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## Using Facebook Secret Groups for Qualitative Data Collection

Stephanie Medley-Rath

Indiana University - Kokomo, [smedleyr@iuk.edu](mailto:smedleyr@iuk.edu)

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### Abstract

The popularity of Facebook (FB) has led researchers to seek ways of using the social media platform in their empirical research. One approach is to use FB's secret groups tool to conduct asynchronous online focus groups. In this research note, I outline the steps to using FB secret groups along with the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. I used FB's secret groups function to conduct three asynchronous online focus groups. I recruited caregivers of children with sensory processing disorder or "sensory issues" who took part by writing about their experiences online. By using Facebook secret groups, the researcher can meet participants in a setting they are familiar with (i.e., FB) which reduces the barriers to participating in a research study. The researcher, however, gives up some control over the research setting. This report fills a gap in the literature with a description of the logistics of using Facebook for online focus groups; this description is designed to help future researchers use this method in their studies of harder-to-reach populations (e.g., parents or caregivers).

### Keywords

Online Focus Group, Facebook Secret Groups, Asynchronous, Social Media, Hard to Reach Populations, New Media

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## Using Facebook Secret Groups for Qualitative Data Collection

Stephanie Medley-Rath  
Indiana University, Kokomo, Indiana, USA

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*The popularity of Facebook (FB) has led researchers to seek ways of using the social media platform in their empirical research. One approach is to use FB's secret groups tool to conduct asynchronous online focus groups. In this research note, I outline the steps to using FB secret groups along with the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. I used FB's secret groups function to conduct three asynchronous online focus groups. I recruited caregivers of children with sensory processing disorder or "sensory issues" who took part by writing about their experiences online. By using Facebook secret groups, the researcher can meet participants in a setting they are familiar with (i.e., FB) which reduces the barriers to participating in a research study. The researcher, however, gives up some control over the research setting. This report fills a gap in the literature with a description of the logistics of using Facebook for online focus groups; this description is designed to help future researchers use this method in their studies of harder-to-reach populations (e.g., parents or caregivers). Keywords: Online Focus Group, Facebook Secret Groups, Asynchronous, Social Media, Hard to Reach Populations, New Media*

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Facebook (FB) has 1.86 billion monthly users (Fiegerman, 2017) and 850 million people use their Groups each month (Guynn, 2016). Groups are like an email list-serv or discussion forum. They are a place on FB for small groups to come together and engage in a topic of interest to them. Two-thirds (68 percent) of U.S. adults use FB (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Among these users, 74 percent use FB daily (Smith & Anderson, 2018) and more than half (55 percent) visit multiple times per day (Greenwood et al., 2016). FB's broad popularity among American adults supports its usefulness as a research site. Potential research participants already know how to use the technology and are regular users of FB, therefore, using FB as a research site meets participants in a setting they are familiar (see Krueger & Casey, 2015).

How can researchers use FB secret groups to conduct asynchronous online focus groups? Using FB as a research tool requires more than just signing up for an account. In this note, I outline the steps that are required to successfully execute research using FB secret groups as a research tool. Finally, like any research tool, FB secret groups have strengths and limitations. How can the researcher avoid the limitations and maximize the strengths of FB secret groups?

To answer these questions, I focus on the potential of FB's secret groups tool to conduct asynchronous online focus groups (see also Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015; Thrul, Belohlavek, Hambrick, Kaur, & Ramo, 2017). FB groups show up in search and membership in a group may be either publicly available or at least available to anyone on a user's friends list. Secret groups are completely private. They do not show up in search, and a user's membership in a secret group is not shared anywhere in FB except within the group itself.

I used this method to study the autobiographical work that people affected by sensory processing disorder (SPD) do when they write about their children's sensory experiences online. My overall substantive question addressed how people make an invisible and subjective sensory experience visible and therefore knowable to others.

Online focus groups were an ideal setting for this research because parents of children with SPD typically have limited ability to commit to face-to-face interviews or focus groups. Some children with SPD have only “sensory issues,” but others have extensive co-morbid conditions (e.g., anxiety disorders, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and their sometimes-complex therapeutic needs limit their parents’ availability for offline participation in a research project. Using FB’s secret groups to hold online focus groups held the promise of meeting potential participants’ convenience needs and maintaining their privacy.

Moreover, most Americans use social media for support. PEW Research Center reports that 80 percent of mothers, 65 percent of fathers, and 70 percent of non-parents indicate that they receive support on social media (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). Mothers (77 percent) are more likely than fathers (64 percent) and non-parents (68 percent) to respond to other users’ questions on social media (Duggan et al., 2015). As parents, participants were likely already using social media for support and to discuss parenting issues. A focus group about their parenting issues resembled this process of asking questions and offering support, so the research project was not asking participants to use FB in a way that deviated from what they were already doing.

I begin by summarizing the potential strengths and limitations of using FB for data collection (rather than as a source of pre-existing data). I then describe the logistics of setting up and conducting a focus group using FB’s secret groups feature. I summarize participation rates and describe how I prepared the data for analysis. This manuscript’s contribution lies in its procedural descriptions, which I hope will help future researchers successfully use this method in their studies of harder-to-reach populations (e.g., parents or caregivers).

## **Asynchronous Online Focus Groups**

### **Strengths**

Asynchronous online focus groups enable convenient participation (Thomas, Wootten, & Robinson, 2013). Conducting the focus groups asynchronously means that not all participants were active at the same time and they could participate at times convenient to them. In other words, questions could be posted, and participants could answer any time after the questions were posted but before the group was closed to any more participation. Compared with other qualitative methods (e.g., traditional focus groups, e-Delphi discussion, online synchronous webcam groups), asynchronous online focus groups generate more substantive information from respondents (Brüggen & Willems, 2009), and participants are more succinct and on point (Synnot, Hill, Summers, & Taylor, 2014). Moreover, participants generate the transcript themselves because they type their responses (Vicsek, 2016). Participants can, however, incorporate audio, video, or still imagery, which require some transcription (see Schiek & Ullrich, 2017). Asynchronous communication gives participants time to reflect before submitting a response (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015; Reisner et al., 2017). Finally, this method reaches people who are geographically dispersed (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015, 2018; Vicsek, 2016), busy professionals (Hancock, 2017), parents or caregivers (Hancock, 2017; Synnot et al., 2014), people with health conditions preventing them from attending face-to-face research settings (Cook, Jack, Siden, Thabane, & Browne, 2014; Synnot et al., 2014), and young people (Boydell, Fergie, McDaid, & Hilton, 2014).

## Limitations

Scholars note that online focus groups save time compared with face-to-face focus groups (Reisner et al., 2017), primarily because they do not require extensive transcription. This saved time; however, it may be redistributed to other tasks (Schiek & Ullrich, 2016). For example, more time is needed to craft a written response than an oral response (Cook et al., 2014; Vicsek, 2016). However, their asynchronous nature means that participants (and the researcher) can take part within broader timeframe parameters and at their convenience.

Conducting focus groups online influences who can join the study. First, online participation requires that respondents have some competence and confidence using English, typing, and online communication (Caron & Light, 2015; Ferrante et al., 2016; Moore, McKee, & McLoughlin, 2015). Second, participants need access to the technology (i.e., computer, Internet, and social media account) (Caron & Light, 2015; Moore et al., 2015). Using FB alleviates some of these concerns as most potential participants already know how to use FB.

In focus group research, participants are expected to respond to the moderator and other participants, but that does not mean that they will (Damaschke & Kommers, 2012; de Jong et al., 2012). Participants may not have time to respond both to the researcher and other participants, which would result in limited interaction (de Jong et al., 2012). The researcher needs to consider how important this interaction is to their research questions. For researchers seeking more interaction among participants, they should design their study with fewer questions, explicit instructions at the beginning of the study with these expectations, and reminders throughout to prompt such interaction.

Multiple scholars note the absence of nonverbal cues in online focus groups (Ferrante et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2015; Pontes, Henn, & Griffiths, 2018). Typed communication, however, can communicate more than what the words say through the use of capital letters, punctuation (e.g., exclamation points, asterisks), spacing, or emoticons (Ferrante et al., 2016; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015; Reisner et al., 2017; Stewart & Williams, 2005). Researchers could summarize participant's answers to check for understanding.

Data security is another concern (see also Glazer & Breslin, 2013; Vicsek, 2016). Using FB may be convenient and familiar to participants, but any data generated on the platform is subject to FB's terms of service (Thrul et al., 2017) and security protocols. The researcher cannot do anything about FB's policies or security but can reassure participants that the researcher is using privacy measures that are within their control (e.g., two-step authentication).

Finally, not all participants who join the online focus group will actively engage with the questions. As a consequence, online focus groups need to be larger than in-person focus groups to ensure an adequate number of participants (Reisner et al., 2017; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Vicsek, 2016). A larger group may be even more important for online focus groups that last multiple days and in studies designed to make participation convenient.

Researchers using online focus groups or FB secret groups need to decide how these strengths and limitations affect their study's goals. The major strength of my study was that I was able to access harder-to-reach-populations by using FB secret groups. Moreover, I was able to collect in-depth qualitative data from 26 participants over about two months, making this an efficient way of collecting a great deal of data over a short amount of time.

The most important limitation of this method for my study is that it is unknown why a participant did not answer a question or stopped participating. I followed up with people who had stopped participating altogether using their email address reminding them about the study. Some participants noted they were traveling or busy and promised to go back and answer missed questions. Others did not respond at all. Regardless, the strengths outweighed the limitations to achieve the goals of my research.

## Facebook as a Place to Meet Focus Group Participants

Scholars have used FB as the meeting place for research participants, including both asynchronous focus groups (Davis, Piven, & Breazeale, 2014; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015, 2018) and synchronous focus groups (Thrul et al., 2017). Other scholars have used FB's chat tool to conduct synchronous group interviews (Pontes et al., 2018).

I conducted asynchronous online focus groups using FB secret groups as described by Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2015). In their summary of their methodological approach, Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2015) focus on how they prepared, monitored and kept track of responses within the group. This focus, while helpful, leaves a variety of questions unanswered for researchers considering using this method in their projects. Therefore, this research note discusses the logistics of setting up an FB secret group, challenges in asking the research questions, respondent participation, and the steps I took to prepare FB secret group data for analysis.

### Logistics of Creating Facebook Secret Groups

Researchers need a FB account to create a secret group. To create a FB secret group, follow these steps: (1) select group (on the left side, under Explore), (2) select create group (upper right), (3) name the group, (4) add a member, and (5) select privacy settings (secret). FB requires a group to have a member added for a group administrator to create the group. This person can be deleted from the group before adding participants to the group. Next, research-specific information needs to be added to the group. In the description section I included my contact information, so it was easily accessible. I added a cover photo of a nature scene to make the page more aesthetically pleasing. Finally, I posted a pinned post for the group that listed participant expectations (see Appendix).

I used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to recruit participants. My initial focus was to recruit people writing about SPD on public forums. I identified 79 people who wrote about SPD on third-party websites (e.g., *The Mighty*, *Scary Mommy*, *Huffington Post*, *Babble*). However, I only found email addresses or contact pages for 52 people of this group and only seven (13.46 percent) consented to take part. My IRB prevented me from recruiting using social media direct messaging. The IRB said that directly contacting potential participants via social media messaging (as opposed to email) typically was a violation of the terms of service for most social media companies.

To increase my sample size (and the size of each focus group), I expanded the participation criteria to include anyone who self-identified as having written about SPD online—whether a blog or on social media. I shared the study on my social media accounts, and I asked my network to share the flyer. I asked authors of books on SPD (i.e., Rachel Schneider, Sharon Heller, and Carol Stock Kranowitz) and administrators of social media groups and pages about SPD or sensory issues to share my flyer on their websites and social media accounts and they gave permission.

Among my study's participants, eight wrote about their child's sensory issues on public websites. Ten participants wrote about SPD on their personal website (seven of which also wrote on public websites). Twenty-four respondents talked about SPD on social media. Despite advertising the study to include only participants who talked about their child's sensory issues online, two respondents reported that they did not talk about their child's sensory issues online. I did not screen participants but relied on their self-identification with the recruitment criteria. The study benefited from expanding the recruitment pool because it increased the diversity of online writing experiences among participants.



Participants joined the study by completing a survey. Once the survey was complete, then I invited them using their email address to join one of three FB groups for the study.

## Participation

I aimed for each group to have at least ten participants and at least 6-8 active participants. I achieved this goal for the first two groups. Group 1 had 11 participants: 7 active participants, one active withdrawal and three passive withdrawals (i.e., they stopped commenting or answering questions). Group 2 had ten participants: nine active participants and one passive withdrawal. Group 3 had five participants: three active participants and two passive withdrawals. Overall, 27 people consented to participate, 26 joined one of the groups, and 18 participated throughout the entirety of the study. One participant actively withdrew by contacting the researcher and leaving the group (on Day 1). Six more participants passively withdrew (three by the third day and three more by the eighth day). One participant took part through the fifth day and then commented once more on day 16.

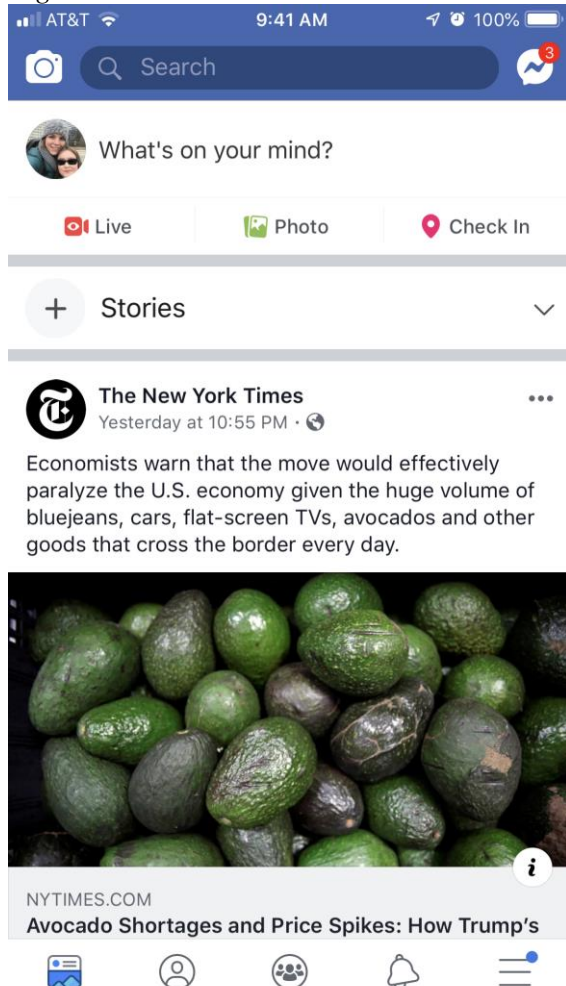
It is unknown why participants passively withdrew. The participant who actively withdrew said that the group was more time consuming than expected. Another explanation is that FB's layout presents several items demanding one's attention (see Deegan, 2012; Thrul et al., 2017). If accessing FB on a computer, at least nine items are competing for one's attention on FB: the field for making a post, other people's status updates, suggested posts, advertisements, friend requests, messages, notifications, stories, event invitations, and the search field; in addition the left-hand column has upwards of 20 links to the user's profile, shortcuts, and so on (see Figure 1). If a participant accesses FB on a mobile device, fewer items are displayed, but the participant can no longer see a list of their groups—including the study group (see Figure 2). Regardless, the researcher needs to ensure that the most important questions for their research are asked early in the online focus group while participants are most invested in participating.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Author's Facebook on a Desktop.



*Figure 1.* Everything circled in orange are notifications of new interactions, posts, or reminding the user of saved items that the user has not yet interacted with (i.e., saved, but not clicked through). On the top right corner, the user sees notifications of friend's requests, comments on posts, interactions in groups or pages they user has connected with. Some notifications are in multiple places on the screen. For example, on the left side next to Events (last third of column), there is one notification. In the upper right corner, there is another notification of the Event.

*Figure 2.* Screenshot of Author's Facebook on an iPhone.



*Figure 2.* Viewing Facebook on a mobile device includes a lot less information. Notifications may appear on each of the icons on the bottom of the screen and the top right corner.

## Facilitating Participation

To increase the likelihood that participants would see new group posts, I advised them to turn on notifications for the group (see Thrul et al., 2017). I also asked them to pin the group to their shortcuts, so they would have a visual reminder of the group and could easily find the group to engage. Pinning a group is like favoriting or starring an item on other websites. It is a means to keep the item on the first page a user sees when they login to a website. Groups that a user pins stay at the top of one's shortcuts in FB (see Figure 3). Finally, I asked participants to visit the group twice a day and spend 15-30 minutes each day answering new questions and interacting with other participants in the forum.



Figure 3. Screenshot of the Author's Edit Shortcuts Screen.

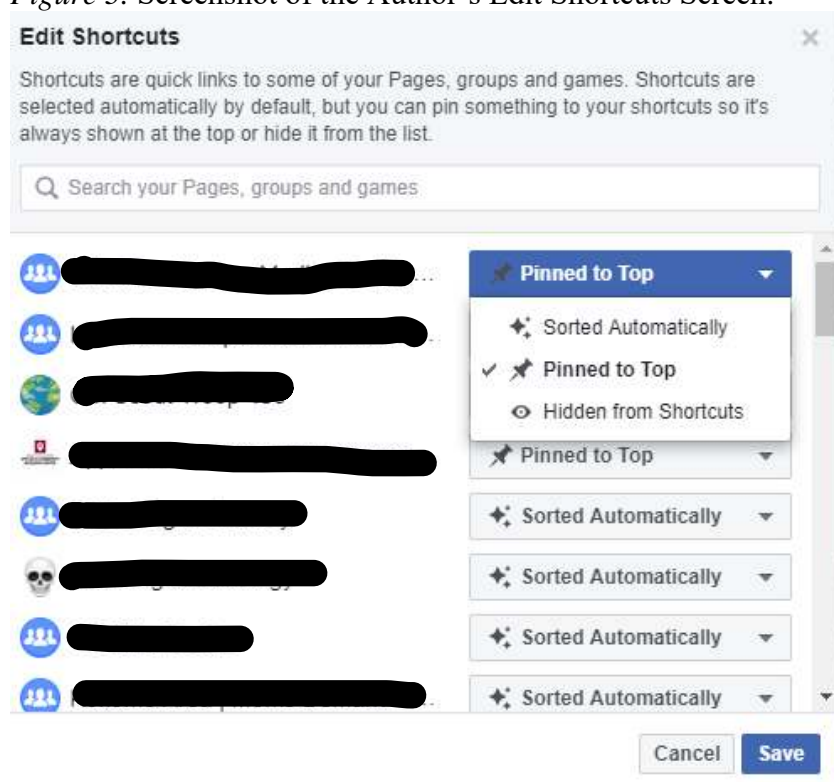


Figure 3. I expanded the options in the drop-down menu next to every Facebook group I belong. Users can select one of three choices (i.e., Sorted Automatically, Pinned to Top, or Hidden from Shortcuts). I asked participants to select “Pinned to Top.” This does not mean that the group really is pinned to the top but should be a group that is visible on the screen when they log in on a desktop.

### Privacy Concerns

Most privacy concerns are similar to face-to-face focus groups. I asked participants to be respectful of the other participants' privacy and not to share any information about other participants. I communicated that if participants did not feel comfortable answering a question in the forum, they could email or call the researcher to answer the question. No participants did this.

FB, however, introduces new privacy concerns. For example, someone could use FB on their phone. If they do not log out of FB or have a password-protected phone, anyone who has their phone could access the group. Alternatively, if the participant stores their FB password on their computer but shares the computer with another person, that individual could access their account. Therefore, I asked participants to review their FB privacy settings, activate two-step authentication, and use passwords on any devices they used to access FB.

### Asking Questions

The groups met during June and July 2017 and lasted 19 days each. I asked 3-5 main questions Monday through Saturday, with no new questions on Sundays. Each question was labeled based on topic, day, and question number (i.e., 3.1 Day 3. Q1). I posted the main questions once each morning so that participants could answer during the day at their convenience and I posted follow-up questions throughout the day.

Numbering the questions was important because posts appear in a user's feed in an order that is based on activity on the post, rather than in chronological order of when they were asked. I added each day's questions last to first so that at least initially, the questions appeared in their intended order in the participant's feed. Once participants commented on a post, the post order changed based on activity (e.g., comments, likes). It is unknown how many participants did not answer a question because it did not show up in their feed. A limitation of FB is lack of administrative control over how the group feed appears to participants.

## Participation Rates

No participant answered every question. Six participants answered at least 90 percent of the questions. It is unknown why a participant did not answer a question, but a few possibilities seem likely. First, participants may not have seen the question in their feed. Second, not every question was relevant to every participant. Third, someone else may have answered the question as they would have answered it. Regardless, participants were consistent across groups regarding the mean number of questions answered: out of 63 questions, each active participant answered between 48 and 50 questions. Participants also went beyond answering the questions; they engaged in further discussion with one another. As Table 1 shows, active participants offered an average of 70-90 comments, well over the total number of questions asked.

Table 1. *Participation Measured by Number of Responses Given and Number of Questions Answered among Active Participants*

	Response Given			Questions Answered (N = 63)		
	Group 1 (N=7)	Group 2 (N=9)	Group 3 (N=3)	Group 1 (N=7)	Group 2 (N=9)	Group 3 (N=3)
Range	22-105	56-125	52-95	24-60	32-61	38-56
Mean	73.0	87.55	81.54	48.73	49.67	49.0

## Preparing Facebook Data for Analysis

To my knowledge, it is not possible to "scrape" data in a closed or secret FB group. Moreover, automated data collection without FB's permission violates its Terms of Service (Facebook, 2010). I could not locate any methods books or articles that addressed how to do this. Therefore, researchers need a method for getting their data off FB and into a setting more conducive to analysis.

A challenge with copying the data from FB into another software program for analysis and back up is that FB truncates comments on posts. Sometimes, the viewer will see no comments even though several people have commented on the post (see Figure 4). Truncated comments are problematic for researchers because the comments are our data. I installed the Chrome extension Social Fixer for Chrome, which has a setting to keep comments expanded until the user truncates the comments. I was then able to copy the complete group feed into Microsoft Word. I then compared the copy with the FB feed to ensure that all information had copied properly.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Truncated and Expanded Comments.



Figure 4. On the left, the post is as it appears when one scrolls through their FB feed. I circled in orange, the sections where comments were truncated. The user has to click on the orange areas to expand the comments. On the right, you see the comments and replies after I expanded them.

Next, I used Microsoft Word's Find tool to find any edited posts (search term: edited). I found the original and edited posts on FB and copied them both into a separate Word file to evaluate and determine how I should handle edited posts. I found that the edited posts had corrected spelling or grammar or were comments posted before they were complete. No participants substantially edited their comments. Therefore, I kept both copies but kept the edited comments in the final dataset. I reorganized the copied material into chronological order. I copied and pasted each question thread in the order in which I asked the questions. Finally, I anonymized the data. I removed the copied profile pictures used Microsoft Word's Replace tool to replace the names of participants and anyone they had mentioned, such as their children, with pseudonyms.

## Summary

Asynchronous online focus groups worked well for this study because participants had reduced ability to take part in face-to-face or synchronous online focus groups due to their circumstances: they had caregiving responsibilities, were caring for children with health conditions, and were geographically dispersed. FB secret groups offered an accessible forum

for this group to participate in this study while offering extra layers of privacy compared to other FB tools.

To successfully execute this kind of research, researchers need to plan a reasonable timeline so that both their participants and they have time to take part in the online focus group. As other scholars note, time is saved but is redistributed to other tasks (Schiek & Ullrich, 2016). More time is needed on the front-end of the study for recruitment and planning out the pacing and grouping of questions compared to in-depth interviews, for example. Further, researchers need to have a clear recruitment strategy and be able to quickly transition respondents into focus groups—ideally, groups need to start a week to ten days after recruitment begins. The greater the delay between a participant consenting to take part and being able to participate, the more likely the participant is to lose interest by the time the study begins.

Researchers also must be comfortable with managing online discussions and using FB. I recommend that researchers who have never managed a discussion forum before practice doing so before using this method for their research. While I had never managed a discussion forum for research purposes before this study, I have used online discussion forums extensively in my teaching, and I have served as an administrator for several FB groups. Researchers might volunteer to serve as an administrator for an FB group they already belong to gain this experience. Likewise, researchers should be familiar with the norms of using FB and comfortable with the technology.

A limitation of this study is that it only took place within the FB secret groups. That is, I cannot compare the participation rates with other qualitative methods such as face-to-face focus groups or in-person interviews. The most difficult part was recruiting participants to the FB focus groups. Once the participants were in the group, most participated, which suggests that most of those who chose to participate were motivated to participate once in the group.

Using FB to conduct focus groups meets participants where they are and enables the researcher to include harder-to-reach populations in the research study. In this manuscript, I describe how researchers can use FB secret groups, including what I learned about the technical side of using FB secret groups. Like other methods, carefully planning the study design is important, but researchers must also consider the limitations of the research tool in their study design.

The researcher gives up some control over the research environment when using a third-party platform such as FB (see Marres, 2017). All users must agree to FB's terms of service and privacy policies. The researcher is also unable to customize the group feed or ensure that questions appear in the participants' feeds as intended or even at all. Researchers using FB to conduct focus groups must decide whether the benefits of meeting participants where they are is worth the tradeoff of limited control over the platform.

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## Appendix

### Text of Pinned Post

I invited you to take part in this focus group because you are a parent or caregiver of a child with a diagnosed or suspected sensory processing disorder or “sensory issues.” The purpose of this study is to examine the content and the process of publicly available autobiographies (i.e., narratives) about sensory processing disorder.

For the next 19 days, I will post 3-5 main questions (and follow-up questions) on Monday through Saturday. I will not post new questions on Sundays to give a break and an opportunity for you to go back and answer any questions you may have missed through the week. I will continue to check the group for ten more days after I post the last questions. You should expect to spend 15-30 minutes each day answering any new questions and interacting with the other participants in the forum. Please try to visit the group at least two times each day.

Please pin this group as one of your shortcuts (<https://www.facebook.com/help/100522613375848>) so that you can find it easily during the course of the study. Make sure that notifications ([https://www.facebook.com/help/187225274663021?helpref=uf\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/help/187225274663021?helpref=uf_permalink)) are turned on for this group so that you can respond when new posts have been made.

Ideally, please plan to do most of your participation during the first 19 days. The group will remain open for an additional ten days so that if you missed a day or have any other thoughts, you can go back and share that information.

I would like to hear from everyone—I would like to make this into a conversation, and it is OK to build on what others say or to present a different point of view.

To greater ensure your privacy, please take a few minutes to review your privacy



settings on Facebook. Please visit “Advanced Facebook Privacy and Security Tips” (<http://www.techradar.com/how-to/internet/facebook-privacy-and-security-tips-1307505>) for instructions. You should also add two-step authentication to ensure greater security of your Facebook account (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-engineering/introducing-login-approvals/10150172618258920/>) and add a password to whatever devices you access Facebook from during the course of this study. Please be respectful of participant’s privacy. Do not share information you learn about participants outside of this forum.

If at any point you have information to share with the primary investigator that you do not want to share in the online focus group, you may email the primary investigator at [author@college.edu](mailto:author@college.edu) or call her at 123-456-7891.

### Author Note

Stephanie Medley-Rath is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University Kokomo. Her research interests include the sociology of autobiography, cognitive sociology, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Her research has been published in *Symbolic Interaction*, *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, and *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [smedleyr@iuk.edu](mailto:smedleyr@iuk.edu).

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