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David L. Morgan¹

Abstract

In the two sections of this article, I examine aspects of the analysis and reporting of interaction in focus groups. In both sections, I argue that the essential importance of interaction for producing the data in focus groups does not correspond to any requirement that the analysis or the reporting of that data should emphasize interaction. With regard to analyzing interaction, the goals of the research should guide the analysis of the data, and those goals might or might not emphasize interaction. In particular, a great deal of focus group research is conducted for substantive and practical purposes, where the analysis typically requires little attention to the dynamics of interaction in those groups. With regard to reporting interaction, quotations from single individuals can often be the most efficient and effective ways to accomplish an article's goals; however, I also discuss the kinds of situations where there are good reasons to report interaction among the participants. I conclude by briefly describing a different agenda for examining the importance of interaction in focus groups.

Keywords

conversation analysis; focus groups; interviews; qualitative analysis

I want to begin by clearly acknowledging the inherent connection between the substantive content of “what” participants say and the interactive dynamics of “how” participants say those things. Although this means that interaction is absolutely essential to producing high-quality data in focus groups, it still leaves a large amount of flexibility in the extent to which the uses of that data emphasize interaction. Hence, I argue that choices about the analysis and reporting of interaction in focus groups must be made within the context of the needs and goals of the overall project. In particular, saying that the interaction in focus groups produces the data is not the same as saying that the interaction itself is the data.

This article is in two sections. In the first I briefly address broader issues related to analyzing interaction in focus groups, and in the second section I provide a more detailed examination of issues related to reporting interaction in the results from focus groups. There are several reasons for spending more time on reporting rather than analyzing interaction. First, the more concrete issues associated with reporting make it better suited to a short essay such as this. Second, the reporting of quotations is itself an important part of qualitative research. In particular, quotations provide valuable evidence for the credibility of the analysis, because they generate a direct link between the more abstract content of the results and the actual data; in addition, they are also the strongest connection between the reader and the voices of the original participants.

My style of presentation for both of these topics is relatively informal, with a minimal use of citations. I compensate for this omission of specific references by limiting myself to points that can be easily located in the core literature about interaction in focus groups, including such sources as Duggleby (2005), Kitzinger (1994), Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin (2006), Markova, Linell, Grossen, and Orvig (2007), Myers (1998, 2004), Puchta and Potter (1999, 2004), and Wilkinson (1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

Analyzing Interaction in Focus Groups

Academic researchers who pursue various forms of conversation analysis and discourse analysis are the source for most of the recent work analyzing the interaction around how things get said in focus groups. Even though these researchers do rely on substantive topics while conducting their focus groups, their analyses typically treat those topics as a source of extracts that demonstrate the kinds of interaction they study. As a result, the typical article in this field begins by targeting some aspect of interaction in focus groups, and then analyzes portions of that substantive content to examine aspects of the

¹Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, USA

Corresponding Author:

David Morgan, Portland State University, Sociology, P.O. Box 751-SOC, Portland, OR 97207-0751, USA
Email: morgand@pdx.edu

interactive dynamics in those quotations. Despite this limited attention to the content of the discussion, nearly all the researchers in this camp acknowledge that the nature of the content can definitely affect the nature of the interaction. For example, if one topic consistently produces more lengthy personal statements whereas another topic generates rapid, brief exchanges, then there is every reason to analyze why those two topics lead to such divergent dynamics.

In contrast, researchers who are primarily interested in substantive goals concentrate almost entirely on the content of what gets said in focus groups. Because the purposes of their research are devoted to understanding this content, it makes sense that they have less interest in the interactive dynamics that produce that content. Once again, however, there are circumstances in which the importance of interactive dynamics is acknowledged, even in the most applied research. For example, if most of the discussions are filled with either high levels of conflict or a remarkable degree of consensus, this information can make a clear contribution to the analysis of substantively oriented research.

There are thus two alternative sets of interests at play, where some academic researchers emphasize “how” the interaction in focus groups occurs, whereas practically oriented researchers concentrate almost entirely on “what” gets said in focus groups. To date, this correspondence between different types of goals and different levels of emphasis on interaction has gone largely unnoticed. This also means that assertions about the importance of interaction in the analysis of focus groups have ignored the fundamental principle that the research goals should determine the analysis methods. In particular, several researchers from the academic side have made strong claims that any analysis of focus groups in which interaction is ignored is either inadequate or misguided.

The goals that motivate these academically oriented researchers often do require detailed analysis of the interaction in focus groups, but that set of purposes cannot exclude the needs of substantively oriented researchers. Indeed, if both of these sets of researchers analyzed exactly the same focus groups, they would almost certainly use very different methods and reach very different kinds of conclusions, simply because they began with such different goals. Thus, for any set of focus groups, the extent to which the analysis emphasizes either what people say or how they say it is always a choice that the researcher must make.

Reporting Interaction in Focus Groups

Starting with some of the earliest articles addressing interaction in focus groups (e.g., Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998b), there has been a consistent complaint that articles based on focus groups are more likely to report quotations

from individuals rather than sequences of interaction. Authors who call attention to this practice typically make implicit or explicit claims that quoting a series of exchanges, or “turns,” among several participants is preferable to reporting the equivalent content from an individual participant. This argument seems to assume that a failure to quote the interaction from focus groups somehow devalues the interactive process that produced the data. I address this issue by considering three formats for reporting quotations from focus groups, beginning with situations in which quotes from individuals are the best choice, then considering the option of using the body of the text to provide information about group interaction, and ending with cases in which sequences of interaction are preferable.

Choosing whether to quote an individual or a sequence of interactions mirrors the perennial dilemma of choosing among several possible quotations that can all illustrate a particular point. This choice is obvious when one quote makes that point more forcefully. When two or more quotations are equally effective, the shortest one has the advantage of efficiency, because it increases the space for substantive content in the body of the article. Remarks by individuals are likely to be both more efficient and more effective simply because the complexity of interactive exchanges means they are less likely to produce brief, pithy quotations.

The same criteria apply for grouping together of a set of quotations that all support a particular point, which is much easier to do with statements from individuals. In this case, providing several related statements from multiple participants and groups adds credibility by demonstrating that this topic reaches beyond a few isolated portions of the data. For example, Tiggemann, Gardiner, and Slater (2000, p. 654) offered the following package (slightly reformatted) of quotations as evidence that many adolescent girls answered “No” when they were specifically asked, “Do guys like women as thin as women think they like them to be?”:

- Guys hate really, really skinny girls. (School B)
- They like to cuddle . . . voluptuous . . . fuller figures. (School E)
- Guys like healthier weights, they don't like skeletons. (School C)
- They don't want women as skinny as the girls in the magazines. (School B)
- They (guys) just like them perfect . . . they want a girl with big hips with a flat stomach and skinny thighs, killer hair, killer face, killer chest, killer everything. (School A)

A different approach to maximizing the impact of quotations from individuals, without including lengthier

sequences of exchanges, is to use the body of the text as a source for the interactive context. Two common formats for doing this are “lead-ins” to set the stage for a quotation and “follow-outs” to extend the context for a quotation. These are, of course, common practices for reporting quotations. To illustrate how this works with regard to interaction, I use two examples from a set of focus groups that I conducted with Margaret Spanish (Morgan & Spanish, 1985) in which the participants discussed their beliefs about why people are likely to have heart attacks, with a particular emphasis on telling stories about people they knew who had heart attacks. The first instance shows how we used both a lead-in and a follow-out to describe the interactive context for a quotation.

In one group, all four members had exchanged at least one story when one of the participants made this observation.

Each of us have mentioned men. Does anyone know a woman who's had a heart attack?

This question led the others to a rambling discussion in which they compared their vicarious experiences and concluded that most heart attacks happen to men. (Morgan & Spanish, 1985, p. 410)

This same approach of embedding the underlying interaction in the text also applies to more complex interactions. Here is such an example, which covered nearly five minutes of discussion (Morgan & Spanish, 1985, pp. 410-411). We began by noting that this group

rapidly moves to a consideration of stress and Type A personality. One member of the group who has been silent until this point then offers the following.

I think heredity—from my experience—has been the big thing. My father died of a heart attack, his two brothers died of heart attacks, his sister died of a heart attack, his mother died of a heart attack.

In the original article, we continued reporting the quote above at greater length, to show the intensity of this participant's experiences and feelings. We then noted that this statement did change the direction of the discussion, at least temporarily:

Throughout this interchange the comparison between heredity and other factors continues to affect the presentation of [story-based] materials. Within a couple of minutes after this story, another

participant seems to agree with the previous speaker, but the assessment soon changes.

My experiences have been of two types—one heredity, my father and my uncle. But I think their behaviour had a lot to do with it. Not only was it hereditary, but they kind of gave up on life and quit and I try to see that as a factor primarily because of my other experiences which is in business and many experiences I've had—every one of them boil down to Type A behaviour. Young, driving, paranoid type behaviour.

From this point, the emphasis shifts from the consideration of heredity to more detailed considerations of stress and personality as an influence on reactions to stress. (Morgan & Spanish, 1985, p. 411)

This account managed to summarize this complex series of interactions in less than a page, even though it included two rather lengthy quotes from individual participants. I estimate that it would have taken at least twice as much space just to present the full interaction.

In the third format for reporting data from focus groups, when quotations of interaction would be preferable is considered. Going back to the criteria I suggested at the beginning of this section, the key considerations are whether an interactive segment has just as much impact as the alternatives without being substantially longer. The decision is obvious when the interactive segment is superior on these criteria. In addition, I would argue for including an interactive quote that is relatively equivalent to the best alternatives in terms of impact and length, because that interaction has the value of connecting the readers to the nature of the original data collection. Finally, I want to describe one area in which interactive data are almost always more effective than individual remarks: when the mere mention of a new topic produces rapid-fire responses from several different participants. In focus group jargon, these dramatic shifts in the discussion are sometimes referred to as “lightening strikes” because the participants are “electrified” by a topic that didn't even exist the moment before. Wilkinson (1998b, p. 337) provided an example of this process from a focus group of women with multiple sclerosis to show how participants can “enthusiastically extend, elaborate or embroider an initially sketchy account.” (Note that the original source for this quotation did not allow Wilkinson to include identifications for the individual speakers.)

S: Another thing that has changed is my appearance. The way that I dress . . . some fads that come out like shoes. Well, you have to. I know

myself and I notice other people. I've been checking underneath the table . . . flat shoes! High heels are no way . . .

S: High heels are gone!

S: And just like our clothes. We go and instead of messing around with those little, little, tiny buttons where you're all thumbs—pull on stuff. Something easy to get on and get it off. And another thing—jewelry . . . the neck pieces . . . I can't get the clasp done.

S: Some earrings I can't get. The one's [sic] now that you have to get through the hole? Like the loop thingy.

S: And another thing—hairdos. Like we can't go and sit there with a curling iron, not anymore. You'd burn your scalp half to death and your fingers.

S: So, it's wash and go.

S: Yeah, and forget about putting makeup on. Try to put on mascara and you get it in the eyeball.

Wilkinson (1998b, p. 336) aptly summarized this exchange as a “consensual piling up of fine detail” where the women “not only provide information about the functional limitations of multiple sclerosis, but also convey a consensual sense of what it is like to live with multiple sclerosis on a mundane and daily basis.” For another example of developing a new topic through a series of rapid-fire exchanges, see Tiggemann and colleagues (2000, p. 654), who offer a strong contrast to my earlier use of that same source to illustrate a compressed set of quotes from a variety of sources. As Wilkinson's example demonstrates, there certainly are situations when quoting interaction can make a conspicuous contribution to the reporting of focus groups. Overall, however, there are almost certainly more cases in which quotations that include interaction can be easily and effectively replaced with more efficient reporting strategies.

Conclusions

Compared to other authors who give more prominence to interaction in the analysis and reporting of focus groups, my own position is somewhat contrarian. To put that position in context, however, I want to return to the central point I made in my opening paragraph: Saying that the interaction in focus groups produces the data is not the same as saying that the interaction itself is the data. In particular, the design of focus groups requires attention to factors that influence the interaction among the participants to ensure that the data will meet the research goals. Likewise, the research goals should determine the importance of interaction in the analysis and reporting of the data from focus groups.

Linking research goals to the design, analysis, and reporting of focus groups creates a three-part agenda for improving our understanding of the role that interaction plays:

1. To generate the kinds of interaction that match specific research designs, we need detailed investigations of how different ways of conducting focus groups affect the interaction in those discussions.
2. To get the most out of the data we collect in focus groups, we need a reflexive examination of the value that is added by various approaches to analyzing the interaction in those groups.
3. To produce effective presentations of the results from focus groups, we need a careful consideration of how and when the reporting of interaction is most beneficial.

This is an ambitious agenda, but even so, the motivations behind it go beyond enhancing our understanding of how interaction makes a difference in focus group research. Ultimately, pursuing this agenda will improve our ability to make use of interaction in designing, analyzing, and reporting focus groups, thus increasing the range of goals that we can accomplish with this method.

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Bio

David L. Morgan, PhD, is a university professor at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, USA, where he is also affiliated with the Department of Sociology.