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Anya Ahmed

Muzammil Quraishi

Asha Abdillahi

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Optimising Rigor in Focus Group Analysis: Using Content/Thematic and Form/Structural Approaches to Understand British Somali's Experiences of Policing in London

Cover Page Footnote

Anya Ahmed PhD is Professor of Social Science and Head of Social Policy at the University of Salford, UK. Dr Muzammil Quraishi PhD is Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Salford, UK. Asha Abdillahi BA MA is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Salford. She led the fieldwork for the Open Society Foundations 'Somalis in London' study.

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Focus groups involve organising and conducting group discussions in order to gain knowledge of the attitudes, beliefs, practices and values of participants on a specific topic.¹ The talk generated in focus groups can be understood as a mixture of personal beliefs and available collective narratives, which are shaped by the context of participants' lives; and in this way, they have the methodological potential to highlight group norms and processes and also to illuminate the social and cultural contexts in which individual agency takes place.² In addition, focus groups can provide multiple layers of meaning, including personal and public information; convergence and divergence in attitudes and behaviour; and insight into people's lives and the circumstances of their lives.

Focus groups can be a stand-alone method and there is evidence that they are useful in studying issues with socially marginalised groups, notably when participants have experienced shared, particular "concrete" situations.³ However, an often cited concern is researchers' inadequate description of the analytical process adopted which then affects the usefulness and credibility of the findings from focus groups and rigor in analysis.⁴ This article addresses these concerns and the premise that rigor in focus group analysis can be achieved by applying an analytical framework which takes account of the content (themes) and form (structure) of focus group data. To illustrate this, this study uses focus group data to examine young British Somali men's individual and shared experiences of policing in the London Borough of Camden. Attending to structure allows for greater depth of analysis. Being clear and transparent about epistemological, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks and framing the material, social, and cultural contexts in which participants' experiences take place enhances the trustworthiness of findings and the robustness of analysis. There are

limitations to focus groups, however analyzing focus group data can provide important insights into complex behaviours and motivations.⁵

Framed within an interpretivist paradigm, this paper's thematic analysis is driven by theoretical interest in how race/ethnicity—as social locations—shape young British Somali men's experiences of policing in the UK, and how experiencing multiple jeopardies or being constructed as “other” in manifold ways destabilises notions of homogeneity among BME populations. Additionally, drawing on the conventions of narrative analysis, this paper presents a form/structural analysis. This centres on three key areas: first, on positioning, or how participants cast themselves and others through their talk; and second, based on the premise that language is a cultural resource which people draw upon to reflect and (re)construct their experiences, the linguistic devices deployed by respondents, and the language they use to refer to and address one other; and third, the interactions between focus group members, considering consensus and disagreement, and on interactions between focus group members and the moderator.

The article first presents an overview of focus group analysis, taking particular account of approaches which privilege both content and form. It then outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and places the focus group in context. A thematic and structural analysis of the focus group data is presented under the following sub-headings: stop and search; feeling unsafe in urban space(s); being under surveillance; negative interactions with the police; and troubling the notion of insider/outsiderness with regard to interactions between focus group members and the moderator. The paper concludes by reviewing the approach to analysis and the premise that rigour and robustness in focus group analysis can be enhanced by adopting an approach which attends to both content and form.

Analyzing Focus Groups

This paper's approach to focus group data analysis derives from and builds upon the work of others who emphasise the importance of rigour and trustworthiness.⁶ However, before this is discussed, it is important to acknowledge that trustworthiness, or how truth claims can be made from focus groups—or oral sources—also have epistemological significance. From an interpretivist perspective, truth is multiple and subjective and ultimately an interpretation, and “Oral sources are credible but with a different *credibility*.... the importance of oral testimony may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge.”⁷ Although trust in research is important, it is not well-understood, and additionally, “The nature and role of trust in research are complex and not well-articulated” The notion of trust is primarily discussed in relation to how one can optimise the “trustworthiness” or rigour in focus group analysis and also in terms of how trust is part of how focus groups operate in practice.⁸

Deborah Warr focuses on both the content and form of group interaction using focus group data on the ideals and expectations of intimate relationships within the context of socio-economic disadvantage.⁹ Anthony Onwuegbuzie et al offer an analytical framework based on the degree to which there is consensus and disagreement among participants and put forward a framework for collecting and analyzing focus group data.¹⁰ In order to achieve analytical rigour, they suggest that it is necessary to gather meticulous information about which respondents respond to each question, the order of responses, respondent characteristics, non-verbal communication, and also employ a conversational analysis approach. However, their ‘micro-interlocutor analysis’ is a rather prescriptive approach which does not address the importance of epistemological and theoretical frameworks nor does it take account of context.

Analyzing the content of focus group data is useful to gain insight into personal beliefs and conduct, while analyzing the form facilitates how frames of meaning are shared and disputed. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, and a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question. As such, theoretical thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's theoretical interests, and it can be used within both essentialist and interpretivist paradigms—but there is a need to make such epistemological and theoretical frameworks clear.¹¹

Going beyond a content/thematic analysis can increase the analytical rigour of focus group data. Here, the form/structural analysis, centres on three key areas: positioning—or how the men in the study present themselves and others through their talk the linguistic devices deployed; and the interactions between focus group members. Based on the premise that language is a cultural resource which people draw upon, we examine the linguistic devices deployed by our respondents. Dialogue is a central feature of focus groups and language reflects and constructs the contexts in which people live and this provides linkage to and ethnographic understanding of the structural and material circumstances of young Somali men's lives and their positionalities.¹²

Interactions between focus group participants reference and describe the context in which lived and constructed experiences occur and these also shape the tone of the discussion. Jenny Kitzinger identifies two types of interaction in focus groups: complementary interactions where there is consensus; and argumentative interactions where focus group participants disagree or challenge one another's views.¹³ Often a group consensus does not emerge and people disagree. In this way, focus group discussions/interactions cannot be described as groupthink behaviour since groupthink theory relates to decision making processes and how groups achieve consensus. The aim of the focus

group was not for participants to make a decision through group consensus, rather to express their shared and conflicting views and experiences of policing.¹⁴

Yet knowledge can be gained through focusing on complementary and argumentative interactions since participants are (re)producing explanations of their everyday experiences, while simultaneously making sense of them. Agreements and disagreements are important processes which influence the nature and content of participants' responses and this needs to be taken into account when analyzing the data, as such transparency has implications for the trustworthiness of the findings and analytical rigour. Michael Agar and James MacDonald highlight two forms of discussion: "insider orientated" discussion where interaction takes place between focus group participants; and "outsider orientated" discussion where participants address the moderator.¹⁵ The focus here is primarily on "insider orientated" discussions in relation to focus group participants. However, this paper also aims to destabilise the notion that "outsider orientation" necessarily characterises interactions between moderator and focus group participants, particularly when the moderator shares positionalities and concrete experiences with focus group members. Again, here the issue of trust is significant: this time in relation to moderator and focus group members. In participatory research, trust between researchers and communities is important. However, trust is "a complex and slippery concept" and a "multidimensional construct, making it difficult to operationalize, measure, and interpret."¹⁶ In simple terms, trust can be understood to denote general beliefs about the extent to which people are "reliable, cooperative or helpful."¹⁷ For the purpose of this analysis, Russell Hardin's threefold structure of trust is useful, whereby there are assumptions that: "a" trusts "b" to do "y"; the object that trust is directed towards can be identified; and there is a general set of expectations and some sort of starting point.¹⁸ Trust does not have to be reciprocal, in that "a" can trust "b" without "b" trusting "a". In the context of this focus group, "a" can be understood to represent focus

group members, “b” to represent the moderator, and “y” represents the facilitation of a safe environment where focus group members can share their experiences. In this way, focus group members (a) trust the moderator (b) to create/facilitate an environment which is conducive to focus group interaction (y).¹⁹

This epistemological approach focuses on the significance and influence of context; knowledge, therefore, can be understood to be temporally, culturally and spatially/geographically specific.²⁰ Accordingly, the findings from this focus group are a (re)construction of the subjective individual and intersubjective group experiences of participants, which are influenced by context. From an interpretive perspective, themes do not simply emerge or are embedded in the data, the researchers play a part in generating them. It follows then that analysis is not just descriptive and we look beyond the words spoken to illuminate and reflect the contexts in which the focus group took place. Such structural and cultural contexts frame agency and influence how people see themselves doing what they are doing.

Other researchers have used single focus groups in their analyzes: For example, Tim Freeman used one focus group to examine critical and reflective engagement with issues that affect participants’ daily lives.²¹ It is particularly important when using one focus group to acknowledge the multiple sources of data generated.²² Here, individual contributions and group interactions are addressed; we attended to what was said, and how it was said; and the relevant structural and material contexts and theoretical and epistemological underpinnings were taken into consideration.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

There is a well-established criminological literature which examines the ways in which Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) populations in the UK have become the subject of a discourse that casts them as “suspect populations.” A connecting theme within this literature

highlights negative interaction between urban BME populations and the police. Such links between ethnicity/race and crime began during the 1950s and 1960s when significant numbers of Black people from former Commonwealth countries arrived in the UK.²³

This in-migration provided a catalyst for racialized social and political rhetoric, prompting a Cabinet Committee on Colonial Immigration to investigate the impact of the so called “Windrush” generation upon public order and crime.²⁴ The conclusion of the Committee enquiry was that these new “Black migrants conduct themselves well and posed no problem in terms of public disorder.”²⁵ Similarly, formal submissions, including those from the Police Federation, to a Home Affairs Select Committee on Race and Immigration in the late 1970s stated that Black people were not disproportionately involved in offending.²⁶ However, over time, the discourse shifted to one where the ethnicity/race of Black people and a propensity towards crime were problematically enmeshed.²⁷ Significantly, stereotypical racist perceptions of BME urban populations by the police played an important role in the public disorders of each decade from the 1950s to the 1980s. Furthermore, the British “race-riots” of the 1980s have been conceptualised as evidence of the cumulative impact of decades of disproportionate and aggressive use of the former “sus” laws²⁸—targeted stop and search tactics—and institutional police racism.²⁹ For many decades, there has been a consistent depiction of an over-representation of BME populations in official crime statistics.³⁰ Importantly, as Colin Webster notes, “The cause of the rioting was not simply police racism but police-black conflict deeply rooted in the local histories and experiences of particular communities.”³¹ However, the policing conflict was not limited to Black African or Black Caribbean communities, as is often popularly depicted, but also extended to multi-faith and secular British Asian populations involved in striking against racism in the workplace and opposition to immigration policing empowered by a “Black” collective political identity.³² The criminological picture is further complicated by the rather crude means by which early

monitoring of ethnicity and “race” in official crime statistics was undertaken in the UK up until the 1980s. Initially, Black and Asian populations were treated as a homogenous whole before more distinct categories such as Asian-Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi emerged in the formal Census. It can be argued that the debates around crime and Asian populations, and more recently Muslim populations, have followed a trajectory which echoes, but may also be distinguished from, the discourse around Black British populations. Although the shift to the creation of British Asian “Folk Devils” had begun in the period outlined above, the populations subject to such constructions were chiefly Muslim, South Asian (Pakistani and Bangladeshi) young men.³³

The conflict briefly described above illustrates an important historical legacy and context when examining the contemporary policing experiences of British Somali respondents articulated in the present paper. It is also worth emphasising that the Somali population has not figured prominently in British criminological research to date.

Although we do not hold notions of racial or ethnic essentialism, it is useful here to clarify the terms in use. Race usually denotes a group of people who share physical characteristics,³⁴ and it is now considered to be a controversial concept since it is based on Darwinian notions of biological and genetic notions of racial “superiority” and “inferiority.” However, although the term race privileges phenotypical traits, and oversimplifies difference, its use continues in everyday language in the terms racism and race relations.³⁵ Ethnic categories can be understood as bounded forms of social organisation, and can also be understood as a construction based on country of origin, an identification and identifier, or as a social position which has contextual meaning. Importantly, two such meanings are relational. The contemporary “ethnicity and crime” debate is prompted by the statutory recording and reporting of official criminal statistics following judicial recommendations by Lord Scarman in his Report into the policing of urban public disorder incidents of the early

1980s.³⁶ For many decades there has been a consistent depiction of an over-representation of BME populations in official crime statistics. However, official statistics tend to deny the complex diversity and pluralism of British BME populations by treating such populations as a homogenous whole. Importantly, in the UK, Somali communities have historically been invisible in ethnic monitoring processes,³⁷ and are often subsumed under the general categories of “African” or “Muslim.”³⁸

Somalis are a distinctive ethnic minority in the UK, sharing a language (Somali), and faith (Islam), with the vast majority being Sunni Muslim.³⁹ The ethnic and cultural positionalities of British Somalis are shaped by their Somali heritage, being born in—therefore ‘from’—the UK and also by being categorised and perceived as “African,” “Somali,” “Black,” and also by being Muslim. However, although British Somalis recognise that they are ascribed an African identity, they often do not identify as such. As such, ethnicity as a social position—or positionality—has contextual and relational meaning. Using positionality can be conceived of a way of understanding the multiple, overlapping, and shifting identities that people construct and are ascribed.⁴⁰ Translocational positionality is also shaped by the melding of multiple social positions, resulting in such locations becoming different and more than they “are.”⁴¹ Significantly, the focus here is on perceptions of ascription (by the police and criminal justice system), rather than on the processes of identity construction).

As mentioned above, there has been scant criminological attention paid to Somali populations in the UK. One of the few studies was undertaken by Coretta Phillips and Alice Sampson and focused on experiences of racial victimisation among Bengali and Somali residents living on an East London housing estate.⁴² The researchers concluded that Bengali and Somali communities were subjected to cumulative discrimination and experienced high levels of anxiety and fear around victimisation. Bengali and Somali residents also expressed

dissatisfaction with the police and housing department in two significant ways: first, with regard to a lack of intervention from both organisations to prevent racial victimisation; and second, in relation to the housing authority and police downplaying the seriousness of reported racist incidents.⁴³ In this research it is the race/ethnicity of these two cohorts which is presented as the basis of discrimination/victimisation, and while this paper's focus is race/ethnicity, it also argues that religion as an additional social position adds further complexity and compounds otherness. Significantly, there is heterogeneity among Muslim populations which is often overlooked.

The Focus Group in Context

This focus group was conducted within the context of a study—"Somalis in London"—which was part of a wider research project, "Somalis in European Cities." Funded by the Open Society Foundations, this research involved a comparative set of studies exploring the views and experiences of Somali communities and the policy responses and initiatives which support their integration.

The research was undertaken concurrently in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Stockholm, Leicester, and London. The focus of the wider study was on the experiences and concerns of Somalis in relation to identity, belonging and interactions, education, employment, housing, health and social protection, safety and security, civil and political life, and the role of the media. The research was carried out to the standards set in the ESRC's Research Ethics Framework and the British Sociological Society's Statement on Ethical Practice. Ethical approval was granted by the College of Health and Social Care's Ethical Approval Panel at University of Salford. In accordance with these guidelines, the research was conducted with the welfare of participants in mind. The London Boroughs of Camden and Tower Hamlets were identified as the research focus based on the size of the Somali population, with Tower Hamlets being home to the longest established Somali

community in London, and concerns about the perceptions of young Somali men's vulnerability to crime in the borough of Camden. In Camden, Somalis are the largest minority ethnic group in the borough.

The study was underpinned by a qualitative methodology with the aim of exploring and capturing the lived experiences of this under-researched group. The overarching aim of the project was to make policy recommendations to address issues around integration and to illuminate the structural context of service provision and the agency of Somali communities. A common research strategy was adopted across the seven study areas each comprising focus groups with Somali communities, with representation across gender and a range of age groups as well as focusing on discrete areas as follows: identity and belonging, citizenship, housing, health, education, policing, and the role of the media. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with stakeholders from a range of backgrounds including representatives from local government, the voluntary sector—including young people and women's organisations, housing, health, education and community groups, and two senior officers from the Metropolitan Police Service.

The findings presented in this paper are based on a focus group ($n = 11$) undertaken with men⁴⁴ in the London Borough of Camden and explicitly focused on experiences of policing.⁴⁵ All the participants were under twenty-five years of age, although men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were invited to attend. Participants were born in and grew up in London, some participants recognised one another (from living in the same locale) but did not “know” one another. A male moderator facilitated the focus group with the assistance of the female research assistant.⁴⁶

The sampling strategy was governed by selecting respondents who would maximise theoretical development.⁴⁷ Theoretical sampling or purposive sampling is concerned with constructing a sample which is meaningful theoretically and empirically because it builds in

certain characteristics (criteria) which help the development of an argument.⁴⁸ It can be understood as selecting cases to study on the basis of their relevance to research questions, theoretical positions, analytical framework, practice, and importantly the argument or explanation being developed. In practical terms, the focus group was scheduled to take place on a certain date and time and participants were invited to attend via posters displayed in shops and leisure/community centres in their locale. In this way, participants activated themselves⁴⁹ and were perhaps motivated to engage with the research to have the opportunity to share experiences.⁵⁰

Being Treated as a “Suspect”: Stop and Search

The following excerpt is taken from the beginning of the focus group. Stop and search was cited as the first priority in response to the grand tour question “What are your experiences [of policing].”⁵¹ This discussion was characterised by consensus, with participants sharing individual and collective experiences of policing.

Excerpt 1

Abdi: Too much stop and search

M⁵²: Ok, is that often, in terms of [...]?⁵³

Hassan: It depends to be honest, sometimes if you’re walking with more than two friends they will stop you

Abdi: Yeah but sometimes if you’re on your own they will still stop and search you so it makes no difference

M: how does it make you feel being stopped and searched?

Abdi: Angry!

Awale: Are they allowed to even do that? If you’re in groups, they are, it depends, but what about if you are in twos? They’ve got to have a reason, but what can you do?

M: Well you can be stopped, it depends, you know if there is section 60/

Mohammed: Well I heard they are not allowed to have that suspicion innit, because it is just suspicion/

Ibrahim: What about getting stopped over the potential rise in crime, ‘cos I got stopped once at (X High Street)? I got told [by a police officer] ‘You walked out of Halifax [Building Society]’. What’s it called, Subway [sandwich shop] ‘You were

talking to four black males and a car pulled over and you're under suspicion of robbing Halifax bank'. And I have just bought a foot long [subway sandwich roll].

Awale: And what happened after?

Ibrahim: They said, 'You are under suspicion, 'cos you lot are trying to rob Halifax Bank', this this and that. It was a load of bollocks but what can you do about it?

Osman: Say you are with your friend and he is known to the police but you're not known to the police, have they any right to stop you?

Adan: Sometimes they use it as an excuse, but I don't see why what your friend's business has got to do with you/

Mohammed: Sometimes they are judging you on your friends innit but you might not be involved with what they are doing and that/

Awale: To be honest I've never had a problem with the police other than one time I got stopped for looking at them and they said 'You are dodgy, 'cos you are looking at us'. That the only excuse they gave and then they stopped and searched me for that right in front of my house/

Bixi: There was one time I was driving through [NW5] and they stopped me, and I didn't know they were after me because of the sirens. I had parked to the side to make more space for them [to pass by] and the next thing they stopped beside me and the guy came and said 'Turn off your engine and give me your keys'. And I said 'I aint giving you my keys and I aint stepping out the car for you, why are you stopping me?' and they were like, 'What are you doing here?' You're from NW1, what are you doing in NW5?' and I said 'Can I not drive through certain areas?' They made us all get out of the car and they flipped the whole car inside out searching and I didn't want to comply with anything. And there was another time I was driving they stopped me, and I was like 'What are you stopping me for?' and they said 'Oh you're driving too slow'. They stopped me for driving too slow.

In response to the moderator's grand tour question, Abdi immediately mentions excessive stop and search, which prompts a discussion and interaction around this experience, which was presented as commonplace. At the beginning of the discussion, the moderator is very involved and the focus group position him as knowledgeable, as an outsider perhaps, but with insider information/experience, when Awale asks, "Are they even allowed to do that?" As the discussion progresses the group share experiences and the moderator's involvement diminishes, and he steps back, leaving his prompt question unfinished for the group to complete. The group co-created insider interaction that describes individual experiences of stop and search and there are complementary interactions and consensus. They position the police as "they" /other, homogenising them, while simultaneously conveying a shared sense

of vulnerability and powerlessness. The group pose rhetorical questions, (for example, Awale, “What can you do?”/ Ibrahim “What can you do about it?” conveying frustration coupled with resignation). They also cite word of mouth as sources of information, displaying uncertainty of legislation and their rights in relation to stop and search. The moderator then provides information in relation to the law regarding stop and search. Through the discussion and insider interaction, shared concrete experiences are focused on and through this the group share their individual experiences.⁵⁴ The use of colloquial rhetorical devices, such as Mohammed’s young urban London “innit” (an abbreviation of ‘isn’t it’), attempts to persuade other group members of the authenticity of his account, and to gain consensus. Through their generalised observations and shared personal experiences, the group convey that they feel under suspicion and vulnerable when with others (like them), when alone, and in particular neighborhoods.

Police suspicion is a feature of the group’s daily lives in the most banal of circumstances: Ibrahim, accused of robbing a bank while buying a sandwich; Awale, considered “dodgy” for looking at police officers; and Biixi who was apprehended for driving too slowly. The individual and shared experiences recounted here convey feelings of being misunderstood by the Metropolitan Police Service, and, as much as participants rely on hearsay to inform their own understanding of the dynamics of interaction, they also construct the police as lacking in knowledge and as untrustworthy. The interpretations of participants’ experiences discussed here are substantiated by providing the following explanation of the material context of stop and search. Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, gives police wide powers of discretion to stop and search *without* the existence of reasonable suspicion if the individual is located in an area that has been designated a “Section 60” area.⁵⁵ There is evidence that excessive use of “stop and search” creates tension and a mistrust of public authorities, and leads to very low numbers of arrests: 3 percent in some

cases.⁵⁶ Camden is the borough with the third highest rate of stop and search among minority ethnic communities in London. Section 60 has been used disproportionately against Asian and Black minorities, creating resentment among communities that are targeted. Additionally, some civil rights activists have expressed concern about the use of the Section 60 stop and search, questioning whether the quality of intelligence is sufficiently robust.⁵⁷

In the following excerpt, which continues directly from the one above in response to the second question: “How safe do you feel in your area?,” the group went on to talk about feeling (un)safe in their daily lives with a particular focus on neighborhood/locale and revisit feelings of being in danger when alone and in groups, but this time in relation to other ethnic groups.

Feeling Unsafe in Urban Space(s)

Excerpt 2

Farah: For Somalis [place in NW5]⁵⁸ isn't safe/

Bixi: I don't really agree with that, what's wrong with [place in NW5]?

Garaar: Yeah, what's wrong with [place in NW5]?

Mohammed: There are a lot of black [people], it's mental, and they don't like boys, but as long as you don't start trouble/

Farah: Like I said, [place in NW5] isn't safe for Somalis, wallahi, especially for your Somalis at this age

Abdi: Is there a reason for that?

Farah: Yeah, obviously, there are a load of 'blackies'⁵⁹ running around loose trying to make a name for themselves. So they are running around reckless and if they see you in [place in NW5] they are going to challenge you, it's a simple fact. That's how the blacks are, that's their mentality

Mohammed: Yeah, they haven't got anything to lose/

Abdi: There was a stabbing a few weeks ago.

Hassan: Really what happened?

Abdi: A fifteen year old got a slice on the arm.

Bixii: It's those under 21 who are most at risk/

Garaar: I would say from the ages of 15-25.

Yeah (agreement among the group)

Ibrahim: I'm turning 25 in July, if they see me they will think I am quite a young guy, and they will try to challenge me, but like I said I'm turning 25, that's a reality innit/

Abdi: I think most of these young guys, yeah I think to be secure they feel like they have to roll in numbers.

Aadan: Some days being in a group could save you, some days it could get you into trouble. 'Cos if you're in a big group some days it could save you and sometimes others think 'Yeah, they're intimidating, let's go for them.' It depends.

The first part of this discussion is characterised by disagreement, conflict, and challenge among the group about whether [place in NW5] was “safe” for young British-Somalis to be.⁶⁰ This particular place—associated with drug and gang activity—was designated a Section 60 “stop and search” area by MPS and was populated by other (black) ethnic groups. Focus group participants predominantly lived in NW1, and the so called “postcode wars” in North West London, referring inter-estate rivalry, often between different ethnic groups are well-documented by the media.⁶¹

This section of interaction illuminates perceptions of identity in relation to ethnic positionality, in particular through the othering of black youths from different ethnic backgrounds. This highlights a perceived lack of homogeneity among black people: the young British Somali men here do not identify with “the blacks,” or indeed identify as black themselves.

In the excerpt above, although there is disagreement at the start, an insider discussion takes place where the young men unravel the complex dynamics involved with overlapping social and geographical locations. They feel under threat and afraid of being challenged due to being male, young, black, occupying (particular) urban space, and this threat is posed by other young, black, urban, males. In this way, being young translocates with being black and occupying urban space. Although they do not identify with the “blackies” in NW5, as the first excerpt shows, they are aware of being homogenised as “black” by the police, which illuminates divergence between identification and ascription of ethnic identity. Paying

attention to linguistic devices also shows how the use of colloquial urban London language mixed with Islamic language illuminates insiderness and multiple positionalities: being young, Somali/black and Muslim—as social locations—translocates with geographical location: occupying urban British space. Abdi refers to a young boy getting a “slice on the arm,” denoting stabbing by a knife attack; Farah’s use of “wallahi,” derived from the Arabic, “I swear to Allah” is used to persuade and convince the others in the group of the authenticity of his claim that NW5 was not a safe place for young British Somali men. In the discussion above, the group displayed a complex understanding of the issues regarding “otherness” and “othering” and how experiencing multiple jeopardies or “othernesses” destabilises notions of homogeneity among BME populations within the context of policing and as such challenges notions of a “Black” collective political identity.⁶²

In the short excerpt below participants raise the issue of excessive CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) in the areas where they lived. The discussion depicts the ways they feel simultaneously over policed and under protected. As the exchange below shows, the CCTV cameras left them feeling under surveillance and under suspicion, but did not make them feel safe.

Excerpt 3

Awale: To be honest they have too many cameras. I heard that whenever you go outside your house at least 60 cameras catch you in the day, that’s what I heard. That’s a lot of cameras.

Ismail: But it don’t do shit fam.

Mohammed: That’s true.

Ahmed: It just watches you, if you get stabbed no one cares bruv.

Aadan: Half of them don’t work anyway.

Ismail: But it’s like paparazzi fam.

Here the participants position each other as familiar/insider (fam/bruv) through acknowledging their shared experiences, living in the same locale—NW1—and belonging to the same ethnic group, even though they had just met. The above exchange is an insider

discussion characterised by rueful consensus, again denoted by the use of shared urban London, (young, black) language “it don’t do shit’/fam/bruv.” Again, hearsay shapes understanding, demonstrated by Awale’s use of “I heard,” while Ismail’s “it don’t do shit” refers to the ineffectuality of CCTV in the areas in which they live. Both “fam” and “bruv” are strong examples of colloquial insider-speak since, “fam,” an abbreviation for family indicates extended family and close friends, while “bruv,” denotes brother abbreviated.

Negative Interactions with the Police

Similar to the first excerpt, in the following extract participants co-reproduce their individual and shared interactions with the police. The content of the talk is important and captures agreement that experiences of policing are largely negative, in spite of Aadan’s initial talk about his attempts to rise above antagonism. Issues of power are apparent throughout this discussion.

Excerpt 4 (a)

Aadan: For me it’s got to the point now that if they approach me I am happy to talk to them. Before I was like, giving them the cold shoulder and not really giving them a proper response. But I talk to them and that, and get them bored, you know what I mean kind of things.

Ismail: But at times they will try to get at you, like they will try to make you say things.

Mohammed: Yeah, trust me man, some are pigs.

Biixi: They approach you in a rude and aggressive way.

Farah: It depends on where they approach you, you could be outside your house or something or near your house, you could just be going home/

Ahmed: Exactly, that’s what happened to me.

Biixi: They just come across as rude and it’s hard for you to be polite to them/

Garaar: How are you going to be polite and respectful towards someone that’s being rude and aggressive towards you? Respect goes both ways you understand.

Farah: There was a time I was meeting my mum at the hospital and I was on the bus. I jumped off the bus and she kept calling me so when I got off the bus I started jogging, I was jogging for a bit as I slowed down there were two undercover police running behind me, but I didn’t know. They were out of breath and they were like ‘Oh god you’re fast’, the other one came and he jumped on me, he threw me up against the wall and started restraining me for no reason whatsoever. So I am confused, thinking,

‘what have I done?’ They were like, ‘There is a lot of drug dealing in this area and we thought you just did a deal and you were running away’. I was like in shock, but at the same time I didn’t want to comply with them because of the way they approached me and the way they handled me innit... I was left with a sense of resentment towards them from that day.

Awale: It’s the questions they ask you as well. They are judging you straight away as well and you can tell they are being racist as well. They will ask you questions like ‘Have you been arrested before?’ and they think you’re a certain type of person straight away.

Mohammed: I get that all the time “Have you been arrested before?” “No” and they laugh at me like “How have you not been arrested before? Come on mate you are lying to me.”

Some in the group start laughing and agree with the comment

Ahmed: “Have I seen you before” [apparent policy response]

Abdi: They are surprised, the best surprise!

Awale: They are expecting to pull your name up and to see he has done this and that, but when you’re like “Nah, I haven’t been arrested” they are like “What? Go and run a check please he is lying to us!” that’s how it is with them, that’s what it’s like all the time, all the time, so it’s like, oh man!

Aadan begins by talking about his strategy to negotiate interactions with the police, having previously (metaphorically) given them “the cold shoulder.” He portrays this interaction as a game, with him having the upper hand as he outwits them, positioning himself as in control and the police as “puppets.” However, Aadan is challenged by the rest of the group: there is strong consensus among them that he would be unable to exercise such control. Farah uses the previous discussion as a platform to tell a story about his experience and also uses the game metaphor to characterise his depiction of interactions with the police. Like Aadan, he minimises the unequal power relationship between the police and him as a young Somali male by his use of “oh god you’re fast,” while emphasising his physical superiority since he outran the two police officers merely jogging, while they were running. The subtext here is that the police would not have been able to catch him if he was running properly and was aware that he was being followed. However, while Farah positions himself as being able to outrun the police and casts them as acknowledging his physical supremacy as

an individual, ultimately they had the institutional power to collectively restrain him. Farah and Mohammed's memetic⁶³ use of "come on mate," positions the police as attempting insiderness and familiarity, which further minimises their individual (and institutional) power.

Awale casts the police as judgemental and preconceiving Somalis in a particularly negative way and through his talk, distances himself from how he being depicted: "they think you are a certain person." Participants mimic (by memesis) the police's recounted assumptions that they would have been previously arrested. However, this is rather dark humour as there they are aware that such negative assumptions are based on their ethnic/racial background. This exchange is characterised by humour and the power of the police is again diminished as they ridiculed and depicted as bungling and prejudiced. The subtext to this exchange is that these young men are superior to the police (as individuals) in a number of key ways. First, physically, since they can outrun them without trying; second, intellectually as the police are cast as victims of clichéd prejudice; and third, morally, since they make erroneous assumptions about the kind of people young British Somali men are.

Excerpt 4 (b)

In the following excerpt there is a distinct shift in tone.

Osman: I do not like the police. I do not like them at all. Trust me. I wouldn't call them in a life or death situation/

Garaar: They are the real mean people I swear to God/

Farah: I wouldn't call them for protection/

Ahmed: They do abuse their power/

Osman: From the time they go to your door step you are dead bruv/

Garaar: The police are institutionally racist, everybody knows that. They are not really going to help you out and they are like really two faced. They are going to do everything to make you look bad. I'm being real wallahi, it's true.

The talk in both of the above excerpts moves between generalised observations, personal beliefs and individual and shared experiences. However, there is a significant change in tone in the above discussion and a distinct absence of humour. The second part of this discussion began with Osman stating “I do not like the police.” Osman was not involved in the first part of this discussion: he did not join in the laughter and a tone of censure about the previous hilarity is introduced: interactions with the police are now presented as a serious matter. Group interactions here are centred on negative perceptions of the police, and this discussion, towards the end of the focus group appears to sum up the group’s feelings based on the nullifying experiences recounted earlier. The group’s approach to dealing with the police in the end is to avoid them wherever possible, which means that even if they needed protection they would not approach them in a “life or death situation.” This is very much an insider discussion inscribed with consensus denoted by the use of young urban London colloquial speech, “trust me/bruv/I’m being real/ I swear to God” interspersed with the Somali/Arabic term “wallahi.”

Instead of depicting interactions with the police as a game, here participants acknowledge the power imbalance and the negative consequences of this. There is a shift from the police being positioned as ineffective to their being cast as the holders of the power: both as individuals and as an institution, and again here there is evidence of homogenisation. Although the context (and content) of the discussion is the same, the form of this excerpt is different, both in terms of the tone and how the police are positioned. However, it is not contradictory and shows how the same experiences can be presented in different ways and multiple and simultaneous “truths” can be presented about interactions with the police.

Troubling the Notion of Outsider/Insider Interactions in Focus Groups

Although Agar and MacDonald highlight two forms of focus group discussion: “insider orientated” and “outsider orientated,” where participants address each other or the

moderator,⁶⁴ the final excerpt from the focus group troubles notions of insider and outsider discussion since the moderator shares some positionalities and experiences with the group.

Excerpt 5

Ibrahim: I've got a question to ask innit. A month ago I was getting followed by the police, I asked the guy doing the investigation 'Why are you doing an investigation on me, I am a full time student?' and he said 'That's none of your business'. So, what I want to ask is can they do an investigation and can they stop me? They have nothing to suspect, I am not a dealer, I'm not a terrorist. I do my thing. I go to college and then I go home.

M: You can write to your local MP or council, so you can write to who represents you/

Biixi: He is 20 years old and you can see what he is going through in terms of the police, the way they are harassing him. He is a full time student he said and they are watching his house, why?

Ibrahim: What you talking about the house wallahi? They watch me when I go to college.

Ahmed: I have a question for you, how was policing when you were a teenager?

Awale: Probably worse innit.

M: it's a good question, policing was probably similar but I think what we didn't have is, we never had all those post-code wards and all that.

As explained above, the male moderator is an older, British-born Somali, who lives in Camden. The interaction in the excerpt above can be understood as an outsider discussion, in that focus group participants are addressing the moderator, "I've got a question to ask" / "I have a question for you" as someone different to them, with knowledge and experience that they do not have. However, they are addressing him moderator as someone with insider experience: of policing, of living in the same area, and of being black, Somali, and once young. There is recognition of shared concrete experiences and also of difference. In this way, the discussion is simultaneously insider and outsider, the moderator through his positionalities and geographical location shares insiderness with the focus group participants. However, because he is older, he is also an outsider, illustrating that positionalities also translocate across time as well as across place(s). This part of the discussion therefore can be seen as a collaboration between the moderator and focus group participants. Similarly, earlier

in the focus group discussion, (see Excerpt 1) Awale addressed the moderator to ask a question regarding the police and stop and search. He positioned the moderator as having more knowledge than he, based on his being older. Here, the “position” of the researcher and subjective and intersubjective elements are significant. However, it is important to note that assumptions about insiderness and outsidership are foundationalist and essentialist and any common ground and difference are to a large extent perceived.⁶⁵

In the context of focus group operation, “a” (focus group members) can be seen here to trust “b” (moderator) to do “y” (provide/facilitate a safe space where they could share their experiences of policing in London). At the start of the focus group, the moderator established the ground rules: assuring confidentiality and anonymity; emphasising the need to be non-judgemental, to show respect for others and conduct themselves appropriately. Expectations regarding behaviour were clear. Focus group members cast the moderator as both outsider and insider throughout the discussion. However, in both circumstances, participants could be understood to show trust: while positioned as insider the moderator was “one of them,” having shared experiences of policing; and when cast as outsider, participants deferred to the moderator’s knowledge. In this case, focus group participants (a) trusting the moderator (b) appeared to be more important than the moderator (b) trusting focus group participants (a).⁶⁶ Although in some circumstances, the research relationship alters from: “An instrumental one dictated by the research tasks to a reciprocal and supportive relationship, influencing the quality of interviews and ongoing interactions between interviewer and interviewee,”⁶⁷ in this particular circumstance, the focus group was a one off event.

Conclusion

The findings from this focus group add to the established criminological literature, which focuses on how UK BME populations have been cast as suspect.⁶⁸ It also generates further evidence of negative interactions between the police and BME populations,

reinforcing the institutional racism of the police/how BME populations have been discriminated against/the historical legacy of police-black conflict in the UK. Furthermore, since the British Somali population has not figured in British criminological literature to date, this paper fills a gap in knowledge and highlights that Somali populations are discriminated against and victimised (along with other BME populations). They fear victimisation and are reluctant to report crime as a result. They feel under-protected and over-surveilled in a variety of situations—alone, with others, in certain areas, in their neighborhoods, because of who they know/are associated with. This research highlights that race and ethnicity formed the basis of discrimination and victimisation and is compounded by religion, age, and social location. In this way, social and geographical locations intersect—or translocate. Such translocation can compound discrimination and victimisation adding further complexity and reinforcing otherness. The men in the focus group were homogenised as “Black” by the police, but demonstrated a lack of collective Black identity with other ethnic groups.⁶⁹ Significantly, by being treated as suspect (i.e. not trusted) by the police, the men demonstrated reciprocal mistrust of the police, not trusting them to protect them if necessary. Excessive use of stop and search and negative interaction with the police could be seen to lead to such mistrust. It must be acknowledged however, that the paper is based on only one focus group from a study which was centred in two London boroughs/across seven European cities.

This paper also contributes to debates on the analysis of focus groups. Increased methodological research and data analysis have previously been identified as a topic for future work on focus groups.⁷⁰ This paper demonstrates that focus groups are useful in gaining knowledge of the individual and shared experiences of socially marginalised groups. Rigour in focus group analysis can be achieved by applying an analytical framework which takes account of the content (themes) and form (structure) of focus group data. Through an

analysis of themes (content) and form (structure), this paper illuminates group norms and processes, within the social and cultural contexts in which individual agency takes place. The central premise is that being transparent in the analytical process and with regard to epistemological, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks optimises the usefulness and credibility of the findings and rigour in analysis. In qualitative research the relationship between the sample and the wider population is not always based on demographic representation: samples are selected purposively for the contribution that they can make to emerging theory, which can contribute to knowledge development when it is recontextualised in numerous different settings, amounting to theory based generalisation.⁷¹

Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, this thematic analysis was shaped by our theoretical interest in how race/ethnicity as positionalities shaped young British Somali men's experiences of policing in London. The men in the group co-reproduce their experiences through their deployment of linguistic devices, for example posing rhetorical questions and through their use of humour. Analyzing how young men in the focus group position themselves and each other provided an opportunity to explore shifting ethnic positionalities, how these translocate and how they shape experiences of policing. In this way, analyzing a single focus group has theoretical value since theoretical generalisations can be made to other contexts.⁷² The generalisations are theoretically, epistemologically, and contextually grounded and provide insight into people's lives and the circumstances of their lives.

In highlighting convergence and divergence within the group, this paper is able to explore and illuminate social processes and contextualise such individual and shared "concrete experiences" within time/space, and also with reference to local, national, international, and cultural contexts and discourses. Congruent with the epistemological position, data analysis must be transparent. Here, the focus group discussion and interactions are framed and contextualised, with the exchanges of opinion, processes of persuasion, sense-

making and consensus/disagreement carefully noted, insider/outsider discussions, the use of linguistic devices, the tone and positioning that shaped the discussions. Cautious generalisations can be made, having explored in detail such multiple layers of meaning.⁷³ As such, this paper offers a new contribution to knowledge, and adds to evidence that focus groups are a useful method to examine the experiences of under-researched and less heard populations and advance the use of focus groups as a method to bridge personal experiences and social contexts.⁷⁴

This paper unravels how social locations can shape experiences of policing, and in the case of the focus group participants discussed here, how being young, Black, Muslim, and British Somali intersect and are compounded by their (urban) geographical location. Such experiences are characterised by negative interactions with the MPS: such interactions with the police are shaped by context and also reflect the context in which such interactions take place. Further, the analytical technique adopted needs to be flexible and to fit with the overarching purpose of the study/analysis.⁷⁵ It is also important to consider how the content discussed in a focus group can influence its structure. In the focus group discussed here, experiences of policing—shaped by unbalanced power relations and negative interactions with law enforcement officers—shapes the tone of the group, the language used, rhetorical devices employed, and how participants position themselves and the police.

A robust and rigorous approach to focus group analysis can be enhanced by addressing the following: first, there must be clarity regarding epistemological, theoretical, conceptual, and analytical frameworks; there is a need to attend to what is said in the focus group (content/themes); attention should be paid also to form/structure (how it is said), and some of the principles of narrative analysis can be deployed here; an examination of individual contributions and group interaction should be included. However, one should not

be overly prescriptive in how this is applied, instead, flexibility and creative approaches to focus group analysis is needed.

In conclusion, this article responds to a criticism levelled at focus group research: that it is often of limited use because the analysis is considered insufficiently rigorous, and therefore the findings are not credible or trustworthy. Throughout, it is argued that the analytical rigour of focus group data can be enhanced. This happens when researchers make explicit epistemological, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks and apply an analytical framework that is designed to make use of a distinctive feature of focus group data (talk)—the interplay of individual/personal beliefs/ attitudes/practices/behaviour, and shared experiences/group/collective narratives, and public information. The analysis must make knowledge claims appropriate to the research design since focus group research generally relies on purposive sampling. This means that while theoretical generalisation is possible, generalisation on the basis of demographic representation is not.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran, “A Qualitative Framework”, 1.
- ¹¹ Warr, “It was Fun,” 198-289; Braun, and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis,” 77-101.
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- ²⁸ 'Sus law' was the informal name for a UK stop and search law that permitted a police officer to stop, search and potentially arrest people on suspicion that they might intend to commit an offence. This law was based on the 1824 Vagabond Act and was repealed in 1981.
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- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Pseudonyms protect the identity of focus group participants.
- ⁴⁵ Four topics guided the discussion: first, experiences of policing; second, feeling safe in their neighbourhood; third, interactions with the police; fourth, key concerns and priorities and these are presented as overarching themes, with identified subthemes below. The discussion within the subheadings also addresses form.
- ⁴⁶ Note that / indicates that the speaker does not complete a sentence and // indicates that a speaker has been interrupted. [...] indicates that a section of talk has been edited out. Such interruptions indicate the collective and dynamic nature of focus group interactions.
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- ⁵¹ James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).
- ⁵² Denotes moderator.
- ⁵³ [...]? denotes an unfinished question
- ⁵⁴ Merton and Kendall, *ibid*.
- ⁵⁵ A police officer has powers to stop and search an individual at any time under Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act 1984 if they have “reasonable grounds” to suspect an individual is carrying: illegal drugs; a weapon; stolen property; something which could be used to commit a crime.
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⁵⁸ NW5 refers to a North West London post code (area).

⁵⁹ A pejorative and racist term to denote non-white populations.

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⁶² Modood, “Muslim Identity”; Ramamurthy, “The politics of,” 38-60.

⁶³ Memesis is the imitation of another’s speech.

⁶⁴ Aggar and MacDonald, “Focus groups and ethnography,” 78-86.

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⁷⁰ Morgan, *Focus Groups*, 1996.

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⁷² Janice Morse, “Qualitative Generalizability,” *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 1 (1999): 5-6; Janice Morse, *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*, (London: Sage, 1994).

⁷³ Kitzinger, “The Methodology of Focus Groups,” 103-21; Aggar, and MacDonald, “Focus groups and ethnography,” 78-86.; Czarniawska; Warr; Ahmed, 2015.

⁷⁴ Warr, “It was fun,” 198–289.

⁷⁵ Ibid.