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## Optimizing the Epistemological Potential of Focus Groups in Research on a Contested Issue

**Abstract**    This article explores the potential of the focus group to generate analyzable social interaction. We investigate the ways in which group interaction may lead to new insights using examples from a 2011 study on transformation at a South African university campus. Certain aspects of sociable interaction, such as communicative interaction, power and agency, conflict, as well as exchange are touched upon and their roles in the intersubjective construction of reality are emphasized. We also look at the role of the facilitator in setting up a successful focus group session and the ways in which a naturalistic interactional setting may compensate for the relative unnatural nature of the group situation. Our argument is for the realization of the potential of the focus group as a qualitative method of data collection that is inherently geared towards generating understanding of contested issues, as it allows for an exciting positioning of the researcher between that of interviewer and participant observer, readily able to experience interactional exchange first hand while subtly directing the group conversation into areas of special interest. We believe that the unique epistemological possibilities of the focus group merit a re-engagement with the method by any social scientist interested in the dynamics underlying the social construction of reality, as it offers a window into the ways in which unfolding reality is intersubjectively contested, debated, and finally agreed upon.

**Keywords**    Communicative Interaction; Conflict; Conversational Exchange; Constructivism; Epistemology; Exchange; Interaction Ritual; Negotiated Knowledge; Power and Agency; Sociable Interaction

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## Introducing the Focus Group

Most sociologists will agree that the focus group consists of a small group of people assembled to explore/discuss a specific topic (Flick 2009:195). But, for some time now it has been accepted that "the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan 1988:12). This article focuses on this very issue of "interaction." We will argue that focus groups are specifically effective when picking up on and highlighting the processes of social interaction as participants present, explain, and defend their personal opinions and beliefs (Bloor et al. 2001). It is a useful "stand-alone" method for seeking socially grounded insights into people's lives, beliefs, and experiences. The purpose of the focus group is not so much to generate accounts of individuals' perceptions – that can be achieved through individual interviews. The interest is rather in what is happening within the group and to what extent the interactions within the group will lead to new insights.

## Focus Group Interaction

An important condition for the effective functioning of the focus group is what Warr (2007:153) refers to as "a group's capacity for sociable interaction." The interaction within the focus group can only take place if the members of the focus group are capable of participating in the discourse opened by the focus group facilitator. In other words, they need to know what the issues are. The capacity of the focus group for "sociable interaction" coincides directly with their conversational competencies:

their capacities for reflexive discussion. Members of the focus group are requested to speak to the others. They need to use the discursive and interpersonal skills that they use in everyday life to converse with others. An assortment of talk (narrative, explanation, persuasion, domination, defense, rationalization, etc.) should ideally be generated in the focus group. For this assortment of talk to take place a fair amount of management skills on behalf of the facilitator is required. A relaxed, conversational atmosphere, created by the facilitator, can make up for the fact that focus group discussions mostly do not take place in truly natural settings (real contexts of everyday life). In lieu of a lack of natural setting, the facilitator needs to promote as natural an interactional setting as possible.

Speaking of a spontaneous interactional setting, a successful focus group can often be somewhat disorderly as members of the group compete for a turn to speak. The sharing of opinions and stories may lead to challenges, interjections, and commentaries. This points towards a successful focus group because lively interaction implies a spontaneous situation, even though the focus group itself might not be a natural setting. Lively focus group interaction challenges participants to join in or drop out of the discussion. Group members can share their experiences, views, and aspects of their life-worlds. During the discussion, meaning can be created, disputed, contested, reworked, and refined within the processes of the group. The real challenge for the facilitator is to prevent the interactions from moving towards silencing, suppressing, or forcefully persuading certain members of the group rather than allowing true opinions to be raised. For this

reason, it might be easier to obtain reliable information from focus groups in which equality is strongly embedded. Conversational competency is often perceived to be easier to obtain when the group members' interpersonal skills and reflexive abilities are relatively similar. To gather superiors and subordinates into the same focus group often stifles conversational competence. Diversity of opinion, on the other hand, is the hallmark of a successful focus group discussion. It is important that the focus group discussion should be directed in such a way that it might reveal the social and cultural contexts of participants' individual beliefs, and not merely the existence of diverse opinions.

To obtain a high level of conversational exchange might be ideal, but it is not often achieved. Gamson (1992) refers to the issue that many participants in focus groups are not accustomed to a situation in which they exchange ideas freely with others. Speaking in a focus group is, for most participants, tantamount to speaking in front of an audience. Speaking out in a focus group equates to "sociable public discourse" (Gamson 1992:20-29). The success of a focus group therefore depends largely on the way in which interaction is produced in the focus group. Some members of the focus group find the aspect of public discourse problematic even when other members of the group are perceived as their equals and as trustworthy, and even when they are personally known to them. The skilled focus group facilitator will be sensitive to the effect of this public nature of the discussion and will attempt to maximize the group's capacity for sociable interaction. He or she will do this by drawing on his/her own conversational competency, as well as the group's capacity for reflexive discussion, using

as much as possible the discursive and interpersonal skills that people use to communicate their opinions (Gamson 1992).

Lively discourses, and sometimes a noisy assortment of talk, are not limitations of the focus group as a method. During data analysis, the researcher has to return to the ways in which meaning was created, challenged, reworked, and shaped. The emphasis is on insightful interaction, and the researcher will be on the lookout for consistent reports of opinion and consistent representations of experience (Warr 2007:154), both of which are conveyed by language. The interaction recorded during the focus group needs to be transcribed in order to establish an account of this interaction (a text that can be submitted to hermeneutical analysis).

The main aim of the hermeneutical interpretation of the text is to move towards understanding the underlying meaning conveyed during the focus group session. This relates closely to the understanding of the underlying meaning that individual remarks, discussions, interventions, arguments, or expressions might have within the context of the focus group. During the focus group session, through language, the participants engage in constructing their social worlds and the way in which they operate within social reality.

## The Focus Group as an Interaction Ritual

In the previous section, emphasis was on the interaction between research participants. In the words of Wilkinson (cited in Silverman 2011:169), "the moderator does not ask questions of each focus group

participant in turn, but, rather, facilitates group discussion, actively encouraging group members to interact with each other." A focus group in which interaction successfully occurs becomes a window to how people experience the issue under discussion because it constitutes a social context that is amenable to direct observation. We will come back to this later on in the article, but at this point it is sufficient to mention that conversational analytic, hermeneutical, reflexive interpretational and ethnomethodological approaches provide a useful epistemological base for the analysis of data obtained through focus groups. In the focus group discussion, everything points towards language in action. The researcher therefore aims at a detailed understanding of talk and text in its social setting.

When focusing on the interaction between participants in focus groups, one is drawn to the microsociological work of Randal Collins. His initial references to the microfoundation of sociology (Collins 1981:985) were followed by his "theory of interaction ritual," as elaborated on in the book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Collins 2004). Some of the issues raised by Collins in this book that are relevant to the assessment of the epistemological strength of focus group research include:

- The small-scale, here-and-now, of face-to-face interaction;

- The energies of movement and change – the dynamics of social interaction;

- The way in which small groups develop a sense of solidarity as a result of shared meaning;

- Intentionality and consciousness expressed during verbal exchanges;

- Symbolic and strategic interaction that constitute an arena within which bargaining, exchange, and rational choice can take place;

- Situations that are defined as momentary encounters between participants;

- "Agency…as the energy appearing in human bodies and emotions and as the intensity and focus of human consciousness" (Collins 2004:6);

- The interaction ritual as based on the participants' definition of the situation (the principle that makes shared reality effectively real for participants);

- The ritual taking place in a condition of situational co-presence – a full-scale encounter;

- The interaction ritual as situation/encounter incorporating a wide spectrum of emotions, symbols, thinking, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity.

In the data analysis section, we indicate to what extent these issues are reflected in the focus groups conducted for a research project on transformation at a South African university campus. The stories told by individuals during focus group sessions are incorporated into narratives that attain a broader, collective dimension. The participants' individual accounts open a new dimension of insight into the experience of social transformation on a university campus. The individual accounts also reflect on the

collective lived experiences of the groups within which the discussions took place. For this reason, successful focus group discussions should also contain ethnographic dimensions in as far as gestures, facial expressions, confirmation, negation, and other forms of observable behavior and communication are concerned.

## Interaction and Negotiated Knowledge within the Focus Group

This article draws from a series of focus groups conducted among students on the campus of a South African university currently undergoing significant transformation. The focus groups took place between May and August 2011 in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Formerly an Afrikaans-language institution for white South Africans, the post liberation University of the Free State (UFS) is now a non-segregated, parallel-medium institution. Currently, the majority of students (about 70%) can be described as black. The research probes the ways in which students from different cultural and racial backgrounds generate critical comments on how directed transformation processes impact on intergroup relations and personal wellbeing. Most of the discussions focused specifically on students' experiences of transformation with regards to the integration of student residences (where segregation along racial lines existed previously). Racial integration of residences appears to be one of the most important issues pertaining to the overall experience of transformation.

In the focus groups, the students' experiences, frustrations, fears, and hopes are explored. This happens within the context of the focus group as a space for constructing a different way of knowing. Departing from the assumption that these focus groups provide an interactive setting for the expression of synergy, conflict, dispute, dialogical exchange, and reconciliation, the article explores negotiated knowledge. How does the interactive setting of the focus group contribute to students formulating opinions, expressing views, declaring beliefs, and managing polarities?

In the preceding sections, we made the argument that focus groups offer epistemologically different insights from other qualitative methods. This is the case because focus groups are more "naturalistic" than interviews, biographies, or life stories. Focus groups are more "naturalistic" because they are closer to everyday conversation and include a range of communicative processes (Wilkinson 2004:180). They make it possible for participants to react to remarks made by other members and to create a "synergistic effect" (Wilkinson 2004:180). The communicative processes facilitated by focus groups include those covered in the examples below.

Under the guidance of a trained facilitator, conversational exchange, engagement, and encounter took place, and knowledge and insight were created. In many ways, when the spoken word gets transcribed, we freeze and solidify the personal and unique characteristics of the focus group as an interaction ritual. The transcriptions therefore do not do full justice to illustrating the communicative processes involved in the interactions that took place during the focus group discussions. However, something of the encounter and interaction will become apparent through the following examples.

## Unpacking the Data

This section highlights the ways in which focus groups offer access to aspects of sociable interaction that are not readily available through other methodological means, as argued throughout the article. Various dynamics of face-to-face interaction and the underlying ritual chains, during which participants consciously and strategically engage in the process of intersubjective meaning making, are explored alongside relevant examples from the 2011 study on transformation mentioned earlier. We focus on four major facets of group interaction in particular, namely, communicative interaction, power and agency, conflict, and exchange. Each of these aspects is explored along with relevant subthemes and practical examples from the data.

### Communicative Interaction

Communicative interaction encompasses the various ways in which language, bodily gestures, and other expressions are harnessed to symbolically create meaning in social encounters. Examples of communicative interaction commonly generated in focus group discussions include argument, explanation, and rationalization.

### Argument

Argument refers to a communicative interaction in which diverging or opposite views are exchanged, typically but not necessarily, in a passionate fashion. In the following example, we see two black male respondents arguing over the possible abolition of Afrikaans as an official language of the UFS, in favor of single-medium English instruction. At first, they disagree, with Sir supporting the idea and Tezovic opposing it, mentioning the idea of first language tertiary education for all. It then becomes apparent that Tezovic had misinterpreted the question, seemingly understanding the question to be about Afrikaans as an official national language. He then corrects himself and agrees with Sir, who displays signs of irritation, as indicated by his offhand final reply, and accompanying facial and bodily expressions of disbelief.

> **Sir:**[1] Exactly. Now, it starts to become a problem because now you have 11 different classes. [South Africa has 11 official languages]
>
> **Tezovic:** No. English, I believe, should be the medium of instruction.
>
> **Sir:** So then exactly. Now, coming down to the question, should Afrikaans go away or not in varsity?
>
> **Tezovic:** In varsity?
>
> **Sir:** Yes, that was his question.
>
> **Tezovic:** Oh, okay, then I misunderstood it.
>
> **Sir:** Exactly.

### Explanation

Explanations are commonly produced during instances of sociable interaction, usually in order to make something clear or justify a certain action, belief, or opinion. After acknowledging the widespread presence of recreational substance use in hostels, two white male respondents justify the phenomenon.

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[1] Each participant in the focus groups picked her/his own pseudonym. The same pseudonyms are used in this article.

**Mr. Gericke:** There's no addiction or anything. I would rather call it regular use.

**Chomp:** Casual use. Look, there are many guys who drink and use soft drugs like dagga. You can find it anywhere on campus. There are so many people who use it, black and white. Alcohol is consumed privately in dorm room. Dagga, I'm not so sure about. [Dagga is South African slang for marijuana]

**Mr. Gericke:** Look, because drug use is a recreational activity, as students, quite a lot of people do it. Because it's so freely available, it isn't really hard to get.

### Rationalization

Rationalization refers to a special kind of explanation in which an attitude or behavior is explained with logical reasons, even if said reasons are inappropriate. The following example by a white female respondent was given when she, as a member of a House Committee (an elected body of senior students overseeing aspects of life in a student residence), was asked how the friction between an increasingly multicultural student body and the deeply entrenched initiatory traditions and hierarchies of authority in certain residences was being managed. The arrogance of her response, while it is a logical one, neglects, amongst other things, the alienation experienced by students who choose not to participate in residence initiations.

**Ané:** Nobody's forced to participate in anything.

Upon being asked about the Christian character of residences, even though many students are not Christian, a white male participant rationalizes this seemingly discriminatory state of affairs by overtly acknowledging the fact that, in the residence, majority rules.

**Chomp:** We open with prayer and everyone sits there, Christian or not. They're not going to moan, it doesn't bother them. They accept that the majority are Christian.

In the next example, a black male respondent illustrates the need to accept at some point one's inability to bring about change.

**Tezovic:** I'd like to elaborate on this point. I think it's very true what he says, because I don't. It's very difficult to change a place where something has been going on for so many years. It's one of those things you either adapt or you just move out. So now, when you come to a certain place, and you are this kind of person and it's done in a certain way in this place, you try and: "Listen guys, it's like this, it's like this." After a while, it's like you're farting against a brick wall, you're just not…and then after that it's like: "Listen, maybe that's the way to go."

### Power and Agency

Individuals often influence the behavior of others during social interaction, intervening in various ways in order to direct social intercourse in a desired direction. Meaningful action and domination are the most readily observable examples of issues of power and agency in focus group discussions.

### Meaningful Action

People continuously strive to attach serious or worthwhile meaning to their actions and opinions, and do so in various ways. In the following example, a black respondent reacts to the idea that a residence should be no more than a place of temporary accommodation, with students coming and going freely, and not having to kowtow to some collectively invented identity.

**Tezovic:** No, you have to. When I went to UCT [University of Cape Town], and I saw what I saw, no. You have to at least know your mates…

The second example relates to the frustration of overregulation and diminished decision-making opportunities.

**Pikes:** Let's face it, we're all adults here and being older than 18, I'm allowed to drink wherever. This place has become a school where you don't…you're not allowed to drink. When you want to drink, it's going to be like you're feeling back at home when you were like 16 or 17 and you go to the bars and buy stuff, and when you get caught, you're in trouble. Here, it's a totally different story. I think that's the main problem, because the bonds [drinking facilities in residences which were forced to close] and alcohol was banned, we progressed to anger, and we don't want to. It's just not the same, it's not the same. I mean, people, for me, the bond was the place, it was part of the culture. But now, what do they expect at the University? I mean, you go to Traümerei [a conventional coffee shop on campus]. What do you do there? It's not the same.

### Domination

Domination is a more aggressive form of exercising power over others in a social context. Here, a white male respondent does not hesitate to place 10 minutes of exposure to what he believes to be the "true faith" above the rights of an individual belonging to a religious minority. The tone and seriousness of his voice, along with the shrugging of his shoulders and a relaxed sinking back into his chair, conveyed the sense that he was talking from a position of power. Being Christian means having one less thing to worry about in the residence.

**Mr. Gericke:** Look, he has the whole 24 hours of a day to practice his religion. He only has to sit for 10 minutes when meetings [opened by prayers according to Christian tradition] are convened. That's not a problem or asking too much.

In the following example, the respondent, again a white male, might come across as domineering in his views, though the crux of the matter lies in the fact that he refers to the general domination of students by top management who, according to him, ignore the discrepancies between the University's public image and the realities of life on campus. He attempts to diffuse the situation by making the reference jokingly. Here, the focus group, with members carefully selected, once again proved its potential. Had the speaker been involved in a multiracial discussion, he is unlikely to have made this comment as the majority of black students attach great importance to Oprah Winfrey's visit to the UFS.

**Chomp:** Look, it's great publicity to have Oprah here and all that stuff [well-known TV celebrity, Oprah Winfrey, visited the UFS in 2011]. To have this or that big famous face here. It's good publicity for campus, but it doesn't show what's happening on ground level, what's really happening…all the rough spots. Everything they ignore. It's great that campus is moving in that direction, but actually, it's not there yet.

## Conflict

Individuals sometimes find themselves incompatibly clashing with others. The protracted and serious nature of conflict differentiates it from momentary, diffusible instances of misunderstanding and disagreement. Challenge and frustration are examples of conflict that often arise in social settings.

### Challenge

In conversational situations, people often dispute the validity of each other's opinions and make rival claims, essentially engaging each other in verbal contests of superiority. Here, a young black male rejects the notion that residence traditions, including often humiliating initiations, are an integral part of campus life.

**Tezovic:** The hostel. There is one or two instances where I guess the hostel has got no choice but to change, like where a certain tradition just isn't on any more. While it was done in 1992, you can't do it in 2011. It's just, it's not on, you know.

A black female respondent elaborates on whether Afrikaans should remain an official language of instruction at the UFS.

**Neo:** No. What are you going to do with Afrikaans? What if you get a transfer to the United Kingdom, what if you get a transfer to the United States? Who is going to understand you if you speak Afrikaans? Reality check.

In the next example, a black female participant negates the argument that racial differences in sexual behavior and attitudes result from cultural differences, accusing white female students of hypocrisy. This was a touchy subject as, during the course of the study, it was found that only black residences had condom dispensers, as white female students were too embarrassed by their presence.

**Galesho:** I personally have white friends. They have the tendency it's [sex] something dirty. They think it's something dirty. "So, it can't affect us." But, they're the ones who are more rebellious. You see, that's the thing. So, I think it's more on race. It's more about race than Christianity and everything, it's more about race. I also have white friends that are not Christians but they also have that mentality that, you know, only a black girl would carry a condom around, not her. She's too clean for a condom, but she's the one who's sleeping around, so.

### Frustration

People voice their frustration when they are annoyed or upset at a state of affairs which they have

little or no control over, or when they perceive progress or the fulfillment of something important to them being prevented. Here, a white female respondent offers an argument against the abolition of Afrikaans as an official language of instruction at the UFS, unfortunately with little rationality.

**Michelle:** If they feel so strongly about that, then they can get people to lecture in Xhosa and Sotho [two of South Africa's indigenous languages]. They go out of their way to get us English and Afrikaans lecturers, so if they feel so strongly about that, they should get other lecturers to cater for everyone.

In the following example, a black female participant disapproves of the fact that the UFS's coat of arms was changed without consulting students, even after a petition was submitted in favor of keeping the old colors.

**Nicky:** About the logo. I feel they should not have changed the logo, the logo should not have changed in the first place. It had a good meaning – the first one. This one is just lines that are going everywhere and you don't really even know what they mean.

A white male respondent's reaction to the thought of residence traditions dying out due to lack of participation and culture clashes brought about by forced integration and top management's policy of placing first year students in residences further illustrates the issue of frustration.

**Chomp:** This forcing must end. They should put guys in the hostel who want to be in the hostel.

Those that don't, should go to private accommodation. The University builds a new building every second day, they can build private accommodation. It can be for black and white because there are lots of people who are put in hostels who don't want to live that life. There should be private accommodation on campus, academic accommodation!

A white female participant ponders the ways in which top management engaged with the issue of residence integration.

**Ané:** They don't know what's going on exactly in the rez [residence], so they decide things which are good things. But the practicalities, how things are done in practice, they do not understand. So, they don't realize what the setup is in a rez. So I think rather they should really get people to look into, … how a rez works, before they make decisions and just force it down on rezzes.

### Exchange

An exchange is a short, active argument or conversation which usually leads to greater mutual understanding resulting from dissimilar starting points. The narratives below reflect the views of black males expressing their feelings about race-based quotas in residences (often resulting in empty beds and waiting lists of students who do not meet racial requirements).

**Lord Mizzy:** The system is there. They tell you to put how many whites, how many blacks. But, along there they don't monitor the whole thing. So, it's just a complete failure. I don't think it's going on nicely.

**Sir:** I've been here for five years, I've lived off campus in my first year, I came to campus in my second year, and I must say in the five years that I've been here this place has changed drastically. All thanks to the systems that have been put in place. Coming here back in the day and seeing how things are now, it's a huge difference. It's a huge turnaround. I just can't say it enough, it's really been big. So me, I totally say yes, but in some manners they could have done things differently, understand. But then, I think their objective by doing the things they did or setting the things in place which they did, I think the objective was definitely reached. And yes, there's a problem with the University management I think us as students have. They mean well and they set good things in place or in motion, but then, when coming to implement them, it's a different story, understand. They don't go throughout with the process, so. But, heads up to them. Heads up to the management.

**Mugabe junior:** Just to add on that. Let's say, for first years there's round about 40 first years that you get [in one residence], and then maybe 25 are blacks and then 15 are whites. Round, during the year, let's say round 10 leave, 10 white first years leave. You have 5 left. Instead of finding more white people, management only bring black students. Meaning, there's still no integration, there's still more blacks, and it's a cycle that happens every year. We are only being ethnically integrated instead of being diverse cultures like white and black.

**Tezovic:** I guess it's true what you're saying, Mugabe, but I don't think you can force. I can't force you to run a marathon, you know. As much as, yeah,

they can have their structures and policies and whatever the case may be, but I can't force you to go stay if you don't want to, you know. I guess that is another barrier where, as much as they're really trying hard to transform, integrate, at the end of the day, it's up to the people. I do believe that transformation can't happen without force, it's my opinion. There has to be some kind of force because when I speak to some of these guys, it's always the case, some of them understand the concept that it has to happen at some time, but when you talk to them, no one wants it to happen in their time. Since because maybe their grandfather or their father was in the hostel at a time, so it's: "No man, it must happen, but why can't it?" If I don't want it to happen in my time, and the next one doesn't want it to happen in his time, and the next one, when is it going to happen? Because we're just delaying the whole process, so the force has to be then: "Listen, like it or not, it's going to be like that."

## Conclusion

In this article, we have illustrated the ways in which focus groups are suitable for capturing qualitatively rich data that shed light on the ways in which people create and interpret social reality in a group setting. Few other methods, be they quantitative or qualitative, allow for the same depth of analysis capturing the various nuances of communication, conflict, and exchange that constitute the foundation of everyday social interaction, and the focus group's unique situating of research participants attains a level of interactional realism that both the survey and one-on-one interview are unlikely to match. Where interaction is of the essence the

focus group has the potential to deliver, allowing the researcher to take the best that the in-depth interview has to offer and combine it with some of the advantages of participant observation, and to create an interactive encounter that, while it closely mimics natural interaction, allows the experienced facilitator to direct the inquiry as necessary. The examples given in this article present a compelling case for the continued development of the focus

group as a method of data collection that allows unique glimpses into the very moment in which intersubjective reality is collectively created or agreed upon. The epistemological potential of the focus group is vast, and the method has much to offer the social scientist interested in the role of human emotions, symbols, and language, and the intersubjective exchange thereof, in the construction of social reality.

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