



# Focus Groups

FROM STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS TO COLLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

**GEORGE KAMBERELIS and GREG DIMITRIADIS**

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*Focus Groups: From structured interviews to collective conversations* is a conceptual and practical introduction to focus groups. As the title indicates, focus groups traditionally encompass a wide range of discursive practices. These span from formal structured interviews with particular people assembled around clearly delimited topics to less formal, open-ended conversations with large and small groups that can unfold in myriad and unpredictable ways. Additionally, focus groups can and have served many overlapping purposes—from the pedagogical, to the political, to the traditionally empirical. In this book, focus groups are systematically explored; not as an extension or elaboration of interview work alone, but as its own specific research method with its own particular affordances.

This book comprehensively explores:

- *the nature of focus groups*
- *political and activist uses of focus groups*
- *practical ways to run a successful focus group*
- *effective analysis of focus group data*
- *contemporary threats to focus groups.*

*Focus Groups: From structured interviews to collective conversations* is essential reading for qualitative researchers at every level, particularly those involved in education, nursing, social work, anthropology, and sociology disciplines.

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to collective conversations

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# Focus groups

## A brief and incomplete history

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Focus groups have become a part of the collective consciousness of the qualitative research community and of the public imagination. Recall here the extensive use of focus groups on virtually all the major US networks following the US presidential and vice-presidential debates of 2008. Although these were sometimes called “polls,” or “town hall meetings,” they all exhibited the forms and functions of large-scale focus groups as most people understand them. The first debate in Columbus, Ohio, was particularly instructive. The CNN press release noted:

Special correspondent Soledad O’Brian will moderate a focus group in Columbus, Ohio. The group will be comprised of a selection of voters from the hotly contested state. During the debate, the participants will operate electronic dial testers that will allow television viewers to see the group’s reaction in real time.

(CNN, 2008)

This group was made up of voters who had not yet decided about their vote. Their individual reactions, as noted, were measured in “real time” by way of a special meter that registered positive, negative, or indifferent responses. Afterwards, they were gathered together and queried about their responses.

SOLEDAD O’BRIAN: Barbara, you are 71 years old. Hold the mike up pretty close so we can get to hear you pretty well. I was watching you watch the debate. It was so interesting because you had a rapt attention and you were working your little dial like crazy, what resonated with you?

BARBARA HOOPER: Well it was what didn’t, if I could speak about that.

O’BRIAN: OK.

HOOPER: I mean, we have so many things going on in our country today, everyone has named so many of those tonight. But I would like for them to have been more specific about the war and a plan on when to bring our troops home. That concerned me a great deal.

(CNN Transcripts, 2008)

Individual group members spoke about their reactions to these debates first and foremost—as Hooper did here. There was very little dialogue between participants and moderator or between and among participants. Moderators like O’Brian tended to be quite directive in their questioning. The goal of the whole enterprise was to elicit a quick snapshot of how messages were taken up (or not) by people across the political spectrum. The end goal was clear—determining whether the debates swayed these undecided voters. Much like the earliest focus group work on propaganda messages in the 1940s, quantitative data (i.e. meters that register a continuum of responses) were privileged but complemented by delimited qualitative data (i.e. participants’ interview responses). This pattern is exemplary of the dominant approach to focus group work—an approach that treats focus groups as extensions of one-on-one interviews and subordinates them to what many researchers deem to be “hard” data.

This example highlights the appeal focus groups have had over time, as well as their place in the popular imagination. Both privately and publicly, focus groups are now routinely used to gauge popular attitudes and dispositions. They are used by politicians to test their platforms or to gauge popular sentiment around key issues. They are used by executives in the entertainment industry to test their latest creations—films, television shows, CDs. They are used by marketing analysts in industry to test their latest consumer goods. Indeed, in the media we often see focus groups on spectacular display, taking them out of clandestine offices and putting them in front of a global audience. Looking across these displays, it is remarkable to see how little has changed in use and function of focus groups during the past 70 or more years.

In many respects, CNN’s version of focus groups—a part of what the network called the most technologically advanced coverage of any election to date—was old-fashioned. More specifically, the double elision alluded to above has continued to mark much of the work on focus groups to date, particularly in more applied fields. First, focus groups are often not framed as distinct from one-on-one interviews. Instead, they are conceptualized as large interviews. In this regard, we will note much slippage between individual and group data gathering strategies throughout this book. Researchers are still puzzling through the similarities and differences between and among such strategies. Second, data from focus groups are often seen to serve a secondary function in research—to complement quantifiable data gathered using surveys or other instruments. Importantly, both of these elisions can be traced to the earliest use of focus groups in research. And both are still prevalent in contemporary research across a wide range of fields today. Indeed, both were prominent in CNN’s coverage of the 2008 elections.

The applied nature of much focus group work helps account for the persistence of this double elision. That is, focus groups have been used to solve a wide array of “real world” or practical problems. Because of their prevalence as practical tools in applied domains, focus groups have been under-theorized. And because they do not rest on a firm conceptual foundation, they are typically reinvented (almost

from “scratch”) by each new generation of researchers or in relation to new empirical problems.

## The origins of focus group research

The use of focus group research extends back to early propaganda or media effects studies at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in the 1940s. Originally founded to study the (then) new media of radio, research was soon undertaken on a wide range of media and their effects. Of particular interest in the post-World War II era was the study of mass-mediated “propaganda.” Several new methods emerged from the Bureau including the focus group or “focussed interview.” Merton and Kendall (1946) were rather inconsistent in their spelling of focused/focussed. We have chosen to use the more common spelling—focused—throughout. The so-called “focused interview” had the virtue of expediency. It was a way to get relevant, specific information from relatively large numbers of subjects quickly. This approach to focus groups was rooted in positivist or post-positivist epistemologies, which assume that the Truth is “out there” to be efficiently excavated, reported, and used. In many respects, the empirical material that emerged from these early focus groups could be analyzed with the same tools used to analyze one-on-one interviews. Here, focus groups were simply extensions of interviews meant to elicit individual opinions. While taking place in a group, the “unit of analysis” was still the individual.

This look at the beginnings of focus group research highlights the role and importance of “epistemology” in research methodology. As we have argued elsewhere, epistemologies are basic ways of seeing and understanding the world. For example, constructivists understand the world as constituted through human interactions. And thus see “fact” and “value” as interrelated. Positivists and post-positivists understand the world as independent from human interactions and thus see “fact” as completely separate from “value.” Epistemologies are different from “theories” which tend to be coherent but also contingent and emergent architectures of ideas. For example, Marxists see oppressive class relations as constitutive of much of how social relations between and among people have been organized throughout human history. Feminists see gender as central. Both epistemologies and theories are distinct from approaches to research and data collection strategies—the frameworks and tools used to gather, interpret, and disseminate empirical findings. See Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) for a fuller explanation of the relations between and among epistemologies, theories approaches, and strategies.

These levels of analyses often get confused and muddled. In particular, researchers and others have tended to conflate positivist epistemologies with quantitative research approaches and strategies, and constructivist epistemologies with qualitative ones. Yet the “paradigm wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, played out in the journal *Educational Researcher* and elsewhere, demonstrated in no uncertain terms that these distinctions do not hold. Much early focus group

research was grounded in positivist epistemologies. The Truth was assumed to be out there to be collected through rigorous and highly “focused” interviews—where situations or problems were defined, hypotheses formulated, interview protocol generated, and individuals questioned. Moreover, because the individual was the basic unit of analysis, in this research, the Truth was thought to be located in individual minds. This is not at all surprising given that western science is both a product of the Enlightenment and is still heavily imbued with Enlightenment principles such as Descartes’ separation of mind and body and privileging of mind and Leibniz’s monadology, where all individuals are unique substances that harbor their unique truths within themselves.

This focus on the individual had disciplinary implications as well. Specifically, by locating the Truth in the individual, focus group research tended to favor psychological approaches and explanations over sociological ones. Indeed, psychological approaches and explanations are dominant within many fields to this day (e.g. education, nursing, and marketing). In contrast (and despite the fact that most major advances in intellectual history during the past few decades have come from social and sociological theory), sociological approaches and explanations have remained marginal in these and other fields. Problems and explanations, here, tend not to be viewed in terms of social forces and structures such as class structure or gender inequalities or race and racism but in the motivations, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals. By thinking of focus groups as extensions of one-on-one interviews key directions for theory and research have been systematically underutilized.

With an eye toward broadening our understanding of the nature and functions of focus groups in research, knowledge generation, and application, *Focus Groups: From Structured Interviews to Collective Conversations* is both a conceptual and a practical introduction to focus group research. As the title indicates, focus groups can and have encompassed a wide range of discursive practices—from formal structured interviews with particular people assembled around clearly delimited topics to less formal, more open-ended conversations with large and small groups that can unfold in myriad and unpredictable ways. In addition, focus groups can serve (and have served) many overlapping purposes—from the pedagogical, to the political, to the traditionally empirical. In this volume, we look to explore focus groups systematically, not as an extension or elaboration of interview work alone, but as its own specific research strategy with its own particular affordances.

This is a practical distinction. The techniques and tools one uses to collect one-on-one interview data cannot easily be imported into focus group settings. Or rather, if they are imported into these settings, they do not usually mine the unique and rich potentials for knowledge generation, pedagogy, and political work that focus groups can afford. But the differences between individual interviews and focus group conversations extend beyond technique alone. There are important theoretical or conceptual distinctions between the two. One-on-one interviews are often undergirded by an Enlightenment notion of the “self.” Recall that the Enlightenment was the source of positivist and post-positivist epistemologies. From this perspective, the self is a transcendent consciousness that functions