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Focus group method and methodology: current practice and recent debate

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This paper considers the contemporary use of focus groups as a method of data collection within qualitative research settings. The authors draw upon their own experiences of using focus groups in educational and ‘community’ user-group environments in order to provide an overview of recent issues and debates surrounding the deployment of focus group methods and to pick out specific areas of contention in relation to both their epistemological and practical implications. Accordingly, the paper reflects on some of the realities of ‘doing’ focus groups whilst, at the same time, highlighting common problems and dilemmas which beginning researchers might encounter in their application. In turn, the paper raises a number of related issues around which there appears to have been a lack of academic discussion to date.

Introduction

Focus groups have a well documented, if contested, history as a method of data collection in both public and private sector organizations (see Bloor *et al.*, 2001). However, in more recent years they have become an established and accepted part of the range of methodological tools available to academic researchers. The increasing popularity of focus groups amongst social scientists is, in part, due to the fact that they are often perceived as more ‘cost effective’ than traditional methods and adaptable to a range of research approaches and designs. In addition, particularly for policy related research, focus groups are seen to yield large amounts of qualitative data in exchange for relatively little face-to-face researcher contact. The popularity of focus groups as a research technique also relates to their current status in popular political rhetoric and market research insofar as since the early 1990s, successive UK Governments have been keen to promote the benefits of focus group research as a reliable way to canvass public opinion.

Despite this growing interest and activity there has been relatively little critical discussion of the problematic aspects of conducting focus groups or analyzing the

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data derived from them. This paper discusses key issues relating to the complexity and necessity of considering sampling issues within the context of focus group research and the implications this has for the collection and analysis of resultant data. Drawing critically on examples from our own experiences of conducting focus groups in educational and 'community' user group settings, the paper outlines a number of reservations that we have with the way in which focus groups are typically conceptualized and conducted, and how focus group data are handled. We go on to propose some suggestions to at least partially resolve some of the methodological and epistemological dilemmas in play at the present time.

The methodological background

Focus group techniques grew out of both a therapeutic and marketing tradition (Szybillo & Berger, 1979; Morgan, 1998a) but were used by social scientists more than half a century ago (Merton & Kendall, 1946; Merton *et al.*, 1956). Though their role in social science research has traditionally been seen as somewhat limited, in market research such techniques have long since been regarded as part and parcel of standard practice (Calder, 1977; Langer, 1979; Linda, 1982). Data relating to a wide range of topics (and for a variety of purposes) have been collected using focus groups, examples include: patient/customer satisfaction (Cunningham & Frontczak, 1988; Chapman & Johnson, 1995), research on sensitive issues (O'Brien, 1993; Hoppe *et al.*, 1994), user education and empowerment (Basch, 1987; Bowie *et al.*, 1995), the development of promotional or teaching materials (Trenkner & Achterberg, 1991; Schickler, 1992; Bryant & Gulitz, 1993) and questionnaire/survey formulation (O'Brien, 1993; Court, 1995). As Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 102) note: 'The most common purpose of a focus group interview is for an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known'. Focus groups aim, Kreuger (1994, p. 3) argues, 'not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights into how people perceived a situation'.

It has been well rehearsed within the social science literature that focus group discussions constitute a type of group interview where, amidst a relatively informal atmosphere, people are encouraged to discuss specific topics in order that underlying issues (norms, beliefs, values), common to the lives of all participants, might be uncovered (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). Epistemologically speaking, and within the context of qualitative research *per se*, such aims would appear commensurate with a range of other data collection methods where gaining access to a sense of respondent commonality is the central concern. Participants are asked to engage in focus groups because they have something in common with each other and something which the researcher is interested in—for example, a lifestyle circumstance or condition. Hence, the 'focus' aspect of the exercise is the premise upon which the collective meeting takes place (usually the 'focus' of the research being undertaken) and the driving force behind the key topic(s) to be addressed.

We wish to raise two issues at this point, one of which concerns the current popularity of focus group method, and the other which highlights the difference between

traditional notions of the 'group interview' and contemporary usages of the term 'focus group'. In terms of the first of these points, it seems that for some qualitative researchers, and for a host of others within the orbits of social science, focus groups have become extremely popular as a method of data collection. Increasing pressure from research funding organizations to adopt multiple-method research strategies and the fact that focus groups generate far more data than a range of other methods in relation to face-to-face contact between researchers and participants, has added to this. In this sense, focus groups appear to have emerged as 'vogue' practice for researchers to the extent that, at the present time, they might even be said to hold some kind of reverence or eminence amongst (and above) other research methods. In turn, it is our experience that within the current climate of funded/contract research it is not unusual for the worthiness and status of project data to be viewed in terms of the inclusion and presentation of focus group material. To this end, the political status and profile of focus group research seems to have increased in appeal and it is now common for funders or stakeholders to request that researchers include focus groups within project design formulations. Whilst we would want to advocate the use of a range of individual research methods and techniques within the confines of any particular study (in the interests of facilitating the *triangulation* of research findings), what a more obligatory deployment of focus groups inevitably stands to mask is a sense of how such data can (and should) compliment findings drawn from other methods and how data from various sources might be simultaneously analysed and interpreted to provide a balanced and holistic picture of the research setting.

A similarly pervasive trend in and around academic discussion of qualitative research methods is that focus groups are sometimes seen as synonymous with group interviews and it is this issue which constitutes our second point of contention. Semi-structured 'one-to-one' and 'group interview' techniques have long since featured as fundamental components of qualitative research in educational settings. From early investigations of classroom interaction and educational attainment (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1980; Burgess, 1983) to more contemporary accounts of pupil subjectivity and identity (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Sewell, 1997; Skeggs, 1997), these methods have constituted the basis upon which researchers have traditionally sought to uncover the processes and practices of educational life. Though limited in number, there are also more recent examples of how focus groups have specifically featured in studies of educational organization and experience (see Flores & Alonso, 1995; Franklin & Lowry, 2001; Allen, 2005). Whilst some researchers have maintained a well-established view of group interview techniques, others have proffered an allegiance to data collection via focus groups. Others still have confused and conflated these two distinctive methods.

In keeping with the views of a number of other writers in this field, we are of the opinion that there is a fundamental difference between these two research techniques and that the critical point of distinction surrounds the role of the researcher and her/his relationship to the researched (Smithson, 2000). In group interviews the researcher adopts an 'investigative' role: asking questions, controlling the dynamics of group discussion, often engaging in dialogue with specific participants. This is

premised on the mechanics of one-to-one, qualitative, in-depth interviews being replicated on a broader (collective) scale. A relatively straightforward scenario ensues: the researcher asks questions, the respondents relay their ‘answers’ back to the researcher. In focus groups the dynamics are different. Here, the researcher plays the role of ‘facilitator’ or ‘moderator’; that is, facilitator/moderator of group discussion *between participants*, not between her/himself and the participants. Hence, where focus groups are concerned, the researcher takes a peripheral, rather than a centre-stage role for the simple reason that it is the inter-relational dynamics of the participants that are important, not the relationship between researcher and researched (see Kitzinger, 1994a; Johnson, 1996). Whilst discussing the kinds of questioning strategies facilitators might deploy during focus group research, Bloor *et al.* (2001, pp. 42–43) provide a clear explanation of how this arrangement works:

In focus groups ... the objective is not primarily to elicit the group’s answers ... but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand (through subsequent analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers. In group interviews the interviewer seeks answers, in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction.

In turn, of course, facilitators may work in pairs or be accompanied by an ‘observer’ who is present to manually record supplementary (observational) data relating to context, environment, personal gesture, posture and the like. As Bloor *et al.* (2001) go on to note, as far as group management roles are concerned, there are differences here with regard to focus groups in commercial and academic research settings. In the former, for example, ‘professional facilitators’ have often been used alongside additional personnel (sometimes an academic researcher) occupying a manual data collection role and/or acting as discussion summarizer. In academic research however, this kind of arrangement has largely been superseded by single-handed focus group facilitation.

Recruitment, interaction and sampling

Whatever the management format, in focus groups interaction is what counts and, in this sense, facilitation is all about generating in-depth discussion via a logical sequence of open-ended questions that encourages universal participation within the group (as is also the case with traditional notions of the in-depth qualitative, one-to-one interview process). If group dynamics work as they should via these processes of facilitation (and very often this takes time to achieve), what emerges is what Kitzinger (1994a) refers to as a ‘synergy’ between participants whereby all those present contribute in some way to the discussion. In turn, a kind of momentum is generated which allows underlying opinions, meanings, feelings, attitudes and beliefs to emerge alongside descriptions of individual experiences. Thus, a central element of data analysis is an examination not only of the substantive content of discussion but also the interaction *between* respondents themselves (Carey & Smith, 1994; Wainwright, 1994; Kitzinger, 1995; Johnson, 1996).

Part of the problem of achieving this kind of interactional synergy in data collection is that, despite their collective interests, participants may not always be keen to engage

with each other, or alternatively, may know each other so well that interaction is based on patterns of social relations that have little to do with the research intent of the focus group. The need to consider the impact on interaction of the constitution of the focus group requires that close attention be paid to methods (and outcomes) of recruitment. Participant recruitment and the way in which groups are brought together continues to be a source of contentious debate. We would argue that as far as qualitative academic research is concerned, the recruitment of group participants is not something which should be carried out simply on an ad hoc or random basis. On the contrary, issues of sampling and selection are likely to prove crucial in relation to the form and quality of interaction in a focus group and therefore the kinds of data one gathers and the extent to which participants share their opinions, attitudes and life experiences.

What previous methodological debate has indicated is that one of the ways in which researchers might increase the chances of focus group recruitment and participation is by offering some kind of incentive to potential group members (i.e., monetary or non-monetary incentives) (see Bloor *et al.*, 2001). That is not to say that either of these strategies will work. An illustration of this is provided by Parker's (2000) study of lifestyle choice amongst UK higher education students. A collaborative venture between the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) and individual university students' union organizations, the aim of this research was to explore the ways in which students' unions might better fulfil their potential in relation to the provision of student services (i.e., with regard to issues such as health and welfare, social and academic support, etc). The study was set within the context of UK political and academic (post-Dearing) debate in the area of student fees and finance and against a back-drop of perceived fragmentation with regard to the relationship between the NUS and individual university students' union organizations. It was agreed by those involved in the research design (contract researchers, students' union personnel and NUS representatives) that specific incentives should be used to encourage student participation in focus groups and that these incentives should reflect some of the commonly perceived needs and desires of the respondent group. Because the project was aimed at shedding light on the ways in which students experienced the various services on offer from their respective students' unions, it was decided that as well as contract researchers conducting focus groups, a number of student volunteers would also be trained as focus group facilitators as a way in which some of those involved in the project might glean a practical skills benefit from the research process. Students' union input at the research design stage stipulated the advertisement of two other practical incentives to encourage students to become focus group facilitators or participants; (i) the provision of 'free entry passes' to students' union evening events for the duration of the focus group interview period (i.e., one full academic term) and (ii) invitations to a series of 'free buffet lunches', provided amidst the familiarity of campus-based students' union premises.

The project launch (accompanied by the first 'free' lunch) was attended by over 25 students and project staff. As a consequence, a small group of volunteers were recruited, trained as focus group facilitators, and given the subsequent task of

recruiting fellow students as focus group participants for data collection purposes. Whilst the majority of volunteer recruits remained faithful to their research and recruitment commitments, others did not, to the extent that despite the ongoing prospect of 'free food' and subsidized 'nights out', many of the early respondents failed to honour verbal agreements on focus group organization, facilitation and participation. Despite the involvement of students' union staff in the research design, especially around issues of recruitment and sampling, this particular incentive strategy proved relatively unsuccessful. Only five focus groups took place, a mere two of which were student-led.

Incentives aside, this kind of non-probability or 'snowball' sampling technique with participant peer groups, associates and friendship networks is not unusual, especially amongst quantitative social researchers (see for example Forsyth, 1996). Indeed, for most research projects one needs to create a sampling frame, select potential participants, and make contact with and collect data from them. In the case of Parker's (2000) study it was agreed that the students sample should be drawn from a range of university departments and academic disciplines in order that a diverse range of individual experiences could be investigated. Respondents took part voluntarily and were recruited through established students' union links with various disciplinary areas. In the first instance two students from each department were identified as initial points of contact with the intention that they would subsequently recruit a number of departmental friends/associates to make up a representative focus group cohort.

Whilst in qualitative research terms such recruitment practices appear relatively straightforward, in many accounts of focus group method the sampling process remains somewhat invisible. Where these issues are discussed this is often in relation to the researcher's reliance on a 'local' (i.e., geographic or institutional) contact or key gatekeeper who becomes the pivotal figure in the recruitment process. As Krueger (1994) notes, the assumption promulgated here is that the local informant has access to networks that permit recruitment of participants that an outsider would never be able to access.

One of the positive features of volunteer assistance in recruiting is that these individuals might be able to use existing community contacts and networks in the recruitment effort. Furthermore, volunteers are likely to be familiar with the demands and pressure on prospective participants and may be able to identify persuasive and innovative recruitment strategies. (Krueger, 1994, pp. 196–197)

Like the kinds of sampling procedures demonstrated in Parker's (2000) study, this approach typically involves using non-researchers to identify and recruit people to attend focus groups and was also adopted by Allsop *et al.* (1995) in their investigation of diabetes in South Asian women. Within the context of this particular project the use of 'local' focus group recruiters was justified on the basis of language issues as well as problems of accessing a relatively tight-knit set of communities with diverse cultural and ethnic characteristics different from those of the researchers. Focus groups were conducted with local recruiters acting as interpreters. Accordingly, data

were analysed and the research report written. But neither researcher was entirely comfortable with the research process because, in their view, too little was known about those who attended the focus groups in relation to those who *might have* attended and little, if anything, was known about those who were actually approached but refused to attend. The focus groups were premised on the availability and willingness of (and access to) local volunteers, but in so being they were necessarily constrained in terms of the level of control and involvement of the researchers in this critical phase of the research process. In the opinion of the researchers themselves, the lack of control over the sampling process and the use of local facilitators who were insufficiently trained, unwilling or unable to collect and process such information, undermined the validity of the findings (Tritter & Allsop, 1995). In this sense, Krueger (1994) is right to infer that one of the central problems of using non-researchers within the context of focus groups is that the recruitment can drift into a process of ‘convenience’ sampling, whereby people whom we know little about are selected simply because of their accessibility.

Another common approach to recruitment which aims to circumvent this dilemma is to use members of pre-existing groups or to convene a focus group as part of an already scheduled meeting of another kind of group; this is what Krueger (1993, p. 71) refers to as a ‘piggyback’ focus group. Commercial market research has tended to promote the use of strangers in focus group composition, whilst others have noted the benefits of using members of ‘pre-existing’ social groups (see Kitzinger, 1994a; Bloor *et al.*, 2001). Yet neither of these sampling methods provides true informed consent and both are forms of convenience that can impact upon the quality of the data generated (Krueger, 1994; Morgan *et al.*, 2002).

To differing degrees, all of these concerns with the recruitment and selection of research participants are applicable to wide range of social science research methods. Our observation, however, is that far less attention appears to be paid to this key research phase in focus group studies. Predominantly, the literature on focus groups not only lacks information on the details of recruitment or selection, but also (and perhaps more importantly) such issues are not taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of the data. Focus groups are valuable because they provide one method for capturing group interaction and harnessing the dynamics involved to prompt fuller and deeper discussion and the triggering of new ideas (see Arskey & Knight, 1999). But in order for this dynamic to develop it is vital that peoples’ stories are not well known to each other. Thus, while the ‘teller’s’ story may be rehearsed, in the case of the ‘listener’ ideally they should not have previous access to it. The need to ensure a dynamic within the group and the lack of control and information about the characteristics of those who participate and those who have refused to participate, are notably absent from much existing methodological discussion. Similarly the invisibility of recruitment and the uncritical reliance on the use of either local facilitators or pre-existing groups is problematic and often receives far too little attention in the write-up and presentation of focus group findings.

In order to maximize transparency and to help ensure that the greatest amount of information is gathered from each group, a set of participants might meet on multiple

occasions; where focus groups are held in series as well as in parallel. Two relatively recent studies of 'community' user groups illustrate how this strategy works (Bell *et al.*, 1996; Barley *et al.*, 2000). In both of these instances the timing and structure of group sessions played a key role in the data collection process. Focus groups were organized and convened on two consecutive evenings (running the focus groups in series) using the same topic guides (making the focus groups parallel). Participants were recruited from a range of different health settings including voluntary organizations, support groups and clinical sites. All participants had been diagnosed with cancer and no more than two participants of any focus group were drawn from the same setting. The team of researchers convened focus groups that included both men and women with a range of different kinds of cancer and at different stages of their illness.

Discussion during the first meeting began with each participant introducing themselves. These introductions usually took the form of the 'story' of the discovery, investigation and treatment of their cancer and often felt well rehearsed but were not known to other members of the focus group. The facilitators used the different stages of the 'cancer journey' (investigation, diagnosis, treatment and cure or cessation of treatment) as a framework for discussion to generate the experiences of different members of the group. The second meeting began with a report back by the facilitator on the key issues that had emerged the previous evening and went on to discuss these issues in more detail and particularly in terms of how they related to specific care needs. It was apparent that the discussion at the second meeting was far more free-flowing than at the first. The participants were at ease with each other, clearer about the commonalities they shared, and more sure of their relationship with the facilitator. Thus, in this instance, focus groups *in series* proved to be a way of retaining the necessary group dynamic whilst ensuring that the greatest amount of valid data was collected thereby maximizing the recruitment outcome. Whilst addressing somewhat different circumstances, a similar kind of strategy was adopted with the higher education students in Parker's (2000) study resulting in comparable outcomes in terms of data collection. A brief 'educational life history' format was used in the initial groups which facilitated a sense of familiarization between participants. In subsequent groups interaction was noticeably more fluid to the extent that students openly shared their experiences and thoughts on issues such as academic plagiarism, social excess and their evaluative disappointments in relation to the quality of the teaching and learning environments which they inhabited.

As is outlined here, whilst focus groups are often 'one-off' encounters, there may well be times when, as researchers, we wish to reconvene our participants for subsequent meetings. Returning to respondents is not uncommon for qualitative researchers but as Bloor *et al.* (2001) accurately point out, people and circumstances change over time and to reconvene an identical group on subsequent occasions may prove problematic for a host of reasons. A way around this is to include, within overall project design, the possibility of sampling a range of prospective groups which may inform the data collection process at a number of different organizational, institutional or circumstantial levels. In turn, as the number of focus groups in the overall

sample increases and their composition broadens, there is an extent to which the representativeness of their findings might be viewed as more acceptable and valid.

That said, any claim to representativeness must necessarily be grounded in discussions of group composition and the individual characteristics of participants. As we have already noted, academic discussion of focus groups has largely failed to address the relationship between sampling and representativeness and this is a key weakness in the ability of focus group method to generate powerful findings that reveal something about social processes rather than simply reporting a discussion of individual circumstance. Where researchers do make a point of collecting such data they are rarely used as part of the contextualization necessary for analysis and the interpretation of findings. A typical approach with potential participants includes a letter of invitation to attend a focus group, a brief questionnaire seeking demographic characteristics and information regarding factors relevant to the study. Interested participants are asked to return the questionnaire together with their consent to participate in the focus group. The analysis of this questionnaire data can be used to ensure that the composition of the focus groups is appropriate in terms of issues such as gender balance, age or social class (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Morgan, 1998b).

Analysing focus group data

All of the issues already raised relate not only to the difficulties of actually conducting focus groups but also to the nature of the data that are produced, and perhaps more to our lack of understanding of how to analyse such data. Focus group data has long been recognized as a product of both the agenda and presentation of the 'facilitator' and the interaction with and between other members of the group (Merton & Kendall, 1956). As we have already suggested there is a dynamic inherent to the group setting that constructs the discursive space within which data emerge. The nature of the discussion (the data) is dependent on the participants and is time and context specific. Unlike an in-depth interview (or to some extent a questionnaire) it is often impossible to clarify or collect more data after the focus group has disbanded (Frankland & Bloor, 1999). Similarly, far more than in a traditional interview context, focus group data includes incomplete and interrupted speech (Kitzinger, 1994b). Indeed, focus groups generate both individual and group level data and it is often difficult to disentangle one from the other (Hyden & Bulow, 2003).

At the individual level people are influenced by the discussions that they are party to. Over the course of a focus group session many members may shift their position on certain subjects, change their minds and/or express different views at the end of the discussion than they did earlier on. At the collective level, what often emerges from a focus group discussion is a number of positions or views that capture the majority of the participants' standpoints. Focus group discussions rarely generate consensus but they do tend to create a number of views which different proportions of the group support (Edwards, 1997). Clearly, there are a whole series of related problems here concerning the unpredictability of group dynamics (silences, dominant speakers, etc), respondent disclosure, and the emergence of sensitive topics (Frankland & Bloor,

1999; Bloor *et al.*, 2001). Some writers have argued that researchers should pay particular attention to the more 'sensitive moments' in focus group interaction (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999), whilst others have suggested that a content analysis approach is most appropriate when considering focus group data, acknowledging that this must take into account the nature and the context of the group itself.

Analysis must also involve an assessment of the relative contribution that different participants make to the overall discussion and the social variables likely to impact upon levels of participation. The importance of appreciating the multiple interaction effects that influence discussion in focus groups goes beyond the possibility of 'controlling for bias'. Similarly, we need to remain aware of how respondents see the researcher/facilitator at different stages of the research process and how these perceptions impact upon what participants are willing to divulge. What such reflections on the difficulty of analysing focus group data highlight is the need to contextualize quotations in order to understand them in the group context. It is important to place a quotation within the temporal context of the group as participant's positions shift. A quote from an individual may be typical of their initial view but radically different from the one they hold when they leave the focus group.

Similarly, considering the nature of the interaction in terms of the degree to which participation is balanced rather than dominated by a small number of participants is essential. This becomes even more important if there are significant differences in social characteristics between individuals in the focus group. In a recent study using focus groups composed of people with serious mental illness (SMI) and primary care health professionals, Lester *et al.* (2005) were careful to incorporate measures of dominance in their analysis. This was done in part by counting the number of interventions by each individual and the total number of words spoken, but also by considering those concerned in relation to the emergent structure of the discussion and their social characteristics. Confirmation emerged from the 'Birmingham-style' discourse analysis concordance language software which was also used to examine patterns of conversation initiation between health professionals and people with SMI. That is, an individual might be more dominant in a discussion of one particular topic rather than another. Such considerations provide an opportunity to explore the interaction between particular individuals, their characteristics and specific research topics.

These considerations of how to analyse and interpret focus group data go to the heart of the epistemological differences between such data and the data that are the result of one-to-one or group-interviews. It is only by systematically considering the relationship between the differences in the complexity of the context from which data emerges that accurate understanding and interpretation can emerge.

Ethical concerns

Of course, within all of this there are ethical considerations with regard to the research process itself. Typically, as professional social science researchers, we make a point of giving assurances on respondent confidentiality (American Sociological Association, 1997; British Sociological Association, 2002). Yet with focus groups it is difficult (if

not impossible) to ensure that participants themselves will adhere to such strict stipulations. This difficulty is further complicated if a local facilitator is actively recruiting participants. Similarly, it is hard to ensure informed consent from all participants as the researcher cannot be sure who else will be present at the group.

Most academic/contract researchers will be aware of their own institutional responsibilities and obligations in this respect, but the lone researcher (i.e. the post-graduate student) must be sure of the boundaries, codes and constraints in play. Even when all of these things are taken into consideration, data collection is not always straightforward. For example, at the outset of each of his focus groups with higher education students, Parker (2000) informed all participants about the remit and scope of his overall project, the kinds of issues he was interested in discussing, and the processes of data transcription, analysis and dissemination which would ensue. In turn, he reaffirmed notions of confidentiality and anonymity and presented students with the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms for the final research report. In order to aid the transcription process (which was to be carried out by secretarial staff not present at the group sessions) he also noted that participants were to be asked to state their (real) name at the beginning of each group discussion, so that the person transcribing the tape could attribute specific names to specific voices as an initial point of reference (see also Bloor *et al.*, 2001). On one particular occasion, a student participant challenged the confidentiality of the data collection process in relation to the explanation offered, claiming that if anonymity and confidentiality were to be guaranteed the 'real' names of group members should not be divulged during tape-recorded discussion. It was further explained at this point that the person transcribing the tape would not disclose anything to any outside party and that, in this respect, such fears were unfounded. Unfortunately however, this did not resolve the issue. What this participant then demanded was detailed information and assurances on ethical protocols, asking a series of questions about research/intellectual property rights and data ownership: what would happen to the data once the project report had been submitted? Who would have access to it? For how long, and where, would it be stored? When and how was it to be destroyed? Would participants be able to access copies of tape-recorded conversations, transcripts, the final report? Would they be able to see and comment on the draft versions of the report prior to submission?

All of these questions arose because of the nature of the research process and the informed views of one particular respondent. Perhaps not surprisingly, individual circumstance was central to these enquiries. Here was a final-year undergraduate student feeling increasingly dependent upon the course tutors who taught him and who was aware that one potential area of discussion within focus groups was students experiences of the teaching and learning process - an area where a sense of participant critique may well emerge. For this student at least, the risk of such critique (by either himself or others) being fed back to tutors was one which he was not prepared to take. What transpired was not so much a questioning of the researcher, or the research process *per se*, but a set of respondent fears and anxieties relating to the use of what the participant considered highly 'sensitive' data.

What does all this tell us? Like other qualitative research methods and techniques, focus groups have the potential to generate unexpected and unpredictable outcomes both in terms of the data gathered and the complexities of the research process as a whole. It also indicates that as researchers we need to recognize (and be empathetic to) the status, position, and specific needs of our participants and to offer reassurances in terms of data sensitivity and confidentiality. In turn, it serves as a reminder that irrespective of our research remit, structure, or time-scale, we must observe the 'professional' codes of conduct in place within our disciplinary and sub-disciplinary contexts and be ready to offer technical and procedural advice and information if and when the need arises. Alongside mastering the recruitment, organization and facilitation of focus groups, these aspects of professional practice may well enable us to feel more confident about conducting focus groups, about analysing the data generated, and about preparing for problematic issues and dilemmas beforehand. Moreover, they may well promote a greater quality and richness in terms of the kinds of discussions respondents are prepared to have in our presence and, therefore, the kinds of data we ultimately collect.

Conclusions

Despite their fluctuating fortunes over a number of years, focus groups are now an accepted and established method of social science research. It has been our contention in this paper that they are distinctive from traditional notions of group interviewing and that within the context of academic discussion and debate, researchers should not conflate and confuse the two. We also argue that there needs to be more critical attention paid to sampling issues and a greater consideration of the epistemological impact of focus group composition. At present, researchers may deploy focus groups without any real awareness of their complexity and without a clear epistemological rationale as to why they are collecting data in this particular way. Following this, further methodological development is needed in terms of how to analyze focus group data. We are of the opinion that typical approaches that apply the same techniques as the (traditional qualitative) analysis of interview data are inadequate. Rather, attention must be paid to the dynamic aspects of interaction within the group, for it is this dynamic nature which is at the heart of focus groups and which endows them with the power to generate insight often negated by other methods. The rediscovery of focus groups as a valuable component of the social science tool kit requires us to not only understand but also to develop and enhance our use of a research method pioneered more than half a century ago.

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