Focus Group Practices: Studying Conversation

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Review Essay:

Claudia Puchta & Jonathan Potter (2004). Focus Group Practice.
London: Sage, 174 pages, ISBN 0 7619 6691 9 (paperback), $29,95

Abstract: *Focus Group Practice* aims at analyzing the interactional process that supports the success of focus groups. The book makes specific observations of what effective focus group moderation can accomplish. Informed by theoretical and methodological approaches taken from conversation and discourse analysis, this work aims at an analysis of the micro-practices that characterize the focus group process. The seven chapters of the book include recommendations for moderators as well as researchers interested in studying focus group methodology as a subject in itself. The book, an analysis of what goes on in the form of conversational processes, is purposely not a "how to" of focus groups, but rather a careful unveiling of the "choreographic" movements that lead to successful group interviews. It includes a series of brief examples of market-research focus groups and pedagogical definitions of conversation analysis and discursive psychology key concepts. A set of principles related to what creates an effective focus group interaction organizes each chapter (interaction, informality, participation, and opinions). Also included are some conversational analysis artifacts like explanations about how transcription is employed in conversational analysis.

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1. Focus Groups as Discursive Events: A Comparison

> *Somos según como actuamos* [We are according to what we act]
> (ECHEVERRIA, 1994, p.191)

Claudia PUCHTA, a market researcher, and Jonathan POTTER, a discursive social psychologist scholar, team up to write a book not "too prosaic" or "too abstract" that concentrates "on the interaction itself" in order to turn "practices into strategies" (p.viii). The bulk of this text is based on marketing research in Germany and discursive psychology, the study of discourse as texts and talk in social practices. Discursive analysis is situated within a social constructionist view of language as "the medium for interaction" or the "analysis of what people do." A

discursive approach to focus groups locates the analysis in what people do in conversation and, as such, this interaction is the core of the lessons we can learn from moderating focus groups. The goal is to discover the "skilled practices that good moderators perform smoothly and seemingly, without thinking about them" (p.vii). [1]

This is a compelling argument that is consistent with the hermeneutic and intuitive dimensions that characterize focus groups. The analysis of focus groups as talk, according to MYERS and MACNAGHTEN (1999, p.173), is based on three basic assumptions: (1) If "identities are negotiated in discourse" then the researcher looks at how focus groups "set up and work rules"; (2) if "talk is organized moment to moment by participants" then "we look for ways they define sections, rather than defining sections as analysts"; and (3) if "talk is sequenced, one thing after another [...], we must consider each utterance in terms of what came before and after." [2]

The introductory and concluding chapters discuss the conceptual and methodological implications of conversation analysis and discursive psychology as it relates to focus group practice. The core of the book is in the other five chapters in which PUCHTA and POTTER provide readers with a clear sense of what the moderator's goal is in a market research focus group. First, moderators should create an "informal" conversational context. "Informality encourages interaction to happen" (p.25). The moderator achieves this goal through a careful understanding of the participants psychology and an open display of "informality through pauses and hesitations" (p.35), "word choices" (p.36), voice intonation, and a careful arrangement of the "physical setting" (p.38). Second, the moderator should aim at producing participation via a set of questions. Beginning and experienced moderators will find this section's review (Chapter Three) of the nuanced questioning process very useful. Chapters Four and Five address the issue of the quantity and quality of opinions that can be handled by successful moderators. A careful treatment of POBA talk (Perception, Opinion, Beliefs and Attitudes) is the highlight of Chapter Four while Chapter Five directs the reader's attention to eliciting "useful" opinions or the quality of the talk and not just extended participation. In all chapters, the summaries are superb at synthesizing the material and offering suggestions for moderators. To illustrate, one of the strategies to be able to produce useful opinions consists of:

> "Ask questions that can be answered with descriptions. Use repeat receipts to model appropriate answers working round the group members who are offering answers. Use projective questions if you want to head off members' worries about getting their answers wrong. Early in the group use a whiteboard exercise to clearly establish appropriate types of answering." (p.117) [3]

PUCHTA and POTTER include brief helpful definitions of key conversation analysis terms in each chapter—i.e., turn taking, explicit versus embedded repair, adjacency pairs, etc. Key literature is suggested for each, but these key concepts are not illustrated with focus group transcripts and I was not sure about its relevance for those learning about the practice of focus groups or becoming

better at focus group facilitation. Despite the subtle critique of "how to" of what would help a moderator to lead a focus group, PUCHTA and POTTER suggest specific guidelines. In the later sense, I found the last brief section of each chapter particularly useful for the tool box of any focus group moderator. The distilled strategies include simple and complex strategies—from suggesting that moderators should start with questions "in a way that shows uncertainty" to treating participants' responses as "incomplete glosses for what they really want to say" (pp.64-65). [4]

In my role as a clinician, *Focus Group Practice's* attention to the details of conversational interactions reminds me of the use of conversation analysis in psychotherapy. In the case of therapeutic interactions, the purpose of conversation analysis is to identify the hidden "magic" or themes of the therapeutic interaction (GALE, 1991; LAWLESS, GALE & BACIGALUPE, 2001). A focus group, like a psychotherapy session, has as its main tool the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, interaction as talk and conversation. Constructing reality from people's "talk" bears striking resemblances to the therapeutic interaction, although involving activities with very different purposes. The conceptual and methodological tensions in current controversies about the role of the therapist are, however, similar to the paradoxical tasks required in running a focus group. Practitioners' understanding of their interaction with patients is often informed by either a strategic (modern) and/or a conversationalist (postmodern) stance. Some therapists lead patients in specific directions through a careful design of strategic interventions. Other therapists assume a not-knowing and curious position in which a nuanced form of new conversation about reality leads to dissolving the problem. In practical settings, therapists, like focus group moderators, are probably operating within an integrated version of these two stances. According to *Focus Group Practice*, the focus group moderator assumes an informal and curious stance. However, this not-knowing and curious stance is sustained by a carefully orchestrated plan. The goal is for participants to utter words while not being accountable since accounting leads to justifications that prevent full participation and useful opinions. In psychotherapy, obviously, the interviewer expects patients to account for their responses while also accepting the core of the person; that is, the acceptance of the patient fosters more useful responses and thus increased participation. [5]

The moderators' role is to facilitate a conversation that fosters participation with the goal of generating relevant, varied and useful opinions. A good moderator, like a good family therapist, orchestrates a setting in which all participants should feel free to express their ideas, although in the case of market research, not their stories. This setting should seem informal and improvised, but it is actually a strategic position that moves people in particular directions. In the case of focus groups, it is about opinions, in the case of family therapy it is about shared goals and/or unspoken stories. The moderator, like a postmodern therapist, is in a 'not knowing' position (p.95), although at the core there is a strategic goal. A similar paradox can be found in the activity of family therapists (MONK, 2003; SIMON, 2003). A good focus group, according to the authors, is one that produces plenty

of useful opinions through the participation of all focus group participants. Good facilitation can elicit such results by a smooth performance that is transparent to the moderator. It is as if the moderator were "naturally" talking with participants. We know though that the moderator is leading the group in a specific direction, in the case of market research into generating opinions which the participants would not have generated on their own. According to *Focus Group Practice*, the least a participant has to explain his or her position, the better. [6]

2. From Market Research to Social Science Research: Parallels and Dissonances

> Tasks include encouraging focus group members to: Speak about selected object and ideas; stay on topic. And discouraging members from: telling anecdotes and stories; filling their talk with account clutter; arguing with one another.
> (PUCHTA & POTTER, p.75)

Historically, the focus group method owes its origins to survey research where focus groups are employed as an adjunct to the preparation of survey questions; even these days, focus groups continue to be employed to refine survey instruments. In the 1970's, market research adopted focus groups as a tool to learn about consumer preferences (MORGAN, 1988). It is only in the last two decades that focus groups have gained preeminence in the social sciences (see for example: BARBOUR & KITZINGER, 1999; BLOOR, FRANKLAND, THOMAS & ROBSON, 2001 [cf. BARNETT, 2002]; KAHAN, 2001; WILKINSON, 1999; and particularly in health services research (see for example: BULLINGTON, NORDE-MAR, NORDEMAR, & SJOSTRON-FLANAGAN, 2003; PERRY, KANNEL, & DULIO, 2002; PILLITTERE, BIGLEY, HIBBARD, & PAWLSON, 2003; EYSEN-BACH & KOHLER, 2002). Guidelines are available in hundreds of publications, several freely available on the world wide web—from useful guidelines published in the form of a brochure by the American Statistical Association to sophisticated reports created with the purpose of impacting policy. [7]

Focus Group Practice invites readers to think of the market research focus group dynamics as comparable to the ones situated in social sciences research. To what extend does market focus group research provide a model for social science research? Market research focus groups are often not transcribed for analysis. The core of the analysis occurs immediately after the group has finished, even in the presence of those who are expecting to learn from the consumers. Transcripts are often not produced. Data from marketing research has a very specific audience that has contracted the services of the marketing researcher. The recipients of social science research results and data analysis are of a very different nature; often the readers of a report or article emerging from a focus group-based study will not necessarily be known to the researcher. [8]

In the practice of focus groups within social sciences, an important assumption is that the themes emerging from participants are the core element of the report. In a general sense, social scientists, (as well as other potential stakeholders—i.e., policy makers), are interested in the participants' stories and how their opinions and experiences reflect the larger community. Thus, grounded theory and narrative analysis prevail in social science reports. *Focus Group Practice*, on the contrary, makes the case for not paying attention or emphasizing the telling of stories to accomplish the task of generating useful opinions (p.75). Why is the telling of stories discouraged in marketing research? According to the authors, this is about dealing with the negative impact of accountability in the generation of opinions. "With rare exceptions, opinions and views are treated as good contributions to focus groups, and stories or personal narratives are not" (p.19). Useful opinions, however, are produced by a moderator who acts with a certain level of naiveté: the moderator needs "to be a market research expert, but naïve with respect to the nature of the product" (p.95). [9]

PUCHTA and POTTER frame the focus group research within a contextual view of attitudes. Rather than conceptualizing attitudes as contained in some sort of mind vases or vessels, a discursive approach explores them only insofar as they emerge as communal evaluations of the world. Attitudes are the result of interaction and not equal to the "emptying" of the vessels of cognitive beings in isolation. Besides learning about the experiences and feelings beneath the simplification of attitudes inquiry, focus groups provide a venue to understand people's ideas within the larger social and cultural contexts in which they live. The focus group provides a setting in which reacting to the stories of other participants elicit new stories. This kind of assumption seems less relevant in the case of the moderation approach sustained in *Focus Group in Practice*. Its purpose is not the detailed process of planning, conducting and analyzing described in other texts such as the friendly *Focus Group Kit* series (MORGAN & KRUEGER, 1998; see also KRUEGER & CASEY, 2000; cf. LANGE, 2002). [10]

Conversation analysis emphasis on turns of talk and on doing things through interaction runs the risk of missing some important contextual clues. What happened before a particular turn or what provides the social, cultural, and economic context for a particular research setting is apparently invisible. We are not privy to the selection of participants, the decisions people make as they come to group interviews, or the information participants had about the group, etc. How does the dissection of the interactive talk converge in the rich reflective process that occurs throughout the research process? The book integrates the contextual clues in less obvious ways like the self-presentation of the moderator. For example, in a discussion about "repeat receipts" (pp.98-104), repeating or reflecting informally on what a participant has said, it is suggested that the moderator "presents him or herself as not the final recipient of the information but as someone who is generating information for some other party" (p.99). [11]

3. Reflecting in Context

> Constructing models of theories-in-use is difficult. Few people think about their theories-in-use. Paradoxically, their theories-in-use prevent them from doing so.
> (ARGYRIS & SCHON, 1975, pp.37-38)

From my perspective, the focus group methodology is conducive to a varied set of reflexive practices that do not just occur within the precise confines of the talk in a group per se, as it may be derived from *Focus Group Practice*. Researchers designing a study start reflecting early on as they decide on the research question and tailor an appropriate methodology. Later on, after careful selection, the "subjects" of research are invited to participate in a focus group. Before the group starts, both researchers and participants prepare for the event, form hypotheses and find their way into the focus group activity itself. During the group interaction, all those involved carefully revisit their opinions and life experiences. The witnessed reflections others in turn evoke new thoughts in a recursive process in which the strategic take and curious listening of the moderator is also shaped. In the case of PUCHTA and POTTER's work, when the group is over, researchers have the privilege of inscribing their reflexive process as they analyze the data, through which the voices of participants gain and loose terrain, depending on the data analysis process. Other stakeholders (i.e., in the case of market research, the contractor of marketing research services) also participate as keen, while distant, observers, sometimes in a simultaneous fashion—i.e., behind a one way mirror. [12]

One of my tasks as a health services researcher includes the planning, moderation and analysis of focus groups. When I face the task of analyzing the focus group data, from initial field notes to modeling conceptual ideas after a careful analysis of many transcripts, the challenge can be daunting. The opportunity to review a book about focus groups that centers on the analysis of focus group data was extremely attractive. A deadline to complete the review was always competing with the deadlines to analyze and write reports of actual focus group data. Initiating both tasks simultaneously taught me a lot about the distinctive nature of analyzing talk in interaction and analyzing the substantive narratives, discourses and themes from a study consisting of almost twenty focus groups. Both projects seemed so different—even though the task of analyzing my data included a careful tracking of the moderators' interventions. *Focus Group in Practice* is definitely about studying one multifaceted aspect of the focus group methodology and much less about how a researcher or moderator would analyze the themes emerging in a group. [13]

The authors effectively analyze the method of effective moderating, rather that how a researcher would analyze the group itself. In my own analysis, the inquiry of what the moderators did is more about careful scrutiny of the method, triangulating the data and interview consistency across groups. The book, in turn, is a terrific exercise in the usefulness of conversation analysis and in learning

about what twists and turns a moderator should take, rather than the intricacies involved in creating a particular content. My own analysis seemed so out of touch with the theoretical complexities posed by the authors' turn taking analysis. My own work seemed so prosaic compared with these careful and nuanced distillations of conversation analysis concepts in consumer research. It is possible that PUCHTA and POTTER find themselves in the same disjunctive when they are challenged by a transcript and they make an analytical choice that is compelling theoretically and methodologically? In my case, the challenge of analyzing a transcript continues to be the negotiation of what is substantive, what is relevant and what will introduce new perspectives in the choreographic dance of creating useful knowledge. [14]

PS:

The transcripts' symbols utilized in the illustrations are included in the appendix. It would be helpful to have the audio portion as audio streams or included in a CD to illuminate the leap from audio to text transcription. [15]

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Citation

Revised 6/2008