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Focus Groups in Ethnography of Communication: Expanding Topics of Inquiry Beyond Participant Observation

by

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Abstract

Historically, ethnography of communication has viewed participant observation as the central and necessary methodological point of departure for any ethnographic endeavor. However, as this article illustrates, this becomes problematic when particular topics of inquiry do not provide ample opportunities for observation. After struggles to participant observe conversations on women's marital naming practices, I was able to research this topic and produce participant observation-like understandings after I incorporated focus groups into my methods. Based upon these experiences and study, this article urges ethnography of communication scholars to step outside their traditional methodological practices, when necessary, and integrate the focus group method into their research protocols.

Introduction

Participant observation, long known as the backbone of ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1962), is unfortunately limited or impossible for projects where access to observation is restricted. This presents a dilemma. Can a researcher working from the tradition of ethnography of communication (EOC) then only pursue topics that provide ample opportunities for observation? This articles explores this problem, arguing that the focus group method contributes to established EOC (particularly participant observation) by providing another means of looking at communicative phenomena. Following a brief history of the evolution of the focus group method, this article invites EOC scholars outside their traditional methodological practices by arguing the following: First, the focus group method provides access to participants' interaction on topics that are either difficult to observe or rare in occurrence; Second, the focus group method improves the practice of EOC research by providing another option for generating data, which allows researchers to better match their research questions to appropriate data collection methods; Third, the method raises important questions of relevance between focus groups and participant observation.

In an investigation of how people think about the causes and prevention of heart attacks, sociologists Morgan and Spanish (1984; 1985) used focus groups to simulate informal discussions about heart attacks. Morgan and Spanish employed focus groups because of their limited if not complete lack of access to such conversations. It was unreasonable to expect opportunities for participant observation of these informal discussions to occur over a reasonable time span.

Similarly, in a recent study I conducted, focus groups were the primary method by which I observed married women's informal discussions about their naming choices. Given that conversations on naming choices rarely occur, I suffered from similar problems of access. In both Morgan and Spanish's study and my own, focus groups functioned as a more appropriate data collection strategy than participant observation. Unlike other methods of data collection, focus group interviewing created conversational groups that, in turn, facilitated participant observation-like understandings.

Ideally, ample opportunity for participant observation would exist for all EOC topics of interest. As my study of women's naming practices illustrates, this is not always the case. This problem raises important questions of relevance. Do focus groups' contributions to EOC's outweigh their limitations; in particular, when used to investigate topics that provide severely limited access to participant observation? The key difference between participant observation and focus groups is that the former observes behavior in its natural setting, while the latter observes behavior in unnatural social settings. Is the effect of focus groups' unnatural social setting so large that it detracts from the insights gleaned, or does it create new opportunities for inquiry? This comparison re-ignites the long-debated effect of the presence of the participant observer on the object of observation. Focus group data are limited to interaction in discussion groups (mainly verbal behavior), while participant observation allows for examination of a wide range and variety of behaviors. The nature of focus groups necessitates that they are created and managed, although the degree of management varies greatly depending on the moderator. In contrast, participant observation, by theory, is a technique employed to allow observation of open and unfettered discussion of the research topic. If the heart of ethnography is thick description (Geertz, 1973), yet there are topics whose limited access to observation leads to "thin" description, then as ethnographers we need to be there in a focused way. If we dare move outside traditional EOC methods, focus groups offer such an opportunity.

History of the Focus Group Method

The historical antecedent of today's focus group is a method first used by Lazarsfeld in the 1940's. Lazarsfeld's work included group discussions of participants' positive and negative emotional reactions to radio programs. Lazarsfeld's colleague, Merton, went on to use this method to explore radio audiences' reception to persuasive messages encouraging war bond pledges. Merton later employed this technique to investigate the impact of training films on World War II soldiers. Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) labeled this method the "focussed interview" and layed out its nature, uses, criteria, and procedures. Despite this publication, the focus group method was rarely used in social scientific inquiry, as this field's interests became almost exclusively quantitative in nature; Lazarsfeld and Merton themselves became immersed in large-scale, national surveys.

During this time, the focus group method could also be found in academic marketing research. Market researchers relied on the focus group method as a means of uncovering consumers' psychological motivations. A well-known example cited in Morgan and Krueger (1998) involves the sale of boxed cake mixes. Researchers found that having homemakers physically crack and add their own egg sufficiently simulated baking a homemade cake; and, as a consequence, sufficiently simulated the "specialness" of baking a cake from scratch for a loved one. The

findings from this series of focus groups prompted the manufacturers to omit powdered egg mixtures and instead allow the baker to add her/his own egg.

In the late 1980's, the focus group method became widely known outside the academy when applied social researchers began to find focus groups useful for their purposes. For example, public and nonprofit agencies conducted focus groups to gain insights on how to improve the effectiveness of their programs (Krueger, 1988/1994). Interestingly, it was around this same time that academic social scientists were rediscovering the focus group method (Morgan, 1988/1997) Morgan and Krueger's recent collaboration, *The Focus Group Kit* (1998), brings together the former's expertise with academic work and the latter's expertise in applied work.

Audience reception research has been a site of the revival of the focus group method in the academy. For example, in the following studies, focus group participants responded to specific media texts on varying topics: Gamson (1998) contributed to the understanding of sex and gender nonconformity in tabloid talk shows; Just et al. (1996) analyzed political campaign discourse; Liebes and Katz (1990) studied the cross-cultural reception of the popular American television show, *Dallas*; Livingstone and Lunt (1994) explored public opinion formation; Morley and Brunsdon (1999) studied current affairs television programming; Press and Cole (1999) explored women's views on abortion; Radway (1984) interpreted readers' responses to romance novels; and Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, and Weaver (1992) contributed to research on women and violence. Gamson (1992) did not explicitly display media texts to participants. Instead, he analyzed how participants invoke media texts in discussions of local and national politics. For example, when asked to think about the issue of how much nuclear power should be relied upon as an energy source, participants appealed to movies like *Silkwood* and *The China Syndrome*, as well as television programs, such as coverage of the Challenger explosion. These examples illustrate the wide use of the focus group in audience reception research within the field of communication. What is missing from this history is an integration of the focus group method into ethnography of communication research. My study offers one such model.

Defining Key Terms

Participant observation has been recognized as a method of data collection since the first published ethnography (Malinowski, 1922). As Gaskins, Miller, and Corsaro (1992) write, "ethnographic research typically involves prolonged fieldwork in which the researcher gains access to a social group and carries out intensive observation in natural settings for a period of months or years" (p. 15). Likewise, Erickson (1986) clarifies the first characteristic of fieldwork as "intensive, long-term participation in a field setting" (p. 121). Yet, as Wolcott (1995) points out, participant observation is never simply "just observing," but rather always involves a careful, focused, acutely aware method of observation.

Working from a Hymesian tradition of ethnography of communication, I have viewed participant observation as the central and necessary methodological departure point for any EOC endeavor. I am reluctant to refer directly to my study as an ethnography of communication because, due to its nature, I was unable to conduct participant observation. I choose to refer to it as a community-based study drawing upon ethnographic methods. Traditionally, EOC's from Hymes' framework have not included focus groups. Methods complementing participant observation generally have

included the write up of observations in the form of field notes, interviews with informants, and sometimes either the collection of relevant documents or the making of a videotape (a sampling of representative EOC's include the following: Conquergood, 1992; Katriel, 1991; & Philipsen, 1975; 1976). However, the topic of my study challenged the traditional methodological framework laid for EOC and I found conventional methods too limiting for research on topics that do not provide the researcher access to participant observation. My study illustrates that, for some topics, EOC's assessment of the relationship between participant observation and ethnography overplays participant observation's significance. EOC equates a sustained period with the community as meaning that this period must present opportunities for the researcher to listen and watch in the form of participant observation. This study offers an example of when focus groups can present similar opportunities. Focus groups offer a unique occasion to both collectively interview participants as well as observe them interacting while discussing the object of selection. According to Morgan and Spanish (1984, p. 260):

In essence, the strengths of focus groups come from a compromise between the strengths found in other qualitative methods. Like participant observation, they allow access to a process that qualitative researchers are often centrally interested in: interaction. Like in-depth interviewing, they allow access to...the attitudes and experiences of our informants. As a compromise, focus groups are neither as strong as participant observation on the naturalistic observation of interaction, nor as strong as interviewing on the direct probing of informant knowledge, but they do a better job of combining [italics in the original] these two goals than either of the other two techniques. We believe this is a useful combination, and one which, for some types of research questions, may represent the best of both worlds.

My technique of individual interviewing draws from a narrative model. My perspective has been strongly influenced by Basso's (1984) work with the Western Apache, from an anthropological tradition; Bauman's (1986) work with Texan oral narratives, from a folkloric tradition; and work from the feminist practice of oral history (i.e., Gluck and Patai's (1991) edited collection aimed at giving women voice and validating their everyday experiences). My goal was to focus on the individual's unique experiences. I sought an in-depth narrative of the meaning of the name change for each of the fourteen individual interviewees.

I opened the interviews by briefly introducing the study, explaining there were no right or wrong answers, and then asking the interviewee to recount "the story of her last name." Since the main sample was women who changed their names[1], the interview prompt was structured such that the change in last name would have occurred when she adopted her husband's last name. After the interviewee exhausted her narrative, I reserved time to probe and ask questions of clarification. The length of the interviews varied, ranging from thirty minutes to over an hour-and-a-half. I audiotaped and later transcribed all interviews.[2] I did not pay participants; rather, I relied on volunteers.

My technique of focus group interviewing draws upon Gamson's (1992) "peer group conversations" and Press and Cole's (1999) "ethnographic focus groups" both of which modify traditional focus group methodology, as reviewed by Morgan (1988/1997). Many of the expectations for how focus groups should be conducted can be traced back to their use in marketing research. For the purposes of marketing research, it is preferable for groups to consist

of seven to twelve strangers who meet in an environment that disguises the product. The discussions are facilitated by a moderator, are video- or audio-taped, and last approximately two hours.

There has been reason to modify groups' formats for the specific purposes of non-marketing research. For example, in order to analyze how participants invoke media texts in discussions of local and national politics, Gamson (1992) modified the facilitator's style, the group size, acquaintance level, and the setting. His groups consisted of four to six participants, were held in non-bureaucratic settings, involved familiars, and minimized the facilitator's role. His groups departed from tradition to such a degree that, to avoid confusion, he chose to call them "peer group conversations." Likewise, Press and Cole (1999) used the label "ethnographic focus group" to highlight their changes to traditional focus group methodology; changes necessary based on the topic of discussion-abortion. Like-minded friends rather than strangers participated due to the emotionally charged nature of the topic. Groups were smaller, ranging in size from two to five. And, the groups met in a member's home, in order to help participants feel comfortable as well as increase the naturalistic feel of the study.

My focus groups similarly deviated from tradition. Not only did my groups range in size from two to five participants, with an average size of four, and members were friends who met at a participant's home, but I also modified the way the groups began. Because of this, a more appropriate descriptor for my focus groups might be the "narrative focus group." I began the groups by asking the host (who had been individually interviewed previously) to "recount the story of her last name." After she shared "the story of her name," the rest of the participants in turn shared their narratives. It was only then that I opened the floor to an open-ended discussion of questions more typical to focus group interviewing.

I adopted this narrative style, beginning with "stories"-in this case, name changes-for two reasons. First, beginning the focus groups in this manner afforded me an efficient opportunity to collect more name change narratives. In addition, acutely aware of the need to de-emphasize my interests as researcher in order to emphasize the interests of the group, I felt that beginning in this manner grounded the discussion in the participants' perspectives. Granted, as moderator I felt the dialogic pull of induction and deduction that Erickson (1986) describes. However, my goal was to remain as unobtrusive as possible while still keeping groups on the general topic of married women's names. I believe this design facilitated my goal.

I conducted eleven focus groups. Together, the individual and focus group interviews yielded a total sample of forty-three women. The focus group discussions lasted between one-and-a-half-to-two hours. I did not pay participants; rather, like the individual interviews, I relied on volunteers. I did supply refreshments, which were sometimes augmented by the host's contributions (or in one case, the host insisted that she serve the group a light lunch before we began our discussion).

I did not use the data from individual interviews and focus groups to re-present the participants' stories. Rather, my design was such that the individual interview collected a more in-depth version of the participant's narrative, not a different version than what was collected in the focus group. This is very important. My women who were both individually interviewed and then

retold their stories in the focus groups did not alter their stories between the two venues. Sometimes the group discussion brought out a new aspect of their story that had not been shared in the individual interview, but I used such instances to enhance my understanding of a particular woman's name change narrative. And, while some participants only told their name change stories in the focus group, I treated them the same as participants who told their story in both the individual as well as focus group interviews. Each woman's story, whether contributed in the focus group only or both the focus group and the individual interview was analyzed on its own merits. The narratives were then compared and contrasted thematically.

Justification for Use of the Focus Group Method in Ethnography

Access to Rarely Occurring or Difficult to Observe Topics

This study is methodologically significant, in part, because it invites EOC scholars outside their traditional methodological practices by illustrating how the focus group method provides access to participants' interaction on topics that either rarely occur or are difficult to observe when they do occur. Based on their own difficulties in observation and eventual success with the focus group method, Morgan and Spanish (1984; 1985) appealed to academic social scientific researchers to reincorporate focus groups into their research methods. Morgan and Spanish (1984) credit Pamela G. Smith, a friend with a background in market research, for originally bringing the focus group technique to their attention in light of their struggle to gain access to observations of informal discussions of friends' and acquaintances' heart attacks. Casual discussions of friends' and acquaintances' heart attacks would have been relatively rare and thus difficult or impossible to observe within any group over a reasonable time span. To redress these concerns, Morgan and Spanish conducted a series of focus groups with a total of forty participants. This method revealed insights into how social interaction influences an individual's health belief schema. Given the issues of difficulty and rarity, these findings would not have been possible without the use of the focus group method.

Issues of rarity and difficulties in observation surfaced in my work on women's naming practices not unlike those experienced by Morgan and Spanish (1984; 1985). Similar to informal conversations of friends' and acquaintances' heart attacks, conversations about women's last names do not occur with enough regularity to allow participant observation. The focus group method afforded me the opportunity to observe these discussions over a reasonable time span. Participant observation is natural for topics of inquiry that occur naturally within everyday interaction and conversation. In contrast, the focus group method allows observation of conversational topics of inquiry that either would never or would arise extremely rarely within day-to-day happenings. Given the dexterity and willingness of the moderator/researcher to take a "hands-off" approach, focus groups offer a unique opportunity to gather conversational interaction on topics otherwise thought inaccessible.

Expanding Options

This study is also methodologically significant in that the focus group method improves the practice of EOC research by providing another option for generating data, which allows researchers to better match research questions to appropriate data collection methods. Different

research methods produce different types of data. Consequently, researchers must carefully select the type of method(s) that will produce the best data to answer the specific question(s) posed. These distinctions may have led EOC scholars to ask only questions they could answer beginning with the traditional point of departure, participant observation, or to use participant observation to answer questions better suited for focus groups. Adding the focus group method to EOC scholars' repertoire allows for improved tailoring of the data collection methods to specific research question(s) posed.

My study on women's naming practices illustrates the above point well. I utilized two principle methods of data collection, the focus group method and individual interviews. When the project began, I expected individual interviews to be the primary means by which I understood the women's narratives. I expected focus groups to function as an auxiliary means of understanding. However, through the process of conducting several focus groups I came to realize the richness of the focus group method for understanding my particular phenomenon under study. This realization caused the research design to evolve. I no longer considered the focus group data auxiliary. Rather, whether the data was drawn from focus groups or individual interviews, it was equally significant in the analysis.

Additional Points of Significance

Beyond the aforementioned significance of the benefits of access and an expansion of options for generating data better matched to research questions, focus group interviews also allow researchers to observe a large amount of interaction on a specific topic of interest in a limited amount of time. In comparison to an individual interview, a focus group interview widens the range of responses due to the increase in the number of respondents. Focus groups increase the number of participants without a sizeable increase in time commitment. For example, in my focus groups, with an average size of four, I was able to collect three additional name change narratives at the start of each group, as compared to if I was individual interviewing.

An additional advantage of focus groups is that by design they allow group interaction on a topic. For some issues this is particularly important. Morgan and Krueger (1993) point out focus groups' utility when members lack an accessible approach to talking about a particular research topic. Often people are not in touch with or are unable to articulate their motivations, feelings, attitudes, and opinions on particular topics. Given the fact that the women in the main sample followed social custom (i.e., adopted their husband's last name), for some of these women their name change was a topic they never had an opportunity to discuss. In contrast, women in the comparative sample had broken with social custom (i.e., hyphenated or retained their birth name) and as a result often had an easier time talking, given that such a break was usually accompanied by tension and conflict, which then led to reflection.[3] The format of the focus group offers a discussion forum for women who followed tradition to compare and contrast comments made by other women, which in turn facilitated reflection and expression of their own viewpoints for those women who had never had such an opportunity.

Yet an additional benefit of focus groups is illustrated by comparing and contrasting what transpired in my study when I used another qualitative method, individual interviewing, to what transpired when I used the focus group method. This is not to privilege the focus group method

over individual interviewing but rather to illustrate how the focus group method can sometimes be advantageous over qualitative methods other than just participant observation. During an individual interview with Sherri Madonia, she was reluctant to talk about the relationship between women's naming practices and feminism.[4] Although she introduced the topic, when I pursued it with a question of clarification, her tone shifted from involved to cold and detached. She responded, "I don't know where you're going" (Madonia, 8: 21), and the interview abruptly ended two turns later. During the focus group, after telling her name change narrative to start the discussion, Sherri mostly listened while the other women discussed the issues. Although I noted this, I felt this was probably her style of interacting in groups. She seemed to have a strong sense of ethos in the group. She was an engaged listener, appropriately reacting to the other women's contributions. Three women she had gone to school with since kindergarten were present and none of them seemed to find her minimal oral participation unusual. However, when the issue of feminism and women's naming practices resurfaced during the focus group, Sherri quickly and decisively took over the conversational floor (Madonia, FG 28-29: 31-45 & 1-6)[5]:

Interviewer: The '70's and the women's lib movement often influenced some women in choosing not to change their name. You guys were born in the generation after the '70's and after the women's lib movement. You guys talked about how it was trendy in the political arena to hyphenate when you were married. What do you think about that? I know how Mindy thinks because she brought it up.

Sherri: Say that one more time

Interviewer: Feminism often influenced some women in choosing not to change their name. What do you think about that?

Sherri: When I think of feminism, I think of someone to an extreme….So I don't think of the way I act as feminist. I don't think that choosing my name [retaining her maiden name as her middle name] was a way of saying that I am a feminist.

I interpret her response as an attempt to squelch this line of discussion as she had already successfully accomplished in her individual interview. However, unlike her individual interview, there were other women present who were very interested in discussing this issue and who had well-developed thoughts they wanted to share. Another participant directly tagged onto Sherri's response and without further contribution from Sherri, the others continued to discuss this issue until the focus group ended, which was not for another four pages of transcript. Therefore, unlike an individual interview, focus groups involve group responses to issues and topics, which as this example illustrates, these responses may vary considerably from an individual to a group setting.

Questions for Consideration

Because EOC has relied upon participant observation as its methodological starting point, the focus group method raises important methodological questions of relevance for EOC. The focus group method raises important questions of relevance. Focus groups differ from participant observation as to whether interactions are observed in natural or unnatural settings. Because the focus group method requires that participants be assembled, rather than the groups forming on

their own, the interactions observed are classified as occurring in an unnatural setting. Ethnographers argue that naturalistic settings are preferable, in large part, because these settings aid researchers in distancing themselves from their own frame of reference in order to understand better the phenomena of interest from the point of view of the participants. One advantage of participant observation is that, in theory, the key points of the study emerge through the process of observation rather than from the researcher's agenda. Most ethnographers acknowledge that it is impossible for the researcher's agenda not to influence what is selected for analysis (Fitch, 1994) and instead understand that participation observation is actually a continual negotiation between induction and deduction (Erickson, 1986). Despite this, participant observation enjoys a natural advantage over other methods as it is designed to emphasize the participants' perspectives over that of the researcher.

I agree that naturalistic settings are preferable. Although I employed focus groups, I created my design to make my study as naturalistic as possible. Following the design, individual interviewees recruited their friends to their homes for the focus groups. Examples of focus groups include members of the same bridge club, a group of friends who had attended elementary and high school together, and a group of "physicians' wives." These women were not strangers; instead they met routinely and regularly. The group of "physician's wives" met weekly at a local coffee shop; the focus group discussion supplanted that week's get-together. The bridge club was playing later during the same day the focus group was held. They joked I might want to tape-record their bridge conversation to catch further insights. By allowing the individual interviewees to recruit their own friends for the focus groups; I increased the naturalistic nature of the interaction because the emerging groups were not created simply for the focus groups, but rather indexed preexisting relationships.

I held the focus groups in participants' own homes as an additional design feature to increase the naturalistic nature of the study. Other studies using focus groups, particularly those in applied social research, often conduct focus groups in laboratory settings equipped with superior recording equipment and one-way mirrors. Although the technology available in a lab would have been highly desirable as the conversations were later transcribed verbatim, I argue that by setting my focus groups in homes, I produced more naturalistic interactions. While I provided refreshments, I often found myself sitting around participants' kitchen tables or in their living rooms eating refreshments they served. This contributed to the overall comfort, conviviality and rapport of the group. For example, when I asked one focus group host for any food preferences or dispreferences of the group, she replied, "If you want to get Joanna to talk, just bring chocolate" (fieldnotes, July 29, 1999). And sure enough, when Joanna arrived, the group slid the candy bowl in her direction, where it stayed. As I mentioned, the "physicians wives" focus group substituted for their weekly get together at a local coffee house. I had brought bagels and pastries from there to serve as refreshments. Upon seeing these, one of the participants remarked, "This is just like being at Java Joint" (fieldnotes, March 18, 1999). The women then proceeded checking to see who wanted to split particular pastries, which seemed to be a weekly ritual.

While others may argue that the focus group method cannot induce participant observation-like understandings, I offer two final arguments to redress these reservations and further advance my larger argument regarding the methodological significance of this study. The first comes from the perspective of my participants. Often participants would ask other group members questions

in the discussions. For example, early in a conversation, one of the group members directly asked, "Are you guys comfortable with women with hyphenated last names"? (Hayes, FG 10: 24-25). In another focus group, during an open-ended discussion on the relationship between feminism and women's last names, one participant posed the following to her fellow group members: "What are we defining women's lib as besides equality? If that's what it is, then I think it's okay but I don't like the whining approach to some of the spokespeople" (Wiss, FG 19: 5-8).

These questions were different coming from a peer than they would have been coming from me as researcher. They differ, in part, because the manner in which a peer asks a question contrasts with the way in which I would have asked a similar question. As both of these examples illustrate, the peer's position on the issue is explicit in the way she asked the question-through her tone, through her phrasing. I would have asked questions about these issues in a less direct, more open way in an attempt to not only disguise my own opinion but also to encourage expression of the members' opinions, regardless of whether our opinions were similar. In addition, the implications of questions from peers were different. I can only suspect that other group members treated these questions differently. Yet, I know I treated these questions as an index of a high level of involvement on the part of the questioner. Generally, when a peer asked a question of others, she not only held a strong opinion on the issue but was also confident in her position. These examples illustrate that what transpired in these focus groups was not a structured discussion; rather, these groups became conversations co-constructed between myself and the other participants, similar to conversations that may have transpired had participant observation been a viable option.

The second argument I offer to counter the reservation that the focus group method cannot induce participant observation-like understandings comes from my perspective as a researcher. I began this project primarily interested in how identity, both individual and collective, was indexed and reconstituted in married women's last names. Although identity remains an important dimension, my research focus has evolved. This project is now primarily invested in explicating how hegemony works in and through our day-to-day lives, using the everyday example of women's last names to illustrate this complicated process. I believe that it was my willingness to listen and be open to what the participants were actually saying, rather than what I wanted them to say, that allowed this reconfiguration. While the women did sometimes speak of identity, they *always* spoke of hegemony, and perhaps even more importantly, they always spoke of hegemony implicitly.

Conclusion

This article explores the relationship between the focus group method and participant observation in ethnography of communication inquiry. I argue that although participant observation has been the principle method of data collection since ethnography's inception, it is limited for topics where access to observation is restricted. Instead, the use of the focus group method allows for the creation of conversational groups that, in turn, facilitate participant observation-like understandings. More specifically, this article argues that the focus group method allows EOC researchers to ethnographically pursue topics that are difficult to observe or rare in occurrence. This article further argues that the focus group method provides another

option for generating data when matching research questions to appropriate data collection methods.

Finally, this article engages questions of relevance between the focus group method and participant observation. Two key dimensions on which the methods differ have been explicated, naturalistic versus unnaturalistic settings and the influence of the researcher's interests. While the inherent naturalistic privilege participant observation enjoys is recognized, I illustrate how focus groups can be highly naturalistic using my design for the study of women's naming practices as an example. Likewise, while the strength of participation observation in allowing topics to arise naturally is recognized, I illustrate how focus groups can de-emphasize the researcher's interests in favor of the participants' interests.

This article invites EOC scholars to consider using focus groups in the place of participant observation when interested in topics without ample opportunities for observation. The focus group method (derived from the "focussed interview") has been successfully applied to early social scientific inquiry, marketing research, applied social research, rediscovered in academic social scientific research, and in media and communication research. I argue it is time for communicatively non-media based ethnographers, particularly EOC scholars, to take up the call, to step outside traditional ethnographic methods and consider integrating the focus group method into their research protocols.

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Endnotes

[1]The total sample for this study is forty-three women. Of these forty-three women, thirty-four are in the main sample. The main sample includes only women who changed their last name to their husband's (five of these thirty-four women retained their birth name as their middle name). The comparative sample includes a total of nine women. Six either hyphenated or retained their maiden name as their last name, while the remaining three never married.

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[3]I noticed this difference in ease of discussion between women who had followed social custom and women who had broken with social custom, not only in this study but also in two pilot studies conducted prior to beginning this project.

[4]The women were given the option of using a pseudonym or their real name. Because this was a study on names, both options were chosen. For example, women often agreed to have their own names represented in order to facilitate arguments based on etymology or ethnicity. Those that kept their real names felt safe in doing this as all place names and other identifying variables were changed. Therefore, names you see may be real or pseudonyms.

[5]This citation refers to transcript materials. The name refers to the last name of either the individual interviewee, or if "FG" (Focus Group) follows the name, it is the host of the focus group. The numbers before the colon refer to the page numbers, while the numbers following the colon refer to the line numbers.

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