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**Essay:**

**How good or bad is media research based on focus groups? What issues are still outstanding with regard to focus group research?**

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## Introduction

The focus group research method has gained more and more importance and interest among the social sciences in the recent years. In the move from the claim “what does the media do to people” to the question of “what do people do with the media”, that is, the move from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of audience-media relationships, the focus group has become more and more significant for audience research.

To discover how good or bad focus group research actually is it is important to take the strengths and weaknesses of the method into account. In this essay I will explain the main reasons named for using focus groups, the single stages of the focus group method and the specific problems that arise there, and in the end I want to explain why I believe that the focus group method in its existing form is fundamentally flawed by wrongly applied propositions.

## Why to use a focus group

As a qualitative method, it is believed, the focus group is suitable to discover the “role of the media use in the everyday life of audiences”<sup>1</sup>, the role media plays as a tool in the social construction of meaning and the examination of “how media audiences relate to, make sense of, use, negotiate, and interpret media content”<sup>2</sup>. Most case studies reflect this view in their publications:

“... the aim was to discover how interpretations were collectively constructed through talk and the interchange between respondents in the group situation.”<sup>3</sup>

“This research is designed to investigate how people use campaign information in *constructing* images of candidates...”<sup>4</sup>

“...we wished to include as a primary element of our study an investigation into how viewers made sense of, and evaluated, the programmes we chose for analysis.”<sup>5</sup>

And Peter Lunt notes in his review of focus group research, that this method is “concerned with the way audiences contribute to the negotiation and construction of meanings.”<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen et al. 1996, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Morley 1980, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Kern & Just 1995, p. 127. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Corner, Richardson and Fenton 1990, quoted in Hansen et al. 1996, p. 261.

creating rich, detailed and valid data, the focus group is supposed to give a better view on the viewer's reception of television than a sole survey of attitudes or opinions can do.

### **Stages and Problems**

We know now why researchers use focus groups. This gives us the opportunity to have a closer look at the framework of a focus group method, which factors are involved and what chances and problems arise out of them.

The most important feature of the focus group method is, obviously, the group itself. It is extremely crucial to ones research how these groups are assembled. But first we want to have another look at the question why to use groups and not individuals. In his well-known 'Nationwide' study of 1980, Morley emphasizes the need to interview groups: "The choice to work with groups rather than individuals ... was made on the grounds that much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context."<sup>7</sup> Jordin and Brunt have an opposing opinion, as they see an individual not as the simplest element in social life, "but, on the contrary, the most complex element, the point at which a multitude of shifting social and determinations converge."<sup>8</sup> They would, therefore, see no reason to object the use of individuals. The other reasons for choosing groups have been explained earlier.

However, as soon as one chooses to use a group, one has also to choose how to assemble these groups. There are different possibilities with different advantages and disadvantages: Firstly, a group can either consist of people who are familiar with each other or not. Secondly, a group can either be composed of members bearing the same variables, be they socio-economic or demographic, or different ones. Concerning the former, Lunt points out: "... much of the innovation in focus group design has involved moving away from the survey sampling approach [which is, having a representative sample on the cost of conducting a group consisting of complete strangers] to engage naturally occurring groups of like-minded people."<sup>9</sup> This means, as researchers want to observe the construction of meaning as it occurs in a natural social setting, it is believed to be useful to have groups consisting of this setting; and that is groups of friends, acquaintances, or working colleagues. Furthermore, it is in a

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<sup>6</sup> Lunt & Livingstone 1996, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Morley 1980, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Jordin & Brunt, p. 234.

<sup>9</sup> Lunt & Livingstone, p. 82.

sense easier to conduct interviews with like-minded participants, as people tend to express their beliefs, opinions and readings of texts more openly to already known people. A discussion involving strangers might need more controlling from the interviewer while friends are more at ease engaging in a natural conversation.

The same reasons apply for the above mentioned variables. As opinion forming or meaning construction in a (natural) group occurs rather between people of the same class, occupation, educational level, and the like, it seems to be useful to have groups with similar characteristics. This, of course, depends on the outcomes one intends to find and on the level of comparability one tries to achieve. It is most common, however, to group people with similar characteristics together.

Whatever approach one chooses, there is always “the risk that the apparent homogeneity within a group ... has been artificially manufactured by the most persuasive members of that group.”<sup>10</sup> Every group will inevitably have members who are more dominant than other members. These dominant members might already have a clear opinion on the topic and are therefore more likely to express it. Weaker members could simply follow their argumentation or might not respond at all. It has been said, that this “manipulation and control exercised by dominant group members simply reflects the reality of social life.”<sup>11</sup> This is true in a sense, but bearing in mind the aims of the focus group method in detecting the construction of meaning in group discussions these weak members simply fall out of the pattern and are then actually not of use for the outcomes. There would then have to be another group in which these weak members feel more comfortable and are more likely to discuss such things.

The number of groups involved is another very important point to consider. Apart from resources and money available, there is a “rule of thumb ... that for any given category of people discussing a particular topic there are only so many stories to be told. Hence one should continue to run new groups until the last group has nothing new to add, but merely repeats previous contribution.”<sup>12</sup> This, of course, raises the obvious question, how to know that there is nothing new coming from the next group. There might be another group with a different composition that might have added a new perspective. If one recruits groups solely

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Lunt & Livingstone 1996, p. 83.

out of a local context, perspectives might be reiterated fairly quickly. But the stories told could be completely unrepresentative of the whole country<sup>13</sup>.

Where the interviews are being conducted is a question of importance. It can either take place in a neutral surrounding or at a familiar place; which will primarily be the home of the participants. When the interviews are arranged in a neutral surrounding like in a university or a laboratory, there is the inevitable question of how this will influence the outcomes. There is, on the one hand, no problem with comparability between the particular groups, as the circumstances are the same for each group. But what about the validity of the findings? Is it justified to assume, that the decoding process is going to be the same as in 'real life'? Can any truth be assigned to the findings, bearing in mind the unnatural conditions of the research? In a familiar setting these questions do not arise, however, there are general problems with the interview situation itself that might influence the research. If asked to look at a television programme and expected to answer questions about it later, the participants will inevitably pay great attention to the programme and probably think about it a lot while watching, trying to memorize as much as possible. This does in no way have any correspondence with the manner in which people watch television in their normal lives. Television has become a kind of a virtual newspaper. People sit in front of the television doing all kinds of things: Arguing, talking on the phone, knitting, and the like. Of course people do also watch television attentively, but many do not. This watching behaviour is not taken into account in focus group interviews, instead, the assumption of attentive television watching is system-immanent in the focus group method and so is the possible flaw.

The actual conduction of the interview and the discussion itself are other stages, where problems can occur. How great is the impact of the interviewer on the responses of the participants? Did he take an active role and steer the issues discussed into a certain direction; the direction he was interested in? Does this flaw the outcomes in a sense, as the researcher's preferred issues might not have been as important for the participants as suspected and therefore the data is invalid? The answer to this question depends on the openness of discussion a researcher allows his groups. Livingstone and Lunt claim that in view of the discussed advantages of focus group interviews as a method of exploring social construction of meaning the interview itself must be as open as possible to see how arguments are raised

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<sup>13</sup> Gavin 1998, p. 173.

and set against each other.<sup>14</sup> The other possible way of conducting the interview is to provide a view and require group members to arrive together at a consensual product. In view of the above mentioned objectives of the focus group method this seems to be rather inappropriate. However, it is clear that the role of the interviewer and his expectations of the outcomes of the interviews are crucial in understanding focus group data. This problem leads us to the questions of generalizability, validity and reliability of the focus group method.

### **Generalizability, Validity and Reliability**

As Höijer notes, “A common criticism raised against qualitative research is that it fails to adhere to canons of reliability and validity...; it is also doubted that the findings can be generalized beyond the few individuals included in most such subjects.”<sup>15</sup> She admits that it would cause serious problems not paying attention to these methodological problems.<sup>16</sup> The problems occur in all stages of the focus group method, at the assembling of the groups, at conducting the interview and during the analysis of the gathered data.

### **Validity**

The validity of ones research is the key to its meaningfulness.<sup>17</sup> It is, though, not actually measurable, but one has to assess the sufficiency of the methods applied. Höijer (1990a) suggests that scientific findings from interviews are valid if the interview “gives the viewer time to activate his/her inner conceptions and interpretations of a programme” and if it “allows the viewer to formulate the reception in his/her own language and structuring of a programme.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, the earlier mentioned method of finding a consensual meaning in a programme would be considered invalid. In terms of data analysis, Höijer finds that applying the appropriate unit of analysis is one crucial point, the other the correct analysis in means of approaching a text; i.e. not with a predetermined reading but rather reading the text from within and finding the results in the text independent from ones own view<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Lunt & Livingstone 1996, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Höijer 1990a, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

## Reliability

Reliability, i.e. “controlling subjectivity in the sense of avoiding arbitrariness”<sup>20</sup> is the other crucial point in measuring the overall validity of research findings. If the findings can be reproduced by somebody else under the same circumstances, the result is generally considered reliable. Regarding focus groups this is an obvious problem. There are simply too much uncontrollable variables in the conduction of the interview and especially in the participants themselves, like mood, changed attitudes towards the interviewer or the subject and the like to assume any reliability. A repeated interview will therefore never bring forth the same results. Hence, reliability can only be pursued in the analysis of the data, that is, trying to control ones findings in finding them repeated in the analysis of another person. Höijer suggests that it is crucially important to apply content analysis on the interviews, where units of analysis are clearly defined, which should help to repeat the findings with somebody else. This might facilitate increasing the reliability; one has to consider, though, the problems of content analysis itself in terms of reliability and reproducibility.

## Generalizability

How can one cope with problem of low generalizability of the focus group method? It is obvious that a representative sample is not possible to interview, as the amount of data would simply be too large and too time-consuming to analyse. Are focus group interviews “nothing more than case studies or even pilot studies... with limited possibilities to generalize the results”<sup>21</sup>? As far as the consulted scholars are concerned, there seems to be indeed no real possibility to claim good generalizability for focus groups as far as generalization on the social level is concerned. Gavin notes, “... the issue of generalization is still outstanding.”<sup>22</sup> Höijer sees a way out in turning from the “emphasis of social determination of phenomena”<sup>23</sup> to a more general area, in which the focus is on findings of more fundamental human qualities. But she also admits that mass-communication research studies rather the social and cultural differences and therefore still has to face the problem of representativeness.

## A different approach

Livingstone and Just deal with reliability and validity in a different way. They see a range of weak and strong arguments for focus groups in this case. The weak arguments, they say,

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<sup>20</sup> Höijer 1990a., p.16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Gavin 1998, p. 172.

<sup>23</sup> Höijer 1990a, p. 18.



“accept the suggestion that there are basic problems of representation and lack of reliability in focus group research”<sup>24</sup> but claim that this is rather a practical problem, as there are not enough funds available to conduct focus groups with greater numbers; and, this problem can be solved by triangulation. Livingstone’s and Lunt’s strong responses to the focus group’s methodological problems are, however, clearly weaker than this one. They criticize survey methods as concentrating on the individual as a social atom, not taking into account the social nature of communication and concentrating on old-fashioned mechanical conceptions of media effects; whereas the focus group would do exactly the opposite and be “in tune with current sensibilities in media research”<sup>25</sup>. This is, of course, not inaccurate, but in view of their second strong argument for the focus groups rather backfiring. They claim: “... the notions of reliability and validity are inextricably linked to quantitative methods and so are irrelevant to qualitative work.”<sup>26</sup> One could, in response, argue that the notions of social communication and “polysemic and context-dependent nature of meaning”<sup>27</sup> are in turn inextricably linked to qualitative research and would therefore be irrelevant to quantitative work. Their line of reasoning kills itself. Both arguments, of course, miss the point. Qualitative work has to at least try to be in line with the general requirements of science, like reliability and validity, be it by means of a clear analysis method as Höijer suggests, or other ways; whereas quantitative work has to take into account its restrictions in method and deal with it in its analysis.

### **The Construction of Social Construction of Meaning?**

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of focus group method is to find out how audiences construct social meaning in discourse and through group negotiation. Every research examined in this essay is concerned with this topic. Morley wants to “discover how interpretations are collectively constructed through ...”<sup>28</sup>, Kern and Just concentrated their research “on the dynamics of group discussion”<sup>29</sup> and Höijer aims to study “viewer’s reception in a cognitive perspective”<sup>30</sup>. In scrutinizing the presented data, however, it seems that the findings are in none of the papers presented, explained and analysed in the proposed way. Furthermore, the work of Goddard et al. does use the focus groups as a research method

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<sup>24</sup> Lunt & Livingstone 1996, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Morley 1980, p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Kern & Just 1995, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Höijer 1990, p. 29.

but does in no way explain why they are used. It is not obvious why the same outcomes Goddard et al. produce could not also have been achieved by interviewing individuals. The same problematic, because not obvious, transfer from methodological and theoretical proposition to the actual practice and the research findings are found by Jordin and Brunt in Morley's 'Nationwide' study from 1980: "What tends to be demonstrated is very much 'decoding' in the sense of a finished product and the component parts of this product, rather than 'decoding' as a process and the substantive ideological shifts which mark the stage of that process."<sup>31</sup> They find that "it is not immediately obvious in what sense Morley's actual research does in fact analyse how *groups* decode television; and whether it could not equally well have been accomplished by working with individuals."<sup>32</sup>

The same applies to the study of Kern and Just. Apart from using only two groups, which is perhaps no sufficient sample size for valid findings, they do not show in which way their group context is important for the outcomes. Although they apply their constructionist method to the individual responses, they do not show how their initial aim of researching group discussion does shape the outcomes and findings of their work.

Concentrating on the construction of meaning and group interchange in focus group interviews is an interesting topic, but I believe that many researchers flaw their findings unnecessarily by proposing this constructionist methodology. They seem to be influenced by the social science zeitgeist, what Lunt and Livingstone sort of admit in their defence of the focus group method in naming it a method "in tune with current media sensibilities"<sup>33</sup>. But, as the researchers interest in this case usually is not social psychology but rather a depiction of how people view a programme and what impact social variables as gender or class have on their decoding of the programme, the group dynamics play a neglectable role and that is how they should be handled.

### Conclusion

The focus group method is considered appropriate for studying viewer's reception of television. It is supposed to create rich data; and, as the answers on questions are not given as in, for example, surveys, the interviews can provide the researcher with a more in-depth sight into how people use television and how they construct their opinions through it. There are, however, many variables to be considered in setting up a focus group, which can all shape and

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<sup>31</sup> Jordin & Brunt 1988, p. 243.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> Livingstone & Lunt 1996, p. 90.

influence the outcomes. From the assembling of the groups to group pressure on the individuals; from the interview style to the analysis of the data – it is not possible to control all these variables and end up with a reliable and generalizable account of the people's use of television.

One major strength of the focus group method, it is believed, is the possibility to observe how people construct meaning in negotiation and discussion within the group. This is supposed to mirror social reality. However, though many researchers use this theory as a justification for using focus groups, the actual analysis of the data and its presentation is not related to this assumption. The particular decodings are not analysed in reference to the group, but treated as single decodings.

If one chooses to use focus groups as a method, one has to bear in mind all these problems and weaknesses and analyse and interpret the data accordingly. The focus group method is in no way an exact science.

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