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Abstract

Book description:

Research in Micropolitics published original essays on a variety of substantive, conceptual and methodological issues of relevance to political psychology, with particular emphasis on promising new areas of theory and research.

Disciplines

Communication | Political Science | Politics and Social Change | Psychology

THE METHOD IS THE MESSAGE: FOCUS GROUPS AS A METHOD OF SOCIAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND POLITICAL INQUIRY

Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams

Focus groups are “carefully planned discussion[s] designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger, 1988, p. 18). Though their roots can be traced to Robert Merton’s research on wartime propaganda (Merton and Kendall, 1946), they are a method that has been surprisingly little used in the social sciences. Today focus groups are enjoying a modest resurgence, most notably in market research and campaign consulting, but increasingly in journalism and academia as well. In this paper we examine the history, logic, and techniques of focus group research as they apply to the study of political psychology and public opinion. In so doing we highlight some of the major findings to emerge from this research, and evaluate the comparative strengths and weaknesses of this promising methodology.

I. EARLY USES OF “FOCUSED INTERVIEWS”

Focus group research, like much of the theory and method of contemporary social science, originated with the pioneering efforts of Paul Lazarsfeld. Throughout the 1940s, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the Office of Radio Research (later the Bureau of Applied Social Research) used *focused interviews* of both individuals and groups as a method for uncovering “the social and psychological effects of mass communications” (Merton and Kendall, 1946, p. 541).¹ According to Merton’s reflections on the subject (1987), he became interested in collective interviews in 1941, while observing one of Lazarsfeld’s assistants question a group of individuals who had just participated in an audience-reaction study. The participants had been asked to *react* to a radio broadcast, using the Lazarsfeld-Stanton program analyzer. This device, the forerunner of contemporary audience response technology (Biocca and David, Forthcoming; West and Biocca, 1992), allowed members of an audience to register their positive and negative responses to a broadcast as they listened. The result was a crude polygraph-like readout that recorded the audience’s second-by-second reactions. Using this printout as a guide, researchers then interviewed the audience in small groups in order to ascertain why they reacted as they did. Having had some experience with depth interviews as part of a Works Progress Administration project during the Depression, Merton saw great potential in these collective interviews, and he and his colleagues went on to develop a set of guidelines for their use that, with a few exceptions, are still applicable.

According to Merton and Kendall (1946), and Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956; 1990), focused interviews should be conducted with individuals who have had a shared “experience” — for example, listened to a broadcast, watched a film, or engaged in a task or social interaction. This collective experience could be part of a controlled experiment or could occur naturally, but it must be observed by the researcher. The dynamics of this experience are then systematically analyzed, resulting in a set of tentative hypotheses regarding the impact of the experience on attitudes, opinions, and behaviors.² Based on these hypotheses, the researcher develops a discussion guide or protocol designed to explore the *subjective experiences* of the participants through the focused interviews.

More specifically, focused interviews were designed to: clarify the particular stimuli responsible for the observed effect; explain discrepancies between hypothesized effects and observed effects; determine why certain individuals or subgroups responded differently than most participants; and reveal the underlying—and usually unobserved—social and psychological processes driving the “experimentally induced effects” (Merton and Kendall, 1946, p. 542). Thus, early focused interviews were used to supplement the findings of experimental and quasi-experimental research designs, and were not treated as free-standing methods. Indeed, Merton and Kendall (1946) believed that the focused interviews were “useful near-substitutes” for the preferred approach of a “series of successive experiments, which test the effects of each pattern of putative causes” (p. 542-543).

According to Merton, an effective focused interview had several interrelated characteristics: Nondirectedness, depth, personal context, range, and specificity. *Nondirectedness* meant that while guided by a protocol, interviews were not dominated by the moderator and were conducted to elicit opinions without being judgmental. *Depth* meant that interviews were structured to draw out “the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects’ responses, to determine whether the experience had a central or peripheral significance” (p. 545). Focused interviews should also reveal participants’ potentially unique social and psychological makeup, allowing researchers to put responses into a *personal context*. Finally, they should explore the potential impact of as wide a *range* of stimuli as possible, while providing details about the *specific* elements of the stimuli that elicited responses.

The best documented of Merton’s focused interviews were conducted with American combat soldiers, and are summarized in Volume 3 of *The American Soldier* (1950).³ These interviews were conducted in the mid-1940s as part of a project sponsored by the U.S. War Department. The army’s Information and Education Division had as its primary goal to “quickly and accurately” provide “facts about attitudes which would be practically useful in policy making—and not attitudes in general, but rather attitudes toward very specific things which might be manipulable” (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, and Williams, 1949, p. 37). Part of this research focused on the role of mass communications in the dynamics of attitude formation and change. Focused interviews were employed in studying this relationship.

The Information and Education Division had produced, under the direction of Frank Capra, the “Why We Fight” film series, to be shown to U.S. soldiers. Stouffer, Merton, and their colleagues designed a series of experiments to gauge the impact of these films on soldiers’ knowledge about the war, their opinions about Allied, German, and Japanese behavior, their support for the war, and their willingness to fight. The experiments followed both a classic pre-post design and a post-only design using control groups for comparison. Knowledge, attitudes, and opinions were measured by mainly closed-ended paper-and-pencil questions. These survey responses were supplemented with information gleaned from focused interviews:

It was found that for the purpose of getting ideas for improvement of the film[s] and for discovery of some of the detailed reactions to the film, the group interviews were successful. In addition to the economy of time involved in using group interviews instead of individual ones, *the group interviews provided social stimulation in getting men to express their opinions.* (Merton and Lazarsfeld, 1950, p. 83, emphasis added)

One hundred fifty soldiers, selected to be representative by age, education, and other demographic characteristics, participated in the focused interviews. Soldiers watched the films in a large group, assembling into smaller groups of 10 to 12 immediately after the viewing. These

smaller groups were constructed to be relatively homogeneous on “intelligence” as determined by education levels and scores on the army’s General Classification Test. This was done because past experience had shown that less educated participants were intimidated from speaking by the presence of more educated, articulate participants. Several things were done to make the discussions as informal and nonthreatening as possible. They were held in the camp recreation hall. Participants, who were guaranteed anonymity, sat in a circle on comfortable chairs and were allowed to smoke. Stenographers sat unobtrusively in the background.

Participants in the focused interviews were not the same individuals who participated in the experiments, but information gleaned from the open-ended discussions was supplemented by a short paper-and-pencil questionnaire. While the protocol for each group was identical, interviews were conducted successively by the same set of moderators, allowing them to use the experience of prior groups to inform the way subsequent groups were run. Questions were initially kept at a very general level, allowing participants leeway in what they emphasized, though moderators would often probe with follow-up questions. The questions became more specific as the discussion progressed, with the most pointed ones asked toward the end of the discussion period.

The focused interviews were used to clarify the results of the experiments, and on occasion to suggest additional data analyses or future avenues for experimentation. For example, while the experiments made clear that the soldiers generally liked the films, the focused interviews were useful in pointing out the *specific* elements within scenes, production techniques, and so forth, that were most effective.

The focused interviews were especially helpful in explaining deviant reactions. For example, a quarter of the soldiers in the experimental setting said that the purpose of the film was to “manipulate” them, a response which, while correct, was of obvious concern to the army. The focused interviews uncovered several reasons why some soldiers felt this way. Sometimes these reasons revealed the soldiers naivety as much as their cynicism. For example, some soldiers did not believe that certain scenes could be real. This was often expressed through skeptical questions like “How could they film the actual men in a German bomber” (p. 91). Or, more directly, “I don’t think they were real because if anyone would get that close to [Hitler] they would shoot him” (p. 91). Significantly, the focused interviews also suggested that some of those who felt the films were manipulative were not upset by it. As one soldier noted, “I think there is some propaganda mixed in now and then to help bolster morale. It had just enough” (p. 92). The approach used to present these “findings” remains a model for presenting focus group results: the authors summarized their “reading” of the transcripts, supplementing their interpretation with illustrative direct quotes.⁴

In the end, Merton and Lazarsfeld remained cautious about the use of focused interviews. They noted the now familiar danger of over-generalizing from comments found in the interviews:

The interest in interview comments was sometimes so great that the [film] producer tended to infer from the comments the nature of the effects of films on attitudes, opinions, and factual information. Obviously, however, such interview data constitute an inadequate method for determining these effects of a film (p. 93).

Indeed, sometimes generalizations drawn from the interviews did not hold up to more systematic analyses. For example, comments like “The film was very stirring. I was fighting mad at the brutality of the Nazis,” or “It made me feel like killing a bunch of those sons-of-bitches” (Merton

and Lazarsfeld, 1950, p. 93) led researchers to assume initially that the films had succeeded in increasing the number of soldiers who resented the enemy. However, further experiments determined that this was not the case. Even here, however, the focused interviews proved useful, in that they pointed to the possibility that while the *number* of soldiers disliking the enemy might not have increased, the *intensity* of that dislike may have.⁵

It is important to note that the authors' hesitation to draw conclusions about cognitive and attitudinal processes from focused interviews was based on the particular design of these studies, and was not a general rejection of this approach:

Group interviews could possibly be used as an alternative to questionnaires as a means of measuring responses [to films], but it would be necessary to have control interview groups that had not seen the film as a baseline against which to determine the film's effects, and direct mention of the film would have to be omitted in both the control and the experimental interviews (p. 93).

II. CONTEMPORARY FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Focused interviews seemed a promising addition to the then formative methods of political psychology and public opinion research. However, survey research quickly relegated them to a methodological footnote.⁶ In the mid-1970s the focused interview—renamed the focus group—enjoyed a resurgence, largely in market research.⁷ By the early 1980s it had also become a staple of campaign consulting.

While focus groups remain an exotic methodology in the social sciences, several recent studies have made extensive use of this technique.⁸ The original emphases on nondirectedness, depth, personal context, range, and specificity remain essentially unchanged, though the purpose of the modern focus group is no longer simply the explication of the findings of a more formal experiment. Increasingly the *experimental* and *exploratory* components of research designs have become folded together, so that the group discussion becomes, in a sense, part of either the stimulus or the response. To be sure, focus groups continue to be used not only with formal experiments, but also with participant observation, depth interviews, and survey research (Krueger, 1988: pp. 31-40; Morgan, 1988, pp. 30-36). However, in what is perhaps the greatest deviation from Merton's prescriptions, they are increasingly used as a free-standing methodology. As such they have provided insights into the process of opinion formation and change, and even occasionally allowed for what Krueger (1988) calls "cautious generalizations" (pp. 42-44).

A. Why Use Focus Groups?

Research using focus groups raises both concerns and possibilities for social scientists weaned on more traditional quantitative and qualitative methods. Ultimately, "focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry" (Krueger, 1988, p. 41). As focus group research has become more common, the kinds of questions for which they are suitable have become clearer.

1. Supplementing and Complementing Traditional Methods

To our knowledge, the first researchers to reintroduce focus groups to the study of political psychology were Roberta Sigel and Cliff Zukin (1985). Sigel and Zukin conducted six focus groups intended to serve two related purposes: to help in the construction of closed-ended

survey questions measuring attitudes about gender relations and gender roles; and to generate hypotheses to be tested with more quantitative techniques. While the focus groups proved useful for these purposes, Sigel (forthcoming) also found them helpful in fleshing out the findings of subsequent quantitative analyses:

Notwithstanding their limitations, focus group observations...greatly enriched our understanding of men's and women's perceptions of gender relations. In fact, we found them to "deliver" much more than we had anticipated. Originally conceived mainly as guides to questionnaire construction, it soon became obvious that they had an independent contribution to make...(p. 13)

Several other projects have since used focus groups to supplement quantitative data. As part of a study of media coverage of the president, Smoller (1990) used a focus group to explore how citizens process news about the president. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a) used focus groups with individuals who had taken a telephone "quiz" to test the validity of a 10-item scale as a measure of general political knowledge. In a comparative study of citizenship, Conover, Crewe, and Searing (1991) used this methodology as a "critical first step" (p. 805) in a larger survey research project. Crigler and colleagues (1992) study of the presidential campaign process developed an elaborate multimethod research design that combined focus groups with survey research, content analyses, depth interviews, and formal experiments. In a project based directly on Lazarsfeld's and Merton's early work, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993b) used focus groups in conjunction with both pre-post experiments and continuous audience response analyses to gauge the reaction of undecided voters to the second presidential debate of the 1992 campaign.

2. Focus Groups as a Compromise of Traditional Research Methods

Focus groups have certain limitations as compared to other research methods. The group setting is less natural than in true ethnographic approaches such as participant observation. The details about any single individual are fewer than with in-depth interviews, and the threat that individuals will conform to peer pressure is greater. The researcher has less control than in experiments over the systematic manipulation of variables or in isolating specific cause and effect relationships. Focus group results are less easily analyzed, summarized, and generalized than they are in survey research. Interpretations are also more easily biased by the researcher's expectations and more difficult to replicate than with more *scientific* approaches.

At the same time, focus groups can reproduce other methods' strengths while avoiding some of their weaknesses. By allowing the researcher to talk to as many as 12 people in one sitting, focus groups combine the probing and flexibility of in-depth interviews with survey research's concern about sample size. For example, Liebes and Katz (1990) talked with almost 400 individuals in their group interviews.

Focus groups also combine some of the hypotheses-testing capability of experiments with the exploratory capabilities of in-depth interviews and ethnography. Kern and Just (1992) used focus groups to explore "the dynamics of schema construction" (p. 2) in presidential campaigns. More specifically, they designed a "quasi-simulation" (p. 4) in which New Jersey voters role played as North Carolinians in the last 10 days of the 1990 senate race between Jesse Helms and Harvey Gantt. The groups were shown news and campaign ads from the campaign. Participants were then led through a loosely structured discussion about the campaign. Participants were also asked to more formally record (through paper-and-pencil questions) their candidate preferences, so as to periodically gauge the "shifts in individual opinion in response to campaign stimuli" (p.

30). While admittedly exploratory, Kern and Just concluded that the “focus group method may be linked to a more traditional method, simulation, to produce a powerful new tool for analyzing campaign discourse” (p. 30).

Press (1991) and Press and Cole (1992) designed their focus groups as qualitative pre-post experiments. The first third of each group meeting consisted of an open-ended discussion about abortion. Participants then watched an episode of the television series *Cagney and Lacey*, the plot of which dealt with this subject. Following the broadcast, the discussion was resumed. Thus, the television show acted as a *stimulus* and changes in the language used by group members to discuss abortion was the *response*. Press also administered short pre-post questionnaires, allowing for more traditional tests of the impact of stimuli.⁹

While having their own potential for bias, focus groups do provide some checks on the danger, found in both in-depth interviews and traditional surveys, that a researcher’s prior expectations will unduly influence the expression of public opinion. As Conover, Crewe, and Searing (1991) note, the group format assures that “participants talk to one another in their own language, rather than simply reacting to the questions and language of an interviewer in a one-to-one situation” (p. 805). This, in turn, increases the likelihood of new, often unexpected conclusions emerging from focus group analyses.

Finally, focus groups combine ethnography’s emphasis on naturalness and unobtrusiveness with the greater control provided by experiments and depth interviews. As Gamson (1992) points out, many aspects of social interaction are better studied “in natural settings...but the focus group contrivance allows us to observe a concentrated interaction on a topic in a limited period of time, with the opportunity to raise questions and perspectives that would not naturally occur” (p. 192).

3. *The Unique Contributions of Focus Groups*

The uses described earlier are enough to recommend focus groups as a method of inquiry. In our view, however, their greatest utility lies less in what they have in common with other methods than in what is unique about them. Focus groups can illuminate aspects of public opinion that are less accessible through traditional methods. In particular, focus groups are valuable in revealing the *process* of opinion formation, in providing glimpses of usually *latent* aspects of this process, and in demonstrating the *social* nature of public opinion.

Opinions are not simply fixed constructs that are *stored* and *retrieved* like data in a computer. Rather, they are continuously constructed through cognitive processes involving a myriad of complex schema (Graber, 1988; Neuman, Crigler and Just, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). However, in spite of creative research designs and sophisticated data analyses, traditional methods of measuring opinions are not always able to capture this dynamism. For example, closed-ended survey items often reify opinions by *forcing* respondents to present them as self-contained and preexisting objects. The cross-sectional nature of most surveys adds to this static quality. Even panel studies and experimental designs encourage a mechanistic model, in which opinions are measured, new information is introduced, and opinions are remeasured. Focus groups, on the other hand, can be “catalyst[s] for the individual expression of latent opinion...for free-associating to life” (Liebes and Katz, 1990, p. 28). By essentially forcing people to “think out loud,” they become windows through which to observe the process of opinion-formation.

Of course the formation of public opinion is more than just a cognitive process:

Attitudes and perceptions...are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us. A deficiency of mail and telephone surveys and even face-to-face interviews is that those methods assume that individuals really do know how they feel. A further assumption is that individuals form opinions in isolation. Both of these assumptions have presented problems for researchers. People may need to listen to opinions of others before they form their own personal viewpoints. While some opinions may be developed quickly and held with absolute certainty, other opinions are malleable and dynamic (Krueger, 1988, p, 21).

Focus groups are often used because of their ability to model these social, dynamic processes. For example, Conover et al. (1991) used focus groups in their research because they were interested in “discovering the commonplace meaning of political terms” (p. 805) such as citizenship, and focus groups allowed them to directly observe the language and categories people used in discussing this concept. Liebes and Katz (1990) also considered the conversational, social nature of focus groups as their greatest asset. In particular, they argued that focus groups are effective in illustrating “the processes of collective meaning-making” because

they permit tentative interpretations to be floated by someone and shot down by someone else, because they permit bullies to try to impose themselves on the others, because expert opinion is sought out for guidance, because interpretations are molded and twisted to fit the underground loves and hates that permeate interpersonal relations. *This is what happens in life*, (p. 82, emphasis added)

They maintained further that focus groups succeed because they replicate the kinds of exchanges that citizens actually have: “[W]e were, in effect, operationalizing the assumption that the small-group discussion following the broadcast is a key to understanding the mediating process via which a program such as this enters into the culture” (p. 28).

There are limits, however, to the comparison of focus groups to “real life.” As Gamson (1992) notes, “[m]ost people do not spontaneously sit down with their friends and acquaintances and have a serious discussion for more than an hour on different issues in the news” (p. 17). Gamson goes on to compare the exchanges that occur in focus groups with two other forms of discourse. *Public discourse* involves “speaking to the gallery” (p. 19), while *sociable interaction* is the informal, private conversation that occurs among friends, family members, and the like. Focus groups as usually constructed in academic research are a blend of these two types of communication. On the one hand, participants know that they are “speaking for the record” and that their views are being recorded, and thus being expressed, for an academic “gallery.” On the other hand, the conversational format, the familiarity of participants with each other (in some research designs), and the relaxed setting in which they take place, give the discussions elements of sociable interaction as well. Gamson labels this blend of public and private exchange *sociable public discourse*.

The semi-public nature of focus group discussions may make them problematic for studying some kinds of discourse. While admittedly artificial, however, they are certainly *less* contrived than most experimental or survey-based research. Consider, for example, the dynamics of a telephone interview, in which one moment a person is sitting at dinner, watching TV, conversing with family members, and so forth, and the next is engaged in a formal interview with a stranger about a variety of issues he or she has had no time to think about. In addition, it is arguable that the way people talk about *politics* is closer to sociable public discourse than to either public discourse or sociable interaction. This is especially true when it occurs outside the home, but holds to some degree regardless of where the conversation occurs or what the

relationship of the people conversing. Rather it is driven by the public nature of the topic. Viewed in this light, focus groups seem an especially appropriate method for studying how people talk—and therefore think—about politics.

B. Research Designs

Contemporary focus group research reveals much variation in the design of specific studies. In general, focus groups are tailored to particular research questions. Nonetheless, any project faces the same set of critical choices: Who to recruit as participants? How to recruit them? How to stratify participants in each group? How many people to have in each group? How many groups to run? How to structure group discussions? And, how to analyze and present the results? While there are no definitive answers to these questions, a review of extant research provides a set of useful guidelines.

1. *Setting Up Focus Groups*

Participants are recruited in a variety of ways. For example, Sigel (forthcoming), and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a) selected individuals based on their responses to earlier telephone surveys. Traugott (1992) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993b) used brief telephone surveys designed specifically for recruiting participants. Delli Carpini and Williams (1994; forthcoming) placed ads in local newspapers. Press (1991) and Press and Cole (1992) used ads, but also made announcements at local PTA meetings. Gamson (1992) set up recruiting tables at community events such as “festivals, fairs, and flea markets” (p. 16). And Liebes and Katz (1990) approached members of different local communities and asked *them* to recruit additional participants.

While the number of individuals interviewed in any single study is usually too small to make confident generalizations, participants are still selected to be as representative as possible of some larger group. Occasionally this *larger group* is the general population. More often, however, researchers are interested in more specific groups. For example, Traugott (1992) limited his focus groups to registered voters, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993b) to undecided voters, Press (1991) and Press and Cole (1992) to women who were strongly pro-choice or pro-life, Gamson (1992) to working class people, and Liebes and Katz (1990) to members of different ethnic communities.

Individual focus groups usually are constructed so that participants share some specific demographic or attitudinal characteristic, which allows people to speak their mind without feeling intimidated or defensive. Sometimes this common characteristic is coincidental to the larger purpose of the study, as in Stouffer et al.’s (1949) decision to stratify by education, or Delli Carpini and Williams’ (1994, forthcoming) decision to stratify by age cohorts. More often, however, it is more directly related to the issue at hand. For example, in her analysis of attitudes toward gender roles, Sigel (forthcoming) conducted separate groups for men and women, and also stratified several groups further by age, class, and occupational status. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a) conducted separate groups for individuals who were very, moderately, or only slightly knowledgeable about politics. Participants in Conover et al.’s (1991) study of perceptions of citizenship were stratified not only by citizenship (British or U.S.) but also by place of residence (rural or urban) and, in Britain, by social class. Liebes and Katz (1990) were interested in the ways in which a *culturally-specific* show such as *Dallas* was interpreted by *culturally-distinct* audiences. As a result, they conducted separate groups with members of four ethnic communities in Israel (Russians, Arabs, Moroccan Jews, and Israeli-born members of a

kibbutz), with second-generation Americans from Los Angeles, and with Japanese from Tokyo. And Press, in her analyses of attitudes about abortion (1991; Press and Cole, 1992), conducted separate groups for working class pro-life women, working class pro-choice women, middle class pro-life women, and middle class pro-choice women.

One of the biggest differences between many contemporary focus groups and the “focused interviews” of Lazarsfeld and Merton is the familiarity of group members with each other. “Stranger groups” are still the norm: Sigel (forthcoming); Traugott (1992); Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a; 1993b); Delli Carpini and Williams (1994; forthcoming); Smoller (1990); and Kern and Just (1992) all conducted groups with people who had never met each other. Half the groups conducted by Conover et al. (1991) also consisted of strangers. However, in an effort to simulate a more organic, sociological notion of “group,” Conover et al. also conducted discussions with individuals who already knew each other. Gamson (1992) Press (1991), and Press and Cole (1992) used only “friend groups,” in which a person recruited by the researcher in turn recruited several friends to participate in the discussion. And Liebes and Katz (1990) used groups composed of three married couples of generally the same ethnicity, age, and education who were acknowledged friends. Gamson (1992) distinguishes these semi organic groups from traditional focus groups by calling them “peer group conversations.”

Whether one uses married couples, friends, or co-workers, using groups whose members have a prior relationship provides a technique for investigating aspects of public opinion that are typically outside the focus of more standard survey research methods. Such groups allow researchers to explore the dynamics of ongoing social relationships (i.e., patriarchal relations in the family; hierarchical relations on the job, etc.) as they affect the way people collectively express public opinion. These significant components of public opinion are difficult to get at using survey methods that try to isolate individuals as they express their opinions. The ability of focus groups to explore the social aspects of public opinion represents the most distinctive contribution that the method has to make in political inquiry. On the other hand, when focus groups are used as an adjunct to survey techniques (i.e., for developing a depth understanding of survey results), it is more appropriate to use stranger groups.

The typical focus or peer group discussion includes between 6 and 10 participants, though as few as 4 and as many as 12 are not unusual (Krueger, 1988, pp. 93-94; Morgan, 1988, pp. 43-44). The size of the group one aims for depends on a number of factors. Large groups expand the number of viewpoints that are expressed, increasing one’s confidence in the conclusions that are drawn from them. They also help assure that a single personality does not dominate the conversation. However, large groups limit the amount any one person can say, thus sacrificing depth for greater breadth. They can also be more intimidating to some participants, making them more hesitant to talk. Finally, the larger the group, the more difficult it can be to moderate the discussion. While at times this is not a problem, it can make follow-up questions less likely and make it harder for the moderator to draw out opinions from less talkative participants.

The size of the groups in the research we examined varied both within studies and across them. The variation within studies is due largely to the unpredictability of recruitment—not everyone who agrees to participate actually does.¹⁰ For example, Traugott’s (1992) groups ranged from 7 to 11 participants, excluding the moderator, and averaged about 9. Similarly, Sigel’s (forthcoming) groups ranged from 7 to 12 and averaged 8, and the discussions conducted by Conover et al. (1991) included from 6 to 10 participants.

In an effort to simulate “real” conversation, researchers working with “friend groups” tend to include fewer participants than those using “stranger groups.”¹¹ Press’s (1991; Press and Cole, 1992) groups ranged from two to five discussants. Gamson’s (1992) peer group conversations averaged five participants each, with some having as few as three and others having “more than six” (p. 193). Liebes and Katz (1990) averaged a very consistent six discussants per group.

In addition to the size of groups, researchers need to consider the number of groups to conduct. Here again the decision depends on the nature of the research question and on the kind of analysis that is intended. According to Krueger (1988), “a helpful rule of thumb is to continue conducting interviews until little new information is provided” (p. 97). The experience of market researchers and campaign consultants suggests that this point is often reached after the fourth group discussion. Academic studies have reported on the results of as few as one group (Smoller, 1990, pp. 62-64) and as many as 66 (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Within these extremes there is a great deal of variation. Kern and Just (1992) reported on the results of two groups, Traugott (1992), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a), and Press (1991) on four, Sigel (forthcoming) on six, Conover et al. (1991) on eight, Delli Carpini and Williams (1994; forthcoming) on nine, Press and Cole (1992) on 20, and Gamson (1992) on 37. While in general, the more groups the better, the amount of qualitative data generated by larger studies can be overwhelming. This, in turn, can lead to a dependency on summary statistics and cursory generalizations, thus losing what is most valuable in this method—the direct, textured exchanges among individuals.

2. Conducting Focus Groups

The structure of the focus group discussions has changed little from those conducted by Merton and his colleagues (1946, 1949, 1956). Researcher’s attempt to put participants at ease by making the setting as natural and informal as possible. In the case of groups held in a public setting like a university, this usually means selecting a conference room that is comfortably appointed, providing refreshments, allowing people to move about with some freedom, and so forth. In the case of friend groups it is possible to hold the discussions in the home of one of the participants, a strategy employed by Press (1991), Press and Cole (1992), Gamson (1992), and Liebes and Katz (1990). Used in this setting, focus groups provide some of the advantages of ethnographic research.

Most focus group projects include some standard paper-and-pencil questions, allowing, at a minimum, the collection of basic demographic and attitudinal information. In some cases, questionnaires are also administered after the discussion. The discussions themselves follow a loosely structured protocol that a moderator uses as a guide, but they seldom stick completely to this “script.” Often topics listed for later in a discussion emerge naturally at an earlier point. In addition, conversations often take an unexpected but potentially valuable turn, and the moderator may decide to deviate from the protocol to pursue new terrain. Usually the protocol serves as a check list to assure that by the discussion’s end, all of the key points have been addressed. While the nondirectiveness of focus groups is one of the method’s advantages, when large numbers of groups are involved, analysis of results may be quite difficult unless fairly uniform protocols are employed to ensure that all groups discuss the same topics. The typical focus group discussion lasts from one to two hours.

Within these broad parameters there is, again, a fair amount of variation. Traugott (1992), Sigel (forthcoming), and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993a) depended exclusively on a set of fairly general questions about the topics of interest, allowing the specifics of the conversation to evolve

naturally. Conover et al. (1991) used a protocol with 13 general questions, each with several follow up “probes.” Seven of these questions presented participants with hypothetical situations and asked how they might solve a particular dilemma. For example, participants were asked:

Suppose that there were a drought that led to a water shortage. To conserve water, the town ordered all citizens to stop all watering of lawns and shrubs. On your way to work, you notice that I am watering my lawn. Assuming that you had the time, would you stop and talk to me? (p. 828)

The moderator followed this with more specific questions that allowed participants to grapple with the competing rights and obligations of individuals and communities. One innovation used by Gamson (1992) was showing the participants editorial cartoons and asking them for reactions. This was done to explore the impact of different ways of framing issues on the subsequent conversations, but, much like Conover et al.’s (1991) “scenarios,” also served as a more general stimulus to conversation.

True to their roots, many focus group studies combine the discussion with some form of mass communication. As noted earlier, both Press (1991; Press and Cole, 1992) and Kern and Just (1992) used broadcasts after discussions had already begun, so as to observe how the conversations were affected by these stimuli. Liebes and Katz (1990) had their groups begin by viewing a broadcast or video-taped episode of *Dallas*, and then used the show to structure much of the following discussion. The discussion itself was based on a loose protocol, which began with very general questions (for example, “what goals motivated [the characters]”) and became more specific as the discussion progressed. As is typical, follow-up questions were used when necessary to clarify participants’ points of view.

The topic of discussion in Delli Carpini and Williams’ (1994; forthcoming) focus groups was the environment. A third of the groups began by viewing an edited version of the made-for-television docudrama, *Incident At Dark River*, which dealt with the issue of toxic waste. Another third began by viewing an episode of the CBS news magazine *48 Hours*, also dealing with the issue of toxic waste. In both cases, the broadcasts were introduced as “a way to get us thinking about the topic.” The remaining three groups watched no television and simply began by discussing their views on environmental pollution. The discussion protocol for each group was loosely structured and was virtually identical whether or not television was present.

3. Analyzing Focus Group Data

Focus groups are recorded on audio or video tape and then transcribed for analysis.¹² Working with the transcripts can be a daunting experience, especially for those schooled in more quantitative techniques. Again, while different researchers offer somewhat different approaches, there is a strikingly similar pattern to their methods of analysis. Conover et al. (1991) describes what is the standard multistage approach:

First they were read through in order to identify descriptive and inferential codes for classifying the respondent’s statements. Thus, the respondents’ discussions more than the analyst’s preconceptions were given the lead in developing the coding scheme. Next, the transcripts were reread to code each statement according to the scheme developed on the basis of the first reading. Finally, these coded statements were subject to a pattern analysis to identify common themes in understanding of particular concepts (pp. 806-807).

This iterative process produced a rich set of discursive *findings* that reflected a combination of a priori theory and post hoc interpretation.¹³

The information generated by focus groups can be analyzed qualitatively, as with depth interviews, or quantitatively, through, for example, the systematic content analyses of language. As an example of the latter, Gamson (1992) presents some of his findings in tables that include tests of significance for reported group differences (a test which assumes random sampling from the larger population of interest). Hall Jamieson (1992), on the other hand, devoted an entire convention presentation to a close textual analysis of four excerpts from a single focus group conversation. In general, however, researchers present findings through a combination of tables, interpretive summaries, and direct quotes taken from the group discussions.

C. What Focus Groups Tell Us About Public Opinion

Focus groups have been used to address a wide range of substantive topics. Despite this diversity, however, focus group findings are remarkably similar in their conclusions about the general process of opinion formation and expression. These conclusions suggest that public opinion is exceptionally dynamic and complex; that opinions are constructed and reconstructed in ways that make them impossible to separate from the context from which they emerge; that opinions emerge from a synthesis of personal, social, and mass mediated information; and that citizens, while seldom in control of this process, are active participants in it. Focus group research does not always challenge the conclusions drawn from more traditional research methods, but it does illuminate and enrich them in valuable and unique ways. To demonstrate this we conclude with a somewhat more detailed analysis of two case studies in the use of focus groups.

1. *The Construction of Class Consciousness*

According to Gamson (1992) people regularly “negotiate with media messages in complicated ways that vary from issue to issue” (p. 4). To demonstrate this active negotiation process and explore its implications, Gamson conducted 37 peer group conversations.

Specifically, Gamson was interested in the way *working people*—a term that emerged from the participants’ own self-references-talk about politics, and how talk is translated into the potential for collective political action. He therefore recruited discussants who were “somewhat less middle and more colorful than Gans’s middle Americans” (p. 14). Of the 188 individuals who participated in his peer group discussions, about 90 percent were employed, with 30 percent in service jobs, 24 percent clerical or office workers, and 12 percent in manufacturing. Fifty-eight percent of them had no formal education beyond high school, a third had some college or post high school technical training, and only 6 percent had a college degree.

Drawing on social movement theory, Gamson argued that for citizens to turn “talk into action,” they need “collective action frames” or “action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns” (p. 7). These frames allow groups to see that an *injustice* has occurred, that they have the power—the *agency*—to address the injustice, and that they have a clear *collective identity* that distinguishes “us” the victims from “them,” the perpetrators.

The mass media are obviously critical in determining how public issues are framed, and, based on an extensive content analysis of several different news media, Gamson concluded that the extent to which the media use the frames of injustice, agency, and identity varied significantly from issue to issue. Consistent with the agenda setting, priming, and framing literature, Gamson found a similar pattern in citizens’ conversations about these topics. For

example, when citizens did raise issues of injustice, the “targets for indignation” (p. 58) were generally limited to the same targets aimed at by the media.

More interesting, however, is his finding that this connection is much looser and more complex than a simple persuasion or agenda-setting model would anticipate. While often unable to construct their own injustice frames, citizens were able to resist some of those constructed by the media. For example, Gamson found that the media often presented the Japanese as the source of injustice regarding America’s industrial problems. However, citizens seldom followed this cue, and tended instead to discuss the Japanese with admiration. Similar “imperfect matches” were found between media and citizen use of the frames used to develop a sense of agency and of collective identity. Thus, a majority (57 percent) of his groups “had a sympathetic discussion of collective action on at least one issue” (p. 82). Gamson supported these conclusions through a combination of tables, verbal summaries, and direct quotes from transcripts.

Having demonstrated that citizens use collective action frames that are related to but not identical with those used by the news media, Gamson turned to the more “general process of how people construct meaning about public issues” (p. 115). It is here that the focus groups are particularly valuable since they are

especially likely to provide insight into the process of constructing meaning. As Morgan sums it up, they “are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do” (p. 192) emphasis in original.

Through a careful reading of the transcripts, Gamson discovered that citizens draw on a much wider range of media discourses than simply the national news, and so have a somewhat wider range of frames on which to draw. For example, in discussing affirmative action individuals in several groups referred to public service advertisements they had seen (for example, to the United Negro Fund’s slogan, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste”). Similarly, in discussing nuclear power, the movies *Silkwood* and *The China Syndrome* were both referenced to make points.

Besides the media, citizens drew on two additional conversational resources for constructing shared frames: experiential knowledge, and popular wisdom. Experiential knowledge was based on personal experiences or the experiences of relatives, friends, coworkers, and so forth. Popular wisdom transcended personal experience and was based on cultural truisms that were accepted at face value. They were often introduced or concluded with phrases such as “As everyone knows” or “It’s human nature.”

Gamson found that in constructing shared frames for discussing public issues, citizens were likely to take either an “integrated strategy” that drew on the mass media, popular wisdom, and personal experience (48 percent of the groups) or a “cultural strategy,” that relied almost exclusively on the mass media and popular wisdom (42 percent of the groups).¹⁴ Not surprisingly, for more remote issues like nuclear power and the Arab-Israeli conflict, citizens were especially likely to draw on cultural resources, while for more immediate issues like affirmative action or troubled industries, the integrated strategy dominated. Nonetheless, Gamson found that it “only takes one person to introduce [a topic through his or her personal knowledge to stimulate others to bring in examples that they have heard or read about” (p. 82). Thus, even for remote issues, three-in-ten discussions depended on a mix of cultural and personal references. Again, in addition to demonstrating these points through tables and summaries, Gamson provides direct examples from the transcripts:

Rich: From my window at school, I could see the Yankee—No, what was it? What was the [nuclear power plant] in Vermont? Vernon, the Vernon power plant.

Pat: You could see that?

Rich: Yeah

Pat: You could see the lights of the plant?

Rich: You can see the lights—about eighteen miles down the river. And they were busted every three or four months for venting off the steam, which is really illegal. You're supposed to cool it with the water tanks and everything. But it costs a lot of money, and they didn't care. I mean they're run so lax.

Tom: There's a place in Charleston I used to work on these boats, and there's a dock out there with a sign that says "Radiation Hazard No Swimming." Turns out the nuclear submarines used to dock there and pump out the coolant water into the water in Charleston.

Luke: They did a thing at our school. The power plant in Vermont that he was talking about. We used to have every Wednesday and Saturday, they had this safety whistle that would like—drills. They'd just test the whistle.

Rich: Yeah. How do you know what to do though?

Luke: Well, see, the thing was—the plan was that buses from Northhampton or Amherst—like the public transportation buses were supposed to drive up there and get all the people and bring 'em down. There's two things, two problems: First of all, if there was actually a meltdown or something, there's no way you can get—we're so close, and we're down river—there's no way you can get away in time. And also, do you think that a bus driver in Northhampton who's farther south is actually gonna drive up towards the nuclear power plant to get people? (laughter) (Gamson, 1992, p. 132)

Establishing shared frames for discussing public issues allowed group members to find a common language, but it did not mean that the conversations were always consensual. This was so because of the "themes and counterthemes" that ran through the conversations:

Themes are safe, conventional, and normative...Counterthemes typically share many of the same taken-for-granted assumptions but challenge some specific aspect of the mainstream culture; they are adversarial, contentious, oppositional. Themes and counterthemes are paired with each other so that whenever one is invoked, the other is always present in latent form, ready to be activated with the proper cue. (p. 135)

Gamson found four sets of themes and counter-themes in his focus groups: *progress through technology* versus *harmony with nature*; *interest group liberalism* versus *popular democracy*; *self-reliance* versus *mutuality*; and *America first* versus *global responsibility*. Which themes or counterthemes were drawn on in the conversations depended on the issue in question. In discussions of nuclear power and of the Arab-Israeli conflict *harmony with nature* and *America first* dominated, respectively. In both cases this paralleled their prevalence in the media's discourse on these subjects. However, in conversations about America's troubled industries, the countertheme of popular democracy was prevalent despite its near invisibility in the media. Here participants were able to draw on experiential knowledge and popular wisdom:

Duane: The government really don't care too much about its part because its going to get his. And the businessman, I can take him or leave him. It's the labor person, in the long run, that's gonna be left out.

Barbara: That's the one that's the most poor, and he's not getting anywhere.

Lucy: (later in the conversation)—The United States has put itself in a predicament—I mean, they have caused poverty to be happening in this country. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. They don't see to it that the poor are fed. This is supposed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave and the land of opportunity, equal opportunity. But I don't see anything equal about it. When there are rich folks over here, across the way from me, who have more than what they need, and right around the corner there are places like Rosies Place [a shelter for the homeless.] And they don't have enough to eat or folks sleeping on the streets (Gamson, 1992).

Gamson concludes that, while the working people in his groups generally lacked political consciousness, they did have “the elements necessary to develop [it]” (p. 175). Further, the more participants could draw on integrated resources to frame their discussions, the better able they were to develop the collective action frames necessary for political consciousness. It was Gamson's reasonable suspicion that frames based on integrated strategies are also the most robust, and thus resistant to shifting media frames. And while the ability to draw on such an integrated strategy varies, Gamson argues that “media dependence...is only partial and is heavily influenced by the issue under discussion” (p. 179).

2. *The Construction of Public Opinion*

In our own research we have used focus groups as the primary method for exploring the role of television in shaping discourse about public issues (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994; forthcoming). As with the other studies described here, we documented our findings through a combination of tables, summaries, and direct quotes. Using this methodology, we found evidence for the extensive role both nonfiction and fiction television plays in public discourse. Based on self-reports and our own observations, we also noted numerous examples of how citizens engage in a kind of ongoing conversation with television, reacting to its “point of view” in ways analogous to their interaction with other people. And we provided examples of the real, but limited, autonomy individuals have in identifying and, where appropriate, resisting, television's ideological biases.

As a way of demonstrating the utility of focus groups, however, we will limit our discussion here to two observations that *emerged* from the transcripts. The first is the fluid, often inconsistent nature of public opinion, and the ways in which people construct rather than retrieve their views on complex issues. And the second is the role of television in this process of opinion formation, focusing on our discussants' surprising awareness of (and concern for) their dependence on the media.

What was clear from a close reading of the focus group transcripts was that people regularly construct rather than retrieve their views on complex issues. The focus group methodology was central to this observation in several ways. Freed from the forced constraints of closed-ended surveys, and from the self-consciousness of one-on-one interviews, the contextual, fluid, and often inconsistent nature of opinions were presented in bold relief. And while this inconsistency partially reflects the participants' lack of information, interest, and so forth, the transcripts made clear that it also reflects the “inherent contestability” of most important public issues (Gallie, 1955-1956). Using *Ethnograph* (see note 13) to “cut and paste together” the complete set of comments made by a single participant on a particular topic demonstrated that even the most thoughtful citizens express views that are contradictory. Indeed, often the most consistent views were expressed by those who clearly were uninterested in and

unreflective about the issues under discussion. For example, Sarah acknowledged that she was “just not concerned about the environment at all,” a view that was very apparent from her general demeanor during the group discussion. Throughout the discussion, however, she maintained a consistent (one might say stubborn) critique of environmental activists:

- I think they’ve gone too much into this pollution. I don’t believe in all of it. The Lord’s going to take care of it, for one thing. There’s just a bunch of kooks around.
- Some of those people are trying to sue Ashland Oil [a local company accused of polluting the environment]....They’re just trying to get rich over it. Ashland is a good citizen.
- As far as recycling, it’s not going to work at all unless they’re paying....Everybody’s collecting cans because they’re paying....They’re not going to fool with anything unless they’re paying.
- I think [environmental problems] are overblown a lot so they can sell more papers...I don’t think most [journalists] know anymore about it than my cat.
- Some of these women [activists] that are involved in this stuff should just stay home and do something productive....They’re always wanting their mug on the TV.

Much more common were opinions expressed by the same person at different points in the conversation which, when placed back to back, appear incompatible. For example, consider the following two comments by Kara:

I think it definitely is possible [to protect the environment in today’s world]. I mean, to think there’s all these big brains and all this big money for making things, surely they can come up with some way to make them in a safe manner, or to protect the public, or the land or animals...

Yet later in the conversation she says:

There’s just a lot of other stuff you have to deal with...I mean, you would just have to take over the world pretty much, it would have to be every person in the United States, every company, every—I just don’t think it would be possible [to protect the environment in today’s world]”... I hate to be Miss Negative, but I just don’t think so.

A similar “about face” is demonstrated in the following two comments by Mike:

I think everybody is concerned about the environment, because we all live here and I don’t think anybody wants to see the earth destroyed....

Yet later, in response to Tim’s comment:

Tim: I don’t think we’re concerned at all....I don’t think the majority of Americans would go to a meeting, lift a finger....

Mike: Yeah, I agree with that 100 percent...I personally never recycled newspapers or anything until I was just about forced to....I think [people] are kind of apathetic towards it...

On some occasions, the ambiguities inherent in difficult political issues manifest themselves within the same comment, as in the following attempt by Elaine to express (more accurately, to construct) her view on whether progress is being made in dealing with environmental problems:

Elaine: I'm thinking two prongs here. When you were talking about the Ohio River, just think about the pollution last year, how [you couldn't swim there]. When I was a child, you could swim there....Then, on the other prong we're talking about, I just think it's great about the schools....They're letting the school kids—and the school kids want to bring these wire carts around [to recycle cans]....In the early seventies the thrust of environmental education really came on board.

What *is* Kara's view of the possibility of addressing the nation's problems? Mike's sense of how concerned the American public is? Elaine's level of optimism concerning the future? Our argument is that their "true" opinions do not reside in one or the other of their statements. Rather, their opinions are to be found in the full set of statements they make about a particular issue, and can be understood only in the specific context in which they are made. More importantly, we argue that citizens play an active, if limited, role in the construction of these opinions, and do so in part through ongoing conversations with other people, and, especially, with television.

Examples of our discussants actively using their own experiences, the comments of others, and the "comments" of television abound throughout the transcripts. Many statements began with phrases such as "I agree with her," or "It's like on the show we saw." In addition, participants often picked up on themes, topics, etc. introduced by other members, or, in those focus groups with television, by the program they had just watched. For example, the plot of *Incident at Dark River* revolved around a local company's polluting a river with toxic waste. Similarly, one segment of the *48 Hours* episode was devoted to toxic water pollution. In the discussions about the environment following both these shows, people were much more likely to focus specifically on industrial water pollution than were people in groups who were without television's immediate influence (Elaine's comment above is one such example). The following were also taken from groups who had viewed these shows:

Mark: It [the docudrama] really made me more aware of things that I guess in the back of my mind I knew were happening. You read occasionally about all these factories dumping in rivers and I think I've read about some things going on up on the Ohio river...

Stephanie: One issue that's really affecting me right now....is the salt in the Jamestown River from that underwear company up there. You know, Lake Herrington, it's not even worth going there anymore, the banks are filled with trash. There aren't very many fish there and it's just nasty....

Similarly, both programs focused attention on the human costs of environmental pollution by emphasizing its effect on children. In the docudrama the lead character's daughter dies after playing in a river polluted with toxic waste, while one segment of *48 Hours* centered on parents whose young son had died of leukemia, the possible result of pesticides used in the area. In focus group discussions following the viewing of these programs, the costs of pollution were frequently measured in terms of children. Comments like the following, found in all the discussions in which television was present, were largely absent from those discussions held without first viewing TV:

Susan: I think that [pollution] is very serious and that...if we don't do something our grandchildren and their children won't have a chance.

Ruby: I don't have any children, but I have nieces and nephews....What kind of world are they going to have....

In one sense these examples simply illustrate the agenda-setting and priming effects demonstrated by mainstream research (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Ruby's comment is typical: "I never really think about them [environmental issues] too much unless I happen to see something on television." However, allowing people to speak for themselves, as in focus groups, also helps expand our understanding of these processes. First, our discussions suggest that the media not only shapes what people *think* about, but also what they *talk* about. Second, they provide evidence that people are very much aware of this process. In some important ways, the agenda-setting function of television is not the insidious process often implied in media research:

Tania: I think people talk about it [environmentalism] more now than they did before because it's brought out so much more now...I think now you hear so much about it that it's on your mind. Whether you're talking about it or not, you are thinking about it.

Catherine: I guess it just depends on who I'm talking to, you know. I don't think it's [environmental problems] something that's a major, major concern. I think...it's like...the war in the Persian Gulf. If you asked me about it [when it was going on], I'd say [I talk about it] everyday. You know, you talk about it and so people kind of put aside other things.

Often our conversants' understanding of the degree to which they rely on the media for determining what is and is not important was fairly sophisticated. Violet and Catherine, for example, note the power of television as a visual medium to dramatize environmental issues:

Violet: I thought it [the program] was real interesting. I think lots of times...you know, you can have all these ideas in your head then you have this visual representation of a landfill or this visual representation of a child and here's their picture and now they've died. Or, these individuals that are actively campaigning that look like very normal people that you would not normally envision as campaigning on environmental issues. I think that's real important.

Catherine:...that's what the media is there for, sometimes they don't belong in people's business, but it's a good thing they're concerned. So we can see what is going on, what needs to be done, they let us know. They're our eyes, kind of...they let us see. You know, if we didn't get to see what was on TV, well, unless we went to a landfill ourselves, would we really know what it looked like? You know, in our heads, we can visualize what it looked like to have all that.

Joseph: For international type things, the only way we're going to hear about them is through television and radio. Like Chernobyl in the Soviet Union. That whole problem there still isn't resolved, but I wouldn't know a thing about it if it wasn't for the media, you know. That's the only way we're going to know.

At the same time that subjects recognized their dependence on the media, they often seemed troubled and ambivalent about the potential such dependence has for selectively shaping their perception of the importance of various political issues. While the media may set the agenda, the public's concern over this process, revealed in the following quotes, is often overlooked by researchers:

Mark: You know, I think that, in a way, most everybody says that we're definitely concerned, I mean, I think I'm concerned, but then on the other hand, I think I spend very little time thinking about it until I see something like this [gestures to the blank screen] or I see the oil wells burning out of control or something to bring it home...I think we need to have more hard facts put before us. I think we need to be bombarded with more things to make us think about it and hopefully therefore to make us act.

Hazel: I think, you know, some of the best people or the most expert people may not have an avenue to get to the public...if the media doesn't involve themselves in that, then there's really no way to get the exposure.

Some subjects moved beyond simple ambivalence to an understanding of the reasons for the shifting nature of media coverage. Consistent with the work of Gamson (1992), such sophisticated understandings open up the possibility of maintaining a critical distance between the media's definition of what is important, and other hierarchies of importance.

Paul: One problem with the media is that...if they talk about some issue then two weeks later if it's not changed, they really don't want to do the story again...They don't want to do the same thing over and over, they think the viewers are going to get bored and change to something else. I wonder if the media's attention to environmental concerns is going to be fad-like and then they're going to find something else to focus on six months from now. That can be a problem... when you involve the media.

THE METHOD IS THE MESSAGE: FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH AND MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

The traditional methods of public opinion research are valuable tools of social inquiry. However, these methods, like any attempt to simplify something as complex as human thought and action, also miss a good deal of what is important in the formation and expression of public opinion. Focus groups offer an alternative method that, either in conjunction with more traditional methods or on their own, help avoid the oversimplification of these cognitive, social, and political processes.¹⁵

Ultimately this is more than an issue of methodology. What survey research and experimental design treats as "public opinion" might better be termed "private opinion" (Barber, 1984). Survey methods imply an underlying normative view of citizenship strikingly similar to the one criticized by Gitlin (1978), Ginsberg (1982; 1986) and Barber (1984). Citizens are viewed as isolated, individual decision makers consuming information and privately choosing at specific points in time among competing elites, parties, or ideas. In this "citizen as consumer" metaphor, politics is a marketplace (or more accurately, a mail order catalogue or home shopping network), and opinions are the currency with which public goods are purchased. A fuller understanding of public opinion requires developing alternative metaphors and methods.

Our own view of public opinion assumes the importance of having a collective political language. As John Dewey argued in *Democracy and Education* (1974), societies can only exist through communication, since people "live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). Developing and maintaining a common political language is an ongoing process, because, politics necessarily involves issues which are contested (Connolly, 1983; Gallie, 1955-1956;

Garver, 1978; Gray 1977). The meaning of any concept or issue varies over time and among different people. Certain concepts, however, are likely to generate a greater variety of meaning than others by their very nature:

When disagreement does not simply reflect different readings of evidence within a fully shared system of concepts, we can say that a conceptual dispute has arisen. When the concept involved is *appraisive* in that the state of affairs it describes is a valued achievement, when the practice described is *internally* complex in that its characterization involves references to several dimensions, and when the agreed and contested rules of application are relatively *open*, enabling parties to interpret even those shared rules differently as new and unforeseen situations arise, then the concept in question is an “essentially contested concept” (Connolly, 1983, p. to) emphasis in original.

Essentially contested concepts “...involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Gallie, 1955-1956, p. 123). Gallie considers “democracy” such a term, and Connolly includes terms such as “politics,” “political interest,” “power,” “responsibility,” and “freedom.” It is fair to say that most of the fundamental concepts of political and social thought are essentially contestable. In turn, specific opinions about political institutions, officeholders, policies, and so forth, rest on the meaning ascribed to these more fundamental concepts, and so are themselves open to negotiation.

Emphasizing the inherently ambiguous nature of politics leads to a significantly different conceptualization of public opinion than the one that emerges from mainstream research. Opinions are viewed as shifting constructs that are situationally based and recreated rather than retrieved (Bennett, 1980).

In addition, opinions are understood as social, imbedded in a dynamic process of interaction and debate (Connolly, 1983; Williams and Matheny, 1994). That is, politics is about *public* issues that are discussed *in public*. It is through “conversations” that political opinions are continuously created and recreated. The need to consider seriously the position of others is what distinguishes public life from private life and public opinion from private opinion.

The notion that public opinion emerges from discourse is both normative and heuristic. We agree with political theorists such as Hannah Arendt (1959) and Jurgen Habermas (1971, 1979) that a defining characteristic of democracy *should* be that political decisions are reached through public dialogues wherein only reason has force. However, we also argue that opinions *are* formed through interactions that occasionally approximate, and that often mimic, even mock, such public dialogue. It is in the conversations that one has with coworkers, family members, fellow citizens, even with oneself, that public opinion resides. Focus groups are a methodology well-suited to study these conversational aspects of public opinion.

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NOTES

1. Merton and Kendall distinguish between “individual focused interviews” and “depth interviews,” seeing the latter as less structured, and less tied to the interpretation of respondent reactions to a previous and usually highly controlled “treatment” of some kind.

2. In most cases, of course, these hypotheses have been developed from prior theory and research, and have informed the design of the experimental situation or the selection of the natural one.

3. Merton had earlier used focused interviews to supplement more systematic studies of the effectiveness of Kate Smith's radio broadcasts on behalf of war bonds, but these were individual, rather than group interviews (see Merton, Fiske, and Curtis, 1946).

4. The focused interviews also helped explain why some expected results did *not* occur. For example, the use of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton audience reaction machine suggested that rather than bolstering support, several scenes elicited as much negative as positive reaction. Subsequent focused interviews revealed that many soldiers felt the use of humor in these scenes was inappropriate.

5. The questions used in the formal experiments were not designed to gauge changes in the intensity of feeling, and so could not be used to confirm or reject this hypothesis,

6. Merton himself notes that *The Focused Interview*, published in 1956, sold only a few thousand copies and quickly went out of print (Merton, 1987).

7. Merton (1987) mildly objects to the use of the term *focus group*, since it has a very specific meaning in sociology, which is generally violated in the methodology of focus "groups". In sociology, a group has some commonality based on shared norms, goals, values, and so forth. In most focus groups the people brought together have some shared characteristics, but are not a sociological group in the sense described above. Merton, therefore, prefers the term "focused interviews" or "focused groupings".

8. For the academic and applied use of focus groups in fields other than public opinion and political psychology, see Basch (1987), Glick, GSordon, and Ward (1987-88), and Watts and Ebbutt (1987).

9. Press (1991; Press and Cole, 1992) herself does not draw these comparisons to more traditional research designs, and correctly sees her work as more firmly in the tradition of ethnographic and qualitative research.

10. Participants are always paid for their participation, usually a small honorarium of from \$10 to \$25.

11. An exception to this is our own research. While we use "stranger groups" we consciously limited the size of each group to better reflect the conditions under which people usually watch television. Thus, our groups ranged from three to six participants and averaged four.

12. Video tape has the advantage of providing additional cues as to the participant's point of view, state of mind, and so forth, and also can ease the transcription process because you can see who is actually speaking. The disadvantage is expense and the disruptive impact of the camera in the room (rooms with hidden cameras avoid some of this problem, even though the participants know they are being videotaped, but are not always available). Audio tape is usually all that is necessary, and has the advantage of being less obtrusive, but usually requires a research assistant who keeps track of who is speaking, so as to aid in the transcription process. In general, however, having someone observe the discussion without actually participating is valuable, in that it gives an additional, sometimes more "objective" perspective on the group dynamics.

13. Chapter Four of Liebes and Katz (1990) is a detailed presentation of the transcript and coding scheme of one focus group, and serves as an invaluable guide and/ or example of how one uses focus groups. Our own method of analyzing transcripts paralleled that described above,

with one exception. In systematically coding the transcripts we used *Ethnograph*, a software package developed by John V. Seidel, Jack Clark and Rolf Kjolseth, and specifically designed for analyzing qualitative data. *Ethnograph* allows each line of a transcript to be coded for up to twelve characteristics (for example, direct and indirect references to television, particular points of view expressed by participants, and so forth). Once coded, the transcripts can be systematically analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively (though we should note that the developers of *Ethnograph* stress that the primary function of the program is to aid in qualitative research, and not for the quantification of such data). Quantitative analysis includes examination of the frequency of certain kinds of statements (for example, the number of times unsolicited references were made to the television program viewed in the focus group). Qualitative analysis involves more interpretive readings of specific parts of the transcripts (for example, one can retrieve and examine all the statements made by a single individual about environmental activists, all the references to television made by one person, or all the interchanges between two particular discussants). In essence, *Ethnograph* does not replace interpretive analysis but rather eases the logistics of transcript management (i.e., “cutting and pasting,” retrieving particular statements and exchanges, etc.), thus easing more systematic and in-depth examination.

14. The percentages are based on only the groups that developed “shared frames,” which were 82 percent of the total (pp. 128-129).

15. While we suggest in this section that focus groups are valuable tools in uncovering a more participatory, communal, and democratic notion of public opinion, it must be remembered that focus groups, like any method of tapping into what people think, is subject to much less democratic uses. One need only consider many of the early uses to which the focused interview was put, and recall that it was a focus group project that directly led to the infamous “Willie Horton ad” of the 1988 presidential campaign.

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