



## Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research

Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone

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Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research

Peter Lunt

Department of Psychology

University College London

Gower Street, LONDON, WC1E 6BT, U.K.

Tel.: (44) 0181 387 7050, Fax.: (44) 0171 436 4276.

and

Sonia Livingstone

Department of Social Psychology

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street, LONDON, WC2A 2AE, U.K.

Tel.: (44) 0171 955 7710, Fax: (44) 0171 955 7565

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### Author Notes

Peter Lunt is a lecturer in psychology at University College London. Sonia Livingstone is a lecturer in social psychology and director of the masters program in media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### Abstract

The focus group is a frequently used method in the social sciences. It is particularly useful when researchers seek to discover participants' meanings and ways of understanding. In this paper we relate the history of the focus group as a research tool, from its original uses by Lazarsfeld and Merton in early communications research to its decline as social science research became more strongly quantitative and experimental. We also explore the recent revival of the focus group in audience reception studies. Contemporary uses of focus groups conducted within the critical tradition are also discussed, leading to a reappraisal of the method and its appropriateness for media and communications research. It is argued that the focus group discussion should be regarded as a socially-situated communication, and the various relations this may bear towards different approaches to mass communication are discussed, together with their implications for research practice.

The resurgence of interest in the focus group interview in social science research, including media and communications, is part of the move towards qualitative methods. Insightful findings and ecologically valid, interpretative techniques are increasingly preferred to the perceived limitations of more experimental, quantitative or supposedly 'scientific' methods. (Burgess et al., 1991; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Morley, 1980; Philo, 1993). However, the focus group is not a new method and both its use as a research tool and the methodological theory surrounding it have varied over time. The history of the focus group demonstrates that it has, at different times in its history, been used first for critical, then mainstream, and now, again, critical research (Merton, 1987; Morgan, 1988). The focus group has also, at different times, been used for varying purposes, from discovering consumer attitudes and motivations to revealing public discourses and interpretive communities. Finally, it has also been used in a variety of theoretical contexts and with a range of methodological assumptions, providing both a source of ideas for quantitative testing and an instrument of discovery in its own right.

Briefly, the method of focus groups involves collecting a group, or, more often, a series of groups of people together to discuss an issue in the presence of a moderator. The moderator's role broadly defined, is to ensure that the discussion remains focused on the issue while eliciting a wide range of opinions on that issue. The usual considerations for conducting open ended interviews apply (Oppenheim, 1992), and one of the commonly-expressed advantages of the method is that of speeding up sampling for one-to-one interviews. Many parameters of the group discussion can be varied, and the various decisions taken by the researcher significantly affect the resulting discussion and have implications for sampling, setting, control, validity, and reliability. Unfortunately, these decisions, and the rationale behind them, often remain implicit, with the researcher presenting the findings as if no choices had been made beyond that of using focus groups in the first place. Research practice has also diverged somewhat from that established by Merton, where:

'for us, qualitative focussed group-interviews were taken as source of new ideas and hypotheses, not as demonstrated findings with regard to the extent and distribution of the provisionally identified qualitative patterns of response' (Merton, 1987, p.558).

In this paper we argue that considerable diversity exists in the decisions implicit in the conduct and analysis of focus groups, a diversity which increases as the use of the method itself is increasing. There is insufficient debate about the uses and interpretation of focus group methods as actually practiced by current media and communications research researchers. In particular, some of the standard views about the focus group in procedurally oriented methodological textbooks on 'how to do' focus groups deserve reconsideration now that focus groups are used within new, often more critical, politicized, and more theoretically-driven research contexts (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). To the extent that focus groups are being used as a stand-alone method, rather than simply a source of ideas and interpretations, the methodological principles underlying the method require rethinking. In the present paper we analyze examples of the contemporary use of focus groups in order to further such a debate and to broaden the justification for using focus groups.

In a 1987 paper Merton reflected upon the early history of the focus group interview. He tells how, in 1941, Paul Lazarsfeld introduced him to the use of the method in order to guide the interpretation of data which had been gathered from people pressing buttons to indicate positive and negative emotional reactions to radio programs. After listening and responding to the radio programs, one of Lazarsfeld's researchers led a discussion with the participants in which the data collected from them was reflected back to them so that they could give their reasons for their individual and collective responses. Interestingly, providing opportunities for the feedback and discussion of respondents' data is now part of the new, critical, approach to methodology which emphasizes empowering and respecting respondents as participants in the research process (Seiter, et al., 1989). Merton went on to use this method to examine responses to the use of radio as a means to persuade people to pledge war bonds. For Merton the point about the focused interview method was the way in which it focuses the respondent on a particular issue or topic, using standard interview techniques to retain that focus. While methods associated with market research are often criticized for their administrative and atheoretical uses, it is interesting to note that Lazarsfeld (1969) recalls the almost accidental way in which he happened upon market research methods and funding when empirical research techniques were otherwise lacking, as a means to pursue politically motivated (socialist) research.

Merton (1987) is intrigued that the initial academic interest in focus groups during the 1940s and 1950s disappeared in subsequent years as social science researchers adopted more exclusively quantitative methods as part of broader changes in social scientific practice and legitimation, only to emerge again in the 1980s, mainly in market research, but more recently also in audience research. In reviewing present and past uses of the method, he suggests that there is fundamental agreement over the method of focus groups (design, sampling, procedure, etc.) and that the difference between then and now is in the use to which focus group materials are put. However, Merton's prescriptions for running focus groups derive from his view of the method as an addendum to the questionnaire or experimental study conducted with a random sample. Thus, his views on sampling, theory construction and operationalization are dominated by the quantitative aspects of design. He sees the role of focus groups as identifying the salient dimensions of complex social stimuli as a precursor to further quantitative research. This means that the design and interpretation of focus groups have been defined by criteria relevant to the quantitative aspects of the study; for example, participants should be randomly selected, and so should not know each other or have any commitment to or continued membership in the group. As we shall see later, contemporary uses of the focus group challenge this and take more seriously the group nature of the discussion.

Merton also conceived of the focus group from a particular theoretical perspective on mass communications. When studying the impact of training films on the American soldier in World War II, Hovland and Merton (Merton, 1987) agreed that the experimental study of media effects was enormously problematic because the stimuli (films or excerpts from films) were complex. Experiments could observe whether or not an effect occurred but could not specify what aspect of the social stimulus (the film) had 'caused' the effect. Attempting to gain control over the stimulus was problematic because of loss of validity (people do not watch controlled

excerpts from films/programs). They suggested that the focus group could be used to pin down putative aspects of the complex stimulus which may have had the effect observed in experiments or surveys. Thus, qualitative and quantitative methods would have a complementary role:

"Our qualitative adjuncts to the experimental design soon convinced that brilliant designer of experiments Carl Hovland that both kinds of data were required for sound conclusions: the rigor of the controlled experiment had its costs since it meant giving up access to the phenomenological aspects of the real-life experience and invited mistaken inferences about the sources of that experimental response; the qualitative detail provided by the focus group-interview in turn had its costs since it could lead only to new hypotheses about the sources and character of the response which in turn required further quantitative or, in this case, experimental research to test the hypotheses" (Merton, 1987, p.557).

Although this quotation gives significant weight to qualitative methods, we suggest that Merton nonetheless subordinated them to quantitative methods. He expresses concern about current practice in market research which makes isolated use of focus group interviews to draw conclusions about the prevalence and distribution of ideas and attitudes. As many contemporary uses of focus groups also use them in this way, some justification for current research practice is required.

#### The Standard Approach

Practically, various technical problems must be overcome in conducting focus groups. Those using the methods over the past forty years or so have evolved ad hoc rules of thumb which have been passed down and then formalized in the 'how to do' books as 'good practice'. Thus, those choosing the method inevitably must make a range of decisions, whether knowingly or unknowingly. The moderator's role is crucial, requiring the monitoring of a complex social interaction, encouraging contributions, and managing disruption, diversion and other problematic group dynamics. The setting should be as informal as possible, so as to stimulate group conversation. The moderator usually has a discussion schedule or a list of key points to be checked off discreetly. The discussion can be video and/or audio taped, and high quality but unobtrusive recording equipment is required (Fielding, 1993). The resulting tapes are often difficult to transcribe because of the free flow of conversation, varying volumes of voices, interruptions and so on, although transcription may be aided by using, in addition to the moderator, a note-taker to keep track of who is speaking and when (Bertrand, Brown and Ward, 1992).

Important decisions are involved in the constitution of the groups. Should one use groups who know each other or those who are relative strangers? Should groups be constituted from members of the same or mixed categories (e.g. all-women and all-men or mixed sex groups)? Merton originally used relative strangers of diverse sociodemographic categories, a practice which continues today (Javidi et al., 1991). However, much of the innovation in focus group design has involved moving away from this survey sampling approach to engage 'naturally occurring' groups of like-minded people (Liebes & Katz, 1990, use 66 groups with 3 couples each, of common ethnic origin, who were already friends). Merton also favored the one-shot design, yet some contemporary researchers favor repeat meetings of the same group (Burgess, et

al, 1991). Group size is less contentious although also important in determining the resulting discussion, with a consensus that 6 to 10 group members works best. One must also decide how many groups should be conducted. A useful rule of thumb holds that for any given category of people discussing a particular topic there are only so many stories to be told. Hence one should continue to run new groups until the last group has nothing new to add but merely repeats previous contributions. While in practice this gives the researcher confidence in the findings, this rule makes it difficult to design and to budget for a research project in advance.

There are a cluster of design considerations regarding how structured the discussions should be which mirror general considerations in interviewing (open-ended versus closed-ended questions, question phrasing, question sequencing, etc.). Focus groups often begin with an initial presentation of material to which the attention of participants is centered (e.g. a television program, press stories, photographs, etc.). The researcher must also decide what rationale to give the focus group; should the groups be asked to 'just discuss' the topic involved or is more direction needed? In terms of 'permitted' roles in the communication situation (Goffman, 1981), the researcher must decide about the distribution of voice amongst the group: does it matter that some people say very little? Should one encourage hesitant or difficult opinions or aim for easy and confident opinions? How should the moderator respond to dominant or distracting opinions? These are not just methodological issues, for consensus, diversity or disagreement may be presumed by the theoretical framework of the research and will affect the conclusions to be drawn.

#### The Focus Group Today

We now consider some contemporary academic uses of the focus group in media research. Our aim is to reevaluate Merton's conception of the aim of the focus group as inevitably supplementary to quantitative methods (i.e. as principally a means of generating ideas and hypotheses and a guide for interpreting and designing quantitative data techniques) and to consider the issues raised by these new uses.

It is ironic that focus groups, now commonplace as stand alone methods especially in market research, have been adopted by television audience researchers as part of the critical questioning of positivist or administrative research and the consequent search for 'new' qualitative methods (Jensen, 1991; Schroder, 1994). The critical approach emphasizes the social aspects of the research context. The nature of the research context itself, regarding access and rights to speech, and whether the subject is being controlled or manipulated. For example, Ang (1989) is concerned to develop a critical approach to empirical methods for studying the television audience and its relation to the ideological operations of television. She defines the critical approach as a self-reflexive intellectual-political orientation towards academic practice which "takes seriously the Foucaultian reminder that the production of knowledge is always bound up in a network of power relations" (p.97). Ang suggests that explicit attention to the following questions is central to the critical interpretation of interviews: what was the researcher's own position in the interviews? How did s/he find and get on with the interviewees? How did the interviews themselves take place? What were the reasons that people took part in the research?

Burgess et al (1991) address the concern of critical researchers that interviewees as well



as researchers gain from the research: using the psychotherapeutic principles and practices of Group Analysis, they hope to avoid the potentially exploitative use of focus groups, in which individuals who don't know each other meet for a hour or two and, because of the unfamiliarity of the situation, are constrained or controlled by the researcher. Instead, Burgess et al held discussions with the same group meeting regularly over six weeks in order that "members have time to create a unique culture, with its own history, humor, preoccupations and concerns" (p.503) and so have the opportunity to learn together by sharing experiences.

In practice, many researchers using focus groups attempt a balance between participant and research interests. The procedure of Schlesinger et al (1992) is typical: for them 'the discussions involved a funnelling process which is designed to allow groups initially to determine their own agendas as much as possible, before urging them to focus on specific issues' (pp. 28-29). It is central to the focus group interview that the researchers do not predetermine responses and that they allow the opportunity for issues to arise which had not been anticipated. However, most moderators work within a broadly standardized format with a schedule of topics or issues which, for the purposes of group comparability and coverage of theoretical concerns, must be addressed by participants (although typically, these may be addressed in the order in which they spontaneously arise).

Probably the most cited focus group study in recent media research is the work of Morley (1980, 1981; Jordin & Brunt, 1988; Wren-Lewis, 1983), which has been highly influential in the re-emergence of the focus group in the context of a cultural studies approach to the mass media. He used 27 homogenous groups of between 3 and 13 people, in a comparative design which covered variation in social class, educational level and political affiliation. His analysis of the focus group discussions following viewing the current affairs television program, *Nationwide*, revealed how audiences with different socioeconomic backgrounds make different 'readings' of current affairs programs, thereby opening up the path for many other investigations into diversity in audience reception.

Much of this debate concerning the critical or mainstream use of focus groups in social science research has developed within the field of mass communications. However, the theorizing of the mass media audience has been radically reworked since Merton's day. Merton, Lazarsfeld and others studied audience response to mass media in order to understand the mass diffusion processes which lead to attitude and opinion formation. Hence we understand Merton's concern with the relation between focus group and questionnaire or experiment: he saw the mechanical processes of stimulus or message diffusion as paramount and the qualitative detailed examination of audience response as a way of elaborating media effects processes.

In contrast, contemporary theories of the audience are more concerned with the way that active audiences contribute to the negotiation and construction of meanings (Livingstone, 1990). The audience is seen not as an aggregate of atomized opinions or attitudes but as individuals located in concrete social groups who construct meaningful social action partly through the discursive interrogation of texts. In this context, the focus group is not used to identify the dimensions of complex stimuli that may have causal power in diffusion but to examine the everyday ways in which audiences make sense of television.

### Discussing Everyday Discussion

Conversation, public discussion, and gossip are all important processes in the production and reproduction of meanings in everyday life. In this section we examine the idea that focus groups can be understood not by analogy to the survey, as a convenient aggregate of individual opinion, but as a simulation of these routine but relatively inaccessible communicative contexts which can help us discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk. This admittedly approximate simulation of everyday conversation or discussion using focus groups may be used in conjunction with, and in order to overcome the disadvantages of, ethnography, participant observation, and a reliance on publicly available recordings of discourse.

In other words, rather than regarding the group context of focus group discussions as a convenient (or contaminated) source of individual opinion, we suggest that the group context may itself be significant to the theoretical framework of the research. Moreover, different theoretical frameworks result in different conceptions of this group context, with consequences for the design and conduct of the focus groups themselves. Thus, we can identify different ways in which these interpersonal relations may play a positive role in the research design, rather than being conceived simply as interfering, problematic or uncomfortable. Analysis of current research practice shows that while some researchers see focus groups merely as aggregates of individuals, others conceive of them as simulations of social relations, or rather, as social occasions in themselves which bear sufficient resemblance to the social occasions under study. Each of these positions depends upon a different understanding of the personal-social-political relations between the participants, including the researcher/moderator, and can be established in a theoretically-driven manner.

One model for the kind of communication that can be developed in focus groups is seen in the work of Morgan (1988), who used them to study the grieving process in groups of widows. Under these circumstances, the groups can take on the character of private self-help groups or confessionals. Lee (1993) and Ward *et al.* (1991) suggest that focus groups can be particularly useful in researching sensitive topics where the participants support each other in self-disclosure in a way that would not be possible in an interview. Lee (1993) suggests that this is partly because participants act more as consultants than as objects of research.

A less emotional but similarly private process has been simulated by Liebes and Katz (1990). They were "less interested in random selections of a sample of each [ethnic] community than ... in clusters of community members who are in close contact and among whom television programs are likely to be discussed" (p.23). They set up focus groups (married couples, with similar friends) in order to simulate everyday domestic viewing (discussion in own living room, following viewing of program) by representatives of different subcultures (groups drawn from six different ethnic groupings). The focus group operationalised "the assumption that the small-group following the broadcast [of *Dallas*] is a key to understanding the mediating process via which a program such as this enters into the culture" (p.28). As this mediating process was hypothesized to involve the critical faculties of the media audience, they employed the focus group as a quasi-ethnographic, quasi-naturalistic method which allowed the inherent critical

abilities of their participants to emerge, and which, it is implied, standard quantitative techniques may ignore.

Liebes and Katz (1990) regard the focus group discussion as a simulation of the spontaneous conversations which occur in families who are themselves members of a specific subculture, and they have designed their study accordingly -- in the home, with known members of a common social category. For them, the focus group is an appropriate fit for their decision to conceive of viewers in terms of their relations to each other, rather than as isolated individuals.

There are other ways of viewing the focus group. One is to regard it as simulating the everyday process of generating social representations. Moscovici (1984) stresses that social representations are generated not so much through individual cognitive processes but through everyday conversations. As with discourse-based approaches, the focus group is significant here as a simulation of everyday conversation which is understood to be socially generated rather than a 'read-out' of individual minds. Moscovici outlines four conditions for the emergence of social representations which parallel features of the focus group: the representation of an issue must emerge through the conversation of ordinary people (the focus group); a vital contribution is provided by 'amateur scholars' who mediate between scientific knowledge and the laity ('interested' or knowledgeable parties may be found in the group or represented by the moderator); the debate is typically held at a time of social concern or crisis (the topicality of the research); finally, the social representation may emerge through a variety of debate forms, resulting in a vocabulary, lay theories, causal explanations, cognitive frames and prototypical examples (qualitative data). Social representations are an ideal field for the application of focus group techniques.

From the perspective of critical, cultural geography, Burgess et al (1991) use focus group discussions in their project on local responses to environmental threat. Their aim is to "seek to replicate, insofar as is possible through a research design, the domestic and other social settings in which people live" (p.502). They argue that focus groups "provide a means of replicating some of these [everyday] social interactions although, inevitably, the settings within which they are conducted and, crucially, the ways in which they are conducted, are much less naturalistic" (p.502). As they theorize that local responses are organized neither in terms of individual, private responses or in terms of the distant-public domain (the national/international context) but rather in terms of the local-public domain, they study groups rather than individuals, and construct their groups from local activists and in other instances from the local community generally, so as to research the collective nature of local experiences.

For Morley (1980), the mutual presence of other group members serves to prompt interviewees to speak from their particular social or material positions of "involvement in various forms of cultural frameworks and identifications" (p.26). Consequently, the groups constructed were homogenous in their political, educational, ethnic or social class compositions and the voice participants use is analyzed as representative of their sociodemographic categories. Here the focus group is used because it is seen to facilitate people's expression of identity in order to show how they make ideological use of television programs, an approach which has been elaborated to include other sociological dimensions of identity such as gender (Seiter et al., 1989) or gender

and class together (Press, 1991).

Ironically, Jordin and Brunt (1988) criticize Morley's work as exemplifying the use of focus groups according to 'the survey model', seeing interviewees as individual representatives of real world social groups (rather than as a real world social group in and of itself) and correlating the opinions expressed within the group with the social category of those group members. Thus he "compromises the ethnographic, qualitative and contextually specific aspects of the research by radically abstracting from the real material complexities of the groups" (p.239). Jordin and Brunt attempt to shift the question asked of focus group interviews from that of cultural competence -- what can we discover about external determining constraints on group discussions (or, how do gender, class etc. affect what people can do or say about the discussion topic) -- to that of cultural performance -- i.e. what can we discover about what people actually do or say when they come together for a discussion. While avoiding the 'survey model' orientation of social determinism, and re-orienting the method in terms of agency (group members as social agents rather than social atoms), nonetheless, they also restrict the interpretations to be made of the data. For undoubtedly, researchers do want to use focus groups as a rich, complex, and efficient means of discovering how external categories such as gender and class are actively negotiated in relation to particular issues, so that we understand how the participants and the discourse (or social representation, or public opinion, etc.) are mutually constituted in the process.

While for Morley, the group context reminds participants of their social identities, Radway (1984) uses the focus group to investigate the broader 'interpretive community', where participants' routine social interactions are of primary interest: for her, the group is primarily collective rather than taxonomic in nature. Radway showed how the critical and social response to popular literature may be mediated through the network of community members centered around a book shop, where the shop functions as a focus for a discursive community. Radway used focused interviews to elaborate this interpretative community and to show the interweaving of critical responses to texts and the construction of a social network. Indeed, this complexity of the relations among discourse, group, identity and community is a common theme for focus group researchers.

In our own work on audience response to audience discussion programs (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994) we used the openness and interactive potential of the focus group to see how arguments were raised and set against each other. The focus group is seen here as a device which allows people to discuss issues abstracted from their social identities, as informed by Habermas' (1989) concept of the public sphere (namely a public space for the disinterested discussion of topics affecting the public good). As such, the focus group is used to simulate some of the processes of public opinion formation, where public opinion is understood as the outcome of rational critical debate or negotiation, rather than as the agglomeration of individual attitudes (Fraser, 1990). On this view, identities become plural and shifting and persuasion involves a conversation among multiple participants, challenging the notion of core social psychological attitudes and identities, for individuals are seen to continually reposition themselves in relation to the circulation of discourses. The diversity expressed within a group conversation is itself dependent on the design of the focus group.

Thus, under the broad umbrella of investigating how interpretations are collectively constructed through social interaction, we allow diversity or consensus to emerge, while others require group members to work collaboratively towards a consensual product, as in Philo's (1993) 'news game'. Here a collectively-generated news report is demanded and then discussed in order to explore the processes whereby people arrive at their beliefs.

Billig's (1987) dilemmatic approach represents the opposite case, as arguments and disagreements rather than consensus are the subject of study. Arguing that discourse is inherently dialogic or dilemmatic, the group can be seen to take on argumentative roles and the interviewer can sit back, guiding the discussion instead of having to take on the alternative position him or herself. Indeed, the ideal group should more or less run itself, with the interviewer occasionally prodding, provoking or reorienting the discussion. In this case, one can conclude, as Billig (1992) does in his work on lay argumentation about the Royal Family, that the discussion topic is dialogically structured in terms of arguments, counter arguments, claims, and rebuttals. As Hiemstra (1983) suggests, one strength of focus groups is that they can "provide the opportunity to observe informants conducting their own discursive tests, negotiating meaning, and confirming or disconfirming appropriate ways of speaking" (p.807).

#### Advantages and Disadvantages

In this section, we reconsider some long-standing debates about the advantages and disadvantages of the focus group method in the light of the above review of contemporary usage in media and communications research. We suggest that many of the traditional criticisms of focus groups can be rebutted.

For Merton the technical aspects of focus group technique had stabilized in the 1950s. He suggests four principles around which focus groups are organized (Merton et al., 1956; Morgan, 1988): range, specificity, depth and personal context. Thus the group should have content validity in terms of covering the range of meanings at issue and providing data that is specific to the topic. Further, focus groups should encourage participants to explore their feelings in some depth and take account of the personal contexts that people use to frame their accounts.

Most of the researchers currently using focus groups would agree with Merton's implicit praise for the technique as providing valid and rich data that engages the subjects fully on a given topic. However, many would challenge Merton's relegation of focus group methods to a secondary position relative to surveys and experiments. Merton's argument is based upon the notion of a hierarchy of methods for making statistical and causal inferences. In contrast to the experiment, the focus group does not control independent variables and carefully measure dependent variables which are the basis for causal inference. Cause-effect relations cannot therefore be made on the basis of focus groups. Surveys are reliable and adequately sampled and therefore can be used to make statistical inferences about populations. Such generalizations cannot be made from focus group data because the results are not reliable and small samples are generally used. On the basis of such arguments the utility of focus groups is restricted to the early, exploratory stages of research, such as in questionnaire design, in generating hypotheses or in helping to interpret survey or experimental results. Such methods are not valid in and of themselves as they cannot be the basis of statistical or causal inference.

There are a variety of responses to this position which can be derived from the practical use of focus groups in contemporary research. We can divide these responses into two categories -- weak and strong. Weak responses accept the suggestion that there are basic problems of representation and lack of reliability in focus group research. However, they seek to qualify the claim that focus groups cannot be the basis of statistical inference. This qualification is sometimes made by arguing that in practice sampling is usually inadequate but suggests that this is a practical problem. The implications of this are that if sufficient funds were available then focus groups could be conducted on greater numbers than they usually are, since it is only the expense and effort that have restricted sampling in focus group research. Another version of this weak response is to suggest that the generalizability of focus groups can be established through triangulation. For example, Ward et al. (1991) show the results of survey and focus group techniques to be comparable in the health field, and Glik, Parker, Muligande and Hetegikamana (1986-7) argue that one should collect different sources of data, including focus groups, in which the quantitative methods are not used automatically to subordinate the qualitative.

There are also stronger responses to the criticism that no valid inferences are possible using focus group methods. The critique of positivism in the social sciences would lead us to question the hierarchy of methods implicit in Merton's critique and to question the justification for causal inference in empirical research. According to this view, the focus group would be a stand-alone method conducted in its own right. This response also offers a critique of survey methods in terms of the reification of the individual and the atomization of responses which disregards the polysemic and context-dependent nature of meaning. The focus group emphasizes the social nature of communication and does not reduce social scientific research to the study of the individual, an important consideration in the context of media research where mechanical conceptions of media effects are giving way to more social, semiotic, and diffusion-based conceptions of media processes. The study of the media audience is less and less concerned with registering effects at the psychological level in aggregates of individuals but rather increasingly concerns the study of social processes of communication. In this sense the focus group is a method in tune with current sensibilities in media research which are the redefining media processes and the conception of the audience.

Focus groups are currently being used by researchers who have a range of positions on the criticisms of representativeness and the invalidity of inferences in focus group research. There is no consensual rebuttal of positivist critiques of qualitative methods such as the focus groups. Rather there are a variety of rebuttals and qualifications of the claim that focus groups can not be used for causal or statistical inference on the grounds of inadequate control or inadequate sampling procedures. Weak responses qualify the scope of focus group validity and the strong responses qualify the relevance and basis of the critique itself.

Strong responses would argue that the notions of reliability and validity are inextricably linked to quantitative methods and so are irrelevant to qualitative work. Consequently, a researcher's attempt to take a distanced, autonomous view of 'data' would be interpreted as a rhetorical stance that attempts to construct the researcher as expert by objectifying the participants as objects of research (Foucault, 1970). Such views would also lead to a questioning

of the assumptions of the focus group method. For example, the role of the moderator implies that the researcher can occupy a neutral, mediatory role in the conduct of public discussion between free agents. Thus the focus group enshrines a view of research and of public discussion that a radical position would question.

#### Issues of Reliability and Validity

The earlier argument for combining qualitative and quantitative methods rests in part on a traditional concern with the distributional or representativeness claims of focus group findings. While qualitative researchers often resist assessment of research in terms of representativeness, it may be as problematic to assume that findings for a particular category of respondent do not generalize to other categories (or other times or places) as it is to assume that they do, as both assumptions are comparative; to assume falsely the particularity of one's findings tends to result in an inappropriate analysis in terms of the particular category of persons studied.

Merton argues that focus groups can be misleading insofar as groups may discuss with enthusiasm and conviction an issue to which, when polled individually in an attitude questionnaire, they may ascribe little importance. However, in our experience, people do not talk at length and with interest about an issue on which they have nothing meaningful to say. The researcher knows -- and could be expected to report -- how readily the group embraced the issue under discussion and whether the discussion was stilted or flowed freely.

In disagreement with Merton, then, we would argue that different contexts of data collection do not invalidate each other but rather they illustrate the truism that different contexts generate different kinds of data with different meanings. For example, the Royal Family may prove meaningful and interesting to a group discussion, revealing people's arguments, assumptions and shared frames of reference; yet when weighed for personal importance against a broader, comparative set of issues (e.g. taxation, politics, education) the issue may be seen as far less significant. It depends if we are asking how people think about and understand an issue or how much that issue matters to them relative to a particular set of alternative issues.

Secondly, and more significantly, one can question the claims being made for the analytic status of the findings. Are the beliefs and understandings expressed in the focus group to be understood as how 'the public' thinks, or as a social representation (a social phenomenon distinguishable from the particular groups who express it and with its own etiology and history; Farr & Moscovici, 1984), or as the beliefs of particular subsections of the public? While the broad notion of the public is increasingly seen as problematic -- because publics are diverse, contradictory, plural, conflicting, and so forth (Fraser, 1990) -- the growing tendency to conduct focus groups separately for different demographic or interest groups raises a different set of problems. Thus, one can conduct focus groups on women separately from men, on labour separately from conservative voters, on mothers separately from non-mothers, and so forth. While this hugely increases the resources required to conduct the research, it pushes back but does not resolve this question: do different groups use different social representations, draw on non-overlapping discourses, represent discrete publics? For example Kitzinger (1993) conducted 52 groups, each with a different category of participant, totalling 351 participants in all (a large sample for a qualitative study), yet with only three or four members representing some categories.

This may satisfy those who look at the overall sample size, but implicitly tends to fragment the public into demographic groups, to presume social category to be the most important determinant of beliefs, and to homogenize within-category beliefs.

These are potentially resolvable issues. The conduct of multiple, comparative focus groups may provide a way forward, albeit an expensive one, for conducting qualitative work. In our experience, groups consistent in composition (just women, or just program fans, or just young people) are easier to conduct: the group establishes confidence more quickly, it moves more readily beyond platitudes towards analysis, and there is still scope for exploring disagreements and contradictions. However, if the research aim is to simulate a general public debate within which one expects strong disagreements to exist, then one needs representatives of multiple positions within the group. And if one wants to interpret the findings on the level of the public in general, then again, groups might be better conducted when composed of diverse rather than consistent membership.

Methods in the quantitative tradition are traditionally evaluated in terms of their reliability. Often the validity of such methods is difficult to establish and researchers focus on reliability because of its computability and as a proxy for validity (Lunt & Livingstone, 1989). This position leads to the prioritization of reliability testing over validity criteria and a variety of the former have become established. However, researchers using qualitative techniques are often more concerned about validity, and a major perceived advantage of focus groups that they generate rich, believable data. So one argument is that qualitative methods compensate for their lack of reliability with greater validity.

There are other potential responses to the charge of lack of reliability. One problem here is that the notion of reliability as generally understood prejudices qualitative methods because it was developed for quantitative methods. The most common method of reliability evaluation is test-retest reliability, and the suggestion is that focus groups are unreliable because different conversations would occur if groups were repeated. However, one criterion used for determining the number of focus groups required is the point at which content is being repeated. Conducting focus groups produces a flood of ideas and information in the early groups which is then reiterated by subsequent groups until (sometimes sooner than others) no new stories are told. Thus although there is variation from one group to another there is a point at which the new information gain drops with each new group. One could argue, then, that the exhaustion of the various things to be said on a given topic is part of the content validity of the method, offering a notion of reliability related not to the identity of two runs of the method but to the rate of information gain.

A related argument is that looking for the same conversation to take place on subsequent runs of focus groups misses the point in two ways. In the first place, the reliability we are interested in is at the level of interpretation (and here procedures for dual coding and content analysis do exist), complementing the open ended nature of data collection which maximizes content validity. Secondly, the unit of analysis in focus groups is the thematic content or discourse used in the groups, not properties of the individuals composing the groups. Therefore variation is not error in the measurement of a property of an individual in the group (the



assumption underlying test-retest reliability), but rather the expression of variation in discursive treatment of a topic for discussion. The critique assuming test-retest reliability as an ideal misses the point that qualitative methods are concerned to capture difference and variation rather than to reduce variance through experimental control. What worries quantitatively oriented researchers is the lack of criteria for validating qualitative methods, while qualitative researchers have been reluctant to develop new concepts of reliability and validity which are required to evaluate such methods. We suggest that this is partly because both sides have accepted the quantitatively driven notion of reliability and its relation to validity, to the detriment of the acknowledged purposes of qualitative research.

A further criticism of both the reliability and validity of focus groups is that people just say anything in open ended procedures -- that focus group discussions are too creative to be informative. This critique can easily be turned against quantitative research in favor of qualitative: the group acts as a context which challenges, asks for elaboration, and demands examples of claims that people make. In rhetorical terms, the group acts as if conducting an enquiry, and there are, therefore, reliability checks in the operation of pragmatic norms for communication in groups. There are no such checks in survey research, which may be seen rhetorically as a highly reduced dialogue between researcher and researched. Focus groups, then, draw our attention to the communicative aspects of research design.

#### The Group Context of Focus Groups

It is often argued that the group context of a focus group discussion biases the data so strongly as to render it worthless. Thus, the false consensus effect, revealed through small group research into conformity, is when people in groups have a tendency either to move towards a consensus or to shift towards unrepresentative extremes (Paulis, 1989). Part the force of this critique comes from assuming that the focus group is merely a way of conducting interviews which conveniently extract individual attitudes from more than one person at a time. As we have already argued, researchers using focus group methods are often not trying to elicit individual attitudes but are interested in socially expressed, and contested, opinions and discourses. One might add that the moderator can and should be trained to conduct the group so as to reduce effects of false consensus or group polarization. After all, there are many sources of error in the conduct of experiments and surveys, some of which are not solved by design but by careful practical conduct.

Is it legitimate to regard focus group interviews as the convenient equivalent of a series of one-to-one interviews or are the responses given by people in a group different because of the operation of group dynamics? Let us again consider contemporary uses of the method. In reviewing Morley's (1980) study of the audience for *Nationwide*, both Seiter et al (1989) and Ang (1989) describe the methodology used as one of interviewing, where it happened that people were interviewed together in groups of varying sizes. Neither comments on the fact that people were interviewed as a group, so we are left to conclude that the group context is not seen as significant, surprising for such self-avowedly reflexive, critical researchers. Seiter et al report unconcernedly that they selected interviewees from telephone responses to their advertisement on the basis of those who could assemble the largest group of interviewees. The issues of who can

do this, of how the number of people may affect what is said and of the relations between group members, are ignored.

Morley (1980) notes that his choice of group rather than individual interviews "was made on the grounds that much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context" (p.33). However, Brunt and Jordin argue, this is to mistake the concept of the individual, for the individual is precisely not a social atom, but rather "the point at which a multitude of shifting social and cultural determinations converge" (p.234) (see also Wren-Lewis, 1983). Interestingly, Hoijer (1990) makes the opposite argument, drawing on the social psychology of groups, to suggest that "the obvious and well-documented effect of group pressure" (p.34) raises too many problems to permit taking the group discussion as a valid basis for research. She thereby sets up the ideal of an uncontaminated interview in which social pressures do not distort the individual expression of opinion and neglects to observe that the interviewer is present giving the participant undivided attention. In contrast, Khan and Manderson (1992) argue that focus groups "are intended to encourage participants to feel free from the constraints typical of one-to-one interviews, and hence to express their views openly and spontaneously" (p.57). Surely this is a matter of choosing different methods for different reasons. It is untenable to suggest that groups interfere with the 'clean' expression of individual opinion. Rather, under individual conditions, people can manage impressions solely for themselves and the interviewer. Under such circumstances, one set of pressures exist, while under group conditions, people manage impressions for the group, and a different set of pressures exist.

The difference between group and individual interviews is not one which contrasts social with psychological frameworks of theoretical interpretation, but one which distinguishes among the varieties of social context within which discourse occurs: the one to one interview is no less social than a family interviewed together at home around the television set, but it involves quite different contextual factors which facilitate or inhibit certain kinds of discourse. Both are different from Morley's group of 20 odd trade-unionists meeting with a researcher at their workplace. It is through these various contexts, each of which also serves to position the interviewer differently in relation to the interviewees, that the interviews must be interpreted.

#### Interpreting Focus Group Findings

Little is written in the technical literature on focus groups about the process of analysis or interpretation and a number of problems exist (although see Lewis, 1991). The evolving practice amongst many researchers has been informed by literary criticism, whereby the researcher becomes immersed in the material, resulting in a thematically ordered account supported by material quoted from transcripts. The local discursive context of an utterance or extract being analyzed has proved a particularly intractable problem for qualitative researchers. If the data is generated in a group rather than an individual interview, then analysis in terms of this local context is even more complicated, for utterances are not responses to direct questions or prompts, but are turns in a free flowing conversation where several themes may be addressed simultaneously. The extent to which illustrative quotations represent broader themes is also problematic, if the analysis of qualitative data is to be systematic, the presentation of extracts

from the interviews is insufficient. Hoijer (1990) criticizes the analytic approach in which one notes "'typical' examples in the discussion by way of illustration", because "reading interviews, you can always pick out striking examples, but you easily miss reverse cases and all the ambiguous cases...It is even more problematic when demographic data about individuals are used to explain differences found in the interviews" (p.38).

For both these reasons, Hoijer advocates a second, less common, approach, namely the systematic coding of transcripts using content analysis. For this, "you certainly need sensibility and intuition, but you also have to be methodical, because you cannot grasp the totality of an interview and even less the totality of a set of interviews" (p.40). Curran (1976) notes that interpretative analyses typically make implicit frequency claims for the distribution of analytic themes, and one might add, implicit causal claims relating interpretations to participant demographics through media effects or social influence. He argues that these should be made explicit and tested through the combination of interpretative with quantitative techniques such as Leiss et al. (1990) who use a combined semiological/content analysis.

Increasingly, a variety of researchers are attempting to develop complex, thematic analyses of transcripts which combine interpretative sensitivity with systematic coding (Hoijer, 1990; Kepplinger, 1989; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Such systematic coding of qualitative material, especially when complex socio-semiotic categories are used, is enormously time-consuming. However, new forms of computer based 'ethnographic' coding are being developed to process the resulting data (Bertrand et al., 1992; Fielding & Lee, 1991; Javidi et al., 1991). Such approaches attempt to overcome some of the criticisms of more interpretive approaches by inserting a reliability check on interpretation and a typicality check on the selection of material. This results in a hybrid method that attempts to integrate the interpretative with the quantitative so as to avoid both unwarranted generalization and 'sterile' representations of the meanings in the text. These emerging approaches to analysis vary in terms of the surface or depth of their representation of the data and in terms of taking a linguistically-oriented or content-oriented approach to analysis.

### Conclusions

In the present paper we have discussed how and why focus group discussions are chosen as an appropriate method to research how different groups actively create meanings. Focus groups can reveal underlying cognitive or ideological premises which structure arguments, the ways in which various discourses rooted in particular contexts and given experiences are brought to bear on interpretations, the discursive construction of social identities, and so forth. Two themes emerge from these diverse rationales. First, focus groups generate discussion, and so reveal the meanings surrounding an issue -- both the meanings that people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings. Second, focus groups generate diversity and difference, either within or between groups, and so reveal what Billig (1987) has called the dilemmatic nature of everyday arguments.

We have argued against some of the views of Merton, pioneer of focus groups, by suggesting that in contemporary research practice the focus group is regarded as a simulation of various aspects of social communication. It therefore has an autonomy from quantitative

methods unanticipated by Merton, although undoubtedly research can only benefit from a triangulated approach. While for Merton, the purpose of the focus group was to generate new research questions and hypotheses to be tested using quantitative methods. In contrast, many contemporary users of the focus group see the method as simulating ethnographic processes of talk and argumentation. This use of focus groups is grounded in a theoretical conception of the relations between identity, discourse and society, although little consensus exists, or indeed is needed, concerning the appropriate model of social communication (interpretative community, sociodemographic identity, public sphere, critical public, private therapeutic discussion, etc.) which underpins the analysis of focus group discussions. The focus group as a method clearly under-determines the theory of social communication within which it is used. More problematically, the various methodological decisions behind a research project too often remain implicit, even though the critical approach to mass communications is committed to an explicit interrogation of these decisions and the assumptions which direct them. Finally, many of the issues raised concern broader methodological debates about the relations between qualitative and quantitative methods. These concern, and doubtless will continue to concern, the relations between discourse and social structure, between individual and social understandings, between theory-led and data-led research, and between the power of the researcher and the exploitation or empowerment of the researched.

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