# Conducting Focus Groups in Terms of an Appreciation of Indigenous Ways of Knowing: Some Examples from South Africa

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**Abstract**: In this article I consider some examples of conducting focus groups in South Africa with school teachers in a manner which takes into account indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous knowing (within various indigenous cultural heritages) can be defined as linked to processes of people collectively constructing their understandings by experiencing their social being in relation to others. I indicate how the conduct of focus groups can be geared towards taking into account as well as strengthening knowing as a relational activity defined in this way. Once facilitators of focus groups appreciate this epistemology they can set up a climate in which people feel part of a research process of relational discussion around issues raised. This requires an effort on the part of facilitators to make explicit to participants the type of orientation to research that is being encouraged via the focus group session. I offer examples of attempts to practice such an approach to facilitation, including examples of feedback obtained from participants regarding their experience of the research process.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I consider the conduct of focus groups underpinned by an outlook that takes account of indigenous ways of knowing. The article is set in the context of HORSTHEMKE's (2008) statement that "[i]ndigenous knowledges, as a discursive framework in the academy, are relatively new and have only gained currency in the last twenty years" (as cited in WANE, 2013, p.100). [1]

When considering Western-oriented knowing epistemologies since the beginning of the so-called Enlightenment in the 17th century, LADSON-BILLINGS states her concerns that these have come to dominate the way in which knowing is defined in research literature, and she argues that more indigenous styles of knowing

(which she calls "ethnic epistemologies") have all-too-often become subordinated (2003, p.398). She sees René DESCARTES' approach to knowing as offering an epitome of how knowledge-making comes to be defined as somehow resting on individual thought patterns to the detriment of communal processes of knowledge-construction. She remarks that his philosophy articulates

> "a central premise upon which European (and Euro-American) worldviews and epistemology rest—that the individual mind is the source of knowledge and existence. In contrast the African saying 'Ubuntu', translated 'I am because we are', asserts that the individual's existence (and knowledge) is contingent upon relationships with others" (LADSON-BILLNGS, 2003, p.398). [2]

She indicates that these divergent epistemological perspectives are not merely matters of "preferences." She argues that the "preference" for the former kind of epistemology serves to reproduce a "dominant worldview and [attendant] knowledge production and acquisition processes" (p.399). In the light hereof it is crucial to revitalize alternative traditions of knowledge-construction and ways of appreciating collective processes of knowing. [3]

COLLINS makes a similar point when discussing the tradition of African humanism. She suggests that this tradition gains expression in "the polyrhythms of African American music, in which the relationships between the different beats becomes focused upon at the same time as individual uniqueness is acknowledged" (2000, pp.262-263). Both LADSON-BILLINGS' and COLLINS' concerns are that for the most part in the literature on methodology a participative, relational approach to knowing has become rendered inferior as an epistemological stance. In view of this political context (where questions of knowing are at the same time linked to questions of power), LADSON-BILLINGS and COLLINS call for researchers—from whatever cultural heritage—to become reflexive in regard to the manner in which their social backgrounds and assumptions about what it means to "know" are coming into play, and/or have come into play, in doing social research. [4]

NDIMANDE, with reference to research undertaken in post-apartheid South Africa, suggests that this would imply, *inter alia*, being attentive, especially when organizing research work that involves indigenous participants, not to enforce still dominant understandings of what it means to conduct research—and to be attuned to the spirit of "decolonizing research" (2012, p.215). He argues that decolonizing research presents a challenge to traditional ways of conducting qualitative research, as well as to ways of doing quantitative research (p.216). He summarizes the movement towards decolonizing research as follows:

> "Decolonizing methodologies can help researchers interrogate the very notion of 'knowing' as well as what it is that we know and who benefits from that knowledge (Rogers & Swadener, 1999). This study [referred to in his article, where NDIMANDE conducted focus groups with indigenous parents of school children] involved marginalized communities whose cultural epistemologies rarely find due recognition or even acknowledgment in academe and/or in educational research institutions.

Interrogating the constitution of knowledge and its function is what can translate to decolonizing research" (NDIMANDE, 2012, p.223). [5]

CHILISA (2009), in explicating an "indigenous African-centered ethic" likewise refers to what she names "scientific colonialism" (p.409). In attempting to revitalize an Afrocentric paradigm, she pleads for a "decolonizing assessment," which is directed towards placing on an equal footing (as Western approaches) for "African ways of perceiving reality, ways of knowing, and value systems" (p.411). [6]

Speaking about the premises of "decolonizing research" across the globe, and more specifically with reference to examples of working with Aboriginal communities, NICHOLLS (2009) explains how "indigenous epistemologies and axiologies can inform the undertaking of participatory and collaborative research" (p.120). This is by taking into account that "the individual person is constituted through his or her communicative and interactive relations with others" (p.121). [7]

CHILISA (2012) notes the similarity between Maori arguments concerning the essential connectivity of people, who exist in relation, and the African adage "I am because we are" (p.100). She suggests that this adage has added to "theorizing on relational ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies" (ibid.). [8]

In this article I offer an account of how, in the conduct of focus groups, one can consciously inform the research in terms of an appreciation of indigenous ways of knowing, where knowing is understood as a relational exercise. That is, I offer detail on how focus group facilitators can give due recognition to epistemological questions in the process of conducting research, while being alert to indigenous ways of knowing. The article is structured as follows: In Section 2, I outline some contours of indigenous epistemologies. In Section 3, I briefly point out the way in which I am using some focus groups conducted in South Africa as exemplars in this article. Before I delve into detail on this (in Section 5), in Section 4 I offer an indication of how my considerations can be said to add a contribution to methodological discussions on the conduct of focus groups. I suggest that one can locate lacunae in the literature concerning facilitators openly talking about ways of knowing when they introduce the sessions to participants, and especially concerning efforts to be culturally attuned in this respect. In Section 5, I proceed to go into some depth into my way of introducing the research enterprise in a manner that can be said to resonate with indigenous ways of knowing (with reference to a number of groups in which I was involved). I offer quotations drawn from my introductions and I offer quotations from participants' feedback at the end of the sessions (on this score). [9]

## 2. Defining Some Contours of Indigenous Epistemologies

Considering indigeneity in the context of Africa, HOPPERS (2012) indicates that the attempt to re-put on the map what African epistemologies have to offer—as legitimate approaches to knowing—does not imply that Western systems of knowledge production need to be replaced (*in toto*). But it does imply that "a new kind of thinking in teaching, research, and community development" (p.1)—new in terms of current dominant practices—needs to be brought to the fore. She suggests that African epistemologies offer options for more collectively-oriented knowledge generation, linked to practical, and valued, ways of social living. OSSAI, also considering indigeneity in the African context, suggests that one of the prime qualities of indigenous ways of knowing is that they are relevant to solving problems as identified in communities and they involve the community's participation in the knowledge-construction process (2010, p.5). In order to spell out what "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems" (AIKS) can put forward as a viable alternative (or as an important complement) to "Western Scientific Knowledge" he points to several features of AIKS, which he contrasts with more Western-oriented styles of knowing as follows:

1. He remarks that thus far across the globe indigenous knowledge systems have become subordinated in relation to what are seen as more legitimate knowledge-production processes in terms of Western epistemologies.

2. Indigenous styles of knowing he defines as being intuitive in the sense of intuiting connections and therefore being more holistic than (Western-oriented) analytic and reductionist approaches.

3. Furthermore, he argues that oral story telling is paramount in this style of knowing, based on people exploring their stories (experiences) together.

4. The way of creating/generating data is "slow/inconclusive"—in the sense that it is acknowledged that experiences/data can be subjected to reformulation in the light of further experience and discussion around it (including discussion of connections between experiences/events). This is in contrast to Western scientific approaches which he sees as fast and selective (for example, selecting specific factors which are isolated for attention).

5. Indigenous knowing is more capable of taking into account long term cycles of feedback, rather than being focused on short term analyses. It is also less linear in its thinking—and does not try to link "effects" with particular causes in linear fashion.

6. And lastly, it caters for the inexplicable (which can also be linked to the spiritual)—rather than trying to orient truth-seeking primarily in terms of what can supposedly be "scientifically" understood. [10]

OSSAI claims that far from being "unprogressive" (as is often claimed by those criticizing indigenous knowledge systems), these systems "can serve as a foundation for restoring social, economic and environmental resilience in many parts of Africa and the developing world in general" (p.10). [11]

The idea that African knowledge systems (and indigenous thinking as such) is "unprogressive" and cannot cater for change and innovation is also contested by HALLEN (2002, p.47). He comments in particular that the notion of African thought as not catering for critical reflection is based on a Western model of what this amounts to (as resting on individual independent thinking). But he avers that even taking this criterion of critique as residing in individual thought processes, there is evidence of "critical thinking" on the part of some members of "traditional societies." More importantly, though, he argues that notions of truth seeking should not be treated in terms of "standard [Western-oriented] theories of truth" (p.24), where truth is regarded as definable outside of collective discourse. [12]

Likewise arguing for the distinctiveness of indigenous epistemologies in relation to Western traditions, MKABELA and CASTIANO (2012) note that generally when scholars speak about African indigeneity, they stress that "indigenous communities have their own indigenous paradigms and these paradigms perceive and understand knowledge and power fundamentally differently than western alternative paradigms. They have their own philosophies, theories of knowledge, methodologies and methods" (p.vii). [13]

The point being made by these various authors is that indigenous thinking needs to be understood as occupying a different paradigmatic space from Western-oriented foci, where the idea of communal construction of meaning as the route to knowing is given less credibility (and credentials). [14]

GODUKA adds an additional angle to this when she contends that while Western-oriented epistemologies may be inclined to devalue communal modes of thinking, *all forms of knowledge production* involve "processes of the social construction of ideas and knowledge that are based on the perception of a community's sense of reality" (2012, p.4). She suggests that "[l]ike all forms of knowledge ..., IK [indigenous knowledge] is a product of people's everyday experiences, therefore it creates meaning from forms of interaction and communication within which it is constructed" (ibid.). She here emphasizes (taking a social constructivist view) that worldviews are always created in social contexts and are inseparable from these.[1] She argues, along with other indigenous-oriented authors, that what is specific about indigenous modes of knowing is that they are *intentionally* communally oriented. As she puts it: "Communal knowledge ensures that knowledge is not collected and stored for personal power and ownership by individual specialists, but is rather developed, retained and shared within indigenous groups for the benefit of the whole group" (p.5). [15]

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1   Her position bears similarity to LADSON-BILLINGS' and COLLINS' critiques of positivist-oriented and indeed any objectivist-oriented positions, which assume that inquiry processes can be divested from the social positioning (and concerns) of inquirers. Such critique has likewise been expressed by many qualitatively-oriented researchers who have queried the Weberian interpretivist position in terms of his plea to strive for value-freedom (or objectivity). For instance, DENZIN and LINCOLN (2003) query this "scientific" agenda when they discuss the principles of qualitative inquiry. CRAM (2009) notes that at a broad level, it can be said that the work of researchers who acknowledge the social situatedness of research, and who advocate a commitment to research processes that try to mitigate against social oppression (including during the knowing process), resonates with the work of those who are committed to "the active decolonization of research" (p.309).

This conception of knowing as an expression of communal togetherness is also emphasized by HARRIS and WASILEWSKI (2004), in their setting out of what they see as an alternative world view and attendant epistemology as offered by indigeneity across the globe. They maintain that part of the strength of indigenous cultural symbols (as they have described them) is that they can serve to create the groundwork for a "dynamically inclusive dialogic space." This space, they note, "includes you, me, all of our relationships, taking place in our various personal, social, political, cultural, physical and spiritual contexts" (p.494). They explain too that one of the characteristics of such a dialogue is that people appreciate that

> "our strength is increased by sharing [in the process of developing communal wisdom]. We can affirm our view, expand our view, or sometimes alter or even give up our current view when we encounter a new one. We can also allow others to have contrastive views as long as they do not impose their views on us and vice versa" (p.498). [16]

HARRIS and WASILEWSKI's reference to not imposing views is set in a global context where they see that thus far Western outlooks have become imposed as ways of knowing and living, to the detriment of more relational ways of knowing and problem-solving. [17]

It is worth highlighting here that I am not claiming that this approach to knowing can be "found" in all indigenous cultural heritages independently of the hermeneutic process of *interpreting the heritages*. As HALLEN points out in the context of Africa, the process of "identifying and reexamining Africa's indigenous 'traditions'" (2002, p.66) is itself not free of an interpretation based on some values that are brought to bear. SEREQUEBERHAN too argues that this involves actively "sifting through [various] legacies, retaining that which is alive, ... [and] casting off that which is lethargic" (2000, p.67). This hermeneutic process is at the same time a call for regenerating what is considered to be valuable and alive —and worthy of nurturing—"in" the traditions (as located). This fits in with a constructivist position which recognizes that the interpretation of history and traditions is indeed a value-laden process, guided by an intention, in this case the intention to revitalize aspects of the heritages. (See also ROMM, 1997, 2002, 2010, for more detailed expositions of how the hermeneutic process of interpretation is admitted in terms of a constructivist stance.) [18]

A question remains as to whether people who are not brought up within cultural heritages where it is understood that the individual is inseparable from the community (QUAN-BAFFOUR, 2006; QUAN-BAFFOUR & ROMM, 2014/in press), can fully appreciate the flavor of epistemologies based on communal knowledge construction. This is the question of the translatability of paradigms, including epistemological ones. My position in this regard is that stances are not completely untranslatable and that points for comparison between them can be made, albeit that the terms used in talking "across" paradigms may still have different meanings/understandings associated with them, as people engage in conversation to enrich their appreciation of their possible meanings (cf.

CHRISTAKIS & BAUSCH, 2006; CISNEROS & HISIJARA, 2013; FLOOD & ROMM, 1996, 1997; HALLEN, 2002; McINTYRE-MILLS, 2000; MIDGLEY, 2000, 2011; OSEI-HWEDIE, 2007; POLLACK, 2006; ROMM, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2010). This implies that there is scope for people coming from different backgrounds to try to come to grips with "alternative" epistemologies, as I argue was done in the case of the facilitation of the focus groups discussed below, where I as White co-facilitator was involved (with other facilitators, White and Black) in facilitating focus group discussion with Black school teachers.[2] [19]

## 3. The Setting of the Focus Group Discussions

The focus groups discussed in this article were conducted with teachers in semi-urban and rural areas of South Africa. Two of the groups which I offer as examples were groups of teachers (six to seven in number each time) who were members of institutional-level support teams [ISLTs] for addressing inclusive education.[3] The focus groups to which I refer were held in two different primary schools in Atteridgeville (in the Province of Gauteng).[4] The research project was part of a larger international project consisting of five countries—China, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, South Africa, and United Kingdom. Along with a standardized questionnaire that was administered across the countries to explore and compare teachers' roles in inclusive education, it was decided to conduct focus groups in the various countries. I came into the project at the point of the design of the conduct of the focus groups in South Africa. The South African focus group discussions were held in three schools and were organized by a team of three of us, with the help of a district officer (Shila MPHAHLELE) who was familiar with the terrain and could negotiate "access" to the schools. The two other team members were Norma NEL and Dan TLALE. [20]

After holding some conversation amongst ourselves, we were keen to orient the South African focus groups towards enabling participants to experience the group discussion as a joint co-learning exercise (also in view of my previous work on consciously facilitating focus groups in this fashion—see ROMM, 2010, pp.248-259). In this article (Section 5 below) I have taken some quotations directly from my introductory comments in this regard as presented to the participants of the focus groups. With reference to the digital recordings, I take exemplary quotations from two of the groups, as this gives a good indication of my

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2    I take the view, along with a myriad of other authors/actors that the categories Black and White are social constructions, which are nevertheless socially "real" in their consequences (cf. ANSELL, 2007, p.329; KIGUWA, 2006, p.113; MILES, 2011, p.2009; ROMM, 2010, pp.10-13).

3    THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION's "White Paper Six" (2001), which deals with building an inclusive education and training system in South African schools, refers to ILSTs to accommodate learners requiring different levels of support in mainstream schools (p.29). These teams consist of teachers in the schools whose role is to put systems in place so that all learners in the schools can be catered for. These teams are in turn supported by the District. As "White Paper Six" indicates: "District support teams will provide the full range of education support services to these institutional-level support teams" (p.29).

4    Atteridgeville is what is termed a "township" area—that is, a relatively underdeveloped urban living area . Township schools, which served Black students living in semi-urban areas, under the apartheid system in South Africa, were particularly disadvantaged under this system, and still are disadvantaged in terms of resources (cf. NGCOBO & MUTHUKRISHNA, 2011).

"storyline" regarding the research endeavor. I also provide some quotations from our later requesting the participants to offer us feedback about their experiences of the focus group discussion. [21]

As had been decided among the research team members, I played the role of clarifying to participants what we meant by doing "re-search" (re-looking) by way of the focus group discussion, while Norma NEL was the primary facilitator during the sessions. Dan wished to introduce himself as a doctoral student of Norma and as learning about the methodology of focus groups while being primarily an observer in the sessions. I in turn facilitated the "feedback sessions" towards the end of the focus groups. I point below to my way of gearing the focus group discussion around the possibility of mutual researching together, and I also draw out the significance of feedback received. This complements articles that we published in other journals (NEL, ROMM & TLALE, 2014; ROMM, NEL & TLALE, 2013). [22]

In this article, I furthermore offer some quotations from one of the group discussions with teachers in a rural area of Kwa-Zulu Natal, namely in Escourt Circuit (with different co-facilitators[5]). In this session the focus of the discussion was on "making schools better" in terms of the performances of learners in various subjects. This too was part of a larger project (this time a national one) with 500 schools in various provinces in South Africa, with a few districts being sampled for focus group discussions. Actually focus group discussions for this project were conducted with groups other than teachers—such as school management teams, parents, and learners across different provinces. But in this article I concentrate on some material from the group of teachers. In this case the co-facilitators sometimes spoke in mother-tongue—isiZulu—to the teachers, but the teachers mainly spoke in English in response (even when I mentioned to them that if they wished they could speak isiZulu). The recorded material from this group is thus also mainly in English.[6] [23]

Before the focus group began, we as co-facilitators agreed on the importance of emphasizing to participants that what we are trying to activate in this research is not individual opinions but a joint discussion around the issues and possible solutions for "making schools better." This was also stressed earlier by me at "training workshops" that were held for the 46 facilitators in the 500 schools project, in order to better equip facilitators who were relatively unskilled in focus group facilitation. It was at these workshops that various people mentioned the need for us to use initiative in the choice of mother-tongue language during the facilitation of the focus groups. [24]

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5   In this case the co-facilitators were Martin MENDELSOHN, Khabonina NKUMANE, and Sibusiso NTSHANGASE.

6   As I indicate in my discussion in Section 6, NDIMANDE (2012) emphasizes that due account should be taken to use a language in which people will feel comfortable in expressing themselves: he therefore recommends the use of indigenous languages when doing research with indigenous participants.

## 4. Lacunae in the Literature on Focus Group Discussion

To provide some background to my considerations around sensitivity to the notion of knowledge-making as a communal process, I here engage with some of the literature on focus group research as a methodology. It is clearly specified in much of the methodological literature that the "data" that are developed via focus group research should be seen as being a product of the group interactions. Nevertheless, most authors do not indicate how discussions *can be set up* so that participants can appreciate that collective re-searching of the topic(s) by participants is what is being encouraged, as a process of people thinking together about the issues being raised (if this is the case). Nor it is common for authors to render explicit the orientation to "knowing/understanding" that facilitators may be adopting when orienting the discussion process. [25]

Authors from various countries have pointed out (*ex post facto*) that one of the qualities of focus group discussion is that it is able to provide a social context for people to build on each other's statements, to the point that views/insights that emerge around a topic cannot be attributed to particular persons. HOLLANDER expresses this understanding of focus group discussion as follows: "Participants in a focus group are not independent of each other, and the data collected from one participant cannot be considered separate from the social context in which it was collected" (2004, p.602). GRAY, WILLIAMSON, KARP and DALPHIN argue that this should be considered as a strength of focus group discussion as a methodology. They explain: "Perhaps the most important benefit of focus groups is that the give-and-take among participants fosters reflection on other people's ideas" (2007, p.362). [26]

WIBECK, ABRANDT-DAHLGREN and ÖBERG similarly describe the potential strength of focus groups:

> "Focus groups are of particular value because of their ability to allow researchers to study how people engage in collective sense-making; i.e., how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified in the context of discussion and debate with others" (2007, p.249). [27]

However, WIBECK et al. remark that thus far few researchers have delved into the manner in which the interactions that take place in focus groups indeed come to generate the information/views that emerge as part of the "collective sense-making" (ibid). [28]

HALKIER too observes that "focus group data (like other types of qualitative data) [need to be] understood as social enactments" (2010, p.71). She proposes that there are ways of analyzing these enactments so that at the point of coming to grips with the "data" these will be recognized as having been generated in a specific context of interaction between participants. She wonders why, with "the growing influence of epistemological positions within various forms of social constructivism ... where all knowledge is seen as dependent on the social context" (pp.71-72), not more researchers have included a discussion on the

social interactions within focus groups (as part of their analyses). She states that "it is somewhat surprising that the issue of dealing with the consequences of the interaction aspect of focus group data have apparently been so relatively sparsely dealt with in the ordinary textbook literature on focus groups" (p.72). FARNSWORTH and BOON echo this observation when they remark that "plenty of attention has been paid to the development of the focus group as a research tool but, oddly, very little attention has been paid to the relational dynamics that are intrinsic to its use" (2010, p.605). [29]

There is thus arguably a dearth of literature on how the processes of interaction and relational dynamics in focus group discussions lead to the data that become generated via the discussions. And (linked to this) there is scant reference to how facilitators might pay attention to epistemological issues concerning styles of knowing that can be activated during the discussion. [30]

LIAMPUTTONG (2011) offers some advice on how facilitators can introduce discussions so as to "assist the participants in feeling confident to contribute to the discussion" (p.73). She points out that facilitators should explain to people that the purpose of focus groups is to encourage them to "speak to each other, instead of addressing themselves to the moderator [facilitator]" (ibid). She also advises that "participants need to be told that it is acceptable for them to disagree on issues" (ibid). She offers an example of a researcher commencing focus groups with jazz improvisors concerning their perceptions of improvisation, where the facilitator states that "this is a focus group; ideally we'd just like you all to talk to each other about being jazz improvisors" (p.74). But in this example, clearly no particular (epistemological) view of what it means to "speak to each other" and thus develop collective insights, is offered. Participants may well not recognize that (if this is the case) a process of constructing meanings *in relation* (rather than each offering individual views and agreeing or disagreeing with particular statements being made) is being encouraged via the research process. [31]

BORG, KARLSSON, KIM and McCORMACK (2012) address the question of how to encourage an inclusive as well as participatory climate in focus groups in line with principles of co-operative inquiry (as explored by HERON, 1985, 1996, and expanded upon by HERON & REASON,1997, 2001). In REASON's explication (2002), the quality of co-operative inquiry lies less in any technique than in "the emergence of a self-aware, critical community of inquiry nested within a community of practice" (p.172). He adds that "co-operative inquiry as human process depends on the development of healthy human interaction in a face-to-face group" (ibid).[7] [32]

BORG et al. (2012) comment that to date there is a "paucity of literature regarding the processes and approaches necessary to make participatory research truly 'participatory' both for research participants and researchers"

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7  Actually, co-operative inquiry is linked in REASON's view (and in HERON's) to *action research* approaches, where participants engage in cycles of action and reflection (REASON, 2002, p.172; HERON & REASON, 2001, p.180). But in this article I am concentrating on implications for focus group discussions.

(Abstract). They plead for more reflection "about ways of creating an inclusive research process ... both between the ... facilitators as well as in the collaborative research groups" (§16) where, *inter alia*, focus groups are conducted. In this way they hope to develop our thinking and practice in regard to what is involved in defining, and creating, co-operative inquiry. BORG et al. indicate that in developing their stance to co-operative inquiry (of which they provide an example in their article), they have also been inspired by the "social network theory named 'open dialogue' (OD) developed in Finish Western Lapland in the early 1980s" (§19) by SEIKKULA et al. (2006). In this approach, facilitators encourage a process of dialogue in which there is "openness to differences in concept formation, definition of situations, interpretation of meanings, and approaches to service [when focus groups are concerned with the relationship between service organizations and service users]" (BORG et al., 2012, §19). BORG et al. indicate that they tried to practice the principles of open dialogue in the case discussed in the article, by, for instance, setting up a process where:

> "the meetings typically started with a participant offering her or his perspective on a theme that was introduced and the researcher following up by continuously asking for more details. After a while other members became involved in discussions bringing in new ideas and views or just elaborating on the theme" (ibid.). [33]

So they suggest that the facilitators manage to "keep the conversations open" (§22) in order to encourage "exploring complicated situations from a variety of perspectives" (§23). They summarize that "[t]his is achieved by not closing the discussions and by avoiding closures with conclusive or fixed ideas" (ibid). And so the conversation proceeds as people explore a "variety of ways of discovering solutions or develop practices through multi-facetted realities" (ibid). [34]

However, while BORG et al. offer ideas on the development of co-operative inquiry (with reference to their cited literature and their example), the possible connection between this and indigenous styles of knowing is not explored.[8] This is understandable seeing that their exemplar was set in Norway, where, presumably the issue of cultural sensitivity to what NDIMANDE calls "cultural epistemologies" (2012, p.223) did not become an issue. It seems that in the co-operative inquiry as they discuss it, individual selves, while interacting, are still not treated (by themselves or others) in terms of their existing "in relationship" (as, for example, in the spirit of Ubuntu in the African context). In order to give more

8  In the work that BORG et al. cite of REASON (1994) and of HERON and REASON (2001), neither of the authors consider possible links between co-operative inquiry and indigenous ways of knowing. REASON (1994) points to "an emerging worldview, more holistic, pluralist and egalitarian, which is fuelled by holistic and systemic thinking" (p.326). And he indicates that by this he means, that "our 'reality' is a product of the dance between our individual and collective mind and 'what is there' [the universe]" (ibid.). Here REASON still distinguishes between the "individual mind" albeit that he sees that "collectivity" can be created. In another article, REASON (2000) cites HERON's view (1992) that, as REASON puts it, learning to integrate "individualizing characteristics with a deeper communion with others and the world" is the basis of co-operative inquiry (2000, p.8). But again here both REASON and HERON seem to be suggesting that people have to learn to "integrate" their individuality with others, rather than having been brought up (as in, say, an Ubuntu-inspired upbringing) with a communal orientation. In some articles (not cited by BORG et al., 2012) REASON and HERON do make some reference to indigeneity, but this is brief and does not delve into indigenous styles of knowing (as part of their explanation of co-operative inquiry).

credence to relational ways of being together where "selves" are experienced from the start as intrinsically connected (see also QUAN-BAFFOUR & ROMM, 2014/in press), what is needed is to find a way of alerting participants that the focus group facilitators appreciate a process of being-in-relation as well as knowing-in-relation. In other words, one can alert participants that the researchers are taking into account cultural styles where co-construction of views is a result of people feeling "in connection." This would then fit in with the advocacy of decolonizing research as explicated by, for example, CHILISA (2012), HOPPERS (2012), NDIMANDE (2012), and NICHOLLS (2009), as discussed in Sections 1 and 2 of this article. [35]

Nonetheless, although it might be said that BORG et al. have not accounted for this (as their work appears not to have needed to concern itself with different cultural styles) many of BORG et al.'s recommendations for facilitating co-operative inquiry can still be said to be valuable for reflections around "decolonizing research." For example, their suggestions that epistemological reflexivity requires researchers to consider as important not only their own initial research topics for exploration but "what matters to co-researchers" (participants) and also to consider "how power is balanced" during focus group discussion (2012, §34) are relevant to recognize when exploring options for decolonizing research. As stressed by BISHOP (2012), it is crucial that power relations are attended to in decolonizing research (p.128). Furthermore BORG et al.'s statement that "co-producing knowledge" does not just happen as "an automatic process" (2012, §35) and that *an ethos towards this needs to be facilitated*, is also relevant to the question of how facilitators can set up climates of relational knowing. [36]

RODRIGUEZ, SCHWARTZ, LAHMAN and GEIST (2011) specifically raise the issue of cultural sensitivity as a concern that needs to be made more central in focus group research settings. With acknowledgment to the work of MORGAN (2002), they make the point that although there is a large body of literature on focus groups, the goal when undertaking methodological reflections should also be to develop the focus group method in this direction. In trying to indeed develop the method, they suggest that this can be done along the lines of "illuminating the importance of using culturally responsive research practices ... to guide qualitative methodology and, in particular, for focus group development" (RODRIGUEZ et al., 2011, p.401). They explain that by "culturally responsive" they mean approaches which are aimed at centering "equitable social power or cultural wealth" (ibid). (Here they cite GINSBERG & WLODKOWSKI, 2009, p.23.) Their argument is applicable to the focus groups discussed in this article, where this was an issue that was tied to the possibility of defining "knowing" with reference to knowing practices which resonate with indigenous traditions for communal co-construction. [37]

This is also affirmed in NDIMANDE's reflections on "decolonizing research." Considering in particular the use of focus groups, he indicates that what he sees as important about the potential of focus group discussions, used in decolonizing fashion, is that "the emphasis on collective or group participation versus individual

participation has stronger impact in the discussions" (2012, p.216). He sees focus groups as able to encourage this emphasis (ibid.). [38]

NDIMANDE makes provision for "non-Indigenous scholars" to learn about and practice decolonizing research (as tied to a collectivist epistemology). Citing DENZIN and LINCOLN (2008), he makes the point that "decolonizing work is not exclusively for Indigenous scholars. Nonindigenous scholars, argue Denzin et al., need to learn about decolonizing research to dismantle and deconstruct the colonizing Western epistemologies in social research" (NDIMANDE, 2012, p.223). [39]

NICHOLLS (2009) supports this position when she states that what is needed is cross-cultural competency on the part of researchers (p.121). She mentions that in any case she does not agree with a position which essentializes the difference between cultures and reinforces dichotomies between cultural groups (p.118). What she suggests is that researchers should be alert to spaces of potential connections between themselves and participants (as played out in the research process). [40]

Below I discuss the way in which this approach could be said to be enacted in the examples that I provide—starting with the international project on inclusive education and moving on to the national one on "making schools better." [41]

## 5. Some Material Related to the Focus Group Sessions in the International Project

### 5.1 Introducing ourselves and (simultaneously) our considerations of the research process

In introducing the sessions for the international project on inclusive education, Norma NEL and Dan TLALE expressed that they were members, respectively, of the Department of Psychology or Education and the Department of Inclusive Education in the College of Education at the University of South Africa. They also explained that from the inception of the project they were part of the team representing the South African component of the research exploring the roles of teachers in inclusive education. Dan explained that he was a doctoral student learning today about focus group discussions, although his doctoral research is in a different field from the topic to be discussed. Norma explained to participants the importance that we attributed to the teachers' voices in the focus group session. For instance, she stated: "your voices today are talking through us to other countries and to this country." [42]

I then went on to introduce myself and in doing so I stated my understanding of the purpose of the focus group session as a research process. The script in the box below gives a flavor of how I stated this. As with Norma and Dan, I was speaking spontaneously in the various sessions and hence the "script" was slightly different for the different occasions.

I am a sociologist but these days one does not need to operate from only one discipline but can be multidisciplinary. I am interested in how as researchers we all today can engage in a process of doing research. Re-search is a process of re-looking at issues by taking a fresh look together. And so we search again. Focus group sessions are one way for people together to take a re-look. We are all re-looking at what is involved when trying to teach inclusive classes in practice. Hopefully we will all learn from one another today. You will hopefully learn by hearing each other and we will learn from hearing you and you may learn from hearing some of our questions and from our input that we make from time to time—so it will be like a learning experience for us all. So we can consider that we are all re-searching together today. At the end of the session we would like to ask you how you experienced the session as we would like to hear your experiences of this. Will it be all right if we put aside about fifteen minutes for this? That means that the session will take about one hour—but we found that in previous sessions people wanted to talk for longer than our initial planning. They wanted to talk more and more about the issues we started with and also about additional questions. Anyway, we would like if you agree, to hear your experiences of the session, including our way of facilitating the discussion. We can do this as a group event as we did in a session in another school where people suggested this way of offering us feedback. [43]

As can be seen from this brief account of our way of introducing ourselves (after which we asked participants to introduce themselves to us) we were trying to create a climate—or what BORG et al. (2013, §18) call an "ethos"—where people would feel part of a joint research process. The language we used stated that it was not individual views that was our focus, but a sense of teachers' views as expressed and developed through the discussion itself. In other words, by way of introducing ourselves we were introducing (albeit not using the jargon of "epistemology," "discursive knowing," "truth as relational") an epistemological orientation which we believed would make sense to participants who were familiar with such an orientation. By using words such as "taking a fresh look together," "re-searching together," and "learning from one another," we tried to make reference to our understanding of relational epistemology, and hoped that this would resonate with participants. The feedback that we later received from participants suggests that they were indeed comfortable with this kind of approach. Below I offer an interpretation of the feedback received from participants, in which I highlight their expressed experiences of collectivity. [44]

## 5.2 Feedback from participants in relation to the research process

When asking for feedback from participants at the end of the sessions, many of their statements indicated their appreciation of the inquiry process and of how it had panned out. For example, in one of the focus groups, when I asked towards the end of the session (as we did in all the focus group sessions): "How did you experience the process of the focus group discussion?," one of the participants stated that "[t]he seating arrangement helped the process. We feel that we are part of the research." This statement was a reference to the fact that we had re-arranged the room when we walked in, so that all the chairs would be in a circle and we all could face one another. The statement made by this teacher is

indicative on two scores: Firstly, it shows that the teacher indeed felt part of the research process of everybody (including the facilitators) exploring together. Secondly, she does not speak merely on her own behalf as an individual, but states "*we* feel that *we* are part of the research." In this way she speaks as representing the others: showing here that she is not seeing herself as separated from the other teachers, but that they form a collective. [45]

It is worth noting here that although various authors writing about focus groups refer to the need to arrange the room so that people all face each other, to make it easy for participants to speak to one another (cf. HENNINK, 2007, p.162; LIAMPUTTONG, 2011, p.72), LIAMPUTTONG points to the specific cultural significance of "circular seating arrangements" for certain indigenous communities (2011, p.142). She mentions, for instance, that in certain "Pacific Northwest Indian communities, the circle symbolizes unity" (ibid.). ARCHIBALD (2008), in discussing her way of developing an indigenous storywork methodology with Aboriginal people likewise refers to ways of revitalizing "the circle of human understanding and caring" so that it grows stronger (p.378). And CHILISA for her part, in referring to relational perspectives from North America and Canada which resonate with African perspectives, points to research based on "talking circles" as a form of focus group discussion (2012, p.121). The fact that one of the participants indicated that the seating arrangement made people feel "part of the research," can be read in the light of the significance of a circle as a symbol of connectivity. [46]

Another statement from one of the teachers in the same focus group too is indicative of the "we" experience. When I asked "Do you think that you learned anything from the facilitator?," one of the teachers answered:

> "She [Norma NEL] understands the dynamics and the complexity of the issues around the schools and understand where the kids come from [that is, that teachers often feel that they have to act as 'second parents' in caring for the children physically and emotionally, as many of them are orphaned and/or their parents or guardians work far away and are not available to assist them]. She appreciates what we are saying. Just by her phrasing her understanding in the way she does, she helps us also to understand better." [47]

I summarized in response to this statement: "Do you mean that just by her re-phrasing it in the way that she does after hearing your statements, she reinforces something in your understanding about the background of the school and so she further develops your understanding?" To this another teacher responded: "yes, that is it." Here one can see—upon retrospective analysis—that I too am using the plural form when I say "after hearing your statements" (seen as a totality, because from time to time Norma was synthesizing their various statements); and when I say "she further develops your understanding" I am referring to the understanding not only of the teacher who is talking at that point in time. Hence another teacher chose to respond to my statement here, again feeling comfortable to respond as part of a "group" process. [48]

One of our other pre-set questions for the feedback sessions was to ask the teachers whether they felt that they had learned from one another. In all of the focus groups, various teachers gave examples of the kinds of things that they had learned during the sessions. For example, in one group a teacher referred to her colleague's use of a remedial book that she had found useful in the foundation phase.[9] The teacher indicated (during the feedback session) that she was not aware of that book and she thought she could use it even in the senior phase. To this Norma responded that the book could indeed be useful there too. I summarized at that point: "So just by sitting here and talking you hear and learn what you had not thought of before." Various teachers indicated (by way of agreement sounds) that this summary resounded with their feeling about the process of learning. [49]

Another one of our questions for all the focus groups was asking teachers what they thought of our questions for guiding the focus group discussion (which had been taken from the international project for purposes of comparison) and whether they thought we needed to ask any other questions or any additional questions. To this, teachers in all the groups stated that we could indeed have asked more questions. They especially said that they would have liked us all to have talked more about "the system and policies that are given to us," as one teacher expressed it. She stated that she was concerned that policies get made without sufficient consultation. She said she had learned from "the disabled people" the phrase: "nothing about us without us." When she said this, another teacher in that focus group elaborated that "if there is to be a change they must involve us." This was a reference to the recent introduction of a somewhat new curriculum and way of teaching it, which the teachers felt had not received sufficient consultation. Once more, what is significant here is that the teachers talk about "us" as teachers (needing to be consulted) rather than individuating themselves. One of the teachers made this clearer: "we do not mean that all of us need to be spoken to; but they must select at least some of us." [50]

The teachers in all the groups stated (as part of the feedback sessions) that they hoped that we would take forward their concerns into other forums. As one of them put it: "It [your being here] shows that someone cares and wants to know what is happening. You have been listening carefully to us and we are happy about it. Maybe someone will [now] carry the baton."[10] Again it is noteworthy that this teacher talks on behalf of the group when she states that "we are happy about it," that is, about our listening style, which here in effect meant that of Norma who had been the primary facilitator and had reflected back to them from time to time what she had understood what they were saying. [51]

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9  The foundation phase in the South African schooling system is from Grade R to Grade 3. Learners in the foundation phase range between 5 and 10 years of age. (They can be admitted to Grade R the year they turn 6, but Grade R is not compulsory.) The foundation phase curriculum covers basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills. Between this and the senior phase (Grades 7-9) there is an intermediate phase (Grades 4-6).

10 On the basis of this and similar comments/requests, we did "carry the baton further" by arranging for a meeting with the district officer, who in turn suggested a meeting with the teachers and a number of district officers and someone from head office, so that experiences and ideas could be exchanged with a view to "reconciliation." This is detailed in NEL et al. ( 2014) and ROMM, NEL and TLALE (2013).

All in all, it seems that teachers felt that they had been given the opportunity to talk together about the questions that we raised so as to offer some (collectively generated) insights about their teaching experiences, as well as to offer ideas on what additional questions would be in order, for other occasions. They appreciated our way of setting up the research process and they indicated that this had worked for them (as expressed by the sample of quotes offered above). [52]

## 6. A Focus Group for the National Project—Another Exemplar

In this section, I now turn briefly to one of the focus groups conducted with teachers at a school in Escourt as part of the national 500 schools project entitled "Making Schools Better." In this exemplar, the facilitators used both mother-tongue (IsiZulu) and English (with different facilitators using different languages). We hoped to show respect for indigenous cultural expressions through introducing the session in IsiZulu (by a native speaker)—see Note 6. Also we believed that by introducing the session in mother-tongue, the participants would recognize that they could feel free too to speak the language with which they were most comfortable. They would presumably be aware that we were trying to give cognizance to their cultural styles of expressing themselves. But besides this, it was important to make explicit the epistemological orientation that we were bringing to the session. Therefore, one of the native speakers on our facilitation team opened the discussions with reference to a piece in the field guide, part of which I had written (the part cited below). This was written to be used as an introduction to all the focus groups conducted during this project (in five separate provinces). The facilitator thus translated the relevant section of the guide, which gave guidance as follows:

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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

Introduction for facilitators to share with participants

The purpose of the focus group sessions [in this research project] is to gather some information about the teaching and learning of various school subjects, which can become the basis for "making schools better". The idea is that together we can explore issues connected with teaching and learning more fully. This will supplement some of the data that we have obtained from questionnaires that have been filled in by a large sample of teachers across five different provinces. This project is supported by the Department of Education [in South Africa]. Any information or ideas that you share with us will, however, remain confidential in that no-one will know who has said what in any of our reports.

...........................................................................................................

Please note that if you are feeling that you do not want to answer some of the questions asked when you hear them, you can mention this to us—we do not want you to feel under any pressure here. But your answers will be helpful to us to gain a better understanding of what we are asking you about. You also may learn by hearing our questions and thinking about your answers to them. And hopefully you will learn from one another too. [53]

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Following this introduction (which included all the facilitators introducing ourselves), we proceeded to ask the participants (there were six of them) to introduce themselves in terms of what grades they were teaching; and thereafter we proceeded with asking questions and probing the teachers' answers and asking for suggestions for "making schools better." The main questions that we asked had been pre-prepared for the purposes of comparing answers from the different focus groups across the whole research project; nevertheless the style of conversation followed an informal style of discussion, as suggested also by NDIMANDE as appropriate for research with Indigenous participants. As he states:

> "The focus group, as part of research design [in the case of the research upon which he reports], was appropriate with Indigenous parents because it is a technique for interviewing that straddles the line between formal and informal interviewing ... . Thus, a focus group interview allows for an informal environment" (2012, p.216). [54]

As the discussion proceeded, we intermingled English with IsiZulu (with different facilitators conversant in different languages), albeit that the talk was mainly in English and even when facilitators spoke in IsiZulu, the teachers answered for the most part in English. This could be because the teachers were teaching English as a first additional language at the school (as one of the subjects), and they might have wished to show us that they were sufficiently proficient in the language. I do concur, though, with NDIMANDE (p.217) when he emphasizes that as far as possible in decolonizing research, efforts need to be made to show respect for the indigenous language of the participants. This was catered for in this case; and indeed across the project we had decided during the "training session" for would-be facilitators that they would need to exercise judgment concerning which language(s) to use during the focus groups. [55]

As with the focus groups discussed in Section 5, towards the end of the focus group (as had been provided for in the focus group field guide that I co-prepared for facilitators) I requested feedback from participants regarding their experience of the session. I stated my request as follows: "We are interested to know how you experienced the discussion today. How did you feel about talking with us? And would you want to raise any other questions?" [56]

A few of the participants indicated that they were happy that we had been there as they enjoyed the refreshments that we had brought along (biscuits, nuts, and fruit juice). Others laughed and said that these had been good.[11] I then asked: "Do you think you learned something from hearing each other talk?" To this, certain participants said "yes" and I asked if they could offer some examples. One teacher stated that she had learned about group teaching as being a strategy that the Department of Education advises (dividing up the class into groups and spending some time with one before moving to the next and hoping that the first

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11 LIAMPUTTONG (2011) states that "the sharing of food ... is an essential part of conducting focus groups in cross-cultural settings" (p.139). She gives examples of research with Latina women, Emirati women, immigrant participants in Canada, Aboriginal communities, Mexican migrant farmworkers, and Pacific Northwest Indian communities. The food given in our case (which for us was a sign of respect for their time and a way of offering something concrete in return), was clearly also significant to these participants.

groups will keep themselves busy). But she said that in a class of 48 people it is chaos. Another participant added that even when they mention to the District officials that this advice is impractical, they are told to "keep trying." Various participants echoed this frustration with the way the advice is given, while they also found somewhat amusing (and perhaps cathartic) the manner in which their colleagues were expressing to us about their being told repeatedly to "keep trying." In this way they were collectively co-constructing the experience of frustration at the attitude that they were seeing in the injunction for them to continue trying against all odds. (This was one of the issues that we mentioned in our draft report that we later shared with government officials in the Research division of the Department of Education, as part of our effort to engender further research dialogues.) [57]

One of the other facilitators in the focus group feedback session then asked "Do you sometimes sit together and discuss problems that you have at school?" They answered in chorus: "Yes." He asked: "What makes this session different from discussing amongst yourselves?" One of the teachers answered: "It is nearly the same." I summarized: "So it is not very different from your talking here today with us being here?" And another replied: "It is like our normal way of talking together." Another stated: "But the answers that we give when we discuss together are different." When I asked for more clarity she said that when we were there, the answers involved more what could be done within the system to support them, for instance, in terms of workshops for teachers that could be set up and the timing of the workshops. [58]

What is important in relation to the argument in this article, is that the teachers did not feel that the process of discussion in the focus group session—that is, of sharing ideas and thinking together—was different in terms of process from their "normal," that is, culturally familiar, style of interacting. They remarked merely that the content in terms of thinking about how they might harness support from "the system," differed somewhat from their usual meetings together. It can thus be said that they experienced the discussion with our being there as involving a similar style of conversation that they normally practice, which involves seeking together "answers" to experienced problems. This implies that the form of inquiry as used in the focus group resonated with what NDIMANDE (2012, p.223) calls cultural epistemologies. That is, the participants did not feel that the facilitators brought in a culturally unfamiliar mode of developing understanding as a collective enterprise. Whether our use of their indigenous language to open the discussion helped in this regard is difficult to say, especially that the participants themselves chose to switch to English most of the time. But what can be said is that the beginning introduction at least set the tone for what NDIMANDE calls an informal conversation (p.216), where people participated in being-in-relation with one another towards knowledge-construction/collective inquiry. [59]

## 7. Conclusion

In this article I have explored possibilities for conducting focus groups underpinned by an indigenous-oriented epistemological position which does not consider individuals (individual selves) as being the route to knowledge production, but sees knowledge-construction as a relational process of developing insights (which are linked to practical ways of living). I pointed to lacunae generally in the literature regarding efforts of facilitators to pay attention to epistemological issues and more particularly regarding efforts to orient focus group discussion to take into account indigenous styles of knowing. [60]

In view hereof I would suggest that especially when focus group research is being conducted with indigenous participants, an endeavor should be made to introduce the sessions in a way that indicates that relational styles of knowing are being encouraged. Without having to use jargon such as "epistemology," "relational thinking," etc., facilitators can still find ways of indicating that they are not gearing the research to replicating "dominant" (Western-oriented) styles of knowing. I would suggest that culturally attentive researchers can experiment with types of "introductions" that signal this; and they can in turn seek feedback from participants later in order to see how their storylines about, and attempts to encourage, relational ways of knowing which are familiar to participants, have been received. [61]

In this way, more case material on possibilities for disrupting the (sole) legitimacy of dominant styles of knowing can be developed. With reference to such case material, researchers can make comparisons between different experiences of attempting to foreground epistemological questions as part of the research process, also considering participant feedback (and exact expressions of participants) in relation to this. I have left partly in abeyance the issue of language use and how this might be handled when organizing cross-cultural research. This is a question that researchers may wish to elicit feedback on as part of inquiries with indigenous participants. All that can be said thus far from the exemplars that I discussed, is that apart from this issue, it is important to find ways of signaling to participants that relational styles of knowing are being encouraged. [62]

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