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Theories of knowledge and focus groups in organization and management research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to develop a reflexive theoretical framework for thinking about focus groups and critiques dominating instrumental views of the method. It emerges out of dissatisfaction with the literature presenting “how to” guides for focus group research, which fail to engage with the epistemological issues surrounding research practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper critically evaluates the link between theories of knowledge and method through interrogation of focus groups as a method of knowledge production.

Findings – While the focus group method can lend itself to a variety of uses according to the epistemological stance of the researcher, this raises important questions about the design, conduct and analysis of focus groups within organization and management research. Such questions are not merely technical or practical issues and call for exploration, self-examination and epistemological awareness on the part of those who chose to use the method.

Originality/value – The article provides students and researchers with new ways of conceiving the focus group method by locating discussions of the method in prevailing philosophical paradigms within organization and management research.

Keywords Epistemology, Focus groups, Organization and management research, Methodology, Research philosophy

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of research that raises questions about the philosophical dimensions of qualitative management research and their relationship to methodologies and methods (e.g. Prasad, 2005; Bryant and Lasky, 2007; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Ruwhiu and Cone, 2010). Concurrently, there has been growing interest in the use of focus groups across a variety of organization and management disciplines, including logistics (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010), business communications (Byers and Wilcox, 1991), information systems (Stahl *et al.*, 2011), supply-chain management (Rose-Anderssen *et al.*, 2010) and marketing (Fern, 1982; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003). With few exceptions (Calder, 1977; Rose-Anderssen *et al.*, 2010; Stahl *et al.*, 2011), however, the growing disciplinary-based literature on focus groups affords substantially more intellectual concern to the practice of the method – with little consideration for the variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and its production – that can underpin its use. The inherent danger is that this renders the root assumptions of particular knowledge systems invisible and, as various commentators warn, making unexamined epistemological and methodological commitments while remaining unaware of their origins is intellectually irresponsible and can lead to poor research practices (Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Sandywell, 1996).

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This paper contributes to the debate by extending the above literatures through offering a conceptualization of focus groups in which the relationship between theories of knowledge and the practical application of the method is an integral feature. Specifically, I aim to strengthen the intersection of theories of knowledge – or epistemology – and method, demonstrating that engagement with research philosophy is a cornerstone of effective research practice and counteracting the view of theoretical issues as a distraction from the real task of “doing” research. The purpose of this paper is not to comfort students and researchers with promises of easy solutions, but to explore different schools of thought – and their implications for focus group research – in all their disconcerting complexity, ambiguity and flux. While the focus group method is addressed as an example of a mode of knowledge production, many of the themes developed here have broader relevance for research more generally.

The paper is organized into three core sections. It begins by drawing on the methodological literature to interrogate the focus group method and how management researchers from diverse philosophical positions may variably conceive it. This section aims to expose how particular approaches to the method are directly linked to underlying assumptions about ontology and epistemology and considers the subsequent implications of this variability for the nature of group work. In the second section, I build on this analysis by presenting a typology of the focus group method located in contested theories of knowledge within organization and management research. Finally, the concluding section calls for critical, reflective practice that engages with the epistemological issues and choices surrounding any given research method.

2. Theories of knowledge and their implications for focus groups in organization and management research

In a broad sense, recent work has highlighted that philosophical consensus does not prevail in qualitative research (Bryant and Laskey, 2007; Johnson *et al.*, 2007), largely due to the variety of forms qualitative management research can take which derive from diverse, and often competing, philosophical assumptions (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The diverse interpretations of what qualitative research is and should be points to the possibility that different meanings and interpretations, which articulate philosophical and procedural variations, underpin the use of what on the surface appears to be the same technique.

With regard to focus groups in particular, much of the literature is limited to discussing the benefits and drawbacks of the method (e.g. Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Gibbs, 1997; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003) and often fails to consider the marked differences of opinion and approach that reflect distinctive intellectual priorities between the two fields from which focus groups emerged: social psychology and psychotherapy (Morgan, 1997; Rook, 2003; Stewart *et al.*, 2007). In short, the social psychological school of thought focusses on within-group research that is evaluative in its purpose, direct in its questions and low in respondent interaction. Morgan (1997) and Stewart *et al.* (2007) cite early social psychology uses of focus groups during World War II in seeking to achieve understanding of the persuasiveness of propaganda efforts and the effectiveness of training materials for troops (see Merton and Kendall, 1946). Focus groups in psychotherapeutic research emerged from the priorities of clinical diagnosis and treatment, and one of the early uses in this domain includes Moreno's (1934) seminal work with psychodrama and play therapy. Researchers influenced by this tradition tend to favor focus groups that are more developmental in orientation and design, and place less emphasis on evaluative tasks. Stewart *et al.* (2007, p. 6) posit

that “compared with groups conducted in the social psychological tradition, the clinical approach is more likely to emphasize interactive group discussions and activities; individuals’ deep-seated thoughts and feelings, and; extensive, wide-ranging and spontaneous expressions.”

The intellectual tension between the two schools of thought, and the epistemological assumptions of researchers, is often hidden behind technique-driven discussions of the method and only emerges in vague notions about what actually constitutes “scientific research” or adequate knowledge (Stewart *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, Rook (2003, p. 40) suggests that few researchers today are actually aware of these historically competitive ideologies and that the “resulting focus group hybrids reflect varying degrees of psychotherapeutic and social psychological influence.” Equally, Prasad and Prasad (2002) note that the growth in popularity and extent of qualitative management research over recent years has been accompanied by a degree of methodological and epistemological confusion. One of my aims here is thus to address this confusion by drawing attention to how management researchers from different philosophical stances might variably conceive the focus group method and the ensuing implications of this variability. Rather than locating this debate within the influences of social psychology and psychotherapeutic traditions, I instead turn to the theories of knowledge commonly debated within management and organization studies: neo-positivism, interpretivism, critical management studies and postmodernism/poststructuralism.

Focus groups for neo-positivist research

Arguably, the intellectual – and methodological – priorities of positivism have had a significant influence on focus group research within the domain of management research, resulting in a form of “qualitative positivism” or neo-positivism (Prasad and Prasad, 2002; Duberley *et al.*, 2012). Calder (1977), for example, made a significant contribution to the marketing literature through consideration of the method from a philosophy of science perspective. While Calder acknowledges and interrogates three distinct approaches to focus groups – what he refers to as the “exploratory,” “clinical” and “phenomenological” approaches – it is noteworthy that his basis for judging the technique is founded upon ideal criteria for “scientific” research. In sum, Calder (1977, p. 356) concludes that exploratory and clinical approaches to focus group research “seek knowledge that is on the boundary between scientific and everyday” knowledge.

Concerns regarding the inability of qualitative research generally and focus groups specifically to form the basis of impartial, rigorous and reliable knowledge is pervasive within the marketing, logistics and business communications literature (Calder, 1977; Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010). This uneasiness with the method is suitably captured by Wells (1974, p. 134), “How can anything so bad be good?” Its use in the face of such skepticism seems largely justified by its instrumental usefulness to management practitioners (Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010), fueled by the implicit idea that “research should be assessed by its contribution to the effectiveness of business management [...] a conflation of research *on management* with research *for managers*” (Adler *et al.*, 2007, pp. 10-11).

The anxieties regarding the subjectivity of the technique within this philosophical stance often result in focus groups being relegated to a junior, preliminary role. This exploratory status manifests in a number of ways. First, management researchers may use focus groups to generate or select theoretical ideas and hypotheses for subsequent deductive testing (Calder, 1977; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010). Second, they may be used for developing and piloting certain operational aspects of anticipated quantitative

research, such as the wording of questionnaire items (Calder, 1977; Zeller, 1987). Here, focus groups are a precursor to scientific knowledge, subsequently generated by the development and deployment of more rigorous and reliable quantitative techniques. As such, the method's value becomes limited to contexts where little is known about the phenomena of interest (Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010).

At a practical level, the emphasis on methodological rigor advocated within the neo-positivist stance has led to strict protocols and recommendations regarding the do's and don'ts of executional details (Stewart *et al.*, 2007). In particular, the management researcher as moderator of the focus group is seen as the key to objectivity and the production of quality data: "A focus group and its resulting information are only as good as a moderator [and] her or his knowledge of focus-group approaches and procedures" (Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003, p. 21). Largely, this involves the researcher adopting a detached observer, or uninvolved spectator approach during data collection in order to reduce threats to the objectivity and value of the research (Calder, 1977; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003; Rose-Anderssen *et al.*, 2010). Reflexivity in this context is limited to methodological reflexivity in so far as a standardized approach involving procedural uniformity minimizes the chances of "technically problematic methodological lapses" (Johnson *et al.*, 2007, p. 24; also see Haynes, 2012). The central goal here is management researchers' control over the output of the focus group and much has been written about the role of group size, composition, level of interaction among participants and venue layout in contributing to the controllability of a focus group (Morgan, 1998; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010). The literature from this perspective is thus awash with stage-driven models, outlining the steps of focus group research and the role of the management researcher within each step (e.g. Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010).

There are analytical implications associated with constructing focus group participants as passive subjects, who hold opinions and preferences that are considered to be objective "facts," best expressed in group situations under the "control" of the moderator. The pursuit of objectivity and neutrality has led some proponents of the focus group method to assign numerical values to the resulting data, which can be manipulated to achieve greater insights into their "meaning" and provide confidence of theoretical saturation (Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2010; Schmidt, 2010). This kind of approach is one that is likely to be advocated by researchers who accept the deployment of qualitative methods of data collection while retaining positivism's key characteristic – the presupposition of a theory neutral observational language (Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Duberley *et al.*, 2012).

Other neo-positivist researchers may, in an attempt to explain human action, favor the adoption of an analytical approach that aims to generate grounded theory through inductively developing "descriptions of the patterns of meaning that actors deploy in sense-making" (Johnson *et al.*, 2007, p. 29; also see Calder, 1977). Indeed, grounded theory is argued to be particularly suited to looking at under-explored phenomena (Kenealy, 2012), which – as noted earlier – has been mooted as the core purpose of the focus group method from a neo-positivist perspective. A contradiction that can exist here, however, is created by the combination of empiricism and interpretation (Van Maanen, 1988; Hammersley, 1992). While the interpretive leaning suggests that groups of people create and give meaning to versions of reality, empiricism emphasizes that inductively developed descriptions of cultures must correspond with participants' intersubjectivity; an intersubjectivity which is presumed not to extend to the researcher (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). In other words, researchers are positioned as immune to the cultural processes being studied and objective in the interpretive act itself (Prasad and Prasad, 2002; Duberley *et al.*, 2012).

Focus groups for interpretivist research

There are a variety of genres subsumed under the label of interpretive research, making its discussion complex. Perhaps the unifying characteristic of such research is that its advocates try to access and understand participants' intersubjective, culturally derived meanings in order to explain their behavior in everyday social contexts through *Verstehen* (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). From this perspective, the management researcher does not presume there is a ready-made world available out there for discovery, but attempts to understand the process of symbolic "world-making" (Schwandt, 1994). Such philosophical commitments render positivistic questions about the reliability and generalizability of focus groups – which are pervasive among management researchers who undertake focus groups from a neo-positivist standpoint – rather pointless.

Within the management literature, consideration of the focus group method appears largely to be located within the interpretive genre of phenomenology (Calder, 1977; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003). Notably, discussion of a phenomenological approach to focus group research is most common within the marketing literature, spurred by its potential to offer: "A chance to 'experience' a 'flesh and blood' consumer. It is the opportunity for the client to put himself in the position of the consumer and to be able to look at his product [...] from her vantage point" (Axelrod, 1975, p. 6). Such an approach is seen to be instrumentally useful and there is recognition that this would call for the moderator to be "actively involved" through "interactive personal contact" (Calder, 1977, p. 359). There is, however, a sense of tension regarding the lack of prescriptive procedural protocols and the extent to which moderator behavior is left to the idiosyncrasies of individual moderators which – drawing on positivistic criteria – leaves phenomenological focus groups to be condemned as producing everyday (non-scientific) knowledge (Calder, 1977; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003). It could be argued then, that management researchers who acknowledge the "usefulness" of a phenomenological approach do not always do so in a way that is in keeping with the spirit of interpretive inquiry. As Prasad and Prasad (2002, p. 4) point out, the rigor of such approaches "needs to be judged by criteria that are markedly different from those used in conventional empirical research."

Nevertheless, what the discussion of a phenomenological approach to focus groups emphasizes is that to explain human action, we have to start by understanding the way people actively establish and reestablish the meanings they use to organize their experiences (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Focus groups driven by interpretive commitments are therefore likely to be less structured, involve less moderator control and greater interaction among group members than those undertaken from a neo-positivist standpoint (Calder, 1977; Kehoe and Lindgren, 2003; Bill and Olaison, 2009). In terms of analytical strategy, likely approaches include a phenomenological approach to template analysis (see King, 2012) and linguistic approaches such as conversation analysis (see Greatbatch and Clark, 2012) and narrative analysis (Maitlis, 2012). Such approaches are premised on their ability to offer greater flexibility than the analytical strategies discussed under the neo-positivist perspective, their emphasis on the situated position of the researcher and the view that reality is an ongoing social act. Here, reflexivity is used to enhance understanding by acknowledging the values and preconceptions researchers bring to that understanding; the researcher's representation of actors' reality actively contributes to creating it (Haynes, 2012).

Focus groups for critical research

Critical management research is a "broad church" drawing on theoretical resources such as Marxism, Labor Process Theory, Frankfurt School of Critical Theory,

Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism and underpins a number of intellectual movements such as feminism and environmentalism (Adler *et al.*, 2007). Postmodernism and poststructuralism could also be considered under the guise of critical management research, but in this paper will be dealt with separately on the premise that they are intellectually distinct enough to warrant a dedicated discussion. The common core of critical endeavors within organization and management research is that they often question the taken for granted, challenge instrumentalism, structures of domination and asymmetrical power relations (Adler *et al.*, 2007). One of the defining features of critical research is thus its attention to promoting emancipation (Stahl, 2008; Duberley *et al.*, 2012). This foundation sets critical approaches apart from the positivist and interpretivist traditions discussed above.

The potential of critical focus group approaches has received some attention in social research generally (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Webb and Kevern, 2008) and management research specifically (Bill and Olaison, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2011). A central consideration for critical focus group researchers is the importance of power in social interaction. That is, from a critical perspective, management researchers become more sensitive to power issues, such as the choice of focus groups topics. Drawing on a pragmatist perspective, for example, Bill and Olaison (2009) propose an in-direct approach to focus groups through the use of role-playing. While acknowledging that the indirect role-playing approach to producing knowledge does not remove power imbalances between researchers and participants, Bill and Olaison (2009) highlight its potential for co-creation between researchers and participants – a cornerstone of critical research:

A role-play has a script with rules and constraints, but it also leaves room for the group's decision-making abilities, analytical acumen, and, most importantly, the experience, emotions and imagination of its members. Our scripts also had rules [...] and the participants started their roleplaying in a specific setting that they could not initially control or co-create [...] To solve the task, or 'to play the game', the participants first had to accept the setting and script, and then they had to co-create it and give their own characters life (p. 9).

Stahl *et al.* (2011) provide equally significant insights into the design of focus groups from a critical perspective, concluding that they – if designed and executed in light of a critical approach – are capable of contributing to the emancipation of both researchers and respondents. In sum, they posit that emancipating participants involves deliberate attempts to enhance empowerment and the voices of the less powerful. Such efforts can include the explicit application of rules to promote an “ideal speech” situation, the strategic placement of participants around the table (based on a pre-focus group assessment of whether participants were likely to be dominant or timid) and involving participants and wider stakeholders in the analytical process. Additionally, they argue that the potential for critical focus group research to emancipate researchers rests upon the influence of participant discourses in challenging researchers' assumptions about their research topics. In other words, focus group members can question the orthodoxy of taken for granted assumptions embedded within disciplinary knowledge systems. Inevitably, such approaches call for an emphasis on critical interrogation of how researchers interpret and make sense of their own experiences during fieldwork. Reflexivity here thus involves attention to how focus group accounts – whether by participants or management researchers – are “influenced by their authors' social positions and by the associated use of power-invested language and convention in constructing and conveying the objects of their research” (Adler *et al.*, 2007, p. 11; also see Haynes, 2012).

The critical perspective thus requires a different interpretation of research findings; one based on the contingencies of power relations and their corresponding reality constructions. In other words, critical perspectives require reflexive critique where management researchers not only question the truth claims of others, but how they themselves make truth claims and construct meaning (Haynes, 2012). Reflexivity is no longer a tool of effective research, but a moral or ethical project. At a practical level, researchers who take seriously the contextual, situated nature of accounts and how they become legitimized are much more likely to advocate analytical strategies such as conversation analysis (Antaki, 1994; Greatbatch and Clark, 2012) and narrative analysis (Maitlis, 2012) due to their focus on talk in interaction. While these approaches differ in many respects, they share assumptions that: identities are negotiated in discourse (and therefore focus on how group members set up and work out roles); talk is organized moment to moment by participants (researchers look for ways participants define sections, rather than defining sections themselves) and; talk is sequenced, one thing after another (each utterance is considered in terms of what came before and after) (Meyers and Macnaghten, 1999).

Focus groups for postmodernist and poststructuralist research

Despite debate within the literature as to whether postmodernism and poststructuralism hold unique characteristics (see Prasad, 2005), their shared emphasis on language and deconstruction means that here – as elsewhere (Adler *et al.*, 2007; Duberley *et al.*, 2012) – they are discussed together. Nietzsche's critique of the use of reason as a veil of power provides impetus for postmodernism and poststructuralism, such that researchers from these traditions argue that claims to objective truth made by social scientists are themselves discourses of power (Adler *et al.*, 2007). A central feature of these perspectives is that the social world is not seen as external to us, but constructed by us; no meaning exists beyond language (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches "engage with multiple interpretations of reality and the indeterminacy of meaning" (Oswick, 2012, p. 477). They are thus characterized by a relativistic orientation; for researchers from these traditions, "there are as many realities as there are ways of perceiving and explaining (Duberley *et al.*, 2012, p. 26; also see Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004 who adopt this perspective toward group methods). As with critical genres, postmodernism and poststructuralist have informed intellectual movements such as feminism and environmentalism (Adler *et al.*, 2007).

Against this backdrop, postmodernist and poststructuralist researchers' relationship to empirical work can be characterized by ambiguity and skepticism (Stahl *et al.*, 2011; Duberley *et al.*, 2012). Such tensions are, for example, manifest in the commonly adopted method for postmodernist inquiry, discourse analysis, in so far as the established convention is that the researcher is not a participant in the production of the (written or spoken) text under consideration (Oswick, 2012). For discourse analysis purists, then, this would render the method inappropriate for focus group discourses in which the researcher participated as a moderator of the group: though the deconstruction of a focus group text in which the researcher had no part may be considered appropriate. For postmodernist and poststructuralist researchers who are advocates of empirical work, the adoption of an indirect approach, such as that of Bill and Olaison (2009), or the study of natural groups (see Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004) may be strong candidates for producing as near to a naturally occurring conversation as practicable while participating in the production of the text. In this scenario, conversation and narrative analysis may be useful in engaging with communicative

interactions as the process of generation and construction of meaning in group situations (Rose-Anderssen *et al.*, 2010).

In sum, I have highlighted the importance of recognizing that focus groups – or indeed any method of data collection – cannot be viewed as an “interpretive” or “critical” method *per se*; “focus groups can involve a disregard or participants, alienation of stakeholders and the brute force of intellectual power” (Stahl *et al.*, 2011). The mere use of a method says little about the mode of engagement within which it is employed. Every decision in the course of designing, conducting and analyzing focus group research is interdependent and takes place within the context of management researchers’ philosophical commitments, heightening the importance of critical engagement with both the theoretical and practical issues around group work. This theme is developed further in the next section where a theoretical framework for thinking about focus groups in organization and management research is presented.

3. Reconciling focus groups in organization and management research

The preceding section has highlighted that approaches to the focus group method are infused with specific philosophical commitments; they do not constitute neutral tools and are tied to different versions of how social “reality” should be studied. Focus groups can lend themselves to a variety of approaches according to the epistemological stance of the researcher. In other words, the technique can serve the requirements of many different epistemological positions along the subjective-objective continuum, raising questions about the design, conduct and analysis of focus group research and the role of reflexivity.

Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) note that a great deal of focus group work adopts a formulaic approach, which fails to develop the full potential of the method, and criticize those who uncritically adopt market researchers’ models of focus group research (also see Hopkins, 2007). They contend that social researchers should adapt and expand such models to take into account their own purposes and theoretical traditions. In the spirit of this contention, within the preceding section of this paper I attempted to delineate the underpinning, and sometimes overlapping, assumptions of various philosophical schools of thought familiar to organization and management researchers, and their implications for the nature and role of the focus group method. In particular, I highlighted that neo-positivistic approaches, which encourage researchers to present themselves as faceless, objective non-entities whose role it is to document the “subjects” point of view have become increasingly contested by those who argue they are not commensurate with interpretive understanding (Cunningham-Burley *et al.*, 1999). Nevertheless, focus groups within a neo-positivist mode of engagement remain commonplace within organization and management studies. Alternative models for conducting, understanding and theorizing researchers’ relationships with their participants are, however, being explored by management researchers seeking to adopt the focus group method from alternative perspectives (Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004; Bill and Olaison, 2009; Rose-Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Stahl *et al.*, 2011) on the premise that:

Focus groups, if treated in an appropriate way, permit us to open up epistemological assumptions about the subject matter (for example, how, or more accurately, in what ways, do people ‘know’ what health risks are?) as well as about the research process (how do researchers gain ‘access’ to other people’s knowledge, their views and attitudes?) (Waterton and Wynne, 1999, p. 129).

One of the inherent dangers in the diversity surfaced in the preceding discussion, however, is that the convergence of diverse research approaches to group work provides ripe ground for naïve empiricism (Thorne, 1997), where little attention is paid

to epistemological assumptions or the role of the researcher in the research process. In such circumstances, the ontological and epistemological differences between subjectivist and objectivist approaches can become blurred in the assumption that focus groups must be interpretive because they access people's views in an informal group setting. Focus groups can thus cross the epistemological divide with such ease that there can be a careless disregard of fundamental issues such as power and control, the constitution of data and the positioning of all those participating in the research. A preoccupation with methods in isolation "obscures the link between the assumptions that the researcher holds and the overall research effort, giving the illusion that it is the methods themselves, rather than the orientations of the human researcher, that generate particular forms of knowledge" (Morgan and Smircich, 1980, p. 499).

What I have attempted to demonstrate in the preceding section is that qualitative research can be conducted within traditions that are positivistic as well as non-positivistic. Indeed, a substantial body of focus group research in organization and management studies can be described as constituting a form of qualitative positivism. Put differently, "although one may usefully think of all interpretive organizational research as belonging to the qualitative domain, not all qualitative research is necessarily in keeping with the spirit of interpretive inquiry" (Prasad and Prasad, 2002, p. 5). The framework presented in Table I reconceives the use of focus groups in organization and management studies by building on the arguments in the preceding section to expose a finer grained conceptualization of the implications particular theories of knowledge present for the researcher in terms of aims, processes and reflexivity. The taxonomy presented, however, is not exhaustive; rather it has heuristic value through articulating the possibility of diverse philosophical approaches to focus groups in organizational research. The main point here is that researchers should articulate and reflect upon their particular philosophical commitments and associated methodological consequences.

The reflexive framework presented thus offers an alternative way of thinking about and using focus groups, by looking upon them as existing in a field of tensions between different logics. Such an approach offers the potential advantages of: avoiding a naïve belief that "data" simply reveal reality and encouraging the acknowledgement of ambiguity in the aims, processes, and outcomes favored in group work. This means bridging the gap between theories of knowledge and method to encourage informed fieldwork practices.

4. Concluding reflections

This paper has demonstrated that the focus group method can lend itself to a variety of uses according to the epistemological stance of the researcher, and highlighted the questions this raises about the design, conduct and analysis of group work. As Morgan (1988, p. 3) points out: "social science and evaluation of research are still at a stage at which most of our knowledge about focus groups comes from personal experience rather than systematic investigation." With the increasing use of focus groups, such investigation is perhaps long overdue. In this paper, I have suggested a reflexive framework for mapping some of the diverse philosophical positions available to organization and management researchers, encouraging more informed choices about how researchers can relate to the focus group method. The idea is less to give an exact map of the terrain than to encourage productive lines of thinking. The complexity and richness of focus groups indicated by Table I suggests the need for careful interpretation of the extent to which and in what ways the method (and resulting

Theory of knowledge	Aim of focus group	Focus group characteristics	Analytical implications	Role of reflexivity
<i>Neo-positivist</i> Realist ontology – objectivist epistemology	Document subjects opinions and attitudes, which are seen as objective “facts”. Often a pre-cursor to quantitative study	Role of researcher: Detached Control: Researcher Discursive flexibility: Low due to structured topic guide Group size: Often 8-10 Group composition: Often strangers to avoid pollution of data	Removal of data from context in which it was generated through the use of quantitative content analysis and/or inductive generation of grounded theory. Often aimed at selecting theoretical ideas or developing hypotheses for deductive testing	Limited to the deployment and monitoring of particular research protocols to ensure methodological rigor, objectivity and data quality
<i>Interpretive</i> Ranging from realist to more subjectivist ontology – subjectivist epistemology	Access and understand intersubjective, culturally derived meanings in order to explain behavior in everyday social contexts	Role of researcher: Engaged Control: Researcher/ participants Discursive flexibility: Medium/ high through semi-structured/ unstructured topic guide Group size: Often 5-8 Group composition: Strangers/ pre-existing groups or both	Aim to shed light on substantive issues whilst retaining richness and complexity of data. Emphasis on systematic not selective analysis of data, perhaps using template analysis/conversation analysis/ narrative analysis	Used to enhance understanding by acknowledging the values and preconceptions researchers bring to interpretative acts; the researcher's representation of actors' reality is seen to actively contribute to creating it
<i>Critical</i> Realist ontology – subjectivist epistemology	Collect data on group norms and on the conformity, consensus, censorship and dispute surrounding such norms	Role of researcher: Engaged co-producer of focus group discourse Control: Researcher/ participants Discursive flexibility: High due to pursuit of discursive democracy Group size: Often 5-8 Group composition: Often pre-existing groups as these are the networks in which people might normally discuss	Examination of competing and contested discourses to surface how and why certain accounts dominate and others are suppressed or silenced. Common analytical methods include conversation analysis/ narrative analysis	Moral/ethical project that gives consideration to how group context and broader cultural/institutional features encourage or suppress certain points of view. Awareness of the (power) location of the researcher in relation to group members and the topic of investigation

(continued)

Table I.
A theories of knowledge approach to focus groups in organization and management research

Table I.

Theory of knowledge	Aim of focus group	Focus group characteristics	Analytical implications	Role of reflexivity
<i>Postmodern/post-structural</i> Ontological subjectivism – epistemological subjectivism	To allow multiple voices to be heard and deconstruct the dominant discourse to surface a repertoire of interpretations	(or evade) issues, form ideas and make decisions Role of researcher: Laissez-faire Control: Participants (as far as possible) Discursive flexibility: High Group size: Often 5-8 Group composition: Often pre- existing or “natural” groups	Attention given to transcripts as “talk”. Each group is seen as having its own socially constructed reality, which is deconstructed through conversation/narrative analysis to reveal multiple co-existing meanings	No transcript (or analysis) is seen as stable: it can always be reflexively questioned through removing layers of meaning to reveal suppressed narratives. Results in a relativistic position where there is no “fixed” truth

material) may be used for a variety of research purposes. This calls for exploration, self-examination and epistemological awareness on the part of those who chose to use the method. A core point here is that the epistemological ideas suggested should not be seen as another complication or additional burden to the researcher, but a way of preventing getting trapped in certain ways of thinking about focus groups and knowledge generation, or indeed, any method and the production of knowledge.

Questions about the design, conduct and analyses of research are not merely technical or practical questions, but are grounded in particular theories of knowledge that significantly influence research aims. It is therefore crucial that any researcher considering the adoption of the focus group method reflexively engages with both the practicalities of research design and the epistemological assumptions they bring to group work and their field of study. Thus, while the focus group method is becoming increasingly established, how the method is adopted and adapted to serve organization and management researchers with diverse and often competing philosophical perspectives is of crucial concern. Ultimately, whether focus groups are uncritically adopted or whether they are employed in a more challenging way depends on whether researchers address the sorts of debates presented here.

Finally, given the importance I have placed on management researchers' reflexive engagement with knowledge constituting assumptions, it would be inappropriate to conclude such a paper without situating my own position within the contested philosophical terrain evoked within the preceding discussion. Through the act of developing a framework located in a philosophical analysis of the focus group method, I have undermined some of the schools of thought I have analyzed. By emphasizing the need for researchers to take into account their role in producing management research and its implications for the nature of group work, I have opposed the functionalist view of neo-positivism that – providing strict methodological protocols are adhered to – researchers can produce removed, objective accounts of a world “out there.” Equally, by attempting to interrogate how management researchers from different philosophical stances might variably conceive the focus group method and the ensuing implications of this variability, postmodernists may level the charge that I have presented a meta-narrative. The paper has not endeavored to provide prescriptions of “how to do” focus group research, but to go some way to addressing the philosophical confusion associated with the use of the method within the spirit of interpretive inquiry.

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