

Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher

What is a focus group? Why do we use them? When should we use them? When should we not?

Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher provides a step-by-step guide to undertaking focus groups, whether as a stand-alone method or alongside other qualitative or quantitative methods. It recognizes the challenges that focus groups encounter and provides tips to address them.

The book highlights three unique, interrelated characteristics of focus groups. First, they are inherently social in form. Second, the data emerge organically through conversation; they are emic in nature. Finally, focus groups generate data at three levels of analysis: the individual, group, and interactive level. The book builds from these three characteristics to explain when focus groups can usefully be employed in different research designs. This is an essential text for students and researchers looking for a concise and accessible introduction to this important approach to data collection.

Jennifer Cyr is Associate Professor of Political Science and Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. She published *The Fates of Political Parties: Institutional Crisis, Continuity, and Change in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), and has published in several journals, including *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, and *Sociological Methods and Research*. She is co-founder of the Southwest Workshop on Mixed Methods Research and co-editor of *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*.

Methods for Social Inquiry

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The Methods for Social Inquiry series comprises compact texts offering practical instructions for qualitative and multi-method research. Each book is accompanied by pedagogical data and exercises.

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The books are tightly integrated with digital content and online enhancements through the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR). QDR is a new NSF-funded repository housing digital data used in qualitative and multi-method social inquiry. The pedagogical data (and related documentation) that accompany the books in the series will be housed in QDR.

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Acknowledgements

As with most things early on in academia, my journey to writing this book began with my dissertation. I was studying what we now call party brands in Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela. What came to mind when citizens thought about a political party? Did citizens regularly associate certain attributes to specific parties? Having spent quite a bit of time in each country, I knew that the standard approach to measuring the phenomenon—that of tying a party’s brand to ideology via close-ended questions on a survey—was not quite right. For one, many parties had historically eschewed a consistent ideological position. This was especially the case in Peru.

But that didn’t mean, for example, that Peruvians couldn’t speak about certain parties and assign attributes to them. All you had to do was ask someone on the street about the *Partido Aprista Peruano* (PAP), a party with a storied and controversial past. They certainly had something to say! To me, those opinions mattered. But they weren’t necessarily about ideology, and they couldn’t easily be captured in a survey setting. I turned to focus groups so that I might replicate the many conversations I had with citizens on the ground. I wanted to understand how they talked about different parties and whether those discussions would travel across different settings.

These initial focus groups were difficult to organize—thanks, in no small part, to my own inexperience. But I learned a lot, and I had a lot of fun doing them. In the end, the payoff for all the hard work was quite high: I obtained a lot of useful information and added a new data collection method to my toolkit. I began to think about how I could utilize focus groups in pursuit of my other research interests.

I began to think, too, more systematically about focus groups: what they could give us that other data collections methods could not, how they might be used in conjunction with other methods, and what their (inevitable) weaknesses were. I also wondered why political science, as a discipline, did not utilize them as much as other disciplines. These questions inevitably turned into a research agenda in its own right. I owe a debt of gratitude to many for supporting me as I pursued it.

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And, finally, to my new family: the countless number of cancer fighters and survivors who largely go unnoticed in our daily lives. So many people told me of their experience with cancer once I began to share my diagnosis. As we compared cancer strains, chemotherapy drugs, and stories of recovery, it occurred to me that cancer is everywhere, and yet we speak so little about it. With my diagnosis I have become marked for life—as a cancer fighter, as a (soon-to-be, hopefully) cancer survivor, and as a person who, having survived, will always wonder if it will come back. These are terrible, existential burdens, and we need to share them more with others. And so I dedicate these pages to this large, and largely silent, family of which I am now forever a part. Without your strength and courage I might not have mustered my own strength and courage to move past the illness, resume my daily life, and finish writing this book. Thank you.