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21

Focus Groups

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INTRODUCTION

action research, and the growing use of online focus groups.

THE HISTORY OF FOCUS GROUPS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Focus groups originated in sociology in the 1920s (Merton and Kendall 1946), but were primarily used by market researchers for several decades (Templeton 1987), before regaining popularity in the social sciences in the 1990s (Wilkinson 1998), as well as becoming widely used as a marketing and political tool for gathering 'opinions'. They are increasingly being used as a research tool throughout the social sciences, as well as in a wide range of other academic fields – for example health studies, education, political science and geography.

Even though focus groups comprise face-to-face interaction of crucial interest to social scientists, and are increasingly being used as a research tool (Wilkinson 1998), there is a significant lack of literature on the analysis of the conversational processes and structures involved in them, although various researchers have called attention to this lack

This chapter sets out some of the main issues, both practical and theoretical, of using focus groups in social research, together with suggestions on how to use and analyse the groups most effectively. First the history and reasons for using focus groups in social research are considered, taking note of some of the different epistemological and theoretical positions underpinning focus group research. Then, design and procedure are considered, including sampling and selecting participants, the logistics of recording and managing the data, and ethical considerations. Third, the role of the moderator, including strategies for moderating focus groups, and acknowledgement of the impact of the moderator, is discussed. In the section entitled 'Analysing focus group data', some of the specific issues which arise in analysis of focus groups are highlighted, with particular reference to the importance of the group context. Finally, the section entitled 'Using focus groups in specific contexts' looks at the use of focus groups in specific contexts: within feminist research, organisational research, in cross-cultural and cross-national research, in

inger 1994, Agar and MacDonald 1995, 1998, Wilkinson 1998), and there have been some recent considerations of active patterns within focus groups (Myers 1998, Kitzinger and Frith 1999, Ta and Potter 1999). Wilkinson (1998) ludes that 'there would seem to be considerable potential for developing new – better methods of analysing focus group (1998: 197). The regularly occurring of theoretical and analytical discussions a focus group literature, even in academic texts, is perhaps partially explained by roots of focus group usage as a market arch tool. The perception that focus ps are a quick and useful way of gathering ions' still informs mainstream debate on s groups and focus group manuals, and ts how they are used – for example, they often viewed as (only) suitable for the al stages of a research project.

AT IS A 'FOCUS GROUP'?

ocus group is generally understood to a group of 6–12 participants, with an rviewer, or moderator, asking questions it a particular topic. Some researchers, 1 as Hughes and DuMont (1993: 776) characterise focus groups as group interviews: us groups are in-depth group interviews loying relatively homogenous groups to ide information around topics specified the researchers'. Others define them group discussions: 'a carefully planned ussion designed to obtain perceptions on efined environment' (Kreuger 1998: 88) 'an informal discussion among selected iduals about specific topics' (Beck il., 1986). These definitions show a ten- i between participant-researcher interac- i and interaction between participants, with ractions between participants in the group ng a particularly distinctive characteristic ocus group methodology, although this is always apparent from analysis of focus up data. The data obtained in this method ether a 'natural' discussion of a relevant ic, nor a constrained group interview with

set questions, but it has elements of both these forms of talk. The different definitions of focus groups, as well as the origins of focus group methodology in very varied contexts, demonstrate some of the variations within this methodology; even within the social research context, focus groups are used by researchers with very different theoretical and analytical backgrounds, and these have implications for the use and analysis of focus groups.

REASONS FOR USING FOCUS GROUPS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

A growing literature on the reasons for using focus groups in the social sciences, together with practical advice and how to organise them and run them, is now available for example by Kitzinger (1995), Vaughn et al. (1996), Greenbaum (1998), Morgan and Kreuger (1998) and Bloor et al. (2000). One often-stated advantage of using focus groups lies in the fact that they permit researchers to observe a large amount of interaction on a specific topic in a short time. They are sometimes viewed as a quick and easy way to gather data. However, there are often problems with setting up and organising groups and obtaining the right number and mix of people to groups. In practice, groups tend to be based on availability rather than representativeness of sample. Moderating focus groups can be complex, and the data obtained can be difficult to transcribe and analyse (Pini 2002).

From a practical perspective, the feasibility of arranging focus groups needs to be considered. For example, if interviewing people who are geographically distant, or who have very little time, or who will be interviewed in a second language, then focus groups may prove impossible (though telephone and online focus group methods are being developed, see the section entitled 'Using focus groups in specific contexts'). Focus groups have been described as particularly useful at an early stage of research as a means of eliciting general viewpoints, which can be used to inform design of larger

studies (Vaughn et al., 1996). They are often used in conjunction with another method, such as individual interviews or survey questionnaires. While perceived convenience is a regularly cited reason for using focus groups, from a methodological perspective, the question should rather be whether focus groups will produce the best sort of data for the research question.

One of the perceived strengths of focus group methodology is the possibility for research participants to develop ideas collectively, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives, 'to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of [the participants]' (Du Bois 1983). Morgan (1988) views the hallmark of a focus group as 'the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (Morgan 1988: 12). A central feature of focus groups is that they provide researchers with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their experiences and to think and talk about a designated topic. 'Within-group homogeneity prompts focus group participants to elaborate stories and themes that help researchers understand how participants structure and organize their social world' (Hughes and DuMont 1993). Focus groups with children have been shown to be a very effective approach for collecting data in a setting which children feel comfortable with (Ronen et al., 2001).

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Sampling and selecting participants

In focus group methodology, the unit of analysis is taken to be the group (Morgan 1988, Kreuger 1998), and groups are typically homogenous – for example, students on a certain course, or a group with a similar medical condition. Participants are chosen to fit in with the group's demographic. According to the prescriptions about focus group methodology in the literature

should be relatively homogenous membership (Kreuger 1994, Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Guides of focus group research typically advocate having single sex groups, and several groups with members with comparable characteristics, to permit cross-group comparability. There are many other variables which may need to be taken into consideration, such as nationality, sexuality and ethnic background. Having people at similar life stages, or working in similar jobs, can be particularly relevant. However, heterogeneous groups can produce very interesting discussions. For example, mixed sex groups can challenge the typical male and female discourses on these topics (Smithson 2000). Recruitment of group members has been shown to affect the group dynamics, for example Agar and MacDonald (1995) point out how the ways in which respondents are recruited come to condition the group talk.

Organisation and dynamics of focus groups

While the literature often (e.g. Vaughn 1996) recommends focus groups of up to 12 participants, there are practical and methodological reasons why many focus groups are smaller. Practically, it can be difficult to get an exact number of participants to turn up to a focus group, especially if trying to get a specific sub-group, for example new parents working in specific jobs, or expectant mothers of a particular age. In larger groups, there is a likelihood that some participants will remain silent or speak very little, while smaller groups (say 4–8 participants) often provide an environment where all participants can play an active part in the discussion. Smaller groups often yield interesting and relevant data, giving more space for all participants to talk and to explore the various themes in detail (Brannen et al., 2002). Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest that if groups are smaller than four they can lose some of the qualities of being a group, while they see triads and dyads as an effective hybrid of in-depth interviews.

The practicalities of organising focus groups are covered in various guides, for example Vaughn et al. (1996) and Morgan and Kreuger (1998). Practicalities of setting up focus groups include considering the issues of how you are going to obtain a sufficiently large (but not too large) group of people at a specific place and time. Will childcare, travel expenses or remuneration be provided, and if not will this exclude certain groups of participants? Moreover, as with recruitment, the way in which the focus group is presented and conducted – whether refreshments are offered, whether the group is being paid to participate, the perceived formality of the occasion – will, as with all research methods, have an impact on the participants' responses and interactions.

The focus group procedure is typically to follow a relatively unstructured interview guide, which generates a list of topics for discussion. The aim is to cover the topics set by the research agenda, but with some flexibility to allow related topics to emerge in this context. The focus group moderator (who may or may not be the researcher) guides the discussion, making sure that all topics are covered, and that all group members are given the chance to speak. Groups will ideally last from 1 to 2 hours. Just as with other forms of semi-structured interview, testing the guide on a pilot group is highly recommended. In social science research, focus groups are usually recorded either aurally and/or using video facilities. This contrasts with market research where notes are made during the focus group by the moderator or a colleague.

Morgan (2002) makes a distinction between the more structured approach to focus groups which originated in market research, and a less structured approach which has emerged from social research using focus groups. In marketing research, moderators are usually being paid to find out some specific answers for a client, and there is therefore a need for the moderator to be active and visible in the group, performing for the satisfaction of a paying client. In this context, the moderator of a fairly structured focus group

is likely to refocus off-topic discussions, and stick to a structured interview schedule. In this context, most interaction is likely to be between the moderator and the participants and there is little discussion besides answering the set questions. In contrast, a less structured approach is typical in much social research; whether the goal is more typically to understand the participants' thinking, the moderator is primarily aiming to facilitate discussion rather than direct it, and participants are encouraged to talk to each other rather than just respond to the moderator's questions. As Morgan (2002) points out, both of these focus group types can be used within social research, depending on the research topic and theoretical approach.

Agar and MacDonald (1995) argued that focus groups are usually too structured and not as useful as more in-depth qualitative ethnographic interviews. However, as described in this chapter, focus groups can be conducted in a less structured way, and have been found useful in postmodernist and feminist research, for example, as a way of uncovering discourses and narratives in a way which can feel less structured to participants. It is vital to remember in focus group research that the data obtained is different to the data which would emerge in a different research context, such as individual interviewing. This can be viewed as hearing different stories in the different research contexts, or as getting both public and private accounts.

Ethical considerations

A particular concern with using focus group methodology is the ethical issues involved of having more than one research participant at a time. This has two implications: first, people may be uncomfortable with talking about their concerns in a group context, whether with strangers or with people they know. Sometimes group members may not respond appropriately to other members' disclosures. The moderator can try and move the discussion on or change the topic if group members appear uncomfortable with sensitive issues.

come out in focus groups unless specifically designed groups, include gay and lesbian views, and other non-standard family setups, and also ethnic minority and religious minority perspectives. Separate focus groups can cover some aspects of these perspectives, and for other aspects, more 'private' methods such as individual interviews may be more suitable. However, the limitations of what is discussed and what is omitted vary and it is possible to get unexpected and extremely interesting discussions about topics which are not always 'recommended' in focus group manuals. Groups may be happy to discuss sensitive topics such as sexual orientation and parenting in a general way, but not to give personal details about their own lives. Sensitive topics can be discussed in a general way in a focus group context, but with the emphasis on general discussion rather than individual experience.

THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF THE MODERATOR

In market research moderators tend to be specifically trained and employed to perform this task, while in the social sciences researchers often moderate the group themselves. Specific issues that the moderator is expected to deal with include dealing with disagreement and arguments in the groups, including all participants, noticing when participants are uncomfortable with a discussion and dealing with this appropriately, ensuring that essential topics are covered in the time available. The moderator is expected to strike a balance between generating interest in and discussion about a particular topic, while not pushing their own research agenda ending in confirming existing expectations (Vaughn et al., 1996; Sim 2002). They should be trying to ensure that discussion is between participants rather than between them and the moderator (Sim 2002).

In qualitative social science research, the role and subjectivity of the researcher is a vital part of the research context, and in this paradigm, the role and positioning of the

When are focus groups not appropriate?

Certain topics are commonly understood to be unsuitable for the focus group context. In particular, topics which participants may view as personal or sensitive are often better left for other methods, for example individual interviews. These may include people's personal experiences or life histories, their sexuality, and topics such as infertility or financial status. What is viewed as a private issue varies between different cultural groups (and also depends on age, gender and other contexts). In institutional contexts, such as workplaces, or schools, people may be particularly wary of presenting their views or talking about their personal experiences in front of colleagues, managers or peers. Focus groups may also be inappropriate when the aim of the research is to obtain in-depth personal narratives, for example of the experience of illness. The methodology may also be inappropriate for topics where people have strong or hostile views. However, in all these cases, much depends on the questions asked and the group dynamics.

There are perspectives which rarely come out in 'mainstream' groups, though these vary in different cultural contexts, and are affected by age, gender and background of the participants, as well as the setting and context of the focus group. Perspectives which rarely

Focus group moderator is understood to make a difference to the group dynamic, as well as to the data obtained. For example, when considering single sex groups, the sex of the moderator also needs to be taken into account. The moderator's impact as a gendered and embodied being needs to be considered both in the set-up of the groups, and in the analysis. This is not unique to focus group research: surveys, questionnaires and individual interviews have all been shown to sometimes result in respondents giving accounts perceived as acceptable to the researcher (Bradburn and Sudman 1979, Bryman 1988). The problem may be exacerbated in focus group research by fear of peer group disapproval.

While focus group literature may sometimes give the impression that the ideal moderator is a neutral person with the ability to encourage the discussion, and pick up on participants' responses and narratives, in practice the moderator can never be a neutral bystander, and should instead aim for reflexivity and awareness of the way their characteristics and behaviour may be influencing the group (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996, Stokoe and Smithson 2002). Moreover, it is possible for the moderator to make explicit use of their own experience as a way of encouraging the discussion, for example a moderator with young children, or with experience of a specific life event or illness, may give examples from their own experience as a way of encouraging the group to discuss an issue.

Group dynamics and interaction

The role and impact of focus group participants on each other and on the perspectives which emerge have been relatively little studied. There is wide variation in focus group research in type and size of group, with corresponding effects on the group dynamics. For example, some groups consist of people who have worked together or know each other well; others are made up of complete strangers. While the literature stresses the importance of homogeneity in groups, there is little attention to how

groups of strangers, friends or colleagues respectively, affect each others' contribution to the research.

Participants' use of groups

Morgan (1996) highlights the need for focus group organisers to consider more carefully both the concerns and the priorities of the participants. In qualitative social research paradigms, research participants are understood to be active co-researchers in participants rather than passive subjects. An important question for focus group methodology is how do participants use the focus groups? Focus groups are not simply a means of eliciting knowledge from participants, but are often reported to be quite creative experiences for the participants themselves (Madriz 2000, Brannen 2004). People can use the context to become particularly reflective, exploring themselves and their relationships in tentative and thoughtful ways. Group can become a space for participants to discover new things about their condition or organisation, or to make contact with other people with similar experiences.

ANALYSING FOCUS GROUP DATA

Even though focus groups comprise face-to-face interaction of crucial interest to social scientists, and are increasingly being used as a research tool (Wilkinson 1998), there was, until recently, a significant lack of literature on the analysis of the conversational processes and structures involved in them, although various researchers have called attention to this lack (Kitzinger 1994, Agar and MacDonald 1995, Myers 1998, Wilkinson 1998), and there have been some recent considerations of interactive patterns within focus groups (e.g. Myers 1998, Kitzinger and Frith 1999, Puchta and Potter 1999). Wilkinson (1998) concludes that 'there would seem to be considerable potential for developing new – and better – methods of analysing focus group data' (1998: 197).

Groups as the unit of analysis

As mentioned earlier, an important characteristic of focus group data is that groups, rather than individuals within groups, are usually viewed as the unit of analysis. However, the unit of analysis depends on the interpretative framework (and attendant underlying assumptions) that the researcher takes on. Wilkinson (1998) argues that many articles based on focus group research appear to be treating the data as identical to individual interview data, and the unique aspects of focus groups are habitually ignored in the analysis.

The many variables in setting up and conducting focus groups touched on earlier can make systematic analysis tricky. Sample populations in the focus groups are small and non-representative. Topics are not all discussed in equal depth in all groups. Some information is volunteered in some groups and not others, some individuals are more forthcoming than others, and the group interactions will determine the discussion. If a systematic analysis is needed for the research agenda, then there will be a fairly structured approach to the use of focus groups, as described earlier (c.f. Morgan 2002), with a strict control on the number and mix of participants, a limited set of questions, and a more guided approach to moderation. The use of systematic coding, or content analysis, which has been historically popular in focus group research (Morgan 1988, Wilkinson 1998) tends to fit with the more structured approach to focus groups found in market research, and often reflects a more positivist epistemological stance.

In contrast, focus group researchers coming from a postmodernist research perspective, place less (or no) emphasis on 'systematic analysis', as groups are viewed as producing locally situated accounts – 'collective testimonies' (Madriz 2000) – which are not necessarily directly comparable. From this approach, size of groups and the exact discussion of set topics may be less essential, and the research agenda may be better met by a fairly unstructured approach which permits a participant-led discussion.

As with all social research, the researcher needs to consider whether the status of the data (for example, realist or postmodernist approach) fits with the methodological approach, and with the analytical techniques employed, as well as fitting the research concerns. The variation in focus group methodologies and uses demonstrates that this methodology is not uniquely tied to one theoretical perspective; focus groups are popular with researchers from a wide range of epistemological positions, as well as across a range of disciplines, but the way they are used and analysed is likely to be very different.

Natural discussion or artificial performance?

The central feature of focus groups, as a site of social interaction, is rarely picked up on in focus group analysis, with some notable exceptions (for example Myers 1998, Puchta and Potter 1999). A key issue for researchers is the complex relation of focus group talk to everyday talk. Agar and MacDonald doubt the 'lively conversation' called for in the focus group handbooks – 'in fact a judgement as to whether a conversation occurred, lively or not, is a delicate matter that calls for some close analysis of transcripts' (1995: 78). Focus groups can be viewed as performances in which the participants jointly produce accounts about proposed topics in a socially organised situation. Participants and moderator are 'operating under the shared assumption that the purpose of the discussion is to display opinions to the moderator' (Myers 1998: 85). However, 'natural' discussion is also a performance (Goffman 1981); there is not a 'simple opposition of the institutional and the everyday, the artificial and the real' (Myers: 107). Rather, 'natural' conversation and various forms of institutional talk, including classroom, courtroom, workplace and research-generated talk, are all part of a range of situations for talk (Drew and Heritage 1992). Silverman argues that 'neither kind of data [artificial and naturally occurring] is intrinsically better than the other; everything depends on the method

of analysis' (Silverman 1993: 106). Focus groups, then, should not be analysed as if they are naturally occurring discussions, but as discussions occurring in a specific, controlled context.

There have been numerous critiques of qualitative techniques which appear to offer an 'authentic gaze' into participants' views or lives (Silverman 2000). Focus group researchers have typically extolled the group context as one which limits the role and impact of the moderator, thereby permitting a more 'natural' discussion to emerge. This view needs to be treated with caution; the group context does not obliterate the role of the moderator, or the research context of the talk.

Consensus and disagreement

The emergence of dissonant views and opinions between participants – what Kitzinger (1994) calls 'argumentative interactions' – is a distinctive feature of the focus group method and often makes an important contribution to the richness of the data obtained (Sim 2002). However, there are limitations to how disagreements are expressed in this peer group context. The group context of this methodology, while appropriate for uncovering group discourses and stories, is, meanwhile, likely to reproduce the socially accepted, normative discourse for that group. People with unpopular views, or less confident group members, may be reluctant to air their views in a group context. People are often (though not always – see shortly) reluctant to disagree openly with a stated view, especially in groups of strangers. It is important therefore not to assume consensus just because no one has disagreed openly (Sim 2002). If a divergence of views emerges, it is safe to assume that participants do hold different views; however if no divergence appears, this does not indicate consensus.

General questions can often elicit socially acceptable responses when it is likely that in fact the individuals in the group hold stronger views than this. The timing and

stage of the focus group can also make a difference – a question asked in the first few minutes of the focus group may elicit a different response if asked later on when people are more comfortable with the group. Overall, a focus group is likely to elicit 'public' accounts (Smithson 2000, Sim 2002) in contrast to the private accounts which might emerge in individual interviews or in everyday interactions.

But detailed study of group data suggests the opposite can also happen and they can be a forum for contrasting opinions to emerge and develop (Smithson 2000, Pini 2002). There are various powerful counter-examples to the expected 'rule' that focus groups replicate the dominant discourse. Sometimes participants make gentle, or overt challenges to the status quo, and there are particular strengths in the challenging of views by other participants, rather than by the moderator. Kitzinger (1994) shows how difference can be examined in the focus group context and how the method can be used as a way of studying how differences are negotiated and understood.

One of the strengths of the method (Smithson 2000, Pini 2002) is the way focus group discussions often range between discussion of personal experiences, and collective experiences. Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) contend that focus groups sometimes provide an opportunity for 'sensitive' topics to be raised, as there is the space for discussion and reflection and time to explore issues in an in-depth way than might be the case in more routine dialogue. They argue that focus groups can be used to unpack the social construction of sensitive issues, uncover different layers of discourse, and illuminate group taboos and the routine silencing of certain views and experiences. Through attention to sensitive moments, researchers can identify unspoken assumptions and question the nature of everyday talk. Focus group talk, like everyday talk can include many contradictions, norms and both official and unofficial perspectives on a sensitive topic.

One of the claims made in favour of focus groups as a methodology is that they

can be a powerful method for minority groups or groups which are often ignored in other research methods to express their views and experiences (Wilkinson 1998, Smithson 2000). In these cases, the group perspective and concerns can dominate, rather than the interviewer's pre-set agenda.

Silences and omissions in focus groups

All research methods have in-built omissions – things that a specific methodology is unlikely to pick up on. Inevitably, some participants speak freely in the groups and others remain silent, or need encouragement to speak. It is not necessarily a problem if some people remain silent. Silence is an enduring feature of human interaction, present in research communicative contexts as elsewhere (Poland and Pederson 1998: 308). Silences and pauses are issues both for focus group moderation, and for analysis. Silences after a specific question can be an indicator to the moderator that the group is uncomfortable with talking about a particular issue (Myers 1998).

Emergent themes and discourses

While researchers construct the focus group schedules around their research topics, a particularly interesting feature of focus group methodology is the way in which groups take up these discourses or themes in ways anticipated by the researchers. It is also common for groups to introduce new themes anticipated in the research design. Literature on analysing focus groups stresses the key issue that the analytic focus is not on what individuals say in a group context but on the discourses which are constructed within this group context (e.g. Wilkinson 1998, Smithson 2000, Sims 2002). For this reason, analytical approaches which explicitly consider interactive effects and group dynamics are particularly appropriate (Myers 1998, Puchta and Potter 1999, 2002, Stokoe and Smithson 2002). These approaches all focus on how discourses, or themes, are constructed jointly by participants in a group context.

Conversational interaction is viewed as the prime locus for the development, or co-construction (Jacoby and Ochs 1995) of sense-making. Disagreements, challenges and resistances are seen as important parts of the construction of collective opinions. From this perspective, social realities and identities are understood to be socially constructed, fluid and context-dependent, so focus groups are a particularly appropriate method. For example, Munday (2006) has argued that the use of focus groups provides a method particularly suited to researching the construction of collective identity. Puchta and Potter (1999) consider the contradiction in focus group methodology between the requirement that the talk should be both highly focused on predefined topics and issues, and at the same time spontaneous and conversational.

USING FOCUS GROUPS IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Using focus groups in cross-cultural and cross-national research

Focus groups are being increasingly suggested as a good method for understanding cultural variations and differences. The involvement of minority community groups through focus groups has been shown to be a powerful tool in developing culturally appropriate methods (Hughes and DuMont 1993, Pollack 2003, Willgerodt 2003), and in including culturally diverse perspectives in research. There are issues in the running of focus groups in different cultural contexts – in some cultures dissent is not expressed in public, some cultures have more subjects which are not discussed in public, and in some cultures variables such as gender will be a bigger concern. There are topics which tend not to work well in the focus group context, though these vary greatly in different contexts and cultures.

As with any cross-national research, there are issues of translation of research tools and data between languages. With qualitative research methodologies, cross-national

research also needs to take note of cultural differences in emotional tone, feelings and reflexivity, which are particularly noticeable in focus group research. In some cultures it is not usual to directly disagree in a group situation, or to overtly criticise authority. Ways of interacting are of course cultural as well as responses to a particular method and the result of particular factors such as gender and status. For example, in a cross-European study of new parents' orientations to work, focus groups in Sweden were described by the national research team as 'consensual', with turn taking easily managed. In the same cross-national study, focus groups in the UK were notable for high levels of criticism and outspokenness, while in the Bulgarian focus groups in the same study there was little cross talking or butting in (Brannen 2004).

Using focus groups in feminist research

Focus groups have been widely used in recent feminist research, and feminist social scientists have elaborated on the ways in which the methodology can be used to further feminist aims of giving various minority groups a voice through the research process. For example, Madriz (2000) starts an account of feminist focus group research with a quotation from a Dominican woman telling how she prefers the focus group context as she finds it less intimidating than being alone with an interviewer. Focus groups have been taken up as an appropriate method by both post modernist and feminist standpoint researchers (Wilkinson 1998, Madriz 2000, Olesen 2000). They are seen as a way of lessening the impact of the researcher and permitting minoritised groups to develop and elaborate their own perspective on a research topic, in a 'safe' environment. Madriz argues that 'the focus group is a collectivist rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences and beliefs' (Madriz 2000: 836).

However, other feminist researchers are more cautious about the use of focus groups. In practice, while focus groups can be less

directive and perhaps less intimidating than traditional research methods, there is variation in this, as described elsewhere in this chapter. The moderator is still exerting a strong influence over the group, and still retaining a high degree of control, typically over the recruitment, procedure and subsequent analysis and reporting of the group. Using focus groups does not in itself make the research 'collectivist', or empower participants. A postmodernist feminist approach which views accounts gathered in a research process as stories, or narratives, can be well suited to focus group methodology, but the questions of how to represent these stories which questions to ask and which replies to prioritise in analysis, and how to interpret or analyse these stories, are as pertinent for focus group research as for other feminist qualitative methodologies. A priority for feminist focus group researchers is how to make participants' voices heard without being exploited or distorted, and taking account of 'unrealised agendas' of class, race and sexuality (Olesen 2000). Focus groups are not a 'solution' for highlighting the views of oppressed or minority groups, but can, used sensitively, help to facilitate listening to these narratives.

Ethnographic research and focus groups

Ethnographic researchers have made use of small-group discussions for many years, although rarely using the term 'focus groups'. Focus groups methodology can fit neatly with certain streams of ethnographic thought which place the research encounter in wider social context, and emphasise the social and processual nature of experience (Tedlock 2000). As with feminist research, focus groups have been viewed within ethnography as a way of emphasising the collective nature of experience, and the social context of accounts.

Focus groups in organisational research

Conducting focus groups in an organisational context has particular implications. While it

can be an advantage having people from the same departments and work teams, who have shared experiences and are often comfortable talking together, there can be problems with how freely people feel they can express themselves in a workplace situation. Shared workplace experiences such as restructuring, management experiences, enthusiasm, resistance to work-life initiatives, can encourage feelings of solidarity among team members. Groups can share common knowledge about relevant issues in the company even when the people were strangers. For example, in a study of new parents in organisations (das Dores Guerreiro 2004), everyone had a strong view about the change from formal to informal flexi-time, and there had clearly been a great deal of discussion over the past months about it which was continued in the focus group discussion.

Possible drawbacks of using focus groups in organisational settings include people feeling unable to speak out in front of superiors or people from different parts of the organisation. It is generally not recommended to place managers and employees in the same group, although this will vary with the nature of the organisation. Privacy and ethical issues are of particular importance in an organisational context, where people are encouraged to talk freely in front of colleagues.

Online focus groups

The use of online interviewing, including group interviewing, is being increasingly taken up in social science research. Online focus group research methods are part of this rapid expansion of online methodologies (e.g. Murray 1997, Chappell 2003). There are various reasons for this. It can be a good way of including in research hard-to-reach groups.

An online focus group method can bring together geographically distant participants in one, online forum. It can also be used to bring together people with disabilities or illnesses who would not otherwise find it easy to participate in research, especially in group contexts. For example, Kralik et al. (2006)

brought together people to explore experiences of chronic illness. It is also a potentially useful way of talking in a group context about sensitive or embarrassing issues, in a relatively anonymous context. Other reasons for the growing popularity of online focus group methods include cost savings, and attracting people who would otherwise have little time to participate (Edmunds 1999).

There are two main discussion options available when running an online focus group – synchronous and asynchronous (Chappell 2003). Synchronous discussions occur in 'real time' with the moderator and participants all logged onto a discussion at the same time, posting their comments on a joint board. While this is a close simulation of a face-to-face focus group, one of the advantages of an online method (the ability to participate at one's own convenience) is no longer available. Additional drawbacks of this method are that the conversation can become hard to follow and participants tend to answer questions with short, 'I agree'-type responses because they feel pressured to answer quickly. This can also pose problems for the moderator. It can become difficult to keep track of the conversations and responses of group members, as there is often more than one track of conversations running simultaneously (Montoya-Weiss et al., 1998). The other main online focus group option is asynchronous discussions, which do not occur in real time. Messages are posted in response to the moderator and the group members at the participants' convenience. Participants do not have to be logged on at the same time and can participate at any point during the day or night.

Edmunds (1999) points out that online groups can lead to greater anonymity for participants, which can lead to greater openness. The downside of this, and a particular issue for online groups is the possibility of 'fake' participants – people joining in with false personas or providing false information (a regular problem on internet chat rooms, for example). While online methods might seem to be particularly susceptible to this sort of misinformation, it is useful to remember

that in 'real' focus groups, as with other forms of research, the participant is an actor constructing a performance (Goffman 1981). Newhagan and Rafaeli (1996) pointed out that using electronic media affected how people communicated. While it is important to be aware of the ways in which different media affect people's communication patterns, this is an issue for all qualitative social research, and all focus group situations, not just for online groups.

There are ways of regulating participation to limit possible misuse, for example making contact individually with the focus group participants before the online group occurs. There is a growing literature on chat room behaviour and discourses, and the use of online methods in social science, which is particularly relevant when considering the use and analysis of online focus groups (Rezabek 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

The diverse nature of focus group research reflects the origins of focus groups, first in social science research before being taken up mainly by market researchers for several decades, and more recently becoming widely and increasingly popular in various social research fields. The method is used by researchers from very varied epistemological and theoretical research traditions, which is reflected in the variations of approaches, and specifically the techniques and approaches to analysing the talk produced in this context.

There are conceptual, methodological and ethical issues in focus group research. As with other qualitative research methods, there are opportunities for consciously or unconsciously manipulating the participants' responses, and it is perhaps a feature of focus group methodology, with its seeming emphasis on 'natural discussion' and 'collective accounts', for there to be relatively little explicit awareness of the constructed nature of the discussion, and the salience of the moderator and research agenda throughout the process. The 'collective stories' which

are produced in this way perhaps mitigate the awareness that the interactions occurring in this formalised research setting will differ in many ways from interactions in other contexts. As well as differing from individual interview data, focus group talk will also be substantially different from 'natural' conversation.

Focus groups have specific dilemmas: both ethical and procedural, such as respect to individuals' privacy, and the difficulties of dealing with inappropriate group behaviour (for example, insensitive comments or reactions to another participant's contribution) as well as the more ubiquitous dilemmas of qualitative research concerning respect to participants' voices, and concerns for misrepresenting the experiences and discussions of vulnerable groups.

The focus group method does have particular strengths. It enables research participants to discuss and develop ideas collectively and articulate their ideas in their own terms and bring forward their own priorities and perspectives. Not only can a wide variety of opinions be given and considered, but also a wide variety of interactive techniques can be observed. Participants engage in a range of argumentative behaviours, which results in a depth of dialogue not often found in individual interviews. Moreover, some of these limitations can also be viewed as possibilities for the method. Myers suggests that the constraints on talk do not invalidate focus group findings; in fact, it is these constraints that make them practicable and interpretable (Myers 1998, p. 107). Focus groups permit some insights into rhetorical processes of contemporary discourses. Another plus is that participants often report that joining in a focus group has been an enjoyable and creative experience (Wilkinson 1998, Madriz 2000, Smithson 2000, Pini 2002).

The effects of group dynamics in focus groups can therefore be of benefit in social research for exploring issues from the perspective of the participants, in a way that is culturally sensitive to participants' priorities and experiences. While there are some limitations of focus group research,

these can be partially overcome by awareness of the constraints, by informed analysis, and by detailed consideration of the way the conversations are socially constructed in the group context, and are narratives produced jointly by the co-participants and also by the moderator.

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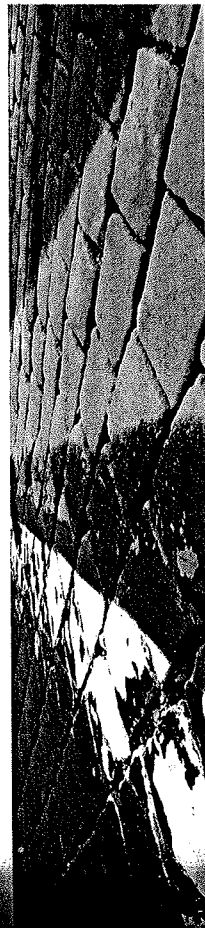
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PART IV

Types of Analysis and Interpretation of Evidence



This section inevitably only covers some of the many analytic strategies available. It covers a number of types of analysis available in relation to quantitative and qualitative data and issues that the researcher will encounter. It also has a number of chapters that focus on the analysis of data derived via different methods.

ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY QUANTITATIVE DATA

Three chapters focus on quantitative data: one on the analysis of change; a second on the analysis of latent variables (variables that cannot be measured); and a third on the biases that are introduced into analysis when there are no comparison groups or control groups as in evaluation research.

Analysing change is difficult. Only in the past 35 years have approaches to statistical measures of change been developed. Chapter 22 by Graham, Singer and Willett provides an introduction to one approach to the analysis of quantitative longitudinal data. The chapter goes into enough depth to provide a basic understanding of longitudinal modelling but does not become so technical that it is difficult for a person who is not familiar with the terminology and concepts to follow.

One of the problems for the student in this field is the surfeit of terms for similar approaches: individual growth modelling, random coefficient modelling, multilevel modelling, mixed modelling, and hierarchical linear modelling, together with the range of statistical packages that can be used. The term the authors use is multilevel modelling. This approach has several advantages that include: its ability to deal with any number of time points; that each wave of data can be collected with different time schedules and; that no data need be discarded because they are missing. The approach can be applied to linear, non-linear and discontinuous trends. The analysis can include both time-invariant predictors such as gender and race as well as ones that do change with time such as attitudes. Moreover, these predictors can be fixed or randomly varied across persons.

In Chapter 23, Hoyle addresses the analysis of complex quantitative data, focusing on latent variable modelling, which examines the presence or influence of constructs that cannot be measured. The chapter discusses the use of linear structural equation modelling (SEM) to evaluate social models, an approach that has many uses in the social sciences: in particular the evaluation of measurement models, mediated effects, moderator effects and longitudinal data using