
Using focus groups: lessons from studying daycare centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to examine focus groups as a qualitative research method. We describe and evaluate the use of focus groups based on three separate research projects: a study of teachers, parents, and children at two urban daycare centers; a study of the responses of second-generation Muslim Americans to the events of September 11; and a collaborative project on the experiences of children and youth following Hurricane Katrina. By examining three different projects, we are able to assess some of the strengths and challenges of the focus group as a research method. In addition, we analyze the design and implementation of focus groups, including information on participant recruitment, the most effective group size, group composition and issues of segmentation, how to carry out focus groups, and the ideal number of groups to conduct. We pay particular attention to the ways in which focus groups may serve a social support or empowerment function, and our research points to the strength of using this method with marginalized, stigmatized, or vulnerable individuals.

KEYWORDS: *9/11, children, data collection, disasters, focus groups, Hurricane Katrina, qualitative methods, sociology*

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest (Krueger, 1988). Focus groups are group interviews, although not in the sense of a researcher asking questions and participants supplying responses. Rather, the researcher relies on in-group interaction and discussion, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher who often takes the role of a moderator (Morgan, 1997). According to Schutt (1996), focus groups are unstructured group interviews in which the group leader actively encourages discussion among participants who have personal or professional experience with the topic being studied.

Focus groups as a research method originated at Columbia University in the 1940s, yet it was not until the late 1980s that they began to be more commonly used by sociologists and other social scientists (Bloor et al., 2001; Morgan, 1996). It is likely that the extensive, and evidently successful, use of focus groups for marketing research by the private sector contributed to the adoption of focus groups as a research and evaluation method in the social sciences (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Morgan, 1997).

In social science research, focus groups may be used as the sole data collection method, or they may be combined with other qualitative or quantitative methods such as in-depth interviews, observations, or surveys (Bryman, 2006; Crabtree et al., 1993; Wolff et al., 1993). Focus groups have also increasingly been implemented in the context of community-based participatory research or participatory action research, where groups and community members become agents of change by telling their stories and suggesting strategies for collective action (Kieffer et al., 2005: 147).

Historically, focus groups have been used with White, middle-class, middle-aged adult populations (Morgan, 1997). Yet the focus group method has also produced rich data with a diverse array of groups, including, for example, children and youth (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2002), the elderly (Johnson, 1996), college students of non-traditional age (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006), religious minorities (Peek, 2005), low-income ethnic minority populations in the USA (Jarrett, 1993; Kieffer et al., 2005), individuals in developing countries (Fallon and Brown, 2002), and members of online virtual communities (Stewart and Williams, 2005).

Focus groups are a valuable research tool, although they are not appropriate for every project (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006). Indeed, the topic under consideration, the social and cultural locations of the research participants, time and research funds available, and the goal of the project are all factors that researchers must consider before deciding to use the focus group method.

In this article, we focus on the potential contributions of focus groups for qualitative research. We have both utilized the focus group method as part of our own research, and thus we begin by providing a brief summary of three projects where we used focus groups to gather data and publish results. Then, drawing on our experience, we provide some practical advice regarding the design and implementation of focus groups, including information on participant recruitment, the most effective group size, group composition and issues of segmentation, how to carry out focus groups, and the ideal number of groups to conduct. Next we elaborate on the strengths and limitations of focus groups as a qualitative method. We conclude by discussing the overall effectiveness of focus groups, especially for marginalized, stigmatized, or vulnerable individuals.

Project overviews

We have successfully used focus groups as a data gathering strategy for three separate projects, including research on teachers, parents, and children at two

daycare centers (Fothergill, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a); a study of the responses of second-generation Muslim Americans to the events of September 11 (Peek, 2003a, 2003b, 2005); and a collaborative project on the experiences of children and youth following Hurricane Katrina (Fothergill and Peek, 2006; Peek and Fothergill, 2006). Along with focus groups, in each of these projects we also relied on observations and individual interviews, to varying degrees, to augment the data collection. The goal of using these three methods was to have each method contribute something unique to our understanding of the phenomenon under study (see Morgan, 1997).

Although we pursued different research questions, used different theoretical frames, and interviewed diverse populations across a variety of settings, our decision to use the focus group method in the aforementioned projects was driven by our common desire to gather a breadth of information from the research participants as they discussed various topics with one another.¹ In each case we were beginning new research projects, and we recognized that focus groups could serve as an efficient and appropriate research technique. Indeed, according to Blumer (1969: 41), during the exploratory phase of data collection, 'a small number of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample.' Conducting interviews in a group setting allowed us to speak with several participants at once, more efficiently using our limited time and resources to gather data and formulate more specific research questions (also see Krueger, 1988). In addition, focus groups also offered us the opportunity to observe group dynamics and interactional processes that otherwise would have been invisible (Bloor et al., 2001).

DAYCARE RESEARCH

In 2001, Fothergill began researching the experiences of individuals at two daycare centers in Ohio: one was a large, diverse, non-profit daycare center serving 120 children, and one was a predominantly African American, for-profit, daycare center serving approximately 80 children from mostly low-income families. At these daycares, she examined how families developed strategies to handle the anxiety of placing their young children in such a setting full time, especially in light of the negative mainstream press on daycare centers, and how teachers and administrators experienced their work in a daycare setting. During this two-year-long research project, Fothergill conducted seven focus groups, 15 individual formal interviews, over 25 informal interviews, and two years of participant observation. Of the seven focus groups, four were with groups of parents, and three were with groups of teachers. The focus groups, participant observation, and interviews were all conducted concurrently throughout the two-year period of the study.

POST-SEPTEMBER 11 RESEARCH

Peek's research examined religious and ethnic identity formation processes among second-generation Muslim Americans following the events of

September 11, 2001. She gathered data from September 2001 to October 2003, and the final sample consisted of 127 young Muslim Americans in New York and Colorado. She conducted focus groups during the first three months of the study and then shifted to gathering personal narratives through semi-structured and unstructured one-on-one interviews. Combining the focus groups ($n = 23$) and individual interviews ($n = 83$) conducted in New York and Colorado, Peek carried out a total of 106 qualitative interviews over the two-year period of the research. In addition to the interviews, she also engaged in participant observation throughout and recorded detailed fieldnotes.

POST-HURRICANE KATRINA RESEARCH

Our most recent collaborative research is a longitudinal study of children's experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In October 2005, just over a month after Katrina devastated the US Gulf Coast, in May 2007, and in February 2008, we traveled to Louisiana to explore how the disaster had impacted children's lives, relationships, and schooling, what adults were doing to help the children cope, and how children themselves were working to aid their own recovery. In this study we conducted observations and dozens of informal and formal interviews with parents, grandparents, daycare workers, school administrators, elementary school teachers, mental health service providers, religious leaders, evacuee shelter coordinators, and also directly with children and youth, aged 3–18 years. We conducted seven focus groups as part of the project: two separate focus groups, each with three elementary school teachers from New Orleans; one with a group of young children (ranging from 3–9 years in age); three with adolescents enrolled in middle school; and one with four mothers who had evacuated to a Baptist Church shelter in Baton Rouge. Most of the focus groups with the adults were conducted in October 2005, and the focus groups with the children and youth were conducted in May 2007.

Designing and implementing focus group research

We agree with previous scholars' assertions that it is a myth that focus groups are simple and quick to implement (Morgan, 1997; Smithson, 2000). Like other sociological methods, designing and implementing research that utilizes focus groups is often time consuming and requires much forethought and skill. Below, we discuss several key factors that should be taken into account by scholars who are considering the use of focus groups in their own research. In each section, we provide examples from our experiences with planning, coordinating, and conducting focus groups.

RECRUITMENT

In our projects, we relied on various strategies for recruiting participants. The different recruitment techniques were driven by the nature and goals of the

research, the sample population, and our proximity to the research setting. Here we discuss three different approaches for recruiting focus group participants: researcher-driven recruitment; key informant recruitment; and spontaneous recruitment.

RESEARCHER-DRIVEN RECRUITMENT.

The first recruitment technique, which we call researcher-driven recruitment, is perhaps the most common strategy for recruiting focus group participants. In this case, while the researcher may receive organizational or institutional support for the study, the researcher is solely (or almost solely) responsible for recruiting the research participants. The researcher must find a way to contact participants (usually through telephone calls, email, letters, fliers, or personal contacts), communicate with them, and schedule the group meeting time and location.

In Fothergill's daycare study, she recruited parents by placing fliers in the children's mailboxes, which is where the parents pick up classroom reports, the children's artwork, and other institutional paperwork such as reminders for bake sales. After placing the first flier in their boxes, she started to receive calls immediately and began to set up times for the focus groups and interviews. Several months later, she placed more fliers in the mailboxes, and received a few more calls from interested participants.

KEY INFORMANT RECRUITMENT.

Relying on 'key informants' is a second strategy that we have used to recruit focus group participants. Key informants may be institutional stakeholders who are invested in seeing the focus groups carried out, or individuals with strong connections to the community of interest. In either case, the key informants must support the research effort and subsequently choose to assist with participant recruitment. Key informants are often vital to the success of the research project, as without their support, recruiting participants for the study would be much more difficult, or even impossible under certain circumstances such as with hidden or hard-to-reach populations.

Before Fothergill could begin her research at the daycare center, she had to receive approval for the project from the center's administrators. The daycare administrators hold an all-teacher meeting every Wednesday during the children's naptime. These meetings are required, so attendance is high. The administrators arranged for Fothergill to have three of those meeting times so that she could conduct focus groups with the teachers. Although this was convenient, and also ensured a high turnout, Fothergill's concern with this approach was that the staff meetings are a condition of the teachers' paid employment, so the teachers may not have felt that they had any choice in participating. She made it clear that they did not need to stay, and that their participation was voluntary, but all of the teachers appeared to participate voluntarily, even eagerly.

Peek's decision to use the focus group method for her study of Muslim Americans after September 11 was somewhat fortuitous. Initially, she intended to conduct only individual interviews and engage in participant observation. However, as she was talking on the telephone to a university student in New York City, her first contact soon after the September 11 attacks, he volunteered to invite several other members of his university's Muslim Student Association (MSA) so that they could participate in the interview as well and so that Peek could 'talk to a bunch of people all at once.' Since Peek was traveling from Colorado to New York City to conduct her research, and thus had a limited amount of time in the field, she recognized that focus groups would allow her to speak with a number of students in a short period of time. Once Peek had established relationships (via telephone and email) with several student leaders at MSAs, she worked with those contacts to organize the focus group interviews. The student contact was typically the leader of the group or a well-known student member. These students posted fliers advertising the focus groups and also sent email messages to their group listservs, inviting members to attend. Peek created the fliers and drafted the email messages, but relied on the students to post the information. Perhaps most importantly, the students often persuaded their friends and fellow MSA members to attend the focus group sessions, sometimes by saying things like 'Come on, she came all the way from Colorado just to interview us!' The buy-in and support of these contacts was crucial, given that Peek lived so far from her research site, had no pre-established relationships with the students prior to beginning the research, and was an outsider to the Muslim community.

In the Hurricane Katrina research, conducting focus groups with middle school students was made possible by the students' teacher, our key informant, who arranged for us to meet with the youth. At an evacuee shelter at a Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, the minister's wife and shelter organizer served as the key informant recruiter by convening the shelter residents and setting up the site for the focus group.

SPONTANEOUS RECRUITMENT.

At times, focus groups may be unplanned and occur somewhat naturally as a result of several individuals offering to be interviewed at once. We call this type of recruitment 'spontaneous recruitment.' It is especially likely to occur in settings where friends and colleagues move in and out of public spaces where interviews may occur.

In our research on children's experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, three of the focus groups that we conducted were not planned in advance. In one case, we had just begun to interview a kindergarten teacher when two other teachers entered the room. The kindergarten teacher asked her colleagues to join in, and soon all three women were discussing and responding to our research questions. The focus group at the Baton Rouge Baptist Church evacuee shelter started with three women, and halfway

through a fourth woman walked by, and the initial three women recruited her themselves, saying 'Come join us, we're talking about our kids!' The woman joined in and became part of the focus group. Finally, while visiting one family at their home, the mother suggested that her children and her neighbor's children meet with us as a group – without parents – to talk about Katrina.

In any qualitative research, and perhaps especially in ethnography, there is sometimes a possibility that others will want to 'join in' on the conversation, especially when interviews are being conducted at schools, places of work, and sometimes even in people's homes. It is for that reason that we encourage all qualitative researchers to be familiar with the focus group method. We both felt comfortable with spontaneously conducting focus groups because we had prior experience with the method.

GROUP SIZE

In their discussion of some of the 'unusual problems' with group interviews, Fontana and Frey (1994) note that there is the possibility of one person or a small group of persons dominating the discussion while others will not speak up. We contend that this issue is largely associated with the size of the focus group. Group size is central to the success of the focus group method, yet opinions vary regarding the 'ideal size' for a focus group, with the literature pointing to an optimal number of 8–10 participants (Frey and Fontana, 1991) or 6–12 participants (Morgan, 1997). However, groups have been reported as small as 3 participants to naturally occurring groups as large as 20 (Morgan, 1997; Pugsley, 1996).

In our research, we have conducted groups that varied in size from 2–10 participants (Fothergill's daycare research), 3–15 participants (Peek's post-9/11 research), and 3–7 participants (our collaborative post-Hurricane Katrina research). Although our goal typically was to include 4–6 persons in each focus group, the number of participants was affected by participant availability and the influence of the key informants who helped with recruitment for some of our research.

In our research, the focus groups that included between 3–5 participants ran more smoothly than the larger group interviews that we conducted. Although we initially worried about the small group size in these instances, after actually conducting the focus groups, we found that in some ways the small groups worked better due to time constraints and the amount of information that participants wanted to discuss. According to Morgan (1997), small groups work best when the participants are interested in the topic, respectful of each other, and the moderator wants to give them more time to talk. We recommend that researchers attempt to include a smaller number of individuals in each focus group, in order to maximize discussion yet still maintain order. However, the topic and personality of the participants will obviously impact the appropriate number for any given focus group. We agree with Krueger (1988: 27) in his assessment that 'the size must be small enough for

everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions.'

We found that managing the larger focus groups, with anywhere from 6–15 participants, was difficult. In the larger focus groups, we were concerned that some views may have been stifled, and that the size made it harder for quieter participants to speak up. In the larger group setting, it was much more likely that a few individuals would dominate the conversation, with several others contributing fairly significantly, but with some saying very little or nothing at all, despite our efforts as moderators to hear from everyone. Smithson (2000) argues that silence in a focus group is not a problem, since it is a feature of human interaction. Yet we still felt uncomfortable in instances where some had very little opportunity to share their thoughts or experiences with the group, due to the large number of participants.

We also saw that in the smaller groups there was more room for disagreement and variation in opinions and viewpoints. In these smaller groups, it was also less likely that one dominant member would emerge, and thus the discussion included more detailed nuances. Smaller groups may also help individuals – particularly vulnerable ones or children – feel comfortable, included, and supported. Eder and Fingerson (2002) contend that researchers studying children and other marginalized groups must be sensitive to the power imbalance. One way to address this power imbalance and to make the interviewing context more natural is to interview children in a group rather than as individuals. Morgan and colleagues (2002) found in their focus groups with children that four or five participants was ideal for children aged 7–8 years old. They also found that when only two or three children showed up, one adult facilitator would be better than two.

Although we recommend that researchers consider conducting focus groups with a smaller number of participants, in some cases we were faced with the methodological issue of what to do when a large number of individuals arrived for a focus group session. We did not want to turn participants away, but at the same time, worried about compromising the quality of the focus group interview or losing participants. In one case, Peek had 15 students arrive for a focus group interview. She asked if some of the students could meet her at the end of the session so she could conduct a second focus group, but no one volunteered. Thus, she went forward with the focus group with 15 young women in the room, all eager to share their post-9/11 experiences. Fothergill had a similar experience, when 10 teachers attended the first focus group that she conducted at the daycare. She arranged to have only five participants at each of the remaining focus groups with the teachers. Of course, clearly laying the ground rules (e.g., only one person can speak at a time, everyone should be given a chance to share, etc.) is important in any focus group, but we found that emphasizing this information was particularly important with the large focus groups. Also, directly encouraging quieter participants to speak, both verbally and using non-verbal signals such as glances and bodily

postures, was more important in these larger group contexts (see Smithson, 2000; Wibeck et al., 2007).

GROUP COMPOSITION

Other important questions to consider when designing focus group research concern *who* should actually take part in the group interviews. Should participants share the same demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, etc.)? Should they be friends or strangers?

ISSUES OF SEGMENTATION.

According to Morgan (1997), segmentation is controlling the group composition to match carefully chosen categories of participants. Many researchers believe that segmentation is important because it allows for more 'free-flowing conversations' and also 'facilitates analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups' (Morgan, 1997: 35). One of the main issues of segmentation is that the participants in the focus group feel comfortable, but the goal is only homogeneity in background or personal characteristics, not in attitudes and opinions. Smithson (2000) points out that homogenous focus groups are supposed to help the problem of a dominant voice silencing others. In her research she made the focus groups homogeneous in terms of age, sex, education, and occupation, but she still had problems with participants who dominated the focus groups (which as mentioned above, may have been the result of group size, rather than group composition).

In our research projects, we used segmented samples in some ways, and not in others, based on our knowledge of the sample population in each study. In Fothergill's daycare research, she had parents in focus groups without teachers and administrators. Then, within those groups of parents, it was helpful to have single parents in one group, and parents who used the daycare only part time in one group, as their common situations led to more productive discussions. In studying issues of maternal guilt, for example, it was important that the parents using the daycare part time were in a separate group from full-time daycare parents, as issues of guilt and anxiety were significantly different for these two groups.

In Peek's post-9/11 research, all of the participants were Muslim American, and thus segmentation based on religion was not an issue (although, of course, Muslim Americans are diverse in terms of values and beliefs, yet sharing the common faith of Islam was the central characteristic in sampling for this study). However, the MSAs Peek visited varied a great deal on the issue of gendered separation. Some of the groups said it would be easier to meet as a mixed male-female group, while others requested that the interview be conducted with an all-female or all-male group. One student told Peek over the telephone that she did not think the Muslim women would be comfortable talking about some of the issues they had faced in front of their male counterparts. Thus, Peek segmented the groups according to sex in part at the request

of the students, but also because it became apparent that the students in the sex-segregated groups seemed more comfortable and talked more openly about sensitive topics.

According to Krueger (1988), under certain circumstances it can be unwise to mix sexes in focus groups, particularly if the topic of discussion is experienced differently by each sex. In Fothergill's study, she did not need to segment her participants' by sex, because only women participated in her focus group sessions. This was not by research design, but because only mothers responded to the recruitment flier, and all the daycare teachers were women. If faced with both male and female participants, particularly parents, Fothergill would have segmented the groups by sex. In the Katrina study, both focus groups with adults were all women, again not by design, but rather because the teachers and the parents in both situations were all women. It also helped to have focus groups that were segmented by age, with children in their own focus groups without any adults so that they could freely express their ideas and not worry about how their words affected their teachers or parents. This is particularly important in light of past post-disaster research that has shown that adults often do not realize the extent to which children are distressed – largely because parents are distracted and children attempt to hide or minimize their anxieties – and subsequently adults underestimate the problems that children are facing (McFarlane, 1987). Morgan and colleagues (2002) argue that gender is significant with older ages, such as age 11 and above, but children 10 and under do well in mixed groups of boys and girls.

Oftentimes separating participants by their achieved statuses is beneficial. Fothergill found that in her research it was good to have teachers of the same rank together, although this turned out to be rather complicated. She asked the administrators to place all 'head teachers' in one group (the administrators broke the staff into groups for the interviews), but they said that there was no 'head teacher.' However, based on Fothergill's observations, it appeared that in each classroom there was one teacher (out of three in each classroom) who took on the role of head teacher. The administrators did, however, split the teams of teachers from each classroom, at Fothergill's request, when they could. Overall, segmentation can be used to try to minimize rank and status differences among participants, although it is impossible to anticipate all the ways that individual characteristics and social statuses may interact to influence group dynamics.

FRIENDS OR STRANGERS?

Beyond segmenting groups based on membership in particular ascribed or achieved categories, some scholars recommend that focus groups be composed of people unfamiliar with one another, ideally, complete strangers. On the one hand, researchers may favor strangers participating in focus groups because of the possibility that participants will 'hold back' or be selective in their sharing because they know others in the group (Agar and MacDonald, 1995;

Wilkinson, 1999). On the other hand, over-disclosure or disclosure of private or confidential information is another concern when acquaintances or friends are included in the same group (Brannen and Pattman, 2005; Zeller, 1993). Krueger (1988: 97) warns of the 'danger of existing groups.' He states that the greatest risk of conducting focus groups in environments where the participants know one another is in the analysis of the results, not in the discussion process. In analyzing the data, it is difficult to decipher whether the interviewees were saying things or taking certain stances simply because they knew others in the group. Stewart et al. (2007) contend that it is generally unwise to have friends participate in the same group, unless the group is specifically designed to bring together individuals who are known to one another.

Yet other academics maintain that in spite of the risks, focus groups can be effectively used in already existing groups (Elrod, 1981). Morgan and Krueger (1993) argue that the notion that focus groups must consist of strangers is a myth. Indeed, the advantages of discussions involving pre-existing social groups both on practical and epistemological levels have increasingly been recognized (Bloor et al., 2001: 22). Kitzinger (1994) maintains that by utilizing friendship groups the researcher may be able to tap into the interaction which approximates to 'naturally occurring' data (such as may be collected through participant observation).

As is the case with many methodological issues in the social sciences, we do not think there is an absolute rule that should be followed in terms structuring focus groups based on pre-existing relationships. Rather, the researcher should decide the composition of the group based on the goals and context of the research project. In the case of Peek's research with young Muslim Americans, one of the most vital aspects contributing to the success of the data gathering was the fact that the focus groups were conducted with friends and acquaintances in pre-existing groups. By the time Peek arrived in New York City only weeks after September 11, hundreds of Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians living in the USA had already been questioned or detained by federal authorities. Some of the students were hesitant to talk with an unfamiliar researcher, let alone in front of a group of complete strangers. In Peek's questioning, she tried to avoid emotional, political, or legal issues, although these topics inevitably arose. Thus, she is certain that it would have been much more difficult getting groups of strangers (regardless of whether they shared the common characteristic of being Muslim or not) to disclose some of the information that was discussed in the focus groups. Furthermore, because of time and distance constraints, it would have been logistically challenging to organize focus groups consisting of complete strangers.

With the daycare focus groups that Fothergill conducted, the parents had a chance to talk before, during, and after the focus group. Some of them knew each other, some recognized each other from the hallway but had never been introduced, and a few were only meeting for the first time. In general, there was a sense of familiarity and a commonality of experience that aided in the

ease of the discussion. In the focus groups she conducted with teachers, most of whom had worked together for years, she sensed a certain level of support and friendliness among them. We agree with Frey and Fontana (1991) in their contention that group interviews with people who know one another provide insights into the social relations between participants, such as friendships or power differentials, and that they also can foster support within the group. In the daycare case, the familiarity helped the teachers commiserate about the stereotypes of a 'daycare worker' and it helped the mothers who faced both guilt and stigma for placing their young children in fulltime 'baby warehouses' empathize with each other.

In the Katrina study, the women in the shelter did not know each other before the disaster, but had lived together under one roof during an extremely stressful time for over a month. Thus, while they were not friends, they were also not strangers, and although they did not know each others' past lives – such as where they used to live, their friends, or their family members – they were intimately connected in their current situation. In the focus groups with children, the participants all knew each other. At the family home, the children were exceptionally close, as they were neighbors, friends, and had evacuated together. In the middle school classroom, the students were all in the same class and appeared to know each other well, even though they had only recently been placed in the same classroom together due to the reorganization of New Orleans schools after the disaster. In both contexts the children appeared comfortable in front of their peers, especially when compared to the one-on-one interviews that we conducted with youth, where some of the young people seemed nervous and provided truncated responses to our questions. With children, even more so than with adults, it may be particularly beneficial to have them know each other in order for them to feel at ease sharing in a group and to feel less intimidated with an adult they do not know.

In all three studies, it is clear that it would have been close to impossible for us to arrange for focus groups of complete strangers. In addition, we are not sure that a stranger-only set up would have benefited any of the three projects. It was helpful, even crucial in some cases, for our participants to be acquainted beforehand. In all three studies the participants, through their interaction and knowledge of one another's circumstances, were able to offer insights and support and create a degree of power in the collective that would have been less accessible in a different situation.

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are typically held in conference rooms in public facilities such as community centers, libraries, or schools (Morgan, 1997), although researchers are also beginning to use computer-mediated online settings with the expanded use of technology (Stewart and Williams, 2005). Because all of our focus groups were conducted in person and not online, we had to find and reserve spaces, most often with the assistance of key informants. Fothergill's daycare

focus groups were conducted in classrooms or offices at the daycare centers, Peek used the student organization offices at the universities where she interviewed Muslim Americans, and in our collaborative project, we conducted interviews in the participants' homes, school classrooms, and in a shelter. Regardless of where the focus group was held, our primary concern was that the location be quiet and private or semi-private so the participants would be more comfortable sharing.

We carried out the focus groups in more or less the same way, with some a little more formal than others. Each group was led by one researcher. We began by welcoming the participants and thanking them for their time. Next we introduced ourselves, briefly described the purpose of the focus group and the larger research project, and then explained that the interview would last approximately two hours (less for the focus groups with children – these sessions lasted between 30 minutes and one hour), that it would be recorded for transcription purposes only, and that all names would be kept confidential. In the Muslim American study, Peek was more thorough at explaining her role as facilitator, discussing the participants' roles, and going over the ground rules for participation than in the other two studies. She also reminded the interviewees that all members of the group should be allowed to participate equally and mentioned that things would go more smoothly (and the interview transcriptions would be much easier) if only one person spoke at a time. Peek found that the students responded well to these instructions, and would often remind one another that 'only one person should talk at a time because of the tape recorder.'

To begin the groups, we did not rely on any formal 'stimulus material' (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan et al., 2002; Wibeck et al., 2007) such as an image, game, or text to introduce the topic of interest to the participants.² Instead, we relied on 'warm-up' questions to get the participants talking. These were carefully planned open-ended questions, designed to bring the participants back mentally to the time or location of interest. For example, in the post-9/11 study, Peek opened the focus groups by asking the participants to recall where they were when they first learned of the attacks. This question was not overly sensitive and was a common question that Americans asked one another after the disaster, yet it served the purpose of focusing the discussion on the topic of interest.

In all three studies, we asked open-ended questions, sometimes utilizing interview probes if necessary. In our research, when possible, we conducted the focus groups in a consistent manner, in an effort to increase the reliability and validity of the results. At the end of the focus groups we asked participants if there was anything they would like to add, which often led to some interesting conversations. In the Muslim American study, Peek found that at this point in the focus group students would often ask her, 'What do you think about all of this?' They seemed very curious about what kind of person she was and how she became interested in these issues. She always answered their questions as truthfully and completely as possible. In one of the middle school focus groups in the Katrina study,

all four of the youth offered their strong opinions about the food they had to eat during evacuation; again, not a topic we introduced but something that emerged because of the open-ended questions.

All of the focus groups ended with us thanking the participants and giving out our contact information. We encouraged them to get in touch with us if they thought of anything that they had forgotten to say. In her post-9/11 study, Peek also asked the participants if they were willing to be interviewed individually, and all of them agreed. In this study and in the daycare study, we provided snacks to the participants. Since some of the Katrina focus groups were unplanned, we did not have food and drink available. In all three studies, every participant – child and adult – received a thank you note from us shortly after the focus group took place. In the Katrina study, we included a photograph of the participants in the thank you card, which we had taken at the end of the interview. We quickly learned that the loss of a lifetime of photographs was highly traumatic for many of our participants, and thus sending a photo seemed to be a particularly appropriate way to offer our gratitude.

TOTAL NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS

Regarding the ‘ideal number’ of focus groups to conduct, most scholars agree that three to five groups are usually adequate, as more groups seldom provide new insights (Morgan, 1997; Krueger, 1988). However, the final number of focus groups conducted should actually reflect the research plan, including which sub-groups have been targeted (Bloor et al., 2001). As Morgan (1995) notes, the more segmented the groups are (for example, by age, race, gender, or sexuality), the more groups will be necessary. Our three studies illustrate how qualitative research can use a varied number of focus groups successfully.

In Peek’s Muslim American student study, she conducted a relatively large number of focus groups including nine mixed-gender focus groups, eleven all-female groups, and three all-male focus groups. Peek conducted more than the recommended ‘ideal number’ of focus groups because of gendered segmentation and because her goal was to increase the number of individual students whom she had contact with so that she could conduct more individual interviews later, in addition to the initial set of focus groups. Thus, conducting a larger number of focus groups during her first research trip allowed her to develop a large sample pool of Muslim students for future return research trips to New York City and it allowed her to be sensitive to particular gender issues with her participants.

The daycare research project used what is considered the ‘ideal’ number of focus groups. There were four focus groups with parents and three with teachers, and it appeared that they captured the main issues for these groups. Because the need for segmentation was limited, there was not a need for more groups. If Fothergill had been able to recruit a small group of fathers to participate, however, she would have added one more focus group with them.

The Hurricane Katrina research had seven focus groups. While that is more than the ‘ideal’ needed, they were varied in their participants: four with

children, one with parents, and two with teachers. In each group, new insights emerged, and thus we felt that due to the segmentation, the additional groups were valuable. Moreover, focus groups were important for the participants themselves as a way to connect with others and to see their situation in a larger framework; thus, if we had come in contact with others who were interested we would have held more groups.

ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP DATA

There is no one best or correct approach to the analysis of focus group data (Stewart et al., 2007). The research design, purpose of the study, and nature of the report that the research should produce are all essential elements in making decisions about how to analyze the data (Knodel, 1993; Morgan, 1997). Our intent was to report the findings from our three separate research studies in peer-reviewed journals. Thus, we followed general social scientific procedures for analyzing qualitative data. First, the empirical material contained in the focus group interviews was coded at a very general level in order to condense and organize the data into analyzable units. Segments of the discussions ranging from a phrase to several paragraphs were assigned codes based on emergent or a priori themes (i.e., based on questions in the interview guide or the existing literature). In some instances, the same text segment was assigned more than one code. This initial, open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) resulted in a list of themes, issues, accounts of behaviors, and opinions related to our different research topics. Second, based on this preliminary list of codes, we conducted axial or pattern coding (Charmaz, 2001) to examine the association between different a priori and emergent categories. Finally, through the process of constantly comparing these categories with each other, the different categories were further condensed into broad themes. In our analysis, we moved between the individual level of analysis and the analysis of the group as a whole (Morgan, 1997: 60). Moving between these levels allowed us to capture individual narratives and concerns, while also considering the interactions and dynamics between focus group participants (Wibeck et al., 2007).

Although we followed similar procedures in analyzing our data, the different research designs that guided our projects influenced the subsequent analysis of data. For example, in the post-9/11 study, the focus groups were conducted during the initial phase of the research and the findings from the focus groups were used to generate additional research questions and to develop a semi-structured interview guide for the individual in-depth interviews that followed. Conversely, in the daycare and Katrina studies, the focus groups were conducted concurrently with the individual interviews, and thus the data were analyzed concurrently as well.

The ways that we segmented our focus groups also influenced the analysis of the data. In Peek's Muslim American study, the groups were segmented by gender and were conducted in two different geographic regions (New York and Colorado). Thus, cross-group comparisons were made across these segments. In

the daycare study, separate coding schemes were developed for the interviews with teachers and parents. In our Katrina research, groups were segmented by age, professional status, and evacuee status. However, we were searching for common themes related to children's vulnerability and resiliency, and thus developed a common coding scheme.

Focus groups: strengths and limitations

As with any research method, qualitative or quantitative, there are advantages and disadvantages to conducting focus group research. The following sections are dedicated to these aspects, drawing on the methodological literature and examples from our three research projects.

METHODOLOGICAL STRENGTHS

There are several practical benefits to focus groups. First, using focus groups in our research allowed us to increase our sample size considerably. Instead of hearing from one participant in a two-hour interview, we were able to gather the perspectives of many individuals. With the logistics of our research projects, especially the 9/11 and the Katrina projects, which involved long-distance travel in the weeks following catastrophic events, this was a significant strength. For instance, in Peek's post-9/11 research, she met with and interviewed 68 Muslim students in the course of one week and was able to learn about the numerous and varied impacts of the terrorists attacks on their lives and relationships. Thus, sample size can be increased without the researcher expending additional interview time. Focus groups can also be cost efficient, particularly if one does not pay the participants or have to rent room space. We did not pay for either of these things in our projects.

Additionally, focus groups can produce a breadth of information as well as concentrated data on a specific area of interest (Krueger, 1988). In each of the focus groups, we had not anticipated many of the responses we received, and the data we gathered from the group interviews helped us develop the concepts and themes in our analysis. In the post-9/11 project, these themes were then subsequently explored more systematically during the individual interviews with the initial focus group participants. In fact, by the time Peek left New York City the first time, she had developed many of the questions for her next round of interviews. In the other two projects, the information gathered in the focus groups helped guide interviews with future participants who had not been part of the focus groups.

In our three projects, we found that the group dynamic that resulted from the open-ended questions and ensuing discussion proved to be productive and fascinating. Some of the focus groups often seemed to closely resemble a typical conversation more than a formal interview. It was because of this interaction that we found in several cases that the dynamic actually seemed to embolden people to say things that they may have not disclosed in an individual interview.

For example, in the focus group with the New Orleans teachers post-Hurricane Katrina, the participants at first broached the topic of race and the role that it played in the disaster, but after hearing their colleagues state their opinions, seemed to offer much more honest assessments of their thoughts on race and the reasons why people were left behind in the city.

According to Morgan (1997: 2), the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group. Krueger (1988: 23) agrees, and posits that focus groups work because attitudes and perceptions are developed in part by interaction with others. As he states: 'We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us.' According to Krueger, mail and telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews are deficient because they assume that people form their opinions in isolation and that people already know how they feel. He argues that people may need to hear the opinions of others before they form their own viewpoint. Johnson (1996: 523) argues that the 'synergy' of a focus group, with moderator as 'witness' and not interviewer, is one of the main draws of this method. In each of the three studies, we found evidence of both incidences: sometimes the participants appeared to already know how they felt about a certain issue, and other times the interaction, discussion, and engagement with others helped them to think about and formulate their views.

In the daycare study, it did not seem that the teachers in the focus group necessarily formed their opinions in the focus group, as they were very clear in their thoughts about what quality daycare meant to them and what characterized their experiences as pre-school teachers. However, the teachers often were reminded of something to add when they heard a colleague mention it. Lofland and Lofland (1984: 15) note that an advantage of focus groups is that they allow people more time to reflect and recall experiences and 'something that one person mentions can spur memories and opinions in others.' For example, one teacher, Maria, spoke of how her prior place of employment asked her to falsify records. For some daycares to receive money from the county for subsidized children, the children need to be present on any given day. Therefore, if a child was absent the individual daycare would not receive the needed money, prompting many directors to ask, or require, their staff to write on attendance sheets that children were present when they were not. After Maria explained her resistance to this practice, several other teachers chimed in with 'Oh, I had to do that where I worked, too!' Until they heard Maria's story, however, they had forgotten about that particular issue. When it was raised it was clear that it was an important issue, as they spoke for some time about how angry it made them to be put in that position. Several teachers also seemed relieved that they were 'not the only one' who had been forced to do something that they disagreed with for professional or personal reasons.

The focus group setting also seemed to provide a comfortable forum for some participants in other ways. For instance, the group setting offered a more

secure space when the participants were unfamiliar with the researcher. In Peek's study in New York, one student informed her that while he would be happy to let her interview him, he indicated that some of the other Muslim males might have a problem with committing to an interview with a female because it would require that they were alone together, in a semi-private space. Thus, the focus group method was particularly advantageous in allowing Peek to gain entrée to a population that otherwise may have been inaccessible. In the Katrina study, it was helpful to have the children talking together with a researcher so they felt more comfortable and had 'power in numbers.' Other research has noted the benefits of having children's focus groups to give them a more powerful voice with a potentially intimidating adult researcher (Eder and Fingerson, 2002). Morgan and colleagues (2002) assert that the facilitator of focus groups with children should also be aware of and implement various strategies to make sure the children feel at ease and less likely to view the researcher as an authority figure.

Our experience demonstrates another benefit of focus groups: the way in which they can be successfully combined with other qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews and observation. Fontana and Frey (1994: 364) believe group interviews or focus groups are not meant to replace individual interviewing, but they 'provide another level of data gathering or a perspective on the research problem not available through individual interviews.' According to Lofland and Lofland (1984), group interviews could work either in place of or as a supplement to one-on-one interviews. Interviews, observation, and focus groups worked well together and helped us triangulate the data in each of our studies.

There is some debate about the order of using the various methods. According to some, a focus group is a situation where a researcher asks participants very specific questions about a topic 'after considerable research has already been completed' (Fontana and Frey, 1994: 364). As a result, they can be a 'source of validation for events observed' (Frey and Fontana, 1991: 184). Morgan (1997) agrees, stating that focus groups work well with participant observation if they are done *after* the observations, as a way to check the data. He suggests using focus groups as 'member checking,' meaning sharing the researcher's conclusions from participant observation with the participants in the focus group and getting their reactions. Morgan (1997) does suggest that focus groups can be used prior to participant observation techniques, but only in a setting separate from the research setting. Yet our experience is that focus groups can be used at any stage of the research process, not just after observation, and can be used in the early stages of projects, or even conducted in conjunction with other data collection methods. For example, in Fothergill's daycare research, she found that being an observer and conducting interviews and focus groups simultaneously worked quite effectively. In particular, in the focus groups with teachers they raised some issues that had not surfaced in the previous interviews or in Fothergill's observations. One issue, for instance, was

the strained interactions between teachers and parents when parents were late to pick up their children and the teachers were ambivalent about enforcing the late fee penalty. This issue had not surfaced in interviews or in observations – mainly because Fothergill never stayed after closing time out of respect for the teachers – but by hearing about it in focus groups she was able to ask about it in subsequent interviews and look for it in her observations. Focus groups can assist on-going data collection, and not just serve as a tool to double-check the accuracy of previously-collected data.

Focus groups can also provide access to observation opportunities. Peek, for example, in her research on Muslim American students, found that her initial contact with the students in a group setting led to several interesting and informative participant-as-observer (Gold, 1958) experiences with the students. As mentioned earlier, Peek's focus groups typically concluded with the students asking her about her research, background, religious beliefs, and political views. In essence, the focus groups ended in a manner similar to many of the personal conversations that she has had with friends. Peek believes that it was because of this group friendship dynamic that she was granted access to several important, and sometimes very personal, events during her second and third research trips to New York City. For example, her second return to New York coincided with Ramadan (the Islamic holy month). She was invited to and attended several Ramadan dinners during this visit. She was also invited to attend Friday prayers at mosques. A few of the students invited her into their homes to conduct the interviews, as the second time around they realized the importance of a quiet space, and also wanted to have a comfortable setting so they could talk freely. Furthermore, the relationships that were developed during the first visit resulted in many of the students sending Peek the contact information for their 'interesting' friends as they were sure Peek would want to interview them as well, as they had something that they thought would be good to add to her research project.

Another advantage of focus groups is that they can be beneficial to the participants themselves. Fontana and Frey (1994) mention that focus groups are 'stimulating' to participants, and we also found this in our work. In the daycare study, parents and teachers often told Fothergill the next time they saw her how much they enjoyed being in the focus group and talking about their experiences. In addition, the participants often stayed over the scheduled time - even when Fothergill signalled that they were finished and were free to go - because they said they wanted to keep talking about various issues. Similarly, following the focus groups in New York, Peek received thank you notes and emails from several Muslim students who said how much they enjoyed the interview and appreciated having the opportunity to discuss pertinent issues with their peers.

Focus groups can go beyond stimulating conversation, however, and also may have a social support function, in that they allow the focus group participants the opportunity to share their stories with others and to develop a sense of solidarity with people who are going through similar experiences or have

similar life circumstances. Brannen and Pattman (2005: 532) found participants could become 'outspoken accomplices' as they lodged complaints against their managers and they could use laughter in focus groups to signal dissension and to create solidarity. Johnson (1996: 531) stated that his focus groups with the elderly and their caregivers were 'a combination of robust research method, self-help group, and consciousness-raising session.' For sociologists who take seriously the notion of 'giving back' to their research participants, this qualitative method has the distinct advantage of providing this social support function. In Fothergill's (2004b) previous work on disaster survivors that did not use focus groups, her research participants frequently asked during in-depth interviews if she could share with them some of the comments, concerns, and experiences of other women who had been interviewed. A focus group would have been able to provide this exchange of ideas that they were seeking and give them some support and a larger framework for contextualizing their experiences. As Johnson (1996) points out, participants can transcend individualism and place their questions of 'Is it just me?' in a larger context – indeed redefining their personal troubles as public problems. In New York, Peek also found that the participants gained insights and support from their participation in the focus groups. Some of the participants felt it was therapeutic to share their stories with others who had similar experiences.

In the daycare study, it was clear that participants felt that they were in a supportive environment. The parents would often say encouraging or sympathetic comments to each other along the lines of 'Oh, I felt that same way' or nodding their heads in agreement when one mother would tell of relationships with in-laws or feelings of guilt around using daycare. For working mothers, who often feel put down or made to feel that they are selfish or not good mothers, Fothergill felt that it was significant that by participating in her research project they have the opportunity to bond with other working mothers and to feel supported when they would tell their stories.

In the daycare study, the teachers also used verbal language and body language to convey their support of their colleagues. In one focus group, one teacher, Lily, spoke of how important she thought it was that they, as preschool teachers, teach various social skills. Following her comment, Katie, a teacher from another classroom, added a remark that Lily was exceptionally skilled at teaching children social skills. The conversation, therefore, provided an opportunity for both to respond to the question posed by the facilitator, and it also gave one teacher the chance to complement another on her talents in the classroom, an opportunity that may not surface frequently. In addition, in the groups' discussions of the low pay and low respect teachers (especially in a daycare setting) receive for their jobs, the teachers gave one another a lot of support when they spoke of how they felt society devalued their work.

In the focus groups in Louisiana, the participants were also able to offer their support to one another. The teachers at the elementary schools and the mothers in the shelter spoke of what they had been through in the storm, with

frequent nods and comments of agreement and support from the other participants. During one of the focus groups with middle school students, all boys, in New Orleans, the youth began by saying that they were 'tired of talkin' about Katrina' and that they were 'over it.' However, once one of the boys began sharing his harrowing story of wading through the floodwaters in order to help his uncle survive, the other boys really focused on what their classmate was saying and began sharing their own stories. At the end of the interview, one of the boys said that he did not know that others had been through the 'same stuff' in the catastrophe. The vulnerability of disaster survivors from their traumatic experiences makes the benefit of social support even more important.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Focus groups also present certain disadvantages as a qualitative research method. One problem can result from the researcher having less interviewer control in a group setting. At times the more talkative participants may dominate the conversation, causing others to lose interest. As mentioned above, this issue can at least be partially addressed by including fewer participants in the focus group. In addition, it takes a great deal of practice and tact on the part of the moderator to minimize group domination by the 'talkers' and to bring the quieter members into the discussion (Fallon and Brown, 2002; Wibeck et al., 2007).

Another issue that was sometimes frustrating for the participants as well as for us as the interviewers was that there was not always enough time for each of the focus group members to share all of the details of their stories. In the daycare study, for example, the teachers discussed their past experiences working at other daycares. Almost every teacher had a 'horror story' to tell, but because of the large group and time constraints, their stories were shortened and some details left out. For the most part, however, Fothergill learned the general sentiments of the group around their prior teaching settings. Peek noted a similar challenge in her post-9/11 research, where she found it difficult to not be able to follow-up with individualized probes to the extent that she would have preferred. The Muslim students would often mention personal, sometimes heart wrenching, details during the course of the focus group. Peek typically chose not to stop the conversation to speak directly with one person because of the risk of disrupting the flow of the group. Instead, she used the individual interviews, which she conducted in the months following the focus groups, to gather more details and life history narratives.

In discussing methodological challenges related to the use of focus groups, the issue raised by Lofland and Lofland (1984) regarding privacy and embarrassment needs to be addressed. One of the purposes of the focus group method is to promote self-disclosure among participants (Zeller, 1993). For some individuals, self-disclosure comes easily and it is natural and comfortable. But for others, it is difficult or uncomfortable and requires trust, effort, and courage (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006; Krueger, 1988), especially when the

topic is of a particularly personal or sensitive nature (Zeller, 1993). Thus, Lofland and Lofland (1984: 14) argue that focus groups are more productive if the topic is 'reasonably public.' For some people, and for some topics, one-on-one interviews will simply be better – participants will be more comfortable, they will be more willing to speak about more private issues, and the group dynamics will not silence some participants. If the group is small enough, then issues of privacy and embarrassment and problems related to participants offering socially desirable responses may become less important. However, this is a potential methodological and ethical problem that researchers must think through carefully when they are considering the use of focus groups as a data collection strategy. One way we addressed this issue in our 9/11 and daycare projects was to always indicate in recruitment fliers and during phone conversations with potential participants that we would be willing to conduct one-on-one interviews with those who would prefer to meet individually. Once data collection begins, researchers and moderators must remain sensitive to the dynamics of the group. Because participants may become embarrassed, uncomfortable, or even distressed as they discuss the topic of interest, researchers must be prepared to alter the flow of the conversation in order to ensure the protection of subjects.

Carey (1994: 236) suggests that a major pitfall of the focus group technique is the potential impact of censoring. Censoring occurs when a person withholds potential contributions, often due to a lack of trust of the leader, other focus group participants, or the future use of the data. In Peek's post-9/11 research, she initially encountered several issues with censoring among participants. This was understandable, given the traumatic nature of the events and the anti-Islamic backlash that followed. However, the context of the research and the population being studied meant that some of the participants were initially unwilling to speak on tape, sign informed consent forms, or discuss certain sensitive topics. A few participants also asked Peek to show university credentials to verify her identity. Censoring diminished over time, as the participants came to know the researcher and more clearly understand the goals of the project. Also, key informants not only played a central role in recruiting subjects for the project, they also offered a sense of legitimacy and helped establish trust.

Focus groups can be logistically challenging to schedule and moderate. Many parents expressed an interest in participating in Fothergill's daycare study, but it was difficult to organize groups of over-extended working parents with small children. Most of them needed childcare while they participated, so the easiest solution was to try to meet between the time they got off work and the time the daycare center closed for the day. While Fothergill had hoped to conduct more focus groups and fewer individual interviews, some parents were only available late at night after the children were asleep, and they preferred to do telephone interviews. Some participants who were interested in the study ultimately were not able to participate because their schedules were

simply too overwhelming. Peek also faced logistical challenges in interviewing college students. In particular, she occasionally found managing an effective focus group environment to be difficult. Sometimes students would arrive late to the focus group, usually because they had just gotten out of class or had some other responsibility, or they would have to leave early to get to their next class or to work. When students would come and go it was disruptive to the flow of conversation.

Analysis of focus group data can also be particularly difficult. Much less has been written about the actual practice of analyzing data generated from focus groups, especially when compared to the amount of 'how to' information available on designing and conducting focus groups. Thus, there is less methodologically sound literature available to guide the analysis of focus group data (although see Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996, 1997). In addition, it is important to move between different levels of analysis – the individual and the group – in analyzing and interpreting focus group data (Morgan, 1997). This requires flexible analytical approaches that capture individual contributions as well as group dynamics, while also identifying areas of agreement and controversy to better understand how perspectives emerge and change in any particular group (Kidd and Parshall, 2000). We conducted focus groups and individual interviews in each of our three projects, and thus we were often transcribing and analyzing the interview and focus group data concurrently. We had to devise separate analytical strategies, and in some cases new coding schemes, in order to analyze the focus group data at the individual and group levels.

Another challenge to focus groups is when there are status differences. As discussed previously, it is often best to create focus groups with participants of the same status and rank level, taking into account ascribed and achieved statuses such as religion, gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and professional affiliation. Smithson (2000: 109), for instance, points out that some voices can be silenced as participants can produce a single 'collective voice.' She also found that participants often make assumptions about the social status of other persons, such as an 'assumed heterosexuality,' which can be problematic (p. 112). In the daycare study, the focus groups with teachers may have been up against this challenge of status differences, as it was unclear if some teachers were quieter because their senior colleagues were in the same group. In one instance, a more junior teacher who participated in a focus group with the senior teacher from her own classroom was particularly quiet, and Fothergill was unable to discern if this was due to their own interpersonal dynamics, the junior teacher's fear of repercussions from the senior teacher, or simply because the junior teacher was quiet by nature. Some participants feel intimidated in a group where other participants are of a higher rank or status or from a more dominant group, but this challenge can be dealt with directly by segmenting samples in a careful way to encourage homogeneity of status, but not of opinion.

Conclusion

The use of the focus group method contributed significantly to the success of our research projects with parents and teachers at daycare centers, second-generation Muslim Americans post-9/11, and survivors of Hurricane Katrina. These projects varied in purpose and scope, but in each case the use of focus groups allowed us to gather a breadth of information and diverse perspectives, increase our sample size, and provide a comfortable and supportive forum for participants to discuss issues relevant to their lives. In addition, we successfully combined focus groups with other qualitative methods, including formal and informal one-on-one interviews and observations, which allowed us to elicit additional data at different stages of the research process. Although focus groups represent an effective and useful qualitative research method, they also present certain methodological challenges. In particular, when using the focus group method, we had to deal with issues related to less interviewer control, larger group sizes and time constraints that resulted in less detailed participant narratives, concerns regarding privacy and embarrassment, logistical challenges associated with scheduling and moderating the group interviews, and analytical difficulties in analyzing the data. However, we attempted to address these methodological issues through strategies such as reducing the number of participants in each focus group, including friends and acquaintances in the groups in order to increase comfort and the social support function, and clearly laying 'ground rules' for participation.

Gubrium and Holstein (1997: 10–14) maintain that while there are key differences between methods of qualitative inquiry, there are also a number of common threads that connect various qualitative approaches, including: an appreciation of the nuances of taken for granted aspects of social life; a commitment to close scrutiny of the lived world of those being studied; concern for detail, rich description, and complex understanding; dedication to studying social life in process, as it unfolds; an appreciation for subjectivity; and tolerance for interactional complexity. Historically, individual interviews and observations have been the primary methods of choice among qualitative researchers attempting to describe and understand social reality. It is our contention that focus groups also have much potential as a qualitative research technique, and thus ongoing debate regarding the strengths and challenges of this methodological approach are warranted.

We agree with Jowett and O'Toole (2006) that focus groups are not an appropriate method for every project and that participants' social and cultural locations can shape their positive or negative reactions to the method. Thus, all researchers considering using focus groups must first carefully define the research topic of interest and be sensitive to the cultural norms and values of the research population. In our three projects, we successfully implemented the focus group method with diverse groups, including children and adolescents, racial minorities, and religious minorities. Based on these experiences,

we would especially like to stress the utility of focus groups for studying children. Social science research undertaken with children is important to understand their views and relationships from their own perspectives, instead of relying on the accounts of adults most close to the children (McFarlane, 1987). The focus group method not only provides the opportunity to hear children's voices, it also can minimize status differentials between adult researchers and young participants. Minimizing these status differences is key to obtaining rich data from children and youth.

Even more broadly, focus groups are a useful method for researchers studying vulnerable, stigmatized, or marginalized groups. Our projects, although different in many ways, were each concerned with examining a population that was struggling with trauma, guilt, or isolation from a dominant group or worldview. The Muslim American participants were caught between the social trauma of September 11 and the attribution of guilt and blame by the larger society toward those who shared a faith with the men who planned and carried out the attacks. The daycare workers were stereotyped and stigmatized as lazy and unprofessional babysitters. The mothers in the daycare study grappled with a dominant culture that labels them as selfish, inadequate mothers, creating feelings of guilt and marginalization. In Katrina, the participants had suffered terrible losses and were vulnerable due to the storm but also due to race, class, gender, and age. The participants revealed their vulnerability and the group setting helped to mitigate the effects of that vulnerability. The social benefits of offering support and providing a setting where people will listen and empathize with each other's stories can have a profound therapeutic effect. This is especially true, we believe, for those who have survived disaster events.

The focus group benefits to participants are not just social, but they also have a socio-political nature. Johnson (1996: 525) advocates for a more radical use of focus groups and argues that focus groups can even 'rupture... underlying social relationships of exploitation and oppression' because they can cultivate the 'sociological imagination' among participants by helping them link their personal troubles to social structures. Indeed, focus groups can produce a 'collective will for change' where the group will move from individual troubles to 'socialized solutions' (p. 532). As Johnson states:

What the radical focus group can offer is precisely the opportunity to explore the collective character of that experience and foster a *collective* will for social change. Certainly the reported experiences of focus group practitioners suggest that *people are quite capable of viewing their own experience in a wider optic than that of the individualizing ideologies of the day.* (p. 535, emphasis in original)

The potential to use focus groups for collective empowerment, social change, and to develop the sociological imagination of the participants is indeed a powerful feature of the focus group method. Community-based participatory research projects and public health researchers have begun to link focus group research with collective action (see Kieffer et al., 2005). In our

post-9/11 and Hurricane Katrina research projects, in particular, the potential use of focus groups to connect and mobilize survivors of catastrophic events became evident. Following 9/11, Muslim Americans felt isolated and fearful as the public and political backlash ensued. After Hurricane Katrina, survivors of this 'unnatural disaster' (see Steinberg, 2006) felt angry, betrayed, and were often traumatized. As researchers, we obviously benefitted from hearing these stories as the narratives shed light on the vulnerabilities and capacities of the disaster survivors. The focus groups also offered the chance for the participants to examine the collective character of their experiences and to put their expert, local knowledge together to realize that their experiences were connected to more macro level issues.

Qualitative researchers have documented and explained the benefits of focus group research, and many of the functions mentioned – social support, empowerment, development of the sociological imagination, envisioning social change – all become magnified when dealing with vulnerable groups. Overall, focus groups have enormous power and potential and it is worth it for social scientists to explore this qualitative methodology in their research settings. Indeed, future research should specifically address the promise and pitfalls of using the focus group method to support and empower those living at the margins of our society. More longitudinal research is also necessary, to follow up on changes in participants lives, values, and outlooks over time.

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NOTES

1. We both began using the focus group method in the fall of 2001, when Fothergill initiated the daycare study and Peek embarked on her post-9/11 research. Then, in the fall of 2005, we began our collaborative study of Hurricane Katrina. We decided to write this article as a result of the numerous conversations we have had over the years regarding our common and divergent experiences with using the focus group method.
2. In the focus group with the young children, the group was centered around a table full of crafts, such as play-dough. The craft activity was not the introduction to the topic, but it was an important part of the focus group dynamic and success as it seemed to put the children at ease.

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