

'Best practice' in focus group research: making sense of different views

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Accepted for publication 7 July 2006

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doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.04043.x

FREEMAN T. (2006) *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 56(5), 491–497

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Aim. The aim of this paper is to identify the broad epistemological debates which underpin conflicting statements on 'rigour' and 'good practice' in qualitative research; to relate divergences in statements of 'good practice' in focus group design made by the pre-eminent commentators on focus group methodology to these broader epistemological debates; and to stimulate further reflection on the range of possible uses for focus groups in health services research. Considerations of the analysis of focus group data are beyond the scope of this paper.

Discussion. Focus groups are a popular form of qualitative data collection, and may be defined as a particular form of group interview intended to exploit group dynamics. While qualitative research may be broadly characterized as concerned with exploring people's lived experiences and perspectives in context, it is a heterogeneous field incorporating many theoretical traditions. Consequently, qualitative researchers may be informed by a wide range of assumptions about the nature of knowledge (epistemology). These assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, have important consequences for claims about rigour and 'good practice' in data collection. Thus, while there is broad agreement over the general form of focus groups, statements of 'good practice' in terms of its application are varied. A close reading of texts by the two pre-eminent commentators on the practical application of focus groups identifies differences in 'best practice' focus group design related to their respective epistemological assumptions, and differences principally related to sampling techniques, composition of groups, the perceived role of group interaction and the nature of inference.

Conclusion. Explicit consideration of the epistemological basis of divergent statements of 'best practice' in focus group design forces health services researchers to balance the demands of theory with the practicalities of conducting focus group research within complex host organisations; and encourages readers to apply appraisal criteria appropriate to the stated intentions of researchers.

Keywords: best practice, discussion paper, evaluation research, focus groups, nursing

Introduction

Focus groups are strongly associated with qualitative approaches to social research, the dominant theme of the latter being the provision of a rich understanding of people's lived experiences and perspectives, situated within the context of their particular circumstances and settings (Murphy *et al.*

1998). While this much is agreed, qualitative research is a notoriously heterogeneous field; it encompasses a diverse range of theoretical traditions including ethnography, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and postmodernism, among others. Given such pluralism, qualitative researchers may be informed by a wide range of assumptions on the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and these divergent

epistemological 'lenses' have resulted in contested claims about 'good practice' in methodology. It is widely recognized that the direct application of quantitative concepts of rigour, such as objectivity, validity and reliability, is inappropriate in qualitative research (Blaikie 1993). However, a range of opinions exist on the possibility and desirability of analogous concepts in the critical appraisal of qualitative research, as evinced in the competing range of 'checklists' available (Blaxter 1996, Mays *et al.* 2001, Spencer *et al.* 2003), and challenges to the very notion of standardization of methodology (Barbour 2001).

In a helpful attempt to organize and make sense of the competing epistemological strands within qualitative research associated with the various theoretical traditions, Madill *et al.* (2000) offer a taxonomy of perspectives under the general organizing categories of 'realism' and 'constructionism'. While a number of realist approaches may be differentiated, all share an assumption that scientific method is capable of capturing true representations of the world. Qualitative researchers informed by 'subtle realist' assumptions seek to represent reality (Hammersley 1992, Mays & Pope 2000), and analyse their data to discover pre-existent categories, striving for consistency of meaning between multiple data analysts as a reliability check. From this perspective, notions of validity and reliability may be re-formulated and legitimately applied to qualitative studies (Miles & Huberman 1994), so that findings may be considered true (i.e. to represent reality) if they reflect events (Hammersley 1992). In contrast, qualitative researchers informed by a constructionist epistemology reject the assumption of a single reality, available to all and revealed through the 'correct' application of method. In contrast, knowledge is characterized as provisional and context dependent, and consequently the re-formulation of criteria such as objectivity and reliability is rejected, in favour of strategies such as reflexivity or articulation of researcher perspective (Wilkinson 1988), use of multiple methods of data collection for richness of analysis rather than consensus (Fielding & Fielding 1986), and the use of constructs of robustness such as credibility, dependability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

While the framework provided by Madill *et al.* is helpful, it is perhaps best seen as a heuristic device; not all qualitative researchers hold explicit views with regard to realism and constructivism in epistemology, nor do they necessarily make methodological decisions consistent within a single tradition. Nevertheless, in their framing of research questions and methodological concerns, researchers reveal preferences related to these competing assumptions; while they may not self-identify as constructivists or realists, their methodological

claims will necessarily be informed by, and contend with, the assumptions of each. The remainder of this paper quickly summarizes the generally accepted form and functions of focus groups and their specific strengths, then applies the above analysis to the work of two writers on 'best practice' in the application of focus groups, Jenny Kitzinger and Richard Krueger, chosen because of their pre-eminence in the literature. A close reading reveals the constructivist and subtle-realist epistemological assumptions embedded within their approaches. The final section of the paper considers the implications of this analysis for focus group design and for the critical appraisal of such studies.

Form and functions of focus groups

There is broad agreement on the basic form and function of focus groups (Table 1). Common attributes include the organized and focused nature of the group discussion (Powell & Single 1996), and the importance of interaction between participants (Kitzinger 1995). Focus groups are thus best characterized as a form of group interview that places particular importance on interaction between participants. They comprise group discussion among carefully selected individuals, guided by a moderator using a carefully designed topic guide. The composition of the group, structure of the guide and location flow from a well-defined research objective; it begins with and is guided by a well-articulated purpose. They are not a substitute for problem formulation or clear thinking about a topic; rather they facilitate discussion on a topic of interest through the application of clearly formulated questions (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990).

Focus groups aim to promote self-disclosure among participants, by explicitly capitalizing on group dynamics in discussions. Participants are encouraged to question each other's responses, elicit clarification and explore caveats to their statements. The method seeks to promote a safe environment for self-disclosure through careful participant selection, sensitive questioning by a moderator and the prior establishment of clear ground rules for participation (Krueger 1994).

Typically, focus groups consist of between 6 and 12 members drawn from a study population of interest, and sessions generally last between one and two hours until the topic has been covered to the satisfaction of participants (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). This number of participants is small enough for everyone to contribute, yet large enough to share diverse opinions across the whole group rather than fragmenting into smaller parallel discussions (Krueger 1994). The task of the moderator is to facilitate and focus discussion

Table 1 Focus group definitions

Bowling (2002, p. 394)	'Focus groups are unstructured interviews with small groups of people who interact with each other and the group leader. They have the advantage of making use of group dynamics to stimulate discussion, gain insights and generate ideas in order to pursue a topic in greater depth.'
Kitzinger (1994, p. 103)	'... group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues ... The group is focussed in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity... Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interview by the explicit use of the group interaction as research data.'
Kitzinger (1995, p. 299)	'... a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data ... focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method.'
Krueger (1994, p. 6)	'In summary, a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment ... Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion ...'
Krueger (1988, p. 47)	'Focus groups have a distinctive cluster of characteristics: (1) focus groups involve homogenous people in a social interaction; (2) the purpose ... is to collect qualitative data from a focussed discussion; and (3) focus groups are a qualitative approach to gathering information that is both inductive and naturalistic.'
Powell and Single (1996, p. 499)	'... a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.'
Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 140)	'Focus groups provide a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of group members in their own words.'

on the topic of interest, ensuring that participants are able to contribute fully to the developing discussion.

Specific strengths of focus groups

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' beliefs, attitudes and feelings by exploiting group processes. There are many stated advantages to interaction between participants and, indeed, many see interaction as the key to the method (Kitzinger 1994). The idea is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views and attitudes efficiently, and encourages participation from those who feel that they have little to say (Kitzinger 1995). The interpersonal communication between participants additionally helps to clarify similarities and differences in expressed opinions and/or values.

Differences in statements of 'good practice' in focus group design

While there is general agreement on the basic form and functions of focus groups, a close reading of the literature reveals a series of tensions between different statements of 'good practice' in focus group design and the status of the results of such research. These differences principally concern sampling techniques; the composition of groups; the role of interaction; and the degree of inference that may be drawn from results. The confusion is due to the adoption of the method by researchers with different epistemological assump-

tions; their statements of 'best practice' in focus group application informed by these assumptions.

The clearest way to explore these tensions is by a close reading of the prescriptions of the two pre-eminent authors on application of focus groups in social research: Jenny Kitzinger and Richard Krueger. Informed by contextual constructionist assumptions, Kitzinger is primarily concerned with the situated nature of interaction between participants in focus groups. This leads her to take up a distinctive position on the value of pre-existing groups, and place an emphasis on the transferability of results at the level of theory (concepts). In contrast, Krueger's realist assumptions are revealed in the requirement for procedures to reduce selection bias and increase transferability of results from samples to broader populations. Four major tensions between their prescriptions are discernible: group membership; homogeneity; the status of interaction; and the generalizability of results (Table 2).

Group membership – from random sampling to pre-existing groups

Krueger is critical of the use of convenience samples and pre-existing groups, and urges caution when using groups of people who know and work closely with each other. The first and weaker injunction is that such groups will have their own pre-existing dynamics. This poses particular problems for analysis given the influence of current relationships on contributions, the inhibition of negative observations and influence of formal and informal hierarchies (Krueger 1994).

Table 2 Methodological tensions between constructionist and realist

	Kitzinger (contextual constructionism)	Krueger (realism)
Group membership	Pre-existing groups may be useful in providing 'naturalistic' exchanges	Pre-existing groups should be avoided given their potential for bias. Random sampling of participants is recommended
Homogeneity	Weak: may be helpful when participants have marked status differences. Homogenous groups may themselves lead to conformity effects and inhibit discussion	Strong: important that groups are homogenous with regard to important variables for sub-group comparisons
Interaction	Strong: interaction as the central analytical resource	Weak: interaction as useful for generating discussion on the topic of interest
Generalizability of results	Weak: theoretical insights potentially transferable, decided by the reader	Strong: given a number of homogenous groups, results may hold for the population from which groups are drawn, given random sampling of participants. It is up to the researcher to make a case for transferability, and to the reader to decide whether the case is made

The second injunction concerns the threat to external validity posed by convenience sampling. As a realist, Krueger is interested in developing analyses with explanatory power beyond the sample, and deploys the logic of population sampling to avoid bias and increase the external validity of results. In contrast, Kitzinger (1994) defends the use of pre-existing groups in focus group research to explore how people talk about a topic. Krueger's logic of segmenting populations by analytically informative variables is inappropriate here; there is no assumption of a single reality waiting to be revealed. Rather, she emphasises the situated nature of human interaction, valuing the fragments of naturally occurring data that become available for analysis. She qualifies her use of the phrase 'natural' to describe such data, accepting that it is a response to specific situations in context rather than pre-existent and awaiting discovery. For Kitzinger, the underlying logic is of reflexivity i.e. an acceptance and heightened awareness of the influences of the subjectivities of analyst and participants: not to somehow transcend them, but to acknowledge the situated (and provisional) nature of any such knowledge construction. This is in marked contrast to Krueger's perspective, in which subjectivities are conceptualized as confounding bias, to be controlled and abstracted away.

Homogeneity and heterogeneity in group composition

Krueger (1994) makes two injunctions against heterogeneity in composition. The first and stronger injunction is analytical, and again concerns external validity. Where the study purpose is to compare the opinions of specific sub-groups within a study population, he advises segmentation of participants into homogenous sub-groups, followed by a series of focus groups with each separate subgroup. For example, if the study concerns the views of health care professionals and

managers towards clinical governance, then focus groups should be run with each relevant professional and managerial subgroup (medical and surgical doctors, nurses, therapists, managers etc.) and participants in any one focus group should all belong to the same sub-group segment. This facilitates an analysis of differences between the sub-group segments, and increases the external validity of comparisons made between subgroups; that statements may be made about the differences between doctors' and nurse' views on the topic that have currency beyond the study sample to the broader population. The logic of inquiry here is concerned with the external validity of inferences drawn from sample to broader population – and consistent with a realist epistemology, Krueger urges segmentation to increase the likelihood of uncovering a pre-existing reality ('what people really think'). This is not a concern for Kitzinger, as she is concerned with situated discourses rather than shared perceptions of population samples.

The second, weaker injunction refers to the need to ensure that participants are able to raise issues for discussion. Failure to segment means that important information may not be exposed (Krueger 1993). Morgan and Krueger (1993) are critical of those who compose groups that make some participants unwilling to express themselves, as this defeats the purpose of a focus group. The concern here is that too much heterogeneity will inhibit discussion, especially when there are status distinctions between participants. Kitzinger agrees that status difference between participants may inhibit participation, but this does not mean that people's 'real' thoughts may not emerge; rather that the situation will influence the discussion.

While stating the importance homogeneity in group composition, Krueger acknowledges a creative tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity in any focus group compo-

sition, between encouraging the sharing of information, and ensuring discussion of diverse opinions (Krueger 1988, p. 47). He further acknowledges the difficulties involved in bringing together groups of participants, especially in an organizational context (Krueger 1993), and appreciates the need for compromise in participant selection. While driven primarily by the study purpose, he does acknowledge practical concerns that may influence participant selection.

Interaction

Both identify the importance of interaction in focus groups, but for somewhat different reasons. For Krueger, interaction between participants is a helpful device for encouraging discussion on the topic; it performs a useful instrumental function in gathering data. Kitzinger identifies a more central role for interaction, as *the* central analytical resource; it is intrinsically valuable, not simply an efficient way of gathering data. Consequently, she emphasises the importance of concentrating on interaction between participants in analysis, to the point of making it a defining feature of the technique (Kitzinger 1994).

Generalizability of results – degrees of transferability

Krueger makes the case for the robust external validity of focus group studies following his methodological precepts of segmentation and homogeneity i.e. given an adequate number of homogenous groups with randomly selected participants, study results may be transferable to the population(s) from which the groups were drawn (Krueger 1994). At their best, results may penetrate through to an underlying reality ('what people really think'). In contrast, Kitzinger is more wary of claims of the external validity of findings, asserting a much weaker criterion of transferability, based on theoretical saturation of data segments. The important thing is that the researcher has refined the emergent theoretical categories in sufficient detail for the reader to make a judgement on their credibility; at their best they are rich constructions offering useful conceptual insights (Kitzinger 1995).

Implications for producers and consumers of focus group research

In the light of divergent views, what counts as methodological pragmatism?

It is important not to overstate the differences in statements of 'best practice' concerning focus group design considered above; they are partly heuristic devices, and it is to their very great credit that many commentators remain aware of the practical difficulties involved in designing and running focus

groups. The contingency of advice is often directly acknowledged, and researchers encouraged to learn from the experiences of others without being bound by them (Morgan & Krueger 1993). Further, there is recognition that applied settings call for specific compromises so that pragmatic considerations, reflecting the nature of the setting, availability of participants and resource constraints, will have an impact on any given study. On occasion, the commitment to methodological pragmatism is such that transgressive readings of 'best practice' advice are actively encouraged:

Every decision in the course of designing, conducting and analysing focus group research is interdependent. A 'one size fits all' formula would be no substitute for serious critical engagement with the political, theoretical and practical issues around group work.' (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999: pp. 19–20)

Notwithstanding the welcome methodological pragmatism above, the basis of differences in statements of 'best practice' in focus group design in the rival epistemological assumptions remains. While this precludes the development of any single, universal and definitive set of 'rules' for conducting focus groups, it is not a counsel of despair; the proper purpose of the above analysis is to provide helpful guidance to both producers (researchers) and consumers (readers) of focus group studies and implies a set of duties and responsibilities on the part of both. The claim to rigour in focus group design should therefore be considered in the round; appraisals of the quality of any given focus group study require consideration of the nature of the research question(s) asked and their epistemological assumptions, the contingencies posed within the particular study setting, and the way in which contingencies were accommodated within the study design.

Researchers are required to engage with both theoretical and pragmatic issues in focus group study designs, and provide readers with an insight into their assumptions, deliberations and compromises. Most importantly, this requires clearly formulated research questions, and the epistemological assumptions of the research question(s) are of paramount importance to study design. Claims to be uncovering the substantive views of particular groups of people ('what people think'), informed by a realist epistemology, require a sampling strategy and analytical methods capable of convincing the reader of their external validity and reliability (i.e. they are true and would have been gained by any other competent researcher using the approach). Under such circumstances, failure to segment the sample into analytically important homogeneous groups requires an explanation (the contingencies of the situation; other, conflicting considerations that were considered to be of overriding importance). Similarly, techniques used to increase the reliability of the analysis (such

What is already known about this topic

- Focus groups are widely used in health care and health services research to collect qualitative data.
- While generically concerned with understanding people's lived experiences, qualitative research encompasses a wide range of perspectives on the nature of knowledge (epistemology), both realist (knowledge is pre-existent and awaiting discovery) and constructionist (knowledge is created in situated encounters).
- While there are many statements of 'good practice' in the application of focus groups in social research settings, some of the advice is conflicting.

What this paper adds

- The source of much conflicting advice on 'best practice' in focus group design lies in differing epistemological assumptions, informed by realism and constructivism.
- Realist and contextual constructivist epistemology have implications for focus group design in relation to sampling strategies, group membership, the degree of homogeneity considered optimal and the basis of generalizability of results.
- Producers (researchers) and consumers (readers) of focus group research in applied healthcare settings need to ensure that proper account is taken in study design of the epistemological assumptions of study research questions, as well as the contingencies of particular settings.

as coding by multiple researchers and a discussion of the resolution of any divergences between coders) also need to be considered and plausibly used.

In contrast, research questions that imply an assessment of the way that participants talk about certain topics or make claims about such topics ('*how* people talk about a topic'), informed by a contextual constructivist epistemology, require a clear articulation of researcher perspective and need to convey a sense of the construction and negotiation of meanings between participants. Inter-coder reliability is not an issue here; what is required is use of all the relevant data to provide a rich and convincing analysis.

Conclusion

This discussion has outlined the importance of the epistemological assumptions of the research question(s) in the design of focus group research. Above all else, the mark of quality in

focus group research is to provide a defensible strategy based on a design consistent with both the epistemological basis of the research question(s), on one hand, and the unique constraints posed by the particular research setting on the other.

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