

(Myers 2008); and the use of focus groups in cross-cultural and developing country settings (Hennink 2007).

Moreover, my personal interactions with others at academic conferences, invited presentations, and at my home institution confirm that there is strong and widespread interest in undertaking focus groups. Scholars and students alike recognize that focus groups can be useful for addressing certain aspects of their research question. Yet, persistent doubts about *how* to use focus groups with rigor and transparency make them reluctant to use the data collection method.

The primary aim of this text is to make focus groups more accessible in practice for those who wish to use them in their work. It pursues this aim by highlighting three interrelated characteristics of focus groups – characteristics that will help us understand when and how to best take advantage of the data collection method. The next section describes each of these, setting the stage for what follows in the rest of the book.

Three Interrelated Characteristics of Focus Groups: A Basis for Their Use in the Social Sciences

The potential utility of focus groups for a variety of research agendas is well known. Their advantages are multiple. Focus groups are an efficient method for collecting qualitative data with multiple participants. They provide a safe environment for sharing ideas and perspectives on sensitive or difficult topics. Focus groups privilege spontaneity. They represent a space where personal problems can be discussed openly (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009, 2; see also, Morgan 1988; Duggleby 2005; Barbour 2008). Certainly, these are valuable guideposts that signal when focus groups may be an appropriate data collection method. It is difficult, however, to fully comprehend when and why to use focus groups without understanding the methodological foundations that underpin this list.

On this point, this text highlights three interrelated characteristics that help distinguish focus groups methodologically from other data collection methods. These are associated with the focus group structure, process, and the types of the data generated. First, focus groups are inherently **social** in form. Second, focus groups produce data that are **emic** in nature. Third, focus groups generate data at **three levels of analysis**. Each of these attributes may not be unique to focus groups. Taken together, however, they help determine when and how focus groups can be useful for our research. Chapter 2 addresses this point in much greater detail. First, however, we must better understand what each of these characteristics entails.

The Social Form of Focus Groups

Focus group conversations are inherently *social* in their form. Participants are likely to consider the presence of others before they give their opinion. This means that what focus group participants say is subject to the same social pressures that affect individual behavior in the real world. For some, this means that individual participants cannot be treated as independent from one another.⁸ It also makes focus groups uniquely capable of measuring how we gain knowledge on certain phenomena in real life.

To make sense of this, let us consider an example of how meaning can be acquired via social processes. As you know, two political parties currently dominate the party system in the United States: the Republican and Democratic parties. Both parties have a fairly solid set of partisan followers (known as Republicans and Democrats). As ample research has shown (e.g., Green et al. 2002), these partisans have acquired fairly stable group identities based on certain policy preferences. Republicans tend to favor small government and more conservative fiscal and social policy. Democrats, by contrast, tend to support a larger, more active government, particularly when it comes to distributive policy. They also espouse more progressive social policies.

These identities were forged through eminently social processes. Partisans embody certain traits in their everyday activities and conversations (Green et al. 2002, 11). Others recognize these traits across the multiple partisans they encounter. Over time, these traits become descriptive of the partisan in general, helping to produce and reinforce group identity. Consequently, individuals identify as Democrat or Republican through social processes. Party traits and stereotypes are learned via inherently social processes (Ehrlich 1973; Leyens et al. 1994).

From this example on partisan identity we can draw two conclusions. First, it is through our groups (e.g., our family, our friends, our colleagues, our

⁸ On this point there is some debate. Can an individual speak freely in a group setting, such that what she says is unaffected by that group setting? Some scholars find that the social pressures operating within the focus group setting make it very difficult for individuals to speak their mind without being influenced by the group. Consequently, they conclude, we cannot treat the individual responses of participants in a focus group as independent from each other (Carey and Smith 1994; Kidd and Parshall 2000; Schindler 1992; Sim 1998). Others, however, contend that individual opinions are formed as a result of fundamentally social processes. We can, therefore, use the focus group to observe this process of individual opinion formation (Vicsek 2010, 131; see also Kitlinger 1994; 2004; Kosny 2003; Puchta and Potter 2002; Wilkinson 2006). In practice, the individual is treated as an independent unit in many studies that use focus groups (Cyr 2016). There are also certain tricks that the researcher can adopt to measure if these kinds of social pressures are at play (see Chapter 4). Finally, social desirability bias operates in multiple different data collection methods, including interviews and surveys. Given these realities, this text adopts the position that it is possible to measure the individual as an independent level of analysis within the focus group. I return to this point in greater detail later.

bowling or garden clubs, our Facebook community) that *collective* sense of the world is made; that shared meanings are negotiated; and that group identities are forged (Wilkinson 1999, 225). The Democratic party develops a set of constitutive traits – its identity – as a result of the behaviors that Democrats exhibit and the ideas that they espouse. Second, individuals develop *their own* understanding, opinions, and perspectives of the world, as well as their place in it, through social processes (Albrecht et al. 1993, 54). An individual comes to identify (or not) as a Democrat precisely because of what she has learned about Democrats through her conversations with family, friends, colleagues, etc.

Because of their social nature, focus groups replicate these processes. For one, focus groups simulate group dynamics that occur in real life. Researchers can organize focus groups around individuals who share certain traits or experiences (e.g., women, union members, domestic violence victims). These commonalities bind individuals together to form groups in the *sociological* sense, such that “the collectivities are more than simple sums of the individuals who comprise them” (Short 2006, 107). Still, the group dynamic can also develop around quite minimal criteria, such as a common shirt color or the shared experience of participating in a focus group (see, e.g., Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971; Frank and Gilovich 1988). The social nature of focus groups allows researchers to tap into group synergy (Stewart et al. 2009, 594).

Additionally, focus groups replicate the social manner through which *individuals* form their opinions. Focus group participants develop or refine their views in reaction to what other participants say (Farnsworth and Boon 2010, 609). Consequently, practitioners must keep in mind that focus groups are an “exercise in group dynamics” (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990, 7). The social nature of the group is a factor to consider when deciding if focus groups are useful for a research project.

The social nature of the focus group means that certain topics are not appropriate for study in a focus group setting. For example, a researcher who wishes to obtain individual narratives should probably not adopt focus groups as a data collection strategy. Here, the group setting can be a distraction (Barbour 2008, 18). This is not to say that social processes did not, in some way, affect that individual narrative. Certainly they did! Still, focus groups will make it difficult to access the individual’s story in an uninterrupted fashion.

In many cases, however, the inherently social nature of focus groups, and the group pressures and dynamics therein, are actually vital for understanding the research topic of interest. Consider, for example, the partisan identity example above. The construction of the Democratic identity occurs inter-subjectively, that is, as partisans engage with each other and with non-partisans. How we, as individuals, understand partisanship in the United States tends to be shaped by

how partisans are discussed at our dinner table, in school, in the office, on the television, or in social media.

We can draw a similar conclusion for other concepts, including race, gender, charisma, identity, power, or legitimacy. Our understanding of these phenomena is often highly contextual and acquired via inter-subjective processes, that is, in our interactions with others. For these kinds of socially constructed concepts, focus groups are particularly useful. This is because focus groups replicate the social processes through which meaning is acquired and forged.

Finally, ample research has shown that the social dimension of focus groups can facilitate and ease the discussion of certain, more sensitive topics (see, e.g., Farquhar and Das 1999; Liamputtong 2011). For example, focus groups can be empowering for individuals who suffer from a traumatic illness, such as HIV/AIDS or breast cancer (see, e.g., O'Brien 1993b; Carey 1994). When participating in a focus group with individuals who have shared the same experience, individuals may be more likely to share their own story. Additionally, as Barbour (2008) reminds us, the extent to which a topic is taboo or sensitive will vary by individual. The group setting can assuage feelings of discomfort on the part of some individuals, because others might be willing to open the conversation and, consequently, "break" the taboo (Barbour 2008, 18).

The Emic Nature of the Data Produced

In addition to its social form, focus groups generate data that are *emic* in nature. We typically contrast emic research with etic research. These represent two different ways of studying people. Emic research entails gathering data from the perspective of the subject. The idea behind this kind of data collection is that the researcher draws from the conceptual schemes and categories that the group deems to be meaningful and appropriate (Lett 1990, 130). In other words, researchers learn about a phenomenon via the descriptions offered by a particular group or culture. Emic data privilege the *subject's* viewpoint.

Etic research, by contrast, privileges a set of theories, perspectives, or concepts previously developed within the researcher's discipline. The idea behind this data collection is to measure whether that existing theory or perspective applies to the new group or culture. Here, the *researcher's* perspective on the phenomenon in question, and her hypotheses regarding that phenomenon, are privileged (see, e.g., Krippendorff 2004; Kottak 1996).

In practice, no data are generated via a purely emic or etic approach. Researchers do not (nor should they!) adopt an emic approach to data collection without having some sense of what the existing literature says about the topic in question. Similarly, researchers rarely apply a model or theory to a new group or context without having some knowledge or sense beforehand

about that group or context. Instead, data collection methods tend to privilege one approach or the other.

Focus groups privilege an emic approach to data collection. The researcher typically poses less structured questions, with the goal of letting participants speak freely about the issues raised. Data emerge from conversations that, while initiated by a question, unfold through the potentially multiple and diverse responses of the participants.⁹

To be sure, the fact that there is a question protocol implies a certain amount of researcher-imposed structure on the focus group. Nonetheless, focus group questions should be open (Merton and Kendall 1946), allowing for a participant-led conversation to organically flow, with only minimal interruption by the moderator. Participants can use their own words, their own categorizations, and their own perceived associations in answering a question (Stewart et al. 2007, 40). Overall, focus group participants enjoy a high degree of freedom to respond as they wish (Stewart et al. 2009, 590).¹⁰ Especially in comparison with survey-based research, which tends to privilege closed-ended questions that are crafted (and therefore “imposed”) by the researcher, focus groups privilege the participants’ perspective.

The spontaneity of the exchanges that occur in the focus group setting, and the emic data that these exchanges produce, represent a unique advantage of focus groups (Stevens 1996, 171). They become a good choice for researchers who are embarking on a new research agenda. Focus groups are excellent for gathering data where little data currently exist (Copsey 2008). By allowing participants openly to deliberate on a set of questions, focus groups provoke hypotheses that can later be tested via other means (Prabhakar 2012, 81; see also Merton 1987). For example, Prabhakar (2012) used focus groups as an initial method for exploring how the British public viewed government spending and taxation. The longer-term research agenda centered on the design of effective tax systems. The focus groups provided an initial set of responses that could later be tested using other, large-scale methods.

Second, focus groups are useful for studying decision-making processes, including how people assess different priorities or tradeoffs (Barbour 2008). Generally speaking, focus groups allow researchers to see how people think, what factors they take into account in making a decision, and how and if these

⁹ This can create some issues with comparability across focus groups. After all, the researcher cannot know how the conversation will evolve. The same question can provoke very different responses in different focus groups, because the participants will be different. As we will see moving forward, however, it is nonetheless possible to analyze data across focus groups that ask the same set of open questions.

¹⁰ Other data collection methods that privilege emic research include unstructured individual in-depth interviews, projective methods, and ethnographies (Stewart et al. 2007, 40).

factors are resolved once the decision has been made. Given their social nature, focus groups are particularly effective at studying group norms, group meaning, and group decision-making processes (see, e.g., Bloor et al. 2001).

For example, one study examined whether targeted social policies engender a more inclusive sense of citizenship among recipients (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014). The researchers undertook eleven focus groups with recipients of one targeted social policy, Brazil's *Bolsa Família*, and asked them to consider whether that policy had a positive effect on their own feeling of inclusion in the community. The researchers learned from group discussions that *Bolsa Família* generated feelings of agency and empowerment (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014, 835). Despite acknowledging serious problems with the program, the groups ultimately (and universally) decided that it engendered a sense of inclusion.

Finally, the emic nature of focus groups allows researchers to understand how participants talk about a topic of interest (Stewart et al. 2009, 591). This can be particularly useful in a mixed-methods research design, where focus groups are used as a pre-test for developing valid survey questions (Copsey 2008; Morgan 1996; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; see also, Fuller et al. 1993). The emic nature of focus groups allows researchers to test and refine survey question phrasing. They can also check for cross-sectional comparability. Does the phrasing of a particular question adequately tap into a topic of interest across multiple research sites? Or, alternatively, must the question be re-worded to address differences in context? Researchers in Thailand, for example, found that seemingly objective terms from a US-based survey, including “room” and “bedroom,” had to be clarified before undertaking the same survey in Bangkok. Additionally, certain sayings, such as “too tired to do anything” had to be re-phrased to account for contextual differences. In Thailand, the more appropriate saying was “too tired to move” (Fuller et al. 1993, 100).

The Three Levels of Analysis of Focus Groups

One final characteristic of focus groups is related to the analysis of focus group data.¹¹ Specifically, focus groups can generate data at three different levels of analysis: the individual level, the group level, and the level of the interaction. This means, in practice, that one can learn a lot from focus groups! It also means that a researcher must decide *where* to focus her analytical energies after carrying out focus groups. To do this, she must understand what kind of information each level of analysis conveys. This section briefly introduces each level of analysis. Chapter 5 provides greater detail on how to analyze focus group data.

¹¹ This section borrows from Cyr 2016.

Researchers may wish to use focus groups as a venue for accessing multiple individual perspectives simultaneously. There is considerable debate about the value of using focus groups in this way (see, e.g., footnote 8 above; see also Vicsek 2010). It is nonetheless the case that a majority of research projects that use focus groups tends to privilege the individual level of analysis.

When researchers privilege the individual level of analysis, they are most interested in the responses that individual participants give to the questions posed. For example, DiMaggio and Garip (2011) use focus groups to understand where migrants go for help and find that “most” migrants prefer to turn to their peers rather than their families (DiMaggio and Garip 2011, 1920). The term, “most,” represents a quantification of the data. The authors surveyed all individuals and found that the majority responded in one particular way.

Focus groups can be a relatively inexpensive way to “rapidly appraise” what a group of individuals think about a question or topic (Bratton and Liatto-Katundu 1994, 537). By this logic, a researcher would use focus groups because of the economy of scale they offer. Rather than undertake twenty-five to thirty in-depth interviews about a topic, which can take multiple hours and several days or weeks to complete, a researcher may instead choose to organize three focus groups. In the context of the focus group, the researcher can ask multiple individuals to provide their feedback on a particular question. This often entails literally going around the room and fielding individual responses on a particular question or concern. Consequently, in as little as six hours, the researcher can access the same number of people’s views as with hours and hours of single interviews.

Individual-level responses are most easily quantified (e.g. *How many individuals agreed with Question 1? How many spoke positively about Issue A? How many spoke negatively?*). Where the responses line up with data collected via other means, focus groups can confirm or build upon that evidence. In this sense, focus groups are an additional venue to generate data. They can also provide valuable quotations that are illustrative of the general findings. Focus groups can add qualitative “meat” to the bare-“bones” data collected via quantitative methods (Posner 2005, 310). Overall, researchers who analyze data at the individual level typically use focus groups to triangulate data collected elsewhere (Cyr 2016).

It bears re-emphasizing that researchers who focus on the individual level of analysis are not as interested in leveraging the social nature of the focus group. In effect, it is difficult to isolate individual responses from the general group conversation on most questions. For example, when noting an individual response, how does a researcher know that the participant is speaking her mind rather than reacting to what someone else has said? It is difficult to know for sure that the response an individual gives in a group is similar to her

response in a non-social setting. One way to get around this is to ask participants to write their responses down before voicing them. That way, researchers will have a written record of individual reactions that are uninfluenced by the group discussion.

To be sure, a unique feature of the focus group is its social setting. Therefore, rather than exclusively focus on the individual level of analysis, researchers might instead emphasize the *group* level of analysis. Much of the focus group is dedicated to participant discussion and debate on specific questions or topics. The back-and-forth that occurs allows answers to build and evolve, uncovering nuances and complexities that may be obscured by more etic-oriented data collection methods (Stewart et al. 2009, 594). By analyzing the group level of analysis, researchers can assess whether there is consensus on a particular topic, on what the topic means for the group, and/or how the topic is discussed.

In practice, this means that focus groups can be used to measure (dis-)agreement on how phenomena are interpreted or understood. For example, Gibson (2004) organized focus groups in South Africa, asking citizens to discuss racial dynamics in the country. The focus groups revealed that, though multiple races co-exist in the country, the predominant racial conflict occurred between black South Africans and all others (Gibson 2004, 205). Gibson then used the focus group findings to refine a battery of questions in a representative survey that he later administered.

Gibson focused his analysis of the focus group data on the group level. This made sense because he wished to assess how South Africans as a group understood racial dynamics. In fact, researchers who use focus groups to pre-test questions for a large-N data collection method, such as surveys or experiments, regularly analyze group dynamics (Cyr 2016; see also Fuller et al. 1993, O'Brien 1993a). When focus groups reveal consensus on a particular question, researchers can feel more confident that the survey or experimental protocol they have developed is tapping into the appropriate sentiments, beliefs, or stereotypes regarding a topic of interest. Researchers who analyze the group level of analysis tend to use focus groups as a pre-test for a more quantitative data collection instrument (Cyr 2016).

When researchers analyze the group level of analysis, they typically bypass much of the deliberation that takes place among participants to focus on the end result or conclusion of a particular conversation. Indeed, focus group conversations, as they unfold, can be quite messy. Participants may work through multiple, conflicting perspectives on a topic before arriving at consensus (Barabas 2004). The numerous interactions that constitute the discussion of one question are not, therefore, amenable for researchers who use focus groups as a pre-test.

Yet, those interactions can produce potentially surprising insights – insights that would not be accessible via other data collection methods (Morgan 1988,

12). The third and final level of analysis, that of the interaction, provides another layer of data that researchers may exploit. Focus group conversations reveal how groups formulate meaning and/or generate opinions. The process through which this occurs, however, is not necessarily linear. Consequently, focus group interactions will not easily support or contradict previously derived hypotheses. Instead, they can lead to the formulation of *new* hypotheses, which can then be tested with other methods (Merton 1987, Bratton and Liatto-Katundu 1994).

Researchers who concentrate on focus group interactions typically do so because the interactions reveal something new or unexpected. This was the case, for example, with Moore (2008). The scholar initially undertook focus groups to triangulate data collected elsewhere on familial roles and stereotypes in black, lesbian stepfamilies. The focus group revealed, however, that conventional (read: gendered) notions of motherhood exercised great influence in these non-conventional families. This unexpected insight caused the author to postulate that women in same-sex relationships seek greater responsibility for childcare and housework to construct a gendered sense of self (Moore 2008, 348). The focus group interactions provoked a new hypothesis to explore.

Researchers tend to examine focus group interactions when these reveal unexpected or unanticipated ideas. Consequently, researchers do not typically undertake focus groups with the sole purpose of analyzing their interactions. Still, as mentioned above, the emic nature of focus groups can make them an appropriate method for gathering data on that which we know very little (see, e.g., Kidd and Parshall 2000 or Prabhakar 2012). Whatever the motivation driving the use of focus groups, researchers should be attentive to the potentially new or unexpected data that interactions can derive. We will return to this point again in Chapter 5.

Overall, then, focus groups produce data at three different levels of analysis: that of the individual, the group, and the interaction. Each level of analysis conveys different kinds of information and can be used toward different ends. The individual level of analysis allows researchers to gather multiple individual opinions simultaneously. It can be useful for triangulating other data. The group level of analysis reveals consensus on topics of interest and can help a researcher pre-test questions to be integrated into a different data collection method. Focus groups interactions produce unexpected ideas or insights. They can lay the groundwork for new hypotheses.

The Use of Focus Groups in the Social Sciences

The previous section underscored three characteristics of focus groups: their social form; the emic process through which data are generated; and the three

levels of analysis where data are produced. The emphasis on these traits is important. It lays the groundwork for what follows in subsequent chapters. The three traits also underscore this book's main purpose: They allow a researcher to understand if, when, and how to use focus groups in her research design. This is because, when taken together, the three traits embody certain, unique advantages of the data collection method.

First, *focus groups allow researchers to understand group processes and dynamics*. We have seen above that the social form of the focus group replicates how social processes work in real life. Focus groups simulate the processes through which individuals and groups acquire meaning about much of the world around them. One implication of this is that researchers should use focus groups when they wish to examine how groups understand the world around them. It also means that focus groups are useful when researchers wish to observe how individuals think and act in social settings.

Second, *focus groups are empowering for their participants*. What do I mean by this? To begin with, in focus groups, the degrees of freedom of participant responses are high (Stewart et al. 2009, 590). The social form of the focus group, as well as the emic data that are privileged, creates a setting in which participants may respond freely to the questions that are posed. They are not forced to select one potentially unsatisfactory or incomplete answer, as with close-ended questions on a survey. Instead, they choose the words they wish to use. They choose to agree or not to agree with other participants. They may even choose not to speak. It is in this sense that the focus group is empowering for the participant (Liamputtong 2011). Researchers may therefore ask questions – about, for example, sensitive topics or with marginalized groups – that might not be accessible via other data collection methods. They can also use focus groups to pursue exploratory work.

Overall, these two advantages mean that focus groups are incredibly versatile: they allow a researcher to assess a variety of different questions. Edward Fern, who has written extensively on the use of focus groups in marketing, underscores this point (2001). He finds that focus groups help undertake myriad different tasks. They help with the exploratory tasks of creation, discovery, and identification. They unveil motivations, biases, prejudices, and predilections. They also reveal information about life experience, attitudes, intention, language, and strategy (Fern 2001, Chapter 1). Notably, Fern focuses on the use of focus groups in marketing. He therefore focuses largely on how the method draws out this information at the *individual* level. We can, however, extract equally rich data at the group and interactive levels of analysis – a point that we already made above.

Once we understand that focus groups entail these three characteristics, we see that the value of focus groups for data collection is potentially very high for

the social science researcher. The rest of this book is dedicated to demonstrating this point. Along the way, it will teach the researcher if, when, and how to use focus groups in a social science research design. Let us glance quickly at the journey that awaits us.

A Road Map of What Follows

The chapters that follow are designed to walk the researcher through the multiple steps involved in undertaking focus groups. They begin by first helping the researcher to assess if focus groups will be a useful addition to her research design. Specifically, Chapter 2 explains when and why to use focus groups. It provides an extensive, if not exhaustive, list of the kinds of questions that focus groups can answer and then explains how focus groups can be used as a stand-alone method, in conjunction with other qualitative methods, and in conjunction with quantitative methods. It also identifies certain tradeoffs implied with adopting the data collection method.

Chapter 3 then helps the researcher prepare for undertaking focus groups. It spells out the logistics that should be considered, helps the researcher develop an effective question protocol, provides guidelines for training the moderator, and addresses certain challenges that can arise in non-native settings and when considering more sensitive research topics. Chapter 4 addresses how actually to carry out focus groups once the logistics and question protocol are in place. It stresses the importance of the moderator in undertaking successful focus groups. It explains the different roles a researcher can have while focus groups are underway. Finally, it tackles certain challenges that can affect focus group interactions, including how to avoid group think and/or manage overly timid or overly aggressive participants.

Chapter 5 provides guidelines on how to analyze the data generated in focus groups. Rather than offer one particular method of analysis, it focuses instead on the factors to keep in mind as you analyze the content of your data. It also briefly explains how to undertake classic content analysis – by far the most common approach to analyzing focus group data. It then reiterates that focus groups can produce data at three different levels of analysis and details when and why each level of analysis should be analyzed. Finally, this chapter provides guidelines for presenting your findings. Chapter 6 provides a brief conclusion.

In addition to providing a step-by-step guide to undertaking focus groups, Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 end with a series of exercises. These exercises should help the researcher put into practice some of the learning milestones of each chapter. They are designed to facilitate comprehension and further enhance the experience of planning and undertaking focus groups.