



## Real Life Methods

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

# Focus groups with young people: a participatory approach to research planning

Anna Bagnoli, Andrew Clark  
& Bren Neale

ESRC National Centre for Research  
Methods: Real Life Methods



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



## The Young Lives and Times study

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- A Qualitative Longitudinal study
  - Prospective 10 year project currently funded for 6 years
  - 29 young people aged 12 at the outset
  - Varied backgrounds
  - Investigating their relationships and identities

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## Focus Groups

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- Participatory approach
- Use of focus groups as part of research planning and design
  - Introduce concept of Qualitative Longitudinal research
  - Develop research questions
  - Research methods
  - Forms of dissemination
  - Participant recruitment

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## The focus group method

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- 22 focus groups
- Between 5 and 8 participants per session
- 6 schools, 1 youth club
- Mixed areas – inner city; suburban; rural; affluent and deprived
- Mixed pupil abilities and school types

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## Focus groups agenda

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- Use of TV documentary series '*Seven Up*' for elicitation (30 mins)
- Followed by 30 mins discussion of:
  - Maintaining participants' interest in longitudinal research
  - Communication practices
  - Dealing with sensitive topics and ethical issues
  - Dissemination and archiving
  - Rewards
  - Recruitment

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## The interest of follow up: appreciating change

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- Girl 1:** I think it's good because when they get older you can see how their opinion changes and different aspects on life and things like that.
- Girl 2:** I think it's a good idea because you find out what people think when they're young and if you go back every year, you find out like how they change and it's interesting.

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## The interest of follow up: Making comparisons

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**AC:** What did you think of the [Seven Up] film?

**Participant:** I liked the idea that there were posh people and common people

**Girl:** Yeah, I think it's, it is really useful because then people nowadays can also look back on it and they, people that took part can look back on it so they can see the comparisons and also between the 2 schools, well more than 2 schools, different types of schools

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## The interest of follow up: learning about oneself

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**Participant B:** Well you might be able to look back on it when you're older and think: 'Oh! Did I use to be like that!'(...)

**Participant C:** They might learn about themselves when they're older.

**AB:** Yeah.

**Participant C:** They might think about the problems instead of like putting them to the back of your mind.

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## Difficult questions

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- BN:** Were there any questions [shown in Seven Up film] that you would've liked to have answered or not liked to have answered?
- Participant A:** Ones where that lad were talking about a dad. And knowing nothing about a dad coz I didn't even, know my dad either. I do know him but I don't see him.
- Participant B:** Same here.
- BN:** So that kind of....
- Participant B:** Well I do see him sometimes but only, only when I can be bothered to go and see him...
- Participant C:** We all ain't got no dads.

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## Research methods: 'not just having a chat'

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- AC:** What did you think of the film?
- Participant 3:** It was all right, but it wasn't that interesting.
- AC:** What could have made it more interesting?
- Participant 3:** [it was] a lot of talking... people find it boring.
- AC:** A bit more action?
- Participant 2:** Yes. They were just sitting and talking.
- AC:** What else could have made it more interesting?
- Participant 1:** You could ask us to do stuff and see how well you could do it (...)
- Participant 2:** Like, putting them in a situation and then asking them a question. I don't know what situation, but not just having a chat and talking.

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## Research methods: Putting participants in control

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**Participant C:** Maybe if you actually do the interviews, ask us what kind of questions we would prefer to be asked... (...) and if like you meet us beforehand, find out what we are interested in and then you can put questions on... if you tell us what the questions are instead of being put on the spot, maybe we would have had time to think.

(...)

**Participant C:** Maybe if you are using a video camera... but give the camera to the kids during the day, sort of when they are going out or something, what sort of things they get up to... so that they are not trying to show off to anybody, just being themselves.

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## Archiving and disseminating

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**Participant A:** There can be some personal questions asked if you don't want them to go in then you can then say like cut that bit out so no-one can listen to it.

**Girl 1:** Do, do you have to protect them because or some people might not mind having a photo on [display].

**Girl 2:** Yeah.

**AB:** Yeah, so we should ask first?

**Girls' joint replies:** Yeah.

**Girl 3:** And find out if their parents mind.

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## Conclusion: young people's responses

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- Longitudinal research can help people to appreciate change and remember, compare, and learn about themselves
- 'Need for colour': the interviews in Seven Up seemed 'static and 'boring'
- Personal questions may not be appropriate
- Request for control over methods and not 'being put on the spot'
- Awareness that editing may be needed before dissemination.
- May not necessarily desire anonymity

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## Conclusion: the value of participation in research design

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- Contributing to research design which is relevant to young people
- Encouraging the development and use of creative methods, through which young people can participate by 'just being themselves'
- Learning young people's views about ethical issues
- Opening up the research process
- Potential tensions may arise between participants' views and research aims or standard ethical practices

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