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Qualitative Research and Consumer Policy: Focus Group Discussions as a Form of Consumer Participation

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This paper describes our ongoing attempts to involve consumers in innovation and technology policy by means of a national Consumer Panel, using focus group discussions as the primary method of consumer participation. We evaluate our experiences of the usefulness of focus group discussions in this context by considering two examples of studies focused on product safety. We evaluate the usefulness of this method in promoting consumer empowerment, deliberation, and multivocality in the assessment of new technologies and innovations. We also raised some critical questions that require further analysis and discussion. Key Words: Focus Group Discussions, Consumer Participation, Empowerment, and Multivocality

Modern Western societies are increasingly defined by consumption. Over the past decade, growth in the EU and North America has been driven largely by consumer demand. The consumer is at the heart of political thinking in the EU, and policy makers assert that consumer participation enhances the economy. This argument is supported by marketing and business gurus, who argue that modern demanding consumers force markets to become more competitive (Inglehart, 1997; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Porter, 1990). Moreover, consumers have been recognized as a source of many economically and socially significant innovations (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004). Within consumer research, as well, interest has grown in the role of consumers as initiators, drivers, and shapers of innovation (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Wikström, 1996).

Apart from consumer protection, consumer policy is today also targeted at consumer involvement in technology assessment and product innovation. An EU study on how public policy could improve customer involvement in the innovation process (Ballantine, Devonald, & Meads, 2003) indicated that companies view consumers as the most important single driver of innovation. Companies considered that most influential obstacles to innovation were consumers' uncertainties about safety issues, low awareness about new products, and high price compared to alternatives. The study highlighted the role of public initiatives to strengthen the demand-side factors, including the enhancement of companies' capacities to involve consumers in the "innovation chain."

It is in this context that the consumer becomes important. One target in innovation policy has been to create new ways to achieve greater public involvement in decision-making (EC, 2002; Hagendijk & Kallerud, 2003). Consumer participation is needed at early stages of the innovation process. For example the UK government has emphasized the need to involve consumer bodies more in policy making, and to empower consumers by

improving consumer education to create "demanding customers." However, at the same time most academic and policy experts interviewed for this purpose (Bush, 2004) complained that, in fact, consumer bodies had not been linked in the innovation process in any meaningful way. There is a clear need to take consumer concerns into account more seriously and anticipatorily. Consumers should be able to influence the innovation process at its early stages, and not merely by avoiding unsuccessful product introductions or by complaining about substandard products.

The political pressure to increase public participation in consumer research raises questions about good approaches and methods. Public participation is a complex concept, involving difficult questions of group interaction, representativeness, impact on the sponsor, and impact on the public debate (Rowe & Frewer, 2004). In this article we will describe how we have attempted to create a new form of consumer participation in Finland using a national Consumer Panel.

Focus group discussions have been our primary method to involve consumers in technology assessment and innovation, yet there is an ongoing debate in the qualitative research community on whether focus groups are participatory and empowering. We address this issue by evaluating two recent studies that have focused on a classical consumer policy issue: product safety. We use these studies to examine our intention to increase the consumer voice in consumer policy. Have we managed to empower consumers? How are consumers represented? What impacts have our studies had on innovation processes and technology policy, and how are these impacts tied to our approaches and methods to involving consumers?

Are Focus Groups Participatory?

This article aims to evaluate our own experiences with focus group discussions as a means for consumer empowerment. We use the term "focus group discussions" rather than the more common term "focus group interviews." The choice of term reflects our emphasis on the active role of consumers as knowledge-producers, and the importance of group interaction in creating new knowledge (see Boddy, 2005, for a discussion on the differences between these terms). By focus group discussions, we refer to a group of 4-12 people brought together to participate in the discussion of an area of interest. Trained moderators run the discussions, and records are made of the course of the discussions.

Focus groups, of course, are a popular (some even think too popular) method in marketing research (Nancarrow, Vir, & Barker, 2005), but they have had a role in serious social science research since the seminal work of R. K. Merton and P. Lazarsfeld (Hollander, 2004; Morgan, 1988). During the past decades, they have established their role in sociology and communications research. In recent years, they have also become increasingly popular in applied fields such as nursing research, urban and community studies, development studies, and educational research (e.g., Barbour & Kitzinger, 2001; Gibbs, 1997). They are also increasingly used for practical purposes such as evaluation (Patton, 1990), user participation in product and service development (Kuhn, 2000; Nielsen, 1993; van Kleef, van Trijp, & Luning, 2005), and community improvement and empowerment (Clark et al., 2003; Lefèvre, de Suremain, de Celis, & Sejas, 2004; Suter, 2000). Focus groups have thus traversed a variety of disciplines and application contexts; at the same time, becoming more than merely a data collection method.

A distinctive feature of focus groups is that they create research data by generating social interaction. This is done by assembling a group of participants to discuss a specific topic and then observe how the ensuing discussion evolves (Boddy, 2005). The underlying assumption is that meaning is created in social interaction (e.g., Wilkinson, 2001). Organized and focused group discussions provide a context for participants to articulate the meaning of their experiences and elaborate on them in a collective sensemaking process. Of course, focus groups are also used to obtain individual viewpoints; it is typical to instruct discussants that the aim is not to reach consensus, but to explore the different viewpoints that emerge. The method is popular in marketing research because it is a quick and easy way to gain a wealth of perspectives on a novel or relatively unexplored topic (Threlfall, 1999). By observing, recording, and analyzing the interaction in the group, researchers can also gain an understanding of how the participants approach the topic and what kind of language they use to frame the issues. Interaction also allows participants to pose questions to each other and to redefine their own views as the discussion evolves.

There is also a lively debate on whether or not focus groups are participatory and empowering (Chiu, 2003; Waterton & Wynne, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001). Even though focus groups as such are not action research, they are a form of data collection that allows participants more latitude than other comparable methods (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). Because of the qualitative nature of the research, the participants are encouraged to define the concepts and framings themselves. Since the discussion is conducted in groups, people also have the opportunity to learn from each others' comments. Focus group discussions also support collective sensemaking processes; when dealing with complex topics, participants can pool their prior knowledge and experience. Thus, the viewpoints gained are more well-thought-out than, for example, immediate responses to survey questionnaires (Heiskanen, 2005; Timonen, 2002). Focus groups thus highlight *lay experience*, rather than laypeople's ignorance, and can thus make a positive contribution to policy making (Cunningham-Burely, Kerr, & Pavis, 2001).

The fact that participants have an active role in the research process does not of course mean that everything can be left up to the participants, or that everything said should be taken at face value. Researchers need to analyse, conceptualize, and consider the validity of interpretations made from the data. They also need to consider what is left unsaid and why, and how the social context influences the way topics are dealt with in group discussions (Hollander, 2004). Perhaps most importantly, especially when evaluating novel products and technologies, the focus of the study needs to be structured so that it becomes accessible to consumers and open to new perspectives. Otherwise, consumers can repeat reified categories and reproduce existing discourses in focus groups just as well as in more structured and individualistic research designs.

Researchers are thus challenged to take a reflective, and reflexive, position when considering their role in mediating between focus group participants and the wider social utilization of the findings of the study (Cunningham-Burely et al., 2001; Heiskanen, 2005). In the concluding section of this paper, we will revisit this topic and consider different roles for researchers in transmitting, mediating, and interpreting consumer perspectives into consumer policy making.

Focus Group Discussions at the National Consumer Research Centre

The National Consumer Research Centre (NCRC) is a state research institute established in 1990 to promote and support consumer policy through research. This research is supported by a panel of voluntary consumers who participate in research projects. The authors of this article are involved in working with the Consumer Panel in various ways, mostly as researchers, but also in developing communications with the panel, surveying their interests, and in responding to suggestions made by individual panel members. From our various perspectives, we have developed an interest in conceptualizing how members of the panel participate in our work, and how focus groups serve as a venue for participation.

In the following, we describe the experiences gained at the National Consumer Research Centre (NCRC) in using focus group discussions in consumer policy-oriented research. We first give a brief account of how and why the Consumer Panel was established, and how focus groups have been used in interacting with the panel members. As technology and innovations have become an increasingly topical issue in consumer policy, we will focus especially on the role of focus groups in this context. We then present two examples of recent studies in which focus groups have been employed to study current consumer and technology policy issues, and consider how they have served to transmit consumer viewpoints into technology development and regulation.

The NCRC Consumer Panel was established in 1995 as a result of extensive discussion, which had raised many viewpoints in favour of establishing such a panel. It was believed that a consumer panel could support consumers' influence in society, and it was viewed as an important consumer policy response to the more general call to "give consumers more voice" in the changing marketplace. The decision to set up the panel was also a response to the need to involve users in product testing and product quality assessment. We had become more and more aware of the need to evaluate products in their natural settings, and include subjective evaluations alongside "objective" measures of product quality. This background led to a distinctive approach to using focus groups at the NCRC, which began with the first focus group studies in 1996.

When the panel was first established, our aim was to involve consumers with a special interest in participating in research studies. A practicable way to find such consumers was to recruit people from non-governmental organizations. We thus contacted consumer counselors and consumer organizations and searched for people with extensive experience in consumer issues. Critical and motivated consumers were also sought through professional, student, and pensioners' organizations. Our call for recruits was published in organizations' newsletters and distributed through organizations' mailing lists. Since those early days, the membership of the panel has changed significantly. Current participants are mainly recruited through daily newspapers and free papers, and they represent a broader group of active consumers; "ordinary" people with an interest in consumer issues. The number of participants has been about 1000.

The Consumer Panel operates on a relatively small budget. Participants are volunteers, who receive compensation for their travel costs as well as a free subscription to a consumer magazine. Thus, their motive to participate is intrinsic. We have surveyed the panel members' opinions on the kind of research we conduct, and their motives and willingness to participate in different types of research. When the first panel members

were asked about their expectations in autumn of 1995 (Isoniemi, 1996), the response rate was more then 99%, and the panel members' hopes were high. The panel was viewed as an opportunity to take a stand on consumer issues of their interest, and it was also seen as a direct channel toward other market actors such as the retail trade and manufacturers. The next survey (Pulliainen, 2005) also revealed similar expectations about participation and making a difference; eight members out of ten mentioned these reasons as the most important ones to participate in the panel. Learning about new developments was also an important motive. Focus groups, especially, were viewed as good a place to discover what issues are topical in consumer research. We have also realized that participants learn from each other, and when the occasion arises, are eager to "interview" other members of the group. Social interaction is also one of the main motives of our focus group participants. For some, being in the panel is a fun hobby.

One of the reasons why we have always spoken of "focus group discussions" rather than "focus group interviews" is our aim to emphasize the active role of the Consumer Panel. One of the tasks of the NCRC is to implement national the Consumer Policy Programmes[1], which emphasize consumer empowerment. By interacting with Consumer Panel members, our studies provide insights on the background and underlying logic of different forms of consumer activism, and mediate these insights into the public debate. When communicating with the panel members, "group discussion" is also an appropriate label for this data collection format, as it conveys the idea of discussing issues in a group.

Over the past ten years, the Consumer Panel has been used to collect data for more than 70 projects. Not all of them used focus groups: Surveys, personal interviews, sensory and contextual product evaluations, and diaries are other research methods used. Yet focus group discussions have been the most popular method, which was employed in over 30 of the studies, either alone or in conjunction with other methods. Focus group discussions have also been conducted with groups from outside the Consumer Panel (e.g., schoolchildren, local residents, or members of specific associations). One of the reasons for the popularity of this method is our experience of its suitability to explore new topics, such as innovative products and services. Yet there are other reasons, as well, which will be considered in more detail in the concluding section of our paper.

Focus groups have been used in research on a wide variety of topics. The largest single group of studies relates to food and food consumption. These studies have examined consumers' views on food production methods, consumption patterns, and the quality of food. Examples include studies on consumers' views on functional food, like cholesterol-lowering spreads or milk drinks that reduce blood pressure, and their perspectives on local and organic food production. Studies have also addressed consumers' views on new technologies in the field of packaging, product safety, digital technologies, and leisure activities. Ecological issues have been topical in recent years as well. Focus groups were used to access consumers' views on possibilities to apply information technology innovations to the sustainable kitchen of the future. We have also

[1] The Finnish Government Consumer Policy Programme for the years 2004-2007 presents guidelines to increase the visibility of consumer issues and to develop consumer skills. Priorities are enhancing consumers' economic security, ensuring consideration of consumer interest, developing well-functioning public and private sectors, and enhancing consumers' confidence in information technology services (The Finnish Government, 2004).

used focus groups to provide feedback and new ideas for a benchmarking tool for sustainable consumption. Recent studies have also addressed the merits of different distribution channels in grocery retailing. Consumers have also discussed their interest in using household services such as cleaning and childcare and the obstacles to service use, as well as providing ideas for new services that might be useful.

Most of the studies have been conducted with public funding; either from the NCRC budget or with funding from various ministries and state agencies. Today, many aim to evaluate and promote product or service innovations, and gain consumer input at early stages of the innovation process. Thus, we have attempted to access consumers' views on the usability, usefulness, and social acceptability of new technologies and services, as well as gain new ideas on products and services that might be useful and necessary, but do not yet exist in the market. Our research designs have also attempted to evoke discussion on broader societal aspects, such as the pace and direction of technological and market development, and their impact on everyday life and society-at-large.

The following section presents two cases as examples of studies in which focus groups have been used to address consumer issues in technological innovation and its regulation. These are examples of studies with a distinct outside customer, and we also consider how we managed to transmit the consumers' "voices" to the knowledge users. The examples examine focus groups as a tool to bring out consumers' views of product safety; a classical consumer policy issue that has until now been rather expert-driven. More recently, health and safety have also become important market drivers for new product innovations. Safety is a subject that interests Consumer Panel members too (Pulliainen, 2005). In the following, we explore whether there is a distinct consumer perspective to product safety, and how it appears in focus group discussions.

Consumer Perspectives on Packaging Safety and Design

In 2003, we were asked to conduct a study on packaging safety from a consumer perspective: what safety means to consumers, how safety can be achieved, and how it should be communicated to consumers. The study was conducted in co-operation with the Association of Packaging Technology and Research (PTR), and its results were published in the report series of the PTR (Järvelä, 2004). The idea for this study originated in an expert group on user needs and attitudes convened within an innovation programme called "Safety and Information in Packaging," hosted by the National Technology Agency. The expert group decided to commission a qualitative study (funded by the National Technology Agency, Tekes), asking consumers to evaluate different kinds of packaging examples.

Starting right from the planning phase, the study involved an intensive dialogue between the PTR, the coordinator of the study, and the NCRC. Both parties had a genuine interest in developing and refining good research questions. One of the tasks was to then translate the research questions into the "consumers' language," in order to make them accessible from the perspective of everyday life and packaging use. We needed to consider, for example, how to get consumers to effortlessly discuss the safety of *packaging*, which is closely linked to the product contained in the package. We also knew from experience that it is impractical to discuss many different products and different

packaging options in one focus group session. We concluded that the products to be selected should be ordinary enough and broadly used by different consumer groups. Another challenge was how to access different kinds of consumer views on the future of packaging. We decided to profile the focus group participants according to stage of life (i.e., young singles, families with children, older people) because we knew from earlier studies that this was a dimension on which consumer views and needs often differ. Representatives of the PTR made an important contribution to the study through their knowledge of current developments in packaging technology by designing and sourcing the packaging samples for the discussion, and in general by maintaining dialogue between the NCRC and the expert group at the PTR.

The packaging samples were selected from two product groups: ready meals and dishwasher detergents. We hypothesized that safety would be constructed differently in these two sample product groups. In ready meals, packaging protects the product from the environment, whereas for detergents it is also important that the packaging protects the environment from the product. The product samples included three imaginary ready meal packages, which were made partly with technologies still under development. In contrast, some of the three detergent packaging samples were already available in the market.

The focus groups were conducted with 59 consumers from the NCRC Consumer Panel. We invited groups of young consumers without children, parents from families with children, and elderly consumers from the Helsinki metropolitan area. Three further group discussions were organized in other parts of the country. Each discussion followed the same thematic structure, but consumers in the different groups shifted the emphasis to different issues. The discussions started with a familiar, everyday issue: experiences of good and bad packaging. These "starters" were expected to inspire consumers to start developing ideas on important aspects of packaging without too much prompting. They also aimed to provide insight on the relative importance of safety vis-à-vis other packaging characteristics. After this we presented the packaging samples to the consumers. The discussions were concluded by making a summary of the topics raised, with an explicit focus on what consumers expected and wanted from packaging, and what kinds of future problems they envisaged in relation to packaging.

The data were analysed using a grounded theory–based coding framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with the help of the ATLAS/ti program. *Open codes* were used to label topics discussed in the focus groups, such as "convenience" or "packaging material." These codes were further *categorized* in terms of the intensity with which the topics were discussed, the spontaneity of bringing up topics, connections between topics made by the discussants, and interpretations made of topics introduced by the facilitator. Special attention was thus devoted to ways in which the discussants reinterpreted the topics in the interview protocol. Next, following Strauss and Corbin, questions such as "who or what;" "how and when;" and "why?" were used to develop theoretical sensitivity. For example, attention was devoted to differences between different types or consumer groups, as well as perspective on packaging use (i.e., packaging selection, use of disposal), to which different issues were linked. Finally, the following *axial codes* were applied to re-link different codes into an interpretive framework: What characterizes "good and bad packaging;" What do people understand by "packaging information and safety;" and who and what are expected to determine the "evolution of packaging in the

future"? The elements of the group discussions were thus regrouped under headings reflecting the original interests of the study, but now elaborated to reveal the types of understandings and reasoning applied to them by the consumers themselves.

From a research perspective, the approach adopted to elicit consumers' views on key features of packaging safety was a success. The consumers were able to analyze the issues of packaging safety on the basis of the extremely simple question of "good and bad packaging" and the packaging samples presented. Some of the ways in which safety was framed were even surprising, and they would not have been likely to emerge in a questionnaire survey. For example, it turned out that consumers use the design of the package as an indicator for safety issues, and were concerned that many packaging designs are misleading from a safety perspective. One example of a misleading package design was a colorful metallic package. The following quotation is one of many similar comments made on the potentially misleading nature of this type of packaging.

> …I have become a user of these [dishwashing detergent] tablets, they are so convenient to just pick out of the packet and throw [into the dishwasher]. But I use the ones that are not wrapped up like candies…Why do they need that wrapping on the tablet? So that kids would be more prepared to eat them, or what?

In contrast, when consumers were asked at the end of the discussion about what aspects of packaging they relate to *safety*, the discussion sometimes actually froze for a few moments, until someone broke the silence by bringing up safety caps or warning labels as examples. These symbols of safety, however, were not apparent in the consumers' own framings of safety. In contrast, such external signs were sometimes even considered as not promoting safety, but rather as obstacles to product use, the main purpose of which is to protect the marketer of the product from legal liability. For example, some consumers commented, with silent irony, that safety instructions on detergent packages are targeted at children, and especially infants, people who cannot read or understand those instructions. This viewpoint is illustrated, for example, by the following quote.

> Well, kids don't understand the warning labels, do they? I'm sure everyone, when they have their first baby, understands that you need to start thinking about chemicals and checking whether there are toxics or not [in products]…The packaging doesn't really make a huge difference at that point…Or if there are some toxic [substances/products], then you put them where kids can't get to them.

The key improvement needs identified did not relate to safety, but rather to usability and the use of packaging materials. Both user-friendliness and environmental compatibility were emphasized, and they were often viewed as being complementary features. The consumers also provided some new dimensions to the concepts of usability and convenience. They were highly critical of superficial and overblown convenience features, referring to them as "packaging gimmickry." One example of the comments on this topic is presented below.

> …I at least, I am extremely aggravated by these "new to the world" elegant open-close systems, because then it becomes this kind of gigantic package and inside, there's three stylishly folded pieces of sausage. So I, at least, feel revolted if I have to buy those elegant new packages…And I don't believe that it's any cheaper because of this fine innovation, which closes and opens and closes and opens…Because someone will open it at the wrong end in any case, and the whole system won't work in any case, for the purpose that it was invented.

Apart from the consumers' explicit comments and opinions on packaging design, our study reveals that for consumers, safety, end-of-use, and convenience may refer to totally different aspects from what packaging designs offer. This type of conclusion cannot be directly derived from individual opinions or comments, but based on an analysis of the data from the perspective of how the research topics were interpreted by discussants, what issues were raised spontaneously, and what kinds of connections can be made between different topics. Through this analysis, we were able to reinterpret the concept of convenience in terms of the interaction between user and package. We were alerted to the role of routines in making packaging convenient. These framings of convenience allowed us to conceptualize and hence understand why consumers sided with traditional, slowly evolving packaging designs, while serving harsh criticism to the packaging industry for the frequent but unsystematic introduction of new packaging features.

What can we conclude from the fact that in a study with the working title of *Consumer-oriented packaging of the future* the consumers praised the traditional egg-carton as an excellent example of a successful packaging design? Or that the discussion on innovative packaging solutions turned, time and again, to traditional and familiar packages? Firstly, it reinforces the notion that consumers are at their best and most natural when discussing everyday, commonly-shared issues on the basis of their own experiences. Secondly, it points to the fact that consumers do not conceptualize the future apart from the present; in discussions, the future is connected to current practices, attitudes, and debates. Speaking of the future usually revolves around hopes and fears; and this study was no exception. The consumers advocated for the values that they believed had been undermined by the current focus on gimmickry and sales promotion. Such values included price and quality consciousness. The participants identified themselves as price and quality conscious consumers, and found it hard to connect with what they saw as the prevalent consumer representations underlying current packaging design.

The consumers considered the research topic both interesting and important. The topic provided them with the opportunity to share their experiences as packaging users, so the discussion in the groups was very lively. They wanted to make sure that their views would be passed on to the packaging industry and decision makes, and would thus have an impact on packaging development. The discussions provided insights on the focus of the study, packaging safety, but they also revealed that safety (in a narrow, technical sense) was not a key feature for consumers. In a variety of ways, the

consumers' discourse on packaging emphasized the importance of traditions, familiarity, and continuity[2].

What, then, did the study contribute to PTR and the packaging industry, and how useful did they find its results? PTR expected the research to either provide some totally new insights, so-called latent signals, or to confirm existing views in the packaging industry. The study met these expectations because it did confirm the prevailing view of consumers as tradition-oriented, but also explained why tradition and continuity are important for consumers. PTR's opinion was that the study provided valuable and usable knowledge for the packaging industry. The feedback from the industry had been positive and industry representatives had stressed the importance of conducting such thoroughgoing studies and reporting them publicly. The findings have been utilized in packaging design in various companies, as well as in specific failure analyses of unsuccessful packaging introductions. Perhaps the consumers' desires and views were not as innovative as some might have hoped, and the industry side was a bit disappointed about how difficult it was for consumers to form opinions on abstract packaging features. Yet the findings had obviously provided the industry with food for thought: now and then, you perhaps need to go back to the basics. For example, one packaging development manager's feedback included the following reflection: packaging design is probably too geared toward creating exciting novelties, which in the final analysis do not benefit the consumer.

Exploring Consumers' Safety Culture

In 1998, the NCRC was approached by the Safety Technology Authority, TUKES, with a contract for studying consumers' safety culture. TUKES is a state agency entrusted, among other things, with the supervision and development of product safety. TUKES had adopted the concept of safety culture from recent international organization research, and was interested in applying the concept to consumers and its own mission of improving product safety. At the NCRC, the study began with a literature review, which explored whether the existing research could contribute anything to the topic. The literature review revealed that there is not much existing literature on safety culture in the

[2] The arguments selected as central interpretive themes initiated a lot of discussion across groups, and there was widespread agreement on them within the groups. Moreover, they recurred in many different parts of the discussion, i.e., the discussants raised the same arguments in connection with many different discussion topics, and elaborated on them in many different ways. So, for example, the conclusions on "tradition, familiarity and continuity" are based on the following kind of interpretive process: Firstly, the discussants provided numerous examples of how a certain continuity in packaging design supports ease-of-use (examples of practices). Moreover, the participants themselves explained at length how familiar, unchanging packaging designs are easily identified in the store, and they support established routines of use that save time and effort (the discussants' own explanation for their opinions). Furthermore, when asked about examples of "good packaging," the discussants most commonly mentioned packaging types that have remained fairly unchanged through the years in Finland, such as the egg box and the milk carton (the discussant's own valuations). Finally, when the discussants were asked explicitly for the message they would like to convey to the packaging industry, they said they wanted to keep the old packaging, and to have a slower pace of change in packaging design than is currently the case, in order for consumers to have time to *learn* to deal with the packaging in their everyday life.

context of consumers and product safety. The conclusion was thus that empirical research was needed.

Because the topic was virtually uncharted, it seemed natural to start exploring this novel concept by organizing focus groups with consumers (cf. Flick, 1998; Morgan, 1988). Our study plan justified the selection of this method in accordance with the following, "…focus group discussions provide information on people's experiences, opinions, desires and concerns, as well as on how people form such opinion and what meanings they link to the topic under discussion" (Saastamoinen, 1999, p. 1). The plan also emphasized that focus group discussions allow researchers closer access to "concrete situations in which consumers use technical appliances, and in which hazards and potential accidents occur" (Saastamoinen, 1999, p. 3). Already when planning the focus groups, we were aware of the commissioner's desire to conduct a survey later on. The focus group discussions were expected to contribute to the planning of that survey, which was phrased as follows in the study plan, "qualitative focus group discussions provide in-depth knowledge on the research topic, which is a prerequisite for conducting a meaningful statistical survey."

Organizing the focus group discussions began with recruiting the participants. In early 2000, members of the NCRC Consumer Panel living in the metropolitan area were sent a letter soliciting their participation, together with a small questionnaire about household appliance ownership. The respondents were placed into five different categories and focus group discussions were organized separately for representatives of each category. The groups included: (a) elderly people, (b) parents from families with small children, (c) users of gas appliances, (d) single-family house residents, and (e) apartment building (block of flats) residents[3]. The purpose in selecting these groups was to target groups that are particularly vulnerable and gain a maximum variation in living environments. In order to gain as many viewpoints as possible, groups were also constructed to include a range of different kinds of participants in terms of age, gender, and education. A sixth group deemed important, residents of rural areas, could not be recruited through the Consumer Panel due to the small number of rural residents in the panel, so rural residents were recruited through an agricultural advisory agency.

The focus group discussions were conducted in early 2000. Altogether 33 consumers participated in the six groups. The technical product categories discussed in the focus groups included electrical appliances, gas appliances, fireworks, and to a lesser extent, elevators (lifts), oil-fired boilers, and hot-water tanks. In the group discussions, consumers' safety culture pertaining to these technical products was explored through a variety of everyday situations. These included acquiring and learning to use the products, everyday use and maintenance, dangerous situations, and safety information. The participants discussed their own perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and practices in relations to the above-mentioned situations.

The focus group discussions ran according to the interview protocol, designed on the basis of the study plan. The participants kept themselves within the subjects and themes that were presented to them. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the participants

[3] Obviously respondents could fit into multiple categories, for example, an elderly person living in an apartment building. The groups were formed by placing volunteers into five different categories so that one person could fit into more than one category. Then six respondents from each category (representing the greatest possible diversity in other socio-demographic aspects) were invited to participate in a group discussion.

and the researcher shared the same idea of what was essential regarding the subject. The participants could easily tell about the everyday situations in which they used technical appliances. They eagerly described their experiences of using and maintaining the appliances, facing dangerous situations, etc.

Participants' stories about their everyday use of appliances revealed the invisibility of safety issues in ordinary household appliances. Appliance use was mainly based on routines and beliefs about safety were based on personal experience. As long as the appliances continued to operate according to expectations, no safety problems were envisaged.

> Electrical appliances are kind of self-evident, you don't really think about them, because you've always had them, the house is full of them, as we have seen. So because they have always functioned without any major hassles, then you wouldn't really start questioning them. I'm not imaginative enough to develop any horror scenarios of what might happen.

> As long as the appliance works appropriately, then I guess it is as safe as a new one. I don't see any reason to be concerned. As long as the washing machine runs and performs its function and works, then I guess it is safe, too. As safe as a new one.

Yet, stories about unsafe usage also emerged in the discussions, especially in connection with do-it-yourself repairs.

> So I think they are kind of challenging situations – seeing whether this girl has what it takes – when you start to repair electrical appliances, but I never managed to cause any major catastrophes. Once I made a blow-dryer explode, but I just marked that up as a learning experience.

One story would lead to another, opening up the discussions to include the possibility of safety risks. People eagerly recounted their own and their friends' experiences of dangerous experiences. Often, people attributed accidents or incidents to their own carelessness or over-confidence. Yet, the group discussions revealed that people have different attitudes to risks, the relevance of their own experience, and the relevance of formal safety information. Some argued that safety warnings should include explanations of what might happen if appliances are used or repaired contrary to safety instructions.

The transcribed discussions were analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti software. The variety of views that came up from the discussions were classified in order to abstract the transcribed speech into research results. The data were first coded according to references to the product categories (electrical appliances, etc.) and the everyday situations (acquiring and learning to use the products, etc.). Similarities and differences between product categories, everyday situations, and consumer groups were examined. Attention was also paid to consumers' own interpretations of the causes and effects of safety incidents, and to their understandings of their own, and other players' roles, in appliance safety. By combining and contextualizing the consumers' reported safety practices,

beliefs, and attitudes (i.e., axial coding), theoretical categories were discovered concerning the context in which safety issues were demoted or elevated, contextual cues pertaining to safety issues, and the use of experience-based vs. formal information of safety. Participants' own suggestions for improving safety information and its usability were also noted and included in the research report.

One of the results of the study was that even though participants were well-informed about safety issues and had positive attitudes toward safety practices, they did not always follow the prescriptions for safe usage in their everyday lives, but rather, based their actions on behavioural routines and personal experience of reliable operation. One of the recommendations of the study was, in fact, to introduce safety instructions more closely into the everyday usage context (e.g., directly on the appliance). This was based, on the one hand, on explicit suggestions by participants, and on the other, on supporting evidence gained by analyzing common features of the participants' narratives of safety incidents and juxtaposing them with the findings pertaining to their attitudes and knowledge levels.

The results of the focus group study were reported in the publication series of TUKES (Saastamoinen, 2000). The findings were also used, later on, to construct a survey questionnaire. Here, the results of the focus group discussions were helpful in limiting the questions to the most relevant product groups, and in raising questions that might not have been discovered had it not been for the focus group discussions. The focus group discussions also helped the designer of the questionnaire to gain a consumer orientation to the topic. It is likely that this orientation helped to improve the validity of the questionnaire instrument.

For TUKES, the role of the focus group discussions was thus mainly instrumental; to serve as input for designing the questionnaire. Yet the safety engineers also gained some new insights into consumers' safety culture that were helpful in themselves. For the NCRC, the focus group discussions functioned as an independent study, providing a range of interesting observation. The study showed that safety measures are often routine and partly unconscious. Technical household appliances are taken very much for granted, and consumers do not often even recognize their existence, despite their risks. Another interesting observation was that the favorable safety attitudes of consumers do not necessarily materialize in actual behavior or action. Even consumers who were pro-safety could take considerable risks when using technical household appliances.

What was the commissioner's experience of the contribution of the study? TUKES did not suggest using focus groups; the idea was presented by the NCRC. Nevertheless, the commissioner agreed to the suggestion, leaving methodological issues to the discretion of the research centre. For TUKES, the method served the purpose of gaining qualitative information that would provide guidelines for designing the quantitative research instrument. However, TUKES was also pleased to gain illustrative practical examples. The findings confirmed TUKES engineers' existing perceptions of consumers' safety culture, but also corrected some misconceptions. For example, they were surprised (even horrified) that a mother of four had very dangerous do-it-yourself contraptions in her bathroom. They thought that people would be aware of the dangers of electric appliances in bathrooms, and also that parents would be very careful to prevent anything happening to their children. This bit of information from the focus group

discussions taught them not to take anything for granted. The results of the study also provided new perspectives for the TUKES experts' presentations, comments, articles, and newsletters (TUKES, 2007). The study findings provided valuable input for designing and targeting safety communications to consumers.

Discussion

During a short period of time, the NCRC has accumulated a range of experiences in the use of focus group discussions in consumer policy-oriented research. During the past ten years, more than a two hundred individual group discussions have been conducted. Consumer-oriented product evaluation has been a central topic since the beginning. In later years, this focus has expanded to service evaluation and gaining input into innovation processes through a better understanding of consumers' everyday contexts and practices.

Consumers have a more active role in focus group research than in more conventional forms of data collection; this is our experience as researchers and group facilitators. Focus groups enable us to access and account for what consumers know and how they reason. Consumers are allowed to explain, in their own words, how such phenomena as novel products or technologies of the future appear in their own everyday lives, as well as discuss their broader social consequences. Thoughts and practices that may seem strange to an outsider become reasonable and understandable when people have the opportunity to explain their background to shed light on contextual factors. Being understood and being able to make sense are fundamental requisites for being empowered, but we think that focus groups can also help consumers participate on a broader level. In the following, we consider the broader role that our use of focus groups may have in consumer empowerment and in increasing the consumers' voice in consumer policy. We focus on three aspects: empowerment, reflection, and multivocality. Finally, we raise some self-critical questions that call for more attention in the future.

Empowerment through Group Membership

As stated in the introduction, there is an ongoing debate on whether and when focus groups are participatory and empowering. In this context, it is important to note that there are a number of differences between focus groups as used in marketing and focus groups as used in an action research context. One is group membership. Marketing researchers usually recruit people who are strangers to one another and who do not necessarily have deep feelings or interests concerning the topic; in contrast to action researchers, who usually involve interested parties and existing groups. We are not action researchers in a strict sense, but group membership does appear to have an important role in how participants are positioned in focus group research.

Firstly, our study participants are members of a community, albeit a virtual one: the NCRC Consumer Panel. They are people who have volunteered to help us in our research, and they are also informed of the results of our study via an annual newsletter. This, we believe, helps make the smaller groups assembled for focus group discussions more self-directed. In both groups (the panel and the focus group) participants gain, at least psychological and symbolic, support from a broader group. Their opinions matter.

The isolated and relatively powerless role of consumers in the market is one of the reasons why society needs specific consumer policies. As consumer policy expands into new fields, such as innovation policy, new approaches are needed. One of the issues is consumer participation in technology assessment and development (e.g., Joss & Durant, 1995; Klüver et al., 2000). Here, being a member of a group and a community can help consumers to make their voices heard, to form opinions, and to make judgments.

Deliberation through Interaction

Scholars have stressed the importance of bringing lay perspectives into debates on the social impacts of science and technology (e.g., Nowotny, 2003; Stilgoe, Irwin, & Jones, 2006). Yet lay people (including consumers) may find it difficult to participate in such debates, and surveys of the public understanding of science and technology do not always paint a very flattering picture of consumers' knowledge resources. Moreover, however knowledgeable one is, the social impacts of technology are a complex subject for consumers, or anyone to that matter, to evaluate.

We have aimed to address the problem of complexity by dissecting the abstract issues to the level of everyday situations. This makes large issues such as "packaging technology futures" or "safety culture" more accessible and manageable. Group discussions also provide a forum for pooling knowledge and engaging in sense-making processes. Thus, consumers can reflect on complex topics through interaction. Our examples of packaging technology and safety culture also indicate that the findings provide food for thought for the experts commissioning the studies. For example, consumers´ views on ease-of-use and functionality of packages were slightly different from what designers seemed to think.

Consumers' everyday experiences and shared reflections are often the "missing link" in technology development. In the case studies presented, consumers' group interactions provided insights on different approaches to technological opportunities and risks. Measured feedback from thoughtful consumer groups can, for example, serve as a "reality check" for designers' most fanciful inventions and counterbalance engineers' techno-enthusiasm, just as one packaging development manager told in her feedback regarding the packaging study and its conclusions. Taking a measured stand on the personal and social impacts of new technologies requires deliberation (i.e., a critical examination of the arguments and experiences underlying opinions; Hamlett, 2003), and group interaction in open-ended focus group discussions seems to be a useful way to promote such deliberation.

Multivocality

Apart from participating in our focus group discussions, there are other forms in which consumers can participate in consumer policy and consumer politics. Consumers can join a consumer organization, which will promote its memberships interests in a variety of forums. And if policy makers or product developers want to hear the "consumer's voice," they can contact a member of a consumer organization. Consumer organizations are an important part of consumer policy, and we certainly do not aim to replace them.

Consumer organizations, however, usually present one perspective on a given topic in public. They represent *the* consumer viewpoint, not *a* consumer viewpoint or *some* consumer viewpoints. Sometimes such viewpoints are developed in extensive consultation with the organization's members, and sometimes perhaps not.

Whatever the case, in reality, there are usually a variety of consumer perspectives. Consumers are not a homogenous group. Our use of focus groups aims to capture the variety of consumer perspectives; different, yet all valid interpretations of reality arise from consumers' different social worlds (cf. Gergen, 1985). After all, consumers come in different sizes and shapes, their life revolves around different issues at different ages, and they hail to different beliefs and opinions. Our experience is that knowledge users appreciate this multivocal perspective. A multivocal consumer representation appears to be useful in policy making and implementation (e.g., safety regulations and information) and in product development (e.g., future packaging technologies). If it is found useful, it is also most probably used. Also if it is used, then consumers obviously have made a difference.

The multivocality of consumers was a clear outcome of the safety culture study. Instead of one universal consumer safety culture, we are dealing with numerous safety cultures. In fact, that outcome changed the whole vocabulary and approach of later studies (the surveys). We gave up the concept safety culture because it was too broad. Instead we used more specific terms like consumers' behaviour, knowledge, and attitudes. Also instead of studying one, common-to-all safety culture of technical appliances, we studied the appliances separately (electric appliances, gas appliances, and fireworks).

Some Critical Questions for the Future

As researchers, we have positive personal feelings about the more participatory direction that our research has taken. Doing research *with* consumers is much more fulfilling and meaningful than doing research *on* consumers. Active consumer participation also serves to engage and influence the "'customers" of our studies more than the results of more distal research approaches such as surveys or desk studies.

Yet there are many tensions involved in our research approach, which balances between research and participation. In contrast to public participation processes, we have an explicit role in selecting participants, and in defining and operationalizing the research questions, as well as in translating the findings of the focus group discussions. We thus determine important issues of representativeness, representation, and group interaction. Organizers and facilitators have similar roles in public participation processes, but they are perhaps more implicit, and more attention is placed on creating conditions for the public to speak freely. The role of the organizer has gained attention only recently, as researchers have started to study what actually happens during participatory forums, and how participation is promoted or obstructed by organizers (Genus & Coles, 2005; Rowe & Frewer, 2004).

This conscious role of the researchers has its pros and its cons. The two cases presented here raise one important issue in this context: the research agenda and discussion themes are concluded before the discussion. The researcher translates the problem or initial research question into the discourse of everyday life. We present this

agenda to potential participants in our panel when sending them a letter, soliciting their help in our studies, but fail to ask for their comments on the study topic and design. This researcher-directed approach is maintained in the group discussions. Researchers ask questions and expect participants' reflections on those questions. If a member of the group wants to raise a divergent question, it is common to shift that question to the end of the discussion. In the end, people are tired, and usually no-one wants to pursue any new, different questions. Thus, to put it bluntly, consumers are empowered to discuss what we want them to discuss.

More conventional academic researchers, on the other hand, might argue that it is dangerous to take the results of focus group discussions "at face value" (e.g., Hollander, 2004; Silverman, 2001). We agree, and do spend a lot of time organizing and analyzing the results, considering the role of group interaction and underlying processes by using grounded theory-based analysis methods. There is a tension here between research-focus and participation-focus, but it is certainly not insurmountable. Recent research on public participation and participatory action research stresses the role of reflection: New knowledge is created in a cycle of action, reflection, and evaluation. In participatory research, however, the participants themselves take part in the reflection; it is an ongoing process of questioning initial assumptions and searching for deeper meaning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). We have still some way to go in fully involving consumers in our interpretation and reflection processes, but this is certainly something with which we would like to experiment, and about which we would like to learn more.

Our current balance between external, theoretically-informed analysis and open-ended, unstructured participation has largely evolved through our experience and involvement in participatory technology assessment (e.g., Bruun & Heiskanen, 2005; Heiskanen, Kasanen, & Timonen, 2005; Schot, 2001). From this perspective, participation requires some sort of focus, and promoting multivocality requires some active input from researchers. Until they are engaged in a research process, people may not be aware of the extent that their everyday lives are affected by new products and technologies. We need to make the issue interesting and relevant for them. Furthermore, participatory processes may not attract all the people affected, or engage all the relevant viewpoints, if one relies solely on participant self-selection. Especially in the context of technology and innovations, our role is to translate the initial research problem into an everyday context (research design), and then translate the findings from that context back to the commissioners of the study and into the public debate (research reporting). Without this translation process, some issues might not be discussed from a consumer perspective, and they most probably would not gain input from such a wide range of consumers. Without our experience in qualitative research, public representations of participants' opinions might not be accompanied by the arguments, deliberations, and contexts in which they are grounded, and might thus provide a less thoughtful input into the public debate (cf. e.g., Hamlett, 2003).

This is a responsible position to occupy. We are aware of the power that we hold in this position, and of our need to further enhance our skills and knowledge in the fields of both public participation and qualitative research. Yet we are not alone in this issue; other researchers are grappling with similar topics in different contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Hamilton, 1998; Jones, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggert, 2000). We hope that this

article also inspires more reflection and analysis of participation, representation, and empowerment also in the context of applied qualitative research.

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