

1 Introduction: the challenge and promise of focus groups

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Background and outline

This volume is a response to the unprecedented popularity currently being enjoyed by focus groups. Traditionally embraced most enthusiastically by market researchers, this technique has gained a high profile as a method for guiding political campaign advertising and governments' image-management. North American politicians have long used focus group research to inform their self-presentation strategies. This technique is now increasingly being adopted in the UK, prompting political commentators to declare that politicians are 'bewitched by focus groups' which unleash 'monsters' and are a 'short cut to anarchy' (Jenkins, 1997). British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, famously declared, 'there is no one more powerful than a member of a focus group' (cited in Ferguson, 1996: 46) and has had to publicly deny that he is attempting 'government by focus groups' (*World at One*, Radio 4, 29 July 1997). This research method has even attracted the satirical pen of the political cartoonist (see Figure 1.1).

In academia, too, focus groups have attracted increasing attention. Although group work has a relatively established pedigree in social anthropology, media/cultural studies and health research, the method is now being adopted and developed in a wide range of social sciences. Over the last few years there has been a three-fold increase in the number of focus group studies published in academic journals.

However, in our view, a great deal of focus group work adopts a formulaic approach which fails to develop the full potential of this method. In particular, social scientists are in danger of uncritically adopting market researchers' models of such research rather than adapting and expanding them, taking into account our own purposes and theoretical traditions.

This book casts a critical eye over focus group research and suggests ways forward in harnessing this versatile and powerful method. We dispute some of the emerging orthodoxies about how to conduct such research, question the uncritical celebration of this data collection technique and challenge simplistic statements about its 'inherent' qualities. Focus groups have great potential. Like any other research method, however, they are



FIGURE 1.1 One of several cartoons parodying focus groups which appeared in the press in the late 1990s

Source: *Guardian* 16 July 1997: 5

open to careless or inappropriate use, the results may be manipulated, and 'subjects' of the research can be exploited.

We have compiled this edited collection in the hope that it will encourage 'good practice' and help to develop the creative use of focus groups. The book draws on the collective experience of 21 researchers who have used focus groups to explore a wide range of issues with a variety of populations in a range of settings. The studies represented here include projects exploring children's experiences of their social worlds, 'community' attitudes towards the nuclear industry, refugees' negotiation of identity, lesbian sexual health, professional decision-making, and public understandings of science, AIDS, sexual violence and genetics.

In preparing this book, the editors and contributors met for a thoroughly enjoyable and very lively all-day discussion about group research methods (thanks to funding from Northern and Yorkshire's Research and Development Directorate). Rather than simply reflecting the editors' views, this introduction is thus the product of the shared expertise of the contributors (although not every contributor necessarily agrees with all the arguments presented here). Dialogue between the authors has also helped to inform

individual chapters (indeed several previously single-authored contributions became joint endeavours during the course of producing this collection).

The book is structured to take the reader through the whole process of planning, conducting and analysing focus group studies. Each chapter explores a different methodological issue. The first few chapters address questions of research design: How does the venue influence the data generated? (Judith Green and Laura Hart) When can individual interviews usefully complement focus groups? (Lynn Michell) Are focus groups suitable for exploring sensitive topics? (Clare Farquhar with Rita Das).

We then move on to examine the potential of focus groups to contribute to radical political research agendas including feminist and participatory paradigms (Sue Wilkinson, Chapter 5 and Rachel Baker and Rachel Hinton, Chapter 6). The next three chapters address specific substantive issues. Lai-Fong Chiu and Deborah Knight (Chapter 7) explore ways of using focus groups to access the views of ethnic minority groups and address issues around working with interpreters. Rosaline Barbour (Chapter 8) discusses focus group research into professional decision-making and organizational change. Claire Waterton and Brian Wynne (Chapter 9) examine the use of focus groups to access 'community views'.

The final section of the book focuses on analysis. Jane Franklin and Michael Bloor (Chapter 10) describe thematic analysis and outline ways of using computer-assisted coding techniques. Jenny Kitzinger and Clare Farquhar (Chapter 11) examine the interaction between focus group participants, and expound on the analytical potential of 'sensitive moments' in group discussions. Greg Myers and Phil Macnaghten (Chapter 12) demonstrate the advantages of discourse analysis. The last chapter reflects on the political context of focus group research in locating people as 'consumers' or 'citizens' (Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Anne Kerr and Steve Pavis).

The contributors come from a wide range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds and employ different models of how to work with focus groups. Some use them to document experience; others to explore discourse. Some write up practical reports documenting service provision or needs; others are conducting in-depth theoretical, even literary, analysis. What the contributors share, however, is commitment to the critical interrogation of focus group research and what might be called a 'sceptical enthusiasm' for this method. We hope that this volume will enthuse readers with the same excitement about focus groups, encouraging researchers to employ this technique reflexively, and facilitating the continued development of focus group research within the social sciences.

An introduction to key questions about focus groups

The following section provides a brief overview of ways of approaching focus group research. Here, we address common questions and highlight the

differences between focus groups and other data collection techniques. This section points to key elements in the book and demonstrates the inter-connections between decisions taken at different points in the design, conduct and analysis of focus group research. We would advise readers new to the field to use this volume alongside basic guides to focus group research. As we go to press Sage is publishing a revised edition of *The Handbook for Focus Group Research* (Greenbaum, 1998) and a comprehensive introductory *Focus Group Kit* (Morgan and Krueger, 1997). The usefulness of such guidance notwithstanding, we would, however, urge focus group researchers not to be constrained by the advice offered, but to reflect on its appropriateness for the research project in hand and would encourage researchers to think creatively about developing focus group approaches.

What are focus groups?

Focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues. The group is 'focused' in that it involves some kind of collective activity – such as viewing a video, examining a single health promotion message, or simply debating a set of questions. Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data. Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view. At the very least, research participants create an audience for one another.

With the increasing popularity of group methods comes a bewildering array of terms, made all the more confusing by lack of consistency in their usage. In addition to focus groups and group interviews, one hears of 'brainstorming sessions' (which involve little in the way of preparation) and 'nominal groups' (which are specially convened rather than naturally-occurring groups and often include ranking exercises to establish participants' priorities or concerns). There are also 'Delphi groups' (involving selected panels of experts responding to results from complementary research) and 'consensus panels' (designed to develop agreed professional principles or protocols).

Perhaps the resulting confusion has contributed to the apologetic tone which accompanies many researchers' acknowledgement of group methods. Research presentations are often accompanied by partial disclaimers such as, 'Well, I'm not sure if we used *proper* focus groups'. Certainly, focus group research is not the same as work involving 'Delphi groups' or 'consensus panels' where these are employed simply to facilitate an *outcome* of an agreed response rather than to observe the *process* of prioritization and decision-making. However, any group discussion may be called a

'focus group' as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction. Focus groups can involve different group compositions (including strangers or friends, 'lay people' or professionals) and diverse group tasks (including brainstorming, ranking exercises or attempting to reach a consensus). Indeed, the creative use of focus groups could include developing – where appropriate – hybrids of the various group types on offer and using focus groups in multi-method studies as well as refining stand-alone group methods to address a wider range of issues.

When is it appropriate to use focus groups?

Focus groups are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns. The method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary. Focus groups also enable researchers to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network. Crucially, group work explores how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms. Indeed, depending on the researcher's theoretical approach, focus group data can go further and challenge the notion that opinions are attributes of subjects at all rather than utterances produced in specific situations (see Chapter 12).

In general, questionnaires are more appropriate for obtaining quantitative information and explaining how many people 'hold' a certain (predefined) 'opinion'. However, focus groups are better for exploring how points of view are constructed and expressed. In-depth ethnographic work may be more appropriate for documenting broad cultural issues, but focus groups are particularly suited to the study of attitudes and experiences around specific topics. Interviews are more effective for tapping into individual biographies, but focus groups are invaluable for examining how knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context. Even these generalizations, however, should not be treated as if they were cast in stone and combining different data collection techniques into a single project can be highly productive.

Combining focus groups with other qualitative methods

Even if focus groups are not the most appropriate primary research tool, including some focus groups in a study can be fruitful (or vice versa). In this volume Rachel Baker and Rachel Hinton (Chapter 6) examine the value of conducting focus groups after lengthy ethnographic research and

Lynn Michell (Chapter 3) describes the importance, in her research, of combining focus groups with individual interviews. The key aspect to remember is that all data are context-bound and the same individuals are likely to answer questions differently, depending on whether we access them individually, through a researcher-convened group, or through a 'naturally-occurring' group. In weighing up the relative merits of focus groups and interviews for a particular study (or deciding how to compose each group), the researcher should consider how the group context and broader cultural and institutional features operate to encourage or suppress the expression of certain points of view.

Several contributors to this volume note differences between statements generated in individual and group work. Rosaline Barbour (Chapter 8), for example, found that the most vituperative comments about social workers were made by general practitioners and health visitors in the group setting, whereas, in one-to-one interviews, the same individuals were more likely to take a sympathetic view of the difficulties faced by other professionals. Differences between focus group and interview data were also revealed by Lynn Michell's (Chapter 3) work with school-children. Whereas focus groups were invaluable for teasing out details of the peer group 'pecking order', it was only in interviews that she was able to access individual experiences of bullying and victimization. However, the way in which group work differs from individual interview data cannot always be predicted in advance. Jenny Kitzinger found that group work could facilitate discussion of 'deviant' experiences and the naming of abuse (Chapter 11) and Rachel Baker reflects that in her work with street children in Nepal she was suspicious of normative responses in interviews (the responses the children were used to giving to journalists and aid workers) and decided to use focus groups to explore these further (Chapter 6).

Combining focus groups with *quantitative* methods

Focus groups can also be combined with 'quantitative' methods such as questionnaire surveys. At the outset of such research, group work can be employed to help construct questionnaires: developing an understanding of key issues and refining the phrasing of specific questions. Focus groups can also provide fertile ground for eliciting anecdotal material and are therefore ideal 'seedbeds' for germinating vignettes for use in questionnaires. Such vignettes, which may allow the researcher to vary significant details or develop unfolding scenarios, can be incorporated into large-scale questionnaire studies, so that their precise impact on responses can be systematically studied (Barbour, in press). Focus groups can also be used in the latter stage of quantitative projects. They can help to tease out the reasons for surprising or anomalous findings and to explain the occurrence of 'outliers' identified – but not explained – by quantitative approaches, such as scattergrams or 'box and whisker plots' (Barbour, in press).

Group work can not only complement data collected via other methods, but may actually challenge how such data are interpreted. Jenny Kitzinger's study of public understandings of AIDS demonstrates how focus groups can suggest different ways of interpreting survey findings through revealing the 'readings', 'facts' and value systems that inform respondents' answers to survey questions (see Kitzinger, 1994b). Similarly Clare Waterton and Brian Wynne (Chapter 9) challenge the nuclear industry's use of particular opinion poll findings by exploring the same questions in focus groups. They argue that the polls constructed a misleading view of local feelings by assuming that 'attitudes' and 'risks' are objects whose basic meanings are stable and universally accepted. Their focus group data, by contrast, demonstrate that, when people talk about the risks from nuclear power, they do so in a highly complex way which highlights the 'relational construction of beliefs'.

Sample size and sampling strategies

Focus group studies range from just three or four groups, to over fifty. Although some research projects rely on less than ten groups in total, all of the contributors to this volume ran considerably more sessions than this. The appropriate number of focus groups will depend on the research question, the range of people you wish to include and, of course, time and resource limitations.

Statistical 'representativeness' is not the aim of most focus group research. Usually focus group researchers employ 'qualitative sampling' (Kuzel, 1992) in order to encompass diversity and compose a structured rather than random sample, guided by the particular research questions which they are addressing.

Within most projects it is important to include demographic diversity and to make particular efforts to consider the voices which might be excluded. It is also useful to develop a topic-specific sampling strategy. Thus a study about attitudes to nuclear power could include groups of those working for the nuclear industry and those not; a study of AIDS might include groups of those who have tested HIV positive and groups of those who have tested negative. Different sampling strategies have been adopted by the various contributors to this volume and the decision-making process is explained in several chapters. Clare Farquhar and Rita Das, for example (Chapter 4), document their efforts to include different types of lesbian groups in their research, while Lai-Fong Chiu and Deborah Knight (Chapter 7) compare two sampling strategies for reaching ethnic minority women.

Maintaining a flexible approach to the sampling frame is desirable. This can be built in at the planning stage. Having determined your ideal sample in an original grant application it is useful to cost in funds for a couple of

extra 'wild card' groups to explore hypotheses as they emerge. So, for example, researchers may decide to work with a group not included in their original sample, such as incomers to an area (within a project which focused on local people) or short-stay patients (in a project focused on long-stay 'patients'). Such strategies can lend greater depth or scope to a study and test emerging hypotheses.

Group size and composition

Advice about group size and composition in existing guides to focus group research is often didactic. This can seriously hamper imaginative – or even appropriate – application of focus group methods. One orthodoxy emerging from the market research literature stipulates that the ideal number of participants is between 8 and 12. However, this number is too large for many sociological studies. Several of the contributors to this volume prefer to work with groups of five or six participants, or even as few as three.

Focus group researchers are also faced with the perennial problem – given much attention in all of the 'how to' books – of deciding whether to aim for homogeneity or heterogeneity among group participants. Bringing together people on the basis of some shared experience is often most productive; however, differences between participants are often illuminating (Kitzinger, 1994a). As with many other aspects of focus group design, though, the guidelines overemphasize the extent to which the researchers can control for all characteristics of participants which are likely to be relevant. Some details are likely to emerge only once discussion has been initiated and the precise composition of groups will often be a product of circumstance rather than planning. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. Khan and Manderson (1992) report that difficulties in stimulating discussion of reproductive issues among a group of young women in India were resolved when an older woman (a mother-in-law who arrived as chaperone to one of the women) started talking. Similarly, Jenny Kitzinger found unexpected advantages in including (by mistake) one short-term resident in a group of long-term residents of a hospital unit for the elderly. The participation of this individual mobilized criticisms and suggestions from the group which might not otherwise have been expressed (as groups composed entirely of longer-term residents adopted a more resigned and institutionalized attitude).

The third issue to consider is whether or not to work with people who already know each other. Market research texts tend to insist on focus groups being held with strangers in order to avoid both the 'polluting' and 'inhibiting' effect of existing relations between group members. However, many social science researchers prefer to work with pre-existing groups – people who are already acquainted through living, working or socializing together. These are, after all, the networks in which people might normally

discuss (or evade) the sorts of issues likely to be raised in the research session and the 'naturally-occurring' group is one of the most important contexts in which ideas are formed and decisions made.

Pre-existing groups are not, however, a prerequisite for successful focus group research. Indeed, many projects bring together people who might not otherwise meet. Studies into the experience of living in a particular tower block, having a particular illness, or winning the lottery, might involve people who are virtual strangers. Even in a study where it has been possible to recruit pre-existing groups, the researcher might want to intervene to bring together other participants who do not know each other and whose voices and common experiences might otherwise be muted or entirely excluded from the research. In some cases, too, researchers deliberately opt to observe the talk generated by strangers or set up one-off groups to ensure that participants will talk without fear of making revelations to members of their own social circle.

If pre-existing groups are chosen then consideration should be given to the types of networks used. For example, an investigation into school sex education programmes could access the same 16-year-old boy through a variety of networks. He could participate in a focus group with his parents and sister; with a selection of his schoolfriends; or he could become involved in the research via a support group for gay teenagers. Each type of group may give a different perspective on this same young man's views and experiences or access different discourses.

Pre-existing groups are likely to have established their own norms as to what can and cannot be said and hierarchies within groups and in broader society may inhibit the contributions of members in particular structural positions. This does not, however, necessarily preclude utilizing pre-existing groups or, indeed, using group work at all. Indeed, the 'sensitive moments' within the group can be a source of insight (see Chapter 11 and also Chapter 8). However, it is often useful to ensure that participants have ways of communicating their points of view outside the group. For example, participants may be provided with a questionnaire or the opportunity to talk one-to-one to the facilitator after the group or in a subsequent telephone debriefing session. Researchers can also adapt their sampling frame to create the context which will facilitate access to particular voices in order to 'fill the gaps' (such as a gay youth group in the earlier example).

Recruitment, access and the role of gate-keepers

There are some issues around recruitment and access which are specific to focus group research and bring both advantages and disadvantages, often involving the adoption of new strategies. For example, although some people may be intimidated by the prospect of a group discussion (or feel that it devalues them as research participants), group methods offer reassurance to others. Focus groups are ideal for individuals whose views

you wish to elicit, but who protest they do not have much to say on the topic in question. Focus groups are also good for involving people who might be nervous of being the sole focus of a researcher's attention.

There are also important *practical* differences between interviews and focus groups. Interviewers can go to a respondent's own home at a time of his or her choice. However, focus group work often relies on research participants travelling to a common venue and co-ordinating with others. This can make people less likely to co-operate. Researchers may therefore need to recruit several more potential participants than are actually needed and reimburse participants' travel expenses or offer payment. It is well worth fitting your research session into established meeting slots where this is an option (for example, existing staff meeting times, youth club nights or support sessions).

Focus group work also often involves increased dependency on gatekeepers. This has two main problems. The first problem is an access and recruitment issue: the gatekeeper may screen potential participants. For example, if the researcher leaves it up to a teacher to ask for volunteers in a school, then she or he may find that the entire group is made up of prefects or members of the school debating society. Similarly, line managers in an organization may try to exclude potential critics (see Chapter 8). Gatekeepers may also view group discussions as far more threatening than interviews: for example, employers of casual labour may worry that group discussion between workers will disrupt existing employer-employee relations or doctors may worry that bringing patients together in a group will result in them telling each other 'horror stories' or engaging in the 'inappropriate' exchange of information. Sue Wilkinson, for example, found that some clinicians were concerned to prevent women who were about to undergo surgery for breast cancer meeting with those who had already had such treatment.

The second issue for focus group recruitment is an ethical one: far from denying access, an enthusiastic group contact may facilitate access without passing on all relevant information. One of us (JK) had a problem when she met with a group set up for her by a market research company. The group, members of a football club, was convened in order to discuss sexual abuse. However, on arrival she discovered that the men had been told by the group contact that they would be discussing football hooliganism. (He had resorted to this strategy because he had found it difficult to recruit participants in any other way.) The other one of us (RB) turned up at a health centre under the impression that the practice manager had secured agreement for a focus group discussion to be conducted in a slot generally used for team meetings. However, she then discovered that staff expected to carry out their usual business at the meeting and viewed the research task as an imposition. In Chapter 4, Clare Farquhar and Rita Das question whether permission granted on behalf of a 'group' can really involve 'informed consent' on the part of all its members. Their chapter suggests ways of addressing this problem.

Research settings

Alongside research design and recruitment, consideration also needs to be given to where the group sessions are actually going to take place. Researchers should choose a venue easily accessible to the people they wish to include in the research. In our experience, people are more likely to turn up for a group which takes place in a familiar venue (such as their community centre) rather than having to travel to an unfamiliar place (such as the university). However, this has to be counterbalanced with consideration of the value of working with groups outside the institutions which bring them together (for example residential care, school, workplace, prison).

Ideally, the room needs to be quiet and comfortable, free from interruptions and protected from observation by those not participating in the research. Social anthropologists are used to conducting informal group sessions in the village square, the market-place, or on the bank of the river where the clothes are washed, recognizing the advantages of such 'natural' set ups. However, it is difficult to conduct a discussion with school pupils constantly interrupted by their teacher, or with in-patients under the scrutiny of staff. The interventions of those who have not agreed to participate, and may be suspicious of the research, can also be a problem if the venue is too 'public' (see Chapter 6).

However, researchers need to be flexible in their use of venues and often have little choice. The contributors to this volume have used a wide range of sites including classrooms, play-group premises, refugee camp committee rooms, prison recreation rooms, health centres, community centres, and people's own homes. Concerns about selecting a suitable venue have led several writers of focus group guidelines to recommend 'a neutral setting, where participants will not feel influenced by the surroundings' (College of Health, 1994: 86). We would argue that there is no such place. Rather than aiming for 'neutrality', researchers should consider, instead, the different messages that are being given to participants when we select different venues. This is discussed in depth by Judith Green and Laura Hart (Chapter 2), where they explain how the 'formal' and 'informal' settings chosen for their focus group sessions influenced the content of discussions. They note that 'different contexts produce different types of stories . . . and different repertoires of social competencies'. Questions about venue are thus, they argue, 'not merely technical questions about validity and reliability, but involve rather more theoretical decisions about research aims.'

Using stimulus materials and exercises

The group facilitator should approach the group discussion with a basic outline of key questions. Over and above this, specific group exercises are sometimes useful. This can be as simple as providing participants with a

flip chart and pens to list key concerns, or showing them advertisements, leaflets, cartoons or newspaper clippings as stimulus material. Alternatively, the researcher may wish to use quite developed exercises such as vignettes.

Several of the contributors to this volume developed their own ways of stimulating discussion. Rosaline Barbour (Chapter 8) used vignettes to explore team members' understandings of each others' roles and how they allocated professional responsibilities. Lai-Fong Chiu and Deborah Knight (Chapter 7) took a speculum into their group discussion about cervical smears and encouraged women to pass it around. In her work on AIDS and on child sexual abuse, Jenny Kitzinger used still photographs from news bulletins and asked groups to try to reproduce typical news reports. This task was specifically developed to trace media influence on public understandings. However, working with pictures can be useful for other types of projects too, particularly because they engage people in discussion without the researcher providing any vocabulary or terminology. (For in-depth discussion of this technique see Kitzinger, 1993.)

Another common exercise consists of presenting participants with a series of statements on large cards, which they are then asked, as a collective exercise, to rank or assign to different categories. For example, Jenny Kitzinger used such cards to explore the views of Greenham Common peace campaigners (asking them to sort statements about gender and violence into different 'agree'-'disagree' categories), to explore public understandings of AIDS (placing statements about 'types' of people into different 'risk categories') and to examine midwives' perceptions of their professional responsibilities (placing a series of statements about midwives' roles along a continuum of importance). (For further discussion of this technique, see Kitzinger, 1990.)

Collective tasks, such as these, encourage participants to concentrate on one another (rather than the group facilitator) and may force them to explain and defend their differing perspectives. They focus discussion around key points of interest to the researcher and facilitate comparison across groups. However, stimulus materials are not always necessary and can make people feel uncomfortable ('it's like being back at school'). As with other features of focus groups, they should be selected judiciously and their usefulness monitored throughout a project.

Facilitators' skills

One reason for researchers' hesitation in using focus groups is the notion that the group facilitator must be inordinately skilled. Certainly skill in conducting focus groups increases exponentially with experience. However, pilot group discussions can be attempted by novice researchers, provided the topic is straightforward, 'safe' and of obvious interest to the research participants. Indeed, this may be an even easier starting point than one-to-

one interviews because the group will have its own momentum, and the researcher's role is to allow the interaction between participants to develop unencumbered by heavy-handed interventions. One simple way of beginning to develop group facilitation skills is to start off by conducting group discussions with your own friends, students, relatives or colleagues just to try out the method.

For difficult (that is complex or fraught) subjects, greater experience is necessary (see Chapter 11). However, most experienced qualitative researchers already possess many of the skills needed for successful focus group moderating. As with interviews, researchers should avoid being judgemental, presenting themselves as experts or making assumptions which close off exploration. A group facilitator also needs skill in balancing keeping quiet with knowing when to intervene. In addition, facilitators need to be able to think on their feet to clarify ambiguous statements, enable incomplete sentences to be finished, encourage everyone to participate and ensure that interesting and unexpected avenues are pursued. One of the key skills is ensuring that interaction between research participants is encouraged.

Prior knowledge (or the ability to pick up on, or interpret) the language, terminology, gestures and cultural meanings of the particular groups with whom one is working is also crucial. This is true both for group facilitation and subsequent data interpretation. For some research projects this will involve working with interpreters (see Chapter 7) and considerable preparatory research. For example, in their work with street children in Kathmandu and with refugees from Bhutan, Rachel Baker and Rachel Hinton (Chapter 6) point to the importance of conducting observational fieldwork before setting up group discussions. Without such background preparation the researcher may not only misinterpret the discussion data after the event but also, at the time, lose credibility with the research participants who may simply decide to 'take the researcher for a ride'.

The potential for researchers to 'lose control' of group discussions is a common concern expressed in the literature. However, the validity of such concerns depends on whether you want to keep control in the first place (see Chapter 5). It also depends on what one means by 'losing control'. The 'freer' and more dynamic situation of a focus group may actually access 'better data' than a more subdued and formal encounter. In addition, it is incorrect to assume that total anarchy will ensue unless the researcher handles the group situation with consummate poise. This worry ignores the skills of the other participants. We all operate in a wide variety of group situations in the context of our everyday lives, and can call on our stock of experiences in dealing with potentially difficult situations. In most focus group settings, participants – as well as the researcher – have a vested interest in avoiding unpleasant confrontation or open hostility. Focus group researchers need to be prepared for the fact that group work may involve 'sensitive moments' and may elicit painful exchanges and revelations (see Chapters 4 and 11). Certainly, the facilitator

should think, in advance, about how to lead group discussion on to safer ground if necessary. However, in practice, many difficult situations are actually 'managed' by the group participants themselves.

The group facilitator's persona and self-presentation

Traditional research approaches encouraged researchers to present themselves as faceless, objective nonentities. This paradigm has now been challenged (see, for example, Oakley, 1981). Alternative models for conducting, understanding and theorizing researchers' relationships with their 'subjects' are increasingly being explored (Whitehead and Conaway, 1986; Edwards, 1990; Phoenix, 1990; McKeganey and Bloor, 1991; Green et al., 1993). Many of these debates revolve around one-to-one interviewing but are equally applicable to focus group research. The only difference is that, on the one hand, group work may 'dilute' the effect of the researcher's own persona because group participants are usually addressing each other as much as (if not more) than the researcher. On the other hand, the researcher's persona may be highlighted as the group members position themselves in relation to their collective identity and in 'opposition' to the researcher's. This can sometimes happen, for example, when a woman facilitates a men-only group or an 'outsider' runs a group with people living close to a nuclear power station (see Chapter 9).

There is no 'correct' persona for focus group facilitation, although some facilitators will be more appropriate for some topics and for some research populations. It is crucial, however, to consider how the researcher's persona influences the data collected. If you've brought together a group on the basis of shared characteristics or experiences, how are you located in relation to this? Are you seen as 'one of us' or an outsider? Are you perceived to be related to 'authority' or the institution under study? How do your own identity, dress, accent and behaviour influence how you are seen (such as displaying heterosexuality by wearing a wedding ring)?

White, heterosexual, able-bodied researchers rarely theorize, or are even aware, of how their own identities or self-presentations impact on research participants, except where they are researching 'the other'. Indeed, being white or heterosexual is seldom a thought-out 'identity' in the same way as being black or gay. 'Minority' researchers are often more sensitive to this dimension, whatever the context. Particularly revealing dynamics may be evident where the researcher's identity is sometimes 'ambiguous', 'hidden' or made invisible and/or when research participants' assumptions become explicit. Lai-Fong Chiu, for example, finds that she is often not seen as 'black' and therefore white research participants feel free to air their prejudices in front of her without feeling that she is implicated by their statements. Indeed, some of the white groups with which she worked were resistant to her self-definition when she did expressly identify herself as a black woman.

While we would not argue that there necessarily needs to be close correspondence between researcher and researched, theorizing about research participants' perceptions of the researcher is a valuable part of the research process. This is discussed in Chapters 4 and 7 in relation to lesbian and 'black' and 'white' identities. These examples throw into sharp focus issues of identity and self-presentation which are pertinent to all research encounters.

Recording and transcribing focus group discussions

The most basic level of recording focus group discussions depends on note-taking and the use of a flip chart to construct, with group participants, a summary of the meeting. Tape-recording provides far richer research access to the discussion and we would advise this, even if it is only used as an *aide-mémoire*. Some researchers recommend video-recording. While this can provide additional information, it can also be cumbersome, may be particularly inhibiting and can give a misleading illusion of comprehensiveness. If you are relying on audio-tape, however, it is useful to note down your own impressions and the most obvious elements of body language. For example, in one group discussion about 'slags', the only female member of the group started to tug at her short skirt until it was stretched right over her knees (Kitzinger, 1993).

Audio-taping needs a high-quality recorder and, ideally, a multidirectional microphone (the flat mikes are excellent). Tapes of group discussions are invariably more difficult to transcribe than are one-to-one interviews. They will take an experienced audio-typist in excess of the four hours per hour of taped material generally calculated for transcription of interviews. This will be even longer if one is aiming for the sophistication of transcript required for conversation analysis with all the pauses and interruptions marked in (see Myers and Macnaghten, Chapter 12, for an example of this). Sometimes, however, the tape may be used simply to refresh one's memories and clarify notes. The amount of transcription required can be cut down by employing a judicious mixture of written and tape-recorded sections (see, for example, Barbour, 1995).

One of the challenges for transcribers is identifying individual speakers. A voice check, where the facilitator simply asks people to go round and give their first names on the tape at the beginning of the session, can be very useful. It can also be helpful if the person who transcribes the tape was also present at the group or if an observer takes notes of the sequence of talk. Some of the contributors to this volume have opted to work with simple male/female identifiers for speakers and only attempt to identify individual speakers for key sections of text (noting in counter numbers during transcription will help locate the relevant sections of tape later on).

Focus group transcription can also be difficult because participants tend to make sudden, apparently 'illogical' leaps, and interrupt or shout over

each other. This happens especially when discussion becomes animated – and, consequently, often when it is of most interest to the researcher. Ideally, researchers should transcribe at least one of the group discussions themselves, and, of course, many do not have the luxury of doing anything else. Transcription by the facilitator will help her to adapt her facilitation style if necessary. (A facilitator who has transcribed her own tape is more likely in subsequent groups to intervene to ask participants to finish off their comments, or to ensure that individual voices are not drowned out.) It will also improve the facilitator's ability to liaise with whoever is transcribing further tapes if this task is subsequently delegated. In any case, it is useful to listen to the tape once more while reading the transcript in order to correct it, and to add in additional notes or impressions. It can also be useful to listen to the tape while coding the transcript – especially where tone of voice and the nature of the interaction is important.

Analysing and presenting focus group data

Focus groups can generate large amounts of very rich and dynamic data. This very richness and complexity can, however, make it unwieldy and, again, adequate time must be allowed for analysis. Analysing focus group data involves essentially the same process as does the analysis of any other qualitative data. However, the researcher needs to reference the group context. This means starting from an analysis of groups rather than individuals and striking a balance between looking at the picture provided by the group as a whole and recognizing the operation of individual 'voices' within it. The researcher should try to distinguish between opinions expressed in spite of, or in opposition to, the group and the consensus expressed or constructed by the group.

Analysis will involve, at the very least, drawing together and comparing discussion of similar themes and examining how these relate to the variation between individuals and between groups. A more developed analysis can use systematic coding and packages such as NUD•IST or Ethnograph. This is documented in detail by Jane Frankland and Michael Bloor in Chapter 10. Alternatively, transcripts can be subjected to conversation analysis. This is discussed in depth by Greg Myers and Phil Macnaghten in Chapter 12. Attention should also be paid to the group dynamics, including examining jokes, anecdotes, agreement, disagreement (see Kitzinger, 1994a). Close attention to 'sensitive moments' can be very revealing and this is discussed in Chapter 11.

Several of the contributors to this volume raise issues relating to how best to present focus group data in talks, reports and published papers. Myers and Macnaghten argue for presenting larger chunks of transcripts to illustrate the context in which remarks were made. It may also be important to include a sense of dynamic change during the course of the group (as people shift their position, accommodate to, or challenge one

another). Sue Wilkinson (Chapter 5) is critical of the tendency for some focus group researchers to bow to the supposed requirements of journals for data in the form of tables and numbers. Asbury (1995: 418) comments: 'Focus groups are not oral surveys; that is, participants' comments should not be tallied, counted, or otherwise taken out of the context in which the comments originated.' Nevertheless, systematic counting prevents impressionistic assumptions and can be useful in some cases, depending on our sample. For example, the 'Cleveland scandal' was spontaneously raised in over half the focus group discussions about sexual abuse in Jenny Kitzinger's research. This study involved 49 groups from a wide range of backgrounds. Only seven groups could not recall the Cleveland case, and these consisted predominantly of participants under 18 or who were not resident in Britain during the time when this case received extensive media coverage. Noting the persistent reference to this case and the role it played in how participants understood more contemporary child abuse cases was relevant to developing a theory about media influence and the role of historical reference points and 'conceptual templates' (Kitzinger, in press, a).

Ethical issues

Ethical issues are relevant to all stages of focus group research design, implementation and presentation. The question of informed consent has already been raised. A second issue is the question of confidentiality. Unlike interviewees, focus group participants cannot be given an absolute guarantee that confidences shared in the group will be respected; the temptation to 'gossip' may be strong if participants are part of the same social network. In addition, vicarious disclosure takes place. For example, in one research session one participant informed the group that one of the young women present had worked as a prostitute. A third issue is that group members may voice opinions that are upsetting to other participants (for example, in one group, the suggestion that incest survivors should be sterilized because they were deemed to be 'unfit parents').

A related problem is that participants may actually provide each other with misinformation during the course of the group; information which may be implicitly legitimized by the presence of the researcher. It is clearly inappropriate simply to walk away from a group after having silently listened to people convincing each other that HIV can be transmitted by casual contact or that anal intercourse is safer than vaginal intercourse. In such cases the researcher has a responsibility to provide accurate information.

Such ethical issues can be addressed through attempting to set ground rules prior to the group, and through debriefing and supplying literature after the group. During the course of the session itself it may very occasionally be necessary to intervene but, as noted earlier, groups often have

their own way of responding to difficult dynamics and individuals within groups may be used to 'putting up with' particular offensive remarks or may, within the group, develop their own robust defence (for a more extensive discussion see Chapters 5 and 11).

The politics of focus group research

Although focus groups introduce some new ethical challenges for qualitative researchers, they also bring new political possibilities. Focus groups are welcomed by some because of their potential for transforming the researcher-researched relationship. In contrast to one-to-one interviews, group work can shift the balance of power in favour of the participants (see Chapter 5). Focus groups may involve participants in helping to define research questions and can even involve them in collaborative writing projects.

However, it would be naïve to suppose that power differentials are thereby entirely dissolved. Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Anne Kerr and Stephen Pavis point out that we need not only to interrogate relationships between research participants and researchers, but also those between researchers and funders (Chapter 13). In addition, Rachel Baker and Rachel Hinton (Chapter 6) argue that participatory research is not a discrete activity, 'rather it is a cycle followed by researchers and participants that begins and ends in shared activities and understanding'. Their chapter shows group discussion as just one of a series of ethnographic and participatory endeavours, and they caution against assuming that focus groups automatically lead to participatory action research practice.

Similarly, Rosaline Barbour (1995) makes the distinction between working *on* people and working *with* people to effect change, and several of the contributors discuss the practical strategies which they employed to this end. Claire Waterton and Brian Wynne held public meetings at which findings were fed back to the communities studied, Lai-Fong Chiu and Deborah Knight recruited and trained bilingual moderators who not only became involved in their research but acted as health educators. They also worked with research participants in analysing transcripts of focus group discussions – a process which proved particularly important in working with white health workers to analyse their own racism. If the potential of focus group work to change relations between research participants and researchers is to be realized, this can only be done through additional practical acts, it cannot be assumed to be an 'inherent' quality of this data collection technique.

The dynamics within focus groups are also heralded as a useful addition to developing a 'new politics of knowledge' by accessing uncodified knowledge and stimulating the sociological imagination in both researchers and participants (Johnson, 1996). Certainly, focus group work can disrupt researchers' (and commissioning bodies') assumptions and encourage

research participants to explore issues, identify common problems and suggest potential solutions through sharing and comparing experiences. Focus group participants have the opportunity to piece together the fragmented experiences of group members and may come to view events in their own lives in a new light in the course of such discussions (see particularly Chapters 5 and 11). Group work can help individuals to develop a perspective which transcends their individual context and thus may transform 'personal troubles' into 'public issues'. The group process can also foster collective identity and provide a point of contact to initiate grass-roots change.

It is these qualities which made group discussion, in the form of 'consciousness-raising groups', such a powerful political tool in the black power and women's liberation movements. It is this potential that has also attracted community activists, action researchers and feminists (see Sue Wilkinson's discussion in Chapter 5). In addition, the ability of focus groups to involve those without access to formal channels of communication and who might resist individual interviews has also led to group work being adopted by some as a means of 'citizens' consultation'. For example 'A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland' (1993) collected the views of around 3000 people about the troubles, using focus groups alongside public hearings (cited in Johnson, 1996).

The other side of the coin, however, is that focus groups can also be co-opted as a powerful public relations tool. Since focus groups have all the right credentials, it is relatively easy for them to be presented as consultation exercises or for findings to be manipulated to justify decisions which have already been made (Barbour, 1995). Alternatively, the insights from focus groups can be employed to massage the presentation of an unpopular government policy, rather than change the policy itself. Several of the contributors to this volume question whether focus groups are inevitably 'empowering' or 'politically correct' and suggest that this may be an overly extravagant claim for focus group research. At the same time, however, many are engaged in trying to realize the radical potential of this research method. Some are trying to create new critical ways of engaging with discourse and society or are explicitly committed to research which reflects 'citizenship as opposed to consumerism' and harnesses the power of focus groups to 'contribute to greater public engagement with policy decisions' (Sarah Cunningham-Burley et al., Chapter 13).

Concluding remarks

In this introduction we have tried to provide a basic guide to some of the key questions around developing focus group research. We have resisted providing definitive answers in favour of suggesting ways of considering alternatives. If our answers have often seemed merely another way of saying 'well, it all depends', that is because it does! Every decision in the

course of designing, conducting and analysing focus group research is interdependent. A 'one-size fits all' formula would be no substitute for serious critical engagement with the political, theoretical and practical issues around group work. We hope that the following chapters will provide readers with a solid basis from which to make their own decisions and to confront both the promise and the challenge of focus group research.