Article

Qualitative Research
1–17


DOI: 10.1177/1468794118757102
journals.sagepub.com/home/qrj
SAGE

The micro-dynamics of power and performance in focus groups: an example from discussions on national identity with the South Sudanese diaspora in the UK

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increasing recognition that both the content of focus group discussions and the interaction that takes place form indivisible facets of focus group data. Interaction, however, is not a neutral activity but one that is infused with the dynamics of power in wider society and in the immediate context of the discussion. I use Bourdieu's notion of fields of power to analyse focus group discussions on national identity with South Sudanese diaspora in the UK. I argue that the micro-dynamics of power in focus group discussions have relevance to the relations of power in the population group from which participants are purposively sampled and, consequently, their observation enriches research findings. Further, I observe that the guidance literature on the conduct of focus group discussions encourages power-reduction strategies, and requires updating to allow space for the power-infused character of social interaction to manifest itself.

Keywords

analysis, Pierre Bourdieu, focus groups, interaction, moderation, power, sampling, South Sudan

Introduction

For focus group practitioners, interaction between participants is a defining characteristic of the method: many consider it to be analytically indivisible from the 'content' of focus group data. The opportunity to directly observe participants' interaction is now recognised as key to its usefulness. Crucial as this development is, it does not go far

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enough. Interaction is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by and revealing of the power relations that exist between group members. Insofar as the characteristics that define the selection of participants are meaningful categories, the micro-dynamics of power that play out in a focus group discussion are revealing of those that operate in the wider population. The ability to observe these power relations is a significant affordance of the method, and a major factor that would indicate its selection. However, focus group literature to date lacks a sufficient account of power. There is little theoretical grounding for or guidance on the analysis of power in focus group data. Further, literature on the conduct of focus groups encourages strategies that serve to minimise power, and thus hide it from view.

In this article, I exemplify an approach to analysing focus group data, with implications for the conduct of discussions, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of fields of power. Participants, I argue, are implicated in positional relations of power which shape their interactions with each other and, in turn, how knowledge is discursively produced. I draw on data from a study that used focus group discussions to explore national identity with the South Sudanese diaspora in the UK. I identify three mechanisms which have implications for the guidance on conducting focus group discussions: the selection of participants, the style of facilitation, and the positionality of the researcher/facilitator.

Interaction and power in focus group discussions

Focus groups, broadly defined as 'facilitated group activity' (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013: 6), provide an arena for 'performances in which the participants jointly produce accounts about topics in a socially organised situation' (Smithson, 2000: 105; Smithson, 2008). They are semi-informal spaces where participants, knowingly observed by the facilitator and (usually) inscribed by a recording device, rehearse social relations. These performative interactions are mediated versions of the everyday interactions that may take place without the intervention of the researcher. As a group-based method, interaction between participants is essential to the generation of data. However, there are markedly differing understandings of the epistemological function of this interaction.

A substantial school of focus group research treats interaction as a means of eliciting more in-depth content. From this perspective, focus group discussions are viewed as means of 'obtaining' participants' pre-existing, personal ideas and opinions, and thus form a 'window' on participants' lives (Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004: 194; CPRC, n.d.). Group interaction, proponents suggest, serves an *instrumental* role in data production by bringing about a 'synergy' that elicits 'rich details' (Carey and Asbury, 2012: 28). This stimulates 'a more complete picture of attitudes' through provoking agreement and disagreement (Greenbaum, 1998: 143), and drawing out more sensitive data from participants (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). While interaction is key to the collection of good quality data, it has done its work, for better or worse, from the moment the voice recorder stops.

This content-driven approach to focus group data has been criticised by researchers who accord interaction a more wide-ranging role. Following Jenny Kitzinger's (1994) landmark article, a competing school has emerged giving a more nuanced explanation of the collective dimension of sense-making that participants engage in. By this account, focus group discussions themselves constitute a social context, and interactive processes

are therefore open to direct observation (Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004; Madriz, 2000; Duggleby, 2005; Halkier, 2010). Interaction is thus treated as an *intrinsic aspect* of data, and the content of the data indivisible from the social process that produces it.

The beginnings of an approach that allows space for power are evident in Kitzinger's early article. She writes:

> Interactions can make groups seem unruly . . . but such 'undisciplined' outbursts are not irrelevant or simply obstructive to the collection of data . . . Everyday forms of communication . . . may tell us as much, if not more, about what people 'know'. (Kitzinger, 1994: 109)

Although power is not centralised, an integrative approach to content and interaction implies allowing sufficient space for it to be expressed. However, guidance on the conduct of focus groups remains rooted in the content-driven perspective. Although there is little explicit treatment of power, it crops up incidentally around two fields of claim: the relationship between participants, and the relationship between participants and the researcher/facilitator.

The mainstream guidance literature describes power differentials between focus group participants as a 'plague' resulting in what is constructed as 'problem behaviour' among participants (Krueger, 1998: 57ff; Krueger and Casey, 2015). Power is positioned as a procedural problem that sabotages interaction and therefore limits data quality - for example, through preventing the establishment of group rapport, creating reticence to share or self-censoring, encouraging conformity and silencing (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Greenbaum, 1998; Bloor et al., 2001; Carey and Asbury, 2012). Two strategies serve to minimise the dynamics of power in focus group discussions. Firstly, the skilled facilitator may exercise covert and explicit control strategies: for example, through room layout, body language, seating positions, selective eye contact, interruption, direct challenge and expulsion (Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2015; Carey and Asbury, 2012). Secondly, the selection of 'homogenous' participants, who are likely to share more because they perceive each other as similar (Carey and Asbury, 2012; Greenbaum, 1998). Taken to the extreme, these measures would produce a heavily sanitised discussion which leaves little space for the observation of everyday interaction, much less any insight into power dynamics within the group.

The relation of the participants to the researcher/facilitator makes an important contribution to the creation of a 'permissive environment' which encourages free-flowing conversation among participants (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 2, 4; CPRC, n.d.). Focus group discussions are often described as *relatively* egalitarian, due to participants' numerical advantage and their collective power through shared knowledge of the subject matter (Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 1999; Smithson, 2000). Nevertheless, participants' perceptions of the researcher/facilitator's authority position and personal attributes endow them with a disproportionate influence over the discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger, 1998). However skilled the facilitation, some sources of power asymmetry are innate and self-evident. In some studies, particularly with traditionally marginalised groups, researchers have found that authentic sharing is encouraged where the facilitator shares a significant aspect of culture or experience with the group members (Rodriguez et al., 2011; Fallon and Brown, 2002; Caretta and Vacchelli,

2015). Others have found that techniques to de-centre the researcher have served to mitigate issues of positionality and power differential (Jakobsen, 2012). In either case, the position of the researcher/facilitator as an implicitly powerful out-group member is presented as a problem to be overcome.

Without an explicit theoretical foundation for the micro-dynamics of power in focus group discussions, recommended practice tends towards the reduction of power between participants and between participants and the researcher. This serves to manipulate participants' performances away from 'everyday forms of communication,' and censors an important aspect of social relations out of the data.

The study

South Sudan seceded from Sudan on 9 July 2011, granting international recognition and legitimacy for the collectivity that had long been imagined by Southerners (LeRiche and Arnold, 2012). At independence South Sudan inherited a 'fledgling national identity' based on the 'common struggle for recognition, dignity, and equal rights' (Awolich, 2015: 1, 6). It was also clear that a process of nation-building was urgently needed (Jok, 2012; LeRiche and Arnold, 2012; Zambakari, 2013; Zambakari, 2015). On 15 December 2013 fighting broke out between troops in Juba[1], sparking a civil war that has been tragically characterised by the deliberate targeting of civilians and forced exodus of over two million refugees, with a further 1.9m people internally displaced (figures from November 2017; see HRW, 2014; UNMISS, 2015; UNOCHA, 2018).

The new crisis of national identity that South Sudanese citizens now face is particularly problematic for groups geographically dislocated from the homeland that confers their political rights and who, as such, are subject to further discrimination and marginalisation (Zambakari, 2015). This study explored how a specific group of South Sudanese citizens – the diaspora in the UK – jointly articulated their national identity after five years of independence, and against the troubling historical-social-political backdrop I have briefly described.

The work of identity negotiation and sense-making in light of present conditions was something that I believed to be going on amongst the South Sudanese diaspora, but as a white British woman I did not have natural access to these conversations. Focus group discussions provided a means of inviting members of the diaspora to model their thinking-in-process for an external audience. Directly, this audience comprised a research assistant, who was also white British and who took notes to aid transcription, and myself; indirectly, it included the possible academic and non-academic audiences of my research, of whom participants were aware. Although I was the sole facilitator at times, as I will examine below, participants spontaneously supported my facilitation efforts by asking questions of each other, praising and encouraging constructive contributions and chastising behavior they perceived to be inappropriate to the setting.

The impetus behind the study came from a set of recent-historic photographic images depicting visual-verbal displays of national identity, such as banners, posters, t-shirts and placards photographed in South Sudan during the three months prior to the referendum. These photographs formed a focal point in the discussions through elicitation activities I instigated and acting as spontaneous points of reference for participants. I facilitated two

focus groups, one with men (4 members) and one with women (8 members), all of whom are adult South Sudanese citizens (including those with dual citizenship) and usually reside in the UK. They were recruited through the networks of a cultural community association. Discussions took place in either a community building familiar to participants, or one of the participants' homes, in June 2016. They were audio recorded and later transcribed, with some minor abridgement to protect the identity of participants.

The South Sudanese diaspora is a relatively small and highly connected network in the UK. As a consequence, and particularly in light of the mode of recruitment, participants were embedded in existing relationships to each other. Where focus groups involve pre-existing groups, this can provide greater access to everyday conversations, tapping into group life that exists independently of the research (Bloor et al., 2001; Kitzinger, 1994; Byrne and Doyle, 2004; Carey and Asbury, 2012). Nevertheless, the focus group context is innately artificial by virtue of the researcher-facilitator's initiation, presence, tasking, and prerogative to intervene, and is rightly conceived as 'somewhere between a meeting and a conversation' (Agar and MacDonald, 1995: 80; Caretta and Vacchelli, 2015; Morgan, 1998). The use of English, under the advice of gatekeepers, as the language of discussions further distinguished them from everyday interactions within the community.

Power and performance in focus group discussions: a Bourdieusian approach

In both focus group discussions, individual and communal power was contested as participants attempted to position themselves in response to both my questions and contributions by others, asserting, relinquishing and conferring influence, and problematizing the basis for their corporate empowerment or disempowerment. I have found Bourdieu's theory of fields of power provides a useful vocabulary for understanding the social practices that were in play in these discussions.

For Bourdieu, inequality is a fundamental aspect of how social space is organised, as:

> an ensemble of invisible relations . . . which constitute a space of positions external to each other and defined by their proximity to, neighbourhood with, or distance from each other, and also by their relative position, above or below or yet in between. (Bourdieu, 1989: 16)

He uses the notion of 'field' as his overarching metaphor to theorise how power structures the objective positions of agents (individuals, groups and institutions). Fields are multi-level, 'nested' sites of struggle (Wacquant, 2013: 276) which operate semi-independently at four levels: the field of power, the general field under examination, the specific field, and the agents within that field constituting a field in themselves (Thomson, 2012). The criteria by which focus group participants are selected projects the existence of fields at these levels. In this study, since the focus was national identity and belonging, participants are located in national-community fields at the macro level of the general field. At the meso level of the specific field, the South Sudanese diaspora in the UK forms a semi-autonomous field with its own internal dynamics and admission criteria. At the micro level, by virtue of being drawn from a shared field with a specific focus, a

particular resource at stake (knowledge) and with relatively stable boundaries (set by who is invited and the limited time available), participants in a focus group discussion form a field in themselves.

Although distinct from one another, Bourdieu suggested that fields are homologous, which he defined as bearing a 'resemblance within a difference' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 106): they share similarly patterned and predictable practices and similar kinds of agents dominate in each social field (Thomson, 2012). Attention, therefore, to the micropolitical, routinized exercise of power in group discussions has the potential to reveal global regularities of power within the population from which participants are purposively sampled. If these micro-dynamics of power are observed and allowed to play out, analysis may reveal how these dynamics are implicated in the topic under discussion (Morley, 1999; Blase, 1991). This is only possible if the groups are conducted in a way that allows sufficient space for power.

In the following analysis, I use aspects of Bourdieu's theory of fields to illustrate how power operated in these focus group discussions, and what implications this has for the guidance literature. Participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms of their choosing.

Defending, contesting and relinquishing the rules of the game

Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game to describe the operation of relations within a field. The specific logic of practice within a particular field is governed by rules or, better, 'regularities' which are embraced by players who, by the very act of playing, 'accord . . . that its stakes are important . . . and worth pursuing' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 116). Agents may resist through attempts to change the 'tacit rules' of the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 99). However, more frequently they will use strategies to transform the field and their position within it within the 'rules of the game,' although doing so inadvertently serves to reinforce existing power relations (Bourdieu, 1998 [1996]: 40-41; Bourdieu, 1989).

In the context of a focus group, for a discussion to be successful the researcher/facilitator hopes that participants will be 'taken in by the game' of knowledge co-production and will 'collude' in its construction (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). Some of the 'rules' that apply are inferred from the semi-informality of the setting – in this case, conventional practices familiar to meetings in the UK, such as speaking in turn, submitting to the chair's direction and staying for the duration. Others are explicitly stated in the verbal invitation to participate, the written participant information sheet and the verbal briefing/introduction to the discussion. By these means, the researcher/facilitator makes clear their expectation that participants will engage in discussion with others about the imposed topic and that everyone will have equal chance to speak. An unintended consequence of consent processes is that participants 'sign up' to play according to the stated rules of the game. At different times, participants in the diaspora focus groups defended, contested and relinquished the 'rules of the game.'

Defending the 'rules of the game' included participants explicitly clarifying what was expected of them, challenging each other when another member deviated from responding to a question that had been asked or spoke in a language other than English, advocating on someone else's behalf when they were interrupted so that they could finish what

they were saying, or affirming my role as 'chair,' encouraging others to respond to my interventions.

The following excerpt took place about mid-way through the men's discussion, and exemplifies both contestation and defence of the 'rules of the game.' Other participants had previously challenged Bel Pen about the length of his contributions, which they considered to be inequitable given the parameters of time. We were mid-way through an activity where each member of the group chose a photograph that particularly struck them. Bel Pen had chosen a picture but instead of describing it he had offered a reinterpretation of a personal account another participant had given, sparking some debate. This exchange follows my intervention to return to the activity and ensure other members also had the opportunity to choose a picture:

Bel Pen:	I haven't finished. You want me to finish, or that is okay?
Rachel:	Oh, yeah, if you want to say something [particularly about that image . . .
Bel Pen:	[Because I was never allowed to finish . . . My contribution
Rachel:	I'm sorry – it's because we have a limited time, you know?
Bel Pen:	(laughs)
Paul:	When you hear the record here (gestures to voice recorder) you are the one, [your voice is . . .
Bel Pen:	[It's not about the time you are talking, it is about how much can you give as a good contribution to this research . . . for example. And if you cannot definitely when you talk more it means you have more information. And if you talk less it means you are satisfied with the few information that you give. So here . . .
John:	That's an interesting way of looking at it Bel Pen.
	(laughter)
John:	But carry on.
Rachel:	We can maybe debate that one later – tell us about that picture.
Bel Pen:	Really, these little girls here [Amos: Yeah; Rachel: Yeah] had the feeling like me that this means peace, it means there will be no bombing, no fighting, nothing at all [. . .] And she was right, and she was right. Whatever happened after that, whatever war you guys had done after that, that was not in, in, in her mind, completely. She was free, she was free like me, on that day.
Amos:	Good point.
John:	Mmhmmm.

At this and various points in the discussion, it seemed that Bel Pen was working to a different set of regulations which caused ongoing conflict within the group. He valued speaking at length without interruption and often made comments on a range of issues on his way to reaching his main point. For Bel Pen, the capacity to make what he perceived to be a more informative contribution to the topic was of greater importance than allowing even contributions between participants, and so he contests their attempts to defend the 'rules of the game' as they saw them. However, he proceeds to complete the task of

describing his chosen photograph, and this adherence to the 'rule' of answering questions is endorsed and encouraged by Amos and John, as well as myself.

Although silence is a normal feature of social interaction (Smithson, 2000), prolonged or deliberate silence can be a means of relinquishing the 'rules of the game' through asserting the power to not speak. In the women's discussion, one participant made only one contribution, which was in response to my direct request for her to describe the photograph she had chosen:

Achol:	Why when people talk about Sudan I keep quiet, because it makes my body, my head, my bottom, my heart (gestures), because I am very happy when er, we got er, referendum I though we going, because the people died in Sudan not me. A lot people lose their people. A lot people. Any qabayla.
Nyanpath:	Any tribe.
Achol:	Innit. But me, what, what, what.
Nyanpath:	When you say 'what' like that, her close relatives, were killed one day.

With the support of her peers, Achol eloquently describes the physical manifestation of her emotional suffering as a result of the post-2013 internal conflict in South Sudan in which her family members have been killed. Although she did go on to comment on the picture she had chosen, she maintained her silence for the remainder of the discussion. Silence can be a culture-bound and context-bound coping strategy which it is important to recognise, understand and respect (Tankink and Richters, 2007; Brun, 2013) – even if this means contributions between participants will be uneven.

If we treat the performance of power relations as a useful aspect of data, this poses interesting questions for the approach to facilitation. When participants contest or relinquish the stated or implied 'rules of the game', should the facilitator enforce them, make exceptions to them, adapt them, or abandon them? In order to allow space for power, the researcher/facilitator will generally prefer to be as unobtrusive as possible, which suggests a minimum of control. However, where participants have different understandings of the 'rules of the game' this can generate conflict. The skill of facilitation, then, becomes to leave as much space for a variety of forms of interaction as possible, whilst maintaining ethical parameters (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998).

In searching for this balance, the examples described above yield some insights. Firstly, rather than dismissing some participants' behaviour as 'problematic,' 'dominant' or 'unruly,' it is more informative to attend to the different sources of 'rules' that participants follow and to acknowledge these as worthy of interest in their own right. Secondly, facilitators can be responsive to the group's self-moderation. This allows participants to determine what practices are acceptable and unacceptable and the researcher/facilitator can observe this process of negotiation. Finally, focus group practitioners need to have a clear awareness of the parameters that we take for granted and those that we impose, implicitly and explicitly. By questioning these, it becomes possible to apply them flexibly, and to open as many 'rules' as possible to negotiation with participants.

Negotiating a game of shifting stakes

Fields are arenas of struggle for valued resources, or 'capitals,' the relative values of which differ between fields, and it is this process of valuing that differentiates between fields and between agents within fields (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007). Those forms of capital that are recognised as at stake in a particular field hold 'ace card' status (Bourdieu, 1989: 17). These are transformed into symbolic capital, the monopoly of which confers symbolic power: the 'legitimate mode of perception' that yields the capacity to name, to categorise, and to impose recognition, thus consolidating existing social arrangements and the patterns of dominance therein (Bourdieu, 1985: 730; Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003; Swartz, 1997; Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991).

Within focus group discussions, the resource at stake is knowledge relating to the topic at hand. The right to speak, and the authority with which one's contributions should be weighted, are a space of contestation. Participants draw on other resources which confer, or diminish, either their own or others' authority to speak. Due to the homologous relation between multi-level, nested fields, the resources that are mobilised within a focus group discussion are related to those that carry weight in the specific field and the general field. Conversely, participants occasionally make explicit statements about power hierarchies, and the resources that underpin them, in the general/specific fields. These shed light on the categories that influence participants' performances of power in focus group interaction. Attention to both overt statements and the bases on which participants valorise or downplay contributions within the discussion shed light on relationally valued capitals.

In the men's group, an explicit discussion arose around the position of the specific field – the South Sudanese diaspora – in the general field of South Sudanese society. Following a question posed by John exploring the relative influence of the Western diaspora, Amos outlines the basis for their shared marginalisation within the general field of South Sudanese society. He argues that 'a complete class system has already developed', with (ex-)soldiers who fought in the SPLA[2] at the top, followed by those civilians who remained in South Sudan during the war, then the East African diaspora, and finally 'the last people at the bottom' are the Western diaspora:

> Amos: Cause they say, 'You ran away, neither did you join the war front, nor did you stay under the bombs, when we were being shelled,' or starved, or whatever.

Amos' discourse identifies the efficacy of certain resources in gaining recognition, influence and position in South Sudanese society. These relate to direct participation in the freedom struggle, physical presence within or proximity to the homeland, and participation in suffering. Within the discussion, criteria emerging from this structure were reference points by which participants evaluated the authority of contributions to the discussion. None had been soldiers; however, those who had spent a significant amount of time living in South Sudan referred to this as a basis for their superior knowledge. Those who had spent relatively little of their adult life in South Sudan worked hard to demonstrate how physical absence did not prevent them from being deeply connected to the land and the people – for example, through regular visits, frequent contact with wide networks in their home community, use of Sudanese Arabic and through up-to-date knowledge about what

is happening in the country through personal contacts and monitoring blogs, national television and other news media. At different times, participants appealed to their connections with family and wider community networks in South Sudan:

John: I wasn't around in Kokora[3] days, all I know is everything I hear, okay?

Similarly, Paul commented:

Paul: There are so many history that South Sudanese people don't know – it is unwritten. I tell what I also hear from others.

By identification with their home communities, participants could share in the legitimised knowledge-base of those networks. Participants in discussions referred to other categories which conferred (or diminished) either their own or others' authority to speak: deference to age, valuing of education, and historical-political literacy. This exchange follows from a discussion of the likelihood of external intervention providing a successful solution to the conflict, in particular by ensuring there is justice for human rights violations:

Liz: This er, joint monitoring and evaluation [[1]commission – they are not doing it because (*Public figure A*) [[2]is threatening them.
Shola: [[1]Ah they are not doing anything
Cynthia: [[2]They are not doing anything
Shola: (*Public figure A*) is threatening them.
Liz: They are threatening them.
Nyanpath: Eh!
Liz: They are doing nothing.
Shola: (*Public figure A*), (*Public figure B*), er . . . and that, that other one.
Nyanpath: (*Public figure C*)
Lamba: Mama mama you are really clever, you know all of them! Me I don't know anybody!

Liz, Shola, Cynthia and Nyanpath share knowledge of current political initiatives and the barriers to their success, including the interventions of key political figures. When Lamba interjects, she singles out Nyanpath, an elder in the group, and after respectfully addressing her as such she praises her for her political knowledge and, through juxtaposition, devalues her own ability to contribute. Traditional aspects of culture remain important; nevertheless, the rapid emergence of South Sudan as a modern state since 2005 has created a state of flux. This uncertainty as to the 'stakes of the game' has opened opportunities for agents to creatively mobilise new categories. During an early monologue about how she was happy to be separated from the North due to the inequalities South Sudanese experienced, Oliba makes this argument:

Oliba: But now, we are alone, we're still suffering, I don't know until when . . . because I am non-educated, I am non-politician, I'm talking as a primitive woman. But, without primitive, who can vote you to come as

> a President? Those people without an education is the one, they use it. And then brought them up.

Although Oliba classifies herself in relation to her lack of education and position, she turns this negative assessment on its head through identifying with the power of those lacking in education, through democratic processes, to elect the President, and conversely his dependence on their votes to be 'brought up' to his position. The sense of agency and dignity that she expresses as a voting citizen directly challenges her self-appraisal as a 'primitive woman' that would traditionally have marginalised her right to speak.

Comparative attention to the expressed bases of power in the general/specific field and the categories to which participants give credence in assessing the relevance of contributions is a useful analytic device. It enables insight into processes of valuing capitals that structure power relations in the field of the focus group, as well as in the specific and general fields which form the substantive interest of the study. This is only possible through engaging participants who are *different* in key respects. However, as I have discussed, guidance recommends that participants are 'homogenous,' in order to reduce any 'interference' by power differences. True homogeneity between participants, of course, never really exists (Kitzinger, 1994). In this study, for example, I held separate groups with men and women to accommodate gendered patterns of social interaction. I could have made further sub-divisions - for example, by age, level of education, duration of residence outside South Sudan or to separate out the narratives of different ethnic communities. However, this would have reduced the potential for power to be observable. By allowing the heterogeneity that exists in the specific field to be reflected in the composition of groups, the resources that effectively conferred power became evident. This enabled participants to negotiate over the relative value of these resources and discursively reconcile differences. A better principle of focus group sampling is *commonality*, rather than homogeneity. This shifts the priority from eliminating power to creating a sub-field that captures some of the diversity of the wider field of interest from which participants are drawn. Indeed, through allowing heterogeneity within commonality, participants themselves can theorise about why diversity, expressed through dissent, exists, and how this affects them.

Mobilising the boundaries of the field

Fields are conceived as relatively stable, where the specific logic of the field and those capitals legitimised in it provide clear boundaries by which agents are recognised or excluded from participation. Nevertheless, Bourdieu suggests that there are relationships of exchange between fields, and the boundaries of the field themselves are sites of contestation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In a focus group discussion, I have suggested that the sampling criteria postulate shared characteristics between participants which are commensurate with their positioning within a specific field, of which the focus group is a sub-field. Who is present and the time that is allotted make the boundaries of the space fairly stable; however, depending on their own positionality in relation to the research focus, the researcher-facilitator may be positioned within, at the margins of, or outside this field.

Within this discussion, my positionality was an anomaly as I was not part of the field from which participants were drawn – the South Sudanese diaspora in the UK. Therefore,

although I clearly had a role in the sub-field of the focus group discussion, my position in it could not follow the same logic as participants' positions in relation to each other. Participants frequently made great efforts, without prompting, to include me through explaining cultural references, filling in historical background, and translating when others made use of Arabic. These useful interventions included me in their community of understanding, whilst highlighting my distinctness from it. They also emphasised our commonality as citizens/residents of the UK, with a shared understanding of the political freedoms and processes we enjoy. In an early monologue, for example, Bel Pen used our shared understanding of the rights held by UK citizens/residents to humorously relay his discovery of these privileges when he arrived in the UK, implicitly drawing a contrast with the unfamiliarity of such freedoms for South Sudanese citizens who have not experienced transnational migration:

> Bel Pen: And then when I came here I found that there were like . . . oh equal rights for blacks, and women, and different religions, they are all displayed here. And I asked myself, 'Can I be free in this country? Can I be equal to anybody? Oh!' When I got the British passport, 'Is my passport, this passport, the same that is the same passport the Queen has? Is this true?! I cannot believe it! . . . Oh! I am a human being! Oh! I cannot believe it!' You can never find this in, in the Sudan.

Participants were also aware that I had been to Juba, and generously assumed a certain amount of knowledge on my part – for example, while relaying how a demonstration in Wau[4] had been violently quelled Cynthia inserted, 'I'm sure you heard about the incident that happened recently'. Through these measures, participants actively diluted the boundaries of the field to include me within the sub-field of the discussion that they were constructing.

Nevertheless, participants were able to mobilise the boundaries of the field through using my outsider presence to strengthen a rhetorical purpose. This forms part of a response by Cynthia to my question about what connects members of the group personally to each other:

> Cynthia: Aaahhhh, I have to start! (general laughter) Oh I have to start! I think it means identity. It means home. We don't go home often [. . .] So, this is to to me the South Sudanese community here is like, er, er, a glimpse of home. You know? And um they, I, I run to them for support, just to talk the language. And, and, and I don't have to make up myself. Like if I'm, I'm going to speak to a white lady for you for example, oh God, I have to push all these things in a cupboard in my head, so I do not have to express myself. But with them, I just feel at home.
>
> Nyanpath: <click>
>
> Cynthia: You understand? So, yeah, it's everything. It's what keeps me going. You haven't been in a foreign land, it's tough. Different culture.

Different faith. Even all this freedom, sometimes too much freedom is, is (laughing) even scary.

Liz: Is a problem.

Cynthia, with supportive interjections from Nyanpath and Liz, builds a compelling picture of shared identity within the diasporic community, which is enriched through the contrast between their experiences and my position as an indigenous British woman. Through naming the racial-cultural and migratory boundaries of the field, Cynthia is able to persuasively elucidate the basis of their solidarity by drawing attention to my privilege outside of the conditions of self-censorship and marginalisation that they tolerate. Thus a flexible and shifting orientation to the boundaries of the field is a useful device which participants can enlist to perform ideological work.

Although with some communities and in relation to some topics it may be preferable for the focus group facilitator to be a *relative* in-group member, it is clear that the same person occupies multiple real and perceived positionalities. The fact of the facilitator's distinctive role in the group and the implications this has in terms of their credentials necessarily distinguish them from other participants. Where there is a particularly steep power gradient between participants and the facilitator, such as across majority/minority world difference, this can override the researcher/facilitator's attempts to reposition herself (Jakobsen, 2012). In this case, as a clear outsider, participants had the opportunity to cast me in a variety of roles: as a chair, a safe third party (Kelman, 2005), a witness, an ally, a conduit to a wider audience, and a student in need of instruction. Further, they mobilised the porous and dynamic boundaries of the field to include and exclude me at different points in the discussion. From a field perspective, 'insider' and 'outsider' are negotiable categories. Participants can use their indisputable position within the field to foreground aspects of the researcher/facilitator's identity that enable them to accomplish rhetorical tasks. The apparent status of the researcher/facilitator is not as important as the way that boundaries are creatively extended and contracted by participants, and to what end.

Conclusion

Power is an inevitable facet of social life and the fields of power from which focus group participants are purposively drawn. It is therefore not only inevitable that power will be manifest in focus group discussions – it is desirable. I have argued that power is under-theorised in focus group methodology, and undervalued as a rationale for selecting the method. There lacks a conceptual framework to enable the analysis of power in focus group data, and the guidelines on focus group conduct treat power as a procedural problem to be minimised and mitigated. This serves to conceal an important aspect of social relations, and distorts the interaction that the researcher/facilitator seeks to observe.

Nevertheless, approaches that take seriously the importance of interaction in focus group discussions lay crucial groundwork for making the most of focus groups' capacity for revealing power. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of fields of power provides a flexible 'thinking tool' to open up this opportunity. The homologous relationship

between multiple, nested fields suggests that the micro-dynamics of power that are performed in focus group discussions are revealing of those that pertain in the wider population from which participants are drawn. To the extent that the field theorised through sampling characteristics is meaningful, field mechanisms are likely to be present in focus group discussions. Therefore, mechanisms such as the 'rules of the game', the valuing of capitals, and the boundaries of the field provide useful analytical tools to understand the dynamics of power within focus groups. During the course of focus group discussions, participants lay claim to power, surrender it, confer it on others, negotiate its bases, harness its dynamics to strengthen a rhetorical purpose, and reinforce or question its corporate experience. The way that these processes play out is not only important for understanding the kind of data that focus groups produce: it provides valuable insights into the relational significance of the substantive topic that is the *focus* of discussions.

An approach which centralises power requires some rethinking of the standard guidance for the conduct of focus group discussions. Received wisdom on approaches to facilitation, sampling and the position of the researcher/facilitator is geared towards producing content rather than co-privileging interaction. The observation of power requires sufficient space for its performance by participants in a social situation that is semi-informal – both structured and familiar. This can be achieved through flexible facilitation that enables negotiation of the 'rules' that researchers impose; through recruitment based on commonality; and through attention to the multiple, flexible positionalities of facilitators and how these are mobilised. Such measures shift the conduct of focus groups away from control towards the managed cultivation of field conditions. There are very few areas of social scientific study where the social implications of power are not of interest. The reorientation of focus group methods towards allowing space for the micro-dynamics of power to be observed is the next key area for literature concerning both the conduct and analysis of focus groups to explore.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Rosalind Edwards, Nyovani Madise, Silke Roth and Malcolm Williams for their valuable comments on earlier drafts. This study would not have been possible without the generous participation of members of the South Sudanese diaspora in the UK.

Funding

This work was supported jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council's National Centre for Research Methods and South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership [award ref. ES/J500161/1].

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Notes

1. The capital city of South Sudan.
2. The Sudan People's Liberation Army is the military wing of the political movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, which led the fight for self-determination in the second Sudanese civil war 1983–2005.

3. Kokora was a controversial decentralisation policy dividing the semi-autonomous region of Southern Sudan into three smaller administrative units, in 1983.
4. City in the north west of South Sudan.

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