



Managing and Making Sense of Focus Group Data

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Managing and Making Sense of Focus Group Data

Chapter Objectives

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Transcribing data derived from traditional focus groups
- Data analysis methods
- Analysis of virtual focus group data

In any piece of research, there will be a time when the researchers have to manage the data they have collected and begin making sense of it. Focus group research is no exception. In this chapter, I will discuss how researchers can manage their focus group data, in particular how to transcribe the data from traditional focus groups including the Jeffersonian transcribing conventions. I will also present analytic approaches including thematic analysis and analysis of group interaction. A brief discussion regarding the management and analysis of virtual focus groups is also included.

Transcribing Traditional Focus Group Data

Group discussions which have been audiotape-recorded (see [Chapter 5](#)) need to be transcribed to enable data analysis. In traditional face-to-face focus groups, transcription transforms an oral text to a written one. Transcription permits further analysis and provides ‘a permanent written record of the interviews’ which the researchers can share with others who are interested in the research (Stewart et al. 2009: 602). Transcribing the interviews is in fact an initial data analysis. However, transcribing large amounts of material is a time-consuming process and often can be tiring and even stressful. For an hour-long focus group interview, it may take an experienced transcriber 4–8 hours to transcribe (Bloor et al. 2001).

Similar to other qualitative methods, there are several salient issues to consider when transcribing focus group interviews. First, who should perform the transcription of the focus group interviews? I suggest that the researchers or the moderators should transcribe their own group discussions. Not only will they learn about their moderating style, but also ‘to some extent they will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation present or reawakened during transcription, and will already have started the analysis of the meaning of what was said’ (Kvale 2007: 95). The researchers will also become familiar again with the data that they have heard. This will certainly help with the further analysis of the data.

Some researchers may prefer to have a research assistant or pay someone else to transcribe the focus group interview. To me, this is not a preferred option as it can also be challenging to both the transcriber and the researcher (see Tilley 2003), but it can be done occasionally. The researchers must ensure that the

transcriber transcribes verbatim, and pauses, laughs or crying must be indicated on the transcripts (Poland 2002; Rapley 2007). This will assist the researchers to make better sense of the interview and hence help with the analysis. Kerry Daly (2007: 217) suggests that if the transcription is carried out by a transcriber or research assistant, the researchers should:

- discuss with the transcriber the transcription techniques used and this may include the techniques they use to record pauses, expressions and grammatical conventions; and
- as soon as one transcription is done, the researchers should listen to the tape and review the transcript. This will allow the researchers to suggest a modification in style or technique to the transcriber.

Lynne MacLean and colleagues (2004) provide several suggestions for ensuring that the focus group interview transcripts are transcribed more accurately. Due to the many problems that the researchers may come across in transcription, they also recommend working with transcribers as part of the research team.

Second, how should the focus group interviews be transcribed? Since there are multiple players in a focus group, it is much more complicated to transcribe focus group discussions and hence more time consuming than transcribing other qualitative interviews. This is due to the fact that researchers must take into account not only what is said, but *who* is saying it in the session. This can be problematic because it is not easy to distinguish individuals' voices (Bryman 2008: 476). Additionally, people often talk over each other, and this can make it more difficult to transcribe. Deborah Warr (2001: 126) too contends that it can be difficult to 'portray turn-taking and interruptions in the exchanges and to note the pauses and moments of laughter, especially if the discussion becomes rowdy'.

Nevertheless, there are ways that researchers can manage their focus group interview data. Blake Poland (2002: 641) recommends that interview transcripts should be transcribed verbatim. The transcript should represent the accounts of what actually happened in the interview. It should not be edited or 'tidied up' to make it 'sound better'. I too suggest that each focus group interview be transcribed word by word and that the transcript includes all the informal conversation style and emotional expressions, including pauses, emphases, laughter, sighing and sounds like 'hm', 'oh', 'ah'. Both the questions and answers should be transcribed. What questions, how the researchers ask the questions and answers from the participants are all important in the focus group interview (Liamputtong 2009). This may sound tedious, but it will assist the researchers when trying to make sense of the data. Some emotional expressions like laughter and crying may indicate how the participant feels when referring to the issue that prompts him or her to laugh or cry.

How much the researchers edit the transcripts is a matter of preference (Stewart et al. 2009). Because not all transcripts will be complete, the researchers may attempt to fill in missing words and gaps, or to correct the spelling of typographical errors. David Stewart and associates (2009: 602) contend:

Although editing may increase readability, it is important that the character of the respondents' comments be maintained, even if at times they use poor grammar or appear to be confused.

Because one use of focus group interviewing is to learn how respondents think and talk about a particular issue, too much editing and cleaning of the transcript is undesirable. Too much editing and cleaning tends to censor ideas and information, often based on the [researchers'] preconceived ideas.

In [Table 10.1](#), I present some instructions that Blake Poland (2002: 641) has developed for transcribing the interview data, which I believe are also applicable to data obtained by the focus group method.

TABLE 10.1 TIPS FOR TRANSCRIBING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW DATA

Pauses	Specify short pauses during talking by a series of dots (...), the length of which depends on the amount of time elapsed. For example, two dots for less than half a second, three dots for one second, four dots for one and a half seconds. Indicate longer pauses with the word pause in parentheses. Use '(pause)' for two-to three-second breaks and '(long pause)' to indicate a pause of four seconds or more.
Laughing, coughing, and so on	Signify in parentheses; for example, '(coughs)', '(sign)', '(sneeze)'. Use '(laughing)' to indicate one person, '(laughter)' to mean several laughing.
Interruptions	Denote when someone's talk is broken off midsentence by including a hyphen (-) at the point where the interruption takes place, for example 'How did you-').
Overlapping speech	Employ a hyphen to signify when one speaker intersperses into the conversation of another, include the speech of the other with '(overlapping)'. Then return to where the original speaker was interrupted (if he or she continues). For instance: R: She said that was impos- I: (overlapping) Who, Mary? R: No, Sonja.
Garbled speech	If guessing what was said, signal words that are not clear with square brackets and question mark, for example 'At that, Emma just [doubled? Glossed?] over').
	Use x's to indicate passage which cannot be elucidated at all. Number of x's should symbolise approximate number of words which cannot be clarified. For example, 'Zoe went xxxxx xxxxx, and then [came? Went?] home.'
Emphasis	Strong emphasis can be represented with capital letters, for instance 'You did WHAT?'
Held sounds	Repeat the sounds which are held, separated by hyphens. If they are emphasised, capitalise them too. For example, 'No-o-o-o, not really' or 'I was VER-r-r-y-y excited.'
Paraphrasing others	When a participant employs a voice which indicates that he or she is imitating someone else's speech or is expressing his or inner voice, use quotation marks and/or indicate with '(mimicking voice)'. For example: R: Then you know what he came out with? He said (mimicking voice) 'I'll be damned if I'm going to let YOU push ME around.' And I thought to myself: 'I'll show you!' But then a little voice inside said 'Better watch out for Susan.' Sure enough, in she came with that 'I'm in control now' air of hers.

As an example, I present the example that Tim Rapley (2007: 53—54) developed from his interactions with his friends when they were cooking in a large kitchen and found that the cucumber was frozen. He terms this short transcription as ‘the politics of cucumber’:

Tim: Is it all frozen?

Mary: No, this part of it's fine. Okay, when you peel it

Ben: Uh huh

Mary: slice it in four lengthways

Ben: Oh and then just ((overlap))

Mary: a n d t h e n just take the seeds out

Tim: Or alternatively slice it in half and use a teaspoon and run it along

Mary: You can choose whichever method you prefer

Tim: And obviously there is going to be politics ((Mary laughs)) depending on
which method you choose

Mary: Absolutely. No there won't

Ben: Secretly there will be though

Mary: Heh?

Ben: Secretly there will be ((Mary laughs))

In the following section, I will introduce the Jeffersonian transcript system which has been widely adopted in conversation analysis, and which some researchers have also used in managing and analysing their focus group data. In the 1960s, Gale Jefferson developed a particular style of transcription notation which was designed to use symbols on a typewriter in order to represent certain aspects of speech which are used in everyday interactions (Rapley 2007: 59). The main features which researchers conducting conversation analysis have employed are adopted from Jefferson (2004) and summarised by Tim Rapley in [Box 10.1](#) (Rapley 2007: 59—60).

Box 10.1 Simplified Jeffersonian Transcribing Conventions

Symbol	Example	Explanation
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(0.5)	That (0.5) is odd?	Length of silence measured in tenths of a second.
(.)	Right (.) okay	Micro-pause, less than two-tenths of a second.
:::	I::: I don't know	Colons indicate sound-stretching of the immediately prior sound. The number of rows indicates the length of prolonged sound.
_____	I <u>know</u> that	Underlining indicates speaker's emphasis or stress .
(	T: (Well at's R: (I mean really	Left parenthesis indicates the point at which one speaker overlaps another's talk.
=	You know=I fine	Equals sign indicates that there is no hearable gap between the words.
WORD	About a MILLION	Capitals, except at beginnings, indicate a marked rise in volume compared with the surrounding talk.
°	°Uh huh°	Words in degree signs indicate quieter than the surrounding talk.
> <	>I don't think<	Words in 'greater than' then 'less than' signs are delivered at a faster pace than the surrounding talk.
< >	<I don't think>	Words in 'less than' then 'greater than' signs are delivered at a slower pace than the surrounding talk.
?	Oh really	Question mark indicates rising intonation.
.	Yeah.	Full stop (period) indicates falling intonation.
hhh	I know how.hhh you	A row of h's prefixed by a dot indicates an inbreath , without dot an outbreath . The number of h's indicates the length of the in- or outbreath.
()	What a () thing	Empty parentheses indicate inability to hear what was said.
(word)	What are you (doing)	Word in parentheses indicates the best possible hearing .
(())	I don't know ((coughs))	Words in double parentheses contain author's descriptions .

According to Tim Rapley (2007: 61), it is often difficult to make sense of the text and see what the speech sounds like when researchers first experience transcripts written in this system. Rapley himself would say the lines out loud and attempt to understand how the symbols represent the sound and pace of words. It requires some practice. However, after a short period of time, the texts will become more and more readable and

intelligible. Additionally, it makes more sense when the researchers can listen to a recording of the interview in parallel to reading a transcript. Using the excerpt ‘the politics of cucumber’ that I presented above, Rapley provides an example of this type of transcription that he deliberately developed for his writing as follows:

Tim: Is it all frozen?

Mary: No. this part of it's fine. Okay, when you peel it,

Ben: Uh huh

Mary: Slice it in four lengthways (a n d t h e n)

Ben: (Oh and then just)

Mary: Just take the seeds out

Tim: Or alternatively slice it in ha::lf, and use a teaspoon, ((banging sound)) and run it along. (0.3)

Mary: You can choose whichever method you, pre:fer.=

Tim: =(And) obviously there is gonna be politics. (.) (depending on which method you choose)=

Mary: (.h u h< h e h h e h h e:h) = Absolutely.

((rustling sound))

(0.4)

Mary: No there won't.=

=((banging sound))

(0.8)

((rustling sound))=

Ben: =Secretly there will be though

(0.4)

Mary: Heh?

Ben: SECRETLY THERE WILL BE=

=ehh °heh heh heh°

Compared with the previous transcription, Rapley (2007: 62) contends that this type of transcription provides ‘a more textured re-description of the scene’ of interactions in the kitchen where Tim, Mary and Ben are

cooking. It certainly provides readers with ‘a sense of the quite artful and beautiful ways that we all routinely interact’.

Lastly, the tone of voice also has significant meanings. According to Richard Krueger (1998: 33), the words ‘This was good’, for example, can have different meanings depending on tone. Considering the following:

Comment	Translation
This was GOOD!	(It was good)
This was GOOD?	(It was supposed to be good but wasn't)
THIS was good!	(This one was good, but others were not)
This WAS good.	(It used to be good, but not any more)

Nevertheless, researchers can have their own reasons for the way they manage the text and may decide on a different approach. In their focus group research *Animals Future* in the UK, Phil Macnaghten and Greg Myers (2004: 73) tell us that the interviews were transcribed by Kate Lamb, who has become highly skilled at ‘puzzling out overlapping talk and attributing turns to speakers’. Kate was asked to follow some simple instructions:

- All words are transcribed, using conventional spelling (not using the spelling to indicate the pronunciation in any way).
- Repeated words, broken-off words and back-channel utterances (uh-huh, mm) are ignored.
- Uncertain or inaudible passages are indicated.
- There are no indications of pauses, overlap, stresses, volume, pace or intonation, except in conventional punctuation.

Macnaghten and Myers (2004: 73) point out that their practices not only save transcription time, but also make the transcripts readable. Some extra features which are used in some other transcription conventions can make the text unreadable (see above). However, they also point out that this practice of transcription was influenced by the way that Phil Macnaghten wanted to analyse the data. Macnaghten wished to look for themes. He needed to know what the participants said in order to find key issues. The polished transcription allowed him to undertake thematic analysis. However, Greg Myers wanted to carry out a discourse analysis on the interview transcripts. Because that necessitates the details which indicate interaction, for example pauses, overlaps and emphasises, Myers revisited the audiotape and added them in. See the previous examples of this type of transcription.

Analysing Focus Groups Results

There has been some debate regarding an appropriate way to analyse focus group data. Some suggest that data generated from the focus group method can be analysed similarly to other qualitative methods,

particularly thematic analysis (Conradson 2005; Kitzinger 2005; Davidson et al. 2010). Others argue otherwise (see Wilkinson 2004; Morgan 2010). For example, Andrew Parker and Jonathan Titter (2006: 34) contend that it is inadequate to analyse focus group data as in other conventional qualitative research. They advocate that 'attention must be paid to the dynamic aspects of interaction within the group, for it is this dynamic nature which is at the heart of focus groups and which endows them with the power to generate insight often negated by other methods'.

Additionally, researchers have discussed whether the analysis of focus group data should only be conducted at the level of the group and how much attention should be paid to the comments expressed by individuals within groups (Barbour 2007). For Rosaline Barbour, there is no straightforward answer. Often, researchers will simultaneously carry out several different analyses. Barbour suggests that it is useful to analyse data at the individual level because this can assist researchers in further exploring differences within the group. Barbour (2007: 131) contends: 'Focusing on individual voices, however, is particularly helpful in determining the extent to which a perspective is a collective one'.

According to feminist focus group researcher Sue Wilkinson (2004: 287), focus group data can be situated within 'either essentialist or social constructionist interpretations'. Within the essentialist interpretation, the researchers are more interested in hearing the voices of individual participants (who may speak with, or in contrast to, other participants). For researchers working within this framework, focus groups offer a valuable means to understand 'the individual in social context' (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 95). Hence, focus group data represents more 'authentic' or 'closer to the essential meanings of participants' lives' than data generated by other research methods. Within the social constructionist framework, focus group data is constructed (Crossley 2002). Within this framework, the focus group methodology allows access to 'the patterns of talk and interaction through which the members of any group constitute a shared reality' (DeVault 1990: 97). The focus of this analytical approach is on 'the construction and negotiation of persons and events, the functions served by different discourse'.

Following Wilkinson's paradigm I will introduce two different types of data analysis in focus group research: thematic analysis and the analysis of interaction within groups.

Thematic Analysis

There are significant similarities between the analysis of focus group and other qualitative data. Commonly, the researchers are interested in the themes which emerge from the data. Thematic analysis is referred to as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data' (Braun & Clarke 2006: 79). It is perceived 'as a foundational method for qualitative analysis' (Braun & Clarke 2006: 78; Liamputtong 2009).

The techniques used for analysing data in thematic analysis and grounded theory are broadly similar. The main difference between grounded theory and thematic analysis is that grounded theory includes theoretical sampling (see [Chapter 4](#)), whereas thematic analysis does not. For thematic analysis, the researchers do not

need to ‘subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded theory analysis’ (Braun & Clarke 2006: 81).

There are two main steps in doing thematic analysis. First, the researchers need to read through each transcript and try to make sense of the interview data. Then, as part of a collective set, the researchers need to examine the transcript and make sense of what is being said by the participants as a group (Minichiello et al. 2008). Thematic analysis ‘involves searching across a data set — be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts — to find repeated patterns of meaning’ (Braun & Clarke 2006: 86). Coding plays a major part in thematic analysis and, as in grounded theory, the researchers need to perform initial and axial coding in order to deconstruct data, code it up and find links between the data. Axial coding is the step that will allow the researchers to connect different codes that they have identified in the initial coding. Axial coding is ‘a way of organising the data together by making connections between a major category and its sub-category’ (Minichiello et al. 2008: 280). This allows the researchers to find themes in the data.

Some qualitative researchers have provided useful strategies or steps for coding that we can follow. Victor Minichiello and colleagues (2008: 268), for example, suggest that when experienced researchers develop codes, one strategy they tend to use is to ask the question ‘What is this thing (or things) I have before me?’ A good example is the work of Erving Goffman (1961) who was interested in the study of mental institutions. He used this question to document particular characteristics of mental hospitals. By further asking ‘What are the general features of mental hospitals?’, Goffman produced ‘total institutions’ theory that many qualitative researchers continue to apply in their work today.

Uwe Flick (2006: 300) suggests the following list of basic questions that qualitative researchers, including focus group researchers, can use as their coding strategies. He also suggests that the researchers should examine the text regularly and repeatedly with these questions. Using these questions, Flick contends, the researchers will be able to identify the themes.

Box 10.2 Basic Questions Used for Coding Strategies

What?	What is the concern here? Which course of event is mentioned?
Who?	Who are the persons involved? What roles do they have? How do they interact?
How?	Which aspects of the event are mentioned (or omitted)?
When? How long? Where?	Referring to time, course and location: When does it happen? How long does it take? Where did the incident occur?
How much? How strong?	Referring to intensity: How often is the issue emphasised?

Why?	Which reasons are provided or can be constructed?
What for?	What is the intention here? What is the purpose?
By which?	Referring to means, tactics and strategies for achieving the aim: What is the main tactic here? How are things accomplished?

Within thematic analysis, it is essential that the researchers attempt to differentiate between the views of individuals and the actual group collective perspectives. Hence, deviant case analysis is important; that is, ‘attention must be given to minority opinions and examples which do not fit with the researcher’s overall theory and attention given to silenced voices’ (Kitzinger 2005: 66).

Analysing Focus Groups and Interaction

Several researchers have suggested that focus group researchers tend to neglect analytical consideration of social interaction within groups (see Wilkinson 1998; 1999; 2004; Hydén & Bülow 2003; Warr 2005; Lehoux et al. 2006; Halkier 2010). Many focus group researchers manage focus group data similarly to what they do with data from individual interviews; that is, representing single voices rather than positioning comments within the group discussion (Crossley 2002; Robinson 2009; Willis et al. 2009). Interactions among the participants in the group, Sue Wilkinson (2004: 286) contends, are ‘rarely reported, let alone analyzed’. And more commonly too, the analysis focuses on the content generating from the group instead of the process of interaction. As I have suggested earlier, the social constructionist framework emphasises the co-construction of realities between people and the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context. Situated within this framework, it is essential that focus group researchers examine the interaction between participants in the data analysis.

According to focus group researcher Janet Smithson (2008: 365), the main issue of analysis in focus groups should not be on what each participant says in a group context, but more on the discourses or themes that are produced within the group context. As such, interactive effects and group dynamics should be a focus of the analytical approaches that the researchers select to analyse their data. Sue Wilkinson (1998: 197) argues that there is a considerable potential for developing new, and better, approaches for analysing focus group data than examining emerging themes. These analytical approaches will allow the researchers to see how themes or discourses are jointly formed by the participants in the group. Similarly, Karen Willis and associates (2009: 133) argue that focus group data has three layers: ‘the individual, the group, and the group interaction’. In order to analyse these three slices properly, it is necessary to pay attention to the forms and scopes of expressions (both verbal and non-verbal), the interactive nature of the discussion, the context in which interaction occurs, and the contents which are produced by the group. This way reveals not only the dynamics of the discussion which can inform the strength of perspectives held by the participants and the level of agreement or disagreement in the groups, but also how the agreement or disagreement is derived.

As I have discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the participants in focus groups may employ humour in expressing their

points and concerns rather than speaking about them directly. Jenny Kitzinger and Clare Farquhar (1999) suggest that these ‘sensitive moments’ may deepen understanding of issues which are seen as ‘private, sensitive and controversial’. If researchers do not pay close attention to dynamics in the groups, perspectives which deviate from the group norm or those which are not expressed explicitly may be silenced (Kitzinger 1994b; Wellings et al. 2000). Hence, considerable attention is necessary so that the researchers can learn about the strategies that participants adopt to deal with perspectives which are difficult to express. Kaye Wellings and associates (2000: 264) argue that rather than seeing the dynamics of the group as problematic, they should be treated as data. If the researchers aim to represent accurately the perspectives of the participants, it is necessary to consider the interpretation of both direct and indirect data, particularly around sensitive issues. Hence, both verbal and non-verbal expressions, the tactical use of humour, interruptions in interaction, and disagreement between participants, must be included in the analysis of focus group data (Willis et al. 2009: 260). An illustration in the research on sexual behaviour conducted by Kaye Wellings and colleagues (2000: 261) is used here to show the analysis of how humour is used by the participants to separate themselves from what they perceived as ‘behaviours or identities’. In one of the focus groups, often male participants referred to themselves as heterosexual and assumed that the other males in the group would also be heterosexual. But this assumption was jokingly challenged by one male participant whose remark led to uproar in the group:

M: How do you know I'm not gay, I might come out of the closet in a minute ... ‘Ooh hello ducky’
(group uproar).

By analysing and interpreting both sets of data (content and interaction), the researchers do not need to be too overtly concerned whether the data obtained from the participants is ‘objectively true’ (Willis et al. 2009). They can be more concerned about the way that such data is exchanged within the group and how group dynamics may confirm or challenge individuals’ claimed perspectives (Warr 2005). For example, rather than trying to prove if people have misperceptions about the use of medicinal drugs, paying attention to both the content and the interaction in the group may allow us to understand more about what influences people to use medicinal drugs and how decision-making is made, which can be valuable for the promotion of safe use of drugs in communities.

If researchers want to claim that the focus group method is an appropriate approach for researching collective identity, they must capitalise on the opportunity offered by the method to analyse process as well as content (Munday 2006). This means paying attention not only to the interactions which occur among the participants, but also to that which takes place between the participants and the moderator. The presence and behaviour of the moderator play a crucial role in forming the context in which discussion is constructed and cannot be written out of the analysis (Myers & Macnaghten 1999; Warr 2005).

Karen Willis and colleagues (2009: 133) use the list of analytic questions that Patricia Stevens (1996: 172) has developed for the analysis of the interactions and examination of meaning at the group level to characterise some important elements of analysis, as given in [Table 10.2](#).

TABLE 10.2 ANALYSING GROUP INTERACTION

Group component	Aspect of interaction for analysis
What?	What topics/opinions produced agreement?
	What statements seemed to evoke conflict?
	What were the contradictions in the discussion?
	What common experiences were expressed?
	Did the collective interaction generate new insights or precipitate an exchange of information among participants?
Who?	Whose interests were being represented in the group?
	Were alliances formed among group members?
	Was a particular member or viewpoint silenced?
How?	How closely did the group adhere to the issues presented for discussion?
	How did group members respond to the ideas of others?
	How did the group resolve disagreements? How were emotions handled?
	How were non-verbal signs and behaviours used to contribute to the discussion?

I recommend that readers may wish to consult the analytical template that Pascale Lehoux and colleagues (2006: 2101) have developed in their research regarding the patients' view. The template allows researchers to understand group interactions in focus groups not only amongst the participants themselves but also between the participants and the moderator. Janne Moen and colleagues (2010) have adopted this template in their recent publication.

At this point, I will provide some examples which illustrate many points that I have discussed above. The following example, taken from Janine Munday's work (2006: 100), demonstrates how paying attention to the process of interaction can provide understanding into how collective identity is formed. It demonstrates that this formation would not have been revealed if content alone had been considered. The example is about a discussion of the nude charity calendar that was produced by the members of Rylstone Women's Institute (WI) and was about the episode of making the calendar which was portrayed in the film *Calendar Girls*. Munday included the question: 'Thinking about the nude charity calendar that was produced a few years ago by a WI group, what do you think this says about the WI and its members?' She assumed that this question would allow the women to speak about the negative image about the WI among people outside the organisation. Munday also expected that the women would feel defensive or worried as membership of the WI was important to these women and played a crucial role in constructing their collective identity. However, she found that although the women acknowledged the negative image of the WI, it did not particularly upset them. As shown in the following excerpt, the women themselves believed that such an image was false. They had no real aspiration to challenge it because it was seen as something that was too difficult to succeed (p.

100).

Moderator: Do you think it sort of ... maybe dispelled a certain image that people have ... of WI members ... I mean dare I say Jam and Jerusalem?

Mary: Mmm yeah could be.

June: think it might be a bit difficult to dispel don't you?

Mary: Well

June: it's quite entrenched isn't it?

Rather, the women spoke about the calendar in relation to the group who produced it, and about their identities as women. The women who produced the calendar were criticised for turning a fun and good idea into a serious matter by permitting their story to be made into a film and by involving the media. They believed that the episode had a damaging effect on the women who were involved and Rylstone WI. They also criticised these women for attracting attention from the media. This was seen as improper behaviour for all women and to WI members. As a consequence of their involvement, some of the women had marriage breakdowns. This was greeted by dismay and disapproval by the participants. One participant, Jane, did not know about the problems that followed production of the calendar. But by the end of the group discussion, Jane was also criticising the women who produced the calendar. This was mainly because the group drew on pre-existing beliefs about marriage and how women should behave, and this persuaded Jane willingly to express her agreement with the views of the others. Through analysing both content and process, Munday (2006: 101) contends, it becomes clear that 'gender identity, more than WI membership, plays the crucial role in informing the collective identity of this group of women'. This example illustrates the importance of taking interaction into account in the analysis of focus groups because it helps to 'reveal an already existing consensus about gender identity that is shared by the group' (p. 101).

The following example underlines the importance of analysing process and content and the way that the expression is constructed and influenced by the context in which the interactive processes are situated. Munday (2006: 102) suggests that content of the discussion cannot be well analysed without making reference to its context. This example is taken from an interaction which occurred towards the end of the session, when the participants openly expressed their disagreement. Up to this point, the women had been expressing their strong sense of cohesion and unity. However, in response to a question about what the women found to be the most important part of WI membership, one participant, June, immediately said it was 'friendship'. Three other women automatically agreed with June's response, but then June challenged this notion. June contended that the WI provided more opportunities to women than just friendship, for example the possibility of studying at Denman, the WI college which offers many courses and arranges some outings for members. However, she eventually agreed with the majority view that it was friendship which really counted:

June: There's an awful lot you can do.

Jane: You wouldn't join the WI just to go to er Denman to learn something. June: No but you might join the WI if it were a big one so that you could ...

do some of the things small ones cannot afford.

Jane: Yes.

June: Um you know I should think () they can go on outings.

Mary: That's right.

June: Theatre visits.

Mary: Yes because they've got the numbers to do it.

June: So it does open up a lot of avenues but you wouldn't go if you didn't want to be friends with other women.

The excerpt shows that June attempted to defend her view, trying to justify it to the other participants who appeared to agree with her view. Although June eventually expressed her view which conceded the majority consensus, it does not necessarily mean that she changed her opinions. Rather, she was prepared to 'express conformity with the group'. Munday contends that 'through careful consideration of both the content of the talk, and the interactive processes through which it was produced, it is possible to analyse how these women work together to construct their own sense of collective identity'.

Virtual Focus Groups and Data Analysis Process

I have suggested in [Chapter 9](#) that data generated from virtual groups does not need to be transcribed as in traditional focus groups. The production of a text file is instantaneous in virtual research (Strickland et al. 2003; Liamputtong 2006). There is no need to set aside a budget for transcribing machines or transcription costs. The immediate production of a text file also eliminates delays caused by transcription. Neil Selwyn and Kate Robson (1998: 4) say that not only does it save the researchers time and money, but it also 'eliminates any errors introduced through incorrect transcription'. In focus groups using email, for example, the data which is eventually analysed is precisely what the participants have written. From a researcher's perspective, this is a major advantage of virtual focus group (Kenny 2005). In her research, Amanda Kenny (2005: 419) did not need to transcribe any data since it was automatically stored in WebCT.

As I have suggested in [Chapter 9](#), virtual focus groups are often criticised for their lack of non-verbal data such as expression, movement and environment. According to Kate Robson and Matthew Williams (2005: 409—410), text-only virtual data is 'all-inclusive text'. This makes it difficult to identify different elements of non-verbal data. In traditional face-to-face focus group interactions, these elements can be easily

observed and are useful for making sense of the data (see previous section). However, Robson and Williams (2005: 409—410) suggest three characters of virtual focus group data which are comparable with those in conventional focus groups: content, form and style. Content refers to the words that the participants use to express themselves. It is similar to the verbal expressions of traditional data. Form resembles 'context' in conventional focus group research. Style is comparable with non-verbal cues in orthodox focus group research. Meanings are conveyed through idiomatic forms of expression such as emoticons, line width, use of capitals, colour and font that I have presented in [Chapter 9](#). Hence, the analytic approaches that I have discussed earlier in this chapter are applicable to the analysis of virtual focus groups. Both the content and interaction through non-verbal expressions such as emoticons can be analysed using thematic and/or interactive data analysis methods. Similar to the analysis of traditional face-to-face focus groups, researchers need carefully to consider what type of data analytic approach is better suited to the aim and nature of their research.

Conclusion

Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (2007: 172—173) write that: 'You have just finished typing the fieldnotes from your final observation of the study and you proceed to file them. There, facing you, is all the material you have diligently collected. An empty feeling comes over you as you ask, "Now what do I do?"' This is very true for most qualitative researchers and I would say that focus group researchers do not escape this type of 'empty feeling' either. There is a time when we must begin thinking about managing our focus group data that we have 'diligently collected' and how to make sense of it. In this chapter, I have discussed how researchers can manage their focus group data, particularly how to transcribe the data from traditional focus groups, and I have introduced the Jeffersonian transcribing conventions. I have also presented two major analytic approaches, including thematic analysis and analysis of group interaction, and provided some examples to illustrate the many points introduced. I have also included a brief discussion regarding the management and analysis of virtual focus groups in this chapter. We must remember that the management and analysis of our data will lead to how we interpret and present our results. This interpretation and presentation are the means by which we represent the voices of our research participants. Hence, they are also an important aspect of our focus group research that we must seriously consider in our research endeavours.

Tutorial Activities

Read through this short focus group transcript:

Manee: People in community tend to see this disease as promiscuous disease. As women, we can have only one partner or one husband. But, for those who have HIV/ AIDS, people tend to see them as having too many partners and this is not good. They are seen as bad women. And they will be discriminated against more than men who have HIV/AIDS.

Sinjai: I also know that men who live with this disease are not seen as bad as the women are. If you are women and have HIV/AIDS, it is worse for you.

Natharee: This is what has happened to me. People in my community knew that I have got AIDS, and they have been treating me like I am a bad woman. They did not even ask me where I got AIDS from and they assumed I got it from being a bad woman.

- What sense can you make of this data?

Form a group of three with your colleagues and do the following tasks:

- 1 Perform coding on this transcript.
- 2 Using thematic analysis, what is the main theme of this short transcript?
- 3 Compare your coding and theme with your colleagues and discuss similarities and differences of your analysis.

Further Reading

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