Where to begin? Grappling with how to use participant interaction in focus group design

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Abstract
Participant interaction is said to be the hallmark of the focus group method, but a number of studies suggest that the defining feature of the method is virtually absent in most focus group research. Our meta-analysis of this debate over participant interaction in the focus group literature suggests that absence of interaction data reflects a philosophical position, rather than neglect. Participant interaction is treated differently in different types of research, reflecting a tacit division between researchers who view the participants primarily as individuals sharing held truths and those who view them as social beings co-constructing meaning while in the focus group. We question the habit of making assumptions about the ‘proper’ use of participant interaction and call for further reflection on its role and usage in light of the aim of each study. We argue that the treatment of participant interaction needs to be a conscious and explicit design decision – one clearly rooted in a theoretical perspective and best suited to the research purpose. While exploring this issue, we discuss how a researcher’s lens affects how they deal with the interaction of participants, what they view as strengths and limitations of the method, and what kinds of results they end up with. We provide an overview of alternative approaches to participant interaction, offer strategies from different disciplines for analysing interaction, and propose a continuum of use demonstrating a range of options for when to use interaction.

Keywords
continuum of use, focus group method, participant interaction, research design

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Introduction
Where and when do people reveal their ‘true’ thoughts to researchers? Arguably this question lies at the heart of most methodological debates in the social sciences. The answer each social researcher has for this question will directly impact the avenues they pursue to gain insights into the perceptual worlds of others. The flexible nature of the focus group method, its usage across a wide array of disciplines, from marketing to medicine, and the seemingly contradictory use of participant interaction can leave newcomers to the method at a loss for how to use it.

Participant interaction is said to be the hallmark of the focus group method. A fairly recent debate deals with a seeming disconnect between theory on the use of participant interaction and practice in focus group research (Author and others, 2007: 250; Kitzinger, 1994: 104; Markovà et al., 2007: 35; Webb and Kevern, 2008: 804). Jenny Kitzinger, for example, reviewed more than 40 focus group studies and ‘could not find a single one concentrating on the conversation between participants and very few that even included any quotations from more than one participant at a time’(1994: 104). Going through the nursing literature on focus groups, Christine Webb and Jennifer Kevern found that ‘whilst selection of the focus group method was often justified in terms of the benefits that participant interaction could yield, this interaction was rarely reported or discussed’ (2001: 798). Sue Wilkinson reviewed another 200 studies conducted between 1946 and 1996 with similar results:

focus group data is most commonly presented as if it were one-to-one interview data, with interactions between group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed. Where interactions between participants are quoted they are typically used simply to illustrate the advantages of focus groups over other methods, and analysed solely at the level of content (rather than in terms of their interactional features). (1998a: 112, emphasis in original)

Why does the defining feature of the method appear to be virtually absent in focus group results? A review of the literature suggests that rather than being ‘under-valued’ and ‘underutilised’, interaction between participants plays different roles in different types of research. It may seem obvious that the richness and complexity of focus group data requires conscientious design decisions that set limits around the use of interaction to make the research manageable; that the researcher first and foremost needs to clarify to what end focus groups are used. However, this is seldom done and we argue that this is a key reason why so many seem to struggle with the method.

In this article, we set out to facilitate a more rigorous use of the focus group method by providing a framework that enables reflection on core issues to be taken into account while designing and carrying out such studies. We start by discussing participant interaction in focus groups, analysing how the researcher’s lens and theoretical orientation affects the research design – including what various researchers view to be the strengths and limitations of the method, how they use the interaction, and what kinds of results they end up with. Thereafter, we scrutinize the claim that focus group researchers rarely make clear the theoretical approaches or methods of analysis they are using. In the final section, we move on to considerations of theory, insights from other literatures, the challenge of
incorporating interaction into focus group design, and to our proposed continuum of use of interaction in focus groups.

**Probing into perceptions of interaction in focus groups: purported strength, analytical weakness**

Our review of the literature suggests that researchers’ way of conceptualizing what is going on in the focus group plays a big role in determining how (if at all) they will utilize the interaction in their analysis and reporting. A dividing line goes between those who view the participants primarily as individuals sharing held truths and those who view them as social beings co-constructing meaning while in the focus group. The former approach centers around an emphasis on the individual, whereas the latter approach centers on an emphasis on the social. The debate on the absence of participant interaction in focus group results is mainly driven by the social-centric group criticizing the individual-centric group, whom they sometimes call ‘rationalists’. It is important to note that a tendency to see the group participants primarily through an individual or a social lens does not mean that a researcher is unaware of the other side. Rather, the distinction lies in how they conceptualize what is going on between individuals in the group:

Rationalists do not claim that social forms of thinking do not exist. What they claim, however, is that these forms are secondary to individual reasoning and thinking and that they develop . . . due to the society’s imposition of various kinds of rules and norms [and that] socially shared knowledge is a ‘team game’. (Marková et al., 2007: 16, italics ours)

In contrast, the social-centric approach – a ‘social constructionist’ or ‘dialogic’ perspective – starts with the assumption that ‘socially shared knowledge of the human species has a dialogic nature. This means that each individual generates his or her knowledge in terms of the Alter, as multifaceted and multi-voiced realities situated in culture’ (Marková et al., 2007: 17).

The focus group emerged from a positivist paradigm that valued above all the rationality of the individual. The social psychology lens through which the father of the focus groups method, Robert Merton, apprehended the perceptions of his subjects certainly guided the early development of the focus group, which was originally used for research on reactions to radio programming (1987: 565; Merton and Kendall, 1946: 541). Underlying this approach are psychodynamic theories ‘which postulate constructs that are personal to the individual and develop over the course of his life history’ (Calder, 1977: 357). The marketing field, which later picked up the focus group method, also rests on strong positivist traditions; so it is not surprising that interaction in this context is portrayed very much as a means to an end – interesting for its influence on the individuals in the group rather than as an object of analysis in itself (Reed and Roskell Payton, 1997: 766). Thus, the participant is seen as coming to the focus group with fundamental orientations and ideas (held truths) that may be better elaborated through interaction with others, but that may also be suppressed by group dynamics that can encourage conformity or silencing of particular viewpoints. Hence, when analysing the data, there is no need to focus on the interaction per se as it is a means to an end: to facilitate the expression of individuals’ held truths.
More socially-oriented researchers view what is going in focus groups as a dynamic social process, one whereby participants are engaged in collectively constructing a narrative about a topic. Those with a social constructionist framework ‘do not view beliefs, ideas, opinions and understandings as generated by individuals in splendid isolation, but rather as built in interaction with others, in specific social contexts’ (Wilkinson, 1998b: 193). From a dialogic perspective, the interaction in focus groups occurs on three levels: 1) the interaction between subjects and researchers creating ‘an intricate web of sense-makings, in which (in principle) each and every contribution is interdependent with previous and possible next contributions’; 2) the interaction between ‘thoughts, ideas and arguments’; 3) the interaction with ‘socio-cultural traditions’ including ‘ways and traditions of talking about the issue’ (Markovà et al., 2007: 133). Thus, analysing the data without paying attention to the interaction going on in the group does not make sense in this context, since this is where the key information lies. In light of the above, it comes as no surprise that the critique of focus group research as being focused on content rather than interaction is driven by socially-oriented researchers critiquing individual-centric studies. At the core of this debate lie questions about whether or not certain aspects of the focus group are strengths or weaknesses.

Strengths and weaknesses of the method from different perspectives

We have created Table 1 to highlight that the interactional elements of the focus group simultaneously result in strengths and weaknesses and each researcher must manage these in accordance with their research perspective and objectives.

Three perceptions, in particular, have been discussed in the literature: the conception of the group as an economical way to conduct many interviews at once (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 16); the idea that there is a ‘synergy’ in focus groups that makes them more productive (Morgan, 1996: 138); and the notion that individual responses are ‘contaminated’ or ‘biased’ by the group setting (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 17). Socially-oriented scholars point out that the notion of focus groups as a faster and cheaper way of conducting many individual interviews at once relies on the premise that one can ‘extract individual attitudes from more than one person at a time’ (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 16). Similarly, the idea that group ‘synergy’ can somehow pull out more views from individuals relies on those views being held in the first place. It is also argued that the word ‘contamination’ draws its power from individually held truths being labelled ‘pure’ – it is only through interaction with the group that they become tainted. This critique is summarized by ironically pointing out that, ‘there is a sense in which [some] focus group researchers desire the benefits of group interaction in encouraging information disclosure and convenience (eight interviews for the price of one) yet regret that the group may contaminate the views of individual members’ (Catterall and Maclaran, 1997: 4). Thus, social-centric researchers argue that (in individual-centric focus group research) participant interaction is portrayed as a valuable tool in conducting the group, but that it becomes a problem in the analysis stage.

It is further argued (by social-centric researchers) that the interaction holds opportunities to put the social dimensions to work, that the ‘complex and social nature of the data...
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is both the source of richness of ideas and interactions and a challenge for the researcher’ (Markovà et al., 2007: 46). Instead of being a problem, they claim that interaction may offer new insights into the content of the interview – providing context and a view into the social processes surrounding the topic. For instance, Wilkinson argues that lessening of researcher control can help to redress some of the traditional power imbalances inherent in the interview process (1998b: 114). This shifting of power may be considered a strength in that it allows participants to take greater control over the topic of conversation. However, she also points out that redressing the power balance between interviewer and interviewees may open the door to harassment within the group (Wilkinson, 1998b). Even though there is a lessening of the power imbalance between interviewers and respondents, attempts to completely eliminate moderator control are unrealistic; as Agar and MacDonald point out, when they attempted to minimize moderator roles: ‘We might as well have started to

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<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Limitation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moderator can probe and observe non-verbal responses (Krueger, 1994: 35)</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Moderator has less control over the interview due to participant interaction (Krueger, 1994: 36) Requires highly trained moderators (Krueger, 1994: 37).</td>
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<td>Respondents can give ‘qualified answers’ (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 16).</td>
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<td>Participants ‘open-up’ and ‘share insights’ (Krueger, 1994: 32) Results are both believable and easy to understand (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 16).</td>
<td>High face value</td>
<td>Their face validity ‘may be too high’, prompting decision makers to ‘rush out and implement’ without adequate scepticism (Krueger, 1994: 32).</td>
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<td>Low cost relative to reaching the same number of respondents individually, potentially fast analysis (Krueger, 1994: 35; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 16).</td>
<td>Low cost &amp; fast results</td>
<td>Fast results imply rapid analysis, less likely to include an in-depth consideration of interaction ‘[E]nding up with some “soundbite” quotations to illustrate themes, ignores the complexities of focus group behaviour’ (Smithson, 2000: 116).</td>
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<td>Participants ‘both query and explain themselves to each other’ allowing researcher to track consensus and diversity around issues; the researcher can also get feedback directly on comparisons (Morgan, 1996: 139).</td>
<td>Rich data &amp; high depth</td>
<td>Data more difficult to analyse (Krueger, 1994, 36) Fully unpacking the depth inherent in dialogue can be very time intensive, ‘if not impossible’ (Markovà et al., 2007: 136).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants ‘react and build upon’ the responses of others (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 16) Generating a ‘wider range of information, insight, and ideas’ than individual interviews (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 19).</td>
<td>Synergy</td>
<td>A study by Fern (1982) shows individual respondents in focus groups produce less ideas (60–70%) as compared to individual interviews, and these may be of a lower quality (Morgan, 1996: 138) (Though Fern’s study involved a fairly neutral topic (Kidd and Parshall, 2000: 294)).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Sources: Kidd and Parshall (2000); Krueger (1994); Markovà et al. (2007); Morgan (1996); Stewart and Shamdasani (1990); and Smithson (2000).
drive by deciding it wasn’t such a good idea to steer (1995: 81). The focus group is after all a structured encounter, one that offers greater freedom for participants to challenge or support one another, but also one in which everyone is aware of who is driving.

The different aspects of interaction have both strengths and weaknesses, and we argue being aware of and embracing some of the challenges posed by participant interaction should make newcomers better prepared to deal with participant interactions and thus strengthen the rigor of their studies.

**Insights from other literatures**

A number of focus group researchers have begun engaging in dialogues about novel ways to better utilise participant interaction. They are drawing on insights from other disciplines and qualitative methods to start building a tool box of options for how to incorporate interaction in different stages of focus group research, and beyond, to incorporating focus groups into wider research agendas. The following insights are paired with tools or ideas for bringing them into focus group design and execution.

An important contribution is the understanding that participants are not always interacting in the same way. Hydén and Bülow (2003), who come out of Communications Studies, contend that focus group participants are faced with two interactive problems. First, how to establish a ‘common communicative ground’; second, how ‘to add their contributions to this common ground’ (2003: 311). If participants manage to establish common ground, they behave more as a small group (co-creating the narrative as they go along); if they do not establish common ground, they will behave more as individuals (expressing their private views) (2003: 311). Keeping track of waves of consensus and disagreement, as well as the ‘processes of social influence’ enables researchers to contextualize the content of their data within the social processes of the focus group discussion; for example, such as ‘coercion, going along to get along, and the acquiescence of less committed individuals to positions more passionately argued by others’ (Kidd and Parshall, 2000: 294–295). By viewing opinions ‘not as previously formed, static things which people brought to the focus group, but as constructed in social situations’ (Smithson, 2000: 116), it is argued that researchers get a glimpse at what social processes may impact the release or change of a product or program in ‘the real world’ (Kidd and Parshall, 2000: 295).

Another useful observation is that individuals do not always speak from the same point of view, and they may change their identification (e.g. speaking sometimes as professionals, members of particular socio-economic or cultural groups, or as private individuals) throughout the course of the interview (Hydén and Bülow, 2003: 320; Markovà et al., 2007: 104). Hydén and Bülow argue that ‘it is important to analyse the data as “situated talk” so it will be possible to analyse in what capacity the members speak at various points in the focus group discussion’ (2003: 320). The argument being that it is important to contextualize what is said in focus groups because the content evolves throughout the discussion; as individuals discuss their positions often change, as people shift their identification, justify or revise their opinions, or come to new ideas through collective reflection.

Including aspects of time, person and context in the analysis of the data allows us to make some statements about whether group displays were well developed or restricted, for example, whether . . . they were presented as incontrovertible statements or ideas for exploration, and whether
there was some degree of consensus . . . or whether there was a degree of dissent and divorce from experience. (Reed and Roskell Payton, 1997: 770)

Situating ideas in the context of processes of group discussion helps to elucidate how the interaction of participants affects the content the group produces.

Drawing on the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) literature we have previously highlighted the kinds of questions participants are asking and how the group is engaging with stimulus materials (Author and others, 2007). We then argued that the analyst should look past the content of focus group discussions ‘to scrutinize how they [participants] are talking, and how their viewpoints are maintained, reinforced, modified or rejected in the interaction between participants’ (2007: 258). Focus groups share some key characteristics in common with problem-based learning groups: they are groups with specific framing (course curriculum vs interview guide) facing a ‘problem’, guided by a detached guide (tutor vs moderator), and engage in a dialogue and ‘collective sense-making’ (2007: 251). They differ with respect to their aims (participant learning vs data gathering) and the amount of time participants spend together (regular meetings vs one-time meeting). In yet another study, we outline types of questions that participants ask when faced with scenarios in stimulus materials: ‘encyclopaedic questions’ (which tend to be one-dimensional and unambiguous, centering on the lexical meaning of a term); ‘meaning-oriented questions’ (more phenomenological, of the ‘what’ or ‘why’ nature); ‘relational questions’ (focusing on the complex relationships between things, causal or consequential); ‘value-oriented questions’ (comparative, involving norms and values, better or worse); and ‘solutions-oriented questions’ (management of issue, including what can be done or changed) (2001: 270–272). Analysing the types of questions participants are asking throughout a focus group can help researchers to understand how the group is problematizing the stimulus materials, giving the researcher clues as to what kinds of concepts the participants are bringing to the discussion and on what level(s) they are engaging with the material. This can be particularly important for the pilot-testing stage of focus group research as it can help with the refinement of stimulus materials.¹

Feminist perspectives on focus groups go beyond the questions of who’s talking about what, to ask questions of power and motivation. What are the power dynamics in the focus group? How does the structure of the focus group affect the interaction of participants and researchers? Where are people coming from and why are they participating? Sue Wilkinson argues that, in the data collection phase, focus groups reduce the likelihood of certain power imbalances because the researcher has ‘much less power and influence over a group than over an individual’ (1998b: 114). While the power of the researcher may be reduced relative to that in individual interviews, another important insight from the feminist literature is that power dynamics between the different group members can result in the emergence of dominant voices (one or two peoples’ views dominating the discussion) and the silencing of other viewpoints. Distinguishing between ‘dominant voices’ and ‘collective voices’ can be difficult; however, Smithson recommends analyzing the discourse for ‘collective voice strategies’ that reveal when a ‘collective voice’ (which she defines as: ‘a group process of collaboratively constructing a joint perspective, or argument, which emerges very much as a collective procedures which leads to consensus’) is present (2000: 109). In terms of structure, the composition of the group and its relationship to the moderator can also impact the power dynamics of the group. Whether or not a moderator shares certain characteristics (gender, ethnic background, socio-economic status, etc.) in common with participants can
impact how the group interacts and what kinds of discursive content they produce. For instance, Kitzinger points out that when discussing sex with heterosexual males ‘participants are more likely to express macho attitudes (with a male researcher) or to sexually harass (a female researcher) in group settings than in individual interviews’ (1994: 117). Smithson points out that when the moderator is construed as ‘Other’, the group can become ‘collectively “powerful” in that they have access to shared knowledge of which the moderator is ignorant’ (2000: 112). Whether the moderator is chosen to be similar to participants or not along certain dimensions is just one of the design decisions that will affect the power balance in the group, and despite the best efforts to structure the group to achieve or minimize a power dynamic, the end result will always depend on how the group plays out. Finally, while a great deal of consideration is given to what researchers are using focus groups for, rarely is the question asked: ‘What are participants using the focus group for?’ (Smithson, 2000: 106). Exploring the issue of why individuals are participating may reveal additional insights that will contextualize the focus group results.

Communications studies, Problem-Based Learning, and Feminist literatures offer new insights into the dynamic social processes at work in focus groups. Building in consideration of variable interaction and identification among participants, the problematization of research questions and stimulus materials, and the power dynamics and motivations of participants can help researchers expand the ways in which they use participant interaction in focus group design and analysis.

The challenge: how to incorporate interaction into research design

Drawing on the reasoning above, we conclude that the integration of participant interaction into the research design can be facilitated by initially asking some basic questions (which are in no way unique to focus-group studies):

- What is the primary research objective?
- What resources (financial and human) are available?
- What theory(ies) will be used to design the study, and to analyse and interpret the data?

The answers to these questions provide a starting point from which to consider how to set the stage and support interaction within the groups, as well as how to deal with interaction in data coding, analysis and reporting.

The research objective should guide all design decisions, and can be used as a touchstone to keep the focus group design on track. When looking for feedback on a relatively concrete topic (e.g. the user-friendliness of a product), a content-based approach to analysis and the use of interaction mainly in-group may be appropriate. For research trying to understand how people conceptualize a more abstract topic, utilizing the interaction in-group and post-group may allow the capture of some of the data’s complexity in the analysis and reporting stages. It is important to note that interaction may be used in analysis and not presented in the research results – which begs the question: should focus group researchers be more explicit in their reporting about how they have used participant interaction in each stage of the research?
Available resources will determine the scope of the study, as well as the level to which participant interaction can be used in data analysis. Studies that focus more on the social interaction between participants can be much more difficult to transcribe, code, and analyse—thus increasing both the time and cost required to do the research.

Once the research goals are defined, it is possible to specify which approach (individual or social priority) is best suited to the project. The next step involves defining the theoretical framework, or body of research and theories, to ground the focus group analysis in. Different bodies of literature have been used as a theoretical framework when analysing focus group data. For example, Agar and MacDonald use conversation analysis conventions to transcribe and analyse their data, but also use folk models constructed from previous ethnographic research to interpret their data and fit it within a wider ethnographic project (1995: 85). Hydén and Bülow use “a method inspired by the techniques and frameworks of discourse and conversation analysis”; however, they feel their objective (to discover “what people are doing when participating in focus groups”) is better supported by using ideas from social psychology and ethnomethodology (2003: 309). We have created Table 2 to provide a sampling of theoretical frameworks previously used in focus group studies when dealing with participant interaction. By listing key features, uses, appropriate kinds of research questions, common data collection and analysis methods, and research outputs we hope to provide students and scholars entering into focus group research with ideas on where to begin building their own theoretical frameworks. The table is by no means comprehensive, other frameworks that could be added to the list include: ethnography (Agar and MacDonald, 1995), clinical (Calder, 1977), or Problem-Based Learning (Author and others, 2007). We believe having a focused objective, sound accounting, and a specific theoretical lens will facilitate making the most of the interaction in focus group research.

Catterall and Maclaran provide a helpful list of what an analysis of the interaction in focus groups can reveal:

- The shared language on a topic; what was taken for granted and what was asked for clarification by other participants;
- The beliefs and myths about the topic that are shared, taken for granted, and which ones are challenged;
- The arguments which participants call upon to justify their views and experiences and how others respond to these;
- The arguments, sources and types of information that stimulate changes of opinion or reinterpretation of experiences;
- The tone of voice, body language, and degree of emotional engagement that is involved when participants talk to each other about the topic. (1997: 7)

### The importance of clarifying the role of participant interaction

A key component of our argument is that the use of participant interaction should be an explicit part of the decision-making process in the research design phase, matching the complexity of the analysis to the appropriate purpose and skill sets of the researchers. For example, it may be a waste of time and resources if market researchers probing for consumer reactions to a product were to delve deeper into participant interaction, because participants
## Table 2. Some theoretical frameworks for focus group design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical framework</th>
<th>Basic qualitative description</th>
<th>Phenomenology</th>
<th>Grounded theory or exploratory approach</th>
<th>Dialogism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key features and interpretive lens</td>
<td>Building on a naturalistic approach and aiming for descriptive validity, renders a comprehensive account of the event in everyday terms.</td>
<td>Originating in philosophy and sociology and based on the work of Alfred Schutz, examines the intersubjective realities experienced by social actors.</td>
<td>Based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) of building empirically grounded theories – theories are developed or emerge out of qualitative research.</td>
<td>Rooted in dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin, emphasizes that a human’s existence, thought and language is interdependent on that of others in their society.</td>
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<td>Uses (What is it good for?)</td>
<td>For giving ‘straight’ and ‘minimally theorized’ answers to questions of practical relevance for ‘practitioners and policymakers’ (Sandelowski, 2000).</td>
<td>For gaining insight into the perceptions or ‘experiential everyday knowledge’ of respondents in target social groups (consumers, minority groups, etc.) (Calder, 1977).</td>
<td>For 3 main purposes: 1) Pilot testing of quantitative instruments 2) Hypothesis building or discovery of new ideas 3) Comparing everyday knowledge to science.</td>
<td>For exploring the ‘formation and change of social representations, beliefs, knowledge and ideologies that circulate in societies’ (Markovà et al., 2007), both in terms of content and framing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>‘Who, what and where of events or experiences, or their basic nature and shape’ (Sandelowski, 2000).</td>
<td>What are the perceptions, feelings, meanings, or ways of thinking held by a group that shares in a particular intersubjective reality?</td>
<td>Testing survey questions, instructions, language; open-ended exploratory questions; questions on understandings, perceptions of phenomena.</td>
<td>What is being discussed and how is it thematized? How are the contents being framed, oriented and heterogeneously displayed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection methods of choice</td>
<td>Relatively unstructured (low-med) open-ended individual or focus group interviews.</td>
<td>Participant observation, unstructured interviews, and focus groups.</td>
<td>Theoretical sampling, Focus groups</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method(s) of analysis</td>
<td>Qualitative content analysis, focused on informational aspects and accurate accounting of event, with simultaneous data collection and analysis (reflexive &amp; interactive in approach).</td>
<td>Moderator should become a part of the group– they need to experience the shared intersubjective reality to interpret data in terms of ‘lifeworld existentials’ (e.g. corporeality &amp; temporality).</td>
<td>Theoretical sampling: ‘the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges’ (Flick, 2006).</td>
<td>Dialogical discourse analysis which records ‘what sorts of content are taken up’ and ‘which linguistic and discursive devices are used’ (Markovà et al., 2007) (voices, themes, clusters).</td>
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</table>
are familiar with their role as consumers and giving feedback from this vantage point. If the responses they are getting from traditional analytic approaches are sufficient (made simpler by this well-established relationship of consumer-producer), then it may be overkill to use the participants’ interaction in a different way. If, on the other hand, researchers are probing into the values underlying particular groups’ choices or more theoretical discussions (e.g. for more exploratory research purposes), then time and analytic effort devoted to unpacking the rich dimensions of the participants’ interactions may well be an important step in gaining the depth of understanding. Thus, the degree to which participants’ interactions are explored and utilized needs to be part of the research design. Given the diversity of fields within which focus groups have been used, we have devised a continuum of use to illustrate a range of options for the usage of participant interaction in focus group design (see Figure 1). The continuum highlights our view that, rather than making assumptions about the usage of interaction (which are markedly different for individual-centric

### Table 2. (Continued)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Output/end product</td>
<td>Descriptive summary of the event organized to best fit data (e.g. chronological, thematic, Rashomon effect)</td>
<td>Emphasis on communicating ‘respondents’ perspective in their own words’ (Basch, 1987).</td>
<td>Emphasis on describing the rationale the analyst used to draw conclusions from the data and build the theory.</td>
<td>Descriptive accounts that focus on dialogic aspects of construction of socially shared knowledge.</td>
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*Rashomon effect:* whereby the same event is described from the perspective of more than one participant (Sandelowski, 2000: 339).

**Sources:** Calder (1977); Flick (2006); Markovà et al. (2007); Sandelowski (2000); Author and others (2007); and Wilkinson (1998a)

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**Figure 1.** Continuum of use of interaction in focus groups research
and social-centric perspectives), researchers should reflect on the range of options available to them in terms of participant interaction. Following Morgan’s lead, we emphasize the importance of making judgements about alternative research designs based on their particular usefulness to the project at hand, rather than taking a theoretical stance that judges one design to be inherently better or worse than another. ‘The general principle that research design should follow from research goals’ (Morgan, 1996: 146) should also be applied to the treatment of participant interaction in focus groups. Researchers need to choose what level of interaction best suits their research purpose. On the low end of the continuum, researchers focus on structuring and facilitating the interaction in-group, using the interaction to productively generate content (such as feedback on a product or service, or a listing of key values). At the medium level of use, researchers are interested in interaction during all stages of the focus group research (pre-group, in-group, post-group); however, they are still mainly focused on the content and are using the interaction to contextualize the content. At the high-use end fall more dialogic or discursive research projects, where the processes of sense-making and group dynamics are the main focus and the interest is in how participants interact to generate content. Whatever the level of usage of participant interaction, we are convinced that researchers can benefit from clarifying how they approach and use participant interaction in focus groups.

**Conclusion**

Whether chopped into individual pieces or analysed in sequences, participant interaction is the basis of all focus group findings. The importance of participant interaction to all stages of the research process needs to be acknowledged, and the interaction itself needs to be built into the research design. As with any other rigorous application of a method, researchers should know the benefits and pitfalls of their theoretical approach to interaction, including the reasoning and logic behind the method, and should be able to justify their design decisions in relation to competing frameworks. It seems clear that some of the challenges in dealing with interaction in focus group research arise because focus groups have been developed in very different settings for very different purposes – it can be seen as a ‘growing pain’ as the method stretches out into new fields. While ‘much has been written about what focus groups are and how to conduct them’ (Webb and Kevern, 2001: 799), we now need ‘how-to’ guidelines for utilising interaction in a more sophisticated and nuanced way to meet the specific goals of our research endeavours.

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**Note**

1. Another interesting insight from the PBL literature is that the presence of text in visual stimulus materials resulted in a high concentration of discussion revolving around the textual elements (Author and others, 2001).
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