Analysing Focus Group Discussions

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Focus groups and their foci

As many recent publications suggest (see Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Bloor *et al.* 2001; Fern 2001; Macnaghten and Myers 2004; Myers 2004), *focus groups* have recently become one of the key methods of qualitative exploration in the social sciences. They have been used for different purposes in a variety of (disciplinary and interdisciplinary) research settings, and depending on those purposes, focus groups may be defined in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, there are several core definitions of focus groups which, pointing to their main advantages and virtues, describe the actual 'what' of the focus group research. And so, while Myers defines a focus group as 'a discussion held for research purposes' (2004:23), Morgan and Spanish claim that focus groups 'bring to gather several participants to discuss a topic of mutual interest to themselves and to the researcher' (1984:253). Other key theoreticians and practitioners of focus groups similarly define them as 'group discussions exploring a specific sort of issues' (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999:4).

Yet it seems that what uniquely and specifically constitutes focus group research is their actual 'nature'. In fact, unlike other methods of (collective) interviewing (see Chapter 6 by Myers in this volume), focus groups are characterized by the 'explicit use of group interaction to generate data' (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999:4); that is, within focus groups participants are expected to interact with one another (and not only with the person moderating a group) and thus to discuss the issues or topics that arise or are presented by the moderator. This in turn explains the designation of the focus groups as such; that is a 'group is "focused" in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity' (Kitzinger 1994:103). This activity might pertain to either discussing different issues right away or performing simple group-tasks which are to facilitate a group debate on a particular topic – for example 'viewing a film, examining a single health education message' (ibid.). In so doing, focus groups are set 'to explore a specific set of issues such as people's views and experiences' (ibid.), while their other unique aspect lies in the fact that within them not only differing assessments of different (public and private) issues are discussed, but also 'meanings that lie behind those group assessments' (Bloor *et*

al. 2001:4) are revealed in an informal way. In other words, *focus groups are used (1) whenever one is exploring shared (collective) or individual opinions and (2) whenever one is willing to empirically test whether those beliefs and opinions are well grounded and stable, or whether they are prone to change in the situation of interaction with others, who are possibly seen as equals (hence excluding the principle of power) and are able to challenge and modify a participant's views.*

While in different strands of the social sciences there is frequent debate on how to treat and analyse the empirical material yielded in the course of focus groups in order to effectively reveal the said *meanings* that lie behind social perceptions of different issues (see below), it must be stressed that those issues themselves have also evolved. Previously, many social science researchers have used focus groups to reveal opinions on strictly individual experiences such as those of, for example, health problems (Morgan and Spanish 1984) or marriage issues (Suter 2000), and in turn have used the focus group-based interactions to assess the commonality of certain strictly individual experiences.

More recently, however, focus groups have been applied to discuss issues of an ever wider (collective) social and public interest and were treated as means of investigating the growing number of different social contexts (see Hollander 2004). Kitzinger (1994:103) refers to examples of other studies on foci such as contraception, drunk driving, nutrition and mental illness, as issues recently studied through focus groups. Just like Bruck and Stocker (1996), Kitzinger specializes on the focus group-based analysis of media audiences by highlighting 'controversial' topics like the role of the media in shaping and changing social understanding of HIV and AIDS in her research (see Kitzinger 1994).[1] The trend developed even further in the most recent studies, where one can see an much clearer departure from private to public areas of social life: for example, the interest in 'public foci' continued with the recent, seminal works by Myers (2004) and Macnaghten and Myers (2004) who, in their focus group-based research, examined public opinions on different environmental problems. By the same token, the interests of other studies reach even further towards the social and political 'macro' (as well as to the even more abstract issues) by trying to investigate issues like national identity and its crisis in the late-modern era through the use of focus groups (see Wodak *et al.* 1999; Benke 2003; Kovács and Wodak 2003).

EXAMPLE 8.1 Voices of migrants as a research focus explored through focus groups

Below, we analyse a set of focus groups which were organized in the course of a cross-national research project investigating institutional patterns and politics of racial discrimination.[2] We focus explicitly on just a strand of the research within that project, specifically five focus groups with migrants organized in Austria in 2003. The focus groups were organized in order to examine the so-called voices of migrants which

was understood as a set of discourse-based experiences of migrants collected on their contacts with Austrian institutions and members of Austrian society throughout a certain duration of time (see Example 8.1). The analysis of those individual as well as, in our case, also collectivized experiences, helps deconstruct various discursive phenomena which shape and reconstruct racial and discriminatory practices prevalent in Austrian society. However, unlike what would usually be the case with discourse-based research on migration, discrimination and so on (see Reisigl and Wodak 2001) those practices are not investigated directly from the point of view of their elements and constituents. Rather, they are approached from the paradigm of the opinions expressed within the said focus groups, and of those who experience those practices (in this case, migrants living in Austria).

Exploring key features of focus groups

Some key features or components of focus groups, which will now be discussed in detail, are elements that are both the primary interest of a respective study, and function in a mutually interdependent manner. These include: (1) *the role of the moderator,* (2) *the role of the participants (and their selection),* (3) *the role of the discussed topics* and (4) *the role of the communicative dynamics taking place during the course of a focus group discussion*. The mutual interplays between those elements as described below are also presented in Figure 8.1.

First, unlike in other methods where the person leading the process of interviewing is defined as the interviewer (thus the one asking questions), those individuals leading focus groups are usually defined as either *moderator(s)* or *facilitator(s)* (see Kitzinger 1994; Bloor *et al.* 2001). These names are very symptomatic for the role of the moderator/facilitator: s/he is supposed to steer and facilitate the process of the discussion rather than actually 'ask the participants questions'. Thus, the role of the moderator is only to present key *topics* be discussed within a focus group; one may say that the moderator is metaphorically hidden behind the topics which are supposed to frame the debate and which shall, above all, be debated by the participants. Differently put, the moderator is first and foremost responsible for overseeing the general development of the *communicative dynamics* taking place in the course of a focus group (see below), while s/he must not take the leading position in the discussion. On the contrary, s/he should primarily listen to participants and, plainly speaking, keep the discussions focused on the subject of investigation.

While the general aim of the focus group sessions is that they be 'conducted in a relaxed fashion with minimal intervention from the facilitator' (Kitzinger 1994:106), it is frequently the case that the moderator must, ideally in a subtle manner, intervene in the discussion. Such interventions must take place when the moderator required to urge 'the debate to continue beyond the stage it might otherwise have ended, challenging people's taken for granted reality and encouraging them to discuss the inconsistencies both between the

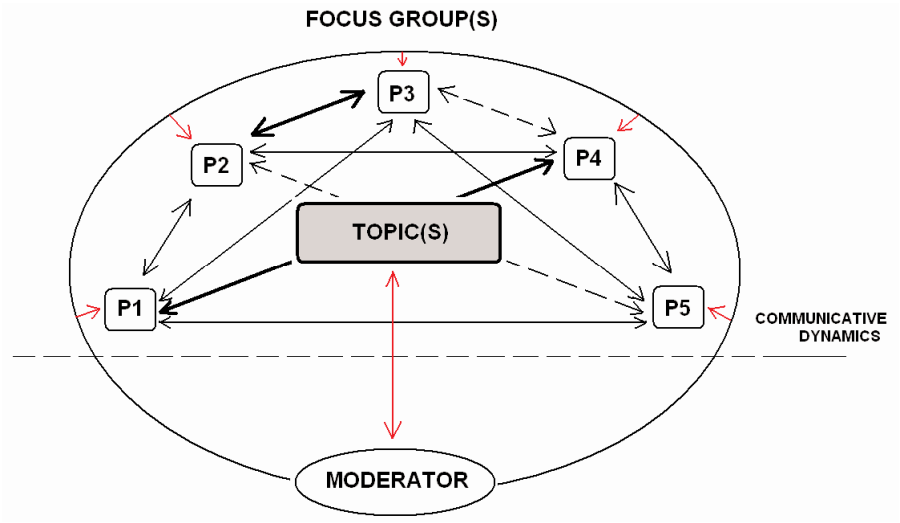

Figure 8.1 Interplays between key elements of focus groups (P = participant; arrows indicate possibility of a diverse intensity of interpersonal exchanges between participants)

participants and their own thinking' (ibid.). On the other hand, apart from these interventions into the contents of the discussions, the moderator is also frequently forced to intervene in order to maintain a balance within the communicative dynamics. Hence, the moderator must also 'seek to avoid the overdetermination of the group by particular individual members' (Bloor *et al.* 2001:49). In other words, s/he must not only assure that the most outspoken participants dominate the discussion, 'but also seek to encourage contributions from the more timorous' (ibid.).

It appears that the core element of the focus groups is the *communicative dynamics* . These dynamics are crucial to the overall development of the discussion and it is within these dynamics that interactions between the participants can yield a possibly far-reaching diversification of views and opinions. The communicative dynamics are to be created and sustained (see below) in the course of the discussion by the *participants*; they remain key actors in the focus group process while the moderator, as much possible, should remain outside the dynamics (see Figure 8.1). Second, the participants also contribute to the communicative dynamics either by stating their own opinions on the previously introduced topics or by challenging the opinions expressed by others.

The (process of) framing focus groups

For reasons of space, this chapter cannot discuss in further detail all of the technicalities of organizing and conducting the focus groups (for closer and

elaborate description of those see for example Krueger 1994; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999; Macnaghten and Myers 2004), yet the (dicourse) analytic focus of the present study requires us to discuss, at least briefly, the process of framing the focus groups.

The latter, which (in a very plain language) boils down to the act of 'asking the right questions', must always be informed by the overall theoretical and practical design of the research, in which focus groups are selected as (one of the) tools of investigation. Each of the overall aims and theoretical underpinnings of one's project, as well as its expected or hypothesized outcomes, would direct the researchers and organizers of focus groups as to how the latter should be framed and why. Thus, while no actual 'general prescription' may be provided with regard to the framing of focus groups, and only some general steps in such framing may be defined as largely universal, one may turn to the example of the previously described focus groups on 'voices of migrants' to show the process of their framing.

First, the process of framing begins with the *overall theoretical background* and the *research design (research questions)* of a project. In the case of the aforementioned research in Austria, the overall aim was to investigate:

1. what the qualitative aspects of migrants' experiences in the country to which they migrated (Austria) are, especially considering the harsh anti-immigration policies introduced in the country at the end of the 1990s and the widely known anti-foreigner moods prevalent among the country's 'native' society, as well as
2. how those experiences can be informative as to which forms of inclusion/exclusion are taking place in relation to migrants, based on their contacts with Austrian state institutions and in their everyday contacts with 'ordinary' members of Austrian society.

Those (overall) research questions were obviously fuelled by the theoretical background of this project. The former constituted a combination of several theoretical accounts which, inter alia, pertained to the following issues: the discursive construction of racism and discrimination (see for example Reisigl and Wodak 2001), the theoretical accounts on the constructions of 'everyday' and 'institutional' racism (see Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Essed 1991; Wieviorka 1995), the theories on the genesis of racism or discrimination (Joppke and Lukes 1999), as well as many other broader and more complex theories on modern democracy and state formation in the European context and and the role of immigrant groups within this context. Of further relevance were the theories on intergroup contacts and community-building (see Delanty 2003), as well as those pertaining to right-wing politics and their impact on the changing social views on immigration (see for example Rydgren 2005).

Following the project's key research questions and its theoretical background (both of which clearly predisposed using focus groups as the key research methods), the *set of specific areas of inquiry* was devised during the

second step of framing focus groups. Those areas pertained to different layers of social reality which were defined as particular contexts or loci in which migrants interact with the 'host' society and state system. There were five key identified areas of inquiry, which included: (1) perceptions of the host country, (2) the labour market and the workplace, (3) education, (4) the extreme right and (5) coping with racism. Those areas pertained not only to certain physical or institutionalized spaces (as is the case with areas 2 and 3), but also to the specific sets of situations or to the actual perceptions of migrants, all of which were defined as pivotal for the formation of migrants' experiences in Austria.

Finally, having designated the key areas of inquiry of the described focus groups, a third step in the framing process took place. Within the latter, diverse *area-specific questions* were formed and those, in turn, were eventually asked to the focus group participants by way of different general and particular questions (see Example 8.3 below). By introducing the questions to the focus groups participants, all of the areas of inquiry were hence elaborated upon by the speakers, while their discursively constructed perceptions of the areas helped the researchers test in which of the areas (and why/how) positive and negative migrant experiences were formed.

Approaching and analysing focus groups

Prior to proceeding to an exemplary analysis of the textual material obtained from the previously discussed migrant focus groups, one must remark that several ways of approaching focus groups in different disciplines exist, which, in turn, define the types and categories of analysis eventually applied.

Within the social sciences, as well as in other disciplines recently interested in focus groups (including health research and marketing research), the analysis of the focus group material is frequently limited to its very general information level and used to support other types of analyses. One may therefore claim that the material is not in fact analysed, and remains only an auxiliary source of information obtained otherwise through questionnaires, individual interviews and the like (see Krueger 1994; Bloor *et. al* 2001; Fern 2001). The majority of such studies, which treat focus groups in this 'general' way, frequently refrain from actually describing their methodology or categories of analysis and refer only to their general ly interpretative questions (sometimes described as 'guiding questions', such as, 'who had voice to speak and who not' or 'what was promoted and what was underplayed' – Smit and Cilliers 2006:308, quoting Cheek 2000) as those guiding their analysis. Some of these studies also claim that the type of analysis they perform may be defined as *content analysis*, though it must be noticed that the understanding of the latter is far from the similarly named text-analytic method which does posses several strictly defined analytical categories such as subject/theme, direction, norms, values, and means (for further details see Holsti 1969; Titscher *et al.* 2000).

A radically different situation occurs in linguistically based analyses of the

focus group material, where, unlike in other approaches, one can speak of a clear recognition of focus groups as a certain *genre*. For example, in the tradition of the sociolinguistic narrative analysis (see Smith 2006), focus groups tend be treated as certain *(group and individual) narratives*.[3] Within individual narratives, the recent emphasis has mainly been on analysing how, within the process of focus groups, different identities are formed in the course of the obtained narratives. For example, by applying such categories as 'affective community space and time' (Kaneva 2006:2) it has been traced how the narratives displayed via focus groups are informative for the 'intersection of memory and identity' (ibid.:2) and for the differentiated construction of spatial and temporal realities of the speakers[4] displayed in different linguistic constructions of temporality and (dis)placement (as well as in other narrative-analytic categories originally proposed by Labov and Waletzky 1967).

On the other hand, within the ethnomethodologically based tradition of conversation analysis (CA) which has been applied very widely in the analyses of focus groups (see Macnaghten and Myers 2004; Myers 1998, 1999, 2004), focus groups have been approached as *a form of (localized) verbal interactions* which, accordingly, have not been examined from the point of view of 'what was said' (Macnaghten and Myers 2004:74) but much rather from the point of view of 'how it was said' (ibid.). Therefore, the interest of the CA has been devoted only partially to the actual contents of the textual material obtained via focus groups, while the main focus was directed towards the local 'sequential organisation of focus-group interaction' (Myers 1998:86). Therefore, the CA-based analysis aims at

> patterns that can indicate what the participants think they are doing here, the relation of the moderator to the participants, and of the participants to each other, to the topic and to the conventions of the group. (Ibid.)

In other conversational-analytic approaches to focus groups as a type of verbal interaction, the analyses have also focused on some more concrete linguistic categories. For example Myers (1999) shows how the usage of different forms of reported speech by the focus group participants can be indicative of shifts in

> setting (shifting to a different time and place), factuality (evidence that something was indeed said), positioning (whether the speaker or group identifies with what is said or not), wording (stepping back to look how it was said). (Ibid.:381)

Other CA-based studies (see for example Myers 1999) also show how topics are indeed shaped, introduced, acknowledged, closed and interpreted in the

course of the focus group-based interaction, or, how different verbal/linguistic elements, defined as 'markers' (ibid.; see also Schiffrin 1988), can signalize agreement/disagreement between the speakers or between the speakers and the moderator.

Thematic structures in focus group discourse: example of analysis

This study offers a way of analysing the textual material from focus groups which, to a certain extent, builds on the linguistic explorations proposed thus far (see above). This approach has recently been developed within the so-called discourse-historical tradition of linguistically based critical discourse analysis (see Wodak 2001; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; also Chapter 1 by Wodak in this volume). Within the latter, an application of the in-depth content-analytical approach has been presented by way of examining two different levels of textual representation: (1) the general level of the key topics of discourse stratifying its contents and (2) the in-depth level, which focuses on discourse elements such as rhetoric, different argumentation patterns and other means of linguistic realization supporting the key arguments.

In a broader sense, the aforementioned critical-analytic, two-level examination of focus group material concentrates on how focus groups may help reveal the discursive character and embedding (that is, discursive construction or construction in/through discourse) of such issues as for example national and other identities (see Wodak *et al.* 1999; Kovács and Wodak 2003). In those studies, focus groups have been applied in order to depict constructions of different forms of social, political and other identities within the so-called 'semi-private' sphere of the society, that is the sphere which is at the borderline between public/collective views and the views of selected small-scale groups or individuals. Those focus group-based examinations of the 'semi-private' have usually been supplemented by other investigations of, for example, the analyses of constructions of different views and opinions in the public sphere analysed through various instances of political language (political speeches, interviews with politicians and so on), as well as by analysing the language/discourse of the media. However, the parts of the critical-analytic research devoted to focus groups remained central in several studies, since, through the focus groups, one could map out the ways in which the public sphere influences (and changes) individuals' views on politics and society and how, conversely, the ideas crucial to the 'social' (individual) level penetrate, as much as possible, into politics, into the media and into other constituents of the public sphere.

As both levels of the critical-analytic examination of the focus group material (the thematic and the in-depth analysis; see above) cannot be presented here in detail owing to limitations of space, the main interest of the present examination is in its 'first level', that is the analysis which pertains to identifying key

themes of the analysed instances of discourse, as well as to mapping links between those themes. However, while the second in-depth level of the analysis is omitted here, it is crucial to refer to other studies in which such in-depth examination of the same empirical material has been undertaken (see Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2007).[5]

Returning to our analysis of the first level of the textual representation of the material generated through focus groups, one must first define the basic analytic category that is central here, in this case *'discourse topics'* (for different conceptions see van Dijk 1982; Brown and Yule 1983). The discourse topics are perceived here from the point of view of text semantics as 'expressed by several sentences of discourse . . . by larger segments of the discourse or by the discourse as a whole' (van Dijk 1984:56). In this vein, discourse topics are seen as 'the most "important" or "summarizing" idea that underlies the meanings of a sequence of sentences . . . a "gist" or an "upshot" of such an episode . . . it is what such passage is *about*' (ibid.; original emphasis). In the analysis presented below, a distinction is introduced between two main types of these basic analytical categories. The first group, that is the *primary topics*, are the ones which, in the process of thematically semi-structuring (or framing) discussions and interviews, were put ('given') under discussion by the moderators through the use of general topics that framed the discussions. The other group of *secondary topics*, on the other hand, includes the topics which were developed by the participants through their utterances during discussions, and were very often brought into discourse in a manner which transcended the primary, structuring topics. The aforementioned group dynamics, which were very crucial to the semi-structured interviewing forms such as the focus groups, played a pivotal role in the discursive development of the secondary topics.

EXAMPLE 8.2 Selecting an appropriate transcription convention

As the analysis of the focus groups studying the voices of migrants was focused predominantly on eliciting textual material presenting different views and opinions of various topics related to migration, discrimination and so on, it did not need to focus on the actual structure of interaction taking place in a focus group and other elements which would otherwise need to be included in the transcript. Therefore, a simplified transcription convention was applied (see Table 8.1.) which was largely based on the so-called half interpretative working transcription system or HIAT (see Ehlich and Rehbein 1976; Ehlich and Redder 1994). The applied transcription convention, while not excluding crucial non- or para-verbal elements of interaction, was focused primarily on (a) textual material as such and (b) additional elements of speech and behaviour which significantly influenced the textual level (for example emphases, rising and falling intonation, overlapping speech as an example of reaction to statements by other participants and so on).

Table 8.1 Transcription convention in focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Symbol	*Function*
M1, M2 (or other)	Speakers
(.)	Short pause
(6.0), (8,0), (9,0) . . .	Longer pause (six seconds, eight seconds, nine seconds, . . .)
(incomp. 6.0)	Incomprehensible elements of speech
[	Overlapping speech
Mhm. Eeeeeh	Para-verbal elements
((leans back)),((laughs))	Non-verbal behaviour
[Heimat]	Elements of original language (difficult to translate)
I would not say so	Normal speech
THIS	Accentuated/stressed element of speech
(↑)	Rising intonation (if significant)
(↓)	Falling intonation (if significant)

Note: See also Example 8.2.

Primary discourse topics (Step One)

The primary discourse topics (see Table 8.2.) were selected as the general frames of the presented focus group discussions. Those topics were devised in the process of designing the research in the aforementioned project as a set of (six) basic areas in which migrants are in contact with various levels and arenas of the Austrian social, state and political system and were therefore treated as pivotal for migrant experiences within them. As mentioned above, they also stand in a one-to-one relationship with the previously described 'areas of inquiry' crucial for the process of framing the discussions.

During the focus group discussions, those topics were introduced by means of different general and particular questions posed to the participants who were further responsible for discussing those topics with other partakers in their focus groups. Depending on the progress of discussions, not all general questions were posed, while, whenever necessary, additional prompts (particularly in the form of descriptions of various frequent 'real-life situations' and in the form of presenting different 'artefacts') were given to the participants.

Table 8.2 Primary discourse topics in the focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Topic I	T-I	Perceptions of the Host Country
Topic II	T-II	Labour Market / Workplace
Topic III	T-III	Education
Topic IV	T-IV	Extreme Right
Topic V	T-V	Coping with Racism
Topic VI	T-VI	Improving Tolerance and Anti-Racism

Example 8.3 presents an extract from the focus groups guidelines and lists the questions and prompts which, whenever necessary, were applied when discussing the first of the aforementioned primary topics. Importantly, one of the general questions posed within the first primary topic includes examples of two (on the one hand 'negative' and on the other hand 'positive') prompts which were used to facilitate the discussion on the so-called 'negative' and 'positive practices' towards migrants which they might encounter in Austria. The introduction of such different types of prompts was applied additionally to assess whether 'positive' or 'negative' examples would cause the most heated reactions and accounts of experiences among the focus group participants.

EXAMPLE 8.3 Questions and prompts in a primary discourse topic

Primary topic I

Perceptions of the host country

General question I/1

How much and where exactly do you have contact with members of Austrian society?

General question I/2

Do you feel welcome in Austrian society?

Prompts to general question I/2

(a) Negative prompt

Passport and customs controls which take place on the night trains passing through the Austrian—German border. Those controls, which are within the Schengen zone, should not take place at all, are performed only at the ethnic selection basis, that is only those passengers who, by their appearance, look non-Austrian or non-European are controlled. The controls usually end up with very overt, radical, discriminatory actions performed by the officials against ethnically non-white passengers.

(b) Positive prompt

Presenting participants the information package file which was sent out to all newly (officially) settled foreigners by the city of Vienna. The package, with a set of welcoming notes and numerous instances of helpful and practical pieces information, is fairly handy to many foreigners who are still not well acquainted with everyday activities at the Viennese institutions of for example education, labour market and so on

General question I/3

Do you think the fact that whether you are welcome/unwelcome in Austria depends on your particular location — living in the city of Vienna/Innsbruck? (Would the situation be different if you lived elsewhere in Austria?)

General question I/4

How about your relatives (for example children) or friends living in Austria?

General question I/5

How does it correspond with your previous experiences (if there are any) gained in living abroad?

Example 8.4 presents how, after a general introduction to the discussion and introducing the first primary frame by the moderator (MK), the primary topics were further developed by different participants (M1, M2 and M3). As one can see, responding to the general question listed above (see Example 8.3), the participants clearly pointed to different areas in which they interact with Austrians (among the listed milieus are: work, casual contacts, education and so on) and thus they developed the said primary topic by introducing another theme (the latter is further defined as a secondary topic – see below) which clearly pertains to the issue of 'social contact'. That topic emphasizes that migrants living in Austria gather the majority of their experiences through interpersonal contacts with the 'ordinary members' of the Austrian society. Crucially, while developing the topic of social contact, the participants emphasize that their interactions with 'Austrians' are limited to milieus in which the interaction must take place (work, education and so on), thus also showing that any other forms of contacts (for example, private contacts and the like) are not prevalent between the migrants and the 'natives'.

EXAMPLE 8.4 Development of a topic (extract from transcript)

MK: No no (.) no no just just wha what s what s the f-the most frequent occasion for your contact with Austrians
[
M2: Work
[
MK: Work (1.5) aha (0.5) for all of you (1.0)
M3: No (.) for me I I (.) I do not have many contacts with with with Austrians in work (.) my only contacts are just casual contacts with ahm people who might quite new within jobs or in (.) ah who come to do some work or (unread.0.5) all but ah I has I has scarcely any contact with Austrians (1.0)
MK: So those are just everyday-everyday situations (1.0)
M3: Yah yah (1.0)
MK: Casual contacts (0.5) ahm okay (1.0)
M1: Yeah my (0.5) ah myself I have a (0.5) a great (0.5) ah contact with the normal Austrian people because since a these ah (2.5) exactly (unread.1.0) twenty years now in Austria (1.0) and at the beginning at (1.0) I studied at university of Vienna (1.0)
and then after when I got national citizenship (0.5) five years ago then I went to the military and then (.) this I my (.) contact to Austrian (0.5) ah students (.) people at the workplace sometime because during the (2.0) summer I used to work at the (1.0) some factories and some (0.5) institutions an then (1.0) yeah

Obviously, this last example constitutes only a strand of the entire response of the participants to the 'given' primary topic on 'perceptions of the host country' (in this case, the listed response constitutes only about 5 per cent of the

entire transcript), while it also crucially represents one of the first issues discussed and therefore still takes place under the involvement of the moderator. However, the extract provided emphasizes how the topics themselves are developed within the focus groups and how the issues placed under discussion by the moderators are further developed by the participants themselves.

Secondary discourse topics (Step Two)

In the following step of the thematic analysis of contents, the main aim is to devise the list of the so-called 'secondary topics' – topics in other words which, in discussing the matters framed by the 'primary topics' (see above), were put forth by the participants themselves. Discussing the lists of topics must be performed in a gradual manner. This discussion occurs first with regard to each of the focus groups in question, and second with regard to all of the focus groups organized in the course of the research, where, desirably, the similar guidelines, frames and general questions (together with respective prompts) were used. In any case, devising the list of secondary topics, which can cross-section the primary ones in the individual groups as well as in the entire set of groups organized in the course of one's research, helps in assessing which issues are in fact crucial for migrants in their functioning in the 'host societies' (in our case Austria). Therefore, the lists of the secondary topics may sometimes differ significantly from those of the primary ones. Yet if this is the case then the secondary topics will prove that the preconceptions about migrants and their reality – reflected in the lists of the primary topics and treated by the researchers as touching upon the key areas which, from their perspective, might be important – may sometimes be misleading. Thus the discourse-based designation of the secondary topics will prove what types of experiences migrants possess in both negative and positive terms, the former referring to discrimination and exclusion, the latter to openness and tolerance. Additionally, this will demonstrate in which areas of their social functioning (institutions or everyday contacts) those experiences would frequently be acquired.

Table 8.3 Secondary discourse topics in the focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Topic 1	T-1	Social Contact
Topic 2	T-2	Perception of Migrants
Topic 3	T-3	Citizenship and Collective Identification
Topic 4	T-4	Ethnicity and Religion
Topic 5	T-5	Language
Topic 6	T-6	Prejudices
Topic 7	T-7	Austrian Radical-Right Politics
Topic 8	T-8	Media and the Public Sphere
Topic 9	T-9	Integration

Table 8.3 presents a list of secondary topics that were developed in the course of any of the focus group discussions with migrants in Austria. As the list suggests, the secondary topics eventually 'developed' by the focus group participants differed from the original lists of the primary topics (see above), thus proving that the actual 'issues' identified as crucial by migrants (and further described in detail in the course of the said focus groups) were different from those which were *a priori* deemed crucial by the researchers.

Connections between primary and secondary discourse topics (Step Three)

It is crucial, however, for the thematic analysis presented not to stop at the level of devising different lists of, respectively, primary and secondary discourse topics. On the contrary, the analysis must proceed further in order to 'map' thematic links that existed between primary and secondary topics (at the linguistic level), and thus to help the researchers locate varying contexts and areas in which different issues become prominent and different experiences are gathered (at the 'real-life' level).

Let us first explore how different primary topics (marked with Roman numbers in Table 8.2 and in Figure 8.2.) triggered the development of different secondary topics (marked with Arabic numbers in Table 8.3 and in Figure 8.2.). For example, within the primary topic T-I described above, the strongest thematic interconnection (established through the statistical frequency of

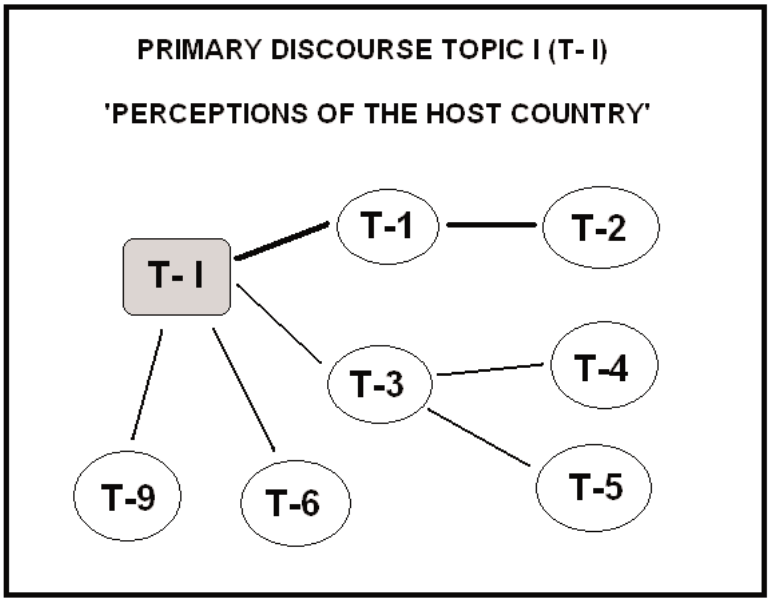

Figure 8.2 Thematic interconnections of the primary discourse topic I (T-I)

referring to the topic in all focus groups – marked with bold lines in Figure 8.2) appeared with regard to the secondary topic T-1 (social contact), which was also further very often connected with T-2 (Austrian perception of immigrants). Also, T-I very often triggered discussion on the issues of citizenship and collective identification (T-3), which brought about further discussions on the problems of ethnicity and religion (T-4), as well as on language (T-5). T-I was also intermittently connected directly with issues such as prejudices (T-6) and integration (T-9).

As one can see, the map of development of the primary topic (T-I) into different secondary topics (T-1, T-2, T-3 and so on) clearly points to the core issues which were pointed out with regard to the overall frame emphasized by the primary topic ('perception of the host country') and how different issues identified through secondary topics were further connected between one another. Based on the example of the strongest primary–secondary connection mapped out above, one can infer that in general the perceptions of the host country in the Austrian case depend on everyday social contacts between migrants and the natives (T-1), while the latter are (further) particularly crucial for the overall perceptions of migrants by the Austrians (T-2). In a similar way, one can map an interconnection (though, of a lesser salience) between the problems of collective identification of migrants and the interlinked issue of citizenship (T-3) and how those issues are, in turn, further fuelled by two crucial aspects of migrants' ethnicity and religion (T-4) as well as by language (T-5). As one could establish from the focus groups, the said connections between identification and citizenship on the one hand, and ethnicity/religion and language on the other, were very crucial for migrants. They claimed that being both identified as a foreigner or native and being granted citizenship (which would emphasize one's membership in the broadly defined Austrian community) was very much dependent on their ethnicity, religion and native language. This, in turn, emphasized that the widely known discriminatory ideologies prevalent in Austria (as a homogeneous 'white' country characterized by Christianity and by the severe repercussions of the use of German language in a variety of settings) is clearly perceived by migrants as the key to their self-identification and the fact that they are identified by others as 'non-belonging' at the level of everyday interactions. Furthermore, it can be seen as the key to defining their status as Austrian citizens (in the institutional milieu).

From a different perspective, one may also look at the interconnections between primary and secondary topics in a way different from the method used above. Thus, by looking at whether (how and when) secondary topics were called upon in realizations of different primary ones, one is able to see whether particular issues identified by migrants within secondary topics were of importance in the analysed focus group material in different areas predefined by the primary discourse topics.

Table 8.4 outlines the links between secondary and primary topics and points to the differentiated use of the former in the realization of the latter. As one can see, some of the secondary topics (such as for example 'T-2: perception

Table 8.4 Links between secondary and primary discourse topics in the focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Secondary topics	*Primary topics*						
T-1	T-I	T-II		T-IV			
T-2	T-I						
T-3	T-I	T-II			T-V		
T-4	T-I	T-II			T-V		
T-5	T-I	T-II	T-III	T-IV	T-V	T-VI	
T-6	T-I	T-II	T-III		T-V		T-VI
T-7					T-V		
T-8				T-IV	T-V	T-VI	
T-9	T-I		T-III	T-IV			T-VI

of migrants' or 'T-7: Austrian radical-right politics') were used only in the realizations of selected primary topics (the analysed 'T-I: perceptions of the host country' and 'T-V: coping with racism'). On the other hand, several secondary topics (such as 'T-5: language' or 'T-6: prejudices') were used extensively in different forms while responding to the primary frames. The latter clearly points to the differentiated importance of different issues in different contexts and allows drawing different types of conclusions. For example, the significant omnipresence of the issue of language (T-5, identified in the realizations of all primary discourse topics) points to the fact that the latter, particularly understood as 'the native-like knowledge of the German language', must be seen as a key that allows migrants full entry into various domains of social reality, in both its everyday and its institutional meaning. This, in turn, allows one to conclude that the very explicit recent migrant-related policies of the Austrian state system, based particularly on the issue of language as a quasi-marker of belonging and non-belonging, are finding their ways into a variety of social and institutional milieus where 'the language' is being perceived as pivotal both by 'ordinary' members of society and by the Austrian institutions regulating education and the labour market, as well as by the Austrian media and politics.

Conclusions

We have examined above the key elements of focus groups as well as selecting ways for their eventual analysis. In particular, the example presented, of analysing key discourse topics of the material generated through a set of focus group discussions, shows that the latter are an effective tool for investigating different issues, including those targeted in the presented material as 'voices of migrants'. As shown in the presented case, focus groups can effectively be used when investigating the discourse-based, semi-private experiences of migrants

on such issues as discrimination and exclusion in different levels of social organization. These include everyday interactions with other 'ordinary' members of society, as well as institutions (particularly those pertaining to the labour market and to education) and different constituents of the public sphere, including politics and the media.

We have seen that focus groups are an effective tool in investigating the relation between discourse and society, in particular of discourse's role in producing, sustaining and reproducing an ideologically based social status quo. Thus, we may say that focus groups are effective when analysing those discursive practices which [327] help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) 'social classes, men and women, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent hings, as well as position people' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997:258).

Accordingly, the analysis of experiences or 'voices' of migrants allows one to discover, uncover and deconstruct the forms of such (discursively shaped) inequalities taking place at an institutional level of the (Austrian) state system. Such a focus group-based analysis, it is argued, may supplement 'primary' analyses of institutionalized, discriminatory practices rooted in the legal and organizational frames of the labour and education system (for such analysis in the mentioned Austrian case, see Wodak *et al.* 2003).

Additionally, by looking past the focus groups, into the experiences of those who, on a daily basis, have to cope with various forms of inequality and exclusionary institutions, one is able to draw a clear map of those practices (as identified in, for example, different discourse topics), which affect the migrants' living and working conditions as well as, in a broader perspective, the ongoing (discourse-based) construction of their 'non-belonging' as part of an 'outgroup' (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) in a European society.

Notes

1. The studies on media audiences were among the first research foci explored in the social sciences through focus groups by the group around Robert K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld who defined them as 'focused interviews' (Merton *et al.* 1956). The approach of examining media audiences through focus groups was also followed later on in a majority of settings, as was the case with for example the research in Austria conducted by Bruck and Stocker (1996) which inspired the later critical-analytic studies which applied focus groups to the exploration of Austrian national identity (see Wodak *et al.* 1999).
2. The data used in this chapter come from an EU Fifth Framework Research Project, 'The European Dilemma: Institutional Patterns and Politics of Racial Discrimination', coordinated by Masoud Kamali (Uppsala University, Sweden; see www.multietn.uu.se) in 2002–5. The project investigated socio-political developments and attitudes towards migration as well as mechanisms of social exclusion of migrants in eight European countries (Austria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and UK). The author participated in the project within the

'Austrian partner institution' located at the Research Centre 'Discourse, Politics, Identity' and Department of Linguistics, University of Vienna.

3. See also Squire (2005) for the description of growing social-scientific interest in narratives.
4. Kaneva (2006) adopts those analytical categories from Halbwachs (1980).
5. Different linguistic categories which can be used for such in-depth (strictly linguistic) analyses can also be found in other parts of this volume (for example Chapter 2 by Mautner).

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