Chapter 8
Critical Perspectives on Using Interviews and Focus Groups

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Chapter Outline

In this chapter we look at the use of both interviews and focus groups within social science and linguistics research. Working on the basis that they are closely related methods, we begin by examining the arguments, put forward by a number of critical commentators, that they are fundamentally flawed in offering up artificial or contaminated data. In line with those criticisms, we agree that there are some serious problems involved where they are deployed and understood – in traditional terms - as means of mining particular 'nuggets of truth'. Rather, following a more constructionist stance, we recommend that interviews and focus groups are treated as collaborative or interactional events in which the interviewer or moderator plays an important, participative role. So conceived, we argue that there is still a legitimate case for employing either of these research methods – and we end by providing a critical review of what are widely considered to be their primary strengths and weaknesses.

Introduction

In recent years it has been claimed that the inhabitants of the Western world (at least) are living in 'interview societies' (see Atkinson and Silverman, 1997 p. 309). In Britain, for example, by the time a person reaches adulthood, it is very likely that they

will have had some first-hand experience of being interviewed – in either 'careers' interviews at school and/ or, of course, later on in interviews for jobs. But, more to the point, the claim rests on the assumption that, as a third party, the typical adult will have been witness to hundreds, if not thousands, of interviews broadcast by the media, in things like news and current affairs programmes, sports' reports and in feature articles found in newspapers, magazines and online platforms. Given the reach of globalised media, one could say that interviews are now familiar to people all around the world as a valued source of common interest. It is generally assumed that the main benefit of interviews is that they give us privileged access to a person; that they allow us an intimate – or 'first-hand' – sense of what, say, a politician or a celebrity both thinks and is like as a person. By comparison, wider society is nothing like as familiar with focus groups. A person could watch television non-stop for weeks or months without ever seeing one. Likewise, readers are unlikely to find a journalist reporting explicitly on a focus group meeting in a newspaper or magazine article. That's not to suggest, however, that the general public are oblivious to the existence of focus groups. Many people will recognise the term, and some may have even taken part in one (organised, perhaps, by a marketing organisation or a political party), but they still do not enjoy the same degree of presence as interviews, in ordinary, everyday culture.

Within the world of academia, however, the use of both interviews and focus groups is widespread. Over the course of the last few decades, their employment within the Social and Human Sciences has increased significantly, partly as a consequence of a more general shift from quantitative towards qualitative methods (in response to a growing disenchantment with positivistic, laboratory-style experiments – see

Armistead, 1974; Hepburn, 2003; Pancer, 1997 for a discussion of the so-called 'crisis debates'). Within Psychology, one of the principal drivers of that shift – Rom Harré – once came out with a memorable injunction: that the basic principle for any social research should be to 'treat people as if they were human beings' (Harré and Secord, 1972). Harré's point was that people are not robots; their behaviour is *meaningful* rather than mechanical. So instead of concocting all kinds of weird and wonderful experiments in attempting to track down the causes of human behaviour, 'why don't we simply *talk* to people?', he said 'Ask them to account for their own actions because', he went on, 'it is very likely that people will be able to provide us with good or, at least, plausible explanations'. Since then, it seems that many social researchers have opted to speak to those in whom their interests lie. Not only has focus group methodology become popular within many social research projects (in education: e.g. Lederman 1990; linguistics: e.g. Myers 1998; health research: e.g. Barbour 2010, Kitzinger 1995, Powell and Single 1996; feminist research: e.g. Wilkinson 2004; Jowett and O'Toole 2006, and in cross-disciplinary research) but, in some quarters of the academy, interviews have emerged as *the* method of choice (Potter and Hepburn, 2005a – see also Wray and Bloomer, 2012, chapter 14).

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Given the above, it should come as no surprise to find that there are a good number of available texts providing guidance on how to conduct interviews and focus groups and to analyse the resulting data (see the end of the chapter for some useful suggestions). What this also means, of course, is that there is not much point in us dedicating a whole chapter to providing yet another step-by-step or practical guide. So what we want to do here instead is to concentrate on some ongoing debates which raise pertinent questions about the merits or value of conducting language research using

data generated by these closely related means. We want to examine why it is that some language researchers (e.g. Edwards and Stokoe, 2004; Potter and Hepburn, 2005a and b; 2012; Silverman, 2014; 2013) are arguing that we should move away from a reliance on these particular methods of data collection. In preparation for that task, it is necessary for us first to review and interrogate some of the basic assumptions concerning research interviews and focus groups.

1. The Logic of the Research Interview / Focus Group

Despite the obvious etymology of the term, most *interviews* are understood, not as reciprocal or two-way exchanges, but as a mechanism by which one party (i.e. the interviewer) extracts vital information from another (i.e. the interviewee). As Patton (1980) explains, they are usually seen as a means of accessing stuff that cannot be got at by direct observation. So, for example, in the context of a job interview, the series of questions put by the interviewing panel will be designed to elicit all kinds of information; including factual details about such things as the applicants' formal qualifications and previous work experience, but also more intangible phenomena like their motives for applying and enthusiasm for the post in question. As already mentioned, the interview is seen as providing us with a *window* onto the mind or 'life-world' (see Brinkman and Kvale, 2015) of the interviewee. Of course, any interviewing panel worth its salt will be aware that the characters parading before it will be trying to cast themselves in a particular light; but it will be assumed, nonetheless, that the central business at hand is, in theory at least, a basic fact-finding mission.

According to David Silverman (2014), these same assumptions underpin most research within the social and human sciences that uses either interviews or focus groups as the primary means of data collection. Of the many thousands of studies that have done so, the majority presuppose that these tools are (at least ideally) neutral devices, facilitating the assembly of so many facts. Accordingly, the main methodological concerns expressed in many of these studies are about ensuring the neutrality of the interviewer or 'moderator' – through the eradication of leading or ambiguous questions and through the standardisation of their delivery. One of the ways of responding to these concerns has been the development of the so-called 'structured' interview. Here the interviewer's task is to work through a series of pre-scripted questions, ensuring that both the order and the wording used is identical on each and every occasion. In many structured interviews the questions are 'closed' or restricted in terms of how an interviewee can respond – either by using 'yes/no' formats, multiple choice questions or rating scales of one kind or another. Within more semi- or unstructured interviews (see Dörnyei, 2007; Hughes, 1996 for further discussion of these differences), the process is more free-flowing and indeterminate. As with focus groups, in these cases, an interviewer/ moderator may possess a set of guide questions, but they would not usually seek to impose them. Instead, they are encouraged to improvise; allowing the interview or focus group to follow whatever course it takes. Nevertheless, the interviewer or moderator is often implored still to remain neutral during the data gathering process; to withhold their own opinions vis-à-vis the questions and to remain impassive in the face of their respondents' answers. Common to both of these approaches, then, is the assumption that interview/focus group data are essentially free-standing or independent of the (discourse of the)

interviewer/ moderator. This is evident, not only in terms of the appeals to interviewers/moderators to remain neutral (i.e. to have no bearing or impact upon what a respondent might say), but also in the fact that, in the presentation of empirical data, the contributions of the convenor are often omitted or ignored.

1.1 Recent Challenges

During the early 1990s, however, a number of academics began to raise questions about the validity of these underlying assumptions; and so too, therefore, about the legitimacy of interviews and focus groups as prime social research tools. In this regard, one of the landmark publications was an article written by two anthropologists, Lucy Suchman and Brigitte Jordan (Suchman and Jordan, 1990), which drew attention to some of the unfortunate consequences that may arise from failing to understand interviews, in particular, as a form of social *interaction*. More specifically, their article looked at some of the misunderstandings that can accrue when interviewers adhere strictly to a fixed schedule of questions. A short article by Antaki (2000) can help to illustrate the kind of point they were making. In the extract reproduced below (see Extract One – NB see end of the chapter for a key to the transcription notation), a psychologist is seen posing a question in a way that conforms to a very common 'structured' survey method. The interviewee ('Anne') is given a range of potential answers from which to select her response ('never'/ 'sometimes'/ 'usually'); but, as we can see from the transcript, she doesn't wait for the provision of the three standardised options. Instead, she provides a response immediately after the completion of the initial question (i.e. at the end of line 2).

Seemingly undeterred, the psychologist forges ahead with the set protocol. On three successive occasions Anne denies that she feels uncomfortable 'in social situations', before she eventually comes out with a different response (in line 9) – which just happens to coincide with the psychologist coming to the end of that protocol. 'Sometimes I do' Anne says – which is then summarily accepted and translated into an 'equivalent' numerical score.

Extract One

1	Psy:	d'you feel out of place (0.4) out an about
2		in soc<u>ial</u> (0.2) situations
3	Anne:	n[o
4	Psy:	[Anne (0.2) <u>ne</u>ver?
5	Anne:	no
6	Psy:	sometimes?
7	Anne:	°no°
8	Psy:	or usually
9	Anne:	<u>some</u>times I do:
10	Psy:	y<u>ea</u>h? (0.4) OK we'll put a two down for that one then (*sniff*)

(from Antaki, 2000: 242-43)

The question is, of course, what are we to make of those three previous denials? Was it prudent of the psychologist to ignore them in this way? The answer, surely, is no. But, as Antaki (and Suchman and Jordan) point out, the source of this seemingly fundamental error is that the researcher fails to appreciate the encounter as a stretch of dialogue. In this case, for example, Antaki explains that the psychologist fails to

appreciate how, in everyday conversational interactions, if a person is repeatedly asked the same question, they will usually infer that their previous responses are wrong or somehow inadequate. The normal response, therefore, would be to come up with a new or different answer. For many linguists, it is precisely these responses (by Anne in the example above) that would constitute a topic of investigation (with CA analysts, for example, focusing specifically on aspects of this interaction such as sequencing, adjacency pairs, or pauses) – more on this below.

The case for treating interview data as social interaction was given significant further impetus with the publication of James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's book *The Active Interview* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The crucial contribution made by these two sociologists was to apply various social constructionist insights, regarding the nature of language, to the consideration of interviewing. In particular, drawing upon the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), Garfinkel (1967) and Cicourel (1964), they tried to emphasize that language is a form of social *practice*; that it doesn't just describe a world 'out there', but rather, that it is a means of *acting* in the world. Additionally, they argued that language has a *constitutional* as well as a representational function; that both the interviewee and the interviewer are, during the real time of the interview itself, in the process of creating knowledge and understanding. As they put it:

> Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably *active*. Each is involved in meaning-making work. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter.

> Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasures of information awaiting excavation – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers.
>
> (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 4)

In keeping with a constructivist stance, Holstein and Gubrium saw interview discourse as their central *topic* of interest – rather than as a simple *resource* (i.e. as a route through to the 'treasures' mentioned above). That said, they maintained, nonetheless, a distinction between what they referred to as the 'hows' and the 'whats' of meaning or knowledge construction; in other words, a difference between the *performative* and the *referential* aspects of discourse. More specifically still, Holstein and Gubrium claimed that it is possible to disentangle – or at least keep simultaneous track of – what people are both *doing* and talking *about* when they take part in an interview (or, for that matter, in any other kind of verbal interaction). So, in Gubrium's own work looking at the life histories of nursing home residents (Gubrium, 1993), attention was paid, not just to how the residents' discourse was designed both to respond to and function within the local context of the interview itself, but also to what their discourse said about their actual lives, their sense of self and so on and so forth. In that respect, Holstein and Gubrium's position echoes that of other discourse theorists, such as Freeman (1993: 16), who described the analytical challenge as one of '[trying] to maintain and embrace [the] primacy of the word without losing the world in the process'.

There are others, however, who take a very different stance in relation to these issues. Silverman (2013), for example, argues that any data emanating from interviews or

focus groups is ‘got up’ or ‘manufactured’, and should only be used as a last resort. Likewise, Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn (2005a and b) regard these forms of data as contrived and so compromised; preferring, instead, what they, and others, refer to as *naturalistic* or *naturally occurring* data. Previously, Potter (1996) has suggested that discourse analysts ought to be able to apply what he called the ‘dead social scientist test’ as a means of assessing the appropriateness (or otherwise) of their data. For him, naturally occurring data emerge out of social interactions that would have taken place even if the researcher set to gather that data had been run over and killed some time earlier in the day. Needless to say, interview and focus group data tend, therefore, to fail Potter’s test – insofar as they are prompted by the initiative of the social researcher her or himself. Indeed, for Potter, the only truly legitimate grounds for using data from either interviews or focus groups is when those very fora are, themselves, the topic of one’s analysis. For instance, in his work with Claudia Puchta (Puchta and Potter, 1999; 2004), the meaning and knowledge-producing practices of focus groups were the object of study. So, for Potter, interviews and focus groups can supply us with ‘natural’ data, but only in these very particular circumstances.

According to Potter and Hepburn (2005a and b) there are several problems inherent in using ‘manufactured’ data, the most serious of which derive from the fact that, in establishing any interview or focus group, the social researcher sets the whole agenda. Volunteers are recruited, in the first instance, to talk about a given theme or topic. As such, they will usually come along on the understanding that they are to speak on behalf of whatever group or category of person is the focus of the researcher’s interest (i.e. as an immigrant, single mother, school governor etc.). What is more, the researcher’s concerns and concepts will also tend to be fore-grounded, as embodied in

the scripting of the questions. The authors claim that all these things put unnecessary constrains upon the parameters of what gets said and that they also tend to draw people into talking about the world around them in strange and artificial ways.

Now, before proceeding any further, it might be worth trying to provide an illustration of at least some of these issues. To that end, we have chosen some data that comes from a series of interviews conducted with a small group of sixth form (i.e. 17-18 years) students who, at the time (during the early 1990s), were attending a single sex boys' school in the U.K. (see Wetherell, 1994 for a full account of this project). The data that constitute Extract Two come from a discussion about heterosexual relationships. Just prior to this stretch of talk, Phil had been recounting a story about a weekend in which his friend (Aaron) had purportedly 'struck it lucky' with a number of young women. Indeed, it was claimed that he had 'got off' with four in one night. Line 73 sees Phil bringing that story to an end.

Extract Two

73 Phil: So that like took me aback somewhat (0.3) so that was
74 a good weekend for you
75 (.)
76 Nigel: Is that good?
77 Phil: Well in his books yes you know=
78 Aaron: =hhhh.h [yeah]
79 Phil: [The thing] is you got so much stick for it
80 Aaron: Well yeah I could take the stick because it was
81 almost like (0.2) a good ego trip when everyone was

82 taking the stick oh you got off with her ah ha ha
83 yep I did so what's your problem? [Oh, er..errr]
84 Nigel: [Hm mm]
85 Aaron: [Errr]
86 Phil: [None of them] were particularly pikey so you were
87 alright really
88 Aaron: No (.) they weren't .hh none of them were like majorly
89 pikey .hh (.) one or two perhaps could have like
90 (.)
91 Phil: I don't know I don't know I think I know this Cathy
92 bird I know Jenny I know Cathy thing I don't know who
93 the other one was and neither do you so can't tell=
94 Nigel: =Yeah I mean I wasn't sort of saying is four in two
95 days good I mean it's impressive [you know]
96 Aaron: [hh [hhh] hh
97 Phil: [hhhhh] hhhh
98 Nigel: But I me:an like (.) it presu:mes that erm that's:: a
99 creditable thing (.) yeah? Is it?
100 (0.2)
101 Phil: ºNo because you're on the moral low groundº
102 Aaron: But I don't mi↑nd being on the moral [low ground]
103 Phil: [Oh no you don't]
104 mind I I it didn't fuss me at all you know and I wasn't I
105 thought it was quite (.) it was quite impressive you
106 know you're sort of thinking that's shocking because it

107 never happens to me um:: .h hhh

108 Aaron: Hhhh

There are, of course, many things that one could say about this extract; but, for now, we want to focus upon just three aspects. First of all, this slice of interaction, like all of the interviews in this project, was framed in terms of the topic of masculinity. As a consequence, the participants are all being invited to speak as members of that gender category. As it happens, the 'jury' still appears to be 'out' as to whether or not gender is an omni-relevant feature of all discursive encounters (see Garfinkel, 1967; Klein, 2011; Land and Kitzinger, 2011; Schegloff, 1997; Speer and Stokoe, 2011; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; Weatherall, 2002); but in any case, in instances such as this, it is clear that speaking as a gendered subject is a structural requirement of the task. In other words, it's not something that the participants could easily avoid. The second feature worthy of comment takes us back to a point made earlier – regarding the conventional understanding of repeated questions. Across lines 76 and 98/99, Nigel (in?)effectively poses the same question twice over. Little wonder, then, that Phil comes back with two different answers. As is evident from the transcript, the second formulation of the question is an attempted clarification (or 'repaired' version) of that posed on line 76. But, as Potter and Hepburn (2005a) pointed out, it would be unwise to take Phil's answer on line 101 as the more reliable (or authentic) opinion – because, in effect, the shape of the dialogue makes it difficult for him to just repeat his previous answer. The third aspect of the data is also concerned with line 101. Note how *quietly* it is produced. Moreover, it is delivered in a somewhat monotonic fashion. Listening to the tape, one gets the distinct impression (particularly as an experienced teacher) that what we have here is akin to a bit of *seminar* interaction;

where Phil is supplying what he imagines is the 'right' or 'sought after' response. How much more dangerous, therefore, to presume that this is what Phil really thinks!

Such an illustration allows us to appreciate better the force of Potter and Hepburn's arguments, as we can begin to see how, in various ways, the framing of an interview or focus group can impact on one's data. The idea of either method as a neutral mechanism for generating data is thoroughly unsettled. Instead, we come to see interview and focus group talk more as forms of 'institutionalised' discourse (see Heritage, 1997), rather than identical to the kind of material that emerges over the phone, down at the pub or in the privacy of people's own homes. However, are Potter and Hepburn (as well as Silverman) entirely justified in treating interview and focus group data as fatally compromised or second-rate (in comparison with 'naturalistic' data)? Should we, in effect, just write them off as a 'bad job' – or are there any positive reasons for wanting to hang on to these most popular of research methods?

1.2 In Defence of Interviews and Focus Groups

Of course, one of Potter and Hepburn's central objections regarding interviews and focus groups - that such events are 'flooded' by the interviewer's/ moderator's research agenda – has often been seen as one of their great strengths or advantages. If a person is interested in analysing how people perform greetings or negotiate invitations, it's all very well using (naturalistic) data taken from, say, a telephone exchange. But if one is interested in looking at people's understandings of, say, the British royal family (see Billig, 1991) or of 'lad mags' (see Benwell, 2003) or of

career choices (see Litosseliti and Leadbeater, 2013), then things aren't always that simple. One might record thousands of hours of casual conversation without encountering even a single snippet on any of these topics. Silverman (2013) has suggested that, with a bit of thought and imagination, it is often easy to solve these problems of access – and that researchers should resist falling back on the interview (or focus group) option. But it's hard to ignore the economies made by setting the agenda – in terms of time, money and patience! What these examples also suggest is the fact that interviews and focus groups can come into their own, as useful research methods, when, in Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) terms, we are interested in what, as opposed to how, questions (see also Smith, 2005). In other words, they can be seen, for the purposes of some research projects, as very useful in examining the content, as opposed to the form of people's talk (but see below). Potter and Hepburn (2005b) have argued that the analysis of what people are *doing*, interactionally, with their discourse should come before any consideration of what they are talking 'about' (see also Wooffitt, 2005) – and it's a point worth considering (not least because our idea of what that something is may change as a result). But that doesn't mean that an analysis of the performative dimensions of language displaces or exhausts all issues of 'reference'. Exploring the limits of the 'sayable' in terms of such things as human sexuality (Hollway, 1984), 'race' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992) or feminism (Edley and Wetherell, 2001) is not the same as analysing what people are *doing* via the invocation of those different discourses. As it turns out, interviews and focus groups seem to be well suited to exploring both of these angles. Within Linguistics, some researchers may use interviews and focus groups to investigate the 'what' or content of people's responses or narratives (e.g. Wagner and Wodak, 2006; Anderson, 2008); others will want to explore a web of responses and 'how' these are pursued, grounded,

clarified and inter-linked through group interaction (e.g. Petraki, 2005; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006); and others focus explicitly on the interplay between these aspects (e.g. McEntee-Atalianis and Litosseliti, 2017; Litosseliti, 2006). A final reason for exercising caution over the dismissal of interviews and focus groups centres on the legitimacy of the very distinction between 'natural(istic)' and contrived or 'got up' data. As Susan Speer (2002) has pointed out, discourse analysts have been at the forefront of attempts to highlight the *indexical* or context-specific nature of spoken (and other discourse) data. In studying the 'expression' of attitudes (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), memories (Middleton and Edwards, 1990) and emotions (Edwards, 1997), they have shown how none of these activities involves the simple reporting of some prior state of mind (or 'heart'); but that all such accounts are designed in ways that are sensitive to the contexts in which they make their appearance. In other words, they have shown that all discourse data is 'got up' for something; there is no such thing as a context-free domain; no pure realm in which people simply 'tell it as it is'. According to this view, the discourse stemming from interviews and focus groups is no more contaminated or compromised than any other data set – and, as such, it should continue to be respected.

In summary, it would appear that there are some clear grounds for seeing both interviews and focus groups as legitimate and valuable research tools. On the proviso that they are understood as interactional events (rather than a simple mechanism for 'harvesting' people's ideas and opinions), they can be used as a basis for examining a whole range of issues – from the way that accounts are designed to do a range of social activities to looking at both the shape and limits of people's understandings of the world. Moreover, in coming to terms with the idea of these methods as forms of

social interaction, a fresh perspective is opened up regarding the role of the convenor. Instead of conceiving of them as a potential liability and putting into practice all kinds of measures aimed at limiting or nullifying their impact, they become re-specified as another participant whose contributions are also open to analytical scrutiny. In considering Extract Two, for example, there's nothing essentially wrong in the fact that Nigel (as interviewer) queries the valorisation of male promiscuity evident in Phil's previous narrative. In no sense is he speaking out of turn. Of course, the fact that the query came from the interviewer – rather than a member of Phil's own peer group – could be significant; that is, it might have an impact upon the shape of the talk that follows. But it doesn't *invalidate* those turns as an object of interest; indeed, it could become the focus of one's analysis. Moreover, as an intervention, it can help us to see other important things – such as the rhetorical resources that may be brought to bear in the defence of what has become here, temporarily at least, a form of 'troubled' identity (see Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2007).

2. Going Ahead with Interviews and Focus Groups

Having given them, in effect, the 'green light', it's appropriate now to move on to consider the conducting of both interviews and focus groups. As we've already mentioned, our intention is not to provide a step-by-step guide to either methodology, rather our aim is to raise some of the issues involved in their use as well as to highlight some of their particular strengths and weaknesses. As is implied by the very framing of this chapter, interviews and focus groups are seen as closely related. Some

researchers maintain that they are similar but nevertheless distinctive (see Dörnyei, 2007), whereas others tend to treat one (i.e. focus groups) as a sub-category of the other (e.g. as in the phrase 'focus group interviews'). To us, they are best thought of as two related forms of practice that often overlap or bleed into each other. In the first section of what follows, we'd like to say a little bit more about the nature of focus groups (as the less well known-about methodology) and how they might differ, if at all, from research interviews. We will then move on to consider the pros and cons of both interviews and focus groups.

2.1 A Focus on Focus Groups

The most obvious feature of focus groups is given away by the very name; focus groups always feature multiple respondents (typically 6-10). Interviews, on the other hand, can be one-to-one affairs – although it is by no means unusual for researchers to interview several people at once. The other half of the label – 'focus' – refers to the fact that, in focus groups, talk constitutes a collective activity centred around a small number of issues (such as debating particular questions, reading a text etc.), but, once again, this tends not to distinguish them too clearly from interviews, particularly those that are topic driven. One of the key claims made about focus groups is that they are genuinely *interactive*, in the sense that a group takes shape by – indeed depends on – the synergistic dynamics of participants responding to and building on others' views. However, it is important to recognise that this is also a feature of many group interviews, where the aim (and hope) is for a dialogue to take off between the participants – instead of every interaction either issuing from or being directed

towards the interviewer. What this gives both focus groups and group interviews is a more 'natural' and unpredictable feel, where participants are influencing each other and being influenced by others (Krueger and Casey, 2015; Morgan 1997; Gibbs 1997). What this also means, of course, is that, compared to *structured* interviews, the moderator / interviewer in these more group-based settings has less control over the research agenda. The person convening the session may initiate topics through the provision of specific questions, but the ensuing talk may spiral off in all kinds of directions and down different kinds of avenues. Importantly, this is usually seen as a strength of both focus groups and group-based interviews – particularly within more ethnographic kinds of studies (where a priority is placed upon encouraging the emergence of participants' concerns and issues) and amongst feminist academics (who have been at the forefront of questioning the power relationships that exist between the researcher and the researched – see, e.g. Wilkinson, 2004, 1999).

One characteristic feature of focus group research is the use of multiple meetings – although, again, this doesn't mark a clear point of distinction from interviews. Typically, each group represents a different or contrasting constituency. For example, in a study on the topic of animals and biotechnology, the researcher may convene one group of farmers, another group of hunters, a third group of pet owners and a fourth of animal rights activists. Through working with these different groups, such a study may be able to shed some light on a 'communication or understanding gap between groups or categories of people' (Krueger 1994: 44) – as might also be the case, for example, between policy makers and the public, physicians and patients, employers and employees and so on and so forth. To take another example, a study looking at whether minority languages should be used in nursery schools may use contrasting

groups: minority language speaking parents of children who did/did not attend schools that used the language, nursery school teachers from ethnically mixed/ unmixed areas and so on (Wray and Bloomer, 2012). Although less common, it is also not unknown for the 'same' focus group to meet on more than one occasion (i.e. either in terms of actual personnel or in terms of the particular constituency). This may be deemed necessary because the outcome of a single session may not be seen as sufficient, or because researchers wish to hear from several such 'representative' users. But, even in such cases, researchers will generally assume (and explicitly acknowledge) the fact that each focus group meeting in a series will vary from the next. One group may turn out to be exciting and energetic, another may be much more quiet or low-key, while another may be affected in unexpected ways by a dominant or 'difficult' participant. Experience has shown that it is extremely rare that the same 'topic guide' will lead different focus groups (however defined) down the exact same conversational pathways.

In terms of selecting participants, focus group researchers have generally placed more emphasis, than those conducting interviews, on finding 'homogeneous, like-minded individuals from the same gendered, ethnic, sexual, economic or cultural background' (Kitzinger 1995: 300 - although, as Kitzinger goes on to suggest, it is often beneficial to have participants from diverse backgrounds, to increase the chances of seeing the emergence of and interaction between various different perspectives). Of course there will be many subtle distinctions within each 'category' of participants – such as social and occupational status, income, educational level, or expertise – and, insofar as they are perceived by participants themselves, these can sometimes make people 'hesitant to share' or 'defer their opinions' to those perceived to be more knowledgeable or

influential (Krueger and Casey 2015). For different reasons, writers of the step-by-step guides sometimes caution against including friends, spouses, relatives and colleagues in the same focus group, as they can affect group cohesion and inhibit other participants by, for example, entering into essentially private conversations (Templeton 1987, Litosseliti 2003). Familiarity can both promote and limit self-disclosure and also discourage disagreement, as interaction is likely to rely more on past experiences, shared or assumed knowledge (Myers 1998).

Finally, as we've already seen, in focus group research, the notion of the 'interviewer' gives way to that of a 'moderator'. Implicit within this role is the idea that the moderator's job is to facilitate and guide the participants' discussion without themselves playing too active a part. It is assumed that a good moderator will keep the discussion 'on track', without inhibiting the flow of ideas, and that they will ensure that all group participants have opportunities to contribute to the discussion. However, as we've also seen, once we re-specify the focus group as a locus of knowledge *creation* or *construction* – rather than as a means of data collection - then the presence and impact of the moderator (on the data) becomes more a matter of academic interest than a 'concern' that has to be acknowledged and 'allowed for'. As mentioned above, it is assumed that the moderator is another participant whose presence, contributions, perceived background etc. influence the group discussion; and that different data are produced by different degrees of structure and flexibility in moderating (e.g. allowing for topics to be revised, and deciding what contributions to pursue in more depth and detail – see also Myers 2007). Similarly, there are countless other factors that influence the amount, kind and quality of interaction in an interview or focus group: the location, the seating and recording arrangements, the presence of observers,

perceptions of confidentiality and other ethical issues (see Litosseliti 2003 for a discussion).

2.2 Interviews and focus groups: assessing the pros and cons

One of the great advantages of interviews and focus groups is their tremendous flexibility. On the one hand, they can be used as the primary source of data. For instance, Myers and Macnaghten (1998) used focus groups to explore how people talk about environmental sustainability; similarly, Edley and Wetherell (1999) used interviews to look at how young men constructed the role of the father. On the other hand, they can be employed just as easily as *supplementary* sources of data, or, indeed, in *multi-method* studies (which combine different data gathering methods – see Morgan, 1997), as in Litosseliti's 2002 study of focus group argumentation on the topic of marriage, alongside analysis of relevant debates in the British media.

Within any given study, both focus group and interviews can be useful at different stages of the project. One of the ways in which they can be used is towards the end of a study - in assessing, for example, the development, effectiveness or impact of a programme of activities. However, some academics feel that both methodologies truly come into their own more at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a research project - in the generating of 'hypotheses' (NB loosely defined – see Kitzinger, 1994). For example, Skeggs, Moran and Truman (1998-2000) conducted focus groups meetings with gay men, lesbians and single women in city and rural areas, to understand these groups' different perceptions of violence and space. The outcome of

these meetings didn't, in itself, form the 'findings' of their study; rather, it helped them in formulating and designing a subsequent research programme.

Many of the advantages of both interviews and focus groups - over other research methods – can be gleaned from the paragraphs above. Specifically, they are ways of providing multiple views on any given subject or topic; they encourage the exploration of 'members' or 'participants' (i.e. *emic*) own experiences or 'life-world' and, as such they have the potential to generate a sense of *empowerment* for those taking part (Goss and Leinbach 1996). Typically they can help 'shift the balance of power away from the researcher [and] towards the research participants' (Wilkinson, 1999: 64), in allowing participants to contribute to the research agenda (particularly if they come from minority, under-represented, or disadvantaged groups). However, focus groups and interviews can have a range of other, more practical, benefits. For instance, they are useful in obtaining information from illiterate communities; they can be used to gather data on activities that span many days or weeks; and, in the case of virtual focus groups, they can facilitate the participation of people (e.g. busy professionals, government officials) who are hard to reach or to get together in one place, or who are unwilling to contribute in person (e.g. on sensitive or controversial topics).

Alongside the above, there seems to be a general consensus in key discussions of the merits of both focus groups and interviews (see Krueger and Casey 2015, Hughes 1996, , Race *et al.* 1994, Barbour 2008, Morgan and Krueger 1993, Powell and Single 1996, Wray and Bloomer 2012), that they are particularly useful for:

- Discovering new information and consolidating old or established knowledge
- Obtaining different perspectives on the 'same' topic (sometimes described as multivocality) in participants' own words
- Gaining information on participants' views, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and perceptions on a topic; 'why' people think or feel the way they do
- Examining participants' shared understandings of everyday life, and the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups
- Brainstorming and generating ideas
- Gaining insights into the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation (group dynamics)
- Generating a sense of rapport between the researcher(s) and the researched

(adapted from Litosseliti, 2003: 18)

Within Linguistics projects and in disciplines where language plays an important role, interviews and focus groups have been used to do all of the above in relation to a range of different topics: people's attitudes towards language in general; people's attitudes towards particular language aspects (e.g. accents and dialects, minority languages, specific language use, language teaching and learning); people's perceptions of a linguistic experience (see for example Kitzinger, 1994, 1995 on audiences' perception of media messages around HIV/Aids); and people's discursive construction of self and identity (for example, gender identity – e.g. McEntee-Atalianis and Litosseliti, 2017, national identity – e.g. Wodak *et al.*, 1999, or ethnic identity – e.g. De Fina, 2007). A common feature of most of these projects is an interest in the way that the groups interact. Group discussions go through stages of 'forming', 'storming', 'norming', 'performing' and 'adjourning' (Tuckman, 1965;

Tuckman and Jensen, 1977), during which participants variously negotiate opinions, arguments, responses, consensus and disagreement. In other words, there is a whole range of fairly unpredictable group dynamics. In relation to focus groups, Stewart et al. (2007) argue that the direct, open-response interaction among participants and between the moderator and the participants allows for a whole range and variety of responses, probing, connections between points made, nuances and deeper levels of meaning. So again we can see that interaction in such groups is not just important for what it tells us about people's views (or their language), but also because it involves participants responding to each other, while considering, reconsidering or re-evaluating their own understandings and experiences (Kitzinger 1994, 1995). Meanings are constantly negotiated, renegotiated and co-constructed in interaction with others in the group. Common sense leads us to imagine that participants will come to such meetings 'armed' (or 'minded' perhaps) with certain opinions, however, experience in conducting both focus groups and (group) interviews reveals that 'opinions' are emergent and dynamic, rather than established and fixed (see Agar and MacDonald, 1995, for an example). Whilst this may prove disconcerting to a researcher determined to 'pin down' what a particular group or individual thinks (NB which is the way that focus groups have been traditionally used within commercial organisations), it will seem a blessing for the linguist who both expects, and is interested in, those very dynamics. As Myers and Macnaghten (1999) put it (in relation to focus group research):

> Focus groups offer a practical way of eliciting such complex talk, and in analysing the conversation we acknowledge the situatedness of opinion, and recover some of the richness and complexity with which people

> express, explore and use opinions. […] Focus groups are typically designed to elicit something less fixed, definite and coherent that lies beneath attitudes, something that the researcher may call feelings, or responses, or experiences, or world-views. [They also] provide richer accounts of how people understand particular issues in the context of wider social concerns. […] The great strength of focus groups as a technique is in the liveliness, complexity and unpredictability of the talk, where participants can make sudden connections that confuse the researchers' coding but open up their thinking. (p. 174-5)

It should go without saying that some of the benefits of interviews and focus groups can be re-construed as weaknesses or problems. As we've just noted, their open-endedness and unpredictability can be a source of dismay, as much as a source of delight. This might be particularly true of those who see interviews and focus groups as a quick and easy method for testing hypotheses (see Merton, 1987) – a perception that may stem both from the sheer ubiquity of interviews and from the legacy of focus group use in time-intensive marketing or advertising projects. In contrast, however, a considerable amount of time and skill has to go into conducting these types of projects. As Steward and Shamdasani (1990) point out, rather than being ad hoc or atheoretical exercises, interviews and focus groups should be both theoretically grounded and rigorously planned. Equal care and attention should be dedicated to the actual conducting of these events and to the analysis of any resulting data (see Krueger and Casey (2015), Bloor et al (2001) and Litosseliti (2003) for a discussion of these stages). That said, as above, it is useful to list some of the more commonly mentioned limitations of interviews and focus groups as they appear in the literature

(see Krueger and Casey 2015, , Morgan 1997, 1993, Gibbs, 1997, Litosseliti, 2003). They include:

- Bias and manipulation, due to the interviewer / moderator leading participants directly in terms of what they say in the meetings, or as a result of participants saying what they think the convenor (or others in the group) want to hear.
- 'False' consensus, which may be the result of some participants with strong personalities and/or similar views dominating the discussion, while others remaining silent.
- Other effects of group dynamics – such as group polarisation (see Myers and Lamm 1976) – where a group may respond collectively in a more exaggerated way than any individual member.
- Problems with making generalisations from these groups to a wider population.
- They are intensive in terms of both time and resources and usually require a high level of commitment from one's participants

(adapted from Litosseliti, 2003: 21)

Some of these problems are practical issues that can be addressed through careful planning and skilful moderation. For example, to address the issue of dominant and retiring participants, the interviewer/ moderator can establish a code of conduct at the start of the discussions, such as asking people not to talk at the same time and to respect each others' views. It is also possible, through the use of eye contact and gentle probing, to minimise the influence of dominating participants and to encourage

the other parties. The careful design of the questions and topics to be developed during the discussion will help the interviewer/ moderator to steer clear of leading or loaded questions (e.g. 'yes/no' and 'why' questions) and promote a balance of contributions among the different participants (for discussions of questions, see Litosseliti 2003; Stewart et al. 2007; Puchta and Potter 1999). Finally, many social researchers will 'check' their practices and interpretations through the use of pilot groups, an observer or assistant present during their group discussions, and/ or via post-discussion interviews with the participants themselves.

However, we should emphasise that most of the 'problems' listed above are limitations only if one assumes, in the first place, that it is possible to achieve a veridical or authentic account of a person's opinion (which treats such 'things' as stable or fixed), or that the 'name of the game' is to identify a representative sample of participants whose views can be safely generalized to a wider population. Again, as Silverman (2013) points out, this would be to adopt a 'positivist' approach to one's research data – which stands at odds with the more 'constructionist' framework assumed by many contemporary practitioners (including us), which treats the interview or focus group as a space in which opinions are (re)constituted, rather than simply reported. Contrary to the positivist position, the constructivist researcher uses focus groups and interviews, not to achieve a representative 'sample' of talk, but to create bodies of data that are indicative or illustrative of particular social phenomena. Likewise, in relation to the 'charges' of bias and manipulation, the constructivist researcher sees interviews and focus groups as offering insights into what participants *say* they believe or do - not into what they 'actually' think or do. This is not to imply, however, that there is necessarily a clear distinction between what a person says and

thinks - indeed, constructionists have been at the forefront of challenging precisely this divide (see Billig 1987; Burr 2003; Edwards 1997). So whilst the positivist researcher may fret about participants telling the interviewer/ moderator what they think she or he wants to hear, or about participants not wanting to disclose certain information about themselves or their lives (because they perceive it to be too personal or embarrassing), this tends not to be such a concern for the constructionist. Many would maintain that there is no 'underlying truth' that may be hidden or concealed. Instead, they'd tend to treat any or all resulting data as designed for the context in which it emerges. In other words, the constructivist researcher expects their participants to tailor their discourse in response to the demands of the situation.

As we can see, many of the most commonly understood limitations of interviews and focus groups involve them being either theorized or implemented in ways that are somehow problematic: by treating the interviewer/ moderator as 'neutral'; by ignoring the many contextual parameters that help to shape any discourse; by taking what people say at face value; by not placing enough emphasis on the interaction and group dynamics; and by generalising or trying to quantify the data produced. What we are promoting here is a different epistemological warrant for both interview and focus group data, in response to observations (see, for example, Wilkinson, 1999) that such warranting is often missing from many studies. We'll end by quoting Krueger, whose point about focus groups extends just as well to interviews. He states: 'it is important to keep in mind that the[ir] intent […] is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation' (1994: 87). So conceived, they are a positive boon to the field of Linguistics.

Transcription Notation

This transcription notation represents a simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984)

(1.0)	Timed pause (in tenths of seconds).
(.)	Micropause (i.e. too short to time)
No= =gap	Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between the end of one speaker's utterance and the beginning of the next.
Wh [en] [No]	Marks overlap between speakers. The left bracket indicates the beginning of the overlap while the right bracket indicates its end
[[	Indicates that speakers start a turn simultaneously
No::w	One or more colons indicate the extension of the previous sound
> <	Indicate talk produced more quickly than surrounding talk
<u>text</u>	Word(s) emphasized.
CAPITAL	Noticeably louder talk
°hush°	Noticeably quieter talk
↑↓	Rising and falling intonation
?	Indicates rising inflection (but not necessarily a question)
.	Indicates a stopping fall in tone (but not necessarily the end of a turn)
hh	Indicates an audible out-breath (the more ‘h’s the longer the breath)

.hh	Indicates an audible intake of breath (the more ‘h’s the longer the breath)
(( ))	Non-verbal activity (eg. Banging)
[text]	Clarificatory information.

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Further reading

Barbour (2008); Barbour and Kitzinger (eds) (1999)

Barbour's 2008 book is a hands-on focus group guide and Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) is a collection of articles on the theory, practice and politics of focus group research. The latter is particularly useful for its critical thinking around participation and community views, its discussion of often neglected areas (e.g. sensitive topics, feminist research), and its perspectives on analysis.

Bloor *et al.* (2001)

A good starting point for student projects and a basic introduction to the key issues and requirements for planning, conducting and analysing focus groups in the social sciences.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015)

This is a detailed, but accessible, book on the use of interviews in social research. It considers the philosophical justifications, practical details and common criticism of conducting this kind of research.

Bryman (2012)

The fourth edition of this engaging and student-friendly textbook offers an introduction to social research methodology. It considers various aspects of the research process and a broad range of qualitative and quantitative methods (including internet research). Chapters 9 and 20 deal with interviews and Chapter 21 with focus groups.

Gubrium et al. (2012)

This is a large compendium of chapters covering a wide range of issues – from the history of the interview through to considerations of research ethics and risk assessment. Along the way, it features a chapter (Ch. 10), by David Morgan, on the focus group interview.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995)

Although in no way a 'how-to-do' guide, this compact book provides an excellent introduction to a constructivist approach to theorizing (and conducting) interviews. It thoroughly unsettles what Silverman (2014 – see below) refers to as the 'positivist' and 'naturalist' interpretations of interview data.

James and Busher (2016)

Nalita James and Hugh Busher have written a whole book about online interviewing (published in 2009), but in this chapter we see a condensed version of their arguments. Here they discuss the advantages and drawbacks involved in working online and take time to explore the complex ethical considerations involved in using devices such as Skype, chatrooms and instant messaging.

Krueger and Casey (2015)

The latest edition of a very informative book on focus group methodology, with useful examples and guidance for developing focus groups (including using them outside marketing research).

Litosseliti (2003)

An accessible overview of focus group methodology and a step-by-step guide to planning and conducting focus groups. Particularly useful for looking at focus groups from a linguistic/ discursive perspective. Full of examples throughout and useful tables of different types of questions and different probes (for developing a discussion, for encouraging different viewpoints, and for managing particular types of participants).

Rapley (2001)

This is an interesting article that draws attention to the identity-work performed within interviews by both interviewees *and interviewers*.

Seidman (2015)

Seidman outlines a particular, *phenomenological,* approach to interviewing – and is relevant, therefore, in respect of its close consideration of the *experience* of the interaction for both interviewers and interviewees.

Silverman (2014)

Within this broader volume, Silverman offers two consecutive chapters (7 and 8) on interviews and focus groups, respectively. The first of these is particularly strong in

drawing attention to the different epistemological frameworks that researchers take to their interview data. As noted above, Silverman has been quite outspoken in his reservations about the overall value of interview-based studies – so he's an important voice to consider.

Wray and Bloomer (2012)

Chapter 14 provides an overview of various research methods – including interviews, focus groups and, indeed, questionnaires. Detailed and practical, this chapter – like ours – underlines the connections between interviews and focus groups, though it sits within a firmly positivist frame.

Online resources:

https://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/conducting-an-interview.php
An Open University study skills page.

http://www.socresonline.org.uk/21/2/12.html
A paper which discusses using Skype for doing qualitative research interviews

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVnIO4vzXg8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW_SKXYnhyQ&feature=related
Two videos where David Silverman explores the idea of the 'Interview Society' and contrasts interviews with 'naturally occurring data' for qualitative research.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xPYGXJ_hM4
An excellent webinar on using focus groups by Rosaline Barbour (*Atlas.ti and International Institute of Qualitative Methodology* (IIQM), 16th April, 2013). In addition to raising key issues, it provides many examples of how different research projects have drawn on focus groups to address different questions and the challenges involved.

https://richardakrueger.com/focus-group-interviewing/

Richard A. Krueger's website, which includes handouts for conducting focus group interviews, a videos on moderating focus groups and references to his books dealing with different aspects/stages of focus group research.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the key questions and issues that your own research project aims to investigate. Would interviews and/or focus groups allow you to explore these questions and issues? What kinds of answers could they provide?

2. If, as a researcher, you were interested in looking at the issues faced by working class students entering elite Universities (such as Oxford or Cambridge), how might you go about sourcing 'naturalistic' data?

3. An issue of reflexivity: what are the implications for the conduct of interviewers, in the actual context of those interviews, when they fully understand their role in the co-construction of knowledge?

4. Focus groups are often described as useful for investigating topical issues on which people may not have formulated an opinion (Wray and Bloomer, 2012). What are some of the potential benefits and pitfalls in attempting to investigate such topics?

Glossary of Key Terms

Adjacency pairs
In Conversation Analysis, adjacency pairs are common structures found in talk; pairs of things that go together, such as questions and answers, greetings and return greetings and accusations and denials.

Emic
A view from inside a particular culture or system, foregrounding the meanings and understandings of 'indigenous' members or participants (as opposed to an 'etic' perspective – or view from outside).

Focus Group Topic Guide

A discussion guide prepared in advance of a focus group, with predetermined questions/ topics to be covered, unscripted probes, and sometimes visual aids or materials.

Focus Group Moderator
Person facilitating a focus group; not necessarily the researcher or person designing and interpreting the research.

Positivism
A philosophy that sees the world as so many objects and events that can be discovered (and, therefore, definitively known) through the rigorous application of the scientific method.

Social Constructionism
A philosophical challenge to the doctrine of Positivism (see above) which treats knowledge as a social creation, or construction, rather than as something forced or determined by the 'facts of the matter' or nature of the world.