Chapter 5

FOCUS GROUPS

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Introduction

Earlier studies of the public understanding of genetically modified crops and foods have shown that many Europeans are sceptical; the Eurobarometer survey undertaken in 2005 (1) is just one example. From that survey, it was obvious that unless GM food products are seen to have consumer benefits, the public will remain sceptical. Nevertheless, the picture of European opinion is somewhat variable. Even though a high proportion (often a majority) of European citizens have said in one form or another that they oppose GM foodstuffs, in some EU countries – the Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal and Spain – supporters outnumber opponents (1). At the same time, most people state clearly that consumers should have freedom of choice about whether or not to buy GM-foods (2).

To secure a deeper understanding of the arguments and value premises underlying the opinions expressed, a number of qualitative studies have been undertaken during the last decade. They have shown, for instance, that attitudes to GM-food are linked to moral, existential and epistemological issues about trust and people's sense of agency. Lay scepticism towards GM-food may be influenced by a lack of trust in the institutions and actors responsible for the new technology (3-5), or by a lack of a sense of agency (1, 4, 6). In addition, GM-food is sometimes perceived as "unnatural", challenging traditional perceptions of nature and of humanity's place in nature which may bring about moral objections (4, 6, 7).

Many of the those studies were conducted in the late 1990s and the early 2000s when there was a widespread societal debate about the legitimacy of GM-foods. In the light of recent approvals of GM-products and field trials in the European market, and the relative political and mass media silence on GM-issues, we find it relevant to explore again the understandings and representations of GM-foods among the lay European public. Are there other types of arguments occurring in lay peoples' discourse today? Do GM-foods still evoke emotions and ethical and epistemological concerns? How do people conceive of labelling issues? Is there an expressed willingness to buy GM-products once they exist on the market? What are the arguments for or against buying GM-labelled products?

To investigate these questions, we have conducted focus groups in seven European countries: Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. The focus group studies aimed to explore: (a) lay people's expressed views on labelled GM-foods and their willingness to buy them, and (b) the implicit value premises/assumptions underlying the arguments presented in the focus group discussions.

Methodological considerations

A focus group is a focused group interview in which a small number of participants are brought together to discuss a given issue under the guidance of a moderator who preferably assumes a retracted position (for an introduction to focus group research, see 8-10). The comparatively free form of discussions found in focus groups enables the researcher to uncover aspects of the topic in hand that could not have been anticipated but that are brought to the fore spontaneously in the discussions and thereby proven to be of importance to the participants.

Focus groups are chosen since they offer a research method well suited to generating a rich understanding of participants' beliefs and experiences (11). Focus group methodology enables analyses of what the participants bring to the group. But they also constitute "thinking societies in miniature" (12), where the process of joint meaning-making in action may be studied (13). Thus, focus group methodology is well suited to study socially shared knowledge as it is constructed, expressed and negotiated in a group (14).

Nevertheless, like all research methods, focus groups have their limitations. Their purpose is not to draw statistical conclusions that are generalisable to a population at large (11, 15). On the contrary, focus groups provide depth and insight into a particular topic which can very well be combined, for example, with survey research (11).

Selection and recruitment of participants

The seven countries included in the study were selected to cover both nations were there exist GM-products in stores and countries with no products currently available. Within The Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom, four groups were selected in each country. In Poland, the special case of the Government attempting to establish that country as a "GMO-free zone" (rejected by the European Commission in early 2008) motivated enlarged data collection. Hence, six focus group discussions were conducted before and four after the rejection by the Commission. In Greece, which has a history of massive political and public resistance to agribiotechnology, a total of six groups were conducted.

The focus group data were collected between September 2007 and March 2008. Each focus group consisted of 4-8 participants and of both men and women, but was internally homogeneous with regard to age and level of education. Thus, with some minor variations as noted in Chapters 10 (page 10-15) and 12 (page 12-6), the following matrix (Table 1) was used to recruit participants:

Table 1. Segmentation of focus groups.

age:	**highest level of education:**	
20-30	High school	University
30-60	High school	University

Since the focus group questions revolved around consumption habits and intentions, we selected participants who were involved in food purchases, either directly (those who buy foods in stores) or indirectly (e.g. husbands or wives who do not usually make the purchases but who influence the family's consumption patterns by having a say in what to buy). This left out young people living with their parents. People who were older than 60 years of age were also excluded since they might not be regarded as the most important target group by the

retail food chains. The participants were divided into different groups based on their level of education in order to avoid hierarchies and differences in social status which might hamper the discussions. An overview of the data corpus is presented in the following table (Table 2):

Table 2. Overview of the data corpus.

country	GM labelled products available in stores?	number of groups	number of participants/group
The Netherlands	Yes	4	4-5
Poland	Yes	10	6-8
Spain	Yes	4	6-8
United Kingdom	Yes	4	7
Greece	No	6	6-7
Slovenia	No	4	5-8
Sweden	No	4	3-4

Interview procedure

The focus group interviews followed a similar structure in all seven countries (see Appendix 1). As a consequence, all focus group interviews were semi-structured with a relatively large degree of freedom for the participants to develop topics which they themselves experienced as central. The participants were encouraged primarily to discuss among themselves rather than directing their utterances towards the moderator. This succeeded to a varying extent in the different groups.

Even though the general frame of the focus groups was the same in all the countries, there were some variations in the actual procedure of the interviews. Because national contexts differ, different priorities needed to be made. For instance, one important difference lay in the presence or absence of GM-products in stores. In countries where there were no products available, the focus group discussions took a hypothetical character: the participants discussed what they would do were they to have the choice of selecting GM-labelled products. By contrast, the Dutch and the Polish focus group participants were given the task of simulating actual purchasing behaviours to test whether or not the GM-label influenced their choices.

The focus group sessions aimed to resemble as far as possible a “natural” conversation. Thus, the moderators took on relatively retracted roles, interfering as little as possible. In all countries, the participants were given the opportunity to raise topics that were central to them but that were not included in the interview guide.

Documentation and analysis

The focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed in their entirety. The data were subsequently analysed by means of *thematic content analysis* (16). In practice, the analysis encompasses procedures of (a) dividing transcripts into segments, based on the identification of topic shifts; (b) coding the segments by assigning “labels” to them, i.e. nouns or nominal phrases summarising the content of the segment; (c) identifying recurrent sub-topics in the coded list of segments; and (d) identifying recurrent themes which captured several sub-topics and which constituted a more abstract summary of the content of the focus group discussions.

In other words, a horizontal approach was used throughout the analytical process (17). In each country, all data were analysed as one text and the identification of recurrent sub-topics and themes was based on the entire material. In Spain and Slovenia, additional vertical analyses were undertaken, exploring similarities and differences between the four focus groups.

In Sweden and Greece, further analyses focused on the use of analogies in the focus group discussions (cf. 14, 18) since they were frequently used by the participants as a value-laden communicative tool to argue for a certain standpoint or to make sense of the issue of GM-foods.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the project, careful attention was paid to ensure the participants' informed consent. This means that each participant was informed about the aim of the study, about the methodology to be used and about their rights before consenting to participate. Each participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any moment, even though no-one chose to do so. Confidentiality was ensured by excluding the participants' names and places of residence from all transcripts and reports.

Results

In this section, we will discuss the most prominent themes and arguments recurring in the entire focus group data (i.e. in all seven countries). Furthermore, we will discuss differences between arguments put forth in the different national contexts. More detailed analysis of national specifics in the focus group data is provided in the respective country chapters.

When inviting participants to the focus groups, potential interviewees were asked to participate in a discussion about how they select their foodstuffs. Not mentioning GM-labelling at this stage was a way of investigating what was at the forefront of participants' minds when thinking about buying food.

Was GM-labelling even considered in their purchasing decisions?

The focus group discussions revealed that the overall awareness of GM-products and labels was very low. The participants did not mention labels related to gene technology as a factor influencing their purchasing decisions either in those countries where GM-products are available in stores or in those where products labelled "GM-free" are on sale. Instead, other factors were put forth such as quality and freshness, value for money, familiarity with the products, and lifestyle values related to health and the environment.

One recurrent argument discussed in all countries concerned the importance of the quality of the products as regards taste, freshness and appearance of products and packages. Price was something that most participants agreed was important but it was rarely mentioned as the main factor determining purchases. Nevertheless, the participants of several focus groups emphasised the importance of value for money: a more expensive product may be selected if judged to provide other values such as better taste, a well-known brand, etc. In addition, familiarity with the product and/or the brand seemed to be important. Many interviewees stated that they usually buy what they have always bought, and what their parents used to buy. This type of behaviour also influences the very activity of walking around in the store. The participants tended always to take the same route through the store and always to look at the

same shelves. Moreover, lifestyles influence people's way of acting in the food store. Focus group participants in The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom expressed their wish to buy products which may facilitate a healthy living. Organic food products were also pinpointed as contributing to a preferred lifestyle by participants in The Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK even though some participants regarded them as too expensive. Locally produced food was also said to be preferred by focus group participants, for example in Slovenia and the United Kingdom.

Information, labelling and trust

In all seven countries it was evident that the participants experienced a lack of information about GM-issues. Prior to the focus group session, gene technology was not an issue to which the participants seemed to have paid much attention. The overall awareness about the availability of GM-products on the market and about labelling requirements was low.

A common argument running through the discussions in The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom was that people should be given individual autonomous choice on whether or not to buy GM-products. This argument implies that GM-products should be labelled to facilitate consumer choice. Nevertheless, participants repeatedly stated that they seldom read labels. Looking at labels was done mainly by participants having a special interest in doing so, e.g. to avoid allergic reactions or the like. In the Dutch focus group sessions, where real-life purchasing activities were simulated, it was obvious that the participants did not read the product labels or the declaration of contents for information. Instead, they looked for well-known brands, low price and attractive packaging.

When the focus group participants discussed their perceived lack of knowledge and information about GM-issues, an underlying argument was that the source of information is crucial in judging the credibility of the information. It was, however, also clear that different types of information sources were considered as trustworthy in different countries. In the Dutch and Spanish focus groups, for instance, hearsay from friends and family was referred to as a valuable source of information. Independent sources, such as national authorities, were pinpointed as trustworthy information providers by participants in Greece, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. There were diverging opinions across the focus groups as to whether or not scientists should be considered trustworthy, or as having a vested interest in the development of gene technology. The Swedish focus group participants pointed to scientists as trustworthy but hard to understand: clearly there is a need for able science communicators. On the contrary, the Greek participants expressed limited trust in scientists since the scientific community was perceived as promoting one-sided subjective information on GM-issues. In Poland, the focus group participants expressed a very high trust in scientists: they argued that decisions on certain complex topics in society, such as gene technology, should be left to experts. Thus, scientifically based arguments were perceived as the most valid.

Risks and possibilities

An analysis of the focus group data collected in the seven countries demonstrated that risk arguments outweighed arguments pinpointing possible benefits. This pattern was, for instance, displayed in the Swedish data, where every time someone suggested a possible benefit, counter-arguments were voiced, emphasising dimensions of risk.

Risks perceived by the focus group participants could be divided into the following four types of arguments: ethical concerns, emotional resistance, health concerns and environmental risks. The ethical concerns related, for instance, to the perceived unnaturalness of gene technology, which was discussed in the British, Dutch, Slovenian and Swedish focus groups. Those who perceived gene technology as unnatural made a clear distinction between gene technology and traditional breeding: gene technology was described as an activity in which humans "meddle" with natural processes. In addition, participants in the Greek and Swedish groups expressed their moral concerns about the risk that large companies may exploit local people in poor countries, with people becoming dependent upon multinational enterprises. In the British and Dutch focus groups, participants explicitly voiced emotional resistance to GM-products, claiming that they had an "uneasy feeling" about them. Such emotional resistance may also underlie the argument that gene technology is "unnatural".

Arguments related to health risks encompassed, for example, fear of increasing food allergies and of serious diseases such as cancer. This fear was based on the argument that the effects of gene technology are difficult to foresee and that there is still not enough experience and evidence to claim that GM-foods are safe for health. Finally, the risk of unforeseeable negative consequences for the environment was discussed in all countries. Thus, participants were concerned about pest resistance and dispersal of GMOs in "natural habitats" and to conventional crops.

Advantages of biotechnology were discussed only in the British, Dutch, Greek, Spanish and Swedish data, where the main advantage was related to the possibility of producing more crops to reduce famine and secure the livelihood of a growing world population. This argument was sometimes based in a discussion about ways of adapting to global climate change; hence the possibility was suggested of producing drought-resistant crops.

Nevertheless, in the discussions about famine reduction it was obvious that participants, while seeing advantages on a global level, were sceptical about advantages locally. This could be interpreted as a kind of NIMBY ("not in my backyard") reaction, where risks could be accepted if they were located somewhere distant but not close to home. On the global scale, participants could sometimes see the benefits of gene technology overriding health and environmental risks.

Willingness-to-buy

Even though risk arguments remained prevalent in the focus group discussions, there were some arguments put forth to why GM-foods could still be considered an option. In Sweden and the United Kingdom, some participants stated that if GM-foods could become a tool for reducing starvation, they would be morally acceptable. Consumers in the rich parts of the world might thus possibly consider buying GM-products as an act of solidarity. Price was also mentioned as an important factor in the Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish data, even though low price alone seemed not to be a sufficient condition. Furthermore, participants in Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom pinpointed health benefits as preconditions for purchasing GM-food products. Benefits of GM-products to the environment were discussed in the British and Swedish focus groups but received mixed responses. A counter-argument was raised that it is more environmentally friendly to produce organic crops than to use gene technology.

Discussion

In the European debate, gene technology in relation to food production has long been framed as an issue of risk (19-23). The academic discussion about social aspects of GM-foods has departed from the sociological discussion about "risk society" (24), where "risk is a statement about how we want to live, our relations to nature and the standards we are prepared to tolerate as rights-bearing citizens" (3, page 287).

In comparing our focus group results to earlier studies of the public understanding of genetically modified food (e.g. 3-7), we find many similarities. In the present study, it was evident that risk arguments were still prevalent in the discussions about GM-foods. For the most part, risks outweighed possible benefits in the focus group participants' argumentation. In scrutinizing the arguments put forth in the focus groups, we interpret them as resting upon some implicit assumptions which seem to have remained relatively stable even though media attention and public debate on GM-foods was much louder a few years ago. First, the argument that gene technology in food production brings about moral concerns rests upon the premise that nature is inherently good. Consequently, if gene technology was regarded as "unnatural" it was also conceived of as non-acceptable. Second, the "feeling of unease" expressed by some focus group participants could be interpreted as one example of how emotional considerations take precedence of rational calculation of risks and benefits. Regardless of whether GM-foods are proven safe for health or for the environment, people remain sceptical because of emotional unease. Third, some parts of the argumentation rested upon the assumption that it is important to have control. Considerations about health and environmental impacts were based on fear of unknown negative consequences. In this respect, gene technology was regarded as having an inherent power that would be dangerous if released, potentially bringing about irreversible damage to the environment and human health. Furthermore, control was also emphasised on an individual level, in that there was a strong emphasis on the importance of labelling GM-food.

The differences from earlier studies lie mainly in the current low awareness of and interest in GM issues. GM-foods seem to have been more clearly on the agenda of the public debate a few years ago (cf. 25). In contemporary Europe, it seems as though GM issues are currently low among the personal concerns of Europeans and not prominent as part of public debate in Europe (see Chapter 4: "Analysis of the European media"). This is also mirrored in the focus group discussions in which participants repeatedly said that they lacked information about GM issues. It was also evident that gene technology was not considered when the participants discussed factors influencing their purchasing behaviours.

Yet a difference in the public debate is the present emphasis on climate change, which was also clear in our focus groups. One recurrent argument in favour of the development of "green" agribiotechnology was precisely that as a means of adapting to climate impacts, gene technology could contribute to secure the livelihood of a growing world population experiencing increasing vulnerability to extreme weather events, droughts and floods. This observation is consonant with the marked change of public mood in the media and public statements in some of the participating countries in the period during and after the focus group studies (see Chapters 4 and 16).

It is of interest to compare some of our focus group findings with the Eurobarometer results of 2005. In the Eurobarometer survey it was evident that a majority of European consumers did not think that GM-food should be encouraged. It was regarded as non-useful, morally

unacceptable and risky to society (1). These results are mirrored in our focus groups. Nevertheless, among the reasons for buying GM-foods, the most convincing arguments according to the Eurobarometer were related to health benefits and reduction of pesticide residues. As in our focus groups, opinion was split on the environmental benefits of GM-crops. However, the Eurobarometer survey did not include questions related to the acceptability of GM-foods in the light of climate change and overpopulation, issues much discussed in our own focus groups. It is therefore hard to judge whether or not these arguments might already have been important to the respondents in the Eurobarometer survey of 2005, or whether they have been entirely triggered by the current strong media and political attention to climate impacts and measures for control or adaptation.

Conclusions

In sum, our focus groups showed that GM-food is not a topic at the forefront of consumers' minds when discussing food purchasing habits. Labelling was demanded by the participants yet few of them actually looked at the labels when buying food. Sceptical arguments were more dominant than arguments about potential benefits but it seems that, in the future, climate and population restraints to food availability may lead to more accepting attitudes to GM-food.

Would our focus groups buy GM-foods if they were on the shelves in their favourite grocery stores? Maybe or maybe not. Do they actually do so is addressed mainly in Chapters 4 and 6.

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APPENDIX 1: SUGGESTIONS FOR TOPIC GUIDE

- what is important to you when you decide which foodstuff to buy?
- what do you think about when you hear the words “genetically modified food” [or the most frequently used term in the local languages] ?
- have you bought any GM-labelled/non-GM-labelled products? if so, what products?
- are there any circumstances under which you would buy GM-foods? (e.g. if there are added values such as health benefits, environmental benefits, reduced price etc.)*
- what benefits do you find in GM-foods?
- what risks do you see?
- do you read food labels when buying food? why? why not?
- is labelling of GM-/non-GM-products good? why? why not?
- from where do you gain information of GM issues? what sources of information do you consider to be trustworthy?
- how would you describe a person who (a) buys or (b) does not buy GM-food?
- do you want to add anything else?

*These alternatives should not be mentioned until the participants have had a chance themselves to identify added values.