10 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS[1]

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SYNOPSIS

A **semi-structured interview** is a verbal interchange where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important. A **focus group** is a group of people, usually between 6 and 12, who meet in an informal setting to talk about a particular topic that has been set by the researcher. The facilitator keeps the group on topic but is otherwise non-directive, allowing the group to explore the subject from as many angles as they please. This chapter explains how to go about conducting both semi-structured interviews and focus groups whether they be in-person or online. These two methods share some characteristics in common but are distinct. They can be used separately or together. Our review traces some of the early work in contemporary geography that used these methods, especially from feminist perspectives, but also highlights recent scholarship to demonstrate the evolution and creative vibrancy of this work over time.

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

- Introduction

[1] Longhurst, R. and Johnston, L. 2023: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In Clifford, N., Cope, M., Gillespie, T., French, S. (eds) *Key Methods in Geography*, 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 168-183.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Talking with people is an excellent way of gathering information. Sometimes in our everyday lives, however, we tend to talk too quickly, not listen carefully enough or interrupt others. This applies to both talking with people in-person and online. Semi-structured interviews (sometimes referred to as informal or conversational interviews) and focus groups (sometimes referred to as focus group interviews or focus group discussions) are about talking with people but in ways that are self-reflexive, orderly and partially structured. Krueger and Casey explain that focus group interviewing (and we could add here, semi-structured interviewing) is about talking but it is also

> … about listening. It is about paying attention. It is about being open to hear what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share. It is about being careful and systematic with the things people tell you. (2014: xi)

Over the past few decades interesting debates have emerged in geography (especially amongst feminist, queer and other critical geographers) about the utility and validity of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Bennett, 2003; Davies and Dwyer, 2007; Longhurst et al., 2008; Gorman-Murray et al., 2010; Secor, 2010; Hutcheson,

2013; Caretta and Vacchelli, 2015; Dowling et al., 2016, 2017, 2018). Interviews are an intensive method (Sayer and Morgan, 1985) and key for examining power relations and social processes constituted in geographical patterns (DeLyser and Sui, 2013). These methods tended to be used mainly in-person but since approximately 2015 - and especially in light of COVID-19 - geographers are increasingly using them online (e.g. with mobile phones or computers that offer audio-visual interfaces) (McLean et al., 2020; see also the Social and Cultural Geography Research Group's post 'Online research methods in a pandemic' which contains a list of websites and academic readings for helping researchers take their methods online - https://scgrg.co.uk/online-research-methods). Conducting interviews and focus groups online enables the inclusion of participants from a wide-range of geographical locations and can save time and travel costs.

Since the early 2000s these 'intensive methods' have become even more 'intensive', or perhaps a more apt description is they have become 'performative' (Dewsbury, 2010; Pile 2010) with researchers using their own bodies as "instruments of research" (Longhurst et al. 2008). Performative methods focus on how different bodily practices involve multiple senses. For example, Longhurst et al. (2008) not only interviewed, but also cooked and ate with research participants. Duffy et al. (2011) conducted 'on the spot' interviews at a festival in order to feel the bodily rhythms of the sounds that surrounded them. Cain (2011) 'rummaged' with her participants through their wardrobes in order to elicit stories about clothing and bodies. In the context of a pandemic these performative methods are adapted for smartphone and tablet technologies and represent an important intensification or extension of semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Miles, 2018; Halliwell, 2020). Semi-structured interviews, however, are probably still one of the most commonly used qualitative methods (Dunn, 2021). Focus groups are not as commonly used but they have become increasingly popular since the

mid-1990s (see *Area*, 1996: Vol. 28 (2), which contains an introduction and five articles on focus groups; Cameron, 2021).

Geographers have used focus groups to collect data on a diverse range of subjects. As early as 1988 Burgess et al. used focus groups (which they called 'small groups') to explore people's environmental values (Burgess et al., 1988a, 1988b). Wolch et al. (2000) ran a series of focus groups in Los Angeles with an aim to find out more about the role played by cultural difference in shaping attitudes towards animals in the city. Hutcheson (2013) conducted interviews and focus groups with families who relocated to another city after experiencing a significant earthquake and aftershocks in Christchurch, New Zealand. Hutcheson was acutely aware of the performative aspects of the interviews and focus groups and wrote notes about her participants' bodily reactions and facial expressions immediately after while sitting in her car. Browne (2016) conducted six focus groups, in conjunction with a range of other methods, to explore patterns of water usage including for more intimate acts such as washing, bathing and showering, across a population in East England. The groups were marked by humour, particularly sexual-joke making, in the female focus groups. Dery (2020) also conducted six focus groups, in conjunction with a range of other methods, but with men to investigate their attitudes towards feminism in Ghana. The focus group discussions provided a space for consciousness-raising about masculinity and gender-based violence. Following the discussions some of the participants were interviewed individually to unpack various ideas that could not be easily discussed in the group setting.

Geographers have also used semi-structured interviews over the past twenty-five years to collect data on an equally diverse range of subjects. Valentine (1999) interviewed couples, some together, some apart, in order to understand gender relations in households. Punch (2000) conducted interviews (and participant observation) with children and their families in Churquiales, a rural community in the south of Bolivia. Duffy et al. (2011) conducted short on-

the-spot interviews in Australia with participants in a folkloristic parade who were performing songs and dance representing their Swiss-Italian heritage. Johnston and Waitt (2015) conducted interviews (and focus groups) with participants and organizers at gay pride parades and festivals in New Zealand, Australia, and Scotland. Hierofani (2021) conducted interviews with 16 Indonesian migrant women workers who live-in with their employers in Malaysia. The choice of method was 'intended to bring out their [the workers'] voices' revealing that the issue of 'control in the home over work and non-work aspects' (Hierofani: 2021: 1741) is very important to them.

In this chapter we define what we mean by semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These two methods share some characteristics in common; in other ways they are dissimilar. We also discuss how to plan and conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups whether it be in-person or online via mediums such as Skype, Teams, or Zoom. It is also possible to use technology to engage participants in text-based chat using platforms such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) although we do not discuss this in the chapter since the interactivity is not audio-visual or 'live'. The discussion on how to plan and conduct semi-structured interviews includes formulating a schedule of questions, selecting and recruiting participants, choosing a location, transcribing data, and thinking through some of the ethical issues and power relations involved in conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Throughout the chapter empirical examples are used in an attempt to illustrate key arguments.

10.2 WHAT ARE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS?

Interviews, explains Dunn (2021), are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person. There are three types of interviews: structured, unstructured and semi-structured, which can be placed along a continuum. As Dunn explains further:

> Structured interviews follow a predetermined and standardised list of questions. The questions are always asked in almost the same way and in the same order. At the other end of the continuum are unstructured forms of interviewing such as oral histories … The conversation in these interviews is actually directed by the informant rather than by the set questions. In the middle of this continuum are semi-structured interviews. This form of interviewing has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant. (2021: 49)

As noted earlier, semi-structured interviews can be carried out in-person or online. One of us (Longhurst) conducted research on people's experiences of using Skype (for work, for connecting with friends and family, and for sex). Given the topic it seemed appropriate, and was convenient, to conduct some interviews in-person and some on Skype. During the interview participants were asked in what ways, if any, the interview might have felt different if it had been in a different medium. The responses varied greatly. Some reported that they preferred being interviewed online because they could stay within the comfort of their own home whereas others reported they would have preferred to be interviewed in-person with one participant noting: 'at least in person there would have been a cup of tea' (see Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2016). Whether in-person or online, both semi-structured interviews and focus groups are similar in that they are conversational and informal in tone. Both allow for an open response in the participants' own words rather than a 'yes or no' type answer.

A focus group is a group of people, usually between 6 and 12, who meet in an informal setting to talk about a particular topic that has been set by the researcher (for other definitions see Merton and Kendall, 1990; Greenbaum, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Stewart et al., 2006; Gregory et al., 2009). The method has its roots in market research. The facilitator or moderator of focus groups keeps the group on the topic but is otherwise non-directive, allowing the group to

explore the subject from as many angles as they please. Often researchers attempt to construct as homogeneous a group as possible (but not always – see Goss and Leinback, 1996). The idea is to attempt to simulate a group of friends or people who have things in common and feel relaxed talking to each other. When Honeyfield (1997; also see Campbell et al., 1999) conducted research on representations of place and masculinity in television advertising for beer, he carried out two focus groups: one with five women, one with seven men. In both groups the participants had either met before, were friends, or lived together as 'flatmates'.

Focus groups tend to last between one and two hours. A key characteristic is the interaction between members of the group (Morgan, 1997; Bedford and Burgess, 2001; Cry, 2019; Cameron, 2021). This makes them different from semi-structured interviews which rely on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Focus groups are also different from interviews in that it is possible to gather the opinions of a large number of people for comparatively little time and expense. It is possible to conduct focus groups via a range of software programmes such as Zoom, Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp, and Google Chat (see Madge and O'Connor, 2002, on 'on-line synchronous interviews', Hanna, 2012, on using Skype as a 'research medium', and Halliwell 2020 on using WhatsApp for 'group chats').

Focus groups are often recommended to researchers wishing to orientate themselves to a new field (Greenbaum, 1993; Morgan, 1997). For example, in 1992 Longhurst began some research on pregnant women's experiences of public spaces in Hamilton, New Zealand. There was no existing research on this topic so it was important to establish some of the parameters of the project before using other methods. For example, what words do pregnant women in Hamilton use to refer to their pregnant bodies – tummies? stomachs? breasts? boobs? Without knowing this it would have been difficult to conduct interviews. Focus groups provided an excellent opportunity to gather preliminary information about the topic (see Longhurst, 1996). Both semi-structured interviews and focus groups can be used as 'stand-alone methods' or as

a supplement to other methods. To sum up thus far, semi-structured interviews and focus groups share some characteristics in common. Both can be used for a range of research, are reasonably informal or conversational in nature, and are flexible in that they can be carried out in-person or online and can be used in conjunction with a variety of other methods and theories. It is also evident that semi-structured interviews and focus groups are more than just 'chats'. The researcher needs to formulate questions, select and recruit participants, choose a medium and/or location, and transcribe data while at the same time remaining cognizant of the ethical issues and power relations involved in qualitative research (see Ch. 3). Sometimes researchers use both semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Other times they use just one or the other. In addition, both can be used with a suite of other methods. The section that follows addresses these topics.

10.3 FORMULATING QUESTIONS

Dunn (2021: 151) explains: 'It is not possible to formulate a strict guide to good practice for every interview [and focus group] context'. Every interview and focus group requires its own preparation, thought and practice. It is a social interaction and there are no hard and fast rules one can follow (Valentine, 2005). Nevertheless, there are certain procedures that researchers are well advised to heed.

To begin, researchers need to brief themselves fully on the topic. Having done this, it is important to work out a list of themes or questions to ask participants. People who are very confident at interviewing or running focus groups often equip themselves with just a list of themes. Personally, we both like to be prepared with actual questions in case the conversation dries up. Questions may be designed to elicit information that is 'factual', descriptive, thoughtful, emotional or affectual. A combination of different types of questions can be effective depending on the research topic. Researchers often start with a question that participants are likely to feel comfortable answering. More difficult, sensitive or thought-

provoking questions are best left to the second half of the interview or focus group when participants are feeling more comfortable. Box 10.1 contains a list of questions Longhurst drew up in order to examine large/fat/overweight people's experiences of place. This schedule could be used for semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Follow-up questions are in parentheses.

It is not necessary to ask these questions in the order listed. Allowing the discussion to unfold in a conversational manner offers participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important. At the end of the interview or focus group, however, it is important to check the schedule to make sure that all the questions have been covered at some stage during the interview or focus group.

It can take time for participants to 'warm up' to semi-structured interviews and focus groups. If possible, therefore, it is worth offering drinks and food as a way of relaxing people although clearly this is not possible if you are conducting the research online. It is also useful at the beginning of a focus group to engage participants in some kind of activity that focuses their attention on the discussion topic. For example, participants might be asked to draw a picture, respond to a photograph or imagine a particular situation. This technique tends to be used more by market researchers but it can also prove effective for social scientists. For example, Kitzinger (1994) presented focus group members with a pack of cards bearing statements about who might be 'at risk' from AIDS. She asked the group to sort the cards into different piles indicating the degree of 'risk' attached to each 'type of person'. Kitzinger (1994: 107) explains that '[s]uch exercises involve people in working together with minimal input from the facilitator and encourage participants to concentrate on one another (rather than on the group facilitator) during the subsequent discussion'.

BOX 10.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW AND FOCUS-GROUP SCHEDULE

Questions associated with Longhurst (2010)

- Can you remember a time in your life when you were *not* large/fat/overweight? (Tell me about that. How did people respond to you then?)
- Are there places that you avoid on account of being large? (Why? How do you feel if you do visit these places?)
- Are there places where you feel comfortable or a sense of belonging on account of your size? (Tell me about these places and how you feel in them.)
- Here in New Zealand there is a strong tradition of spending time at the beach. Do you go to the beach? (Explain. What is it like for you at the beach?)
- Describe your experience of clothes shopping. (Where do you shop? Are shop assistants helpful? Are the changing rooms comfortable? Do you ever feel that other shoppers judge you on account of your size?)
- When you shop for groceries or eat out in a public space, how do you feel? (Why?)
- Are there any issues concerning your size that arise at work? (What are these issues?)
- Do you feel cramped in some spaces? (For example, movie-theatre seats, small cars, planes?)
- Do you exercise? (If so, what do you do and where do you do it?)

- Have you made any modifications to your home to suit your size? (For example, altered doorways, selected particular furniture, arranged furniture in specific ways, modified bathroom/toileting facilities. Explain.)
- Do you imagine that your life would be different if you were smaller? (Explain.)
- Are there any issues that you would like to raise that you feel are important but that you haven't had a chance to explore in this interview/focus group?

10.4 SELECTING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Selecting participants for semi-structured interviews and focus groups is vitally important. Usually people are chosen on the basis of their experience related to the research topic (Cameron, 2021). Burgess's (1996, cited in Cameron, 2021) study of fear in the countryside is a useful example of this 'purposive sampling' technique. When using quantitative methods, the aim is often to choose a random or representative sample, to be 'objective' and to be able to replicate the data. This is not the case when using qualitative methods. Valentine (2005: 111, emphasis in original) explains that, unlike with most questionnaires, 'the aim of an interview [and a focus group] is *not* to be representative (a common but mistaken criticism of this technique) but to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives'.

For example, if you were studying home evictions you might anticipate interviewing and/or running focus groups with people from different ethnic groups, especially those thought to be involved in the process. However, you might also want to examine the ways in which people's ethnic or racial identities intersect with other identities such as gender, sexuality, 'migrant status,' and age in order to explore more fully the processes shaping eviction, because, as Mollett and Faria (2018: 565) explain, "the interlocking violence of racism, patriarchy,

heteronormativity, and capitalism have always constituted a spatial formation". It is not only participants' identities that need to be considered, however, when conducting research. Valentine (2005: 113) makes the important point that 'When you are thinking about who you want to interview it is important to reflect on who you are and how your own identity will shape the interactions that you have with others'. She explains this is what academics describe as being *reflexive* or recognizing your own *positionality* (see England, 1994; Moss, 2002; Bondi, 2003, on 'empathy and identification' in the research process).

There are many strategies for recruiting participants for semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Some strategies work for both methods while others are more appropriate for one or the other. One common method of recruiting participants is to conduct a short, accessible survey, often implemented online or using a phone app, (see Ch. 12) to gauge people's interest in the topic, establish some baseline data, and ask people who are interested in participating further to provide their contact information. For populations who are less likely to engage in social media, it is also possible to advertise for participants in local newspapers, community bulletin boards, or on radio stations, requesting interested parties to contact you.

Indeed, researchers are increasingly using social media (such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and web-based surveys (such as SurveyMonkey) to reach out to potential participants in particular target groups. Special groups who share an experience or background can be identified and contacted via a survey link, email or text in an attempt to set up an in-person or online interview or focus group. For example, when conducting research on people's experiences of love and romance in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft,* PhD student Cherie Todd invited players to respond to an online questionnaire and then asked if they would be prepared to be interviewed in-person if they lived locally or via Skype if they lived afar (Todd, 2016).

Using social media to recruit has largely replaced the earlier method of 'cold calling' which involves actually calling people (usually strangers) on the phone or dropping in somewhere in-person to ask if they would be prepared to be interviewed. This can be a nerve-racking process because interviewers often get a high refusal rate. However, in some instances – such as seeking out participants from a specific neighborhood using door-to-door visits – this may be the most effective approach.

As mentioned above, focus groups are often made up of people who share something in common or know each other. Group membership lists, therefore, can be a useful tool for recruiting. People who already know each other through sports clubs, online groups, community activities, church groups or work can make an ideal focus group. Halliwell (2020) used the social media applications WhatsApp and Twitter to research gender and sexual identities in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest. Fan groups had formed themselves online, making the recruitment of participants and the coordination of research 'group chats' relatively easy. When one of us (Longhurst, 2000) conducted focus groups on men's experiences of domestic bathrooms (a private space rarely discussed by geographers) it was possible to enlist (with the help of friends) four groups of men. The first group belonged to the same rugby club, the second were colleagues in a government department, the third were 'job-seekers' and the fourth were family/friends.

Another useful route for securing participants for focus groups is what Krueger (1988: 94) refers to as 'recruiting on location' or 'on-site recruiting'. Again, one of us used this strategy to recruit first-time pregnant women to talk about their experiences of public places. Pregnant women were approached at antenatal classes, midwives' clinics and doctors' offices (Longhurst, 1996). These women 'opened doors' to the researcher speaking with other pregnant women. Social scientists refer to this as 'snowball-sampling' in which one participant

recommends others who might be interested, and they in turn provide further contacts to build a pool of potential participants.

10.5 WHERE TO MEET

Not only is it necessary to decide how to select and recruit participants but also to decide where to conduct the interview or focus-group meeting. In the first instance you will need to decide whether to conduct it in-person or online. It comes as no surprise to most geographers that *where* an interview or focus group is held can make a difference. Ideally, the setting should be a location that is convenient and comfortable for respondents, but also safe for researchers (see Ch. 2 on research safety). One of us once made the mistake of helping to facilitate a focus group about the quality of service offered by a local council at the council offices. The discussion did not flow freely and it soon became apparent that the participants felt hesitant (understandably) about criticizing the council while in one of their rooms. It is worth noting, however, that 'In most cases if you are talking to business people or officials from institutions and organizations you will have no choice but to interview them in their own offices' (Valentine, 2005: 118; but also see McDowell, 1997, on interviewing investment bankers in the City of London). Being in the environs you are studying can also prove useful. If you decide to conduct semi-structured interviews or focus groups online think which app or software (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, FaceTime, Google Chat, Messenger, WhatsApp) might be most user-friendly and/or work most effectively for you and your participants. It is a good idea to test the technology first on someone who is willing. In particular conducting large focus groups online can be prone to technology issues, lagging, interruptions and internet dropouts. Keeping them to under six participants might be advisable.

It is not always possible to conduct interviews and focus groups in 'the perfect setting' but if at all possible aim to find a place that is neutral, informal (but not noisy), and easily accessible. For example, if you are conducting a reasonably small focus group it may be

possible to sit comfortably around a dining-room table (see Fine and Macpherson, 1992, for an account of a focus group that took place 'over dinner'). Needless to say, if it is a larger focus group then multiple computer screens or a larger space will be required, perhaps a room at a school or club (see Johnston and Waitt, 2020 who conducted interviews and focus groups at sports venues). The main consideration for both semi-structured interviews and focus groups is that interviewees feel comfortable whether in real or online space. It is important that the interviewer also feels comfortable (see also Chapter 2). Valentine (2005: 118) warns: 'For your own safety never arrange interviews with people you do not feel comfortable with or agree to meet strangers in places where you feel vulnerable'.

10.6 RECORDING AND TRANSCRIBING DISCUSSIONS

When conducting semi-structured interviews or focus groups it is possible to take notes or to audio/video-record the discussion. We both usually audio-record the proceedings. Many researchers who are themselves facilitating a focus group prefer to have a note-taker in the room even if the session is recorded, to capture facial expressions, gestures, the seating pattern, and other social cues. If you are conducting the research online you can use either inbuilt software (e.g. Sound Recorder on Windows; QuickTime on Mac) or commercial applications such as those embedded in the meeting software to record the conversation. Recording allows the researcher to focus fully on the interaction instead of feeling pressure to get the participants' words written in a notebook or typed in to a device (see Valentine, 2005). Directly after the interview it is a good idea to document the general tone of the conversation, the key themes that emerged and anything that particularly impressed or surprised you in the conversation. Taking these notes, in a sense, is a form of data analysis (for information on qualitative data analysis, see Chapter 36; also Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2019; Kitchin and Tate, 2000).

It is advantageous to transcribe interviews and focus groups as soon as possible after conducting them (for how to code a transcript, see Chapter 36). Listening to the recorded

conversation when it is still fresh in your mind makes transcription much easier. Focus groups, especially large groups, can be difficult to transcribe because each speaker, including the facilitator, needs to be identified. While some challenges have been addressed by recent developments in talk-to-text technologies embedded in Zoom and other meeting platforms, the automatic transcriptions are often quite poor at capturing conversation, especially if participants use jargon, slang, acronyms, or foreign terms, so editing and supplemental transcription is essential.

In Box 10.2 is an example of a transcript from a focus group of young mothers who met to discuss their experiences of using various technologies as part of their mothering practices. Note the 'dynamism and energy as people respond to the contributions of others' (Cameron, 2021: 201). Also note the various transcription codes: the starts of overlap in talk are marked by a double oblique //; pauses are marked with a dot in parentheses **(.)**; non-verbal actions, gestures and facial expressions are noted in square brackets; and loud exclamations are in **bold** typeface (for more detailed transcription codes see Dunn, 2021: 170).

BOX 10.2 TRANSCRIPTION OF A FOCUS GROUP

Lakin: I just got told that the photos you put on Facebook become Facebook property, even if you delete them off, they are still part of Facebook property. They've still got copies of them all **//.**

Jasmine: **But who cares**? What are they gonna do with them? **(.)**

Theressa: Well, I am not keen on that in a way [frowns]. That's pretty scary really.

Jasmine: But there are millions and millions and millions of photos on there.

Theressa: But imagine the worries about certain people getting hold of them. Like we would not let kids' photos at school go on the Internet. We won't let things like that happen because what if the wrong people get them. Just anything like that.

> If they are Facebook property anyone can go into the data base and get any photo of anything and do God knows what with it.

Source: Audio-tape excerpt from a focus group conducted by Robyn Longhurst in 2009 (see Longhurst, 2013, for a publication based on these data)

As this transcript illustrates, sometimes participants can disagree and data can be 'sensitive' (some mothers fear paedophiles on the Internet). It is not surprising, therefore, that there are numerous ethical issues to consider when conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

10.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

Two important ethical issues are confidentiality and anonymity. Participants need to be assured that all the data collected will remain secure under lock and key or on a computer database accessible by password only; that information supplied will remain confidential (online interviews and focus groups can be encrypted to help provide data security); that participants will remain anonymous (unless they desire otherwise); and that participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation (see Ch. 3). It is also sound research practice to offer to provide participants with a summary of the research results at the completion of the project and to follow through on this commitment. This summary might take the form of a hard copy or an electronic copy posted on a website (for example, the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford provides a comprehensive website containing links to various research projects conducted by staff: see https://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/).

Focus groups pose a further complication in relation to confidentiality because not only is the researcher privy to information but so are members of the group. Therefore, participants need to be asked to treat discussions as confidential. Cameron explains:

> As this [confidentiality] cannot be guaranteed, it is appropriate to remind people to disclose only those things they would feel comfortable about being repeated outside the group. Of course, you should always weigh up whether a topic is too controversial or sensitive for discussion in a focus group and is better handled through another technique, like individual in-depth interviews. (2021: 270)

Another ethical issue is that participants in the course of an interview or focus group may express sexist, racist or other offensive views. As mentioned earlier, Krueger and Casey (2014) claim that researchers ought to listen, pay attention and be non-judgemental. Sometimes, however, being non-judgemental might simply reproduce and even legitimize interviewees' discrimination through complicity (see Valentine, 2005). Researchers need to think carefully about how to deal with such situations because there are no easy solutions. Madge (2007) has addressed specifically the ethical issues surrounding researching using online methods.

Researchers also need to think carefully about how to interview or run focus groups in different cultural contexts (see Chapter 7). For example, researchers investigating oppressed or marginalized communities need to be highly sensitive to local codes of conduct, as well as to their own positionality in relation to exploitation or past abuses, and should follow community-determined guidelines to build trust-based relationships that will avoid 'extractive' research (Watson, 2021). In short, there is a web of ethical issues and power relations that need to be teased out when conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Feminist geographers in particular made early contributions in this area (for example, see Katz, 1994; England, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Moss, 2002; Bondi, 2003). More recently, critical geographers have built on intersectional perspectives, social justice goals, and decolonial approaches (see Ch. 7) to develop sensitive, respectful, and even liberatory scholarship (Cahuas, 2022; Gilmore, 2022), which confronts the ethics of research at personal and structural levels.

10.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have outlined two qualitative methods – semi-structured interviews and focus groups – and how they can be employed in geographical research. Both methods involve talking with people in a semi-structured manner whether it be in-person on online. However, whereas semi-structured interviews rely on the interaction between interviewee and interviewer, focus groups rely on interactions amongst participants. Both methods make a significant contribution to geographic research, especially now that discussions about meaning, identity, subjectivity, emotion, affect, politics, knowledge, power, performativity and representation are high on many geographers' agendas. Critically examining the construction of knowledge and discourse in geography has led to an interest in developing methodological strategies that can be employed with a high level of reflexivity about the process of research. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are useful for investigating complex behaviours, opinions, emotions and affects, and for collecting a diversity of experiences. These methods do not offer researchers a route to '*the* truth' but they do offer a route to partial insights into what people do and think.

SUMMARY

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are about talking with people both in-person and online but in ways that are self-conscious, orderly and partially structured.
- These methods are useful for investigating complex behaviours, opinions, emotions and affects, and for collecting a diversity of experiences.
- Every interview and focus group requires its own preparation, thought and practice.

- There is a range of methods that can be used for recruiting participants, including advertising for participants, accessing membership lists (including Internet mailing lists), using social media, on-site recruiting and 'cold calling'.
- Interviews/focus groups ought to be conducted in a place or space where both participants and interviewer feel comfortable, including online options.
- When conducting semi-structured interviews or focus groups take notes and/or audio/video record the discussion.
- There is a web of ethical issues and power relations that need to be teased out when using these methods.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups make a significant contribution to geographic research.

FURTHER READING

There are numerous excellent publications on semi-structured interviews and focus groups written by geographers and other social scientists. We have listed below some recommended titles:

- Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) 4th edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* provides useful chapters including on interviews (e.g. chpt. 32 by Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori) and focus groups (e.g. ch. 33 by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis). Other topics covered include ethics, politics, feminism, performance and technology.
- Madge and O'Connor (2002) discuss their experience of conducting what they call 'semi-structured synchronous virtual group interviews' with a

group of mothers. Using Internet technologies for research, especially since Covid-19, is now very popular across the social sciences.

- Cameron (2021) provides a geographer's perspective on focus groups, explaining the various ways they have been used, how to plan and conduct them, and how to analyse and present results.
- Valentine's (2005) chapter on 'conversational interviews' is highly readable and provides advice on whom to talk to, how to recruit participants and where to hold interviews.
- Dunn (2021) discusses structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing in geography, critically assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each method. Like Valentine, Dunn has a useful guide at the end of the chapter to further reading.

Note: Full details of the above can be found in the references list below.

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