Women in European Universities

RESEARCH AND TRAINING NETWORK

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## Collecting and Analysing Focus Group Data[1]

## 1. Introduction

Six women have gathered in a seminar room at a Swedish university. They have at least one thing in common, all being professors, albeit of different disciplines. They have agreed to dedicate one hour of this evening to a group discussion about what it is like to be a female professor, and what difficulties and hurdles there may be for women in reaching high positions in academia. The discussion, which is video-taped, is initiated by a moderator, a doctoral student, who asks the following: "When you think back on your career, was there a period of time that was particularly demanding for you?" After this point, the moderator leans backwards, takes notes and scarcely takes part in the discussion. The six professors keep the discussion going and raise different topics, thus exploring the subject on the basis of their own experiences and interests rather than as responses to questions formulated by the moderator. This situation is an example of a relatively unstructured focus group discussion.

In this paper I will briefly introduce focus group methodology (Section 2), discuss certain issues of data collection and the nature of the collected data (Section 3), and then move on to give a few examples of how data collected by means of focus groups can be analysed (Section 4). While Section 3 returns to the focus group discussion above (henceforth referred to as the "FP" (female professors) focus group), Section 4 draws examples from another focus group study, from my ongoing doctoral work about understandings of genetically modified food (the GMF project)[2].

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[1] The workshop held at the project meeting in Lund from October 5th to October 6th 2001.

[2] The data-collection of the GMF project was carried out in two steps, a) among lay people from various groups (Christian students, dieticians, farmers, biology students, restaurant personnel, managers of grocery stores, recent mothers, and members of the Swedish branch of the Greenpeace organisation); and b) among decision-makers from three big companies related to the Swedish food industry (production, wholesale trade and retail trade). The

## 2.  What does focus group methodology mean?

A focus group is a type of focused group interview. The procedure of using focus groups entails small groups of participants (preferably 4 to 6[3]) gathering to discuss a given issue under the guidance of a moderator, who preferably occupies a retracted position.

One definition of the focus group methodology states that focus groups are "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1996:130). This has at least three implications:

a) focus groups are a *research technique*, which implies a difference between focus groups and other kinds of groups with purposes other than research, e.g., therapy, education, decision-making, etc. (although focus groups, apart from generating research data, may have educational, therapeutic or other outcomes as well);

b) data are collected through *group interaction*, which excludes techniques involving multiple participants but where interaction between group members is not allowed, e.g., nominal groups and Delphi groups (for a brief description of such methods, see Stewart & Shamdasani 1990:22-25);

c) the topic is *determined by the researcher*, which means that a distinction should be made between focus groups and spontaneously arising group discussions without a formal interviewer/moderator (e.g., discussions that may occur during ethnographic field work).

Although focus group methodology originated as a method within the social sciences, its main field of application has traditionally been within applied market research[4]. Since the early 1980s, however, this has gradually changed, and during the last few years focus groups have been used for several purposes such as:

* Explorative studies of how people understand issues that may be considered 'new'/complex/fuzzy/hard to grasp (e.g., Bülow 1998; Grove-White *et al* 1997).

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research project was made possible due to grants from K-LIV (Kunskapsplattform för livsmedelsbranschen) and the ELSA-program (Ethical, Legal, Social Aspects of gene technology). Project leader is professor Viveka Adelswärd and project worker is Victoria Wibeck. The analytical suggestions presented in this paper have benefited from discussions with professor Per Linell.

[3] The optimal number of participants is a controversial issue. Some focus group researchers advocate larger groups with as many as 12 participants (e.g., Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). Nevertheless, I find a maximum of six participants suitable, since larger groups tend to split into subgroups, and more dominant members tend to "take over" the discussion at the expense of the more shy members.

[4] For a capsule history of focus groups, see Morgan (1998:37-43).

- Studies of social representations/shared assumptions/underlying arguments and value premises (e.g., Jovchelovitch 2000; Linell 2001).
- Sensitive or personal topics, e.g., HIV/AIDS (Kitzinger 1994), drug abuse (Agar & MacDonald 1995), chronic diseases (Grace 1995), family planning (Folch-Lyon *et al* 1981).
- Health research (e.g., Carey 1995; Kidd & Parshall 2000; Wilkinson 1998b).
- Feminist studies (Farquhar 1999; Frith & Kitzinger 1998; Wilkinson 1998c,1999).

As a starting point for the rest of my discussion, I will quote British feminist psychologist Sue Wilkinson, who has reviewed over 200 focus group studies. She states that the focus group method **"is distinctive not for its mode of analysis, but rather for its *data-collection* procedures, and for the nature of the data so collected"** (Wilkinson 1998a:182, emphasis in original). This has been how focus group methodology has traditionally been treated, resulting to that focus group research are characterised by a lack of analytical reasoning (for a similar critique, see e.g., Myers & Macnaghten 1999:173). Of course, there may be several features that data collected in focus groups have in common with, for instance, individual interviews; nevertheless, there are clear differences between a dyadic conversation (i.e., a conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee) and a multi-party conversation (cf. Linell 1990). Conversational phenomena such as turn-taking, the possibility to address different participants or to let a turn be unaddressed, as well as the often complex interplay between ideas and arguments distinguish the focus group interview from other research situations. This may in turn have consequences for the analytical procedure; there are analytical approaches that are well suited for at least some kinds of focus group data, but not for data collected, for instance, by means of individual interviews. Data from focus groups are often very rich, thus it would be fruitful to go beyond what Wilkinson calls "the usual types of qualitative analysis", by which she primarily refers to content analysis. I would argue that issues of analysis urgently demand development, if focus groups are to be able to stand up as a method in the social sciences. Before going any further into analytical issues, however, I will comment on what Wilkinson points out as the distinctive features of focus group methodology, namely the data collection procedures and the nature of the data.

## 3. Issues of data-collection and the nature of the data

When it comes to the practical aspects of the data collecting procedure, I will not go into details. There are quite a few textbooks dealing with such issues (e.g., Krueger 1988; Morgan 1988; Morgan & Krueger 1998; Stewart &

Shamdasani 1990; Wibeck 2000), even though many presuppose a rather structured approach towards focus groups. I, on the other hand, advocate a more unstructured, or at least semi-structured, approach. Below, I will discuss the reasons for this.

In the focus group mentioned in the introduction, with the exception of the initiating and closing phases of the discussion, the moderator was not addressed by the other participants. This is what a relatively unstructured focus group may resemble. The purpose of such an approach is to have the participants discuss among themselves and give them the freedom to raise issues that are of relevance to *them*, rather than issues determined beforehand by the researcher when designing the study. This allows room for 'surprising moments' – the participants may introduce aspects of the topic that would never have been raised if the moderator had been more dominant. In an explorative study, this is desirable; the aim of such a study is precisely to explore and investigate rather freely the participants' understandings, experiences, argumentation, etc., concerning a particular issue.

During the entire session, the moderator of the FP focus group assumed a retracted role. In introducing the task to the participants, she emphasised that the discussion was not to be directed towards her. At the end of the recorded session, however, one of the participants somewhat criticised the task given: to focus on the negative aspects of being a female professor. The argument that the overarching research interest concerns the difficulties and hurdles women face in reaching high positions in academia may of course justify a focus on demanding periods. Nevertheless, it would also be interesting to gather another pilot focus group and give them an even more open task, for instance merely to discuss their experience of being a female professor. It might be that they would still focus on demanding periods; this would be an interesting result in itself.

Focus group discussions can be audiotaped and/or videotaped. While the presence of a tape recorder usually does not exert any great influence on the conversations, restricting oneself to audiotaping may bring about difficulties for the transcriber and the analyst in distinguishing between voices. However, this can be dealt with by taking notes on the speaking order. Likewise, non-verbal cues may be noted by the moderator and/or an assistant moderator[5]. Nevertheless, in order to make a thorough analysis of non-verbal communication possible, it may be helpful to document the focus group session

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[5] The presence of an assistant moderator is often presupposed in the handbooks. In some cases, the assistant moderator may have an important role in dealing with practical arrangements, making the participants feel comfortable, taking notes, etc. On other occasions, however, the presence of a person whose primary task is to observe may rather impede the discussions. Consequently, the choice of bringing an assistant moderator in should be a deliberate one.

on videotape, even if there are a few things to be noted as regards video recording: First, in order to improve sound quality, it may be wise to also use a tape recorder with a good microphone. Second, the camera documents the session from *one* specific angle, which means that all participants will not be equally focused on during the data-collection phase. This might not be a problem for an analyst primarily interested in the participants' verbal communication, but for someone who wants to incorporate body language – gestures, gazes, etc. – in the analysis, it is. Third, as clearly demonstrated in the FP focus group when one woman deliberately turned her back to the camera, some participants may feel uncomfortable with being videotaped.

As regards transcripts, it is often helpful to transcribe all the conversations verbatim entirely. The transcription process means a bit of hard work, yet the analyses will benefit from it. It could also enrich the analysis if the transcriber noted such things as laughter, pauses and overlapping speech (see Section 4.5). As compensation for the hard work and the headache involved in preparing transcripts, some of the analytical process usually starts during transcription. The analyst becomes familiar with the data while repeatedly listening to the tape, trying to capture the conversations, and can start to notice patterns in the data that might be interesting to address analytically.

There are naturally both advantages and disadvantages connected with every research methodology. I will mention a few arguments in favour of working with focus groups, and then discuss some issues that are important to be aware of when using the methodology.

Advantages:
- Focus groups often generate very rich data; hence many analytical approaches are possible.
- Focus groups can be used as a stand-alone method, but also in combination with, e.g., individual interviews or questionnaires, either to generate ideas about appropriate interview questions, or to follow up on the results (Morgan 1988).
- Since there are several participants involved in a focus group session, the balance of power and the control over the interaction tends to shift from the researcher to the research participants (Wilkinson 1998b; 1998c; 1999). Thus, focus groups may be conceived of as "a relatively 'egalitarian' method" (Wilkinson 1998b:336).
- In a focus group context, disclosure and openness is encouraged. While a moderator who contradicts and challenges the participants, or asks personal questions, may be regarded as threatening or authoritarian, in a focus group such things are often done by the participants themselves. Hence, the group members must elaborate their accounts and provide explanations and support for the arguments as responses *to each other*. Another result of the group

dynamics is that "the less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants, and that one person's revelation of 'discrediting' information encourages others to disclose similar experiences" (Wilkinson 1998b:334).

- When a focus group moderator assumes a retracted role, the participants are encouraged to direct their conversation to each other rather than to the moderator. This means that the conversation, more often than in an individual interview, resembles an informal conversation, by which the analyst is given an insight into the participants' own language and concepts. Further, the participants share their experiences with each other, and jointly try to make sense of those experiences, thus enabling the analyst to explore some of the shared assumptions underlying the participants' accounts (Wilkinson 1998b:335).

- The focus group context enables the researcher to observe "the co-construction of meaning in action" (Wilkinson 1998b:338). Many times people may not simply 'have' opinions, but instead form them, try them out and modify them in conversations with others (cf. Billig 1996). This process is much harder to gain access to by using one-to-one interviews.

- Focus group data might be used for a dialogical analysis, which takes into consideration not only the dialogue of research participants in developing ideas, but also the dialogue of ideas, topics and arguments in the interaction (Linell 2001; Linell *et al.* 2001). This last point is something I will return to when discussing analysis.

Issues to be aware of:
- There is a tendency in much focus group research that, although focus groups generate interactive data, those data are reported as individual utterances. The social nature of the data are often obscured or glossed over in the report, i.e. they are decontextualised, and the interaction, neither between participants nor between ideas, topics, arguments, etc., is analysed in its own right (Wilkinson 1998 a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999).

- Another risk is that data are treated as "a 'transparent' window through which the analyst can see the reality assumed to lie behind it" (Frith & Kitzinger 1998:304). In other words, the researcher treats participants' accounts, representations, etc., as something given that can be "tapped off" in a research interview. I would argue, however, that the interview or focus group situation itself, or the wordings of the questionnaire, greatly influences the outcome of it. As noted above, opinions, arguments, etc., are not static but may be negotiated and sometimes modified during the course of the interaction. Nevertheless, the choice of focus group methodology may be motivated precisely by the insight that the communicative situation itself contributes to the results and that this can be taken advantage of by showing

not only *what* was said, but also *how* it was said. British linguist Greg Myers (1998:106) states: " If focus groups are to stand up as a technique in social-science arguments, alone or in conjunction with other techniques, then researchers need to be able to show how something was said, and in what situation, as well as what was said."

- As with all research methods, ethical issues are important to reflect upon before initiating a focus group study. Most urgent is likely to be the issue of *over-disclosure* (Morgan 1998:90-91). In the heat of the discussion, participants may be thrilled to reveal personal details or strong opinions that they afterwards regret having shared. A significant difference between a focus group and a one-to-one interview is that in the former, stories are told not only to an interviewer, who can guarantee confidentiality, but also to other group members who may not maintain secrecy afterwards. It is therefore important to raise these issues in the beginning of each focus group session, in order to make participants aware of the risk of over-disclosure and to emphasise that information shared is to stay between the participants.


## 4. Analysis

As mentioned above, a shortcoming of much earlier focus group research has been the absence of analytical reasoning; the reader is informed of how the study was designed and what the results were, but very little is said about the actual procedure of analysis. Admittedly, this is beginning to change, and recently articles have appeared in which analytical issues are addressed (e.g., in the field of discourse analysis: Frith & C. Kitzinger 1998; J. Kitzinger 1994; Agar & MacDonald 1995; Myers 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Myers & Macnaghten 1999; Wilkinson 1998b, 1998c, 1999). Nevertheless, compared to the total number of articles published about focus group studies, issues of analysis are still underdeveloped. This scarcity of descriptions of the analytical process can, on the other hand, somewhat paradoxically also be considered one of the reasons why it is so exciting to work with focus groups: as an analyst, one is rather free to find one's own entries into the data. The analytical process, thus, is an explorative process in which the analyst can allow him/herself to be rather eclectic in the choice of methods. The suggestions I will make here about possible ways of approaching focus group data should, consequently, be regarded precisely as suggestions. I will argue that they all form part of what may be labelled a 'dynamic content analysis' directed mainly at exploring aspects of content while also aiming at capturing the interactivity in the sense making practices (cf. Linell 2001; Linell *et al.* 2001).

Before presenting any analytical approaches, I will stress that it is naturally not necessary to perform *all* these different kinds of analysis; this

choice depends on the kind of data at hand and the issue on which the discussions focus.


## 4.1 Thematic analysis

Focus groups typically generate large amounts of very rich and interesting data that may be approached in different ways. In order to get an overview of the data – also for scholars primarily interested in pursuing analyses of communicative strategies used in the groups, or the argumentative web that constitutes the discussions – it might be wise to start with a thematic analysis. Thus, an initial coding and categorisation of the material cannot be dispensed with.

Inspiration for a thematic content analysis of focus group data may be taken from Glaser and Strauss (1967) and their work on grounded theory. Among other things, they argue that the researcher should refrain from trying to force data into categories formulated *a priori*, on the basis of existing theory. For the analysis of focus group data, this may mean that the analyst on the one hand repeatedly listens to the tape recordings or watches the videotapes, and on the other hand reads through the transcripts and divides them into segments based on criteria for topic shifts (for a discussion of topic shifts, see Adelswärd 1988:55 pp.). The result of this is a list of local subtopics[6], each of which may be assigned a label, i.e. a noun or nominal phrase summarising the content of the sequence. This coding forms the basis for an analysis ultimately aimed at discovering what Sandra Jovchelovitch (1997) calls "big themes", which underlie the discussions and are recurrent in different forms on different occasions throughout the material.

I will briefly account for some reasonings that were identified as an outcome of the content analysis undertaken of the GMF focus groups consisting of lay people[7]. Earlier research, based on questionnaires and individual interviews, has shown that an important feature of consumer resistance towards genetically modified food is moral concerns (Fjaestad *et al*. 1998). Thus, in planning the study I anticipated that issues of ethics would be prevalent in the focus groups as well. One of the 'big themes' was, indeed, ethical considerations. The participants discussed whether the responsibility for the development and applications of gene technology should be attributed to scientists or to politicians, and what the consequences will be of implementing the technology - decreased risk for world famine or more money for multi-national companies. They also tried to identify and argue for different kinds of boundaries related to applications of gene technology, e.g., between medicine

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[6] Given that the issue in focus is the superordinate topic throughout the entire discussion, these local sequences may be labelled *sub*topics.
[7] Preliminary results are discussed in Wibeck (1998).

and food, or animals and plants. Yet another recurrent topic concerned the supremacy of nature: should man interfere with it or let it run its course? However, my analyses also showed that underlying and intertwined with such ethical issues was another theme of an ethical-epistemological character. The participants posed questions like the following: "Can we trust the information that we receive?", "Who is informing?" "What is my responsibility as a consumer to keep myself informed about the new technology?" Thus, the issue of genetically modified food was not only framed as an ethical issue in its own right (is it good or bad?) but was interpreted as part of overarching questions deeply concerned with human agency (how large is our field of action?), intimately connected with everyday epistemology (how can we know what we know?) and responsibility (how much work should I do to gain access to knowledge?).

To summarise: a content analysis such as the above helps to give an overview of the data; patterns and tendencies in the material may be discovered and a picture of what was said in the different groups emerges. Such an analysis may of course stand alone and be presented as the outcome of the entire study (which is common, e.g., in market research or other kinds of applied research), but it may also be a starting point for other types of analyses: new analytical entries may be discovered, and the analyst is given a hint of what would be interesting to approach in a second phase.

However, I would like to emphasise that a thematic analysis in which the discussions are divided into segments and coded runs the risk of becoming too static, not paying enough attention to the richness and the dynamics distinctive to focus group data. Therefore, a thematic analysis may be complemented by analyses of how different subtopics are related and how the discussions follow what can be called 'topical paths' or 'discourse-semantic trajectories' (cf. Linell 2001:188).

## 4.2 Topical trajectories

An analysis of what I will call 'topical trajectories' thus avoids decontextualisation and implies a recognition of the dynamics and complexity of focus group data. Research questions guiding such an analysis may address, for instance, how different subtopics are related – is this similar in the different groups or at different occasions within the same group? Do the participants talk about the subtopics in similar ways in the different groups? Can one interpret this as relatively standardised associative links (i.e., are relatively the same associations made?)? Other possible research questions, which have interested me more, address whether there are certain subtopics that the participants 'gathered around' and returned to in different ways.

An example from the GMF project may illustrate this: in the data I found a certain subtopic that I (in my role as a moderator) did not usually bring up, but that the participants in the different groups introduced at an early stage and then returned to at several occasions, although from different perspectives. It was a subtopic that dealt with fear (one's own fear of gene technology, or others' assumed fear), and was something of a starting point for many of the discussions. The participants discussed, among other things, why people are afraid of the new technology, if there is reason to be afraid, to what extent the mass media can be held responsible for creating and maintaining the fear, and to what extent the food industry legitimates the fear by removing GMO products from the grocery stores. It seemed that when the participants were asked to discuss the issue of genetically modified food, they immediately associated this to fear. However, fear was described as having several reasons, and at times the participants also questioned the rationale behind the fear.

In sum, an analysis of which subtopics the participants themselves bring up and often return to, and in what ways this is done, can illuminate what is important and relevant to the participants, and what their associations are when given a particular topic to discuss.

## 4.3 Analysis of the discursive construction of actors and agency

There are a number of suggestions for approaching what happens in a focus group. One way of exploring this could be to concentrate on how the participants discursively construct actors and agency, or in other words, to focus on questions like the following: Which agents do the participants construct as being influential versus non-influential? How are power relations discussed? How do the group members conceive of their own space of action, or, in other words, what is their sense of agency?

'Agency' is a concept describing "the relationships of action, freedom to act and power to take action" (O'Connor 1995:432). It is also linked to moral aspects of responsibility and to reflection upon our actions. In order to address how the participants in a focus group discursively construct agency, it may be useful to identify which different agents are mentioned by the participants, and how these agents are presented – are they claimed to be actually operating in a given situation, or to be suggestions of agents who should act? Thereafter, a list of all the relevant agents may be compiled to provide the analyst with an overview of which agents are at stake and which recur in several groups[8].

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[8] When agents are discussed here, it is assumed that they are discursively constructed by the focus group participants, i.e. they are discussed on a rhetoric level, and are tied to the focus group context. Hence, it is the participants' perception of agents that is in focus.

After having made such an inventory of the (discursively constructed) agents, I have chosen to focus on how agency was conceived of by the participants; did they claim or deflect their own agency, or did they rather problematize the whole issue? For these purposes, in the GMF project, I have used Patricia O'Connor's continuum of agency (1995:431). In her study of criminals' autobiographical narratives, she examined how agency may be linked to a continuum of responsibility, on the one hand deflecting agency (e.g., through the phrase "we ended up getting caught"), on the other hand claiming agency (e.g., "I shot him"). Between the two extremes, there are instances of what O'Connor terms 'problematizing agency', such as when the criminals reflected upon their actions, or took on an ironic stance about them. In my data, these were instances in which the participants discussed the complexity of the relations between different agents and where issues of responsibility were problematized.

Example 1 is an example of how agency was problematized, the actions of the consumers and the food companies being presented as interrelated and mutually influent:

Example 1[9]
(TEMA K: GML 2 – FG 3)

| 78. | Lars: | But it isn't very easy for a company, because when we take up a position like we did, we also legitimise the worry |
| 79. | Nina: | Yes |
| 80. | Olivia: | Yeah, right |
| 81. | Lars: | So that's a […] tricky question |
| 82. | Nina: | We are part of that worry |
| 83. | Lars: | Yes, we make it stronger= |
| 84. | Nina: | =Yes sure we do |
| 85. | Lars: | Since we give credibility to it (Nina: Yeah yeah) If now the big strong (Nina: Sure) whatever it's called, all companies say no, well then there has to be something strange about it |
| 86. | Nina: | Yes of course it's  something nasty= |
| 87. | Olivia: | =Yes |
| 88. | Lars: | And actually we did it without knowing (Nina: Um) but we, there you are on the border between being an opportunist… and um keeping a standpoint, you |

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[9] The extracts are given verbatim. Normal orthography has been applied. Back-channelling utterances are noted in the ongoing turn. The following conventions have been used:
Underlining signals simultaneous speech.
= signals that the turns lash immediately into each other.
CAPITAL LETTERS signals that the word is emphasised. The analyses were performed on tape-recordings and transcripts in Swedish, but the extracts have been translated into English for the purposes of this paper.

could think about (Nina: Um) that
89.  Olivia:      There was there… we started from the consumers' worries which were
                  reinforced by the retail dealers' worries, which we became the manifest sort
                  of (Nina: Um) gatekeeper of
90.  Lars:        Right
91.  Nina:        Right… because it was sort of like the cat chasing the mouse (Olivia: Um) so
                  you sort of increased it all
92.  Lars:        'Cause what if it's really something good (Nina: Yeah right) and then we
                  stop (Nina: Yeah right) the whole process
93.  Olivia:      Mm
94.  Lars:        Well that's not easy (Olivia: They surely say) but I mean we don't have a
                  choice, we don't have a choice either

        While the participants of the decision-makers' groups, at several
instances, mentioned consumers as powerful, governing the decisions of the
food industry, in the example above this relationship is problematised. If the
companies' decision not to sell any GMO products increases consumer worries
and resistance, then this resistance will in turn further inhibit the companies
from including the products in their assortment. Thus, the issue of agency is
related to responsibility: there is a possibility that gene technology could mean a
positive development, and that this development is impeded by the company
(turn 92). Should the company then have the moral obligation to not hamper a
good and productive process, or could it be claimed, as in turn 94, that they
actually do not have a choice, considering the economic backlash if the
consumers are still worried and boycott the company – or in other words, that
they experience a lack of agency?
        Without going any further into the analyses of agency performed on
the different discussions, I will summarise them by suggesting that it seems that
agency was in all the focus groups among lay people located mainly in an out-
group, i.e. in a group, an institution or an abstract agent of which the discussants
were not part themselves. Abstract agents such as nature and the market forces
were perceived in several of the groups as influential, while the prevailing image
of consumer agency, with few exceptions, was that it is limited or practically
non-existent. Thus, deflecting consumer agency was far more common than
claiming consumer agency. In the groups among decision makers, it seems on
the contrary that the participants conceived of the consumer as a powerful agent,
setting limits for policymaking concerning genetically modified food (even
though some of the participants, as in the example above, recognised a mutual
sense of agency). Consumer fear towards GM food was said to be a very strong
reason why it should not be sold, although the decision-makers claimed not to
believe that the food is dangerous to human health.

Yet another way of addressing issues of agency is through a narrative analysis. In a study of narratives of high-school dropouts, Rymes (1995) shows how moral agency may be constituted through these stories. Telling stories from one's own experience is neither a neutral nor an uncomplicated activity: "Through talk, people are not creating a merely random identity; rather they are actively narrating themselves relative to a moral ideal of what it is to be a good person" (Rymes 1995:498). Thus, an analysis of how focus group participants present themselves and others as agents through narratives may illuminate their ideas of moral norms. Another, yet related, possible focus of an analysis of agency is directed to communicative agency (cf. Wibeck 2001). By this I mean, for instance, what a focus group participant is able to say without threatening the faces of the other participants. Through an analysis of communicative agency, the analyst may be able to discover, among other things, which areas are sensitive to talk about, whether there are issues that the participants avoid talking about, and what strategies there are to implicitly criticise others. In other words, both moral agency and communicative agency relate to social and moral norms, the breaking of which has consequences for the image of the speaker, and which is therefore avoided as far as possible.

## 4.4 Analysing communicative strategies

In a focus group discussion, the participants use several communicative devices as resources. Partly depending on the issue in focus, these may be different. In this section I will point out a few that were prominent in the GMF data.

### 4.4.1 Analogies and distinctions

Two communicative resources frequently used in the GMF discussions were *analogies* and *distinctions*. By the use of analogies, similarities between the issue in focus and other issues are emphasised. An analogy takes on the form of "X SIMIL Y (X= FI [focus issue] phenomenon, or an example of the FI phenomenon, SIMIL a predicate meaning 'is similar to', e.g., "is like", "reminds me of", "is the same as", "is similar to")" (Linell 2001:176). The use of distinctions, on the contrary, implies an emphasis on differences, and can be defined as "X DIFF FROM Y (where DIFF is a predicate meaning "is different from")" (Linell 2001:177).

In the GMF discussions, analogies and distinctions served at least two purposes: a) to describe, explain, comprehend and categorise the abstract notion of gene technology, and b) to argue for or evaluate a certain view on GM food. An analysis of the analogies and distinctions forming part of the

argumentative web can be aimed at exploring the participants' view on and understanding of the issue in-focus at a rhetorical or discursive level, but can also have as its main purpose as addressing representations of the phenomenon at an underlying level, hence focusing on, e.g., implicit assumptions, value premises, etc.

Nevertheless, analogies and distinctions are not always distinguishable. My analyses show that they tend to appear in analogy/distinction chains, as in the following example:

Example 2
(TEMA K: GML 2 – FG 2)

| 1. | A | […] we don't have an idea of how dangerous all these eh screens computer screens are today, not an idea, I can promise you there are gonna be BOMBS in the future (X: Yeah) that we are just sitting and watching today, nobody knew about asbestos and all those stuff… everyone just set up REALLY NICE 'poor guys' *[refers to a building material/"eternitplattor"]* on their houses thinking it would require no maintenance and all that, it was really ugly but very good and very practical (H: Mm mm) and cheap. And we sit in front of our screens and it… streams right through, we sit with our cellular phones (J: Cellular phones) right in our ears and so on= |
|---|---|---|
| 2. | B | =It isn't dangerous, everyone should have one= |
| 3. | A | =But there in addition you KNOW that it's dangerous, here we are discussing something that we actually don't know (J: Yeah) but when we sit there with our cellular phone we KNOW that it's not good |

In this example, A depicts an image of contemporary society, in which health risks are ubiquitous, computer screens and cellular phones being hazards metaphorically described as "bombs".

The analogy here is double: genetically modified food is placed in the same category as the potentially dangerous computer screens and cellular phones, offering a health risk to its users (I draw evidence for the classification of this as an analogy from turn 2: "here [i.e. when discussing GM food] we are discussing something that we actually don't know"). Furthermore, computer screens are compared to a building material common in Sweden a few decades ago, which proved to contain asbestos, hence being a health risk.

In turn 3, B comments that "It isn't dangerous, everyone should have one". After having listened to the tape-recording, I draw the conclusion that this remark should be interpreted as an ironic comment, echoing the voices of ignorant consumers. A then expands his line of reasoning by modifying the

comparison from turn 1. He introduces a distinction, namely that in the case of cellular phones it is well known that they may be hazardous. When it comes to GM food, on the other hand, no one knows whether or not it is dangerous. Consequently, A links up with a line of thought much discussed in the different GMF groups, namely that gene technology is problematic, since it is a technology characterised by uncertainty.

Apart from analogies and distinctions, but related, *prototypical examples*, for instance, may be focussed on. In the FP data, I would suppose that such examples may often be related to personal experiences. In the GMF data, on the other hand, it was quite common, for example, that one application of gene technology was selected as a prototypical example representing the whole technology. For instance, participants would talk about 'giant tomatoes' instead of genetic engineering of plants, or of 'cloning Hitler' instead of talking about gene technology as an activity. A study of which prototypical examples are chosen, presented or taken for granted, can add to the analysis of why, as in the GMF data, many people express concern or fear regarding genetically modified food; I would suggest that when participants talk about the entire phenomenon in terms of prototypical examples, the recurrent examples found in the GMF data more often than not have negative connotations.


## 4.4.2 Quotes

Apart from analogies, distinctions, prototypical examples (and, by the way, metaphors, which are related to analogies and which for different reasons I have not discussed here), it might be interesting to analyse how the participants use *quotes*. Since discussions recorded in focus group are often very vivid and animated, at their best instances reminding of informal conversations among friends, there are certain features of talk-in-interaction that are worth analysing. One of those is reported speech. One could argue, as has Adelswärd (2000), that in a group there are real participants and 'virtual participants', i.e. those whose voices are heard throughout the discussions in the form of quotes. (Henceforth I will avoid the notion of 'reported speech' and rather use the term 'quotes', since when another's speech is reported, it will always undergo semantic changes, even if it is completely correctly transmitted (Bakhtin 1981). Thus, "reported speech" should not be regarded as reported, but as constructed by the very speaker, speaking in another's voice (Tannen 1989).) Identifying and analysing the blending of voices in focus group discussions is useful "because people develop their own opinions only in relation to, and in response to, those of others" (Myers 1999b:588).

Research questions of relevance for a study of quotes may focus on, for instance, the virtual participants that are brought into the discussion by the

present ones, in the form of quotes, to support their claims and arguments. How are the virtual participants treated? Are some of them questioned and others not? Are there virtual participants that recur on several occasions in different groups? Further, one may ask whether the virtual participants are presented as real or hypothetical, i.e. whether the present participants quote sources they believe have actually said or written something, or if they relate what could or should have been said/thought/written in the past, or what might be said/ thought/written in the future? This may form part of an analysis aimed at investigating whether there are authorities or experts on which the participants lean in their argumentation, or if such voices are absent.

Another type of research question is concerned with group dynamics, positioning and presentation of self: How does the act of quoting affect the dynamics in the group – do the participants succeed in creating involvement by using quotes (which is often the case (cf.Tannen 1989), not least as quotes often appear in connection with the use of narratives (Myers 1999b))? How do the participants position themselves through quotes, or, in other words, how do they illustrate the difference in the way of speaking between themselves and others, and how do they illustrate the difference in opinions? (For a discussion on the concept of 'positioning', see Harré & van Langenhove (1991); concerning positioning through the act of quotation, see Holsánová (1998), and Myers (1999a).) Concerning group cohesion, do the participants in any way present themselves as a group with certain characteristic features as opposed to other groups, or do they rather consider themselves as individuals only gathered to display their own opinions? Furthermore, if they present themselves as a group, is there consensus about the self-presentation or is it disputed?

I will provide an example from a GMF group consisting of farmers. Throughout their discussion, a subtopic concerning the role of the scientists appeared from time to time. All the participants seemed to take a sceptical stance towards the scientific community, doubting its motives, methods and benefits. In the example, Frank raises the issue of scientific narrow-mindedness, supported by back-channelling utterances from two female participants:

Example 3[10]
(TEMA K: GML 1-FG4)

Frank:   No but if we would have some prejudices, it would be that those scientists they have their area of research, and whatever happens outside their door, they don't bother about it (Cecilia+Gudrun: Mm) but they look straight ahead *that* **this should be done** and they develop a new product and **this is gonna be great**[11] (Cecilia: Mm) and what happens with it afterwards, I don't think they CARE

As the issue of GMF had not been much debated at the time I conducted the lay focus groups, and as several of the participants stated that they did not know much about it, it might be interesting to study whether the different voices heard in the discussions are used as authorities/expert voices with the function of supporting the own argumentation, or if they are quoted in order to be questioned.

Example 3 shows a frequent pattern, found when I investigated the use of quotes throughout the entire GMF corpus of discussions among lay people: the voices of scientists, spokesmen for the technology, biotech companies, policymakers, etc., were often questioned. Frank expresses his mistrust against the scientists who, according to him, do not care about the consequences of their research. According to Frank, the scientists look at their work with pleasure and are very satisfied with the way things are going. Nevertheless, they have lost their perspective. Frank quotes the scientists in a collective voice and immediately thereafter questions their motives: they do their research just for fun and do not care about the possible outcomes of it. By quoting the scientists, Frank also manages to make his argument more vivid – in the words of Tannen (1989), the quotes help "creating involvement".

Further, it was obvious that the group members did not identify with the scientific community, i.e. at several instances during the discussion they positioned themselves as opposed to the scientists, leading a life closer to nature and less concerned about economic profit. They presented themselves as a fairly

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[10] Quotes were marked by: (a) speech report verb, (b) a grammatical marker, like a shift of pronoun, tense or mode, (c) a prosodic change (a shift of "voice"), (d) other linguistic marker, e.g., "like this", "like", "just", "that" or (e) a shift of language (e.g., from Swedish to English). In some cases it was also evident from the context that the speaker was quoting another. These criteria are not exclusive, but one and the same quote may be signalled by several of them. There may, for instance, be both prosodic and grammatical changes related to the same quote. In the transcription, the use of *italics* indicates what signals the quote. The use of **bold type** marks the actual quote.

[11] The quote is signalled prosodically.

homogeneous group, displaying consensus about a self-presentation as environmentalists.

My analysis of the use of quotes in the focus groups consisting of lay people generated two results especially worth mentioning: First, at the time the focus groups were conducted, there seemed to be a gap between expert knowledge and lay knowledge about GM food. When scientists were quoted, it was almost exclusively done hypothetically, hence almost none of the participants referred to what scientists were actually believed to have said. The voices of other experts (e.g., representatives for the National Food Administration, who are often quoted in media texts on GM food (Wibeck 1999)) were echoed only on a few occasions. Second, there were not many "reporting" quotations of what advocates or adversaries of GM food had said. However, the voices of the advocates (as a collective) were constructed in the form of hypothetical quotes. This might indicate that at the time of the recording of the discussions, the debate about GMF had not actually found a hold among the participants: they had no clear conception of what the advocates and adversaries stood for. Neither did the group members display much familiarity with the pro- and contra-argument frequent in the debate in other arenas.

## 4.5 Analysis of the interaction between group members

One of the key features of focus groups is the possibility to study the interaction among the group members. Some focus group researchers even state that "/r/esearchers who use focus groups and do not attend to the impact of the group setting will incompletely or inappropriately analyze their data" (Carey & Smith 1994:125)[12]. Interactive features that may be of special interest to an analyst may be, for instance:

- Pauses – which may indicate that the participants are bored of talking about the topic and want to change the subject or even end the conversation; but which may also indicate that the topic is sensitive and possibly face-threatening.

- Overlapping speech – which may be interpreted as a signal of devotion to the topic being discussed; but which may also indicate that there is certain competition among the group members in holding the conversational floor (an empirical question being whether there are some members who succeed more often than others in this attempt, while others constantly fail).

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[12] However, Wilkinson (1999:236) points out that"/focus group data are most commonly presented as if they were one-to-one interview data, with interactions among group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed."

- Laughter – which, much like pauses, may indicate a tiredness of the topic; but which may also indicate that the participants are ashamed of something – at least on a rhetorical level (for an analysis of how jokes and laughter in the GMF project were linked to sequences in which the participants admitted their lack of energy in keeping themselves informed about gene technology and its consequences, see Adelswärd 1998).

## 5. Conclusions

Focus groups typically generate rich data, which may be approached analytically in various ways. In this paper I have pointed out a few issues regarding the organisation of a focus group study. I have also given examples of possible analytical entries for focus group data. There are great possibilities inherent in a methodology that gives room for the research participants to raise topics, share experiences and argue much on their own terms. On the other hand, there is still a lack of methodological literature on how to analyse and do justice to the interactive features of the data. Thus, focus group methodology remains a challenge to its users.

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