

1 Introducing focus groups

Definition of a focus group
Outline of the book
Historical antecedents
Claims in focus

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

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

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

Doing focus groups

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

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

Definition of a focus group

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

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

Introducing focus group

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

Outline of the book

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

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

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

Doing focus groups

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

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

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

Introducing focus group

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

Historical antecedents

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

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

Doing focus groups

Broadcasting, marketing and public relations

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

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

Organizational research and development

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

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

Introducing focus group

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

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

Community development and participatory approaches

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

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

Doing focus groups

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

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

Health services research and social science research

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

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

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

Introducing focus group

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

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

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

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

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

Doing focus groups

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

Disciplinary engagement and debate

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

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

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

Utilizing advice

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

Introducing focus group

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

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

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

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

Claims in focus

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

Doing focus groups

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

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

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

Introducing focus group

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

Key points

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

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

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

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

Doing focus groups

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

Further reading

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

- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Cunningham-Burley, S., Kerr A., and Pavis, S. (1999) 'Theorizing subjects and subject matter in focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 185–199.
- Kitzinger, J. and Barbour, R.S. (1999) 'Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups', in R.S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 1–20.
- Macnaghten, P. and Myers, G. (2004) 'Focus groups', in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 65–79.