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Focus Groups in Triangulation Contexts

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Introduction

There are numerous ways to combine focus groups with other methods in social sciences research. Morgan (1997) proposed that focus groups can be used as a stand-alone method or in combination with other methods: as an exploratory tool or as a follow-up method. In these kinds of combinations, focus groups are conceived of as part of a sequential research design and their role is similar to their original use by Merton. Conducted ahead, focus groups permit the development of hypotheses to be tested in a survey or in an experiment (Merton 2001), or in order to find the relevant dimensions to ask for and the appropriate

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wording for a questionnaire. Conducted afterwards, focus groups can help to further interpret the data as for example, understanding experimental data that do not fit with the hypotheses (Merton 2001) or interpreting survey results (Lucas and Lloyd 1999). In such research designs, focus groups provide a supplement to quantitative methods. During the 80s, focus groups were used also as a stand-alone method in social sciences.

However, 'a stand-alone method' does not mean that focus groups are necessarily used alone. In fact, focus groups as a stand-alone method can be combined with other methods, allowing for the adoption of a strong triangulation approach (Flick et al. 2012). In this chapter, we will develop this point, which, in some aspects, seems to be underdeveloped in the literature. For example, for the period between 1995 and 2015, 18,177 publications containing the word 'focus group' are indexed by the databases *Psycinfo* and *Sociological Abstracts*. But only 1% of them contain at least a reference to triangulation (and 5.74% of them contain the term 'mixed methods'). While focus groups are quite often used in combination with other methods, this is not often conceptualized as part of a triangulation strategy.

The term 'triangulation' refers, in this chapter, to the combination of different methods. The notion was first proposed by Denzin (1970) as a strategy to validate results (with the idea that results which converge across methods are right). However, this perspective was criticized and replaced by the idea that each method constitutes the phenomenon under study in a specific way and that attention should be paid to the theoretical differences between methods (Flick 1992). Thus, triangulation is perceived less as a strategy of validation than as an alternative to validation, allowing systematically for a broad and deep understanding of the phenomenon (see Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Flick 1992, 2014, 2018). In this context, divergent results are not considered as 'wrong', but should be interpreted by reference to the theoretical perspectives underpinning the use of different methods. Methods can be applied either one after the other or in parallel, but all methods should be treated on an equal footing (Flick 2014). For example, using explorative interviews in order to create a survey is not considered as triangulation, because both methods are not treated on an equal footing (Flick 2018).

Thus, in a first part, we will characterize the specific way we consider focus groups – that is, the theoretical background of this method, and consider the main differences between focus groups and individual interviewing. Then, we will provide some examples in order to illustrate how data from focus groups can enrich our understanding of the phenomenon under study, within a triangulation research design.

The aim of this chapter is to present one specific way to combine focus groups with other methods (through triangulation). This does not mean that we consider that other perspectives are not relevant; rather, in some situations, a sequential research design can be the one most appropriate to the objectives of a study.