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Cowton, Christopher J. and Downs, Yvonne

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The use of focus groups in business ethics research: potential, problems and paths to progress

Christopher J. Cowton and Yvonne Downs

University of Huddersfield Business School, Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

Focus groups are a well established qualitative research method in the social sciences that would seem to offer scope for a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in the field of business ethics. This paper explores their potential contribution, reviews their contribution to date and makes some recommendations regarding their future use. We find that, while the use of focus groups is not extensive, they have been utilised in a non-negligible number of studies. Focus groups are usually used a supplementary method, often as part of the development of a research instrument. Whether used on their own or in conjunction with other methods, we find that in the majority of cases there is insufficient information for a reader to judge that the method has been carried out well and hence that the 'findings' may be trusted. Nor is it easy for future researchers to learn about the practical application of the method in business ethics contexts. We therefore recommend improved reporting in future published studies. Based on an analysis of a sub-sample of papers that provided a reasonable level of methodological detail, we provide further insights into, and recommendations for, the use of focus groups in business ethics research.

Introduction

As a multidisciplinary field, business ethics lends itself to a range of research approaches; and to the extent that empirical research has a role to play, it might be expected that all social scientific research methods have a contribution to make. The predominant use of questionnaire surveys as a method of primary data collection in business ethics research is

long established (Robertson 1993), perhaps because they yield data that can be analysed quantitatively. However, responding to calls for other research methods (e.g. Liedtka 1992), there is nevertheless a growing stock of published research that uses qualitative research methods, including semi-structured or unstructured interviews, case study and – the subject of this paper – focus groups. For such research to make a substantive contribution and to possess academic credibility more generally (Cowton 1998), it is important not only that qualitative methods are accepted in principle but also that their practical application to business ethics research questions meets appropriate academic standards. Focus groups are a well established qualitative research method in the social sciences. The aim of this paper is to explore their potential contribution to the field of academic business ethics, to examine their place in the literature to date, and to make recommendations regarding their future use.

The paper is structured as follows. First, an overview of focus groups is provided, highlighting their potential and some of the key issues in their definition and employment. This section covers some similar ground to Vyakarnam (1995) and Vyakarnam, Bailey, Myers and Burnett, (1997), whose potentially generative insights have largely been overlooked. Second, the method employed in our search and review of the business ethics literature is outlined. Third, the results of our review are described. Fourth, we discuss our findings in the light of our earlier general discussion of focus groups. Finally, we summarise the key points and contribution in the conclusion.

Focus groups in qualitative research

Morgan (1998) charts three phases of the use of focus groups in qualitative research. They were used in the 1920s by social scientists to develop survey questionnaires, then after the Second World War and through the 1970s they were used predominantly in market research. Only since the 1980s have they been widely used as a method in qualitative research. Interest in their use grew in response to concerns over one-to-one interviewing because of the influence of the interviewer and the limitations of answers to closed questions,

particularly in structured interviews. However, although a focus group has multiple participants, it is more than a one-to-many interview.

Boddy (2005) is critical of the lack of differentiation between various kinds of group interview research and notes that several terms are used interchangeably (*inter alia* focus group, discussion group, group interview and focus group interview). Sutton and Arnold (2012) also differentiate between three kinds of research with groups; interactive, nominal and the Delphi system. It is the first of these that is most commonly understood as focus group research. Denscombe (2003: 178) suggests that focus groups have three distinctive and vital points which make them different from general group meetings. First, there is a focus to the session, with all participants sharing common knowledge about a particular topic of interest. Second, emphasis is placed on the interaction of the group as a means of gaining information. It is this interactive element of focus group research which, according to Madriz (2000), offers the potential to create 'new research paradigms' and can be designated as its defining feature. Third, the role of the moderator is limited to that of facilitating group interaction and discussion. Group discussion, uncoupled to a greater or lesser degree from the interference of the researcher, might be construed as the salient feature of the focus group. In view of this it is perhaps apposite to refer to data generation rather than data collection. Whether this is to be construed as a strength or a weakness is open to debate, of course, and in the discussion of the features of focus groups that follows, we acknowledge their ambiguous nature.

Strengths of interactive focus group research

Whilst it cannot be assumed that the characteristics of focus group research and of using focus groups will remain constant through transposition into other settings, the account given by Sutton and Arnold (2012) of using focus groups in research into accounting information systems nevertheless provides a useful starting point for consideration. They outline several aspects of using focus groups in research:

- The purpose is to acquire as much information as possible.

- The participants are 'experts' on a given topic.
- Pre-specified topics and open ended questions are used to stimulate discussion, encourage interaction and prompt participants.
- Participants have the opportunity to offer their own observations and to feed off the observations of others.
- The researcher is able to draw on the expertise of the group and gain fresh insights into the topic.
- Focus groups are particularly useful when access to data is limited and when the researcher is addressing unexplored and emerging phenomena (O'hEocha et al. 2011, Sutton, Khazanchi, Hampton and Arnold 2008, Sutton Reinking and Arnold 2008).

Madriz (2000) supports this last point, arguing that the main strength of a focus group is that it enables an in-depth discussion of the topic and the issues that pertain to it. It is thus an excellent method for exploratory research and for less structured themes and topics and those that are broad in scope, while at the same time allowing for in depth-discussion of a bounded theme. It is also likely that rich data – with consequent opportunities and challenges for analysis – will be generated in the course of a focus group discussion. Moreover, whilst it is likely that clarification of the issues will occur naturally in the discussion, the moderator also has the option of seeking clarification and of asking further questions in the course of the session. The added dimension of being able to observe group behaviour is also a strength, particularly if the session is being recorded, leaving the moderator free to monitor the interactions.

Challenges in the use of focus groups

Paradoxically, some strengths can be construed as weaknesses of the method. Thus it may be said that relying entirely on the interaction of the group is a weakness because the quality of the interaction takes on inordinate significance. It may also be that the group members do not interact at all. However, in practice one might be reasonably confident that gathering

together a group of people to talk about a topic in which they share, if not a common interest, almost certainly a measure of common knowledge or curiosity, will encourage at least some discussion, especially if competently facilitated.

Nevertheless, Robson (2002) has argued that the advantages of focus groups are often outweighed by their many disadvantages. First, since only a limited number of questions can be covered, it is important to choose those questions that are closely linked to the research question. The size of the focus group is a related issue here because if it is too big, giving each person a chance to contribute when they feel they want to, the session risks becoming a protracted affair; too small, and participants may feel exposed or not have enough to say or fail to be prompted into speech by something someone else has said. Furthermore, results cannot be generalised, but this is a weakness inherent in most qualitative techniques (Cresswell 1994) and population generalisability is anyway not the aim of qualitative studies. Indeed, some would go further and argue with the very designation of non-generalisability as a weakness.

Another possible weakness of focus groups is that they can be overcome with group dynamics and power hierarchies that govern who speaks, when and how much. Strong personalities can come to dominate and those of a more reticent disposition may be reluctant to speak up. The issue of particular dispositions is also relevant when considering the composition of focus groups, as it may be that only certain kinds of people would volunteer to take part in them. Here the role of the moderator is important. The challenge is, firstly, not to allow particular individuals to dominate the group and to ensure that everyone has had a chance to contribute something to the discussion. Secondly, the moderator must also ensure that the discussion is not allowed to be taken too far from the original topic. The moderator must be skilful in knowing when to steer the discussion back on track while allowing all participants to have their say. Whilst this is not a weakness, the choice of moderator is certainly something that should give researchers pause for thought. If a researcher wishes to moderate, she should not assume that she will automatically possess sufficient skill to do so successfully.

Another issue is the extent to which participants in a focus group will be self-selecting; that is, those who are confident about talking in groups and about their ability to articulate their point of view. But this might be seen as an issue of sampling that is common to many research methods, self-administered survey questionnaires included. There are ways of addressing this. The researcher might consider using other methods to supplement and augment the focus group and the data generated from it. The benefits of augmenting or verifying data using more than one data collection method, or 'triangulation', are not confined to the use of focus groups alone. Triangulating data is common practice in qualitative research where rich data is being sought and depth rather than breadth of reach is of paramount importance.

There are also some practical issues to be addressed. It might be difficult to recruit participants, as participation will entail each giving up a significant amount of time. Although there are no hard and fast rules for the amount of time required, and much will depend on the numbers involved in the group, it is difficult to imagine that any topic could be fully explored in much less than an hour. There is also the difficulty of getting several people together in the same place at the same time and of finding a suitable venue for the focus group to meet. Some researchers advocate holding focus group meetings at 'neutral' venues (Marshall and Rossman 2006). However, others advocate choosing a venue that is not only known to participants but is one in which they feel comfortable (Madriz 2000).

We will consider the ethics of focus group research below, but the issue of informed consent is a practical as well as an ethical consideration. Although it can be solved by giving out consent forms at the beginning of the session and before initiating the discussion, it may be that some participants might require more time to think about what they are signing. It may be safer therefore to send out forms before the event, taking spare copies in the case of misplaced or forgotten forms. However, this has cost implications as well as the problem of low response rate, and forms may have to be re-distributed on the day. It is also likely that a participant who, for whatever reason, did not receive a consent form may feel aggrieved, which might influence the quality of their participation in the group.

In conclusion, although the focus group method does possess some disadvantages or challenges (as do other research methods), many of these can be overcome or managed, especially through good planning and skilled facilitation. Nevertheless, *pace* Robson (2002), we would not wish to assert that focus groups are always apposite or that they are always capable of standing alone; but they have a role to play. Before we consider their role in business ethics research, we will first specifically address the ethical issues that are entailed in their use.

Ethical considerations when using focus groups

Confidentiality is clearly a major consideration in the conduct of focus group research. Even though the contributions will be anonymised by the researcher when reporting the findings and the Chatham House Rule invoked, all the members of the group, if they are 'experts' in a specific area, may be known to each other, if not by name then by sight. If they are discussing a topic in which they share an interest it may be that they might also meet in circumstances outside the research setting. Whilst this might not be problematic for the participants themselves (although it might), some thought needs to be given to dealing with this. Whilst it is reasonable to stipulate that proceedings of the focus group should not be shared with non-participants, what if participants continue discussion of the research topic amongst themselves, outside the 'safe space' of the group? What if this causes frictions between them? What if they decide they have changed their minds on an issue? Moreover, it may be that in the course of the discussion participants express opinions that they later come to regret, or they may reveal more than they intended. However, any research method that involves human participants by definition also entails human quirks and foibles. This simply goes with the territory, but these are issues that should nevertheless be considered when planning research. There are ways of mitigating risk, possibly by addressing areas of contention in the consent form and/or in a discussion that takes place between the moderator and the participants before the focus group discussion gets underway.

Importantly, the researcher must bear in mind that participants will be giving up their time willingly – or it is to be hoped they are, for those who have been coerced are unlikely to be the kind of participant a researcher ideally seeks, as the possibility of taking ‘revenge’ or derailing the discussion in some way is increased. The researcher must learn to work with the human-ness of the process. It would be unethical to ride roughshod over those who, for example, have a change of heart or who wish later to say more. The researcher who privileges data collection over the participants from whom that data comes may also find it more difficult to recruit participants next time. Thus the ‘messiness’ of human interaction should be factored in and the possibility of ‘loss of data’ in whatever form considered in the planning stages.

Madriz (2000) also advocates taking account of the participants’ antecedent experiences of sitting together around a table for a discussion. Mixing participants who are familiar with and experienced in this setting (board members for example) with those who are not (factory workers for example) is not necessarily a bad idea, but the setting and conduct of the focus group would require close consideration.

The above might all be construed as ‘ethical *problems*’, but Madriz (2000: 840) also sets out some ‘ethical *plusses*’ of focus group research. First, the moderator has less power over a group than over an individual. This is not to imply that it is likely that such power will deliberately be exercised for ill. But to take just one example, the time pressures of doing fieldwork may tempt the researcher to rush participants into saying something they may not have said independent of this influence. The salient point is that the potential for the exercise of this influence is reduced in the focus group situation compared to the one-to-one interview. A related point is that the unstructured nature of focus groups also decreases researcher control of the process, although there is often an attempt to regain control of the process in practice. It must also be noted here that the limits to moderator interference may be an ethical plus but it may also be a methodological minus. Although the participants may have practical knowledge they may not possess theoretical knowledge or have critical distance from their topic, which has implications for the subsequent analysis of the data.

Although 'vertical and horizontal' interaction hierarchies may appear, this may also be seen in a positive light, as 'documenting the development of these hierarchies may provide the researcher with some very important data' (Madriz 2000: 840). Moreover, the fact that participants may challenge each other is not simply an ethical matter. It can also impact positively on the quality of the data. Indeed, Vyakarnam (1995) states that it is this very quality of focus groups, namely that members act as a moderating influence on each other, that acts as a safeguard in ethics research.

To conclude our brief overview of focus groups as a research method, there are useful guides that deal with the subject in greater detail (Litosseliti 2003, Krueger and Casey 2009). Barbour (2007) and Morgan and Krueger (1998) provide comprehensive 'research kits' which include reference to the theoretical foundations of focus group research, as well as general guides and specific advice on how to conduct it, how to run focus groups, the role of the moderator, and how to analyse the data and report on the results. However, the outline we have provided should be sufficient for the review that follows.

A review of focus groups in business ethics research: method

Having outlined some of the general features, the positive benefits and the challenges inherent in using focus groups, we now turn our attention to their use in the particular case of business ethics research. The intention is that what follows will animate the general points made above and provide an overall impression of the current state-of-the-art regarding the use of focus groups in business ethics research. In order to do that, a database of published business ethics research that has used focus groups was required. The method by which that was constructed is explained next. The review had just one broad aim, namely to get a clearer understanding of when, how, where, why and to what extent focus groups are used in business ethics research.

In November 2013 we searched the database 'Business Source Complete' using the terms "Journal of Business Ethics" AND "focus group", also searching related words and within the full text of articles. This ensured both the *Business Ethics Quarterly* and *Business Ethics: A European Review*, as well as the much larger *Journal of Business Ethics*, were included in the search. Therefore the three main repositories for the reporting of business ethics research were included. Whilst our primary focus was business ethics, and we funnelled our analysis in that direction, we expected that our search would result in some papers that did not belong to the field but this would nevertheless contribute to gaining a comprehensive view of the field. To this end we initially reviewed all the papers yielded by the search. This revealed that, despite the search term used, some papers did not contain any reference to focus groups, while some others did refer to focus groups but did not use them as a method. We also filtered out papers that used focus groups in research on business ethics *education*. We wanted to review only those papers that were reporting on research done 'in the field' in some sense, given the desirability of empirical research opening up novel vistas on business ethics (Frederick 1992) and the challenges of initiating and managing focus groups with non-students.

After this initial review we initially concentrated on those papers that were using focus groups as a sole method in research and this for four reasons. First, the method used carries a heavy burden for the quality of the research. This means, second, that its use has to be absolutely defensible. Third, the authors have more space to devote to an account of its use. For these reasons it is reasonable to expect a detailed account of the application of the method in the field which means, fourth, we hoped to assemble a list of questions that we might apply as a benchmark to those papers in the three main business ethics journals. However, unexpectedly we did not find that sole use translated into best reporting of the method and we therefore formulated a list of questions that we considered reasonable to find addressed in the methodologies of those papers. Taking into account the material covered in the previous section, we selected papers for review based on the extent to which they included mention of the following:

1. the topic that was being addressed;
2. what focus groups were used for;
3. who the participants were;
4. how the sample was determined;
5. detail about the practicalities of running a group, that is:
 - a) size of group(s),
 - b) composition of group(s),
 - c) number of groups held,
 - d) number of meetings per group,
 - e) duration of meeting(s);
6. the role of the moderator;
7. how ethical issues were addressed;
8. how the focus group data were analysed;
9. whether, in the case of mixed methods research, findings from the focus groups were reported separately;
10. what was said about the effectiveness of using focus groups as a method and how researchers evaluated the effectiveness of the method; and
11. whether any issues were reported to be problematic.

It is important to note that the questions refer specifically to what the authors actually did and related to issues in their own research. For example, where authors wrote generically about the issues and challenges of focus group research, or of analysis of qualitative data in general, we did not deem that they had addressed our particular questions.

These questions, then, had the aim of establishing the presence of a threshold for reporting on use of the method. Inclusion of the details to which the questions refer can be

seen as constituting a guide for those researchers new to the method as well as establishing the trustworthiness of the research. We then applied the questions to a sub-sample of papers that represented the best examples of reporting on the use of focus groups. A total of fifteen papers were reviewed. Most were from the *Journal of Business Ethics* (14/15), which reflects the fact that it publishes many more papers per annum than *Business Ethics Quarterly* and *Business Ethics: A European Review* combined.

A review of focus groups in business ethics research: findings

Table 1 summarises the place of focus groups in the context of the research design reported in the main sample of 145 papers.

[Insert Table 1 here]

It can be seen that focus groups were used as the sole research method in only a small minority of papers (13.1%). Whether this is a research design effect (rarely done) or a publication effect (less likely to be published) is impossible to judge. However, within our main sample it is clear that focus groups are usually used in conjunction with other methods; and in only one case was focus group the main method (the subsidiary method was a survey). In just over 40% of cases, focus groups had a preliminary role to play, aiding in the development of a survey questionnaire, which carried the main burden of the data collection. The remaining 65 papers used focus groups in equal measure with other methods; Table 2 shows which ones.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Some papers reported the use of one or more other methods, so the total number of occurrences in Table 2 exceeds the number of papers examined. Over 40% used survey in addition to focus group, while nearly three-quarters conducted interviews.

Having gained insights into the role of focus groups in business ethics research, we now turn our attention to how the method is implemented. As explained earlier, only fifteen of

the 145 papers in the main sample were deemed to provide sufficient detail to warrant inclusion in the main analysis, which seeks to answer the questions developed from our general review of focus groups as a research method. Table 3 presents an overview of the extent to which the papers addressed our questions.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Although the sub-sample was constructed on the basis of providing information about the implementation of focus groups, it will be apparent from Table 2 that most papers did not provide insights into all the issues. Indeed, although they were *relatively* good at disclosing information, in many cases there were still features of using focus group as a research method that were not clear. Using a simple assessment system, papers were rated “1” if they addressed a particular issue and “0” if they did not. In order to introduce a little more subtlety into the analysis, a partially addressed issue was rated “½”. On the basis of this simple system, the average score per paper was 9.7. As might be expected, the four papers that used focus groups as the sole method scored higher than those where focus groups were used in conjunction with other methods (11.1 vs 9.2) – while recalling that eleven papers in the main sample that used focus groups as the sole method did not provide sufficient detail to appear in Table 3.

Table 3 indicates that, at least in the sub-sample, the major issues of topic, sample selection and what focus groups are used for are relatively well addressed. However, methodological detail is patchy. The following sections examine the questions in further detail.

Questions 1-4: general issues

The topics investigated using focus groups were varied and cannot be said to constitute a particular subset within the business ethics field. Moreover, focus groups were used for a wide variety of purposes, with some authors (but not the majority) emphasising why focus groups were *the* most appropriate method rather than just *an* appropriate method.

Considering that using focus groups for qualitative research in business ethics is not well

documented, we might have expected to see rather more consideration given to this matter.

Reasons for choosing focus groups as an appropriate research method included:

- exploring a particular theme or issues;
- establishing a baseline from which to proceed with further investigation;
- identifying commonalities and differences between and/or within groups;
- theory development;
- generating hypotheses, research questions and a conceptual language for future inquiry;
- as a piloting technique when researching particularly sensitive or controversial issues in order to gauge the emotions and problems that might arise;
- enriching and providing greater detail and additional insights into the research topic itself;
- assisting in the development of concepts for further investigation of the topic and exploring links between concepts;
- generating additional data which could then be used as background or contextual data or to build a fuller picture of the general field in which the research topic was situated;
- refining research questions and providing a space or forum for discussion of the research topic (this was often mentioned in conjunction with the idea that the focus group provided a neutral or even a 'safe', unthreatening space, one free from intimidation);
- to gauge perceptions of the topic;

- to assist in the ‘triangulation’ of data or as part of a range of methods used, for example in case study research or where the research questions demanded a differentiated approach;
- to generate explanations for particular phenomena;
- for pragmatic reasons, to fit round employee work schedules for example, or to minimise disruption to an organisation, or because unlimited access to interview employees at any time was not an option;
- as part of the qualitative analysis of quantitative data;
- to allow comparison of different perspectives; and
- to set specific issues in broader contexts.

In keeping with the variety we have noted to date, there was no one favoured sampling method.

Q5: practicalities

(a) Size of group(s)

There was general agreement that groups should be small to allow all members time to make a contribution without making sessions overly long. However, there was variation in the interpretation of ‘small’. The largest group, where it was clear this was a single group, consisted of twenty participants and the smallest group consisted of four. Other papers reported larger numbers of participants but the inference was that each focus group meeting consisted of a smaller number – though it was often far from clear what had taken place. Some reports did not specify how many participants were in each group, stating instead the number of participants overall and the number of groups held. Sometimes it was specified that the moderator was included in that number. Where no mention was made the inference

was that the moderator was supernumerary. None of the papers made reference to whether the researchers, with the benefit of hindsight, considered the group too big or too small.

(b) Composition of group(s)

All the papers contained some detail about the how the groups were made up. However, this was largely done in a descriptive fashion or to demonstrate the diversity or similarity of the sample. There was little discussion or recourse to the methods literature about how composition might affect group dynamics and interaction. Again, there is some suggestion that more thought was given to this than was reported because the inference in all the accounts was that the group was considered a suitable one for the discussion of the topic. However, there was little explicit description, explanation or justification.

(c) & (d) Number of groups involved/number of meetings held

We are taking these two areas together because it was not clear in all cases whether the information given referred to meetings of the same or of different groups – though we might assume that, unless otherwise specified, each focus group met only once.

The nature of the research and the topic being researched clearly played a role in how many groups were involved and how often each group met, but it was also determined in some cases by practical issues such as access to participants and availability of participants. There was no reporting that there had been insufficient time to fully meet the objectives of holding the group. Moreover, this information was not included in all the papers.

(e) Duration of meetings

In terms of duration, the longest reported length of meetings was 2-3 hours and the shortest was one hour.

Other details that were mentioned, but not in all the papers by any means, was how the data were recorded. Methods for recording were taking notes, tape recording and video-ing the proceedings. However, what was missing in most cases was the rationale for *why* recording

was done in a particular way, and how this might impact on proceedings and on analysis and interpretation.

Q6: the role of the moderator

A good number of the papers did not make reference to who moderated the groups. Others mentioned that the researcher took that role. Perhaps in the cases where no reference was made to a moderator it should be assumed that the author, or at least one of the authors where applicable, acted as moderator – though as we noted earlier, there is no reason why an independent moderator should not be used (indeed, there might be good reason to do so).

Where information was provided, there was evidence of some variation in the degree of control and involvement that moderators had over the group. Some of the moderators seemed involved in steering the direction of the conversation and we wondered about its impact on the interaction of the group, to the extent where it might even have become, in effect, a group interview. Others emphasised how pains were taken to leave participants free to self-steer the discussion.

Q7: ethical issues

In general there was little discussion about ethics, although some of the papers referenced guidance given in the methodological literature, the inference being that this would have included ethical considerations. Given the sensitive nature of some of the topics being discussed, and the fact that the papers were published in business ethics journals, it is perhaps surprising that more of the papers did not pay more attention to ethical issues in the research.

Q8: data analysis

One of the challenges of qualitative research is how to analyse the data generated, as there is generally a large, sometimes overwhelming amount of it. The number of groups/meetings

and the length of the meetings, referred to above, imply that this is likely to have been the case in many of the papers we reviewed.

Some of the research under review did make use of data analysis software but most took some variation of the approach that involves reading for emergent themes and then coding. Content analysis was also used. Audio recorded group sessions were transcribed first, and some researchers mentioned this was done 'verbatim', although no reasons were given for this and none of the research was positioned under the 'discourse analysis' umbrella. We can only speculate that it may be that qualities that are pertinent in the setting of quantitative or quasi-experimental research design are sometimes being imported uncritically into qualitative research settings, or it may be that researchers feel the need to establish parity with quantitative research. Thus reporting that audio-recordings were transcribed 'verbatim' may be a way of signalling the rigour of the research – although it imparts little about the analysis and its outputs, which is where many of the issues relating to the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative research occur.

Q9: separate reporting of focus group analysis

Where focus groups were not the sole method of research (11 out of the 15 papers) it might have been expected that there would be at least some mention of the data generated by this particular method. This was not the case. There was a tendency instead to package the results of data analysis together. One possible explanation might be that the data from focus groups was not considered sufficiently robust to stand alone. Although this statement must remain speculative, taken together with the general use of focus groups in conjunction with other methods it seems at least worthy of further consideration. Overall, there was little or no attempt to explain or justify how the data from different methods were combined.

Q10: effectiveness

Vyakarnam et al. (1997) emphasise the *group* element of focus groups, maintaining that this group process generates material that would not have been generated in multiple one-to-one

interviewing, where the influence of the researcher and the lack of group interaction may simply produce the 'wisdom of the age' rather than an original take on the issue.

Although there was little explicit evaluation of how effective using focus groups had been, the fact that most studies used focus groups in conjunction with other methods might be seen as an evaluation of the method itself; it is seen as a complementary or supplementary method rather than one that can stand on its own. However, there was no reporting that using the groups resulted in not meeting the objectives of the research – although, again, there might be unpublished research that has experienced this. Interestingly, Hillenbrand, Money and Pavelin (2012) also state that for 'pragmatic reasons' they were not able to conduct all their interviews in focus group settings and had to use one-to-one interviewing as well. They found that the two different methods did not materially affect the themes raised – which is not to say that this would always be the case.

Q11: problematic issues

There was little discussion of problematic issues other than in the paper by Vyakarnam et al. (1997). The latter raise some of the issues that we attended to in an earlier section and we will not repeat them here. However, they also mention the following useful points:

- how to deal with the emotional responses of group members as these are not measurable behaviours;
- some group members may simply go along with the majority view and the minority view is lost;
- behaviour in the group setting may not correspond to how participants would behave in real life settings.

Perhaps other researchers have not encountered any particular problems; or at least those that have encountered and described problems have not followed through successfully to publication, either self-censoring or meeting a barrier at the review stage. However, perhaps

some authors have not wished to allude to challenges, or have been sufficiently unreflective not to notice them.

Discussion

The foregoing review has demonstrated that focus groups are used in business ethics research – not extensively, perhaps, and certainly not featuring prominently as a proportion of the published empirical research in business ethics (Taneja, Taneja and Gupta 2011), but non-negligible nonetheless. It has shown that there is an appetite for the use of focus groups, which we find encouraging given their potential; but what we have found through our review also provides food for thought and prompts some concerns.

It should be acknowledged that our review has been limited in certain respects. For example, we focused on journal literature in English and, in particular, upon three leading journals. Within that ambit, our sample selection included a degree of subjectivity, in both the formulation and application of the criteria, and it is possible that we missed some relevant papers. However, the three journals (especially *Journal of Business Ethics*) dominate the academic field of business ethics, and it is unlikely that our conclusions would be changed significantly by finding a few more papers, within those journals or elsewhere. The key findings, first, that focus groups, while not common, are a non-negligible feature of business ethics research and, second, that they are generally poorly written up in published papers, seem robust.

The insights that we were able to gain into the use of focus groups were limited less by our sampling method than by the lack of detail in the published papers that we found. This is probably our key finding, and even in the case of the small subset of cases (15) that we identified for further analysis, the level of detail was often not great. Generally, we found limited description of what had been done, insufficient explanation and justification of why it had been done that way, and little or no reflection on how successful the exercise had been.

This makes it difficult for a reader to judge how trustworthy the research findings are. We wonder, in many cases, how referees were able to judge the quality of the research prior to publication. We would encourage them to ask more probing questions of papers using focus group data than appears to have hitherto been the case – not because we are sceptical about such research, but because we are supportive of it and want it to fulfil its potential to contribute to the business ethics literature. Greater description, explanation and justification of how the research was conducted and the data analysed, and reflection thereon, will not only add to the credibility of the findings but also provide practical examples for other business ethics researchers to learn from. This is particularly the case for papers that rely on focus groups as the sole source of data, but it also applies to some extent to papers where the use of focus groups is a supplementary method. In the latter case, proper consideration should also be given to how the focus group data relate to the other data collected. If they are simply merged, some defence of this should be provided.

Although the standard of reporting meant that we gained limited insights into how focus groups have actually been carried out in business ethics research, our review of the sub-sample of 15 papers raised some issues, which we mentioned in the previous section. In general, there does not seem to be a standard way of conducting focus groups. This is not necessarily a problem, but there were hints that some researchers might be taking a more directive role than we would expect a focus group moderator to do. This would risk turning the research event into a one-to-many interview, thus missing out on the benefits of focus groups, which depend on the less directed interaction of members. Perhaps researchers who have not been trained in the facilitation of focus groups should consider employing a skilled moderator, which would not only generate better data but also give the researcher more opportunity to observe group dynamics. However, because the conduct of qualitative research appears to be closer to everyday social life – in contrast to, say, running a statistical test – we fear that researchers might be less inclined to take training and skills seriously, which in turn will tend to undermine the quality of the qualitative research that is undertaken.

It is also worth re-iterating that several of the general issues we are raising and attending to in this paper have been addressed before, by Vyakarnam (1995). This was a reflective paper that arose out of empirical research using focus groups. The report on the research appeared at a later date (Vyakarnam et al. 1997), although it too contained far more reflection on use of the method than was usual in the papers we reviewed. In addition to forewarning of some of the issues that we have picked up, Vyakarnam's 1995 paper, taken together with our review, provides a benchmark for assessing developments in the use of focus groups in the field. Unfortunately, the paper has only six citations in Google Scholar. Thus it seems that that scant heed has been paid to a potentially valuable paper; and the literature would have been stronger if attention had been paid to the points he was making.

Vyakarnam (1995) asked fundamental questions about the viability of focus groups in business ethics research and concluded that, 'The error being made by some researchers is to use one methodology when their research question is essentially based on a different school of thought'. He points out that the main concern should be with this 'fit' between epistemology and methodology, and that this needs to be thought through in the process of scoping out and designing the research. Moreover, researchers using focus groups should recognise appropriate criteria for qualitative research rather than simply adhering to certain positivist tenets (Bochner 2000). Thus details that are believed to support claims to rigour (e.g. verbatim transcription) are of little value without concomitant attention paid to why this was necessary and how sense was made of the data thus collected. We would suggest that there should be a greater degree of engagement with the underlying philosophy as well as the methodological debates around the use of qualitative research. Thus, for example, Miyazaki and Taylor (2008) contend that the generation of trust that comes with greater interaction might, counter-intuitively for a positivist, mitigate the effect of researcher interaction biases. There is a rich methodological literature on qualitative research, reference to which is conspicuous by its absence in reports of the use of focus groups in business ethics research.

Conclusion

Focus groups are a well-established qualitative research method within social science that would appear to offer significant potential for contributing valuable insights into business ethics. The review reported in this paper demonstrates that there are signs of focus groups being used in business ethics research, particularly in conjunction with other methods – sometimes in order to support the development of a research instrument and sometimes as a data collection tool in its own right. This is encouraging, but less encouraging is the evidence of a lack of transparency about the way in which the focus groups were carried out and, indeed, the specific reasons why the method was being used. This shortcoming both undermines the trustworthiness or credibility of the reported research findings and misses an opportunity to build a body of work that could provide examples and guidance for the future.

It is therefore hoped that future researchers will not only conduct focus groups competently – with due appreciation of the methodological, practical and ethical issues outlined in this paper – but also that they will provide greater insight into what they have done and why they have done it. The gatekeepers of academic publication – the editors and referees – have a role to play in encouraging this. If greater transparency occurs, then a future review of the use of focus groups in business ethics research should be able to provide a more substantial analysis of actual research practice than has been possible in this particular paper. Moreover, our experience of reviewing focus groups suggests that it might be worthwhile undertaking similar reviews of the use and reporting of other (qualitative) research methods in business ethics research, in order to take stock of the current state of affairs and to provide guidance for future research.

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Role in research	Main sample	Sub-sample for detailed review
As sole method	19 (13.1%)	4
As main method in mixed methods study	1 (0.7%)	0
In equal measure with other methods in mixed methods study	65 (44.8%)	11
In development of research instrument	60 (41.4%)	0
	145	15

Table 1. The use of focus groups in business ethics research

Method	Frequency	Percentage using
Survey	27	40.9%
Documentary	11	16.7%
Interview	47	71.2%
Observation	6	9.1%
Case study	7	10.6%
Other	7	10.6%
	N = 65	

Table 2. Methods used in equal measure with focus groups in mixed methods studies

Question	Paper															Score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	15
2	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	15
3	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	15
4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	11½
5a	Y	Y	N	Y	P	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	P	Y	Y	9
5b	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	11
5c	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	12½
5d	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	12½
5e	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
6	Y	Y	P	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	6½
7	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	Y	7½
8	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10½
9	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	8
10	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	P	3
11	Y	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	1½
Score	15	12	8½	10	7	8	5½	8	5½	10	11½	11½	9½	10	13½	145½

Table 3 Questions addressed in accounts of the use of focus groups

Articles numbered in bold use focus groups as sole method.

Y Question addressed (=1)

N Question not addressed (=0)

P Question partially addressed (=½)