scottish epilepsy centres – to furnish a sampling pool for focus group discussions. Although her research was theoretically informed in relation to exploring Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus', Callaghan (2005) maximized the potential for comparison by convening three focus groups to reflect three different socioeconomic profiles, as identified by cluster analysis of census data. Thus, although the use to which sampling is put remains essentially 'qualitative' in its focus on comparing and contrasting to identify patterns and seeks to explain similarities and difference, the possibilities can be enhanced by paying attention to quantitative information already available – even, on occasion, carrying out some further analysis of these data in order to explore the opportunities this may provide for purposive sampling.

Although it is useful to sit in a research office and draw up a sampling frame, it is not always possible to fill all the boxes identified and it is also important to leave the outline sufficiently open in order to capitalize on any further insights that occur to the researchers as the study progresses, or further opportunities present themselves. In practice, theoretical models, knowledge of the existing literature, knowledge of a specific locality, contacts and gatekeepers, and serendipity all play a role. This is illustrated by the following example of a piece of work currently being written up (see Box 5.1).



**Box 5.1 Developing a sampling strategy**

A colleague in the Law Department at the University of Glasgow (Kay Goodall) had been funded to carry out research into the policing of racist incidents and crimes in the Strathclyde area. This geographical region has a relatively long history of immigration from the Indian subcontinent. An area with several universities, it also has a sizeable student population, representing a wide ethnic mix. More recently the Glasgow area has seen an influx of asylum seekers and there had, regrettably, been two high-profile murder cases prior to this research being carried out.

Although I became involved in this research project in relation to the focus group component, the study had a mixed methods research design, combining focus group discussions with survey methods and one-to-one interviews. As the research was seeking an explanation as to the reasons for under-reporting of racist attacks (a 'Why not?' question), focus groups suggested themselves as the ideal method for unpicking this complex issue, by allowing us to explore definitions of racism, responses of people involved and decision-making processes with regard to dealing with both perpetrators and the police.

Initial research team discussions identified the importance of eliciting – and comparing and contrasting – the perspectives and experiences of members of various ethnic minority groups; men and women; people of differing ages; individuals belonging to different social classes; those who had been born in Scotland and more recent immigrants. Thus we developed a notional sampling grid with a wide range of potential groups. We worked closely with a range of local organizations in order to establish, firstly, whether there were sufficient numbers in any given group to allow us to convene the range of groups required. Given the relatively small number of people in Glasgow belonging to the African-Caribbean community, we were able to convene only one group, which involved people from a range of ages and social class positions. In addition to paying attention to social class differences we also sought to explore the views of people in specific occupations, including representatives of minority ethnic organizations, small business owners and students. Another potentially interesting dimension related to the locality in which people lived, and we were able to hold a Chinese focus group discussion with a number of individuals living in a small town rather than the inner city.

The minority ethnic groups run were as follows:

- Asylum seekers (English-speaking from a range of ethnic backgrounds)
- Representatives of Chinese organizations
- Asian men (range of ages and social classes)
- Asian women (range of ages and social classes)
- Representatives of Asian organizations
- Asian young men (16 to early 20s)

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

- Asian young women (16 to early 20s)
- African-Caribbean (range of ages and social classes)
- International students (various ethnic backgrounds)
- Chinese (mixed gender and locality, and belonging to lower socio-economic groups)
- Chinese small business owners
- East European (mixed ages and social classes)
- Asian and African-Caribbean researchers.

We also convened eight focus groups with members of the indigenous white community. These included groups of people living in affluent, mixed and deprived areas, male students, professional women, a church group and a group of individuals actively involved in local politics. Focus group discussions were also held with groups of serving police officers throughout the region.

Of course, regardless of our grand designs, it does not always prove possible to recruit all the people we would like to take part in our study and nor are we always able to convene all the groups identified in our sampling grids – or 'wish-lists'. In the context of the above study, we reasoned that it might be illuminating to carry out a focus group discussion with a mixed ethnic group consisting of small business owners in order to tease out which issues were specific to particular groups or localities and which were common. Not surprisingly, this proved impossible to set up, due to the long hours worked by people running such businesses and the necessity of holding such a group in a location that would have involved travel for some of the participants. However, some difficulties can be turned to advantage. In our asylum seekers study, although we were unable to convene a specific group, the reasons that mitigated against the inclusion of some individuals provided very valuable insights into the challenges and anxieties besetting asylum seekers in Glasgow.

### **The role of serendipity**

For those who, by now, may be daunted by the complexities involved in maximizing the potential for purposive sampling, a word of comfort might be derived from the related observation that it is equally unlikely that you will get it all wrong. An example is provided here by the experience of convening focus groups within the context of research methods workshops (the source of the cumulative

datasets; some excerpts from the resulting transcripts are presented later in this book, in Chapters 8, 9 and 10). I have frequently pointed out to workshop participants that the health care professionals, health services researchers and PhD students attending these sessions are largely drawn from what could flippantly be referred to as 'the chattering classes' – in which, I have been quick to point out, I would also place myself. This, however, severely limits the comparative potential of the resulting cumulative dataset. If the focus groups were being carried out as part of a funded rather than 'virtual' workshop project, I would certainly wish to convene some focus groups with people of differing ages and genders living in a deprived locality, for example.

Notwithstanding this important limitation, though, there is generally potential for some instructive comparison: for example, between parents and non-parents and between people of differing cultural or ethnic backgrounds, where differing expectations of couples' relationships and ideas about raising children may provide illuminating insights highly relevant to the topics of fathers' attendance at deliveries and the challenges of parenting (the two workshop 'virtual' topics). It has been possible to convene a few men's groups, in addition to a larger number of women's groups and mixed gender groups. Here, too, serendipity has played a part: one workshop yielded, quite by chance, a group of parents who each had four or more children, who were also serendipitously allocated to the same focus group. Another workshop involved a number of participants who were grandparents, and who could, thus, add valuable first-hand observations regarding how views had changed over time.

We like to think, as researchers, that we are in control of sampling and research design, but matters are often taken out of our hands. This can sometimes work to our ultimate advantage: Khan et al. (1991) report on their experience of seeking to elicit discussion on sexual health with young Asian women. This proved extremely difficult as the young women appeared reluctant to open up and discuss this issue. The chance attendance, as chaperone, of an older woman, who voluntarily joined in the discussion, sharing her own experiences, was fortuitous in that this gave permission to the younger women present to talk about these matters and encouraged their participation, thus enabling the researchers to generate data on their chosen topic. In relation to the focus groups held for a project that was looking at decision-making about medication, the occasional participant brought along a partner or friend. We welcomed this, reasoning that it might provide additional insights since it suggested that discussion was perhaps more likely to resemble everyday talk.

### Returning to the field and second-stage sampling

The original formulation of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) advocated that researchers return to the field in order to test out emergent hypotheses.

However, the current funding climate and tight project deadlines mean that this is, in many instances, an unattainable ideal. In contrast to other qualitative methods, focus groups afford unrivalled potential to engage in this sort of exercise, through 'second-stage sampling' or convening of further 'wildcard groups' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) to enhance analytical sophistication. In terms of those aspects of our research over which we retain control, it is helpful to remain alert to further differences within groups, not only with respect to the niceties of social interaction and the need to minimize distressing encounters, but also in order to develop the analysis. Although an individual may have been recruited into a focus group study by virtue of some characteristic (e.g. age or gender), there may be other aspects of his or her situation that become apparent only during discussion, but which are illuminating and may provide ideas for further sampling.

An example of the dividends paid by this approach is the study of general practitioners' views and experiences of sickness certification (Hussey et al., 2004; see Box 5.2). Provided that such 'second-stage' sampling does not involve the researchers contacting an entirely new group of people and merely involves configuring the groups differently to reflect a specific shared characteristic in preference to others, it is generally possible to allow for such an eventuality – even in ethics applications – by reserving the option of convening further groups, depending upon the provisional findings produced during preliminary data analysis. After all, this is not so different from sending a subsidiary questionnaire to a subsample in a quantitative project. It may also be possible to convene further 'wildcard groups' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999), which may involve recruiting through additional routes – provided that this is allowed for in the original proposal. Most commonly, this is likely to involve listing a wide range of potential recruitment sites in the initial project outline and ethics application.

#### Box 5.2 An example of 'second-stage' sampling

The four general practitioner members of the research team drew on their own knowledge of what might be factors likely to affect the experiences of general practitioners (GPs) and we decided that we would seek to convene groups of GPs practising in urban, rural and remote localities, and in affluent and deprived areas. Clearly the challenges of dealing with the potentially fraught issue of providing sickness certification were likely to be somewhat different for GPs living and working in a tight-knit island community than for GPs working in a relatively anonymous inner-city area, where the GP almost certainly would not have his or her home. Incorporating a range of localities was also likely to afford potential for comparison in terms of the different types of employer active in an area and the implications for issuing 'sicknotes' (i.e. whether

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most of these were destined to arrive in the same office where there was an identified principal employer, such as a large factory). We agreed, at the outset, that we wanted to include both men and women, GPs of varying length of experience, degrees of seniority, those working in large group practices, smaller practices and, if possible, some single-handed GPs.

Having sampled according to these criteria and having run the first set of seven focus groups, the GP moderators compared notes and we began the process of preliminary analysis of our data. As well as looking at the patterning (i.e. similarities and differences) between the seven groups, we also took note of which members of each group were raising particular issues. This exercise suggested that there might be specific issues for GP locums (who worked for short periods of time in a number of different GP practices), GP registrars (who were still undergoing training) and GP principals (who had management responsibilities, a long-term commitment – often financial – to one GP practice, and whose remit included providing continuity of care for patients). We therefore decided to convene three additional focus groups – one with each of these three groups – to further explore this hunch, or hypothesis.

### Pre-existing groups

Marketing research texts consistently advise recruiting groups of strangers, in preference to naturally occurring groups. However, it is important to bear in mind the context in which such advice is offered. Marketing research, as we saw in Chapter 1, is primarily concerned with tapping into public preferences and is charged with making broad recommendations as to whether or not to develop or market a specific product or to pursue a particular advertising campaign. Whilst it is unlikely that such publications will overtly state that this research seeks to produce a cheaper and quicker equivalent to a large-scale survey, this goal is implicit in the attempt to recruit a sample that is representative of the target population. Certainly, given this objective, it becomes apparent that pre-existing groups would be problematic for marketing research, as they would be likely to skew the findings in favour of subgroups within the population, rather than affording blanket coverage.

However, when engaging in health services or social science research, our goals are somewhat different from those that inform marketing research. We are, quite simply, asking very different – and usually more complex – questions, often with the ultimate aim not only of answering straightforward questions but also of contributing to long-established and constantly accumulating bodies of disciplinary knowledge. (Moreover, we carry out our research within a context that is characterized by collaboration – personal and institutional rivalries notwithstanding – as distinct from the more fiercely competitive world of business and

marketing.) The goal of most health services and social sciences research involving focus groups is likely to be that of developing a greater understanding of process rather than that of predicting outcome in terms of the likely public response to a new product or marketing campaign.

Rather than viewing pre-existing groups as a potential problem, however, some commentators, such as Bloor et al. (2001), argue that there are some advantages in utilizing what they refer to as ‘pre-acquainted’ groups. In contrast to the marketing research concern to avoid friendship pairs or groups in recruiting children to focus groups, Lewis (1992) has argued that friendship groupings are an important criterion for convening groups of young people. Having pre-acquainted – or even intimately acquainted – individuals within focus groups can lead to enhanced understanding of group dynamics and how these shape the development of views or responses. Crossley (2002) only found out after running a group that two of the participants were sisters. She explains that, when analyzing the data, this information helped her ‘to make sense of the frequently acrimonious nature of their disputations’, which, in turn, illuminated the ‘real-life’ context in which these two people weighed up the exhortations of health promotion and made attributions about their own health status and decisions about their health-related behaviour. Munday (2006) used her personal networks to recruit Women’s Institute members to her focus group, the aim of which was to explore how collective identity was produced and managed. Rather than viewing the presence of her own grandmother as problematic, she considered that this gave her additional and valuable insights into the phenomenon she was studying.

Using pre-existing groups, however, raises important ethical issues, particularly with regard to ensuring confidentiality. Researchers need to be mindful that these groups have a life that continues after they have elicited their data and should seek to minimize possible negative ramifications. It is essential that the researcher takes time to emphasize the importance of confidentiality prior to the discussion and that space and time are allowed for any concerns about disclosures to be raised at the end. Particularly in work with members of minority ethnic communities, participants in focus groups may have complex interlocking relationships that can be affected by shared confidences. Indeed, it is for these reasons that Ruppenthal et al. (2005) advocate the use of multi-ethnic groups in such instances (provided that they share a common language).

### *Distinguishing between ‘public’ and ‘private’ accounts*

As with all other pieces of advice regarding focus group research, the decision as to whether to incorporate or avoid pre-existing groupings depends on the scope of the research project in question. For instance, it is likely that the presence of someone’s line manager will inhibit the frank exchange of ideas. However, this may be germane if the purpose of the research project (as in the case above) is to provide an understanding of the ‘real-life’ context in which people work or

come together for other purposes. Munday (2006), who convened a focus group discussion with members of one Women's Institute in order to explore the construction and expression of collective identity, reasoned that the inclusion of the Branch President in the group, although likely to influence what was and was not said, nevertheless reflected the tenor of discussions that this group were likely to have in 'real' life. One of the many virtues of focus groups, however, is the potential to convene additional groups as insights accumulate. In some cases it might be worthwhile convening separate groups consisting entirely of junior staff in order to access their uncensored views.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked by workshop participants is whether to convene mixed professional or single professional focus groups. As usual, there is no ready answer, except to point out that groups consisting of general practitioners will generate data different in content from that of groups with nurses or those with hospital doctors, reflecting their varying concerns and the complementary, but distinct, nature of their work roles. My advice, in this situation, would be to convene both single and mixed professional groups and to compare the data elicited in these two different contexts, and only then to make a decision as to which type of data is most germane to the research question in hand. It may be that the study benefits from the comparative focus provided by the two types of group, or the researcher may decide that her or his interests lie firmly with gaining insights into how multidisciplinary teams interact and make collective decisions.

Where researchers decide to try to convene focus groups with pre-existing groups it can be pragmatic to utilize pre-arranged meeting slots, such as team meetings or conferences. However, there are some pitfalls associated with such 'piggybacking' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). It is essential to pre-warn all potential attendees that the focus of the sessions will be different from that of usual meetings, and even once the group is convened, Krueger (1994) stresses the need to remind participants that the group discussion is for the purposes of a research study and to distinguish this from a decision-making forum or planning committee.

### Ethical issues in sampling

The practicalities of planning focus groups are inextricably bound up in ethical considerations. At one level, failure to appreciate some of the ethical niceties involved may simply compromise our ability to recruit some potential participants, as was the case for the study carried out by Groger et al. (1999). They reflected: 'We also lost potential participants by using (in recruitment materials) "African American", the politically correct term that offends some elders who would prefer to be called "colored", a term that has become politically incorrect in academia' (1999, p. 833). This serves the useful function of highlighting that

our attempts to behave in an 'ethical' manner may backfire, particularly in contexts where the academic and popular 'register' are 'out of synch'. In addition to considering the comparative potential that sampling frames may afford the researcher, we need to think very carefully about the unintended consequences of bringing together individuals with different experiences, such as exposing newly diagnosed people to those with advanced disease. Not only does the researcher have to consider the impact on individuals of taking part in the research; she or he also has to bear in mind the consequences for the functioning of the group, where the decision has been made to utilize pre-existing fora.

Although this was an issue with which we wrestled in the course of a research project on management of community nurses, the accompanying data collected by means of written exercises served to reassure us of the considerable skills that our focus group participants brought to the encounter. This clearly demonstrated that individuals were selective with regard to which of their responses they shared with the wider group. Sometimes, casting ourselves in the role of the 'all-powerful researcher', we can forget that the people we speak to in the course of our research are often adept at negotiating teamwork tensions and are likely to have developed ways to deal with these on an everyday basis. However, it is obviously important that we avoid imposing exercises that might breach these accommodations and might have lasting effects on relationships long after the researchers have departed the scene. In one of the focus groups, we, as researchers mindful of this potential for damage to team relationships, cringed, as one of the GPs pressed a district nurse to share her views in relation to a written exercise on barriers to effective teamworking – in direct defiance of our reassurance that individuals would not be asked to discuss these particular responses in the course of the discussion. However, we need not have feared: the nurse smoothly, and without hesitation, produced a suitably anodyne response that varied markedly from her written comment, which, as we later were to discover, read 'over-bearing GPs!' (Barbour, 1995).

However, such concerns relate not just to working with pre-existing groups: researcher-convened groups also raise many important ethical challenges, showing that practical and ethical issues are inextricably bound up in making and implementing research design decisions. My own recent involvement as a consultant on a project serves to emphasize the complex deliberations involved in planning focus groups (see Box 5.3). Whilst this project was notable in that it raised particularly taxing ethical issues, it demonstrates that what might appear, at first glance, to be a straightforward decision may have much more complicated ramifications. Ethical considerations need to be taken into account not just during the planning phase of the research, but are crucial to carrying out good-quality research and attention should be paid to these throughout the whole process. Chapter 7 is devoted to examining in detail the ethical considerations that should be attended to in the course of the research endeavour. Practical and ethical issues are inextricably bound up and both impact on the final product in

terms of project design, and the next chapter (Chapter 6) deals with the practicalities involved in planning and running focus groups.

### Box 5.3 Planning focus group research to study cancer patients' experiences of services

I had been asked by a Health Authority to provide research design advice and training to enable nurses to generate qualitative data following a survey of patients' views of cancer services in one geographical region. A short questionnaire had been circulated to patients attending all the main cancer service points and who had received a diagnosis of cancer within the past two years. At the end of the questionnaire we had included a section that invited respondents to volunteer to take part in focus group discussions and to provide contact details. Although we were in the unusually fortunate position of having a large sampling frame and plenty of potential focus group participants, the decision proved considerably more difficult than might at first be imagined.

You might like to apply yourself to this sampling exercise and consider the following questions:

- Who would you include? People with all types of cancer? Might there be any specific ethical issues?
- Would you run cancer-site-specific groups or mixed groups – or a combination, and, if so, what rationale would you provide for this decision?
- Who, if anyone, might you want to exclude?
- Are there any potentially awkward combinations in terms of group composition?
- Would you have mixed gender or single gender groups?

Hopefully, this will have given you some indication of the many considerations you would need to make. We decided to run both cancer-specific and mixed cancer groups. Some groups were to consist of women only (obviously the breast and cervical cancer groups) and, due to the potentially embarrassing nature of certain cancer sites, we opted to run separate groups for men and women with bowel cancer, for example. We did think, however, that there might be some advantages in running a limited number of groups that brought together both men and women and some groups that included people with different types of cancer, provided that these were sufficiently similar in terms of prognosis and absence of noticeable symptoms (which might be distressing both for people with the condition and for other participants).

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Lung cancer posed particularly difficult issues, not least of which was ensuring that potential participants were still alive by the time we were ready to set up our groups. In this case, the ethical implications of bringing together people at different stages of disease progression were thrown into particularly sharp focus.

A further practical issue related to whether there would be enough individuals to form a viable group in any one location matching our selection criteria. We spent a lot of time plotting on a map of the area the location of individuals with specific diagnoses who had expressed an interest in participating in a focus group, using different coloured pins for the various types of cancer. This identified useful clusters and also led us to conclude, regretfully, that holding certain groups in specific locations was not a viable option.

There was, however, one significant problem that we simply had not anticipated. We had – rather naïvely, in retrospect – thought that our problems were over in relation to informed consent, given that we had invited people to volunteer for focus groups. However, when we scanned the completed questionnaires for information about individuals' diagnoses, we found that there were quite a few who managed to detail their symptoms and trajectory through services without once mentioning the word 'cancer' or 'malignancy'. This amounted to more than simple circumlocution and we became concerned that some individuals really were 'in denial'. Surprisingly, virtually all of the people in this situation had volunteered to take part in focus groups 'with others with a diagnosis similar to your own', as we worded the questionnaire. What, we wondered, might be the implications of confronting people who had not 'owned up' to having cancer with others who spoke quite openly about their diagnosis and prognosis? On the other hand, was it ethical to exclude people who had expressed a desire to participate in this stage of the research? Given that our researchers were all cancer-specialist nurses (but working with patients outside their own geographical remit), we did, arguably, have people on hand with the requisite skills to provide support and counselling. After debating this issue at length, we decided that, therapeutically beneficial as it might have been for the individuals involved, we did not wish our focus groups to provide the confirmation of their cancer diagnosis, as this was best done, if at all, with the support of those health care professionals who were providing ongoing support and treatment to the people involved in the study.

Shortly after these deliberations I received a letter from the Health Authority, informing me that they had decided to 'take the project on to completion themselves', and I cannot report on the outcome of the study. I strongly suspect, however, that the qualitative component of the work was suspended indefinitely.

### Key points

Like any other method, focus groups can culminate in high-quality research only when due attention is paid to developing an appropriate and rigorous research design. Sampling is the keystone of good qualitative research design. The main points of this chapter can be summarized as follows:

- Sampling is of crucial importance as it holds the key to the comparative potential of your dataset.
- The aim of 'purposive' or 'theoretical' sampling is to reflect diversity, not to achieve representativeness.
- There is no magic formula regarding the number of focus groups to hold or the number of participants in each group. Rather, this depends on the comparisons you wish to make, the research topic, the type of data you wish to generate and how you plan to analyze this.
- Whilst it is helpful to draw up a sampling grid that reflects the characteristics of your ideal sample, you should remain alert to additional opportunities for comparison afforded by unanticipated differences between participants.
- You should try to be 'theoretically sensitive' throughout the research process, in order to spot gaps in coverage or potential for exploring further distinctions/differences.
- Second-stage sampling can be extremely valuable in following up 'hunches' developed through paying attention to individual voices within focus group discussions.
- Although pre-existing groups can afford access to discussions that more closely approximate 'real-life' situations, these raise challenges in terms of maintaining the research focus and the implications for group members should be fully considered.
- Ethical issues are inextricably bound up with research design choices around sampling. The effect on pre-existing groups of taking part in a focus group discussion should be taken into account and questions and exercises designed with this in mind. Concerns about the consequences for individuals of talking with others with particular characteristics sometimes have to take precedence over research design requirements.

### Further reading

The following publications give you some further advice about how to sample in focus group research:

Flick, U. (2007a) *Designing Qualitative Research* (Book 1 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.

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- Hussey, S., Hoddinott, P., Dowell, J., Wilson, P. and Barbour, R.S. (2004) 'The sickness certification system in the UK: a qualitative study of the views of general practitioners in Scotland', *British Medical Journal*, 328: 88–92.
- Kitzinger, J. and Barbour, R.S. (1999) 'Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 1–20.
- Kuzel, A.J. (1992) 'Sampling in qualitative inquiry', in B.F. Crabtree and W.I. Miller (eds), *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 31–44.
- Mays, N. and Pope, C. (1995) 'Rigour and qualitative research', *British Medical Journal*, 311: 109–12.

## 6

## Practicalities of planning and running focus groups

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- be aware of the practical issues concerning planning of focus groups;
- know about the role of stimulus material;
- understand the necessary skills of moderators; and
- know more about how to document focus groups.

It would be a pity to scrupulously develop your research design and sampling strategy only to be let down by failing to take account of the practicalities involved. This chapter provides some advice on the decisions and skills involved in setting up sessions, recording focus group discussions, note-taking and transcribing. Moderators' skills are considered and hints are provided with respect to introducing the topic to participants, managing difficult situations, developing and using topic guides and selecting appropriate stimulus materials. The importance of piloting is stressed. Finally, it will discuss the potential of focus group sessions to generate materials for use in further 'second-stage' focus group discussions. Although some pitfalls are outlined, along with suggestions as to how to avoid these, there are no rigid rules to follow, since, again, the focus of the

study and the research question are, ultimately, what decide these matters (see also Flick, 2007a).

### Setting the scene

As discussed in Chapter 4, with regard to the research setting it is important to check out the room, taking note of any materials (such as posters) that might influence the content of the discussion or even cause offence to participants. It is advisable to visit the venue in advance to ensure that it is accessible, especially if it is anticipated that some individuals with disabilities or restricted mobility may be attending. For our asylum seekers study we decided to make a crèche available, as many potential participants had full-time child-rearing responsibilities. However, this necessitated inspection of premises in advance by private crèche providers, in order to ensure that buildings met specified safety requirements, which could cause delay in setting up groups.

It is worth considering providing refreshments, as a way of showing gratitude to participants and encouraging a relaxed atmosphere. There are, though, many potential pitfalls associated with providing foods, since focus groups may consist of individuals from religious or cultural communities that stipulate that certain foods should not be consumed or that foods must be prepared in a specific manner. It would be highly insensitive to offer food and drink to practising Muslims during Ramadan, for example. With multi-ethnic groups the issue of refreshments can become a veritable minefield for the researcher who lacks such awareness. If participants have particular disabilities or conditions they may experience difficulty swallowing, rendering consumption of food potentially hazardous or likely to result in embarrassment. Certain foodstuffs that involve crunching etc. may be inadvisable, as they are likely to compromise the quality of the recording. When considering this last point, it is also important to find out whether there is likely to be noise from adjoining rooms or from passers-by (which may also threaten privacy and confidentiality).

If you intend to assign participants to smaller groups to work on parallel exercises, it may be a good idea to book separate break-out rooms. In such cases it may also be useful to enlist the help of an assistant moderator to ensure that transitions are handled smoothly and that help is on hand should participants require clarification about the tasks set. Although the focus group literature advises over-recruiting due to the likelihood of 'no shows' on the day, it is also possible that additional people will turn up. Hiring a second room is a relatively easy and inexpensive option that allows for the running of two parallel focus groups, provided that you have had the foresight to secure a second moderator.

## Recording and transcribing

Although it is important to use good-quality recording equipment that is fit for the purpose of group discussions, there can be a tendency, in some quarters, for attention to equipment specifications to take over and dominate discussion. Equipment – however good – cannot compensate for bad research design or moderating that is not sensitive to the nuances of the discussion. A good-quality recorder, however, is essential. Technology continues to develop apace of research methods. When I first began running focus group workshops the advice was to invest in a mini-disk recorder and separate microphone, which had the unwelcome complication of requiring downloading to cassette tape in order to use a transcription machine with a foot pedal. This advice has been superseded by the appearance of a new generation of digital recorders, which are eminently portable and continually coming down in price. These allow the researcher to download directly onto his/her computer for transcription, and can store large quantities of data. However, they do vary with regard to how long their rechargeable batteries last and it is advisable to check on this when you select a model. It is possible to purchase very small but highly efficient microphones, which plug into these machines. It is best, if possible, to position the recorder and microphone on a table in the centre of the group, but for some groups, such as elderly disabled people (Barrett and Kirk, 2000) or children (Kennedy et al., 2001), wall-mounted microphones may be preferable. It is worth turning up early to check out the venue, so that you can set up the room to maximize recording quality.

In general, the less complicated the equipment, the less there is to go wrong. Most modern recording equipment is compact and unobtrusive, but there may occasionally be situations where participants are not agreeable to you recording their discussion and you should be prepared to take notes instead. It is important that you have familiarized yourself with the equipment prior to using it in a focus group, so do ensure that you have plenty of opportunity to practise and become confident. Check that batteries are charged and that you carry spares and that microphones are switched on (where they have separate on/off switches). It is also worth considering using a back-up recording machine, as accidents do inevitably happen and a moderator secure in the knowledge that two machines are recording discussions is a much more relaxed moderator, better able to concentrate on the task in hand.

There has been some debate as to whether video recording is superior to audiotapes in terms of producing the most accurate record of a focus group. Certainly videos can capture all-important non-verbal communication and assist in identification of individual speakers. Whilst video recording might appear the obviously better option, this is not a foregone conclusion and there can be disadvantages, such as the potential to increase participants' discomfort or self-consciousness, difficulty in anonymizing individuals, logistical challenges with regard to the positioning of

cameras, the capacity to capture all participants on film, and limitations on the number of participants that can be accommodated. I suspect, too, that videoing sessions may give the moderator licence to try less hard and may result in her or him going into 'automatic pilot'; having to keep several balls in the air at the one time can keep a moderator on her or his toes. With regard to the quality of the resulting transcript, Armstrong et al. (1997), who asked a group of experienced focus group researchers to analyze transcripts produced from video-recorded and audiotaped discussions, together with detailed notes, found little difference in judgements of the quality and comprehensiveness of video- and audio-recorded sessions, although the written records consisting of notes were considered less helpful (see Rapley, 2007, for more details).

### Note-taking

As with all qualitative research encounters, it is advisable to record your immediate observations about the focus group discussion, noting any salient features of group dynamics, and your own impressions of the topics that most engaged participants. This should include making reference to any theoretical frameworks, or other research studies that may be particularly relevant, as this will help you to reconstruct your emergent explanations at a later date, when you may well have forgotten why you were sensitized to certain issues or themes. Chapter 10 discusses how such detail can be utilized to advantage in furnishing explanations for differences between transcripts generated in separate groups.

There has been some discussion in the focus group literature as to how best to capture the insights of moderators with regard to features of groups, individual participants and group dynamics. Whereas Carey (1995) advises focus group moderators simply to describe these details and use this to inform their interpretation of data, Morrison-Beedy et al. (2001) advocate that these observations are systematically incorporated into transcripts in a manner similar to adding stage directions, which allow for things such as tone, facial expressions and gestures to be interspersed throughout the text. Proposing an approach similar to that suggested by Traulsen et al. (2004), who encourage research teams to 'interview' focus group moderators, Stevens (1996) recommended routinely asking the same set of 12 questions. Whilst this may well be useful, it is likely that this could result in a somewhat rigid approach with limited potential to illuminate analysis, since it would be well-nigh impossible to anticipate all potentially relevant details. (This topic is revisited in relation to developing sophisticated analyses, which is the subject of Chapter 10.)

Although the group is likely to be the main unit for analysis, it is also important that the researcher is able to distinguish individual voices, particularly if she or he is to capitalize on unanticipated opportunities for comparison through convening additional groups, or simply utilizing intra-group comparisons in analysis.



Kevern and Webb (2001) advocate taking notes on the order in which participants speak and recommend that the note-taker also record a few of the key words from each utterance. However, audiotypists with whom I have worked have stressed the utility of notes that record simply the first few words spoken in each utterance. This, they have explained, is more useful since it enables them to identify each successive speaker without having to rewind the tape, and hence cuts down significantly on transcription time.

Although sitting in on someone else's focus groups can be a valuable learning experience for the novice researcher, my own experience of asking people to take notes on the sequence of talk suggests that this may best be done by someone who is not an academic researcher, as the temptation of getting side-tracked by the often fascinating content can mitigate against accurate and consistent note-taking. However, there are several steps that the moderator can take, such as asking participants to introduce each other (observing common courtesies) and using people's names during discussion, which make this task easier. The chat show 'hostess' Edna Everage (as personified by the comedian Barry Humphries) offers an excruciating object lesson in – perhaps even a parody of – the skills involved. In this show the 'hostess' assigns name badges to guests, generally taking the liberty of conferring over-familiar variants of their first names, and also over-uses names when addressing people whilst 'moderating' discussion. Think about the advantages afforded by a similar, but slightly toned-down, approach, allowing for attention to detail.

An assistant moderator can also be a valuable resource for dealing with any housekeeping issues that arise, such as an upset participant who needs to be reassured. It is also useful to work in pairs (perhaps as part of a reciprocal arrangement where only one researcher is assigned to a project), which facilitates note-taking on sequences of talk or content of discussion and also allows (provided you have booked more than one room) for parallel groups to be run, in the event of more people turning up than you expect. In terms of timetabling your focus groups, it is advisable to leave sufficient time between sessions to allow you to check that the discussion has successfully recorded. Provided you have left sufficient time and do this as soon as possible after the focus group has taken place, it is surprising how much you can recall of the discussion, particularly with the aid of your notes.

### **Decisions about transcription**

One of the best pieces of advice for the novice focus group researcher is to do some of the transcribing yourself. This makes you a much more attentive moderator in the future, as it will bring you face to face with the frustration of noticing where you have neglected to pick up on interesting leads or where you have failed to seek clarification or to invite participants to finish sentences that were

interrupted. It also has the added bonus of making you much more appreciative of the skills of audiotypists hired to produce focus group transcripts – often with little guidance from researchers about their requirements regarding layout. Some information as to the use to which you want to put transcripts can also be very helpful for the typist charged with this responsibility. Carrying out some of your own transcribing also pays dividends in terms of familiarizing you with the data.

Many researchers assume that they must have verbatim transcripts. However, this does not, in itself, automatically confer rigour any more than relying on notes or listening repeatedly to tapes infers that the procedure is necessarily lacking in terms of being systematic and thorough. This is a property of the research process and is not closely related to the presence or absence of verbatim transcripts. However, verbatim transcripts do open up the possibility of returning to your data at a later date, perhaps to reanalyze it in the light of new insights you have gained from subsequent studies or through further reading.

So enshrined are transcripts in the process of qualitative research that we rarely question their value or the ways in which they are produced. However, transcription requires a range of specialist skills and involves the transformation of fleeting and lively discussion into a text (Poland and Pederson, 1998, p. 302). It is therefore important to bear in mind what may be left out of a transcript, as Macnaghten and Myers (2004) also note. Jenny Kitzinger recommends reading transcripts whilst listening to the original recording, and noting (with the aid of your field notes) any significant gestures, emphases and expressions (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

Conversation analysis requires that transcripts be produced according to a set of conventions, utilizing a range of symbols to indicate specific features of talk. Such attention to detail is crucial, as, according to conversation analysts, 'no facet of speech, whether it is a pause, a repair, a change in pitch or volume, the selection of particular words, the point at which one speaker overlaps another, or even a sniff, should be assumed to be irrelevant to interaction' (Puchta and Potter, 2004, p. 3). As Puchta and Potter (2004) concede, this framework can be difficult to work with at first – both for the researcher and for the typist, since it is cluttered with symbols indicating features of speech delivery and intonation. (See Silverman, 1993, or the appendix provided by Puchta and Potter, 2004, for a glossary of the symbols required for 'Jeffersonian transcription', as this approach is called, and also Rapley, 2007.) For those who are interested in pursuing conversation analysis, Puchta and Potter (2004) also recommend consulting Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) and ten Have (1999).

Even if a rigorous conversation analysis approach is not followed, the general focus group analyst can learn much from this attention to detail, and may incorporate helpful notes on tone, interruptions and body language to aid analysis. (This is discussed further in Chapter 9.)

## Getting started

It is helpful to consider aspects of the moderator's presentation and to ensure that anything likely to emphasize differences in status is minimized. Gray et al. (1997), who carried out focus groups with young people in the school setting, explain their approach, which involved dressing casually and using colloquial language. It is essential, at the outset, to explain the purpose of the group and to give reassurances regarding anonymity, including securing agreement from group members that they will respect confidentiality. It is also essential to allow some time for introductions. Not only does this follow normal rules of courtesy in social encounters; it also aids with voice recognition and, hence, with attributing comments to specific group members during transcription.

Although many projects will benefit from sharing research aims with participants, there are situations where it would be unhelpful to explain this in detail to those taking part in focus groups. An example is provided by the work of Gray et al. (1997), which was concerned with establishing the impact of images of smoking in magazines on young people's perceptions of the individuals and lifestyles portrayed. Here the researchers took care not to reveal that the focus of the research was on smoking. This is more similar to traditional notions of contamination and relates only to certain research situations, such as the one described here, where the intention is to probe automatic responses.

## Moderators' skills

Although many of the marketing research texts present the focus group moderator as someone imbued with inordinate skills, it is useful to bear in mind the principal skill that is a feature of this industry, namely that of marketing. Marketing researchers are engaged in selling a product (the focus group and moderator) to a client, so it would be surprising if there were not a sales pitch and some degree of 'hype' involved.

Other commentators (e.g. Puchta and Potter, 2004), however, have emphasized the transferability of skills already possessed by many individuals, particularly those who have experience of group work, chairing meetings, or even those who are easy communicators in social situations. Although some individuals undoubtedly are predisposed towards this type of interaction, there are, nevertheless, some helpful hints that can be passed on to prospective moderators, which depend on anticipating common problems and having strategies on which to draw in dealing with these. Again preparation emerges as the most valuable tool at the researcher's disposal. One of the most important points to remember is that the good moderator should also keep a weather eye open for distinctions, qualifications and tensions that have analytic promise. The next sections provide some guidance on how to manage difficult situations and how to select or develop effective topic guides and stimulus materials.

## Managing difficult situations

Somewhat surprisingly, Murphy et al. (1992) include in their list of potentially problematic situations those where participants are disagreeing or arguing. Unless this was a particularly acrimonious dispute, my response would be that this is providing valuable data. Frey and Fontana (1993) asserted that focus groups allow the researcher to subtly set people off against each other and explore participants' differing opinions. Again, rather than viewing disagreement as a problem, the trick is to turn this to advantage and use it as a resource in the analysis. Rather than seeking to move the discussion along, my advice would be to probe and invite participants to theorize as to why they hold such different views. This will often occur naturally, as focus group participants generally do not want the session to degenerate into a 'slanging match' and are likely themselves to attempt some resolution of conflicting perspectives.

As researchers, we must continually examine our own assumptions about the degree of power we wield. Although the moderator plays an important role, her or his voice is only one amongst several and other participants also possess sophisticated group-working skills. It is often another focus group participant who helps extricate a facilitator from a tight corner, either by moving the conversation on, redirecting group members to the task or question in hand, or even telling another participant off. Green and Hart (1999) recount how children in one school-based focus group admonished their peers for playing with Plasticine once the discussion had been initiated by the facilitator (1999, p. 27).

Bloor et al. (2001, pp. 48–9) usefully remind us that the task of the moderator is to facilitate the group, not to control it. Disagreement can be an invaluable analytic resource, provided that the facilitator picks up on and explores the reasons behind differences of opinion or emphasis. Indeed, this approach mirrors some models of intervention with regard to conflict resolution, which involve getting individuals on opposing sides to understand the other's point of view.

Although it has sometimes been assumed that one-to-one interviews are more appropriate than are focus groups for exploring sensitive topics, group discussions also have their advantages, not least being that they do not force all participants to answer all questions and allow them to decide what they want to share and what they wish to keep private. Given the encouragement provided by group members who do make personal revelations, however, it is possible that some participants end up revealing more than they had intended, in the face of such exchanges (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Certainly it is crucial that we secure agreement regarding confidentiality at the start of focus group discussions. It is also important to bear in mind the potential for participants to be coerced into making revelations that they regret in retrospect. However, we can sometimes, as researchers, be a little too 'precious' about this and perhaps, provided we have put in place all the necessary safeguards, we should have more confidence with regard to letting our focus group participants 'make their own judgement calls'.

Most focus group manuals provide advice on how to deal with problematic group members, whether this is the dominant person or the individual who is reluctant to contribute to the discussion. Rather than casting the individual as problematic, the best advice is probably to reflect on group processes and to take these into account in your response. For example, it is likely that the persons who have been silent so far are acutely aware of their failure to engage. The longer they don't say anything, the more they are likely to feel that their first utterance is required to be especially pertinent and insightful. An invitation from the facilitator – even if this merely provides an opportunity to echo comments already made – can be a source of relief for the uncomfortable quiet group member. It is relatively rare for a participant to be simultaneously inexpressive, both verbally and non-verbally. The facilitator can provide an opening by, for example, picking up on non-verbal behaviour, such as smiling, nodding or looking surprised.

In a similar vein, Murphy et al. (1992) advise researchers to deal with the participant with grievances by listening to these and to redirect the discussion away from those grievances that are irrelevant to the research. Whilst this is good advice, it is important to acknowledge the propensity of focus groups to elicit 'horror stories'. This becomes apparent when we consider parallel social encounters. For instance, who is going to make the bland statement that they have had a good experience at their dentist's, when others are hogging the limelight with lurid tales of teeth extracted before the anaesthetic had kicked in? Certainly, grievances are not always germane to the research topic in hand, but such stories will out and it is probably best to go along with this rather than trying to fight it. Moreover, horror stories do tend to reveal a lot about expectations, just as exceptions throw into sharp focus the underlying regularly occurring patterns

### Developing and using topic guides

Putting together a topic guide for a focus group discussion requires something akin to an act of faith. New focus group researchers are invariably disconcerted by the apparent brevity of topic guides and need to be convinced that a few brief questions and well-chosen stimulus material will be sufficient to provoke and sustain discussion. However, the brevity of focus group topic guides belies the amount of work involved in their development. The key to this is to anticipate the discussion, imagining the possible responses to your conversational gambits, and, preferably, to pilot topic guides or specific questions before using them in the main research project. If your research is concerned with a topical issue, you might think about trying this out during your own social gatherings, such as dinner parties or with a circle of friends and acquaintances 'down the pub'. Your questions are too focused on individuals, or too detailed, if such social contacts feel you are putting them on the spot. If there has been a lot of media coverage, for example with regard to a news item on cloning of humans, you may not even

need to broach the subject, let alone utilize a topic guide, although the spontaneously occurring discussion may well give you some very useful pointers when it comes to putting together a topic guide for your project. Like the novelist, the qualitative researcher is always poised to capitalize on his or her own social encounters: it is all 'grist to the mill'.

### Ordering of questions and exercises

As with all research tools it is important to consider the ordering of questions. Before discussing this, however, do consider whether you can collect any routine information by means of a pro-forma. This makes more efficient use of both the moderator's and the transcriber's time. In line with standard advice provided in most focus group manuals (Basch, 1987; Murphy et al., 1992), the use of unthreatening general questions is recommended in order to ease one's way into the topic of choice. Murphy et al. (1992) highlight the usefulness in the early stages of focus groups of items that allow each respondent to share a view or experience. In phrasing questions, it can also be useful to appeal to the willingness of other groups to discuss sensitive topics, using an opener such as that suggested by Murphy et al., 'In last night's group, some participants felt that ...' (Murphy et al., 1992, p. 39).

Murphy et al. (1992) also advocate the use of strategically placed items to add humour, and case vignettes to explore views or experiences, where many variables are involved. Although questions should be open-ended, prompts are important and are really used as an aide-mémoire for the researcher to raise any issues that are not spontaneously mentioned. The use of prompts, however, is harder than it might at first appear and is a skill that is developed over time. One of the hardest things for the novice researcher – or focus group moderator – is tolerating silence, and there can be a temptation to rush into using prompts (thereby foreclosing discussion) while participants are, in fact, still thinking about your question and formulating their response (Barbour et al. 2000). One of the functions of prompts is to obtain clarification, by asking participants to expand on or explain their comments, or usage of a particular term.

Advice such as that of starting with non-threatening questions and progressing to the more sensitive ones is helpful, but groups vary in the speed with which they are comfortable to progress and some participants may be less inhibited than others. Focus group manuals sometimes overemphasize the degree of control that a moderator has over the sequence and content of questioning, as other group members may put questions to others out of the intended sequence and may even ask questions that are more sensitive than those that the researcher had decided to use.

It also takes time and practice to become comfortable with using a semi-structured topic guide. Even in one-to-one interviews the researcher must be prepared to change the sequence of questions in response to the issues raised by the interviewee and needs to remain alert so that she or he can pick up on any potentially interesting comments. Focus group moderators are also required to 'think on their

feet' and to remember that the topic guide is just a flexible guide rather than a tightly structured protocol (Murphy et al., 1992, p. 38).

A helpful explanation is provided by Gray et al. (1997) of the rationale behind the content and ordering of questions and exercises in their study of young people's response to images of smoking in youth magazines. They divide these up in order to explain both practical and theoretical reasoning behind the tasks. Amongst the practical reasons were the need to get participants to relax, making the tasks enjoyable, and providing variety, whilst theoretical concerns related to identifying the salience of the cigarette in the pictures presented and establishing how soon participants noticed its presence.

## Types of stimulus material

Cartoons can be especially effective as focus group stimulus material, since they often tap into and express succinctly in an amusing way, difficult and keenly felt dilemmas, but take the sting out of thinking about these. They thus, simultaneously, break the ice and give permission to raise difficult issues. Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) have also highlighted the potential of humour for eliciting responses in focus groups.

Where the main purpose of using stimulus material is to break the ice, it obviously makes sense to introduce the material early in the discussion, as was done with a set of focus groups that sought to elicit people's views of primary care services in one deprived locality. Mindful of the potential for a university-based research project to be viewed as elitist or overly intellectual, we opted to use a still from a television soap, *Peak Practice*, which depicted the unfolding events in a fictional primary care group practice. Importantly, all the participants were familiar with this TV programme and were able to contextualize their own GP (general practitioner, or family physician) practice using this as a reference point. The facilitator showed the photograph and asked, 'This is one general practice that you're probably all familiar with. How does your own GP practice compare with this?' This example illustrates the threefold value of stimulus materials:

- Their usefulness in breaking the ice and injecting humour.
- Their capacity to stimulate discussion.
- The potential they afford for comparison across groups.

Stimulus materials, however, need not be frivolous. Crossley (2002) used health promotion leaflets to explore resistance to professional advice, which had been hinted at by participants in a focus group. Newspaper clippings provide ready access to topical issues and their use in focus groups mirrors naturally

occurring discussion of such items in the course of everyday conversations. Rather than broaching directly with professionals their fears of criticism and litigation, we chose, for our focus groups exploring the challenges of work involving both mental health problems and child protection issues, to use a very recent newspaper clipping. This reported an incident whereby a woman, without a definitive psychiatric diagnosis, had had her baby returned to her care, only to throw the baby from a bridge a few days later. The article went on to question the lack of a diagnosis, quoting a psychiatrist who supplied a diagnosis of personality disorder after the event, and then speculated as to who was to blame for this tragic outcome. Not surprisingly, this generated impassioned debate, with professionals avowing that this was their 'worst nightmare' and questioning how it is possible to be wise before rather than after the event.

For the study that sought to explain the apparent under-reporting of racist incidents, we used material from the Scottish Executive's national advertising campaign, 'One Scotland, Many Cultures', to stimulate discussion regarding how to define racism and what constituted an appropriate response to different situations. This was also topical, as the adverts were being shown on television throughout the period of the study.

### *Developing stimulus materials to facilitate analytic tasks*

As has already been highlighted, the data generated in a group discussion will reflect the dynamics of the group, rather than providing an accurate record of individual participants' views. However, in some research projects it is extremely useful to gain insights into the differences between private and public perspectives. Such insights can arise spontaneously or the researcher can build in such comparative potential by combining focus groups and one-to-one interviews (as did Michell, 1999). An alternative avenue for exploring this issue involves the judicious use of complementary written exercises within the one focus group session, which can also provide access to individuals' views and concerns. Furthermore, such an approach has added value in that it affords a ready comparison between private comments and shared discourse on a specific occasion.

In our research project on management of community nurses in primary care, we were especially interested in how team members perceived each other's roles and contributions and their views on how to facilitate effective team working. Borrowing an approach that had impressed me at a staff development session I had attended at Glasgow University, I designed a booklet for completion throughout the session, with written comments preceding group discussion on specific questions. The first three items in the booklet were each followed by further discussion, as detailed (see Box 6.1).

**Box 6.1 Written exercises****Question One:**

Given that primary care teams can vary in their composition, what range of staff do you think should be included in a team serving an area similar to your own?

*(This was followed by a flip chart exercise where teams produced a 'wish list' of professional representation and access to services.)*

**Question Two:**

Can you think of a list of factors which contribute to a good working relationship? (We are aware that, in answering this question, you may need to think also about the factors which impede the development of a good working relationship. Please use the space provided to note these down. We will not, however, ask you to talk about the negative aspects in the group discussion.)

Factors which contribute:

*(Factors which impede:)*

**Question Three:**

*This exercise is purely a written one and will not be explored in the group discussion. It is intended to act as an 'aide-mémoire' for you to use in relation to exercise 4.*

Can you describe the contribution which each category of staff makes to the primary care team? What is each especially good at?

District Nurse:	Practice/Treatment Room Nurse:
Auxiliary/SEN:	GP:
Health Visitor:	Social Worker:
Other (Please specify):	

Exercise 4 consisted of three separate hypothetical patient scenarios. For each of these, focus group participants were asked which members of their team would be involved in providing care and what actions they considered would be appropriate. These scenarios were designed, with help from specialist practitioners, in order to reflect grey areas of practice, where tasks could, in principle, be performed by more than one category of staff, and included diverse situations, such as a terminally ill AIDS patient, an isolated, recently bereaved man with a leg ulcer and housing problems, and a new mother with potential postnatal depression. The content will, of course, depend on the research interests of the specific project. In this case, we were focusing on how work was allocated in teams and how they perceived each other's roles and responsibilities, so it was

necessary to have examples that were not 'clear-cut' and were likely to give rise to some debate. Vignettes are a well-established tool in survey research (Finch, 1984) but can work particularly well in a focus group setting, which has the added advantage of eliciting comments about the specific aspects of similar but differing scenarios that would give greater cause for concern or merit another response.

Gray et al. (1997) took the novel approach of using digitally altered images to allow them to gauge the impact of pictures both with and without a cigarette present. This also involved separating focus group participants into separate small groups to carry out the related exercises, so required some planning beforehand to ensure that discussions could be kept separate. More commonly, however, such 'contamination' is not a great concern with regard to the sort of exercises likely to be used in focus group studies.

Selection or development of stimulus materials is not an exact science. Nor need selection of materials require an inordinate level of skill. However, piloting – and, on occasion, specialist advice, as in the case above – is essential in order to be confident that the material is likely to give rise to discussion around topics relevant to the research agenda rather than giving rise to discussion unrelated to the research questions.

**Taking stock and piloting stimulus materials**

Stimulus material may not always have the desired effect. We can never be certain of the underlying meanings that materials may have for participants. Researchers should monitor carefully the impact of stimulus materials and exercises and be prepared to modify or withdraw these if they prove to have unintended consequences. For example, Burman et al. (2001) report that they abandoned the use of vignettes and role-playing activities in their study of teenage girls and violence, after this led, in one situation, to a fist fight that culminated in a girl being hurt. Even where the outcome is not so dramatic, pilot work may suggest that a specific piece of stimulus material is likely to have unintended consequences (see Box 6.2).

Focus groups are well placed to explore people's perspectives on issues to which they have previously given little thought. In a study of professionals' views and experiences of advance directives (Thompson et al., 2003a), Thompson was aware that he was likely to be speaking to individuals with varying degrees of exposure to these. We therefore opted to provide a hypothetical clinical vignette, which encouraged them to debate the issues involved in applying the advance directive in this specific situation. The hypothetical scenario was developed to reflect real-life dilemmas with regard to the implementation of advance directives and was specifically designed to 'create dissonance between the ethics of beneficence and respecting autonomy' and, thus, to provoke differences of opinion and discussion (see Box 6.3).

**Box 6.2 An example of stimulus material 'back-firing'**

When running focus group workshops on the theme of the challenges of parenting, I decided to use a newspaper clipping from a UK-based tabloid newspaper (*Scottish Daily Mail*, Monday 14 January, 2002: leading item), which referred to Prince Harry having been exposed as abusing drugs and alcohol. He was quoted as saying, 'I'm so sorry, father', which provided the headline for the piece. I had anticipated that this example of problems extending to royalty would give participants permission to admit to their own concerns and to air worries about their own potential shortcomings as parents. However, this material did not have the desired effect, stimulating, instead, animated discussion about the Royal Family and relationships within it – other than parent and child ones. Indeed, these relationships appeared to hold less interest than did the opportunity to speculate on whether Prince Charles would marry Camilla Parker-Bowles.

**Box 6.3 Hypothetical clinical vignette**

The patient is 78 years old. She lives in a residential home. Up until retirement she worked as a secretary to the headmaster of a private school. She has a devoted daughter who visits twice a week and another daughter 'down south' who comes up infrequently.

The patient lives with dementia. She can walk and feed herself and needs some help with dressing. She occasionally wanders at night. Her physical health is good in that she is not currently being treated for any medical condition, having had a thorough assessment at the hospital one year ago.

She recognizes her daughter and is glad to see her, but her conversational repertoire is limited – the daughter does virtually all the talking during visits. She is unable to read – something that up until three years ago she did avidly. She is undemanding, popular with the staff, and does not seem to be distressed.

She made an advance statement aged 70 years at a time when she enjoyed good mental and physical health. This was given to the home when she arrived 18 months previously.

One night, after a home outing, she comes down with a high fever. The doctor is called and examination shows that she has a pneumonia. With antibiotic treatment she may make a full recovery, without it there is a significant chance she will die.

**Using focus groups to develop stimulus materials**

Focus groups themselves can be used to generate stimulus material, either for use in later groups or to develop vignettes for use in qualitative research or, indeed, for incorporation into a questionnaire (Barbour, 1999b). In our study of GPs' views and experiences of sickness certification (Hussey et al, 2004), the first round of focus groups generated spirited discussion and uncovered a wide range of potential responses, including some examples of behaviour at the extremes of the spectrum between acquiescing to all patient demands (at one end) and challenging all patients' requests (at the other end). Rather than leading discussion in these peer groups, such comments really served as stimulus material, giving participants permission to admit to – or at least to consider – such responses and to locate their own position with reference to this notional continuum (see Box 6.4).

**Box 6.4 Additional probes derived from focus groups**

GP2: ... so, I've just given up worrying about whether I'm acting as the gate-keeper to the DSS (Department of Social Security) system or the Benefits Agency system, or whatever it is. Too many other things to think about; too many other priorities. Terribly sorry – I just don't give a moment's thought. Patient wants a line – that's fine, here you are.

GP3: After the Benefits Agency fraud hotline was put out about 18 months ago I made a few 'phone calls (I did the 141 before dialling). I reported information that I had got, circumstantially, you know, third-party information to the effect that this person should have a review of their DLA (Disability Living Allowance).

**PROBE SET 5:**

I had a lady just before lunch time, one time, who came in and was absolutely academy award performance: she couldn't sit down, back pain agony (group chuckling), furrowed brow, you know, almost out in a cold sweat, and straight leg raise – the whole lot. I couldn't, couldn't trip her up. So, anyway, I had to give her the line. So, this was about five to one. I was just going home for my lunch about 10 minutes later – I saw her walking at a rapid pace up the back – fitter than Linford Christie, you know, and she'd pulled the wool ... and I just laughed. But she won't do it again, I mean, obviously (general laughter). That was her one and only dupe on me.

Further information on the probes used in these focus group discussions (together with a full list of coding categories developed) can be found on the *British Medical Journal's* website, which allows for the deposit of supplementary materials. This can be accessed electronically by a link from the original article (Hussey et al., 2004).

The potential of dissemination sessions for generating further data is often overlooked. However, presenting preliminary findings can provide an opportunity to involve research participants in working collaboratively to furnish explanations. This is a much more useful approach than simply viewing such exercises as providing corroboration of findings through 'respondent validation' and allows the researcher to explore any difference in the responses of participants to tentative findings. Rather than casting the researcher in the role of 'expert', this approach also recommends itself because it enables researchers to acknowledge any puzzling patterns that have emerged and gives them a chance to ask further questions.

### Key points

There are, once again, no hard-and-fast rules regarding the practicalities involved in planning and running focus groups. The key, however, is in carefully considering the implications of your decisions, both in terms of ethical issues and the impact on participants and, importantly, their capacity to generate the data required and to furnish comparative possibilities for analysis. The advice provided here can be summarized as follows:

- Good-quality equipment is important, but don't get carried away with regard to specifications.
- Ensure you are confident in using your equipment and leave plenty of time to set up the room you are going to be using.
- Take notes on the sequence of talk and content of discussion and also record your immediate reflections in your field-note diary.
- Enlist an assistant moderator, if possible.
- Fill in the gaps in the transcript by noting non-verbal communication, while listening to the original recording.
- Pilot topic guides and stimulus materials.
- Practise using prompts and learn to tolerate silences.
- Think about whether you can collect some information from participants using a pro-forma or short questionnaire.
- Remember that focus groups can generate stimulus material for use in later sessions and that dissemination sessions can also be used to generate further data.

### Further reading

Such practical issues are discussed in more detail in the following works:

- Flick, U. (2007a) *Designing Qualitative Research* (Book 1 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Hussey, S., Hoddinott, P., Dowell, J., Wilson, P. and Barbour, R.S. (2004) 'The sickness certification system in the UK: a qualitative study of the views of general practitioners in Scotland', *British Medical Journal*, 328: 88–92.
- Murphy, B., Cockburn, J. and Murphy, M. (1992) 'Focus groups in health research', *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 2: 37–40.
- Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (2004) *Focus Group Practice*. London: Sage.
- Rapley, T. (2007) *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* (Book 7 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Thompson, T., Barbour, R.S. and Schwartz, L. (2003a) 'Advance directives in critical care decision making: a vignette study', *British Medical Journal*, 327: 1011–15.

# 7 Ethics and engagement

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## Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- be aware of the special ethical issues in the use of focus group; and
- understand in particular the impact focus groups can have for participants.

This chapter revisits and expands upon the ethical issues that arise throughout the whole process of conducting research using focus groups. It examines the reasons for people agreeing to take part in our research and the responsibilities of the researcher in terms of reciprocity. Participating in focus group discussions can have either a positive or negative impact and some suggestions are provided with regard to minimizing the potential negative consequences. However, the difficulty of predicting what might give rise to distress is acknowledged, since responses to discussion are inevitably dependent on the specific context and circumstances of the individuals taking part. The importance of allowing time to debrief is emphasized, as is the need to have relevant information or contact numbers on hand, so that researchers do not simply 'grab the data and run'. Debriefing may also be valuable for the researcher, particularly if the topic is an emotive one and grant-holders and supervisors also have ethical obligations with regard to safeguarding the psychological and physical well-being of research staff and students. The final section of this chapter examines the issues raised in conducting focus groups with vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly,

the disabled and those with mental health problems, and the challenges of cross-cultural focus group studies.

## Impact of focus group participation

Little is known about the reasons why people agree to take part in focus group discussion, but several researchers have noted that focus group discussions can be cathartic. Jones and Neil-Urban (2003), for example, report on the impact of a focus group session on fathers of children with cancer, which far exceeded the anticipated benefits. Taking part in focus groups can also have benefits for participants who do not have such expectations at the outset. Burman et al. (2001), who carried out a study of teenage girls' views and experiences of violence, commented that: 'Many girls maintained that taking part in the research enabled them to reflect upon their experiences and gain better understanding of the role and impact of violence in their lives' (2001, p. 449).

Particularly where we are involved in convening focus groups to discuss sensitive topics – but not only in such cases – the discussion may touch on areas that are more difficult for some participants than for others. However, it is worth bearing in mind that focus group participants can be very skilled in terms of providing support for each other and can, at times, give reassurance that it would be difficult to provide in the course of a one-to-one interview. This is what is occurring in the following excerpts from a mixed gender focus group discussing fathers' attendance at deliveries, where two of the men present questioned the conventional wisdom about the birth being an overwhelmingly emotive experience for new fathers (see Box 7.1).

### Box 7.1 A focus group as a forum for providing support

*Moderator – Male General Practitioner (GP)/Family Physician with 2 children*

*Isaac – GP with 1 child*

*Jack – GP with 2 children*

*Pam – GP with 1 child*

*Jane – Practice Nurse with 2 grown-up children*

**Isaac:** And we've seen so many births and we know – well, maybe it lessens the significance of childbirth ... which must be an amazing experience for other people. Erm, but in so many ways it was just another birth to me. Although, you know, there's no way that I

*(Continued)*



(Continued)

would have missed it. I wanted to be there. Erm, I think it would have been better if I hadn't been a doctor in my first childbirth experience.

**Mod:** **Can you think back to how you felt at the time?**

**Jack:** During when the baby was actually being born? When the baby was actually born or during the labour? Erm, yeah, it just seemed like another birth. It doesn't particularly – you know, I can't say, 'Oh, gosh, yes, that was when ...' and the two of them were fairly blurred, even though they were in different hospitals. Er, and, you know, it's not really such a big deal ... And, er ... erm ... you know, to me it was just another (laughs) another day.

(laughter)

**Jack:** And, you know, other things that the children have done since then have been much more special in different ways than just popping out.

(Excerpt One – Workshop Mixed Gender Focus Group)

**Mod:** **Isaac, you said you wouldn't have missed it for the world. What do you think you would have missed if you hadn't been there?**

**Isaac:** The first sight of my child being born and seeing, 'Is it a boy? Is it a girl?'

**Mod:** **Um ...**

**Isaac:** Erm, and, actually, to have, in some ways, I have to see it to know it had happened. To know it was my baby, almost. Erm, and I suppose I wanted to protect (my wife) from what she might go through. Because I've seen plenty of things go wrong.

**Mod:** **Um ...**

**Isaac:** And I did witness a rather cocky anaesthetist and I kept quiet and didn't say I was a doctor ... Yeah, I wouldn't have missed it, but, erm, it was spoilt by my previous experiences.

**Mod:** **Yeah ... yes.**

**Isaac:** But that's – again as I say it's very personal. Erm, I didn't want that – my previous experiences of some of the midwives – spoiling a very happy experience.

**Pam:** My husband says that he has this ... this sort of image etched on his memory, really, of the birth. You know, that at the moment when the baby is born is just something that will always be there. I think ... I just don't know whether that's the same sort of thing that ... that you say. The sort of – this kind of picture of your child, who is actually coming into the world – something that you will never forget. That was that moment.

(Continued)

(Continued)

**Isaac:** Yeah. Having said that I can relate to what Jack said about it being a bit of a blur and ... (laughs) It wasn't that it was any different to any other birth.

**Jack:** That makes me feel better. I must say, never having done an obstetric job, either, so you haven't, you know, you haven't seen lots of ... maybe seen a few ... A few, but that's all.

(Excerpt Two – Workshop Mixed Gender Focus Group)

As well as providing support for each other in their admissions of having had experiences that fell somewhat short of the euphoric picture often painted of fathers' engagement, Jack and Isaac are also comparing their experiences and reflecting on the impact of their previous levels of professional involvement: that is, they are, in effect, sharing in the moderator's task of starting to analyze the data, even as it is being generated. Focus group discussions may also throw up comments on the part of some participants that may upset others (for example, racist or sexist ones) (Kevern and Webb, 2001, p. 331). However, a common feature of focus group discussions is the degree to which participants actively support each other, encouraging others to speak (Duggleby, 2005) and endorsing their experiences, if not always their specific views.

The potentially harmful impact can also be lessened by giving careful consideration when convening groups and seeking to separate those whose comments are likely to cause offence to others. For example, in the study of professionals' experiences of advance directives, we opted to carry out one-to-one interviews with individuals who were known to hold particularly strong stances and whose presence might have inhibited – even offended – others with less well-developed views. However, it is not always possible to anticipate all such occurrences, due to the fluid nature of focus group discussions and to the fact that the researcher is never in possession in advance of all the information about participants that might be relevant or that might influence comments (Krueger, 1994). Smith (1995) stresses the importance of considering not only how participants feel during the group discussion, but how they feel at the end of the session. Here, too, there can be surprises in store, as what participants may find upsetting is likely to be a highly personal matter.

## Debriefing

Debriefing participants at the end of a focus group session is the responsibility of the moderator and should never be rushed. It is important to allow enough time for participants to raise any concerns and to ensure that they have a contact

number for the researcher, should they wish to query anything. At this stage it is also advisable to give participants the opportunity (then or later) to request that any of their comments be erased from the transcript. Interestingly, I have never had the experience of anyone asking for this to be carried out; perhaps knowing that this is an option provides reassurance enough for most people.

Moderators should also come prepared with relevant information leaflets or helpline contact numbers. For instance, in our study of decision-making about medication in the context of prescription charges, we provided information about 'pre-payment certificates' (which allowed people to save money and budget for prescription charges). Similarly, Seymour et al. (2002) provided the elderly people they had asked about end-of-life care with addresses of bereavement care organizations and scheduled a follow-up meeting with each association that had been involved in recruiting participants to the study.

The issue of the impact of doing research on the researcher is also important – although frequently overlooked. Carrying out qualitative research, even where sensitivity of the topic is not immediately apparent, may expose the researcher to upsetting or distressing accounts, and it is important that the researcher has access to a 'supportive and experienced research supervisor or colleague: in order to discuss her/his thoughts and feelings after fieldwork exposure' (Owen, 2001, p. 657). Commenting on their experience of eliciting data from girls on the topic of violence, Burman et al. (2001) highlight the cumulative effect of reading multiple transcripts during the process of analysis, which may catch the researcher unawares. Support needs, therefore, are not limited to the data generation phase.

Physical safety also needs to be considered when designing a piece of research. Contract researchers tend to be young and female and, as such, may be particularly likely to be placed in potentially dangerous situations (Green et al., 1993). Since focus group work frequently seeks to include the 'hard to reach' or marginalized, it may require researchers to travel to areas characterized by high crime rates and violence.

## Special considerations and challenges

### *Vulnerable groups*

Focus groups have frequently been used to access hard-to-reach populations, such as urban youth in Boston (Rosenfeld et al., 1996), Mexican-American gang members (Valdez and Kaplan, 1999), minority ethnic groups (Hennings et al., 1996; Farooqui et al., 2000), or people who are out of contact with services (Cossrow et al., 2001). For other groups, such as the elderly or children, focus groups are often favoured in preference to one-to-one interviews, which tend to be considered either inappropriate, or too invasive or threatening. This raises the question as to whether special consideration should be given to using focus groups in these situations or whether specific techniques should be developed.

Focus groups are generally considered more appropriate than one-to-one interviews for young children (Mauthner, 1997, p. 23). Gender is likely to play an important role in determining dominant voices in focus groups with children; thus, most researchers advocate holding single-sex groups to guard against the tendency of boys to 'talk more, more loudly and determine the conversation topics [and] to overshadow girls' (Mauthner, 1997, p. 23) in mixed gender groups. Similarly, focus groups with siblings also present a challenge in terms of older children tending to dominate the discussion (Mauthner, 1997).

Most researchers working with children rely on a combination of activities involving drawing, writing, reading and sorting (Mauthner, 1997). Both Mauthner (1997) and Morgan et al. (2002) recommend using pen and paper exercises, and Morgan et al., report that, on one occasion, a child who had previously been very quiet contributed more to the discussion after engaging in this activity. Morgan et al. (2002) were also enthusiastic about the data-generating potential of role-play and found it helpful to permit children to 'fiddle' with toys throughout the discussion. They report having used a soft toy as a mouthpiece to allow them to ask knowledge-related questions in a non-threatening manner. It is also important to locate discussion within a meaningful context for children (Mauthner, 1997, p. 24).

However, props are not always necessary, and a creative approach that builds on children's natural propensity for imaginative play can pay dividends: see, for example, the paper by Sparks et al. (2002), who were interested in studying the 'ways in which the moral and practical dilemmas of punishment are debated and deliberated upon in discussions among nine year old children' (Sparks et al., 2002, p. 116). They employed a Hobbesian-inspired make-believe gambit to encourage children to consider a world in which adults had disappeared. Generating data from children raises important issues for researchers, not least ethical considerations. Also useful is a degree of reciprocity, whereby the researcher is willing to share some information about her or himself, perhaps in response to direct questions put by child participants, who may well broach subjects that adult respondents would hesitate to raise.

Carrying out research with children highlights the issue of the unequal power relationships involved between adults and young people. However genuine the researcher's intentions, there nevertheless appear to be some defining characteristics of the research relationship that concentrate power in the hands of the researcher rather than the participants.

Seymour et al. (2002) used focus groups to explore the attitudes of elderly people towards end-of-life care, thus combining a sensitive topic with a group considered to make special demands of the researcher. In common with Barrett and Kirk (2000), who make recommendations regarding the use of focus groups with the elderly disabled, Seymour et al. (2002) advise using small groups. The use of a television-like format that was familiar to participants facilitated discussion and allowed the researchers to move the discussion along if it became too personal. Barrett and Kirk also point out that aspects of working with the disabled elderly, such as their declining ability to divide attention between more than one speaker,

difficulty in switching topics, and the tendency to answer questions some time after these have been put, provide specific challenges. These characteristics require the moderator to take particular care to discourage interruptions and to flag up changes in topic, and they suggest that, during the process of analysis, the researcher should remain alert to the possibility of replies that are 'out of synch' and ensure that any apparent non-sequitur is interpreted within its rightful context. Similar issues were raised by research that involved conducting focus groups with women with serious and enduring mental health problems (Owen, 2001).

Owen (2001) reports that she had chosen focus groups on account of their potential to be respectful and non-condescending (as suggested by Morgan and Krueger, 1993). In the event she found that the women participants did not engage in interaction with each other to any great degree, generally responding directly to the moderator, which suggests that the extra time and effort involved in setting up focus group sessions may not yield many significant advantages. In our own study on mental health and child protection, we opted to use one-to-one interviews with mothers with severe mental health problems, since these also gave us the opportunity to follow up their progress through the system some six months later. We were careful, however, to employ as the interviewer an individual with experience as a psychiatric nurse. In contrast to many researchers with clinical experience who take their skills for granted, Owen does not discount such valuable expertise, which is eminently transferable to the task of generating focus group data. Although Owen (2001) acknowledges that, at times, the distinction between a research focus group and a therapy session became quite blurred, she was able to address this dilemma through eliciting the support of staff members who had sat in on the focus group sessions and who worked with individuals with regard to the issues raised over the weeks following the focus group discussions.

### ***Cross-cultural research***

Yelland and Gifford (1995) argue that focus groups may be inappropriate for use in cross-cultural research, since they have been developed specifically for use with Anglo-Celtic populations. However, they found that, with due attention to context, focus groups did provide a forum where they were able to discuss in depth the beliefs about sudden infant death with women from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, who were living in Australia. For such research to be successful, it is crucial that the researchers have a detailed knowledge of the cultural context in which they wish to work. Strickland (1999) reports on the important role played by tribal planning teams whose help was enlisted for a study of conceptualizations about pain amongst Coastal Salish (Inland River Native Americans in Washington State). Amongst the many helpful pieces of advice provided was one alerting the research team to the custom whereby tribal elders – especially men – did not speak until others have spoken. This had important consequences in terms of building in time at the end of focus group sessions to

ensure that these individuals' views were given adequate expression and attention. Further immersion in this culture revealed that the talking circle relied on turn-taking, resulting in a distinctly Native American form of communication as compared to that of other cultural groups where group communication is generally more interactive and spontaneous.

Focus groups with non-English-speaking participants, however, raise particular challenges. There are dangers in restricting research to members of these groups who do speak English. As Esposito (2001) points out, such individuals have, by definition, been acculturated and, hence, cannot provide a 'true reflection' of the views of their non-English-speaking peers.

There are obvious advantages to holding focus groups in participants' native languages. Even where they are also fluent in English, using their mother-tongue can encourage more spontaneous and open discussion. Lam et al. (2001) observed that they generated much richer data through allowing medical students to hold discussions about their training course in colloquial Cantonese. Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) recommend, if possible, recruiting bilingual moderators, since even where focus groups are held in English and participants are fluent English-speakers, they found that the Latina women they studied still frequently resorted to using Spanish terms, particularly to refer to concepts and people invested with emotive significance.

Most translation exercises in research involve developing a culturally equivalent research instrument for cross-cultural testing in quantitative studies. Not all concepts can be rendered in another language, nor are they necessarily universal. Therefore, not everything is, in effect, translatable (Esposito, 2001, p. 572). This applies equally to translating focus group topic guides. Tang et al. (2000) found, for example, that Chinese women did not have a word for violence and had to find novel ways of directing conversation to this topic in focus groups. Also, given the flexibility with which moderators apply these loosely structured topic guides, picking up on new topics as these emerge and seeking to harness participants' insights, there is considerable potential for meanings to shift. Chiu and Knight (1999) encountered challenges of this kind in their work on minority ethnic women's views and experiences of breast and cervical screening, where they relied on interpreters to run groups in languages other than English. Since Chiu is herself bilingual, this afforded insights that might otherwise have been overlooked and highlighted the extent to which interpreters were changing the meaning of questions and, hence, affecting the content of the data generated. They conclude that it is essential to provide interpreters with some training in moderating focus groups; it is not sufficient to expect them simply to translate 'on the hoof' and hope that research objectives will somehow, magically, be preserved.

Translation – whether of topic guides or taped focus group discussions – is a highly complex process, which in addition to the obvious requirement of fluency in another language, needs to take into account contextual issues (Esposito, 2001). This is particularly important where there are no equivalent words in English

for concepts appealed to during focus group discussions. With regard to some languages, such as Cantonese (Twinn, 1998), verbatim translation would result in ungrammatical English, since the structures of the languages are so different. Taking these difficulties into account, Esposito recommends encouraging translators to use 'meaning-based rather than word-for-word interpretation' (Esposito, 2001, p. 572). This has clear implications for the extent to which phenomenological approaches can be applied to data analysis, since nuances are as likely to have been the result of the translation process as to have reflected participants' original meanings and constructions. In the iterative process, which characterizes qualitative research, data generation and the beginnings of analysis occur simultaneously. Topic guides are 'fluid, adaptable, and change course when appropriate' (Esposito, 2001, p. 573). Esposito goes on to outline two main options in generating data in languages in which the researchers are not fluent, the first of which involves the monolingual researcher relying on trained bilingual facilitators to carry out focus groups. The other option is to add a real-time professional interpreter to the process, which lets the researcher participate in the data collection process as it occurs (2001, p. 573). This facilitates concurrent analysis, redirection of questions and validation through feedback to participants.

Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) describe in detail the approach that they took in order to ensure that translations of their Spanish-speaking focus groups remained as true as possible to the original content and meaning. They had taken pains to recruit some researchers who were bilingual in English and the various dialects spoken by the Latina women in their study. Each focus group was transcribed and then translated by one researcher, after which a second researcher listened to the tape and double-checked the translation. Wherever possible, they made sure that a researcher familiar with the dialect in question was involved at some point in this process.

### Key points

Ethical issues are not just something that needs to be taken into account in completing application forms for ethics committees. Consideration of ethical issues should be a feature of each stage of focus group research and we should not only seek to minimize potential harm for those recruited into our studies, but should also build protective measures into our supervisory relationships. Whilst carrying out focus group research with vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly, the disabled or those with mental health problems, raises particular challenges, we can benefit from paying more attention to these same issues in our more mundane focus group applications. Cross-cultural research, for example, highlights the extent to which analysis – and moderators' influence on the analytic potential of datasets – begins even before transcripts are produced.

- You should give careful consideration to the reasons participants may have for taking part in your study and seek to be as open with them as possible with regard to the implications for them as individuals and the likely outcome of the research project.
- Try to anticipate potential difficulties and be as clear as possible about role boundaries, especially if you are a health care professional or therapist.
- Anticipate problematic focus group scenarios and be prepared. Try to minimize the potential for these through giving consideration to sampling and be prepared to deal with any that do arise through sensitive moderating.
- Debriefing is important and you need to build in time so that this is not a rushed activity. Provide participants with your contact details and provide assurances with regard to erasing from transcripts any comments with which they are unhappy. Also bring along any relevant information leaflets (with helpline numbers etc.) to distribute at the end of the session.
- Think about the impact on the researcher of exposure to potentially difficult situations and heated debates and make sure that you address both safety and support issues.
- You should give extra thought to the special issues raised in relation to conducting focus groups with vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and those with mental health problems or learning difficulties. Focus groups with minority ethnic populations require a sophisticated understanding of the differences within as well as between groups, an awareness that language, culture and religion are not synonymous, and an appreciation of interpretation and translation as being far from straightforward processes.

### Further reading

Ethical issues around using focus groups are discussed in more detail by these authors:

- Mauthner, M. (1997) 'Methodological aspects of collecting data from children: lessons from three research projects', *Children and Society*, 11: 16–28.
- Owen, S. (2001) 'The practical, methodological and ethical dilemmas of conducting focus groups with vulnerable clients', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 36(5): 652–58.
- Seymour, J., Bellamy, G., Gott, M., Ahmedzai, S.H. and Clark, D. (2002) 'Using focus groups to explore older people's attitudes to end of life care', *Ageing and Society*, 22(4): 517–26.
- Umaña-Taylor, A.J. and Bámaca, M.Y. (2004) 'Conducting focus groups with Latino populations: lessons from the field', *Family Relations*, 53(3): 261–72.

## 8 Generating data

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- have a feeling for what to consider in getting a focus group started, continuing and making it work;
- know the practicalities of steering such a group; and
- know how to keep a focus on comparison.

This chapter provides an insight into the craft of generating qualitative data, through thoughtful and theoretically sensitive moderating of focus groups. It provides a flavour of the sort of interaction elicited during focus group discussions, including how people may reformulate their views, engage in animated debate, and express shared cultural understandings. It makes explicit some of the skills involved and emphasizes the importance of anticipating analysis, even as data are being generated, through picking up on differences between participants' perspectives, asking for clarification and harnessing their insights.

### Investigating how people form their views

Focus groups, as David Morgan (1988) has argued, excel at uncovering *why* people think as they do and it is certainly possible to unpick the process of formation of views during focus group exchanges.

The following example is drawn from a focus group transcript generated via a focus group workshop that explored, as the 'virtual topic', people's views of fathers' attendance at the delivery of babies. This topic had been chosen because it consistently makes for spirited discussion and is particularly useful in getting health care staff to take off their 'professional hats'. As such, it is valuable in affording participants insights into the very personal nature of focus group discussions and gives them an opportunity to 'problematize' an aspect of their lives to which they may not have previously devoted much critical attention. Here, one of the participants, Carolyn, laughs as she recounts how she, in fact, gave her partner little choice with regard to attending the delivery. This reflection prompts another group member, Gail, to reconsider her own behaviour (see Box 8.1).

#### Box 8.1 Reformulating views

**Martin:** But, in a sense, what's the point of going to the classes if you're not going to be there on the day? On the other hand, what's the point of going to the classes and ... and doing all the 'Fu, fu, fu', you know – the breathing bit, or whatever – because, I mean, I'm not sure how helpful that's going to be.

**Mod:** **OK. I wonder if anyone's had a recent experience of ... of a birth with either the father present or not present?**

**Carolyn:** Yes, well, I've had a baby recently – two in the last three years.

**Mod:** **Oh really?**

**Carolyn:** So, and my husband was there for both and it wasn't an issue – he was *gonna* be there (laughs).

**Mod:** **It wasn't an issue?**

**Carolyn:** Yes, yes. I didn't even ask him whether he wanted to be there or not and I don't know whether it was just, sort of, me deciding that was how it was going to be

...

**Gail:** I think I put enormous pressure on my ex-husband to be there at the birth, but, having been through it once, I don't know if I would have done it again the second time – whether I'd have insisted on him being there. As it was, it all happened in such a panic anyway. He was there and didn't have a lot of choice, but, erm, having, as I say, gone through it once, I really don't think it matters who's there with you as long as there's somebody there, guiding you and reassuring you ... er ... And I feel really sorry for anybody who strongly feels that they ... they don't want to be ... there ... a ... a partner who doesn't want to – feels that they ... they don't want to be there ...

(Continued)

*(Continued)*

a ... a partner who doesn't want to be there and the pressure is on them – be it male or female.

**Mod:** Carolyn brought up another issue, that ... er ... I don't know whether you have ... any comment to make on this: that some women wouldn't actually want their partners there, but you may have a situation where the partner is ... the woman's choice is almost taken away because the ...

**Gail:** (Interrupting) Um ... I know a friend of mine she didn't want her partner there ... erm ... because she felt it was a very undignified situation and she didn't want him to see her in that state ... erm ... I don't know why – she never really elaborated on it – but ... and he wanted to be there, so it works both ways, I suppose.

**Martin:** It seems to me every situation's completely different because each couple is completely different.

**Gail:** Yes.

**Martin:** So, you know, why ... why is the, sort of, society pressure there? I don't really understand. I don't really understand why I'm expected to attend the event.

*(Workshop Mixed Gender Focus Group)*

Interestingly, Martin, a researcher with no children, does not have a partner who is pregnant, as might be suggested by his last comment. What this shows is the immediacy of focus group discussions and their potential to encourage participants to engage in projecting, in a similar fashion to that involved in role-play, but in a much less laboured and artificial way. Note, also, the stress that Carolyn puts on the word 'gonna' and her laughter after this statement, which is picked up on by the moderator who asks, 'It wasn't an issue?' This underlines the importance of paying close attention to the tone and emphasis in the original speech and demonstrates how much could be lost by relying solely on a written transcript, as sometimes occurs when the so-called 'principal investigator' – or grant-holder – has responsibility for analyzing data generated by someone else. (See the discussion on note-taking in Chapter 6 and also on capitalizing on the information that can be provided by the moderator during the process of analysis, discussed in Chapter 10.)

### Stimulating debate

Frey and Fontana (1993) point out that what they refer to as 'the group interview' provides 'an especially nice situation for revealing variations in perspective and attitude and a ready means, through subtle pitting of one [respondent] against the other, for distinguishing between shared and variable perspectives' (1993, p. 82).

In the study about the reporting of racist incidents in the Strathclyde area we used material from a national advertising campaign, 'One Scotland, Many Cultures', developed by the Scottish Office and designed to raise awareness of racism in Scotland. This series of short films was broadcast regularly during the period in which we carried out the research and included a series of vignettes ranging from everyday encounters to more serious instances of racism. However, I had noted that several of these short films elicited varying responses from my own circle of friends, with some people commenting that they did not consider that certain scenarios constituted racism, whilst others maintained that they did. We therefore anticipated that this material would be fruitful with regard to tapping in to differing perspectives and encouraging debate.

Inevitably, some groups are livelier than others and, on occasion, animated discussion, with participants comparing and justifying their perspectives, rendering the issues relevant to their own lives and situations, can progress for lengthy spells, which do not require any input from the moderator (see Box 8.2).

#### Box 8.2 Animated debate

**Paul:** I've even heard other people say that they're going to the 'white Pakis' – if it's an international shop run by a white person, it's 'white Paki's'.

**Roddie:** I wouldn't think of 'Chinky' as being ... whenever it's used, as 'I'm going to the Chinky', I wouldn't think of that as racist, but I would *never say*, 'I'm going to a Paki shop'.

**Stuart:** Mmm ... see, I don't know ...

**Roddie:** ... and, if I said, I would be saying it and thinking, 'You shouldn't be saying that'. Whereas, with 'Chinky' – although I wouldn't refer to the people themselves when I'm saying that.

**Stuart:** I think it's more, 'I'm going to the Paki's – do you want anything?' I say that all the time.

**Roddie:** I think it's used as an abbreviation. The Chinkies are the Chinese – in the sense of the shop ...

**Dave:** Yeah – rather than the people – whereas, with Paki, you're more ...

**Stuart:** Yeah, I think it is more ...

**Roddie:** Most of the time it's descriptive.

**Dave:** Yeah, that's true. That's what Paul's been saying.

**Roddie:** Just a term for a kind of international shop – more than, I think, being a racist comment.

**Stuart:** It means someone who comes from Pakistan.

**Roddie:** If you turned round and called someone a 'Paki bastard', then that's what's racism, but, I mean, hardly anyone ever says that when they're

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

actually there, I mean ... it's interesting, I don't know ... I mean, I would never think of going up to someone and calling them 'Paki'.

**Stuart:** I did. I got a row at the weekend. I was speaking (with some of my friends) and I said, 'I'm going for a Chinky the night when I get home', and the other (people) are going, 'Sssh!' and I'm 'What?' And there were some Malaysian people behind me, but I didn't see anything offensive in that.

**Roddie:** No, that's what I thought. I don't see anything offensive in it at all. And then at work, someone says something like that and the Chinese girl there went up to the toilet crying, and everyone else at work gave this other girl hell - just because they didn't like her anyway - for saying it, but I never thought twice about it.

**Paul:** Maybe it's us that's got the problem then, you know.

(Quick exchanges - impossible to differentiate between speakers)

?: It's interesting, what becomes with it ... to do with how ... coloured people have used the term 'nigger' and think nothing of it, but if white people use it ...

?: Aye.

?: It's not the same.

?: (Inaudible)

?: Far, far worse.

?: (Inaudible)

?: No - well they would say, like, 'Well, you're coloured as well.'

?: ... Not a problem.

?: But I think it's kind of all right for them to call each other that.

?: Yeah, exactly, in a way it's kind of ...

?: Aye.

?: (Inaudible)

**Roddie:** You know, it's like gay people calling each other faggots. ... You know, it's the same thing with religion as well - you can call each other whatever you like if you're in that religion, but, if you're outside that religion.

?: I can't call you a Papist.

(Young 'Indigenous' White Men's Focus Group)

Animated discussion in focus group transcripts is often characterized by the absence of the moderator's voice. Knowing when not to intervene is, in itself, a skill - and a hard-won skill at that. One of the hardest things for the novice moderator is perhaps taking a back seat and refraining from asking questions or making comments, provided that the discussion remains on track. In practice it can be

difficult to decide when discussion goes off track, as participants may be developing a point that turns out to be germane, although this may not be clear from the outset.

## Accessing cultural frameworks

Focus groups allow participants to debate issues within the context of their own shared cultural background, as noted by Callaghan (2005). In the course of focus groups, participants may tell stories in order to confirm their common experience and collective identity (Munday, 2006) - which may also be what tends to give rise to consensus in focus group discussions. The capacity of focus groups to access shared cultural frameworks means that different groups establish their own 'rules of engagement', and the following excerpt shows how later in the same focus group (from which the previous excerpt is drawn) the moderator was able to use to advantage the casual swearing and references to shared culture that were a feature of these young men's talk in order to further explore their ideas about racism and racist incidents (see Box 8.3).

### Box 8.3 Capitalizing on shared cultural referents

**Roddie:** I mean, I've known quite a few 'Weegies' (term used to refer to Glaswegians) living in Edinburgh, who've got quite a lot of hassle - calling them 'soap dodgers'. I mean, it's kind of funny, but it happens again and again and again, and they get really pissed off with it - and it's only a wee thing, but that's a bit out of order and that's only, like, 'cos they're Glaswegian, and the whole England thing as well, you know ...

(Further discussion about being Irish or English in Scotland and being teased about this.)

**Alan:** (Tells a story about being in a pub in Glasgow watching football, when the Scots present were supporting the team playing against England and describes his feelings of intimidation as one of a few people supporting the English team.)

**Roddie:** I think you've got a point, though, I mean, I suppose it's racism ...

**Mod:** Well, I was just going to ask you that - how do you differentiate between calling someone a 'Weegie' and calling someone a 'Paki'?

**Roddie:** Mmm ... (Long pause)

**Mod:** I mean, you rarely get 'Weegie bastard' written all over the front of a shop ...

(Continued)

(Continued)

**Roddie:** Mmm ... If you get someone calling someone a Scot in a derogatory ... that becomes quite ... I mean, it's just the way and context it's being used ...

**Alan:** Like if you call someone a 'Jock', that is quite offensive, but ... it depends. You get people from Newcastle generally called 'Geordies' and that's just the term for people in that area, and Glaswegians – 'Weegie's' short for Glaswegian – but it depends. It's more the short term from the area you're from sometimes, when it isn't meant offensively at all and when, another time, it could be meant as an offensive word ...

(Inaudible comment followed by general laughter)

**Mod:** So you think it's the way it's used, or ... ?

**Alan:** It's the sense in which it's meant. Most of the time you can tell whether it's in a, sort of, conversational way, or it's an insult.

**Dave:** But I think, yeah, I think you're being sort of derogatory towards people you don't know, about where they come from. It's different when it's your friends, but when you're being derogatory about – to – someone you don't know, like, you sort of imply – you're bringing up – that I am from wherever – a name for it ...

(Young 'Indigenous' White Men's Focus Group)

As the above excerpt implies, focus groups also allow participants to stake a collective identity by differentiating themselves from other people. Munday (2006), in her study of members of a Women's Institute, recounts how they distinguished between 'ladies' and 'members', explaining that the former, 'whilst being clever and skilful and able to successfully turn their hands to anything, are seen as lacking the genuine warmth and spontaneity of the member' (2006, p. 102).

Such complex social constructions are challenging for the data analyst, who cannot always take what is being said at 'face value'. As Matoesian and Coldren (2002) remind us:

... speakers do a lot of things when they talk and focus on something called a topic is only one of them. ... They may design their talk as strategic ideological performance rather than a factual report. And when speakers do offer opinions they do not usually state what they mean explicitly but often do so in a highly poetic and implicit fashion. ... (2002, p. 484)

## Seeking Clarification

However, as Matoesian and Coldren (2002) point out:

... the community (involved in the research) may speak (in) a different voice from the academic professionals who evaluate them and because they may not use a professional or academic register ... their words may stimulate misunderstanding in focus group interactions. (2002, p. 487)

In other words, there may be several different standards of linguistic rationality at play in any one focus group discussion. Rather than assume that you, as a moderator, have adequately understood such references, however, there is always the potential to seek clarification, thereby stimulating further discussion. One of the adverts used in the 'One Scotland, Many Cultures' campaign showed a male Asian shopkeeper reacting to being called a 'Paki'. In the following excerpt, the moderator, alert to the subtle nuances involved in the choice of vocabulary, chose to ask explicitly about this usage, following a comment by one focus group participant who referred to going to 'the ethnic shop' (see Box 8.4).

### Box 8.4 Seeking clarification

**Barbara:** Well, I think if they're there and they're opening all hours when the other shops are closed and they are out working and they are going to supply – supply and demand – and it's food. Maybe, when a child's hungry, when they are looking for bread and milk, we always go to the ethnic shop.

**Mod:** And you used the word there 'ethnic shop' – what did you ... one of the things in the advert is the use of the word 'Paki' and I was wondering what you thought about that? Is that something that you think is racist? Or, what kind of words or images do you think are racist?

**Sarah:** We had that in the conversation ... and, actually, I don't think of a Glaswegian ... I don't think so. There is always going to be Pakis. I mean, I'm 72 and that is what it was called, so, I mean ... to say that it's wrong to say it – I don't think it's wrong.

**Alison:** Well, it's not meant to be wrong – it's just, like, you shorten people's name.

**Sarah:** Well, they come from Pakistan, from so ...

**Alison:** It's not meant to be derogatory.

**Eileen:** Well, ye cannae pronounce their name anyway if they've got an unusual name.

(Continued)



(Continued)

- Mod:** So you don't think that that is racist necessarily?
- Alison:** Well, it's not meant to be racist. If they take it as racist it would have to change, if they do, but it's not meant ... well, I don't think ...
- Barbara:** It's meant to be distinguishing.
- Joan:** You are becoming very aware of these things, you know, although we don't mean it – we are so used to saying the word. But it's, you know, ... I don't think ... 'I am going to the Paki's'. It's just a word.
- Alison:** It's an endearment, really, isn't it?
- Eileen:** Aye, aye. I don't think I have ever said it in front of the Pakis.
- Barbara:** Why I changed it to 'ethnic' was my sister's granddaughter turned around and said, 'They are not Pakis' there are some Algerians, there is some ... They are all different nationalities – you call them 'ethnic'. 'Now, she was 6 years old! 'Because I have got ethnic people in my class at school and that is why I call them ethnic.'

(*'Indigenous' White Women's Focus Group*)

## Maintaining focus/steering discussion

Puchta and Potter (1999) have highlighted the tension for focus group moderators between 'working at' getting people to speak and encouraging spontaneity. They refer to this as a tension between 'pestering the living daylights' out of participants and the ideal that group members should 'answer as spontaneously as possible'. They continue: 'Put another way, it is a tension between the licence to give answers that are "neither right nor wrong" and a demand on participants to actually produce answers rather than "I-don't-know's"'. (1999, p. 315).

Much as we might like to emphasize the open-ended nature of focus groups and their greater capacity – in comparison to other methods at our disposal – to explore issues of salience for participants rather than rigidly pursuing the researcher's agenda, we are generally being paid by funders to carry out focus groups with the ultimate purpose of answering a specific research question. Whilst brainstorming sessions may be useful during the exploratory phase of a research project, Morgan argues that groups where the moderator does not take the role of directing the discussion are not focused enough to be called focus groups (Morgan, 1998, p. 34).

Of course, the structure may be apparent only to the researcher, and a good focus group moderator may be able to make it appear as though the discussion flows effortlessly with little in the way of direction. Krueger (1994) draws our attention to questions that appear spontaneous but that are, in fact, carefully prepared.

We have already seen, in Chapter 5, the value of piloting topic guides and gaining practice in utilizing prompts. Contrary to advice from people such as Krueger, who recommended that questions be limited to a single dimension, Puchta and Potter found, in the market research focus groups they examined, that rewordings and reformulations of questions were pervasive: 'in our corpus questions are routinely asked in an "elaborate way"' (1999, p. 319). They helpfully distinguish between three different usages of elaborate questions:

1. To guide responses and 'head off trouble', particularly when asking questions likely to be unfamiliar in the context of participants' everyday interactions.
2. To ask questions flexibly by providing a range of alternative items to which participants can choose to respond.
3. To coach participants in producing the kinds of responses that are appropriate (in their case, to market research reports and to the company representatives and advertising people who may view the sessions from behind one-way mirrors).

In relation to this third usage outlined by Puchta and Potter, social science researchers might, similarly, attempt to encourage participants to join them in the-oring by introducing, for example, sociological terms or feeding back observations from preliminary analysis of earlier focus groups. Furthermore, Puchta and Potter argue that moderators can sometimes achieve all of these three jobs at the same time (1999, p. 332).

## Picking up on cues

The next excerpt illustrates the richness of focus group data and shows the participants, as well as the moderator, thinking on their feet. It emphasizes the capacity of focus groups to provide access to participants' meanings and conceptualizations as they interrogate and debate the issues raised. As frequently happens during focus groups, the participant who used the term 'ethnic shop' goes on to provide an explanation for her choice of words and this affords a window onto the outside world and the other social networks and exchanges that help to shape people's views and behaviour. It is important, however, to acknowledge that this explanation might not have been forthcoming if the researcher had not been attuned to the use of vocabulary and ready to pick up on this. Although they are talking about one-to-one interviews, Poland and Pederson (1998, pp. 296–7) stress the importance of being attentive to what our respondents are telling us: 'When we train interviewers, perhaps too much emphasis is placed on asking questions, when the real skill may be listening.'

In the earlier example, however, this is not the only skill that the moderator is demonstrating. She is also beginning to theorize, albeit tentatively, about the possibility that people think separately about the words used and what constitutes 'racism'. Another moderator, this time talking to a group of professional white women, also picks up on this distinction and attempts to explore it further in the course of the discussion (see Box 8.5). This moderator takes things a step further, by attempting to summarize the participant's point and by seeking clarification. Interestingly, she is pulled up by one of the participants who – politely, but clearly – asks her to rephrase her 'sociological theorizing' so that it is accessible to group members.

### Box 8.5 Picking up on cues

- Debbie:** I think it is just that we have grown up with these words and that is the words that we use and that is the words that we know. If there was a dictionary with the proper terminology to use for a shop that is open all hours, well, maybe that would be a different matter, to bring it into the society. You don't say 'a shop that is open all hours' – you say 'the Paki's'.
- Mod:** **So what words are racist then?**
- Helen:** If you add the appropriate or nasty word after it, like 'Paki scum' – that is racist.
- Kate:** That is true – good point.
- Paula:** But it would be just like 'You Celtic (one of Glasgow's two main football teams, renowned for the division of supporters along sectarian, i.e. Protestant/Catholic lines) bastard!'
- Debbie:** So, it depends on what context you are using it in.
- Mod:** **Do you think, therefore, that words or images in themselves could be racist or does it have to be contextualized?**
- Paula:** Sorry, say that again?
- Mod:** **Sorry. In the context in which it is used. Do you think that something like 'Paki' isn't racist on its own? Words are not racist on their own – they have to be in a certain context?**
- Helen:** Yes.

(*'Indigenous' White Professional Women's Focus Group*)

## Thinking comparatively and anticipating analysis

Capitalizing on the comparative potential of groups, however, requires more than convening a range of groups that reflect different characteristics. Research design is important, but it is what we make of the opportunities it affords that ultimately determines the quality of our focus group research. It is also important

to focus on thinking comparatively – or in terms of contextualizing views – in the course of generating focus group data.

Of course, all is not lost, even if focus group moderators do not take advantage of these opportunities when generating data. If you are lucky, the focus group transcripts will provide sufficient material to make such comparison possible – although, undoubtedly, further insights could have been obtained by asking a few well-considered questions *in situ*. Depending on the topic in question, however, it may not always be appropriate to harness participants' insights in this way and there are some situations where we have to take on, as researchers, sole responsibility for such comparative theorizing. Some of the comparisons may occur as the researcher reads further around the topic of inquiry and derives instructive parallels, sometimes from unexpected sources. This, after all, is what is implicated in the view of qualitative research as an iterative process.

Particularly when conducting focus groups, but also during one-to-one interviews (see Kvale, 2007), the researcher begins to analyze the data even as she or he is generating them. It is this that makes focus group research simultaneously so demanding and so exhilarating. This can be true not only for the researcher, but for other participants, who may become swept up in the discussion virtually as co-moderators. Although this was particularly common in the workshop context, this sort of exchange is not just a property of this particular grouping, but reflects features of general 'dinner party-type' informal conversations amongst friends or associates. We all draw on myriad selves and experiences in the course of social interaction.

### Key points

Focus groups can generate lively discussion and rich data, as participants reformulate their views, engage in debate, and express and explore shared cultural understandings. An interesting feature is that participants frequently reflect their considerable skills in group interaction, as they make supportive comments, encourage each others' contributions, and even, on occasion, assume the role of 'co-moderators'. It is also possible to harness focus group participants' analytic skills, as individuals provide a commentary, perhaps, on their own shifting perspectives, or tease out subtle differences in meaning or emphasis. Some potential pitfalls in terms of the capacity of focus groups to generate antagonistic exchanges can be avoided through giving careful consideration to group composition (as discussed in Chapter 5) and the use of stimulus material that gives permission to raise difficult topics and can take the 'heat' out of discussions by placing them at a distance from individuals' actual experience. There are, however, several hints on moderating thoughtfully and attentively in order to maximize the quality of the data generated. These can be summarized as follows:

- Don't feel you have to intervene all the time. Provided the discussion remains on track, there may be little need for input from the moderator.
- Be prepared to use prompts or ask additional questions.
- Pay close attention to the vocabulary used by participants and to tone and non-verbal communication. You can pick up on these as a moderator.
- You can also rephrase or elaborate on questions, in order to make your research interests clearer, or to encourage participants to 'problematize' concepts.
- Use interim summaries to provide clarification and to explore further any distinctions or qualifications being made.
- Do start to theorize tentatively and invite participants to join in, but be careful to explain or rephrase academic/theoretical terms. Remember that you can ask participants to speculate along with you – you don't have to take the role of 'the expert'.

### Further reading

Here you will find more examples and suggestions on how to keep a focus group going:

- Kvale, S. (2007) *Doing Interviews* (Book 2 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Munday, J. (2006) 'Identity in focus: the use of focus groups to study the construction of collective identity', *Sociology*, 40(1): 89–105.
- Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (1999) 'Asking elaborate questions: focus groups and the management of spontaneity', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 3(3): 314–35.
- Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (2004) *Focus Group Practice*. London: Sage.

## 9 Starting to make sense of focus group data

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- have an idea of how to get your analysis going on the basis of the data in the focus groups;
- understand the role of coding frameworks in this context; and
- see the relevance of grounded theory as an approach to coding and analyzing.

This chapter starts with a suggestion for generating your own data (using a short topic guide on the subject of the challenges of parenting) and allows you to gain some 'hands-on' experience of developing a provisional coding frame. It provides some examples of coding frames of varying levels of analytical sophistication and emphasizes the iterative nature of the process of qualitative data analysis, as researchers move back and forth between coding frame and transcripts. The role of individual approaches and learning styles is also acknowledged and the chapter explores the difference between researchers' 'a-priori' codes and 'in-vivo' codes, where the latter are derived from the data. This involves employing a 'pragmatic version' of 'grounded theory', which enables researchers to use participants' insights to advantage in developing and refining coding categories, whilst ensuring that the questions posed by funding bodies are also addressed. Examples of thematic code modelling are provided, as is a grid or matrix diagram that allows data to be systematically interrogated in order to

identify any relevant patterning. For further discussion of the role and potential of 'grounded theory' see Gibbs (2007).

### First generate some data

You might like to have a go at generating some data yourself – possibly with a group of friends, fellow students, or colleagues, in a dinner party-type setting, or one in which you would tend to usually meet up. The topic I would suggest is one that I have found to be highly successful in eliciting spontaneous and frank discussion: 'the challenges of parenting'. Again, it is not essential for all participants to be parents, just to be able to reflect on their own and others' experiences of being parented. In the workshops I used a couple of cartoons from Steven Appleby's book, *Alien Invasion! The Complete Guide to Having Children* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998). However, it is not necessary to use stimulus material, as a few well-placed questions will probably suffice.

I would suggest using the following as a topic guide, bearing in mind the hints on generating data and encouraging discussion provided earlier, particularly the advice about teasing out any differences – here, most likely to be in relation to their own parental status, number of siblings and own place in the family, or cultural background (Box 9.1). You may be surprised at how few prompts you need to use in order to stimulate debate. As you probably want your associates and friends still to be talking to you afterwards, I would recommend taking brief notes rather than audio- or videotaping the session, but you could usefully try to develop a provisional coding frame shortly after the discussion has taken place, noting the main themes and trying to group comments under related subcategories.

#### Box 9.1 A topic guide to try out the challenges of parenting

What sort of challenges do you think people face with regard to parenting?

##### PROMPTS:

- Ensuring physical safety
- Differences between boys and girls
- Difficulties related to parents' circumstances – people like yourself; people different from yourself
- Change over time – own experiences of being parented
- What sort of mistakes do parents make?
- Peer pressure
- Drugs and alcohol
- Sexuality

### Generating a provisional coding frame

There is no right or wrong way to go about developing a provisional coding frame. Although your topic guide can provide a starting point, you should not, however, rely overly on this to generate all your themes or coding categories. This is a very different situation from that involved in a quantitative approach, where coding categories are determined prior to administering research tools. One would expect the discussion to reflect the questions put by the moderator, but the coding frame should be flexible enough to incorporate themes introduced by focus group participants as well. This makes sense, given the exploratory potential of qualitative research in general and focus group discussions in particular. While identifying the broad themes, be sure to pay attention to trying to provisionally allocate some other more specific themes to subcategories relating to these broad headings. This process resembles reworking a report or journal article, and the best guide to determining whether something is a broad theme or a sub-theme is to think about whether themes are really 'stand-alone' issues or whether they address particular aspects related to wider headings. Of course, this does not preclude relationships between the broad themes that are identified. Although it can be very useful at the outset of this process to 'brainstorm' themes, it is helpful to bear in mind the need to think about linkages between these.

Amanda Coffey (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) has referred to the possibility of developing a 'coding fetish', which can be encouraged by the ease of allocating codes using software packages (such as Atlas-ti or N-Vivo). This is a problem I have certainly encountered in supervision, with one student reporting that he had assigned 240 codes under 240 themes! This is not, of course, an insurmountable problem, but it is something that needs to be remedied. In the course of running workshops I have realized that some individuals like to read through transcripts and assign very detailed codes and then return to these in order to group the codes they have developed into broader themes. This was what the student in question had to do as the next step in analysis. However, other individuals tend to conceptualize in terms of broad themes and only then consider how these break down into narrower codes. It really does not matter which route is followed, as the end product should be the same. The labels you use for your coding categories will inevitably reflect your own disciplinary background (Armstrong et al., 1997)

It may be useful to compare your themes with the provisional coding frames developed in a couple of workshops where this same topic was discussed. In the workshop setting – and, indeed, in the context of real-life projects, when analyzing data manually – I favour the use of coloured pens. Not only does their use facilitate manual retrieval of relevant coded sections in transcripts; this practice also gets researchers used to thinking about their data conceptually, rather than in a merely descriptive way, as when they rely simply on itemizing – and

accumulating – themes. All of the software packages on the market do emphasize the need to group categories together under headings. However, they use different terminology, with some using the analogy of family relationships whilst others use the terms ‘trees’ and ‘nodes’. Although it is impossible to offer definitive advice, I would generally expect projects to generate no more than around twenty broad themes; not only does this give ample scope for subheadings in your final report, it also leaves lots of room for manoeuvre, as you also have the option of focusing on specific sections of your coding frame in writing up further papers – or chapters, if you are writing a thesis.

Reproduced below (Box 9.2) is a provisional coding frame developed in the course of one focus group workshop, which explored the same virtual topic of the challenges of parenting (Workshop A). This coding frame shows third-level codes in addition to broad themes and second-level categories. Coding packages such as N-Vivo allow for coding up to nine levels, which is almost certainly more than you will need (see Gibbs, 2007).

### Box 9.2 Provisional coding frame: workshop A

*(N.B. Themes are presented alphabetically, rather than in order of significance.)*

#### CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS

Can you be a parent AND a friend?

#### CHANGE OVER TIME

More rules and regulations – e.g. not smacking

Children more aware of their ‘rights’

Media ‘hype’ – e.g. re paedophiles

Greater societal awareness of safety

*Expectations re reducing/eliminating risk*

Emphasis on materialism

Children’s unwillingness to do housework

#### CHILDREN’S SAFETY

Physical

*More traffic*

*Walking to school*

#### CONTEXT IN WHICH PARENTING IS CARRIED OUT

*(N.B. Link to CHANGE OVER TIME)*

Socioeconomic circumstances

*Consumerism*

*Children taking expenditure on them for-granted*

Rural and urban environments

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

Safe and less safe environments

#### OWN EXPERIENCE OF BEING PARENTED

Role models – own parents?

Experience as eldest child in a family

#### PARENTS’ CONCERNS ABOUT PARENTING STANDARDS

Worrying about others’ perceptions of their parenting skills

Parenting in the public eye

Quality time

Working mothers and reconciling roles

*Possibility of over-compensating*

Development of parenting styles

*Learning on the first child*

*Spending less time with younger children*

*Erosion of rules over time with successive children*

#### SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Education

How do you know what you are doing is right ?

*(Workshop involving participants with children of varying ages.)*

I would suggest that you now revisit the provisional coding frame you have already developed and consider whether any of the themes or categories identified in Workshop A might be useful in understanding what was being said in your own focus group session.

I have also noted at the end of these excerpts some details about the composition of groups. All of the software packages also allow for storage of information about groups (and, indeed, individual members) (e.g. in N-Vivo these are referred to as ‘attributes’), and when carrying out searches after coding has been completed these are brought to bear in interrogating the data – in much the same way as you would use cross-tabulations in quantitative analysis (see the grid or matrix presented in Chapter 10).

## Grounded theory

Many focus group researchers claim to be using a ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach to data analysis, which relies on using categories generated by participants. Clearly, however, it is not feasible to approach data analysis

as an entirely 'empty vessel' with no preconceptions about what you are likely to find, and Melia (1997) has pointed out that most researchers, in fact, use a pragmatic version of grounded theory, which recognizes the need for some statement of focus and intent (necessary to write a research proposal and to secure funding and ethical approval). Although you probably will have quite a good idea, at the outset, of the themes likely to arise – what Ritchie and Spencer (1994) call '*a priori*' codes – this provides no more than a starting point. Be alert to the analytic potential of phrases used or concepts appealed to by focus group participants. Udo Kelle talks about '*in-vivo*' codes and describes them as 'theories of members of the investigated culture' (Kelle, 1997). These can be readily distinguished from '*a-priori*' codes in that their meaning is unlikely to be immediately apparent and they are likely to require some explication by the researcher.

Focus groups are especially conducive to the development of '*in-vivo*' codes, particularly where the researcher actively engages the participants in speculation and tentative theorizing. These can helpfully be described as akin to 'soundbites' and are often related to a particularly colourful quote, perhaps from one focus group participant, which nevertheless sums up a common or shared perspective. Participants, as well as researchers, are aware of the potential of comedy to illuminate complex social processes, and in several of the workshops with the virtual topic of the challenges of parenting, spontaneous reference was made to the same television programme. This was a UK series presented by the comedian Harry Enfield and featured a challenging adolescent called Kevin. What made it especially relevant for focus group participants was the way in which it underlined the rapidity of the transition from angelic little boy to difficult and unreasonable adolescent. This was the aspect of the sketch highlighted by everyone who appealed to this in the course of focus group discussions and it was this portrayal of rapid transition, in particular, that appeared to strike a chord with participants.

Another theme to which many of the focus groups alluded concerned a complex set of ideas about changes to the social world in which children were being brought up. Whilst most participants agreed that the world was a less safe place for children nowadays, they acknowledged, at the same time, that the mass media plays an important role in, perhaps, exaggerating the dangers posed by paedophiles and were aware that they might be looking at their own childhoods through 'rose-tinted specs'. A related theme was the concern expressed about latter-day children as 'couch potatoes' reliant on computer games in comparison to their own parents and grandparents who had 'made their own entertainment'. In one of the focus groups a participant waxed lyrical about her own childhood, saying that she had been in the habit of spending all day cycling and picking bluebells in the woods, and contrasted this with the pursuits of today's children and the fears and resulting constant vigilance of their parents. At the same time she also acknowledged the potential to overstate the dangers for children. Her statement struck a ready

chord with other participants, who went on to use the phrase 'picking bluebells in the woods' as a shorthand when they wanted to acknowledge the double-edged nature involved in the potentially contradictory activities of looking backwards to a 'mythical past' and commenting on the current preoccupation with children's safety. Thus, in a good-humoured, self-deprecating and ironic way, they explored some very complex issues and illuminated underlying tensions, providing valuable insights into social constructions. Thus, 'picking bluebells in the woods' provides an excellent example of an '*in-vivo*' code: it sums up, in participants' words, a complex argument, but also requires further explanation from the researcher in the ensuing written account.

## Revising your coding frame

The following provisional coding frame was developed at a workshop where the participants were more experienced researchers than those involved in Workshop A and provides an example of greater analytical sophistication. Although this was their first attempt at producing a coding frame, it serves as a useful example of what you might expect to achieve by revising an earlier coding frame. In particular, these workshop participants had taken on board the advice to try to conceptualize in terms of polarities or continua, both of which are helpful devices (see Box 9.3).

### Box 9.3 Provisional coding frame: workshop B

*(N.B. Themes are presented alphabetically, rather than in order of significance.)*

#### ACHIEVING A BALANCE

Discipline vs. developing independence/individuality

Over-protectiveness vs. putting responsibility onto children

Over-reacting vs. ensuring physical safety

Wanting to know everything vs. 'turning a blind eye'

Being neurotic vs. identifying situations where you need to intervene

Trust

*Allowing things in moderation rather than children sneaking behind your back*

#### CHANGE OVER TIME

Cultural change/societal change

*Children are more vulnerable now vs. greater publicity afforded the same issues*

*Walking to school*

The role of the media

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

Learning on your first child

*Loosening up vs. tightening up*

Seeing childhood differently now that I'm older

*I think I was a nightmare child!*

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN

Gender

Treating male and female children differently

Parents worrying about different issues for boys and girls

The challenge of nurturing the opposite sex child through puberty

*Especially for single mothers of boys*

Girls in more danger than boys OR boys in more danger than girls

Girls being more secretive

Boys being less communicative

Personality/Behaviour

Some children testing parents to the limit

Challenges for parents at different stages of childhood

'Raging hormones' – variation in behaviour from day to day

## COUPLES AS PARENTS

Differences between couples

Parents sharing responsibility

## PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations vs reality

Wanting to be the same as your own parents vs. seeking to be different

*Being more open about sexuality*

## SEXUALITY

The challenge of nurturing the opposite sex child through puberty

*Especially for single mothers of boys*

Siblings assuming a quasi-parental role

Puberty

Being more open than one's own parents

## WIDER INFLUENCES ON PARENTING

The media

Schools

Other parents – peer group pressure

*Being more judgmental re single parents?*

Financial circumstances

Consumer pressures on children (including issues around weight)

Neighbours keeping parents informed

*(Workshop with participants, most of whom are experienced researchers, and several of whom have teenage or grown-up children.)***Modelling coding frameworks**

All of the software packages available emphasize the need to arrange codes in a hierarchical order, as I have done above. However, they also have the facility to present your codes in diagrammatic form, such as in N-Vivo's 'Model Explorer', which can be helpful, as this allows you to show links between subcategories more clearly and with greater sophistication than is possible using simple lists. This can also be imported into documents, which is an added bonus. It is possible to use such models to summarize virtually the entire argument or explanatory framework applied to a research project (see also Gibbs, 2007).

Rather than viewing the relatedness of subcategories that are grouped under different broad themes as problematic, I would stress that it would be much more worrying if data could be divided cleanly into separate categories without any linkages. This, for me, would be a sign that the data might have been squeezed to fit available categories rather than the categories being derived from the data, which, particularly in qualitative research, tend to be complex and multi-faceted, with individual sections from transcripts capable of fitting simultaneously into more than one coding category, some of which may relate to different broad themes. Long – or even short – data excerpts can be coded using up to around nine different themes or subcodes (and this is allowed for by all of the computerized packages). Sometimes exactly the same section of a transcript relates to more than one code, but sometimes sections relating to one code are 'nested' within larger sections, which may relate to a broader code. At other times codes may overlap. For an example of coded data excerpts that show nesting and overlapping in action, see the examples provided by Frankland and Bloor's account of how they carried out systematic analysis of focus group materials generated in their study of smoking and giving up smoking in the school setting (1999, pp. 148–9)

In order to illustrate how codes can be broken down into further subcodes, I have drawn on categories developed to provide an understanding of the data generated at workshops on the topic of fathers' attendance at deliveries. Figure 9.1 provides an example of the sort of diagram that can be produced. This starts by looking at the different types of relationship that might be involved and the issues discussed in relation to each of these. The diagram begins to show how subcategories are interrelated, with, for example, the issues 'becoming a family' – for the 'couple' – also involving a shift in their relationships with 'wider family and friends'. Another feature is the inclusion of both positive and negative aspects of relationships and this could be used to develop a somewhat different diagram, were this to be the focus of a section in a report or paper.

Another coding diagram (Fig. 9.2) shows how polarities can be used to analytic advantage: in this case, in relation to constructions of the role of fathers. An interesting aspect of this diagram is that it captures the double-edged nature of 'advocacy', which, at times, is presented as a positive feature of fathers' role, but

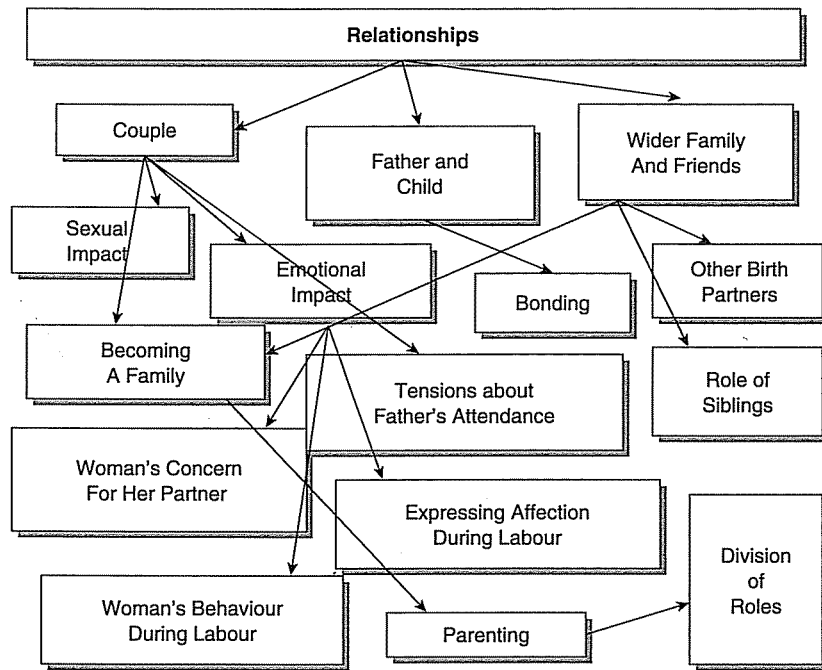


FIGURE 9.1 Coding: Sub-divisions

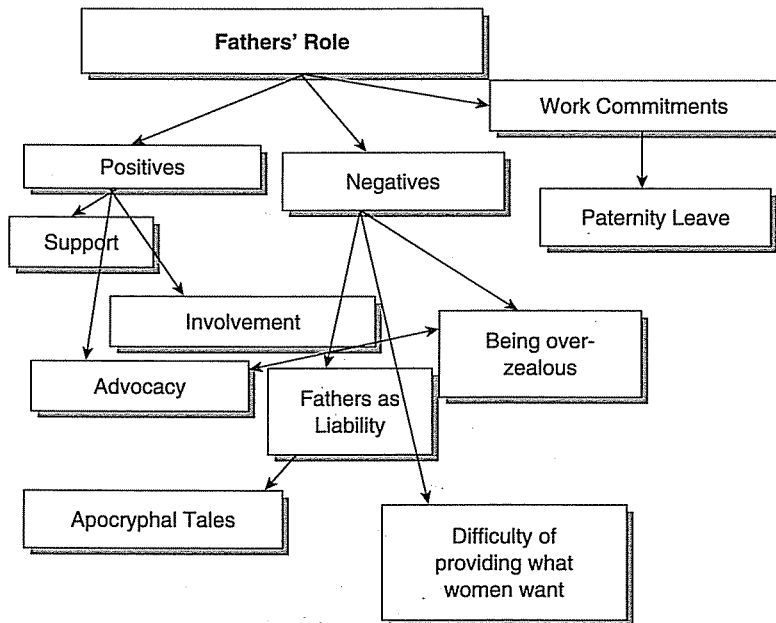


FIGURE 9.2 Coding: Positives

which is also seen negatively at times. This is in the context of men taking this role 'too seriously' and reminding women, for example, that they have committed themselves to enduring labour without pain relief. Such comments have been assigned the subcode 'being over-zealous'.

Figure 9.3 explores the theme of the 'lay-professional interface', with data assigned the further subcodes of 'professional management', which relates to the procedures involved in conducting deliveries; 'professional attitudes', which covers views about fathers' attendance at deliveries (with a subcode for midwives' attitudes, as they emerged as a particularly vocal 'community of interest'); and 'barriers', which was used to explore the ways in which both professionals and public acknowledged that the ideal of fathers' attendance at deliveries could be difficult to operationalize. With respect to 'professional attitudes', two particularly interesting subcodes examine social constructions of health care professionals as, respectively, mothers and fathers. This takes account of the multiple roles that we all inhabit and uses this to comparative advantage in showing how comments and discussion in focus groups draw on these different sources – often to throw assumptions and concerns into particularly sharp focus. Again, some health care professionals joined with the researcher in the process of analysis by highlighting and providing commentaries on the insights afforded through looking at the topic of fathers' attendance through the very different lenses afforded as professional and parent.

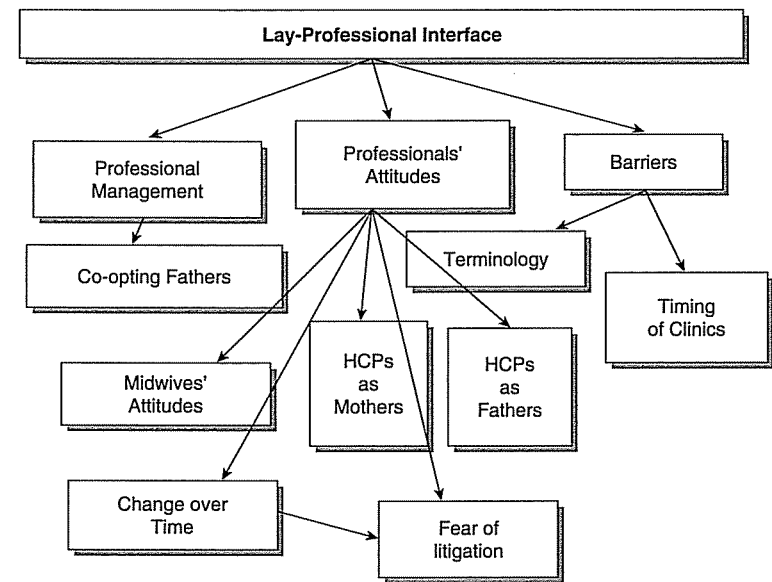


FIGURE 9.3 Coding: Multiple influences



There is no easy formula for developing analytically sophisticated codes, and this underlines the challenge involved in attempting to 'teach' qualitative methods. Several commentators, including Hammersley (2004), have debated whether the skills involved are 'taught' or 'caught'. I suspect that a bit of both is involved, although, undoubtedly, some people find this easier than do others. However, there are some pieces of advice that it is helpful to bear in mind.

First, try to question, or 'problematize' your own disciplinary assumptions. This is easier said than done, as these are likely to have been internalized to the point where we may not recognize where our ideas come from, regarding them, instead, as personal attributes. Here the multidisciplinary team comes into its own and the analytic potential afforded by team discussion is discussed further in the next chapter (Chapter 10).

It is important to remain alert to the concepts to which participants are appealing and pay attention to the language – and even sentence constructions and rhetorical devices – they employ. This approach recalls the methods used in conversation or discourse analysis, but there is no reason why you cannot apply some of these where appropriate, without having to adopt this approach wholesale. I sometimes think that some of the skills involved are more akin to those required in literary criticism – something with which I have some experience, having started my student career in languages.

Always be on the lookout for tensions or dilemmas to which participants may explicitly refer. These may also be implicit. In making sense of variation in perspectives it is also helpful to think about whether these can best be described with reference to polarities (i.e. oppositional statements) or as forming a continuum. However, as Howard Becker (1998) suggests, there is no timetable for such inspiration; rather it forms part and parcel of the uncertain, continuously evolving iterative process of qualitative research:

None of the tricks of thinking in this book have a 'proper place' in the timetable for building such a contraption (in the case which we are discussing – a coding frame). Use them when it looks like they might move your work along – at the beginning, in the middle, or toward the end of your research. (1998, p. 9)

Many qualitative researchers have appealed to the notion of 'saturation' to describe the point at which they judge their coding frame to be sufficiently robust that it needs no further amendments. This point, however, is somewhat illusory. As Mauthner et al. (1998) suggest, it is nearly always possible to return to a dataset and identify further themes, perhaps after several years, bringing to bear on your reanalysis insights gained from further reading, subsequent research projects and personal life events. However, in the 'real world' of deadlines for reports to funding bodies and impending termination of short-term research contracts, it is wise to settle for what could be described as a 'good enough' coding frame.

This does not absolve the researcher from engaging in the iterative process described, applying a thorough and systematic approach developing coding frames, or documenting the steps taken throughout the process of analysis. However, ultimately the level of detail required by coding frames depends on the purpose to which you wish to use your data. For example, for writing a report to funding bodies it may not be necessary to move much beyond broader level coding, whilst using subcodes to provide illustrative details. More sophisticated coding schemes, such as the one illustrated in Fig. 9.3 above, can be used to write more theoretically informed papers for peer-reviewed journals with a specific disciplinary focus (see further discussion on presenting focus group findings in Chapter 10).

### Key points

Making sense of qualitative data through assigning and developing a coding framework is a complex and inherently 'messy' process. This is because qualitative methods provide insights into the highly sophisticated social constructions employed by respondents, including the many contradictions that become apparent and the distinctions or qualifications that they make along the way. That data cannot be slotted, once and for all, into a neat coding frame is not, however, a limitation of focus group research; rather it testifies to their unique potential to elaborate and provide a deeper understanding of the processes that underpin the development of views and collective identities. Rigour is achieved through a systematic and thorough iterative process, whereby coding categories are continuously subjected to review in the light of disconfirming examples or exceptions to concepts and patterns identified. This process of interrogation is further explored in Chapter 10. There are, however, some useful pieces of advice with regard to starting to make sense of your data:

- Don't rely on your topic guide to furnish coding categories.
- Do include 'in-vivo' as well as 'a-priori' codes. Be alert to the concepts appealed to and the language, sentence structure and rhetorical devices employed by participants. Note any tensions or dilemmas and whether perspectives are expressed in terms of polarities or continua.
- Think about linkages between categories and try to group these under broad themes.
- Move back and forth (iteratively) between the coding frame (adding, removing or renaming themes and categories, or reallocating categories to other themes) and transcripts (recoding using the revised coding frame and generating new ideas for further amendments to the coding frame).

- Remember that categories can appear under more than one theme, but make sure that you keep a note of where this has occurred.
- Remember that any section of text can be assigned as many codes as you think are appropriate – codes can be co-terminous, nested or overlapping.
- Although you may revise your coding categories, don't ever discard any more detailed coding categories that you have assigned along the way, as these could be the focus of later papers.

### Further reading

These works will give you more advice on how to start analyzing your focus group data:

- Gibbs, G. (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. (Book 6 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.
- Hussey, S., Hoddinott, P., Dowell, J., Wilson, P. and Barbour, R.S. (2004) 'The sickness certification system in the UK: a qualitative study of the views of general practitioners in Scotland', *British Medical Journal*, 328: 88–92 (see supplementary materials for a detailed breakdown of the coding frame developed).
- Kelle, U. (1997) 'Theory building in qualitative research and computer programs for the management of textual data', *Sociological Research Online*, 2: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/2/1.html>
- McEwan, M.J., Espie, C.A., Metcalfe, J., Brodie, M. and Wilson, M.T. (2003) 'Quality of life and psychological development in adolescents with epilepsy: a qualitative investigation using focus group methods', *Seizure*, 13: 15–31.
- Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage (especially chap. 6 on Sorting, Organizing, and Indexing Qualitative Data).
- Melia, K.M. (1997) 'Producing "plausible stories": interviewing student nurses', in G. Miller and R. Dingwall (eds), *Context and Method in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, pp. 26–36.



## 10 Analytical challenges in focus group research

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- appreciate the issues linked to deeper analysis of focus groups;
- understand how to make use of the characteristics of the group for advancing analysis;
- know how to make sense of silence and how to deal with complexities in the analysis; and
- understand how to identify patterns in group discussions.

This chapter explores the analytic challenges raised by focus group research. It discusses and provides some hints on how to capture, and use analytically, the all-important feature of group interaction. It acknowledges that focus groups can overemphasize consensus and suggests ways to avoid – or, at least, to anticipate – this tendency. Although the group is the main unit of analysis, it is also worth taking account of individual voices in the group, and this chapter presents some examples that show the benefits of paying attention to this issue. It also demonstrates how the constant comparative method can be used to interrogate similarities and differences between groups, providing several examples both from

workshops and a funded study. The usefulness of producing a matrix or grid is highlighted, as this enables patterns to be systematically identified and guards against impressionistic analysis, thus enhancing rigour. It is argued that gaps are just as important as clusters in such grids, and the analytic potential of silences (with some examples illustrating the importance of what is not said in particular contexts) is explored. The final section is concerned with using reflexively the personal and professional backgrounds of research team members as a resource in analyzing focus group data.

### Utilizing interaction and group dynamics to analytic advantage

As Kitzinger (1994) stresses, the whole point of holding focus groups is to capture the interaction between participants. Rather than simply extracting the comments made by individuals, huge dividends can be gained by paying due attention to what is happening during a piece of interaction, as the whole can be infinitely greater than the sum of the parts. At a workshop where participants discussed their experience of using general practitioners' out-of-hours services, one focus group formulated a solution that involved triage by a team of 'telephone nurses'. This uncannily predicted the basic tenet of NHS 24, which was introduced some time later, and highlights the capacity of focus groups to develop solutions.

The way in which data tend to be presented can result in an over-simplistic presentation of complex discussions (Green and Hart, 1999), and there is an important difference between reporting the content of the agreement achieved by the group and assuming that all members necessarily share these views outside of the specific situation created by the focus group discussion. The above example illustrates the usefulness of focus groups in harnessing participants' creative problem-solving skills, but caution should be exercised with regard to extrapolating from this to talk about individuals' opinions. Focus groups can overemphasize consensus (Sim, 1998).

Not only may an apparent consensus mask important gradations or emphasis; Waterton and Wynne (1999) comment that many discussions fail to reach a final coherent position. This, of course, is not a problem, unless the researcher is operating with the implicit assumption that each group will achieve consensus and that this, in turn, will provide definitive grounds for comparison. It is also possible for the thoughtful moderator to take account of the tendency of focus groups to veer towards consensus and actively seek to recruit individuals likely to hold contrasting perspectives (perhaps by virtue of different circumstances or experiences – see Chapter 5) or to build in questions or exercises designed to steer discussion away from agreement to explore more contentious areas likely to give rise to differences in opinion and debate (see Chapter 6).

### Constant comparison: inter- and intra-group differences

Researchers attempting to analyze focus group data frequently seek guidance on the extent to which they should be carrying out analysis at the level of the group and how much attention they need to pay to the comments expressed by individuals within groups. As always, the answer is not exactly straightforward; the thoughtful data analyst will pursue several different strategies simultaneously. As discussed in Chapter 7, it is helpful to have recorded details relating to focus group participants, so that you can access not only thumbnail sketches of groups in terms of their composition, but also so that you can use information about individuals to further explore intra-group differences. This may also, as we have seen, inform further sampling strategies. Focusing on individual voices, however, is particularly helpful in determining the extent to which a perspective is a collective one.

It is the systematic application of constant comparison that helps qualitative data analysis to transcend the limits of purely descriptive accounts. This, in practice, means focusing on both inter- and intra-group differences.

### Identification of patterns

Counting is an approach that is not entirely alien to qualitative data analysis. Indeed, Silverman (1993) has highlighted the importance of counting in identifying patterns in our data, distinguishing this from attempts to use numbers in ways that attach significance to the actual values, and which I would describe as 'bogus quantification' (Barbour, 2001). The approach to data analysis advocated by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), called 'framework analysis', depends on using a grid to identify – indeed to 'frame' – patterns in the data. This allows you to see at a glance the preponderance and distribution of comments on particular themes in the various focus groups convened in the course of your study. You may wish to produce more than one grid to cover a range of themes and coding categories. An example is provided in Fig. 10.1, from a cumulative dataset generated at workshops on the topic of fathers' attendance at deliveries. This grid or matrix summarizes the patterning with regard to the raising of specific issues (or codes) under the broad theme of the lay/professional interface in the context of five focus groups (with men, women, both genders, midwives, and male health care professionals).

Whilst most of the groups talked about barriers and tensions, fear of litigation is an additional issue that exercises health care professionals. The women's groups were more interested in discussing birth plans – perhaps because they had personal experience of developing these or, in the case of the midwives' group, of trying to respond constructively to these in practice. Interestingly, comments

Lay/professional interface	Barriers	Men as liability	Fear of litigation	Birth plan	Tensions
FG1 Women		✓✓✓✓		✓✓✓	✓
FG2 Men	✓✓✓✓				✓✓
FG3 Mixed	✓			✓	
FG4 Midwives	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓
FG5 Male health care professionals	✓✓		✓✓		✓✓✓✓✓

FIGURE 10.1 Frames and grids.

about men in the delivery room being seen as a potential liability were confined to the all-women groups, with this arising in both the all-women group and the midwives' group. Of course, both of these groups were exclusively female, although the midwives' group also included some women who were able to draw on both their professional experience and their experience as mothers. Such a diagram might also benefit from the use of initials (suitably anonymized) to denote comments from individuals and it can also be helpful to include a reference to the location of this excerpt in the coded transcript (which aids in selecting quotes for writing up). This practice would also allow the researcher to take account of individual voices and might result in further theorizing – for example, with regard to differences in the perspectives of participants of varying ages or length of professional experience. Again, software packages have the facility to produce similar tables, which can be imported into other documents (see Gibbs, 2007).

Importantly, the practice of developing and utilizing these grids guards against impressionistic evaluations slipping into analysis. Given the need for the researcher to begin some tentative analysis whilst generating and starting to process data, it is inevitable that she or he engages in making some generalizations – perhaps merely in summing up initial ideas to other members of the research team. Here, it is important to capitalize on the additional information that is available to the team via the original moderator. Traulsen et al. (2004) advocate that focus group researcher teams routinely interview the moderator immediately after each focus group discussion has taken place. Whilst this can be extremely valuable in producing detailed context-rich notes (as recommended in Chapter 6), I would argue that it is even more valuable to build in a mechanism for harnessing these extra insights during the process of analysis – and, in particular, to use these to interrogate the patterning identified in grids as the research team attempt, collectively, to furnish an explanation for the observed similarities and differences. This was an approach that we used in our study of perspectives and responses to racist

incidents, where we employed a team of moderators. We combined team analysis sessions with further training for the moderators, most of whom were postgraduate students. Had we relied on their immediate recall of the group discussions I suspect that we would not have used their observations to full advantage, since this would have relied on us identifying in advance which aspects of the focus group discussions, or individuals' circumstances, were likely to be relevant during analysis. However, there is no harm in using both approaches in an attempt to marshal as much potentially useful information as is possible.

An illustrative example is the study focusing on racist incidents, when the team members had sight of an early draft that contained the quote from the 'indigenous' white young men's group that made reference to the 'white Paki shop'. Some team members thought that this had been wrongly attributed as these comments were thought to have occurred solely in white women's groups. However, once the transcripts were double-checked it emerged that this reference had, indeed, been correctly attributed. Perhaps because the young white men's group had proved to be such a rich source of data in relation to other themes, this reference had not featured in either the moderator's or other team members' recollections, which will always be partisan and partial.

### Group composition as a resource in explaining differences

Differences in the composition of groups can sometimes provide an explanation for observed differences in emphasis or content of discussions, although it is, of course, important not to leap to conclusions, but also to look systematically for exceptions to such patterning. In workshops that used fathers' attendance at deliveries as the topic for discussion, groups consisting only of women talked much more about the intimate aspects of childbirth.

Given the preponderance of women amongst those researchers interested in attending focus group workshops, it was only occasionally possible to convene all-male groups. However, the discussion arising in these was noticeably different, providing an interesting contrast with the data generated in mixed gender groups. In the all-male groups (with male moderators) the men talked in greater depth and at greater length about the emotional impact of attending deliveries, apparently feeling that they had permission, in this somewhat unusual context, to talk about their feelings to a greater extent than usual – particularly, as in the example below, where all of the participants were fathers who had attended deliveries (see Box 10.1). This transcript stands out in that the men talked at considerably greater length than was generally the case in mixed gender groups. The language was also more emotional, although Colin attempts to distance himself by using the 'bloke-ish' term 'sprog' and even Nick several times uses the word 'bloke' alongside a heartfelt account of his experiences. Interestingly, there were

no examples, such as Colin's, of fathers admitting to feeling diffident in groups where mothers were also present.

The discussion that ensues is dependent not just on the composition of the group, but also on the characteristics of the moderator, how these are perceived by participants and the complex dynamics involved.

### Box 10.1 An all-male focus group as an opportunity to air 'feelings'

*(Excerpt One)*

**Nick:** My experience was for our first child all the antenatal care was done by a load of midwives who were taking place on a ... on a stage, basically, who were wielding around large forceps, saying, 'Ho, ho, ho!' – which wasn't particularly constructive, and ... But everything was entirely done around the woman – the only comments they ever made about the blokes was that ... I think there was about two things: one, er ... 'We can have you removed if we want' and, two, er, sort of, 'Behave yourself', basically, sort of implication, and, two is, er, 'The child – you're not the legal next of kin – that's the mother'. Now, I, I felt, by the end of this, was nothing and ... and there was nothing to ... to say, er, 'Blokes – you may find it difficult seeing someone you love in such desperate pain', so, in terms of, you know, what their perceptions were of fathers attending the birth, was they seem to me to have an attitude, 'Well – we don't need them here anyway, 'cos we can cope. We're not going to provide any constructive advice – particularly in terms of what you can do, other than, you know, bring some stuff that, ho, ho, ho. Anybody from NTC here? Oh, well, you can bring your own little sprays and blah de blah, bit of cotton wool and do a bit of dabbing, or whatever.' It ... it was very oriented towards the woman and there was nothing about the bloke – everything about the bloke would seem to be negative, but it was just conspicuous in its absence. That was more so the case for the first child, when I suddenly found out that we'd gone for twenty hours – a very long labour – in a lot of pain for a lot of it, er, and I was mostly shattered the next day and I ... I really felt at that point it was the antenatal stuff that had ... that had just been a joke from the bloke's point of view, because it was a traumatic experience. There was no preparation – there was no recognition of it at all. It was entirely negative.

*(Excerpt Two)*

**Nick:** I've got to say I ... I ... I'm not sure whether being from a health professional background would make that much difference, in the sense

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

that, er, the seeing a birth is – possibly the shock of birth, no blood and guts issues at all – just going through such a prolonged period of time, seeing somebody who ... who you love desperately being in such a ... such an amount of pain.

*(Excerpt Three)*

**Daniel:** ... so he was brought back half an hour later. 'Here's your child.' So we had ... that seems like ... I've often wondered if they swapped him for another one actually, especially....

**Colin:** *(at the same time)* As bad as that, is he? *(laughing)*

**Daniel:** Oh, Jesus, terrible! *(laughs and the others join in)* and 'He can't possibly belong to us – he must be somebody else's!'

**Colin:** Er, it's an ... it's an interesting, er ... er, I think, that's an interesting one. Again, I'm reflecting on my ... my ... the ... the last experience when, you know, Kirsty was out of it, so, effectively, you know, the child was actually delivered to me – not her.

**Eric:** Ummm ...

**Colin:** ... in a, you know, so I was the one who saw the sprog coming out and getting minimal resuscitation and stuff and as then, you know, incubated, and all that stuff but ... but, actually for three or four days, Kirsty didn't care a damn about this child that she'd wanted desperately and I hadn't and I then had the ... I *(laughs)* you know, but I have had no difficulty at all – slightly to my surprise – accepting this, er, child that I didn't particularly want. Now, I don't know if that whole, you know, the whole experience, or the business of being present at the birth and the ... was instrumental in it or not, but I can imagine it would help. But it would be really odd if you were off on your oil rig ... and you came back and there was your ready-made family, that would be a bit, 'Wow!', you know, wouldn't it?

*(Excerpts from Workshop Fathers' Focus Group)*

### Using group dynamics as a resource in analysis

Brannen and Pattman (2005) reflect on the critical comments about management's performance with regard to implementing family-friendly policies in the workplace made by men in an all-male focus group moderated by a female researcher. They comment that the group dynamics made for a particularly lively discussion, and suggest that this was a situation in which the moderator enjoyed a special position where she was accorded a certain privileged status.

Sometimes, however, group dynamics operate to pit participants against each other, as illustrated in the following excerpt (see Box 10.2). In the context of workshop discussions on fathers' attendance at deliveries, the influence of midwives was apparent, in that certain issues were more likely to be raised – in particular, viewing men's presence as an impediment to the practice of professional skills (as could also be seen in Figure 10.1). Rather than simply seeking to identify the views of the various participants, attention to the context in which comments are made and the exchanges between group members allows us to develop an analysis that takes account of the complexities involved, including the explanations, justifications and tentative hypotheses advanced by people taking part in our research.

### Box 10.2 The impact of group dynamics

I was moderating a focus group discussion as part of a workshop. The group comprised two middle-aged physicians who were both fathers and two young women, neither of whom were mothers. The men started the discussion by musing about whether it was important for fathers to be present. One of them, who had several children, and who had also done an obstetrics job, confessed that he could not specifically recall whether he had actually attended the birth of his first child. The two young women were visibly shocked by this and embarked on a long discussion about choosing a partner and impressing upon him the need to be there at the delivery. I did not think that they would have made these points so forcibly had the two men not been there and claiming expertise in an area where they, as women, might have felt they had the prerogative. Interestingly, I was talking about this as an example at a subsequent workshop when one of the participants revealed that she had, in fact, been one of the young women in question and agreed that they had felt 'wrong-footed' by the men's comments. Although, in the course of this second workshop, she had taken part in a discussion on the same topic (on this occasion moderated by another workshop participant), the argument about the importance of selecting partners on the basis of their willingness to be involved at the birth was notable for its absence in the resulting transcript.

### Focus group participants as 'co-analysts'

Focus group participants, who, as discussed in Chapter 6, are often very skilled with regard to interacting in group settings, may engage in discussion, assuming the informal role of 'co-moderators' and even 'co-analysts'. This certainly occurred in the study reported below (see box 10.3), where participants became animated and put helpful questions to each other. They also, sometimes, began to formulate explanations for their own and others' responses and started to

speculate alongside the researchers and to 'theorize' about what was happening. Although some participants – as did those in focus group discussed earlier in Chapter 8 – acknowledged that they would need to rethink their use of the term 'Paki' if it caused offence, others hinted that they might be offended – or feel rebuffed – if what they viewed as a term of endearment was not accepted in the manner intended. Thus, the focus groups revealed gradations in terms of people's views and how far they were prepared to go in defending these (see Box 10.3).

### Box 10.3 Focus group participants as 'co-analysts'

Participants in the 'indigenous white' focus groups carried out in the course of the research into reporting of racist incidents alluded to the common Scottish practice of adding an 'ie' to a word to provide a diminutive, as in 'chippie' (chip shop), 'bookie' (bookmakers), or 'offie' (off licence). This was particularly prevalent with regard to using diminutives for naming people, as Jenny explained:

In saying that, the West Coast culture always shortens everything and puts an 'ie' at the end of it – Jimmy; Hugh – no it's Hughie; William – Willy. Pakistani is just a wee bit long, so it gets shortened to 'Paki'. (*'Indigenous' White Professional Women's Group*)

With very few exceptions, white focus group participants indicated that this was something which they viewed with a certain sentimentality, and several argued that extending such usage to ethnic minority groups signalled acceptance. In addition, some participants, such as the woman quoted below, argued that they used the term 'Paki' as a shorthand to refer to properties other than race, which illustrates the way in which such usage has become enmeshed in popular parlance to the extent that it is very difficult to tease out precise meanings. Ellen went on to provide clarification:

A 'Paki shop' is a shop that is opening very early and closing very late. It is your local shop that does that. I have a shop down from me and they called it the 'White Paki's' because it was white people. ... It was open at the most ungodly hours and it was a white chappie behind it. (*'Indigenous' White Professional Women's Focus Group*)

Also in the context of this same study, participants in several of the groups became quite enthused by the self-assigned task of questioning or 'problematizing' popular terms, highlighting the capacity of focus groups to encourage people to look at their own perspectives and behaviour through a slightly different, more analytic lens (see Box 10.4).

### Box 10.4 Focus group participants 'problematizing' popular terms/concepts

Interestingly, discussion in one of the Asian groups acknowledged the formative influence of Scottish upbringing and showed some sympathy with the view that people might use the word without thinking. One of the male participants commented:

It's because of the culture that they are raised in ... see, the family call us 'Pakis'. Then they pick it up from their parents – and, obviously, there is peer pressure and peer groups, so that it's that cultural sort of setting which engrains these phrases. And, at the same time, they might not be actually racist in that sense, but it becomes a sort of normalized term. They don't actually realize that it is, you know, racist. (*Man – Focus Group with Representatives of Asian Organizations*)

## Embracing complexity

As previously emphasized, the analysis of focus group data is never a neat and tidy business. Instead of shying away from complexity, valuable analytic insights can be gained by engaging with it and exploring further those areas that are prone to multiple interpretations. In the context of the above study, the complexities involved are thrown into sharp focus with the revelation from some Asian participants who conceded that they themselves used the word 'Paki'. This gave rise to some spirited debate; clearly, although this may be acceptable for some Asians, it is frowned upon by others. The African-Caribbean group provided a parallel and suggested that, whilst for some the defining factor is the imputed intent behind the usage of the term, for others the use of such terms is never permissible (see Box 10.5).

### Box 10.5 Exploring complexity: example A

- Ben:** It depends on what manner it is said, you know – like, somebody could call me a 'nigger', you know, but if it was another black guy saying it to another, it's just termed as a figure of speech. I wouldn't find that offensive if that was another black guy, but it depends. If it was a white guy that said it to me – it depends how it is said.
- Eugenie:** No, I would find it offensive, black or white – definitely.

(*African-Caribbean Focus Group*)

Not only were there marked variations between groups, there were also important differences of views within groups sharing ethnic minority status, just as there had been with the 'indigenous' white groups. Whilst some people, like the

woman quoted above, were unequivocal, others suggested that the meaning was contingent upon the situation and found it hard to provide clear guidelines. This might depend on the interactional context in which such incidents are played out (see Box 10.6).

### Box 10.6 Exploring complexity: example B

I mean, I have had so many people come up and ask me all sorts of daft questions. And sometimes in a sarcastic way, but, you know, I just think, 'Maybe they are just questioning' ... I think, sometimes, we as Asians get a bit all hotted up, you know, 'It's cause I'm black' and 'it's 'cos I'm Asian' and verbal abuse, harassment, the constant backdrop ...

(*Young Asian Women's Focus Group*)

Considering all of the focus group data generated for this project together, it would appear that, for some white focus group participants, the focus group discussions provided a forum where they began to explore the implications of some of their taken-for-granted behaviour for those at the receiving end. However, for some of the 'ethnic minority' participants the sessions allowed them to reflect on the potential gap between the speaker's intent and the way in which they themselves interpreted comments. Thus, the two broad groupings could be seen to be converging on a point – albeit from very different standpoints.

## Similarities between groups: interrogating surprises

Similarities between groups can be just as illuminating as are differences, and analytic purchase can be gained by paying close attention to these and considering the implications for the explanatory framework that is being built up as a product of the research. Similarities – particularly when focus groups have been convened with the express purpose of highlighting differences – can come as something of a surprise, but it is important that we question these in the same thorough manner. The following excerpt comes from a focus group with young white men (see Box 10.7). However, since this point is not developed further, this reference could have been missed, had the research team not been alerted to this theme and had the process of analysis been less systematic. This underlines the importance of continuing to interrogate data thoroughly, not glossing over important similarities that may provide valuable insights.

**Box 10.7 Recognizing the potential of illuminating similarities**

**Mod:** So, that's a racist incident *involving* the police – what about those not involving the police?

**Dave:** If there's a fight between a black person and a white person, how can you tell if it's a race-related incident or a genuine disagreement? Just saying ...

**Stuart:** Generally people, for example, just see red and attack. Just because it's different coloured people – it could be two white people, or two black people. For exactly the same reason – just one was white, one was black.

**Roddie:** (Recounts how the local community signed a petition to support an Asian shopkeeper threatened with closure.) It showed them that they weren't alone.

**Mod:** Mmm ...

**Roddie:** See, if you had a fight and it's two, say – I hate saying 'white' – two white kids and they're shouting and bawling at one another and fighting, but, if they're a black and a white guy, fighting wi' one another, and you get angry, your intelligence switches off, this bit takes over, and you just say whatever comes to your tongue – and, if the guy's black, you're gonnae call him a black whatever.

**Dave:** Mmm ...

**Roddie:** So, if again that becomes a racially motivated thing, just because you've switched off the thinking bit of your brain for a second, and ...

**Dave:** ... and you just find something to insult them about ...

**Roddie:** Aye.

**Dave:** If they weren't a black person, you'd find something – they wear glasses ...

**Roddie:** Or, if they're wee-er than you – 'Short-arse'.

**Dave:** Yeah, they're a 'small-arse', or, it's back to, em ...

*(‘Indigenous’ Young White Men’s Focus Group)*

The propensity of young men for 'trouble' in the form of arguments and getting into fights was also acknowledged in most of the focus groups with serving police officers. There was also a fleeting reference made to this during discussion in the young Asian men's group:

*(Here the group are talking about what they think makes for a racist incident.)*

**Harpreet:** When you say something first and then you get it back ... When someone says something and you give it back – they are both equally as wrong. But, when there's no need for it, that's racist.

*(Young Asian Men’s Focus Group)*

**Silences**

What is *not* said can be as important as what *is* said during focus group discussions and, indeed, in all qualitative research encounters. Poland and Pedersen (1998) outline the multiple meanings that silences may have. Realist approaches to producing data would view silences as a problem (Collins, 1998) to be addressed by more sensitive moderating. Of course, some silences may be the product of the researcher foreclosing discussion or omitting to ask key questions. Not only may the researcher be held responsible; blame can also be apportioned to the participant, and Poland and Pedersen (1998, p. 301) highlight the often implicit assumptions of some qualitative researchers as to what constitutes a 'good' respondent.

However, the silences that hold analytic potential are those that cannot readily be attributed to shortcomings on the part of the researcher – or the research participants. As Poland and Pedersen (1998) have argued, these are a valuable resource in analysis, since both what they call 'silences of estrangement' (where issues have no salience for participants) and 'silences of familiarity' (where issues are not explicitly mentioned, as their importance is taken for granted) serve to highlight significant themes that might otherwise be overlooked. The attentive and theoretically sensitive moderator may become aware of such silences during a focus group discussion and may be able to avail her/himself of the opportunity to raise this at the end of the group, using an introductory comment such as, 'Other groups have talked about X but this is something you haven't really mentioned ...'.

**Personal and professional backgrounds as resources**

What often alerts the researcher to both emphases and absences in the data is the disjuncture between her or his own ideas and those represented in the data. Burman et al. (2001, p. 451) reflect: 'As women who were once girls we shifted between being researcher/observer/listener to participant, as aspects of girls' experiences resonated with our own. Burman et al. (2001) also allude to the insights afforded by the differing responses and interpretations of research team members. Hall and Callery (2001) have also highlighted the value of reflexivity as a resource in the analysis, and Barry et al. (1999) describe how their research team used discussion about their own value stances and experiences to advantage in interrogating their data, through the process of developing a provisional coding frame, to producing an analysis and making decisions about how to present their findings. The team can therefore be a valuable resource in the analysis. My



own role as the one social scientist working alongside four general practitioners (GPs) on a project exploring GPs' views and experiences of sickness certification afforded a similar valuable vantage point. At one of the project meetings where we debated our coding categories and revised our coding frame, we had noted that there were many instances of GPs bemoaning the fact that they were frequently in worse shape than the patients who came requesting sick notes. Whilst the GPs on the team shared their colleagues' indignation, I saw this as 'data'. We subsequently decided to include one such statement in our second round of focus groups to explore this idea further.

It is probably evident from the examples provided here that the iterative process of qualitative data analysis is time-consuming and intellectually demanding, particularly where one aims to transcend the purely descriptive and provide a more analytic account. As argued earlier, the key to this process lies in theoretically informed sampling and in theoretically sensitive moderating and paying close attention to the group processes happening during discussions. An analytic approach hinges on the 'constant comparative method', which involves, as the name suggests, constantly comparing and contrasting participants' comments, looking for – and seeking to explain – differences between individuals and groups; distinctions that individuals or groups may make; and justifications advanced and arguments pursued.

### Key points

One of the main challenges involved in analyzing focus group data is that of reflecting and utilizing the interaction between participants, taking account of group dynamics. Focus group data are inherently complex, with discussion often occurring at more than one level and serving multiple functions for the various participants engaged in co-constructing a response. Focus groups, by acting as a forum through which individuals 'worry away' at a specific issue or set of problems, can help them to formulate potential solutions. Even where this is not the overt purpose of holding focus group sessions, this illustrates another way in which the 'whole' of focus group discussions can be 'greater than the sum of the parts'. Key to systematic analysis is the identification of patterning in the data (through employing some form of counting) and then seeking to formulate explanations for these patterns and, indeed, for lack of specific patterns in some cases. This frequently involves the researcher in interrogating the relationship between other codes and other coded excerpts, as the analysis is refined and, particularly, as exceptions are identified and the insights that they provide are explored.

Suggestions as to how to ensure rigour and maximize the analytic potential of your data analyses include the following:

- Be careful not to take excerpts out of context. Look at where they arise in the discussion, what other comments may have prompted these, and consider what the speaker is using the utterance to achieve; for example, providing a supportive environment for others, staking a claim to membership of a specific group, or emphasizing her or his separation from others.
- Pay attention to what is happening (in terms of group dynamics and the end product/point) during focus group discussions. Is the group producing a collaborative account, a potential solution or blueprint, is one participant being encouraged by others to reformulate his or her views or experiences, or are participants individually recasting their own ideas?
- Although the group is the main unit of analysis, you should also pay attention to individual voices. Whilst focus groups can overemphasize consensus, a focus on individual members can interrogate apparent consensus, by highlighting any discordant voices.
- Remain open to other explanations for identified patterns. Differences between groups can perhaps be explained by reference to the shared characteristics that informed your sampling decisions. However, focus groups are complex pieces of interaction and other factors are likely to have a bearing, including group dynamics, the contribution of individual participants, and unanticipated differences between individuals (in terms either of characteristics or perspectives).
- Sometimes unexpected similarities between groups can be just as illuminating as differences.
- The key to identifying patterns in your data is to use some form of counting. Grids can be helpful, but only insofar as you use the results as a basis on which to speculate as to the reasons for such patterning and begin to theorize.
- Silences can be equally illuminating, provided that you can demonstrate that they do not arise as a result of the moderator intervening to cut off discussion or being remiss in asking particular questions.
- Use reflexively your own reactions to excerpts from focus group discussions. Personal as well as disciplinary backgrounds impact on how we interpret data and the team can be a valuable resource in analysis.

### Further reading

The following works will lead you deeper in to advanced analysis of focus groups:

Frankland, J. and Bloor, M. (1999) 'Some issues arising in the systematic analysis of focus group materials', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 144–55.

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- Poland, B. and Pedersen, A. (1998) 'Reading between the lines: interpreting silences in qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(2): 293–312.
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## 11

# Realizing the full potential of focus groups

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### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

- understand how to make full use in your analysis of what your focus groups have to offer;
- know about the ways to present and render transferable findings from focus groups; and
- see the more potential recent developments like using virtual groups.

This final chapter reflects on how focus groups can be used to full advantage, outlining some of the limitations of the ways in which they have been used and emphasizing the significance of a comparative focus with the ultimate aim of enhancing analytical sophistication. It argues that it is this comparative potential that gives focus groups an 'edge' in relation to their capacity to produce 'transferable' findings. Challenges involved in writing up and presenting focus group data are also examined and some suggestions are made with regard to anticipating and addressing these issues. Finally, it critically reviews the possibilities afforded by 'new technologies' and speculates as to the future of focus group research.

## Limitations and possibilities

Once the researcher has systematically used the sort of grid advocated by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) to identify patterns in the data, the task of producing an explanation begins. Although many researchers claim to employ 'framework analysis', there is considerably less evidence of their engagement in interrogating and seeking to account for such patterning (Barbour, 2003). Ritchie and Spencer acknowledge that inductive or interpretive thinking is a much harder skill to capture (1994, p. 193) and this may be why so many researchers fight shy of taking their analysis one step further.

Of course, some of the hunches that inform our sampling strategies turn out not to be fruitful in terms of explaining differences between groups or individuals within them. Returning to the study by Black and Smith (1999), which explored the responses of women in Australia to the death of Princess Diana, the researchers explain that, although they had expected age to be an important dimension, this did not appear to be the case. Fortunately all is not lost in qualitative research if initial hypotheses are not supported – if the comparisons we make in interrogating our data do not provide the patterning, and hence analytic purchase, for which we had hoped. Since qualitative methods – and focus groups in particular – generate such rich data, there are always other differences, dimensions or processes that we can explore. McEwan et al. (2003) had anticipated that there would be marked differences in the perspectives of adolescents with epilepsy taking part in separate focus groups convened with 12–13 year olds, 14–15 year olds, and those aged 16 or over. In the event, there were surprising similarities between the groups. McEwan et al. speculate that this may simply reflect the general cultural shift involved in the increased 'time period' assigned to adolescence and conclude that it might be profitable to include over-18 year olds in future research on this topic.

Having acknowledged that age did not appear to have a noticeable difference on perceptions of Diana and her death, Black and Smith (1999) were able to compare women's responses and sentiments along a continuum ranging from very positive, through neutral, to very negative. They interrogated their data with reference to public discourses and representations of Diana, which were in evidence throughout the period when the study was carried out. Notwithstanding the small number of focus group sessions involved, their analysis achieved a considerable degree of theoretical sophistication. They reported that the women in the groups provided their own reflexive commentaries, which, whilst they drew on individuals' own lives and experiences, centred around the central task performed in the groups, namely, that of accounting for deviant feelings in an atmosphere of public grief, depicted most forcefully in media images. They explain:

The women who spoke in the groups did not identify with Diana as a feminist martyr struggling with a heartless spouse, her body image and the pressures of juggling work and the family to represent the causes of women. Rather they saw her as an admirable person who had tried to bring love to her children and whose life had ended in tragic circumstances. The identification, if any, was conservative, maternal and ontological rather than radical and political. (1999, p. 276)

Thus, even when the data do not allow us to tell the anticipated story, their richness affords ample scope for analytical interrogation. There is, then, no excuse for simply taking refuge in outlining themes in a descriptive manner. Crossley (2002) provides a commentary with regard to her own move away from using focus group data to illustrate general themes identified in research and her adoption of an approach that allowed her 'to capture some of the more important processes of social action and moral negotiation occurring during the course of focus groups' (2002, p. 1471).

## Presenting focus group findings

Wilkinson (1998), who reviewed focus group studies published between 1946 and 1996, reported that data are most frequently presented as though drawn from one-to-one interviews 'with interactions between group participants rarely [being] reported, let alone analyzed' (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 202). This probably reflects the realist assumptions that often underpin the use of the one-to-one interview (Billig, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), whereby interviews (and, indeed, focus groups) are seen as opportunities for 'data grabbing' (Collins, 1998, p. 1).

Of course, the strict word limits of some journals present quite a challenge for presenting focus group findings and there can be a temptation to shorten excerpts, or to concentrate on finding examples of individuals' comments that can be seen to reflect discussions pursued elsewhere by the group as a whole. Whilst this can help to cut down on words, it can have the unfortunate effect of taking comments out of context and can lead the reader to ask why focus groups were employed in the first place.

There is, inevitably, a tension between publishing findings in peer-reviewed journals (which may allow scope to develop theoretical arguments and the presentation and discussion of lengthy data excerpts) and publishing in journals likely to be read and heeded by health care professionals. There may, then, be a case for producing exactly the sort of 'summary' paper – perhaps for a journal that is read by practitioners – notwithstanding the issue that the academic researcher may feel this does not do credit to the conceptual sophistication of her or his

work. Nevertheless, Crossley (2002, 2003) used the different possibilities offered by two journals to her advantage to present her work in different ways, using her paper in *Social Science* and *Medicine* to explore the theoretical insights offered by data from one focus group and her paper published in the *Journal of Health Psychology* to compare the findings from her focus groups to illuminate ideas of health as a moral phenomenon.

Although there are, inevitably, some who still regard all qualitative research as unreliable and anecdotal, focus group findings can be very persuasive. Macnaghten and Myers (2004) reflect: '... the claim to have something new to say relies, at least in part, on the sense of authenticity conveyed by the colloquial words on the page and their contrast with the register of the academic argument going on around them' (2004, p. 77). The power of focus group data is partly a function of its ready appeal and partly a result of the rhetorical devices employed by authors (Seale, 1999). Macnaghten and Myers's comment serves to remind us of the implications of preserving our focus group participants' inarticulacy whilst contriving to tidy up our own theoretical arguments through the use of multiple drafts (Barbour, 1998b). Again, there is no easy answer, but we should perhaps question whether there is any inherent value in refusing to tidy up participants' comments, when our intention is to present these in print, in contrast to when we analyze the data, when preserving their original words is undoubtedly more important.

### Transferability of focus group findings

The other advantage of giving careful thought to sampling to facilitate comparison is that it affords an opportunity to contextualize our research findings. Although, as discussed in Chapter 2, focus groups excel at exploring 'Why not ...?' questions, it was argued that we can run into problems if our research looks only at those who fail, for example, to take up screening opportunities, thus sampling by deficit (MacDougall and Fudge, 2001).

Making use of the comparative potential of datasets, however, can also contribute in terms of rendering transferable the findings produced by focus group research. Even at the planning stage, there is evidence of considerable theoretical sophistication in the research carried out by Curtis et al. (2002), which looked at patients' perspectives on physician skills in end-of-life care, and which anticipated the issue of transferability by comparing patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cancer and AIDS. We would do well to bear in mind the potential of focus groups to contextualize our research in this way.

Focus groups afford an especially economical way of achieving this ambitious aim. Provided that we have read around the topic widely enough and have some idea of the other contexts to which our emergent explanations and theoretical

frameworks might be transferable, it is seldom necessary to convene more than two or three additional focus groups in order to test out our hypotheses. Of course, this may well necessitate a further proposal and ethics application, but certainly provides exciting possibilities. Simply by convening further groups, which comprise different combinations of individuals, we can go some way towards addressing these challenging questions with regard to transferability. Herein lies the unique potential of focus groups – their capacity to allow the researcher to return to the field in the time-honoured fashion advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), but without adding significant costs or time to the project. It is in this respect – and this respect only – that focus groups offer genuine economies. I am not advocating the convening of additional groups 'out of the blue', as one reading of the term 'wildcard group' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) might suggest. Of course, such an approach would raise ethical issues and might even necessitate the renegotiating of ethical permission from the relevant committees. I am recommending, rather, that the researcher consider recruiting to additional focus groups individuals who could legitimately have been included in the original groups, but bringing them together in a different combination, grouping them in respect of different characteristics. Thus it would only be the groups that would be different, not the people involved.

### Potential for new developments

It is almost *de rigueur* to end by making a plea for further research. However, there can be no definitive right or wrong way to design a piece of focus group research: choices will always depend on the research question, the sort of data being sought, the theoretical frameworks, skills and epistemological assumptions that the researcher brings to bear on the topic, the setting in which the research is being carried out, the availability and demographic characteristics of potential participants, the funding available and the research timetable. As with the enterprise of qualitative research itself, the answer lies in learning from other pieces of research and giving careful consideration, in the light of others' experiences and one's own past experience, to the possibilities that exist in relation to convening and carrying out focus groups in any given research project.

There are, however, some particularly promising recent developments related to the use of focus groups in order to advance our understanding of collective identity and to unpick the analytically rich theoretical framework of 'habitus'. Whilst my enthusiasm regarding this work – carried out, respectively, by Munday (2006) and Callaghan (2005) – undoubtedly reflects my own theoretical and disciplinary leanings, this does appear to me to be work that holds enormous potential for further developing focus groups as a method and focus group data analysis as a theoretically informed and rigorous practice.

## 'Virtual' focus groups – the future?

There has been some interesting debate with regard to the potential afforded by 'virtual' focus groups, where the participants do not actually meet, but are brought together either through telephone or video-conferencing, through convening online groups and utilizing naturally occurring materials posted on web-based discussion sites. Bloor et al. (2001) highlight the immediacy and collapsed spatial distance afforded by the Internet. Online focus groups are particularly useful when researching remote populations (Underhill and Olmsted, 2003) and Kenny (2005) found telephone conferencing invaluable in engaging with a geographically spread population of Australian nurses. I have used telephone conferencing to access senior members of professional groups who were geographically dispersed. One interesting aspect of this latter usage was that individuals were less likely to dominate the discussion than in face-to-face groups, perhaps because, in the absence of visual contact, they cannot rely on signifiers of status and body language to stake their claim for preferential treatment regarding 'air-time'. Telephone conferencing has also been used successfully to discuss sensitive topics, such as the experiences of families involved in organ donation (Regan, 2003). However, Regan advises that additional time be allocated to preparation of a virtual environment that is conducive to discussing sensitive topics. In particular, participants may be concerned about anonymity, which is an issue also raised by Bloor et al. (2001) and Stewart and Williams (2005), who discuss the implications of using web-boards that require discussants to complete a registration process.

Some further practical hints in relation to computer-mediated focus groups are provided by O'Connor and Madge (2003), who describe the software conferencing technique they have developed, and Sweet (2001), who discusses technical obstacles and how to overcome these. Notwithstanding some of the additional challenges of such approaches, they are worth considering in certain situations. In particular, they can offer economies in terms of recruitment, travel costs and transcribing (as online discussions come ready transcribed). They can also be used simply to furnish a sampling pool for more conventional qualitative research (Williams, 2003). Online discussions can also dispense with some of the problems associated in matching moderators and groups, since gender (Campbell et al., 2001) and age of the moderator need not be made explicit and hence do not have an impact on the data generated (although, of course, participants will make their own assumptions, perhaps based on the language used and style of responses). However, there are also disadvantages and their relative importance has to be weighed up in the context of the particular research project under discussion, and its aims and focus.

Comparing the advantages of face-to-face and online focus groups, Campbell et al. (2001) concluded:

The face-to-face format caused some participants to hold back from discussing information that they felt was too personal or potentially embarrassing. ... The need to type, however, may have led some people to shorten or omit comments they would have voiced in a face-to-face discussion. (2001, p. 101)

Where researchers rely on established chat rooms to 'harvest' pre-existing discussion material for research purposes, they lose control over the amount of background information they can collect in order to contextualize responses (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 78). 'Harvesting' online data also raises important ethical considerations (Robson and Robson, 1999). Stewart and Williams (2005) highlight the complications concerning data storage and anonymizing, since the original data are automatically available to all discussants. This means, in turn, that individuals can, at least in theory, be identified by others through deductive disclosure.

Campbell et al. (2001) and Underhill and Olmsted (2003) both found that online discussions and face-to-face groups produced similar amounts of data and that there was a lot of similarity in terms of the themes identified. Schneider et al. (2002) also compared online focus groups and face-to-face discussions, in this case in the context of eliciting users' views of a number of health-related websites. They reported that the online contributions were shorter and that participation was more uniform. They conclude that online and face-to-face focus groups can have different roles, depending on the nature of the research question and the degree to which equal but succinct participation is considered important as compared to more extended, but uneven, engagement.

Campbell et al. (2001) carried out online and face-to-face focus groups to explore perspectives on risk and colon cancer. Their face-to-face participants were recruited from amongst those identified, but not selected, to take part in a quantitative study and online participants were recruited via a national colon cancer online support association. Their experience, however, suggests that researchers need to carefully consider the implications for sampling of reliance on computer-mediated formats. Campbell et al. (2001) report that the participants in their online focus groups tended to be younger, better educated and had higher incomes than did those taking part in face-to-face groups. This could be crucially important, depending on the topic under study.

Another factor to take into account when deciding whether to use face-to-face or web-based discussions is the relative importance within the project under consideration of naturally occurring as opposed to researcher-facilitated data. Reflecting on their experience of using computer-mediated groups to study the views of faculty members with regard to using technology in the classroom, Franklin and Lowry (2001) acknowledged that an important disadvantage of the online format was that it reduced the ability of the moderator to guide the discussion and request elaborations and this may require enhanced moderator

skills (Stewart and Williams, 2005). Bloor et al. (2001), however, point out that asynchronous discussions unfolding over time – as opposed to ‘real-time’ exchanges, which can be fast and furious – are much easier to moderate, although they do not give quite the same immediacy.

As with the other choices and decisions debated here, there is no definitive answer. Bloor et al. (2001) provide the following measured summary of the potential of virtual focus groups

Virtual focus groups are not the future of focus group research. ... However, virtual focus groups do offer a useful stablemate in the focus group tradition, and a worthwhile new tool for the social researcher. (2001, p. 75)

## Concluding remarks

Focus groups, if used appropriately and imaginatively, really can ‘reach the parts that other methods cannot reach’ (Kitzinger, 1995). In order to optimize their contribution, however, it is crucial that the researcher give careful consideration to the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of focus groups as a qualitative method. As well as discouraging the abuse of focus groups, for instance as a ‘back door’ to survey-type data, this guards against the development of unreasonable expectations that would otherwise only be disappointed. This also potentially saves the researcher many hours of agonizing over perceived limitations and challenges, but allows instead for aspects such as the active involvement of the researcher in generating data, group dynamics or constantly evolving perspectives to be recognized as the resource they are and not as problems to be overcome. Focus groups can be used to develop analytically sophisticated findings, but only if their full comparative potential is harnessed, through thoughtful sampling. The constant comparative method, with the associated continuous interrogation and review of emergent explanatory frameworks, serves to protect the focus group researcher from the temptation of slipping into employing an impressionistic approach. In addition, the transparent reporting of the process of developing coding frames and carrying out analysis should ensure that such allegations are a thing of the past. There are, undoubtedly, considerable challenges involved in planning, running and analyzing focus group data, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Running a successful focus group can produce a real ‘buzz’ as the researcher generates truly fascinating material and begins to engage with this ‘on the hoof’ as it is generated, anticipating analysis and even eliciting the collaboration of participants in co-producing early but nevertheless theorized accounts.

There are no ready answers, but ample scope for imaginative and creative use of focus groups. Because of the inherent flexibility of focus groups there are almost infinite possibilities. It is also important not to be too precious in our

application of focus groups and also not to succumb to the comfort and attractiveness of our own disciplinary ‘certainties’. Group methods are not the sole preserve of the research community, and this opens up interesting possibilities for collaboration with professionals with groupwork skills rather different from our own (such as management consultants and teamwork facilitators). Although not without its challenges, such multidisciplinary work could yield exciting dividends (Barbour, 1999a). Staying open to new approaches need not mean sacrificing rigour, as is sometimes feared. I often think there are parallels with the genre of science fiction writing: the sheer range of possibilities afforded by focus groups and science fiction throws into particularly sharp focus the limits of the researcher’s and writer’s imagination. I hope that you will embrace this challenge creatively, but rigorously, as you explore the exciting possibilities presented by focus groups as a method – whatever your own discipline, level of research experience, or research topic.

## Key points

By way of a few last words of guidance I would offer the following:

- Although focus group data can be used descriptively, this approach has important limitations.
- Seek to maximize the comparative potential of your study through theoretically informed sampling and extensive interrogation of your dataset – not just by identifying patterns, but by striving to furnish explanations for these.
- Focus groups produce very rich data and there will always be considerable potential for comparison, even if this is along lines other than you had originally foreseen when drawing up your sampling frame.
- Focus groups offer unique advantages in terms of their capacity to enhance the transferability of your findings.
- Don’t rely exclusively on quotes from individuals when presenting your findings. Use some excerpts that reflect the interaction between participants, especially where the perspectives involved have been developed collaboratively or through argument amongst focus group members.
- Think about writing up your research for a range of audiences and identify relevant journals. This may involve you in publishing in places you would not normally consider.
- Develop a publications strategy and capitalize on the knowledge of all team members regarding the range of potential journals that serve different disciplinary interests.

- Focus groups are an inherently flexible method and the only limitation on their use is likely to be the imagination of the researcher.
- Although 'new technology' offers tantalizing new possibilities, it is important to weigh up the pros and cons and it is unlikely that these will supersede focus groups as we have used them until now.
- Finally, there is no substitute for well-thought-out projects whose research design allows for focus groups to be used to full advantage.

### Further reading

The various current debates and issues addressed in this chapter are outlined in more detail by these authors:

- Callaghan, G. (2005) 'Accessing habitus: relating structure and agency through focus group research', *Sociological Research Online*, 10(3), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/3/callaghan.html>
- Macnaghten, P. and Myers, G. (2004) 'Focus groups', in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 65–79.
- Munday, J. (2006) 'Identity in focus: the use of focus groups to study the construction of collective identity', *Sociology*, 40(1): 89–105.
- Stewart, K. and Williams, M. (2005) 'Researching online populations: the use of online focus groups for social research', *Qualitative Research*, 5(4): 395–416.

## III Glossary

**Coding frame** A template or system for organizing the content of transcripts into themes and sub-themes. It can consist of a list of broad themes with their corresponding subcategories, or can involve representation in diagrammatic form, showing more complex relationships between themes and coding categories. Such templates can be generated manually or by using a computer software package designed for qualitative data analysis.

**Community development** An approach to working with disadvantaged communities (often, but not necessarily, in developing countries) in order to produce knowledge (that allows for the identification of problems and development of potential solutions) with the aim of improving their material and/or social conditions.

**Constant comparative method** This involves continuously and systematically comparing and contrasting the comments made in separate focus groups and by different individuals within groups. It also refers to using the findings of other studies in order to contextualize one's own findings through highlighting and seeking to explain similarities and differences.

**Dataset** In focus group research this refers to the transcripts, notes or annotated recordings generated through discussions, as they are organized into themes according to the coding frame (see above).

**Debriefing** This refers to exchanges between the researcher and focus group participants after the session has ended and may consist of addressing participants' questions or concerns (such as explaining the use to which data will be put, or the procedures for ensuring anonymity) and provision of appropriate contact numbers (for researchers, services or helplines) or relevant leaflets or specially designed information sheets.

**Delphi group** This approach most commonly refers to a combination of a survey, the results of which are fed back to an expert panel (see below), which then discusses these and makes decisions as to their relevance.

**Expert panel** A group seen as holding specialized knowledge (as defined by a professional group or by the research team). The panel may meet for a focus group discussion or may be involved as a 'virtual' group, where

members either exchange responses via telephone, e-mail or written documents or correspond directly and individually with the researcher.

**Focus group discussion** A group convened for research purposes that relies for data on the discussion generated between participants.

**Focus group interview** A group method that relies on asking the same question (or series of questions) of each participant in turn.

**Framework analysis** An approach developed in order to aid constant comparison by producing grids (or frames) that allow for the systematic identification of patterning in the data.

**Health services research** Research that critically examines the ways in which health services are organized, provided or experienced by users.

**Mixed methods studies** This refers to studies that employ more than one approach to generating data, whether this involves combining quantitative and qualitative methods or different qualitative approaches (such as observational fieldwork, interviews or focus groups).

**Moderator** The researcher who runs a focus group, putting questions to participants, and clarifying with them their meanings and any distinctions they are making in the course of their discussion.

**Nominal group technique** Literally meaning a 'research-convened' rather than pre-existing group, the term is most often used to refer to group sessions that involve a ranking exercise, with participants generating a set of priorities, which they then rank.

**Piloting** Trying out questions, topic guides and stimulus materials in order to establish whether these are likely to elicit the sort of data required for the research project at hand. This procedure also indicates whether particular lines of questioning and terminology are acceptable to participants.

**Prompts** These are supplementary questions or items to be used in addition to the broad questions on a topic guide (see below) only in the event of these not arising spontaneously.

**Purposive sampling** Sometimes used interchangeably with 'theoretical sampling', this refers to utilizing prior knowledge to guide selection of participants. This is done through anticipating the characteristics of potential respondents likely to give rise to differing perspectives and accounts of their experiences and using this to inform decisions about who to approach and invite to take part in a research project.

**Reflexivity** This refers to acknowledging the input of the researcher in actively co-constructing the situation that she or he purports to study. It

also alludes to the use to which such insights can be put in making sense of or interpreting data.

**Respondent validation** Attempts (verbal or written) to check with those who have taken part in focus groups the accuracy of the interpretations and findings produced by the researcher(s).

**Sampling frame** A scheme for ensuring adequate coverage/diversity in selecting focus group participants. It lists combinations of demographic characteristics or attitudinal positions likely to have an impact on perspectives and experiences. Sampling frames can be represented in grid form to enable progress to be checked, as groups are convened.

**Second-stage sampling** This refers to augmenting sampling at a later stage (once initial focus groups have been run and preliminary analysis has been carried out) by convening groups that involve either new types of people or that simply bring the same types of people together in focus groups in different combinations.

**Social constructionism** An approach that sees social phenomena as being actively constructed, mediated and sustained through social practice (including interaction).

**Stimulus materials** Pre-existing (e.g. health promotion leaflets, newspaper clippings, cartoons or video clips) or specially designed materials that encourage and help to focus discussion around the topics the research is designed to address.

**Symbolic interactionism** An approach to research associated with the Chicago School of sociology and most commonly involving observation of naturally occurring interactions or exchanges. It encompasses the idea of human actions as arising through the active construction of meaning through discussion with significant others.

**Theoretical Sampling** See **purposive sampling**.

**Topic guide** A set of broad questions or headings that anticipates the areas to be covered in a focus group discussion.

**Transcript** A text of the interaction in the group discussion, usually reproduced verbatim.

**Triangulation** This refers to attempts to compare data obtained using different methods and is based on the notion of corroboration or validation borrowed from the quantitative tradition.

**Virtual focus groups** These can be telephone discussions (which are similar to face-to-face focus group sessions) or web-based varieties, involving



either sequential responses via discussion fora or real-time exchanges between 'live' participants. Such approaches may involve the researcher in convening groups and dictating the topic and questions (as with more conventional focus groups) or may capitalize on independently generated discussions that are available, but which were not originally intended for research purposes.

**Wildcard groups** This term relates to additional groups that are convened in order to plug any gaps in coverage that are identified as a study progresses. This may involve convening groups with new categories of participant or simply selecting group members with respect to new criteria to which the researcher has become sensitized.

### III References

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