

# SAGE research methods cases

## Analyzing Focus Groups About Poverty in the Early Years Using a Narrative Approach

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**Abstract**

This case draws on the author's doctoral studies about practitioners' narratives of poverty in the early years. The case discusses how focus groups provide a useful way of exploring early years practitioners' (EY practitioners) understandings of child poverty. The research was based in two Sure Start Children Centres with onsite Nursery Schools and Daycare provision in the South of England. Overall 40 EY practitioners took part in six focus groups. A "secret box" and newspaper article were used to help stimulate discussion and address issues of power within the groups. A narrative approach was chosen to analyze the focus groups based on Riessman's dialogic/performance analytical approach. Lessons learnt included: using innovative strategies to help facilitate focus groups, allowing sufficient time to analyze data, and the developmental nature of the analysis process. It is concluded that focus groups provide a rich source of narrative data particularly for examining how participants co-construct understandings and meanings relating to child poverty.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Decide when it would be appropriate to use a focus group
- Plan an analysis of a focus group using a narrative approach
- Understand some of the challenges of using focus groups and how these might be addressed.

**Context of the Study**

This case study draws on my doctoral studies about early years practitioners' narratives of poverty in the early years. The impact of poverty on children's lives is pervasive and enduring. By the age of 5 years, there is a significant gap between children's attainment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) between those living in deprived areas and children in other areas which continues throughout their education (Department for Education [DfE], 2014b; Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Children living in areas of deprivation or with parents on lower incomes are likely to have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Ridge (2011) in her research about the experiences of low income children in the United Kingdom concludes that poverty permeates every area of children's lives, including the economic, social, and relational causing isolation and exclusion from society. Latest figures, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (2017), indicate there were 20% of children living in poverty in the United Kingdom during 2015/2016 based on "before housing costs." With "after housing costs" taken into consideration this figure rises to 30% equating to 4.0 million children living in families with an income below 60% of the median household income. The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that relative child poverty levels will rise to 36% in 2021/2022 returning to the same level of poverty in 1997 when Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, announced his pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020 (Hood & Waters, 2017).

**Project Overview**

The aim of my doctoral study was to explore Early Years Practitioners' (EY practitioners) understandings of child poverty within early years settings and how this intersected with their narratives of professional and personal identity and political discourses of poverty in the United Kingdom. A qualitative narrative approach was chosen to gain an in depth understanding of how EY practitioners' meanings of child poverty were constructed and to understand the complexity of how this connected or disconnected with political discourses of poverty. My ontological and epistemological positions were in keeping with a relativist position, that "there are multiple constructed *realities*, rather than a single, pre-social reality or mind-independent truth" and "constructivism," that is, the world is constructed through "discourses," there is no one discernible truth or way of seeing the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 27). In simple terms, I took the position that there were multiple ways that EY practitioners construct their understandings of child poverty through the narratives they tell.

**Research Design**

The study took place in two Sure Start Children Centres with onsite Nursery Schools for children aged 3 to 4 years and Daycare provision for children aged 0 to 2 years in the South England. Sure Start Children Centres are managed by local authorities and deliver services to young children and families in an integrated way. A decision to use Sure Start Children Centres was made because they were part of the government's poverty strategy to improve outcomes for young children and families and reduce inequalities for those families in the greatest need (DfE, 2013, p. 6). The research design included focus groups and individual interviews with EY practitioners from both centers. The decision to use both focus groups and individual interviews to collect data was twofold. Focus groups were chosen as a way of opening up a debate within each center about key narratives and co-constructions of poverty within the setting. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore early year practitioners' personal understandings and narratives of poverty in the early years. The research was conducted in three stages. All EY practitioners within both centers were invited to take part in a focus group, followed by an individual interview and then a final discussion group to discuss preliminary findings from the analysis of the data.

Overall, 40 EY practitioners took part in six focus groups, 16 EY practitioners took part in individual semi-structured interviews and 5 participants took part in the final discussion group. The sample included a wide range of EY practitioners, including teachers with qualified teacher status, nursery nurses, teaching assistants, managers, early year advisors, family outreach, and support workers and early years teachers. All participants described themselves as White British and female. The sample reflected the general population of early years practitioners working in the United Kingdom with 98% of workers being female and 80% to 93% being White British (DfE, 2014a).

**Conducting Focus Groups**

Three focus groups were conducted in each center, one with practitioners from the Nursery School, one with practitioners from Daycare and one with practitioners from the Children's Centre. Two of the biggest challenges was finding a convenient time to meet with practitioners as a group and managing the size of the groups. Both centers agreed that I could conduct the focus groups within a staff meeting. The first setting allowed me to meet the staff before conducting the focus groups, which enabled me to explain the project and gain consent in advance. However, in the second centre, it was not possible to meet with participants prior to the focus group, which resulted in explaining the project and gaining consent on day of the discussion. Consequently, the time left to conduct two of the focus groups was very limited, 18 and 12 min, respectively (see [Table 1](#) below). In addition, one of the focus groups was very long, 58 min, resulting in large amount of data to transcribe and analyze which was particularly time consuming.[CE1]

**Table 1. Focus groups.**

Centre	Setting	Length of focus group	Number of participants
1	Nursery school	35 min	5
	Daycare	37 min	11
	Children's centre	58 min	7
	Nursery school	18 min	3

2	Daycare	12 min	11
	Children's centre	45 min	3

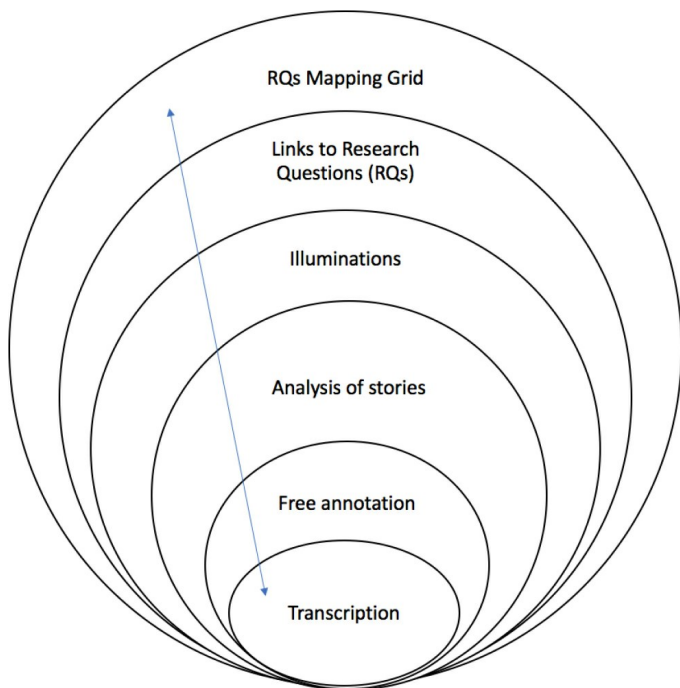
Krueger and Casey (2015) recommend five to eight participants in a focus group, particularly where a topic is complex and participants are likely to have strong feelings. However, in reality it was difficult to manage the number of participants because of the constraints of meeting times offered and not wanting to exclude anyone who wanted to participate. As a result, two groups had large numbers, 11 participants in both. In anticipation of some participants feeling self-conscious about contributing within a larger group, the opportunity to use a "secret box" was given. The technique was adapted from a study by Punch (2002) who used it with young people at the beginning of a group discussion. The young people were invited to post written comments into a "secret box" about things that they did not want anyone else to know. In my study, I introduced the "secret box" at the end of each focus group. Participants were invited to anonymously complete a card about anything they wanted to add to the discussion which they had not wanted to share in front of others or did not have an opportunity to discuss. Two participants completed the cards, one of whom later told me in her individual interview that she did not want to say anything in the focus group because she felt shy speaking in front of others.

In addition to the "secret box," a newspaper article from *The Guardian* (Gentleman, 2015) was used as a stimulus to prompt an initial discussion about poverty. As Punch (2002) suggests such a technique is especially useful when exploring a potentially sensitive topic where there might be unequal power relationships within the group or between the researcher and participants. In this case, poverty in the early years is something that may have been affecting participants personally as the sector has historically been associated with low wages and poor working conditions (Osgood, 2009). In addition, some groups included managers, which might have made other participants feel uncomfortable. The newspaper article, proved to be particularly successful in generating discussion in all six focus groups, and was often revisited at different points in the discussion. The article was deliberately chosen to stimulate debate with the headline posing the question: "Is poverty caused by not having any money, or is it the result of lifestyle choices like *unstable relationships* and *debt and addiction*?" (Gentleman, 2015).

**Method "in Action"—Using a Narrative Approach to Analyze Focus Groups**

According to Riessman (2008), narrative analysis refers to a "family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form" (p. 11). This appeared to be an appropriate approach to take, as I was interested in how EY practitioners' narratives can help to explore their understandings of child poverty. I decided to take a dialogic/performance analytical approach, as I wanted to explore how understandings of poverty in the early years were co-constructed within the narratives that EY practitioners told. Riessman (2008, p. 105) describes dialogic/performance analysis as "a broad and varied interpretative approach," which "interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative." This approach facilitates interrogation of both the local context (co-production of stories between the participants and the researcher) as well as the broader context (how society and culture are constructed within the narrative). This was an appropriate approach because I was interested in how EY practitioners co-constructed narratives of poverty within the setting as well as links to broader political discourses of poverty. Dialogic/performance analysis draws on Goffman's (1969) theory of performance of identity and how this is constructed in relation to audience. Riessman (2008) suggests that performances of identity are "plurivocal," that is, the narrator's voice is only one of many constructed within the narrative. Equally, the analyst and reader present further voices through their engagement with the narrative bringing their own positions to interpretation. As interviewer and analyst, I positioned myself as part of the co-construction of the narrative and included my questions and comments in the transcription and analysis of the focus groups.

**Figure 1. Using a narrative approach to analyze focus groups.**



The analytical process is summarized above in Figure 1. It is presented as a series of concentric circles, starting with the smallest circle. As Cook (2009) points out research is a "messy business" with data analysis often being the "most messy." This was certainly the case in my experience and rather than having neat linear stages my analysis was more organic and evolved throughout the process. During the process, I often returned to earlier stages as my ideas around the analysis developed, this forwards and backwards process is represented by the double edged arrow in Figure 1. The process broadly follows the stages listed below:

- "Transcription" involved transcribing the focus group, listening to the transcription, checking that the transcription was accurate and that lines were numbered for ease of reference.

- “Free Annotation” was noting down anything which struck me as interesting and looking at where participants were co-constructing narratives, with a particular focus on words at the beginning of sentences, such as, “and” (often used to build/support a narrative) and “but” (often used to disrupt or divert a narrative).
- “Analysis of stories” involved looking at several elements, such as, individual characters and their overall stories, for example, What story are they telling? How do stories get interrupted or diverted? How are characters constructed? To make this stage more manageable I divided the focus group up into units of analysis, which I loosely termed “stories.” These are not stories in the traditional sense of Labov and Waletzky (1967) which have a clear structure and temporal sequence. Instead they are based on Gee’s (1991) idea of units of analysis which divides narratives into stanzas or units of meaning. This part of the process was the most complex and very time consuming. To illustrate how I approached the analysis, I have provided an example from focus group 1. The extract below is taken from the end of the focus group where Jackie and Carol, both teachers, are talking about how low pay and zero hour contracts are a challenge to parents who want to work:

Jackie: ..and the annoying thing is that politicians talk about um getting parents back to work as though they’re all going to go into a lovely career on a good salary that they’re all professionals but most of them go into crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours you know and they just never mention that do they?

Carol:... things like zero hour contracts ... but you can’t turn round to the nursery school and say oh I know I’ve paid for daycare but actually MacDonalds isn’t busy today so they’ve sent me home so actually I don’t want to pay you because the nursery school would say terribly sorry you’ve got a contract with us and you’ve got to pay us or you know

Focus group facilitator: yer ...it’s real challenge isn’t it?

Carol: ... tis a challenge.

In this short story, Jackie comments on how politicians talk about parents “going into a lovely career” when the reality is they are offered “crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours.” She contests the government discourse of “work pays” (Department of Work and Pensions, 2017), by suggesting that a “lovely career on a good salary” is not available for many parents in poverty. Jackie talks about “zero hour contracts” and how this is very difficult for parents, particularly if they need to arrange childcare. Carol constructs a story about a parent who has arranged childcare because they are expecting to work at MacDonald’s, however, she is not needed at MacDonalds and ends up having to pay for the childcare because it is too late to cancel. Here she builds on Carol’s story again contesting the political discourse of “work pays” by suggesting that for parents on zero hour contracts work is precarious and unreliable.

- Once I had completed the analysis of the focus group I summarized the main ideas or themes, which had been “illuminated.”
- In “links to research questions” I made links between my “illuminations” and the aims of my study, as appropriate.
- Finally, I entered a summary of the main points from each focus group onto a “mapping grid,” which linked to the overall research questions for my study (see an example in Table 2).[PC2]

Table 2. Example of mapping grid.

	How do EY practitioners understand child poverty within early year settings and its relation to political discourses of poverty	How does professional and personal identity shape EY practitioners’ narratives of child poverty?	How do political narratives of poverty (dis)connect with EY practitioners’ understandings of child poverty?
1	In Focus Group 1 practitioners co-construct an understanding of poverty around different characterisations of parents. They discuss different aspects, such as, education, work and benefits. There is a strong link to “work” and how some parents try to provide for their children by juggling complex work situations and struggling to meet the needs of their children because of low wages and work insecurity.	As a group they present themselves as those who are knowing about families and know how to support and signpost them. Some practitioners closely identify with those in poverty citing their own examples of financial difficulty.	The participants provide a challenge to government policy throughout the FG, suggesting that they are not “docile” subjects but are prepared to challenge. In the examples below, the practitioners are a site of revolt as they challenge neoliberalism through their critique of government policy (and alternative characterisations of parents in poverty).

**Practical Lessons Learned**

Overall, there were three key lessons that I learnt from using focus groups and taking a narrative approach to analysis. First, techniques, such as, the “secret box” and a carefully chosen article aimed to stimulate discussion can be incredibly useful if you have shy participants or a topic which might be potentially sensitive or controversial. Second, allow plenty of time to analyze your data, narrative approaches are particularly time consuming and difficult to rush. Third, keep detailed notes of your analytical process, often the process will evolve as you go along and you may need to explain changes that you have made in the write up of your research.

**Conclusions**

Overall, I found the focus groups a rich source of narrative data, which gave a helpful context of understandings of poverty within the different settings and helped to complement the data I gathered from the individual interviews. Taking a narrative approach to analyze focus groups is particularly useful if you want to examine how participants co-construct understandings and meanings. The approach is very adaptable, and there are many different ways that it can be used, as indicated by Riessman (2008) in the further reading.

**Exercises and Discussion Questions**

1. When would you use a focus group?
2. How would you plan for a focus group? What might be the challenges?
3. When would a narrative approach to analysis be useful?
4. How would you record the analytical process? What considerations would you need to make?

**Further Reading**

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London, England: SAGE.
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**Web Resources**

Centre for Narrative Research (CNR). <https://www.uel.ac.uk/schools/social-sciences/our-research-and-engagement/research/centre-for-narrative-research>

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