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Chapter Six

Reflections on Design and Implementation

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Introduction

Generally speaking, we believe that the scientific character of social research mainly depends on the reflexivity involved in the research design and its implementation. So, we have decided to dedicate a whole chapter to methodological issues. More particularly, we aim to discuss, and we hope to cast light on, a recurring difficulty of cross-national qualitative methodology: the comparability of the data on which the analysis is based.

Our project analyses data from 24 focus groups in France, French-speaking Belgium and the United Kingdom, convened between December 2005 and June 2006. We compare eight groups from each of three cities: Paris, Brussels and Oxford. Each group brought together 4 to 8 participants - all were citizens of their respective countries. Our focus groups were experimental, gathering together participants - volunteers - who we ensured did not know each other beforehand, and did not know any of the research team. The groups were intended to reflect a simplified model of social stratification, based on education and occupation. The resulting cross-cutting national and social comparability of the groups has to be assessed. In particular we want to consider the question how far researchers conducting this kind of study should go in the construction of comparability.

The study focusses on reactions to European integration, and we wanted to examine this in the framework of a theory of 'politicisation'. Each group had to bring together participants with common social categorisation but with contrasted political orientations. The practical implementation of this sampling therefore required effective recruitment of volunteers, and the rigorous selection of participants. We will return to practical aspects of these stages of the work in more detail in later sections. We will then outline how the conduct of these focus groups was designed, in a quasi-experimental way, and relate this to the tradition of social scientific study centred on the focus group technique since the 1980s. We also explain how, and on what theoretical and methodological basis, we drew up the focus group schedule. Finally, we discuss our procedures, and our substantive interpretive frameworks, for handling and analysing our data.

It is important for us to go back over all the methodological choices that we have made, and their implementation. Our analysis in this chapter reveals four criteria which we believe determine the quality of qualitative comparative research: the rigour of the sampling, the verification of comparability, reflexivity, and methodological innovation. Respect for these criteria is not only essential to ensure the reliability of the data collected, it is also needed to establish the validity of the results, which depend directly on the research strategy adopted, but also on the detail of its implementation. By aiming to collect data of high quality, by trying to innovate and test techniques that are precisely adapted to the research questions asked, by striving for a constant reflexivity towards them and by reporting on this, we hope to have constructed the right conditions needed to renew our knowledge of the attitudes of citizens of the countries studied to European integration.

Research Design

In this section we will go back over the origins and the objectives of the project. This detour via the beginning will allow us to explain many of the methodological choices made. Our research project was at first entitled: 'How discussions become political: French, English and French-speaking Belgians talking about Europe'. It was carried out from June 2005. The project was designed to continue the work on politicisation of discussion begun by Sophie Duchesne and Florence Haegel which used data from discussion groups focussing on delinquency (Duchesne and Haegel, 2004). In a context marked by citizens' growing disaffection with institutional forms of politics, understanding how their conversations become political is an original way, and one with support from certain strains in political theory, of reflecting on the potential for the repoliticisation of these societies. Publication in English of the results of this exploratory research allowed the authors to assess the influence of the French context on their concept of politicisation, and in particular on their focus on conflictualisation. (Duchesne and Haegel, 2007). So the decision was made to carry out a comparative project, conducting focus groups in several countries. The topic chosen for discussion was Europe - that allowed us to position the research in line with the analyses carried out jointly by André-Paul Frognier and Sophie Duchesne on European identity (Duchesne & Frognier, 1994, 2002). And crossing these two research dynamics was justified by the fact that at the time when the research programme was launched, the question of politicisation was placed at the heart of the controversies in the field of European studies.

The project therefore had a dual objective and split into two series of analyses and publications. On the one hand it was about constructing a general model of politicisation at the level of the individual actor and at the level of group settings. This combines three ideal-type processes of the emergence of politics in democracy: conflictualisation, deliberation, and competition. It also aimed to examine social and national differences in political culture, and therefore in the nature of legitimate forms of politicisation (Duchesne and Haegel, 2010). On the other hand, it comprised an in-depth analysis of the diversity of normal relationships with European integration that citizens reveal when they talk about Europe. This book sets out to report on the results of this second dimension of the survey. But we think these cannot be understood independent of the dual objectives of the work, as our research design has been marked so much by its origins.

Experimentation

Focus groups became prominent in the social sciences in 1980s, having been developed and standardised over a few decades within the market research profession. (Morgan 1996, 1997). Their take up in social studies was thanks to two factors. First, researchers on the margins between the social sciences and marketing pushed for the focus group to be used as a method that was likely to collect, in a more economical way than the individual interview, a substantial number of opinions in a limited period. (Krueger 1994) Second, researchers in the social sciences saw this as the way of departing from an essentialist approach to opinions, to use Wilkinson's term. (Wilkinson, 1998). The focus group method enables the analysis of the co-construction of meaning, thanks to the recording of interactions between participants. This dual heritage is still evident today. The method is both easily accepted and promoted in its canonical form by social scientists who use statistical methods, although they see in the group dynamic a potential source of bias compared with the expression of individual opinions. But it is also particularly valued by researchers who emphasise the interpretive nature of data analysis, and who see in it an instrument adapted to innovation and to methodological experimentation (Morgan, 1993; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999). Our project is firmly part of this second tradition. The experimental dimension of our activity is not second-best. We have deliberately put in place a situation which in many respects is artificial. This choice was justified by the idea that to study the mechanisms of politicisation, whether this concerns the politicisation of Europe or any other subject, we should create a political situation.

In accordance with other authors, in particular Lagroye (2003) we take the concept of politicisation to refer to the process by which citizens confront themselves with and challenge the well established differentiation of the political field from other social activities. Our project, which explicitly takes up the standpoint of citizens rather than elite and organised agents of politicisation, put our participants into a situation to which they would react to this differentiation, to the specialisation of political action. We wanted to see how actors, invited to discuss together a political subject, 'tinker' and negotiate, invent rules, practices, ways of talking together. We wanted to see how participants in discussions adapt (or not) to the fact of being confronted with the 'border' of politics. By this we mean that in a world in which politics is a specialised activity, practised by professionals and dedicated enthusiasts, ordinary citizens have to take a step 'into' politics, or, they can desist from this step and remain in an a-political place. We wanted to analyse how these participants deal with this setting - whether or not they cross the border, enter into political discussion and action. To this extent, our focus groups were designed to be a test of politicisation. (Duchesne and Haegel, 2010). The term test can, incidentally, be taken in its proper meaning, insofar as the experience of the situation was not easy. Our participants' expressions of unease, that in particular punctuate the moments which precede the beginning of the discussion, and the break, as well as their reactions of relief and satisfaction at the end of the session, prove this. This choice of constructing 'artificial' groups, in which participants do not know each other, in addition to enabling us to control recruitment, also corresponded to our wish for an experimental dimension to our project.

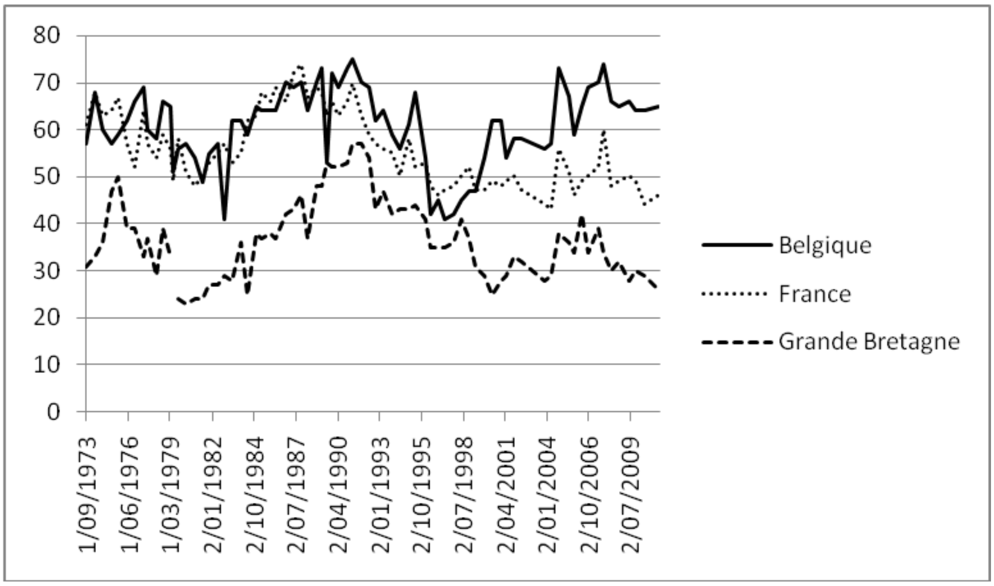
Since politicisation regarding European questions was at the heart of the project, the sampling for the groups had to be based on the political heterogeneity of participants, in general ideological terms (left or right), and also specifically in their position on European integration (pro or anti). Our first priority was to guarantee a minimum representativeness of the participants – not in the statistical sense of reproduction in miniature of the structure of the base population, but rather in the qualitative sense of representing the diversity of opinions with regard to the topic of the discussion. Second, we needed to encourage a group dynamic that is conducive to debate. This is difficult in a social order that does not favour conflictual behaviour, particularly in its relationship with politics (Hamidi, 2006). But our sampling and selection strategy would mean that in the discussion the divisions between positions on European integration were activated and made visible. So, recruitment that crosses social homogeneity with political heterogeneity, was joined with methods of organising the group sessions, and the schedule for discussion (to which we will return).

Comparisons

As with every project of comparative research, we have in part been dependent on our professional networks. But we were also concerned to conduct the groups in the two languages spoken by the members of the research team, French and English, wishing to reject national and technical specialisation, and wishing that everyone should participate in the whole of the research process. Methodologically, we believe that this involvement of all the members of the team at every stage of the work contributes to the comparability of our data and the validity of our analyses, thanks to triangulation between researchers. Comparing points of view at each moment of the survey produces a de facto reflexivity, and avoids falling into such classic traps as national methodologism, or the juxtaposition of national cases framed by general introductory considerations which do not have any genuine comparative results. (Hassenteufel, 2000, 107).

As several statistical studies have shown, we know that the attitudes of citizens towards the European Union vary greatly around two main criteria of differentiation - national and social. So our groups were constucted so that we could compare reactions on these two dimensions. There is marked contrast between our three national cases which have diverse positions within the EU, and there are also differences in popular support for integration, in any case as measured by the Eurobarometer opinion polls. In summer 2006, (EB 66.1), 61% of Belgians (70% amongst French-speaking respondents against 55% amongst Dutch-speakers) and 55% of French respondents declare that they feel themselves to be European often or occasionally; the figure is only 32% in the British case, where 67% of respondents declare that they never feel European.[52] In the matter of evaluation of one's country's membership of the European Union, there too France has a median position between Belgium and Great Britain. At the time of our research, 54% of French respondents declared that their country had benefited from its membership of the European Union, against 71% in the Belgian case (69.6% for French-speaking respondents and 71.5% for Dutch-speaking respondents) and only 43% in the British case.[53] The percentages of respondents evaluating membership of their country as being a good thing was respectively 69% in Belgium (65.8% for French-speaking and 71.3% for Dutch-speaking respondents), 49% in France and 42% in Great Britain (EB 66.1).[54] As graph 6.1 shows, these contrasts hold for the whole post-Maastricht period.

Graph 6.1: Changes in support for membership of one's country in the European Union (Belgium, France and Great Britain)



Source: *Eurobarometer Interactive Search System*

Our comparison was more precisely between three cities where the focus groups were convened: Paris, Brussels and Oxford. In Brussels, our participants were all French speakers, most came from the Brussels-Capital region, with some from further away (Namur, Charleroi or Liège). In other words our survey refers exclusively to the French-speaking part of Belgium. Moreover, Diez Medrano's results (Diez Medrano 2003), which shows that national frames are on the whole homogenous from one city to another in his research, led us to believe that the regional differences are not such that conducting research in these three cities threatens our national comparison.

Although the formation of national cases is straightforward, we also had to implement a social stratification of our groups that is comparable from one country to another. This social stratification is first justified by the fact that the relationship of citizens with the European Union is strongly determined by social affiliations and education levels. It is also made necessary by the focus group method. Speaking in public, especially on political subjects, is socially determined. There is the matter of greater or lesser ease of expression, of confidence in the ability to say what one one is feeling, and to convince others about what one believes. Also the matter of the use of words, the structures of language, of codes of behaviour and cultural references. One of the golden rules when conducting focus groups is to secure social homogeneity, to minimise domination, of the groups as much as possible. We therefore organised our groups according to a simplified social stratification: for each country, two focus groups brought together 'workers and temporarily unemployed', two brought together 'employees' (our label for the groups that consist largely of 'white collar workers') and two consisted of ‘managers’. Two other groups were organised in each city by bringing together political activists, as a kind of control group for politicised dicussion, in general and of European questions in particular.

This social sampling had to be rigorous. It required meticulous recruitment and the considered selection of candidates. Our need to control the sampling as carefully as possible in order to ensure the best social comparability of data led us to reject the recruitment methods that are most frequently used in focus group research. A common method is to use a key informant, who is sometimes paid to be an organiser, and who convenes a group of acquaintances - friends, neighbours, or co-workers etc. As Gamson remarks, interviewees who use personal contacts tend to recruit from amongst their acquaintances people who they believe to be the most likely to talk in public, and who accordingly are mainly found to be amongst the most educated (Gamson, 1992). By delegating the composition of the groups to them, we risked weakening the social typification of the groups and, in addition, their comparability from one city to another. Another common strategy for selecting participants consists in general of delegating recruitment to specialists, for example opinion poll companies. But we know that such organisations tend to work with files of volunteers who often end up by being almost focus group specialists, something we also wanted to avoid.

Recruiting 'Ordinary' Candidates.

The first stage of recruitment consisted in communicating with potential voluntary participants. Throughout this initial stage, we were keen to make contact with a public which most often eludes opinion surveys, and also eludes focus groups when these are recruited by professional research agencies. We wanted to widen recruitment beyond the circles of those who tend to agree to take part in this kind of study – that is basically those who are either in personal contact with researcher or who take an interest in research. As well as arousing their interest, we had to obtain detailed socio-political information from them, in order to select from these candidates those who would in the end take part in the groups. A questionnaire was therefore given - by phone - to all those who replied to our advertisements. (Appendix 2) The process presented us with a practical problem of comparative qualitative methodology, namely the harmonisation of techniques of making contact and forming a sample in areas of recruitment which had varied characteristics.

Contacting potential participants

Recruiting participants who on the one hand do not know each other, and on the other hand are not experts in opinion surveys by focus group, necessitated a costly recruitment system. It was carried out in each country by a single researcher[55], using various publicity channels such as classified ads, internet, posters, and leaflets. To increase the likelihood that all kinds of people would contact us, we were keen to remain very general in our presentation of the topic of the survey, to avoid eliciting particular interests or conversely (and more probably) discouraging those who were not particularly interested in the subject, or were positively put off by it. The advertisement therefore did not mention the term Europe, nor the political nature of the research, referring to a discussion 'on social issues'. But we did mention that participants would be kept anonymous. Introducing a financial incentive was judged to be essential from the start in order to attract the public who most often elude opinion surveys, particularly members of the working class. Having to speak for three hours in front of strangers and on potentially political subjects, while being filmed, is obviously an unusual experience. It might indeed provoke reserve, as some candidates in fact confided to us on the telephone, and as some participants said on the day of the discussion. To offset this reluctance, we engaged to pay them a sum at least equivalent to the minimum daily wage in each country. The level of pay was €50 in Paris and Brussels and £40 in Oxford. (See Appendix 1).

We also had to make the advertisement as visible as possible. At the beginning we explored the least expensive solution, namely publication on the internet. Using sites for 'casual work', the most flexible method, was effective in terms of the volume of responses. However, it produced results that were quite socially discriminatory, generating many applications from young people from intermediate social categories. This was particularly the case in Brussels. The lack of this kind of widely used internet site made recruitment of this category of respondent more difficult in Oxford. An alternative solution was to publish the ad on distribution lists likely to consist of a large number of employees and managers in tertiary sector organisations (publishing companies, charities, etc.). The disadvantage of that, however, is the high rate of unusable response. We aimed to get together people who did not know each other, so we could select only one candidate from each company, even though in many cases we received many applications.

In order to restore social balance in the sample of candidates, and therefore to increase our freedom of choice in selecting participants, we also published the ad in free newspapers. However, this method only imperfectly reached the categories that were most lacking. First higher social categories are less affected by the financial incentive and do not often read this kind of newspaper. Then, working members of the working class proved strikingly impervious to this kind of offer. In addition, a pernicious effect of this kind of appeal was that it attracted a large number of candidates who were difficult to categorise, particularly in Oxford, where a large proportion of responses came from non-workers, including housewives, retired people and some whom we judged to be downwardly mobile. Classifying these individuals on the social scale sometimes proved difficult. Finally, we tried to distribute leaflets and to display posters in carefully chosen places, so as to more accurately target the social categories which were lacking. It is here that the purely practical constraints linked to the city areas to be researched, and the deadlines set for the teams to recruit participants and organise groups, came into play.

Terrain

The size of recruitment areas plays an important role. It proved difficult to physically cover the whole of the terrain in Paris and Brussels, as we were working on the basis of a single recruiter per city. It was therefore almost impossible to reach working populations living in the (outlying) suburbs by going directly to meet them. Moreover, in Brussels, we excluded respondents working closely with the European institutions, and that deprived us of a major recruiting pool for the higher social classes. In comparison, the city of Oxford covers a much less extensive area, as the historical city centre, which is small, is easy to cross on foot and residential areas and factories are close. Here it was possible to carry out a major poster campaign in very different locations - newsagents' windows, public libraries, hospitals, community centres, churches, town halls, factories, department stores and banks, etc. Intensive leafleting was also carried out, on several occasions, outside places that might recruit workers - the car factory, Royal Mail depots, the central bus depot, several schools, in particular in Cowley, a district with a high working class and ethnically mixed population. Despite everything, and in conformity with most sociological research projects, it was really difficult to recruit typical workers with jobs in industry, transport, etc., and we had to widen this category by including temporary workers and even some unemployed people - groups who can more easily be mobilised because of time availabity, and are more attracted by the financial incentive. In Paris and in Brussels we organised leafletting and posters near to employment agencies or metro stations in working class and ethnically mixed districts (for instance the 18th arrondissement in Paris, as well as on the premises of the Restos du cœur - a charitable organisation which distributes food and meals to those in need).

To recruit managers, who were not very attracted by the offer of payment and who claimed to be short of time, particularly in Oxford, we had to go and find people face to face - that is to directly approach accountants or solicitors in their offices, and bank managers in their branches, to try to persuade them to take part. In Paris and in Brussels, we also had finally to mobilise our networks of acquaintances, taking care to maximise the degrees of separation between the team members and the potential participants.

If we leave to one side problems posed by the non-equivalence of the indicators used in different national statistics, every research terrain, without being fundamentally idiosyncratic, still has special characteristics which cannot be ignored. From the start of the work, we were well aware of the particular characteristics of the population living in the Oxford region - because of the relative importance of the University as an employer. Certainly, London would have been a better research site in many respects – more comparable to Paris and Brussels, if only from the viewpoint of its status as a political capital. But logistical constraints - London's size, the difficulty of securing a venue in a suitable building and related costs - made this impossible in the end. Research settings that differed from each other, in cities with contrasting social geographies, were the trade off for the practicality - well possibility, at any rate - of recruiting socially accurate samples of respondents. That we needed a relatively small number of participants, and that our recruitment criteria were clear, meant that our efforts in the end did achieve a good standard of comparability.

Time

Fieldwork took place successively in Paris, Brussels and Oxford. Although pilot groups were conducted in each of the three cities beforehand, decisions made for recruitment in Paris had consequences on the way we proceeded in Brussels and Oxford. Another constraint which influenced the recruitment work was the time scale. We were constrained - by professional commitments in teaching and administration - in team members' stays in the research locations. In Paris, where our fieldwork began, recruitment took place in two stages (because of the end of year holidays) and over quite a long period of about seven weeks (during the first two weeks of December 2005, then between the beginning of January and the beginning of February 2006). As a result we had quite a substantial period of time to reflect, and refine the selection of candidates. Time constraints were more pronounced in Brussels. Here the fieldwork took place over four weeks, which had a significant effect on the selection process. The recruitment stage was only able to begin after the end of the Paris fieldwork, at the beginning of February 2006, as the moderators were the same in both places. In order to be as efficient as possible and to cope with a lack of time during the last few days of the fieldwork, shortlisting of candidates, by telephone, on the basis of their profession alone also became necessary, in particular to bring together groups of managers. In Oxford, the recruitment campaign started when the Brussels fieldwork ended, at the beginning of March, and it was carried out over a total of eight weeks, divided into two distinct stages. Because of time constraints (we had planned two weeks between the beginning of the recruitment and the organisation of the first groups), and the special characteristics of the place, we were not at first able to refine the selection of candidates as much as we wanted to. We decided to halt the fieldwork and restart it a bit later. We were therefore able to make greater use of leafleting. Altogether, the specificity of the recruitment stage in each city is reflected in the characteristic of the candidates we got.

Table 6.1 : Sample Size by City

	Paris	Brussels	Oxford	Total
Length of recruitment stage (in weeks)	7	5	8	20
Total size	137	93	181	411
Number of participants	49	41	43	133

Candidates' characteristics

We recruited 411 applicants, 137 in Paris, 93 in Brussels and 181 in Oxford (table 6.1). The size of the Belgian sample is significantly smaller than those in Paris or in Oxford, mainly because of the shorter amount of time devoted to the fieldwork, and conversely, the Oxford one is larger as we spent more time there.

Table 6.2 : Socio-economic characteristics of respondents to ad

		Paris	Brussels	Oxford
		%	%	%
Sex	Male	50.4	58.1	52.5
	Female	49.6	41.9	47.5
Age	18 – 24	13.1	14.0	15.5
	25 – 34	27.7	57.0	28.2
	35 – 44	26.3	14.0	16.0
	45 – 54	17.5	6.5	21.0
	55 – 64	13.9	7.5	12.7
	65 and over	1.5	1.1	6.6
Occupation	Tradesmen, shopkeepers and similar	-	2.1	3.3
	Company directors, liberal professions, senior managers	13.9	15.1	9.9
	Middle managers, junior managers	32.8	30.1	39.8
	Office employees	22.6	28.0	14.9
	Retail or service employees	23.4	11.8	21.0
	Workers	4.4	9.7	6.1
	Non-workers	2.2	1.1	3.9
	Others	0.7	2.1	1.1
Occupational status	Full-time employee	60.6	49.5	34.3
	Part-time employee	10.2	11.9	22.1
	Unemployed	16.1	29.0	21.5
	Student	1.5	1.1	3.3
	Retired	5.8	3.2	8.8
	Housewife (house husband)	2.2	2.2	6.1
	Other non working	0.7	3.3	3.9
Auto positioning on political scale	Extreme left	9.5	9.7	5.0
	Left	29.2	31.2	38.7
	Centre	16.8	23.7	26.0
	Right	21.2	24.7	17.1
	Extreme right	1.5	2.2	0.6
	Don’t know /refuse to answer	21.9	8.6	12.7
Choice (hypothetical) in referendum	Yes	21.9	41.9	33.1
	No	34.7	24.7	25.4
	Don't know/No answer	6.6	16.1	33.7
	Did not vote/would not have voted	37.2	17.2	7.7

The Belgian candidates also proved to be younger than the others, with the mode in the 25-30 age range (Table 6.2). This characteristic doubtless is explained by the importance of contact by internet. Thus many temporary workers responded[56], or at least young people (in fact mainly men[57]), whose professional position was less connected to their initial education, compared with older respondents. European Union managers (civil servants, lobbyists, etc.) were systematically eliminated from the sample, in order to reduce bias from closeness of participants to the subject of discussion. In addition, unsurprisingly, the Belgian sample appears to be the most pro-European (if we measure this position by the hypothetical vote to ratify the ECT) and the British sample is characterised by a substantial number of non-responses on this question.

Selecting focus group participants.

The next stage of the work was to select participants from the pool of candidates who applied. By taking their profiles, using the selection questionnaire, we constructed our groups so as to harmonise their social composition and diversify their political composition. Political orientation was not only measured on a political left right scale and voting declarations, but also on the basis of a question on European integration. The selection of candidates to be invited, and therefore the actual composition of groups, had an improvised, 'bricolage' quality in the end. Our choice of participants was dictated by a series of requirements that it was not always easy to reconcile.

Retaining political diversity

The major practical constraint of focus groups is trying to bring selected participants together, in the same place, at the same time. Finding a time slot that simultaneously suited several people who did not know each other – 6 on average - but who were carefully chosen often proved to be extremely difficult. That had a substantial influence on the choices we had to make: the most suitable candidates, those who together would have made up the ideal group, socially homogenous and politically contrasted, with a good ethnic and gender diversity, were rarely able to convene at one time. We therefore had to choose replacements who were not always completely suitable (we thought of this as 'upgrading') and sometimes the choice of replacements meant that individuals who had been selected, and were available, had to be stood down (or 'downgraded').

The simple structure of occupation, in three categories, that we adopted to construct the social homogeneity of the groups, can be presented as follows. (1). The 'managers' category comprises liberal and intellectual professions, individuals practicing freelance, and intermediary health professions such as for example nurses or physiotherapists, teachers in secondary and primary schools in supervisory roles, and company middle managers such as department heads in small and medium-sized businesses, IT experts, engineers, etc . (2). The category 'employees' consists of white collar workers, at the lower fringes of the intermediary professions (technicians, foremen, etc.) as well as office, retail and service employees. (3). The category 'workers' includes temporary workers, and brings together blue collar working class occupations with tradespeople, shopkeepers and other 'small independents', but also more broadly people without a stable profession and not very qualified.[58]

More importantly, we avoided identifying candidates simply from their profession, as that is far from exhausting their social affiliation. We took other indicators into account. First, the level of education, as a substitute indicator of the cultural level likely to be correlated to the professional position. Then, family origin because a person does not belong to a given social class in the same way when he himself comes from a comparable home environment, as when life time mobility puts him in a position different from his origins. We tried, as much as we could, to avoid participants who would be between our pairs of categories. This meant that we looked, in conformity with qualitative sampling, for 'highly typical' participants in each category.

The composition of these groups was also complicated by the fact that, when possible, we took into account the ethnic and sexual diversity of each group (or at least of each category of groups meaning that if one group was constituted only of white males, we would make sure that the second one would be ethnically and sexually diverse). This also explains some adjustments in the social homogeneity of groups. As well as the fact that ethnic diversity was likely to make parts of the discussion more interesting - in particular the question of Turkey's possible entry into the EU - we also wanted to recruit participants who often elude surveys. Our aim was also to make these discussions closer to the real conditions of public interaction in our societies. However, ethnic diversity, like taking into account the sex of the participants, raises a problem of domination. Ethnic minority participants, and women, are more likely to adopt passive or recessive positions in discussions in mixed groups. (Crawford, 1995; Monnet, 1998: 9–34). We had to ensure that they were not alone in a group facing a bloc, as it were, of white men. An alternative solution was to select female and ethnic minority participants with a slightly higher sociocultural profile than that of the male and ethnic majority counterparts in the same group. Finally we note that this selection of invited participants was complicated further by anticipating the risks of non-attendance, which, we assumed, was more likely in some categories of our invitees than others (women in particular).

Finally, the logic of sampling for focus groups should tend towards appropriate diversity relevant to the topic of the discussion.(Duchesne & Haegel, 2004: 48).

The point is to encourage the development of group dynamics that favour discussion. We chose to create the conditions for political opposition within each group. At the time when they were contacted our volunteers therefore were asked to indicate their ideological orientation, their vote in the last general elections in their respective countries, and their position in relation to the European Constitutional Treaty. (Appendix 2) Table 6.3 shows, in aggregated form, the distribution of the volunteers and the participants selected in the three cities in terms of ideological orientation.

Table 6.3: Autopositioning on left-right scale. (Respondents to the ad) and participants selected

	Paris	Brussels	Oxford
Extreme left	(9.5%) 5.6%	(9.7%) 6.7 %	(5 %) 6.1%
Left	(29.2 %) 25.0%	(31.2%) 30.0%	(38.7%) 21.2%
Centre	(16.8%) 16.7%	(23.7 %) 20.0 %	(26%) 33.3%
Right	(21.2 %) 25.0%	(24.7%) 33.3%	(17.1%) 30.3%
Extreme right	(1.5%) 2.8%	(2.2%) 3.3%	(0.6%) 3.0%
Don’t know	(21.9%) 25.0%	(3.2%) 0%	(12.7%) 6.1%
Refuse to answer	(0%) 0%	(5.4%) 6.7%	(0%) 0%

Because what mattered was first to create the conditions for politicisation, and not to produce a strict equivalence in terms of political structuring by group, the comparability of the ideological scale across the three countries is not so important. Beginning with a pool of applicants that tended to be left-oriented, we tried to rebalance things with a view to forming the most clear-cut left-right oppositions possible. However, we remained dependent on the categories of respondents who refused to respond or answered 'don't know' to these items as this tends to be the case among lower social and less educated categories. Here, representing genuinely social groups was the most important, and political diversification was second in our priorities.

Finally, still concerned to facilitate discussion, we decided to bring together people whose opinions on Europe were on paper divergent. In the recruitment questionnaire we had two items which allowed us to determine the attitudes of citizens regarding European integration. A first question concerned the vote, real or hypothetical, on the Constitutional Treaty. Although the position in relation to the ECT referred to an actual situation in France, since a referendum on the subject had taken place slightly more than six months before, it assumed a different meaning in Belgium (where the treaty was simply ratified by parliament) and in Britain where the ratification of the ECT, after France's rejection, was hardly discussed). Nevertheless, this is the question we used for selecting participants. However, other questions on Europe taken Eurobarometer and posed in the second questionnaire that all participants had to fill in before the discussion begins (also in Appendix 2), showed in the end also poor predictors from opinions expressed by the participants in the discussions.

As Table 6.4 shows, although our 'bricolage' attempts to select participants optimally did not perfectly result in our balancing the groups' composition between europhiles, eurosceptics and those who declare themselves to be indifferent, we did achieve diversity.

Table 6.4 : Vote or hypothetical vote in European Constitutional Treaty referendum, (respondents to ad) and selected participants.

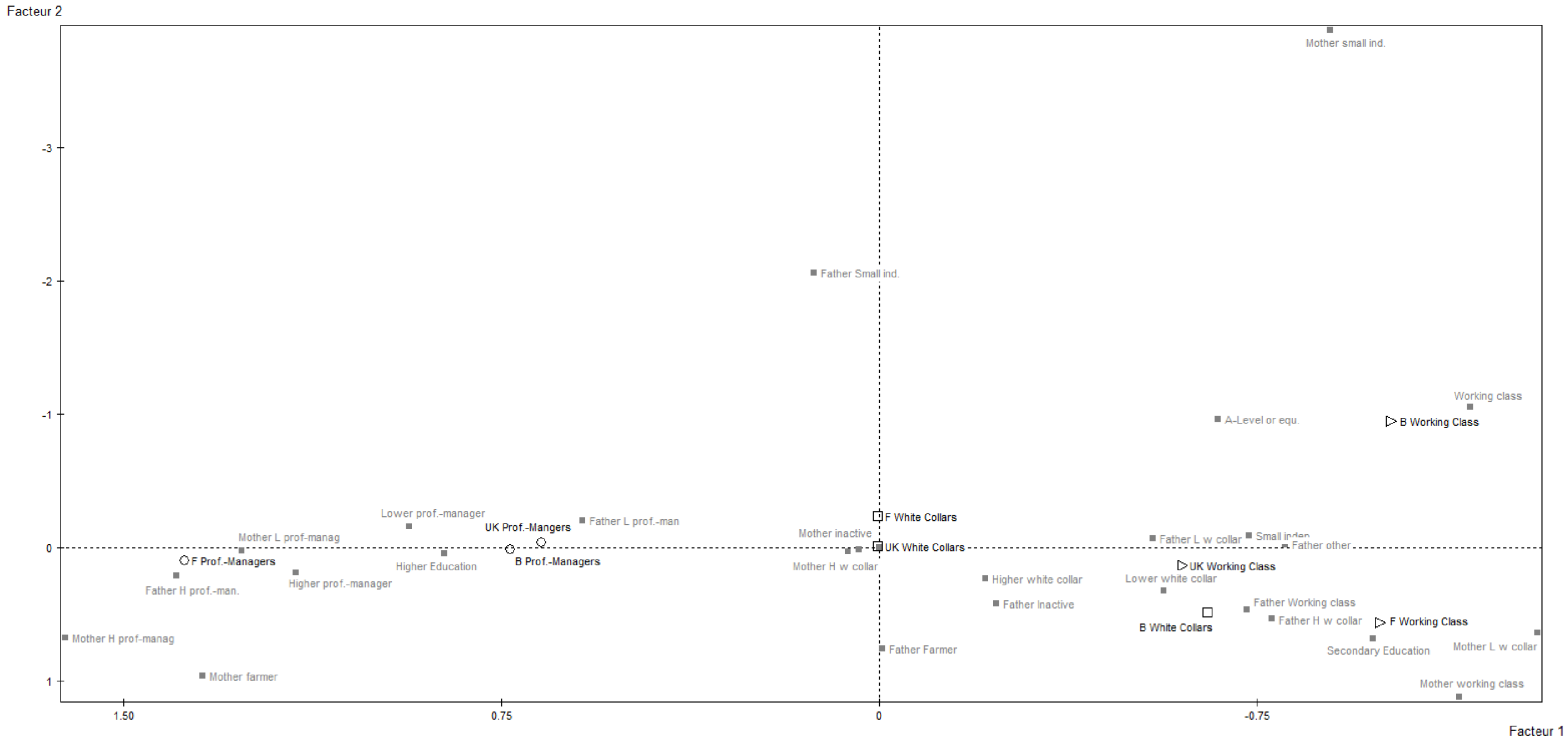
Vote or hypothetical vote in referendum	Paris	Brussels	Oxford

Yes	(21.9%) 39.2%	(41.9%) 26.6%	(33.1%) 32.6%
No	(34.7%) 41.5%	(24.7 %) 42.6%	(25.4%) 27.9%
DK/ Did not / would not have voted	(43.3%) 19.3%	(33.3%) 31.2%	(41.5%) 39.5%

Test of social homogeneity

In all, we conducted 32 focus group sessions. Our initial analysis of the results (scrutiny of our summaries and reports on the sessions, and scrutiny of the DVDs) led us to discard some of these, on the grounds that either the social composition of the group, or the group dynamic, or both, made them incomparable or unusable. In addition to the 2 groups of political activists from each city, we have ended with 18, socioeconomically homogeneous, and comparable, groups: 2 working class, 2 employees, and 2 managers, in each of Paris, Brussels and Oxford. These 18 involved 99 participants in total (36 in Paris, 30 in Brussels and 33 in Oxford). Although as our description of our recruitment and convening procedures emphasises, we did everything we could to ensure that the groups convened corresponded to our design, the number of criteria to be taken into account in real time were such that we could not be certain that we had achieved comparability. In hindsight, therefore, we sought to verify the effectiveness of our work. We have chosen to represent our participants' values for a range of variables in the form of a multiple correspondence analysis, which allows the visual representation of the position of the groups along two factorial axes.[59]

Graph 6.2: Multiple correspondence analysis of participants' characteristics showing position of Belgian, French and British managers, employees and working class groups along two factorial axes.



Graph 6.2 shows only those individual level variables which, in the analysis, make a greater than average contribution to the construction of the two axes. The first, horizontal, axis is structured by a continuum between a series of occupational and educational variables - 'senior manager', 'junior manager', 'father manager', 'mother manager' and 'higher education' on the minus or left hand side, and 'workers', 'father worker', 'higher education' on the plus or right hand side. It is notable that the variable 'mothers' profession' shows up on this graph. Although our sample contains many non-working mothers, so we have fewer data points on this variable, it strikes us as interesting that having a mother who is a manager is far from insignificant. It helps us to identify typical individual participants from that part of our socio-economic spectrum. The second, vertical, axis shows an opposition between on the one hand the variables 'small independent father', 'small independent mother', 'Baccalaureat or equivalent' at the top, plus and of the axis, and 'worker', 'mother employee', 'secondary education' at the bottom, negative, end. Here is an opposition between social origin 'small independent' and the working-class world.

The graph thus shows us a world of higher socio-professional categories to the left. On each side of the vertical axis, toward the centre, are the intermediate social worlds proximate to the world of small independents. Further right are the working class milieux and, right at the edge of the north east quadrant the 'worker' variable itself.

We can locate our socio-economic and national groups on this graph. The French, UK and Belgian managers' groups are all located very near to the horizontal axis. However, they are arrayed along the axis - with the French managers appearing to have family origins that are higher, in socio-economic terms, than their Belgian and above all British counterparts who are positioned nearer the centre of the graph, therefore closer to the world of the middle classes. Our employees' groups appear to be less homogenous on both axes. The French and British groups are very close on the horizontal axis, but more distant from each other on the vertical axis; the Belgian employees, close to the British employees vertically, are themselves located much further to the right horizontally, close to the working-class world. Finally, although the Belgian, French and UK working class groups, located on the extreme right of the graph, are clustered fairly closely, they are separated both on the horizontal, with our British working class groups being positioned slightly closer to the employees groups; and on the vertical - with the Belgians being located closer to 'Baccalaureat or equivalent', 'junior employee', and even the zone of 'small independent'.

Graph 6.2 shows the three pairs of French groups to be quite distinct from each other, ranged quite separately on the graph. This suggests that in Paris our operation of typifying our sample, and recruiting socially homogeneous and distinct groups, worked very well. The distances between various categories of groups in the Belgian and British cases are less clear, although there is a visible distinction in both. In the Belgian case, the distinction between employees and workers is less marked, while the managers' groups are clearly separated from the rest. In the British case the distance between each of the three categories is certainly clear, but it is spread over a much reduced area, the groups being gathered together more. Although our typification procedures worked well in Britain and Belgium, the result is less clear than in France. Our interpretation is that these variations are an upshot of the order in which the fieldwork was carried out, and more specifically the role of the Paris fieldwork in setting our procedures and criteria for participant selection. Because Paris was our first case, it became our base case, and the task in Brussels and then in Oxford was to conform to the Paris categories (as measured by parents' occupations, current occupation, educational qualifications and the rest). However, social stratification, and particularly the role of educational qualifications in access to jobs, are different in the three cities. We were, as it happens, quite aware of this at the time, being struck by the way job titles and educational qualification seemed not to synchronise in the expected way in Oxford, compared to Paris. So, our strategy and procedure of modelling the Brussels and Oxford groups on the constitution of the Paris ones, quickly found its limits. The results are visible on Graph 6.2. Nevertheless, the distribution of groups according to these social variables, and their distinctness from one another, is satisfactory, in our judgement, despite the pressures of selection according to multiple criteria in real time that we have described.

Recruiting Activists

In addition to these 18 socially diverse groups, we needed to test our diversity in politicisation. In each country, we added 2 groups of political activists, thus taking the total number of groups to 24 and participants to 133. A topic like Europe is particularly sensitive to the effects of political competence. So it seemed appropriate to assess how very politicised individuals react to the questions we put to them in a group. We knew from experience (Duchesne and Haegel 2007) that it is difficult, when analysing group discussions, to identify what comes from partisan politicisation, as in ordinary discourse ideological schemas are largely weakened. The discussions in the activist groups were therefore useful because they enabled us to record the most politicised ways of understanding the topic and prosecuting a competitive argument about it. Then we were in a position to check whether and to what extent such schemes were found in the other groups.

For this recruitment exercise, we used different methods. At first we thought that recruitment would be relatively easy for this category of respondent. Activists are most often prepared to talk in public, they would be tempted by the exercise; we could make direct contact with the party and political organisations' offices and ask them to circulate our message via the internet. In addition, sampling requirements were less restrictive as it was enough for us for participants to have distinct and definite partisan affiliations.

However, recruitment turned out to be complicated. We had a disappointing response rate, and had to make several attempts before we could assemble groups which represented all the significant political parties and groups in each city. Quite frequently, we resorted to the tactic of sending the message that the party we were calling was the only one not yet represented in the group, and this often worked. The time constraint was such that it proved impossible to visit local branches of parties and explain the project. Moreover, because Oxford is not the capital, we had less access to party or pressure group headquarters which made things even more difficult. Parties of the far right and far left were particularly suspicious of the project. In every case, it was not uncommon for us to still be lacking a representative of an important party the day before a group was due to convene, and last minute defections happened with activists as well as other categories of participants.

Finally, the activists' groups are heterogeneous. Not so much in social terms as party activists, as we know from sociological work, tend to belong to lower middle classes. But regarding the degree of involvement in the party, the activists we gathered are quite diverse. They can include simple activists in party branches, party workers (young parliamentary assistants, administrators), and even elected representatives or candidates. We were not able to control who the parties sent us.

As an example, in the Belgian case, the activists taking part in our groups were all in their 30s and were young managers in the party, with the exception of a very young activist in the Socialist Party who therefore ended up in a situation of de facto inferiority in the group. Moreover, they were also quite heterogeneous regarding their ideological relationship with their own party: some of our participants were explicitely part of the party minority. However, we tried to control for this heterogeneity when selecting half of the groups in order to increase the comparability of our groups.

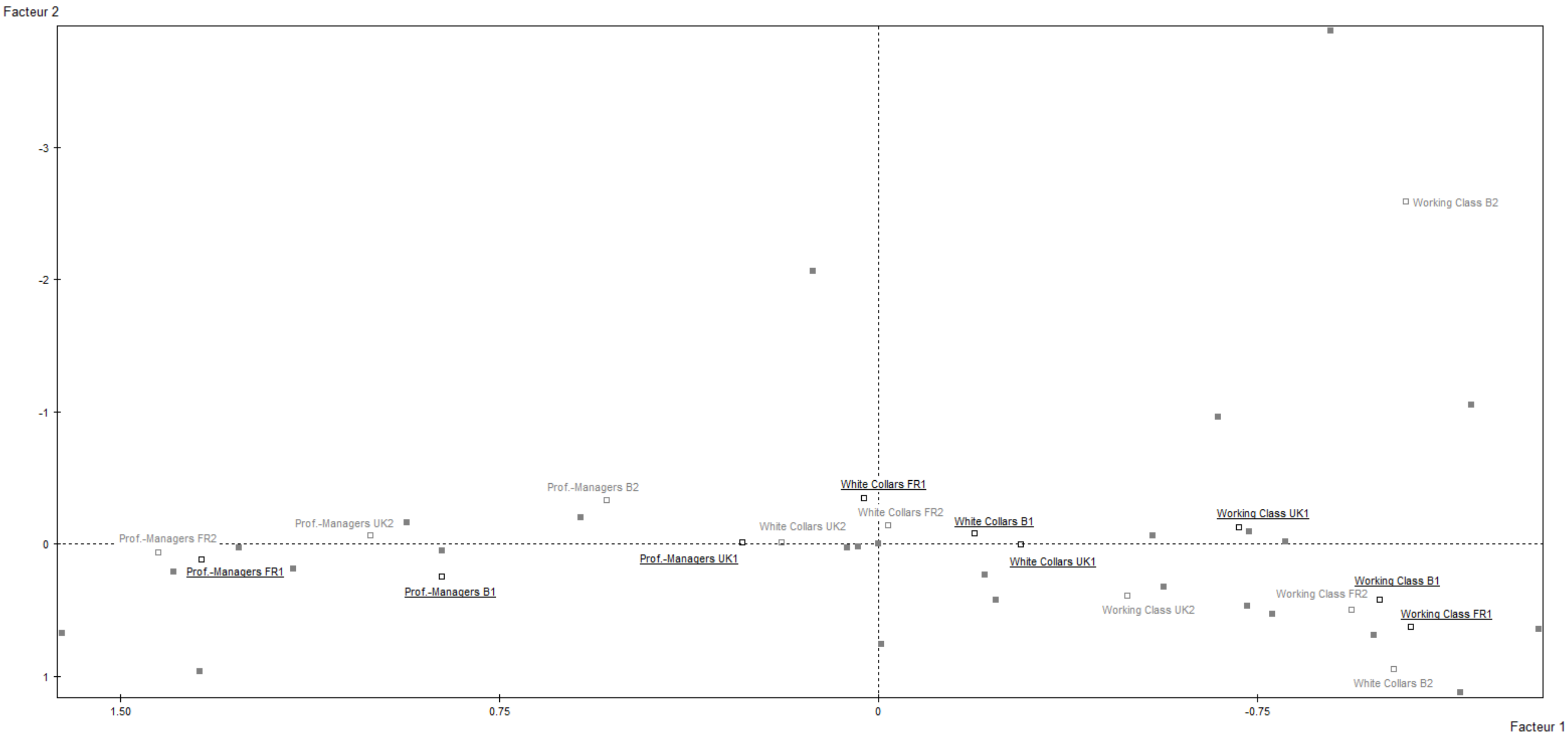
Comparability: Set 1 and Set 2

Our procedure was to duplicate each of the socio-economic group categories, so that for our final analysis of social differences we could choose the set of groups that was most comparable across countries, while putting to one side groups that were socially heterogeneous, or untypical, or too dysfunctional in terms of the discussion dynamic. A discussion of almost three hours results in a transcript of several hundred pages. For many analytic purposes, limiting the analysis to 12 discussions seems reasonable, especially as we aimed to combine several methods of analysis. And we judged that ex post selection was likely to better ensure the comparability of the groups on which such analysis would be based.

So, once the groups were complete, in summer 2006, and on the basis of all the data, we constructed two sets. The first brought together the 9 most comparable and consistent groups from a social point of view, those where it did not seem that one or more participants had had any dysfunctional effect, as well as the 3 most comparable groups in political terms for the activists. Of course, the notion of dysfunction here is very intuitive, although the team were pretty much agreed that they knew it when they saw it. It meant, generally, that one person (sometimes more) dominated the discussion, forcing others essentially to react to his positions. This process of organising the groups into sets was carried out in quite a short and tense period of the research, based at the time on our initial reports and analyses of the sessions. So we wished to confirm, later, that our distribution of groups between these two sets was appropriate. Again, we conducted multiple correspondence analysis, analysing each groups individual level variable values, and measuring their correlation with the set into which we had put the group.

Graph 6.3 shows how the 18 socio-economically based focus groups, and the 9 we selected in Set 1 (underlined), are arrayed on the axes of graph 6.2. It shows that in the Belgian and British cases we have clearly picked out the most typical groups for Set 1. We have selected the British group most marked by working class characteristics, that is to say, furthest to the right on the horizontal axis; and we have excluded the Belgian group which was in the world of small independents, that is, out in the top right quadrant. The three working class groups in Set 1 are quite close to each other - close from the point of view of factor analysis, and positioned in the 'working class world' of this spatial analysis. The employees' groups are similar. Those allocated to Set 1 are closer graphically and positioned in the centre. Again, the most atypical Belgian employees group, because it brings together individuals that have less education, and who come more from the more working class world - the bottom right quadrant on the graph - was rejected in favour of the group that is more comparable with the French and British.

Graph 6.3: Formation of Sets 1 and 2



With regard to the managers' groups, though, the British one we allocated to Set 1 is not, at the factorial level, the most obvious. It is close to the employees world, although we did have another group, more typical and closer to the world of managers, shown on the left of the horizontal axis. The characteristics of the groups helps explain this choice. The Set 2 British managers' group, although socially typical and comparable, consisted only of individuals who either positioned themselves in favour of Britain's membership of the European Union, or who simply did not position themselves at all. Because we were intent on dividing our groups on the European question, and in view of the acknowledged euroscepticism in the British case, this lack of any participants who were critical of the process of European integration was problematic. The Set 1 group proved to be more interesting and the discussions conducted explain why we preferred to include them in our main analysis.

Finally, in both Sets 1 and 2, the French participants appear to be the most typical of their socio-economic categories, in that they are better distributed than the others across the factorial axes. Further, the French Sets 1 and 2 groups are closest to each other on the horizontal axis. As we have remarked, our procedure and schedule, by which we established the French groups first, established protocols for selection which closely fitted the Paris context, and then attempted to replicate this in the other cities, has had an undeniable influence on the constitution of our sample of groups.

Conducting Focus Groups and Generating Data

Our recruitment procedures ensured comparability of data, socially and nationally, and conformed with our research aims of bringing together people who are not naturally disposed to this kind of interaction. We tried to be rigorous in the organisation of the group sessions, and the conduct of the discussions, as these determined the validity of the data collected. As we said above, we wanted to use the focus groups quasi-experimentally, in keeping with our initial conception and theory of politicisation, so we needed a mode of organisation and moderation that facilitated conflict, and also allowed participants to move the discussion, and the expression of their disagreements, on to the topics that mattered most to them.

Different features of the sessions were meant to reinforce the experimental logic of our focus groups, and to construct the discussion as test of politicisation. The surroundings in which the groups met - in a meeting room of a Sciences-Po research centre for the French, in a university seminar room for the Belgians and the British - could not be for them everyday and banal surroundings. The staging of the discussion also contrasts with any usual course of daily conversation, because of the presence of a moderator and a research team, and also because of the arrangement of the room, the setting of chairs for participants in a semi-circle, not to mention the presence of a camera, which filmed the whole discussion. (Appendix 6) This unfamiliar scene inevitably gave the discussion a kind of public character. Requiring participants to discuss a subject that is probably remote from their usual experience, and largely handled by members of the political system, was obviously part of the experimental logic. Furthermore, the discussion was preceded by each individual completing a more detailed questionnaire, than the short one that they had completed by telephone as part of the application process, on their political opinions. This questionnaire enabled some (they told us) to deduce the political nature of the subject that would be presented to them. To sum up, everything contributed to breaking with the everyday in discussion practices, and to giving their exchanges a particular kind of political character.

Creating Conflict and Allowing Speech

Our moderation technique was also designed to facilitate conflict in the discussion. Duchesne and Haegel had used this technique, adapted from a method developed by a consultancy company, in their previous work on politicisation. (Duchesne & Haegel, 2004b: 882). The impetus to conflict and the dynamic in the discussion is generated by the display of participants' comments on large boards which face them. The objective is not to reproduce the conditions of natural discussion, but on the contrary those of a debate that is partly public, but that is explicitly reflexively monitored by the participants.

On the board, the moderator sets the main points that are made, writing these on cards and pinning them up as the discussion proceeds. The participants can thus see the discussion progress, as well as participate in its production. In front of them, they have a summary of the comments and can therefore react to these later. This display technique is useful insofar as participants often need time to think, and seeing points written helps them react, and in particular to express their disagreement. (Appendix 7)

To further facilitate the expression of conflict a particular rule - the 'flash' rule - is introduced. In her preliminary remarks, the moderator says that participants should not speak for too long (no more than 30 seconds per utterance), so that the flow of exchanges is preserved, and that participants could use the 'flash' either to express their lack of understanding, or their disagreement, or quite simply to comment on, qualify, or amend the comments displayed on the board. When requested, the moderator draws a 'flash' on the relevant card; this indicates that the point would be revisited later, and discussed more fully. Moderators promoted the use of the flash, thanking those who used it, and hence introducing a clear incentive to challenge remarks or views, express disagreement, or to question others.

Further, moderators left the participants free to shift the conversation towards subjects which interested them. The moderators' script, to which we will return, provided a framework for the discussion that clearly focuses it on Europe, but within each of the planned stages, the objective was to make it as easy as possible for as many as possible to take part, to allow disagreements to emerge, and not to refocus the conversation by redirecting participants to the European issue. In the event, the practice of the three moderators, Sophie Duchesne, Florence Haegel for the French-speaking groups, Elizabeth Frazer for the British groups, was not completely uniform. Their styles of moderation varied according to professional habits and personalities; and Duchesne and Haegel, but not Frazer, had undergone formal training in this moderation technique. The three can be arrayed on a continuum from the less (Haegel) to the more directive (Frazer). Our conduct of the groups, actually, encompasses two psychology traditions which inspire interviewing techniques in the social sciences - the experimental psychology associated with the development of the focus group interview by Merton (1987), and the clinical psychology, popularised by Rogers (1945). Such differences between research settings are usually quite invisible when national research teams work more or less independently of one another. Our integrated method (Duchesne, for instance, was present at every focus group session) has allowed us to take this variation into account, in our analyses.

Our principle of allowing participants to talk about what they wanted, and not to force them to redirect the flow of the discussion onto European questions, allowed the groups often to ignore the European level, and to address matters that interested them such as global economic and social dynamics, work, education, immigration, etc. It allowed a whole range of possible reactions to the proposed instruction. It means that we can observe in these groups many strategies of avoiding and evading the task of talking about politics and talking about Europe. The first strategy is of course silence: some participants in fact only speak very occasionally. The share of the 'silent' or the 'not very talkative' is a function of at least two parameters. The first, as studies of political engagement in general and of political discussion in particular, indicate, linked to the influence of social inequalities. (Mansbridge 1983, Sanders 1997, Mendelberg 2002) Even if the attention that we gave to the composition of the groups allowed us to create relatively homogenous socio-occupational milieux, social inequalities still remain and those of sex are particularly powerful. As we indicated above, we quickly observed that it was imperative to put more than one woman in a group, to avoid seeing our only female participant retreat into silence. The second parameter relates to the size of the groups. The distribution of those who speak is all the more balanced as the group is smaller. A larger group probably allows some to free ride more easily. Our pilot groups convinced us that six participants is the maximum number if most are to contribute to the discussion – four or five is better in that regard; but the risk of defection was such that we kept inviting six participants per group.

In addition to silence, participants had other strategies of avoidance. One was to maintain a classroom like, face-to-face relationship with the moderator, waiting to be told. Another was to resort to asides and discussions with neighbours, inaudible to the group and to the recording equipment. But above all, if questions of Europe did not inspire them, they were free to talk of other things. Notably, the task of refocusing the group was quite often spontaneously taken up by one of the participants, noticing and noting that the discussion was no longer about Europe, or questioning others about the connection between what they were saying and the European issue.

We began from the premise that from the moment the groups were asked to talk about Europe, all the talk that this instruction generated was meaningful in understanding their reactions to the European question. This includes those reactions that seem, on the face of it, to be distant from the initial question. This principle follows from the social scientific method inspired by clinical psychology, which is at the heart of the introduction of non-directive interviews into the social sciences (Rogers 1945, Michelat 1975). When the topic to be explored is proposed to respondents in such a way that they find they are free to respond as they wish, all associations of ideas, even when they appear to be digressions from the initial topic, inform us about the way in which the respondents define, understand and make sense of the topic, in the context of the research.

The Schedule

The conduct of the discussion, then, was largely free and non-directive. But the conduct of the sessions was based on a schedule of scripted questions, put to the groups in a rigorously standardised manner.(Appendix 4) Sessions lasted about three hours (a long period by comparison to other focus group studies) and were structured around five major sequences, taking about 30 to 45 minutes each, except for the last, which was shorter. This left open large time slots for discussion. Our data also include a range of observations made by the research team throughout the sessions. We have field notes covering the arrival period, the break (about 30 minutes around a buffet table), and finally the period after the discussion closed and before the participants' departure. These notes include all comments made and conduct and action that the team members present were able to observe and recall. These documents were written jointly. We do not here reproduce any samples of these, as they all contain very personal notes. Each consists of about four pages; the initial version was drafted by Duchesne and completed in turn by all team members present. This was a minimum of three people (the moderator or moderators, the researcher in charge of recruitment and reception, and a research assistant in charge of the camera).

Constructing a focus group schedule consisting of meaningful topics and questions, which could provoke similar levels of engagement and interest in the three countries, relied on a process of harmonisation, translation, and evaluation. We tested different versions of the script by carrying out pilot discussions in the three countries. The final script which was used for the 24 groups analysed met a dual objective. First, we wanted to tap many facets of normal relations between citizens and Europe, and therefore to address the questions of identity, legitimacy, and interest (in the dual sense of being interested in and of having an interest). Second, we wanted to allow, encourage, conflict to build up over the discussion.

The first question 'What does it mean to be European?' was to act as a warm-up and allow us to collect data on perceptions of European borders, and degrees of identification with Europe. The second question was aimed at confronting the participants with the complexity of the European system. They were asked 'How should we distribute power in Europe?' and to sequentially discuss the advantages and disadvantages of four sources of power: nations, elected representatives, experts and the market. After that there was a break; and then in the second half we posed questions designed to provoke conflict, or at least debate. The topics chosen were a priori more controversial. We formulated the third question in a deliberately provocative way: 'Who profits from Europe?'. It aimed to reveal a possible divide between the losers and winners of European integration. The fourth question concerned the issue of Turkey's entry into the EU. The techniques of eliciting responses to these two questions were also chosen with the aim of provoking conflictualisation. Whereas in the first session participants responded individually, for the third question they had to work in groups of two or three and write their responses on cards which would be displayed, then discussed together. To form these sub-groups, and based on observations of the first half of the session, we tried to put together participants who we thought were similar in view of their positions on integration, or in terms of ideological orientation. We were aiming to maximise the differences of opinion within the group. Response to the fourth question took the form of an a priori vote, for or against Turkey's entry in the EU. We asked the participants to vote before the discussion, publicly, in front of the others, telling them that they would then have the opportunity to express their doubts and that their vote could be revised. This technique of a preliminary vote also responded to a concern to create the conditions for conflictualisation, by fixing the discussion on clear-cut and clearly expressed positions.

In addition to the choice of topics and and the response techniques, the hypothesis of a greater conflictualisation in the second session resulted from the idea that the participants, having had the opportunity to get to know each other in the first half, to take stock of each other's opinions, would be able to identify the participants with whom they agreed or disagreed on European questions. Insofar as we know that conflictualisation comes from the creation of an alliance (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007) we had to give the participants the time to identify other people's positions, so that the formation of alliances becomes possible when the questions asked became more controversial. Finally, the fifth question asked the participants to list the different national parties (and regional parties in the case of French-speaking Belgium) on a continuum going from the most in favour to the least in favour of Turkey's entry into the EU. It aimed both to give us data to assess the political competence of each of the participants, but also to provide a period of calm, and cooperation, after a period of more heated discussion. The more relaxed atmosphere was helped by the fact that there was often no 'correct answer', as the parties' positions on Turkey's accession to the EU was far from always being clear or unanimous, and by the fact that the participants' position in front of the political world of parties allowed a semblance of solidarity to be recreated, based on opposition between 'them', the politicians, versus 'us', the citizens.

Data Analysis

This way of organising and conducting focus groups is clearly in line with the standard social science uses of them, in opposition to market research. Following Morgan (1997), the method loosened the rules and procedures elaborated in the marketing context, and favoured methodological innovation. More importantly, the tradition is associated with interpretive analytic methods that explore the complexity of the data to the greatest possible extent. Theoretically, advocates of this kind of focus group work take a position close to 'social constructivism' with respect to 'opinions', 'attitudes' and political positions. It questions the idea that opinions are independent elements of individual consciousness, standing in a linear, predictive, relationship with subsequent behaviour or action. For constructivists, the meaning that people give to things and their actions is constructed in context, in interaction, and it is these interactions that we should analyse to reconstruct the meaning that is exchanged, and to assess the impact of the opinions expressed. This general position is of course fully realised in the focus groups. Here, the analysis of interactions is therefore not additional and detached from the analysis of the content: it is work that is essential to understand the meaning exchanged in the conversations.

Interpretive Analysis and the Reconstruction of Reaction

This constructivist understanding of respondents' positions is all the more legitimate here as the subject of discussion was clearly remote from the familiar reality of our participants. As White shows, when European citizens discuss the questions which are important to them, they do not spontaneously mention European integration (White, 2011). Participants in our groups often indicated that the subject was unfamiliar, or that it was boring. Thus, they clearly signalled that the opinions that they might produce on the subject were not well formed in advance of the discussion. They were, rather, constructed during the sessions.

Further, the discussions we organised are, as are many other focus groups, marked by the fragmented and disorganised nature of the reasoning. The transcripts consist of many sequences that are difficult to understand for anyone who merely reads them – that is, for anyone who looks for meaning only in the content and the sequence of utterances. Our participants react, gradually, to what is said and to what they hear. One problem in the interpretation of focus group data is the impossibility of recreating with certainty and accuracy what each person heard or understood of what the others may have said. This is particularly true at times when the discussion becomes heated, and where the participants tend, then, to talk at the same time. Our method of displaying the course of the discussion on the board was aimed at partly overcoming this problem. But, of course, there was a time lag, as the moderators displayed cards in batches. (This is quite apart from the issue of legibility - which was pointedly brought up by participants in teasing, and by asking the moderators to read the cards out). In sum, it is necessary before trying systematically to analyse and compare the data, to go through a stage of interpretive construction of the meaning of the utterances exchanged. At this point, we make the data - the transcripts - into a corpus in the proper meaning of the term.

Our procedure for relating utterances to the development of relations between the protagonists in order to understand meaning, has been inspired by the work of Billig. From conversations between close relatives about the British royal family (Billig 1992), he shows how arguments are adapted to the reputation of the interlocutors: someone considered to have strong opinions will be led to retain his role, to construct his discourse and to adapt his replies in order to always have the last word. By contrast, our groups were made up of strangers without any prior reputations to maintain. But, their interventions certainly should be interpreted as reactions of participants to each other, and impressions of groups members were developed over the course of the session. These impressions and reputations tended to be strengthened after a while in systems of more or less explicit alliances. Our interpretive analysis therefore aimed to understand these interpersonal games and to provide an interpretive framework from which we could analyse how participants constructed their interventions and adapted their positions according to those held by those with whom they wanted to express agreement or disagreement.

Each of the 24 discussions analysed was therefore, in the first place the subject of an interpretive narrative account by one of the project researchers. Using the video recording, the transcription, the questionnaires filled in by the participants, and the observational notes written by the team after each group session, she constructed an account of the discussion, and everything that happened around it, by responding to the following questions: What happened between the participants? What conflicts were avoided, and what conflicts were engaged, in the discussion? What agreements, or what consensus was found and how? How did alliances between group members develop? What divisions did they reveal? What were the subjects of discussion, explicit and implicit? What resources did the participants mobilise? The emphasis here on identifying implicit topics and disagreements assumed that analysts would fully take into account everything that had been expressed, even when the link with the topic and the discussion did not appear to be clear, by gambling that this link would (perhaps) take shape once the history of the group had been clarified. The final document took the form of a narrative, about the participants and their conduct within the group. This helped us to interpret affinities and antagonisms.

These documents circulated within the research group and served as a framework for subsequent analyses. In view of the complexity of the data collected, we were keen to multiply the methods of processing them, in order to guarantee the reliability of the results, by the triangulation of methods. Each chapter in the book is based on at least two of the methods that we have implemented.

Sensitive Moments and Discussion Dynamics

These narrative analyses of the group discussions support a systematic comparison of the dynamic of each group, by providing detailed analyses of 'sensitive moments'. (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Kitzinger and Farquhar argue that such moments, defined by their emotional charge, allow the borders of acceptable discourse to be drawn. In other words, what is sayable is established. In our study, moments where conflict is revealed in the interactions, whether implicitly or explicitly, are moments when emotion suffuses the interactions between the participants. These moments, and the positions which are defended by participants, allow us to identify potential for the politicisation of integration. Our premise was that participants would only risk conflict and clearly express disagreement with another if the subject was really close to their heart and if they were assured of finding the support of one or several allies in the group (Duchesne and Haegel 2007). The study of sensitive moments, based on the previous interpretive analysis, therefore led us to develop the idea by which the conflictuality of a subject, in a research setting like ours, could be considered salient. More practically, we therefore looked at how and to what extent European integration, the explicit topic for discussions as imposed by the research team, was present or impliated in the 'sensitive moments' which emerged between participants. Comparing the distribution of these sensitive moments, and their implicit and explicit topics - integration, globalisation, employment, migration etc - differentiated socially and nationally, helps us to observe the mechanisms of politicisation of European questions.

Quantitative and qualitative content analysis

This free interpretive analysis of the sessions was complemented by two other methods of analysis of the content, both computer aided, one quantitative and the other interpretive. First, we deployed the automatic analysis implemented by Alceste software. Alceste generates distinct classes determined by co-occurrence, and supplies a 'description' of these classes in the form of a list of strongly associated words and units of analysis. Researcher intervention is confined to a substantive interpretation, and labelling, of the various classes. The procedure is entirely automatic, so there is no researcher bias, but because a large part of the corpus is automatically discarded because of statistical insignificance, there is a danger of over-interpretation. The use of the method therefore assumes, as was the case for us, a close knowledge of the texts involved. (Chapter Two for further detail and use of Alceste analysis).

Interpretive analysis of the content, by implementing a systematic coding of the discussions, does not involve the same risks. We used the software package Atlas-ti, one of a number of CAQDAS (computer aided qualitative data analysis) packages. Here, the categories produced by the analysis are completely created by the coder. Coding is certainly the most common method of systematic text analysis. It follows three basic principles. First it makes possible the falsification of the analysis by allowing, in theory, each code to be tested. It is less the technical principle of the possible challenging of the attribution of a code to an element which counts here, although inter-coder reliability tests have their place in this method, and are implicit in the practice of different researchers reading the text on multiple occasions. More, the point is that the method of attaching codes to text reveals precisely how each unit of text was interpreted in the analysis. Coding in fact imposes a procedure of systematic processing of the corpus, and therefore helps to fight against any tendency to over-use some sections, the content of which would be more in keeping with hypotheses, in analysis.

Finally, coding fulfils the essential function of linking the different parts of the corpus to each other. It allows us to make systematic comparisons between the text that is attached to a code throughout the entire corpus. Codes mediate, link, sections of text with each other. The use of computer packages like Atlas-ti enable the application of code to text to be reviewed, tested and revised, and because of their powerful search and retrieve facilities, enables researchers to find patterns, and divergences, in very large datasets such as ours.

That said, coding can be used in two profoundly different ways, and has been in our project. It can be based on an a priori scheme which is derived from previous work. For example, our conception of 'conflictualisation' emerges from previous work, and was an a priori code that the research term had in mind when getting to grips with the corpus. The research task then consists in part of observing the distribution of codes within a corpus. By contrast, coding can be constructed inductively and the categories emerge from readings of the data. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) Here it is less the distribution of the coded text units, than the development of the codes themselves that is the heart of the analysis. In the end, the list of codes represents all the concepts constructed by the researcher to take account of the data.

Finally, in addition to triangulation of methods of analysing the discussions themselves, we have processed, using statistical procedures, the other information collected - in particular the questionnaires filled in by each of the applicants, and each of the participants. We have also analysed, quantitatively, the cards generated in response to the third question of the script: Who profits from Europe? Diversifity of methods of analysis, according to the questions discussed, seems to us to be likely to consolidate our results. In other words, if the results presented in the different chapters tend to add up, this is for us the sign that the main results are validated. We hope that the reader will therefore not see in these convergences useless repetitions, but rather the result of our efforts to guarantee the solidity of our results.

Conclusion

This book is published at a particular moment in European studies, when the results obtained by researchers claiming different methodological traditions, qualitative versus quantitative, tend to differ. Our project aimed to examine in detail the results obtained by decades of analysis of Eurobarometer data. In fact it led us in part to question some of that work. Our project clearly shows that the reactions of citizens of Paris, Brussels and Oxford are far from being as structured and polarised as most of the analyses published by European studies would suggest. Their reactions include a good deal of ambivalence and indifference. In part, these are linked to the shadow that the processes of globalisation cast over European integration. Their reactions are, moreover, largely defined by national frameworks, insofar as Europe is not an independent horizon in citizens' representations, but a more or less visible level in a system of power to which they are subject to a greater or lesser extent.

Discussions between researchers who use statistical methods for analysing opinions, or qualitative interpretations of the links to politics, are often confused by contention over the 'scientificity' of their work. The results of qualitative work sometimes appear to be less conclusive, more intuitive and less verifiable than the statistical work. In the qualitative approach, the reflexivity of researchers constitutes, in addition to the systematicity of their implementation of their techniques, the essential criterion for validating their methods. This is why we have taken care to explain in detail, in this long final chapter, the way in which we have carried out our project. In the course of this, we have explained the many methodological choices that a comparative focus group project involves. And we have managed the discrepancies between the objectives that we set for ourselves at the research design stage, and the problems we faced when implementing it. The details of all of this may appear somewhat tedious; but in our view they are essential to be able to fully appreciate our results.

Qualitative research is always a bit of an adventure, and, we might add, usually involves an admixture of misadventure. The data collected are rarely in keeping with what one imagines one would collect. But they are also always more full of information than one expects. Consequently researchers can develop, and move ahead from, the theoretical framework which predates the implementation of their projects. *Overlooking Europe* is no exception to this rule. The years that we spent in keeping this project alive, as a team, were full of discussions and discoveries. We hope that the narrative which we have here presented concerning the practical realisation of this research will have given readers a glimpse into what it was like for us. The availability of all the documents and research data, which accompany the publication of this book at (http://www.sciencespo.fr/dime-shs/content/dime-shs-quali) will allow colleagues who wish to do so to fully discuss our results and to continue the adventure.