

21

Focus groups

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Chapter guide

The focus group method is an interview with several people on a specific topic or issue. It has been used extensively in market research but has only relatively recently made inroads into social research.

This chapter explores:

- the possible reasons for preferring focus group interviews to individual interviews of the kind discussed in the previous chapter;
- how focus groups should be conducted in terms of such features as the need for recording, the number and size of groups, how participants can be selected, and how direct the questioning should be;
- the significance of interaction between participants in focus group discussions;
- some practical difficulties with focus group sessions, such as the possible loss of control over proceedings and the potential for unwanted group effects.

Introduction

We are used to thinking of the interview as something that involves an interviewer and one interviewee. Most textbooks reinforce this perception by concentrating on individual interviews. The **focus group** technique is a method of interviewing that involves more than one, usually at least four, interviewees. Essentially it is a group interview. Some authors draw a distinction between the focus group and the group interview techniques. Three reasons are sometimes put forward to suggest a distinction.

- Focus groups typically emphasize a specific theme or topic that is explored in depth, whereas group interviews often span very widely.
- Sometimes group interviews are carried out so that the researcher is able to save time and money by carrying out interviews with a number of individuals simultaneously. However, focus groups are not carried out for this reason.
- The focus group practitioner is invariably interested in the ways in which individuals discuss a certain issue *as members of a group*, rather than simply as individuals. In other words, with a focus group the researcher will be interested in such things as how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group.

However, the distinction between the focus group method and the group interview is by no means clear cut, and the two terms are frequently employed interchangeably. Nonetheless, the definition proposed in Key concept 21.1 provides a starting point.

Most focus group researchers undertake their work within the traditions of qualitative research. This means that they are explicitly concerned to reveal how the group participants view the issues with which they are confronted; therefore, the researcher will aim to provide a fairly unstructured setting for the extraction of their views and perspectives. The person who runs the focus groups session is usually called the **moderator** or **facilitator**, and he or she will be expected to guide each session but not to be too intrusive.

Another general point about the focus group method is that, while it has been gaining in popularity since the 1980s, it is by no means a new technique. It has been used for many years in market research, where it is employed for such purposes as testing responses to new products and advertising initiatives (see Thinking deeply 21.1 for an example). In fact, there is a large literature within market research to do with the practices that are associated with focus group research and their implementation (e.g. Calder 1977).



Key concept 21.1

What is the focus group method?

The focus group method is a form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning. As such, the focus group contains elements of two methods: the group interview, in which several people discuss a number of topics; and what has been called a focused interview, in which interviewees are selected because they 'are known to have been involved in a particular situation' (Merton et al. 1956: 3) and are asked about that involvement. The focused interview may be administered to individuals or to groups. Thus, the focus group method appends to the focused interview the element of interaction within groups as an area of interest and is more focused than the group interview.



Thinking deeply 21.1

The real and the unreal thing: focus groups in market research

On 23 April 1985 a product was launched that proved to be one of the greatest marketing blunders in business history. On that day, the Coca-Cola company not only launched what it called its New Coke, but it removed from sale the old one, on which the massive corporation had been built. New Coke was a flop, and the public clamoured for the return of its predecessor, in spite of assurances from the company that people would get used to the new formula and get to like it better. Yet close attention to data drawn from focus group research that the company had commissioned in the lead-up to the launch of New Coke might have prevented the disaster from happening. In 1982 and 1983 focus group research was conducted across the USA. At one point in each session, local consumers were presented with a scenario in which they were told that a new formula for a certain product had been introduced and that the response to it was very favourable. The participants were then asked how *they* would feel when that product came to their town and replaced the traditional one. The response to the prospect of new, improved Budweiser beer and of Hershey chocolate bars being replaced was positive. However, when the replacement of Coke was being considered, the consumers became vehemently antagonistic to the idea. Taste tests had shown that consumers liked New Coke, but they had not been asked how they would feel if traditional Coke was taken off supermarket shelves. The focus groups made it clear how they would feel, but Coca-Cola's chief executive officer was determined to plough ahead, and his assistant, who liaised with the firm conducting the focus groups, chose to follow his boss's lead.

Sources: Pendergrast (1993) and Greising (1998).

One final general point to register is that there is growing interest in the use of online focus groups, which will be covered in the context of Internet-based research methods in Chapter 28. There is evidence that, although they tend to be shorter than comparable face-to-face focus groups, they can generate a considerable amount

of relevant data for the researcher (Reid and Reid 2005). When this is viewed in relation to the saving in time travelling and cost for both researchers and participants, it is clear that this is a form of the method that is likely to be used more and more in the future.



Uses of focus groups

What are the uses of the focus group method? In many ways its uses are bound up with the uses of qualitative research in general, but, over and above these, the following points can be registered.

- The original idea for the focus group—the focused interview—was that people who were known to have had a certain experience could be interviewed in a relatively unstructured way about that experience. The bulk of the discussion by Merton et al. (1956) of the notion of the focused interview was in terms of individual interviews, but their book also considered the extension of the method into group interview contexts. Subsequently, the focus group has become a popular method for researchers examining the ways in which people in conjunction with one another construe the general topics in which the researcher is interested. One of the best-known studies using the method in the context of a social scientific topic is Morgan and Spanish's (1985) study of the ways in which people organize knowledge about health issues. Their special interest was the question of people's knowledge about who has heart attacks and why they have them. Thus, the emphasis was on how focus group participants make sense of the causation of heart attacks in terms of the knowledge they have picked up over the years. However, a major impetus for the growing use of focus groups in social research has been their intensive use in the field of media and cultural studies. The growing emphasis in these fields is on what is known as 'audience reception'—how audiences respond to television and radio programmes, films, newspaper articles, and so on (McGuigan 1992; Fenton et al. 1998: ch. 1). An influential study in this context was Morley's (1980) research on *Nationwide*, a British news programme shown in the early evening that was popular in the 1970s. Morley organized focus groups made up of specific categories of people (for example, managers, trade unionists, students) and showed them recordings of the programme. He found that the different groups arrived at somewhat divergent interpretations of the programmes they had watched, implying that meaning does not reside solely in the programmes but also in the ways in which they are watched and interpreted. This research and the increasing attention paid to audience reception set in motion a growth of interest in the use of the focus group method for the study of audience interpretations of cultural and media texts.
- The technique allows the researcher to develop an understanding about *why* people feel the way they do. In a normal individual interview the interviewee is often asked about his or her reasons for holding a particular view, but the focus group approach offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view. This can be more interesting than the sometimes predictable question-followed-by-answer approach of normal interviews. For one thing, an individual may answer in a certain way during a focus group, but, as he or she listens to others' answers, he or she may want to qualify or modify a view; or alternatively may want to voice agreement to something that he or she probably would not have thought of without the opportunity of hearing the views of others. These possibilities mean that focus groups may also be very helpful in the elicitation of a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue.
- In focus groups participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant. This is clearly an aim of individual interviews too, but, because the moderator has to relinquish a certain amount of control to the participants, the issues that concern them can surface. This is clearly an important consideration in the context of qualitative research, since the viewpoints of the people being studied are an important point of departure.
- In conventional one-to-one interviewing, interviewees are rarely challenged; they might say things that are inconsistent with earlier replies or that patently could not be true, but we are often reluctant to point out such deficiencies. In the context of a focus group, individuals will often argue with each other and challenge each other's views. This process of arguing means that the researcher may stand a chance of ending up with more realistic accounts of what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly revise their views.

- The focus group offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it. It is a central tenet of theoretical positions like symbolic interactionism that the process of coming to terms with (that is, understanding) social phenomena is not undertaken by individuals in isolation from each other. Instead, it is something that occurs in interaction and discussion with others. In this sense, therefore, focus groups reflect the processes through which meaning is constructed in everyday life and to that extent can be regarded as more naturalistic (see Key concept 3.4 on the idea of naturalism) than individual interviews (S. Wilkinson 1998).
- The use of focus groups by feminist researchers has grown considerably in recent years, and S. Wilkinson (1998, 1999b) has argued that it has great potential in this regard. Its appeal to feminist researchers is its compatibility with the ethics and politics of feminism.

As we have seen in previous chapters, feminist researchers are suspicious of research methods that are exploitative and create a power relationship between the female researcher and the female respondent. Wilkinson observes that the risk of this occurring is greatly reduced because focus group participants are able to take over much of the direction of the session from the moderator. Indeed, they may even subvert the goals of the session in ways that could be of considerable interest to the moderator. As a result, participants' points of view are much more likely to be revealed than in a traditional interview. This kind of argument has been extended to suggest focus groups may have a further role in allowing the voices of highly marginalized groups of women to surface. Madriz (2000: 843) argues that, for a group like lower-socio-economic-class women of colour, focus groups constitute a relatively rare opportunity for them to 'empower themselves by making sense of their experience of vulnerability and subjugation'.



Conducting focus groups

There are a number of practical aspects of the conduct of focus group research that require some discussion.

Recording and transcription

As with interviewing for qualitative research, the focus group session will work best if it is recorded and subsequently transcribed. The following reasons are often used to explain this preference.

- One reason is the simple difficulty of writing down not only exactly what people say but also who says it. In an individual interview you might be able to ask the respondent to hold on while you write something down, but to do this in the context of an interview involving several people would be extremely disruptive.
- The researcher will be interested in who expresses views within the group, such as whether certain individuals seem to act as opinion leaders or dominate the discussion. This also means that there is an interest in ranges of opinions within groups; for example, in a session, does most of the range of opinion derive from just one or two people or from most of the people in the group?
- A major reason for conducting focus group research is the fact that it is possible to study the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed within each session (see above). It would be very difficult to do this by taking notes, because of the need to keep track of *who* says what (see also previous point). If this element is lost, the dynamics of the focus group session would also be lost, and a major rationale for doing focus group interviews rather than individual ones would be undermined.
- Like all qualitative researchers, the focus group practitioner will be interested in not just what people say but *how* they say it—for example, the particular language that they employ. There is every chance that the nuances of language will be lost if the researcher has to rely exclusively on notes.

It should be borne in mind that transcribing focus group sessions is more complicated and hence more time-consuming than transcribing traditional interview recordings. This is because you need to take account of *who* is talking in the session, as well as what is said. This is sometimes difficult, since people's voices are not always easy to distinguish. Also, people sometimes talk over each other, which can make transcription even more



Tips and skills

Transcription of a focus group interview

In Tips and skills 'Transcribing sections of an interview' (see Chapter 20), I pointed out that it may not always be desirable or feasible to transcribe the whole of the interview. The same applies to focus group research, which is often more difficult and time-consuming to transcribe than personal interview recordings because of the number of speakers who are involved. The suggestions I made in Chapter 18 in relation to transcribing sections of an interview therefore apply equally well to focus group recordings.

difficult. In addition, it is extremely important to ensure that you equip yourself with a very high-quality microphone, which is capable of picking up voices, some of which may be quite faint, from many directions. Focus group transcripts always seem to have more missing bits because of lack of audibility than transcripts from conventional interviews.

How many groups?

How many groups do you need? Table 21.1 provides data on the number of groups and other aspects of the composition of focus groups in several studies based on this method and follows a similar table in Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdock (1999) in taking the view that this is a helpful way of providing basic information on this issue. As Table 21.1 suggests, there is a good deal of variation in the numbers of groups used in the studies referred to, with a range from eight to fifty-two. However, there does seem to be a tendency for the range to be mainly from ten to fifteen.

Clearly, it is unlikely that just one group will suffice the needs of the researcher, since there is always the possibility that the responses are particular to that one group. Obviously, time and resources will be a factor, but there are strong arguments for saying that too many groups will be a waste of time. Calder (1977) proposes that, when the moderator reaches the point that he or she is able to anticipate fairly accurately what the next group is going to say, then there are probably enough groups already. This notion is very similar to the theoretical saturation criterion that was introduced in Key concept 18.4. In other words, once your major analytic categories have been saturated, there seems little point in continuing, and so it would be appropriate to bring data collection to a halt. For their study of audience discussion programmes, Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 181) used saturation as a criterion: 'The number of focus groups

was determined by continuing until comments and patterns began to repeat and little new material was generated.' When this point of saturation is reached, as an alternative to terminating data collection, there may be a case for moving on to an extension of the issues that have been raised in the focus group sessions that have been carried out.

One factor that may affect the number of groups is whether the researcher feels that the kinds and range of views are likely to be affected by socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, class, and so on. Many focus group researchers like to use stratifying criteria like these to ensure that groups with a wide range of features will be included. If so, a larger number of groups may be required to reflect the criteria. In connection with the research described in Research in focus 21.1, Kitziinger (1994) writes that a large number of groups was preferred, not because of concerns about the representativeness of the views gleaned during the sessions, but in order to capture as much diversity in perspectives as possible. However, it may be that high levels of diversity are not anticipated in connection with some topics, in which case a large number of groups could represent an unnecessary expense.

One further point to bear in mind when considering the number of groups is that more groups will increase the complexity of your analysis. For example, Schlesinger et al. (1992: 29; see Table 21.1) report that the fourteen tape-recorded sessions they organized produced over 1,400 pages of transcription. This pile of paper was accumulated from discussions in each group of an average of one hour for each of the four screenings of violence that session participants were shown. Although this means that the sessions were longer than is normally the case, it does demonstrate that the amount of data to analyse can be very large, even though a total of fourteen sessions may not sound a lot to someone unfamiliar with the workings of the method.

Table 21.1

Composition of groups in focus group research									
Authors	Morgan and Spanish (1985)	Schlesinger et al. (1992)	Kitzinger (1993, 1994)	Lupton (1996)	Macnaghten and Jacobs (1997)	Fenton et al. (1998)	Livingstone and Bober (2003); Livingstone (2006)	Warr (2005)	Silva and Wright (2005); Silva et al. (2009); Bennett et al. (2009)
Area of research	Lay health beliefs concerning heart attacks	The responses of women to watching violence	Audience responses to media messages about AIDS	Responses to controversies concerning diet and health	Public understanding of and identification with sustainable development	Audience responses to reporting of social science research	Children's use and experience of using the Internet	Expectations regarding intimate relationships in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts	Cultural tastes and activities. Each focus group was allocated a pair of topics specific to that group.
Number of groups	9	14	52	12	8 (each group had 2 sessions)	14	14	8	25
Size range of groups	4–5	5–9	Not specified but appears to be 3–9 or 3–10	3–5	6–10	4–6	Not specified	4–9	2–8
Average (mean) size of groups	4.4	6.6	6.75	4.1	Approximately 8	5	4	Not clear	5.7
Stratifying criteria (if any)	None mentioned, but all participants needed to be aged 35–50 and those who had experienced a heart attack were excluded	Experience of violence, Scottish/English ethnicity, social class	None, but groups made up of specific groups (e.g. civil engineers, retirement club members, male prostitutes)	Gender	Age, ethnicity, gender, occupation/retired, rural/urban location	Gender, education, occupation (private/public sector)	Age, gender, and school	Gender	Gender; urban/rural; occupation; ethnicity; age; employed/unemployed
Natural groups?	No, but all participants were mature university students	Some	Yes	Yes	No	Some	Yes, but picked at random by teachers	Most	No



Research in focus 21.1

Focus group in action: AIDS in the Media Research Project

Focus group research on the representation of AIDS in the mass media was part of a larger project on this topic. The focus groups were concerned with the examination of the ways in which 'media messages are explored by audiences and how understandings of AIDS are constructed. We were interested not solely in what people thought but in *how* they thought and *why* they thought as they did' (Kitzinger 1994: 104).

Details of the groups are in Table 21.1. Since one goal of the research was to emphasize the role of interaction in the construction of meaning, it was important to provide a platform for enhancing this feature. Accordingly, 'instead of working with isolated individuals, or collections of individuals drawn together simply for the purposes of the research, we elected to work with pre-existing groups—people who already lived, worked or socialized together' (Kitzinger 1993: 272).

As a result, the groups were made up of such collections of people as a team of civil engineers working on the same site, six members of a retirement club, intravenous drug-users, and so on. The sessions themselves are described as having been 'conducted in a relaxed fashion with minimal intervention from the facilitator—at least at first' (Kitzinger 1994: 106). Each session lasted approximately two hours and was tape-recorded.

Size of groups

How large should groups be? Morgan (1998a) suggests that the typical group size is six to ten members, although the numbers in the groups cited in Table 21.1, which admittedly are not randomly selected and include mainly British studies, imply that this calculation is

slightly high in terms of both the range and the mean. One major problem faced by focus group practitioners is people who agree to participate but who do not turn up on the day. It is almost impossible to control for 'no-shows' other than consciously over-recruiting, a strategy that is sometimes recommended (e.g. S. Wilkinson 1999a: 188).



Tips and skills Number of focus groups

Focus groups take a long time to arrange, and it takes a long time to transcribe the recordings that are made. It is likely that students will not be able to include as many focus group sessions for projects or dissertations as the studies cited in this chapter. You will, therefore, need to make do with a smaller number of groups in most instances. Make sure you are able to justify the number of groups you have chosen and why your data are still significant.

The question of 'no-shows' aside (which almost certainly accounts for the figures at the low end of the size ranges in Table 21.1), Morgan (1998a) recommends smaller groups when participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic. This is likely to occur when participants are very involved in or emotionally preoccupied with the topic. He also suggests smaller groups when topics are controversial or complex and when gleaning participants' personal accounts is a major goal. Morgan (1998a: 75) recommends larger groups when involvement with a topic is likely to be low or when the researcher wants 'to hear numerous brief sugges-

tions'. However, I am not convinced that larger groups are necessarily superior for topics in which participants have little involvement, since it may be more difficult to stimulate discussion in such a context. Larger groups may make it even more difficult if people are rather reticent about talking about a topic about which they know little or have little experience. A topic like media representations of social science research, which most people are unlikely to have much interest in or even to have thought about, could easily have resulted in a wall of silence in large groups (Fenton et al. 1998; see Table 21.1). Barbour (2007) proposes a maximum of eight for most purposes.

She argues that larger groups will be less suited to the interest among most social researchers in participants' interpretations and the ways in which views are constructed in the course of focus group sessions. Also, she suggests that larger groups can be a challenge for moderators in terms of responding to participants' remarks in the course of sessions and also at the analysis stage because of practical difficulties like recognizing the different voices in audio-recordings of the sessions. Peek and Fothergill (2009) provide confirmation of the likelihood that, in many contexts, smaller groups will be preferable (see Research in focus 21.4 for more on this research). They report that those focus groups that included between three and five participants 'ran more smoothly than the larger group interviews that we conducted' (Peek and Fothergill 2009: 37). By contrast, they found that the management of larger focus groups that varied between six and fifteen members was considerably more taxing. In particular, they found it hard to entice more reticent members to speak up. Also, in the smaller groups, there seemed to be greater opportunity for disagreement and diversity of opinion, perhaps because there was less of a tendency for one person to dominate proceedings.

Level of moderator involvement

How involved should the moderator/facilitator be? In qualitative research, the aim is to get at the perspectives

of those being studied. Consequently, the approach should not be intrusive and structured. Therefore, there is a tendency for researchers to use a fairly small number of very general questions to guide the focus group session. Moreover, there is a further tendency for moderators to allow quite a lot of latitude to participants, so that the discussion can range fairly widely. Obviously, if the discussion goes off at a total tangent it may be necessary to refocus the participants' attention, but even then it may be necessary to be careful, because what may appear to be digressions may in fact reveal something of interest to the group participants. The advantage of allowing a fairly free rein to the discussion is that the researcher stands a better chance of getting access to what individuals see as important or interesting. On the other hand, too much totally irrelevant discussion may prove too unproductive, especially in the commercial environment of market research. It is not surprising, therefore, that, as S. Wilkinson (1999a) observes, some writers on focus groups perceive the possibility that participants come to take over the running of a session from the moderator as a problem and offer advice on how to reassert control (e.g. Krueger 1988).

One way in which the moderator may need to be involved is in responding to specific points that are of potential interest to the research questions but that are not picked up by other participants. In the extract in Research in focus 21.2 from the study of the reception of



Research in focus 21.2

Extract from a focus group showing no moderator involvement

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with no intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator. The participants are discussing how people view media reporting of social science research.

- R1 Essentially with the pure sciences I get an end result. Whereas with the social sciences it's pretty vague because it's very, very subjective.
- R2 I suppose for me the pure sciences seem to have more control of what they are looking at because they keep control of more. Because with social sciences there are many different aspects that could have an impact and you can't necessarily control them. So it seems more difficult to pin down and therefore to some extent controversial.
- R3 Pure science is more credible because you've got control over test environments, you've got an ability to test and control factually the outcome and then establish relationships between different agents or whatever. I think in social science it's always subject to interpretation. . . . I think if you want to create an easy life and be unaccountable to anybody, to obtain funding and spend your time in a stress-free way then one of the best things to do is to work in funded research and one of the best areas to do it in is in social science. (Fenton et al. 1998: 127)

media representations of social science research from Fenton et al. (1998), a group of men who have been in higher education and are in private-sector employment begin to talk about the differences between the natural and the social sciences.

It is interesting to see the way in which a consensus about the social sciences is built up in this discussion with a particular emphasis on the lack of control in social research and on the supposed subjectivity of interpretation when compared to the 'pure' sciences. On other

occasions, a little nudge from the moderator may be required when a particularly interesting point is not followed up by other participants. An example of this is provided in Research in focus 21.3, which is from the same research, but this time the focus group is made up of women in private-sector employment and whose education is up to GCSE level. They are talking about a news item reporting research on victims of crime but that includes a number of detailed case studies of individual experiences of being a victim.



Research in focus 21.3

Extract from a focus group showing some moderator involvement

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with only a little intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator. The participants are discussing how people view media reporting of social science research.

R1 That was easy and interesting.

[Moderator] Why interesting? Why easy?

R2 Because it affects all of us.

R1 It was actually reading about what had happened to people. It wasn't all facts and figures. I know it was, but it has in the first sentence, where it says 'I turned the key and experienced a sinking feeling'. You can relate to that straight away. It's how you'd feel.

R3 She's in a flat and she hears noises—it's something that everyone does. Being on their own and they hear a noise. (Fenton et al. 1998: 129)

On this occasion, the moderator's intervention usefully allows the discussion to bring out the kinds of attributes that make for an easy and interesting media item on this topic. In particular, the participants feel that they can appreciate the media representation of social science research when it is something they can relate to and that an important way of doing this is the ability to use people's personal experiences as a lens through which the research can be viewed.

Clearly, the moderator has to straddle two positions: allowing the discussion to flow freely and intervening to bring out especially salient issues, particularly when group participants do not do so. This is not an easy conundrum to resolve, and each tactic—intervention and non-intervention—carries risks. The best advice is to err on the side of minimal intervention—other than to start the group on a fresh set of issues—but to intervene when the group is struggling in its discussions or when it has not alighted on something that is said in the course of the session that appears significant for the research topic.

The role of moderator is not just to do with the asking of questions and ensuring as far as possible that the discussion flows well. It is also to do with controlling events in the discussion. If participants begin to talk at the same time, as often happens when a discussion really 'takes off', it will make the audio-recording of the session impossible to decipher. The moderator has an important role in reminding participants to talk one at a time (see Research in focus 21.7 for an example). Also, it is well known that some participants have a tendency to monopolize discussions and that some participants are very reticent about talking. The moderator can have an important role in encouraging the latter to speak, perhaps by asking whether those who have not said much would like to take the opportunity to contribute.

Selecting participants

Who can participate? Anyone for whom the topic is relevant can logically be an appropriate participant.

Sometimes, certain topics do not require participants of a particular kind, so that there is little if any restriction on who might be appropriate. This is a fairly unusual situation and normally some restriction is required. For example, for their research on the organization of knowledge about heart attacks, Morgan and Spanish (1985: 257) recruited people in the 35–50 age range, since they ‘would be likely to have more experience with informal discussions of our chosen topic’, but they excluded anyone who had had a heart attack or who was uneasy about discussing the topic.

More often, as Table 21.1 suggests and as previously noted, a wide range of people is required, but they are organized into separate groups in terms of stratifying criteria, such as age, gender, education, occupation, and having or not having had a certain experience. Participants for each group can then be selected randomly or through some kind of snowball sampling method. The aim is to establish whether there is any systematic variation in the ways in which different groups discuss a matter. For example, in his research on the *Nationwide* news programme, Morley (1980) found that groups of managers interpreted the programmes they were shown in ways that were broadly consistent with the intentions of the programme producers, but that groups of trade unionists derived interpretations that were in opposition to those intentions. Such an inference can be derived only when focus group participation has been organized in terms of such stratifying criteria. Similarly, drawing on findings from their research into the responses of women to viewing violence, Schlesinger et al. (1992) derived a similar kind of conclusion. They showed their fourteen groups (see Table 21.1) four items: an episode of *Crimewatch UK* featuring some violence; an episode of *EastEnders* in which violence was incidental; a television drama, *Closing Ranks*, featuring marital violence; and the Hollywood movie *The Accused*, which contains an extremely vivid rape scene. Drawing on their findings concerning the groups’ responses to these showings, the authors concluded:

in general, the salience in any particular programme of ethnicity, class, or gender or a lived experience such as violence is greatest for those *most directly involved* and diminishes in importance with social distance. Having a particular experience or a particular background does significantly affect the interpretation of a given text. The four programmes screened are obviously open to various readings. However, on the evidence, *how* they are read is fundamentally affected by various socio-cultural factors and by lived experience. (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 168; emphases in original)

A slight variation on this approach can be seen in Kitzinger’s (1994) study of reactions to media representations of AIDS (see Research in focus 21.1 and Table 21.1). Her groups were made up of people in a variety of different situations. Some of these were what she calls ‘general population groups’ (for example, a team of civil engineers working on the same site), but others were made up of groups that might have a special interest in AIDS (for example, male prostitutes, intravenous drug users). However, the general point is that increasingly focus group practitioners try to discern patterns of variation by putting together groups with particular attributes or clusters of attributes.

A further issue in relation to the selection of group participants is whether to select people who are unknown to each other or to use natural groupings (for example, friends, co-workers, students on the same course). Some researchers prefer to exclude people who know each other on the grounds that pre-existing styles of interaction or status differences may contaminate the session. Not all writers accept this rule of thumb. Some prefer to select natural groups whenever possible. Kitzinger (1994; Research in focus 21.1 and Table 21.1) used groups made up of people who knew each other. The reason was that she wanted the discussions to be as natural as possible, and she felt that this quality would be enhanced through the use of members of what she calls ‘pre-existing groups’. Holbrook and Jackson (1996) report that, for their research on shopping centres, they initially tried to secure participants who did not know each other, but this strategy did not result in anybody coming forward. They then sought out participants from various clubs and social centres in the vicinity of the two North London shopping centres in which they were interested. They argue that, in view of their interest in research questions concerning shopping in relation to the construction of identity and how it relates to people’s sense of place, recruiting people who knew each other was a highly appropriate strategy.

However, opting for a strategy of recruiting people entirely from natural groups is not always feasible, because of difficulties of securing participation. Fenton et al. (1998: 121), in the context of their research on the representation of social science research (Table 21.1), report that they preferred to recruit ‘naturally occurring groups’ but that ‘this was not always achievable’. Morgan (1998a) suggests that one problem with using natural groups is that people who know each other well are likely to operate with taken-for-granted assumptions that they feel do not need to be brought to the fore. He suggests that, if it is important for the researcher to bring out such assumptions, groups of strangers are likely to work better.



Research in focus 21.4

Recruiting focus group participants

Peek and Fothergill (2009) have outlined the strategies they used in recruiting participants for focus groups studies in three North American contexts: with parents, children, and teachers in two urban day-care centres; with Muslim Americans following 9/11; and experiences of children and young people after the Hurricane Katrina flooding of New Orleans. They used three approaches:

- What they call *researcher-driven recruitment*, whereby the researcher with the support of an organization with an interest in the research uses email, letters, flyers, and telephone calls to solicit interest in participation.
- *Key informant recruitment*, which entails stakeholder organizations actively assisting in the recruitment of participants. For example, in the Hurricane Katrina study, a schoolteacher smoothed the path for the researchers to make contact with 'middle school students'.
- *Spontaneous recruitment*, which arises when individuals volunteer to participate having heard about the research through others. An example is when people see someone being interviewed and ask to join in.

Similar strategies seem to have been at work in the focus groups that formed part of the CCSE research on cultural tastes and activities (Research in focus 2.9, 21.6, and 21.7). The authors write that 'group formation involved a variety of processes of access negotiation, via community groups, businesses, professional organisations, and drew on established personal and professional networks' (Silva and Wright 2005: 3). For example, to recruit the Pakistani groups, a community centre was approached, and, to secure working-class pensioners, a church acted as a source. At the same time, relevant businesses were approached for employment- or work-related groups.

Asking questions

An issue that is close to the question of the degree of involvement on the part of the moderator is the matter of how far there should be a set of questions that must be addressed. This issue is very similar to the considerations about how unstructured an interview should be in qualitative interviewing (see Chapter 20). Some researchers prefer to use just one or two very general questions to stimulate discussion, with the moderator intervening as necessary along the lines outlined above. For example, in their research on knowledge about heart attacks, Morgan and Spanish (1985) asked participants to discuss just two topics. One topic was 'who has heart attacks and why?'; here participants were encouraged to talk about people they knew who had had attacks. The second topic was 'what causes and what prevents heart attacks?'

However, other researchers prefer to inject somewhat more structure into the organization of the focus group sessions. An example of this is the research on the viewing of violence by women by Schlesinger et al. (1992; see Table 21.1). For example, in relation to the movie *The Accused*, the reactions of the audiences were gleaned through 'guiding questions' under five main headings, the first three of which had several more specific elements.

- Initially, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss the film in terms of such issues as: perceived purpose of the film; gratifications from the film; and realism and storyline.
- The questioning then moved on to reactions to the characters such as: Sarah Tobias (the woman who is raped); the three rapists; the female lawyer; and the male lawyers.
- Participants were then asked about their reactions to scenes, such as: the rape; the female lawyer's decision to change from not supporting Sarah Tobias's case to supporting it; and the winning of the case.
- Participants were asked about their reactions to the inclusion of the rape scene.
- Finally, they were asked about how they perceived the film's value, in particular whether the fact that it is American made a difference to their reactions.

While the research by Schlesinger et al. (1992) clearly contained quite a lot of specific questions to be addressed, the questions themselves were fairly general and were designed to ensure that there was some comparability between the focus group sessions in terms of gauging participants' reactions to each of the four programmes that were shown. Moreover, there was ample opportunity

for moderators to react to points made in the course of the sessions. The authors write that ‘due allowance was made for specific issues raised within a given group’ (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 28). Moreover, the early questions were designed to generate initial reactions in a relatively open-ended way. Such a general approach to questioning, which is fairly common in focus group research, allows the researcher to navigate the channel between, on the one side, addressing the research questions and ensuring comparability between sessions, and, on the other side, allowing participants to raise issues they see as significant and in their own terms.

Clearly, there are different questioning strategies and approaches to moderating focus group sessions. Most seem to approximate to the research by Fenton et al. described in Research in focus 21.3, which lies in between the rather open-ended approach employed by Morgan and Spanish (1985) and the somewhat more structured one used by Schlesinger et al. (1992). Similarly, Macnaghten and Jacobs (1997; see Table 21.1) employed a ‘topic guide’ and grouped the topics to be covered into areas of discussion. Their middle-of-the-road approach in terms of the degree to which the questioning was structured can be seen in the following passage, in which a group of working women reveal a cynicism about governments and experts regarding the reality of environmental problems, a tendency that could also be seen in most of the other groups, which similarly preferred to rely on their own sensory experience (in this passage ‘F’ is ‘female’):

- F* They only tell us what they want us to know. And that’s just the end of that, so we are left with a fog in your brain, so you just think—what have I to worry about? I don’t know what they’re on about.
- Mod* So why do Government only tell us what they want us to hear?
- F* To keep your confidence going. (All together)
- Mod* So if someone provides an indicator which says the economy is improving you won’t believe it?
- F* They’ve been saying it for about ten years, but where? I can’t see anything!
- F* Every time there’s an election they say the economy is improving. (Macnaghten and Jacobs 1997: 18)

In this passage, we see an emphasis on the topic to be addressed but a capacity to pick up on what the group says. A rather structured approach to focus group questioning was used in a cross-national study of young Europeans’ ‘orientations to the present and future, with respect to their “careers” as partners, parents and workers’ (Smithson and Brannen 2002: 14). The countries involved were Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK. Three hundred and twelve people participated in the research, but the number of groups and the number of participants in them varied considerably by country. The somewhat more structured approach to questioning can be seen in the fact that there were nineteen topic areas, each of which had several questions. For example, for the topic of ‘jobs’:

- What do you want from a job?
- What is important when you look for a job?
- Do you think it is important to support yourself?
- How do you expect to do that (job/state/spouse/other way)?
- Do you think it is different for women and men of your age?
- Do you expect to be in paid employment in five years’ time/ten years’ time? (Brannen et al. 2002: 190)

The more structured approach to questioning that seems to have occurred with these groups may have been the result of the demands of ensuring comparability between the sessions conducted in the different nations.

There is probably no one best way, and the style of questioning and moderating is likely to be affected by various factors, such as the nature of the research topic (for example, is it one that the researcher already knows a lot about, in which case a modicum of structure is feasible) and levels of interest and/or knowledge among participants in the research (for example, a low level of participant interest may require a somewhat more structured approach). The sensitivity of the topic may be a further consideration where several open-ended questions may be needed to act as ‘ice breakers’ (see Research in focus 21.5). Whichever strategy of questioning is employed, the focus group researcher should generally be prepared to allow at least some discussion that departs from the interview guide, since such debate may provide new and unexpected insights. A more structured approach to questioning might inhibit such spontaneity, but it is unlikely to remove it altogether.



Research in focus 21.5

Questioning in a focus group

Warr's (2005) study was concerned with notions of intimacy among predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged people in New Zealand. Most of her participants were aged between 18 and 29 years. Her questioning strategy was to begin with what she calls an 'icebreaker', which entailed asking participants about a popular movie that was on release at the time. Such an opening can be useful in stimulating initial thoughts on issues of intimacy, given the frequency with which relationships are emphasized in movies. This icebreaker was followed by the following questions:

'How do you know when you've in love?' 'How do you know when someone is in love with you?' 'In getting to know people, who makes the first move?' and 'How do you learn about sex and love?' To conclude, I would request participants to imagine the future in terms of whether they expected to settle down with someone, get married, or have children. The theme list posed very broad questions for discussion so there was plenty of scope for participants to pursue the topics in undirected ways and to introduce other issues as required. (Warr 2005: 156)

This approach clearly entailed using broad questions or topics as a means of stimulating discussion.

Beginning and finishing

It is recommended that focus group sessions begin with an introduction, whereby the moderators thank people for coming and introduce themselves, the goals of the research are briefly outlined, the reasons for recording the session are given, and the format of the focus group session is sketched out. It is also important to present some of the conventions of focus group participation, such as: only one person should speak at a time (perhaps explaining the problems that occur with recordings when people speak over each other); that all data will be treated confidentially and anonymized; that the session is open, and everyone's views are important; and

the amount of time that will be taken up. During the introduction phase, focus group researchers also often ask participants to fill in forms providing basic socio-demographic information about themselves, such as age, gender, occupation, and where resident. Participants should then be encouraged to introduce themselves and to write out their first names on a card placed in front of them, so that everyone's name is known.

At the end, moderators should thank the group members for their participation and explain very briefly what will happen to the data they have supplied. If a further session is to be arranged, steps should be taken to coordinate this.



Group interaction in focus group sessions

Kitzinger (1994) has observed that reports of focus group research frequently do not take into account interaction within the group. This is surprising, because it is precisely the operation of social interaction and its forms and impact that would seem to distinguish the focus group session from the individual interview. Yet, as Kitzinger observes, very few publications based on focus group research cite or draw inferences from patterns of interaction within the group. Wilkinson reviewed

over 200 studies based on focus groups and published between 1946 and 1996. She concluded: 'Focus group data is most commonly presented as if it were one-to-one interview data, with interactions between group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed' (S. Wilkinson 1998: 112).

In the context of her research on AIDS in the mass media, Kitzinger (1994) drew attention to two types of interaction in focus groups: complementary and

argumentative interactions. The former bring out the elements of the social world that provide participants' own frameworks of understanding. The discussion in Research in focus 21.2 brings out the agreement that emerges about the differences between the natural and the social sciences in people's minds. The discussion demonstrates broad agreement between the participants concerning such issues as the lack of control and the subjective nature of interpretation. Such a view is an emergent product of the interaction, with each participant building on the preceding remark. A similar sequence can be discerned in the following passage, which is taken from Morgan and Spanish's (1985: 414) research on heart attack victims:

- No. 1* But I think maybe what we're saying here is that there's no one cause of heart attacks, there's no one type of person, there's probably umpteen different types of heart attacks and causes coming from maybe smoking, maybe obesity, maybe stress, maybe design fault, hereditary, overwork, change in life style. Any of these things in themselves could be . . .
- No. 2* And when you start putting them in combination [unclear] be speeding up on yourself.
- No. 3* Yeah, you may be really magnifying each one of these particular things.
- No. 2* Yeah, and depending on how, and in each person that magnification is different. Some people can take a little stress without doing any damage, some people can take a little smoking, a little drinking, a little obesity, without doing any damage. But you take a little of each of these and put them together and you're starting to increase the chances of damage. And any one of these that takes a magnitude leap increases the chances.

This sequence from the transcript helpfully brings out the consensus that emerges around the question of who has heart attacks and why. No. 1 summarizes several factors that have been discussed; No. 2 then introduces the possible significance of some of these factors existing in combination; No. 3 agrees about the importance of combinations of factors; and No. 2 summarizes the position of the group on the salience of combinations of factors, raising at the same time the possibility that for each person there are unique combinations of factors that may be responsible for heart attacks.

Munday (2006) suggests that the capacity of focus group research to bring out the emergence of a consensus as well as the mechanics of that consensus makes it a potent tool for research into collective identity. She gives the example of her research on social movements and in particular a focus group with members of a Women's Institute (WI). For example, she asked the group about the movie *Calendar Girls*, based on the nude calendar made by Rylestone WI members some years previously. Munday writes that she asked the question because she felt it might encourage them to discuss the traditional image of WIs as staid and stuffy. Instead, the women chose to discuss the Rylestone WI and its members, such as the impact that the calendar's notoriety had on its members. At a later stage, the following interaction ensued:

- Alice* It might appeal more to the younger ones than perhaps the older members don't you think? . . . Although I suppose they were middle-aged ladies themselves.
- Jane* Oh yes.
- Mar* Oh yes they were yes.
- Jane* They weren't slim and what have you.
- Mary* Oh no no.
- Jane* ()
- Mary* No they were quite well . . .
- Jane* They were.
- Mary* Weren't they?
- Jane* I mean it was very well done because you never saw anything you wouldn't want to. (Munday 2006: 100)

Munday argues that the discussion of the movie did not revolve around dispelling the traditional image of WIs, but instead on dispelling a traditional image of older women, while at the same time recognizing that the women's respectability was not compromised. Thus, a sense of collective identity surrounding gender emerged that was somewhat different from how the researcher had anticipated the discussion would develop.

However, as Kitzinger (1994) suggests, arguments in focus groups can be equally revealing. She suggests that moderators can play an important role in identifying differences of opinion and exploring with participants the factors that may lie behind them. Disagreement can provide participants with the opportunity to revise their

opinions or to think more about the reasons why they hold the view that they do. By way of illustration, a passage from Schlesinger et al. (1992; see Table 21.1) is presented. The group is made up of English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence. The debate is concerned with the rape scene in *The Accused* and reveals a misgiving that its inclusion may actually be exploiting sexual violence:

- Speaker 1* I think . . . that they could've explained it. They could easily leave that rape scene.
- Speaker 2* But it's like that other film we watched. You don't realise the full impact, like, the one we were watching, the first one [*Crimewatch*], until you've got the reconstruction.
- Speaker 3* Yeah, but I think with that sort of film, it would cause more damage than it would good, I mean, if someone had been raped, would you like to have [to] sit through that again? (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 151–2)

The debate then continues to consider the significance of the scene for men:

- Speaker 1* But you wouldn't miss anything, would you? What would you? All right, if you didn't watch that particular part, would you miss anything? You could still grasp it couldn't you?
- Speaker 2* You could still grasp it but the enormous effect that it's had on us at the moment, it wouldn't be as drastic . . . without those.
- Speaker 1* Yeah, but I'm thinking how would men see it? . . .
- Speaker 3* That's what I'm saying, how would they view that scene?
- Speaker 4* They couldn't believe it either, I mean, they didn't—they didn't think they were doing any wrong.
- Speaker 1* Men would sit down and think, 'Well, she asked for it. She was enjoying it and look, the men around enjoyed it.' (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 152)

One factor, then, that seems to be behind the unease of some of the women about the inclusion of the vivid rape

scene is that it may be enjoyed by men, rather than being found repulsive, and that they would identify with the onlookers in the film. This account has come about because of the discussion that is stimulated by disagreement within the group and allows a rounded account of women's reactions to the scene to be forged. As Kitzinger (1994) argues, drawing attention to patterns of interaction within focus groups allows the researcher to determine how group participants view the issues with which they are confronted in their own terms. The posing of questions by and agreement and disagreement among participants helps to bring out their own stances on these issues. The resolution of disagreements also helps to force participants to express the grounds on which they hold particular views.

As Warr's (2005) research on intimacy found, focus groups frequently reveal a mixture of agreement and disagreement among participants (see Table 21.1 and Research in focus 21.5 for more on this research as well as Research in focus 21.6 for an example of a disagreement in a focus group). This feature allows the researcher to draw out the tensions associated with people's private beliefs in relation to wider public debates and expectations. This was of particular significance for Warr's interest in intimacy, because of the difficulties involved in resolving disagreements about what is and is not appropriate in matters of love and sex. Warr argues that focusing on areas of agreement and disagreement in focus groups can be a useful starting point for the interpretation and analysis of the qualitative data that derive from them.

While interaction and disagreements represent distinctive features of the focus group compared to individual interviews in qualitative research, it is also the case that they add a layer of complexity to the analysis of the ensuing qualitative data. Most of the principles and approaches that will be identified in Chapter 24 can and should be usefully followed. In addition, Barbour (2007) recommends seeking out patterns within focus group data—for example, showing how particular interpretations are associated with individuals in different positions or with certain social characteristics. This might involve seeking out intra-group or inter-group patterns, depending on whether each group is made up of similar individuals or different ones or a mixture of both.

Morgan (2010) has argued that focus group data that emphasize group interaction are not necessarily superior to those that do not. This is clearly a different position from that proposed by Kitzinger (1994). He argues that it all depends on what the researcher wishes to demonstrate. Sometimes, quoting what individuals have said



Research in focus 21.6

Disagreement in a focus group

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with no intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator, David, after his initial question. The participants are discussing Tupac Shakur, a rap singer.

David Who would be more kind of modern artists you would listen to . . . ?

Yusuf Tupac. Tupac Shakur. I'm not into that Hindi or nothing. R&B and Hip Hop unless you recommend to me it like to me it's Tupac.

Moin I think Tupac, the way he sings his songs and jumps around is a thug and I don't really appreciate him.

Kamran Who?

Moin Tupac Shakur, Machiavelli he calls himself. You see a lot of women jumping up and down, flashy cars, he is singing about his life experience, no that doesn't do anything for me. I would rather listen to some Bollywood songs. (Silva and Wright 2005: 10)

On the face of it, this exchange from a focus group of Pakistani working-class participants may seem unexceptional, but Silva and Wright report that Yusuf played very little further part in the session after the suggestion that he proffered had been undermined by Moin and to some extent by Kamran claiming not to have heard of Tupac. This is one of the risks of focus groups—namely, that, although they can capitalize on diversity of perspectives, sometimes disagreement may be difficult to deal with and may be offputting to some participants. Should the moderator, David, have intervened to quell the disagreement? Probably not: disagreements about taste are common in everyday life, and he could not really have anticipated Yusuf's unusual response.

can be more effective than passages of interaction, if what the researcher wants to show is an often repeated position. Quoting sequences of interaction might be less effective in making the point and also uses up far more words, which may be a consideration when there is a tight word limit. One situation that he refers to as almost

always warranting emphasizing interaction is when a new topic is introduced and this very rapidly stimulates a series of responses from a variety of focus group participants. The emerging consensus or dispute in this situation is clearly very significant to participants and warrants being quoted in detail.



Limitations of focus groups

Focus groups clearly have considerable potential for research questions in which the processes through which meaning is jointly constructed is likely to be of particular interest. Indeed, it may be that, even when this is not a prominent emphasis, the use of the focus group method may be appropriate and even advantageous, since it allows participants' perspectives—an important feature

of much qualitative research (see Chapter 17)—to be revealed in ways that are different from individual interviews (for example, through discussion, participants' questions, arguments, and so on). It also offers considerable potential for feminist researchers. What, then, might be its chief limitations?



Student experience

The challenges of focus groups

For her research around the topic of childhood obesity with mothers of young children, Samantha Vandermark conducted two focus groups of six people per group. She clearly found moderating the groups challenging:

Organisation of the focus groups was a primary difficulty, not only in terms of getting the right demographic for my samples but getting all of the mothers in one place at one time to conduct the focus group. My skills as an interviewer and moderator were tested as the mothers often tended to lose focus on the questions and shift conversation onto broader topics; I had to ensure that I used my initiative to adapt the questions according to the flow of conversation, keeping the questions relevant and the respondents interested.

This experience demonstrates that it is important to remain very active in a focus group session so that you do not lose control over the proceedings.



To read more about Samantha's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

- The researcher probably has less control over proceedings than with the individual interview. As we have seen, by no means all writers on focus groups perceive this as a disadvantage, and indeed feminist researchers often see it as an advantage. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) note that there is a tradition among some focus group researchers to value the method because it provides greater opportunity than most other methods for research participants to have some 'ownership' of the interview and the research process more generally. However, the question of control raises issues for researchers of how far they can allow a focus group to 'take over' the running of proceedings. There is clearly a delicate balance to be taken into account over how involved moderators should be and how far a set of prompts or questions should influence the conduct of a focus group, as some of the earlier discussions have suggested. What is not clear is the degree to which it is appropriate to surrender control of a focus group to its participants, especially when there is a reasonably explicit set of research questions to be answered, as is commonly the case, for example, in funded research.
- The data are difficult to analyse. A huge amount of data can be very quickly produced. Developing a strategy of analysis that incorporates both themes in what people say and patterns of interaction is not easy. Also, as previously pointed out, focus group recordings are particularly prone to inaudible elements, which affects transcription. However, studies like those of Morgan and Spanish (1985) and Kitzinger (1994) demonstrate that the examination of group interaction can be used to show how issues of thematic interest arise in the course of discussion.
- They are difficult to organize. Not only do you have to secure the agreement of people to participate in your study; you also need to persuade them to turn up at a particular time. Small payments, such as book or store tokens, are sometimes made to induce participation, but nonetheless it is common for people not to turn up. As a result, it is a common practice in focus group circles to over-recruit for each session on the grounds that at least one or two people will not turn up.
- The recordings are probably more time-consuming to transcribe than equivalent recordings of individual interviews, because of variations in voice pitch and the need to take account of who says what. For example, Bloor et al. (2001) suggest that a focus group session lasting one hour can take up to eight hours to transcribe, which is somewhat longer than would be likely in connection with an equivalent personal interview.
- There are problems with focus groups that are not encountered in individual interviews, most notably the tendency for two or more participants to speak at the same time. It is usually very difficult and often impossible to make sense of and therefore transcribe the portions of recordings where this has occurred. Of course, moderators can ask participants not to speak at the same time, but in my experience it is difficult to prevent this from occurring in spite of constant warnings (see Research in focus 21.7 for an example).
- There are possible problems of group effects. This includes the obvious problem of dealing with reticent



Research in focus 21.7

Speaking at the same time in a focus group

Like Research in focus 21.6, this extract is taken from one of the twenty-five focus groups that were part of the CCSE project (see Research in focus 2.9). This is a group of unskilled and semi-skilled workers discussing museum visiting:

[All talking at once]

Stephanie Please, please, I know I'm being like a schoolteacher . . .

Bill No, no, we're all ears 'Miss'!

[General laughter]

Stephanie Will you all shut up!

Tel I don't think I would go to the [museum] in Swansea because it wouldn't be as good as the one in London. And please 'Miss' I need to piss.

Stephanie All right then but no running in the corridors and make sure you wash your hands afterwards.

[General laughter] (Silva and Wright 2005: 7)

The moderator, Stephanie, has clearly had problems stopping this group talking at the same time. She very cleverly turns it into a joke by likening herself to a schoolteacher, even telling them to shut up. The group seems to enter into the spirit of the joke but whether she was able to stop participants from talking over each other, thereby making audio-recording more or less impossible, is another question.

speakers and with those who hog the stage! In this respect, they are a bit like tutorials. Krueger (1998: 59) suggests in relation to the problem of overly prominent participants that the moderator should make clear to the speaker and other group participants that other people's views are definitely required; for example, he suggests saying something like 'That's one point of view. Does anyone have another point of view?' As for those who do not speak very much, it is recommended that they are actively encouraged to say something. Also, as the well-known Asch experiments showed, an emerging group view may mean that a perfectly legitimate perspective held by just one individual may be suppressed (Asch 1951). There is also evidence that, as a group comes to share a certain point of view, group members come to think uncritically about it and to develop almost irrational attachments to it (Janis 1982). It is not known how far such group effects have an adverse impact on focus group findings, but it is clear that they cannot be entirely ignored. In this context, it would be interesting to know how far agreement among focus group participants is more frequently encountered than disagreement (I have a hunch that it is), since the effects to which both Asch and Janis referred would lead us to expect more agreement than disagreement in focus group discussions.

- Related to this last issue is the fact that, in group contexts, participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than in individual interviews. Morgan (2002) cites the case of a study in which group interviews with boys discussing relationships with girls were compared with individual interviews with them on the same topic. In the latter they expressed a degree of sensitivity that was not present in the group context, where more macho views tended to be forthcoming. This suggests that, in the group interviews, the boys were seeking to impress others and were being influenced by the norms of their peer group. However, this does not render the group interview data questionable, because it may be precisely the gulf between privately and publicly held views that is of interest.
- Madriz (2000) proposes that there are circumstances when focus groups may not be appropriate, because of their potential for causing discomfort among participants. When such discomfort might arise, individual interviews are likely to be preferable. Situations in which unease might be occasioned are: when intimate details of private lives need to be revealed; when participants may not be comfortable in each other's presence (for example, bringing together people in a hierarchical relationship to each other); and when participants are likely to disagree profoundly with each other.



Checklist

Issues to consider for your focus group

- Have you devised a clear and comprehensive way of introducing the research to participants?
- Do the questions or topics you have devised allow you to answer all your research questions?
- Have you piloted the guide with some appropriate respondents?
- Have you devised a strategy for encouraging respondents to turn up for the focus group meeting?
- Have you thought about what you will do if some participants do not turn up for the session?
- Have you ensured that sessions will allow novel or unexpected themes and issues to arise?
- Is your language in the questions clear and comprehensible?
- Are your questions relevant to the people who are participating in the focus groups?
- Have your questions been designed to elicit reflective discussions so that participants are not tempted to answer in 'yes' or 'no' terms?
- Have your questions been designed to encourage group interaction and discussion?
- Do your questions offer a real prospect of seeing the world from your interviewees' point of view rather than imposing your own frame of reference on them?
- Are you familiar with the setting(s) in which the session will take place?
- Are you thoroughly familiar with and have you tested your recording or audio-visual equipment?
- Have you thought about how you will present yourself in the session, such as how you will be dressed?
- Have you devised a strategy for dealing with silences?
- Have you devised a strategy for dealing with participants who are reluctant to speak?
- Have you devised a strategy for dealing with participants who speak too much and hog the discussion?
- Do you have a strategy for how far you are going to intervene in the focus group discussion?
- Do you have a strategy for dealing with the focus group if the discussion goes off in a tangent?
- Have you tested out any aids that you are going to present to focus group participants (for example, visual aids, segments of film, case studies)?



Key points

- The focus group is a group interview that is concerned with exploring a certain topic.
- The moderator generally tries to provide a relatively free rein to the discussion. However, there may be contexts in which it is necessary to ask fairly specific questions, especially when cross-group comparability is an issue.
- There is concern with the joint production of meaning among focus group participants.
- Focus group discussions need to be recorded and transcribed.
- There are several issues concerning the recruitment of focus group participants—in particular, whether to use natural groupings and whether to employ stratifying criteria.

- Group interaction is an important component of discussions.
- Some writers view focus groups as well suited to a feminist standpoint.



Questions for review

- Why might it be useful to distinguish between a focus group and a group interview?

Uses of focus groups

- What advantages might the focus group method offer in contrast to an individual qualitative interview?
- Evaluate the argument that the focus group can be viewed as a feminist method.

Conducting focus groups

- How involved should the moderator be?
- Why is it necessary to record and transcribe focus group sessions?
- Are there any circumstances in which it might be a good idea to select participants who know each other?
- What might be the advantages and disadvantages of using an interview guide in focus group sessions?

Group interaction in focus group sessions

- Why might it be important to treat group interaction as an important issue when analysing focus group data?

Limitations of focus groups

- Does the potential for the loss of control over proceedings and for group effects damage the potential utility of the focus group as a method?
- How far do the greater problems of transcription and difficulty of analysis undermine the potential of focus groups?
- To what extent are focus groups a naturalistic approach to data collection?



Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of focus groups. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.