“In Search of …”

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New Methodological Approaches to Youth Research

Edited by

Airi-Alina Allaste and Katrin Tiidenberg

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Airi-Alina Allaste
Katrin Tiidenberg

INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH OF INVENTIVE METHODS IN YOUTH RESEARCH

KATRIN TIIDENBERG
AND AIRI-ALINA ALLASTE

Social science research methodology, particularly in the case of qualitative inquiry, has long struggled with issues of language. Discursive conventions which have emerged from social sciences' historical insecurities over their status compared to that of the natural sciences have tended to favour the use of a language which minimizes the role of creativity and passion in producing credible and reliable work. There is a strong impetus to describe our processes of data collection and analysis in ways that emphasize the usefulness and possibility of predetermining their minutiae. The language we use cannot be underestimated, it allows us "to do things and to be things"[1] in addition to informing each other. Language is a meaning-making practice that "constructs perceptions and formulates understanding"[2]—it has the power to make things important or not, understandable or not, worthy of effort or not. This is as true of what we say about our identities as it is of what pertains to our research epistemologies and methodologies.

We are fortunate to be social scientists at a time when the field has, by and large, outgrown its squabbles and rigidly contrasting approaches, paradigms and disciplines. Flexibility and skilful combination of previously unrelated techniques and practices are increasingly accepted as the new order in understanding complex and constantly changing phenomena. It has been pointed out, however, that "qualitative research requires tolerance for chaos, ambiguity, and inductive thinking, yet its written accomplishments (…) rarely display the researcher's inductive pathways or the decisions that led them down those routes."[3] The choice of what to talk about when discussing methods and what words to use has a profound

effect on fellow and future researchers who scrutinize these texts for ideas and inspiration.

Building on these premises, we have assembled this collection of fifteen methods texts by a group of thirty international youth- and social research scholars from eight European countries. A number of significant decisions influenced the design and editing of the book. Firstly, the articles mainly focus on qualitative methods. While quantitative research produces valuable findings, it is our belief that the use of qualitative methods—with the implied commitment to researching people's experiences from the inside out—offers greater potential to mirror the messiness of the everyday experiences most people, particularly youth, navigate. For decades now, sociologists[4] have been writing about transformations in social life, social order and knowledge production. Despite a noticeable fatigue in academia regarding the need to embrace the fluid and the unknown, it continues to be the condition that most of us have to deal with on a daily basis. The digital era as well has "facilitated remarkable acceleration toward de-privileging expert knowledge, decentralizing culture production, and unhooking cultural units of information from their origins."[5] Granted, calls for research methods which respect the open-endedness of life situations are by no means new, yet we can still agree with Flick, Kardoff and Steinke (2004) who say that "even if postmodernity age is perhaps already over, the processes of pluralization and dissolution, the new confusions that are referred to by this concept, continue to exist. Standardized methods need for the design of their data-collection instruments (for example, a questionnaire), some fixed idea about the subject of the investigation, whereas qualitative research can be open to what is new in the material being studied, to the unknown in the apparently familiar."[6]

Secondly, we situate this book in the space of not only qualitative but also youth inquiry. There are aspects to youth studies and methods of youth research which make them stand apart from wider qualitative research—most significantly perhaps, the tension which the adult researcher experiences in trying to make the voices of young people heard in respectful yet publicly useful ways. Young people's voices rarely shape the public discourses which surround their lives[7] and it is the responsibility of youth research to ensure that youth voices are heard among all the other teacher, parent and media voices which talk about them, their problems, their engagement with their surroundings and their future. The past decade has brought a welcome and needed influx of books which consider various aspects of youth research methods. Novice youth researchers and practitioners can find accessible, textbook-like works[8 9 10 11]; while more experienced researchers can choose from collections guided by paradigmatic

approaches which have a long tradition in youth studies, i.e., participatory action research[12] or social justice approaches.[13] Most of the recent collections attempt to acknowledge the complexities of the everyday life of young people, youth studies as a discipline, and (qualitative) inquiry in the broader sense.[14] [15] It is not our desire to replace any of these; we rather see the current collection as joining this polyphony of voices in order to further youth and qualitative inquiry as a field. Today's transnational and online environments, where young people spend an increasing amount of their time, affect research methodologies, ethics and data. As danah boyd writes in her long-awaited book "It's Complicated. The Social Lives of Networked Teens," listening to the voices of youth will give us a "hodgepodge of opportunities and challenges, changes and continuity."[16] The lives of many young people are being reconfigured by the microchip and new digital technologies. On the other hand, as boyd notes "many elements of (…) teen culture remain unchanged in the digital age. School looks remarkably familiar, and many of the same anxieties and hopes that shaped my experience are still recognizable today. Others are strikingly different, but what differs often has less to do with technology and more to do with increased consumerism, heightened competition for access to limited opportunities, and an intense amount of parental pressure, especially in wealthier communities."[17] Nevertheless, young people's lives are not framed only by their own culture and country, and youth issues need to be acknowledged, analyzed and solved in the global context. The current collection of chapters written by authors from different countries contributes to the transnational discussion on a methodological level.

Thirdly, it has been our desire to home in on ways of bending, remixing and reconsidering qualitative methods in order to better serve social and youth researchers in the twenty-first century. We have aimed to include texts that offer honest and open accounts of searching for, assembling, testing and rejecting creative, well-known and also unconventional techniques from various methodical homes. Thus, this book explores contemporary youth research by focusing on both seasoned and junior scholars' accounts of how they have used and combined lesser known and better known methods. Individual chapters provide examples of different research questions, theoretical approaches, and above all, methods. As is emphasized in the title of the book, it is not so much an overview as an inquiry into conducting youth research in the environment of constant transformation. As researchers, we are always in search of the best ways to capture and (co)-produce meaning that can be used for the greater good. We believe that this book offers fresh associations and feedback on inventive combinations of methods, research questions and theoretical

frameworks. This collection of reflections from authors in the field could be read and discussed by all who are interested in youth studies and sociology. The book can be used by postgraduate students, junior scholars, or established researchers seeking to branch out into terrain that is new to them.

Remix and relationality

In his 2010 "call to arms,"[18] the leading man of qualitative research—Norman Denzin—promotes qualitative research that is brave, committed to justice and sensitive to identities. He believes that as a community, interpretive scholars need to accept the blurring of lines and set aside binary boundaries between old and new, while still adhering to certain criteria which help assess quality. Our book sets out to respond to this call. Most of the chapters of this book—indeed the book as a whole—follow a relational[19] or remixed[20] logic. They bring together practices and techniques from various diciplines and borrow from classic research methodologies in creative ways. None of this is done for the sake of methodological posturing, but because the researchers needed to step out of their comfort zones in order to be able to interpret what they saw and experienced in an honest and ethical way. All of the authors offer their own assessments on the lessons learned from their remixes and speak in a language of honesty, which makes the non-linearity of methodological work evident. We hope this collection will allow the reader to be inspired, build on and go beyond what we were able to do.

Our search for meaning and the best ways to find it is most evident in the cases our collaborator's have worked with. These highlight the methodological and methodical choices made and take the reader through a plethora of youth experiences, such as parkour, longboarding and inline skating in Finland;[a] capoeira-Angola in the Russian cities of Samara and Ufa[b]; rainbow families in Norway[c]; youth political participation in Estonia[d] and first-generation immigrant girls in Finland[e]. In the majority of our authors' research projects it might be said that the young people themselves are in search of something. They are transforming, not from one bounded state to another, but rather they are becoming[21]—in the

[a] Chap. 4 by Päivi Harinen et al., 75–92.
[b] Chap. 9 by Tatjana Lipiäinen, 173–91.
[c] Chap. 11 by Jorid K. Hanssen, 216–32.
[d] Chap. 5 by Reelika Pirk, 93–113.
[e] Chap. 3 by Laura Kyntölä, 54–74.

Deuleuzean sense—through a "processes of movement, variation, and multiplicity."[22] Deleuze's concept of becoming is based on by multiplicity and difference and through it "we invent new forms of becoming, rather than sticking to something we already were."[23] Multiplicity is repeatedly cast into the spotlight by authors in this book; some[fgh] rely on Bakhtin's concept of the multiplicity of voices or polyphony to conceptualize their choices of research design and data analysis. "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium."[24] This dialogue of life becomes the researchers' dialogue, a dialogue of methods and a dialogue of data in the work of these authors. Moreover, many of the chapters emphasize the need to take research activities through multiple sites of data collection or analysis—these can be varied sites of meaning making in the material world or combined sites online and offline.[ijklmn] Multiple data sources are embraced in almost all of the chapters in this collection, the more creative uses being the road-movie made in response to the direction and impulse of one research participant,[o] the team reflexivity exercise through photography,[p] the analysis of popular music to conceptualize citizenship,[q] and the use of collage as a collective self-presentation technique.[r] Multiple epistemologies are evident in some chapters.[st]

This appreciation of multiplicity and relationality is increasingly evident in current sociological work. Kenneth Gergen, in his recent book "Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community," claims that "there is no

[f] Chap. 10 by Judit Strömpl, 194–215.
[g] Chap. 11 by Hanssen, 216–32.
[h] Chap. 6 by Sofia Laine et al., 116–135.
[i] Chap. 1 by Iris Summanen and Suvi Uski, 14–33.
[j] Chap. 4 by Harinen et al., 75–92.
[k] Chap. 2 by Sheila Zimic, 34–53.
[l] Chap. 10 by Strömpl, 194–215.
[m] Chap. 8 by Maria Bruselius-Jensen, Dina Danielsen and Stine Hansen, 153–72.
[n] Chap. 12 by Katrin Tiidenberg, 233–56.
[o] Chap. 7 by Reidun Follesø, 136–52.
[p] Chap. 6 by Laine et al., 116–35.
[q] Chap. 15 by Elena Omelchenko, Yana Krupets and Anna Zhelnina, 295–317.
[r] Chap. 2 by Zimic, 34–53.
[s] Chap. 13 by Raili Nugin and Elen-Maarja Trell, 258–82.
[t] Chap. 14 by David Cairns, 283–94.

isolated self or fully private experiences."[25] According to him, the world is best thought of in terms of relational confluence. What do these ontological statements have to do with research methods and this book? We believe that relationality and becoming are useful concepts not only in terms of understanding our participants' experiences and identities, but more than ever before also in terms of understanding the entire research endeavour. In his exploration of the theory of relational being, Gergen suggests that "every tradition of coordination forms a particular kind of game."[26] A methodology, even a set of methodical techniques, can be thought of through the metaphor of the game too. We can borrow and insert actions from one game to another and as we do so, the rules of the game become increasingly ambiguous.[27] Isn't this precisely what various calls for action in methodological literature have been advocating? This is exactly what we need in order to be able to better interpret the game-play of life.

To flesh out the idea of relational confluence in methodical game-play, we use Annette Markham's (2013) idea of remix as a lens in interpretative research, which, instead of inventing new methods, offers a different, generative way of creatively thinking about what we do when we engage with particular methods.[28] Remix, according to Markham, relies on "sampling, borrowing and creatively reassembling units of cultural information to create something that is used to move or persuade others"[29] and it is always "part of a larger community of remix."[30] Its power comes from the participation of others and from the the fact that the origins of the elements do not matter as long as the results resonate with the audience. As remixers, researchers work in liminal spaces to connect the "familiar with the unfamiliar, or the original element and the remixed."[31] This book as a whole and its individual chapters are all remixes in a sense, our ventures into adjusting research practices to the complexity of the phenomena we strive to understand.

Structure of the book

The book has been divided into four, ostensibly approach-led sections. We start with a section in which all of the chapters address attempts at combining techniques, research venues and methods; they are thus interdisciplinary in the more conventional sense. The second section consists of chapters which represent participatory and ethnographic research. The third section combines chapters driven by narrative thinking, while the fourth section brings together texts which take a broader approach to thinking and rethinking methodological questions.

The first part of the book, "**In Search of Multiplicity: Interdisciplinarity and (Re)mix**," opens with Iris Summanen and Suvi Uski's chapter on conducting research—more specifically online focus groups—in two quite different cultures: Finland and Chile. Based on young Chileans' and Finns' discussions of their Facebook use, the authors highlight and question issues relating to the role of the moderator, cultural differences in participant recruitment and perception of time, and positioning questions and the role of technology in interaction.

The second chapter is Sheila Zimic's "**Understanding the Notion of 'Net Generation': The Use of Collage in Young People's Descriptions of their Own Age Group**," in which she suggests that allowing young people to work in groups to remix pre-existing visual material (magazine clippings and printouts from the Internet) in order to create collages which express their image of their generation allows researchers to interpret both the collages and young people's construction of meaning.

The next chapter is Laura Kyntölä's search for the best way to interpret and understand the experiences of first-generation female immigrants in Finland. She offers an alternative to methods that compress individual actors into a homogeneous and faceless mass of immigrants in her revamping of the conventional, often quantitative, social network analysis through the use of diaries and interviews.

Päivi Harinen, Veli Liikanen, Anni Rannikko, Jussi Ronkainen and Hanna Kuninkaanniemi's "**Beyond Freeze-Frame Pictures? Using Methodological Triangulation to Understand New Youth Sports Cultures in Flux**" offers the reader a chance to witness the researchers' struggles in attempting to follow the practice and the practitioners of alternative sports, those who by definition do not want to be seen by adult eyes and yet are simultaneously highly demonstrative.

The fifth and final chapter in the first section of the book is Reelika Pirk's "**Case Study on Youth Political Participation: A Comparative Approach**," in which she shares her case-based approach with its variety of overlapping data and the use of constant comparison to shed light on the much debated issue of youth political participation in contemporary Estonia.

The second part of the book is entitled "**In Search of Dialogue: Participatory Research and Ethnography**" and opens with Sofia Laine, Elina Oinas, Leena Suurpää, Tiina-Maria Levamo, Henri Onodera, Piia Lavila and Minna Rantama's take on team ethnography at mega-events. They term their approach to teamwork and reflexivity "polyphonic ethos" and guide the reader through the choices a team must make in order to be

able to work together on a project that contains a multiplicity of research interests and needs to cover a huge ground within a limited time.

The next chapter is Reidun Follesø's "**Magic Moments with youth as participants in research**," in which she explores how to include youth on the fringes of society as active partners in research. Building on existing approaches and criticisms of Action Research, Participatory Action Research and Youth Participatory Research, Follesø tells the passionate and stirring tale of a true dialogue with participants, from changing the name of their project and consecutively the definition of the group of young people from "at risk" to "in flight" to the birth of a road movie on "magic moments" in young people's lives—at the initiative of Kevin, one of the participants.

Pursuing the participatory methods theme, the following chapter by Maria Bruselius-Jensen, Dina Danielsen, and Stine Hansen—"**Juggling Participatory Methods in the School Context: Lessons Learnt from a Study on Health Representations in Young People's Virtual Space**"—offers epistemological, ethical and educational arguments for the negotiation of the concept of participatory methods when applied in the school context.

The final chapter in this section of the book is by Tatiana Lipiäinen, who questions a practice and data that are often taken for granted in ethnographical approaches—field notes—and contemplates how the ethnographer can approach potentially overwhelming material both clearly and creatively.

The third section of the book, **In Search of Stories: Narrative and Biography**, brings together texts which share a passion for a narrative approach to identity and the social construction of reality. The section opens with Judit Strömpl's "**Online Risks: Adapting an Interactive Dialogical Narrative Method for Studying the Process of Meaning Making by Teenagers in the Focus Group Interview Context**," in which she brings her decades of experience as a narrative scholar to bear on the challenging situation of discussing online dangers and harassment in group settings. Her sensitive approach to the co-creation of difficult stories highlights questions of power between young discussants and adult moderators and shows how narrative analysis illuminates the connections between the collective, the personal and the societal metanarratives.

The second text in this section is Jorid Krane Hanssen's take on using autobiographies in an Actor Network Theory led approach in order to understand meaning making in young participants from rainbow families. Hanssen offers an honest account of autobiographies as an alternative or

an addition to interview research or the analysis of social media for autobiographic content.

The final chapter in this section is Katrin Tiidenberg's "**Great Faith in Surfaces: Visual Narrative Analysis of Selfies**," in which the author offers an exploration of a method which allows the incorporation of the analysis of both textual and visual data into coherent meaning making through the lens of narrative inquiry.

The final section of the book, **In Search of a Mindset: Epistemologies and Frameworks**, takes a step back in terms of allowing distance between the researcher's methodological inquiries and the research situations. This section is comprised of texts which offer a macro-level or an epistemological take on issues in qualitative youth research.

The section opens with Raili Nugin and Elen-Maarja Trell's "**(Re)searching Post-Socialist Rural Youth: Towards a Nuanced Understanding**," in which the authors offer a set of guidelines and focal points for researchers investigating the post-socialist rural context. Their tripatriate framework offers a way out of the one-dimensional, narrow perspective often present in research on post-socialist youth.

This is followed by David Cairns' chapter "**Learning from Experience: An Example of Youth Ethnography and Reflexive Research Practice**," which offers a deeper look at combining old and new methodologies and addresses the practical dilemmas that arise in the field when the researcher finds himself in a situation where theoretical and methodological principles suddenly lack relevance.

This section ends with Elena Omelchenko, Yana Krupets and Anna Zhelnina's chapter on studying citizenship in contemporary Russia. After offering an intriguing insight into the ambiguity of the concept of citizenship itself, they outline why they needed and how they combined multiple data collection and analysis methods which correspond to the varying notions of citizenship they employ. They home in on one of their methods—the analysis of popular songs—and highlight the benefits and drawbacks of this creative technique in analyzing complicated phenomena such as citizenship.

In a nutshell, this book allows the reader to accompany a number of youth researchers on their search for interdisciplinarity, participation, stories and epistemological frameworks conducive to qualitatively studying young people in the second decade of the twenty-first century. We hope that the opportunity to witness this search and read accounts of methodological and methodical processes written in an honest and open manner will act as an incentive for readers to creatively remix and experiment in their own work.

Notes

1 James P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis, Theory and Method* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 2.
2 Jaber F. Holstein and James A. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.
3 Nancy K. Baym and Annette N. Markham, "Introduction: Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground," in *Internet Inquiry, Conversations About Method*, ed. Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2009), ix.
4 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Anthony Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas Of Identity In Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications, 1992).
5 Annette N. Markham, "Remix Culture, Remix Methods: Reframing Qualitative Inquiry for Social Media Contexts," in *Global Dimensions of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Michael D. Giardina (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 64.
6 Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, Ines Steinke, "What is Qualitative Research? An Introduction to the Field," in *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, Ines Steinke (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2004), 5.
7 danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2014).
8 Sue Heath et al., *Researching Young People's Lives* (SAGE Publications, 2009).
9 Simon Bradford and Fin Cullen, *Research and Research Methods for Youth Practitioners* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).
10 Andy Furlong, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).
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12 Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008).
13 Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn, *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry With Youth and Communities* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2013).
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15 Andy Bennett, Mark Cieslik, Steven Miles, *Researching Youth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
16 boyd, *It's Complicated*, 16.
17 Ibid.

18 Norman K. Denzin, *The Qualitative Manifesto. A Call to Arms* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010).
19 Kenneth Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
20 Markham, "Remix Culture."
21 Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 277.
22 Rebecca Coleman, "The Becoming of Bodies," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008):168.
23 Serge Gutwirth, "Beyond Identity?" *Identity in the Information Society* 1, no. 1, 2009: 129.
24 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minnieapolis: University of Michigan Press, 1984): 293.
25 Gergen, *Relational Being*, xv.
26 Ibid., 42–43.
27 Ibid., 43.
28 Markham, "Remix Culture," 65.
29 Ibid., 70.
30 Ibid., 66.
31 Ibid.

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PART I

IN SEARCH OF MULTIPLICITY: INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND (RE)MIX

CHAPTER ONE

CONDUCTING ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

IRIS SUMMANEN AND SUVI USKI

Abstract

In this chapter, we present our reflections on an online focus group study which was conducted on two continents with participants from two different national cultures. We move beyond previous studies in that we approach online focus groups as a data collection method which is able to access different cultures in a way that facilitates the collection of exceptionally rich data.

The well-known benefits of online focus groups include not only cost efficiency and immediately available transcripts but also the "natural situation" (similar to laboratory experiment) of being online in a place of one's own choosing and the concealment of physical presence (anonymity). However, previous studies that have examined various configurations of online focus groups have generally been conducted within one national culture. Consequently, the potential to study different cultures with this method has been overlooked. As online focus groups make it extremely easy, in theory, to conduct studies with geographically distant national cultures, we now emphasize the need for investigation of the practical problems raised by the cross-cultural setting.

This chapter derives from a study of eight synchronous, real-time online focus groups conducted during the autumn of 2012. The participants were Facebook users discussing their use of Facebook. Four groups comprised Finnish participants, and four groups Chileans. On the basis of our experience, we introduce five key considerations that should promote cross-cultural use of online focus groups: 1) the role of the group moderator, 2) participant recruitment, 3) perception of time, 4) question positioning and 5) technology and interaction. If practical problems are recognized sufficiently in advance, there is a great deal of hidden potential in this method of data collection.

Keywords: online focus groups, cross-cultural research, online communication.

Introduction

Online focus group methodology has gained in popularity in a variety of research fields due to its cost efficiency, ease of access and the immediately available transcripts. It opens up new horizons for youth studies on account of its accessibility and because many young people today are considered digital natives. Digital natives are increasingly fluent in online communication which goes beyond local and national boundaries. It has also been noted that the reduction of social cues in an online environment may make participants feel less inhibited and render their participation less hierarchical as compared to face-to-face interaction.[1] Prior research has shown that shyness, for instance, can be overcome in an online environment.[2] For youth studies, which often focus on sensitive topics online, focus groups as a method of data collection offers distinct advantages.

In terms of research, focus groups offer a data collection procedure for many research purposes which need novel information, cultural accounts and group dynamics. As Morgan states: "The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group."[3] The fact that the methodology is based on a "collective understanding of participants' views" differentiates it from many other qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews (also group interviews) or observation.[4] The classical definition of focus groups by Richard Krueger[5] proposes six criteria that distinguish focus groups from other group interview techniques:

- Focus groups involve people.
- Focus groups are conducted in series.
- Participants are relatively homogeneous but do not know each other.
- Focus groups are a data collection procedure.
- Focus groups provide qualitative data.
- Focus groups have a focused discussion.

According to Turney and Pocknee,[6] a focus group moved to an online environment fulfils these six criteria. However, even though online focus groups conform to Krueger's definition and may therefore be termed focus groups, this is not to say that they do not differ from those which have been widely documented in the literature of the past seventy years. Obviously, the social interaction in traditional focus groups and in online focus groups differs. However, besides Turney and Pocknee, a number of other

researchers[7] claim that focus groups may still be called focus groups when conducted in an online environment.

Over the past two decades, online networks have facilitated intercultural and interpersonal communication in all fields, especially through the use of online tools. The technological services available offer a variety of options for focus group methodology. The numerous studies that investigate these "new" modes of focus groups have created a wealth of terminology: e.g., computer-mediated,[8] online,[9] virtual,[10] electronic,[11] group support system (GSS),[12] and Internet[13] focus groups. This can often lead to conceptual confusion which renders development in the field fragmented. Online focus groups, as we conceive of them in this chapter, are focus groups whose participants gather together in an online platform at the same time, irrespective of their geographic location.

Previous studies[14] have reached the conclusion that the online focus group method is useful for data collection and has the same characteristics as the traditional method. In this chapter, we move beyond this question to discuss how the online method functions in a setting where the interest is in one or more national cultures at the same time. Here, we employ the broadly used term "cross-cultural" to refer to the setting in which we, the researchers, are Finnish and our participants are of two nationalities—Finnish and Chilean. The subgroups are divided according to nationality. In her comprehensive book "Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice," Liamputtong[15] emphasizes Madriz's[16] view that the "collective talk" in focus groups makes it a culturally sensitive data collection method. Thus, the focus group methodology is increasingly acknowledged as a useful technique for grasping cultural differences and diversities.[17] The online environment maintains both the method's cultural sensitivity aspect (i.e., collective talk) and facilitates the conducting of studies between national cultures which are geographically far apart.

The purpose of our research project was to study the users of a social network service— Facebook—in different cultures and to investigate how the users' meaning making of their behaviour might vary between cultures. To carry out this multicultural study of Facebook users, we opted to employ online focus group methodology, as it would provide 1) a "natural situation" of being online in a place of one's own choosing, 2) research access to two continents during the same time period, 3) a shared topic of interest (Facebook use), 4) the concealment of physical presence (in order to maintain anonymity[18] within the focus group) and 5) culturally sensitive data.

Besides the qualitative analysis of the data (which is not presented in this paper), we felt it important to share our experience of conducting this

study with other researchers who employ online focus group methodology and to comment on the challenges related to conducting such focus groups in cross-cultural settings. Liamputtong[19] proposes useful guidelines for conducting cross-cultural focus groups, mentioning, for example, language issues, cultural sensitivity and practical considerations, such as transcripts and seating. Obviously, some of these guidelines, such as cultural sensitivity and language issues, apply to online focus groups, while others, such as transcripts and seating, relate only to the face-to-face situation. And the reverse is also true—there are some aspects of the cross-cultural online situation that must be taken into consideration only in an online environment. In the following, we will discuss five key considerations for conducting online focus groups in a cross-cultural setting: the role of the group moderator, participant recruitment, perception of time, question positioning, and technology and interaction.

Short description of our study

This study is based on eight synchronous, real-time online focus groups conducted in two national cultures during the autumn of 2012. Four groups comprised Finnish (Northern Europe) participants, and four groups Chileans (South America). The total number of participants was 23 (7 men and 6 women from Finland; 8 men and 2 women from Chile) with group sizes varying from 2 to 4. The age range of the participants was 18-35 years. Since the online platform fostered anonymity, the participants did not know the ages of the other group members or have access to any other identifiers. The two moderators for all of the sessions were Finnish. The Finnish language was used in the Finnish groups and Castellano in the Chilean groups.

The groups were conducted on a text-based online chat platform. The platform was technologically minimalist and coded for the simplest chat that would include only textual communication. The participants were asked to sign in to the platform by using their first name. Each participant's name appeared in a different colour on the site; no other personal identifiers were used. Immediately after the study, feedback was gathered from the participants via an e-questionnaire. We will address the description of our study in more detail in the following sections.

Adhering to the principal guidelines[20] for conducting focus groups, our group sessions adopted the following procedure. The duration of each group discussion was approximately one hour, beginning with easy-to-answer, warm-up questions (e.g., "How many times per day do you visit Facebook?") and progressing to broader, more open-ended questions (e.g.,

"What kind of behaviour do you consider to be appropriate in Facebook?"). As researchers, we would like to have had longer sessions, but this had to be negotiated in order to recruit participants and get them to engage in the study; we felt that one hour would be a more attractive option than two. Although our interview guide involved eight pre-planned questions for the groups to discuss, the aim was to allow the discussion to evolve as naturally as possible. Thus, taking into account the different group dynamics of each of the discussions, we did not follow a strict order in asking the questions; instead, we attempted to tie the questions to themes that evolved during discussion.

In the next sections, we will describe five lessons we learned while carrying out online focus group discussions with participant groups from Finland and Chile.

The role of the group moderator

In traditional face-to-face focus groups, the group moderator plays a central role in steering the group.[21] We take the view that the focal task of the group moderator is not to interview the participants but to act as a facilitator of the interaction, encouraging all the participants to take part in the discussion.[22] Our study followed the five guidelines[23] which support the moderator's role as a facilitator:

- Allow the discussion to develop naturally (e.g., do not strictly follow the anticipated sequence of questions).
- Ensure that the focus of the discussion stays on the subject (i.e., steer carefully).
- Remain non-judgmental and non-authoritative.
- Encourage the participants to express their differing views.
- Try to involve all the participants in the discussion.

In traditional focus group methodology, the moderator plays an important role. But does this role differ when reassigned to an online focus group? As online focus group interaction is distinct from that of face-to-face interaction, the moderator's role undergoes some changes, as Hughes and Lang[24] state: "…the moderator simply needs an alternative set of skills, based on the possibilities and conventions of chat room communication." The lack of physical presence places greater emphasis on textual verbal communication. It is commonly noted that to be able to conduct an online focus group, the moderator needs to possess some online-communication skills.[25] For instance, Fox, Morris and Rumsey[26] suggest

that to some extent the moderator needs to be a fast typist and should have at least some previous experience of online chats. In keeping with this view, Hughes and Lang underscore the fact that an experienced chat-moderator knows how to employ (and interpret) "non-standard" uses of text, such as emoticons. Gaiser[27] also points out that the online focus group moderator needs to be extremely attentive to such verbal cues, since this is where the group dynamics lie in an online situation, "embedded in the participants' language and verbal cues."

From previous studies of online focus groups, it has emerged that the online environment changes the moderator's role. At the same time, however, it can be said that this change does not mean that the role becomes any less important or, for that matter, any easier, quite the contrary. The online focus group moderator needs to possess both the conventional moderator skills and the skills needed in technology-mediated interaction.[28] As mentioned above, we opted to have two moderators in each session: one visible to the participants and the other in the background, supporting the interaction. Although the participants could see only one moderator typing in comments and questions, the steering was actually carried out in collaboration between the two researchers, who were both observing the discussion. We propose that this is one of the benefits of online focus groups—the co-existence of multiple moderators whose interpersonal communication does not interfere with the interaction of the rest of the group. Unlike in a face-to-face group discussion, in an online environment the formulation of questions can be negotiated between the researchers separately before the comments are published on the chat platform.

A primary challenge for the moderators in our study was the cross-cultural context. As mentioned above, in both contexts the two moderators were Finnish. Both were familiar with Latin American culture and fluent in Spanish—they also understood Castellano but wrote in Spanish. At the time of recruitment, the participants were informed that we were interested in studying how people use Facebook in different cultures, so both the Chilean and Finnish participants started from the assumption that they were speaking from their own cultural viewpoint. Given this study setting, it was noticeable that the participants from the Chilean groups explicitly highlighted their culture in the discussions in order to facilitate the Finnish moderators' understanding. For instance, in the following comments the participants explicitly emphasize (see the underlined text) the Chilean context of their Facebook use:

> 16:25:13 Alejandro: mm, a little, at the beginning I created an account to be in contact with my foreign friends (*in 2007 it was not commonly used in Chile*) and later when my friends joined I started to use it more (Chile Group 1)

> 19:32:25 Jorge: for, *at least here in Chile*, this is what is happening at the moment. (Chile Group 2)

We did not, however, observe this type of reference to Finnish culture in the Finnish groups; the participants and the moderator shared the same national and cultural background, therefore it was not necessary to explain when Facebook became popular in Finland, for instance. In general, the Finnish groups (unlike the Chilean groups) did not explicitly emphasize the fact that their Facebook habits were specifically linked to the Finnish context. This can be seen as one of the advantages of conducting focus groups in different cultures—the possibility to observe how the culture is promoted in the discussion. In discussions where the moderator is from a different background, this kind of interesting, "self-evident," cultural artefact may emerge, but may also be circumvented in a group where everyone shares the same cultural knowledge.[29] Taking these observations into consideration, we believe that handling a "global theme" (such as Facebook use) in two different cultures can produce data that renders the cultural context more salient, thus enriching our understanding of how interpretations are attached to cultural context.

Additionally, it should be noted that the discussion in a focus group is not only addressed to the moderator; on the contrary, an essential part of the focus group methodology is that the participants interact with one another.[30] Unlike in an interview situation, not only is there a Finnish interviewer and a Chilean interviewee present in the group, there is also a group of participants who are sharing their views. In this sense, the situation is somewhat different to the one-to-one interview. Participants in a group are expected to make claims about Facebook use in their culture that are recognized as valid to the other group members who share the same culture; if they do not, their claims will most probably be challenged in the discussion.

It could be also claimed that in a text-based online focus group, cultural differences are less in evidence than in a face-to-face situation. This can be considered a significant aspect of the online environment in a cross-cultural setting, if we take into account Liamputtong's[31] remark that "in many cultures the social positions of people are based on a hierarchy which determines who can speak first and/or last." Furthermore, Nicholas et al.[32] argue that since interpersonal differences and external cues by and

large fade out in an online situation, the online environment can reduce stereotyping. In a face-to-face situation, some information on the other participants is always automatically on display (e.g., gender and age), whereas for a group interacting via computers, the communication may even be entirely anonymous, if so desired. In practical terms, this implies that if information on, for example, the gender and age of other participants' is not automatically revealed, it becomes a matter of selection. Additionally, online situations can block the most visible cultural differences; in our study, for example, by choosing to use our first names as the only personal identifier, we kept our typical Finnish physical appearance out of the situation—it would have been an obvious reminder to the Chilean groups of our different cultural background. The benefits of this "lack of physical presence" in online focus groups have also been recognized in the field of health research. For instance, Fox, Morris and Rumsey[33] have used online focus groups to study appearance-related concerns among young people with chronic skin conditions (people who might have been reluctant to participate in a face-to-face focus group). In youth studies, this lack of visible cues as to the age and gender of the moderators and participants can be beneficial, since—in their absence—potential social gaps are less obvious and a sense of equality may be enhanced. For example, in our study the participant age range was quite wide, varying from 18-year-old young adults to 35-year-old adults, and by using online communication we were at liberty to choose whether we wanted to make age a salient factor or not. We chose to exclude age, since we wanted to minimize all factors that could create a sense of hierarchy among the participants.

Participant recruitment

The commonly recommended size for a traditional face-to-face focus group is 4-8 or 6-12 participants; the number varies slightly depending on the source.[34] Krueger[35] maintains that the group needs to be small enough to facilitate the sharing of ideas, yet large enough to allow for a diversity of perspectives.

The number of participants in an online focus group greatly depends on whether it is a synchronous or an asynchronous group. In an asynchronous group—based on an e-mail list, for example—the communication allows for lengthier and more pondered responses; in a real-time, synchronous focus group, the communication is more chaotic and fast-paced, and can be perceived as closer to a face-to-face situation than in an asynchronous group.[36] As in conventional face-to-face focus groups,[37] studies in-

vestigating synchronous online focus groups have favoured the use of a small number of participants.[38]

In Easton, Easton and Belch's[39] experimental study, it was demonstrated that not only face-to-face focus groups but also electronically conducted focus groups were more efficient with a smaller number of people. A small number of participants is also favoured by Fox, Morris and Rumsey, who contend that in a large synchronous online discussion group, the speed of comments can be so rapid that important points may be overlooked. This is also a consideration for the moderator, as pointed out by Fox et al.[40]: "the number of participants can be crucial to the moderator's sense of control." Based on their personal experience of moderating a synchronous online focus group, Fox et al.[41] recommend that the number of participants per one moderator should not exceed five. Hughes and Lang[42] concur with this figure, claiming that even two moderators tend to be kept busy in a session with five participants. Additionally, based on our experience of life in Finland and within the Finnish research context, we decided to use smaller rather than larger groups in order to enable even the shyest people to participate in the discussion. Moreover, we anticipated that smaller groups would be easier to moderate given that we felt challenged by the use of technology and non-native language communication. Thus, we opted to form groups consisting of a maximum of four persons. Similarly to Hughes and Lang, we found that two moderators were not in any sense a surfeit, even when our largest groups consisted of only four participants.

However, it transpired that the group sizes were even smaller than we had anticipated. This was most probably due to the particular nature of the communication culture in the two national cultures. The recruitment procedure was similar in both contexts—both the Chilean and Finnish participants were recruited via Facebook. With the help of our networks, we managed to get people interested in our study quite quickly. The participants signed up for the study in an e-form, after which an e-mail was sent to them confirming the date of their participation. In addition, all the participants received a reminder about the study closer to their participation date. Despite our careful recruitment procedure, one participant from each Chilean group failed to attend the session; this happened in only one of the Finnish groups. In the case of Chilean groups, the reasons are unclear, as no explanations were forthcoming. It could, perhaps, be attributed to the different communication culture or simply to the fact that the recruitment procedure which worked with the Finnish participants did not function in the Chilean context. When considering cross-cultural recruitment in the future, we believe that a good strategy would be to devote more time to