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What is This?
Focus groups as social enactments: integrating interaction and content in the analysis of focus group data

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ABSTRACT This article argues that there is a need for more methodological discussions and examples upon how to include the social interaction element in analysing focus group data. It is suggested that from a practice theoretical perspective, focus group data (like other types of qualitative data) are understood as social enactments. The article gives examples of four different but related methodological tools of analysis that can help integrating interaction and content in analysing focus group enactments, namely tools from Goffman-inspired interaction analysis, conversation analysis, discourse psychology and positioning theory. The examples are unfolded on focus group data-material from a qualitative empirical research project on how Danish women cook and relate to normative issues in cooking, and the choice of specific examples of tools of analysis are linked to the specific knowledge interests of this research project.

KEYWORDS: data analysis, enactments, focus groups, practice theory, social interaction

Introduction

The methodological discussions about focus group data have slowly begun to include more about the importance of analysing not just the content of what participants express, discuss and negotiate, but also the analytical consequences of the social form of the focus group data: Group interaction (Barbour, 2007; Duggleby, 2005; Stevens, 1996; Warr, 2005; Wibeck et al., 2007). This is in some ways parallel to the development in the discussions about analysing individual interview data as explicitly including situational and contextual interaction forms (Abell et al., 2006; Brinkman and Kvale, 2005; Denzin, 2001; Engelsrud, 2005; Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Silverman, 2006).

The influence of the social interaction seems so obvious particularly in focus group data, and the group dimension is often used as argumentation for the specific strengths of the method in data-production (Barbour, 2007; Bloor et al., 2001; Halkier, 2002; Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, the growing influence of
epistemological positions within various forms of social constructivism and perspectivism (Polkinghorne, 2007) where all knowledge is seen as dependent on the social context of its production also points in the direction of actively including the social interaction. Hence, it is somewhat surprising that the issue of dealing with the consequences of the interaction aspect of focus group data have apparently been so relatively sparsely dealt with in the ordinary textbook literature on focus groups (e.g. Bloor et al., 2001; Fern, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Stewart et al., 2007). Here the interaction aspect is primarily dealt with as part of sampling strategies and other issues to do with the production of data such as introductions, question-types and moderator-strategies. But the sections on analysis of focus group data often do not expand on how to analyse the social interactions and the specific analytical consequences of these interactions for the content of focus group data.

Thus, it is encouraging that the discussion about using interaction forms explicitly in the analysis of focus group data is growing. This article provides a contribution to this discussion by suggesting what a moderate social constructivist perspective could imply for the integration of social interaction forms in the analysis of focus group data, and by providing a range of concrete examples of how to do it at a practical methodological level.

The article begins by arguing that a practice theoretical perspective can be one way of helping the researcher to analytically integrate content and group dynamics by dissolving the traditional firm distinction between interview-data and observational data. Second, the article introduces shortly an empirical research project on cooking practices among Danish women using (among other data-types) focus group data. Third, the uses of a range of concrete methodological tools for analysing the importance of the social interaction are exemplified via this research project. Finally, the article concludes on the importance of striking a balance between the interaction and the content of focus group data.

A practice theoretical perspective on qualitative methods

Practice theory is not a coherent cultural theory, rather a particular reading of an assembly of theoretical elements in e.g. early Pierre Bourdieu (1990), early Anthony Giddens (1984), late Michel Foucault (1978), Harold Garfinkel (1967), Judith Butler (1990) and Bruno Latour (1993). A practice theoretical reading foregrounds the common assumptions among these theoreticians about the performativity of social practices, so how social action is carried out and carried through is central in practice theory. Recent conceptual systematization (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001; Warde, 2005) turns the elements into a distinct analytical approach to social life.

Practice theory can be distinguished from several other kinds of cultural theories (Reckwitz, 2002: 247–9), where two of them are relevant for the subject of this article. Practice theory is firstly different from what is labelled
cultural mentalism, where the social is placed in mental repertoires of actors’ consciousness and in mental activities such as common understandings and assumptions. Phenomenology can be seen as an example of cultural mentalism in the sense that phenomenological studies primarily are interested in analysing how social life is expressed through intentional interpretations of meaning in actors’ experiences (e.g. de Certau, 1984; Luckmann, 1989; Schütz, 1975). Second, practice theory is different from cultural textualism which places the social outside of actors in larger chains of signs, symbols, language and discourses. Various types of social constructivist approaches can be seen as examples of cultural textualism in the sense that they primarily pay attention to how sociality is expressed discursively (e.g. Hall, 1997; Laclau, 1996; Luhmann, 1995).

Instead, practice theory places the social in the performance of practices. The concept of practice is defined as:

A practice ... is a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice – a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of other etc. – forms so to speak a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (Reckwitz, 2002: 249–50)

Such a definition allows for a multi-relational understanding of practices as performed by and produced in social life. Practices are in this definition seen as webs of a number of equally important and interconnected dynamics, which is also the case in another classical definition of practices within practice theory: ‘A practice is a set of doings and sayings organised by a pool of understandings, a set of rules, and a teleo-affective structure.’ (Schatzki, 2001: 53).

My position is to use practice theory as a distinct analytical approach for empirical analysis to which other field-relevant theoretical concepts, analytical knowledge about the field and field-relevant methods can be related. Hence, the purpose is not to contribute to a development of a coherent theory, but rather to discuss the analytical empirical usefulness of this distinct analytical approach. Thus, I prefer to talk about a practice theoretical perspective where performativity of social life is in focus, and whereby social practices can be seen as multi-relational configurations in everyday life.

This theoretical assumption about the performativity of social life dovetails with the attempts going on within the more perspectivist parts of the qualitative methods discussion about dissolving or sophisticating the firm distinction between interview data and participant observational data (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003). Atkinson and Coffey make a case against attempts to privilege the one data production method (participant observation) over the other (interviews), and they argue from the perspectivist assumption that methods of data-production are co-constitutive of the knowledge produced. Instead,
they argue that participant observation and interviewing both can be seen to generate social action, which gives a more symmetrical view on methods for qualitative data-production. Finally, they suggest focusing on the ways in which different contexts of data-production forms different kinds of social actions performed.

Hereby, it becomes possible to see all types of accounts as well as events as ‘enactments’ of social life: That participant observation data, focus group data and individual interview data all can be seen as social practitioners’ performances in different contexts. This view of qualitative data as social enactments underlines the necessity of including the social interaction dynamics in analysing focus group data. Because in such a view is included a social constructivist theoretical and methodological assumption about how social forms among the participants (including interviewers, moderators and observers) and contents of expressions in qualitative data mutually influence each other (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002; Puchta and Potter, 2005). The rest of this article will exemplify different methodological ways of taking this assumption into account in the analysis of focus group data.

A qualitative empirical project on cooking as example

The empirical research that this article draws upon as example is the project ‘Cooking in Medialised Society’.¹ In recent years, the Danish public has witnessed a growth in the amount of magazines, lifestyle sections in news media, television shows, coffee table books and home pages that all seem to celebrate ordinary everyday life activities traditionally associated with domestic femininity (Hollows, 2007), such as, for example, cooking home made meals, baking, preserving, cleaning, producing and maintaining clothes, decorating the home and gardening. The research project consists of a qualitative in-depth study of the cooking practices (Short, 2003) and magazine practices (Hermes, 1995) among Danish female readers of the magazine ‘Isabellas. Enthusiastic about Everyday’² which is seen as an example of such everyday life celebratory media texts. The purpose of the research project was to shed light upon how these women do cooking in their alleged busy everyday lives, and how they handle the potentially demanding social normativity of the everyday life celebratory representations of cooking in the magazine. The project was carried out using a practice theoretical perspective.

A strategically selected sample (Kuzel, 1992) of 17 women participated, displaying a variation according to age (20’s, 30’s and 40’s), according to education level (without and with high-school exam), according to family status (without and with children), and according to geography (city, suburb, village: in different parts of Denmark). Eight of the women were recruited through snowballing according to the demographic criteria above. Three of these women, representing the three different age-groups, each then recruited three
friends in their own age-group to bring to a focus group, and at least one of
these friends had to be a non-reader of the magazine ‘Isabellas’.

The qualitative data in the study was produced by three methods. The first part
of data was produced by individual in-depth interviewing and re-interviewing
the eight original participating women in order to produce their enactments of
cooking in their life-story, cooking in their everyday life, cooking in relation to
other people in their network, and cooking in relation to the representations of
cooking in the magazine ‘Isabellas’. These interviews were performed using
ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979), biographic interviewing (Atkinson,
1998) and active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003).

The second part of data was produced by auto-photography (Heisley and
Levy, 1991; Hurdley, 2007) where the eight women participating in individual
interviewing had taken photos of their own cooking one or two everyday
evenings (ingredients, food stuff, tools, places, activities and the cooked food or
meal). These photos were used as part of the second individual interview as a
help to embody and materialize the stories about cooking activities, and they
were also used as data in themselves.

The third part of the data was produced by focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001;
Puchta and Potter, 2005). Three segmented focus groups were carried out
with women in each of the three age groups, 20’s, 30’s and 40’s. The partici-
pants in each focus group was one of the individually interviewed women and
three members of her social network. The focus groups produced enactments
mainly consisting in negotiations and normative positionings between the
women about cooking practices and representations of cooking in the maga-
zine ‘Isabellas’. It is only the focus group data that is included in the exemplifi-
cations in the next section of the article.3

Analysing social enactments in focus group data

This section of the article uses selected bits of focus group data from the
cooking research project to show how four different but epistemologically
closely related methodological tools can be used for systematic analysis of the
relations between interaction and content in this particular type of social
performance. Other tools can of course be used, the chosen ones are merely
examples, and different types of discourse analysis (Phillips and Jørgensen,
2002), narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004) or multi-modal ethnography
(Dicks et al., 2006) could be obvious alternatives. Furthermore, it is the tran-
scribed pieces of focus group discussions that are analysed, which means that
the enactments of the focus groups are mediated through writing with the
obvious limitations to the representation of forms of interaction. On the other
hand, written text as media entails a mode of representation that allows other
modes (such as other sounds, gestures, body language etc.) to be described, even
though they are initially missing (Dicks et al., 2006: 82, 88). A list of simple
transcription codes, adapted slightly from Bloor et al. (2001) follows here:
Goffman-inspired interaction analysis

Most of Erving Goffman’s texts are about how social interaction is carried out in practice, and his approach has inspired or partly inspired many different types of analysis of social interaction from classical face-to-face encounters such as patient and doctors to new types of interaction such as internet-based. In relation to analysing focus group data, I will emphasize two main points in Goffman as useful.

First, there is Goffman’s point about how people in social interaction attempt to sustain their self-narratives (Goffman, 1959). For many years, this point was interpreted in an essentialist manner. Hereby people’s interaction with most others were seen as strategic, taking place ‘front-stage’, and people were seen to hold true selves which they then only showed in interaction with very few and close others ‘back-stage’. With the growth of social constructivism, now there is a tendency to interpret this point on upholding self-narratives differently (Branaman, 1997; Tseëlon, 1992). Instead, it is argued that people constantly produce themselves in all contexts of interaction by telling, negotiating, re-telling and performing their self-narratives, and that none of these self-narratives is more ‘authentic’ than the others. Such an interpretation is in line with the performativity assumption about social life in practice theory.

The second point from Goffman is to see conversations as social rituals where interaction is dependent upon silent assumptions about ‘how-to-do’ that forms a local contextual frame for how the social relations are produced and reproduced among participants in interaction in this context (Collins, 1988: 58–61; Goffman, 1974). Contextual frames can of course be broken and changed, but this demands a much bigger social effort than adapting to the frames of the interaction (Kendon, 1988: 31).

When analysing focus group data, these two Goffman points can assist in noticing that particular content or meaning of expressions among the participants are perhaps expressed in order to help sustaining a part of somebody’s self-narrative. Or the points may help in interpreting consensus on particular content of statements as also having to do with rebuilding social relations. The following empirical example illustrates both types of social enactment – how what is the content of a conclusion is related to a process of sustaining elements of self-narratives and to processes of rebuilding relations between especially two of the participating women.
The extract is from the focus group in the cooking project with women in their 20’s, and the women are in the middle of handling a group exercise where they have been asked to sort a pile of food stuff into two piles: One pile with food they would serve for guests, and one pile with food they would absolutely not serve for guests.

**Susy**: There were green grapes, they are really good, and then there are such cantuccini, these biscuits with almonds, and such things that are...

**Pia**: They taste really nice, yeah.

**Susy**: Yes.

**Anna**: And you could also serve these, okay?

**Pia**: Yeah, OKAY mum.

**Anna**: Then there is pesto, right...

**Pia**: Mmm.

**Anna**: Yes.

**Pia**: No, cause I would NEVER serve such a pesto, cause if I were to serve pesto, I would make it myself.

**Susy**: Okay. But that’s fine. But I ACTUALLY don’t have the time to make it myself, so I buy it.

**Pia**: Time to make it, it doesn’t take any time to make a pesto.

**Susy**: That doesn’t matter, because I...

**Pia** [interrupts]: You just need a blender and some basil and some pine kernels and a little bit of other good things.

**Susy**: Yeah, yeah.

**Pia**: And then you have made a pesto.

**Susy**: But I DON’T [Pia makes farting-noises with her mouth] always have the time for it ... ehm, and it’s not always I have it in the cupboards ... cause then Morten has eaten it.

The participating women are in the middle of building consensus on what to put in the ‘what we will serve for guests’ pile. They have managed to agree upon the grapes and the Italian biscuits, but then Pia withdraws from the process of forming consensus by refusing to take part in placing the ready-made pesto in the positive pile, because she claims that she makes her own pesto from scratch. This withdrawal is implicitly signalled already in the reluctance of her second expression, ‘yeah, okay mum’ about the biscuits. But the explicit statement about the pesto seems to result in Susy beginning to legitimize why she does not make it herself. After this, Pia changes manner of speaking from ‘I’-form to ‘generalized you’-form – called shift of footing (Goffman, 1981) – in her arguments in favour of pesto made from scratch. This change in form makes the interaction more clearly normative, and the social interaction thus deals with negotiations of appropriate conduct, here suitable cooking practices. The sequence ends with Susy referring to her
boyfriends’ habit of eating everything in the kitchen cupboards in order to support her self-narrative in the group as someone who does suitable cooking – if only her boyfriend did not hinder it. By Susy’s introducing her boyfriend as a condition to her cooking practices, the relation between Susy and Pia can also be rebuilt. Thus, the content or meaning of what in the focus group is performed as suitable cooking practices is dependent on the details in the self-narratives and relationships among the participants which construct and draw upon a local social order.

Conversation analysis

This method of analysis has directly inspired focus group methodologies (e.g. Puchta and Potter, 2005), for the obvious reason that focus group data can be seen as a particular type of conversation. One of the main assumptions of conversation analysis is indeed that the social organization of the situational sequencing of conversations influences the content of what is being interpreted by the participants (Noësinger, 1991; Psathas, 1995; Silverman, 2006). This is related to the indexical character of sense-making in social life (Garfinkel, 1967: 4–7). Interpretations of meanings of doings and sayings are potentially multiple, but conversations produce temporary fixations of meaning.

Conversation analysis offers a broad range of tools for analysis of details in the connections between the forms in the social organization of participants in an interview or context, and the content of enactments of these participants (Cameron, 2001: 87–105; Silverman, 2006: 210–22). Which specific tools are chosen should be related to their relevance to the knowledge interest of the research using focus group data. In my research project on women’s cooking, one of the central knowledge interests is in the social norms and normativity around cooking. Hence, I have been using one of the tools from conversation analysis that is particularly useful in analysing how content of norms are negotiated in the focus groups, and this tool is adjacency pairs. In conversation analysis, the social organization of conversation has been described with a metaphor, ‘talk is traffic’ (Antaki, 1994: 107). This means that one of the decisive elements in how we express ourselves in group talk is when in the sequences we participate. Conversation analysis claims that there are certain regularities in patterns of what kind of expressions follow which kind of expressions in conversation sequences, because all speech acts offer possibilities but participants use these possibilities in different ways. These regularities are called adjacency pairs, and to all first parts of such pairs of speech exchange there are preferred and not-preferred types of answers (Antaki, 1994: 80). A preferred answer to an invitation is, for example, acceptance, and a not-preferred answer is rejection.

Here follows an extract from the focus group with women in their 40’s from the cooking project. The participants have sorted pictures and recipes cut from women’s magazines, and they are now in the middle of discussing what good and bad cooking is to them.
Sonja: When I was a child, when we had fish it was these frozen fish fingers...
Karen [interrupts]: Yes, THAT is disgusting [Sonja: He, he...] ... that is bad cooking.
Dorte: Yes, it is.
Sonja: That is simply YUKKY.
Birgit: Yes, my kids love them...
Dorte [interrupts]: No, nobody likes fish fingers.
Birgit: Yes, I like them.
Karen: It’s the same with that breaded fish you can buy, it’s only breading.
Birgit: No, that depends on which ones you buy ... some of it is okay to buy...
Karen [interrupts]: I will rather buy it without breading, and then ... [pause]
Birgit [interrupts]: ...where there is a lot of fish ... [pause] [Karen: do it myself] but that is [Sonja: You don’t know what’s in there] obvious...
Karen: No.
Sonja: It looks like such stuff.
Karen: Yep.
Sonja: Oh yes, that’s bad cooking too. To me bad cooking is doing it with deep-frying.
Birgit: Yes, all right I can only admit that [Karen: Yes] to you ... we don’t use that either.
Karen: I also think...
Sonja [interrupts]: But then again, it’s that fat.
Karen: I actually used it, I used it to deep-fry those camembert cheeses for dessert, but I have begun to make that in the oven ... that’s actually the only deep-fry...
Dorte: It’s a long time since you have made that dessert for us.
Karen: Yes, he he.
Birgit: It’s actually quite a while since I’ve had it, you know with a little bit of homemade blackberry preserve...
Dorte: Yes.

Sonja and Dorte express agreement with Karens normative assessment that it is an example of bad cooking to use prefabricated frozen fish fingers, hence these are preferred reactions. But Birgit comes into the conversation sequence with a not-preferred reaction by declaring her taste for fish fingers and challenging the incipient formation of consensus on what is bad cooking. The non-preferred reaction is notable also because the evaluation which it follows is an ‘extreme case’ formulation (‘nobody likes fish fingers’), and Birgits disagreement contains no use of repair or hesitance (Nofsinger, 1991: 71–5). This results in a longer negotiation where Birgit ends declaring herself partly in agreement with the others by the means of the deep-fry issue. Especially Karen helps Birgit back in
the accepted social relations by admitting that there is one meal where she used to use deep-fry, namely the deep-fried camembert for dessert. This lends an opening for Birgit to react with acceptance to this invitation (preferred reaction) to talk about deep-fry in positive terms. At the same time, Birgit manages to repair upon her formulations that are interpreted as performing bad cooking. She does this by underlining that the blackberry preserve she would serve for the camembert is homemade, which is associated with performing good cooking. Thus, the content of the normative category ‘bad cooking’ has become moderated by the processes of exchanges of adjacency pairs.

**Discourse psychology**

Methods within discourse psychology tend to be placed in between conversation analysis and other types of discourse analysis. Discourse psychology is inspired by conversation analysis, but recognizes that analysis of conversations – such as focus groups – make claims that go beyond the conversational situation itself and its social performances. This is done, for example, by working with categories such as interpretive repertoires (Whetherell and Potter, 1987: 146–57) to express the institutionalization of discursive interpretations across contexts, something common to all discourse analysis. On the other hand, discourse psychology seems to be the type of discourse analysis relatively most interested in seeing discursive interaction as part of social practice, and interested in analysing how situational interaction draws upon but also negotiates, moderates and changes the larger discursive repertoires (Potter, 1996: 105).

Just like with conversation analysis, a range of concrete tools are available and different varieties of discourse psychology, so again the concrete choices for analysing focus group data must be those that are relevant for the knowledge interest in question in the research. In relation to the research project on women’s cooking, Jonathan Potter’s discourse psychology offers tools to analyse how groups form consensus and how they handle disagreements. This is relevant because the knowledge interest in the project on normativity about cooking makes it relevant to produce analyses of how such normativity is produced, challenged and negotiated in concrete social enactments. Tools to analyse this are, for example, the strategies used in conversations to construct expressions and narratives as fact-like, ‘this is how things are’ (Potter, 1996). Potter’s argument is that fact-like or factivist characterized descriptions and evaluations have a tendency to win arguments. Thus, our everyday life conversations are full of strategies to construct our own opinions and descriptions as fact-like as possible in order to form or challenge consensus and conflict, and thereby make particular social performances possible.

One of the strategies Potter suggests to look for is ‘interest management’ (Potter, 1996: 112–18). Here, participants in focus group enactments will try to down-scale their expression of personal interest in a particular description, evaluation or argumentation in order to make their own contributions seem
fact-like. Whereas the opposite strategy is called ‘category entitlement’, where participants will try to underline how their personal experiences and knowledge in terms of life situation, job or other positions make their construction of a description, evaluation or argument more authentic and thereby more fact-like. Both strategies, and others referred to by Potter, can be used when analysing how interaction in focus groups deal with consensus and conflict, and how these socially organizing processes influence and are influenced by the contextual content interpretations.

Here follows an example from the cooking project, where the sequence is from the focus group with women in their 30’s. The female participants are nearly at the end of discussions arising from the exercise mentioned in the first example with sorting food stuff in two piles – one that can be served for guests and one that cannot. In the sequence, an example of the use of the strategy ‘interest management’ can be seen.

Connie: Yes, and then there is the thing that IF it REALLY shall be delicious ... [pause] [Birte [whispering]: Then you must make it YOURSELF], then you must make it yourself.

Birte: Yep.

Connie: You know, your ... and your jam.

Ellen: Yes.

Anja: Do you really think so? You know, you can get something that’s delicious...you know honestly...

Connie [interrupts]: Yeah, you can sort of, but...

Anja: Some of that Meyer’s5 something...

Connie: Well now, I am not exactly sitting and saying what I DO in real life.

[all participants laugh]

Connie opens the sequence with the normative evaluation that you have to cook food from scratch in order for it to be appropriately pleasurable to eat. Apparently, a consensus is being formed with Birte and Ellen as not over-enthusiastic participants. Anja, however, argues explicitly against Connie’s normative evaluation, and this seems to make Connie use the strategy of ‘interest management’. She suddenly underlines that making food from scratch is just something she says, while in real life she does something else. This way, Connie achieves a displacement of the normative evaluation to only apply at a discursive level, the way people talk about cooking in general – instead of having the normative evaluation related to her own practical cooking performance and become identified as someone who poses unrealistically high expectations to cooking.

An example of the use of one of Potters other tools, the strategy ‘category entitlement’, can be seen in this following extract from the focus group with women in their 40’s where the women are discussing what they understand as good cooking.
Birgit: No, but it’s right, on ordinary days I too don’t think it’s good cooking if we ring and order three pizzas, and then ... then ... there is a burp and a fart and then you are hungry again, and actually you’ve got a lot of unhealthy stuff.

Dorte: It...actually, it CAN be Birgit ... because if it are freshly made pizzas, when you ring the pizzeria, well you know that it’s bread, and you know that it’s tomato sauce, and you know they are fresh, you ought to suppose, when you ring them instead of taking a frozen pizza.

Birgit: No, but I wouldn’t dream of doing that either. If I’m having pizza, if it was up to ME, then I make them myself, right, where we buy ... [Karen: The you could buy, ehm...] the dough and roll out and then you put on the minced meat sauce that you’ve made yourself ... [Dorte: Yeah, yeah.] and the tomatoes, then you KNOW that in the pizzerias the pan where they fry everything is FILLED with fat, almost only this fat...you know, I for example never use fat when I do minced cow I almost said, you know ... minced beef. I wouldn’t DREAM of putting fat into it.

Dorte: But at a pinch, you know ... a fresh pizza and a round of salad ... and then it’s one of those days...

Birgit: Yeah, but there I would rather choose to say, all right, don’t we have some fish we can just chuck on the frying pan or ... some other easy things, and then some vegetables, because often when you order from such a place, right, but then I order some salad to go with it, but the rest of the family they DON’T ... [pause] ... Then you sit there and eat French fries together with those pizzas, then I don’t think it’s good food any more...

Karen: Mmm [in affirmative tone of voice].
Sonja: Hmm mm [in affirmative tone of voice].
Dorte: No all right, that’s bloody true.

Birgit opens the negotiation with a normative evaluation of take-away pizzas as not being proper everyday dinner cooking. Dorte disagrees explicitly with this categorization, but she does so in a manner signalling she knows this is a non-preferred reaction to Birgit’s evaluation (by hesitating in the very beginning and using repair through the word ‘actually’). In order to handle the negotiation as potential conflict, Dorte draws upon her cooking practitioner experience by underlining that she knows exactly what is in a freshly ordered take-away pizza, compared to frozen pizzas. She does this by arguing about her own experiences in a generalized ‘you’ language, and hereby make use of the strategy ‘category entitlement’ in order to construct her experiences as fact-like. Birgit, however, uses the same strategy when explicitly disagreeing with Dorte, arguing on the basis of her knowledge as cooking practitioner about the amount of fat in take-away pizzas. When Dorte persists in trying to negotiate take-away pizzas to be constructed as not entirely unsuitable cooking by arguing on the basis of the conditions of everyday life, Birgit again enters into the same mode of interaction and argues on the basis of her very specific conditions of
everyday life (it’s impossible to order pizza without French fries on the side). In the end, a consensus is formed that take-away pizzas do not amount to suitable everyday dinner cooking when the two other participants join in with affirmative sounds, and Dorte explicitly joins this consensus.

**Positioning analysis**

Positioning theory is analytically closely related to discourse psychology and share many analytical assumptions. Positioning can be understood as a particular kind of situational fixation of interaction, where the fixation is about both identification and normativity at the same time (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999: 17). Positioning is seen as open-ended processes, which is why researchers who use these methods do not conceptualize positions or identities but rather positionings and identifications. Thus, processes of positioning are at the same time framed or structured by contextual conditions of the institutionalized social practices, and at the same time processes of positioning give everyday life actors space for performing (Davies and Harré, 1999: 35). This encourages an analytical view on interaction in, for example, focus groups where participants relate to each other through multiple positionings, rather than through unambiguous identities and norms (1999: 52). Such a view on interaction and positioning parallels the arguments within practice theory about the performativity and multiplicity of social categories, coming from the theories of intersectionality (Butler, 1990; Fenstermaker and West, 2002).

This particular analytical tool of positioning analysis resonates well with the knowledge interest in the cooking project about how women in their practical performances handle normativity about suitable cooking in everyday interaction as well as in popular cultural representations of cooking.

The following extract is from the focus group with women in their 30’s from the research project on women’s cooking. We enter the sequence in the beginning of the focus group, where the women are discussing what occupies them in relation to cooking in their everyday life at the moment. They are discussing ‘koldskål’, a particular Danish buttermilk dish, in the offset:

**Anja:** It doesn’t happen so often, but it happens some times, it’s really handy. Or sandwiches, or now it’s season for ... buttermilk pudding...

**Birte:** And I’d like to do that, but not really with all those small rusk in, my son would eat most of a bag of small rusk [Anja: Why, mine just don’t get so many, he, he], oh can’t I have some more mummy, please...

**Ellen:** That thing about small rusk, it’s cool to know that the eggs have become unhealthy, because before I would never buy buttermilk pudding in a carton ... cause I just think it was, I don’t know really, ehm ... I did not grow up with it and my mum cooks everything from scratch, so I think, no you just can’t, but now I think okay, it’s cumbersome anyway and you are not allowed to eat those raw eggs, so now that’s how it is.
Connie: Got a good excuse.
Ellen: Yes, now I’ve got such a good excuse for trying out all those different ...
... and some of them are a bit more eco-ish...
Birte: And with little dots in...
Ellen: Oh yeah ... with real vanilla...
Connie: I saw that on television, I haven’t seen it myself [he, he]
Birte: I actually got it this morning, mummy, when are we gonna have buttermilk pudding? So now you lot just sit here and pick upon that, I think I’m going to HAVE to no matter what, it has to be fun also now and then...
Ellen: For dinner, can you do it for dinner? WASN’T that what you said?
Birte: Yes.
Anja: I thought, in reality I feel a bit like this, if the alternative, if you think okay, I also didn’t grow up with such, ehm, ready made food, and I think you belch so if the alternative is to call for a pizza, then I’d rather make porridge or something like that, cause really, I just think it’s more okay.

Especially Ellen, Birte and Anja produce self-positionings in relation to what can be seen as suitable dinner cooking in this sequence, and through their exchanges of self-positionings, a particular cooking performance is being legitimized, namely to serve readymade buttermilk pudding for dinner. In this way, the situational fixation of suitable dinner cooking is expanded from first not entailing the use of neither readymade products nor dessert/breakfast formats, and then to construct readymade buttermilk pudding as an appropriate evening meal.

Another example on how the situational fixation of the definition of proper food is changed through processes of exchanges of positionings comes from the focus group with women in their 20’s. The extract comes from the part of the focus group discussions where the women together are sorting different food items into two piles, one they will serve for guests and one they will not serve for guests.

Pia: Honeycake-slices,7 I also don’t fancy that.
Susy: Honeycake-slices, they’re absolutely fine.
Pia: No, no, no, no, no, no!
Susy: Yes.
Pia: No, no, no girls ... cake is something you bake yourself.
Susy: Yeah, but I could ... [Pia: [interrupts] Even if it’s Amo8 ...] ... put them on a dish and serve them for guests, honestly really Pia, you could do that too.
Pia: No, no.
Anna: There are different guests.
Susy: Yep.
Pia: I could never ... [pause][laughter, everybody talks at the same time] ... serve honeycake-slices...

Susy: No, honeycake-slices, they are good.

Anna [he, he]: They are good.

Pia: If I should serve something ready-made, then it had to be you know cookies, REAL cookies, not clammy Karen Wolff⁹ cookies, but ... [Anna [interrupts]: I have never tasted those...] ... such cookies that have been treated and ... such luxury stuff.

Pia begins with a clear self-positioning as somebody who will not serve ready-made honeycake-slices for guests, and Susy positions herself as someone for whom it’s fine to do so. Susy does this first through categorizing the cakes, but when Pia changes her vocabulary from speaking about ‘I’ to speaking about a generalized ‘you’ and hereby makes the interaction more normative, Susy also enacts a clear self-positioning. She also strengthens this by including a fairly categorical other-positioning of Pia (‘honestly really Pia, you could do that too’). Anna suggests a compromise between the two others by introducing a distinction between different types of guests (some you can serve honeycake-slices for and some you cannot) which Susy agrees to, and they now perform an alliance about the honeycake-slices as suitable guest serving. Pia then expresses a different self-positioning in which she can serve not home-made cake, but only particular other kinds of ready-made cake than the one on the table. Thus, the explicit definition of what are suitable guest servings is changed through the exchange of enactments of self- and other-positionings. There seems to be more conflict in this example than the first (about the buttermilk dish), and this can be seen not just from the explicit verbal statements but also from the interruption with group laughter (signalling not to take it too seriously) at some point.

Conclusion

This article is written as part of the recent attempts in methodological discussions about focus groups to include the social interaction element in the analysis of focus group data. Apparently, social interactions have previously not been adequately dealt with in relation to concrete data-analysis at least in the majority of text-books. This could be due to a majority of the uses of focus groups and the text-book writings about focus groups have rested upon more or less implicit realist epistemological assumptions, which could lead to a preoccupation with analysis of contents of focus group discussions.

Thus, the article provides a contribution by suggesting what a moderate social constructivist view could imply for how to integrate analysis of social interaction forms and expressed content in focus group data-material. The specific approach in the article is a practice theoretical perspective where social life is understood as performativity, and this approach fits the current
methodological discussions on dissolving the traditional firm and hierarchical distinction between interview data and participant observational data. As a consequence, focus group data (like other types of qualitative data) are understood as social enactments throughout the article.

The rest of the article gives examples of four different but related methodological tools of analysis that can help integrating interaction and content in analysing focus group enactments, namely tools from Goffman-inspired interaction analysis, conversation analysis, discourse psychology and positioning theory. The examples are unfolded on focus group data-material from a qualitative empirical research project on how Danish women cook and relate to normative issues in cooking, and the choice of specific examples of tools of analysis are linked to the specific knowledge interests of this research project.

All four different tools are already well-established tools for analysing qualitative data, and several of them are drawn upon (more or less explicitly) in other types of analysis that seeks to integrate both social interaction and expressed content. This seems to be the case in, for example, Adele E. Clarke’s recent attempt to turn the otherwise fairly inductivist type of qualitative data-analysis, ‘Grounded Theory’ into a social constructionist approach (Clarke, 2005). Other tools can of course be used, such as discourse analysis (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002), narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004) and multi-modal ethnography (Dicks et al., 2006). Only, it is important to make sure that the tools used for data-analysis are coherent with the epistemological assumptions and the concrete knowledge interests of the research. Furthermore, I would argue that just like pure content analysis of focus group data is relatively uninteresting, and does not take the specific methodological strengths of this kind of data seriously, likewise pure interaction form analysis is a methodological dead-end for most social scientific uses of focus groups.

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NOTES

1. Funded by Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies, Roskilde University, Denmark, 2006–2007.
2. ‘Isabellas. Enthusiastic about Everyday’ is a glossy lifestyle magazine, targeted at women between 25 and 50, dealing mainly with cooking, gardening, and home decorating.
3. Those who are interested in analyses of the other types of data as, for example, cooking performances and cooking positionings, see Halkier (2009).
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. ‘Meyer’s’ is a brand of speciality foods developed by a well-known cook from Danish television.
6. Kærnemælks-koldskål is a cold buttermilk dish made with buttermilk, sugar, raw eggs, lemon juice and vanilla, traditionally served with a small rusk in. Traditionally, it was a sweet ‘starter’ along with other milk, fruit and porridge dishes, aimed at filling people’s stomachs, so they did not eat too much of the expensive meat. But from the 1970s onwards, it became a dessert-dish.

7. Honeycake-slices are ready-made small cubes of cake made with honey, coated with chocolate.

8. Amo refers to the specific brand of flours, and other baking products, including ready-made cake powders and bread mixtures.

9. Karen Wolff is the most common specific Danish brand of cheap ready-made biscuits and cookies, which you can get in every store.

REFERENCES


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