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Issues in the Analysis of Focus Groups: Generalisability, Quantifiability, Treatment of Context and Quotations

Lilla Vicsek

Corvinus University of Budapest, lilla.vicsek@uni-corvinus.hu

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss some concerns related to the analysis of focus groups: (a) the issue of generalisation; (b) the problems of using numbers and quantifying in the analysis; (c) how the concrete situation of the focus groups could be included in the analysis, and (d) what formats can be used when quoting from focus groups. Problems with respect to generalisation are discussed; types of generalisation are presented which can be used in focus group research. Arguments are made against using a primarily quantitative perspective in the evaluation of focus group data. It is argued that the situation of the particular group discussion should be taken into account in the analysis. A scheme for analysis that has been developed by the author is presented. Suggestions are made for the characteristics of the quotations in the analyses.

Keywords

Focus Group, Analysis, Methodology, Generalisation, Quantifiability, Quotations, and Context

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Issues in the Analysis of Focus Groups: Generalisability, Quantifiability, Treatment of Context and Quotations

Lilla Vicsek¹

Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

In this paper I discuss some concerns related to the analysis of focus groups: (a) the issue of generalisation; (b) the problems of using numbers and quantifying in the analysis; (c) how the concrete situation of the focus groups could be included in the analysis, and (d) what formats can be used when quoting from focus groups. Problems with respect to generalisation are discussed; types of generalisation are presented which can be used in focus group research. Arguments are made against using a primarily quantitative perspective in the evaluation of focus group data. It is argued that the situation of the particular group discussion should be taken into account in the analysis. A scheme for analysis that has been developed by the author is presented. Suggestions are made for the characteristics of the quotations in the analyses. Key Words: Focus Group, Analysis, Methodology, Generalisation, Quantifiability, Quotations, and Context

Introduction

When I started doing focus group research more than a decade ago, I faced difficulties with respect to analysis. I found there was ample literature on the organization and execution of focus groups, but literature on focus group analysis was scant. Furthermore, I was dissatisfied with the suggestions given in the literature. I had to develop my own answers, drawing on non-focus group methodological literature, and my experiences with focus groups. Years later, I find that in spite of the fact that there is a growing number of publications dealing with the analysis of focus groups², still many open questions remain and many issues are not elaborated to a satisfactory degree within the focus group literature. This article is an attempt to fill some parts of this gap.

In this article I address some issues in connection with the analysis of focus groups³. Can we generalise focus group results? Should numbers or quantification be used in the evaluation? Should the situation of the group discussions be included in the analysis and if yes, then how? What formats can be used when quoting from focus groups?

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² There are several articles discussing the issue of analysis (for example Carey, 1995; Carey & Smith, 1994; Catteral & Maclaran, 1997; Duggleby, 2005; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 2004; Rabiee, 2004; Smithson, 2000; Stockdale, 2002; Vicsek, 2007; Wilkinson, 2006). There are also several textbooks that are available as well which touch upon the issue, although textbooks often lay less emphasis on evaluating the results, than on the description of planning and conducting the groups (Barbour, 2008; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2002; Edmunds, 1999; Fern, 2001; Krueger, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003; Morgan, 1993, 1997; Sim, 1998; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2006; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

³ I define focus groups as a method in which data are generated by the research participants, who collectively communicate on a given theme. I have intentionally indicated collective communication as a criterion rather than oral discussion because I include computer mediated groups under focus groups (Vicsek, 2006).

My goal was to present a comprehensive view on these key analytical issues to which those planning to conduct focus group research can turn. Some of these issues are discussed in the focus group literature here and there, but there is no source which discusses all these issues together in one writing, and in sufficient depth. If focus group writings touch upon these issues, they are rarely elaborated upon (except for the topic of group context) and there are gaps which I felt needed to be discussed. Some of these issues are discussed amply (e.g., generalisation), not within focus groups, but within general quantitative and qualitative methods literature. I felt it was important to discuss these in connection with focus groups and to include new ideas which I could present (e.g., existence generalisation, etc). Out of the issues which are the topics of this article, the treatment of the group situation is the primary issue discussed within the focus group literature. There are more and more articles (Carey & Smith, 1994; Catteral & Maclaran, 1997; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994, 2004; Puchta & Potter, 2002; Schindler, 1992; Sim, 1998; Smithson, 2000; Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b, 2006) which call attention to the fact that the context of the group should be included in the focus group analysis. In some of these writings advice can be found on how to incorporate the situation of the group into the analysis, but these suggestions are either too general without specifying a concrete method, or only appropriate for certain research goals and theoretical perspectives and only consider a limited array of situational factors. In the article I discuss a scheme I developed for including characteristics of the concrete situation in the analysis which can be utilized for research projects in which group phenomena is not a central research question.

Those conducting focus group research come from different research traditions, paradigms, diverse disciplines and have different goals with their groups (academic, applied), and have varying levels of experience as researchers. This paper was written with all kind of focus group researchers in mind. Some of the details discussed might be only new for beginning researchers/students (e.g., ways of confidentiality protection in the analysis), but I felt I needed to put them here to make a more complete discussion of each issue. My hope is that even advanced focus group researchers will find new ideas in this paper.

In the following I present my own approach as well as different arguments and various methods put forward by others for each investigated issue. Examples are drawn from my research to illustrate some of the points.

Generalisation

Following Smaling (2003) I regard generalisability as the question to consider: "When persons, groups, organisations, situations, social processes, aid programs, et cetera have been researched, do the results and conclusions of this research also hold for other persons, groups, organizations et cetera, as with those that were the object of the research?" (Smaling, p. 2). This is a very wide definition, and it includes under generalisation the traditional quantitative notion, as well as associated qualitative concepts.

One of the limits of generalisation with focus groups is that the method of asking questions is not standardised and thus it might differ according to the individual situation. In different groups the discussion might go in different directions. It is possible that in one group somebody throws in an aspect of the issue which is then discussed, while in another group this subject does not surface, although it is equally relevant for members of both groups. The group situation, group dynamics, and the group composition can also influence what the participants say during the different discussions (Sim, 1998). It is possible that the same person would have said something different in a group having a different composition, perhaps in order to avoid a conflict with others. It is possible that people might be convinced by the argumentation of others in the group and as a result might change their opinion.

Therefore, if we would have had different group compositions, our results might have been different as well. This raises the issue of the limits of generalisation beyond a specific group situation.

There is also the question of what we want to generalise based on these groups: individual opinions present in the population, group phenomena, or the relationship between the individual and the group? In the case of the first objective which is very common in focus group research, it is a problem that people have not been interviewed individually. If we assume that group dynamics did not have a great effect on our results, then we might try to create a generalisation about individual opinions. This, however, carries a certain risk, because we might be wrong, maybe group phenomena did play a role.

Statistical generalisation

I think it would be fruitful if we differentiated between different types of generalisation. In the following I briefly describe some generalisation types while comparing their usefulness. The first type (statistical generalisation) is inappropriate for small sample research and some of the rest contain risk of error.

Firstly, there is what Smaling (2003) calls statistical generalisation. The condition for this type of generalisation is a statistically representative sample. Thus, we need a large sample taken from the population using a probability-centred sampling procedure. Then on the basis of the sample we can draw conclusions regarding the wider target population having a pre-determined high probability (close to one). It is not appropriate to apply statistical generalisation on our focus group results. Besides the reasons mentioned earlier, another reason for this is that in the case of focus groups the criterion of a statistical sample representative of a larger target population is basically never met. This is because in most cases these are small samples whose participants are not always chosen randomly. Moreover, those who actually agree to join the focus group can be considered as “special people” because they undertake to participate in a group discussion on a particular subject and are even willing to travel for this purpose (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Incentives and a comfortable location may help in attracting to the focus groups participants who are interested in the subject, like to talk and can spend time discussing it. Nevertheless, there will always be people who cannot ever be convinced to participate. This is a limitation of the samples of focus group researches, as these people who do not participate might hold special perspectives.

The statistical generalisation concept originates from the quantitative tradition. I find it useful, following the advice of some qualitative researchers, to apply a wider generalisation concept than this (Gobo, 2004; Sharp, 1998; Sim, 1998; Smaling, 2003)⁴. There are varieties of generalisation which can be used in small sample focus group research always taking into consideration the limits mentioned earlier.

⁴ Some of these researchers speak out against a statistical generalisation. They believe that real representativity cannot be achieved in practice even in the case of research based on questionnaires (partly because the sample would have to be representative for all the variables examined), and that this kind of approach involves an excessively atomistic concept of society, because the sample is composed of individuals (Gobo, 2004).

Tentative incidence generalisation

Another type of generalisation which can sometimes be observed to be done on focus group results is what I call tentative incidence generalisation⁵. In the case of tentative incidence generalisation, when one finds that certain perspectives or aspects are common to the research subjects belonging to a particular social category in small sample research, one infers from it, that it is likely that not just members of the sample, but others belonging to the target population – consisting of people of the same social category – might share similar views. Arguments in this case are not based on statistics and we cannot set a probability rate for the correctness of our generalisation. This form of extrapolation can be considered at most as a hypothesis and not a final conclusion. Moreover, I find it important to emphasize that tentative incident generalisation is only applicable if certain conditions are fulfilled (for example for the selection of participants) and even then this kind of generalisation is very risky and should be treated with caution.

The confidence with which we can make tentative incidence generalisation depends on the similarities and differences found in our results across the groups (Knodel, 1993). If similar views were expressed across focus groups, even though there were differences between the composition of the groups in terms of social-demographic characteristics and in conducting the sessions, then Knodel claims that “it is likely that views or experiences are being tapped that are common to a shared underlying culture within the broader population” (p. 49). However, if we find for example that our focus groups with elderly people gave other results than our focus groups with young people, it is difficult to tell whether this difference can be attributed to the different age of the participants or whether it is due to the different course of the sessions, the particularities of the concrete situation (especially if we have not conducted many focus groups with both young and old people – which is often the case). I find Knodel’s ideas worth consideration, but even in the case of similar results of the groups, I think it is important to emphasise the tentative and provisional nature of such results. Although this kind of generalisation may be applied in the case of focus groups, the risks it contains must not be forgotten. This kind of generalisation is also the closest to the quantitative logic. There are qualitative researchers who prefer other kinds of generalisation, use other concepts of generalisation in case of qualitative research, arguing for example, for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or for theoretical generalisation (Sharp 1998).

I employed tentative incidence generalisation in the research examining feelings of insecurity in Hungary (Vicsek, 2004b) drawing on Knodel’s (1993) argumentation. Each focus group in the research consisted of participants coming from a certain section of the Hungarian population. There were great differences among the composition of the groups: some groups were held in the capital, some in middle-size cities, some in villages, some groups took place with employees, some with pensioners, whilst others with entrepreneurs, with those highly educated or those with a low educational level. Despite this, similar reports on the topic of insecurity could be observed across the groups. Thus, after presenting the results in a study, I concluded: “We do not of course argue that our focus group results are statistically representative. However, the fact that there were strong convergences among many of the groups and similar clusters of opinion appeared again and again in the groups,

⁵ I coined the term as I found no term describing this kind of generalisation. Sim (1998) writes about different degrees of generalisation with a similar argument that I apply here: “It would seem reasonable to infer from the fact that a group of brain-injured clients share certain perspectives and find certain aspects of their lives problematic, that other such individuals are likely to have the same or similar perceptions and experiences.” The difference is that he does not clarify whether he regards the first group of people to be a sub-sample of a larger target population, or not. Thus, it is not clear, if he wants to make inferences from few cases to many cases, or whether he wants to make inferences from few cases to other few cases (in which latter case his concept can be similar to transferability).

supports the assumption that the results have significance⁶ beyond their particular situated location” (Vicsek, 2004b, p. 307).

Variation-based generalisation

One type of the broad concept of generalisation is the variation-based generalisation (Smaling, 2003). When applying this type of generalisation a researcher wishes to reveal all the versions of a specific phenomenon. The underlying assumption of this generalisation is that based on the variations observed in the sample, we are able to make a generalisation about the variations present in the population. There are researchers who emphasise, also in connection with focus groups, that with this method it is possible to reveal diversity in the population (Puchta & Potter, 2004). For example, Bers as cited in Puchta and Potter (2004), states that through focus groups we can make generalisations about the larger population regarding what different dimensions certain attitudes might have. Puchta and Potter (2004) highlight that focus groups can reveal a wide scope of concerns, approaches, and dimensions, and the existence of these dimensions can be generalised for the population in question. However, they argue that focus groups cannot provide data about the incidence of those phenomena in a large population.

It seems to me important to add a limitation to these statements. Applying variance-based generalisation carries some risks: we can never state with full confidence that we were able to reveal the complete set of phenomena. We might try to organise the groups so that the widest possible range of opinions and experiences is revealed in the course of the research (for example by employing certain sampling and questioning strategies), but still there might be opinions/experiences, which are not voiced in our sample, which exist amongst the population.

Existence generalisation

A safer alternative is what I call existence generalisation⁷: here we simply generalise the existence of a certain response, but not its distribution, and we do not claim that this is the whole range of responses. Thus, we draw conclusions about dimensions, concepts, approaches, and mechanisms potentially present in the target population, but we do not claim that other dimensions and approaches do not exist. With the help of focus groups we show which processes, reasons, and mechanisms may explain a phenomenon, but our argumentation is that what we demonstrate is only one possible scenario.

Tentative incidence generalisation or variance-based generalisation might seem to be offering more than this type (indeed some people might argue that existence generalisation is not really generalisation). However, these two former types carry higher risk. And I am of the opinion that even existence generalisation can produce useful information for focus group researchers. I found a good example of this when I was doing the already mentioned research on feelings of uncertainty in Hungary (Vicsek, 2004b, 2005). I found in the case of questionnaires used in a country-wide sample consistent occurrences of people who answered that their future was not foreseeable were at the same time also claiming to be afraid of the future. There were also some survey respondents who indicated that, although they do not know what the future will bring, they are not afraid of it at all. I experienced such opinions in the focus groups of the research as well:

⁶ Of course the term significance here is not meant in the statistical sense, just in the sense of relevance.

⁷ McQuarrie and McIntyre (cited in Fern, 2001, p. 125) have used this term in a different sense when they differentiated between incidence generalisation and existence generalisation in their 1988 paper .

Ellen: I have no fear at all.

Moderator: Because you said the future is unpredictable. But this does not cause fear.

Ellen: But it's no problem... But exactly the fun is, you understand, that basically your life's every aspect is an uncertainty factor,

Ann: Yes, but...

Ellen: One learns to live with these, because what should I be nervous about this?

Ann: But after a while you are not nervous anymore.

(...)

Ellen: I have no fears, because I know what I am worth, I know that I am doing well, what I do, I know, that if not here, then there, I know that I will make money even there, if it's needed even at the 72nd place.

(Female managers focus group – Uncertainty and Insecurity Research Project)

(Vicsek, 2005, p. 111)

Ellen mentioned that she did not know what to expect from the future but she was not worried. She felt no matter what happens she will be able to get on successfully. Due to her greater self-confidence, there actually was a kind of certainty in her vision of the future that she would be in a good position. I have argued that this case illustrates the types of opinions which may be behind the results of those survey responses in which respondents claimed not to be afraid of the future, whilst seeing it as unpredictable. It is evident that the case shown is just an example and for some people there might be other mechanisms. I still believe that the existence generalisation that can be made from this result is valuable.

Another fruitful use of existence generalisation is the detection of mistakes. In research on the reception of a film on sexual harassment, some focus group members told me that the film should contain addresses of organisations where victims could turn for help. This showed that they did not notice that at the end of the film, after the list of contributors there was actually a list of such organisations! Now, this is very valuable information! Based on this we cannot tell what percentage of the population will have the same problem with the film, but it raises an issue which might be a problem for at least some people. It is also relatively easy to correct this mistake.

Theoretical generalisation

Another form of generalisation is theoretical generalisation. Sim (1998) and Sharp (1998) define this type in different ways, though both types can be used in focus group research. Sim states that we can talk about theoretical generalisation if, based on the data of research, we make theoretical statements characterised by a level of universality. This universality enables us to apply it to other situations, which are similar to the original either from a theoretical or a logical point of view. In this case, the researcher draws a conclusion based on the logical and theoretical similarities between the originally examined situation and another situation in a way that the theoretical insights can be projected onto the new situation as well. Fern (2001) mentions an interesting example of theoretical generalisation. Many researchers believe that the theories of social psychology concerning group processes can be applied to focus groups as well. Behind this lies the presumption that, although there are several empirical characteristics in which focus groups may differ from the small groups that were the subject of research exploring social psychological group dynamics, these differences have no significance from a theoretical point of view.

Sharp (1998) approaches the question from a different angle. He emphasises that, in the case of a statistical generalisation, we can only make a generalisation about the pattern and empirical co-occurrence of the variables. But quantitative surveys cannot provide an answer to the question as to what explains connections observed between the variables. He cites an example of this: if during questionnaire research it turns out that there is a correlation (empirical co-occurrence) between belonging to a class of society and health, then the empirical co-occurrence can be generalised for the population as well. However, the data do not show why this connection exists. There are several theoretical explanations in existence, which try to explain the relationship. Empirical testing is only one aspect, which serves as a basis to decide whether the theoretical explanation can be accepted because it is possible to imagine a situation in which the results are not in contradiction to several theories at the same time. For Sharp, theoretical generalisation means that theoretical explanations answering the “why” question already involve a certain process of generalisation. Nevertheless, in the case of a theoretical explanation, the basis of the generalisation is not the representativity of the sample, but the fact that we discovered a general principle about a phenomenon. He argues that case-studies, or other small-scale, in-depth research can be fruitful sources for generating theories, thus theoretical generalisations can be made with these methods.

Analogical generalisation, transferability

There is a kind of generalisation applied by qualitative researchers in which they want to reach a conclusion based on a particular observed case about another specific case, or they want to generalise from a small set of cases to another small set of cases (Baskerville, 1996; Smaling, 2003). For example, there are two companies and we want to know whether a method of organising work which was useful for one, could be successful for the other company as well. In such a case we can turn to analogical generalisation. We compare two things; we try to see to what extent they have relevant similar characteristics and, based on those, we decide whether our results concerning the first are applicable to the second with regard to a characteristic that was not examined in the second case. Smaling names six criteria which can be used to determine whether the analogical reasoning is plausible (such as: the two compared cases have more similar characteristics than differing characteristics; the similarity of the cases is supported by empirical data or by theories, etc.) This type of generalisation does not operate with quantitative statements concerning probabilities. Analogical generalisations can also be used for focus group research operating with a small number of cases.

A classic concept within the constructivist paradigm is Lincoln and Guba’s transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability can be regarded as “parallel” to (Guba & Lincoln, p. 241) to the traditional positivistic generalisation concept, which involves random samples. Transferability is an “empirical process of checking the similarity between sending and receiving contexts” (Guba & Lincoln, p. 241). Lincoln and Guba emphasize the tentative nature of statements when making inferences from one context to another. In case of transferability the reader of the analysis is the one who is making inferences from Context A to Context B and not the original researcher. Smaling’s (2003) six criteria for plausible analogical reasoning might provide useful ideas when making comparisons between Context A and B. Transferability can be applied to focus group research (Krueger, 1998).

The Quantifiability of Results

For the most part, focus group analyses do not use numbers. Many focus group experts believe it is not appropriate to make an analysis based on numbers, or at least it is not very useful (Asbury, 1995; Barbour, 2005; Carey, 1995; Edmunds, 1999; Sim, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998b). There are, however, some focus group researchers who say that when analysing group interviews it is all right to make certain types of numerical analysis on the transcripts (Allen & Maybin, 2004; Fern, 2001; Millward as cited in Dickson, Rainey, & Hargie 2003; Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). There are researchers who do quantitative content analysis, analysing the frequency of the occurrence of certain phrases (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Some experts of marketing and economy apply a more complicated statistical analysis in the evaluation of focus groups. Schmidt (2001), besides examining frequency, recommends a factorial analysis and multi-dimensional scaling. Nevertheless, he believes that this is beneficial only if we do not apply it on its own, but do a qualitative analysis as well. Allen and Maybin, for example, have made estimates about the price of new products based on data from focus groups with the help of a mathematical formula.

Some focus group experts believe that it is a good idea to use numbers in the process of interpretation but they think that emphasis should not be put on the numbers but on what lies behind them (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Morgan, 1998). In the course of his focus group research, Morgan (1998) counted frequencies, but he was much more interested in what lay behind the numerical data; he examined the whys and the hows. The numbers were only a starting point for a “more reflective interpretation of why these patterns occur” (Morgan, 1998, p. 93). As an example, he cites the case where he had numerical data from the transcripts about how often siblings provoke family conflicts. Based on this, his question was: “If siblings provoke the majority of family conflicts, how does this occur?” (Morgan, 1998, p. 93). He argues that with this method he is able to recognise the patterns within the text and reduce speculation. Kidd and Parshall (2000), in the course of their research, very often ask for statistical data about the number and length of comments by the group members. Based on this, they examine whether there has been a dominant participant in the group. Furthermore, how much a participant has spoken about a particular topic is often examined as well. Carey (1995) believes that in certain cases it is useful to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Focus group experts who are against using numbers within focus group analysis very often do not support their argumentation with reasoning, or their justification is brief and not satisfactory. Edmunds (1999), for example, simply states that a focus group is qualitative research and thus it cannot be analysed with numbers. Krueger (1998) formulated the argument that numbers have to be handled with care in the case of focus group analyses because they might give the impression that what we say can be generalised for a larger population. He does not explain why the numbers would create such an impression. Perhaps because questionnaire-based research, which can often be generalised statistically, applies a numerical analysis? We can avoid any misunderstanding if we state clearly that results cannot be generalised from a statistical point of view.

Focus group analysts often use such expressions as “most participants,” “few group members,” and “the majority,” while they refrain from giving concrete numbers (Krueger, 1994). It is important to recognize that it is a shared characteristic of such expressions (e.g., “most participants”), and of statements that include numbers that they both refer to quantity and distribution, and they both have an underlying quantitative logic. The difference is in how concretely the analyst wants to specify the quantity.

I am of the opinion that during a focus group analysis, if the analyser wants to, he or she can make statements about quantity (with or without numbers), but in general it is not fruitful to place emphasis on them. This can be lead back to two reasons: (a) limits of generalisation, and (b) the data collection is not individual and standardised.

Because of the limits of statistical and tentative incidence generalisation of focus group results, information about quantity is usually not very valuable to us when it stands on its own⁸. As tentative generalisation is not an accurate estimate, using numbers in a focus group study we want to generalise is even less meaningful than applying vaguer terms such as “minority” or “majority.” Generally, we can provide a much better quantitative prediction of the opinions, evaluations of a large target population on the basis of the distribution data of a quantitative survey.

There can be exceptional cases when quantitative data are the goal of the research, and it still might be better to employ focus groups than to do a questionnaire survey. For certain research goals we might not get good results via questionnaires. Such research goals can be for example complex issues, topics about which the lay public has vague and hazy knowledge, or topics on deviant phenomena in which, if we employ certain composition of the groups, we believe interviewees will tell us more on a subject in focus groups than in questionnaires⁹. However, limits of generalisation and limits of using quantities in the analysis of non-standardised data have to be taken into account.

It is a further argument against solely numerical analysis of transcripts of focus groups, that this kind of analysis often takes the meaning out of context and does not take into account that the process of question and answer was not standardised. The comments of participants might influence each other and might steer the conversation in another direction. If we see in one group that the question of crime related to an ethnic group came up 30 times, whereas in the other group it did not come up at all, we can draw only limited conclusions. It might be possible that in the first group somebody started to voice negative feelings about a minority and the others felt that this “broke the ice” so they also started voicing similar views. While in the other group perhaps there was no participant raising this issue even though if someone had started, similar reactions could have been observed. I felt this was the case in my research on insecurity (Vicsek, 2004b). In some of my groups there were people who broke the ice and started to talk negatively of the Roma spontaneously, and then these groups continued to discuss this at length, bringing up anecdotes which presented the Roma in a negative light. Now, I would not say that in the other groups in which the topic of Roma did not come up, people were less prejudiced. Studies demonstrate that there are strong prejudices against the Roma in the Hungarian society (Enyedi, Fábíán, & Sík, 2004). Thus, in this case

⁸ Using quantitative data when deciding whether there were participants who dominated the discussion – like Kidd and Parshall (2000) sometimes do – might come in handy in the course of preparing an analysis.

⁹ If we are interested in quantitative data concerning distribution and we want to generalise to a small population and a not too small proportion of this population participates in our focus groups (and if we have selected the participants of the sample properly and the sample is not very small), then in this case we can assume with greater confidence that the distribution we have observed in the groups might also be true for the small population as a whole. Let us assume for example that after several focus groups involving young managers of a company, we find the majority likes the service we provide. We have selected the participants of the groups randomly. If we believe that individual opinions were able to surface in the groups (which is a bold assumption(!)), then based on this, applying tentative incidence generalisation, we can argue that the majority of the young managers of the company like this service. However, as I have argued earlier tentative incidence generalisation is risky, the greater confidence which we apply it here is only because not such a small percent of the population participated in our groups, as would be the case with a large population. And even though our confidence in our results might be greater than in the case of a large population, we still might be making a mistake with our assumption. We also have to seriously consider the issue: if we were interested in distribution data, why haven't we collected data by asking the participants in a questionnaire?

an analysis simply counting the negative comments on the Roma in the groups would not be a good way to draw conclusions on the extent of prejudice present amongst the participants.

The analyst can also be influenced by the expectations directed at him/her when deciding whether or not to use numbers in the analysis (Vicsek, 2006). It may happen that the contracting party wants to see numbers in the analysis. The contractor, for example, might be curious about the results of the so-called “ranking”; what order of priority emerged in the group where a choice had to be made among several options, how many people voted for the different alternatives. I suggest that even if such a ranking is prepared at the request of the contracting party, the limits of such data should be strongly stressed. Emphasis should be placed on how the ranking came about and what arguments the participants put forward. In applied focus group research where I tested plans for a political commercial, even though one of the plans was rated highly by the majority, a minority was greatly offended by it, as they felt it inappropriate that it contained a major national symbol. I explained to the contractor that she should not look only at how many people voted for which option, but also take into consideration that some people in the target population of the advertisement might also be put off by the use of the national symbol in the advertisement.

Treatment of the Situation of the Group Discussion in the Analysis

Some social scientists feel that it has been established that group phenomena should be taken into account in focus group analyses. Despite the appearance of a number of writings in which authors argue that it is important in focus group analyses to take into account group phenomena (Carey & Smith, 1994; Catteral & Maclaran, 1997; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994, 2004; Puchta & Potter, 2002; Schindler, 1992; Sim, 1998; Smithson, 2000; Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b, 2006), the dominant trend in most disciplines is still to leave out the group context.

Analyses of the dominant approach are often based on the underlying assumption that individual, internal opinions appear in the focus groups if the discussion has been organised and carried out “properly”¹⁰, consequently results are similar to what would be obtained if the participants had been asked individually. Because of this view, adherents of the dominant trend do not feel it necessary to deal with the group context in the analysis. Advocates of the newer approach usually emphasise that focus groups should be considered as a group situation and this has to be reflected in the analyses. Some of the adherents to these newer perspectives assume that individuals have essential individual internal opinions and that it can happen that these “real” opinions are not expressed during the group discussions because of group phenomena such as conformity (Carey & Smith, 1994; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Schindler, 1992; Sim, 1998). Other focus group experts (belonging to the newer approach) oppose the above views which are based on traditional social psychology and stress the process of emergence and shaping of opinions and evaluations, pointing out that we can observe this process in focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994, 2004; Kosny, 2003; Puchta & Potter, 2002; Wilkinson 1998a, 1998b, 2006).

¹⁰ For example Morgan and Krueger (1993) write: "A good moderator will strive to create an open and permissive atmosphere in which each person feels free to share his or her point of view. When there is some fear that pressures toward conformity may limit discussion, the opening instructions to the group can emphasize that you want to hear about a range of different experiences and feelings, and subsequent questions and probes can follow up on this theme by asking for other points of view. When participants see that the researchers are genuinely interested in learning as much as possible about their experiences and feelings, then conformity is seldom a problem" (pp. 7-8).

Group phenomena

I have experienced a wide range of group phenomena in focus groups. For example, a preference toward agreement can arise. This can result in a lesser diversity of answers in a group situation than in the case of individual questioning. I have found that even in cases where I employed techniques which aim to counter the tendency toward agreement (such as emphasizing that there is no right and wrong answer, etc.) there was often a smaller diversity of views presented in the focus groups than expressed by the same participants in individual questioning (e.g., in the screening questionnaire).

For example in the course of my research examining feelings of insecurity in Hungary (Vicsek, 2004b) in which I analysed the screening questionnaires and the recordings of the focus groups as well, I reached the conclusion that in some cases the tendency toward agreement in the groups could be observed, despite the fact that I had emphasised in the group that there were no right or wrong answers and that we were interested in everyone's opinion, even if it does not coincide with the views of the others. In the case of some issues in some focus groups it could be observed that the individual evaluations expressed by group participants in the screening questionnaire contained greater diversity than the views presented in the group sessions. Although there were disagreements in the groups, several times, however, the minority opinion was expressed in a form somewhat more compatible to the majority opinion. Often after it became clear that an opinion was held by a minority, it was not so extensively talked about any more, except by some people with strong personalities. Some people basically ceased to talk in the group about their own feelings of security after they found out that others represented a different view (and then these people only contributed their opinion on other topics, where they agreed with the rest of the group). These happened both in groups held in the capital or other cities, with participants who did not know each other before the session and also in groups of acquaintances (Vicsek, 2004b).

The group situation might influence certain individual experiences not to be mentioned in focus groups, as found for example, by Hollander (2004) in her research on the role of violence in everyday life. The author met one of the focus group participants accidentally one year after the focus group and this is how she found out that the participant did not want to share some of her personal experiences as a victim of violence in the group discussion.

In Hungary, I have experienced that applied market researchers are even more prone than social scientists to disregard group effects in their analyses. It is indeed probable that the tendency toward consensus is manifested differently in the case of themes that are in conflict with strong social norms (as can be the situation for some social science topics) compared to market research questions. But it should not be assumed that this tendency will not appear in these later discussions. In their writings on methodology Stokes and Bergin (2006) compared the extent to which the results of focus groups differ from those of qualitative individual interviews in the analysis of a business question. They found that the reception of the Italian spectacle frame they examined was influenced by whether the questioning was in an individual or group setting. An effort to reach consensus could be observed at the group occasions. Stokes and Bergin stated that individual interviews held later with the participants confirmed that certain individual views differing from the majority did not even appear in the groups. The researchers also observed that once it became clear that others have a differing opinion, representatives of the minority view became passive in the groups.

According to my view whether group dynamics are distorting factors or facilitating factors depends on the concrete research approach and research questions. We might be interested in for example, in group norms or in social influence, in which case conformity is not a distorting factor for the research purpose.

If group dynamics are discussed at all in market research articles, then often these are regarded as distorting factors (see for example, Fam & Waller, 2006; Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Contrary to this, Robert Schindler (1992) represents the view that market researchers could be making a mistake if they do not make use of the opportunity provided by focus groups of observing how people influence each other. If the individuals can imagine exactly what opinion the people exercising an influence on them will have of a given product when it appears on the market, and they are aware of these views when the interview is conducted with them, then the individual interviews can also perform well. In other cases the focus groups can provide instructive additional information on what influence consumers will be exposed to when the product appears on the market. Making use of this information could prove to be useful for products where consumers will sooner or later be faced with the views of others¹¹. So far not many researchers have taken the advice given by Schindler in the early nineties (Vicsek, 2006). In my opinion it is vitally important in the case of certain products and market research goals (such as mentioned by Schindler) to build up the focus group discussions and analyse them in such a way that different processes of social influence can be clearly observed.

Taking situational factors into account

Even if group phenomena, such as social influence mentioned above, are not the primary target of our research, these phenomena should be taken into account when writing the report. If we factor into our analysis that our data are not independent from the actual situation, but are embedded in it, our conclusions can be richer and more illuminating. If we leave the contextual factors out of our interpretation, we might arrive at distorted conclusions (for example, if we do not take the potential tendency toward consensus into consideration). This is why it is better if we specify how the group was organised, it makes the quality control of the analysis possible (Waterton & Wynne, 1999). In addition to group phenomena, I have found it useful to include other contextual characteristics in my analysis, for example the effect of the environment, the type and subject of the guide, time factors, and characteristics and style of the moderator (Vicsek, 2004a). Although these factors, can affect the results of focus groups, there are only a very small number of analyses in which any of these factors are taken into account (see Hollander, 2004, where she discusses amongst others the effect of the location of the focus group discussions on what the participants said in the groups, or Knodel, 1993, where he writes that moderator influence has to be analyzed when checking the quality of the information).

There are several possible ways taking situational factors into account within the analysis. I differentiate between two types: (a) incorporated treatment of situational factors, and (b) separate treatment of situational factors¹².

¹¹ Schindler (1992) identifies a number of factors that can contribute to determining the probability that people will later know about the attitudes of others. One such factor is how visible the product is. Obviously, we meet other people's decisions on cars and clothing daily. The importance and riskiness of the product is also a factor. In the case of important and risky consumer goods people often seek advice from others whose opinion they respect. They may ask others even if they do not regard the product as especially important but they consider it is difficult for them to make a decision on it. This may be the case when they feel that a good decision requires special knowledge (for example, knowledge of computer hardware).

¹² Duggleby (2005) presents a typology for the different kinds of analyses which together with certain differences, also shares a few similarities with this classification. However, her typology is concerned with the treatment of group interaction data only, and she does not discuss the other situational factors. An important point made by her is the observation that if group interaction data are analysed separately from thematic analysis they are often "not analyzed systematically with a methodological approach consistent with that used for data from other sources and might not be integrated with the other data" (p. 834). The different methodological

When performing incorporated analysis, the situational analysis is included in the thematic analysis, the context of the groups is analysed at the level of the statements. For example, this kind of analysis can expose what reactions have been evoked by specific contributions of group members. I often find that such detailed analysis of the context of individual statements takes a great amount of time, making it difficult to apply systematically to a large quantity of text. The method of analysis must be congruent with our research goals (Duggleby, 2005). To achieve congruency in case of certain research objectives and theoretical assumptions, incorporated analysis might be needed. Incorporated analysis can be fruitful, for example, if our research goal is to examine group phenomena, such as social influence (for example in case of market research products mentioned by Schindler, 1992). If our approach is based on conversation analysis (ten Have, 2002) or on discursive psychology (Potter, 1996, 1998, 2003), then incorporated analysis (see also Wilkinson, 2006) is also called for.

In case of the separate treatment of situational factors in the analysis, the situational factors of the group discussions are analysed together separately from the thematic analysis. In the course of my research I have developed a scheme for analysing the results of focus groups with separate treatment of the situational factors. This scheme can be usefully applied in cases where the group phenomena are not a central part of the research question.

Analyses based on my scheme have two components. The first component is the analysis of the situational factors (the interactional factors, the characteristics of the participants, the moderator, the environment, the time factors and the content (e.g., characteristics of the guide) which influence the course of the focus groups. Here the similarities found in the different situational factors for the research groups as a whole are discussed, while the essential differences between or among the groups are also mentioned. The analysis of situational factors is followed by the second component of my scheme, a thematic analysis.

In the first part of the analysis, I describe the situational factors, and I write about what potential influence the factors could have had on the results. To illustrate the situational analysis component let me bring an example from recent focus group research. In the project, I collaborated with Beáta Nagy to examine gender culture among employees of a work organisation in Hungary (Vicsek & Nagy, 2006). In our situational factors, we characterised among others the following factors, and formulated assumptions about their influence on the course of the discussions:

- the participants of the groups were each other's colleagues
- some of the groups were homogenous with respect to gender, while others contained both men and women
- the head of the work organisation did the recruitment, he asked the research participants to take part in the focus groups
- the scene of the discussions was a room at the workplace
- the conversations were video-recorded
- the moderator was a woman
- the atmosphere – except for one group – was relaxed
- the topic did not cause great conflicts among group members

We stated, for example, with respect to gender composition that we assumed negative evaluations about the other gender would be mentioned more in a group homogenous with respect to gender. In the male employees group the participants rated many female

approaches of the situational analysis and the thematic analysis might indeed make integration difficult, but I would argue that integration on at least a minimal level can be possible even in these types of analyses.

characteristics very negatively and complained about female co-workers. We argued that some of these opinions might not have been voiced if female employees had been present in that group (Vicsek & Nagy).

The situational part is followed in my analyses by a thematic analysis where I focus mainly on what the participants said and not how or through what interactions.

As within the situational analysis there might be assumptions on how certain factors have influenced what the participants said in the group; there can be some connection/overlap between the situational and thematic component. There are also some cases, when I find it useful to pay attention to at least some important group phenomena even during the thematic analysis¹³. It is a complex issue how to integrate the situational analysis with the thematic analysis. I try to achieve this in the conclusion part of my writings where I make some of my arguments based on both situational and thematic components of the analysis.

The Quotations

Many reports of focus group analyses contain quotations of what has been said during the discussions. But to what extent should the quotations be edited, how are they selected how should the participants be referred to, how detailed should the marking be, and what length the quotations should be? Some of these issues are mentioned in the focus group literature, whilst others are not.

We have to consider the extent of editing to be done on quotations included in the analysis. When we first see a transcript we might be shocked by how different it is from a text that was prepared originally in written form. It may be marked by half-finished statements, bad wording, tics, and repetitions. This simply comes from the fact that in live speech we use less formal wording than when we write. If we decide to change the text substantially, we can make it more easily digestible for the reader. At the same time it is not certain that it will then properly reflect the course of the discussion we have observed in the group. In some cases we can prepare two versions of the transcript. We can prepare one version for analysis – here the person transcribing it does not clean the text and does not make it more legible by applying proper punctuation. Then we can have another version which is easier to read and which we put into our report. This second version can have commas, full stops indicating the end of the sentence or additional comments in brackets to assist analysis. We can prepare this second version for only selected parts of the transcript, ones which we decide to include in our reports.

The process of selecting quotations for inclusion in the analysis from the long transcript is an “art.” Whether the quotations should reflect the variety of the answers or their typicality or whether we choose special, deviant comments depends on the objective of the research (Litosseliti, 2003). In the course of my research I usually try to select quotations where expressions that are relevant and interesting in terms of the purpose of the study are voiced by the participants of the group themselves. It is also an aspect to consider that these should be quotations which do not require a lot of add-ins in brackets to make the text understandable. If the limits of length are important I select a text where I do not have to quote a too lengthy part to be able to illustrate comments which are relevant to the analysis. It might happen that I omit small parts of the text, for example, expressions or sentences that are irrelevant for the research or are unintelligible. Because of this, their omission does not really modify our impression of the discussion (in such a case I indicate in the text that there has been an omission).

¹³ For more information about my scheme of analysis see Vicsek (2007), where I discuss the social psychological underpinnings of the scheme and present each component in detail with examples from different research projects.

In order to preserve confidentiality, the real first names of the group participants should not be included in the quotations. Instead we can give them another first name of a person of the same sex. It is more practical to refer to participants using first names and not numbers because it is easier to track down if we have included quotations from the same person several times, it indicates the sex of the person, and makes reading easier as well, and helps the reader gain a sense of the participants' personalities.

The extent of detail applied when preparing the transcript, and how detailed our marking will be in the quotations included in the analysis, might depend on our research approach, objective, financial limits, and time available. Conversation analyses and discursive psychology apply a detailed marking system. They indicate the length of pauses between the words uttered and the changes in the pitch of the voice (Potter, 2004; ten Have, 2002). If we decide not to apply a detailed system of signs it is often still useful to include oral communication other than speech in the transcript (e.g., laughter). In addition it is perhaps worthwhile to describe some kinds of metacommunication (e.g., nodding).

We have to define the length of the quotations in our material. The dominant practice in focus group analysis is that isolated comments are quoted from the group discussions (Kitzinger, 1994). Some researchers, who believe that the context of the group should also be taken into consideration, emphasise that we should not quote isolated comments, all our quotations or the majority of our quotations should contain the text of several comments (Kitzinger, 2004; Myers & Macnaghten, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998b). In this way, we can observe interaction and receive information about how the participants reacted to each other's statements, as well as about the course of the discussion.

I believe that for many research goals it results in valuable observations if at least a part of our quotations contain excerpts with several comments each. The existence of adjacency pairs has been confirmed by several pieces of research (Pomerantz, 1984); individuals orient themselves to the comment directly preceding theirs. A question is, for example, followed by an answer (Myers & Macnaghten, 1999). Therefore it may be worthwhile to show at least adjacency pairs in our text. We can, however, select longer parts as well. Therefore within the thematic analysis part of my evaluations, usually at least part of the excerpts contain adjacency pairs or even longer chunks of the conversations (the length constraints of articles submitted to journals is a limit that sometimes makes it difficult for many of the excerpts to contain longer parts of the discussions).

Let me illustrate the usefulness of presenting longer excerpts from focus groups, with the following example. It is from a research project in which a colleague and I examined how male and female managers were evaluated by the members of a local municipality in Hungary (Nagy & Vicsek, 2006, 2008). Here is a quotation from our thematic analysis. It is from the male subordinates group:

Imre: - Let me say something that is not totally relevant: it is since the Creation that men have always been the head, and I feel that even these "wild and masculine" executive ladies have some little feminine need to have a man whom they might be attached to....

Moderator: By being attached to, do you also mean looking up to him?

Imre: - Yes, I think all women have the claim to have a man they can rely on in their work or in their private life or wherever, they need that for some reason...

Gergő: - Personality! It is a question of personality again, there are women who like being women. And they like to live through the female role, and there are women who, on account of their career or of other things, like to be masculine . . . (Imre and Áron are nodding)

Sebestyén: - They don't have a family, they have no children. . .

Antal: - I think that the female manager or. . . whose photo appears in the magazines because she is the best in that year, either has no husband or kids, or is divorced, so . . .

Gergő: - It's very stylish to be single nowadays and that is related to this.

(Male subordinates group – Evaluations of Female Managers Research Project; Nagy & Vicsek, 2006, p. 55)

This excerpt gives us a richer glimpse into the atmosphere of the discussion than if we had just singled out one sentence. It shows that the men in the group are on the same wavelength, when they finish each other's sentences.

It is also useful to write below the quotations which focus group they are from, if this is not evident from the main text. This also links the results more to the group context in which they originated. In the dominant practice very often not just isolated comments are taken from the groups but quotations from different groups are mentioned together so it is not always possible to recognise from which discussion the comments are derived.

Concluding Remarks

According to my view the strength of focus groups lies not in quantitative analysis or in making statistically probable generalisations but in the fact that focus groups can show some evaluations, approaches, and mechanisms that exist in the target population and they can provide a deep and differentiated characterization of these phenomena. Focus groups can help in building theories (Barbour, 2005) or formulating analogical generalisations. Tentative incidence generalisation can be fruitfully applied in special cases (for example in case of similar results with focus groups of different compositions), however the risks of error connected to it must not be left out of consideration.

I argued that situational factors should be taken into account in the analysis even if group phenomena or other situational factors are not our primary research question. Depending on the researcher's approach/research questions I concluded that there are different ways of discussing these factors in the analysis (incorporated or separate treatment of situational factors). It is also useful if the quotations themselves are not totally separated from the situation they originate in. At least some of the quotations should not be isolated comments, but at least adjacency pairs, and it should be made obvious which focus group a quotation comes from.

Most of the above suggestions go against the current dominant practice: most focus group analyses still use isolated quotes without mentioning the source, do not deal with group context (Wilkinson, 2006). Moreover, some focus group reports contain quantitative ranking, without adequate discussion of the limits of such quantitative approach¹⁴. However, there is some change taking place, as more and more focus group experts call for group phenomena, interaction to be taken into account in the analyses (Carey & Smith, 1994; Catteral & Maclaran, 1997; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994, 2004; Puchta & Potter, 2002; Schindler, 1992; Sim, 1998; Smithson, 2000; Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b, 2006). In the article I

¹⁴ I have seen these kind of quantitative rankings in case of applied research reports (which I can not refer to).

argued that not only group phenomena, but even a wider range of situational factors should be discussed in the evaluation of the results.

Some of the concerns of this article might seem too academic to applied researchers. However, my point is that adequate applied research practice must be based on scientifically correct foundations; otherwise focus groups are utilized the wrong way.

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Author Note

Lilla Vicsek, Ph.D. is Research Associate at the Institute of Sociology and Social Policy at the Corvinus University of Budapest. She has more than a decade of experience in focus group research, conducting and analysing focus groups of varying kinds (both applied and academic research) on diverse topics. She has recently published a book on the method. Special features of the book include the chapter on social psychological approaches, where she presents a comprehensive overview of both mainstream tenets and new approaches (such as discursive psychology), considering the consequences these have on the way we view group discussions. In the book she pays particular attention to the issue of analysis and presents the method she devised for the analysis of focus groups. Her research interests include methodological issues in relation to focus groups; text analysis, gender and workplace, and investigation of how media influence the way people interpret risks. Correspondences regarding this article should be addressed to the Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Közraktár u. 4-6. 1093, Hungary; FAX: +36 1 482-7348; E-mail: lilla.vicsek@uni-corvinus.hu.

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