Department of Psychology
& Speech Pathology

Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group

IOD Occasional Papers: Number 1/98

Methodological Issues in Qualitative Research: Dilemmas, Choices and Solutions

Baljit Rana, Paul Reid, Janet Smithson, and Cath Sullivan

Methodological Issues in Qualitative Research: Dilemmas, Choices and Solutions

Baljit Rana, Paul Reid, Janet Smithson, and Cath Sullivan
Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group, Manchester Metropolitan University

Published by: IOD Research Group

Copyright (c)1998 IOD Research Group

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced by any means, or transmitted, or translated into a machine language without the written permission of the IOD ResearchGroup, unless under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agreement, or for use in Education, or for dissemination within an organisation in which cases the work must be reproduced in its entirety with acknowledgement of the IOD Research Group as its source.

IOD Occasional Papers

Published occasionally by the IOD Research Group

For information contact the publishers at the address below

ISSN 1359-9089

ISBN 1-900139-70-7

Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University

IOD Research Group

MISSION:

To undertake research and consultancy which informs policy, enhances the effectiveness of organisations, and enhances the lives of vulnerable people by asking meaningful questions, encouraging the participation of those involved in the research and disseminating the findings to all those with a stake in the research

Interpersonal & Organisational Development Research Group
Department of Psychology & Speech Pathology
The Manchester Metropolitan University
Elizabeth Gaskell Campus
Hathersage Road
Manchester
M13 0JA

Tel: 0161 247 2563/2556/2595
Fax: 0161 247 6394
Email: C.Kagan@mmu.ac.uk
S.Lewis@mmu.ac.uk

CONTENTS

1. Acknowledgements

2. Introduction

3. Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas in Conducting Sensitive Research
Paul Reid

12. The Role of Semi-structured Interviews in Building Definitions and Selecting Participants for Exploratory Research
Cath Sullivan

19. Representing the same: issues of reflexivity in black feminist research
Baljit Rana

33. Using focus groups to study young peoples' orientations to work and family life
Janet Smithson

47. Conclusions

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to all those in the Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group who have contributed to reading and editing these papers.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: DILEMMAS, CHOICES AND SOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

The contributions to this Occasional Paper have been adapted from presentations at an IOD group research seminar on work in progress. All the contributors are carrying out research on community, work and/or family issues using qualitative research methods. A number of common and specific methodological and ethical issues emerged from these presentations and from the discussions that followed. These issues and dilemmas and the strategies adopted to deal with them are explored in the case studies that follow.

In the first paper Paul Reid discusses some dilemmas that emerge in conducting sensitive research, based on his study of young homeless people's experiences of harassment. He shows that methodological and ethical issues are interrelated. For example ethical concerns about not disempowering an already disadvantaged group have important implications for the ways in which accounts are generated and the data treated. This paper provides a thoughtful discussion of the dilemmas that have emerged at various stages of this particular piece of research, some solutions and compromises adopted, and debates and dilemmas which researchers must continue to revisit.

Researchers often have to grapple with key conceptual issues before embarking on a project. Cath Sullivan describes how she set out to study the impact of telework on families, but was faced with a number of problems about how to define telework and to select participants. She discusses the use of semi structured interviews as a means of clarifying her own understanding of this construct and hence the criteria for selecting participants in later stages of the research.

Baljit Rana considers some of the issues and complexities of doing research as an "insider" representing "the same" and "the other". She draws on her study of British Asian women's experience of the work-family interface to demonstrate how the researcher may be both "same" and "other" within one interview encounter. An Asian woman herself, she explores some specific dilemmas arising out of sameness and/or difference in the interview context.

Finally, the use of focus groups in social research is discussed by Janet Smithson. Drawing on British data generated as part of a trans national study of young adults' orientations to current and future work and family, she explores dilemmas in the conduct and analysis of focus groups, which have both methodological and ethical dimensions. The extent to which focus groups can empower participants to express their own view or suppress non dominant perspectives is a major concern.

Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas in Conducting Sensitive Research

Paul Reid

Introduction

This paper will discuss the variety of methodological and ethical issues which can arise in conducting qualitative research around 'sensitive' topics.

A precise definition of sensitive research is not unproblematic, given that virtually all social research may be interpreted as sensitive by one group or another. This discussion, however, will focus largely on what has been termed the 'intrusive threat' of social research (Lee 1993). That is, research which deals with areas which are construed as, 'private, stressful or sacred'.
The context in which sensitive research is addressed is a study of youth homelessness and harassment being carried out by the author. This is an action-oriented piece of work which looks at ways of coping with harassment (sexual harassment, police harassment, aggressive harassment) among young homeless people. The methodology comprises semi-structured interviewing and focus groups with young homeless people, police officers and homelessness agency workers. The paper will outline methodological and ethical issues in carrying out such sensitive research, and strategies to address them. In order to do this it is useful to briefly set out the background to the research context in which this discussion will take place.

Background

The most recent estimate places the number of young homeless people in the United Kingdom at 246,000 (Evans 1996). Official statistics on the numbers of single homeless people are unreliable as they are based only on those who actually approach and are offered accommodation by local authority housing departments. Acceptance on to the homeless register turns on young people being defined as 'vulnerable' - the majority of young single homeless people, having no dependents, do not fit this category and are not accorded priority status for re-housing. In knowledge of this fact some may not bother to approach the local authority housing department, or may, for example, secure temporary accommodation with friends or family.

The 1996 Housing Act made some changes to the legislation regarding homelessness in the U.K. For example, it broadened the definition of 'vulnerability', and hence the groups of people to be considered priority cases for housing, to include those individuals lacking family support and contact (Departments of Environment and Health 1996). This seems an important change given the large numbers of young people who now become homeless as a result of relationship problems with family members (Hammersley & Pearl 1996; Downing-Orr 1996). Discretion in interpreting such guidelines, however, still remains with individual local authorities and previous research has demonstrated significant variations in local authority decisions on priority cases and vulnerability (Mullins et al 1996).

Harassment

This project builds upon a pilot study specifically examining accounts of sexual harassment among young homeless people. The pilot phase also highlighted reports of other forms of harassment in the lives of young homeless people, such as police harassment and verbal aggression. Accounts of such forms of harassment have been noted in other studies involving homeless people in the U.K. (Klee et al 1996; Murdoch 1994).

The complexities in arriving at operational definitions of harassment are illustrated in the various theoretical positions taken on the subject of sexual harassment. For example, one theoretical standpoint suggests there to be five differing types of sexual harassment (Barickman et al 1992), whilst others offer simpler one-dimensional interpretations, i.e. 'unwanted and unreciprocated behaviour of a sexual nature' (NATFHE 1994).

Existing accounts of sexual harassment given by young homeless people are largely anecdotal, including accounts of sexual advances made in temporary accommodation, sexual approaches to street dwellers, or offers of food or accommodation in return for sex (Miller 1990; Newman 1987; Murdoch 1994). A recent study of 200 young homeless people throughout Greater Manchester, however, (Klee et al 1996) outlined high reported levels of sexual harassment (37%), but even higher levels of aggressive experiences (64%) and harassment by police (62%). The present study seeks to examine ways of coping with harassment and young people's constructions of these topics. It is important, however, to acknowledge the subjective nature of the researcher's standpoint, to 'accept that our knowing is form a perspective ..(be)..aware of that perspective and its bias..and articulate it in...communications.' (Reason 1994). Thus, from my own perspective, social research should be clearly seen to benefit participants, be carried out with their full consent and should not harm them in anyway. This position evidently has implications for the consideration of methodological and ethical issues in sensitive research, and these will be discussed throughout the paper. Topics will be discussed in conjunction with possible strategies to resolve the dilemmas which are outlined.

Sensitive topics

There are a variety of methodological and ethical dilemmas in conducting research which touches on such sensitive areas as may be involved in the study of homelessness and harassment. For example, the reasons which have led people to become homeless can include the addressing of such difficult topics as family breakdown, sexual and physical abuse, or the use of illicit drugs (Downing-Orr 1996; Jones 1995). Moreover, the discussion of experiences of aggression, police harassment and sexual harassment can involve broaching subjects which respondents and researcher may find difficult to talk about and which respondents may rather not recall.
In order to minimize the potential impact of discussing such sensitive topics I found it useful to embed discussion of especially sensitive issues towards the middle of an interview, with the discussion of more general issues taking place nearer the beginning, in an attempt to gain the interviewee's confidence and put him or her at ease. This is not to say, however, that

researchers should try to obscure the areas to be covered in the discourse or indeed the purpose of the research, as to do so would reinforce the power imbalance inherent in the encounter between researcher and researched. It is important, from a participatory research perspective, to be candid with participants in conveying the reasons for undertaking a piece of research (Foote Whyte 1991; Finch 1984).

With regard to the sensitivity of the topic of sexual harassment, fieldwork from the piloting phase demonstrated that my interest could be perceived as prurient or voyeuristic. Participants' responses manifested themselves differently according to gender, in that females seemed to perceive an element of voyeuristic interest on the part of a male researcher, while males were more ready to offer a quick 'no' response to the question of sexually harassing experiences (even if they subsequently did provide accounts).

To address such reactions general accounts of other homeless people's stories of sexual approaches were subsequently offered and some participants did go on to recount experiences of their own. This approach seemed to reassure respondents that their experiences were not perhaps as atypical as they imagined, and gave them confidence to discuss the issue. This strategy was fruitful regardless of the gender of the interviewee. An additional and more general means of attenuating possible perceptions of prurient interest was by detailing as clearly as possible at the outset, and throughout the interview, the overall aims of the research; in order that participants could see why a particularly sensitive piece of information may be requested.
The piloting phase of the study is particularly important in providing an opportunity for the interviewer to build confidence in broaching 'taboo' subjects, as the sensitive nature of subjects such as sexual harassment can create embarrassment for interviewer and interviewee. Indeed, anxiety about discussing certain issues on the interviewer's part can invoke a parallel anxiety on the part of the interviewee, and result in a reluctance to disclose information (and indeed exacerbate any impressions that the researcher's interest is voyeuristic). A pilot study offers an opportunity for the researcher to build confidence in bringing up sensitive subjects, and hopefully to inspire similar confidence in the respondent.

Introducing the research

The initial act of contacting participants to explain the project and ask for their assistance brings other dilemmas. Thus, the handing out of leaflets to people in homelessness drop-in centres was productive in the sense of allowing a measure of privacy to consider their participation while reading, but problematic and potentially embarrassing for those individuals who had literacy problems.

My approach in this instance was to offer a leaflet as a way of introducing myself, and to quickly talk about the purpose of the research in order to compensate for any difficulties that people may have experienced with literacy skills. Evidently this approach detracted from the potentially 'private' nature of the interaction, but overall seemed a more satisfactory arrangement than causing unwanted stress or embarrassment to those individuals with reading difficulties.

Fieldwork encounters suggested, though, that I may have felt more ill at ease in approaching young people than did they in responding to requests for participation.

Participatory research

Conveying the purpose and outlining the reasons for conducting a study is, however, more difficult than may at first seem apparent. Although one could say, for example, in this instance, that the research was designed to benefit homeless people and that it may serve to ameliorate their situation, I could offer no guarantee that this would be the case.
In following an 'action oriented research' perspective (Small 1995), and aiming to ensure active participation of all those involved, the study attempts to engage with young homeless people throughout the research process and involve them in producing guidelines for other young homeless people in coping with harassment. And also, in convening discussion groups with young people, police officers and homelessness workers, to raise awareness on all sides of the issues involved. Such a strategy aims, in part, to counter possible impressions of a researcher using research largely to the benefit of his or her career.

One must acknowledge, however, that career development is indeed the primary motivating factor for much research, be it in the quantitative or qualitative traditions, and one should always pay close attention to the perceptions of research and researcher by those individuals who are the subject of study. This is especially important in research which focuses on ostensibly disadvantaged groups such as the young homeless, who as a minority group, often have their perspectives interpreted and presented by others in a more powerful position. In this case I strove to establish a 'non-hierarchical' relationship with the interviewee (Finch 1984). In a further attempt to redress the power imbalance of the interview setting I also attempted to 'invest' my 'own identity' (Banister et al 1994) in the encounter, by offering personal accounts, such as my own childhood experiences when discussing the topic of reactions to bullying at school.

Validity

As has been noted elsewhere, qualitative research has often focused on the 'powerless' (Lee 1993). When research focuses on such disadvantaged groups, however, it is quite easy to immerse oneself in the accounts of the 'underdog'. In this study I had to be careful in ensuring that disturbing and 'unjust' recollections of young people's lives did not encourage me to pursue a one dimensional focus on their recounted experiences at the expense of other potential actors. Thus it was necessary to include an element of 'data triangulation' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994) by focusing not only on the young homeless people's accounts of harassment, but also those of the supposed 'harassers', namely the police force. Throughout such a study as this, though, one must continually re-assess one's own interpretations of data to ensure that a measure of rigour is retained, in order to attain a level of 'critical subjectivity' (Reason 1994).
It was unfortunately not possible, as some theorists suggest (e.g. Oakley 1981) to offer transcripts of interviews back to participants for validation. The transitory nature of homeless people's lifestyles and the difficulties of recontacting, given the lack of any fixed address, made this impracticable. From a participatory research perspective this was unfortunate, but

unavoidable. Within the context of the interview itself, however, any key responses were repeated back to the respondent in order to verify that my account was as accurate an interpretation as possible of the meaning attributed by individuals to their own actions. Future encounters with young homeless people in focus groups on harassment will also serve as a form of validity check.

Emotional responses

The research encounter in the case of homelessness and harassment is obviously one which can invoke many emotions in both respondent and researcher. The act of recounting and recollecting disturbing experiences can be stressful for the individual concerned, perhaps leading to additional trauma for those who have repressed memories of negative experiences. The researcher must assume responsibility for the possible effects the recall of such experiences can have for the interviewee.

In this study referral sources were offered to the respondent at the end of the interview, including agency numbers and contact individuals who could provide counselling or other help should the respondent feel the need to discuss issues further.

A majority of participants were, however, quite open in talking about their experiences and seemed to welcome the opportunity to discuss personal issues that they may not have had the chance to discuss previously. Often a simple question, such as 'are you happy talking about this?', offered individuals the chance to move on to another topic if they felt uncomfortable.
The study of sensitive issues can also be stressful for the researcher, in the sense of uncovering information that can be disturbing to hear. Thus, regarding the emotions felt by myself in 'owning' traumatic accounts, it was important to be able to turn to relations, colleagues and friends to discuss the emotions that had been invoked in fieldwork. This offered the opportunity to discuss encounters as a form of catharsis.

Phenomenological approach

Within an essentially 'phenomenological approach' (Vaughn 1996) to qualitative research the issue of attending to participants' own constructions of social reality should be at the forefront of methodological considerations.

As regards 'sensitive research' it was particularly important not to impose my own interpretation of the term homelessness in fieldwork, i.e. to define individuals as homeless regardless of whether or not they would apply this particular epithet to themselves. The special sensitivity of imposing such a 'label' lies in the potentially damaging effects that such a description may have on individual self esteem (even though housing status may be equated with an 'official' definition of homelessness). Indeed, previous studies have demonstrated that even people sleeping on the streets may not define themselves as homeless (Hutson & Liddiard 1994). In this study respondents were asked for their own definitions of the terms harassment and homelessness at an early stage in the interview.

Discussion

This paper has given an overview of some of the methodological and ethical dilemmas which can arise in conducting sensitive research. This is not to say that it is an exhaustive list, however, and researchers working in other fields would undoubtedly have issues to add.
From the perspective of this study it has been important to outline how the sensitive or taboo nature of topics can be de-sensitized to an extent by attending closely to interview structure, being clear in outlining research aims to participants, and by thorough piloting. Strategies for dealing with emotional responses to the discussion of sensitive topics have also been outlined; that is, by offering sources of counselling for the respondent, and also in addressing the researcher's need to discuss his or her own reactions with others. The specific issue of addressing power relations when working with disadvantaged groups has also been discussed. Possible strategies, such as investing one's own identity in the research process, and the establishing of a non-hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee have been proposed. The responsibility of researchers to find ways of ensuring active, rather than tokenistic participation of all those involved in the research process has also been addressed. Within the context of this study raising awareness of harassment among police and homelessness workers, and potential guidelines for the young homeless in coping with harassment have been developed as strategies for ensuring active participation. Finally, the importance of attending to actors' own constructions of research topics (such as homelessness, or harassment) has been stressed, both from a phenomenological perspective, and from the need to avoid imputing any negative labels which may damage respondents' self esteem and self concepts.

As productive as some of these strategies have proved, however, they are not intended to be definitive answers to the dilemmas raised, and indeed the proposing of solutions has raised a number of other questions.

Thus, although the offer of counselling to participants offers a remedy to the possibly traumatic effects of discussing stressful events, it is not an ideal solution. The securing of counselling will invariably involve making a future appointment and may not be accessible at that particular moment in time. I always made time available if respondents wanted to discuss experiences in more detail, but I have not been trained as a counsellor. This begs the question of whether or not researchers working in such sensitive areas should receive prior training in counselling techniques. To do so, however, would alter the nature of the research encounter, and it is debatable whether the role is an appropriate one for someone who has only limited contact with research participants. This is an area, though, that would benefit from further debate.
Within the field of sensitive research promises of confidentiality to participants are obviously essential to gaining consent, but sometimes this can be difficult to square with the researcher's need to discuss, outwith fieldwork settings, the disturbing nature of information they may encounter. When discussing data no names of respondents were mentioned, as none were asked at the time of interview, but the issue of confidentiality would have perhaps benefited from more in-depth consideration at the start of the research process. The use of the term confidentiality within research projects should perhaps be re-evaluated in so far as dissemination of findings through reports or publications must necessarily negate any promises of confidentiality between

researcher and respondent (even though data will normally be rendered anonymous). In this case respondents were made aware at the outset that anonymous data would eventually be reproduced in reports and publications.

Gaining consent by research participants is a complex issue in as much as it is very difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that respondents are fully aware of all the various 'purposes' of conducting a study, from, for example, the immediate objectives, through publications, to perhaps gaining a qualification to enhance career prospects. Within this study the sensitive nature of gaining initial consent was demonstrated in the possible lack of literacy skills amongst the group at which leaflets were targeted. Although an apparently successful strategy of verbally outlining the aims of the study was adopted in order to counteract potential embarrassment, this strategy raised further questions about the nature of consent given in a generally public (often day centres), rather than private arena. Although respondents always seemed happy to participate, perhaps a more 'informed' measure of consent could have been obtained if more private time had been available for individuals to consider their involvement. As interviews were always conducted in private, though, I had the opportunity to go into more detail and answer any questions before commencing an interview.

As research into the areas of homelessness and harassment involves broaching sensitive issues with a somewhat disempowered section of society the earlier points made about adopting a reflexive position on the researcher's own involvement must be borne in mind. One must always be prepared to be critical of one' s own interpretations and ensure that recorded interpretations, such as draft reports and publications, are always open to inspection by colleagues and made available for their comment.

A final issue to consider concerns sensitive research with groups who may have undergone a particularly high level of negative life experiences. Accounts of experiences in such contexts may be even more problematic than those encountered in any research which relies largely on self reported data. With regard to young homeless people, preliminary data from this study suggests that accounts of specific childhood experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse, may involve some element of fantasy on the part of respondents. Some young people appeared to construct elaborate 'stories' in order to repress the particularly difficult memories that recounting actual occurrences could invoke. As with any self reports it is not possible to gauge how far accounts reflect 'reality', but the particularly problematic nature of accounts given by this type of target group must be considered.

In conclusion, although there are a number of dilemmas in conducting sensitive research it is possible, as this paper has demonstrated, to devise strategies to minimize the impact of such sensitivity. And, although further questions and dilemmas may be raised in the process, the possibility of debating issues and comparing experiences within the research community should serve to create a body of knowledge that can be utilised in the design of future studies.

REFERENCES

BANISTER P. et al (1994) *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: a research guide* Open University Press, Bucks.

BARICKMAN P. et al (1992) *Sexual Harassment of Students: victims of the college experience* in: Viano,
E. C. (ed) (1992) *Critical Issues in Victimology: international perspectives.* Springer, New York.

DENZIN N. K. & LINCOLN Y. S. (eds) (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.

Departments of Environment and Health (1996) *Code of Guidance on Parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996.* Dept of the Environment, Dept of Health, London.

DOWNING-ORR K. (1996) *Alienation and Social Support: A social psychological study of homeless young people in London and in Sydney.* Avebury, Aldershot.

EVANS A. (1996) *We Don't Choose to be Homeless: Report of the national inquiry into preventing youth homelessness.* CHAR, London.

FINCH J. (1984) *It's great to have someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women* in: Bell C. & Roberts H. (eds) (1984) *Social Researching: politics, problems, practice.* Routledge, London.

FOOTE WHYTE W. F. (1991) *Participatory Action Research.* Sage, London.

HAMMERSLEY R. & PEARL S. (1996) *Drug use and other problems of residents in projects for the young, single homeless.* Health and Social Care in the Community 4 (4), 193-199.

HUTSON S. & LIDDIARD M. (1994) *Youth Homelessness: the construction of a social issue.* The Macmillan Press, Hampshire.

JONES G. (1995) *Family Support for Young People.* Family Policy Studies Centre, London.

KLEE H. et al (1996) *Young Homeless Drug Users: Coping strategies and self protection.* Final report to E.S.R.C.

LEE R. M. (1993) *Doing Research on Sensitive topics.* Sage, London.

MILLER M. (1990) *Bed and Breakfast: women and homelessness today.* The Women's Press, London.

MULLINS D. et al (1996) *Evaluation of the 1991 Homelessness Code of Guidance.* HMSO, London.

MURDOCH A. (1994) *We are Human Too: a study of people who beg.* Crisis, London.

N.A.T.F.H.E. (1993) *Discussion Paper on Harassment.* NATFHE, London.

NEWMAN C. (1987) *Young Runaways: findings from Britain's first safe house.* The Children's Society, London.

OAKLEY A. (1981) *Interviewing Women: a contradiction in terms* in: Roberts H.(ed) (1981) *Doing Feminist Research.* Routledge, London.

REASON P. (1994) *Three Approaches to Participative Inquiry* in: Denzin & Lincoln (1994).

SMALL S. A. (1995) *Action-Oriented Research: Models and Methods.* Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57 (Nov '95), 941-955.

VAUGHN S. et al (1996) *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology.* Sage, London.

The role of semi-structured interviews in building definitions and selecting participants for exploratory research

Cath Sullivan

Telework is attracting growing attention. However, there is still no adequate, standardised definition of telework. This paper discusses the use of semi-structured interviews as a stage in the research process which refines definitions and focuses further research.

Focus of the research

My research aims to increase understanding of the experience of telework from home, and its interaction with family life. To recruit appropriate participants, it is essential that I have a clear definition of telework. It needs to be clear to whom I am referring when I use the term teleworker. Therefore, one of the aims of the first phase of my research was to devise an adequate working definition - which would guide the second phase of my research, and play a part in the development of an ultimate definition.

This paper will show how semi-structured interviewing can be used as a tool for refining definitions and recruiting participants in exploratory research.

General background

There are many problems with developing an adequate working definition of telework. Two particular problems are fundamental.

Firstly, enormous potential for variation exists amongst teleworkers. For example: teleworkers can be self-employed or employees; can work solely from home, spend some time in the office, or work from 'satellite offices' or 'telecottages' (offices where teleworkers can rent space in which to carry out their remote work); and, they perform a broad range of different types of work. To create a working definition that is both narrow enough to be practicable for research, and precise enough to allow extrapolations, decisions must be made to exclude some of the above people from this definition.

Secondly, it is important to apply criteria in a way that is not arbitrary. There should be reasons why a definition takes the form it does. For example, if defining on the basis of the amount of hours spent working from a 'remote site' - at home, or in a telecottage - it may be necessary to decide how many hours a person needs to spend at this site, to qualify as a teleworker. How should one arrive at a cut-off point (i.e., a number of hours below which a person is not classed as a teleworker) that does not lead to an arbitrary distinction between teleworkers and non-teleworkers.

There are many different existing definitions and conceptualisations of telework. Definitions of telework (and of sub-categories within telework) have used several criteria as their basis.

Early definitions of telework tended to focus on issues of transportation (Huws *et al.*, 1990). This conceptualisation (e.g., Nilles *et al.*, 1976) focuses on the benefits that reduced travel may bring and sees telework as a response to commuting. Shamir (1992), in classifying different types of decentralised work, refers to this as 'telecommuting'. However, research suggests that, although reduced commuting may be a factor, it is not a primary motivator in the adoption of telework (e.g., Huws *et al.*, 1996; Gordon, 1988; Olson, 1985).

Telework has also been defined on the basis of the technology that is involved and the electronic communication that occurs between worker and employer. However, there is a certain degree of confusion surrounding the use of technology to define telework. Huws *et al.* (1990) argue that using the existence of an electronic communication link between teleworker and employer is problematic because many organisations (e.g., financial institutions) use branch systems in which people receive and transmit information electronically every day. However, Huws (1993), in surveying home-based telework in the UK, used this as one of her defining criteria. She states that teleworkers are people who *"would not be able to work remotely without the use of this technology"* (page 3). Haddon and Silverstone (1993) argue that the increasingly widespread use of computers for work suggests that use of computers is an insufficient criterion for defining telework. Furthermore, they suggest a high degree of variation amongst teleworkers in the centrality of technology, and that the level of technology used is often low.

As Huws *et al.* (1990) argue, there are potential problems with using simply working from home as the basis for defining telework. For example, if the only criterion was whether or not a person worked at home, this would mean classifying farmers, shop keepers and other home-based workers as teleworkers. Also, there are problems in distinguishing between those who work 'at home' and those who work 'from home', for example 'mobile telework' (Hill *et al.*, 1996) where mobile equipment is used and the work location can be changed according to business or personal needs (Illingworth, 1994). Huws *et al.* suggest that defining telework as a sub-division of home-work is problematic because existing definitions of home-work (including the legal one) exclude many of the professional and creative jobs that teleworkers perform.

Methodological dilemma

Although I had developed some selection criteria for the first stage of the research, I was uncertain about the nature of telework. My methodological dilemma was that I was researching a topic whilst experiencing doubts and confusion about one of the most fundamental terms of reference.

Strategy adopted

The strategy that I adopted was to use semi-structured interviews in the first phase of my research in an attempt to better understand what telework is, and therefore guide the second phase of my research.

Semi-structured interviewing is useful because it allows access to teleworkers own subjective reflections of what telework is and what it means to be a teleworker. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee to bring their own ideas, issues and areas of relevance to the interview (Banister *et al.*, 1994; Haddon and Silverstone, 1993). This means that the questions being investigated are not limited to those that the interviewer pre-conceived as pertinent. When investigating a topic that has not been investigated fully before, this is especially useful. As there is little written about the interaction between telework and the family it is less reliable to use the literature as the sole source of questions. It is possible that the researcher must rely on the interviewee to indicate what issues and questions are important to them; semi-structured interviews allow this process of negotiating the agenda for the interview. An important aspect of this approach is *"to respond to and follow up issues raised by your interviewee, including ones that you may not have anticipated"* (Banister *et al.*, 1994).

The model below shows the strategy that I adopted. Having started out with an idea of what telework is, I was able to draw up some criteria on which to select candidates for interview. However, I experienced conceptual problems (of the nature described above) in applying these criteria. Conducting and analyzing the interviews provided information that could then be fed back and used to refine recruitment criteria for the second phase of my research.

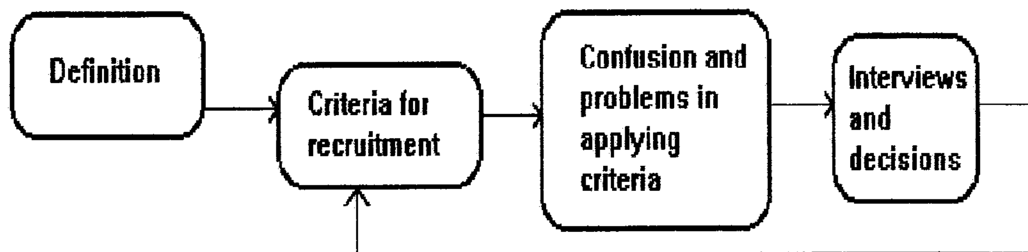

Figure 1 Feedback model of semi-structured interviewing

Another strategy was to use a wide definition and not exclude certain people, for example, home-based workers who do not use information technology. If I did not talk to them, it would not be possible to ask whether their work-family experience was similar to that of people to whom information and communication technologies were more central.

Outcomes

The analysis of the phase 1 interviews provided information relating to several of the criteria that are used to define telework. Below are two examples of how the information gathered in the interviews contributed to decisions about future sampling and recruitment of participants.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

Virtually all of the interviewees used information technology. For some this was an integral part of their work, whereas for others it was a tool they used to do their work. Although only three of the interviewees did not use a computer at all, the level of sophistication in the ICTs being used was fairly low. The only ICT which was used by all interviewees was the telephone.

Furthermore, the interviews did not suggest that the role of ICTs in the work-family relationship differs from that of other equipment and resources.

These findings are consistent with Haddon and Silvertsone's (1993) assertion that use of ICTs alone is an insufficient criteria for defining telework. The implications of increased use of indirect communication mediated by technology is an area which will be of great interest to some. However, I would suggest that, from a work-family perspective, the use of technology in home-based work may be less pertinent than other factors (for example, the amount of household space taken up by the work).

This research is concerned with the relationship between work and family, rather than with organisational factors or the use of ICTs. I would suggest, therefore, that, although the use of ICTs is a continuum on which home-workers vary, it is not a sufficient basis for excluding or accepting participants in the second phase of this research.

The amount of time spent working in the home

The interviewees represented a very wide cross-section in terms of the amount and proportion of working time spent within the home.

It seems obvious that the amount of time a person spends working will have a big impact on their experience of work and family. The interviewees can be categorised into two groups according to whether or not they report problems of over-working.

The over-working group reported that working from home was accompanied by increasingly blurred boundaries between work and family, and an increase in their working hours. These interviewees tended to be full-time. Peter, who works a very large number of hours per week, some of them at home, says:

"I know that I'm going to be working until midnight, one o'clock, whatever, because it's there. I wouldn't be sitting in the office until one o'clock. You can't do that. So, in a sense it is a problem for that reason. It gives you the opportunity to work endless hours."

However, another common statement among this group is that they have a tendency to over-work which is caused by having high levels of involvement in their work. The weakened boundary (and subsequent over-work) is exacerbated by working from home, not caused by it. Peter says

"I'm very interested in what I do, and I've always done the same thing all my life, so it is very interesting to me - and I just can't leave it alone".

The group of workers who do not report a tendency to work excessively long hours are mostly part-time workers. It seemed initially that the amount of work being done was related to the tendency to over-work, and that possibly there was something about the part-time workers which made them less susceptible to over-work (or, conversely, better able to keep their amount of work in proportion with other aspects of their life). I was therefore, especially interested in one particular member of this group because, although he is a full-time teleworker, he does not report a tendency to over-work. What Andy and these other interviewees have in common (and where they differ from the 'over-work' group) is a firm boundary, and a relatively low level of primacy given to work. When asked whether it was tempting to work too much, Andy replied:

"It can be, yes, because I quite enjoy what I'm doing and I'm also under quite a lot of pressure to get it done because they've got deadlines ... but I also feel it's very important not to work too much, and make sure that I do have time for other things".

So, because one of the major differences between the two groups is the amount of work they do, one might infer that a combination of high work involvement and working from home causes a weak boundary, which in turn causes people to over-work. However, a closer analysis suggests that it is also possible that when one already has a weakened boundary and a high involvement with work, working from home can exacerbate tendencies to overwork. Conversely, those who have a stronger boundary either are not tempted to over-work, or find it easier to resist that temptation. Therefore, maybe the crucial dimension on which these two groups differ is really the nature of their work-family boundary.

This suggests that excluding or including people on the basis of the number of hours they work would not be prudent. It would seem that the more interesting alternative would be to try and

include a wide range of different working hours in order to examine further the possible relationship between working hours and the work-family boundary.

It is also important to remember that the concept of over-working is highly subjective and is dependent upon the expectations of the worker, their family, their employer and cultural and social norms. For example, five hours work could have a greater impact in one family than 40 hours work in a different family.

Evaluation

This research was started with the aim of investigating the experiences of teleworkers and their families. However, as the research moves towards the end of phase I, it has become apparent that the term teleworker is not necessarily as useful for my research as it might be for research with a different focus. As the above examples show, the people I am interested in talking to are not necessarily only teleworkers (because I do not wish to exclude people who do not have a certain type of ICT link with their employer or clients), and are not necessarily all teleworkers (because I do not wish to include people who work in telecottages or other remote sites).

The interviews in phase 1 of the research have contributed to the formation of the following draft criteria for recruitment of phase 2 participants:

i. a certain proportion of the person's work is done at home (the proportion of time spent at home can then be measured in order to examine it's possible impact); and,

ii. that person lives in a situation which he or she considers to be a family situation.

Interestingly, these criteria are very similar to my original criteria. The crucial point is that I am now able to reinforce their use with some understanding of the issues and experience of people who work from home. I am better equipped to defend their use, and to reject other potential criteria (for example, the nature of the contractual relationship between worker and client or employer) on an informed and carefully considered basis.

REFERENCES

Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M., Tindall, C., (1994) *Qualitative methods in psychology: a research guide* Buckingham: OUP.

Gordon, GE (1988) 'The dilemmas of telework: technology vs. tradition' in Korte WB, Steinle WJ and Robinson, S. (eds) *Telework: Present situation and Future development of a new form of work organisation* North Holland.

Gordon, G. and Kelly, M. (1986) *Telecommuting: How to make it work for you and your company*. Prentice Hall.

Haddon L., and Silverstone, R. (1993) *'Teleworking in the 1990s: A view from the home'.* SPRU CICT Report No. 10 CICT, SPRU, University of Sussex

Hill, E.J., Hawkins, A.J. and Miller, B.C. (1996) *'Work and family in the virtual office: Perceived influences of mobile telework'* Family Relations 45:3, 293-301.

Huws, U., Korte, W. and Robinson, S. (1990) *Telework: Towards the elusive office* Wiley

Huws, U. (1993) *Teleworking in Britain* Sheffield: Department of Employment

Huws, U., Podro, S., Gunnarsson, E., Weijers, T., Arvanitaki, K., and Trova, V. (1996) *Teleworking and gender* Institute of Employment Studies.

Illingworth, M.M., (1994) *'The virtual office: Technology can free you from your desk, but some managers won't like it'* Information Week 14-16.

Nilles J.M., Carlson, F.R., Gray, P., and Hanneman, G.J. (1976) *The telecommunications-transportation tradeoff: Options for tomorrow* New York: Wiley

Olson, MH (1985) *'The potential of remote work for professionals' in National Academy of Sciences (Eds)* Office Workstations in the Home, National Academy Press.

Shamir, B. (1992) *'Home: The perfect Workplace?'* in S. Zedeck (ed.) Work, family and organisations Jossey Bass.

Representing the same - issues of reflexivity in black feminist research or: Race and gender interviewer/interviewee effects in the research process:-

Baljit Rana

Previous literature on 'representing the other' - researching people who are different to the researcher has been presented as a problem, where the researcher and respondent are considered to be incompatible with each other. Instead, it is claimed that the key to good feminist research is the existence of shared experiences with the researcher and the researched. However, in my research I have found that researching those who are similar to me in terms of gender and ethnicity has been a problematic as well as a positive experience. This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the researcher and respondents representing the same race and gender, and the implications therein. Five methodological and ethical dilemmas are highlighted.

Focus of the research

The study undertaken as part of my MPhil/PhD research investigated: "British Asian women's experiences of the work-family interface". It aimed to collect and analyze British Asian women's accounts of the problems and supports they experienced in combining employment with family life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Sikh, Hindu, Muslim; single, married, and divorced British Asian women, with and without children. The sample were recruited mainly through snowballing techniques, after initial contacts were made through networking with community members and women's organisations. The process of 'snowballing' respondents was particularly useful for me as
I am not familiar with the communities in the North West region, especially where it was proving very difficult to identify and recruit Asian women. The criteria for selecting the sample was fairly broad, representing a range of different parameters (age, religion, marital status, occupational status, caring responsibilities, country of origin and/or upbringing). An attempt was made to incorporate a diversity of experiences for British Asian working women, (born and/or brought up in UK and resident for at least five years) coming from heterogeneous backgrounds in a range of occupations. This meant that although I was similar to the women on the basis of my race and gender, I still had to be sensitive to the varying experiences and statuses of the women.

The aim of this paper is to explore interviewer/interviewee race and gender effects on semi-structured interviews. These differ from 'demand characteristics' as pointed out by **Orne, 1962**, and 'experimenter effects' which were reported by **Rosenthal, 1976**.

General background

(i) Previous research: work-family studies

The mere fact that there is a lack of research on British Asian women's experiences of the work-family interface is a clear indication that it is perhaps difficult to generate data on this sector of the population. At the outset it was apparent that it would perhaps be difficult to talk to Asian women due to the stereotype that Asian women do not talk about their feelings, which it can be argued reinforces their oppression, and inferior position. At the same time, I did also take it for granted that it would be somewhat *easier* for me as an Asian woman as opposed to being a white woman researcher. But I still had mixed feelings about why it should be left to Asian women researchers to have to conduct this research?

Other work-family studies of Indian/American/black and white women have mainly used questionnaires to gain data. However those limited studies which have spoken to Asian women directly via interviews have produced more rich and illustrative accounts of their experiences. Especially where they have discussed and revealed their emotions, apprehensions, and anxieties in great depth: on the experiences of culture (**Ghuman, 1994; Stopes-Roe & Cochrane, 1993; Anwar, 1981**); on the experiences of education (**Mirza, 1992; Wade & Souter, 1992**); on the experiences of the labour market (**Davidson, 1997; West & Pilgrim, 1995; Bhavnani, 1994; Gilkes, 1990**). It has been pointed out that research should focus on the experiences of subordinate minority groups in order to understand how cultural differences are *perceived* to affect them (**Phoenix, 1994**).

(ii) The study: semi-structured interviews

It was decided to adopt a qualitative approach utilising an interview technique, because it allows the women to speak in their own terms. It is also seen as empowering women in their efforts to promote change (e.g. **Griffin, 1986**). More specifically, the purpose of research with traditional ethnography is to allow a detailed analysis of patterns of cultural life through the eyes of participants within that particular culture (**Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993**). A more rigid structured interview was not chosen as it would have lost the flow of 'natural conversation' and exerted more control over the respondents. Instead, a less structured approach allowed the researcher to engage in more indepth conversation with the informants to access their inner perspectives in a flexible manner (**Smith, 1995**). Being a member of the Asian community enabled me to converse openly with the Asian women and to have a deep understanding of their situations than an outsider. It is argued that, as a result, the information gained is more consistent in accurately reproducing the views and experiences of the women interviewed, and therefore making them more valid (e.g. **Statham, 1992**). Thus, subjectivity was favoured instead of objectivity, especially because "so much of what is cultural is hidden and is rarely made explicit, it exists between the lines and in the assumptive world of both the researcher and the researched" (**Uzzell, 1995**). The interviews were conducted wherever it was most convenient for each respondent. It was ensured that the environment of the interactional encounter was neither too

formal in order to encourage intimacy, nor was it informal to encourage adequate responses. However, the existence of power imbalance in the interview situation cannot be overruled **(Oakley, 1981)**. An attempt was made to share the power with the respondents by giving them a piece of paper listing the areas to be covered at their own pace. Due to the personal and sometimes sensitive nature of the research (discussing life experiences), issues of anonymity, and privacy were extremely pertinent. Each respondent was assured that these would be respected before they agreed to participate.

When conducting this type of research it is important to examine the orientation of the respondents in relation to the interviewer, that is the existence of 'demand characteristics' **(Plummer, 1995)**. The distance between the researcher and the respondents is very significant in the ethnographic framework; especially because the researcher is a crucial part of the data. In order to counteract the typical stereotypes of interviewer and interviewee, I attempted to maintain rapport during the interviews at a friendly conversational level. However, as the interview process is a two-way interaction, my presence and contribution inevitably affected their replies.

(iii) Representing the 'other' or the 'same': issues of reflexivity in black feminist research

Contemporary feminist theory and practice has documented the experiences of researching people who are different to the researcher. **Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996** have coined the phrase 'representing the other' in discussing such experiences which are viewed as being problematic, where there is a distance on the basis of gender, race, and social class differences. In such a relationship, one is represented as being subordinate and the other as privileged. Instead, it is suggested that perhaps it is somewhat easier to study those who are similar. However, what has not been reported are the *dynamics* in the research process where respondents are marked more by similarity than difference. It has been argued that 'sameness' can also distance the researcher and researched. It is therefore a critical aspect in the reflexive research process as it can result in the misinterpretation of accounts (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996).

In my research I have found that researching those who are similar to me in terms of gender and ethnicity has been a problematic as well as being a positive experience. Is it really "the easiest thing in the world to get women to talk to you"? as Bell & Roberts, 1984 suggest, where interviewees may too readily "expect *(me)* to understand what they mean, simply because I am another woman" (Finch, 1984:76). Structurally based variables such as race and class which can affect the research process need to be considered **(Edwards, 1990, 1993)**. In order to ascertain the impact of difference between researcher and researched, further exploration from a feminist perspective is required in terms of theoretical reflexivity (see also Bola, 1995). It is important to realise the reflexive character of social research and to recognise that "we are part of the social world that we study" **(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993)**. I can only speculate about whether the respondents would have felt as comfortable and relaxed in discussing sensitive issues at all, or even at great lengths, if the interviewer had been male and/or Caucasian. However,

power does not always lie with the researcher, there may be situations where the researcher is seen to be different on the basis of variables other than their race and/or gender. That is, their social status and/or age can be construed as a potential barrier, where they are perceived to be inferior or superior to their respondents, and therefore not on the same 'wavelength' during their interactional encounter.

Thus, not all experiences of women interviewing women are positive (Horn, 1996) in terms of establishing rapport, trust and disclosure, as **Oakley, 1981 and Finch, 1984** found. On the positive side, there was the advantage of having an 'insider-within' perspective, on the basis of cultural backgrounds, where I had a wide prior knowledge of the issues affecting Asian women. Such shared common experiences gave additional insights into their accounts where I as the researcher was able to engage in conversations with them, where personal experiences and opinions were important to elicit. It was therefore an important source of empathy and served as a means of establishing and maintaining rapport with them. Conversely, it also assumed an automatic understanding of their problems, as well as an anticipated kinship, which can be potentially unethical in research.

In contrast, interviewing people very different from the researcher can be also be positive (as long as their trust is gained) in that both parties are in a position to be explicit to each other about taken for granted issues. However, it can also have an impact on the research process, for example Reay, 1996 reported that her working-class history affected her relationships with her interviewees and her reading of their accounts.

Methodological/ethical dilemma's of semi-structured interviews conducted by an Asian woman on Asian women

I was concerned about being different and about being the same to the women interviewed and was aware that these differences and similarities were conditional upon the degree of distance to be maintained during the interviews. Hurd & McIntyre, 1996 have discussed these dilemmas in terms of 'participatory engagement', which does not adhere to the traditional researcher-subject paradigm. This is because it aims to address the uncertainties which are arise due to the researcher being totally responsible for meeting their research aims as well as consciously being involved in the research process. In such situations the process of 'reflexivity' is important. Reay, 1996 acknowledges that it is extremely pertinent to disclose any differences the researcher's differences make, such as: age, class, occupational and marital social status/class. On this basis I attempted to treat each interview on an individual basis, inherently mine and their variables were compared and matched.

Methodological dilemma 1: Not on same level - Too busy to talk

The first dilemma discusses a situation where I did not feel to be on the same level as the informant. It was mainly due to differences in age, but I was also confronted with the usual problem of conducting indepth semi-structured interviews, that of time management. It was ironic that although the Participant realised the importance of conducting research in this field and giving Asian women a voice, she wasn't prepared to give up too much of her time. In a way, she tried to prove to me how busy she really was - in terms of work/family commitments. Therefore, although she was keen to be selected for the study, she was not willing to participate according to my guidelines and agenda. This also reflects a tendency of Asians to take each other for granted and not take cultural issues as seriously as their profession where they are working for white employers. The informant was apparently a well known woman in the community but I wasn't aware of her popularity and social status as I don't belong to it. The only knowledge I had of her was that she used to be the President of the Indian Women's Association. The following selected areas from her interview highlight the limited responses she gave.

> ***I: So has it always been this way right from the beginning when you started working?***
> ***R: Aha, it has always been busy***
> ***I: Do you feel now that your children are a bit older that obviously the pressure has been reduced?***
> ***R: I think the pressure as far as the work, yeh....but there are other worries isn't it? You're always worried about the kids***
> ***I: You have strong links with your community, do you feel they are very understanding to your and your career and how you're coping. Do you feel pressurised by them in any way?***
> ***R: Not really but I think at one time people probably felt oh well we don't have to work so we should be staying at home*** (Hindu, 55y old, G.P., married, 2 children)

She also made judgements about me not being on same level to her as I belong to a different generation to her, and implying that things are easier for us. Comparisons were made to me throughout interview and that is how she answered the questions, I asked her instead of focusing on her opinions and personal experiences.

> ***"but you people, if your husband didn't help, maybe you would be shouting and screaming. But my boys will probably be doing the same when their wives come"***

Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma

The way that I had to control the interview was to utilise my prior awareness of the Asian culture; however this sometimes involved leading questions being asked.

> ***I: What about people in the community, social contacts?***
> ***R: Yeh we've got a lot of social contacts and friends and other things and I think I could talk to them***
> ***I: Are you saying that it can be too personal?***
> ***R: Hmm, yeh***
> ***I: And that's an Asian cultural thing?***
> ***R: Yeh, you couldn't say to other people oh god your husband doesn't want to..."***

My status as a single second generation Asian woman student was clearly constructed as a barrier on this occasion and made me feel inferior. This was contrary to the notion that power lies with the researcher. It was the result of being perceived to be different on the basis of other variables. Even though similarity existed in terms of race and gender, and I attempted to dress conservatively and professionally, it didn't make a difference to the extent she was receptive towards me. Instead, she made me feel inferior because she was very busy and I therefore had to value her time as she carried on doing her work whilst I conducted the interview. This meant that her attention was divided, where mostly one word answers were given, as she was careful and dubious to go into depth. This put pressure on me to elaborate on what was said, this was of course open ended and left to my subjective interpretation. This therefore placed additional pressures on me to be conscious about the time and having to be precise. The interview became more structured than semi-structured and the flow of the conversation was lost.

Methodological dilemma 2: Not on same level - Apprehensive to being recorded

The second dilemma is that of being apprehensive of interviews to be tape recorded, which is a common tendency for white woman. Some Asian women felt intimidated to talk freely whilst being tape recorded; instead they felt more at ease to talk in a more informal environment, e.g. over dinner, where it was offered. In such situations, during the interview process more guidance was preferred, where direct questions were asked (again making it more of a structured interview). This was perhaps because the women were scared that if they talked more freely they would divulge too much personal information.

> ***"It's different when someone is asking you questions than to start saying what you want to say"*** (Hindu, 45y old, Accounts assistant, married, 2 children)

In contrast, other women felt comfortable to carry on talking at great lengths themselves about their past home and work experiences (resulting in pages of continuous text in interview transcripts).

Where some women didn't speak freely and were very hesitant, they wanted total reassurance of their confidentiality and privacy as they felt scared that they would be easily identified. They were therefore dubious and suspicious to reveal personal information because of the close knit structure of the Asian community they belonged to. One particular woman was a psychologist herself doing research on Asian families and agreed to participate in my study. Yet she was just as sceptical of my professionalism and underestimated my trust.

> ***"Yes I'd like to look at the transcript because it's very personal information that I've given to you and there might be things I wouldn't want you to type or there might be things that people will be able to identify me with. So if there are things that you use that I don't want you to I'll seek you out. I know with what I'm doing, I respect the confidentiality of everybody that I do my interviews with. I have to be very careful to avoid things which will name them because if they do something which I very specialist they're very easily recognised. I will be very protective of my identity, I'm helping you out with your research because I think it's important and valuable. But at the same time I'm not going to do it at the expense of my own identity"*** (Muslim, 31y old, Race Equality Officer, married, 2 children).

Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma

The use of their personal constructs and my analysis of their discourse was important in defining what they said and actually meant. However, valuable information was lost where conversations took place before and after recording the interviews. Although I could recall certain points, this placed too much reliance on my memory and raised ethical issues of doing this. Such a process was very subjective and it was critical to obtain prior consent of using such information.

With regards to the woman who was too scared to be identified, I felt angry and upset about her attitudes towards me, even though the interview itself went very well. As a consequence, I had to ensure that her transcript was sent to her very soon after the interview. After reading it she was amazed at what she had discussed and couldn't believe that she revealed such personal information to me. As a consequence, I reminded her that I didn't force her to answer the questions at the time, it was her who chose to give lengthy answers in order to put things into context for me but that she could ask me not to put this information in my final write up. At this stage, she wanted to withdraw (she was the only informant in my study who felt this way), but I reassured her that I would be happy to meet her again to discuss which areas I wanted to use. This was an ironic situation as she had just completed her research on Asian families using interviews and was therefore familiar with the research process. She then agreed to look at the copy of the transcript highlighting areas to use (out of context). It was then sent back advising me which areas were okay to use and which weren't. I did feel that rich and valuable data was lost; I couldn't understand why she chose to disregard certain issues.

Methodological dilemma 3: On same level - Making suggestions for research:- interviewee pointing out power relationships in interviews (transferring power)

There were some women who were more responsive and helpful where they appeared eager for research to be done and made constructive suggestions. Such a process of transferring power is not usual in research but can be successful. For example, one woman made me aware of community politics and new Government initiatives on work-family issues. The interview with her was a very informal discussion with reciprocal interaction and mutual turn taking where I did not feel intimidated by her. A conscious attempt was made to give each other undivided attention throughout; she actually made arrangements not to be disturbed. She was very keen to give an indepth interview on a personal level: to be given a chance to speak out and have a friendly ear to listen to their problems. Also on a professional level, she was keen to guide and assist my research. For example, she pointed out the existence of power relationships in interviews.

> ***"so where you have got women like me, who are pretty independent, assertive and confident about their position, about what they say and they can say it very openly. Then I think you need to structure that, otherwise we'll have our opinions all over your research basically. But where you're working with women in a more traditional role there are lots more stronger cultural ties, when you'll know there is a power of balance on there because you are yourself confident and the women you're talking to may not be necessarily and may feel intimidated by you. So that's where you'll need to give them a bit more space, so that they'll say what they feel rather than you intimidating them. That's where I think there's a power imbalance, but I think we have a balanced relationship so that's what it's about"*** (Muslim, 34y old, Assistant Company Director, married, 2 children).

Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma

As hers was the first full interview that I conducted, I tried to ensure that further interviews attempted to share the power between myself and the informants. I thus utilised her suggestions of balancing power by giving the informants a piece of paper listing broad areas to cover during the interview, so that they were encouraged to talk as much as they felt comfortable to, at their own pace where guidance was given if required

Methodological dilemma 4: Dealing with unknown situations - Caught on the spot

Although the primary aim of my research was to investigate the experiences of Asian women combining work and family life, some women did feel that the interview was an ideal opportunity to talk about their personal experiences. In certain situations respondents disclosed

very sensitive issues about their personal life, this was very horrifying for me where it was not at all expected. However, it was difficult to not encourage this and they felt at ease to talk about them:-

> ***"I went to Pakistan, had a lovely time there until I got raped (laughing) when I was 17. I'm quite alright talking about this now because I've been going to get counselling. So I can talk about it as a joke, that's the way I talk about it now ..... my mum had already emphasised to him to sleep with me before we had the actual ceremony, so my husband raped me before our wedding. And throughout the marriage it was constant rape, if I didn't do what he said it was 'I'll divorce you', that happened on my wedding night"*** (Muslim, 28 year old, Student, Family Support Worker, divorced, no children

Strategies adopted to deal with dilemma

I tried to ensure that I wasn't merely taking on a counsellor's role; even though it was rewarding that the informants felt that they could talk so freely and honestly with me. I had to keep myself focused. I had to show that I was listening and not trivialising this sort of information and to show respect as she said she felt comfortable talking about this.

Methodological dilemma 5: Shared characteristics - "It's nice to have someone to talk to on your wavelength"

Some women felt that they could relate themselves to me, as I could to them, especially where they were the same age, had been students at university, and were intending to settle down but were worried about their choice of partner. I too was experiencing the same apprehensions and pressure from my parents to uphold their respect as they valued what the community thought of our family. In that way, all of my behaviours were also judged and determined by what others in the community dictated.

> ***"it's not that they don't trust me it's just that they really worry because I'm at the age when I have to find a husband. And so everything I do counts and my reputation is very important, I am the family's 'izzat'. I am their respect and if I screw up then it all comes down on them. So in that sense it's a lot of pressure, if I marry the wrong man because I found him myself then I've screwed up. I think my dad is very scared in making the wrong choice for me. I still get this 'what are other people going to say?' so I have to watch what I wear, what I do, who I speak to because if I say something wrong it's going to spread and no one will want to marry me. So until I'm married and settled my parents will be happy and relaxed because I'm not their responsibility any more"*** (Muslim, 24y old, Teacher, single).

This woman's views were particularly similar to mine in that she was also studying for an MPhil and doing research with Asian families. She too felt very proud of Asian women doing well for themselves and acting as role models for others.

> ***"at uni. I lived with 3 other Asian girls and it was like moving from one family into another. We'd all come home and have tea together and we'd go off to do out work, and then we'd all go out together in the evening. It's amazing how you can live on 2 thousand pounds a year isn't it? It's amazing I never thought that I would be doing an MPhil, if I go back to my primary and secondary school teachers and tell them they'd be horrified. I'm enjoying it sometimes and hating it, thinking what am I doing? But at the back of my mind it's that I'm making a name for myself. I don't go for things because it's the best, thing to career wise and that has been the driving force behind me because I don't just want to disappear, I want to be an Asian with a name, I don't just want to be an Asian face. Now that I know of Asian people like yourself doing research I'm so proud because it's people from my background that are doing things"*** (Gujarati, 29y old, Dietician, doing Mphil).

Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma

Although these were the interviews I most enjoyed doing, I did have to ensure that I didn't get carried away with solely talking about issues of interest to me. I therefore had to keep reminding myself of my research aims and avoiding talking off tangent; being aware of utilising their time effectively.

Evaluation

These are just a few of the ethical/methodological dilemmas I have encountered during my research. But overall, I have found the process of conducting semi-structured interviews to be straightforward and I do feel that I did successfully adapt my role according to each individual interviewee, especially where similarity did exist in terms of race and gender. Another very important and interesting issue resulted from the snowballing technique of recruiting my sample. After interviewing an informant, I asked if they had any suggestions of their personal acquaintances (a friend or relative) whom they believe to be suitable for the study. The information that they gave me could not then be used in the interview situation. For example, one respondent suggested her sister-in-law as she had experienced unfair treatment by her mother-in-law due to her problem of severe facial hair, amongst other problems. However, at the interview although I noticed the facial hair myself, it was not disclosed or discussed at all. This put me in an awkward position as I was not able to ask her outright as it would be unethical as well as intimidating. Such an unique issue facing second and third generation women is not really reported in the literature and would therefore be interesting to highlight but I realised that it cannot be done so easily. There was also another informant who had a son with a walking

disability, which I had prior knowledge about through another respondent, but it was not brought up on the occasions of meeting her.

Despite the problems, it is certain that the use of a qualitative approach so far has proved to be useful in allowing respondents themselves to discuss their perceptions of their work-family experiences (**Brannen, 1992**). It also provides rich and highly illuminating material (Robson, 1993), as well as empowering disadvantaged groups by validating and publicising their views (**Burman, 1994**). It is useful in giving under-researched groups a voice, where they are able to express their attitudes and perceptions (**Hertz, 1995**).

More specifically, the use of 'participatory engagement' was particularly beneficial, (**Hurd & McIntyre, 1996**) where I as the researcher was the primary active agent and was able to relate to the respondent's experiences because I was on familiar territory. At the same time, such similarity did blurr my vision where I failed to be totally objective and see beyond reality. I was aware of the dangers of forcing to align myself with participants non critical life experiences:- ***"this is especially difficult at moments when the seduction of sameness coopts the research process"*** (**Hurd & McIntyre, 1996: p.87**). It is therefore important not to critically focus on difference and ignore the impact of similarity, as sameness is just as influential.

Problems of reflexivity must also be recognised - where some influences of social identity are not accessible in reflexivity. These include taken for granted issues which the researcher is unaware of, any bias is not therefore stated in their write up. Acknowledging objectivity is just as important as subjectivity (**Stanley & Wise, 1993**). The importance of emotions in research also underestimated as it determines what informants may say and what they feel comfortable to exhibit over the course of the interviews (**Reay, 1996**). The next stage of my research is to conduct interviews with partners of women already interviewed, as well as joint couple interviews. It remains to be seen whether it will be easier or difficult than my experiences in conducting interviews with women so far (**Hertz, 1995**).

REFERENCES

Anwar, M (1981); *'Between two cultures. A story of the relationship between generations in the Asian community in Britain';* London: Commission for Racial Equality.

Banister, P; Burman, E; Parker, I; Taylor, M; Tindall, C (1994); *'Qualitative methods in Psychology, A research guide';* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bhavnani, R (1994); *'Black women in the labour market. A research review';* Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

Bola, M (1995) 'Questions of legitimacy? The fit between Researcher and Researched', *Feminism & Psychology* Vol 6 (2):290-293, London:Sage Publications.

Davidson, M (1997); *'The black and ethnic minority woman manager: Cracking the Concrete Ceiling';* London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Edwards, R (1990) 'Connecting method and epistemology: A white woman interviewing black women', *Women's Studies International Forum* 13: 477-90.

Edwards, R (1993) 'An education in interviewing: Placing the researcher and the research', in C.M. Renzetti and R.M. Lee (eds) *Researching Sensitive Topics.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Edwards, R (1996) 'White woman researcher - Black women subjects', *Feminism & Psychology* Vol 6 (2): 169-175, London:Sage Publications.

Finch, J (1984) ' "It's great to have someone to talk to": The ethics and politics of interviewing women', in C.Bell and H.Roberts (eds) *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice.* London: Routledge.
Ghuman, P (1994); *'Coping with two cultures: Indo-Canadian Adolescents';* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Gilkes, C.T. (1990); 'Liberated to work like dogs: labelling black women and their work'; in H.Y.Grossman & N.L.Chester (eds); *'The experience and meaning of work in women's lives';* London: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp165-88.

Griffin, C (1986); *'Typical girls? Young women from school to the job market';* London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M; Atkinson, P (1982, 1983, 1993); *'Ethnography, Principles in Practice';* London: Routledge.

Horn, R (1995) 'Reflexivity in Placement: Women interviewing women', *Feminism & Psychology* **Vol 5 (1): 94-98,** London:Sage Publications.

Hurd, T.L; McIntyre, A (1996); 'The Seduction of Sameness:Similarity and Representing the Other' in **S.Wilkinson; S.Kitzinger (eds) (1996);** *'Representing the other. A Feminism and Psychology Reader'*; London: Sage.

Joseph, D.P (1995) 'Nigger Bitch'/'Dreadlock Sister': The experiences of an African-Caribbean woman working in the British National Health Service', *Feminism & Psychology* Vol 6 (2):285-289, London: Sage Publications.

Kitzinger, C; Bola, M; Campos, A.B.; Carabine, J; Doherty, K; Frith, H; McNulty, A; Reilly, J; Winn, J (1996) 'The Spoken Word: Speaking of Representing the other', *Feminism & Psychology* Vol 6 (2): 217-235, London:Sage Publications.

Mirza, H. S (1992); *'Young, female and black';* London: Routledge.

Oakley, A (1981) 'Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms', in H.Roberts (ed) *Doing Feminist Research.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Orne, M.T. (1962); 'On the Social Psychology of the Psychological Experiment with Particular Reference to Demand Characteristics and their Implications'; *American Psychologist,* 17, 776-83.

Phoenix, A (1994); Narrow definitions of culture: the case of early motherhood'; in **M.Evans (ed) (1994);** *'The woman question';* London: Sage Publications.

Plummer, K (1995); 'Life Story Research' in **J.A.Smith; R.Harre; L.VanLangenhove;** *'Rethinking methods in Psychology';* London: Sage Publications.

Reay, D (1996); 'Dealing with difficult differences: Reflexivity and social class in feminist research', *Feminism & Psychology* Vol 6 (3): 457-462, London:Sage Publications.

Rosenthal, R;(1976) *'Experimenter Effects in Behaviourial Research';* New York:Irvington.

Skeggs, B (1994); 'Situating the production of feminist ethnography' in **M.Maynard & J.Purvis (eds);** *'Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective';* London: Taylor & Francis.

Smith, J.A (1995); 'Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis' in *'Rethinking methods in Psychology';* London: Sage Publications.

Statham, A (1992); 'Examining gender in organisational relationships and technological change' in **B.C.Long & S.Kahn (eds) (1993);** *'Women, work and coping. A multidisciplinary approach to workplace stress';* Canada: Queen's University Press.

Stanley, L; Wise, S (1993); *'Breaking out again. Feminist ontology and epistemology';* London: Routledge.

Stopes-Roe, M; Cochrane, R (1987); *'Citizens of this country: The Asian British';* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Uzzell, (1995); 'Ethnographic and Action Research'; in **G.M.Breakwell; S.Hammond, C.Fife-Shaw (eds);** *'Research methods in psychology';* London: Sage.

Wade, B; Souter, P (1992); *'Continuing to think: The British Asian girl: An exploratory study of the influence of culture upon a group of British Asian girls with specific reference to the teaching of English';* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

West, S; Pilgrim, S (1995); 'South Asian women in employment: the impact of migration, ethnic origin and the local economy'; *New Community,* 21 (3), 357-378.

Using focus groups to study young peoples' orientations to work and family life

Janet Smithson

Introducing the research

This research was undertaken as part of an EC funded project: "The Reconciliation of Future Work and Family Life. Understanding and Supporting the Family and Employment Orientations of young people in Europe". The project examined the employment and family orientations of young (18-30 year old) women and men in 5 different European States, specifically considering the current and anticipated needs concerning the reconciliation of work and family for these young people.

As the first part of the research, 10 Focus Groups were run in each of the 5 countries involved. Each group involved 6-10 people between the ages of 18 and 30 from a variety of backgrounds. The groups were mainly single sex groups of people at similar "life stages", i.e. all university students, or all unemployed, or all in semi-skilled jobs. A semi-structured Focus Group guide[1] was developed by the team and used as a basis for discussion. The groups were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed transnationally, looking at the themes which emerged from the groups. This paper draws on the British sub-section of the data.

In this paper I will examine some of the methodological issues of using focus groups for social science research. I will consider some of the claims made about focus groups in the light of examples of focus group data from a particular study. In particular, I will look at possible analysis techniques specific to this type of data.

General Background: Conceptual and Procedural Issues

* Definition of "focus group"

Something called a "focus group" is becoming an increasingly popular research tool in the social sciences, as well as in many other types of qualitative research. Focus groups had their origins in sociology (for example Merton and Kendall, (1946), used them to examine the persuasiveness of wartime propaganda), but became primarily used by market researchers. Despite the recent popularity of this approach in psychology and sociology research, there is much divergence of opinion on what a focus group actually is, how it differs from other types of group interviews, what its uses are, and how focus group material should be analyzed.

[1] This Focus Group Guide can be seen in Appendix 1.

I use the definition of "Focus Group" which was provided by Hughes and DuMont: **"Focus groups are in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information around topics specified by the researchers"** Hughes and DuMont (1993)[2].

*** Procedure**

The focus group procedure is typically to follow a relatively unstructured interview guide, which generates a list of topics for discussion. but allow related topics to emerge in this context. The focus group moderator (who may or may not be the researcher) guides the discussion, making sure that all topics are covered, and that all group members are given the chance to speak. In this way a large amount of discussion on specified topics is generated. For more details on how to run focus groups see, for example, Morgan and Kreuger, (1998).

*** The uses of focus groups for qualitative research**

There is a substantial literature on the use of focus groups in market research (for example, Templeton (1987)), but little from a social science perspective. The use of focus groups for qualitative research in the social sciences has been discussed, for example by Hughes and DuMont (1993), Vaughn et al (1996), Morgan and Kreuger (1998). Their strengths and weaknesses have been discussed in these and other literatures. One of the major advantages lies in the fact that they permit researchers to observe a large amount of interaction on a specific topic in a short time. The main disadvantage is that the discussion is controlled by the researcher, or moderator. Groups also tend to be based on availability rather than representativeness of sample.

"When all goes well, focusing the group discussion on a single topic brings forth material that would not come out in either the participants' own casual conversations or in response to the researcher's preconceived questions" (Morgan, 1988, p21)

*** Culturally anchored research**

A central feature of focus groups which I will emphasise in this paper is that they provide researchers with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their experiences and to think and talk about a designated topic. "Within-group homogeneity prompts focus group participants to elaborate stories and themes that help researchers understand how participants structure and organize their social world" (Hughes and DuMont, 1993). The formulation of issues and concerns in participants' own words, and the emphasis on the issues

---

[2] A second definition of a focus group is provided by Beck, Trombetta and Share (1986), and used by Vaughn et al (1996): **"an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand"** (Vaughn et al, 1996).

which participants view as important to the topic, are particular strengths of the focus group method which I will investigate here. This is particularly useful when researching groups of people from diverse backgrounds, whose language and priorities may not reflect the researcher's expectations and position. In the context of trans-cultural or trans-national research, it is claimed that focus groups can give information about the relevant issues to different groups of people. Issues emerge in varied ways across the groups, and are dealt with differently.

*** Analyzing Focus Group Data**

An important characteristic of focus group data is that groups, rather than individuals within groups, are the unit of analysis (Kreuger, 1988, Morgan, 1988). This makes systematic analysis tricky. Sample populations in the focus groups are small and non-representative. Topics are not all discussed in equal depth in all groups. Some information is repressed, some individuals are more forthcoming than others, and the group interactions will determine the discussion.

For Morgan, the hallmark of a focus group is "the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1988, p12). What sort of data and insight might this be, and how should it be analyzed? In the following section I look at particular aspects of focus group discussions and consider approaches to analyzing and making sense of the data obtained in this way.

Methodological and Ethical dilemmas of focus group research arising from our study

Many of the methodological and ethical issues of focus group research are common to all qualitative research. For example issues of reflexivity, issues of researcher bias, respecting the rights of the participants, and of exploitation of participants' data[3]. In this paper I look at methodological issues which are particularly pertinent to the Focus Group context, and I consider whether the data collected is a reliable source of information. To do this I will discuss some of the comments and discussions from the transcripts of the Focus Groups.

*** Dilemma 1: Dominant Voices**

The influence of groups on individual behaviour has been well documented. The issue for focus groups is: will this distort what the research project is looking for?

I use the term "voice" here to describe a point of view or opinion which emerges from the group discussion, but which does not necessarily originate from an individual. An example of a particular point of view being articulated in a group discussion can be seen in the example below. These (mostly single and childless) men in their early 20's are discussing why housework is more suited to women than to men.

---

[3] These issues are discussed in Banister et al, (1994).

Men on vocational training course.

Gary: It's like a different way of looking at things (by women), you can find work to do, well you can clean the carpets, dust the mantelpiece, do you know, but I mean like=
Andy: =it's not working.
Gary: Yeah, it's not working. You need like the environment and that as well.
Ben: Yeah. You have to get out of the house don't you?
Gary: Exactly

In this conversation a particular "laddish" voice dominates the discussion. This perspective is contributed to by several of the men in the group (Gary, Andy, and Ben[4]), and not challenged by the others, so a dominant viewpoint emerges from the discussion. This view has been constructed as a group process. It may reflect individuals' opinions, or it may be an active product of the group interactions. The dominant opinion which emerges in this context may or may not express the views of all the men in the group. In groups like this it is sometimes difficult to tell from the transcript who is actually speaking, which increases the sense of a collective voice being articulated.

Other opinions being ignored
(The same group of men discussing the idea of paternity leave)

Gary: I can't see what they're gonna do for three months really. There's not that much you can do, you know.
John: Give them a month (Laughter)
Colin: Well there again ...
Gary: After like, the first month right, yeah, changing the nappies, sterilising bottles and whatever else you need to do for babies and stuff right. And after a month or so, you'll just be sat there watching the footie with a can of lager in your hand, and=
John: What's wrong with that! (Laughter).

In this discussion Colin may be attempting a dissenting voice, trying to disagree with the dominant opinion, but he is ignored and shut out. In this way an individual's opinion may go unheard in the focus group context. The unheard opinion may be in fact held by several of the group.

4 All participants' names have been changed in this paper.

*** Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma**

It is helpful to make focus groups fairly homogenous in terms of age, experience, education and gender. This encourages participants to share their views. When there is a large age difference, the younger members tend to keep silent, but a group of teenagers will often be very talkative. The moderator can also encourage different group members to speak. For example, in the group above, one of the quiet members is a father, and the interviewer directly asks for his opinions during a debate on nursery education.

I: *What do you think, Mark you're the parent here?*
Ben: *Yeah, go on.*
Mark: *I think nurseries are fine but from a minimum age, say from 4 upwards because anything under that it affects the child's future. It ruins any bond between a mother or father. Putting a kid straight into nursery at three months old I think that would affect their ability to learn as they get older...*

Though Mark does not join in the discussion spontaneously, he has a lot to say when appealed to directly, by the interviewer and also by the other participants.

*** Dilemma 2: Interviewer bias**

The effect of the interviewer's behaviour and perceived attitudes on individual interviews is also an issue for focus group interviews. For example, in this research the interviewer was a white, educated woman, and this will have made a difference to the responses obtained. In the example below, the focus group consists of Asian women students who have to give details of their culture for the interviewer.

I: *So it is important within the Asian culture, marriage by about 21 or something?*
S: *To an extent, it's not so much enforced, sort of um, it's more just an expectation that people have, like, when you get to a certain age for a girl, a certain age for a guy, it's like, well you should be married this year, and, because of the arranged marriage thing it is like, it is a tangible possibility, so...*
B: *Otherwise you get left at the bottom of the pile, like a rotten apple!*

In this example, having an interviewer from a non-Asian background meant that certain things had to be described overtly, which could be either an advantage or a disadvantage.

*** Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma**

A possible strategy is to ensure that the interviewer is from a similar background to the participants. In the following extract an Asian Moslem woman is moderating a group of young Asian Moslem men.

I: *What about way of dress and diet, food you eat?*
N: *Way of dressing like a cultural thing really, you've got like guidelines, like for women like you have you know certain guidelines for men , certain guidelines for women, as long as you stick within those guidelines for women, as long as you stick within those guidelines that religion provided for us, then it's fine.*
R: *I agree with you=*
N: *= As long as it=*
A: *Covers them=*
N: *Yeah, as long as it covers their body how we're supposed to, I don't think there's nothing wrong with it, how, how you dress, as long as you, you know fulfil the basic needs.*
I: *Erm...Right.*

Having an interviewer from the same cultural background may have facilitated the discussion, although there is still the problem of having an interviewer of a different gender.

The examples in Dilemma 1, above, where men articulated quite traditional views about women and housework, suggest that the interviewer is not always a dominating feature of the discussion. I suggest that focus groups are less affected by interviewer effects than other forms of interviews, as the dominant view for the group in question is more likely to affect the response. In this respect the research is more "culturally anchored" in participants' terms than other forms of research.

*** Dilemma 3: Respecting Individual Privacy**

A particular issue for focus groups concerns how to respect individuals' opinions, and right to privacy, in a group context, while trying to draw out group members to express their views. Certain questions cannot be asked, however informative the answers would be. An example of a taboo issue would be direct questions about participants' sexual orientations and practices. There were other questions which we found were difficult for people to answer in the focus group context. These included asking about household set-ups ("Who do you live with?"), and divisions of housework between couples.

The following extract is during a discussion on who does the housework with a group of professional working women.

Kate: *In my case it's changing to the point that neither of us do we employ somebody to do the housework*
I: *Do you live with people at the moment?*
Kate: *On and off, um but they equally don't like living in mess but can't think of anything worse to do at the weekend.*

In this extract the interviewer is trying to encourage participants to talk about their beliefs and actual practices concerning sharing housework, without making assumptions about whether people have partners, or assumptions about heterosexuality, but Kate answers without giving much away about her private life.

*** Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma**

One way around the issue of how to get personal data in a group context is to ask the group in general, and see if people volunteer personal information, as they often did on this type of subject. Another way, for example concerning issues of household dynamics, was to ask people about their parents' lives and households, which they were usually happy to respond to and comment on.

I: *I don't know how many of you are living with people, are any of you living with partners?*
Emma: *Yeah.*
I: *When it comes to things like that, um do you see your lives as different from your parents lives in like whose doing the housework whose doing the washing-up?*
Suzy: *Tom does most of it in the house cos he's home all day.*

Questions about people's opinions can be related to topical issues in a general way.

I: *People actually think men and women are changing these days, there's a lot in the media about changing roles and all this, has anyone thought about this?*

Some questions we felt were better left for individual interviews, although it could be noted that these are not always easy to ask in individual interviews either. Morgan (1988)

suggested that the "tone" of a discussion provides clues about the appropriateness of focus groups. If participants are discussing an issue with enthusiasm, it is probably suitable for focus group research.

Many people found issues about the future quite conceptual, maybe there was an element of not wishing to make public their private hopes and desires. This can be respected by not pushing individuals to say more than they feel comfortable with.

*** Dilemma 4: Normative Assumptions_**

I use the term "normative" here to describe views which are not explicitly stated in the group, but are assumed by participants to be held by the other group members. I use the example of homosexuality as one that was both relevant to our research and commented on by participants in feedback to the focus groups. As researchers we were interested in notions of "family" and in non-standard views and practices on relationships, families and parenting. However, we did not feel that asking people directly about their sexual preferences and practices was acceptable. It is unlikely that everyone in all our groups was heterosexual. However, no-one expressed any non-heterosexual views. As researchers we wanted to make our questions "open" on this issue, and tried to avoid heterosexist language, for example by using the word "partner" instead of boyfriend/girlfriend. However, when talking to a group of 18 year old women, they will naturally talk about "boyfriends". The researcher has the option to use the terms the group would naturally use, thus "assuming heterosexuality", or use politically correct terms which may alienate the group, or impose the researcher's values on the group.

It was possible to bring up the possibility of homosexuality in a non-personal way, for example, asking the group for views on lesbian or gay couples bringing up children. People were prepared to express their views on the subject, but, when the group appears (though not necessarily is) to be mainly heterosexual, the issue is positioned from a heterosexual point of view.

Secretarial students, aged 18

I: What do you think about lesbian couples, homosexual couples having children, do any of you know any people in that position?
Sally: I don't, I don't think it's right really, 2 lesbians to bring up a child
Vicky: =I don't know
Sally: =because they're
Tina: It depends if they're happy
Rachel: =if that's what they want

Here the group members, in common with most of the participants, expressed a general tolerance of homosexuality, while clearly positioning themselves as not in this situation. This sort of issue is particularly difficult to overcome in a focus group context. Being "culturally anchored" conflicts with not allowing the normative views to dominate.

Normative influences are not the same for all groups. For example it was acceptable in the young male white collar groups to be a "caring" man and express a desire to share in childcare and housework. While in young blue collar group, as we saw above, this was laughed at by the group. Some evidence of disagreement can be seen (as in the first example shown), but it is likely that people will keep quiet if they think their view will be laughed at or considered incorrect.

Normative influences are not limited to group interviews. For example, surveys, questionnaires and individual interviews have been shown to result in respondents giving socially acceptable accounts. (Brannen and Moss, 1991). It is important to remember, therefore, that this is not a problem specific to the focus group context, although it may be exacerbated there.

*** Strategies adopted to resolve dilemma**

Whether the interview, either individual or focus group interview, is really uncovering actual beliefs and attitudes, or those which participants feel they should be saying, depends to some extent on how the questions are framed. If the words of the question suggests a variety of possible answers, participants are less likely to just state the opinion they think the researcher wants. However, as noted already, participants are already well aware what is an "acceptable" opinion on a given issue. The possibility in the focus group method of discussing issues in some depth does permit participants to change and develop views during the focus group. The ideal strategy to resolve this dilemma is to frame the questions and issues in such a way as to encourage discussion and disagreements in the groups, but even then, the success of this strategy will depend on the group members and how they react to the issue. In the group of 18 year old secretarial students, the interviewer's question shown in the example above led to a long discussion on gay rights and gay marriages.

Much also depends on the analysis; the relevance of the data, as in other methods, depends to a large extent on an open-minded analysis which is aware of the constraints on peoples' accounts of their lives. In the case of a thematic analysis of focus group data, it is vital to keep in mind that because something is not said does not mean that no-one is thinking it. It is simply not part of the discourse produced in this context.

Another strategy to lessen normative effects is to elicit feedback from the participants, either by short forms to fill out, or by talking to participants after the group is officially over.

*** Dilemma 5: Are the focus groups getting data that other methods would not?**

In this final section I briefly discuss areas where focus groups might highlight issues not picked up by other methods. It was stated earlier that the strength of a focus group might centre on "the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1988). Here I consider three types of group interactions and the effect of these on the discussions.

a) Constructing a "Collective Voice"

An example of a "collective voice" being constructed in a group situation was shown above in Dilemma 1. In that case, the collective voice dominated the discussion to the exclusion of other views being articulated. Collective voices, in the way the term is used here, can also be a group process of building up a perspective, or argument, so that in the group a collective expression is articulated, which emerges very much as a collaborative construction, rather than as any individual's view.

For example, in the following discussion the contradictions between beliefs and actions concerning gender roles are explored.

Professional women

Becky: I do that when I go home, find myself making cups of tea for people..
Cath: Yeah polishing shoes
Becky: ..and think why am I doing that. When he's just sat on his bum doing, looking at teletext.
Cath: But I do think it's slightly better but not a lot, because they take their example from an early age from their parents, it's going to take several generations to get through it.
I: Do you think you'd bring your children up differently from the way you were brought up?
Zoe: No.
Ann: It would be nice to say yes, but I don't think so.

This extract is very revealing, in that it shows some of the subtleties that emerge in focus group discussions. Firstly, it shows that the issue, discussed in this and other groups, of men not sharing housework equally, can be a two way thing. These women accept the difficulties of changing ingrained habits. Rather fatalistically, they do not even imagine bringing up their children differently. Here there is a distinction between ideals and expectations. For researchers looking at what might help men and women manage

current and future commitments (which was the aim of the research here), this type of data is particularly useful, going as it does beyond a simple survey of attitudes. Here the use of the "collective voice" enables participants to jointly develop a position and explore an issue in detail.

b) Participants challenging statements

The extract below shows how a discussion can be taken over by participants who challenge each other's statements. Mark, a pharmacist, asserts his view about the bad childcare provisions in his job. This is challenged on gender grounds by Paula, a doctor, who clearly has her own agenda to get across.

During discussion of what employers can do to help working parents

Sonia: You're asking more, job flexibility for parents.
Paula: Part time opportunities and crèche facilities and=
Mark: =and that's one of the major issues in departments like, in the health service, there's so many people work in the health service but the crèche facilities and baby care facilities are absolutely abysmal, I think that anything with perhaps above 70% of female, the people you're working for would personally provide=
Paula: =but why should it be, uh, because the women's, where the women's jobs are?
Mark: That's=
Paula: =why can't it be where the male's job is?
Mark: It's like, it can be anywhere, but once=
Paula: =you see, the trouble is, I mean it's never gonna change until men actually think that the responsibility of providing childcare is, is theirs as much as it is women's, cos, at the end of the day it's still the woman who, who has to fit in her job around the crèche, and there, there's not many men whose job has to fit in around the crèche, and the nursery times.

In this extract participants have the opportunity to take control of the discussion, to challenge each other and to raise issues of relevance to them. In this way issues are not always set by the interviewer, but can be dictated by the group members. In this conversation there is certainly no one collective voice, but strongly contrasting opinions (though Mark does not get the chance to articulate his argument once challenged). The participants in focus group research therefore have the possibility of taking control and directing the discussion to a greater extent than in other methods of research.

c) Culturally anchored views emerging

It was asserted earlier that focus groups might be a particularly useful method for researching opinions and perspectives of groups of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. In this final extract I consider this claim.

Asian women students discussing divorce

A: *They're not as tolerant now, my mum says, like couples now, like women put up, like my mum and all our mums here, that generation, they put up with so much.*
B: *So much.*
A: *Some of that stuff that the in-laws did, and even the husbands did, whereas I think that cos we've probably been more educated we don't put up with as much.*
S: *And also we've been introduced to a life where we don't have to put up with it=*
?: *=Yeah*
?: *=Yeah*
S: *=we can stand on our own two feet.*
Z: *I think that's like, when you said, "Do you think that education is stopping you from being a good wife and mother?", I think that's why they sometimes think that education is not a good thing, cos it teaches you to think for yourself, and to assert yourself.*
A: *They find it a threat, yeah*
B: *=cos it is.*

Here the members of the group, 6 Asian women, share a great deal of common experience from a distinctive culture which the researcher, a white woman, is outside. This discussion is somewhere between an explanation to the outsider, and a group debating an issue of relevance to their lives. The researcher directs the conversation as far as bringing up the relevant topics for her research, but the direction of the conversation depends on the issue as perceived by the group. In this way focus groups differ from individual interviews because of the difference in power dynamics. One white woman and one Asian woman would give a different power relationship than in the case above. Here the group is collectively "powerful" in that they have access to shared knowledge of which the interviewer is ignorant.

It was asserted earlier that, ideally, in a focus group the discussions will be less influenced by the researcher's views than in other qualitative methods such as individual interviews. The three examples in this section demonstrate that this can be the case, with participants articulating issues in their own terms and highlighting their agendas.

Evaluation

There are conceptual, methodological and ethical issues in focus group research. As with other qualitative research methods, there are opportunities for consciously or unconsciously manipulating the participants' responses. Focus groups also have specific dilemmas which we need to be aware of, such as normative effects, dominant "voices", and respect for individuals' privacy.

Perhaps the main, and inevitable, dilemma to be aware of is that "interactions that occur in a formal setting will differ in unknown ways from interactions observed in a naturalistic setting. The researcher compromises ecological validity of observations in favour of control over the research topics". (Hughes and DuMont, 1993)

However, the focus group method does have particular strengths. It enables research participants to discuss and develop ideas collectively, and articulate their ideas in their own terms, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives. It can be seen from the few examples shown in this paper that in the focus groups not only is there a wide variety of opinions but also a wide variety of interactive techniques, including direct and subtle challenges to opinions, and the "collective voice" strategy. Participants engage in a range of argumentative behaviours, which results in a depth of dialogue not often found in individual interviews.

The effects of group dynamics in the focus groups can therefore be a distinct advantage over other qualitative methods, for exploring issues from the perspective of the participants, in a way that is culturally sensitive to participants' priorities and experiences. The difficulties of focus group research can be mitigated by awareness of the constraints, informed analysis, and to some extent by detailed consideration of the way the conversations are constructed in the group context.

REFERENCES

Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M, and Tindall, C. (1994), *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A Research Guide*. Open University Press.

Brannen, J. and Moss, P. (1991), *Managing Mothers: Dual Earner Families After Maternity Leave.* Unwin Hyman.

Hughes, D. and DuMont, K. (1993); *Using Focus Groups to Facilitate Culturally Anchored Research.* American Journal of Community Psychology, Vol 21, no 6.

Knodel, J., Havanon, N. and Pramualratana, A. (1984), *Fertility Transition in Thailand: a qualitative analysis.* Population and Development Review 10: 297-328.

Kreuger, R.A. (1988), *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research.* Newbury Park, CA. Sage.

Kreuger, R.A. (1998),. *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results. Focus Group Kit, Volume 6* Sage. CA.

Marshall, H. and Wetherell, M. (1989), *Talking about Career and Gender Identities: A Discourse Analysis Perspective.* In The Social Identity of Women. Skevington, S. and Baker, D. (eds.) (1989). Sage, London.

Merton, R.K. and Kendall, P.L. (1946), *"The focused interview"* American Journal of Sociology 51: 541-557.

Morgan, D.L. (1988), *Focus Groups as qualitative research.* Newbury Park, CA. Sage.

Morgan, D.L. (1998), *The Focus Group Guidebook. Focus Group Kit, Volume 1.* Sage, CA.

Morgan, D.L., and Kreuger, R.A., (1998), *The Focus Group Kit.* Sage, CA.

Templeton, J.F. (1987), *Focus Groups: a Guide for Marketing and Advertising Professionals.* Chicago: Probus.

Vaughn, S., Shay Schumm, J. and Sinagub, J. (1996), *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology.* Sage, CA.

CONCLUSIONS

These accounts of researchers' experiences of methodological, conceptual and ethical issues, arising in diverse projects, using a range of qualitative methods, illustrate some of the dilemmas which emerge in research practice.

The authors have confronted ethical issues arising out of their methods at every stage and they illustrate how ethical and methodological issues are often are intertwined. All the authors are concerned to find the best way to empower participants, not least by encouraging active participation in the research. They seek ways of giving participants a voice so as to challenge assumptions and deconstruct taken for granted notions about groups to which participants belong.

The issues raised by the authors, including those of definition, confidentiality and anonymity, reflexivity, sameness and difference are by no means exhaustive, not are the choices made the only possible solutions. Nevertheless these case studies provide valuable insights into a neglected dimension of the research process. There are no easy answers to the dilemmas raised, but simply being aware of and reflecting on the issues, and being willing to confront rather than gloss over them, is an important step.

£7.50 (+ p&p)