



Using and analysing focus groups: limitations and possibilities

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The paper examines some methodological issues associated with the use and analysis of focus groups in social science research. It is argued that what distinguishes this methodology from other methods is the interactions which take place within focus groups, and that this should be reflected in analysis of the data. Interactive features considered here include individuals dominating within the groups, constructing the Other, tendencies towards normative discourses, and conflicts and arguments within focus groups. These are considered in relation to examples from a study of young adults' expectations of the future, and their orientations towards work and family. Possible moderator strategies and analysis approaches which take account of the interactions are discussed.

Introduction

In this paper I examine some methodological issues of using and analysing focus groups for social science research, as they arose in a particular study, and consider the implications for analysis of the data. How do the particular tensions and dilemmas of focus group participation and moderation relate to the data obtained? It is argued here that the unique aspects of this methodology all relate to the interactions which occur within the group context. Can and should these tensions be dealt with by procedural changes, and by improved moderator techniques? How can analysis of focus group data take account of the interactive nature of the data.

In this paper I briefly describe some possible approaches both to focus groups and to the data obtained in them. Then I describe the research project which I have used here to illustrate my points. This paper considers three issues which arose in using focus groups as a research method. They are: having one or several dominant individuals within a group, permitting only one opinion to be heard; using focus groups to research minority groups, with consequent problems of constructing the other; and the likelihood of group dynamics obscuring some of the more controversial perspectives, for example the tendency for

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participants to reproduce normative discourses. These issues can be treated as problems to be overcome by better moderator techniques, or as limitations for the use of this methodology. I argue that the most important issue for the researcher is how to analyse focus group data in a way which takes account of these issues, and moreover, that the interactive features of focus groups can be viewed as interesting possibilities for this methodology, as well as limitations.

The use of focus groups in social science research

Focus groups originated in sociology (Merton and Kendall 1946) were primarily used by market researchers in recent years (Templeton 1987) and are increasingly being used as a research tool in the social sciences. A growing literature on the setting up and running of focus groups for social scientists, including some of their strengths and weaknesses, is becoming available, for example by Hughes and DuMont (1993), Kitzinger (1995), Vaughn *et al.* (1996) and Morgan and Kreuger (1998).

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

Definitions of 'focus group' and consequences for analysis

Some researchers, such as Hughes and DuMont (1993: 776) characterize focus groups as group interviews: 'Focus groups are in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information around topics specified by the researchers'. Others define them as group discussions: 'a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined environment' (Kreuger 1998: 88), 'an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics' (Beck *et al.* 1986). These definitions show a tension between participant-researcher interaction and interaction between participants.

It is stated that the interaction within groups generates a particular type of data: 'Focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method' (Kitzinger 1995: 299). This paper uses the definition of focus group as a controlled group discussion, on the basis that the group interaction generated through discussion is of prior importance to this methodology.

Natural discussion or artificial performance?

A key issue for researchers is the complex relation of focus group talk to everyday talk. Agar and MacDonald doubt the 'lively conversation' called for in the focus group handbooks—'in fact a judgement as to whether a conversation occurred, lively or not, is a delicate matter that calls for some close analysis of transcripts' (Agar and MacDonald 1995: 78). Focus groups can be viewed as performances in which the participants jointly produce accounts about proposed topics in a socially organized situation. Participants and the moderator are 'operating under the shared assumption that the purpose of the discussion is to display opinions to the moderator' (Myers 1998: 85). However, 'natural' discussion is also a performance (Goffman 1981) there is not a 'simple opposition of the institutional and the everyday, the artificial and the real' (Myers 1998: 107). Rather, 'natural' conversation and various forms of institutional talk, including classroom, courtroom, workplace and research-generated talk, are all part of a range of situations for talk (Drew and Heritage 1992). Silverman argues that 'neither kind of data (artificial and naturally occurring) is intrinsically better than the other; everything depends on the method of analysis'. (Silverman 1993: 106). Focus groups, then, should not be analysed as if they are naturally occurring discussions, but as discussions occurring in a specific, controlled setting.

Approaches to analysis of focus groups

Taking focus groups as controlled group discussions, with their hallmark being their interactive nature, and other important features being the public performance aspect, and the moderator's constraints and guidance, how can these central features of the methodology be reflected in the analysis?

I would argue that the focus group method is not merely, as is sometimes argued (Vaughn *et al.* 1996), a quick way to pick up relevant themes around a topic, but a social event that includes performances by all concerned. From this perspective, language is viewed not as a neutral conveyor of information, but as functional and constructive, as a medium which people use to achieve a variety of actions (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This paper is not primarily concerned with which level of analysis of talk to use, for example Discourse Analysis or Conversation Analysis (e.g. Billig 1999, Schegloff 1999); rather, I focus on some specific issues which might arise for any analysis of focus group data, and utilize techniques from both the above approaches.

Wilkinson (1998) argues that many articles based on focus group research appear to be treating the data as identical to individual interview data, and the unique aspects of focus groups are habitually ignored in the analysis. An important characteristic of focus groups is that it is often stated that groups, rather than individuals within groups, are the main unit of analysis (Kreuger 1994, Morgan 1988). A question addressed in this paper will be: how can a group be seen as a 'unit of analysis'? Another important

but little discussed question which will be considered is, for what purposes are participants using the focus groups?

These issues may be treated as procedural 'problems' for the moderator to minimize (Kreuger 1994, Vaughn *et al.* 1996). I will be suggesting that these 'problems' are an integral part of focus group use, and even if mitigated by moderator techniques, will still exist. Therefore, a question for the researcher is, how can an analysis take account of these concerns?

To answer these questions, and to illustrate these points, I consider three issues which arose for me in using focus groups as a research method. I look at how they might arguably be mitigated by better moderator techniques, and I show possible ways to analyse the data to take account of these issues.

The distinction between data collection and analysis is not clear cut (Silverman 1993, Potter 1996). For this reason my analysis is integrated with consideration of what goes on in focus group discussions and with consideration of moderator techniques.

The research

This paper discusses the methodology in relation to research into young adults' expectations of the future, based on an EC funded trans-national study which examined the employment and family orientations of young women and men, aged 18–30, in five European States (Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Portugal and the UK), specifically considering the current and anticipated needs concerning the reconciliation of work and family for these young people.

As the first part of the research, approximately ten focus groups, more or less homogenous, were run in each of the five countries involved. Focus groups have been described as particularly useful at an early stage of research as a means for eliciting issues which participants think are relevant, which can then be used to inform design of larger studies (Vaughn *et al.* 1996). The method therefore seemed appropriate for an exploratory investigation. Most focus groups involved 6–10 people between the ages of 18 and 30, although a few groups had fewer participants. The groups were mainly single sex groups of people at similar life stages, i.e. all university students, in vocational training, young unemployed, or in semi-skilled jobs or professional jobs. At least one focus group was held in each country for each of these categories determined by the trans-national research team.

A semi-structured focus group guide used as a basis for discussion was developed by the transnational research team, which included seven women academics working from a variety of feminist perspectives. This paper draws on data from the 14 UK focus groups (for a report of the findings from the trans-national study see Lewis *et al.* 1998). The UK groups, involving 49 women and 33 men, were carried out in the North West of England. Twenty percent of the participants were members of ethnic minorities. Two groups were conducted specifically with young British Asian women and men, and five of the other groups included members of ethnic minorities.

I recruited, conducted, audio-taped and transcribed all the groups (with one exception to which I will refer later). I used a variety of recruitment methods (advertisements, contacts through employers, training and enterprise councils, and personal contacts). It is likely that young people's motives for participating were varied. Some participants were motivated by the chance to earn ten pounds (a fee offered to all participants), while others were there because the focus group was included in a training programme or course. Some volunteered out of interest.

Analysis

This paper uses some extracts from the focus group transcripts as specific illustrations of the methodological issues which concern me as a researcher. For each issue here, I consider how it can be modified or limited by procedural changes and/or by moderator approaches. I then consider how specific analytic approaches might incorporate this feature of the methodology. The issues described here relate to my interests, and to a particular research project. It should be remembered that these not the only concerns, and are just one way of looking at the data.

Dominant voices

One issue for the focus group moderator, and for analysis, is how to deal with one or several group member(s) dominating the discussion so that theirs is the only opinion clearly articulated. Will this opinion be represented as the 'group's opinion'? I use the term 'voice' here to describe an opinion or viewpoint which emerges from the group discussion, which can, but which does not necessarily, originate from an individual (Smithson and Diaz 1996). The men in the extract below¹ are in their early 20's, mostly single and childless. They are debating whether housework is more suited to women than to men:

- Gary It's like a different way of looking at things (by women), you can find work to do, well you can clean the carpets, dust the mantelpiece, do you know, but I mean like ...
- Andy ... it's not working.
- Gary Yeah, it's not working. You need like the environment and that as well.
- Ben Yeah. You have to get out of the house don't you?
- Gary Exactly.

(Men on vocational training course)

In this conversation, a particular voice emerges: the view that women look at housework as working, while men need external work, which continues throughout the rest of the discussion. This voice is contributed to by several of the men in the group, and not strongly challenged by the others, so this dominant viewpoint emerges from the discussion. Other opinions within the group may be ignored, for example, later in the same focus group the men discuss the notion of paternity leave:

- Gary I can't see what they're gonna do for three months really. There's not that much you can do, you know.
- John Give them a month (Laughter)
- Colin Well there again . . .
- Gary After like, the first month right, yeah, changing the nappies, sterilizing bottles and whatever else you need to do for babies and stuff right. And after a month or so, you'll just be sat there watching the footie with a can of lager in your hand, and . . .
- John . . . What's wrong with that! (Laughter).

In this discussion Colin may be attempting a dissenting voice, trying to disagree with the dominant opinion, but he is ignored. In this way an individual's opinion, which may reflect the views of several of the group, may go unheard in the focus group context.

Possible moderator approaches

The problem of a dominant voice overriding other voices is supposedly dealt with by the technique of making the focus groups homogenous for example in terms of age, experience, education and sex. In this study the groups were homogenous in terms of sex, age, education and current occupational position. These categories were central to the research agenda, agreed on by the team to facilitate trans-national comparison. However, people who were already parents (rare in most of the groups) usually dominated discussions relating to parenthood and childcare, and were deferred to by other group members, who acknowledged them as 'experts'. Members of minority ethnic groups did not raise issues of race or ethnicity except when their minority ethnic group was in the majority.

Of course, the moderator can encourage different group members to speak. For example, in the group above, one of the quiet men is a father of five, the only parent in the group, and the moderator directly asked for his opinions about nursery education:

- Mod What do you think, Mark, you're the parent here?
- Ben Yeah, go on.
- Mark I think nurseries are fine but from a minimum age, say from four upwards because anything under that it affects the child's future. It ruins any bond between a mother or father. Putting a kid straight into nursery at three months old I think that would affect their ability to learn as they get older . . .

Though Mark did not join in the discussion spontaneously, he did join in with detailed views when appealed to directly, here and elsewhere, by the moderator and also by the other participants. It need not be viewed as a problem if some of the focus group remain silent throughout the time. Silence is an 'enduring feature of human interaction', present in research communicative contexts as elsewhere (Poland and Pederson 1998: 308).

This moderator technique may encourage silent individuals to speak within the group, but does not resolve the underlying question of how focus group analysis can treat the group as the primary unit of analysis, when it is

not always clear whether the emerging 'dominant voice' may over-represent the opinions of one or two vociferous members.

Possible analytic approaches: looking at construction of collective voices

A possible way of analysing group processes is by considering opinions in focus groups as being constructed collectively. By 'collective voice', in the way the term is used here, I mean a group process of collaboratively constructing a joint perspective, or argument, which emerges very much as a collective procedure which leads to consensus, rather than as any individual's view (Smithson and Diaz 1996). This approach follows theories of argumentation, whereby opinions are rhetorically constructed in specific social situations (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, Billig 1987). The collective voice which emerges in this context may reflect individuals' already held opinions, or it may be an active product of the group interactions. It may or may not express the views of all the men in the group. Opinions also vary across time within a discussion (Goffman 1981). It is possible to analyse focus group discourse for collective voice strategies.

For example, in the following discussion the contradictions between beliefs and actions concerning gender roles are explored by a group of professional working women:

- Becky I do that when I go home, find myself making cups of tea for people ...
- Cath ... Yeah polishing shoes
- Becky ... and think why am I doing that. When he's just sat on his bum doing, looking at teletext.
- Cath But I do think it's slightly better but not a lot, because they take their example from an early age from their parents, it's going to take several generations to get through it.
- Mod Do you think you'd bring your children up differently from the way you were brought up?
- Zoe No.
- Ann It would be nice to say yes, but I don't think so.

(women in professional jobs)

This extract demonstrates a jointly produced position. The overlaps can be read as instances of conversational completion (Lerner 1991, Coates 1994) rather than as (conflicting or overriding) interruptions. The women are jointly producing an account in a socially organized way as a single 'collective voice'. This conversational construction is not just facilitated by the focus group, but constituted by it (Puchta and Potter 1999).

This extract shows some of the subtleties which emerge in focus group discussions. Firstly, it shows that the issue of gendered divisions of housework can be a complex topic. These women demonstrate a distinction between ideals and expectations; they acknowledge the strength of ingrained habits, to the extent that they do not even imagine bringing up their children differently. For researchers looking at what might help women and men manage current and future commitments (which was the

aim of the research here), this type of data is particularly useful, going beyond a simple survey of attitudes, to locate tensions between beliefs and practices, which emerged discursively through the focus group. The analytic focus is not on what individuals say in a group context but on the discourses which are constructed within this group context.

Constructing the 'Other'

The effect of the moderator's behaviour and attitudes is an issue for focus group interviews, as it also is for individual interviews. For example, in this research, as the moderator—a white, middle class woman, aged 28 (of a similar age to the older participants) I am likely to have affected the group interaction. For the groups most different to the researcher, there is a risk of constructing some in the group as 'Other' (Edwards 1996, Griffin 1996, Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996).

An issue for focus group research is: to what extent do the moderator's actual or perceived attributes affect the group behaviour, and should the moderator ideally be from a similar cultural background as the participants?

Possible moderator approaches

A possible strategy to minimize moderator bias is to ensure that the moderator is from a similar background to the participants. The following extract is from a group of young British Asian Moslem men. This was the only UK focus group I did not conduct. As a white woman I felt uncomfortable with doing it, so I asked a young British Asian Moslem woman postgraduate student to conduct this group, although I was present:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Mod | What about way of dress and diet, food you eat? |
| Asim | Way of dressing like a cultural thing really, you've got like guidelines, like for women like you have you know certain guidelines for men, certain guidelines for women, as long as you stick within those guidelines for women, as long as you stick within those guidelines that religion provided for us, then it's fine. |
| Yusuf | I agree with you... |
| Asim | ...As long as it... |
| Rashid | ... Covers them. |
| Asim | Yeah, as long as it covers their body how we're supposed to, I don't think there's nothing wrong with it, how, how you dress, as long as you, you know fulfill the basic needs. |
| Mod | Erm... Right. |

(British Asian men, university students)

Having a moderator from the same cultural background (although from a different gender) may have facilitated the discussion in putting participants at their ease. In this case the young Asian woman moderator (who does not wear traditional dress) later commented on how uncomfortable she felt with much of the discussion.

While it might seem ideal always to have a moderator from a similar background to the participants, having the same moderator for all groups is also useful, as she can ensure that the same issues are addressed in all groups. Importantly, it also facilitates analysis. Moreover, Hurd and McIntyre (1996) made the point that there is ‘seduction in sameness’ between researcher and researched which can hinder a critical reflexive research.

Possible analytic approaches: highlighting diverse voices

Instead of aiming for ‘sameness’ between moderator and researched, it is possible to use focus group methods to highlight the emergence of diverse voices. Hughes and DuMont (1993) assert that focus groups are particularly useful for researching perspectives of groups of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Phoenix (1987) highlights the ‘normalized absence/pathologized presence’ of black women in research. Within focus group methodology there is scope for ‘minoritized’ participants to frame and to some extent to normalize (Burman *et al.* 1998) their accounts. For example, the Asian women in the following extract compare their views on marriage with those of their mothers:

- Purba They’re not as tolerant now, my mum says, like couples now, like women put up, like my mum and all our mums here, that generation, they put up with so much.
- Sabiya So much.
- Purba Some of that stuff that the in-laws did, and even the husbands did, whereas I think that cos we’ve probably been more educated we don’t put up with as much.
- Mira And also we’ve been introduced to a life where we don’t have to put up with it . . .
- ? . . . Yeah
- ? . . . Yeah
- Mira . . . we can stand on our own two feet.
- Zora I think that’s like, when you said, ‘Do you think that education is stopping you from being a good wife and mother?’, I think that’s why they sometimes think that education is not a good thing, cos it teaches you to think for yourself, and to assert yourself.
- Purba They find it a threat, yeah
- Sabiya . . . cos it is.

(British Asian women, university students)

Here a group of six Asian women, all second or third generation British from Sikh or Hindu backgrounds, share common experience from a culture. This discussion is somewhere between an explanation to the Other—the researcher—and a group debating a topic of relevance to their lives. The moderator directs the conversation as far as bringing up the relevant topics for her research, but the direction of the conversation depends on the issue as perceived by the group. With this group of British Asian women, the discussion returned many times to the issues the women felt were most relevant—arranged marriages versus love marriages, the problems of living with in-laws. Focus groups give a substantially different power dynamic than individual interviews; one white woman and one Asian woman would be unlikely to produce as

detailed a picture of young British Asian women's lives and debates. Here the group is collectively 'powerful' in that they have access to shared knowledge of which the moderator is ignorant. Rather than being constructed by the researcher as the Other, these Asian women use the focus group to position themselves between two cultures at 'intersecting axes of identification' (Brah 1996).

Normative discourses

Do focus groups suppress or encourage conflicting, contentious and non-normative views to emerge? First here I consider assumptions by group members about assumed dominant discourses: 'normal', or 'standard' views, which are not necessarily explicitly stated in the group (as was the case for the dominant voices issue), but are assumed by participants to be held by the other group members. I use the example of homosexuality as one that was both relevant to our research and commented on by participants in feedback to the focus groups (two women noted in written feedback forms that they felt the researcher or the group had 'assumed heterosexuality'). As researchers we were interested in notions of 'family' and also in the differences in views and practices on relationships, families and parenting. The primary focus of our research was not about sexuality, but the implications of different lifestyle choices on future life expectations and choices. It is unlikely that everyone in all our groups was heterosexual; however, no-one positioned themselves as lesbian or homosexual in any of the discussions. This was particularly noticeable as some participants did choose to disclose other personal details about their living arrangements, relationships and hopes for future relationships, and their expectations of future family life.

Using focus groups gives some insights into the 'public' discourses on a set of issues, to views expressed with peers (Kitzinger 1994). These may be different from 'private' views expressed in individual interviews (Radley and Billig 1996, Temple 1998) and also different from views expressed away from research contexts. As argued in the introduction, analysis needs to view accounts produced in diverse contexts not as 'wrong or right' or 'accurate or inaccurate' but as products of those contexts.

Possible moderator approaches

The focus of this research was on 'orientations' and discourses, not on individuals' practices and experiences. There is still the possibility that the moderator influences the whole tenet of the discourse. While I tried to avoid heterosexist language, for example by using the word 'partner' instead of boyfriend/girlfriend, it is possible that by making 'family' the whole focus of the research, the research team inadvertently adopted a heterosexist bias, which was shared by some of the groups. For example, a group of 18 year old women typically talked about 'boyfriends'. A moderator has the option to use the terms the group use, in this case

assuming heterosexuality, or to use inclusive terms which risk alienating the group.

Homosexuality was brought up in a general way by the moderator, for example, asking the group for views on lesbian or gay parenting. Some people did express their views on this subject, but the issue was always positioned from a heterosexual point of view:

- Mod What do you think about lesbian couples, homosexual couples having children, do any of you know any people in that position?
- Sally I don't, I don't think it's right really, two lesbians to bring up a child
- Vicky ... I don't know
- Sally ... because they're
- Tina It depends if they're happy
- Rachel ... if that's what they want

(Secretarial student women, aged 18)

Here two group members, Tina and Rachel, in common with many of the participants, expressed a tolerance of homosexuality, while clearly positioning themselves as heterosexual (e.g. 'It depends if they're happy').

Normative influences are not the same for all groups. For example it was acceptable in the young male professional groups to be a 'caring' man and express a desire to share in childcare and housework. Men who deviated publicly from this position felt the need to justify their position to the rest of the group. However, in the young blue collar male groups, as we saw above, the 'new man' image was sometimes laughed at. It is likely that people will keep quiet if they think their view will be considered incorrect or naïve.

Normative influences are not limited to focus groups. Surveys, questionnaires and individual interviews can result in respondents giving accounts perceived as acceptable to the researcher (Bradburn and Sudman 1979, Bryman 1988). The problem may be exacerbated in focus group research by fear of peer group disapproval.

A problem for this particular research project was that we did not want to only report majority opinions, but had hoped to be able to demonstrate a diversity of views as far as possible within the groups, while recognizing that these would be public discourses. From a perspective of hoping to influence policymakers and employers towards a wider acceptance of 'family needs' this was frustrating for us, and demonstrates a limitation of the focus group methodology. However the research did illuminate the current norms of the under 30 generation: for example we had not been certain beforehand that homosexuality would be a taboo subject for this age group (often viewed as being tolerant on issues of sexuality). In retrospect, the findings suggest that we should have included specific focus groups with young lesbians and gay men in order to understand their orientations to family life.

Possible analytic approaches

Normative values have been viewed as a positive feature of focus group methodology, making it 'a data collection technique particularly sensitive to

cultural variables' (Kitzinger 1995: 300). This issue of focus groups generating normative data can be reconceptualized by viewing the focus group as a forum for generating public discourses about a topic, and not as a way of uncovering participants' 'real' views. As in other qualitative methods, focus group research requires an awareness of the contexts and the constraints on peoples' accounts of their lives, and an acknowledgment of the things which are left unsaid.

While some perspectives are not available in a method that highlights public discourses, certain things only arise, or are much more likely to arise, in public rather than private discourse, and it is here that focus group methodology holds the most possibilities. For example, sites of disagreement, confusion and contradiction can be studied by careful attention to the focus group discussions. Tensions can often be seen in these discussions even when the general emerging theme contains normative assumptions. In the example above, while the dominant discourse was of homosexual lifestyles being fine for other people, one participant, Sally, expressed a different, conflicting view. In that extract this was not fully picked up on by other participants, but in other cases, conflicting views and contradictions are illuminated in focus groups by members disagreeing and arguing with other participants, perhaps in areas unanticipated by the researcher.

The extract below shows how a discussion can be taken over by participants who challenge each other's statements. Discussing how employers can help working parents, Mark, a pharmacist, gives his views about childcare provisions in his job. He could be argued here to be reproducing a normative discourse (observable in many of the focus groups in this study), that childcare is the responsibility of working mothers. Paula, a doctor, challenges this, and clearly has her own agenda to get across:

- Sonia You're asking more, job flexibility for parents.
- Paula Part time opportunities and crèche facilities and . . .
- Mark . . . and that's one of the major issues in departments like, in the health service, there's so many people work in the health service but the crèche facilities and baby care facilities are absolutely abysmal, I think that anything with perhaps above 70% of female, the people you're working for would personally provide . . .
- Paula . . . but why should it be, uh, because the women's, where the women's jobs are?
- Mark That's . . .
- Paula . . . why can't it be where the male's job is?
- Mark It's like, it can be anywhere, but once . . .
- Paula . . . you see, the trouble is, I mean it's never gonna change until men actually think that the responsibility of providing childcare is, is theirs as much as it is women's, cos, at the end of the day it's still the woman who, who has to fit in her job around the crèche, and there, there's not many men whose job has to fit in around the crèche, and the nursery times.

(women and men working in professional jobs)

In this extract participants 'take control' of the discussion, challenging each other and raising issues they perceive as relevant. Topics can be dictated by the group members as well as by the moderator. In this conversation there is no one collective voice achieving a consensus, but strongly contrasting opinions (though Mark does not get the chance to finish his argument). The participants in focus group research have the

possibility of directing the discussion away from the moderator's original agenda to a greater extent than in other methods of research. Although sometimes the data generated through this methodology tends towards the reproduction of normative discourses, the use of argumentative skills by participants can at other times highlight areas where the 'public discourse' is confused or contradictory.

In conclusion to this consideration of sites of conflict being either suppressed or illuminated by focus group methodology: I have suggested that procedural and moderator approaches are important here, for example separate groups for young gay men and lesbians would have been beneficial for this research project. I have also suggested that analysis can specifically consider the tensions, discrepancies and conflicts which appear. While focus groups may tend towards reproducing normative discourses, this is not universally the case; occasionally groups highlight confusion and conflict within normative discourses.

Reflexive analysis

Being a member of the age group being researched had implications for my role as moderator, and also for my analysis of the data. Being a similar age to the older participants may have facilitated discussion as I shared many of the concerns and experiences. This did not mean that there were not power differences between me and the participants due to gender, class, education and ethnic background. However, power variables were not always constant: notably, parents in the groups tended to speak with authority (as if 'educating' the childless group members, including me). One of the groups I felt least comfortable moderating was the one I shared most outward characteristics with—a group of white, professional working women. I found I had little in common with their outlook on life, which was uncomfortable as I was frustrated when the women most 'like me' expressed views so alien to mine; whereas, for example, with the young working class men I was not expecting similar outlooks to mine, so I was perhaps more prepared to 'perform' the role of 'researcher'.

Concerning the analysis of the focus group texts, my presentation and interpretation of the data described here is inevitably a reinterpretation of the participants' positions, including my constructions and attributions beyond the participants' own intentions, and they may not share my interpretation. I was analysing these transcripts from a specific, feminist perspective, in relation to a particular research agenda. My analysis should be read as one of a multiplicity of possible analyses.

Conclusion

In this paper I have considered some specific issues for focus group methodology: dominant voices, constructing the other, normative discourses, and using focus groups to study conflict and contradiction. It can be seen from the examples shown in this paper that focus groups not only

tap a wide variety of opinions but also provide many different forms of interaction, including direct and subtle challenges to opinions, and the 'collective voice' strategy. The range of argumentative behaviours exhibited by participants results in a depth of dialogue not often found in individual interviews. The use of focus groups as a quick data-gathering method, ending up with some 'soundbite' quotations to illustrate themes, ignores the complexities of focus group behaviour.

I have argued that focus groups should be viewed as a performance by all concerned, with participants and researcher all positioning themselves through the group discussions. I have suggested that opinions stated in the groups should be viewed not as previously formed, static things which people brought to the focus group, but as constructed in social situations. Neither should these opinions be treated as 'belonging' to individuals within the group, or as opinions held by the whole group, but as discourses which emerge in this context.

Limitations of focus groups include the tendency for certain types of socially acceptable opinion to emerge, and for certain types of participant to dominate the research process. While there are ways of setting up and moderating groups which may reduce these limitations, I have argued that it is crucial to analyse focus group data in ways which do not ignore these limitations.

Moreover, some of these limitations can also be viewed as possibilities for the method. Myers suggests that 'the constraints on such talk do not invalidate focus group findings; in fact, it is these constraints that make them practicable and interpretable' (Myers 1998: 107). Focus groups permit some insights into rhetorical processes, or 'practical ideologies': 'the often contradictory and fragmentary complexes of notions, norms and models which guide conduct and allow for its justification and rationalization' (Wetherell *et al.* 1987).

The focus groups in this research project aimed to examine employment and family orientations of young adults. There are limitations to the use of focus groups in this context. While there are topics which are unsuitable for focus group research, and views which are unlikely to emerge in this context, the discussions in the focus groups highlighted some of the current debates, contradictions and tensions prevalent among young people's views.

A particular strength of the methodology is the possibility for research participants to develop ideas collectively, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives, 'to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of [the participants]' (Du Bois 1983). Participants themselves use the groups in ways not always anticipated by the researcher. This can be especially useful for highlighting issues for disadvantaged or minority groups by validating and publicizing their views, although this only works when these 'minorities' form the majority within a focus group.

Some weaknesses and common pitfalls of the methodology have been highlighted, and some strategies for analysing focus groups with these limitations in mind have been suggested. Other issues have been mentioned but not given detailed attention in this paper. Further study comparing focus group data explicitly to similar data gathered by other methods would be fruitful. Another issue for focus group methodology is how one topic

leads into another (Myers 1998): issues are not discussed in isolation but in a context where, typically, many related topics are raised by the moderator over a short time span. I have suggested that at times the group has a collective voice, at times individual voices dominate the group, and that opinions change and develop during the group's duration. Further research could lead to more concrete suggestions for how to incorporate these complexities into focus group analysis.

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Note

1. All the names of the participants have been changed.

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