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17
Focus Groups

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CONTENTS

AIMS OF THIS CHAPTER

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the focus group method as a legitimate psychological tool. From this general overview, readers will be able to decide whether to use focus groups as their primary means of gathering evidence, as a tool to complement other methods of data collection within a multi-method framework, or as a focus of study in its own right. Readers will also be guided on how to manage a focus group study (including design and implementation); and on how to handle the data appropriate to the particular nature of the evidence being sought.

KEY TERMS

focus group interview	focus group facilitator
focusing stimuli	focus group content
topic guide	focus group process

17.1 **INTRODUCTION**

17.1.1 **What is a focus group?**

The focus group is a discussion-based interview that produces verbal data generated via group interaction. Focus groups aim to build conversation among participants rather than conversation between the interviewer (or focus group facilitator) and individual participants, which would be akin to doing a 'round robin' exercise (Clark, 2009). It is the 'interaction element' that is important to understanding how focus groups can be used to generate a very different type of evidence than is possible from a one-to-one interview (Morgan, 2010; Table 17.1). Verbal data is a qualitative form of evidence and will be of analytic interest in the form of individual partici-pant contributions and/or dialogue occurring between individuals (Halkier, 2010). The 'focus' of a group discussion can be anything, from the concrete (e.g. images, objects) to the abstract (e.g. shared activities, critical events and experiences). To ensure that the discussion occurs in a focused way, it is managed by an external moderator or interviewer who is able to regulate the group dynamic.

17.1.2 **Historical origins of the focus group method**

While the study of focus group processes has a rich and substantial research history, the focus group method challenges the predominant focus of psychology on intra-psychic individual processes and behaviours (i.e. mechanisms inside the individual's brain and mind that can explain behaviour). Although psychology is much more 'open' to the use of diverse methodologies now, over ten years into the millennium, than it was at the start of the twenty-first century, there is still some reticence about the use of focus groups as a legitimate psychological tool.

The earliest known *scientific* use of the focus group method can be traced to the work of Bogardus (1926) , testing his social distance model with groups of school-boys. However, a more formal articulation of the method is attributable to Merton and Kendall (1946) from their research into the social effects of mass communica-tion otherwise known as 'wartime propaganda'. Ironically the evolution of focus groups as a viable research tool is less rooted in this sociological tradition than in what Berg (1995) has called the 'vulgar world of marketing'.

For decades, marketing research relied on focus groups as the quickest and most cost-efficient means of obtaining consumer-relevant information. Essentially, the focus group method largely evolved as a 'quick and dirty' means of generating a lot of data quickly rather than as a sophisticated research tool.

In 1988, Morgan (p. 75) noted that 'the contribution of focus groups to social science research … is more potential than real'. In the ten years after that, there was an exponential rise in the number of published works legitimising the focus group

Box 17.1   What focus group evidence may look like

The following excerpt is taken from Halkier (2010, p. 81) to illustrate the nature of interactive data. The focus group comprises women from Denmark all of whom had been participating in a project on 'Cooking in Medicalised Society' looking in particular at the role of a particular magazine in their cooking practices.

Connie: Yes and then there is the thing that IF it REALLY shall be delicious…[pause]
Birte whispering: Then you must make it YOURSELF], then you must make it yourself.
Birte: Yep.
Connie: You know, your…and your jam.
Ellen: Yes.
Anja: Do you really think so? You know, you can get something that's delicious… you know honestly…
Connie [interrupts]:   Yeah, you can sort of, but…
Anja: Some of that Meyer's something…
Connie: Well now, I am not exactly sitting and saying what I DO in real life.
[all participants laugh]

This excerpt arises from an exercise where a 30-year-old women had been invited to sort food into piles one suitable for guests and one not suitable for guests. Connie sets up a norm that food suitable for guests is homemade, confirmed by Birte and Ellen. However, Anja disagrees with this criterion noting that delicious things suitable for guests can also be bought. Connie concedes and then differentiates between what is ideal and what happens in practice. In this way she excuses herself from being judged as someone who poses unrealistic expectations on the group; and some consensus is achieved.

   Morgan (2010) notes that dialogue in focus groups that shifts from being moderator directed to being participant owned occurs when participants are sparked (what Wilkinson, 1998 p. 337 has termed 'electrified') by a topic and then between themselves proceed to 'extend, elaborate and embroider' (Wilkinson, 1998 p. 337).

method (e.g. Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998; Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1994; Morgan & Krueger, 1997). By the turn of the century, within psychology alone, the method gained a substantial foothold as a means of distinctively 'qualitative research' (Breakwell, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Smith, 2003; Wilkinson, 2003, 2004b). In the decade between 1995 and 2004, the rise in use of the focus group method (either for primary or secondary data gathering) was substantial, with 2,367 papers extracted from PsychInfo, compared with only 138 publications between 1985 and 1994, and a mere 7 recorded between 1975 and 1984. In September 2010, the total number of

papers extracted from PsychInfo to date either using, or investigating the focus group method, rose to a remarkable 13,191. Indeed, the focus group method has achieved what Morgan (2008) describes as 'well recognized' status in qualitative research. The method is seen to be especially popular within applied psychology, and in the last decade or so the uptake of the focus group method in health psychology is particularly noteworthy. There is also an interesting rise in the use of focus groups in research involving children and young people (e.g. Clark, 2009).

While the full potential of focus groups as a distinctively psychological tool is beginning to be realised, this is still much more often said than done (Morgan, 2010). This chapter highlights further some of this relatively untapped potential, demonstrating, I hope, how focus groups can not only enhance the ability of psychologists to answer their research questions but also, more importantly, generate questions from new angles and perspectives.

17.1.3 The use of focus groups to address PROCESS (i.e. how, why) as well as CONTENT (i.e. what) questions

In the words of Wilkinson (1998, p. 182), the focus group method is 'distinctive not for its mode of analysis, but rather for its data-collection procedures, and for the nature of the data so collected'. To this end, some additional practical issues will also be addressed, including the use of Internet forums and telephone facilities to generate discussion across participants distributed in both space and time, and also issues of analysis arising from the use of focus groups as interactive forums. It will be argued that the future of focus group research in psychology depends not only on the quality and rigour of its use (Krueger, 1993) but also in appreciating how focus groups can furnish 'tiny glimpses of the world' (Hollander, 2004, p. 605) one might not normally be able to see (Halkier, 2010).

By skillfully managing the group dynamic, it is possible to cultivate 'natural' conversation and discussion (through 'synergy, snowballing, stimulation and spontaneity') as a focus of investigation in its own right (Catterall & MacClaran, 1997; Jovchelovitch, 2000; Linell, 2001). For example, Kitzinger (1994) describes a major shift she witnessed in her research on illness explanations from personal and self-blaming (e.g. 'I should have been stronger') to structural/systemic (e.g. 'If we all felt confused a leaflet would have helped us deal with it better') as a function of a focus group dynamic. She concludes, from this and other similar findings, that people's attitudes are 'not necessarily neatly encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions' (1995, p. 108); they are more likely in fact to be constructed through discussion and interaction (see also Morgan, 2010; Wilkinson, 1998). In other words, focus groups have a relatively untapped potential to explore answers to 'how' and 'why' (i.e. process) questions as well as 'what' (i.e. content) (e.g. Munday, 2006).

17.2 THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD

Used alone or in combination with other methods, the conventional aim of focus groups is to capture *content* in the form of understandings, perspectives, stories, discourses and experiences 'not otherwise meaningfully expressed by numbers' (Berg, 1995, p. 3; see also Hoepfl,1997). In the last few five years or so, the role played by interaction in the production of content has also been emphasised within the analytic frame on focus groups (Morgan, 2010). Either way, focus groups are not suitable to the formal testing of hypotheses although they can be used for hypothesis formulation and/or construct development.

The focus group can be used either as a primary means of data collection or as a supplement to a multi-method approach depending on how it fits into the overall research plan (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). The overall research plan will also involve a particular set of epistemological assumptions (i.e. essentialist, social construction-ist – see section 17.3). Secondary, more practical uses of the focus group (e.g. for decision-making, intervention, collective empowerment and social change), for obtaining some end other than research (e.g. attitude change, problem-solving) do not fall strictly within a research remit. For a fine example of agenda based use of focus groups, readers could usefully consult published work by Eggins *et al.*, (2008).

In practice, the focus group method is most commonly used for the following:

- To develop and/or test constructs as a first step in developing a questionnaire; for instance, Anatchkova and Bjorner (2010) explored fluctuations in role participation across the life span with eight focus groups as the basis for developing an 'item bank' for questionnaire development.

- To check the validity of conceptual models; for instance, Stanton *et al.* (1993) used the framework of 'protection motivation theory' to frame a group discussion looking at how adolescents protect themselves from sexual risk.

- To supplement other more traditional methods (Box 17.2); for instance, Winborne and Dardaine (1993) used the focus group to generate additional, more open-ended conversation among teachers about survey results on 'at risk' children in an educational setting. Wutich *et al.* (2010) provide an interesting comparison of focus group and questionnaire responses with regards to 'water decision makers in a desert city'. They demonstrate the complementary nature of each method for producing a more complete picture of the decision-making scenario under investigation.

- To invite a uniquely different perspective on an issue; for instance, Michell (1998) found that focus groups produced a completely different sort of evidence

> ## Box 17.2 Focus groups within a multi-method approach
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> Recently, Lambert and Losielle (2007) used focus groups to complement interview findings on decision making and information seeking in cancer patients. They illustrated how:
>
> - focus group evidence informed their exploration of individual accounts;
> - individual accounts enabled some in-depth refinement of initial focus group findings where patients honed in mainly on issues common to everyone present;
> - multi-methods enabled some convergence across findings to be identified across focus group and interview data, for example, on the kinds of information that patients need in order to make an optimal decision; and
> - multi-methods enabled both individual and contextual factors to be captured in relation to decision making practices; for instance, focus group discussions emphasised contextual influences on decision making such as the role of professionals through sharing experiences, whilst individual interviews looked closely at decision making processes.
>
> However, Lambert and Loiselle (2007) cautioned that combining data from different methods poses an integration challenge that cannot be taken lightly. They used a grounded theory approach (see Chapter 19) and advocate the use of visual data matrices to help map out the findings obtained by each method across themes (see section 17.9.2).

on peer group structures than was possible using other methods. Likewise Michell and West (1996) found unexpectedly that teenagers in their study came across as more self-regulated than anticipated, being actively involved in the decision to smoke or not (rather than easily coerced or bullied into smoking by peers).

- To generate conversation worthy of analysis in its own right; for instance, Lunt (1996) used the focus group to study tensions in discourses on 'savings' (e.g. between discourses on cash and credit, between budgeting and borrowing, between necessity and luxury, and between prudence and pleasure), linking these tensions to discourses on social and economic change.

It is clear that focus groups can offer evidence from an alternative and equally valid perspective on a topic than is possible using more traditional methods (see also Bloor *et al.*, 2001, for other examples). There is an especially fast growing interest in using focus groups to produce conversation that can be studied in itself. Exploration of this kind is consistent with a post-modern turn on the use of focus groups to analyse discourse (e.g. Halkier, 2010; Lunt, 1996; Myers, 2000),

conversation (Halkier, 2010), processes of social construction (e.g. Linell, 2001), narratives (e.g. Anatchova & Bjorner, 2010) and positionings (Halkier, 2010).

17.3 WHAT TYPE OF EVIDENCE DO FOCUS GROUPS PRODUCE?

17.3.1 The essentialist position

Conventional uses of the focus group fit squarely into an 'essentialist' framework, which is an approach to research that assumes that there is 'truth' to be found and that some methods are better than others at getting closer to it. The advantage of focus groups is that, when managed well, they can produce a broader as well as more in-depth understanding of an issue or topic, because the *interaction process* stimulates memories, discussion, debate and disclosure in a way that is less likely in a one-to-one interview (Wilkinson, 2003).

The emphasis within the essentialist framework is on content (i.e. thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, knowledge, ideas, and so on) and on being skilled enough to moderate the interaction process to optimise both the *quantity* and *quality* of the content produced by the focus group discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Accordingly, all the usual guidelines on how to conduct a focus group study are underwritten by a requirement to harness the group process to *maximise disclosure and minimise the likelihood that the truth will be 'clouded'* by problems of inhibition (i.e. silence) and self-presentation (manifest, for example, in exaggeration or invention) arising from dysfunctional group dynamics (e.g. groupthink/conformity, status dynamics and polarisation) (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997; Morgan, 1997). In Hollander's (2004) words, even if there is a 'truth' to be told, 'people may choose not to tell it'.

Debates centre on whether groups comprised of participants who all have something in common (so-called 'homogenous groups') facilitate the disclosure of 'truth' more than groups comprised of divergent individuals with no obviously shared interests or experiences, and whether members who already know each other produce better-quality data than a group of strangers (e.g. Wellings *et al.*, 2000) (see below for a more detailed discussion of 'sampling issues' connected with focus group research). It is clear, however, that what the focus group cannot do is measure attitudes in the conventional sense of a survey (Wilkinson, 2003).

17.3.2 The social constructionist position

Hollander (2004) points out that focus groups are actually *very limited in their potential for understanding individual thoughts, feelings and experiences* but are

excellent for 'analysing processes of social interaction'. Given that the former is the most common use of focus groups (Wilkinson, 1998), it is important to appreciate that no matter how skilled or experienced the moderator, they cannot and do not provide a 'transparent window on reality' (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998, p. 304). On the contrary, it can be argued that the 'reality' represented by focus groups is collaboratively produced through a process of context-specific meaning making (Wilkinson, 2003). Of particular interest here is not so much the 'reality' itself (or the meanings created by the discussion process) but the way this reality is 'constructed, defended and modified' (Wilkinson, 2003), particularly if group members are empowered to guide the direction and flow of the discussion (Glitz, 1998).

From this so-called 'social constructionist' position, the focus group is much more than a tool for accessing cognitions and meanings – it is 'by definition an exercise in group dynamics and the conduct of the group, as well as the interpretation of results obtained, must be understood within the context of group interaction' (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 7).

Formally stated, then, two interrelated forms of evidence can be produced from focus group discussions: the group process (the way in which people interact and communicate with each other) and the content around which the group process is organised (the focal stimulus and the meanings arising from it). Analysis wise, the group process can be understood on two different levels: the intra-personal (i.e. the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and values of the individual) and the intra-group (i.e. how people communicate and interact with each other within the group).

With regard to the 'content' of the discussion, one advantage of using the group as opposed to the individual as the medium of investigation is its 'isomorphism to the process of opinion formation and propagation in everyday life' in so far as 'opinions about a variety of issues are generally determined not by individual information gathering and deliberation but through communication with others' (Albrecht *et al.*, 1993, p. 54).

From this perspective, focus groups are communication events in which the interplay of the personal and the social can be systematically explored. Gervais (1993), for instance, used focus groups (among other qualitative methods) involving Shetlanders to look closely at their processes of social representation in the wake of an oil spill. Each focus group comprised a natural social unit (a family, a crew of fishermen, fish farmers, local council members and a group who had got together after the spill to act on behalf of the community). Evidence revealed the evolution of a collective rhetoric which maintained community integrity by minimising the impact of the crisis despite it being experienced `like a death in the family' (engendered by the intimate relationship that Shetlanders have with their land). The rhetoric was derived from Shetlanders' representations of their identity as 'resilient' and of the archipelago as 'the Old Rock'. The focus groups thus provided the ideal forum in which the collective mobilisation of community resources and traditions could be captured and analysed in the face of crisis.

On the issue of 'process', one way of investigating how meanings are produced in context is to look at what happens when people are confronted with active disagreement and are provoked into analysing their views more intensely than during the individual interview. Jarrett (1993), for instance, describes how, in her study involving low-income black Americans, participants tended to 'perform for each other'; a climate was established in which they were encouraged to discuss things with greater licence than they would otherwise. The reality created was tempered by peer pressure to 'tell it like it is' whenever idealism prevailed. In this way group pressure inhibited people from providing misleading information. This example illustrates how attempts to resolve differences provide leverage on the basis of which participants build comprehensive accounts to explain their various experiences, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, values and behaviours. The challenges that group members can level at each other (e.g. pointing out discrepancies between what is said and assumptions made) during a member-'empowered' focus group discussion may not be the kind that are possible or even ethical for a researcher (Hyden & Bulow, 2003). Such an example highlights the potential of this method to provide unique insights into 'the complex and varying processes through which group norms and meanings are shaped, elaborated and applied' (Bloor *et al.*, 2001, p. 17).

There is a growing and increasingly apparent tension between the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on focus group research. Until recently, few researchers had taken up the potential within focus group contexts to examinine communication processes *per se* and the impact of these on the way meanings are constructed *in situ*. However, examples are beginning to emerge in a shift towards investigating these processes in focus group discussions comprising naturally occurring groups (e.g. Lunt & Livingstone, 1996), including work groups consistent with an emerging interest in 'organisational ethnography' involving the investigation of natural cultural processes (e.g. Steyaert & Bouwen, 2004).

One rare early example of this potential for focus groups to investigate meaning making is provided by Delli-Carpini and Williams (1994) who examined the relationship between television and the formation of public opinion. The focus group was seen as a vehicle (a 'conversational metaphor') for examining the way opinions are formed via discourse generated by television. This conversational metaphor for examining the influence of the media contrasts radically with the idea that the media work like a 'hypodermic' syringe, 'injecting' people with opinions.

17.4 THE FOCAL STIMULI

The 'focusing' component of focus group research refers to the boundaries of the discussion in relation to a particular stimulus object, event or situation. Originally the stimulus object was a form of mass media communication (e.g. a film

or a pamphlet). In marketing, the focus of research might be people's reactions to a particular advertising campaign or consumer product. In the social sciences, the stimulus might be a scenario (e.g. a sexual encounter as a way of accessing attitudes towards safer sex; O'Brien, 1993), a concrete event (e.g. driving and young people's risk taking; Basch, 1987), or even a concept (e.g. household crowding and its effects on psychological well-being; Fuller *et al.*, 1993). The range of possible stimuli is in fact quite broad, extending to the use of projective techniques, role-play scenarios, word association exercises, sentence completion and fantasy themes, which have proved especially effective in producing discussion among children (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; see also section 17.11.3). There is also a growing interest in using PhotoVoice techniques in focus group contexts (Box 17.3).

One suggestion put forward by Stanton *et al.* (1993) is to use 'theory' as the focusing vehicle especially if the topic or issue is complex and/or potentially sensitive (personally or politically). As an example of this, Hilder (1997) used Schein's model of organisational culture to focus employee discussion. Culture is a topic that employees might not have thought much about before, and even if they had, they may not easily be able to comment on it without being provided with some kind of discussion context. Using theory, however, as a focusing device, the researcher is faced with a dilemma. If the discussion is framed using constructs from a model, there is an obvious risk of driving the content of the conversation. 'Advance organisers' like this can inhibit other avenues of discussion that might otherwise come up, risking loss of useful information. On the other hand, participants may not know where to start or what to say, and may end up talking endlessly about quite superficial aspects of the topic or using the focus group to 'offload'. Since some

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Box 17.3   The use of PhotoVoice in focus group contexts

The use of visual images to help people think critically about their lives and experiences is not new (e.g. Freire, 1970). PhotoVoice is however a particular photographic technique in which participants use a camera to record their real life experiences and then bring them to a discussion forum (see for example, Gosselink & Myllykangas, 2007 Gotschi *et al.*, 2009). Cooper and Yarborough (2010) illustrate the use of PhotoVoice in what they call a 'tell me – show me' method to gather insight into health conditions in rural Guatemala. In phase one, participants engaged in a more traditional focus group discussion and then took photos of their experiences. In phase two, the same participants viewed and responded to each other's photos. Cooper and Yarborough (2010, p. 651) conclude that 'photographs can be viewed as tools to enrich and extend existing interview methodologies by providing information that cannot always be obtained through direct analysis.'

kind of 'focus' is necessary and limitless time is not available, it may be more sensible, Hilder (1997) says to scene-set to hopefully gain quality input on the preferred topic within an agreed time-span.

In general, research objectives guided by theory are not likely to be exactly the same as the aims presented to participants and which are used to frame the discussion process. In research reported by Stanton *et al*. (1993) it is unlikely that the participants were told that the focus group was designed to 'explore developmental, socio-historical and cultural concepts' influencing sexual behaviour! Rather, participants will be informed more concretely that the aim is to find out what they think or how they feel about particular sexual behaviors. Likewise, for an investigation of 'processes' the aim of the focus group will be the research objective translated into a set of practical questions or issues for exploration. For instance, a study into the effects of certain contextual factors (e.g. gender) on both the process and the content of discussion may employ a topic of conversation that is most likely to throw up gender issues (e.g. experiences of violence) (Hollander, 2004). The onus is then on the researcher to translate this into an aim that will both focus and facilitate group discussion around this issue in anticipation of being able to witness gender differences in both process and content (e.g. 'the aim of the discussion is to find out what your feelings are about …'). Where focus groups are guided purely by practical rather than substantive concerns (e.g. to find out what clients think about the quality of a particular hospital service), the aims are likely to be more transparent. The question of what to tell participants about the research aims is likely to become particularly important in a sensitive organisational context. Participants may become suspicious and likely to withhold information or to say only what they feel is expected of them, if they perceive that they are not being properly informed. Participants may suspect a 'hidden agenda' and will need to be reassured that this is not so. Gaining participation in defining the nature and scope of the 'focus' for discussion is one way of achieving a sense of group ownership which can help to open people up to further discussion (Hilder, 1997).

17.5 FOCUS GROUP DESIGN AND PLANNING

Morgan (2008) reiterates the valuable point he made back in 1993, that there is no 'one right way to do focus groups'; on the contrary, a pragmatic approach built on a clear understanding of the goals and outcomes of the research is fundamental to the design and planning stage. Clarity of goals also depends on the epistemological approach, which will in turn also impact on the style of moderation most suited to getting the evidence you need. Morgan (2008) addresses the option of running repeated focus groups over a duration of time, rather than necessarily always using them as one off sessions.

17.5.1 Sampling and recruitment of participants

It is not the intention of focus group studies to produce conclusions that can be generalised beyond the context in which they are conducted, so random sampling is not necessary. Nonetheless, it is important to be systematic when deciding on group composition. The sample should be chosen to reflect those segments of the population who will provide the most meaningful information in relation to the project objectives. Participants should have something to say about the topic of interest or something to demonstrate when using focus groups to understand processes. Recruitment strategies have important consequences for the degree of cooperation and commitment generated amongst respondents. The time and energy invested in meeting with 'local' people and making personal contact with potential participants at the outset can help build group rapport.

Focus group researchers disagree on whether it is necessary to use screening procedures during the recruitment process. One argument in favour of screening says that differences in participant background and/or lifestyle might inhibit the flow of discussion due to lack of common ground. Others argue to the contrary that if all participants were to share virtually identical backgrounds the discussion would be flat and unproductive. The general rule of thumb is that group members should have at least some common characteristics (e.g. same socio-economic class, same age group) to facilitate disclosure because of the rapport it creates among people who are otherwise unknown to each other (Box 17.4)

Another argument in support of screening is based on the principle of reactivity. Ordinarily, the reactivity arising from the screening process is seen as a liability: participants are given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the research issues and may therefore enter the focus group situation with prejudice and bias. Alternatively, the reactivity created by screening procedures may give people the time to mull over the topic in advance, but this can enhance rather than undermine the validity of the content generated by the discussion. The issue of bias, however, is only problematic if the aim is to get 'closer to the truth' of something.

If, on the other hand, the aim of the focus group is to investigate the interrelationship between various contextual factors (e.g., gender, socio-economic status, extent of acquaintance, topic context, and so on), interaction and discussion processes, as well as the content of what is discussed, the question of bias is irrelevant. The important consideration in this respect is to be aware of all relevant 'contextual factors' including moderator characteristics and preconceptions. From this perspective there is no absolute truth to be accessed: 'what' is said is entirely relative and must be appropriately contextualised (Hollander, 2004). For instance, in a discussion about experiences of violence, men in predominantly male focus groups downplay their victimisation stories and exaggerate their role as perpetrators; women do the opposite. Hollander (2004) put this down to norms of masculinity becoming salient in predominantly male groups (i.e. where men are motivated to strategically

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Box 17.4   Sampling criteria

Knodel (1993) advises on running separate focus group sessions with homogenous but contrasting subgroups against certain sampling criteria. Criteria are selected on substantive grounds and involve the subdivision of groups in ways that furnish potentially contrasting views and experiences on the topic of investigation. For example, the sample may comprise females who are subdivided by role criteria – e.g. 'housewife and mother' and 'career woman' – in an investigation of social representations of women in connection with female identity. Other examples of sampling criteria might be socio-economic class, language and culture. Socio-demographic differences within a focus group could create power dynamics that inhibit full discussion, as could cultural barriers. Facilitating a mixed language group will also pose a challenge to even the most skilled moderator (Clark, 2009). There is nonetheless a limit to the number of sampling criteria that can be applied to any one study. Knodel suggests that 'breaking' up the sample into subgroups should be kept to a minimum, otherwise both the sampling and the analysis process will become unwieldy and also very costly. At the very least, one focus group will need to be conducted for each combination of sampling criteria. Clark (2009) provides an example of how they divided up their focus group sample in a study of high risk youth. The research team decided to use school as a key criterion because of long-standing rivalry between the two schools attended by the youths in question. Sex was also another criteria, but the research team decided instead to use a skilled facilitator to work with mixed-sex groups to create richer discussion.

One caveat to the use of criteria for sub-sampling is that having something in common is by no means a guarantee of increased disclosure and in some cases may inhibit it – e.g. males disclosing experiences of fear in a study of violence are less likely in all-male groups (Hollander, 2004; Wellings *et al.*, 2000).

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present themselves with strength and bravado in relation to their male peers), especially in groups where 'what one says' in the group discussion could have ramifications for maintaining valid masculine identities back in the real world. In other words, if participants know each other, what they say may have longer-term consequences. The issue here is not so much 'what' was found (which was different to data obtained from surveys) but why, and what self-presentational purposes are being served (Michell, 1998). Ultimately the decision rests on determining the composition of the group which will maximise the probability of obtaining the most theoretically relevant information. There is mounting evidence that males and females interact differently in mixed-sex as opposed to same-sex groups, and this has prompted some to suggest that focus group sessions should be homogenous in terms of gender (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). However, this assumes a focus on content only rather than process (Hollander, 2004). Some would argue that the dynamics of gender in a focus group context is interesting in itself. Social scientists

argue that there are many occasions when participants not only have something in common but also a shared history. Not only can a shared history facilitate openness by offering validation via the sharing of experience but it may in itself be of interest to the investigation (Frith, 2000). There are many examples of focus groups being successfully conducted with naturally occurring communities of people (e.g. Gervais, 1993; Taylor *et al*., 1991). Taylor *et al*. (1991), for instance, used 'natural' focus groups to examine the psychosocial impact of solid waste facilities within exposed communities.

One crucial consideration in reflecting on the relevance of culture to the above discussion, is the issue of whether the idea of participating in a focus group is contrary to some cultural norms (Halcomb *et al*., 2007). Willgerodt (2003) for example, notes the discomfort of the Chinese with the 'norms' of the focus group method whilst Strickland (1999) found that participants in North West India, embraced the discursive nature of the method. On the other hand, focus groups have played and can continue to play an important role in helping to voice the perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse participants (Halcomb *et al*., 2007). Clearly the onus is much on the skill of the moderator to capture diversity in the most appropriate way in the focus group forum.

17.5.2 Sample size

Sample size (not group size, note) varies widely from as small as 21 (e.g. occupational therapy practitioners in Llewelyn, 1991) to one rare exception of 744 (e.g. parents, adolescents and educators in Croft & Sorrentino, 1991). The number of focus group sessions conducted will be a function of both sample and group size. Some researchers have noted that the data generated after about 10 sessions are largely redundant. The decision rests on the type of evidence required and from whom, as well as considerations of cost in terms of time and resources.

17.5.3 Group size

A systematic review of recent focus group research in psychology yields an average of nine participants per session as conventional, with a range of six to twelve. This conclusion is consistent with the figures quoted in the focus group methods literature, although some would advocate between six and eight participants as ideal (Albrecht *et al*., 1993; see also Wilkinson, 2003). There are several reasons why it is advisable to keep groups as small as possible whilst still being able to elicit the breadth of responses required. Large groups are unwieldy to manage, allow free-riding and can be apt to fragment as subgroups form. Also it may be hard to obtain a clear recording of the session: people talk at different volumes and at different distances so the

discussion may be difficult if not impossible to track. It is common practice to over-recruit for each session by 20 per cent since it is inevitable that not all of those recruited will actually turn up. The group size on the day will therefore vary.

17.5.4 Location, setting and length of session

The issue of location assumes that the focus group will involve a number of co-located people engaged in face-to-face conversation. However, there is a move towards considering ways in which to engage people in focus group discussion through Internet and telephone forums, removing the need to think about location and setting (see section 17.11.1). For the conventional co-located group members choice of location will need to balance the needs of the research with those of participants. It should set the tone of the research as professional and, where possible, be on neutral ground. However, there are times when the sample will be hard to reach unless the research is conducted on home territory (e.g. a hospital), or it may be of particular interest to frame the research in a particular context.

Two prime considerations for participants are convenience and comfort. The location should be easy to reach and the research schedule should not pose any difficulties for them (e.g. child care and transportation problems). Once in place, the conditions of the room itself should be conducive to a smooth-flowing discussion and basically comfortable (e.g. an appropriate ambience of informality, availability of refreshments, nearby toilets, suitable seating and table arrangements). It is also usual to supply name tags. Most focus group researchers agree that between 1 and 2 hours is the standard duration for each session involving adults, and a maximum of 1 hour for sessions involving children.

17.6 FOCUS GROUP IMPLEMENTATION

At its most basic level, the successful implementation of a focus group study depends on two key factors: preparation and good people skills (Greenbaum, 2000; Wilkinson, 2003). The exact nature of the preparation and the skill involved will, however, depend on epistemological stance, perhaps even more so than the question(s) being asked. Broadly speaking, an investigation of content will necessitate a very different kind of preparation and moderation (e.g. active process facilitation) than an investigation of processes of meaning construction and negotiation in a natural group (e.g. strategic retraction from both group content and process). In the content-oriented scenario, the aim is to maximise disclosure by actively engaging all participants in the discussion, minimising group biases and status dynamics. The discussion will perhaps be guided in this instance by a fairly strict topic guide (see below), the intention being to elicit and record as many individual utterances as possible.

In the more process-oriented investigation, the idea is to create a situation where participants direct their conversations towards each other in as natural way as possible (Hollander, 2004) group members are effectively *empowered* to direct the flow and direction of the dialogue that ensues (Wilkinson, 1998). Here the focus of interest is the 'interaction process'.

17.6.1 Facilitator style and skills

From the above it is clear that the style and skills of the facilitator are fundamental to the effectiveness of the focus group (Box 17.2). In some instances also the moderator must be someone with whom the participants can identify so as to be able to gain their trust and commitment (e.g. members of low-income ethnic minority groups). In practice people will talk surprisingly freely about a wide variety of personal topics so long as the climate is permissive and non-critical. From an essentialist perspective, the best moderator guides the proceedings in an unobtrusive and subtle way, intervening only to the extent of maintaining a productive group. For example, one or two of the more dominant group members may be engaged in a heated exchange at the expense of others in the group who are obviously experiencing some discomfort. In this case the moderator needs to take active steps to defuse the situation, refocus the group and balance out the discussion process (Box 17.5).

If the interest of the study is the content of the discussion, there are three additional criteria for ensuring that 'focus' is maintained: specificity, range and depth.

- Specificity: this is about the extent to which minute detail is sought in people's responses and reactions to the stimulus object or event. It is the moderator's task to elicit meanings and differential responses.

- Range of coverage: this is about the skill of the moderator in actively facilitating transition from one area of a discussion to another.

- Depth: this is about the personal context of the response or reaction elicited by the stimulus. Eliciting in-depth responses involves expanding on responses beyond limited reports of 'positive' or 'negative', 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant' reactions. The moderator's task is to diagnose the level at which participants are talking to each other (i.e. ranging from superficial description to detailed elaboration) and where necessary to deepen it.

All these criteria can be met by the moderator who is skilled in listening and questioning techniques. There are some instances where group members may themselves *spontaneously* take responsibility for the flow as well as the content of the discussion. This would occur when, say, someone in the group tries to reorient a

Box 17.5   Style of group facilitation

There are two basic styles of group facilitation most appropriate to the implementation of a focus group depending on whether the study has an essentialist or a social constructionist focus. An essentialist approach will involve the facilitator taking control over *what* is discussed as well as *how* it is discussed. A social constructionist focus will by contrast focus only on the skillful facilitation of the group dynamic but not so much the topic of discussion.

When the focus is more on the group dynamic the aim is to maximise involvement and interaction. Interaction is facilitated by ensuring that the discussion is productive (i.e. all the relevant issues are covered and in sufficient depth). Only the issues to be focused on are determined in advance. However, there will be occasions when the research objectives are revised based on the results of the focus group discussions. In this case the facilitator should mainly allow the participants to determine the agenda. A pose of 'incomplete understanding' but not ignorance (which will appear insincere) is recommended; the facilitator makes it clear that s/he is there to learn from the participants. In some cases, it may be necessary for the facilitator to completely stand back and allow the group to manage both what is discussed and how. Initially this will require that the facilitator empowers the participants to take progressively more responsibility for the group dynamics as well as the topic of the discussion. This kind of focus group will provide the opportunity to see how participants naturally organise their discussions of certain issues. The climate is then also ripe for the discussion of controversial or sensitive topics that would otherwise threaten rapport if the researcher introduced them. The main disadvantage for the essentialist stance is the complete absence of standardisation, thus rendering it difficult to compare findings across different focus groups within the same research project. If the focus is on what is discussed rather than how, without prompting, some topics may never come up. Hence, the facilitator will need to stick more to a script of topic areas and questions to ensure that everything is covered.

discussion that has gone off track or who frequently asks others for clarification. From a social constructionist perspective this will be a phenomenon of interest in its own right. Jarrett (1993) describes how the low-income African-American women in her study challenged each other's 'idealised accounts' (e.g. as strong women who have to manage errant husbands, disobedient children and meddlesome mothers) of their housewife role. The extent to which self-management of this kind occurs depends on the climate established by the moderator at the very outset. Overall, the smaller the degree of external control, the smaller the opportunity for moderator influence (e.g. unwittingly leading participants into a particular area of discussion that provides validation for previous work), thereby increasing the external validity of the information derived (Box 17.5).

17.6.2 **Topic guide**

A topic guide is necessary only if content is the focus of the study. The guide should nonetheless only be suggestive, giving the moderator latitude to improvise fruitful questions and pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry. The guide should not be used in the form of a questionnaire or interviewing straitjacket. Reliance on fixed questions may undermine the ability of the moderator to listen analytically to the content of the discussion, thereby overlooking the implications of what is said. Sometimes the feelings being expressed in people's comments are cloaked in abstractions and rationalisations. The moderator might develop a hunch about the nature of the undercurrent and raise it in the form of tentative questions, creating a climate in which people are encouraged to articulate their feelings. To ward against using the guide as a script, some have advocated that the issues to be covered are instead committed to memory. The number of issues raised will depend on the extent to which the group identifies with the topic as a whole and the type of thinking they are required to engage in (e.g. highly sensitive topics may lead quickly to emotional fatigue). It may be advisable to pre-test the 'tone' of the discussion to collect clues about the appropriateness of the focus group method for how easily or openly a topic is discussed and the range of emotions elicited.

17.6.3 **Listening and questioning skills**

Whatever the epistemological stance, the listening and questioning style of the facilitator is key to determining the nature of the discussion. This will be reflected in the sequence of questions as well as how the questions are worded. Overall, question wording should facilitate openness. For instance, rather than direct people to say either 'yes' or 'no' without elaboration ('Are you happy with …?'), a question should invite a disclosure and elaboration (e.g. 'What are your thoughts about …'). Consistent use of open or probing questions helps create a climate of attentiveness and listening where people feel able to respond in any way they like (Box 17.6).

Questions need to be strategically and sensitively used by a facilitator when initiating transitions in the discussion, perhaps cued by something said or alluded to by a respondent or by a more strategic desire to revisit an issue that was sidestepped, superficially discussed or not mentioned at all. However, cues for transition originating from the respondents help maintain the flow of the discussion, whereas the more stylised kind of moderator-initiated moves can interrupt the flow if not managed carefully. Other requirements for moderator intervention may arise from 'difficulties' with particular people (Box 17.6).

Silence is also a powerful way of getting people to talk, allowing them time to think about and formulate a response. Moderators should not be tempted to fill every single void with a question, and certainly, within a framework of interest in the process of interaction, silence in terms of what is not being said and why is a relational issue and thus an important form of data in itself (Michell, 1998).

Box 17.6   Managing group dynamics

Focus group discussions can sometimes become imbalanced, being dominated by one or two members. If the intention is to engage everyone on a fairly equal basis without inhibition, the 'domination' by certain participants is likely to be problematic to the aims of the investigation. If on the other hand, the aim is to investigate language and interaction, this picture of domination may tell us something important. For example, it might tell us about information status differentials or it may reveal some power dynamics. Lakoff (1990, p. 45) says that the first person to speak at length in a discussion can set the tone and direction of the conversation, legitimising some topics as the focus of conversation over others. This is 'difficult' for a discussion in which the intention is to increase the breadth and depth of discussion about a range of preplanned topics, but a rich source of data for those interested in looking at group dynamics. On the other hand, the facilitator will need to be mindful of the ethics of allowing someone not only to inhibit the contributions of others but also potentially to upset them. The group facilitator may need to intervene if other group members are becoming visibly disengaged or distressed by the 'dominating' participant.

Skilled use of questions in particular requires double hearing or the ability to read between the lines of a discussion in order to 'ferret' out what is only implied (e.g. in linguistic derivatives) rather than relying totally on what is made explicit. By explicating the implied (e.g. tentatively playing it back to respondents in the form of a clarifying question), it is rendered legitimate (e.g. it is acceptable to talk about this) and respondents may then feel able to elaborate.

17.7 RECORDING THE DATA

Focus groups generate data in the form of transcripts produced from audio tape supplemented by a few general field notes to minimise the burden of having to simultaneously observe, listen and facilitate. It is crucial to first obtain the informed consent of the participants and to give assurances of confidentiality. Note that the larger the group the less easy it is to get a clear recording using one tape recorder alone, so it is important to carefully plan and trial the logistics of recording.

17.8 TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription is a primarily mechanical task. Its time-consuming and laborious nature, however, has often led researchers to analyse the content directly from the

tape, which entails transcribing only the most illustrative comments. Since the purpose of a focus group is to gain insight into how respondents' represent a particular issue as a whole and on a collective rather than an individual basis, it is important to capture the entire character of the discussion, warts and all. Any form of short-circuiting of the transcription process or selective editing is therefore undesirable, particularly insofar as the interactive process is integral to the way that particular content is produced (e.g. Hopkins, 2007).

17.9 ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

It is clear, as Wilkinson (2003, p. 203) succinctly puts it, that there is 'no single canonical – or even preferred – way of analysing (focus group) data'. The practicalities are, she recognises, that focus group data are 'voluminous, relatively unstructured and not easily analysed'. The form of analysis, moreover, will depend fundamentally on whether it is the 'content' or the 'interaction process' (i.e. group dynamic) that is the 'data' of interest. From an essentialist perspective in which 'content' is foremost, some form of content analysis will be the most appropriate approach to use. By contrast, a discourse analytic approach will be more appropriate to a social constructionist epistemology because it takes into consideration both the content of discussion and the interaction process.

This discussion of content analysis as it is used to analyse transcription data is equally applicable to other types of data that can be reduced to textual form (e.g. discourses and historical materials) (see Chapter 21). Content analysis comprises both a mechanical and an interpretative component (Krippendorf, 1980). The mechanical aspect involves physically organising and subdividing the data into categories, while the interpretative component involves determining what categories, are meaningful in terms of the questions being asked. The mechanical and interpretative are inextricably linked in a cycling back and forth between the transcripts and the more conceptual process of developing meaningful coding schemes. Two methods of interpretation applicable to the analysis of focus group material, are interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discourse analysis.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a form of qualitative analysis which explicitly acknowledges that the process of analysing experiences and the meaning of these experiences will necessarily involve 'interpretation' on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2003; see Chapter 18). As a fundamentally idiographic approach to investigation and analysis, IPA is concerned with the exploration of *intrapersonal* rather than group experiences. This has prompted some researchers to maintain that using focus groups in 'phenomenological' research is an oxymoron (e.g., Bradbury-Jones *et al*., 2009). However, there may be instances where people find it easier to talk openly about their personal perceptions and experiences in a context in which these experiences can be shared with similar others. Alternatively, there

may be good practical reasons why focus group interviews are being used to explore individual experiences – including cost and time considerations. In such instances, the *individual perceptions and experiences* will need to be parsed out from the group discussion (and to an extent this will only be possible if the facilitator has engaged each and every individual at an experiential level in the discussion process) (Bradbury & Jones *et al.*, 2009).

By contrast, discourse analysis is based on the epistemological assumption that what people say is a form of purposive social action which has a function to serve in a particular interactional context (see Chapter 20). In this instance, the focus group is the interactional context in which statements are made. Discourse analysis is an especially useful way of looking at both content and interaction within a social constructionist framework. Wilkinson (2003, p. 202) illustrates this by using a data extract from a discussion between two pub landladies where they collaboratively produce ideas about the role of their profession in 'causing' breast cancer. However, only a very small proportion of focus group data can be handled using discourse analysis; it does not furnish the researcher with the potential to summarise the data in any general way.

Another means of qualitative analysis more pertinent to the capturing of shared experiences is furnished by techniques associated with grounded theory. Grounded theory's theoretical background is in sociology, underpinned by the assumption that meanings are made sense of in social interaction (see Chapter 19). Grounded theory should be used when the researcher wants to explore complex issues or processes and create a theory. It involves the progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning from textual data. Researchers often look for negative cases – instances that do not fit with the identified categories – to ensure they have understood the full intricacy of the data

Analysing interaction *per se* is a more recent development but is core to the qualitative research agenda (Barbour, 2007; Lyons & Coyle, 2007), although there is no consensus yet on how to do this (Linell, 2001). Leboux Poland and Daudelin (2006, p. 2092) provide one practical template for addressing questions like, 'What types of interactions occur among participants (e.g. limited, empathic, negative, constructive, etc)?', 'To what extend do these interactions reflect broader social contexts (e.g. gender, age, status, authority etc)?' and 'Who do participants represent when they meet (e.g. own experience, particular role or group membership)?'.

By contrast to this thematic approach to looking at processes (as well as content), others have offered frameworks for a finer-grained approach to 'interaction analysis'. For instance, Rothwell (2010) developed an interaction coding system she calls EGCCS (Emotional Group Culture Categorisation System). Using this template, she shows how adolescents used joking as a mechanism to deflect the discussion away from the issue of quitting smoking. Exploring this further she shows how peer interaction in the focus group put pressure on participants to continue smoking. Rothwell illustrates how the interactions captured in the focus group

discussion may replicate those occurring in everyday life. Her research offers rare insight into the social and interpersonal difficulties adolescents may face among their peers if they wish to stop smoking.

17.10 FEEDBACK OF RESULTS/FINDINGS

Feedback to participants or an organisation raises a dilemma for the researcher. It is unusual for access to be granted within a company without some expectation of feedback. However, some of the information arising out of the focus group may not be what the sponsor wants to hear and may even be personally compromising. One also has to consider that what people have talked about in the group may be not what they would wish to pass on, and not pleasant to receive. The decision as to how much, if any, of the information and analysis to discuss with the company sponsor has to be an individual one. Clearly no attributable information should be given; the confidentiality agreed with the group members must be absolute. However, if the focus groups are part of a potentially long-term relationship between you, the researcher and the company, then the relationship with the sponsor is also an important one. Thus, while diplomacy in the analysis given may be appropriate, there is little point in hiding non-attributable information which will form part of the longer-term study (Hilder, 1997). On a more positive note, the focus group environment is particularly conducive to 'freedom of speech' within the constraints of the research agenda and skill of the moderator (Lezuanm, 2007).

17.11 FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

17.11.1 The 'e-focus group'

Advances in technology and the 'globalisation' of real-time communication have seriously opened up the scope for running focus groups across cultural, spatial and temporal boundaries to be run either using 'online' forums (Greenbaum, 1998; Markham, 2004) or conference calling (Frazier *et al.*, 2010). With regards to online forums, as Markham (2004, p. 95) puts it: '[A]s a communication medium, a global network of connection, and a scene of social construction, the internet provides new tools for conducting research and new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discussion behaviours'. In particular, the opportunity via an online medium to 'witness and analyze the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and communities' (Markham, 2004, p. 97) is one that researchers are beginning to capitalise on in the pursuit of the study of collective sense-making. Two types of online global focus group are being used: real-time focus groups who log on to the network at a

Box 17.7   Global focus groups

The concept of 'global focus groups' opens up a whole realm of research possibilities, but also brings with it potential logistical problems and issues of 'virtual' facilitation. Kenny (2005) used a computer program called WebCT© to facilitate on-line engagement and interaction among a group of nurses brought together (from any location at any time) to explore certain nursing issues. She describes the experience as positive, enabling her to 'collect richly detailed research data' (2005, p. 417). Whether the unmanaged and ongoing aspects of on-line discussion groups which are somewhat akin to the practice of 'Twittering' (Dorsey, 2006) mean that they can no longer be called focus groups is yet to be contemplated. Such groups may be better used for practical (e.g. information sharing) rather than research ends, such as reported by Low and Dugmore (2009) whose e-mail focus groups were beneficial to teamwork among mental health professionals distributed in time and space across the service. One problem with the real-time discussions is ensuring that everyone knows what time to sign on and that the timings are coordinated exactly across time zones (see Greenbaum, 1998, for more on this).

set time for a set period to discuss a topic or issue, and ongoing focus groups whose members sign on and off whenever they wish, and contribute whenever convenient and/or appropriate (Box 17.7).

In the real-time version a focus group is run in the traditional fashion with a facilitator keeping the discussion on track, probing wherever necessary, and so on. In the ongoing version a discussion is not easily managed or facilitated, the group itself being responsible for determining the shape and direction of the dialogue that ensues. An example of this type of online focus group is reported by Low and Dugmore (2009) in a study on FOCUS e-mail discussion. Real-time 'virtual' focus groups are staged, while ongoing focus groups are not and exist irrespective of whether all their members are signed on at any one time.

Some like Greenbaum (2000) have argued that computer-mediated focus groups are not sound alternatives to the conventional face-to-face forum because of what can get lost in the process. Specifically, he says that discussion can be inhibited because of the absence of social context cues. For instance, there is some evidence that online groups produce less discussion (in terms of words contributed) than face-to-face groups (Hiltz *et al.*, 1987). Reid and Reid (2005) have also compared online and face-to-face focus groups against a broader range of criteria (i.e. number of ideas contributed), process (e.g. interaction processes, self-disclosures, uninhibited behaviours), and satisfaction measures. Across the same amount of time, online groups contributed less than face-to-face groups. There were no differences, however, across groups in equality of contribution and no differences in

process dynamics. And contrary to expectation, online participants did not feel less inhibited about contributing. On the other hand, face-to-face participants experienced their discussion as more satisfying than online participants. However, after controlling for number of words contributed, the online group were more productive of ideas. Reid and Reid (2005) concluded that online focus groups can be sound alternatives to face-to-face groups insofar as the dynamics do not substantially differ, and may in some instances be advantageous in producing better quality content.

On the use of telephone conferencing to run focus groups, there is little evidence to draw on with regard to their viability relative to face-to-face forums. With this rationale, Frazier *et al*. (2010) compared four telephone with five face-to-face focus groups controlling all but the forum, for understanding employment experiences after a gynaecologic cancer diagnosis. They found no differences in terms of the content produced using thematic analysis; but interestingly, they did find that telephone participants disclosed more emotionally sensitive experiences. Frazier *et al*. suggest that telephone participation facilitated deeper disclosures because of visual anonymity.

Overall, what little we do know about the workings of online, telephone and face-to-face groups, suggests that it is important to think through the potential advantages and disadvantages of each forum before deciding on whether there is a risk of trading content for logistical convenience or whether, in fact, the absence of social cues may facilitate discussion of sensitive issues. In the end, the decision will ride much on what is being discussed and by whom. Reid and Reid (2005) were using focus groups to capture general attitudes towards marriage and body image, whilst Frazier *et al*. (2010) were engaging participants in a much more personal and emotionally sensitive topic.

The issue of comparability across online and face-to-face groups is not so relevant for research conducted in a more social constructionist vein. In principle a focus group can be managed equally well across online, telephone and face-to-face forums, because contextual and interactional variations are integral to understanding content (Halkier, 2010).

17.11.2 Using focus groups with children and young people

There has been a surge of interest in using focus groups for research on children and young people (e.g. Olsen *et al*., 2008; Pfefferbaum *et al*., 2008). This interest is mainly derived from the potential of focus groups to generate discussion about semi-public issues, content that might otherwise be difficult to obtain from children and young people in one-to-one interviews. Clark (2009) cites the following example of how asking 12-year-olds in a one-to-one interview to talk about how to prevent bicycle injuries is likely to produce the 'right answers' like obeying traffic signs and wearing a helmet. However, in a focus group it is possible

to facilitate debate about whether there may be situations in which 12-year-olds might not feel they 'need' to wear a helmet, which is much more informative about actual bicycle attitudes and habits. Clark, however, cautions against the risk of focus groups lapsing into round-robin exercises in which each child contributes something in turn. This can occur when facilitators are not skilled in managing group dynamics and/or where they may be prone to lapsing into a 'teacher-like' classroom style.

On the other hand, children are unlikely to feel comfortable participating in a controversial debate, and in fact, may not be developmentally 'ready' to contribute to discussions of this kind. Clark recommends using 'youthful' facilitators to help gain rapport with children and adolescents, but they will need to have the requisite skill to manage genuine discussion. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) emphasise the critical importance of rapport as a prerequisite to the engagement of young people in any type of research, in combination with the introduction of some 'colour'; for example, by introducing some activity as a stimulus to discussion rather than just 'sitting and talking to an adult' (p. 111). This is consistent with the call by Hopkins (2007) for more creativity generally in the use of focus groups in qualitative research.

17.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described and explained the potential of the focus group method to generate both content and process data depending on which epistemological approach is used to underwrite the choice of method. Design and implementation of a focus group study is discussed according to which of these two foci of investigation – if not both – is of primary research interest. Accordingly, various analytic approaches are also introduced including basic content analysis, as well as the application of more sophisticated qualitative approaches underpinned by a particular analytic approach such as discursive analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory. Innovative uses of the focus group online as well as to investigate active sense-making processes in context are noted.

17.13 EXERCISES

1 Design a focus group study to investigate mothers' ways of managing what and how much their children eat. What epistemology will you assume and why? Who will you sample and why? What questions will you ask? How will you manage the data?

2 Run a focus group comprising at least four students to discuss the transition from A-level to university. Identify the key themes arising.

17.14 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1   What is the difference between the use of focus groups in psychology and the use of focus groups in marketing contexts?
2   Why would a psychologist want to use focus group discussions as opposed to separate one-to-one interviews?
3   What are the challenges face by the person who facilitates the focus group discussion and how might these be addressed?
4   Find an example of two published studies, one that uses focus groups in an 'essentialist' way and one that uses focus groups in a 'social constructionist' way. What are the key differences in focus group design, implementation and analysis?
5   What are the challenges faced in analysing focus group data as opposed to data from single interviews?

17.15 **FURTHER READING**

There is a burgeoning literature on the focus group method. A classic in terms of handbooks on the focus group method is Greenbaum (1998), which introduces the idea of 'global focus groups' and also examines the relevance of technological advances for the focus group method; others are Bloor *et al.* (2001); Edmunds (1999); and in particular Morgan *et al.* (1998), which comprises a set of six books each devoted to a particular aspect of the focus group method, from design and planning through to implementation and analysis.

   Greenbaum (2000) is a must for advances in uses of the focus group method for different types of purposes. Krueger and Casey (2000) specifically address problems likely to be encountered during focus group research, providing a down-to-earth set of guidelines on how to optimise the potential of the focus group method. Other recommended books include Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), which has now acquired the status of a theoretical classic on the focus group method. For a distinctively psychological perspective on focus groups and, in particular, on how to handle the data analysis, Wilkinson's (1998, 2003, 2004b) work is an inescapable must, to help funnel people to respond on a more concrete and specific level if necessary while maintaining openness. Halkier's (2010) paper on focus groups as social enactments is a major contribution to understanding how to apply well-established methods of analysing interaction to focus groups. Finally, Morgan's (2010) reflections on how to 'use' interaction in focus group analysis is essential reading for all focus group followers.