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Abstract

Interaction among participants is the fundamental mechanism that generates data in focus groups. Despite calls for ways to analyze interaction in focus groups, there is still an unmet need to develop such tools. We present a coding system to investigate interaction by emphasizing how participants use the substantive aspects of the topics they discuss. We then apply it to the question of how conversations in dyadic interviews (with two participants) compare to discussions in focus groups (with four or more participants). We find that dyadic interviews are more likely to contain explicit connections to the content of the previous speaker's statement, and to generate more statements of agreement, indicating a higher degree of mutual attunement. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of our coding system in one particular context. We conclude by considering both the limitations of this system and the possibilities for extending it in future research.

Keywords

Focus Groups, Dyadic Interviews, Qualitative Data Analysis, Content Analysis, Interaction

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A System for Coding the Interaction in Focus Groups and Dyadic Interviews

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Interaction among participants is the fundamental mechanism that generates data in focus groups. Despite calls for ways to analyze interaction in focus groups, there is still an unmet need to develop such tools. We present a coding system to investigate interaction by emphasizing how participants use the substantive aspects of the topics they discuss. We then apply it to the question of how conversations in dyadic interviews (with two participants) compare to discussions in focus groups (with four or more participants). We find that dyadic interviews are more likely to contain explicit connections to the content of the previous speaker's statement, and to generate more statements of agreement, indicating a higher degree of mutual attunement. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of our coding system in one particular context. We conclude by considering both the limitations of this system and the possibilities for extending it in future research. Keywords: Focus Groups, Dyadic Interviews, Qualitative Data Analysis, Content Analysis, Interaction

Interaction among participants is the fundamental mechanism that generates data in focus groups. Over the past two decades, there have been repeated calls for more attention to interaction in focus groups (Duggleby, 2005; Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998); however, much of this literature calls for paying more attention to including interactive exchanges in the reporting of focus group research. From this perspective, accounts of focus group studies should emphasize interactive ex-changes, since interaction is the source of the data. Yet, as Morgan (2010) notes, "Saying that the interaction in focus groups produces the data is not the same as saying that the interaction itself is the data" (p. 718). Consequently, our objective is not to study interaction in focus groups for its own sake, but to investigate the factors that influence that interaction.

Our starting point is the proposition that whatever affects the nature and quality of inter-action in focus groups is likely to affect the nature and quality of the data itself. Our goal in this article is to develop methods for the study of interaction in focus groups. In particular, we need tools that can systematically investigate the differences between focus groups in terms of how differences in research design lead to differences in interaction. The coding techniques that we introduce are such a tool. As an empirical example, we will compare the interaction in typical focus groups to dyadic interviews, in which there are only two participants. Recently, Morgan (2015) and his colleagues (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013; Morgan, Eliot, Lowe, & Gorman, 2016) have introduced dyadic interviews as something other than just "miniature focus groups." Specifically, these authors claim that the two-person conversations in dyadic interviews are different from the discussions in focus groups, but a detailed specification of those differences is currently missing. The techniques we introduce can address issues such as this.

The next section of the article lays out the general basis for what we call the "co-production of interaction" through a comparison to two previous approaches to interaction

in focus groups: conversation analysis and the co-creation of meaning. This section is followed by a description of our system for coding interaction, as well as the details of how we collected and analyzed the data for our empirical example. Following the results from our comparison of the interaction in focus groups and dyadic interviews, we consider the lessons learned from this work, along with directions for future research.

Background

The approach described in this article borrows from two previous ways of treating interaction in focus groups: conversation analysis (e.g., Myers, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2002, 2004) and the co-creation of meaning (e.g., Wilkinson, 1998). These two approaches each emphasize different aspects of interaction in focus groups, which can be summarized in terms of "how" and "what" (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004; Morgan, 2012; Myers, 2005). On one hand, conversation analysis concentrates on *how* interaction occurs; on the other hand, the co-creation of meaning concentrates on *what* occurs in the content of that interaction. By comparison, our approach, the co-production of interaction, relies on both the processes that determine how interaction occurs in focus groups and the substantive topics that determine what that interaction contains.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis emphasizes the micro-dynamics of interaction, both in general (e.g., Schegloff, 2007) and its application to focus groups (e.g., Myers, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2004). This is apparent in the field's core interest in the concept of *turn taking*, where one speaker's turn at talk is followed by a contribution from another speaker. The result is close attention to relatively short segments of interaction. In addition, conversation analysis avoids explaining what happens in interaction through cognitive concepts, such as attitudes and feelings, and concentrates instead on the processes that govern actions such as turn taking.

The strengths of conversation analysis include its fine-grained examination of how interaction is generated and sustained. This attention to the internal structure of the exchanges between speakers is a hallmark of conversation analysis. Further, the avoidance of speculation about what participants were thinking (i.e., attitudes, etc.) leads to an examination of the text itself, without the need for further assumptions.

In terms of limitations, past uses of conversation analysis have typically treated focus groups as a source of data on interaction, and thus have not compared different approaches to doing focus groups. The question of what difference it makes to do focus groups one way rather than another has not been addressed. One reason for this may be the emphasis in conversation analysis on the structure of micro-processes, such as openings and closings of conversations, so that it is rare to consider a continuing series of exchanges between speakers.

Co-Creation of Meaning

Wilkinson (1998) originally developed the concept of the co-creation of meaning to describe the points in focus groups when participants jointly expressed what was especially important to them. Similarly, Kitzinger and Farquar (1999) pointed to "sensitive moments" in focus groups, when portions of discussion were particularly powerful for the participants. In both cases, the idea is that participants work together to create meaning about the things that are significant to them in the discussion.

The strengths of the co-creation of meaning approach include its recognition of the importance of the topics that make up the discussion. This substantive content is what the

participants use to generate their ongoing interaction. In addition, this recognition is coupled with a sense that not all parts of the discussion are equally meaningful, so that some convey a particular importance.

In terms of limitations, the main problem with the co-creation of meaning approach is its lack of specificity. There are no procedures for determining either when particularly meaningful segments of the discussion occur or how participants go about producing that interaction. This means that the co-creation of meaning is a highly interpretive means of analysis, rather than a well-specified method.

Co-Production of Interaction

The current approach borrows from both conversation analysis and the co-creation of meaning. The main concept that we share with conversation analysis is an emphasis on *how* things get said in terms of turn-taking as a fundamental process. We go beyond traditional conversation analysis, however, by developing a systematic coding system that tracks how each new contribution connects to the discussion. This produces a further divergence from conversation analysis through a reliance on the content of the conversation as a key element in understanding conversational dynamics. Thus, our system codes the transitions between speakers in terms of the continuity or change in the topics they discuss.

What we share with the co-creation of meaning approach is an emphasis on substantive topics as a way to track *what* gets said. Again, we track what participants do to connect each new contribution to the discussion by comparing its content to the content of what was just said. Further, we examine the beginning of each new turn at talk to determine what the participant does to join it to the ongoing discussion. The systematic coding of this interaction is the main way that we depart from the traditional approach to the co-creation of meaning.

We are not claiming that our co-production of interaction approach is superior to either conversation analysis or the co-production of meaning. Instead, we believe that these are three different ways of studying the interaction in focus groups. We can reinforce this point by considering the strengths and limitations of our own approach. Compared to conversation analysis, the strength of the co-production of interaction is its systematic coding of what takes place during turn taking. The corresponding limitation is a failure to examine other aspects of the conversation, beyond transitions between speakers. Compared to the co-creation of meaning, the strength of our approach is its systematic coding of the interaction, but this comes at the cost of less attention to what is most meaningful to the participants.

Research Methods

The basis for our approach to the co-production of interaction is a coding system that systematically labels each transition between speakers in terms of the connection to the content in the previous turn at talk. We began by using a substantive coding system from an earlier examination of focus groups to define the topical content of what each person said. These codes relied on manifest content (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Mayring, 2000), ensuring a minimum of interpretation in applying them. This substantive coding system is presented in the Appendix.

We then examined and coded each transition between speakers. The coding system shown in Table 1 began with a theoretical specification of ideas from Morgan (1997, 2012). In particular, we built on concepts related to “sharing” and “comparing” as basic elements of focus group interaction. We each began by independently applying the preliminary set of codes to a single focus group, and then compared notes to revise the codes. We then applied this updated coding system to a dyadic interview, which led to only minor revisions.

Table 1. Coding System for Transitions Between Speakers

Questions and Answers
- Between moderator and participants
- Among participants

Continuation of Topic Connections
- Implicit continuation—maintains the same topic without saying so
- Explicit continuation—maintains the same topic with an overt statement

Change in Topic (can be implicit or explicit)
- Introduction of new topic—shifts the content of the discussion
- Expansion—shares new aspects of existing topic
- Differentiation—compares different aspects of topics

Interpersonal Connections (always explicit)
- Agreement—reinforcing another participant's statements
- Disagreement—disputing another participant's statements
- Support—sympathizing with another participant's statements

The first set of entries in Table 1 covers questions and answers, which were the most obvious kind of transition between speakers. The next codes are devoted to continuation, which occurs when there is no difference between the topical codes assigned to one speaker and the content of what the previous speaker just said. Thus, when the content does not change between speakers, this generates a transition that is coded as continuation. Note that there are two kinds of continuation: implicit and explicit. With implicit continuation, the transition happens without any mention of the connection to the preceding content. With explicit continuation, the new speaker specifically says something that indicates the continuation with the preceding content. Table 2 illustrates the application of this coding system, which is a segment from a focus group. Here, Person #1 simply adds to the previous person's remarks (not shown) on the subject of workload and time management, so the code is implicit continuation. Next, Person #2 signals a connection to what was just said, generating an explicit continuation, and then Person #4 does the same.

Table 2. Example of Coding System for Transitions

Implicit Continuation Implicit New Topic Workload & time management Positive feelings, school	#1 I think I've become a lot better at handling the frustrations and the stress […] I realized how much I had grown in the last year. I'm able to, yes, this is hard, the day to day kind of stuff sucks, but overall I'm so much more capable of doing the things that need doing.
Explicit Continuation	#2 I had one of those right before this actually. I commute by bike, and I had 10 minutes, I had a 10-minute window, and I looked at my bike and I had a flat tire. What am I going to do, so I literally ran to the Max station and caught it three minutes before it came. I was like I'm going

Workload & time management Positive feelings, school	to make it. Usually I would have been like I'm going to sit at home, but okay, everything is good.
Explicit Continuation	#4 I had one of those before I came too. I decided not to grade all of my papers last night because…

Table 2 also demonstrates a code from the next group, in which Person #1 introduces a new topic by adding content about positive feelings related to school to previous remarks about workload. This happens without any specific reference to this new content, so it is coded as an implicit new topic. Following that, Speakers #2 and #4 continue talking about the joint content, workload and time management plus positive feelings related to school.

In addition to a straightforward introduction of a new topic, there are two other ways that topic shifts can occur. The first of these is *expansion*, which adds new content that is closely related to the previous content. In particular, with the two-level coding system in the Appendix, expansion almost always involves contributing material that would fall under the same larger heading. Morgan (1997, 2012) originally called this kind of interaction "sharing," noting that expansion has the feeling of two turns at talk joined by the conjunction "and." In particular, an explicit expansion would contain a phrase such as "And a different part of that is…" or "Another version of that happens when…" The implicit version of expansion occurs when a person adds a new code that builds on what the previous speaker said, without an overt remark to that effect.

The third code in this set is *differentiation*, which Morgan (1997, 2012) originally called "comparing." As he noted, this process often uses the conjunction "but" to join the new speaker's contribution to what was just said. An explicit differentiation might contain a phrase such as, "But a different way of thinking about it is…" or "Yes, but the other side of that is…" In both of these examples, the second person's response is not so much a disagreement as a demonstration that there are multiple aspects to the current topic.

A full-scale disagreement would fall into the final set of codes in Table 1, which also includes *agreement* and *support*. In our coding system, these codes are always explicit, and thus require clearly positive or negative statements, with support going beyond agreement to include a distinct sense of sympathy. Each of the codes in this section could also be given in combination with other transitions, so beginning a statement with "yes" or "yeah" was treated as an element of agreement, along with any other form of connection to the previous statement. Finally, it was also possible that a single turn could consist of nothing but a statement of agreement, disagreement, or support.

In applying these transition codes, our goal was to do as little interpretation as possible. Thus, unless there was an obvious shift in the substantive coding, we coded the transition as continuation. Further, unless there was some relatively obvious marker, we coded the transition as implicit.

Research Participants

The data come from three dyadic interviews and three focus groups with either four or five participants (for more information on dyadic interviews, see Morgan, 2015; Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013; Morgan, Eliot, Lowe, & Gorman, 2016). The broad topic for

these interviews was "becoming a graduate student," and the participants were all graduate students in the final weeks of their first year of school. The participants were drawn from a wide range of departments in the social sciences and humanities. The group composition was set so that each of the participants in an interview was from a different department. This gave the participants a degree of diversity to explore in each other's experiences and increased their comfort level by avoiding self-disclosure to acquaintances.

Interview Questions

Each interview followed a pre-determined guide, and questions were as close to identical as possible across all groups. The research team had conducted similar interviews in previous years, so it was easy to choose questions that would match the participants' interests. The interviews used a funnel format (Morgan, 1997) that moved from more general, participant-oriented questions to more specific, researcher-defined questions. The opening questions asked how the participants became interested in graduate school and how they chose the particular program in which they were enrolled, as well as what their first year of school had been like. The more specific questions matched elements of the substantive coding system in the Appendix, including issues related to life outside graduate school, professors and classes, program requirements, and personal feelings about graduate school. The final question asked about the participants' future plans.

Moderating Strategy

The style of moderating was once again kept as similar as possible across all groups. The approach chosen was a relatively non-directive style with little active probing. The reason for this choice was to emphasize the participants' own guidance of their interaction, since a more moderator-directed style might well have affected the patterns of interaction that we were trying to study. More specifically, the moderator's primary role was to ask questions from the interview guide and let the participants carry things from there. The moderator explained this general format to the participants as part of the initial instructions in order to set appropriate expectations for their active role in sustaining the conversation.

The first author conducted one dyadic interview and one focus group, and the remaining interviews were done by advanced graduate students under his direction. Because the participants themselves were also graduate students, this minimized the degree of difference between the participants and the moderators for most of the groups. For the groups conducted by the Dr. Morgan, the goal of minimizing the moderator's direct involvement had the desired effect of encouraging the participants to interact almost entirely with each other, rather than with the moderator.

Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a professional typist. The transcripts concentrated on the literal content of what was said, and thus ignored expressions such as "um" or "er," but captured shortened forms of agreement such as "yeah" or "OK." The two authors coded each interview separately and then compared their coding and resolved any differences. For the over 800 transitions between speakers, we produced an initial agreement rate of between 80 and 85 percent, which demonstrates the consistency of our coding of this relatively latent (rather than manifest) content (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Mayring, 2000).

We have relied primarily on bar charts for presenting our results, instead of precise numerical tables. We do so because we wish to treat our results in a relatively descriptive sense.

Our goal is to give an overall impression of the differences between focus groups and dyadic interviews, rather than perform statistical tests on data that are derived from small, non-random samples.

Results

Table 3 provides a general overview of the two different types of interviews. On average, the focus groups were about 20 percent longer than the dyadic interviews, corresponding to a difference between approximately 90 minutes and 75 minutes. This difference makes sense, since the focus groups had more people to respond to each question but doubling the size of the groups from two to four did not double the amount of time that it took for the focus group participants to finish their interviews.

Table 3. Overview of Focus Groups and Dyadic Interviews

	Total # of Words	**Transitions**	**Words per Speaker**
FG #1	10,392	110	94
FG #2	9,459	116	82
FG #3	12,159	148	82
Average	**10,670**	**125**	**86**
Dyad #1	12,599	253	50
Dyad #2	6,749	134	50
Dyad #3	6,910	199	35
Average	**8,753**	**195**	**45**

Table 3 also shows that there were notably more transitions between speakers in the dyadic interviews, which, in combination with their shorter total length, meant that the average number of words in each turn at talk was considerably shorter in the dyadic interviews. This provides the first evidence that two-person conversations in dyadic interviews are indeed different from the discussions in focus groups. In particular, the dyadic interviews consist of more exchanges back and forth, in the form of shorter turns at talk. By comparison, each statement in the focus groups tended to be longer, with fewer exchanges between participants.

Table 3 also indicates differences within the two categories of interviews. This is particularly notable for the first dyadic interview, which is also twice as long as the others. Examination of that interview suggests that these two participants may simply have had a greater degree of affinity with each other, such that they each had more to say to the other, resulting in a longer interview. To make sure that this relatively unusual interview did not have an undue influence on our overall results, we considered its role in each of the findings that we report below and found that it did not change any of the results.

Figure 1 reports our first look at transitions between speakers. The initial results on the left side of the figure examine whether we applied our moderating strategy consistently between the two types of interviews. Our success in this regard is not perfect, since 7 percent of the transitions in the focus groups resulted from the moderator asking a question, whereas 11 percent of the transitions in the dyadic interviews were due to the moderator's questions. This indicates a somewhat active moderating style in the dyadic interviews.

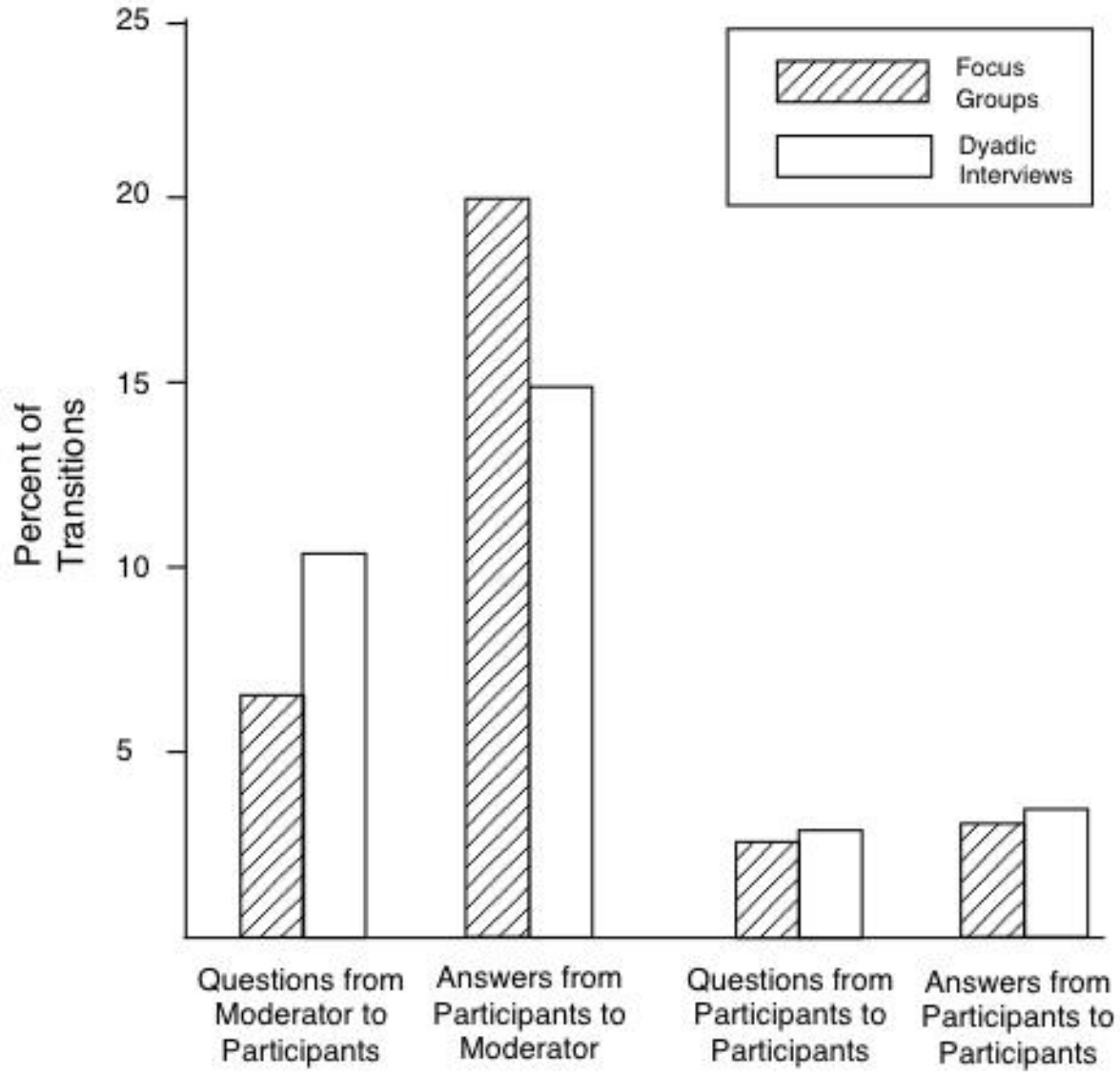

Figure 1. Question and Answer Transitions

The next comparison in Figure 1 shows more responses from focus group participants to the moderator's questions (20% versus 15%), which is reasonable because there are more people available to provide an answer in each focus group. Note, however, that the rate at which participants respond to the moderator's questions is nowhere near a four-to-one or one-to-one ratio. This is because the participants quickly shift from answering directly to building on each other's comments.

The right half of Figure 1 compares questions and answers between the participants, and it shows very little difference between the two types of interviews. In all cases, less than five percent of the transitions between speakers were devoted to either asking or answering questions from other participants.

The first two comparisons in Figure 2 deal with continuations, where a new speaker's comments generate the same substantive codes as the previous speaker's comments. There is a notable difference between the focus groups and the dyadic interviews, starting with more reliance on implicit continuation in the focus groups (23 versus 15 percent), which is matched by more use of explicit continuation in the dyadic interviews (10 versus 19 percent). This shift

between implicit and explicit continuation is not in any way compelled by the nature of the data, since any participant is free to make their transition in any number of ways, so making more implicit transitions in the focus groups is not directly tied to making fewer explicit transitions. Instead, these are two related indicators of the same tendency, where the tendency in one direction does not force the tendency in the other direction.

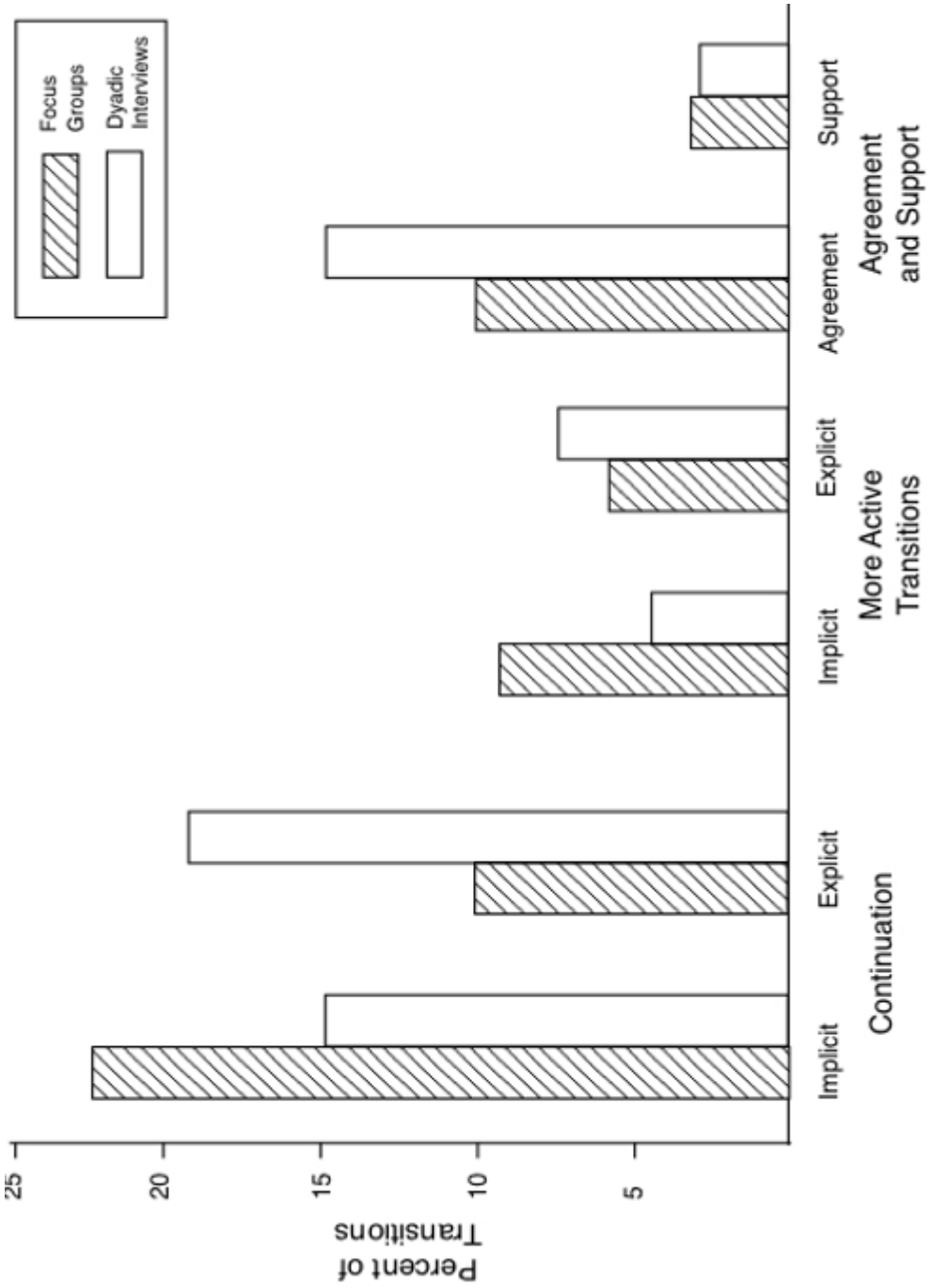

Figure 2. Continuation, More Active Transitions, Agreement, and Support

The middle set of columns in Figure 2 compare the three more active forms of transitions (introduction of new topics, expansion, and differentiation). The reason for combining these codes was the relative rarity of each one separately. Even in combination, the implicit and explicit versions of these codes make up less than 10 percent of the transitions. These more active connections show a weaker version of the same pattern visible in

continuation, with more frequent use of implicit connections in the focus groups, as opposed to a higher percentage of explicit transitions in the dyadic interviews.

Finally, Figure 2 shows the occurrence of agreement and support. In this case, there is somewhat less use of agreement during the transitions in the focus groups than in the dyadic interviews (10 versus 15 percent). By comparison, there is no difference in support. In addition, there were no instances of disagreement in any of the interviews, which makes sense, given the non-controversial nature of the topic.

In summary, the clearest differences between the focus groups and the dyadic interviews were in the statements that continued the content of the previous speaker's remarks. In the focus groups, these continuations were more likely be done in an implicit fashion, as opposed to the explicit linking that was more likely to occur in dyadic interviews. This indicates that the participants in dyadic interviews were more likely to acknowledge the connection between what they said and what the previous speaker had said. This same pattern was also found to a lesser degree in the more active forms of transitions, and it also corresponds to the tendency for participants in dyadic interviews to indicate explicit agreement with what the previous speaker said. Combining these patterns with the earlier indication that dyadic interviews tend to consist of more and briefer turns at talk provides evidence that those two-person conversations may indeed be different from the discussions in focus groups.

Discussion

Under the heading of limitations, it is important to see the present comparison of dyadic interviews and focus groups as preliminary rather than definitive. In particular, a total of six interviews on a single topic is only a starting point for the comparison of these two methods. It is thus best to see our empirical example as a proof of concept for our coding system, rather than a final judgment on the differences between the conversations in dyadic interactions and the discussions in focus groups.

With regard to the coding system itself, once again, a single study is not enough to guarantee its value. Consequently, we will propose a number of potential topics for future research, any of which could be used to assess the effectiveness of our approach. One way to extend the test of the current system would be to apply it to topics that are systematically different from this illustrative data. One possibility would be more active discussions than the notably orderly exchanges that characterized these interactions. For example, it could be examined with more controversial topics, and especially those that require managing disagreement. Along the same lines, it would be interesting to look at more sensitive topics, which might well generate a different interactive dynamic.

Another area for future research would involve tracking the interaction styles associated with different formats for interview guides. In this illustrative data, the interview followed a classic funnel format, and Morgan (2012) has speculated that this interview technique may prematurely truncate the participants' ability to develop their own style of interaction, due to the way that it replaces the participants' interests with moderator-directed topics. As an alternative, he suggests that a so-called reverse funnel may produce a different developmental pattern in the interaction, because it allows the participants to move from more specific to more general topics. As in the example study here, the design would compare two sets of interviews on the same topic, one based on a funnel format and the other on a reverse funnel.

A different suggestion for future research with this coding system is to compare different moderator styles (see Myers, 2007 for a system to code moderators' actions). As noted earlier, the moderators in these interviews used a less directive style with a relatively low level of activity by each moderator. Other styles of moderating assign a much more active role to

the interviewer, and it would be interesting to see how this affects the dynamics among the participants.

Pointing to differences in moderating styles also suggests ways in which our coding system could be extended, since the current version pays little attention to the variety of actions that the moderator might take. This leaves room to develop a more detailed repertoire of moderator actions. In general, we think of our coding system as open to revision, and further attention to the moderator's actions is just one possible direction.

Our final suggestion for future research returns to our initial comparison of the co-production of interaction to the two additional traditions related to conversation analysis and the co-creation of meaning. Meyers' work on moderation (2007) suggests that it may be possible to derive concrete coding systems from the conversation analysis approach. Unfortunately, no similar applications of coding are currently associated the co-creation of meaning approach. It is our hope that the current demonstration of one coding system for interaction among participants will encourage similar work in each of those other traditions.

Overall, we believe that further work with this approach to analyzing interaction in focus groups could apply to many claims that differences in research design lead to differences in interaction. Differences in the kind of topics being discussed, the kind of interview guide, or the kind of moderating style are all examples of how the nature of the focus groups could affect the nature of the interactions in those groups. This information can be helpful to researchers as they make decisions about the design of their focus groups.

Conclusions

Our overall goal in this article has been to create tools to support a methodological research program on interaction in focus groups. Remember, however, that the goal is not just to study interaction for its own sake. Instead, the point is to understand what difference it would make to conduct focus groups one way rather than another.

A fundamental task in research design for any method is to understand what the options are and how to evaluate those options, in order to make appropriate decisions for a given study. Currently, there is a great deal of advice about how to choose between options when doing focus groups, but most of that advice is based on broad summaries of prior experience. Rather than relying on informed speculation, our preferred approach is research-based—not just with regard to interaction in focus groups, but anything else that might affect the quality of the data that this method produces. We hope that what we have accomplished here is a step in that direction.

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Appendix

Substantive Coding System

Life Outside of School
- Changes outside school
  - Example: Moving, dealing with new environment, building new relationships
- Combining school and life
  - Example: Working outside school, managing existing relationships, commuting
- Financial issues

School-Related Issues
- Transitions to graduate school
  - Example: Comparisons to undergraduate, finding or choosing graduate school
- Workload & time management
  - Use only for school-related issues, but not "combining school with life outside"
- Professors & classes
  - Example: Relationships with professors, advisors, specific classes
- Department & program issues
  - Example: Requirements, thesis topic, how TA-RA assignments are made
- University level issues
  - Example: Non-departmental financial aid
- Other students, cohort
  - Example: People who are in the same program, people who are the same year

Feelings, Emotions, and Personal Reactions
- Positive feelings, non-school
- Negative feelings, non-school
- Positive feelings, school

Negative feelings, school
Plans after Graduation
Job or school plans
Example: Choosing job or career, choosing place to work, deciding to get PhD
Non-job or school plans
Example: Starting a family

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