

EDITED BY
ROSALINE S. BARBOUR
& DAVID L. MORGAN

A NEW ERA IN FOCUS
GROUP RESEARCH

CHALLENGES,
INNOVATION AND
PRACTICE



A New Era in Focus Group Research

Rosaline S. Barbour • David L. Morgan
Editors

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Challenges, Innovation and Practice

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For Mike and Alasdair

✧

For Susan

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1

Setting the Scene for a New Era of Focus Group Research

Rosaline S. Barbour

Introduction

The appearance of this edited collection testifies to the ascendance of focus groups as an established method and to the variety of usages involved. No longer do social science researchers struggle to justify their choice of focus groups to ethics committees, collaborators or funding bodies, as the method has now undeniably entered the mainstream. However, with this new – and sometimes hard-won – acceptability come particular challenges: some of these are new, as researchers bring focus groups to bear in a new disciplinary context or when they use them to explore a fresh research topic; others are perennial, although some of the contributors to this volume suggest fresh approaches to addressing these. Many of the more creative developments that have occurred have not, so far, reached the wider audience they deserve.

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This book aims to redress the balance, by showcasing new usages and developments in focus group research across a range of substantive topic areas, disciplines, cultural, and theoretical contexts. It also aims to illuminate the challenges and possibilities involved in designing, carrying out, analyzing, and utilizing focus group research, recognizing the tensions between different research traditions, disciplinary emphases, funding climates, cultural and political constraints, and the ever-changing policy backdrop.

This collection seeks to cover a broad spectrum of focus group usages and associated challenges, together with their potential benefits. Drawing out differences – and, sometimes, instructive parallels – it spans focus group research in the disparate fields of sports science; health services research; sexual health; education; youth work; and political science. It explores issues including public opinion, environmental issues, sustainability and climate change. Orientations range from more traditional usages (e.g. in order to gauge participants' views) to approaches that take a more participatory – even politicized – approach to the collective production of discourse. Thus, it encompasses focus group research ranging from applied to more theoretically focused applications, macro- and micro-approaches, and, importantly, the embedding of focus groups in mixed methods designs. Some of the work showcased here involves stand-alone focus group studies, while other researchers have used focus groups alongside other methods – whether qualitative or quantitative. While some focus group teams are closely aligned along disciplinary and theoretical lines, others involve inter-disciplinary collaborations. Not surprisingly, these different situations give rise to varying opportunities for innovation – both in relation to enhancing data generation and informing data analysis.

Rather than presenting a consensus statement, the collection, in line with the reflective and reflexive potential of focus groups, themselves, seeks to highlight and debate differences of opinion and practice between contributors, thus laying the ground for future developments and further innovation.

Outline of the Book

The contributions are divided into four sections:

Section I – Using Focus Groups in New Settings

Section II – Capitalizing on Focus Groups in Mixed Methods Contexts

Section III – Innovations in Focus Group Facilitation

Section IV – Theoretical Developments

Researchers new to focus groups, or those seeking to use focus groups in uncharted topic areas, are likely to benefit from a close reading of the chapters in **Section I**, while, for more seasoned focus group researchers, these contributions may serve mainly as a concise reminder of the issues they need to address in setting up fresh projects. **Section II** is concerned with focus group research within mixed methods designs. It offers guidance for both novice and experienced focus group researchers, who may find themselves tasked with working with a new set of collaborators with different assumptions, expectations and working practices. Many funding bodies currently emphasize the importance of mixed methods and inter-disciplinary collaborations, rendering such insights relevant for increasing numbers of researchers. **Section III** (on innovations in facilitation) and **Section IV** (on theoretical developments) aim to showcase ‘state-of-the-art’ focus group applications and are likely to be of most immediate interest to those already conversant with, and enthused by, focus group research. However, novice researchers may also benefit from dipping into these chapters and extracting some ideas useful for their own projects, while reserving a repeat, but more nuanced, reading for a later stage in their focus group career.

Section I – Using Focus Groups in New Settings

This section begins with **Platts & Smith** ([Chapter 2](#)) reflecting on their experience of using focus groups – a relatively new method in the field of sports science – in order to study the closed world of professional

football. They outline some of the logistical challenges they faced and the ever-present need to negotiate power relationships; not just with regard to gaining access, but as something they had to address throughout the whole research process. Opting to use pre-existing – or pre-acquainted (Bloor et al. 2001) – groups, the researchers were able to elicit data that illuminated the processes of interaction and negotiation between young players, as they engaged in ‘face work’ through ‘focused encounters’ which afforded a unique window on their co-construction of meaning.

Much of the discussion that has, to date, taken place surrounding the use of focus groups has privileged the project-specific detail – whether this relates to technical/procedural aspects or to theoretical approaches to interpreting/analyzing data. However, it is also important to consider the broader context in which focus group research is carried out – including the funding climate. **Kohn & Christiaens** (Chapter 3) provide insights into the world of commissioning, drawing on real world examples of qualitative research, that has used focus groups, when responding to calls from a government agency. They critically examine their experience with six projects, in order to tease out the strengths and weaknesses of academic teams as compared with private sector research teams. While methodological skills are not sufficient in order to deliver a successful project, private sector teams tend to be more flexible and better equipped to produce work within tight timescales. Although academic teams generally produce work of a high scientific quality, they view their work for specific research calls as an opportunity to further their own interests and agenda and are less likely to write succinct reports that are tailored to address commissioners’ requirements. These are issues that are not usually discussed within academic circles, perhaps due to the fierce competition for research grants. However, some important lessons for focus group researchers can be drawn from this chapter.

Using focus groups in cross-cultural research is the topic of the next contribution from **Hennink** (Chapter 4), who offers advice on delivering such projects while satisfying the often-competing demands of flexibility, cultural sensitivity and rigour. She argues that, although there are overarching theoretical principles that govern focus group research, field application can – and, indeed, should – vary from project to project. Hennink

stresses the importance of remaining alert, throughout the process, to cultural norms and values and the need to cultivate a willingness on the part of the researcher/research team to adapt their research design and approach to generating data, in order to ensure that it is relevant, acceptable, and appropriate for the groups involved in the study. This chapter raises specific issues relevant to cross-cultural applications, but also highlights some perennial challenges involved in designing focus group studies, generating and analyzing data, while engaging meaningfully with participants in, and audiences for, our research.

Some focus group applications may give rise to specific constellations of challenges, as research designs are developed and implemented in the complexity that characterizes the social world. **Newman, Tepjan & Rubincam** (Chapter 5) reflect on the multiple challenges that they faced in their mixed methods study of a sensitive topic (the introduction of a rectal application with the purpose of reducing risk of HIV) with ‘hard-to-reach’ participants (men who have sex with men (MSMs)) in the cross-cultural context of Thailand – a Buddhist country, where focus groups were originally viewed suspiciously by the funding body. While insider knowledge and collaboration with trusted community-based organizations were key components for successful recruitment, the authors acknowledge that professionals occupy a very different subject position to that of research participants, and that more egalitarian relationships require a considerable amount of work. The researchers had to be flexible throughout, relying particularly on their facilitation skills, to encourage and also to temper disclosure in focus group sessions. This project also provides an exemplar of the use of focus group data in order to inform domains for use in a survey and to guide decisions with regard to a choice experiment – both challenging tasks for qualitative researchers.

Section II – Capitalizing on Focus Groups in Mixed Methods Contexts

This next section develops the theme of mixed methods applications. Focus groups have been embraced, in particular, by health services researchers and medical sociologists (Barbour 2007; 2017 in press).

Given recent funding developments and priorities, many such researchers now find themselves working as part of multi-disciplinary teams, comprising medical researchers from various specialties and a wide variety of health professionals (such as nurses, dieticians and physiotherapists), as well as health psychologists, economists and statisticians, engaged in work under the broad remit of complex interventions. **Eborall & Morton** (Chapter 6) report on their focus group work as part of an mHealth (i.e. using mobile technology) project for people with pre-diabetes. Qualitative methods are a well-accepted aspect of such work, with a range of guidelines available, including those that are overtly user-centred. The Medical Research Council (MRC) framework envisages the process as involving a cycle, comprising development, feasibility testing, implementation and evaluation. However, focus groups are most frequently used in the development phase (where they can, of course, be valuable in generating possible solutions). Eborall & Morton argue that such mixed methods research may not be using focus groups to their full potential, since they could, for example, afford useful insights if carried out prior to writing grant proposals and could also contribute meaningfully to ongoing review and modification of interventions. This mirrors, to a degree, the history of mixed methods research more generally, with qualitative methods – and particularly focus groups – often being confined to the initial phase; whereas more imaginative approaches could yield dividends (Barbour 1999).

Shek (Chapter 7) provides an account of his use of focus groups within the field of youth development programme evaluation. This involved a longitudinal, 5-year study, which looked at the experience, not just of programme recipients, but also that of programme implementers. It was also unusual in that it employed random sampling in order to convene a large number of focus groups. This led to the somewhat more controversial step of translating qualitative data in order to render it amenable to quantitative analysis – and it is this aspect that leads Shek to describe this as a mixed methods study. Also of note is the role of metaphors (more commonly used in in-depth small-scale qualitative studies) in illuminating responses to the programme.

Critically examining the practice of triangulation, **Caillaud & Flick** (Chapter 8) stress the importance of taking a reflexive approach to research design and recommend that researchers take account of the particular properties of focus groups, when seeking to combine these with other methods. They illustrate how combining focus groups with one-to-one interviews provided new insights that would otherwise not have surfaced. These involved, respectively, highlighting the normative function of knowledge about climate change, and the ways in which ecological practices were legitimated in public and in private. Thus, rather than seeking to achieve corroboration, different methods provide parallel – and potentially valuable – insights (Barbour 2014a). This constitutes an analytic resource rather than a problem – as Morgan (1993) argues: ‘... if research finds differences between the results from individual and group interviews, then the methodological goal should be to understand the *sources* of these differences’ (1993, p. 232; my emphasis).

Prades, Espluga & Horlick-Jones (Chapter 9) are also enthusiastic about the capacity of focus groups to afford privileged access to features of social life that are otherwise hard to capture. They used re-convened focus groups to uncover patterns of practical reasoning of lay citizens with regard to diverse topics (genetically modified crops; railway safety decision-making; fusion energy) and also included policymakers in order to shed light on how they draw on knowledge and to make linkages between policymaking and everyday worlds. Crucially, the reflective spaces between re-convened focus groups allowed participants to further develop their ideas and enabled researchers to develop fresh, responsive materials, such as a simulated newspaper article and an oral mapping exercise.

Rather than adopting a ‘one-size fits-all’ template, all of the authors writing here acknowledge the importance of ‘translating’ focus groups in order to meet the needs of a specific project (Morgan and Botoroff 2010). This also means that researchers have to ‘think on their feet’, constantly reviewing the research design and remaining amenable to tweaking this should the need arise.

Section III – Innovations in Focus Group Facilitation

‘Thinking on their feet’ in this way, the researchers whose work is represented in this section have all sought to use innovative methods in order to elicit focus group data. In the context of a study of neighbourhood regeneration in the wake of the London 2012 Olympic Games, **Thompson, Lewis & Taylor** (Chapter 10) used visual methods longitudinally within a participatory framework, in order to explore the unfolding perceptions of secondary school-aged children. In common with Prades et al., they wanted to involve their research participants as producers of knowledge. This formed part of a much larger study, but the researchers were, nevertheless, able to be flexible with regard to choosing their methodological approach, which led them to adopt visual methods in a spirit of experimentation and risk-taking. The gambit of setting up a room as a mock television studio proved to be popular with children and elicited impassioned and opinionated narratives. The longitudinal design allowed for repeat sessions, using clips from the original filming in order to encourage reflection, commentary on past narratives, and the creation of new and potentially more complex accounts.

Lobe (Chapter 11) outlines the possibilities afforded by synchronous online focus groups, comparing their advantages and disadvantages with face-to-face and asynchronous online focus groups. Issues such as the lack of social context cues and the limits of online video are highlighted, but Lobe argues that, amongst the advantages, is the greater scope for sample selection and, hence, coverage of various constituencies. She reflects on the skills that moderators and participants require and advocates using smaller groups than would generally be the case for face-to-face focus groups. This chapter also provides advice on technical specifications and requirements and considers, in depth, the ethical issues raised by synchronous focus groups, while acknowledging that many such issues are also present with regard to more conventional focus group formats.

Performativity is taken to a new level by **Wooten** (Chapter 12) who advocates using performance-based focus groups (PBFs), involving

physical engagement of participants' bodies. Focusing on the experience of non-native teachers of Spanish in US schools, these theatrical exercises and the incorporation of the body throughout the process of data generation afforded insights into the goals and desires of teachers. This innovative focus group format produced findings that could not have readily been gleaned using other, more conventional, methods of elicitation/facilitation. Of particular note is the role of the facilitator, or 'Joker', described here as being someone who questions, or 'problematizes' (Barbour 2007, 2017, *in press*) – which is also an approach that is of potential value in other settings. In the context of PBFPG exercises, moreover, Wooten points out that this can be empowering for participants.

Ruiz (Chapter 13) is overtly concerned with the collective production of discourse and draws on the work of the Qualitative School of Madrid – to date little known outside the context of Spanish/Latin-American social researchers. He outlines the conditions for successful production of group discourse and is careful to distinguish this from the attempt to research agreement or consensus. Although this may be the outcome of discussion groups, Ruiz unpicks such apparent agreement, emphasizing that this can be relative, tacit or implicit, and highlights the importance of the facilitator's skills in provoking, encouraging, questioning, and analyzing collective discourse.

Section IV – Theoretical Developments

Contributors to this section demonstrate the added value of theoretically informed focus group usage and make a case for embedding such insights into practice in more traditional fields. Thus, they offer valuable suggestions as to how to address that gap between theory and practice, which is frequently bemoaned by commentators on both sides of the applied-theoretical divide.

Seaton (Chapter 14) also highlights the potentially transformative power of communal narratives of identity, elicited via focus group discussions. In this case, focus groups allowed rural adolescent girls,

living in a tight-knit community, whose voices had previously been muted, to explore and consolidate their identities. Rather than viewing identity as the property of an individual, Seaton's work is underpinned by a relational framework and she examines the ways in which narrative identities were crafted and negotiated as a communal activity.

Again, using focus groups to elicit narratives, **Phoenix, Orr & Griffin** (Chapter 15) advocate a combination of visual methods and the underpinning framework afforded by socio-narrative/'socio-narratology' (Frank 2010). The empirical research on which this contribution is based looked at the perceptions of UK-based physically active older adults taking part in focus groups convened to cover different stages across the lifecourse. It critically examines the work done by stories – conveyed through visual stimuli, involving photography and film – on the collaborative production of discourse through 'narratives at work', imbued with stereotypes, contradictions, and reflexive commentaries.

Macnaghten (Chapter 16) demonstrates vividly the potential of focus groups as an 'anticipatory method', which, if used at an early stage in the consultation process, can make a significant contribution to public policy, affording valuable insights into the processes through which opinions are constructed, expressed and, subsequently, hardened into attitudes. Drawing on the experience of a range of projects, relating to new science and technology (agricultural biotechnology; climate geo-engineering; fracking); and lay ethical engagement, this chapter also serves as an object lesson in taking on board many of the recommendations made by other contributors to this collection. Macnaghten and collaborators have, throughout all these projects, employed thoughtful approaches to sampling (based on prior knowledge, e.g. of participants' habits, practical interests and investment in the future – in terms of lifecourse stage). They have also developed responsive materials, recognizing the salience of how information and issues are 'framed' (Vliegthart and van Zooten 2011), and have sought to use this as a resource, presenting participants with accounts, apparently offered by various interested parties - with different agendas. Along the way, this chapter also highlights illuminating cross-cultural comparisons. Focusing on discourses invoked, created, and challenged by participants (Barbour 2014b), in order to identify counter-narratives, the analysis

identified, amongst other things, the conditionality of public acceptance - thereby making a convincing case for the use of focus groups as a form of 'upstream public engagement'.

Public engagement is also the focus for **Duchesne** (Chapter 17), but here the topic is de-politicization. In common with Macnaghten, this research sought to elicit responses from people who were not necessarily already conversant with the issues under discussion. In order to avoid the risk of exposing participants' lack of interest or of steering talk in a particular direction, Duchesne and colleagues chose not to disclose the central topic of their research, as, indeed, did Macnaghten. Instead, the focus groups were convened around the broader topic of European integration, which blurred the focus on the absence of politicization and which also avoided the difficulties inherent in seeking to address a negative concept. Again, this project necessitated some 'thinking on their feet' on the part of researchers, who opted for small groups and sampled to allow for comparison between participants in different countries, having varying social positions and levels of political activism. Their approach to generating data was developed afresh, using some of the principles of non-directive interviewing (but adapted to a group context) and data were elicited using a card exercise, with sessions being video-recorded.

Halkier (Chapter 18) revisits here the debate regarding the relative importance of content and form in relation to analyzing focus group data. She poses the question as to the extent to which patterns of expression produced in focus groups are culturally and socially recognizable in everyday life. At one end of the continuum are those who focus on the content of data, in order to argue that patterns uncovered in focus groups are, indeed, generalizable and, at the other end, are those who emphasize the uniquely situational character of exchanges that occur in such settings. Drawing on a practice theoretical perspective, Halkier contends that everyday life consists of a mixture of tacit and explicit elements and that it also involves performativity. Illustrating her argument with excerpts from her own work on contested food habits, she concludes that it is possible to occupy a middle position: that is, it is possible to use focus groups in order to identify patterns with regard to reasoning and behaviour, while, at the same time, acknowledging that these are situationally negotiated. Halkier then offers three strategies which should ensure that,

while responses are actively constructed in the group setting, discussions are grounded in the everyday worlds of participants. These involve utilizing existing social networks; using common, even ubiquitous items as stimulus materials (in her case everyday food items); and including relevant media representations. While such choices are explicitly outlined by Halkier (and referred to by Duchesne and Macnaghten), such reasoning can be seen to implicitly underlie much of the practice that focus group researchers report – both in this volume and elsewhere.

The final chapter, from **David Morgan** (Chapter 19), makes a plea for further innovation in focus groups. He highlights the use of reconvened focus groups and suggests that these can be valuable, especially when researchers are investigating a topic to which participants have previously given little thought, and where discussion might develop as knowledge and engagement increase. Focus group researchers are also urged to consider convening very small or very large focus groups, both of which offer intriguing, but very different, possibilities. Re-examining the case for homogeneous focus groups, Morgan outlines some of the advantages afforded by heterogeneity, but stresses the importance for moderators of drawing out ‘common ground’ in order to facilitate discussion. Finally, he makes a plea – to which some contributors to this volume have already paid attention – for flexibility in research design. There is, then, considerable scope for further development, as focus groups continue to offer exciting possibilities and to pose new and engaging challenges. We look forward to seeing how future cohorts of focus group researchers employ and shape the method.

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Section I

Using Focus Groups in New Settings

2

Outsiders on the Inside: Focus Group Research with Elite Youth Footballers

Chris Platts and Andy Smith

Introduction

For a global sport that receives significant social and cultural attention and invites much comment from fans, media, current and former players, and many other interested commentators, professional football (soccer) remains a largely under-researched area academically (Roderick 2006). Of the studies that do exist, many have investigated the provision of sports science support to players and several aspects of the clinical management of conditions which may limit performance (e.g. pain and injury). These investigations have most often been conducted by researchers with an interest in disciplines such as exercise physiology, psychology, biomechanics, coaching, nutrition

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and strength and conditioning. Much less common are sociological investigations of players' experiences of working in professional football. Indeed, as Roderick and Gibbons (2015) have noted, accounts of the everyday realities of working in sports such as professional football are frequently absent from dominant portrayals of workers' lives, one consequence of which is the continued production of often one-sided, overly romanticized and glorified media-led presentations of the apparent luxuries of pursuing a career in professional football. Among other things, such one-sided views of professional players' lives are based upon a series of ideological assumptions which suggest that 'athletes must always strive to win and be successful, and that they must love their work and treat it as a privilege; they must realize, and not squander, their "God given" talents' (Roderick and Gibbons 2015: 153–54). This is especially true of younger players who seek to pursue a career in football and whose workplaces can be violent, highly authoritarian, insecure and untrustworthy underpinned by an almost constant fear of failure and punishment (Kelly and Waddington 2006; Roderick 2006).

Professional football is, thus, a notoriously difficult context for researchers to access, especially when studies investigate welfare-related issues that may produce findings which are politically uncomfortable and which may question the appropriateness of everyday practice. Brackenridge (2007), for example, noted that 'professional football clubs are often close-knit, very traditional, male-dominated environments characterized by "authoritarian leadership" and an 'almost collusive secrecy and suspicion of "outsiders"' (2007: 67). Reflecting upon the findings of research on the management of pain and injury in English professional football, Waddington (2014) also recalled the steps that were necessary in order to assure players of the anonymity of their interview responses – especially in environments where the revelation of 'insider' information to 'outsiders' is rarely welcome. Other studies of the working lives of current and former professional players (e.g. Roderick 2006, 2013), as well as aspiring young players¹ seeking entry into the apparently lucrative world of professional football

¹ Over the past 30 years or so, young footballers have been referred to using a range of labels including 'youth team players', 'scholars' and 'apprentices'. For ease of presentation, we shall refer to them here as 'players'.

(e.g. Parker 1996, 2000), have similarly identified the dilemmas and difficulties encountered by researchers undertaking sociological investigations in the generally closed social world of professional football.

These introductory remarks outline the context in which we conducted the research on which this chapter is based and which was, to our knowledge, the largest study of its kind since the publication in the mid-1990s of Parker's seminal ethnographic study of players' lives (Parker 1995, 1996, 2000). Our study involved the use of focus groups and a four-part self-completion questionnaire to investigate the working lives of 303 young elite male footballers (aged 16–18) who at the time (2008) worked in 21 professional football academies in England and Wales (Platts 2012). The questionnaires – which were conducted immediately preceding the focus groups – generated data on the types of activities players engaged in during their daily work, the amount of time they spent doing them and with whom they did them. Since young footballers are part of complex networks of social relations, focus groups were also used to identify patterns of behaviour which were not peculiar to a single individual player, but which were shared, to a greater or lesser degree, by groups of players who shared common situations. In this regard, focus groups – rather than individual interviews – were used to help replicate the collective social contexts in which players formed their impressions of their everyday experiences and illuminate processes of interaction and negotiation between them in their workplaces. In this chapter, we draw upon our experiences of conducting focus groups to examine: (i) how we negotiated access to our sample of clubs and players; (ii) how we elicited data from focus group participants, with a particular emphasis on encouraging them to share and compare experience as part of our concern with studying the co-construction of meaning; (iii) the implications of focus groups for players; and (iv) some of the disciplinary advantages conferred by focus groups held with players in the workplace.

Negotiating Access to Clubs and Players

Given the general distrust of the media, suspicion of outsiders (such as academic researchers) seeking to investigate workplace practices, and a reluctance to grant public access into highly privatized working

environments, we anticipated, from the outset, many difficulties. These related to negotiating access into what are traditionally closed social worlds and in being able to speak with young players who – while not as high status as first team players – were, nevertheless, club employees over whom influential figures had significant control. There was also a possibility that, if granted access to club premises, we might encounter first team players and other high profile figures (such as managers and coaches) making our presence potentially problematic for insiders.

In the initial planning of our focus groups and the broader study of which they were a part, we spent a considerable amount of time reflecting upon some key questions. For example, would clubs want to be involved in the study? If they were, would key gatekeepers (e.g. Academy Directors/Managers, managers and coaches) allow the researchers to be left alone with the players? Would players be released for up to 2 hours to participate in the study? How could we convince the clubs that the research would be conducted ethically and that it would be of benefit to them and their players? How could we allay any suspicions they would have of us, as outsiders, whom they have never met personally? And how would we be able to convince them of the merits of our work, relative to the many other requests they receive from researchers, so that we could meet our objectives?

Heads of Academies occupied a significant position of power and, while they might have been willing to facilitate our research, they were also able to prevent us gaining access to clubs and conducting the study as we intended. Our initial strategy towards negotiating access to clubs and players – via the Academy Manager – thus sought to operate within, rather than work against, the rather unequal, largely hierarchical, structures of power and relational constraints that characterize the workplace of professional football (Brackenridge 2007; Parker 1996; Roderick 2006). As will become clear, this strategy worked well and proved an important first step in securing access to our focus group participants.

Altogether 21 clubs agreed to participate in our research. Despite the clubs' desire to take part in the research, it was not uncommon, however, to find that, upon contacting them by phone, they had not read the research brief, were rather unclear about what they had signed up to, or were rather

vague regarding the time commitments being requested (especially for the focus groups). While partly frustrating, this process enabled us to better understand some of the more pragmatic reasons why clubs had provisionally agreed to participate in the study – reasons which we may have otherwise missed and which proved helpful in recruiting others clubs to the study. In particular, some gatekeepers explained that agreeing to participate would enable them to use our visit and the tasks (i.e. focus groups and other methods) we were proposing as part of Continuing Professional Development for staff, or as evidence for the education qualifications players were expected to undertake while pursuing their football career. Interestingly, given our focus on player education and welfare, none of the clubs explicitly stated the potential benefits of our research for them, and their players, as being amongst the reasons for granting us insider access to conduct our research! We shall return to the implications of this apparent insignificance of player education and welfare for our research later.

Eliciting Data

Context, Settings and ‘Getting Onside’

Given the anticipatory anxiety we felt prior to negotiating access to clubs, we were also mindful of the possibility that previous (perceived and real) misrepresentations of clubs and players might have further fostered emotional hostility towards us once we were ‘on-site’ inside clubs. In practice, however, when we began planning the logistical matters of our research, the majority of clubs were accommodating both of us and the requests we made of them. In the main, the Head of Academies, Education and Welfare Officers and coaches whom we met ensured the research could take place by, amongst other things, altering schedules, providing access to rooms and equipment, and most important of all leaving us alone with the players to conduct our focus groups and other methods.

In total, 41 focus groups were conducted with between four and ten players at each of the 21 clubs. For the most part, two focus groups were held in each club: one with a group of first year players (aged 16 and 17)

and one with players in the second year of their scholarship (aged 17 or 18).² In this regard, our sample of players – overall and in each focus group – was relatively homogenous, had experienced some ‘particular concrete situation’ (i.e., were seeking to secure a professional football contract) (Merton and Kendall 1946: 541), and, unlike many focus groups, consisted of ‘groups in the sociological sense of having a common identity or continuing unity, shared norms, and goals’ (Merton 1987: 555). The construction of our groups of participants in this way was intended to help encourage discussion about a range of topics and stimulate interaction amongst group members while discussions were taking place (Morgan 2010, 2012). It also enabled us to examine the different experiences recalled by players at varying stages in their careers as aspiring professionals, within and between clubs across the respective football leagues.

As Stewart and Shamdasani (2015: 97) have noted, the focus group research situation is ‘a complex interaction of the purpose of the research, the composition of the group, and the physical setting in which the group takes place’. In our research, we were clear about its purpose, had a large measure of success in securing the appropriate composition of the intended sample, but had relatively little control over the physical setting in which to conduct the research, especially the focus groups. Given the importance of maximizing continuity in the social settings of focus group discussions, we ideally wanted to conduct them in similar settings across clubs. This, however, proved impossible and we were required to be completely flexible – and above all agreeable – when accepting the locations in which to hold the discussions with players. Some focus groups were held at the club’s home ground, others at their training ground. In both settings, the availability of space varied considerably and so the focus groups were held in changing rooms, canteens, classrooms, boardrooms, hospitality lounges and a physiotherapy room. We were also required to be flexible with the timing of our

² Although it was intended that two focus groups would be held at each club, in two clubs (1 Championship; 1 League Two) players in their first year were unavailable to participate in the study, and in one Premier League club the unusually high number of players meant that three focus groups were organized over two separate visits to the club.