8 Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups

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Synopsis
A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important. A focus group is a group of people, usually between 6 and 12, who meet in an informal setting to talk about a particular topic that has been set by the researcher. The facilitator keeps the group on the topic but is otherwise non-directive, allowing the group to explore the subject from as many angles as they please. This chapter explains how to go about conducting both interviews and focus groups. The chapter is organized into the following sections:

• Introduction
• What are semi-structured interviews and focus groups?
• Formulating questions
• Selecting and recruiting participants
• Where to meet
• Recording and transcribing discussions
• Ethical issues
• Conclusion

INTRODUCTION
Talking with people is an excellent way of gathering information. Sometimes in our everyday lives, however, we tend to talk too quickly, not listen carefully enough and interrupt others. Semi-structured interviews (sometimes referred to as informal, conversational or ‘soft’ interviews) and focus groups (sometimes referred to as focus-group interviews) are about talking with people but in ways that are self-conscious, orderly and partially structured. Krueger and Casey (2000: xi) explain that focus-group interviewing (and we could add here, semi-structured interviewing) is about talking but it is also

... about listening. It is about paying attention. It is about being open to hear what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share. It is about being careful and systematic with the things people tell you.
Over the last few decades there has emerged in geography interesting debates (especially amongst feminist geographers) about the utility and validity of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Eyles, 1988; Pile, 1991; Schoenberger, 1991, 2007; McDowell, 1992a, 2007; Nast, 1994; Crang, 2002, 2003, 2004; Davies and Dwyer, 2007). Many geographers have moved towards what Sayer and Morgan (1985) call ‘intensive methods’ to examine the power relations and social processes constituted in geographical patterns.

Geographers employ a range of intensive or qualitative methods. Some included in this book are participant observation, keeping a research diary and visual methodologies. Semi-structured interviews, however, are probably one of the most commonly used qualitative methods (Kitchin and Tate, 2000: 213). Focus groups are not as commonly used but they have become increasingly popular since the mid-1990s (see Area, 1996: Vol. 28, which contains an introduction and five articles on focus groups).

Geographers have used focus groups to collect data on a diverse range of subjects. As early as 1988 Burgess, Limb and Harrison used focus groups (which they called ‘small groups’) to explore people’s environmental values (Burgess et al., 1988a, 1988b). A decade later Miller et al. (1998) conducted focus groups (as well as surveys and ethnographic research) on shopping in northern London to explore links between shopping and identity. Myers and Macnaghten (1998) conducted focus groups to investigate ‘rhetorics of environmental sustainability’. Wolch et al. (2000) ran a series of focus groups in Los Angeles with an aim of exploring the role played by cultural difference in shaping attitudes towards animals in the city. Skop (2006) examined the methodological potential of focus groups for population geography.

Geographers have also used semi-structured interviews to collect data on an equally diverse range of subjects. Winchester (1999: 61) conducted interviews (and questionnaires) to gather a range of information about the characteristics of ‘lone fathers’ and the causes of marital breakdown and post-marital conflict in Newcastle, Australia. Valentine (1999) interviewed couples, some together, some apart, in order to understand gender relations in households. Johnston (2001) conducted interviews (and focus groups) with participants (or subjects – see McDowell, 1992b: footnote 4, on the contested nature of the terms ‘participant’ and ‘subject’) and organizers at a gay pride parade in Auckland, New Zealand. Johnston was interested in the relationship between people taking part in the parade (hosts) and people watching the parade (guests). Punch (2000) conducted interviews (and participant observation) with children and their families in Churquiales, a rural community in the south of Bolivia. She wanted to ‘document the ways in which children devise ways to contest adult’s [sic] power and control in their lives’ (Punch, 2000: 48). Yantzi and Roseberg (2008) interviewed 11 women in Ontario, Canada who identified themselves as the main caregiver for their child with a disability.

In this chapter I define briefly what I mean by semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These two methods share some characteristics in common; in other ways they are dissimilar. I also discuss how to plan and conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This discussion includes formulating a schedule of
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questions, selecting and recruiting participants, choosing a location, transcribing data and thinking through some of the ethical issues and power relations involved in conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Throughout the chapter empirical examples are used in an attempt to illustrate key arguments.

WHAT ARE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS?

Interviews, explains Dunn (2005: 79), are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person. Basically there are three types of interviews: structured, unstructured and semi-structured, which can be placed along a continuum. Dunn (2005: 80) explains:

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

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are similar in that they are conversational and informal in tone. Both allow for an open response in the participants' own words rather than a 'yes or no' type answer.

A focus group is a group of people, usually between 6 and 12, who meet in an informal setting to talk about a particular topic that has been set by the researcher (for other definitions see Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997; Merton and Kendall, 1990; Swenson et al., 1992; Greenbaum, 1993; Stewart et al., 2006; Gregory et al., 2009). The method has its roots in market research. The facilitator or moderator of focus groups keeps the group on the topic but is otherwise non-directive, allowing the group to explore the subject from as many angles as they please. Often researchers attempt to construct as homogeneous a group as possible (but not always – see Goss and Leinback, 1996). The idea is to attempt to simulate a group of friends or people who have things in common and feel relaxed talking to each other. When Honeyfield (1997; also see Campbell et al., 1999) conducted research on representations of place and masculinity in television advertising for beer he carried out two focus groups: one with five women, one with seven men. In both groups the participants had either met before, were friends or lived together as 'flatmates'.

Focus groups tend to last between one and two hours. A key characteristic is the interaction between members of the group (Morgan, 1997: 12; Cameron, 2005). This makes them different from semistructured interviews which rely on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Focus groups are also different from
interviews in that it is possible to gather the opinions of a large number of people for comparatively little time and expense.

Focus groups are often recommended to researchers wishing to orientate themselves to a new field (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 1993). For example, in 1992 I began some research on pregnant women’s experiences of public spaces in Hamilton, New Zealand. There was no existing research on this topic so I wanted to establish some of the parameters of the project before using other methods. I did not know what words pregnant women in Hamilton used to refer to their pregnant bodies – tummies? stomachs? breasts? boobs? – therefore, it would have been difficult to conduct interviews. Focus groups provided an excellent opportunity to gather preliminary information about the topic (see Longhurst, 1996, for an account of these focus groups).

Both semi-structured interviews and focus groups can be used as ‘stand-alone methods’, as a supplement to other methods or as a means for triangulation in multi-methods research. Researchers often draw on a range of methods and theories. Valentine (2005: 112) explains:

> Often researchers draw on many different perspectives or sources in the course of their work. This is known as triangulation. The term comes from surveying, where it describes using different bearings to give the correct position. In the same way researchers can use multiple methods or different sources to try and maximize their understanding of a research question.

To sum up thus far, semi-structured interviews and focus groups can be used for a range of research, are reasonably informal or conversational in nature and are flexible in that they can be used in conjunction with a variety of other methods and theories. It is also evident that semi-structured interviews and focus groups are more than just ‘chats’. The researcher needs to formulate questions, select and recruit participants, choose a location and transcribe data while at the same time remaining cognizant of the ethical issues and power relations involved in qualitative research. In the section that follows I address these topics.

**FORMULATING QUESTIONS**

Dunn (2005: 81) explains: ‘It is not possible to formulate a strict guide to good practice for every interview [and focus group] context.’ Every interview and focus group requires its own preparation, thought and practice. It is a social interaction and there are no hard and fast rules one can follow (Valentine, 2005). Nevertheless there are certain procedures that researchers are well advised to heed.

To begin, researchers need to brief themselves fully on the topic. Having done this it is important to work out a list of themes or questions to ask participants. People who are very confident at interviewing or running focus groups often equip themselves with just a list of themes. Personally, I like to be prepared with actual questions in case the conversation dries up. Questions may be designed to elicit
information that is ‘factual’, descriptive, thoughtful or emotional. A combination of different types of questions can be effective depending on the research topic. Researchers often start with a question that participants are likely to feel comfortable answering. More difficult, sensitive or thought-provoking questions are best left to the second half of the interview or focus group when participants are feeling more comfortable. In Box 8.1 is a list of questions I drew up in order to examine large/fat/overweight people’s experiences of place. This schedule could be used for semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Follow-up questions are in parentheses.

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

It is important to remember that it can take time for participants to ‘warm up’ to semi-structured interviews and focus groups. If possible, therefore, it is worth offering drinks and food as a way of relaxing people. It is also useful at the beginning of a focus group to engage participants in some kind of activity that focuses their attention on the discussion topic. For example, participants might be asked to draw a picture, respond to a photograph or imagine a particular situation. This technique tends to be used more by market researchers but it can also prove effective for social scientists. Kitzinger (1994) presented focus group members with a pack of cards bearing statements about who might be ‘at risk’ from AIDS. She asked the group to sort the cards into different piles indicating the degree of ‘risk’ attached to each ‘type of person’. Kitzinger (1994: 107) explains that ‘[s]uch exercises involve people in working together with minimal input from the facilitator and encourage participants to concentrate on one another (rather than on the group facilitator) during the subsequent discussion’.

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Box 8.1  Semi-structured interview and focus-group schedule

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

Are there any issues that you would like to raise that you feel are important but that you haven’t had a chance to explore in this interview/focus group?

SELECTING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Selecting participants for semi-structured interviews and focus groups is vitally important. Usually people are chosen on the basis of their experience related to the research topic (Cameron, 2005). Burgess’ (1996, cited in Cameron, 2005: 121) study of fear in the countryside is a useful example of this ‘purposive sampling’ technique. When using quantitative methods the aim is often to choose a random or representative sample, to be ‘objective’ and to be able to replicate the data. This is not the case when using qualitative methods. Valentine (2005: 111, emphasis in original) explains that, unlike with most questionnaires, ‘the aim of an interview [and a focus group] is not to be representative (a common but mistaken criticism of this technique) but to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives’.

For example, if you were studying ‘racial violence’ you might anticipate interviewing and/or running focus groups with people from different ethnic groups, especially those thought to be involved in the violence. However, you might also want to examine the ways in which people’s ethnic or racial identities intersect with other identities such as gender, sexuality, ‘migrant status’ and age in order to explore more fully the processes shaping racial violence. It is not only participants’ identities that need to be considered, however, when conducting research. Valentine (2005: 113) makes the important point that ‘When you are thinking about who you want to interview it is important to reflect on who you are and how your own identity will shape the interactions that you have with others.’ She explains this is what academics describe as being reflexive or recognizing your own positionality (see England, 1994: 82; Moss, 2002; and Bondi, 2003 on ‘empathy and identification’ in the research process).

There are many strategies for recruiting participants for semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Some strategies work for both methods while others are more appropriate for one or the other. If you are recruiting participants for interviews it is common practice ‘to carry out a simple questionnaire survey to gather basic factual information and to include a request at the end of the questionnaire asking respondents who are willing to take part in a follow-up interview to give
their address and telephone number’ (Valentine, 2005: 115). Asking for an e-mail contact is another useful way to follow up. It is also possible to advertise for participants in local newspapers or on radio stations requesting interested parties to contact you.

Another method for recruiting participants for interviews is ‘cold calling’ – that is, calling on people (usually strangers) to ask if they would be prepared to be interviewed. When I was studying the ways in which managers in the central business districts of Auckland and Edinburgh present themselves at work (their dress, comportment and grooming) I called into retail stores and businesses, introduced myself and asked to speak with the manager. I then explained the research and requested an interview. This can be a nerve-racking process because interviewers often get a high refusal rate. In my research on managers, however, approximately 70 per cent of those approached agreed to take part, resulting in 26 interviews (see Longhurst, 2001).

As mentioned already, focus groups are often made up of people who share something in common or know each other. Group membership lists, therefore, can be a useful tool for recruiting. People who already know each other through sports clubs, social clubs, community activities, church groups or work can make an ideal focus group. When I conducted focus groups on men’s experiences of domestic bathrooms (a private space rarely discussed by geographers) I succeeded in enlisting (with the help of friends) four groups of men. The first group belonged to the same rugby club, the second were colleagues in a government department, the third were ‘job-seekers’ and the fourth were family/friends.

Another route useful for securing participants for focus groups is what Krueger (1988: 94) refers to as ‘recruiting on location’ or ‘on-site recruiting’. I used this strategy to recruit first-time pregnant women to talk about their experiences of public places. Pregnant women were approached at antenatal classes, midwives’ clinics and doctors’ surgeries. These women ‘opened doors’ to me speaking with other pregnant women. Social scientists refer to this as ‘snowballing’: ‘This term describes using one contact to help you recruit another contact, who in turn can put you in touch with someone else’ (Valentine, 2005: 117).

WHERE TO MEET

Not only is it necessary to decide how to select and recruit participants but also to decide where to conduct the interview or focus-group meeting. It comes as no surprise to most geographers that where an interview or focus group is held can make a difference (Denzin, 1970). Ideally, the setting should be relatively neutral. I once made the mistake of helping to facilitate a focus group about the quality of service offered by a local council at the council offices. The discussion did not flow freely and it soon became apparent that the participants felt hesitant (understandably) about criticizing the council while in one of their rooms. However, it is worth noting that ‘In most cases if you are talking to business people or officials
from institutions and organizations you will have no choice but to interview them in their own offices’ (Valentine, 2005: 118; but also see McDowell, 1997, on interviewing investment bankers in the City of London. Being in the environs you are studying can also prove useful).

It is not always possible to conduct interviews and focus groups in ‘the perfect setting’ but if at all possible aim to find a place that is neutral, informal (but not noisy) and easily accessible. For example, if you are conducting a reasonably small focus group it is possible to sit comfortably around a dining-room table (see Fine and Macpherson, 1992, for an account of a focus group that took place ‘over dinner’). Needless to say, if it is a larger focus group a larger space will be required, perhaps a room at a school, church or club. The main consideration for both semi-structured interviews and focus groups is that interviewees feel comfortable in the space. It is important that the interviewer also feels comfortable (see also Chapter 4). Valentine (2005: 118) warns: ‘For your own safety never arrange interviews with people you do not feel comfortable with or agree to meet strangers in places where you feel vulnerable.’

**RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION DISCUSSIONS**

When conducting semi-structured interviews or focus groups it is possible to take notes or to audio/video record the discussion. I usually audio(tape) the proceedings. This allows me to focus fully on the interaction instead of feeling pressure to get the participants’ words recorded in my notebook (see Valentine, 2005). Directly after the interview I document the general tone of the conversation, the key themes that emerged and anything that particularly impressed or surprised me in the conversation. Taking these notes, in a sense, is a form of data analysis (for information on qualitative data analysis, see Miles and Huberman, 1994; Kitchin and Tate, 2000).

It is advantageous to transcribe interviews and focus groups as soon as possible after conducting them (for how to code a transcript, see Chapter 27). Hearing the taped conversation when it is still fresh in your mind makes transcription much easier. Focus groups, especially large groups, can be difficult to transcribe because each speaker, including the facilitator, needs to be identified. In Box 8.2 is an example of a transcript from a focus group of men who met to discuss their experiences of domestic bathrooms and toilets. Note the ‘dynamism and energy as people respond to the contributions of others’ (Cameron, 2005: 117). In this focus group excerpt one of the participants puts a question to other group members. Wayne’s question about bidets (small, low basins for washing the genitals and anal areas) spearheads a discussion on cultural difference. Note the various transcription codes: the starts of overlap in talk are marked by a double oblique //; pauses are marked with a dot in parenthesis (,); non-verbal actions, gestures and facial expressions are noted in square brackets; and loud exclamations are in **bold** typeface (for more detailed transcription codes, see Dunn, 2005: 98).
Box 8.2 Transcription of a focus group

Wayne: The other question you didn’t ask is: has anyone got a bidet? And if they have, then the other question is: does anybody know how bidets are supposed to be used? (.)
Brent: I’ve never understood how it works.
Robert: No, nor have I.
Christopher: Well, I’ve got an idea about how it works but it just doesn’t seem very efficient.
Robert: Crocodile Dundee just uses a water fountain [laughter].
Brent: Exactly.
Facilitator: That’s an interesting question. What do you think about using, I mean, how do you use a bidet?
Robert: It’s supposed to wash your bloody bottom [sic] out isn’t it?
Christopher: Mm, that’s the whole object. And then you use a towel?
Robert: I don’t know, I think so, instead of wiping //
Wayne: // In Asia for instance all you get is a bloody hole in the ground and a dipper and you dip the water out and go ‘woof’ and over and it washes it clean.
Robert: Oh my god! That’s terrible!
Christopher: It’s another culture.
Wayne: And that is probably why Asians are so good at squatting on their heels ‘cause they are used to it. You look at a kid, a tiny tot, and they can squat on their heels all day long.

Source: Audio-tape excerpt from a focus group conducted by David Vincent in 1999 (see Longhurst, 2001)

As this transcript illustrates, sometimes data can be ‘sensitive’. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are numerous ethical issues to consider when conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see Chapter 3).

ETHICAL ISSUES

Two important ethical issues are confidentiality and anonymity. Participants need to be assured that all the data collected will remain secure under lock and key or on a computer database accessible by password only; that information supplied will remain confidential and participants will remain anonymous (unless they desire otherwise); and that participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation. It is also sound research practice to offer to provide participants with a summary of the research results at the completion of the project and to follow through on this commitment. This summary might take the form of a hard copy or an electronic copy posted on a website (for example, the Department of Geography, Durham University provides reports on various research projects conducted by staff, see: www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects).

Focus groups pose a further complication in relation to confidentiality because not only is the researcher privy to information but also members of the group.
Therefore, participants need to be asked to treat discussions as confidential. Cameron (2005: 122) explains:

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

Another ethical issue is that participants in the course of an interview or focus group may express sexist, racist or other offensive views. In an earlier quotation, Krueger and Casey (2000: xi) claim that researchers ought to listen, pay attention and be non-judgemental. Sometimes, however, being non-judgemental might simply reproduce and even legitimize interviewees’ discrimination through complicity (see Valentine, 2005). Researchers need to think carefully about how to deal with such situations because there are no easy solutions.

Researchers also need to think carefully about how to interview or run focus groups in different cultural contexts (see Chapter 12). For example, ‘First World’ researchers investigating ‘Third World’ ‘subjects’ need to be highly sensitive to local codes of conduct (Valentine, 2005). In short, there is a web of ethical issues and power relations that need to be teased out when conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see Law, 2004 on ‘mess’ in social science research). Feminist geographers in particular have made a useful contribution in this area (for example, see Katz, 1992, 1994; McDowell, 1992b; Dyck, 1993; England, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Moss, 2002).

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have outlined two qualitative methods – semi-structured interviews and focus groups – and how they can be employed in geographical research. Both methods involve talking with people in a semi-structured manner. However, whereas semi-structured interviews rely on the interaction between interviewee and interviewer, focus groups rely on interactions amongst interviewees. Both methods make a significant contribution to geographic research, especially now that discussions about meaning, identity, subjectivity, politics, knowledge, power and representation are high on many geographers’ agendas. Critically examining the construction of knowledge and discourse in geography (see Rose, 1993) has led to an interest in developing alternative methodological strategies coupled with greater reflexivity about the process of research. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are useful for investigating complex behaviours, opinions and emotions and for collecting a diversity of experiences. These methods do not offer researchers a route to ‘the truth’ but they do offer a route to partial insights into what people do and think.
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Summary

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are about talking with people but in ways that are self-conscious, orderly and partially structured.
- These methods are useful for investigating complex behaviours, opinions and emotions and for collecting a diversity of experiences.
- Every interview and focus group requires its own preparation, thought and practice.
- There are a range of methods that can be used for recruiting participants, including advertising for participants, accessing membership lists, on-site recruiting and ‘cold calling’.
- Interviews/focus groups ought to be conducted in a place where participants and the interviewer feel comfortable.
- When conducting semi-structured interviews or focus groups take notes and/or audio/video record the discussion.
- There is a web of ethical issues and power relations that need to be teased out when using these methods.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups make a significant contribution to geographic research, especially now that discussions about meaning, identity, subjectivity, politics, knowledge, power and representation are high on many geographers’ agendas.

Further reading

There are numerous excellent books, book chapters and articles on semi-structured interviews (and interviewing more generally) and focus groups written by geographers and other social scientists. I have listed below some of the more recently published titles:

- Krueger and Casey (2000). This popular book, first published in 1988, has been reprinted three times. The third edition is easy to read, well illustrated and offers numerous examples of how to use focus groups. It is one of the most comprehensive guides on focus groups available.
- Cameron (2005) offers a geographer's perspective on focus groups, explaining the various ways they have been used, how to plan and conduct them and how to analyse and present results.
- Area (1996: Vol. 28) contains an introduction by Goss and five articles on focus groups (by Burgess; Zeigler, Brunn and Johnston; Holbrook and Jackson; Longhurst; and Goss and Leinback). The collection illustrates effectively the range of research carried out by geographers using focus groups.
- Valentine’s (2005) chapter on ‘conversational interviews’ is highly readable and provides advice on whom to talk to, how to recruit participants and where to hold interviews. Valentine raises interesting questions about the ethics and politics of interviewing and alerts readers to some of the potential pitfalls that can occur in research.
- Dunn (2005) discusses structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing in geography, critically assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each method. His chapter provides advice on interview design, practice, transcription, data analysis and presentation. Like Valentine, Dunn has a useful guide at the end of the chapter to further reading.

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

Area (1996) 28(2) ‘Introduction to focus groups’ by J.D. Goss and five papers on using focus groups in human geography by Burgess, Zeigler, Brunn and Johnston; Holbrook and Jackson; Longhurst; and Goss and Leinback.


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