

Focussing on the Focus Group

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

An investigation of community responses to literature on environmental sustainability (Myers and Macnaghten 1998), a study of rapid social and economic change in non-metropolitan regions (Gibson, Cameron and Veno 1999), an examination of the construction of identity through shopping (Jackson and Holbrook 1995), and an exploration of the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in Canada (Pratt 2002)—all of these are examples of research projects which employ focus groups as a means of disentangling the complex web of relations and processes, meaning and representation, that comprise the social world. With the shift to more nuanced explorations of people–place relationships in geography the focus group method has been recognised increasingly as a valuable research tool.

Focus groups can be exhilarating and exciting, with people responding to the ideas and viewpoints expressed by others, and introducing you, the researcher, and other group members to new ways of thinking about an issue or topic. This chapter discusses the diverse research potential of focus groups in geography, outlines the key issues to consider when planning and conducting successful focus groups, and provides an overview of strategies for analysing and presenting the results.

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

The focus group method involves a small group of people discussing a topic or issues defined by a researcher. Briefly, a group of between six and ten people sit facing each other around a table (see Figure 8.1), the researcher introduces the topic for discussion and then invites and moderates discussion from group members. A session usually lasts for between one and two hours (you might see parallels here with university tutorial group meetings!).



Figure 8.1: The synergistic effect that occurs in a focus group discussion as members listen and respond to each other's contributions.

Interaction between members of the group is a key characteristic of this research method, and it is that which helps differentiate focus groups from the interview method, where interaction is between interviewer and interviewee. The group setting is generally characterised by dynamism and energy as people respond to the contributions of others (see Box 8.1). One comment, for example, can trigger a chain of responses. This type of interaction has been described as the 'synergistic' effect of focus groups and some propose that it results in far more information being generated than in other research methods (Berg 1989; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). In the focus group excerpt in Box 8.1, for example, the discussion shifts from family farming practices, to people's commitment to an area, to ways of working with government, to projects that address environmental degradation. Yet as the farmer points out at the conclusion of this excerpt, the speakers all highlight the effect that taking a long-term approach has on economic, environmental and community practices.

Box 8.1: The ‘synergistic’ effect of focus groups

Farmer A: Where we make a mistake in business is in thinking of tomorrow. The family approach is what’s happening to the next generation. It’s a much longer term approach. I’m more interested in investing my resources for the next generation and therefore you build a solid business.

Farmer B: My attitude is that I’m the tenant in time.

Farmer A: The custodian.

Farmer B: Yeah, the custodian. My father gave it to me and I’ll hand it on to the next generation. And people say you could sell it and make lots of money but that just doesn’t come into the equation. The thought of selling it and leaving the good life—the kids probably will. And I think there are an awful lot of farmers with that attitude. And I think it has probably in lots of ways been to our detriment. We could use that asset and make more money—as if money is the most important thing.

Consultant: I think that’s right. I think one of the important reasons there have been successes and perhaps less problems here is that even though we have all identified lots of problems, we are really committed to this community and making it better. And I think there are an amazing range of people that do choose to live here—they don’t have to—but choose to live here and [have] invested huge amounts of time and energy. And I also think this community, just thinking back to my experience, that it’s really open to working with whatever government is in at the time and turning the rules or the policies or the dollars that are around for the best here. Like local government saying we don’t want yet another regional development board but we will have the money and this is our structure and this is what we’ll do. I think there has been some creative use of government money and good partnerships and also just that huge commitment, that energy to make it work.

Manager: You mention our successes and I think one of the unheralded things we’ve done really well is look towards the sustainability of the whole area from land management which underpins our whole economy. Because we’ve poured irrigation water onto this country for years and years and we’ve never really looked at the repercussions: the drainage problems, the salinity problems. And I think in recent years, in the last fifteen, twenty years, that’s really been addressed—the work that’s gone into it by some very dedicated people and I think that message has gone across to virtually all land holders in the area. With the advent of some major arterial drains, community drains, the cooperation—the cooperatives virtually that have been formed to bring this into being, really will underpin the future of our economy and the management of our natural resource, which is absolutely vital to the future of our farmers and businesses etc.

Consultant: And a lot of that work’s been voluntary.

Farmer A: It all comes back to the notion that it’s the next generation. It’s a different approach.

Source: videotape excerpt from focus group conducted by Katherine Gibson, Jenny Cameron and Arthur Veno, Shepparton, Victoria, 5 June 1997 (see Gibson, Cameron and Veno 1999).

The interactive aspect of focus groups also provides an opportunity for people to explore different points of view, and formulate and reconsider their own ideas and understandings. Kitzinger (1994, p. 113) describes this form of interaction in the following terms: '[p]articipants do not just agree with each other. They also misunderstand one another, question one another, try to persuade each other of the justice of their own point of view and sometimes they vehemently disagree'. For researchers who are interested in the socially constructed nature of knowledge this aspect of focus groups makes them an ideal research method; the multiple meanings that people attribute to places, relationships, processes and events are expressed and negotiated, thereby providing important insights into the practice of knowledge production.

A second characteristic is the pivotal role of the researcher, who promotes group interaction and focuses the discussion on the topic or issue. The researcher draws out the range of views and understandings within the group, and manages—and sometimes even encourages—disagreement between participants (Myers 1998). By comparison, in an observation situation, the researcher may have a more 'hands off' role (see Chapter 12) .

Initially focus groups can be extremely challenging for researchers who are new to the process. They are, however, well worth it. In focus groups the diversity of processes and practices that make up the social world and the richness of the relationships between people and places can be addressed and explored explicitly. A not inconsequential consideration is that group members almost invariably enjoy interacting with each other, offering their points of view and learning from each other. Researchers also find the process refreshing (for example, see the discussion by two skeptical anthropologists in Agar and MacDonald [1995]).

USING FOCUS GROUPS IN GEOGRAPHY

Focus group discussions—or focused interviews, as they were originally known (Merton 1987)—were used by sociologists in the United States during World War II to examine the impact of wartime propaganda and the effectiveness of military training materials (Merton 1987; Morgan 1997). Although this work resulted in several sociological publications on the technique, focus groups were neglected by social scientists in the post-World War II period in favour of one-to-one interviews and participant observation (Johnson 1996). It was in the field of market research that the focus group method found a home. Since the 1980s there has been renewed interest in the technique among social scientists and this has led to considerable diversity in the practice of focus group research (Lunt and Livingstone 1996; Morgan 1997). Focus groups can be a highly efficient data gathering tool but they are also appropriate in 'more critical, politicized, and more theoretically driven research contexts' (Lunt and Livingstone 1996, p. 80), exploring, for instance, the **discourses** which shape practices of everyday life, the ways in which meanings are reworked and subverted, and the creation of new knowledges out of seemingly familiar understandings. The range of uses and purposes of focus groups is evident in geographic research employing the technique.

Geographers have used focus groups to collect information. Zeigler, Brunn, and Johnson (1996) used them to find out about peoples' responses to emergency procedures during a major hurricane. They claim that the focus group technique provided insights that might not have been revealed through methods like questionnaires or individual interviews. As a consequence they were able to recommend important refinements to disaster plans. Burgess (1996) has also used focus groups, in combination with participant observation, to obtain information about factors that inhibit visits to, and use of, woodlands. Her findings have contributed to the development of landscape design and management strategies to enhance the use of woodlands.

One concern of some researchers involved in data gathering is that because of the relatively small numbers of participants in focus groups the findings are not applicable to a wider population (for a discussion of this issue, see Chapter 5). Combining focus groups with quantitative techniques is an extremely useful way of dealing with this issue. A survey questionnaire, for instance, might be administered to a random sample of the population from which the focus group was drawn to test the generalisability of the insights gained from the group discussions. Quantitative methods can supplement focus groups in other ways. Preliminary surveys are sometimes helpful in identifying focus group members or the topics for detailed focus group discussion.

Conversely, focus groups can supplement quantitative research. They have been used to generate questions and theories to be tested in surveys (Goss and Leinbach 1996; Pratt 2002), to refine the design of survey questionnaires (Jackson and Holbrook 1995), and to follow up the interpretation of survey findings (Goss and Leinbach 1996), particularly where there seem to be contradictory results (Morgan 1996). It is, however, entirely appropriate to use focus groups as the sole research method rather than in combination with other research techniques.

For geographers interested in the process of knowledge production focus groups are an excellent research tool. Robyn Longhurst (1996) is a geographer from New Zealand/Aotearoa interested in the absence of a language to talk about pregnancy. She has employed focus groups as a forum in which pregnant women could converse and interact. The narratives, accounts, anecdotes and explanations offered by these women provided Longhurst (1996) with insights into a new discursive landscape of pregnancy. Similarly, Gibson, Cameron, and Veno (1999) have been concerned to not just reproduce a knowledge of the problems and difficulties confronting rural and non-metropolitan communities in Australia, but to reshape understandings so that new responses might be engendered. The seemingly isolated instances of innovation that several focus group members could readily recall provoked other participants to think of additional examples. The beginnings of a body of knowledge on regional initiative began to emerge through these discussions.

In a report of their Indonesian research on individual and household strategies related to the allocation of land, labour, and capital, Goss and Leinbach (1996) also highlight the collective rather than individual nature of knowledge production. By interacting with other focus group members Javanese villagers developed new understandings of their social conditions. Indeed, Goss and Leinbach argue that 'the main advantage of focus group discussions is that both the researcher and the research subjects may

simultaneously obtain insights and understanding of particular social situations *during* the process of research' (Goss and Leinbach 1996, pp. 116–17, emphasis in original). For geographers who are committed to the idea that research can be used to effect social change and empower 'the researched', the potential for focus groups to create and transform knowledges and understandings of researchers and participants is compelling (see also Johnson 1996; Swenson, Griswold and Kleiber 1992).

The focus group method has an important contribution to make to geographic research. It is a highly effective vehicle for exploring the nuances and complexities associated with people-place relationships. The material generated in focus groups can add important insights to work that seeks to describe and document the social world. But focus groups serve not just to 'mine', 'uncover', and 'extract' existing knowledges (Gibson-Graham 1994); they can also contribute to the development and construction of new knowledges and understandings for both researcher and 'researched'.

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Given that the focus group method can be used for a range of research purposes in geography, there will be some variation in how groups are organised and conducted. There are, however, basic principles and methodological and theoretical issues that need to be considered. To be sure, the success of a focus group depends largely on the care taken in the initial planning stage.

Selecting participants

Selecting participants is critically important. Generally, participants are chosen on the basis of their experience related to the research topic. Burgess' (1996) study is a good example of this **purposive sampling** technique (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of participant selection). In work intended to ascertain the perceptions among different social and cultural groups of crime and risk in woodlands she selected women and men of varying age, stage in the life cycle, and ethnicity to participate in focus groups. In another study (Casey et al. 1996) of local perspectives on potential strategies to address agricultural pollution in the Minnesota River Basin, people from the area involved in different aspects of farming were invited to participate. Groups were made up of farmers—who varied in age and gender, and size and type of farm—and local staff from agriculturally-based government agencies and non-profit groups.

Composition of focus groups

Should people with similar characteristics participate in the same group or should groups comprise members with different characteristics? This decision will be largely determined by the purpose of your research project.

Holbrook and Jackson (1996), for example, sought to address issues of identity, community and locality by grouping together people with characteristics like age and ethnicity in common. In their research on environmental responsibility, Bedford and Burgess (2002) had people with similar experiences in each focus group but a range of different focus groups – suppliers, retailers, regulators, consumers and advocates. They describe this as 'ensur[ing] homogeneity within the group and heterogeneity

between them' (p. 124). Other researchers have noted that discussion of sensitive or controversial topics can be enhanced when groups comprise participants who share key characteristics (Hoppe et al. 1995; O'Brien 1993). In some projects it may be more appropriate to have groups made up of different types of people. Goss and Leinbach (1996) were interested in the social relations involved in family decision-making and deliberately chose to conduct mixed gender groups. The different knowledges, experiences, and perspectives expressed by women and men became an important point of discussion.

Another consideration is whether people already known to each other should participate in the same group. Generally it is best not to have people who are acquainted in the same group, but in some research, particularly place-based research, it may be unavoidable. Researchers need to be aware of the limitations this can produce. One is peer pressure with participants not wanting to appear "out of step" with their acquaintances. Similarly some participants may under-disclose or selectively disclose details of their lives, as Pratt (2002) found in her research.

A different problem is when participants over-disclose information about themselves. One strategy for dealing with this is to outline fictional examples and ask group members to speculate on these. In groups they ran in Indonesia, Goss and Leinbach (1996) provided details of three fictional families and asked group members to discuss which of the families would be most likely to accumulate capital. Participants did not have to disclose information about their own situations but could still discuss family strategies. Participants can also be asked to treat discussions as confidential. As this cannot be guaranteed, it is appropriate to remind people to disclose only those things they would feel comfortable about being repeated outside the group.

Of course, you should always weigh up whether a topic is too controversial or sensitive for discussion in a focus group and is better handled through another technique, like individual in-depth interviews. (Most universities now have ethics committees to ensure that researchers carefully manage material from focus groups and other qualitative research methods. For more on this see Chapter 2.)

Size and number of groups

The size of each group and the number of groups are other factors to be considered. Too few participants per group—fewer than four—limits the discussion, while too many—more than ten—restricts the time for participants to contribute.

In terms of the number of groups, one rule of thumb is to hold three to five groups, but this will be mediated by factors (Morgan 1997) such as the purpose and scale of the research and the heterogeneity of the participants. A diverse range of participants is likely to necessitate a larger number of groups. Burgess (1996), for instance, conducted thirteen focus groups with people of varying age, stage in the life cycle and ethnicity while Secor (2003) held four groups with women migrants to Istanbul. Likewise, Le Heron et al. (2001) held four focus groups with dairy and sheep meat farmers in New Zealand.

The structure of the focus group is also a factor to consider. When less standardised questions are used and when there is a relatively low level of researcher intervention

and moderation more groups are needed, as both these factors tend to produce greater variability between groups (Morgan 1997). Time, cost and availability of participants may also limit the number of groups that can be held. The overall research plan – especially whether focus groups are the sole research tool or one of a number of tools – will also affect decisions about the number of groups convened. Finally another guide to the number of focus groups is to use the concept of **saturation** (Krueger 1998, p. 72). This means that you continue to conduct focus groups until you gather no new information or insights.

Recruiting participants

The strategy used to recruit participants will depend on the type of participants you require for your study. Gibson, Cameron and Veno (1999) recruited business and community leaders in two regions by initially contacting local people who featured in local newspapers and targeting managers of key government and non-government agencies. These initial contacts were asked to suggest other people who would make interesting contributions to the study (this snowball **recruitment** technique is also discussed in Chapter 5). A preliminary phone conversation quickly established whether nominees were interested and able to attend. This was followed by a letter with more information about the project. A few days before the focus groups were held, participants were telephoned again to re-confirm their participation. Twelve people were invited to attend each group to allow for cancellations due to illness, last-minute change of plans and so on (several people from each group did drop out).

After an unsuccessful attempt to recruit participants by advertising in local newspapers and writing letters to local organisations, Holbrook and Jackson (1996) went directly to places where potential participants were likely to meet and socialise, such as community centres, homes for the elderly, play groups and clubs. Managers or convenors of the centres helped set up the groups, or the researchers visited venues and invited people to participate. Once people had been involved in a focus group, news of the project spread by word of mouth and other people were recruited easily. Like Holbrook and Jackson, researchers need to think strategically about how best to locate potential participants (see also Burgess, Limb and Harrison 1988a).

Questions and topics

Before conducting focus groups, give thought to the questions or topics for discussion. This involves not only the general content of questions or selection of issues for discussion, but also the wording of questions and issues, identification of key phrases that might be useful, the sequencing and grouping of questions (see Chapter 7 for additional material on question order), strategies for introducing issues, and the links that might be important to make between different questions or issues.

One way to proceed is to devise a list of questions. Swenson, Griswold, and Kleiber (1992) developed a list of twenty questions to act as **probes** for focus groups comprising rural journalists. Another list of twenty questions was used in separate focus groups with community development leaders. Holbrook and Jackson (1996) identified six themes related to the experience of shopping and then used these to develop questions that were raised spontaneously and that fitted with the flow of the discussion. Burgess (1996) preceded each focus group with a walk through a

woodland and then introduced for discussion five primary themes related to elements of the walk. As part of the recruitment process, Gibson, Cameron and Veno (1999) asked each participant to prepare a brief two-minute summary of their perception of social and economic changes in the region over the last twenty years. The similarities and differences between these statements provided the basis for discussion.

Take care when letting people know in advance what the questions or topics will be. If attendance or discussion is likely to be enhanced by providing this information then it may be appropriate. Sometimes, however, it might be necessary for you to paint a very broad picture. For example, it might be more judicious to let a group of men know that you are interested in how they manage the interrelation between work, recreation and home than to tell them you are interested in contemporary negotiations of masculinity (provided of course that you do want to know about masculinity in work, recreation and home environments). (See Chapter 2 for a consideration of the ethical dimensions of this sort of approach.) This example is also a reminder to be sure to use language that participants will understand when you are providing them with advice on the themes of your research.

Generally, questions or topics should allow for discussion of between one and two hours. With very talkative groups it might be necessary to intervene and move the discussion on to new topics. Alternatively, if you have planned a hierarchy of questions or themes then it may be appropriate to allow the group to focus on the more important areas of discussion. With less talkative groups you may need to introduce additional or rephrased questions and prompts to help draw information out and open up the discussion. These should be thought about in the preparation stage.

Another issue to consider is whether questions and topics will be standardised across all focus groups involved in your study or whether new insights from one group will be introduced into the discussions of the next. In many qualitative research situations it may be appropriate to incorporate material from earlier groups, but this should be determined by referring to the project aim. Information that might identify people who attended earlier groups should not be revealed to subsequent groups.

As well as running meetings with several groups, you may find it useful and appropriate to have each group meet more than once. Burgess, Limb and Harrison (1988a and b) ran in-depth discussion groups that met each week for six weeks to explore individually and collectively held environmental values. Although this group method is slightly different from the focus group method—it draws on the psychotherapeutic tradition and places an emphasis on the exploration of feelings and experiences—it does not preclude focus groups from meeting more than once.

Multiple focus groups may be a particularly useful strategy when participants are being asked to explore new and unfamiliar topics or to think about an apparently familiar topic in a new way (such as Longhurst's [1996] research on a new language of pregnancy). Multiple groups may also be appropriate as a way of developing trust between the researcher and research participants. For instance, when researching the experiences of single mothers I met several times with one group of teenagers who were very wary of talking with people associated with educational, medical and media institutions (Cameron 1992).

Conducting focus groups

Generally, focus groups are best held in an informal setting that is easily accessible to all participants. The rooms of local community centres, libraries, churches, schools and so on are usually ideal. The setting should also be relatively neutral: for example, it would not be advisable to convene a focus group about the quality of service provided by an agency in that agency's offices. Food and drink can be offered to participants when they arrive to help them relax, but alcohol should never be provided. It is also helpful to give out name tags as participants arrive.

There has been much written about the ideal focus group facilitator or **moderator** (for example, Morgan 1997; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). In academic research it is often the researcher, who is familiar with the aim of the research and the purpose of the focus groups, who is best positioned to fill this role. To gain some confidence and familiarity with the process, a less experienced researcher might initially take the role of note-taker while a more experienced researcher facilitates the first groups. Focus groups can also be run with more than one facilitator, and a less experienced researcher might invite a more experienced researcher to take the lead.

When a note-taker is present they should sit discretely to one side of the group. The notes, particularly a list of who speaks in what order and a brief description of what they talk about, can be helpful when transcribing audio-recordings of the discussion. A seating plan is also essential. As the facilitator has to attend to what participants are saying and monitor the mood of the group, they should not take extensive notes, though they may want to jot down a point or two to come back to in discussion.

It is highly advisable to audio-record focus groups. The group will usually cover so much material that it is impossible to recall everything that was discussed. In addition, because presentation of focus group results generally includes direct quotes to illustrate key points, a transcribable audio-recording can be very helpful. The quality of the recorder and microphone is crucial. (See Chapters 6 and 7 for a fuller discussion). Most recorders come with a built-in microphone, but several flat 'desk' microphones placed around the table will ensure that quieter voices are recorded and much better sound quality. The audiovisual departments of universities are sometimes excellent places to get advice. Ensure you test the equipment long before the focus group, and also later in the room before group members arrive. Spare batteries (and tapes if you are using them) are essential equipment for focus group researchers. Take care that the setting for the group meeting is quiet enough for discussion to be recorded clearly.

The facilitator usually initiates discussion by giving an overview of the research and the role of the focus group in the project. The themes or questions for discussion can then be introduced. As group members may be unfamiliar with the focus group technique, a brief summary of how focus groups operate should also be given. Box 8.2 provides an example of a focus group introduction.

Box 8.2: A sample introduction to a focus group session

In this focus group, three researchers acted as facilitators. As people arrived they were greeted by one of the research team, introduced to the other researchers and group members and offered tea or coffee. When all participants had arrived the group was

invited to sit around a table. The primary facilitator for this focus group session explained the consent form that was already laid out in front of each person. Participants were asked to read and sign it. The consent forms were passed to one of the researchers, and the session was ready to begin. The researcher acting as the primary facilitator introduced the project:

Well, I'd like to thank you all for making the time and coming along today and contributing and sharing your knowledge. In this particular project that we're working on, we're looking at how communities negotiate change and the reason that we particularly wanted to look at this community was that it seemed there was a lot of change going on and the community, ummm, seemed to be, ummm—we were interested in how you saw your community handling that change and specifically what we're trying to get is to—in the long term is to generate a set of suggestions for other communities on how to manage and negotiate change. So we're hoping to learn from both the mistakes and the right things you've done. So what we're looking for today is a frank and open discussion about how you see change occurring in your community over the last twenty years and how that has been handled. And a little later on in the session we'll get you to—as we go on through the session we'll ask you specific things to help flesh out answers and issues that might be raised. And anything you feel like contributing or adding to just jump in and have that because these focus groups are to get at what the ideas and issues are as you see them. So I think we mentioned in the initial contact with you that we'd like to start out with a two-minute presentation from each of you as to how you see the critical features of change in your community. So we might start around this way. And if you would introduce yourself and your affiliation as you start.

Once all the group members had made their presentations the primary facilitator opened the discussion up:

Great, thanks very much. Well that's been really informative to get all those different perspectives. What we'd like to do now is to explore some of these issues. But from here on in the process should change and you should feel free enough to ask, agree, disagree, jump in, put your opinion forward, and so on. And if things get a bit noisy then we'll just jump in and try and get some semblance of order. One of the common themes that runs through what you've all said is that the community fabric has been affected in a really negative way by all the changes that have occurred. And what I'm trying to get at is what could have been done to improve that. So what do you think?

From this point on different group members responded to questions from the researchers, asked each other questions, agreed and disagreed with each other. The topics for discussion flowed as people each contributed adding a slightly different perspective and introducing new ideas. The researchers also asked questions and points of clarification and introduced new areas of discussion.

Source: videotape excerpt from focus group conducted by Katherine Gibson, Jenny Cameron and Arthur Veno, La Trobe Valley, Victoria, 19 June 1997 (see Gibson, Cameron and Veno 1999). An example of an introduction is also provided by Myers (1998, p. 90).

The facilitator moderates discussion by encouraging exploration of a topic, introducing new topics, keeping the discussion on track, encouraging agreement and

disagreement, curbing talkative group members and encouraging quiet participants. Examples of the sorts of phrases used by facilitators are outlined in Box 8.3.

Box 8.3: Examples of phrases used in focus group facilitation

- Encouraging exploration of an idea:
‘Does anyone have anything they’d like to add to that?’
‘How do you think that relates to what was said earlier about . . . ?’
‘Can we talk about this idea a bit further?’
- Moving onto a different topic:
‘This is probably a good point to move on to talk about’
‘Just following on from that, I’d like bring up something we’ve not talked about yet.’
‘This is an important point because it really picks up on another issue.’
- Keeping on track:
‘There was an important point made over here a moment ago, can we just come back to that.’
- Inviting agreement:
‘Has anyone else had a similar experience?’
‘Does anyone else share that view?’
- Inviting disagreement:
‘Does anyone have a different reaction?’
‘We’ve been hearing about one point of view but I think there might be other ways of looking at this. Would anyone like to comment on other sorts of views that they think other people might have?’
‘There seems to be some differences in what’s been said and I think it is really important to get a sense why we have such different views.’
- Clarifying:
‘Can you give me an example of what you mean?’
‘Can you say this again, but use different words?’
‘Earlier you said that you thought . . . now you’re saying . . . can you tell us more about what you think/feel about this topic/issue?’
- Curbing a talkative person:
‘There’s a few people who’ve got something to add at this point, we’ll just move onto them.’
‘We need to move onto the next topic, we’ll come back to that idea if we have time.’
- Encouraging a very quiet person:
‘Do you have anything you’d like to add at this point?’

Source: Drawn from discussions in Carey (1994), Krueger (1998) and Myers (1998) and from personal experience.

Some aspects of facilitation require special comment. Expressing and exploring different points of view is important in focus groups, yet research shows that groups have a preference for agreement (Myers 1998). The facilitator plays a central role in creating the context for disagreement. This can be done by stating in the introduction that there is no correct answer and that disagreement is normal and expected, by asking directly for different points of view, and by making explicit implied disagreement and introducing it as a topic for discussion (Myers 1998, p. 97). Watch for non-verbal signs of disagreement such as folded arms, movement away from the

table, and a shaking or downcast head. You might ask the whole group or target the disagreeing member to give a different point of view. Of course, as facilitator, never state that someone is wrong, nor display a preference for one position. In the unlikely event that the discussion becomes heated then intervene immediately, suggest that there is no right answer, and move the group on to the next question.

Very talkative or very quiet participants can be a problem. Talkative people need to be gently curbed, while quiet ones need to be encouraged to participate. Along with the sorts of phrases listed in Box 8.3, your non-verbal signals can be useful. Pointing to someone who is waiting to speak indicates to the talkative person that there are others who need to have a turn. Making frequent eye-contact with the quieter person and offering signs of encouragement, like nodding and smiling when they do speak, is important. Remember though that silence gives people time to reflect and gather their thoughts. Don't feel that you have to fill silences; give people time to respond.

At the conclusion of a focus group you might review key points of the discussion, providing a sense of completion and allowing participants to clarify and correct your summary. Group members should always be thanked for taking the time to attend and for their contributions. You can do this again with a personal letter to each participant.

ANALYSING AND PRESENTING RESULTS

Krueger (1998, p. 46) importantly reminds us that 'analysis begins during the first focus group'. Listen carefully to responses and clarify any unclear or contradictory contributions, as this information may be critical later when presenting the results. For example, if young people say that they would watch television news and current affairs if the coverage was more relevant to them, it is probably important to get them to explain or give examples of how news items could be made more relevant if it is your intent to increase the amount of televised current affairs shows they watch (see also Box 8.3).

Since there is always a richness of material, analysing focus group discussions can be as time-consuming as it is interesting. The first step involves transcribing the audio-recording. A complete **transcript** of the entire discussion takes time, as one hour of recording usually takes over four hours to transcribe. When a detailed comparison of groups is to be undertaken full transcripts may be necessary. Generally a partial or abridged transcription (which involves transcribing only key sections of the discussion) will suffice. This is best done as soon as possible after the focus group with the facilitator/s and note-taker working in collaboration to decide which sections should be transcribed. A record of seating plan and running order of speakers and a brief description of what was said are extremely helpful at this point. If you have the time it is also advantageous for the researcher to transcribe the audio-recording as this is a way to become more fully immersed in their content (and for a researcher new to focus group research to reflect on their facilitation style, and identify strengths and weaknesses). (For a full discussion on transcribing interviews, see Chapter 6.)

It is advisable to transcribe and undertake a preliminary analysis of the first focus group before conducting any others. This is a way of checking that your questions are understood by participants and are eliciting the type of information you need for your research. It is also a way of checking that you understand and can interpret the

responses of participants. For example, in an initial focus group you might not think to ask young people to clarify what they mean by relevant news coverage, but by carefully reading the transcript you are likely to pick up this omission.

Once you have the complete set of focus group transcripts available, read the material over several times to help make yourself very familiar with the discussion. One relatively straightforward strategy for proceeding draws from the questions or themes that focused the discussion. Write each question or theme on the top of a separate sheet of paper and then on each sheet list the relevant points made. Finally take a note of key quotes that might be used in written material (Bertrand, Brown and Ward 1992). This approach works well when the discussion did not deviate widely from the questions or themes set by the researcher, or when comparisons are to be made between focus groups (Bertrand, Brown and Ward 1992). For example, in a research project comparing the land management strategies for dealing with salinity preferred by farmers, policy-makers and researchers, the sheets with the responses of the different groups to each question or theme might be compared easily.

When the purpose of the research project is to identify key themes or processes associated with a particular issue or topic it may be more appropriate to use **margin coding** (Bertrand, Brown and Ward 1992). To do this, read through the transcripts, identify key themes or categories, and devise a simple colour, number, letter or symbol-based coding system to represent the themes or categories. The transcripts should then be reread; words, sentences, and paragraphs related to each category or theme are highlighted by writing the appropriate code in the margin. Once transcripts have been coded, a cut and paste technique—completed either on a computer or manually—can be used to group the discussion related to each theme or process (see Chapters 6, 14, and 15 for more information on this). Always keep an original of the transcripts for future reference. Sherraden (n.d.) suggests a variation of this thematic analysis. He develops a list of key words and, in a word-processing package, types two or more key words beside each comment. Using the search function, it is then possible to locate related points of discussion. Computer programs specifically designed for qualitative analysis, like NVivo, can also be used, and are particularly helpful when there is a large amount of transcribed material to be analysed (see Chapter 15 for a discussion of this).

Being able to find material quickly is an important consideration as analysis and writing rarely proceed in a linear fashion. During the writing process new insights unfold (see Chapter 17) and frequently you may find it necessary to return to the original transcripts to refine and reformulate ideas. Sometimes it will be necessary to listen to and make additional transcriptions of sections of the recordings.

When reporting on focus group research, present your results only in terms of the discussion within the groups. As noted earlier, focus groups do not produce findings that can be generalised to a wider population. Focus group results are also expressed in impressionistic rather than numerical terms. In place of precise numbers or percentages, the general trends or strength of feeling about an issue are typically given. As Ward, Bertrand and Brown (1991, p. 271) have noted, focus group reports are ‘replete with statements such as “many participants mentioned ...,” “two distinct positions were observed among the participants”, and “almost no one had ever ...”’. Reporting on their study into people’s responses to emergency procedures, Zeigler,

Brunn and Johnson (1996), for example, noted that the people in their focus groups generally responded with either compliant behaviour or under-reaction. Zeigler, Brunn and Johnson then used direct quotes to illustrate the different ways that the responses were expressed (see Box 8.4 for an example of a focus group analysis, and see also the ways that Jackson and Holbrook [1995], Jarrett [1994], and Myers and Macnaghten [1998] discuss focus group findings).

Box 8.4: Example of how focus group results can be written up

The following is an extract from a journal article reporting on findings from Australian focus group research on the impact of television news and current affairs on young people's political participation and active citizenship. The analysis of the focus group discussion starts by highlighting how young people find the reporting of news and current affairs too complex, particularly because of the sophisticated language and the absence of background information. The analysis continues:

Political current affairs television was viewed by respondents as too complex to incorporate into their everyday viewing habits, but young people also feel it is not worth investing time in television current affairs because any political information received from the programs is usually trivialized and played for entertainment value. For example, *A Current Affair* [a news magazine show] was described by Debra, a nineteen year-old university student, as *Hey Hey It's Ray* after the celebrity of its former host Ray Martin, and was seen by her focus group as a form of populist emotional exploitation. As the following responses suggest, there was a strong feeling amongst the groups that television current affairs portrays politicians as being 'full of it'.

Bianka: The whole politics thing. They're all liars; they're all full of it.

Craig: All the media carry on with is stuff like when they asked Hewson [a former politician] if [the] GST [Goods and Services Tax] would be applied to a birthday cake and they just blew that up. Who gave a shit?

The respondents felt news and current affairs did not help them develop a political identity. They also expressed distrust in politicians who attempt to 'persuade' them to choose a lesser evil. As Bianka points out: 'They all change their minds when they get what they want. I mean what's the point?' What eventuates is a distrust of not only politicians but also the media that is supposed to decipher the positive and negative elements of each candidate's actions.

Note how the findings are reported only in terms of the focus groups and in tentative terms with the use of phrases such as 'responses suggest', 'respondents felt', and '[w]hat eventuates'. Main themes that emerged from the focus groups are summarised by the authors and quotes from participants are used to illustrate and elaborate these themes.

Source: Evans and Sternberg (1999, p. 105).

In some projects it might not be the general trends but the ambiguous or contradictory remarks that the researcher particularly wants to explore. The development and presentation of an argument may refer not only to what was talked about, but the way

it was talked about in the group setting. This became a significant aspect of the focus group research conducted by Gibson, Cameron and Veno (1999, p. 29):

The stories of success and hope that emerged when the discussion was shifted onto the terrain of community strengths and innovations were numerous. They came stumbling out in a disorganised manner suggesting that these stories were not readily nor often told. In the face of dominant narratives of economic change perhaps such stories are positioned as less important or effective. It is clear that there is a lack of a language to talk about this understanding of community capacity; yet, as we will argue, this understanding has the potential to contribute to the ability of a region to deal effectively and innovatively with the consequences of social and economic change.

One important element in the process of writing up (or 'writing-in' as Mansvelt and Berg call it in Chapter 16) is to find a balance between direct quotes and your summary and interpretation of the discussion. When too many quotes are included the material can seem repetitive or chaotic. Too few quotes, on the other hand, can mean that the vitality of the interaction between participants is lost to the reader. Morgan (1997, p. 64) recommends that the researcher should aim to connect the reader and the original participants through 'well-chosen' quotations (see Chapter 17).

CONCLUSION

Focus groups demand careful preparation on the part of the researcher. The selection and recruitment of participants; the composition, size, and number of groups; and the questions and topics to be explored are all key points to consider in the planning stage. Even the apparently mundane details of appropriateness of venue, provision of refreshments and quality of audio equipment are critical to the success of focus groups. A well-prepared researcher also gives thought beforehand to the process of facilitation, including the points to cover in the introduction; the wording of key questions, topics and phrases; the probes and prompts that might be useful to explore further a theme or topic; and strategies for drawing out different points of view, keeping the discussion on track, and dealing with more talkative and quiet members of the group. As soon as possible after the focus group start the process of analysis, beginning with transcribing the audio-recordings and followed by the reading and rereading of transcripts, summarising main points and identifying central themes.

Although they require careful planning beforehand and a great deal of reflection afterwards, focus groups are an exciting and invaluable research tool for geographers to use. Participants almost invariably enjoy interacting with each other, and the discussion can generate insights and understandings that are new to both participants and researchers. The interactive element makes focus groups ideally suited to exploring the nuances and complexities of people-place relationships, whether the research has a primarily data gathering function or is more concerned with the collective practice of knowledge production.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 Find a research project from a recent issue of a geographical journal that you think could have been conducted using focus groups. Why do you think focus groups would be appropriate? Discuss the participants you would select, the composition of the focus groups, the size and number of groups you would use, the questions you would ask or themes you would use, and strategies for recruiting participants.
- 2 The University of Pacifica is planning to upgrade its indoor sports facilities. Your research company has been commissioned by the University to conduct a focus group study on the sorts of changes that students think are most important. Discuss your research plan, including the composition, size and number of focus groups; the process of selecting and recruiting participants; and the questions or topics you would use. Make sure you provide a rationale for each of your research decisions.
- 3 In a few days time you will be facilitating a series of focus groups. Describe the final steps you would take to prepare for the groups. What are some of the issues you anticipate might arise when conducting the groups? Discuss the strategies you would use to manage these. You might want to consider the following issues: too much agreement between participants; over-disclosure of personal information; groups that are overly talkative or overly silent.

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