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## FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY: Introduction and History

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- An introduction to the focus group method
- The nature of focus group research
- Why the focus group is used in the health and social sciences
- Some criticisms about the focus group method
- History and development of focus group methodology
- Focus groups employed in market research and social research
- Virtual focus groups
- The advantages and limitations of focus groups

### INTRODUCING THE FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

- Fezile: From rape you get AIDS.  
Gugu: AIDS is rape.  
Researcher: What's rape?  
Nokulunga: When an older person calls you and does bad things to you.  
Mlondi: A person grabs you when you are going to the shops and then does bad things to you.  
Nontobeko: When he's doing bad things to you ... he puts his penis in you with force.

Focus group interview with young African children aged between seven and eight in a working class township context of KwaDabeka, Greater Durban, South Africa. (Bhana 2009: 596)

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The quote above is taken from a study by Deevia Bhana (2009) in her research on how HIV and AIDS are interpreted and made meaningful by seven- and eight-year-old South African children. Her work shows that children's understandings of HIV and AIDS are constructed through many social processes and these processes frame their responses to the disease. This was carried out via focus group methodology. Fundamentally, as the quote above presents, the methodology offers the researchers 'a way of listening to people and learning from them' (Morgan 1998: 9).

Focus group methodology can be traced back to Emory Bogardus, who in 1926 described group interviews in his social psychological research to develop social distance scale (Wilkinson 2004). Over the past century or so, focus groups have been used for many purposes. In particular, the US military (see Merton 1987), Marxist revolutionaries (see Freire 1970/1993), literacy activists (see Kozol 1985) and feminist activists (see Madriz 2003) have adopted the focus group method as a means to allow them to advance their causes and concerns (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Despite the fact that focus groups were initially developed as an academic research method, since the 1950s they have become more synonymous with market research (Munday 2006). However, the focus group method has now been regaining more popularity among academic researchers in the health and social sciences. Many of these researchers have been developing the method and steering it to suit their research needs.

The more recent popularity of focus groups in qualitative research in the health and social sciences is reflected in an increased number of papers and books. The reason that focus groups have become popular in recent years is partly because they are seen as the method which can provide results quickly (Kroll et al. 2007). It is perceived as a method which can generate complex information at low cost and with the minimum amount of time. It also can be used with a wide range of people and groups in different settings. However, this claim has been contested by several writers on focus groups (see Wilkinson 2004) and as readers will see in later chapters, the focus group method is not as cheap, easy and quick as has been claimed.

Focus groups have started to gain popularity in research relating to different social groups and in cross-cultural and development research. The main argument for using them in this context is their collective nature. This may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily and provide collective power to marginalised people. Hence, we have seen more articles dedicated to the use of focus groups in different social and cultural groups. However, there is not a single book that includes such topics. This is the main gap in the literature that I propose to fill with this volume.

According to David Morgan (2002), a prominent focus group researcher, there are two broad types of focus groups: a structured approach which is employed more in market research; and a less rigid and structured approach which has emerged from focus group research in the social sciences. In marketing research, the moderators need to be visible and take an active role in the group. They perform focus groups for the satisfaction of their clients because they are usually employed to seek some specific answers for their clients. Hence, more interaction is likely to occur between the moderators and the participants. Additionally, discussion between the participants will be minimal and they are likely to answer the set questions posed by the moderators (see also Stewart et al. 2009). On the other hand, in the less structured approach to focus groups which is commonly adopted in social science research, the

participants are encouraged to talk to each other instead of answering the moderators' questions. Hence, the moderators primarily aim to facilitate discussion, rather than to direct it. The aim of focus groups in social science research is to understand the participants' meanings and interpretations. Morgan (2002) argues that, depending on the research topic and theoretical approach, both approaches can be adopted within the social sciences. However, in this book, I advocate the less structured focus groups in the social sciences as I base my discussion on the social construction of knowledge and praxis/practices, as readers will see later on in this chapter and throughout the volume. In this chapter, I will focus on the importance of the focus group method, its history, and its benefits and pitfalls.

## THE NATURE OF FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

At the simplest level, a focus group is an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic (Wilkinson 2004). There are many potential focus group scenarios, for example women who are waiting to see their health care providers in a family planning clinic discussing contraception; adolescent girls sprawled over tables in a classroom to share stories about sexual harassment in schools; and a group of family members gathered around the TV in their living room and discussing their favourite movies (Wilkinson 2004). A focus group, as a research method, 'involved more than one participant per data collection session' (Wilkinson 2004: 271). As such, the focus group method is sometimes referred to as a focus group interview, a group interview, or a group depth interview.

Broadly speaking, focus groups are 'collective conversations', which can be small or large (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2008: 375). Focus groups are group discussions which are arranged to examine a specific set of topics (Kitzinger 2005). The group is focused because 'it involves some kind of collective activity' (Kitzinger 2005: 56), for example debating a specific set of social or health issues, reflecting on common perspectives or experiences, or discussing a health or welfare campaign. The primary aim of a focus group is to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a select group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group (Liamputtong 2009).

Methodologically, focus group interviews involve a group of 6–8 people who come from similar social and cultural backgrounds or who have similar experiences or concerns. They gather together to discuss a specific issue with the help of a moderator in a particular setting where participants feel comfortable enough to engage in a dynamic discussion for one or two hours. Focus groups do not aim to reach consensus on the discussed issues. Rather, focus groups 'encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behavior, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues' (Hennink 2007: 6).

A successful focus group discussion relies heavily on 'the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group' where the participants can feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences without fear that they will be judged or ridiculed by others in the group (Hennink 2007: 6). Focus group discussions are more akin to natural social interaction among participants. Thus, the

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environment of focus groups may be more comfortable and enjoyable for the research participants (Jowett & O'Toole 2006; Liamputtong 2009).

A focus group is not simply a means for obtaining accounts of individuals. Rather, it is 'a means to set up a negotiation of meanings through intra- and inter-personal debates' (Cook & Crang 1995: 56). In conceptual terms then, focus groups are situated between individual interviews where only one respondent is involved in a considerably structured setting and participant observation where many participants are involved in a relatively unstructured of 'natural' setting (Conradson 2005).

The focus group method is different from group interviews since group interactions are treated explicitly as 'research data' (Ivanoff & Hultberg 2006: 125). The participants are chosen because they are able to provide valuable contributions to the research questions. The discussion between participants provides the researchers with an opportunity to hear issues which may not emerge from their interaction with the researchers alone. The interaction among the participants themselves leads to more emphasis on the points of view of the participants than those of the researchers (Gaiser 2008).

Focus group interviews allow group dynamics and help the researcher capture shared lived experiences, accessing elements that other methods may not be able to reach. This method permits researchers to uncover aspects of understanding that often remain hidden in the more conventional in-depth interviewing method. Group work is an inviting method for researchers who are working from 'power-sensitive' theoretical perspectives including feminism and postmodernism. It may reduce the imbalance in power relationships between the researcher and participants that grants the researcher the 'authoritative voice', an issue that most feminist and postmodern researchers are concerned about. Instead, focus groups 'create data from multiple voices' (Madriz 2003).

Focus groups put control of the interaction into the hands of the participants rather than the researcher. The interaction between participants themselves substitutes for their exchange with the researcher, and this gives more prominence to the points of view of the respondents. Focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to listen to local voices. A focus group method is a research tool that gives a 'voice' to the research participant by giving him or her an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand his or her experience. In this way, the focus group method allows researchers to pay attention to the needs of those who have little or no societal voice.

The strengths of the focus group method are that the researchers are provided with a great opportunity to appreciate the way people see their own reality and hence 'to get closer to the data' (Ivanoff & Hultberg 2006: 126). The method allows the intended individuals and groups to be more involved in the research project. As such, it is likely that the research will meet their needs.

A focus group interview has several important features:

- It enables in-depth discussions and involves a relatively small number of people.
- It is focused on a specific area of interest that allows participants to discuss the topic in greater detail.
- Interaction is a unique feature of the focus group interview. Indeed, this characteristic distinguishes the method from the individual in-depth interview. It is based on the

idea that group processes assist people to explore and clarify their points of view. Such processes tend to be less accessible in an individual interview. This group interaction has been termed 'the group effect' by recent writers on focus groups (see Carey & Smith 1994; Barbour 2007; Stewart et al. 2007; Davidson et al. 2010).

- A moderator, who is often also the researcher, introduces the topic and assists the participants to discuss it, encouraging interaction and guiding the conversation. The moderator plays a major role in obtaining good and accurate information from the focus groups. There can be more than one moderator facilitating and moderating in one focus group.
- The participants usually have shared social and cultural experiences (such as age, social class, gender, ethnicity, religion and educational background) or shared particular areas of concern (such as divorce, marriage, motherhood, childbirth, infant feeding, childhood immunisation, diarrhoea, nutrition, mental health, contraception, STDs, or living with HIV/AIDS).

## WHY FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus group methodology is useful in exploring and examining what people think, how they think, and why they think the way they do about the issues of importance to them without pressuring them into making decisions or reaching a consensus. According to Jenny Kitzinger (2005: 57), a well-known focus group researcher, the focus group method is an 'ideal' approach for examining the stories, experiences, points of view, beliefs, needs and concerns of individuals. The method is especially valuable for permitting the participants to develop their own questions and frameworks as well as to seek their own needs and concerns in their own words and on their own terms. Group work allows the researchers to access different communication forms which people use in their day-to-day interaction, and these include joking, arguing, teasing and recapturing past events. Being able to gain access to diverse forms of communication is valuable since it may not be possible, or can be difficult, to capture the knowledge and attitudes of individuals by asking them to respond to more direct questions as in positivist science such as surveys and questionnaires. The forms of communication that people use in their everyday life 'may tell us *as much*, if not *more*' (Kitzinger 2005: 58) about their knowledge and experience. As such, focus groups permit researchers to enter the world of the participants which other research methods may not be able to do. Focus groups are likely to reveal diverse understandings which often are difficult to access by more orthodox methods of data collection. The method also allows the researchers to explore individuals' diverse perspectives since focus groups function within the social network of groups. Crucially then, focus groups discover 'how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed, and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms' (Kitzinger 2005: 58).

As a research method, focus groups are valuable in two main perspectives (Conradson 2005). They offer the researchers a means of obtaining an understanding (insight) of a wide range of views that people have about a specific issue as well as how they interact and discuss the issue. A focus group, for example, could be used to find out how

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consumers perceive health care and services, both in terms of their own opinions and in relation to others. For example, how individuals who live in urban areas see health care in comparison with those who live in rural settings (Conradson 2005).

A focus group interview is a useful research tool when the researcher does not have a depth of knowledge about the participants. Focus groups provide rich and detailed information about feelings, thoughts, understandings, perceptions and impressions of people in their own words. The focus group method is a flexible research tool because the method can be applied to elicit information from any topic, from diverse groups of people and in diverse settings (Stewart et al. 2009).

Focus groups are valuable for obtaining in-depth understandings of the numerous interpretations of a particular issue of the research participants. Focus groups permit researchers to search for the reasons why particular views are held by individuals and groups. The method also provides insight into the similarities and differences of understandings held by people. If carried out appropriately, the method enables researchers to examine how such understandings differ by social groups, such as social class, age, gender, ethnicity, profession and so on (Conradson 2005). This is the reason why focus groups are particularly suitable for exploring issues 'where complex patterns of behaviour and motivation are evident, where diverse views are held' (Conradson 2005: 131).

As such, focus groups offer possibilities for researchers to explore 'the gap between what people say and what they do' (Conradson 2005: 131). In a Western society, for example, when people are surveyed about their opinions regarding waste recycling, many would suggest that it has significant environmental merits. However, the actual practice of recycling is not always correlated with what they say. People believe that recycling is a good idea, but they actually recycle very little (Conradson 2005). Why is this so? The focus group method is a useful approach for exploring this difference. An individual may be reluctant to discuss this contradiction during an in-depth interview where the main dynamic occurs primarily between researcher and the participant. But in a focus group setting, where the interactions occur between the participants themselves rather than with the researcher, the participants are likely to be more open about the divergence and the reason why this might be. The focus group setting also provides the researcher with opportunities to follow up the comments and to cross-check with the participants in a more interactive manner than a questionnaire or individual interview can offer.

Focus groups allow multiple lines of communication. For people who find one-on-one and face-to-face interaction 'intimidating' or 'scary', the group interview may offer them 'a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds' (Madriz 2003: 364). Focus groups are ideal for many people from ethnic minority groups. For instance, in their study on the views of health services with Negev Bedouin Arabs, Jeffrey Borkan and others (2000: 209) suggest that focus groups offer 'an enjoyable forum for interaction' among respondents and permit some data quality control because 'extreme views are often muted or marginalized by the majority'. They also offer the respondents the possibility for connecting with others and the continuous establishment of opinions during the group sessions. See Chapter 8 in this volume.

Focus groups have been used to 'give a voice' to marginalised groups such as ethnic minority groups, poor women and men, or people affected by stigmatised illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. They enable researchers, policy-makers and others to 'listen' to people who may have little chance otherwise to express their viewpoints about their health and other needs (Madriz 1998; 2003; Liamputtong 2007; 2010a). In early HIV/AIDS research, Joseph and others (1984) employed focus groups as a means of understanding gay and bisexual men who were perceived as at risk, yet whose health behaviour and needs were not well understood by researchers or the public. The voice of marginalised groups is essential in participatory action research where the participants play an active role in the research process (Liamputtong 2007; 2009; 2010a). Thus, focus groups are used extensively in this type of qualitative research as a basis for empowering marginalised people (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

Focus group methodology is adopted widely in the field of development in a cross-cultural context, especially in eliciting community viewpoints and understanding community dynamics (Lloyd-Evans 2006). Recently, there has been a move towards more participatory research approaches which seek to 'redress issues of unequal power, positionality and Eurocentricity', which may happen when field research is undertaken in non-Western contexts (Lloyd-Evans 2006: 153; see Peek & Fothergill 2009; Liamputtong 2010a). The focus group method has become 'one of the main processes for engendering public participation and facilitating the use of non-verbal techniques'. Focus groups provide a more rapid and fruitful way for working with communities than other methods such as in-depth interviewing or ethnographic methods can (Lloyd-Evans 2006: 153–154). See Chapter 8 in this volume.

One of the great advantages of the focus group method is its ability to cultivate people's responses to events as they evolve (Barbour 2007). In some situations, research can be carried out quickly. For example, Elizabeth Black and Philip Smith (1999) undertook their focus group research in a timely manner following the death of Princess Diana. They observed that women comprised 80 per cent of the signatories in books of condolence. Hence, three separate focus groups were held with Australian women of different age groups and social backgrounds and were conducted within three weeks of her death and funeral. Black and Smith (1999: 263) argued that: 'The death of Princess Diana set in train a series of official and popular responses ... Mass media accounts of Princess Diana's purportedly extraordinary appeal are speculative, lack methodological foundation, and fail to give adequate consideration to potential variability in responses to her life and death.' Focus groups were seen as an appropriate method which would enable Black and Smith to timely explore popular understandings of Diana.

Similarly, Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill (2009: 34) carried out a longitudinal study of children's experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. About a month after Katrina had devastated the US Gulf Coast, in October 2005, they travelled to Louisiana to explore how the disaster had affected the lives, relationships and schooling of children, how children themselves were doing in order to assist their own recovery, and what attempts were being made by adults to help the children cope. In this study, they undertook seven focus groups as part of the larger project. One focus group had a group of young children, with ages ranging from three to nine years. Three were carried out with adolescents who were enrolled in middle school. One was organised with four mothers who had been evacuated to a Baptist Church shelter in Baton

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Rouge. Two focus groups of elementary teachers from three schools in New Orleans were also carried out. Most of the focus groups with the adults were undertaken in October 2005. But the focus groups with the children and adolescents were conducted in May 2007. See also the study conducted by Ali Ardan and colleagues (2010) with older people in the aftermath of the Bam earthquake in Iran in 2003.

### SOME CRITICISMS ABOUT THE FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Like any other research methods, focus groups do not suit all research aims and there have been times when they were found to be inappropriate or problematic. For example, focus group discussions may not be sufficiently in depth to allow the researchers to gain a good understanding of the participants' experiences. In addition, the participants may not actively take part in group discussion. A focus group researcher, Janet Smithson (2008: 361), contends that some research topics are unsuitable for focus group environments. For example, topics which are seen as too personal (such as living with HIV/AIDS, sexuality, infertility, financial status, divorce, domestic violence and abortion) may be better carried out by other methods such as individual interviews. In institutional contexts (such as the workplace or schools), people may be reluctant to express their opinions or discuss their personal experiences in front of colleagues. If the objective of the research is to generate in-depth personal narratives such as the experience of infertility or illness, focus groups may not be appropriate. And for topics where people have strong or opposing opinions, there may be some difficulties associated with the use of this method. Nevertheless, these difficulties or problems really depend on the questions asked and the dynamics of the groups. And some unexpected and very interesting discussions which are seen as problematic in some focus group topics may emerge (see Jowett & O'Toole 2006, for example).

Often, focus groups are criticised for only offering a shallower understanding of an issue than those obtained from individual interviews (Hopkins 2007; Krueger & Casey 2009). In a focus group discussion, personal information and experiences may not be discussed. Peter Hopkins' (2007) own qualitative research project about the life and times of young Muslim men living in Scotland showed that they revealed personal experiences of racism during individual interviews far more than they did in focus group discussions.

In some focus groups, certain personalities of the participants (such as dominant and aggressive personalities) may influence the group discussion (Hollander 2004; Krueger & Casey 2009; see Chapter 5 in this volume). Also, the social context of focus groups has a significant influence on 'issues of disclosure, social conformity and desirability' (Hopkins 2007: 530; see also Hollander 2004). In some focus groups, due to the presence of some group members, the participants may feel too intimidated to speak. In other situations, they may simply conform to the dominant ideas present in the group. As such, the quality of data generated will be affected by the characteristics and context of the focus groups.

David Morgan (1997: 17) suggests that the simplest way that researchers can be confident whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project or not is 'to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest'. If the researchers suspect that there may be serious barriers to active and easy interaction,



they should review some of the detailed procedures described by other researchers who have dealt with the issue. If there are still problems, perhaps the researchers need to look for a more suitable method.

It is often perceived that a focus group interview provides greater numbers of participants than in-depth interviews (Willis et al. 2009). In health research in particular, 'quick and easy' focus groups with opportunistic participants are a popular means of tapping into people's values, beliefs, perceptions and experiences. Indeed, this perception has prompted some cost-conscious contracting organisations to specify that their preferred method is the focus group interview. They are concerned that this 'overuse of impressionistic focus group' research may impair the value of the methodology. This will lead to the perception that 'focus groups are an easy but low-level research approach, rather than a method capable of providing high quality evidence when well designed and well conducted' by funding agencies and health journals (Willis et al. 2009: 132).

## HISTORY OF THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD

Focus group methodology has been adopted by social science researchers for a long time, but it was not made visible by the earlier field researchers. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the leaders in cultural anthropology, wrote in his diaries about group conversations among native Trobriand Islanders but did not explicitly depict the specifications of these group interviews in his report (Frey & Fontana 1993). Similarly, in his *Street corner society* (1943; 1955), William Foote Whyte employed group interviews with gang members in Boston, but did not explicitly credit the use of group interviews as his unique research tool (Madriz 2003: 366).

The visible use of focus group interviews in the social sciences can be traced back to 1941 when Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, who worked at Columbia University, employed the method to examine the impact of media on people's attitudes towards the involvement of the United States in World War II (Merton & Kendall 1946). Lazarsfeld and Merton invited groups of individuals to listen and respond to radio programmes which were designed to boost morale for the war effort (Merton 1987). Originally, the participants were asked to push buttons to indicate their responses, positively or negatively, to the radio programmes. However, this type of data did not help them to answer why the participants responded as they did. It became clear that this method was not sufficient to understand 'the complexity of the respondents' views' (Conradson 2005: 131). In their subsequent studies, an alternative approach for carrying out these group-based interviews was developed. More attention was given to the unstructured and qualitative aspects of the participants' views as expressed in their own words. Hence, focus groups were used as forums for permitting the participants to articulate the reasons for their responses. The details of this method entitled 'The focused interview' (Merton & Kendall 1946) were published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which has now become a classic paper (Conradson 2005). Although Lazarsfeld and Merton used focus groups as qualitative research strategy, they were used in exploratory ways as a means to generate new questions which could be used to develop new quantitative strategies or to complement the more quantitative results of their research (Madriz 2003: 366). However,

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Lazarfeld and Merton's research efforts have created the use of the focus group method as qualitative enquiry in two main ways. First, to capture individuals' responses in real space and time and in the context of face-to-face interactions. Second, the use of focused interview themes and prompts which are relevant and important to the researchers and the research topics for generating data in the face-to-face interactions (Madriz 2003: 391).

Because of the interest in the in-depth interviewing method and due to the fact that sociologists rarely employed focus group interviews in their research, the influence of Merton and Kendall's focused interview on academic research at that time was short-lived. Within the social sciences in the United States in the 1950s, the focused interview 'faded into relative obscurity' (Conradson 2005: 130). Nevertheless, the focused interview method received growing attention within the commercial world. In the 1960s, numerous companies started to use focus groups as their market research strategies. Thomas Greenbaum is the leader in the development and dissemination of the focus group method in the commercial world. Focus group suites are located on entire floors of Manhattan office blocks and are complete with recording facilities and moderators which can be accommodated for any research projects (Conradson 2005). Within market research, focus groups have been used mainly to explore consumer preferences for commercial products (Kroll et al. 2007).

### FOCUS GROUPS IN MARKET RESEARCH: CASE STUDY

On 23 April 1985, the Coca-Cola Company introduced a new product, called New Coke, which turned out to be one of the greatest misjudgements in the marketing world. Not only was New Coke introduced, but also the old one, on which the corporation had been massively built, was removed from sale. As it turned out, New Coke was a failure and consumers demanded the return of the old Coke. This disaster might have been prevented from happening if the company had paid closer attention to the information generated from focus group research which the company had authorised prior to the launch of New Coke. In 1982 and 1983, focus group research was carried out in different parts of the United States. The consumer participants were presented with a vignette where a new formula of a certain product had been introduced and local consumers had given their favourable responses toward the new formula. The participants were then asked how they themselves would feel if that product arrived at their local areas and replaced the old one. But when the replacement of Coke was discussed, the participants expressed their antagonistic feelings towards the idea. When the consumers were tested by tasting the formula, the results showed that they liked New Coke. However, they were not asked how they would feel if the old Coke was dropped from market shelves. The results from the focus groups clearly showed the consumers' negative responses, but the chief executive officer of the Coca-Cola Company was determined to press ahead. And his assistant, who worked closely with the company carrying out the focus groups, decided to follow the determination of the CEO (Bryman 2008: 474; see also Pendergrast 1993; Greising 1998).

It was only in the 1980s that focus groups re-emerged as a distinct research method in the health and social sciences (Conradson 2005: 130). When it did re-emerge, 'it was no longer wed to – or used in the service of – predominantly quantitative-oriented research' (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2008: 391). Since then, focus groups have been popular and used extensively in several disciplines. Many social scientists and other professionals have found this qualitative approach very useful. Political scientists, for example, employed focus groups to examine the public perceptions of political candidates and their opinions on particular political issues (Madriz 2003; Gaiser 2008). Gamson published a noted study in *Talking politics* (1992) that relied on a form of the focus group method for its data collection. During President Ronald Reagan's administration in the 1980s, focus groups were adopted to learn about the perceptions of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and their citizens (Stewart et al. 2007). In the UK, focus groups were used by the New Labour government to examine British opinions about health spending, education policy and military action. The aim was to explore 'a better understanding of the multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives held by the public on particular issues' (Conradson 2005: 130).

Focus groups have also found their place in the assessment of public health and strategies and campaigns for preventive health care (Kroll et al. 2007). In the early 1980s, focus groups were introduced in the health area through studies of knowledge, attitudes and practices of contraception (Folch-Lyon & Trost 1981; Stycos 1981). John Knodel and colleagues (1984; Knodel et al. 1987) used focus groups to elicit information about the transition of fertility in Thailand. With the AIDS epidemic, focus groups were used as a first step to overcome the limited knowledge of researchers about the gay community (see Joseph et al. 1984). Health educators have also used the method. Basch (1987), for example, employed it to improve the effectiveness of intervention programmes in public health. In more recent times, focus groups have been popularly employed in public health research (see Willis et al. 2009).

Focus groups have been used historically by Marxist revolutionaries, literacy activists and three waves of feminist scholar-activists in order to raise the consciousness of oppressed people. In his work on the *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970/1993), Paulo Freire established focus groups, what he calls 'study circles', as a way to work with vulnerable individuals in their 'lived realities' in order to empower them to change their worlds from their marginalised positions within society. Jonathan Kozol (1985) similarly used 'study circles' to elicit information and empower oppressed groups in his literacy programmes in New York City. Both Freire and Kozol adopted focus groups for imagining and enacting the emancipatory political possibilities of collective work (see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

The use of focus groups is becoming increasingly popular among feminist researchers. The focus group method resembles feminist research practice ideals (see Madriz 2000; Strange et al. 2003; Wilkinson 1999; 2004; Munday 2006; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). They have been effectively used by feminist academics such as Ann Oakley and Esther Madriz. With the influence of feminist research and increased movement towards qualitative research methods, focus groups have now become very visible in different disciplines (Gaiser 2008).

## FOCUS GROUPS, MARKET RESEARCH AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

As I pointed out earlier in the chapter, focus groups are adopted differently in market research and the social sciences. Often, the practices in market research are not suitable for conducting social science research. Focus groups practising in market research fall within the positivist paradigm; that is, they are very rigidly structured and highly controlled as in most quantitative methods (Munday 2006). The aim of focus groups in market research is to obtain perspectives and opinions on new products from the perspectives of the consumer participants (Morgan & Krueger 1993). Hence, the researchers need skilful moderating skills in order to generate 'objective facts' about the perceptions, attitudes and opinions of the participants in the group.

However, social researchers explore different kinds of research data from the processes of focus groups and hence require different research skills for the management of the focus groups and data analysis from those of market researchers (Kitzinger 2005; Munday 2006; Barbour 2007). But as Morgan (1993) and Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) note, the model of the focus group method in market research seems to dominate as an accepted norm. This has created certain presumptions as to how focus groups should be carried out. And these have resulted in the limitation of the use of focus group methodology in qualitative research within academia. Often, social science researchers feel that they must adhere to 'the rules' of focus groups in market research, which are not necessarily appropriate for academic research. Many focus group researchers have warned of this danger. In order to use the focus group method successfully in the social sciences, it is crucial for researchers to 'break away' from common presumptions which derive from the market research about how focus groups should be practised (Munday 2006: 90). This book suggests these issues in the chapters that follow.

## VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS

More than ever before in human existence, we are now able not only to reach out to other human beings, but also to gain knowledge rapidly through new global technologies such as computers and the Internet. As our lives and societies are being transformed by innovative technology, there are new ways for qualitative researchers to collect the data. I argue that, as researchers, we must engage in 'the fourth revolution' in 'the production of knowledge' (Murray 1995: 11), which is essential for our understanding of the intersection of language, society and technology. Qualitative researchers cannot ignore electronic communication as a research tool. We are 'saturated in technologies', and 'Internet technologies have the potential to shift the ways in which qualitative researchers collect, make sense of, and represent data'. This is particularly so for social scientists who are concerned with understanding different aspects of collective human behaviour.

A qualitative method which takes advantage of new technology is the use of the Internet to carry out focus groups, and this is known as virtual focus groups or online focus groups (Hughes & Lang 2004; Liamputtong 2009). Online focus groups have received increasing popularity in recent years, not only in market research, but

also in the fields of health, social science and educational research (Mann & Stewart 2000; Liamputtong 2006; Fielding et al. 2008; Gaiser 2008). This trend stems primarily from several pragmatic advantages which the Internet can offer. The most attractive aspects of virtual focus groups include the reduction in costs and time of research fieldwork, the feasibility of bringing together individuals who are located in geographically dispersed areas, the availability of a complete record of the discussion without the need for transcription, and the anonymity secured by the research setting (Mann & Stewart 2000; Liamputtong 2006).

Similar to the development of orthodox focus groups, market research adopted virtual focus groups much earlier than research in the academic area (Robson & Williams 2005). Additionally, as a means for carrying out academic research, computer-mediated communications were cultivated in other methods before being taken up by the focus group method. In the second half of the 1990s, online surveys were popularly used, as were covert observation and collection of online discussions, which provide a swift and viable means of collecting rich data. The virtual focus group method and its applications, benefits and limitations are presented in Chapter 7 of this volume.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have introduced the focus group methodology which has become popularly employed in the health and social sciences. The nature and main features of a focus group have been discussed. This was followed by the history of focus groups and some discussions on the differences between focus group practised in market and social science research. In this chapter, I also introduced virtual or online focus groups.

Readers can now see that the focus group methodology offers many advantages to health and social science researchers. Many researchers have adopted the methodology in their research and continue to point to the benefits of the method in different disciplines. However, for some researchers, its use is not without difficulties. It is likely that the methodology will continue to be on the horizon of discussion in the years to come.

## TUTORIAL ACTIVITIES

- 1 In Raymond Macdonald and Graeme Wilson's focus group research concerning the perceptions of jazz music and lifestyle with Scottish jazz professionals (2005: 398), they claimed that 'if jazz is to be seen as a socially generated music, then social understandings of it should be examined; if you create the music in a group, it is worth asking a group about it. Focus group interviewing was therefore adopted as methodology.' You are about to commence your work as a research assistant in an art department. You are asked to develop a research proposal to examine

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the social and professional identities of young artists. Will the focus group allow you to explore these issues? How will it provide the answers that you wish to explore? Discuss.

- 2 As a student undertaking a course in evidence-based practice, you are required to find the best evidence using empirical research to find answers about housing issues and the needs of older people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. You need to consider the best method which allows the potential participants to interact so that they can find their collective voices which are seldom heard. Is the focus group methodology the best approach you can use? Discuss in detail.

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