

1 Introduction

What is a focus group? Why do we use them? When should we use them? When should we not? As a reader of this book, you may wish to know the answers to these questions. You are possibly considering using focus groups in a research project.

The primary objective of this book is to assist you in this process from start to finish, that is, from deciding if you should use focus groups all the way to analyzing and storing the data that are eventually generated. Along the way, the book includes examples of published works that have incorporated focus groups into their research design. It also provides practice exercises. By the book's end, you should know if, when, and how to undertake focus groups.

First, though, let us begin with a definition. When you think of focus groups, what comes to mind? Even if you have never participated in one, you can probably imagine what they are like. At the very least, you have likely seen a portrayal of one on TV or at the movies. Fictional examples abound. On *Mad Men*, the advertising company, Sterling Cooper, brings together a set of young women to discuss their daily beauty routines.¹ The HBO series, *Silicon Valley*, includes a focus group in which young adults absolutely skewer the new operating system of the so-called “Hooli Phone.”² The character, Bertie, on the Netflix series, *Love*, uses her skill-set as a focus moderator to snag a guy at a party.³ Focus groups even made an appearance at the 84th Academy Awards, where (mock) footage from a 1920s focus group on *The Wizard of Oz* was released.⁴ The list goes on and on, and includes examples from *The Simpsons* and *Parks and Recreation*, as well as a host of movies, such as *Spinning Boris* (2003) and *Our Brand is Crisis*, both the documentary (2005) and the movie (2015).

These fictional portrayals of focus groups are illuminating. For one, they make it clear what focus groups are. Focus groups bring individuals together to discuss a set of questions. These conversations typically take place around a table, and they include a moderator who guides and nurtures the discussion. The fictional focus groups also typically ask about some sort of product, such

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnOCGrNJSqc (last accessed July 24, 2018).

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx1J3S6vUJ8&app=desktop (last accessed July 24, 2018).

³ Season 1, Episode 4, “Party in the Hills.”

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=eh6mCImeyle (last accessed July 24, 2018).

as beauty cream, a smartphone's operating system, a movie, or a presidential candidate. Individuals provide their honest feedback. The feedback becomes valuable data for the product's owner, who will use the information to improve the product and, hopefully, its reception when the product is finally launched.

As a consumer of these shows, I find these fictional depictions amusing. As a social scientist who uses focus groups regularly in her substantive work, I also tend to find them bemusing. This is because they typically emphasize the use of focus groups as a marketing tool. To be sure, focus groups have a long and storied role in marketing research (see the next section). But when we use focus groups to survey individual opinions on different kinds of products, we under-utilize the very unique strengths that focus groups provide the social science researcher.

Has, then, the fictional portrayal of focus groups been incorrect? Not exactly. Instead, I would argue that it has been incomplete. We typically only see one perspective on how to use focus groups: the marketing perspective. But, as this text hopes to illuminate, focus groups are remarkably versatile. They can be helpful in answering a variety of questions. In most cases, focus groups are useful precisely because they are more than just a space for acquiring multiple individual reactions to a product or question. When it comes to the value of focus groups for the social science researcher, the whole tends to be greater than the sum of its parts.

What, then, is it about focus groups that make them useful for social science researchers? Let us begin, first, with a formal definition of the method. David Morgan, a sociologist with a long history of writing about and working with focus groups, provides a useful definition. A focus group is a "research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1996, 130).

Why is this definition so helpful? First, it is simple and straightforward. Second, it stresses that focus groups are a data collection method, or an approach to gathering data on a topic. They are, in fact, a *qualitative* data collection method. Researchers use focus groups to get at the substance of what people say. This substance is more important than quantifying the data for statistical purposes. Focus groups excel in revealing *what* participants think and *why* they think as they do (Bratton and Liatto-Katundu 1994, 537).

Third, the definition reminds us that, although focus groups generate data through participant discussions, the researcher nonetheless has a role in defining the topics that are discussed. As we will see moving forward, the creation of a question protocol (Chapter 3) and its execution by the focus group moderator (Chapter 4) are key elements in determining whether the method will be successful or not.

Finally, and most importantly, the definition highlights the social and interactive nature of focus groups. In fact, focus groups are one of the few *inherently social* data collection methods that social science researchers have at their disposal. Focus groups create data from the twists and turns of the conversation as it unfolds – what we call an *emic* approach to data creation. Although focus groups are often used to survey multiple individual opinions simultaneously (see, e.g., Cyr 2016), they can and, as we will see, often *should* privilege the social nature of the world around us.

We can build off these points to come to the fundamental premise of what follows in this book: **The advantages of focus groups for the social science researcher are grounded in three interrelated characteristics of the data collection method.** First, focus groups are **social** in form. Second, the data are generated through largely **emic** processes. Finally, focus groups produce data at **three levels of analysis**: the individual, group, and interactive level. Taken together, these three characteristics give the focus group certain competitive advantages over other data collection methods. First, focus groups allow researchers to understand group processes and dynamics. Second, they are quite empowering for focus group participants. As we will see in what follows (this chapter and also Chapter 2), these two advantages allow researchers to address certain questions that may not be feasible via other data collection methods.

Before we get to this point, however, it might be useful to first understand how focus groups have historically been used. As we will see, the three characteristics that this book highlights have not always been considered the method's primary features. Instead, how they have been used has changed fairly dramatically over time.

A Brief History of Focus Groups

The Development and Early Uses of Focus Groups

Sociologists first used focus groups to examine citizen attitudes on US involvement in World War II. These scholars observed a group of individuals watch and then react to a radio morale program that the US government was testing (Merton 1987, 552–553). Following the program, the individuals were asked to share and explain their reactions to it. Focus groups emerged largely in response to the deficiencies that the sociologists identified in that follow-up, group interview. The sociologists eventually published an article (Merton and Kendall 1946) and then a book (Merton et al. 1956) on how properly to use the method.

The sociologists who formalized the so-called ‘focussed [*sic*] interview’⁵ emphasized four key characteristics of the data collection method: (1) non-direction, or openness with respect to the structure of the interview questions; (2) specificity, or the need to elicit precise answers from participants on particular phenomena; (3) range, or the goal of generating as much data as possible; and (4) depth and personal context, or the need to extract as many self-revelatory comments as possible on the material in question (Merton and Kendall 1946, 541–545). Although developed initially by sociologists, focus groups became particularly prominent early on in the field of marketing (Fern 2001, 3; Hollander 2004). There, researchers used focus groups to understand what, if anything, was noteworthy or salient about a particular product (Calder 1977).

Two additional points bear mentioning regarding the development of focus groups as a data collection method. First, focus groups were never envisioned as a stand-alone method. Instead, focus groups were seen as either post-tests for or precursors to quantitative methods. Merton, for example, believed that focus groups should be used to interpret the results of statistical analyses. Focus groups, on their own, lacked “scientific exactitude” (Merton and Kendall 1946, 543); one could glean very little from them without further quantitative testing.

Second, although the term, “focussed interviews,” would eventually give way to focus groups (Merton 1987), there was little in their original conception that involved the group dimension of the data collection method.⁶ Indeed, the World War II tests upon which focus groups were based elicited *individual* reactions to the radio morale programs. Moreover, there was nothing in the method’s four key characteristics that necessitated a group environment. One could achieve non-direction, specificity, range, and personal context without exploiting the conversations and interactions that constitute a focus group. Especially for marketing purposes, where the method gained early prominence, the “group” element of the focus group was secondary to the desire for (individual) reactions to stimuli (Cyr 2016).

The group dimension of the method became more salient with the use of focus groups in clinical psychology, sociology, and socio-psychology. These disciplines engaged in group analysis and therapy (clinical psychology), group dynamics and behavior (sociology), and the effect of these on the individual (socio-psychology) (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 1). For these disciplines, focus groups were more than just a venue for eliciting multiple individual reactions.

⁵ Merton preferred the term ‘focussed interview’ to refer to the data collection method he formalized. Since then, the term ‘focus group’ has become predominant.

⁶ In fact, Merton believed the data collection method could be used for interviews with groups *and also* individuals. By the 1970s, however, books on qualitative methods associated (or, in Merton’s terms, “conflated”) the “focussed interview” of Merton and his colleagues with the focus group (Merton 1987, 563). Any reference to focused interviews with single individuals was lost.

Instead, focus group conversations replicated the social processes that constituted social identities and knowledge (Farnsworth and Boon 2010, 610). Focus groups became a venue for observing those processes in action (Munday 2006, 95). Rather than privilege the individual, the method's *social* nature became increasingly salient.

Focus Groups in the 1990s: A Resurgence

Focus groups eventually “fell out of favor” during the 1960s and 1970s, when experimental and quantitative methods emerged in full force (Stewart et al. 2007, 6). By the early 1990s, however, a renewed interest in qualitative methods sparked a *renaissance* of sorts for focus groups (Hollander 2004, 607). In 1994 alone, focus groups appeared in over one hundred peer-reviewed articles (Liamputtong 2011). This resurgence in the use of focus groups in social science research was accompanied by a proliferation of textbooks and edited volumes that addressed focus groups exclusively (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Morgan 1993; 1996; Krueger and Casey 1994; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999; Bloor et al. 2001; Fern 2001) and in conjunction with other qualitative research methods (e.g., Finch and Lewis 2003).

These works highlighted the important role that focus groups played in providing insights into complex behaviors and emotions (Morgan and Krueger 1993), the exploration of shared experiences and identities (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999), and sensitive topics (Farquhar and Das 1999; Kitzinger 1994, 112; Morgan 1996; Wellings et al. 2000). For these scholars, focus groups were uniquely important because of their inherently social nature. They highlighted the “rich experiential information” generated through focus group interactions (Carey and Smith 1994, 124; see also Smithson 2000) and underscored the potentially wide range of perspectives that focused conversations uncovered (Morgan 1996, 134).

Despite this theoretical focus on the social nature of focus groups, in practice, researchers rarely capitalized on the group and interactive dimensions (Kitzinger 1994). Instead, focus groups were used largely to collect multiple individual reactions simultaneously (Carey and Smith 1994, 125), an approach that, again, had become predominant in marketing (Lezuan 2007, 130; Munday 2006). By the end of the 1990s, the marketing approach to focus groups had become the “accepted norm” in social science research (Liamputtong 2011, 12).

Focus Groups at the Turn of the Century

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the role of focus groups in social science research has been ambiguous. On the one hand, with

technological advancements and the proliferation of internet access, the number of formats for organizing focus groups has increased. No longer limited to the face-to-face format, researchers undertake focus groups over the telephone and online (Gaiser 2008; Smith et al. 2009; Gothberg et al. 2013). The expansion of focus groups venues has made them increasingly accessible for researchers both in terms of their cost and the audience that can be reached.

Still, the use of focus groups in the social sciences, and in sociology and political science in particular, plummeted after its relative peak in the 1990s. In the two most highly ranked journals in each discipline (Gerber and Malhotra 2008), focus groups appeared in less than 1.5 percent of the articles published between 2004 and 2013.⁷ A more inclusive search, in which all sociology and political science journals were included, uncovered a similar proportion of articles (Cyr 2016).

Additionally, of the articles that included focus groups, at least 50 percent of them focused on the individual, rather than the group or interactive, level of analysis. Well into the twenty-first century, in other words, researchers are still de-emphasizing some of the unique dimensions of focus groups as a data collection method. Indeed, what this brief history of focus groups has shown is that certain key characteristics of the focus group method have historically been under-exploited. In particular, researchers tend to privilege the individual level of analysis in their research. Consequently, the focus group's inherently social nature remains under-utilized. As we will see in the chapters that follow, this focus on the individual comes not only at the expense of the types of data generated within the focus group setting. It can also threaten the validity and the reliability of the data analysis.

An Agenda Moving Forward

Despite the apparent decrease, after the 1990s, in the use of focus groups in the social sciences, it is clear that interest in understanding and undertaking focus groups remains high. For one, publications on specific themes associated with the practice and ethics of focus group-based research continued to emerge well into the twenty-first century. These include: an examination of focus group interactions oriented toward the linguistics discipline (Marková 2007); the use of focus groups for approaching sensitive and/or difficult topics, especially in the area of health (Liamputtong 2011); an analysis of focus groups as one determinant of public opinion

⁷ The journals included were *American Political Science Review* (APSR), *American Journal of Political Science* (AJPS), *American Sociological Review* (ASR), and *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS). Focus groups appeared in 0.47 percent of APSR articles; 0.34 percent of AJPS articles; 0.72 percent of ASR articles; and 1.42 percent of ASJ articles (Cyr 2016, 237).

(Myers 2008); and the use of focus groups in cross-cultural and developing country settings (Hennink 2007).

Moreover, my personal interactions with others at academic conferences, invited presentations, and at my home institution confirm that there is strong and widespread interest in undertaking focus groups. Scholars and students alike recognize that focus groups can be useful for addressing certain aspects of their research question. Yet, persistent doubts about *how* to use focus groups with rigor and transparency make them reluctant to use the data collection method.

The primary aim of this text is to make focus groups more accessible in practice for those who wish to use them in their work. It pursues this aim by highlighting three interrelated characteristics of focus groups – characteristics that will help us understand when and how to best take advantage of the data collection method. The next section describes each of these, setting the stage for what follows in the rest of the book.

Three Interrelated Characteristics of Focus Groups: A Basis for Their Use in the Social Sciences

The potential utility of focus groups for a variety of research agendas is well known. Their advantages are multiple. Focus groups are an efficient method for collecting qualitative data with multiple participants. They provide a safe environment for sharing ideas and perspectives on sensitive or difficult topics. Focus groups privilege spontaneity. They represent a space where personal problems can be discussed openly (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009, 2; see also, Morgan 1988; Duggleby 2005; Barbour 2008). Certainly, these are valuable guideposts that signal when focus groups may be an appropriate data collection method. It is difficult, however, to fully comprehend when and why to use focus groups without understanding the methodological foundations that underpin this list.

On this point, this text highlights three interrelated characteristics that help distinguish focus groups methodologically from other data collection methods. These are associated with the focus group structure, process, and the types of the data generated. First, focus groups are inherently **social** in form. Second, focus groups produce data that are **emic** in nature. Third, focus groups generate data at **three levels of analysis**. Each of these attributes may not be unique to focus groups. Taken together, however, they help determine when and how focus groups can be useful for our research. Chapter 2 addresses this point in much greater detail. First, however, we must better understand what each of these characteristics entails.

The Social Form of Focus Groups

Focus group conversations are inherently *social* in their form. Participants are likely to consider the presence of others before they give their opinion. This means that what focus group participants say is subject to the same social pressures that affect individual behavior in the real world. For some, this means that individual participants cannot be treated as independent from one another.⁸ It also makes focus groups uniquely capable of measuring how we gain knowledge on certain phenomena in real life.

To make sense of this, let us consider an example of how meaning can be acquired via social processes. As you know, two political parties currently dominate the party system in the United States: the Republican and Democratic parties. Both parties have a fairly solid set of partisan followers (known as Republicans and Democrats). As ample research has shown (e.g., Green et al. 2002), these partisans have acquired fairly stable group identities based on certain policy preferences. Republicans tend to favor small government and more conservative fiscal and social policy. Democrats, by contrast, tend to support a larger, more active government, particularly when it comes to distributive policy. They also espouse more progressive social policies.

These identities were forged through eminently social processes. Partisans embody certain traits in their everyday activities and conversations (Green et al. 2002, 11). Others recognize these traits across the multiple partisans they encounter. Over time, these traits become descriptive of the partisan in general, helping to produce and reinforce group identity. Consequently, individuals identify as Democrat or Republican through social processes. Party traits and stereotypes are learned via inherently social processes (Ehrlich 1973; Leyens et al. 1994).

From this example on partisan identity we can draw two conclusions. First, it is through our groups (e.g., our family, our friends, our colleagues, our

⁸ On this point there is some debate. Can an individual speak freely in a group setting, such that what she says is unaffected by that group setting? Some scholars find that the social pressures operating within the focus group setting make it very difficult for individuals to speak their mind without being influenced by the group. Consequently, they conclude, we cannot treat the individual responses of participants in a focus group as independent from each other (Carey and Smith 1994; Kidd and Parshall 2000; Schindler 1992; Sim 1998). Others, however, contend that individual opinions are formed as a result of fundamentally social processes. We can, therefore, use the focus group to observe this process of individual opinion formation (Vicsek 2010, 131; see also Kitzinger 1994; 2004; Kosny 2003; Puchta and Potter 2002; Wilkinson 2006). In practice, the individual is treated as an independent unit in many studies that use focus groups (Cyr 2016). There are also certain tricks that the researcher can adopt to measure if these kinds of social pressures are at play (see Chapter 4). Finally, social desirability bias operates in multiple different data collection methods, including interviews and surveys. Given these realities, this text adopts the position that it is possible to measure the individual as an independent level of analysis within the focus group. I return to this point in greater detail later.

bowling or garden clubs, our Facebook community) that *collective* sense of the world is made; that shared meanings are negotiated; and that group identities are forged (Wilkinson 1999, 225). The Democratic party develops a set of constitutive traits – its identity – as a result of the behaviors that Democrats exhibit and the ideas that they espouse. Second, individuals develop *their own* understanding, opinions, and perspectives of the world, as well as their place in it, through social processes (Albrecht et al. 1993, 54). An individual comes to identify (or not) as a Democrat precisely because of what she has learned about Democrats through her conversations with family, friends, colleagues, etc.

Because of their social nature, focus groups replicate these processes. For one, focus groups simulate group dynamics that occur in real life. Researchers can organize focus groups around individuals who share certain traits or experiences (e.g., women, union members, domestic violence victims). These commonalities bind individuals together to form groups in the *sociological* sense, such that “the collectivities are more than simple sums of the individuals who comprise them” (Short 2006, 107). Still, the group dynamic can also develop around quite minimal criteria, such as a common shirt color or the shared experience of participating in a focus group (see, e.g., Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971; Frank and Gilovich 1988). The social nature of focus groups allows researchers to tap into group synergy (Stewart et al. 2009, 594).

Additionally, focus groups replicate the social manner through which *individuals* form their opinions. Focus group participants develop or refine their views in reaction to what other participants say (Farnsworth and Boon 2010, 609). Consequently, practitioners must keep in mind that focus groups are an “exercise in group dynamics” (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 7). The social nature of the group is a factor to consider when deciding if focus groups are useful for a research project.

The social nature of the focus group means that certain topics are not appropriate for study in a focus group setting. For example, a researcher who wishes to obtain individual narratives should probably not adopt focus groups as a data collection strategy. Here, the group setting can be a distraction (Barbour 2008, 18). This is not to say that social processes did not, in some way, affect that individual narrative. Certainly they did! Still, focus groups will make it difficult to access the individual’s story in an uninterrupted fashion.

In many cases, however, the inherently social nature of focus groups, and the group pressures and dynamics therein, are actually vital for understanding the research topic of interest. Consider, for example, the partisan identity example above. The construction of the Democratic identity occurs inter-subjectively, that is, as partisans engage with each other and with non-partisans. How we, as individuals, understand partisanship in the United States tends to be shaped by

how partisans are discussed at our dinner table, in school, in the office, on the television, or in social media.

We can draw a similar conclusion for other concepts, including race, gender, charisma, identity, power, or legitimacy. Our understanding of these phenomena is often highly contextual and acquired via inter-subjective processes, that is, in our interactions with others. For these kinds of socially constructed concepts, focus groups are particularly useful. This is because focus groups replicate the social processes through which meaning is acquired and forged.

Finally, ample research has shown that the social dimension of focus groups can facilitate and ease the discussion of certain, more sensitive topics (see, e.g., Farquhar and Das 1999; Liamputtong 2011). For example, focus groups can be empowering for individuals who suffer from a traumatic illness, such as HIV/AIDS or breast cancer (see, e.g., O'Brien 1993b; Carey 1994). When participating in a focus group with individuals who have shared the same experience, individuals may be more likely to share their own story. Additionally, as Barbour (2008) reminds us, the extent to which a topic is taboo or sensitive will vary by individual. The group setting can assuage feelings of discomfort on the part of some individuals, because others might be willing to open the conversation and, consequently, “break” the taboo (Barbour 2008, 18).

The Emic Nature of the Data Produced

In addition to its social form, focus groups generate data that are *emic* in nature. We typically contrast emic research with etic research. These represent two different ways of studying people. Emic research entails gathering data from the perspective of the subject. The idea behind this kind of data collection is that the researcher draws from the conceptual schemes and categories that the group deems to be meaningful and appropriate (Lett 1990, 130). In other words, researchers learn about a phenomenon via the descriptions offered by a particular group or culture. Emic data privilege the *subject's* viewpoint.

Etic research, by contrast, privileges a set of theories, perspectives, or concepts previously developed within the researcher's discipline. The idea behind this data collection is to measure whether that existing theory or perspective applies to the new group or culture. Here, the *researcher's* perspective on the phenomenon in question, and her hypotheses regarding that phenomenon, are privileged (see, e.g., Krippendorff 2004; Kottak 1996).

In practice, no data are generated via a purely emic or etic approach. Researchers do not (nor should they!) adopt an emic approach to data collection without having some sense of what the existing literature says about the topic in question. Similarly, researchers rarely apply a model or theory to a new group or context without having some knowledge or sense beforehand