Collective Production of Discourse: an approach based on the Qualitative School of Madrid

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Introduction

In recent years, social researchers who use focus groups have shown a growing interest in group discourse, recognizing that this involves much more than the simple aggregation of individual opinions or individual discourse. This has also extended to include a focus on the necessary conditions for group discourse to emerge. It seems clear that not every group technique encourages the production of group discourse to the same extent: depending on the group dynamics established in each case, more or less group discourse will be produced. This has opened a field for reflection that seeks to identify the conditions needed for the emergence of group discourse. We argue that a specific branch of discourse methodology can be particularly useful, namely the qualitative research method proposed by Jesús Ibáñez more than thirty years ago and later developed by other Spanish and Latin American social researchers of the so-called Qualitative School of Madrid. This paper aims to present this group technique for discourse production to a wider audience, and demonstrate that it is particularly powerful for fostering the production of group discourse.

Discussion groups and *focus groups*: similarities and differences

In 1979, Jesus Ibáñez published the first edition of *Más allá de la sociología* ('Beyond Sociology') in which the author provided a methodological framework for discussion groups. This approach was the result of his research experience gained in over more than two decades of practice in the field of market research alongside Alfonso Orti, Angel de Lucas, Francisco Pereña and Jose Luis Zárraga, and others, who later formed the so-called Qualitative School of Madrid (Valles & Baer, 2005). This theoretical framework for discussion groups almost completely ignored focus groups, which is surprising, since this technique had been developing at the same time[1]. Indeed, Ibañez only made two brief references to Merton's focussed interviews' as being more similar to in-depth documentary interviews with the clear intention of differentiating them from his discussion groups (Ibáñez, 1979: 122, 257). In contrast, he based his discussion groups on psychoanalytic theory, especially Bion's theories (Bion, 1952), as an interface or intersection between "basic groups" and "working groups" (Ibáñez, 1979: 21; Dominguez & Davila, 2008: 98). Later, however, other methodological developments of this technique largely abandoned this psychoanalytic approach[2] (Martin Criado, 1997; Alonso, 1996; Canales & Peinado, 1994; Canales, 2006), but neither was it based on focus groups, which were practically ignored[3].

A similar situation has occurred among authors who have developed focus group methodology. In studies by these authors, no mention is made of the discussion group technique, as developed by the Qualitative School of Madrid.

Thus, although discussion groups have been used for a long time by Spanish and Latin American social researchers, they are virtually unknown in other countries - particularly among English-speaking audiences and specialists. Another example (and cause) of this separation between the methods of both techniques is the lack of papers written in English, and which address the technical and methodological features of discussion groups; a fact that has undoubtedly contributed to the limited international dissemination of this technique. Although numerous studies have been published that describe and explain the features of discussion groups, all have been written in Spanish (Ibáñez, 1979, 1989, 1991; Ortí, 1986; Martin Criado, 1997; Alonso, 1996; Canales & Peinado, 1994; Canales, 2006; Domínguez & Dávila, 2008). Hence, it could be said that both techniques have followed a "parallel" path since they rely on very different assumptions and theoretical approaches and have continued to develop in a different manner, while barely acknowledging one another.

In practice, however, focus groups and discussion groups have many features in common. Based on these similarities, some authors conclude that they are actually different versions of the same technique (Valles, 1997; Callejo, 2001) or that the differences are those of an epistemological nature rather than a methodological one (Gutiérrez, 2011). Moreover, if we consider the more inclusive (or less restrictive) definitions of focus groups, it is clear that these can also be applied to discussion groups. For example, the definition of focus groups "as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan, 1996: 130) would be equally applicable to discussion groups. Or, similarly, if we consider that focus group discussion is a flexible method which permits myriad forms and can be adapted to different research purposes (Barbour, 2005), discussion groups could also be considered a particular type or form of focus group.

In addition to demonstrating and highlighting these similarities, I am interested, here, in examining discussion groups in relation to the diverse forms of focus groups. This will allow for a clearer and more precise explanation of the specific methods and techniques of discussion groups to introduce these to audiences unfamiliar with them. While it is true that discussion groups and focus groups have many similarities, some share more than others. For example, discussion groups bear a close resemblance to focus groups that emphasize the group aspect or dimension, while they differ largely from more individualized focus groups[4]. It could be said, therefore, that discussion groups are a type of focus group, but not a type of group interview (Canales & Peinado, 1994: 294). In Spain and Latin America, the distinction between group interviews and discussion groups is much more marked than in English-speaking countries, where focus groups are often considered as a type of group interview (Frey & Fontana, 1991; Hughes & DuMont, 2002; Madill, 2012) that permit varying degrees of interaction between participants, a more or less structured or directive moderation, and thus a more or less individualized discourse.

From an individualistic point of view, interactions among participants – one of the principal features of focus groups – are valued in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, these interactions encourage the emergence or disclosure of the individual opinions and views of each of the participants, which, according to this approach, is the ultimate aim of the technique. However, these interactions can also be a disadvantage or drawback. Indeed, from this point of view, interactions between participants may mean that the group 'contaminates' or biases the individual opinions of the participants. The role of the moderator is to "structure a process of interaction conducive to the elicitation and elucidation of the most private of views, while reducing to a minimum the residuum of 'socialness' left over from the process" (Lezaun, 2007: 130). From this individualistic perspective, the group situation is, in part, an obstacle for participants in expressing their thoughts or individual opinions, which are regarded as the only real or authentic point of view, and hence the most interesting to collect. The group situation necessarily involves some group effects (Carey & Smith, 1994). In this regard, Hollander (2004: 610) noted the pressure to conform that may lead participants to adjust their own contributions to match those of others. This phenomenon, which is known as "groupthink",

involves a "bandwagon effect" where people endorse more extreme ideas in a group than they would express individually; and social desirability pressures induce participants to offer information or play particular roles, either to fulfill the perceived expectations of the facilitator or other participants, or to present a favourable image of themselves. From this individualistic perspective, these group effects must be neutralized, or at least minimized, by a directive, more structured and individualizing approach to moderation.

In addition to this individualistic approach characteristic of focus groups, there is another approach that emphasizes group dimensions or aspects. According to this group-based approach, focus groups are perceived, essentially, as involving group dynamics rather than group interviews (Smithson, 2008; Wilkinson, 2006) in which interactions between the participants in the group are encouraged at the expense of interactions between the moderator and each of the participants (Parker & Tritter, 2006: 26), and where moderators take on a less directive role and less structured group dynamics are encouraged (Krueger, 1991). Because the interactions between the participants and the context in which they are produced are considered fundamental to producing the focus group's results, these interactions must be taken into account when analyzing the information obtained within a constructivist perspective (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998; Smithson, 2008; Hollander, 2004; Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Grønkjær et al. 2011). Last but not least, the group is considered to be the unit of analysis, rather than the sum or aggregation of the opinions, attitudes or information of each of its participants (Wilkinson, 1998; Munday, 2006; Smithson, 2008). In short, this conception of focus groups, which may be called collective or collaborative, fully assumes the group situation to be a characteristic of focus groups. As a result, it seeks interactions between participants in order to produce richer results, and these interactions are taken into account in the analysis rather than trying to eliminate or reduce their impact.

The discussion group goes further and may be considered a radical version of this type of focus group, which emphasizes the group aspect. Indeed, the explicit aim of discussion groups is the collective production of a group discourse through conversation. As Alonso argued, "discussion groups are essentially a socialized conversation project, in which the production of a group communication situation is useful for collecting and analyzing ideological discourse and symbolic representations associated to any social phenomenon" (1996: 93) (translated from the Spanish). Therefore, the interest is in enhancing and maximizing the group dimension of the technique: that is, to encourage the flow of interactions between participants and to maximize intense group dynamics. Thus, from the discussion group perspective, group effects no longer are viewed as a problem or an inconvenience, but can even become a source or mechanism for the production of group discourse. It is not a question of preventing or minimizing these effects through group moderation or direction; nor that these effects must be taken into account in the analysis of the data produced. According to the discussion group approach, it is precisely these "group effects" which produce the group discourse. This proposal is more radical, as it intentionally seeks to produce and foster these effects.

Agreement as a discursive product typical of discussion groups

Discussion groups constitute a research situation in the form of a conversation around a topic or issue proposed by the researcher to produce a shared discourse by the group: that is, the participants reach agreement on these issues. When a conversation is held in any context - not just in social research - the more or less explicit objective of the speakers is to reach agreement; a conclusion that is shared jointly or negotiated through reciprocal influence. Each participant in a conversation seeks to influence and persuade others, but may also be influenced and convinced by others, in turn. Agreement can be considered the goal, or the horizon, of any conversation. In this way, the production of a shared discourse is fostered in discussion groups through the communicative exchange and interaction between participants leading to the implicit agreement in any conversation. Thus, group dynamics in

discussion groups can be viewed as a process of decreased individuality, a progressive loss of individualities for the emergence of a collective discourse and a group identity (Callejo, 2002).

Gadamer refers to the potential of conversation to produce a group or shared discourse—understood as an agreement among participants on the issues at hand—when he says that "conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus, it is a feature of every conversation that each person opens him/herself to the other, accepts his/her point of view as valid and transposes him/herself into the other to such an extent that he/she understands, not the particular individual but, what he/she says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his/her opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus, we do not relate the other's opinion to him/her, but to our own opinions and views" (2004: 387), since "the true reality of human communication is such that a conversation does not simply carry one person's opinion through against another's, or even simply add one opinion to another. Conversation transforms the viewpoint of both" (Gadamer, 2006: 17). The result or outcome of a conversation, to the extent that this occurs, is something other than the individual opinions of those who participated in it; it is a shared discourse. Or, in the terms of Gadamer, conversation is a process that produces "a common diction and a common dictum" (2004: 388).

However, this agreement should not necessarily be understood as absolute agreement on each of the topics covered, and the degree agreement that is reached on the various topics can be very diverse. In other words, the output of a discussion group is always a shared discourse, but the degree to which it is shared does not have to constitute absolute agreement. For this reason, discussion groups always allow for some degree of dissent in terms of both the group dynamics and the group output. At times, this dissent acts as a catalyst for discussion by enriching debates and bringing out important aspects that would have otherwise remained implicit. In other cases, this diversity of views is maintained until the end, meaning that the group's discursive output is only shared to some extent or with regard to some issues and not others[5].

The goal of focus groups is not to reach consensus between participants, which is what differentiates them from other group processes such as nominal groups or the Delphi method (Krueger & Casey, 2010: 381). Unlike focus group, discussion group always attempt to reach agreement; but unlike nominal groups or the Delphi method, this agreement does not necessarily have to be absolute (consensus). Thereby, the fact that full agreement is not reached does not imply that the discussion group has not achieved its goal. On the contrary, the degree of agreement reached is a feature of the discursive production of the group and, as such, a research result that must be analyzed. Discussion groups in which absolute agreement is reached on all issues are valid to the same extent as those in which there is less agreement or major disagreements persist among the participants until the end. This is because the discursive product is always collective or shared insofar as it is a discourse which is produced in a collective attempt to reach agreement, to seek agreement. In sum, discursive result of discusion group is mutual understanding more than consensus.

Furthermore, discussion group, unlike nominal groups or the Delphi method, neither pressure nor push the participants to agreement. Rather, they create the conditions for conversation, and so, agreement arise spontaneously. In no case does this agreement-based focus imply the silencing or inhibiting individual or particular differences and disagreements among participants. On the contrary, a dynamic in which agreement is reached on the various issues in too immediate a manner and with little previous discussion is very unproductive in discursive terms, and requires more intervention by the moderator in order to reveal what lies behind this apparently obvious consensus. Discrepancies are not repressed but are, to some extent, necessary for discussion group dynamics and, as such, are encouraged by the moderator. Some authors argue that considering discourse as a collective or shared output implies the disregarding, silencing or even stifling divergent or dissenting opinions (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2011).

However, from our point of view, there is no inconsistency between shared discourse and such discrepancies. Rather, discussion groups propose reaching a shared discourse precisely through the confrontation of divergent opinions, and the kind of shared discourse that is produced in them is rarely characterized by absolute unanimity.

Moreover, discursive cleavage may occur in discussion groups, which does not necessarily mean they have not functioned well or have failed. The formation of factions within the group that engage in more or less incompatible discourses, thus making the prospect of agreement impossible, may be a plausible outcome of a discussion group, although it is not a usual one. When this is the case, it is necessary to revise the group design, as it is based on the expectation that the groups will produce a shared discourse through conversation. But in no case should this outcome be considered an error, but rather an interesting surprise, to which any type of research - and especially research based on qualitative methodology - should be open. The unexpected discursive cleavage in a group is an outcome that requires explanation, since its analysis can reveal important aspects of the social reality under investigation.

Collective or shared discourse production through conversation

Discussion groups foster the production of a collective or shared group discourse around issues of interest to the research by setting the conditions for participants to engage in and maintain the liveliest and most intense conversation possible. There are at least four important factors that must be taken into account in order to enable conversation to flow: the composition of the group or the characteristics of its members; the instructions or indications they are given to engage in the group dynamics; the nature of the discussion topic; and the type of moderation. None of these four features of discussion groups is exclusive to this technique, but each is also found in differing degrees in some versions of focus groups - especially those that maximize the group dimension or aspect. However, the specific characteristic that distinguishes discussion groups from focus groups is that all these strategies are combined, or used jointly, to ensure the optimal conditions for shared discourse to emerge through conversation.

Group composition

As regards the composition of the group, the participants should be homogenous if the group is to reach some degree of consensus on the issues discussed. Group homogeneity usually refers to similarity in socio-demographic characteristics (Canales & Peinado, 1994), but also to the horizontal relationships among participants in hierarchical or conflicting contexts (Callejo, 1998). It is important to note a crucial issue here. If the aim of the group discussion is to produce a shared discourse through conversation, a necessary intermediate step for this to occur is the formation of the group in the conversation itself. For this to be possible, at least two conditions must be met: 1) that the group does not already exist, that is, that none of the participants know or have habitual or close relationships with the other members of the group[6]; and 2) that the characteristics of the participants permit a group to be formed, that is, they mutually recognize one another as being socially similar.

The homogeneity or similarity of participants has also been defended for focus groups as a way to encourage the emergence, expression or disclosure of individual views and to foster a high-quality discussion about the topic being researched (Greenbaum, 1998). The homogeneous composition of the group builds trust among participants, who subsequently facilitate the expression of each participant's individual opinions (Morgan, 1995, 1988; Hughes & DuMont, 2002). However, although no doubt related to trust, the objective of this within-group homogeneity in group discussions is somewhat different. Greater trust among participants in group discussions is important not so much because it fosters the expression of individual opinions, but because it allows for more intense group dynamics and

ensures the flow of conversation, and, thus, a more collective and shared discourse output. The difference may seem subtle, but it is very important to the results of the technique.

Moreover, the homogeneity requirement is relative because participants can only be homogenous to a certain degree. Thus, while homogeneity should be sought, there should also be a certain degree of diversity in the group, in order to allow for divergent opinions that enrich and revitalize the debates[7]. In this regard, a group that is too homogeneous may lead to dynamics that are not sufficiently intense, reaching instant consensus on the issues raised, and the discourse that is produced will be poor. Moreover, homogeneity is not an intrinsic characteristic of the group itself, but refers to the views group members have about the issue to be discussed or the topic in question. For example, while both men and women can be brought together to discuss a variety of topics, there are some topics where it is clearly advisable to separate by gender, such as contraceptive use or the division of housework. In addition, some issues that can be easily debated by both men and women in our society may be somewhat problematic in other societies. In these conditions, it is advisable to conduct discussion groups separately by gender[8].

In discussion group methodology, this within-group homogeneity is complemented by between-group heterogeneity by incorporating criteria in the research design to reflect the diversity of social discourses in a particular historical and social context. Research using discussion groups seeks to capture the diversity of social discourses by using different groups so as to cover, to the greatest possible extent, the different discourses found in society. Discussion group methods aim to elucidate or establish the system of social discourse around a particular issue (Conde, 2009), that is, the variety of views on the matter, and the relations or interplay among them. Discussion group research is designed in such a way as to reach information saturation, in line with focus group research (Hennink, 2007: 145). However, discussion group research is also designed to take into account the saturation of different types of existing discourses in a given social context, which involves formulating a hypothesis about discursive differences (or kinds of discourse) among different groups, depending on their social characteristics.

Instructions for engaging group dynamics

Regarding this second feature of discussion groups, it is very important that the initial instructions or indications make it very clear that the dynamics involve an exchange of views. However, these seemingly simple instructions can actually be quite difficult to put in practice. Firstly, it is very common for participants to expect the group dynamics to consist of alternating sequences of questions and answers between the moderator and the participants. In fact, these question-answer dynamics are perhaps most widely recognized as a typical social research method as, to some extent, they reproduce the logic of surveys, which is undoubtedly the most well-known social research technique. In other words, discussion group dynamics are, in a sense, strange or atypical and it is, therefore, common for these group dynamics to be hindered by such preconceptions - especially at the outset.

To overcome - or at least mitigate - these difficulties, the moderator can explain the group dynamics by resorting to images or concepts, such as debates or conversations, which, by analogy, may be more familiar to the participants, and this can help them to better understand what is expected of them. It is also important that moderators specify their own role in the group and mark a distance from it. This can be done, for example, by defining their role as observers who will ask some questions during the course of the meeting. A useful indication for this purpose is to request that participants direct their contributions to all members of the group rather than to the moderator or to any single participant. This prevents participants from speaking directly to the moderator and permits debates to be carried out in an organized manner without concurrent conversations.

Nature of discussion topic

A third point that should be taken into account to ensure the flow of conversation among members of a discussion group is the importance of formulating in a suitable manner the issue to be discussed. Indeed, depending on how the issue is presented, participants may tend to express more personal or private views rather than exchanging their opinions or views with others. For example, asking participants if they are for or against contraception is different from raising the issue of the decision to have children. In the first case the members will be prompted to take an initial position that can make subsequent conversation very difficult, while, in the second case, they will be encouraged to contrast and explore the different opinions. In general, it is preferable to avoid topics or issues which require an answer or which encourage participant to take an individual, closed position. Thus, it is preferable to raise the issues to be addressed in an indirect manner: for example, by proposing a topic that differs from the research goal but which bears a certain relationship to it and which can eventually steer the discussion to the issue that is of interest to the researcher[9]. Moreover, these indirect formulations have another advantage insofar as they foster greater spontaneity and allow for a less biased discourse.

In addition to this initial indirect approach, the moderator should take special care with regard to how the issues are raised or how questions are asked, in order not to bias the course of the conversation or interfere negatively in the group dynamics. In this sense, it is preferable to formulate questions in such a way as to link up with what has already been said, to expand on statements, to clarify earlier responses, or to bring up a relevant issue that has not been raised in the conversation. Insofar as possible, discussion group moderators should also avoid addressing individual participants in the group, but, instead, should address the group as a whole. Thus, questions that require participants to express their individual views or opinions should be avoided, such as those directed at single participants. Obviously, individual turn-taking in answering the moderator's questions is highly unadvisable. While discussion group moderators should explore discrepancies, this should not involve individualized responses[10]. These considerations bring us to the question of the type of moderation.

Type of moderation

Discussion groups rely on non-directive moderation, which is the fourth characteristic that differentiates discussion groups from focus groups.   The objectives of non-directive moderation are twofold: to ensure the spontaneity or the natural flow of conversation in the group without interference or bias by the moderator, and to promote and enhance group interactions, particularly those that occur among participants in the group. Non-directive moderation, or less structured moderation, is, perhaps, the most important strategy used in conducting discussion groups aimed at producing a shared group discourse

Non-directive moderation and the production of a shared discourse by the group

Non-directive moderation is a strategy that was developed in clinical psychology as a way to promote the so-called encounter groups, that is, groups in which participants can express or disclose their views and opinions in the freest possible way without interference or manipulation by the moderator (Rogers, 1973; Gutiérrez Brito, 2008) The moderator is more a facilitator than a conductor. In this setting, the moderator acts as a facilitator to elicit participants' personal views. In social research, however, non-directive moderation is somewhat different in terms of how it is presented and the objectives to be pursued. Here, non-directive moderation refers primarily to the self-containment or restraint of moderators regarding their involvement in the group, which must also be as neutral as possible.

This non-directive or less structured moderation is also found frequently in focus groups, especially those which are more group based or collaborative (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Kitzinger, 1998). For example: "typically you want

a moderator to ask the question, then sit back and listen. Let the participants interact. Let them have a conversation about the question. A focus group is working well when participants begin to build on each other's comments rather than continually responding directly to the moderator" (Krueger, & Casey, 2010: 383). Indeed, this style of moderation is characteristic of focused interviews (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956), which can be considered the immediate forerunner of focus groups. In focus groups, moderators may use a non-directive style depending on their own preferences, the issue to be discussed, or the specific objectives of the research. In contrast, non-directive moderation is a central strategy employed in discussion groups with the aim of to producing a collective and shared discourse. Thus, in addition to the above objectives, the main aim of non-directive moderation in discussion groups is to establish the necessary conditions to form a group at a specific time and for a specific task.

In the initial stages, a discussion group is not really a group, but rather an artificial or contrived grouping (Lezaun, 2007); a meeting or a focused gathering[11] that is artificially created by the researcher. Although this initial situation is identical to that of focus groups, focus groups allow varying degrees of grouping and various forms of group interaction (Agar & MacDonald, 1995),which may oscillate between those sequences characteristic of the dyadic interaction in standard interviews and a conversation (Hyden & Büllow, 2003: 308). The purpose of discussion groups is to enable a group to be formed through conversation around the issue of interest to the research, so that its members can produce a collective discourse from the discourse shared by the group. Whether they are successful in achieving this aim or not will depend largely on whether the moderator provides an open arena for discourse and remains neutral in order to allow for conversation among participants[12].

To achieve this additional goal, non-directive moderation in discussion groups has some distinctive features. On the one hand, self-containment of the moderator is more intense. But this greater intensity of non-directive moderation cannot be understood as a difference only in terms of degree, as some authors argue (Gutiérrez Brito, 2008; Valles, 1997). On the contrary, as has been argued, the greater intensity of non-directive moderation seeks to encourage different group dynamics, equally intense conversation among participants in the group, and, with it, a distinctly collective or shared discursive production.

Further, non-directive moderation should be especially intense or even extreme in the early stages of the meeting. Thus, in the first moments, non-directive moderation in discussion groups is practically equivalent to the moderator withdrawing from the discussion. This is because, in the beginning, the group should be established around the conversation: that is, based on the mutual recognition of participants as valid interlocutors in relation to the issue. The withdrawal of the moderator and the homogeneity of participants will permit the group to establish a common ground that may function as a starting point for interaction (Hyden & Büllow, 2003: 311). To the extent that this common ground is established, the group will be formed to a greater or lesser extent, and the discourse will be more or less collective. "In discussion groups, the problem arises when the moderator becomes too involved in the meeting, making it more like a group interview. This makes it difficult to talk of group discourse since what is shared only flows through a regulator outside the group itself" (Callejo, 2002:100, translation from Spanish). Later, however, when the group has already been formed and acquires its own dynamics - usually around 30 or 40 minutes from the start - the moderator can then relax this non-directive moderation and begin to intervene more directly by posing questions to the group.

A distinction should be made between dialectic and dialogic conversations. The former refers to conversations whose express aim is for partners or participants to reach agreement. In contrast, dialogic conversations are more anarchic or less formalized verbal exchanges that do not necessarily lead to agreement, but, rather, an increased awareness and mutual understanding of the participants' respective viewpoints. Or, in the words of Bakhtin, a "knitted-together but divergent exchange" (Sennett, 2012: 18-19) Thus, the conversation that arises in the framework of a discussion

group should be more dialectic than dialogic. Dialectic conversation is more suited to the production of a collective discourse, to the extent that it implies that some type of agreement is reached among the participants.

Yet this is true only in part. In the beginning, the conversations that take place in discussion groups acquire characteristics that are clearly dialogic: participants sound each other out, are prudent and listen, thus allowing the participants to acknowledge one another and, to some extent, identify themselves as part of a group. Only when the group has been formed through this dialogic conversation can it undertake the task of reaching agreement on the issues raised by the moderator. In this second phase, the conversation acquires more dialectic characteristics, in so far as the group attempts to reach agreement and consensus and share members' views, regardless of their differences. In this sense, discussion groups are formed in a dialogic manner in order to function and reach agreement dialectically. Hence, for the group to function dialectically, it must have been previously formed dialogically. The transition from one phase to another is marked by a change in how the moderator conducts the group dynamics, which may involve shifting from an nondirective moderating style to one that is somewhat more interventionist.

Sociological analysis of collective or shared group discourse

A collective or shared group discourse, such as that which is produced in discussion groups, is of enormous sociological value. In particular, collective discourse is a perfect means to research social representations, such as systems of norms and values, images associated with institutions, groups or objects, topics, and stereotyped discourses (Alonso, 1996: 94); to explore the ideological certainties existing in a given social space (Canales & Peinado, 1994: 294); or even to seek consensus in conflicting contexts (Callejo, 1998). In this sense, focus groups that maximize of the group aspect have also been shown to be useful in studying collective identities (Munday, 2006), developing ideas collectively among research participants and allowing them to bring forward their own priorities and perspectives (Smithson, 2008: 358), or making collective sense of personal experiences and beliefs (Wilkinson, 1998b). In short, the discourse that is shared and collectively produced by the group is a perfect way to gain insight into broader social discourses.

However, in order to exploit the potential of collective discourse as empirical material, attention must be paid to the type of analysis. Indeed, collective discourse where the group is the unit of analysis (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Hyden & Bulow, 2003) requires a sociological analysis. This type of analysis involves taking account of the consensus or agreements reached by the group in its conversation or discussion. But, as noted above, under no circumstances does the priority given to consensus imply a disregard for possible discrepancies or dissenting opinions within the group. This is because any agreement or consensus is relative, so that a fundamental question posed in analysis is to determine the degree of agreement or consensus reached by the group or groups on the research issues. Thus, in addition to consensus, a group analysis – such as the one we propose here – should also take into account dissenting voices; issues on which agreement is weak or even nonexistent; and opinions or views that differ from those of the group. Moreover, this type of discourse analysis does not only consider the "final" consensus reached by the group, but also the processes which have led to it: that is, the interactions among the participants. Hence, it is essential to pay attention to the group interactions when evaluating and interpreting the discursive output in this kind of analysis (Ruiz, 2009).

Another important point is that the consensus reached by discussion groups is not always expressed or made explicit, but often takes a tacit or implicit form. Thus, for example, choosing some topics of conversation, avoiding others, or ironic and indirect ways of addressing them are important elements for the group to reach agreement or

consensus. Consequently, these implicit agreements and disagreements should be considered when analyzing the discourse produced by the group (Ruiz, 2014). Citing Zeldin (1998), Sennett noted that "the good listener detects common ground more in what another person assumes than says. The listener elaborates that assumption by putting it into words. You pick up on the intention, the context, make it explicit, and talk about it" (2012: 19). Analysts of a discussion group resemble this good listener, but without an interlocutor standing before them, that is, when the conversation has ended.

A last feature of discussion group discourse analyses is that they are never performed in isolation, but always within the discourse system of which they are a part (Conde, 2009). Thus, collective discourses produced in discussion groups must be interpreted in open contrast to other discourses that occur in the same social arena, and which, in turn, have occurred in other discussion groups.

Conclusion: Differential characteristics of discussion groups

Discussion groups and focus groups are apparently similar social research techniques, but which nevertheless seek different aims and, thus, give rise to very different group dynamics. Specifically, the aim of focus groups is to gather the views and opinions of participants in a context of mutual influence, while discussion groups attempt to produce a collective or shared discourse, that is, a group discourse through conversation in a group situation. While the first corresponds to a group interview situation, the second involves conversational dynamics among the participants.

However, new types of focus groups have recently been developed that attach greater importance and relevance to interaction among participants. These variants of the focus group foster conversation to a greater extent and limit individualized dynamics based on two-way interactions between the moderator and each of the participants. In this regard, these focus groups share some of the dynamics characteristic of group discussions, as they explore the potential of conversation as a means to allow opinions to emerge in a group setting. Nonetheless, the difference between the two lies in the objectives of group dynamics, since these types of focus groups do not aim to produce or analyze the group discourse.

Discussion groups can be considered a radical version of focus groups that place emphasis on the group, except that they pursue different objectives. Specifically, the discussion group provides concrete possibilities for social research because it is a technique aimed at producing a group discourse, understood as a collective or shared group discourse. To the extent that this is so, this is a technique similar to the focus group which can be useful when our research objectives require investigating this collective dimension of social discourse. For this reason, here I've tried to provide a better understanding of discussion groups for those more familiar with focus group techniques.

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[1] See, for example, the paper published by Merton in 1987 in which he compared "focussed interviews" to focus groups (Merton, 1987) or the first edition of Krueger's (Krueger, 1988).

[2] Years later, Ibáñez also provided a foundation for discussion groups from a more constructivist perspective, based on the second cybernetics (Ibáñez, 1991). However, some elements of these psychoanalytic origins remain, such as the need for discussion groups to relax the censorship of inconsistencies characteristic of interviews, at least in part. In this sense, discussion groups aim to broaden the discursive field by permitting inconsistencies to a greater extent than other research situations allow (Callejo, 2002: 97).

[3] Javier Callejo's handbook (2001) is a notable exception to this disregard for focus groups in discussion group methodology. To a large extent, Callejo equates these two techniques and makes several references to focus groups.

[4] For more on the differences between these two traditions and types within the focus group technique, see Smithson (2000), Wilkinson (1998), Hollander (2004), and Farnsworth & Boon (2010). A defense and summary of individualistic approaches to focus groups can be found, among others, in Hughes & DuMont (2002), Lezaun (2007), and Onwuegbuzie (2011).

[5] The difficulty in reaching agreement is often the cause of unease among participants, thus demonstrating that agreement is the more or less implicit goal of the conversation. When it is not possible to reach agreement, the conversation is brought to an end, or participants change the topic of conversation. Farnsworth & Boon (2010) referred to a similar situation when they stated that "in one group, for example, one of us found the continued splintering of discussion cognitively overwhelming. In the end she stopped processing and went into a passive state, effectively 'shutting down'. So when it came time to introduce the next major topic she had trouble re-engaging with the focus group research agenda" (p. 615).

[6] Of course, the artificial nature of the group is also a feature of focus groups (Morgan, 1997; Hyden & Bülow, 2003). However, some authors suggest the possibility - or even the convenience - of conducting focus groups with natural or pre-existing groups, as it can build rapport and trust among participants and hence the disclosure of their particular opinions or views (Barbour, 2008; Kitzinger, 1994). From the point of view of discussion groups, using pre-existing groups is highly problematic - if not outright unadvisable - as this prior relationship may have an adverse effect on the collaborative production of a shared discourse. The prior relationship among participants in a discussion group, or even mutual knowledge, is always an inconvenience because it hinders the group dynamics. Elsewhere we have defended a small group format in the form of a triangular or minimum group as the best way to ensure the production of shared discourse in these atypical or exceptional conditions (Ruiz, 2012).

[7] This seems to be the sense of Morgan's recommendation to offset the homogeneity in the background characteristics of participants in focus groups by the greater diversity in their attitudes (Morgan, 1997).

[8] In a sense, group homogeneity may be considered counterproductive with regard to the discursive production of the group, as it reduces the discrepancies among the participants. However, as Kitzinger (1994: 113) noted, regarding particularly homogeneous natural groups,, when the group is properly conducted discrepancies and different opinions among participants emerge in all conversational contexts - even those in which unanimous agreement is initially reached.

[9] Although Jesus Ibáñez recognized that the topic of discussion can be approached directly, he preferred an indirect approach due to the problems involved in a more direct approach to presenting the issues (1979: 303 ff).

[10] For example, with questions like "Does everyone agree with that?", or statements such as "I would like to hear everyone's opinion on this issue", participants are encouraged to express differences but not individual views that hinder or close the conversation. These questions therefore contribute to building a collective discourse by contrasting different positions. Again the difference may seem subtle, but the effects on discursive output are substantial.

[11] This is a concept formulated by Goffman and adopted by Hyden & Büllow (2003: 307) to refer to a situation in which individuals agree to sustain a single focus for a time. The point is that this concept describes what happens in some forms of focus groups, but this, on its own, is insufficient for conducting a discussion group.

[12] In this regard, discussion groups bear a close resemblance to the group discussions developed by the Institute for Social Research of Frankfurt in the 1950s (Gugglberger et al., 2013). Beyond their names, the two techniques are similar in terms of their objectives (the production of a collective discourse), and the strategies adopted to achieve them (specifically, an open and unstructured approach). However, we also found significant differences between these techniques, although this issue exceeds the scope of the current chapter.