The Methodological Potential of Focus Groups in Population Geography

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ABSTRACT

Within population geography, the last decade has seen an explosion in qualitative work in terms of the types of work, the topics addressed, and the potential theoretical consequences. Yet focus groups have received less attention as an alternative method. This paper highlights the particular promises, challenges, and practicality of doing focus group research in population geography. I begin by addressing how this research method answers ongoing pleas within the subdiscipline for non-essentialist ways of thinking about taken-for-granted social categories and labels. I then outline two other promising outcomes of this method, including the potential for unique and spontaneous group interactions, and the potential for the empowerment of participants. I use the rest of the paper to provide a review of some of the methodological details of focus group research, with the idea of encouraging more population geographers to engage with this method. Throughout, I contend that focus groups have the capability to further our understanding of population processes, and to connect population geography research to ongoing debates within the broader discipline. Observations stem from an extensive review of existing focus group research, along with my own focus group research conducted with residents living in multiracial suburban communities. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: focus groups; qualitative methods; population geography; social construction of identities; racialisation

INTRODUCTION

Within population geography, the last decade has seen an explosion in qualitative work in terms of the types of methods utilised, the topics addressed, and the potential theoretical consequences (for reviews, see Findlay and Graham, 1991; White and Jackson, 1995; Lawson, 1998; Findlay and Li, 1999; Graham, 1999; McKendrick, 1999; McHugh, 2000; Graham and Boyle, 2001; Boyle, 2002; Gober and Tyner, 2004; Silvey, 2004a). Yet focus groups, which are an increasingly popular qualitative research method in other subfields of human geography (see Jackson and Holbrook, 1995; Goss, 1996; Pratt, 1999, 2002; Cameron, 2000; Hoggart et al., 2001; Bedford and Burgess, 2001; Secor, 2003, 2004), in demography (see Ward et al., 1991; Race et al., 1994; Wight, 1994; Madriz, 1998; Hyden and Bulow, 2003) and in other social sciences (see Morgan, 1996; Napolitano et al., 2002; Umana-Taylor and Bámaca, 2004), have received less attention as an alternative in the population geography literature (for exceptions, see Gordon and Jones, 1991; Goss and Leinbach, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the particular promises, challenges and practicality of doing focus group research in population geography. I begin by addressing how this research method answers ongoing pleas within the subdiscipline for non-essentialist ways of thinking about taken-for-granted social categories and labels. To articulate further how valuable focus groups can be for population...
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There is one side-note worth mentioning before turning to my more in-depth discussion of focus group as method. In this article, I use Morgan’s (1996) widely-accepted definition of a focus group as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic predetermined by the researcher(s), although once in a focus group setting, the conversations between the researcher and the researched often take unexpected turns. The group discussion yields the primary source of data, and group interaction is expected to produce insights that would be difficult to obtain through individual interviews or large-scale surveys. Typically, focus groups are an ideal method for both exploratory and confirmatory purposes; in other words, focus groups are useful for gaining background information, clarifying ideas, developing questions, and understanding group reactions to particular problems, processes and patterns.

FOCUSING ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES IN POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

Over ten years ago, White and Jackson (1995) asked that population geographers become more engaged in ongoing debates within the broader discipline. Among the more powerful of their arguments was the need for the consideration of the constructed nature of social categories and of the material interests that those categories inevitably serve.

‘Researchers have been relatively uncritical of the ways in which data come in ready-categorised forms, and have not sufficiently examined alternative (non-essentialist) ways of thinking about social categories and labels.’ (White and Jackson, 1995: 111)

They suggested that demographic research could be enriched by moving away from the fixed categories so readily accessible in data sources like censuses and surveys, and so commonly used by population researchers. They argued that in order to broaden the focus of population geography, scholars might want to consider the subjective meanings that individuals hold about their own identities, as well as how these meanings are crafted and reconfigured in a variety of political, social and economic contexts.

Significant developments have occurred since this paper was first published. McHugh (2000) revealed the ways in which ethnography works towards understanding processes of belonging and identity formation at a variety of analytical scales. Another example includes Graham’s (1999) fundamental questioning about the inter-relationships among methods, data, and research problems within population geography. Both Boyle (2002) and Silvey (2004a) convincingly demonstrated how critical and feminist migration studies have made substantial strides in pushing the themes of population geography into explicit engagement with a wide range of vibrant contemporary theoretical debates. Particularly in migration studies, these scholars have begun to take apart the concept of gendered identities by drawing attention to the importance of the constructed nature of male/female identities, and the way that gender is played out through the body, households, communities, labour markets, and regional projects of neoliberal restructuring through which migrants move (see also Lawson, 2000; Price, 2001; Domosh and Seager, 2001; Silvey, 2004b). This broadening of the subfield serves to take us away from gender-blind analyses of population processes and helps to bring us up to speed with the work of other geographers engaged with feminist theory.

Still, much work remains to be done in population geography research to move outside of an essentialist frame of analysis. Race, particularly, continues to be a taken-for-granted social category within the population geography literature.
Even as White and Jackson (1995: 112) called for specific engagement with recent ideas about the social construction of race and the racialisation of policy and politics, minimal progress has been made in this regard in the past decade. But in this case, population geographers are not alone: as Peake and Schein (2000), Anderson (2002), Kobayashi and Peake (2000) and Nash (2003) have recently argued, most geographers have not done enough to attend to an anti-racist geography. There is a vociferous call for more geographers to engage in critical race theory.

A racialised analysis of population processes is more complicated than merely employing current racial/ethnic groupings and categorisations. Race affects societies deeply and in multiple ways that are not always easily identified, separated and categorised. Part of the task of understanding the influence of race is to try to identity and tease apart the many influences of this categorisation while remaining conscious of the ways in which this categorisation is constantly transforming. In racialisation discourse, argued Omi and Winant (1994), attention is focused on the ideologies that underlie the very exercise of racial categorisation and/or the consequences and material manifestations of labelling population groups in particular ways.

For instance, the traditional demographic approach to race/ethnicity might be to concentrate on spatial patterns and indices of residential segregation. Yet an alternative, racialised approach might relate particular social and spatial practices to the wider social structure in which those practices are embedded and from which their meanings and values are derived: that is, the hierarchies, institutions and changing ideologies of race and racialisation as they relate to and reproduce existing social, economic and political structures. So, instead of relying on the ‘mapping’ of racial/ethnic districts by employing large-scale census databases, both Anderson (1987, 1988, 1991) and Craddock (2000) revealed how, historically, the Chinese became racially categorised during the time when the Chinatowns they lived in became spatially segregated communities.

The task of deconstructing social categories is likely to be particularly difficult in population geography where data-driven and aggregate ways of thinking still influence fundamental conceptualisations of race, gender, age and generation (Graham, 1999: 87). In my own research, for instance, I have often relied on traditional techniques and conventional data sources and categories to analyse the residential patterns, spatial segregation and spatial assimilation of recent immigrants to the US (Skop, 2001; Skop and Li, 2006). While the results of this research are useful for describing the form and character of new immigrant settlements in America’s suburbs, as well as for drawing some general conclusions regarding their spatial assimilation, it does little to produce an in-depth understanding of: (1) how race/ethnicity, class and place shape the racial/ethnic identities of suburban-bound immigrants; or (2) how the suburban settlement of immigrants contributes to shifting conceptions of the main racial/ethnic boundaries of American life.

In order to uncover the interlinking processes of immigration, suburbanisation and racialisation, I have moved towards alternative methods like in-depth interviews, participant observation and landscape analysis (Skop, 2002; Skop and Li, 2003). This ‘mixed methods’ approach begins to answer the call by Wright et al. (2005) for more critical research that displaces ‘whiteness’ as the exclusive endpoint in assimilation trajectories. It also begins to articulate how the suburbs become more than just a passive backdrop for the negotiation of racial/ethnic identities.

Still, while these qualitative techniques are useful for answering certain questions, it turns out that focus groups supply an entirely different perspective in understanding racial/ethnic categories, attitudes and stereotypes and the ways in which these are socially and spatially constructed. Through focus groups, we uncovered both the suburban experiences of immigrant newcomers, as well as the experiences of native-born, non-Hispanic white residents. Through focus groups, we explored their role in the social construction and classification of racialised minorities, which is as important, if not more important, than how ‘classified’ racial/ethnic immigrant groups identify themselves (see Lipsitz, 1998; Hiebert and Ley, 2001; Mitchell, 2004).

In our focus group discussions, participants pronounced both agreement and disagreement, highlighting unanimity and consensus in the case of agreement and thereby identifying group norms. Because racial/ethnic identity and
racial/ethnic attitudes are social and spatial constructions that are strongly influenced by a person’s group interaction and affiliation, the focus group setting provided an alternative way to get at the subject. In the case of disagreement, individuals had to explain, justify and perhaps even modify their positions, providing insight into the reasons why participants think the way they do. At the same time, muted and/or censored identities and subjects in the focus group discussions were used to reveal some of the social processes underlying the articulation of knowledge. This includes stigmas attached to certain opinions or information, especially with regard to the social and spatial boundaries created and sustained in the racialisation process. Concomitantly, the focus groups helped both to generate new questions and to verify previous results gained through other research methods. By moving outside the established norms and techniques of the subdiscipline, and by incorporating a mixed method approach, including focus groups, we can begin to answer White and Jackson’s (1995) call for a (re)theorised population geography.

THE FOCUS GROUP AS ALTERNATIVE METHOD: OTHER PROMISING OUTCOMES

For population geographers interested in uncovering the social constructedness of social categories, focus groups are useful for a variety of reasons. The focus group provides participants with a space in which they can define their own identities, occupy different categories, and create new categories. The mutually exclusive categories handed down to us in official documents and surveys take on new meanings and significance when discussed in a group setting. Fixed conceptions of identities as natural, objective categorisations begin to unravel, and the situational nature of identities, subject to change and dependent on context, emerges. The focus group can articulate how categories are a form of labelling, and how labels carry power when they are arranged into hierarchies, and when they are used to both ‘include’ and to ‘exclude’. Thus, by opening population geography inquiries to include multiple notions of identity and not just those categories of data provided in official statistics, we introduce another level of complexity and a more critical approach to the ways that social categories influence population processes.

To articulate further how valuable focus groups can be for population geographers, I outline two other principal advantages of this method, including: (1) the potential for unique and spontaneous group interactions; and (2) the potential for the empowerment of participants.

The Potential for Unique and Spontaneous Group Interactions

One significant benefit of focus groups is that the interaction between group participants offers the potential for unmasking ideas, beliefs and opinions that may not come out in an in-depth interview or survey questionnaire. Compared with these techniques, the group interaction inherent to the focus group setting can encourage spontaneous responses from participants. While the moderator imposes some structure on the discussion in order to maintain the focus on the subject at hand, the discussion may deviate towards issues that the researcher had not considered but are in fact pertinent to the subject and may result in important data findings.

As interaction between participants replaces interaction between participants and the researcher, an emphasis is placed on the participants’ point of view. Participants may take the place of the moderator, questioning each other and explaining themselves to one another. This provides the researcher with alternative perspectives regarding differences in attitudes or experiences, as the participants themselves provide comparisons and explanations of their different points of view. As Kitzinger’s (1994) research on the AIDS Media Research Project demonstrated, the group not only censors, but also encourages the sharing of private or ‘taboo’ topics, as more aggressive participants will break the ice. Indeed, the group setting can also destabilise the particular prejudices and meanings that the researcher herself brings to the project.

Secor’s (2003, 2004) research offers an example of the role of group interaction in producing both group consensus and multiple points of view. Because Secor is interested in the ways in which citizenship is encountered and contested through the spatial practices of everyday life, focus groups revealed how some participants joined together to express pride in their cultural
identity (through references to their neighbourhoods and workplaces). Yet, after prompting from other participants, the group began to raise questions about the unity and meaning of that identity. The group setting allowed the many discourses revolving around issues of citizenship and belonging to emerge.

The benefits of group interaction can be articulated clearly in comparison with individual interviews, where in-depth information may also be obtained, but within an entirely different context. Wight (1994) used both individual interviews and focus groups to explore the ways in which adolescent boys think about sex. He found that within the group setting, the boys were more likely to exaggerate and parody their ideas according to what they believed was expected by the adult moderator, perhaps to show off in front of their peers. In individual interviews, the boys’ histories were modified to accommodate the interviewer’s expectations and morals. Consensus, therefore, occurs in the case of both focus groups and individual interviews but in different ways, illustrating the key role of social and geographical contexts in understanding various phenomena. Focus groups encourage a setting whereby research participants can provide their own interpretations of their attitudes and behaviour in the context of a group. Because of the interactive nature of group settings, participants are forced to explain their views and theorise about differences in their attitudes (Zeller, 1993a; Hollander, 2004).

Of course, a potential shortcoming of focus groups concerns the issue of conformity. If participants fall back on conventionality and traditionalism, it can serve to undermine focus group results. Hyden and Bulow (2003) emphasised that researchers must pay attention to the capacity in which participants express themselves. Analysis of the dialogue can indicate whether participants have developed a common ground upon which they act as a group, such as when individuals respond to and build upon one another’s stories. Conversations among participants can also reveal when they act as individuals, especially when participants focus on their own experiences without making connections to the experiences of the other group members. Depending on this sort of group identity development, the attitudes may not be reducible to individuals and will reflect, instead, a group orientation. The consensus regarding interaction in group data collection appears to be that it is immensely valuable as a research tool if it is analysed in such a way that pays attention to the specific influence of the group setting.

The Potential for the Empowerment of Participants

Potentially, focus groups can also involve the incorporation of marginalised groups, since the group discussion can empower participants who typically lack a ‘voice’ to discuss issues relevant to their lives. Focus groups can ensure that priority is given to the respondents’ hierarchy of knowledge, their language and concepts, and their frameworks for understanding the world (Zeller, 1993b; Goss, 1996). Furthermore, ‘targeting issues for focus group investigations that are important or relevant to them… by itself can serve to empower participants’ (Race et al., 1994: 737). This is especially the case when participants are assumed to be the experts on any given topic, as often happens in a focus group setting.

Including marginalised groups in research on important social issues can help negate feelings of systematic exclusion. The research conducted by Lengua et al. (1992), Nichols-Casebolt and Spakes (1995), and Koppelman and Bourjolly (2001) all served to empower women who otherwise live on the margins of society. Pratt’s (1999, 2002) interactions with Filipina domestic workers made evident an otherwise invisible group often subject to victimisation, exploitation and abuse. In the safety of their own focus groups, the domestic workers were able to direct the discussion to topics important to them and to interpret the researchers’ topics in their own way. At the same time, focus groups with local service providers illustrated how particular discourses emerge as situated practices in particular places, and as a result, establish the women’s social and spatial marginalisation. To encourage new, more positive discourses and dialogues, Pratt worked in partnership with the Philippine Women Center on a number of papers and reports.

This kind of cooperation is not uncommon for scholars who use focus group methods. Indeed, focus groups are especially useful for scholars committed to addressing topics that may
eventually engender positive social change (Smith, 2001; Cameron, 2000; Moss, 2002). As Gibson et al. (1999) discovered in their research on neighbourhood restructuring in Australia, the results of their focus groups not only empowered the research subjects, but also encouraged the development of alternative management plans and strategies to enhance the quality of community life. Thus, focus groups can serve to transform the understandings of both the researchers and the participants in new and compelling ways.

Focus groups can also help to ease language barriers that may exist between the researcher and participants. Oftentimes, for instance, close-ended surveys and structured interview questionnaires rely on assumptions about what the respondent already knows or what language they use to express the same idea; in focus groups the researcher can overcome those barriers by listening to how the participants speak with each other in their own language and/or vocabulary. This issue speaks directly to the idea suggested by White and Jackson (1995) to move away from fixed categorisations and can also create a less hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the research subject.

Even so, it is important to point out that the particular viewpoint of simply giving ‘voice’ to marginalised groups does not always make much difference in the material conditions of those individuals’ lives. Nor does it mean that the final representations and communication of the focus group discussions and results (which the researcher still controls) will result in positive social change (Cope, 2002). It is thus critical that, if focus groups are to serve the function of empowerment, researchers need to develop as many strategies as possible that can be used to disrupt the traditional power dynamic between researcher and subjects, such as sharing and confirming the results of analysis with the respondents, and/or, as Pratt (1998) has done, co-author the final presentation of results with subjects. Another forum through which the research can make a specific and particular difference in participants’ lives is through the organisation of social events whereby various community members (including the participants themselves, policy-makers, and social service providers) come together to exchange ideas and information gathered in the research, as evidenced by Menjivar et al. (2000). All of these strategies are not free from problems, but they are worth considering for the purposes of negating participants’ feelings of systematic exclusion.

DESIGNING FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group proponents, like Kitzinger (1994), point out that most scholars using focus groups do not adequately justify their use of the method nor do they report the specifics of the research design. According to Morgan and Krueger (1993), the cost and time savings can lure researchers towards using focus groups without any real basis for the method in the research question, theoretical framework, or data objectives. Indeed, the logistic advantage of focus groups is that they can provide a fairly cheap and reasonably easy source of quality data in a relatively short amount of time (although the opposite can also be true, since the organisation required to get everyone together at the same time and place can be a logistical nightmare!). Unfortunately, the result of cost–time efficiency is ‘a plethora of inadequate studies, involving poor design and shoddy reporting’ (Krueger, 1993: 65).

Perhaps the lack of high-quality examples of focus group research partially explains why population geographers have been reticent to use the method thus far. To encourage more engagement with this method, I use the rest of this paper to provide a review of some of the methodological details of focus group research. While articulating all of the logistics of focus group design, implementation and analysis would go beyond the purpose of this article, there are some basic considerations and principles of the method that I suggest inform upon its methodological and epistemological potential. In particular, given that research outcomes ultimately depend on the research design, I discuss three factors that I find useful to consider with the focus groups method: (1) segmentation; (2) the role of the moderator; and (3) standardisation. Because focus groups can be used for a range of research purposes in population geography, other considerations will certainly turn up for each particular research project, but based on my experience with focus groups, these are the most common issues that I have encountered, which, if addressed early on, will probably result in greater success.
Segmentation

Segmentation is the marketing term describing the conscious selection of groups according to particular characteristics (Morgan, 1996: 14). Because of the nature of focus group research, it is important to control for group composition in terms of participants’ social and demographic characteristics. Generally, focus groups need to be homogeneous with respect to the research question at hand and along certain features, such as age, gender, social class, language and/or race, or as Knodel (1993) called, them ‘break characteristics’.

Increased segmentation, of course, yields a higher number of groups; so, in order to reach data saturation, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) recommended completing between four and six focus groups per group type. Hoggart et al. (2001) suggested that each focus group include between 6–12 participants, depending on the topic at hand. To address topics that people are unfamiliar with or feel neutral about, researchers typically select a larger group in order to generate sufficient discussion. Yet for topics that are very familiar and emotionally charged, the researcher generally restricts the size of the focus group to increase intimacy and a feeling of security amongst participants. This occurred in Longhurst’s (1996) research on the ways in which pregnant women converse and interact in public space. Even though a very small number of participants were included in the study, Longhurst held five different focus groups with women who were pregnant for the first time. With the stories and observations offered by these women, the researcher was able to articulate a novel understanding of the landscape of pregnancy.

There are three basic advantages to segmentation. One is that homogeneity with respect to a certain aspect of the research topic increases the safety of the group and therefore encourages group participation. In other words, an imperative consideration in group composition is power differentials among participants. Under most circumstances, participants feel most comfortable talking about an issue with fellow participants who have the same power relationship relevant to that issue. So, when addressing racial formation and reactions to Western films, Shively (1992) segregated her groups by race. Jackson and Holbrook’s (1995) examination of the construction of identity, community and locality through shopping grouped people together with common characteristics like age and sex. And in a study of work burnout, Hyden and Bulow (2003) arranged groups according to specific professional categories in an effort to establish a common background and knowledge among group participants.

Another advantage to segmentation is that it ensures that the ineffectiveness of one group will not affect the final outcome of the study. The possibility of stagnant group discussions is always prevalent with this method, and can serve to undermine focus group results. Yet if researchers recognise this potential shortcoming early on, they can simultaneously overcome it. Thus, researchers generally aim for data saturation, which is the level at which the researcher can predict the responses from participants. In their research with Latino mothers, Umana-Taylor and Bámaca (2004), because they were exploring the sensitive topic of socialisation among Latino adolescents from their parents’ perspectives, recognised the need to limit the size and composition of each focus group. But in order to achieve data saturation, the researchers had to conduct 21 separate focus groups with six types of groups: Guatemalan mothers, Colombian mothers, Puerto Rican mothers born in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican mothers born on the mainland, Mexican mothers born in Mexico, and Mexican mothers born in the US. While it required significantly more time and effort, the result was a much richer and more complete understanding of the socialisation process.

The third advantage to segmentation comes after the focus groups take place, and once analysis has begun. Segmenting each focus group according to various characteristics gives the researcher the ability to code the transcripts easily afterwards, along key themes and across categories of people. In my research, for instance, I segmented focus groups to compare and yield insights regarding each group’s ideas and attitudes about race/ethnicity at different levels of community integration and community activism. The results generated remarkably different outcomes based on the highly segmented groups. In one suburban neighbourhood with relatively small numbers of minorities, the groups were more likely to be ‘tolerated’ by long-time non-Hispanic white residents. However, new tensions
and conflicts emerged in non-Hispanic majority white communities that experienced a rapid influx and growth of minorities and their institutions. The process of racialisation was much more intense in these communities.

The Role of the Moderator

The decision about the role of the moderator is generally related to whether the researchers prefer a standardised format or a more open, exploratory format. Generally, the moderator’s main role is to present the group goals and subject topic at the beginning of the session and to keep the group focused. Oftentimes, this involves bringing up new questions and/or creating interruptions when the group gets off-subject. The moderator can also increase group structure and manage group dynamics through the curtailment of some participants who dominate the discussion, and/or by encouraging more hesitant participants to respond. At the same time, one of the more beneficial aspects of the focus group method is that it can be a more ‘non-directive’ method, in the sense that the relationship between the moderator and the research subjects can be more ambiguous if so desired (Pratt, 2002: 214).

Despite overall agreement regarding the importance of the moderator, there is some debate as to the moderator’s necessary skills and training. Yet, as Morgan and Krueger (1993: 5–6) pointed out ‘skills and training’ do not necessarily imply that the moderator should be professionally trained. Several researchers argue that it may be preferable to use a member of the research team who is extremely familiar with the research protocol, the time schedule, and the kind of coding scheme to be used after the focus groups are complete. The general message suggests that focus group moderators should be trained or skilled to the extent that they can create an environment where data collection is maximised according to the goals of the research project; in other words, the participants are able to interact comfortably while focused on the subject at hand.

To increase comfort, the researcher may wish to match the moderator with the participants in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity or class, depending on the research topic (Krueger and Casey, 2000). There is general agreement in the literature that participants are less inhibited when the moderator is of the same national, ethnic and/or racial origin as the participants. This is especially the case for revealing negative remarks regarding other groups. Shively (1992), for example, matched the race of the moderator with the race of the group in her study of Native Americans and Anglos. In Umana-Taylor and Bámaca’s (2004) research, the focus groups were moderated by individuals who not only matched the racial/ethnic characteristics of the research subjects, but who were also familiar with the goals of the project and who had experience working with the specific populations of interest to the study. Later on, they discovered that there are also benefits to having a diverse group of researchers involved in data analysis. With their varying lenses, the results were interpreted from and validated with multiple perspectives.

Standardisation

Standardisation is the process by which researchers create similar questions and procedures across groups. In order to achieve comparability across groups, a researcher may argue for a pre-determined and fixed set of questions to be administered to each group. This standardisation may also improve comparability during the analysis period, since a consistent format is followed during each group interaction.

On the other hand, if the research is exploratory by nature, the researcher may prefer to adjust the questions and format based on the experience of each group, which can contribute to an accumulated set of information. Bedford and Burgess (2001) relied on these more open-ended focus groups in their work on discursive constructions of environmental responsibility by different sectors in the retail commodity chain. This exploratory, open-natured format may be more consistent for scholars dedicated to the goal of not imposing the researcher’s assumptions or interpretations on the research.

Morgan (2002) suggested a useful design that allows for both comparison and exploration. By formatting each group session with a certain set of fixed questions during the first half and a more open discussion during the second half, this allows the research process to be more dynamic and adaptive. Napolitano et al. (2002) followed this suggestion in their research on migrant farm-
workers in Oregon – even as they maintained a structured format at the beginning of each focus group, those questions that they ended with tended to shift and transform as they came into contact with more individuals and institutions. The focus groups opened up a genuine dialogue in which both participants and researchers were led to reevaluate their positions. Through this process of interaction and debate, the scholars felt they generated more constructive and thoughtful research.

Researchers can also profit from the principle of reactivity, which predicts that respondents will be more informed and articulate about a subject that they have been alerted to in advance of the research setting. If given the opportunity, either through a pre-screening questionnaire or pre-focus group exercises, participants can compose their thoughts prior to the group meeting, which will help them express themselves more fully, making their contributions more valuable. For instance, before the group interaction, Kitzinger (1994) asked each participant individually to arrange a series of cards with pictures of types of people into categories such as ‘likely to get AIDS’ or ‘not likely to get AIDS’. Shively (1992) invited participants to watch a movie and fill out a questionnaire before the group session. In their study of women’s perceptions of family problems in Arizona, Nichols-Casebolt and Spakes (1995) asked participants to fill out a questionnaire and answer several questions about the topic in writing before beginning the discussion. And Kneale (2001) conducted pre-focus group interviews to describe the project and record details of the types of media/novels each participant consumed. These preliminary logistical considerations had important implications for the final quality of the results.

CONCLUSIONS

Research is rarely just a process of generating data, analysing and interpreting the results. By putting forward answers to research questions, researchers engage in the process of debate about what can be known and how things are known. Thus, the choice of the focus group method cannot be removed from these epistemological struggles, whereby research objectives and research methods differ across research traditions (McKendrick, 1999: 44). Indeed, the manner in which focus groups are used will vary remarkably according to the research objectives/research traditions.

Many population geographers have begun to turn to qualitative methods because they see the process of research as reciprocal, with both researcher and researched learning from each other. And focus groups are an ideal setting in which this give-and-take can occur; the method also encourages reflexive research practice. Thus, focus groups often provide researchers with surprising insights because conversations take on their own dynamic, and spontaneous group debates can reveal unexpected findings (Bedford and Burgess, 2001: 124). The focus group allows for enthusiastic brainstorming or loose-word associations among the participants, and thus can demonstrate the ways in which identities, ideas, landscapes and images are reproduced, reinforced and reiterated.

Focus groups are also an excellent research tool for those interested in the process of knowledge production. In other words, the method creates a unique setting for addressing the ways in which social context shapes the attitudes and opinions of research subjects. Thus, focus groups acknowledge the social nature of discourse and can become ‘a highly effective vehicle for exploring the nuances and complexities associated with people-place relationships’ (Cameron, 2000: 89). The key point is that focus groups are particularly useful in projects where researchers seek to uncover the ‘world-views’ (especially regarding attitudes, perceptions and experiences) of different groups of people (segmented by any number of demographic and social characteristics) in a variety of locations (whether real or imagined).

The particular promises, challenges, and practicality of focus group research are especially relevant given the current debates surrounding population geography. With White and Jackson’s (1995) decade-old concern that population geographers accept the ready-categorised form and essentialist nature of data, and Graham’s (1999) more recent concern that they are reluctant to delve into the larger social world in which population processes take place (and thus do not engage enough with social theory), the subdiscipline has been seriously tested. Hopefully, this discussion of focus groups responds to the call for expanded methodological approaches, and population geographers who employ the tech-
nique will find that they contribute to the development and construction of new knowledge and understanding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Paul Boyle and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and effort of Erin Hamilton, a graduate student at the Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. She worked with me in Spring 2004 to gather some of the material presented in this paper and did a wonderful and thorough job; her diligence is much appreciated. An earlier edition of this paper was presented at the 2004 Race, Ethnicity and Place Conference in Washington, DC, sponsored by the Association of American Geographers, Binghampton University and Howard University.

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