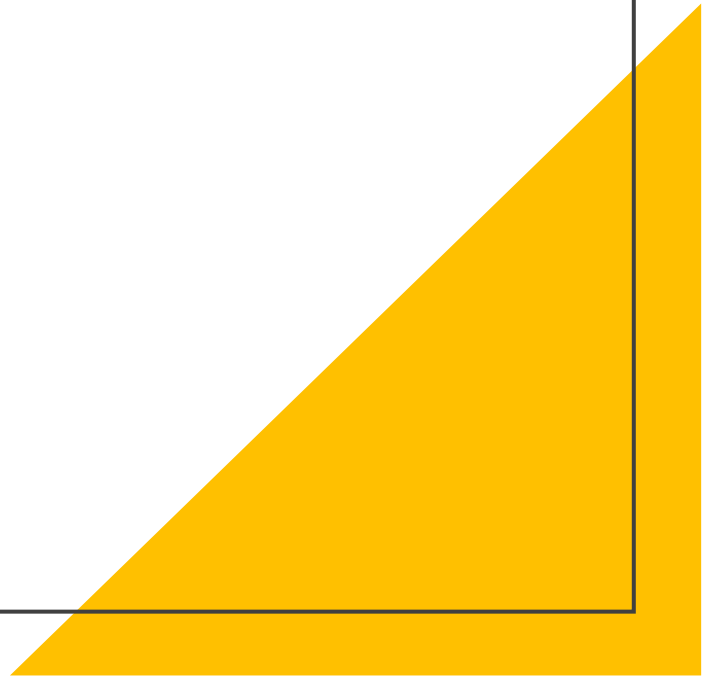# Focus Groups

Doing Political Research

What are Focus Groups?

- Group interviews facilitated by a moderator, focused on a particular topic
- Number of participants varies, usually between 5 and 10
- Levels of analysis
  - Individual
  - Group
  - Interaction

Why Use Focus Groups?

- Cyr finds focus groups to be rarely used in social science research
  - But they are an excellent way to investigate group dynamics
- Three uses of focus groups:
  - **Triangulation**: corroboration of evidence from other sources/methods
  - **Pretest**: checking how other methodological instruments, especially survey questions, are understood by participants
  - **Exploration**: finding new knowledge about/interpretations of political phenomena and processes

Examples

- What Do the Public Think of Taxation? (Prabhakar 2012)

- Everyday Narratives of European Border Security and Insecurity (Löfflmann and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 2018)

- Students' understanding of "radicalisation" (McGlynn and McDaid 2019)

- Public conceptions and constructions of 'British values' (Jarvis et al 2020)

- How politicised is European integration? (Hurrelmann et al 2015)

Focus Groups vs Individual Interviews

	Focus Groups	Interviews
Focus of Analysis	Group and interaction	Individual
Role of interviewer/ moderator	Starts discussion, occasionally intervenes	Directs the conversation
Views challenged?	Often, by other participants	Rarely, by interviewer
Structure	Less structure	More structure
Who asks questions?	Moderator and participants	Interviewer

The Process
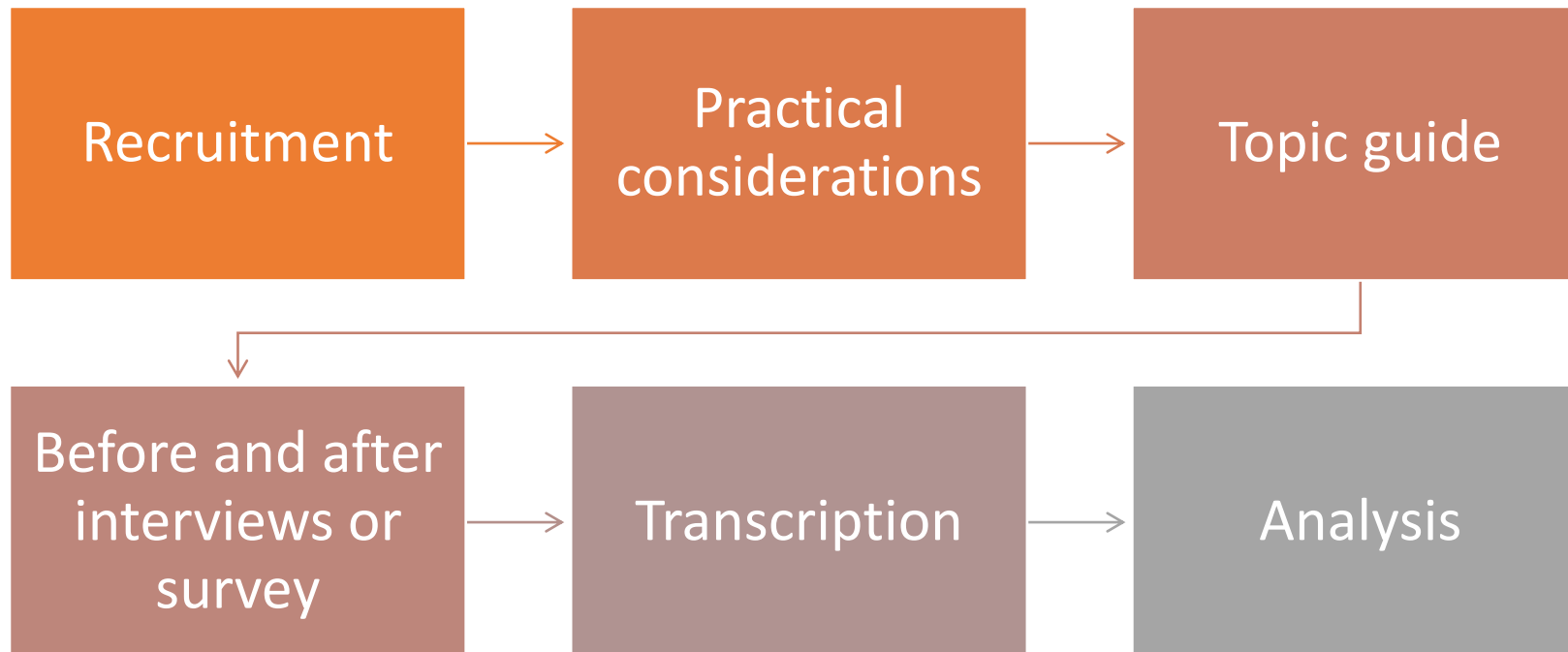
Recruitment

Similar issues to finding participants for interviews

- Who can you find?
- Who is willing to participate?
- Who is <u>not</u> included?

Composition of groups

- Variation within groups
- Variation between groups
- What varies (or does not vary)? Age, gender, class, ethnicity, region, political views, form of involvement with your research topic? Guided by your research question

Practical Considerations

Where will the focus groups take place?

How long will they last for?

How many people in each focus group?

Moderator and note-taker?

Topic Guide

- What questions will you ask?

- Icebreakers/activities

- How are they introduced?
  - Use of prompts: verbal, written, pictures, videos

- In what order are questions asked?

Group Dynamics

- Social pressures, groupthink, desirability bias
  - Are these problems or possibilities?
- Role of the moderator
  - How active? Guide discussion, or let it run?
  - Potential for 'moderator effects' similar to 'interviewer effects'
  - Moderator and researcher: are they the same person?
- Before and after the focus group
  - Use of questionnaires and individual interviews
  - How do views change after the focus group experience?
  - Allows for participants to reflect on the group interaction

Table 8.1   Transcription convention in focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Symbol	Function
M1, M2 (or other)	Speakers
(.)	Short pause
(6.0), (8,0), (9,0) . . .	Longer pause (six seconds, eight seconds, nine seconds, . . .)
(incomp. 6.0)	Incomprehensible elements of speech
[	Overlapping speech
Mhm. Eeeeeh	Para-verbal elements
((leans back)),((laughs))	Non-verbal behaviour
[Heimat]	Elements of original language (difficult to translate)
I would not say so	Normal speech
THIS	Accentuated/stressed element of speech
(↑)	Rising intonation (if significant)
(↓)	Falling intonation (if significant)

Note: See also Example 8.2.

Transcription
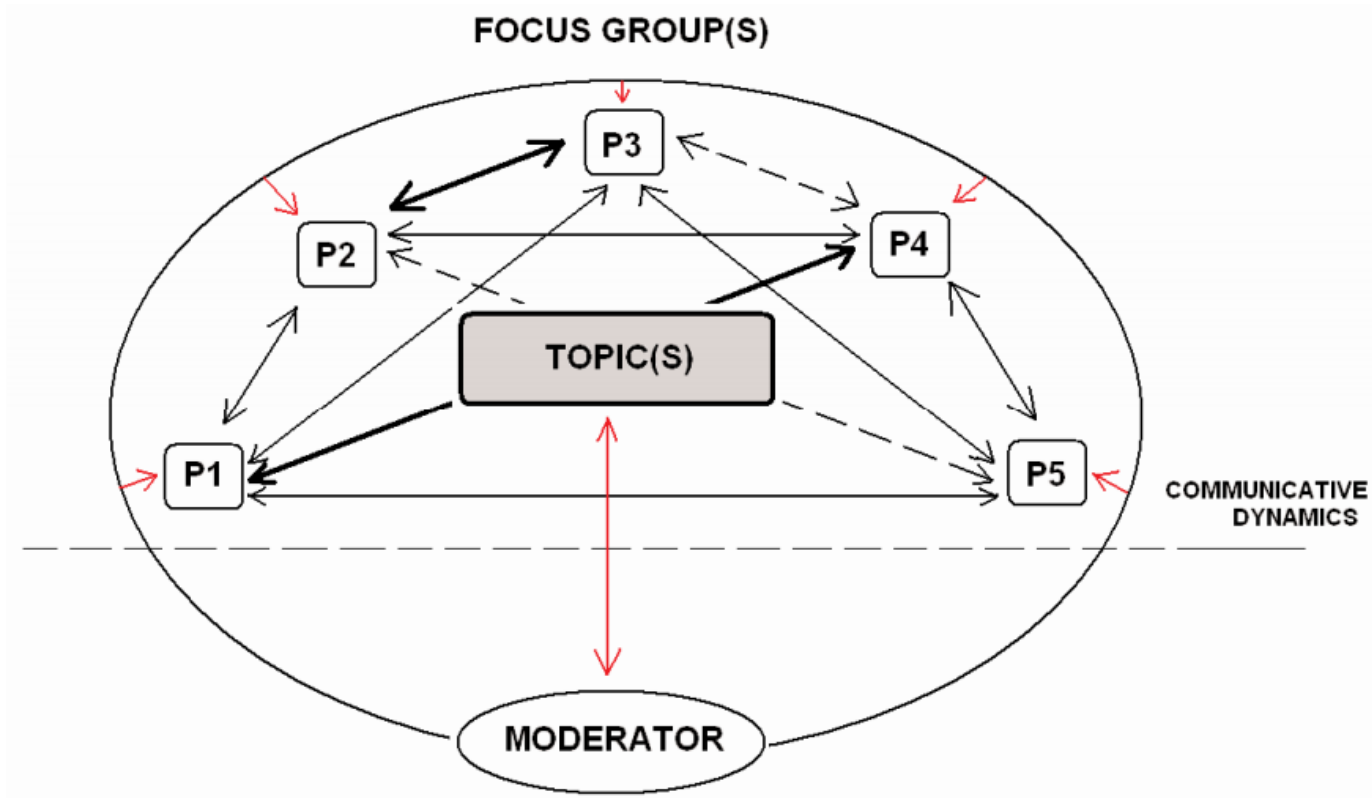
Figure 8.1 Interplays between key elements of focus groups (P = participant; arrows indicate possibility of a diverse intensity of interpersonal exchanges between participants)

Analysis: Group Dynamics

Analysis: Thematic Mapping

Table 8.2   Primary discourse topics in the focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Topic I	T-I	Perceptions of the Host Country
Topic II	T-II	Labour Market / Workplace
Topic III	T-III	Education
Topic IV	T-IV	Extreme Right
Topic V	T-V	Coping with Racism
Topic VI	T-VI	Improving Tolerance and Anti-Racism

Table 8.3   Secondary discourse topics in the focus groups on 'voices of migrants'

Topic 1	T-1	Social Contact
Topic 2	T-2	Perception of Migrants
Topic 3	T-3	Citizenship and Collective Identification
Topic 4	T-4	Ethnicity and Religion
Topic 5	T-5	Language
Topic 6	T-6	Prejudices
Topic 7	T-7	Austrian Radical-Right Politics
Topic 8	T-8	Media and the Public Sphere
Topic 9	T-9	Integration

PRIMARY DISCOURSE TOPIC I (T- I)

'PERCEPTIONS OF THE HOST COUNTRY'

Figure 8.2   Thematic interconnections of the primary discourse topic I (T-I)

Presenting Focus Group Analysis (Cyr)

- "Clearly state the main purpose of the focus group in a research design."

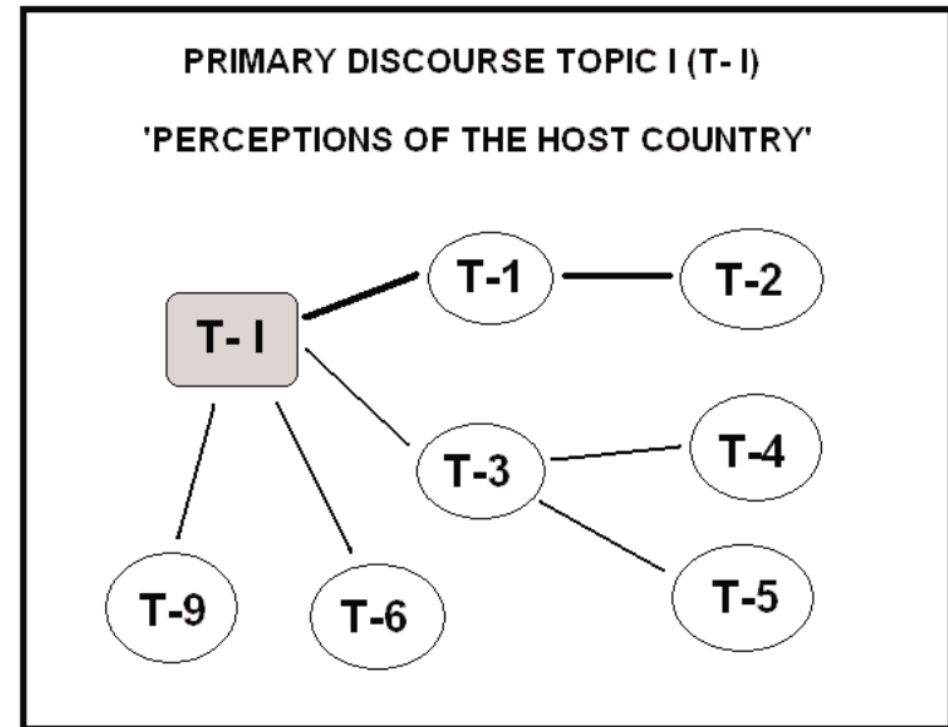- "Specify the unit of analysis exploited in the data collection process."

- "Provide the battery of questions from the focus group."

The Pitfalls and Promise of Focus Groups as a Data Collection Method

Jennifer Cyr[1]

Abstract

Despite their long trajectory in the social sciences, few systematic works analyze how often and for what purposes focus groups appear in published works. This study fills this gap by undertaking a meta-analysis of focus group use over the last 10 years. It makes several contributions to our understanding of when and why focus groups are used in the social sciences. First, the study explains that focus groups generate data at three units of analysis, namely, the individual, the group, and the interaction. Although most researchers rely upon the individual unit of analysis, the method's comparative advantage lies in the group and interactive units. Second, it reveals strong affinities between each unit of analysis and the primary motivation for using focus groups as a data collection method. The individual unit of analysis is appropriate for triangulation; the group unit is appropriate as a pretest; and the interactive unit is appropriate for exploration. Finally, it offers a set of guidelines that researchers should adopt when presenting focus groups as part of their research design. Researchers should, first, state the main purpose of the focus group in a research design; second, identify the primary unit of analysis exploited; and finally, list the questions used to collect data in the focus group.

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Conclusion

- Focus groups can be a very important tool to understand group dynamics in thinking about political phenomena

- But careful attention needs to be paid to how design choices might influence how participants talk and act

- The level of analysis is key: are you interested in individuals, groups or interaction?