6.3 Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used within a wide range of academic disciplines. The method's historic roots lie in Anglo-Saxon market and advertising research from the 1940s, where test persons were presented with stimuli in the form of product packaging or advertising films and their reactions to it were recorded. The temporal point of view was the focus of researchers' attention, as the reaction of multiple test persons could be recorded simultaneously (cf. Loos and Schäffer 15). In the mid-1950s, the German Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung and other schools pushed for a new orientation toward group dynamics in focus group research. This new focus on group dynamics stressed the fact that individuals' opinions often only become apparent in discourse with others (cf. Loos and Schäffer 20). Since the early 2000s, focus groups have become increasingly popular in socio- and educational-scientific research, whereas they remain rare within cultural anthropologists' methodological repertoires (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 112; cf. Boellstorff et al. 105).[4] This may have something to do with the fact that "focus groups are artificially set up situations" (Kitzinger as cited in Jowett and O'Toole 458); although they may resemble participant observation when the conversation is flowing, they are not "natural" situations, but social situations created by the researcher, but then one-on-one interviews are so, too. Unlike focused one-to-one interviews, where the interviewee is encouraged to speak about all possible aspects, arguments and value judgments connected to a specific topic through a more or less elaborated and fixed set of questions, the discussion between participants within focus groups is guided by a few stimuli given by the moderator (cf. Zwick and Schröter 27). Here, stimuli are not restricted to questions, but also include the distribution of short articles to read and discuss, or the presentation of pictures or short video clips meant to stimulate exchange between the discussants. The main idea behind this method is to facilitate the effects of group dynamics, which are believed to have a positive influence on the participants' engagement and willingness to provide information (cf. Schulz 13). For example, new ideas and points of view may be stimulated by spontaneous comments within the group that would otherwise remain hidden or unrecognised in one-to-one interviews (cf. Schulz 12). While one-to-one interviews typically lead to deeper insights into

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to expand her (geographical reach) in data collection beyond what would otherwise be possible (cf. Kee and Browning 4). Telephone interviews also appear to me to be a chance for scholars with physical disabilities broaden the reach of their research.

4   Dissertations like that by Sabine Wöhlke are a rare exception. In Geschenkte Organe?, the German cultural anthropologist discusses ethical and cultural challenges in familial live kidney donations (cf. 67ff.).

the individual attitudes and experiences of interviewees (cf. Schulz 13), it is impossible to harvest as wide a range of opinions as in focus groups. In times in which opinions and attitudes are regarded as socially constructed, fragmented, and ephemeral, the method of the focus group does justice to this fact by paying close attention to the interaction process, deliberation, and the formation of opinion through mutual communication (cf. Littig and Wallace 10).

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, participant observation, interviews, and focus groups were identified as the methodological cornerstones of the investigation. Most importantly, the suitability of established methods of ethnography, regardless of whether one researches predominantly online or offline situations, was stressed. Alongside her participants, the researcher "lives everything at once" (Miller 28) during periods of participant observation. This is also true for interviews, which "must be viewed as social events in which the interviewer […] is a participant observer" (Hammersley and Atkinson 120). Once again, the chapter illustrates that "(e)thnography is a lived craft rather than a protocol which can be separated from the particular study or the person carrying it out" (Hine, *Ethnography* 13).