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Focus group discourses in a mined landscape

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Abstract

Focus group research is rarely used for examining environmental discourses other than when conflict arises. This study looks at local citizen perceptions in relation to mined (or ‘cutaway’) industrial peatland landscapes in Ireland, and seeks to shine a light on the opinions of potential actors, and the degree of willingness to participate in after-use strategies, through focus group sessions. Data are analysed using two mechanisms – content and discourse analysis. It is shown that there is a high degree of reflective perceptions on issues of quality of life and the environment with a low level of concern about further use of peatlands as places of employment – a shift from a productive, utilitarian perception to a post-productive, non-utilitarian perception. It is also shown that, when presented with a scenario that sees cutaway peatlands being used for amenity and biodiversity, there are no negative issues and some degree of enthusiasm. This paper will conclude with remarks on focus group methodologies.

Key words: Focus groups, peat mining, landscape perception, methodology.

Introduction

Background

Focus group research is an interpretative research paradigm using a qualitative methodology. Prior to the 1970s, focus groups were popular within commercial market research and, as a result, very little empirical data from this area are available (for a detailed timeline of focus group development in the last 80 years see Stewart, et al., 2006 p. 3/4). Since the 1980s focus groups have been used increasingly in academic research, especially in community healthcare research. At the same time, Morgan and Spanish (1984) argued that sociological research would benefit significantly from the use of focus groups specifically for triangulation of data gathered using other methodologies. However, Sim (1998) warns that focus group data should be analysed with the knowledge that the data produced in such settings may be suspect and artificial. Specifically, any apparent consensus of the group may have more to do with group dynamics and peer pressure (real or perceived). In addition, though it is possible to record participants' range of viewpoints, it is difficult to measure the strength of opinion and so inference may or may not be drawn from the presence or absence of specific topics or issues between several groups. Finally, it may not be possible to generalise empirically but theoretical generalisation may be more realistic (Sim, 1998). Consequently, this method of establishing stakeholder perceptions in dispersed inhabited landscapes may reveal more about social dynamics than landscape perceptions, though these are seen as interlinked in rural landscapes (Antrop, 2005; Council of Europe, 2000; Selman and Wragg, 1999). There are several advantages,

however, to the use of semi- or non-standardised focus group research within a planning process for new landscapes, and a selected number of these, as they relate to the research reported here, are outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Focus groups may be used to gather a disparate group together, such as randomly selected stakeholders within spatially diverse locations (such as rural areas), as well as targeted stakeholder coalitions (such as special interest or pressure groups). Such focus groups are known to bring disparate perspectives together and thus produce a degree of perceptual knowledge (Morgan, 1997; Morgan and Spanish, 1984). Focus groups with randomly selected participants may yield more generalised information, which can be useful when seeking insights into the broader issues and their relevance in the general population, and could be an ideal method for establishing baseline conditions prior to an environmental initiative. More ‘focused’ groups (that is, groups of stakeholders with similar opinions or interests such as farmers or business people) can manifest consensus on specific issues and may be more useful at gaining insight into motivations and a potential willingness to participate. When it comes to environmental research the focus group research methodology is rarely utilised to garner baseline stakeholder values prior to planning an environmental project or after-use of an emerging landscape. Rather, planners often approach focus group sessions with a set of potential plans upon which they are seeking feedback and consensus on existing plans rather than eliciting new ideas. Though this ‘group interviewing’ can be useful in addressing potential conflict, the gathering of stakeholder opinion prior to an environmental action is rarely carried

out (Meffe, et al., 2002). This paper argues that the use of focus groups to generate ideas is functionally useful in planning for the after-use of mined landscapes, in this case after industrial extraction of peatlands, so it may be helpful to describe the landscape in question.

Peatlands in Ireland

Peat extraction in Ireland dates back many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years (Feehan and O'Donovan, 1996) and much of the Irish landscape (around 16-17% or around 1.2mha²) is classed as peatland (Hammond, 1981), colloquially known as bog. The location of this study is in two Counties (Longford and Roscommon) in the North Midlands of Ireland which straddle the River Shannon (see Figure 1). This is a location where there are many peatlands and harvesting, manually and industrially, pervades the physical and cultural landscape. Manual harvesting is traditional in Ireland and there are many households who still have the right to harvest peat for domestic, non-commercial purposes (known as 'turbary' rights). Industrial or commercial harvesting of milled peat is more extensive (ca. 14.5 million m³ per annum nationwide), with much of the harvested material in this location going to feed the local electricity generating station.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The industrial sites are owned and operated by a semi-state company which operates under strictly regulated conditions and obtains operations licences from the Irish Environmental Protection Agency. Both the extraction company and the power station

have been significant employers locally over the years. Within the next twenty to thirty years between 80,000ha to 100,000ha of these industrial peatland will be deemed 'cutaway', resulting in post-industrial landscapes of various dimensions, embedded within the central region of Ireland. The location for the survey reported here was chosen because of local anxiety over the future of these landscapes which has led to the formation of several small community coalitions. These groups joined in 2005 to propose the development of a National Wetlands Wilderness Park (NWWP) on the sites where peatland harvesting will eventually cease over the coming three decades. While still a notional idea (Feehan, 2004), this concept was accepted in principle by an Irish Governmental sub-committee for the environment (Dáil Éireann, 2005), and is rapidly gaining acceptance within the extractive industry (McNally, 2008).

Rationale and methods

As a qualitative form of research, focus group data can appear simple to collect. However, the analysis of data can be more problematic. Often this involves analysis of discourses, making it interpretative rather than iterative. Focus group research can be used to access participants' experiences, often seen as peering through a 'window' onto their lives. It can also be used to analyse social interaction within the group itself (Kitzinger, 1994) and thus may be approached from the 'social constructivism' point of view. This latter epistemology is not utilised here as this is not the prime intention of this study, though it may be of inherent interest in itself. As mentioned, the ultimate goal of the research reported here is to mitigate against the proverbial 'consensus in principle; conflict in practice' scenario that typifies many environmental issues, early in

the planning and assessment stage rather than following the commencement of the planning process. Therefore, epistemologically, we emphasise “subjective, idiosyncratic perceptions and motivations” (Stewart, et al., 2006 p. 112). Thus, the rationale framework for the utilisation of focus groups to gain insight into perceptions of, in this case, mined landscapes is that they were an ideal method for identifying key issues and discourses as well as potential conflicts prior to cessation of mining. In addition, it has been postulated that focus group research is not sufficient as a stand-alone method in social science (Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Reed and Roskell Payton, 1997). Thus, these discourses will then be compared to parallel ethnographic research on the same topic (Collier and Scott, 2008).

Having first consulted with key stakeholders, both national and international, it was decided that a random selection of local residents be surveyed. The purpose was to identify key local issues, the degree of citizen interest in cutaway peatlands and potential community support in the overall context of the after-use options for local and national cutaway peatlands. A total of four focus group sessions were conducted between Autumn 2005 and Spring 2006. In addition to landscape perceptions, there was a desire to gauge the opinions of residents on (intact and industrial) peatlands and further to gain insight into their perceived values on the environment. Using randomly selected participants, each session lasted between two and two and a half hours. Between eleven and thirteen participants attended each session. The location was in Longford Town and Roscommon Town (two groups each) and a wide diversity of ages was represented. Each group was evenly represented in gender (Tot. m=26, f=25).

All sessions were recorded and transcribed and additional notes were made during each session. The focus groups were moderated by two people with one leading and 'tracking' most of the discussions and the other recording issues of relevance in case of tape malfunction as well as attitudinal information and direct quotations (and the sense in which they were given). During each session a wide array of issues, mostly relating to the environment, were discussed initially, and the session was gradually focused onto the specifics of peatlands and their after-use. Careful observation was made as to the level of agreement between participants. A photomontage depicting one possible 'before and after' scenario for cutaway peatlands was given to each participant towards the end of the sessions (see Figure 2). No wording was used on the photomontage but the participants were verbally informed when they sought clarification on the topic.

Over the four focus groups a total of fifty-one members of the local community participated. All participants were from the case study area and have lived locally for the majority of their lives; all were familiar with the landscapes under discussion. The sessions were lively with some participants volunteering little information and others dominating as is often the case with such research. However, the moderator encouraged the 'quieter' participants at various stages and in general it was felt that all participants had given their views to some extent. In order to ensure quality one of the moderators met with participants of two of the focus groups after the sessions had finished and when many of them were enjoying refreshments. In this informal setting, the moderator ascertained if the participants were concerned that they were not represented correctly or if they were uncomfortable. No negative issues were recorded relating to the topic in general, the issues discussed or the nature of the data acquisition. Thus, it may be

inferred that an accurate record of stakeholder opinions was obtained. It should also be noted that the case study areas in question are not highly populated – indeed, it was noted that some participants recognised each other even though the participants were randomly selected.

Results

It is a commonly held view that focus group methods are widely known and discussed, but that the analysis of the data is less well described (Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004). A frequently used method for analysis is to scrutinise the data using different perspectives, in this case, content analysis and ethnographic or discourse analysis (Morgan and Spanish, 1984). In this study both methods are used.

Content analysis

The analysis of focus group content in this study follows Morgan (1988; 1997) who suggests three ways to analyse and code content:

- to note if each focus group contains a given code
- to note if the code appears across all focus groups
- to note how many participants use the code.

While sometimes referred to as a “scissor-and-sort” or “cut-and-paste” technique (Stewart, et al., 2006 p. 116), codes were assigned to topics that arose in all sessions. These were used as an indicator of how often key words or phrases and their meanings recurred in the focus group sessions, how often these words and meanings were referred

to, and the level of group consensus. This was problematic as many people used the same word for different meanings and different words for the same meaning, and in the locations of the study there are many colloquialisms used that can be ambiguous. This ambiguity was rectified by asking for clarification after the sessions were over rather than during it so as not to divert the flow of information.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 shows the key word / meaning codes derived from each of the four focus groups. The Table also shows the level of consensus among the participants when the code in question was discussed. This was extracted through multiple reviewing of the live recordings of all focus group sessions, as well as written notes made during the four sessions. Verification, of random sections of the focus group tapes, was provided by a secondary analyst who had not attended any of the sessions, and who has little knowledge of the landscapes in question.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The codes have been grouped together into six key or focal themes, shown in Table 3. It should be remembered that though the data and the grouped codes appear to be quantitative in presentation, they are qualitative representations of non-linear data. However, it is possible using this data to elucidate the main thrust of perceptions of local residents and the key issues in the locality as well as providing an efficient summary of the focus groups. Broadly speaking, issues relating to quality of life are

foremost in the analysis of content. This has been shown to be an emerging global concern (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Issues relation to biodiversity and heritage also feature strongly and are indicative of other pan-global issues (CBD, 1992). This indicates that there is a high perceived value now ascribed to non-market goods and it is noticeable that issues relating to employment are poorly represented. This may indicate that the traditional view of jobs over the environment in rural areas may no longer be true or it may be a result of the recent affluence that Ireland has achieved with its recent economic boom. Still, this was surprising as these landscapes have provided secure employment for several generations and thus were indirectly responsible in the formation of local communities. Indeed, 45% of the focus group participants indicated that either they or their family members (past or present) had either been an employee of, or a contractor to, the extractive industry.

While content analysis reveals the themes of discussion it does not identify the level of feeling or degree of importance of these themes. The themes that the data have produced here are broadly related to quality of life issues such as health, planning and development. The environment and ‘wildness’ feature strongly as well. This may be a result of the deliberate ‘focus’ of the sessions but when the discourse analysis is examined it is noticeable that there appears to be a deep awareness of the environment, and specifically peatlands. The central feature of the first four themes is that they reflect anxiety over the landscape both physical and cultural. This addresses a central concern of this study – the identification of the key issues in damaged landscapes. To deepen our understanding of how these broad perceptions are embedded within local values, discourse analysis was also applied to interrogate the data.

Discourse analysis

Ethnographic or discourse analysis is not as systematic as content analysis and is more selective and contextual. Based on reviewing the transcripts, the audio data, notes and after-session conversations it is possible to convey a discourse. Table 4 contains a selection of three key discourses recorded across all of the focus groups *prior* to the showing of the photomontage image. An important aspect of this is that these are selected discourses from the early stages of each focus group session.

These discourses reflect more evocatively the themes in Table 3 but indicate the prevailing perceptions whether positive or negative in nature. The discourses revolve around concern for the local environment, nostalgic remembrances of previous landscapes, and perceptions of local identity. Thus, there is a strong awareness of landscape issues both past and present. When it comes to peatlands there is consensus among local residents as to their physical morphology, both before and after human interventions. Participants often admitted that in the past peatlands were viewed with negative associations. This is a strong recurring discourse which is supported by historical data (Andrews, 2008; Bellamy, 1986; Clarke, 2006; Cross, 1989; Feehan and O'Donovan, 1996; Forest and Wildlife Service, 1976; Mollan and Herries Davies, 1980). Participant 10M, FG4 summed up this view: "... as children we hated the bogs, especially cutting time. ...[bogs were seen as] damp, smelly places full of midgies [biting insects]. Nowadays I miss that smell – its only when I light the fire of a winter evening that I remember being young". Reminiscences such as this were common and

not only among older participants, as might be expected. Some of the younger participants (those under 30 years) also remember ‘cutting’ (harvesting) and gathering turf and many are still doing this today, though not manually. Memories of local peatlands revolve mainly around their management specifically harvesting for fuel or employment, that is their utilitarian or productive values.

Many negative or indifferent perceptions were also revealed. In addition, there were some instances of misinformation, such as the possibility of a nuclear power station being built on cutaway bogs (Participant 5M, FG3) and inaccurate perceptions of some peatlands as being pest-ridden (Participant 2M, FG2), containing invasive squirrels (Participant 8M, FG2) as well as inaccuracies on species of native trees (several instances). It must be stated that these specific negative associations were not as common as the more general ones, and they were not favourably received by other participants (though no outright contradiction or argument ensued any of these comments). Participants often admitted, during all sessions, that they had not thought about peatlands since they are so pervasive in the local landscape, and this is reflected in one, more cryptic comment “... its hard to see something when you see it every day!” (Participant 8F, FG2). This perception reveals an indifference towards the familiar.

Table 4 also shows a number of viewpoints relating to peatlands as a landscape. From reviewing the tapes it was clear that as participants expressed landscape opinions they were often positive with other participants being in strong agreement, which is not unknown in focus groups because often there is a desire to agree with other group members. This is also reflected in the often high level of consensus noted in Table 2 and

is evidenced by some of those participants who were under 30 years of age and who had indicated that they desire to return to live, or have already purchased a house, in these landscapes.

TABLES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE

Table 5 contains excerpts of some of the discourse that occurred *after* all participants were shown the photomontage image. As can be seen in Figure 2, the photomontage is a simplistic representation of the potential of mined peatlands (scarred landscapes) to regenerate into what appears to be a natural landscape. Participants were informed, truthfully, that both photographs were taken in Ireland in recent months, were in the same (nearby) landscape and on the same peatland system. They were also informed that the photographs were not altered in any way other than resizing to fit onto the page. Immediately following the photomontage being distributed and studied there was a palpable change in participant attitude across all four groups. The taped data are somewhat difficult to analyse immediately after the photomontage is shown due to the volume of overlapping comments. In order to reveal opinion the moderator had, in each of the four sessions, to request participants to slow down and make individual comments. Careful observation on the behaviour of participants noted that there were favourable discussions between participants, many out of range of the microphone.

As mentioned, prior to the photomontage the discussion may be described as reflective and introverted. Participants rarely discussed the topic among themselves, preferring instead to comment directly to the moderator or to contradict or clarify other

participants. After the photomontage was introduced, participants across all focus groups studied the images and some participants commented that they had seen it somewhere before. "... reminds me of a trip I had as a child, to England (Participant 7M, FG4)". After clarification it was discovered that he meant the fenlands of East Anglia – which are also areas of wetland restoration. Another participant - 11F, FG2 – commented that she had "always wanted to see the bog full of life again". To these comments there were favourable inter-participant communication that, in the case of the first comment, continued after the end of the session. Discussions therefore moved from reflective to expressive and enthusiastic. As the participants viewed the image, the moderator introduced the notion that there are other scenarios, "such as wind farms", in order to obtain further insight. Participants did not seem to have the emotive opinions usually surrounding wind farming in peatland landscapes (McCormack and O'Leary, 2004), and when some participants suggested that wind farming would be a good use of the land there was no disagreement. When the discussion turned towards feasibility and timescales the moderator sought opinion on the level of willingness to participate in the amenity / biodiversity after-use option. From the transcripts it is noted that many were willing with an estimated 25% seeking clarification or asking to be kept informed in order that they can participate. It should be reiterated that there was a lack of desire for the further creation of employment in cutaway peatland landscapes on viewing the emerging landscapes from a productive or utilitarian perspective. There is also no mention when viewing a future scenario (photomontage) causing problems such as traffic, property value decrease, and so on. This may be viewed as a key variable when designing policies relating to the after-use of peatlands in these areas.

It was clear that the industrial harvesting of peatlands nearby was a familiar sight and that this was not in any way uncomfortable, unwelcome or distasteful. When looking at the photomontage, some participants discussed the manufacturer of the tractor in the left photograph and even its merits over another brand! Aside comments were made to the moderator on the technical feasibility of creating amenity areas in the disused peatlands and in every focus group the moderators were asked many questions relating to timescale and costs. After focus group 2 and 3 had concluded, and when the microphones were turned off, there was animated discussion among participants (who didn't know each other prior to the focus group) on this topic. There were no objections forthcoming even though earlier in focus group two participants had claimed that peatlands may be pest-ridden and areas of dereliction ("... the places [bogs] are full of rats, rats everywhere... [I] wouldn't cross them..." (Participant 2M, FG2). But, when it was suggested that a new 'wild' area may be possible objections or derogatory comments did not surface even when prompted ("are there any down sides to this [scenario]?"). Perhaps this could be viewed as a combination of the perceived traditional negativity towards peatlands in Ireland (Joosten and Clarke, 2002) and the more positive perceptions relating to things that are new and possibly more controlled or managed. It may also relate to the fact that participants, by the time they viewed the image, had aired their environmental grievances and were willing to accept a more positive future scenario. Either way, this appears to indicate a willingness to participate and certainly indicates a high level of stakeholder interest in recovery of scarred landscapes. It may also illustrate a useful methodology for engaging community participation early in the planning process and support when the after-use of these peatlands is finally being devised. In this regard, engaging the community initially to

discuss all topics and permitting these discussion allow participants to air grievances followed by a non-use, but high value, option that is optimistic and attractive. The level of enthusiasm and inter-participant communication generated in the focus groups indicates that some degree of social learning was occurring and this may be a necessary mechanism in the planning process within a collaborative framework.

Integration

Data triangulation is a useful tool for identifying issues that arise from different methodological approaches and data sources and thus is a valuable mechanism for establishing a holistic image of the social phenomenon being studied (Denzin, 2006). It can increase confidence in data as well as provide a clearer understanding on an issue (Jick, 1979). However, triangulation may also yield data that are inconsistent and contradictory as well as convergent, but triangulation ought to be “beyond data” (Mathison, 1988) and thus avoid a technical explanation of the data, and the difficulties associated with coding data from different methodological sources (Thurmond, 2001). By using codes and themes for describing the focus group sessions, a baseline was established that describes discourses on this specific topic – industrial peatland landscapes. The focus group data were therefore used to inform a second, more focussed and targeted survey and in doing so the utility of focus group research is evident. Across all four focus groups the number of key words codes exceed thirty each and in total there are thirty-seven. A similar number of key words or codes noted in the ethnographic, ‘grab’ sampling survey that was carried out during the summer of 2006 (Collier, et al., 2008; Collier and Scott, 2008). Indeed, when the data from that second

survey were analysed using the same coding system and reducing these codes to themes, the same inherent themes appear and in the similar rank order. Thus, some element of data triangulation can be claimed. In addition to this, it should also be noted that the same codes appear across all focus groups with only a small percentage of no occurrence of the code word (3% max.). This degree of repetition implies that some sample saturation has occurred. Indeed, after the second focus group no new codes appeared in the following two focus groups.

Concluding remarks

There were few, if any, realistic or new ideas generated by the focus groups in this research, despite continual prompting and facilitation. Participants were generally reflective about the landscape but were cognisant of environmental issues with some degree of uniformity and awareness. When an image of one after-use possibility was introduced the level of enthusiasm was elevated and there were several ideas put forward and discussed more positively. This noticeable mood change was accompanied by a degree of agreement and communal discussion. There appears to have been a level of social learning taking place, where participants exchanged information more freely and more accurately.

The notion of using cutaway peatlands for non-market uses such as wildlife and amenity parks is relatively new. Though there are a few areas where this has become a reality (and then more by accident than by design, in many cases), there is currently a move to see the entire cutaway peatland complex given over to some degree of biodiversity and

amenity after-use (Feehan, 2004). However, this will not be possible without a high level of community consultation and assessment of stakeholder 'willingness to participate' in making this a reality. Stakeholder consultations to date show that among many communities (professional, community, business, and so on) there is such a desire and a high degree of willingness to participate. But often in these cases there is 'consensus in principle; conflict in practice'. This may be resolved utilising a participatory process and (adaptive) co-management arrangements (e.g. Folke, et al., 2005). Such arrangements depend on a high degree of social capital and we see here that there is a likelihood of communities joining to participate in decisions relating to future-oriented restoration (Choi, 2004).

Studies such as this one, alongside studies using different methodologies, will be needed to ascertain the level of consensus and point towards possible conflicts. This study reveals issues of importance to local residents in peatland landscapes. It also shows that cutaway peatlands have a valuable role to play in addressing these issues, that is, if the after-use options for peatlands are designed for amenity and biodiversity. The study also shows that there is much consensus among a randomly selected residents group, as well as a high level of interest in after-use options (both specific and generalised), but the degree to which they might be willing to participate is somewhat unknown. There do not appear to be serious conflicts at this stage. Looking at some of the instances of misinformation, there is clearly a role for information dissemination and planning consultation. This is evidenced in theme 6 (Table 3) where stakeholders appear to require more information. This could indicate either a possible limitation to the

process of consultation or that this process ought to include a learning aspect in order to encourage collaboration from local communities.

The methodology used here is limited by its artificiality and subjectivity. Stakeholders have given their opinions in the knowledge that this study originated from an environmental point of view and thus participants may have been biased in their answers or aware of the data recording of their views. Looking at the content of the discussions, however, it is clear that, across different groups within the case study area, there is some level of consensus. In analysing the discourses there also appears to be consensus. This consensus should not be confused with democratic desire or a groundswell of positive opinion relating to the after-use of peatlands. It does indicate that, with guidance and honest application, community stakeholders may appreciate the non-use values of peatlands (intact and cutaway).

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