

# What About Focus Group Interaction Data?

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*The purpose of this article is to discuss issues related to group interaction data in focus groups. How should it be analyzed and reported? The author addresses these questions using qualitative research approaches with examples from her research to foster further discussion regarding focus group research.*

*Keywords:* focus groups; qualitative data analysis

Focus groups have become a popular method of data collection in health sciences research (Sims, 1998; Webb & Kevern, 2001) and are now considered an important qualitative research technique (Madriz, 2000). Data generated using focus groups are the result of group interactions (Morgan, 1996). These interactions have been viewed as having positive or negative influences on the data (Agar & MacDonald, 1995; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Owen, 2001; Sims, 1998; Smithson, 2000; Wooten & Reed, 2000). However, group interactions have also been described as a source of data that is underused and underreported in focus group research (Wilkinson, 1998). Group interaction data reflect the interactive patterns within focus groups. Although several authors have discussed group interactions in focus groups, questions remain regarding group interaction data. How should it be analyzed and reported? My purpose in this article is to address these questions using qualitative research approaches with examples from my research to foster further discussion regarding focus group research.

## WHAT IS GROUP INTERACTION DATA?

The term *focus group* comes from the idea that groups are "focused" on a collective activity (Kitzinger, 1994). This collective activity occurs within a social context. Although the social context in a focus group is not a natural one, the use of focus groups presents an opportunity to observe group interactions within this social context (Morgan, 1996). For example, researchers can observe participants sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences, and even debating each other. This opportunity to observe interactive processes among participants is a clear advantage of focus groups over individual interviews (Madriz, 2000). The interactive processes or

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group interactions are a source of data that should be analyzed and reported (Wilkinson, 1998).

Group interaction data can be found in focus group transcripts and observations documented in field notes. For example, in my study entitled *The Aging Experience of Well Older Women*, supportive helping group interactions were found in the transcripts and field note observations. All of the 12 focus group transcripts had examples of supportive helping interactions. In one of the transcripts, a focus group participant had expressed concern about not having any children to rely on when she and her husband began to have difficulty looking after themselves. The following excerpts from the transcript reflect suggestions made by other participants to help Participant 1 (P1).

P1: We had, you know, thought about maybe assisted living, you know . . .

P2: Had you thought about a seniors complex? Well, the apartment complex we moved into is strictly seniors, you know.

P3: You can get your meals? Are there other things that older people can do?

P2: Yah, you can get your meals and if you do get sick they will bring your meals up to your room . . .

In another focus group, the women were discussing problems associated with aging and being isolated:

P1: I think isolation is one of the most the most difficult things . . .

P2: I recommend a senior program at—if you haven't got into that. It's a wonderful outlet.

P3: I've been thinking about that too . . .

P2: Well, you can go for \$20. I thought I'll probably go Wednesday.

In the study field notes, the trained observer noted that participants often encouraged others to speak and, when discussing problems, made gestures and comments of support. The following is an example of supportive helping group interaction data from the study field notes:

All appeared relaxed and had comfortable clothing on appropriate for exercise. They responded very openly to questions . . . many comforted each other with kind words as they spoke.

Within any focus group study, there will be many types of group interactions found in transcripts and observations. As the purpose is to identify group interaction data, it is important to identify from these data sources the interactions that are predominant in the group and not those of one or two individuals.

## HOW SHOULD GROUP INTERACTION DATA BE ANALYZED?

As in any type of qualitative research, the analysis of focus group data is based on the methodological approach chosen by the researcher reflecting the study purpose and specific aims. A critical guideline for any qualitative study is that the method

and operational practices should be consistent with the approach chosen based on the study purpose (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). Thus, the method of analysis in focus group research will vary from study to study based on the methodological approach used. However, with the complexity of analyzing three levels of data (individual, group, and group interaction) in focus group research ways to approach the analysis of these data within any methodology requires discussion.

Most of the methodological literature on focus groups has described the formation and conducting of the groups (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998; Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). Data analysis was seldom discussed in any detail or at all in reports of focus group research (Carey, 1995; Franklin & Bloor, 1999). As well, there has been a significant lack of literature on the methodological analytic issues of focus group data (Agar & MacDonald, 1995; Kitzinger, 1994; Myers, 1998; Webb & Kevern, 2001; Wilkinson, 1998). The literature relating to analysis has focused on analytic difficulties, with very few researchers proposing solutions (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). In Table 1, I have illustrated the recommendations of authors who proposed analytic solutions for focus group research. There appear to be two suggested methods for analyzing group interaction data: (a) describing interactions to interpret findings (Carey, 1995; Carey & Smith, 1994; Stevens, 1996) or (b) incorporating the group interaction data into the transcripts (Morrison-Beedy, Cote-Arsenault, & Feinstein, 2001).

### Descriptive Analysis

Carey (1995) recommended "an appropriate description of the nature of the group dynamics is necessary to incorporate in analysis" (p. 488). For example, whether there was heated discussion, a dominant member, or little agreement is useful in interpreting transcripts. However, if the researcher is using this method, the group interaction data would not be analyzed systematically with a methodological approach consistent with that used for data from other sources and might not be integrated with the other data.

Stevens (1996) built on Carey's (1995) ideas by proposing a list of 12 questions researchers should answer regarding group interaction when analyzing data. These 12 questions were

How closely did the group adhere to the issues presented for discussion? Why, how and when were related issues brought up? What statements seemed to evoke conflict? What were the contradictions in the discussion? What common experiences were expressed? Were alliances formed among group members? Was a particular member or viewpoint silences? Was a particular view dominant? How did the group resolve disagreements? What topics produced consensus? Whose interests were being represented in the group? How were emotions handled? (p. 172)

Stevens (1996) suggested that these questions help the researcher to understand the collectivity of the experience and how interactions build on one another. This type of analysis resulted in a description of the group interactions, but the group interaction data would not be analyzed with the same methodological approach or integrated with other types of focus group data.

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TABLE 1: Published Articles on Focus Group Data Analysis

<i>Author</i>	<i>Analysis of Individual Data</i>	<i>Analysis of Group Data</i>	<i>Analysis of Group Interaction Data</i>
Carey, 1995	Use selected approaches	Use selected approaches	Describe group interaction data and use it to interpret group data
Carey and Smith, 1994	Examine individual responses and behaviors without group context	Interactional and sequential analysis	Describe group interaction data written in field notes to interpret group data
Kidd and Parshall, 2000	Cross-code data to determine which is individual and which is group data	Cross-code data to determine which is group data or a strongly held opinion of an individual	Not discussed
Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001	Incorporate individual data into transcripts and analyze with other data	Incorporate group data into the transcripts and analyze with other data	Incorporate all aspects of the group process into the transcript and then analyze all the data together using selected approaches
Stevens, 1996	Not addressed	Not addressed	Proposed a list of 12 questions to differentiate between group interaction and group data; describe group interaction
Wilkinson, 1998	Analysis of individual data should occur within group context	Not discussed	Not discussed

### Incorporated Into Transcripts

Morrison-Beedy and colleagues (2001) suggested that all the data should be analyzed by incorporating them into the transcripts. This included group interaction data. A completed transcript would include what was said, nonverbal behavior, and a comment on group interaction:

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"It was no big deal" (said sarcastically with eyes looking downward). [It really was a big deal to her, but others had not acknowledged that.] (p. 52)

In this case, "It was no big deal" was data from the spoken word. "(Said sarcastically with eyes looking downward)" was the individual's nonverbal reaction. The phrase "It really was a big deal to her" was the researcher's interpretation of the words and nonverbal data. "But others had not acknowledged that" was the researcher's interpretation of the group's reaction to the comment through analysis of

the group interaction. In this way, the transcript became a primary data source, and group interaction data were integrated at the first level. However, although this method is promising, using it introduces some problems. The actual group interaction data that supported the researcher's interpretation were not reported, making it difficult to maintain an accurate audit trail and confirmability of the study results.

### Congruent Methodological Approach

Another potential method of analyzing focus group data is to analyze the group interaction data using the same approach as group or individual data. Using the chosen methodological approach, group interaction data would be analyzed separately and then compared with group data. In the study *The Aging Experience of Well Older Women*, using Luborsky's (1994) thematic analysis of group interaction data from the field notes and transcripts, I identified *Helping Others* as an emerging theme. Based on this analysis, a word search was completed of the verbal transcript data to determine if this helping supportive interaction pattern was referred to in the spoken word. Data bit examples from the transcript of one focus group were

P1: I think instead of what can I get and what to have. . . . But now it's what I can to do, how can I help.

P2: That's right

P1: What can I do to make someone else's life happier and easier

P3: and really sincerely help them. You know, I mean from the heart.

P4: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh.

From another focus group,

P1: I think we have to look after other people, see their needs and just talk to them . . . uh, help them.

P2: But I think as long as we are able to take responsibility to get out and encourage other people. [Group members nodding]

Thus, group and group interaction data supported the theme *Helping Others*. Using this approach, I integrated data from all sources until theoretical saturation occurred within the emerging theme of helping others. I considered the analysis complete when the theme reflected frequently occurring categories in the focus groups as well as what was important and had meaning to the participants. ✓

An ideal method of group interaction data analysis should be congruent with the qualitative approach and provide new levels of insight in the phenomena being researched. For this reason, analyzing the group interaction data separately might be one possible approach. I attempted to use the other approaches but found that data were lost when I used only descriptions of interactions, and specific, structured questions did not permit consistency in the analytical approach. By analyzing group interaction data separately, I was able to extract group and group interaction data and integrate the results in the emerging theme of helping others.

## HOW SHOULD INTERACTION DATA BE REPORTED?

Very often, the findings of focus group research are reported with data examples similar to single interviews resulting in the underreporting of group interactions (Wilkinson, 1998). Authors have suggested that focus group findings should be reported with descriptions of group interactions (Carey, 1995; Stevens, 1996) or detailed data excerpts (Wilkinson, 1998).

### Descriptions

Carey (1995) and Stevens (1996) suggested that descriptions of interactions should be reported as a means to interpret individual and group findings. For example, Stevens reported descriptions of group interactions:

I examined group processes, emotional charge, how group members' interactions built on each other, power dynamics within the groups, group stories, areas of agreement and dissent, and how the groups represented and explained areas of consensus and area of disparity. (p. 173)

Stevens described how group interactions lent insight into the collectivity of the participants' experiences but not how the interaction data were integrated with other data. With this approach of reporting group interaction data, there is a risk of ignoring and not integrating group interaction data with other types of data.

### Detailed Data Excerpts

Wilkinson (1998) suggested that detailed data excerpts of group interactions, not individual quotations, should be reported. Wilkinson proposed that group process data should be reported, as it shows how individuals within groups find their own meanings. In her focus group research of women with breast cancer, group interactions were a process of co-construction of meaning:

*Anne:* Would you like to see my prosthesis? The size of it?  
*Barbara:* [laughs] Well, mine's only really tiny [laughs]  
*Anne:* Excuse me [pulls out breast prosthesis and passes it around the table] Feel the weight  
*Carole:* [gasps] (p. 339)

This example highlights the co-construction of meaning in wearing a prosthesis, as the group interaction normalized the event. Should all focus group findings be reported with detailed data excerpts? The detailed group interaction examples reflect Wilkinson's (1998) purpose of illustrating the co-construction of meaning, thus maintaining congruency with the purpose of her study. For her study, but perhaps not for other studies using focus groups, detailed data excerpts were appropriate.

### Congruency With Study Purpose

Another example of maintaining congruency with a methodological approach and reporting of findings is the use of detailed data excerpts from focus groups in discourse analysis. The purpose of discourse analysis is to examine how "language-in-use" (language used in interactions) influences social activities and group membership (Gee, 1999). An example in the literature of this reporting style with focus groups using discourse analysis was Shefer and colleagues' (2002) study of sexually transmitted infections (STI) in South Africa. In their article, the excerpts from the focus groups showed comments from several participants illustrating the dominant discourses of stigmatization of STIs. The purpose of Shefer's study was to examine the implications of the social constructions of STIs. In this example, the purpose, method, and reporting style were congruent. Therefore, maintaining congruency of purpose, method, and reporting style might be one solution to the issue of how to report focus group data.

### Theoretical Sensitivity

Another qualitative concept that might assist in answering the question of how to report findings of focus group research is the concept of theoretical sensitivity. Although theoretical sensitivity is a concept associated with grounded theory, it might have merit in the discussion of what and how group interaction data should be reported. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher's ability to conceptualize what is important and give it meaning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This conceptualization is reflected in the writing of research findings. Therefore, if group interaction data are relevant to the findings, they should be reported using detailed data excerpts from transcripts and field notes. In the example of my study of the aging experience, group interaction data found in field notes and transcripts should be reported as part of the description of the emerging theme of helping others.

If the group interaction data do not contribute to the discussion of the study findings, then, using the concept of theoretical sensitivity, the researcher does not need to report them. If they are not reported, however, there is possibly a need for the researcher to describe how group and group interaction data were analyzed using a specific approach in the study, so that the readers are confident that a source of data was not ignored. Using methodological congruency as a guide would provide flexibility with regard to reporting of focus group findings.

### CONCLUSION

Maintaining congruency with the qualitative paradigm potentially provides a framework to answer analytic and reporting questions in focus group research regarding group interaction data. How should group interaction data be analyzed? As more researchers engage in analysis of group interaction data, the pros and cons of the different methods will be discussed more thoroughly in the literature. A simple method might be to analyze group interaction data separately from group or individual data using the same methodological approach and then integrate the findings with other data. Integration of group interaction data with other types of data is very important however it is achieved.

How should group interaction data be reported? This remains a philosophical question. Reporting of findings using qualitative research, as with other aspects of the research, should be congruent with the methodological approach. Wilkinson's (1998) suggestion of detailed data excerpts of interactions has merit when it is congruent with the study purpose. Using the concept of theoretical sensitivity, the researcher would decide what data were important to report by deciding if they are meaningful and will contribute to the readers' understanding. However the findings are described, the authors should make some statement as to the methodological approach used in data analysis of group and group interaction data. The ultimate goal, however, in reporting the findings of qualitative inquiry, whatever the approach, is for the researcher to find the most effective way of relating the expressions of the participants and their meanings (Janesick, 2000).

Wilkinson (1998) suggested that there is a potential for developing new and better methods of analyzing focus group data. This potential can be realized through further discussions of methodological issues of group interaction data using qualitative paradigms as frameworks. As the discussions continue, they will increase the understanding of the issues and will hopefully suggest possible solutions for researchers to improve the quality of focus group research.

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