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Focus

Groups - a sound choice of research methodology?



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Outline

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3. Core issues
 - Sampling and setting
 - Role of the moderator
 - Focus group as an interview
 - Group dynamics
 - Data collection and analysis
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Key characteristics of the focus group

Groups of between 6 and 12 participants who convene in order to answer questions posed by a moderator (Smithson, 2008)

Often used in conjunction with **quantitative** methods (mixed-methods) or **qualitative** methods (multi-methods).

Compromise for more traditional qualitative methods such as ethnography and in-depth individual interviewing.

Generally considered to be qualitative methodology

Key characteristics of the focus group

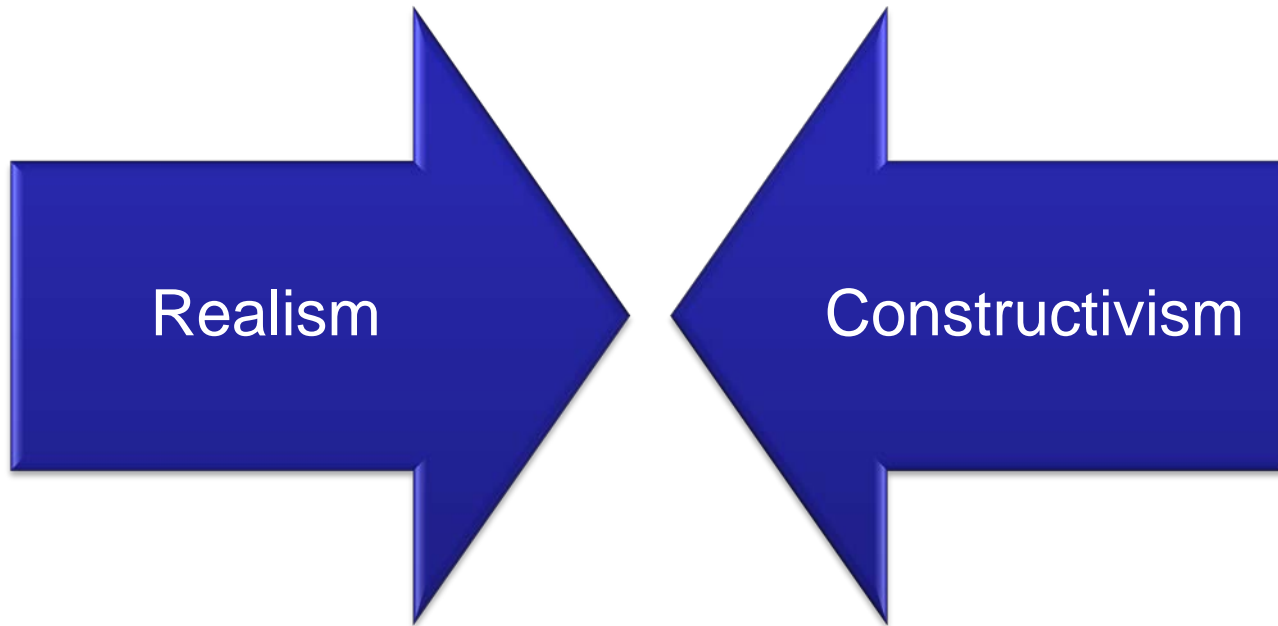
Generally considered to be **qualitative** methodology because of the opportunities for interaction

Justify opinions, argue, debate issues **NOT** detailed descriptions
(Brinkmann, 2013)

Participants can even start to moderate and analyse the discussion, speculate and theorise (Barbour, 2008)

Therefore provides **in-depth** data.

Ontological conflict



Realism in focus groups

Historically, focus groups used for market research = **realist** ontology

Search for the individual '**truth**' = 'clear positivist paradigm'
(Cunningham-Burley et al., 1999)

Focus groups simply an extension of the one-to-one interview
(Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013)

Cyr (2016) meta-analysis found that over 50% of research articles in
Social Science over the last decade prioritised **individual** data

Constructivism in focus groups

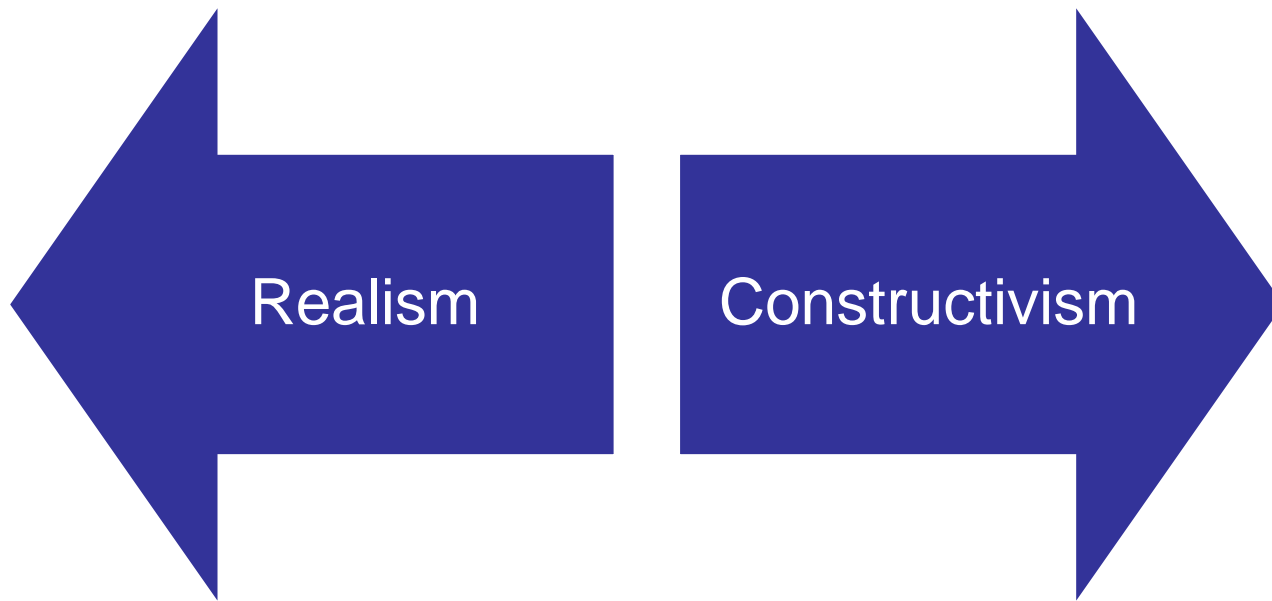
Interactive, interpretive nature = **social constructivist** ontology

Dynamic entities – by exploring group activity we can see how people interpret and create their **own** reality (Richards, 2003)

Group setting allows greater understanding, sharing of ideas and anonymity

Groups set their own **agendas** (Roulston, 2010)

Contradictions



Paradox?

Focus groups can be used to gather individual, group or interactive data (Cyr, 2016)

Sampling and setting

Sampling = **recruitment** of participants

Pre-existing groups vs. **specifically convened** groups

Pre-existing favoured so participants feel comfortable

BUT some think this is 'convenience sampling' i.e. lazy recruitment
(Parker and Tritter, 2006)

Which are best for **interaction**?

Setting: 'importance' of the location

Sampling and setting

Examples of **segmentation**, **snowball sampling** and even
'information-oriented sampling (Li et al., 2013)

Often no explanation.

Generally **no** information about setting – one study (Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) used **e-mail** when it became too difficult to hold regular focus groups.

Constraints obvious

Sampling and setting

Contradictions:

Diversity in sampling

- Rejected by some **qualitative** researchers:
'Qualitative research uses [...] non-random methods of participant recruitment' (Hennink, 2013)
- BUT greater diversity leads to more **interaction**

Criticisms:

Focus Groups are **not** qualitative

- '[Qualitative Inquiry] will not set up artificial situations for the purposes of study or try to control the conditions under which participants act' (Richards, 2003)
- See also Silverman (2013)

Role of the Moderator

Prominent issue

Default role of group **leader**

Contradictions:

- Active engagement of the moderator can help to generate higher levels of understanding (Barbour, 2007)
- Interaction between researchers and participants helps to improve the quality of the data

Vs

- Moderators should aim for limited input (Hennink, 2013)
- Stepping back allows moderators to see more of the discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013)

Role of the Moderator

Lack of epistemological **clarity**

Positivism = tight control, parity of contributions

Constructivism = allow freedom, even contribute themselves

How can a moderator contribute **without** influencing the discussion?

Focus Group as Interview

Focus group **interview** or focus group **discussion**?

Again, what is the researcher looking for?

Interview = search for objective truths

Discussion = subjective interpretation of reality leads to deeper understanding (Boddy, 2005)

Focus Group as Interview

Interview culture (Silverman, 2013)

Interviews do **not** allow us to see perspectives or experiences

Ubiquity of the interview = formulaic answers and automatic snippets

e.g. news voxpops

Search for the **emic** (insider) viewpoint but interview format can only provide **etic** (outsider) perspective

Focus Group as Interview

Almost all focus group research uses **pre-prepared questions**

‘Ontological and epistemological differences between interpretivism and positivism are blurred in the naïve assumption that focus groups must be interpretive because they access people’s views in an informal group setting’ (Cunningham-Burley et al., 1999)

Prescribed questions which impose categories are a challenge to social constructivism (Richards, 2003)

Group Dynamics

Two types of interaction

1. **Relationship** interaction – interpersonal emotional bonds
2. **Task** interaction – how group works together

Group Dynamics

Conflicting views

Interaction unveils the **reality** of the group (Liamputtong, 2007)

Every **individual** should be heard (Cyr, 2016)

Vs.

Tensions and ambiguities spark **new ideas** and **revised hypotheses**
(Cyr, 2016)

Conflict and contradiction lead to **richer data** (Kamberelis &
Dimitriadis, 2013)

Group Dynamics

Interaction processes conspicuous by **absence** in research texts

Positivist approach prevails

If individual **views** are being sought, why not use individual **interviews**?

The unpredictability of interaction results in most researchers subordinating careful consideration of the interactive process in favour of the group unit of analysis (Cyr, 2016)

Data collection and analysis

Natural vs. artificial data

Holy grail of **natural** data – rich record of **real life**

Group dynamic leads to natural data because participants **influence** and **are influenced by** each other (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013)

Active listening, openness and empathy (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015)

Data collection and analysis

Criticism of focus groups

If the only link between a group is that they are meeting to discuss a research then the data is **artificial** (Silverman, 2013)

It is not normal to focus on a single topic for a long time, or redirect conversations which go off on tangents (Puchta & Potter, 2004)

Data collection and analysis

No authentic data in research texts:

- Tidied-up extracts
- Translated extracts
- Expanded notes
- No interjections
- No questions
- No body language or facial expressions

In Mixed-method research it can be **unclear** whether the data comes from focus group or individual interview

Conclusion

- More epistemological **clarity** needed in research texts
- Greater awareness of how **sampling** affects the data produced
- Moderator role needs to be **explicit**
- Less **reliance** on interview questions
- More exploitation of **task** interaction
- Greater focus on **natural** data

References

Available on request 😊