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Focus groups in research: information gathering or real in-depth value?

First Submission: 12 November 2007
Acceptance: 6 June 2008

This article aims to highlight the value of real in-depth inquiry against the often uninformed use by novice researchers. Focus groups are frequently regarded as a more economical way of gaining the individual opinions of the eight to twelve members of the group. An in-depth focus group clarifies underlying issues in a group or organisation, such as power dynamics, interrelationships, alliances and consensus. The approach to focus groups whereby the researcher can glean deeper information and understanding about the values and power relationships underpinning all inter-group communications, is discussed, emphasising that it is neither "easy" nor "cheap". The skill and knowledge of the facilitator or researcher in this regard is paramount.

Fokusgroepe in navorsing: versameling van inligting of dieperliggende waarde?

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die soeklig te plaas op die waarde van indiepte-ondersoek teenoor die dikwels oningeligte gebruik van fokusgroepe in navorsing. Fokusgroepe word dikwels gesien as 'n ekonomiese manier om individuele inligting van die agt tot twaalf deelnemers te bekom. Die indiepte-fokusgroep werp lig op die onderliggende kwessies in 'n groep of organisasie, soos onder andere magsdinamiek, interverhoudinge, samewerking en konsensus. Die benadering wat gevolg word in die afneem van 'n fokusgroep waar 'n navorser die dieper inligting en begrip oor die waardes en magsverhoudinge wat alle intergroepverhouding onderlê bekom, verskil hemelsbreed van die insameling van slegs inhoud, en dit word onderstreep dat die fokusgroep nie noodwendig maklik of goedkoop is nie. Die vaardigheid en kennis van die fasiliteerder of navorser is in hierdie verband van die uiterste belang.

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The focus group (also sometimes called "focus group interview") might be characterised as an approximation of Habermas's (Gaskell 2000: 49) description of the "ideal public sphere", where the debate is open and accessible to all, the issues common concerns and inequalities disregarded. The exchange of views and ideas takes place within a small group of approximately six to eight people (Patton 1990: 335, Gaskell 2000: 47), or eight to fourteen (Robson 2002: 241). The group members participate in an interview, or in a facilitator- (moderator-)led discussion, on topics of research interest for a time period that could range from half an hour to three hours, and even longer. In the in-depth discussion, the less people in the group, however, the harder the "work" for the group members as opinions start to form and roles are assumed.

In the Editors' Introduction to Morgan's 1988 book on the subject, Manning *et al* wrote that the

> focus group technique is a tool for studying ideas in group context. The technique has the potential to assist policymaking and policy-driven research, and a long history that extends to Lazarsfeld's Marienthal studies in the thirties (Morgan 1988: 5).

Morgan is also of the opinion that focus groups are useful as a sole means of data, as well as a supplement to other methods, being one of several components in a research programme.

1.   Purpose of focus groups

It appears that there is little consensus among qualitative researchers on the exact purpose of a focus group: some promote it as a "highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique", but emphasise the fact that it is in essence an interview and neither a problem-solving session nor a decision-making group (Patton 1990: 335). Flick (1998: 115) and Morgan (1988: 20) contend that the main advantages of group interviews are, among other things, that they are low in cost and rich in data, an opinion that is, however, not shared by all.

According to Hofmeyer & Scott (2007: 1) the reasons for using a focus group as a method of research is twofold, namely as "an exploratory approach to develop survey items and questions with face

validity for the respondent group or to examine an issue with a homogenous group of participants".

Although it is true that the purpose of the research determines the approach to facilitation, one too often comes across novice researchers in qualitative methodology who are unable to utilise focus group techniques to yield more and richer data than the obvious:

> Interpretive description can draw productively on a wide range of these activities, but inherently requires that the researcher accept a job description comprised of comprehending data, synthesizing meanings, theorizing relationships, and recontextualizing data into findings (Thorne *et al* 2004: 12).

Unfortunately, there is scant information on the practical implementation of facilitation, resulting in a group interview (often structured) that yields less rich data than the researcher was hoping for.

2.   Origins of focus groups

In addressing a range of research questions, sociologists and anthropologists have had a long history of participation-observation methodology. How to report the observations and findings was left to the researchers who were directly "on the scene" (Sanchez-Jankowsky 2002: 144). Focus groups first emerged in market research as early as the 1920s (Robson 2002) but the technique came into popular use as a tool in qualitative research in market research and survey operationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. The processes and problems of qualitative or ethnographic research were reported in published and oral reports as early as the turn of the previous century:

> Although partly starting from a comparable critique of standardised interviews, group discussions have been used as an explicit alternative to open interview in the German-speaking area (Flick 1998: 116).

In anthropology and sociology Franz Boas and Robert Park offered their insights and reflections to "insiders" (Altheide & Johnson 1998: 285). The demands for reliability and validity shaped and refined techniques in social science to illustrate rigour and counteract critique from the exponents of quantitative research in the positivist and post-positivist tradition.

Market researchers employed group interview techniques when they needed information on their target markets, ranging from new products and niche markets to regional subcultures and retail planning. According to Miriampolski (1999: 75), it has taken "nearly a hundred years for the theory and practice of ethnography to spread through the marketing disciplines" to help them understand the dynamics of a world driven by market capitalism. Marketing discourse was initially influenced by the positivist notion that "if it cannot be counted, it does not exist" and that society is a "closed system with interlocking parts", easy to comprehend. Consequently, a cause-and-effect model was adopted, that was only disturbed when qualitative researchers introduced ideas about human voice, choice, emotion and context (Miriampolski 1999: 75-6).

Some work involving focus groups in social sciences was published in the 1940s and 1950s, with only passing mention of the contributions, but not of the methodology (Morgan 1988: 11). Neo-Freudian psychology brought a new perspective to marketers in the 1960s, while Weber and Durkheim saw it as a goal of social inquiry "to go beyond statistical relationships to a deeper understanding of human affairs" (Miriampolski 1999: 76). Despite the call for a post-positivist deeper understanding of underlying issues by the 1970s focus group, discussions were preferred in order to discover consumer trends.

3.   Controversy

Apart from the "uneasy awareness that the traditions of qualitative research commit the researcher to a critique of the positivist project" (Denzin & Lincoln 1998: 7), there is apparently some uneasiness within the field of qualitative research on the position, utilisation and value of focus groups. Emphasising this unease, Robson (2002: 288) states that "much of the literature on focus groups is methodologically naïve".

In the last chapter of his book *Focus groups as qualitative research* David Morgan (1988: 75) concluded that the "contribution of focus groups to social science research is, at present, more potential than real". Even though he ventured to shed some light on the uses and methods of focus groups, one detects more than a slight scepticism about its

value and contribution to the social sciences. While Morgan's text is nearly twenty years old and techniques and applications have developed markedly, in many instances the methodology of focus groups adheres to the practices of decades ago. Qualitative research has had a long and distinguished history in the human disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln 1998a, 1998b & 2005, Guba & Lincoln 2005), but the techniques and uses for focus groups still seem to resort under the social sciences, while other exponents of the technique, in particular in psychotherapy (Yalom 1983), practise it with great success (but for a different purpose). While Morgan's point of departure developed mainly out of market research (getting the opinions of many people at the same time), Yalom utilises group techniques in psychotherapy to bring feelings to the surface and to deal with what was not previously visible or verbalised.

There is indeed still a notion that focus groups provide easy and cheap access to information of interest to the researcher:

> The practical strength of focus groups lies in the fact that they are comparatively easy to conduct. In many circumstances, the research can be done relatively cheaply and quickly (Morgan 1988: 20),

an opinion still shared ten years later by Flick (1998). Morgan (1988: 20) admits that it should be possible to use focus groups in complex projects, but "when time and/or money are essential considerations, it is often possible to design focus group research when other methods would be prohibitive". He regards the production of data from topics of interest as the biggest advantage of focus groups (Morgan 1988: 21). This notion, however, places severe constraints on the value of focus group discussions to gain information on more levels than merely the obvious quantifiable data.

In the earlier focus groups quoted in Morgan's topics on heart attacks, a number of children and comparison of grieving experiences were discussed as "focus groups", but they were in fact structured group interviews. Many people were used to gain information on certain topics and procedures, while very little was gained by the interaction between a random group of people with no connection other than an opinion:

> In a typical case, group interviews are used primarily for convenience
> — either because groups allow more individuals to be reached at
> once or because participants are most likely to be located in a group
> (Morgan 1988: 12).

Thus Morgan is emphasising his notion of the "cheapness" of focus groups, while in reality the lack of depth in the understanding of the interactions in the specific context constitutes a price.

In an effort to enlighten the readers in the uses and methods of focus groups, Morgan (1988: 77) compares these to participant observation and individual interviews, and in so doing, reveals in his own work a dangerously close resemblance to group interviewing, even if he calls it focus groups ("a rose by any other name …"). He states that the main advantage of focus groups "is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time", and the key to the success of the information gained is the ability of the observer to "control" the group.

I differ from Morgan in this regard: the role of the observer or facilitator in focus groups in industrial or corporate settings is less of a controller than a keen observer to underlying tensions, group politics and roles people play (Hofmeyer & Scott 2007). Morgan (1988: 16) further states that "focus groups are limited to verbal behaviour, consist only of interaction in discussion groups, and must be created and managed by the researcher". For this reason he prefers participant observation to focus groups, as it is more "natural". Morgan apparently hardly emphasises non-verbal behaviour and implicit power relations. The moderator (or the therapist in Haley's work) "should observe how everyone acts as well as what they say" (Haley 1976: 29-30). Watzlawick (1990: 13) also views non-verbal behaviour as an integral part of human communication, as part of the pragmatics of human behaviour:

> The order in all systems presupposes […] that their components stand
> in specific relations to one another, i.e., that they communicate.

In all interactions between human beings there is both verbal and non-verbal communication (Watzlawick 1990: 15), and the relationships, "the contents of our interpersonal, pragmatic reality, are

not real in the same sense as objects are; they have their reality only in the perception of the partners …" (Watzlawick 1990: 16). In other words, the understanding of messages in all types of communication is steeped in the context, be it between partners, business associates or working teams in the industry. Freeman (2006) advocates the process of creating a setting that actively involves participants in the co-construction of meaning and understanding in contextual interaction.

Watzlawick (1990: 12-3) describes three mutually complementary methods used by an observer to gain insight into the intentions, motives, feelings and personalities of human interaction. He uses the metaphor of chess players to explain on which levels an observer could gain insight into the interaction, even without knowing the rules of the game. The first is the cybernetic method where it matters only that a given set of operands are changed: "… the transformation is concerned with what happens, not with why it happens" (Watzlawick 1990: 12). The "why" question lies more in the domain of the monadic approach where the cause, or reason, is taken into account (Watzlawick 1990: 17). The second is a system-orientated approach, where the "players and their reciprocal behavior" are viewed as a whole, a structure with effects and failures according to natural laws (Watzlawick 1990: 13). But the communication between the systems, their interlinking relationships, the use of symbols and the effects on the users fall in the area of pragmatics which is, according to Watzlawick (1990: 13), the most significant for understanding human relationships. Freeman (2006) also stresses relationships and the hermeneutic qualities in the processes of interaction.

Relationships and the underlying processes of consensus and disagreement during the interaction are highlighted in Hofmeyer & Scott's (2007: 7) questions regarding the processes (based on Stevens 1996: 175):

> How closely did the group adhere to the issues presented for discussion? Why, how and when were related issues brought up? What statements seemed to evoke conflict? What were the contradictions in the discussion? What common experiences were expressed? What alliances formed among group members? Was a particular member or viewpoint silenced? Was a particular view dominant? How did the group resolve disagreements? What topics produced

consensus? Whose interests were being represented in the group? How were emotions handled?

Bearing the above questions and dynamics in mind, it is clear that the researcher is not only the gatherer of information, but also as Gaskell (2000: 46) states, the interviewer who is "often called the moderator is a catalyst for social interaction (communication between the participants" (my italics). Robson (2002: 287) points out that the moderator must have "considerable skills and experience" for such a task to be done well, and recommends the involvement of a second researcher to observe and lend general support. Though focus groups are not necessarily therapeutic in nature, many of the techniques are complementary. Yalom (1983: 176) points to a fundamental prerequisite for the therapy group, namely that the members keep communicating with each other. This differs drastically from a group interview where each person voices an opinion or tells a story to the moderator or facilitator. In a discussion where group members communicate with each other, a different dynamic develops out of the interaction, and the moderator/facilitator is the observant spectator. Babbie & Mouton (2003: 292) state that the focus group requires "greater attention to the role of the moderator … and provide[s] less depth and detail about the opinions and experiences of any given participant". Hofmeyer & Scott (2007: 7) describe the role of the moderator as follows:

> During the focus group interview, usually an observer or assistant moderator makes critical observations and notes about interactions between group members, power dynamics, seating arrangements, nonverbal gestures, enthusiasm, voice tone, sarcasm, influences in the physical environment, and any other relevant information.

In Morgan's (1988) opinion focus groups differ from group interviews (in which there is alternation between questions and responses) in the reliance on the interaction in the group, but the purpose of his work still reveals the influence of market research. His work is based on information gained form "topics that are supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of a moderator" (Morgan 1988: 9-10), whereas the interpretive approach to focus groups in sociology, psychology, the industry and in companies lies in, apart from information

on a relevant topic, gaining insight into the interactions, the underlying discourse and conflicts between people working together in teams. For that matter, the topic under discussion could be irrelevant to the circumstances, with the value of the discussion lying solely in the information gained from the interaction, verbal and non-verbal, between the participants. The unspoken or non-verbalised interaction reveals a great deal about personalities, leadership and skills, which entail more than mere information on certain topics introduced by the interviewer or facilitator. The social processes and group dynamics have been studied extensively, and Gaskell (2000) quotes at least three progenitors of the focus group: the group therapy tradition (Bion 1961), the evaluation of communication effectiveness (Merton & Kendall 1946) and the group dynamics tradition in social psychology (Lewin 1958).

4.   Operationalisation of focus groups

From the above it is apparent that the notion of focus groups as a means to gain information in an economical manner hampers the true value of the method. In a situation of "eight for the price of one" (Babbie & Mouton 2003: 291), subtle nuances in the interaction are invariably lost. The emphasis is not on the content, but on the process taking place in the group (then again, the technique would depend on the research question). Ultimately, the facilitator should be able to notice how or whether the group has moved and the opinions have changed, regardless of the topic in question. The dynamics in the discourse should reveal the power relations within the group, making the implicit explicit.

Gaskell (2000) quotes Tuckman (1965) who identified four developmental stages in conducting focus groups: the forming stage, where acquaintances are made and group identity is established; the storming stage where conflicts might occur between members, and the norming stage where the group becomes cohesive. When roles are defined, the performing stage is reached, where "the real work of value for the researcher is done" (Gaskell 2000: 47). According to Gaskell, there is yet another stage, namely the mourning stage, where group members, often after the tape recording has been stopped, debrief among each other, and where valuable information is sometimes offered.

Conducting focus groups as described by Babbie & Mouton(2003: 292) links to gaining information, changing opinions as well as creating meaning among the members:

> For example, you may have a certain opinion about a certain book. However, once you begin discussing this opinion with some of your colleagues, things may come up which you have not thought about before. In the course of the conversation with your colleagues, you may even change your mind about the book. It is this shaping and reshaping of opinion that we are after. We may know what each individual thinks, but once we put several individuals together in a group, we are confronted with a completely new set of data.

While meanings and opinions are created, the facilitator should only offer (never interrupt) a reflective summary when there is a pro-longed silence, which would in many instances set the ball rolling again. No new topics should be introduced, but the cues should be picked up from the points of discussion. The silences in focus groups might also be longer than in individual interviews. No new questions or topics should be introduced, but when it appears that no one is going to respond, the facilitator (who is not a senior staff member, but pref-erably someone from outside the company or industry) could resume with the reflective summary. In doing so, the facilitator (who has iden-tified the leader in the group by watching the process) acknowledges the leader by looking at her/him, while talking to the other leader (another development in the group) in case of a power struggle. The leader is not necessarily the person who talks the most and ventures the most opinions, but the one subtly setting the tone, holding the conversation together without threatening the other participants, and allowing fair participation. A silent person could be brought into the discussion by the facilitator subtly asking clarification on some point from that person, not necessarily for specific information volunteered, but for bringing the person into the team as a player.

Generally, in (in-depth) focus groups the facilitator should con-sider how opinion is constructed — a process developing in the group. The facilitator should seek alliances and roles people play: from lead-ership, the carrier of the storyline, the changer of levels of discussion, the enhancer (who makes a contribution and gives space) and silent members. The facilitator should consider among other things eye

contact, language, facial expressions and tone of voice. If a member is severely disruptive, s/he should not be acknowledged, because the group would most probably take care of that person. The "cymbal" effect (the changer of levels in an orchestra, and in a focus group the person who changes the direction) should not be lost by reflecting at that stage — allow the group to consider, and wait for their response. The facilitator's reflective summary is also aimed at the group, not at an individual. The group discussion should not be interrupted.

The above method differs radically from that offered by Morgan (and from many methods used by novice researchers), and needs a more skilful facilitator to detect the inherent power relations and the implicit discourse. Handling focus groups in this way could be linked to Watzlawick's (1990: 43) description of a metacommunicative phenomenon. He is also convinced that "in the coming years an increasing interest in the phenomena of relationships will encourage further study and new, fruitful, and interdisciplinary perspectives" (Watzlawick 1990: 42). His words are echoed by Turner (2003: 19) who claims that we should be constantly "questioning our beliefs and our understanding as we become prepared for the phenomenon we are exploring to say something new to us". More information is offered apart from mere content: the process of group interaction, the forming or changing of hierarchies, the forming and changing of opinions, power relations as well as verbal and non-verbal communication conveying specific messages.

Gaskell (2000: 47) emphasises the fact that focus groups offer more than mere content or quantifiable information:

- A synergy emerges out of the social interaction: in other words, the group is more than the sum of its parts.
- It is possible to observe the group process, the dynamics of attitude and opinion change and of leadership.
- In a group there can be a level of emotional involvement that is seldom seen in one-to-one interviews.

Examples of novel ways of utilising focus groups are becoming more frequent in the literature (Gaiser 1997, Murray 1997, Turney & Pocknee 2005, Oringderff 2004). The virtual nature of the web environment enables one to reach people who are geographically

removed and who are from diverse circumstances. Market researchers who initially developed the focus group method now use the Internet to conduct focus groups, but social scientists are still less enthusiastic about this method. Though Turney & Pocknee (2005: 5) state that "[i]f their objective is not generalizability but depth understanding from an insider, or emic (Pike 1967), viewpoint, interest groups are an important and legitimate source of, and target for, research". They maintain that this method shares the key features of focus groups as outlined by Krueger (1988) and Morgan (1988):

> focus groups involve people; they are conducted in a series; participants are reasonably homogenous and unfamiliar with each other; they are methods of data collection; the data are qualitative; and they constitute a focused discussion (Turney & Pocknee 2005: 5).

These criteria, however, hardly mention the processes and the dynamics in focus groups, highlighted by Gaskell above. Turney & Pocknee admit that the scope of the inquiry was limited, but still recommend that the virtual focus group is theoretically sound. Oringderff (2004: 4), who followed the same approach, points out several limitations in the dynamics, such as the lack of non-verbal cues and the absence of vocal cues:

> Further, an online environment sometimes affords individuals more freedom of expression (and therefore less discretion and tact). Conflict may flare up as a result of inflammatory language (especially with sensitive topics), and this can alter participant interaction. There is also the tendency for participants, particularly in a group that evolves over a period of time, to develop 'pair friendships' where they engage in their own exclusive dialogue and alienate the rest of the group.

Many new ways of thinking and methods of inquiry exist and are still emerging. These may signify new trends in research methodology that cannot be ignored but rather be explored further. It is hoped that the physical proximity of participants and interaction in real time will still be "first prize" for a while, as processes occur in groups which are not possible in virtual spaces or in answer-driven market research: "The emergence of the group goes hand in hand with the development of a shared identity, that sense of common fate captured in the self-description 'we'" (Gaskell 2000: 46). Group members might

challenge each other's views, and generate emotion, humour and creativity. By contrast to Morgan (1988) who sees the group discussion as an unnatural setting (preferring participant observation), Gaskell (2000: 46) is of the opinion that

> the focus group is a more naturalistic and holistic setting in which the participants take account of the views of others in formulating their responses and commenting on their own and other's experiences.

5. Data analysis

Robson (2002: 285) cautions that the results of focus groups "cannot be generalized as they cannot be regarded as representative of the wider population". He stresses that focus groups reveal a "very different realm of social reality" than that revealed in other qualitative or quantitative methods (Robson 2002: 289). Furthermore, Thorne *et al* (2004: 12) stress that the findings do not "emerge" in the sense of having their own agency (Morse 1994); neither do participants in a study have their own "voice" in the sense of representing their own interests, nor do data "speak for themselves". The authors emphasise the importance of the role of the facilitator/researcher in the collection and interpretation of the data:

> No matter how participatory and collaborative the method, it is the researcher who ultimately determines what constitutes data, which data arise to relevance, how the final conceptualizations portraying those data will be structured, and which vehicles will be used to disseminate the findings. Thus, an explicit awareness of the investigator as interpreter becomes an essential element in generating 'findings' that have the potential for credibility or 'interpretive authority' (Thorne 1997) beyond the artistic license of the individual author (Thorne *et al* 2004: 12).

Not only is there scant information on how to conduct focus groups to yield in-depth information, but some researchers also lament the limited access to information regarding data analysis according to a specific philosophical paradigm. Turner (2003: 18) states that

> texts often do not provide detailed descriptions of how to undertake data analysis when a study is conceptualized using particular philosophical orientations, and some omit discussion about analysis of qualitative data altogether.

The knowledge and skill of the facilitator or researcher is paramount during data collection (the conducting of the focus group) as well as the analysis, because the processes inform each other as the inquiry evolves.

The analyst must always remain skeptical of the immediately apparent, and must create data collection pathways that challenge, rather than reinforce, the earliest conceptualisations. Therefore the researcher's questions seek alternative linkages, exceptional instances, and contrary cases as a mechanism for broadening rather than narrowing conceptual linkages (Thorne *et al* 2004: 11).

5.   Going one step further

Watzlawick (1990: 43) alludes to the analysis of non-verbal communication as being more costly and difficult than the pure verbal one. It is interesting that when focus groups are conducted with groups of people working together in teams, more than verbal and non-verbal information is offered to the trained facilitator, namely the hierarchy of power and organisation in the group. As a therapist, Haley (1976: 100-1) observed the following:

> When one is observing people who have a history and a future together, one sees that they follow organized ways of behaving with one another. If there is any generalization that applies to men and other animals, it is that all creatures capable of learning are compelled to organize. To be organized means to follow patterned, redundant ways of behavior and to exist in a hierarchy. Creatures that organize together form a status, or power ladder in which each creature has a place in the hierarchy with someone above him and someone below him. Although groups will have more than one hierarchy because of different functions, the existence of hierarchy is inevitable because it is in the nature of organization that it should be hierarchical. We may dream of a society in which all creatures are equal, but on this earth there is status and precedence and inequality among all creatures.

The existence of a hierarchy or structure does not mean that the facilitator has to accept it. Unjust structures are everywhere, but the members of the group should feel free to take part in the discussion while the facilitator observes carefully. The role of the facilitator is not to ask questions or to resolve conflicts. Disagreement should be

allowed, and facilitated or summarised. Watzlawick & Weakland (1977: 61) offer an interesting view on disagreement:

> Whether or not communicational closure is reached on the content level will produce agreement or disagreement between the communicants; on the relationship level, it will result in understanding or misunderstanding between them — two phenomena that are essentially different […] Thus, it is possible for two communicants to disagree about an objective issue but understand each other as human beings, or, to agree and understand each other […].

Findings may (not) illustrate certain perceptions, co-operation or disagreement. Inquiry does not mean "looking for answers" (Bentz & Shapiro 1998: 39), but "rather a discipline consideration of a range of possibilities before interpretative conclusions ought to be drawn (Thorne *et al* 2004: 12). Therefore, a personal opinion or voice from participants is less important than the group dynamic.

A much debated issue among social scientists is the one on power and "voice". To a lesser degree focus group discussions do facilitate "voice" or empowerment to people who would not be able to air their views in a situation outside the relative safety of the group. Hofmeyer & Scott (2007: 2) contend that

> traditional ethical approaches are insufficient to address these risks that might arise when conducting focus group interviews with spatially familiar participants who have pre-existing power and hierarchal relationships in workplaces. Observational notes provide valuable insights and better understanding to support participants.

Griffiths (1998: 124) also maintains that the voice-empowerment link is clear: "Like 'empowerment', 'voice' can refer to something individual and personal, or it can mean something far more collective, social and overtly political". The controversy about this aspect of research (claims that "giving a voice" is actually disempowering by conferring a dimension of authenticity to damaging stereotypes) does not fall within the scope of this article, but is worth bearing in mind when conducting focus group discussions. A very fine line indeed exists between empowerment and disempowerment, and extreme care should be taken when embarking on research in this regard. It does seem, however, that being able to be heard affords a person a sense of self, which is empowering to a great extent.

6. Conclusion

According to Hofmeyer & Scott (2007: 7) the time has come

> to speak aloud and write about not only how we manage marketplace expectations for conducting research […] but also how we invest the time necessary in the participant recruitment phase to ensure that we can create moral geographical spaces for qualitative research.

This article was an attempt to explain the vagueness in the conducting of in-depth focus groups. There is no "recipe", but it appears that generic textbooks on qualitative research methodology do not offer much information on the implementation of techniques to the novice researcher. There is a vast difference between market research and the creation of meaning and understanding. Some contradiction remains on the utilisation and value of focus groups: process *versus* content, natural or unnatural settings, cheap or costly, verbal or non-verbal importance. The role of the researcher in accepting the responsibility of unpacking the group processes is highlighted. The explicit awareness of the investigator as interpreter, her/his skills, knowledge and understanding are important in generating findings that have the potential for credibility or the "interpretive authority" referred to by Thorne *et al* (2004: 12).

The use of focus groups presents a clearly superior technique for research in the social sciences. Often the choice of method, emphasis and interpretation of focus groups is a function of the researcher's own theoretical orientation. A more interdisciplinary approach between the social sciences and social psychology regarding focus groups is required in order to gain more insight into human interaction, organisational structuring and hierarchies.

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