



Designing and Conducting Focus Groups in Realist Evaluation

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The Realist Hive 12th
September 2023



Summary

The history of theory-driven focus groups

Designing realist focus groups: Justification, preparation and topic guides

Conducting focus groups: The Classroom-learners group cycle

Myth-Busting: Was my focus group “realist” enough?

- There is **diversity within realist and constructivist ontologies** and qualitative research. More info: (Clark, 2008; Madill, 2008; Hammersley, 1992, 2008; Maxwell, 2012, 2013).
- There are several approaches to realist evaluation (e.g. Henry et al., 1998)
- My focus: **Realist Evaluation “a la Pawson & Tilley”**.
- There is **no authoritative account** of what the realist focus groups are or should be, neither is there an authoritative version of “non realist” focus groups.



Article

The craft of interviewing in realist evaluation

Ana Manzano

Abstract

Pawson and Tilley suggest a unique strategy for conducting qualitative interviews within realist evaluation studies. Theories are placed before the interviewee for them to comment on with a view to providing refinement. The subject matter of the interview is the researcher's theory and interviewees confirm, falsify, and refine this theory. This relationship – described as a teacher–learner cycle – is integral to realist evaluations. This article provides an overview of how interview techniques have been applied in realist evaluations in the last decade as well as suggesting two guiding principles. The first one relates to the design of realist studies and the second one explains how to ask questions like a realist, and proposes three different phases in realist interviews: theory gleaning, theory refining and theory consolidation. The article aims to contribute to a growing understanding of the practical and epistemological challenges presented by primary data collection in realist evaluation.



Article

Conducting focus groups in realist evaluation

Evaluation
2022, Vol. 28(4) 406–425
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DOI: 10.1177/13563890221124637
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Abstract

Focus groups are valuable tools for evaluators to help stakeholders to clarify programme theories. In 1987, R.K. Merton, often attributed with the birth of focus groups, wrote about how these were 'being mercilessly misused'. In the 1940s, his team had conceived focus groups as tools for developing middle-range theory, but through their astonishing success focus groups have metamorphosed and are often an 'unchallenged' choice in many evaluation approaches, while their practice seems to provide a philosophically diverse picture. This article examines what knowledge focus group data generate, and how they support theory development. It starts with an overview of the history of focus groups, establishing a relationship between their emergence as a data collection method and the evaluation profession. Practical lessons for conducting groups in realist evaluation are suggested, while exploring how qualitative data can support programme and middle-range theory development using the example of realist evaluation.



The History

Of theory driven focus groups as a research method



From “Focused Interviews” to “Focused Groups”

- In the early 20th century, most of the traditional qualitative research methods were consolidated. **Focus groups got established in academia and evaluation later on.**
- In the 1940s, in the influential Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) run by P. Lazarsfeld at Columbia University, US sociologists **R. K. Merton and P. Kendall** (1946) published a set of methodological procedures to conduct what they originally called “the focussed interview”. These could be used with individuals and groups.
- Focus groups stayed for decades in the domain of marketing & polling. First editions of key books and handbooks on qualitative theory and methods (Silverman, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) **did not have dedicated chapters** on focus groups.

Stanton-Lazarsfeld Program Analyzer: “Little Annie”

- *“These people are being asked to press a **red button** on their chairs when anything they hear on the recorded radio program evokes a negative response—irritation, anger, disbelief, boredom—and to press a **green button** when they have a positive response. For the rest, no buttons at all. I soon learn that their cumulative responses are being registered on a primitive polygraph consisting of the requisite number of fountain pens connected by sealing wax and string, as it were, to produce cumulative curves of likes and dislikes. That primitive instrument became known as the Lazarsfeld-Stanton program analyzer. Thereafter, we observe one of Paul's assistants questioning the test-group—the audience—about their "reasons" for their recorded likes and dislikes. I begin passing notes to Paul about what I take to be great deficiencies in the interviewer's tactics and procedures. **He was not focussing sufficiently** on specifically indicated reactions, both individual and aggregated”*

(Merton, 1987: 552-553)



NEW “FOCUSSED” INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE: HYPOTHESES TESTING

Four distinct novel aspects:

- 1) “The people interviewed have **experiential knowledge** of a **specific social situation**”
- 2) That interviewer has **previously analysed that social situation and developed hypotheses** about meaning, elements and outcomes relevant to that social situation
- 3) The interviewer questions **are prepared in advanced taking into consideration those hypotheses** to guide the data collection process
- 4) Although the interview is conducted by elucidating the subjective experience of participants about those social situations, this is done with two aims:
 - “a) **To test the validity** of hypotheses derived from content analysis and social psychological theory, and
 - b) To ascertain unanticipated responses to the situation, thus giving rise to fresh hypotheses”**

(Merton & Kendall, 1946:541).

Mixed Methods and Focus Group Misuse

*“One gains the impression that focus-group research is being **mercilessly misused as quick-and-easy claims for the validity of the research are not subjected to further, quantitative test.** Perhaps the pressures of the marketplace for quick-and-easy-possibly, for quick and relatively inexpensive-research make for this misuse of focus groups. That misuse-the term seems a smidgen less harsh than “abuse”-consists in **taking merely plausible interpretations deriving from qualitative group interviews and treating them as though they had been shown to be reliably valid for gauging the distributions of response**”*

(Merton, 1987: 557)





Focus groups keep evolving in many ways technically and conceptually

USER-GENERATED CONTENT ANALYTICS

Analyze user-generated content like never before

AI-based focus groups enable you to analyze user-generated content through engagements with virtual personas powered by large language models, just as you would with customers in a traditional focus group. These personas summarize the main points expressed by real customers in reviews, social media posts, and comments; answer specific questions; and provide recommendations grounded in the actual user-generated data.

How can I improve marketing communications for our lawn mowers?



Most user like me would appreciate educational content about garden maintenance.



Technology savvy users like me would appreciate more content on configuring your robotic lawn mowers via a mobile app.

[AI Focus Groups Starter Kit \(griddynamics.com\)](https://griddynamics.com)



Designing Realist Focus Groups

Justification, Preparation and Topic Guides

Philosophy of Science & Design



Realism

Philosophical basis of realist evaluations

There is **an external reality** that can be assessed through configurations: contexts, mechanisms, outcomes

Theoretical claims obtained through these evaluations are expected to represent knowledge of the real world.

Theorizing, then will test those theories; these will be refined and tested again and, in this iterative process, our understanding of the real world is also refined



Qualitative Approach

The realist approach assumes that participants **accounts have a direct relationship with the real experiences in the world** (beyond the interview situation)

A qualitative approach can help in the **identification of contextually grounded explanatory mechanisms** which could be difficult to obtain using only quantitative methods

Focus groups should be used as **means to explore propositions** that will be **tested and refined with other data** and not just as a means to an end.



Focus Groups

Methods should be purposely selected because they are supposed **to be the best tools to uncover patterns** about the programme

Focus Groups may help **to explore theories that** try to understand expected and unexpected processes for different **subgroups**

Use them only if they are the best **available and feasible** tool for the evaluator to explore specific theories

Justification: Why conduct focus groups in realist evaluation?



We are after the key theory-driven feature that makes them unique: 'group intelligence' (or 'group reasoning' as opposed to "individual reasoning")



We want to examine theory-relevant responses for sub-groups of populations impacted by the programme



Observing group relational interactions (e.g. non-verbal communication, arrangements, leadership behaviours) could help gleaning mechanisms...



Doing focus groups in naturally occurring settings can potentially enable complex social data to surface (e.g. Relevant features of contexts)



Awareness that they are not that good as a sole method?

"If you divide the 90 minutes by the eight respondents, the "fair" amount of airtime for each respondent is about 11 minutes apiece. The ideal number of separate issues that can be covered in 90 minutes is four topic areas. If every respondent speaks an equal amount of time on each topic area then **each person will have a little over 2.5 minutes on each of the four topics.**" Henderson, 1990

Focus groups or individual interviews?

- Individual interviews and focus groups are both useful to **explore propositions that will be tested and refined with other data.**
- More **in-depth discussion** in interviews
- Some issues are better discussed individually through in-depth interviews for **ethical, privacy and/or theoretical reasons** (e.g. to consolidate specific hypotheses/ programme theories).
- Key distinction: **group communication.** For example, a homogeneous group of people in a focus group may find it easier to talk to one another and bounce back ideas about programmes, interventions and topics they all have similar expertise in. Heterogeneous groups of participants can compare responses with each other and expose **the lack of consensus**
- The **‘risk of “armchair” theorizing.** Differences can be examined ‘in situ’ and this allows researchers to explore and observe how people theorise their views ‘in relation to other perspectives and how they put their own ideas ‘to work’ (or not).

Sampling. How many focus groups? How many participants in each focus group?

- There is **no agreement** in the qualitative research methods literature on the optimum number of focus groups or participants in groups
- Realist evaluators do not refine or discard their hypotheses through conceptual theoretical saturation, but through **relevance and rigour** while digging for nuggets of evidence in other mixed-methods sources of data
- For realist evaluators, **samples can only be weakly elaborated before fieldwork** commences (Emmel, 2013), with rough ideas being clarified during fieldwork.
- Focus groups are **notoriously onerous** to organise and even when recruited, some group members are also notably difficult to gather in the same room.
- **Theoretical hurdles, iterations, contingencies and last-minute practical decisions** can impact how many focus groups can be conducted. Evaluators have little control over final number of focus groups and of attendees per group. Or who leaves early!
- The key is not on 'how many' groups of people we talk to but on '**who**', '**why**' and '**how**'.

Preparations: How to put the theories in front of the group? Two necessary steps and warning message



Construct some tentative theories before deciding who you are going to recruit for a focus group and before conducting them



Prepare realist topic guides



WARNING: Programme theories do not need to be repeated literally to the group.

Realist Topic Guides

- Topic guides **are very personal tools**, so you have to structure them so they can be useful to you.
- Useful for the conduct of the discussion and useful for the **realist data analysis** (programme theory refining)
- Guided by **programme theory refining**
- Looking for Cs, for Ms, for Os, for CMs, for COs, for CMOs
- They **are not static**. Change them for each focus group as you revise your knowledge
- They are **not a script**. They may not work
- Do not expect to ask every question in the guide
- Do not expect to ask the questions in the same order as the written guide. “Follow the energy”

Example: REVAMP (Ebenso et al 2020)

Sample questions and prompts for Initial working theory 1 (IWT 1) and information areas:

Note:

- Questions related to IWT 1 are suitable for health workers, facility managers and policymakers

What participant focus group?

Have the initial working theory there

Remind yourself why you are asking that question

Information area	Example questions and prompts	Logic behind the questions
Introduction by respondent		
	For the tape, can you introduce yourself, and describe your work/what you do?	This question is to get respondents talking
IWT 1: If different incentives (<u>e.g.</u> competence training, salaries and supportive supervision), are provided to demoralized health staff in poorly functioning facilities, this can lead to improved staff motivation and performance that will be reflected in improved quality of MCH services.		
Context	1) From your experience, what categories of MCH staff work in this health facility? Prompt: might include doctors, nurses, midwives, CHEWs etc.	Questions 1-2 are introductory, to get respondents talking. They also check individual context .
	2) In your opinion, is the skills mix of MCH staff working here adequate to enable provision of high quality MCH services?	Questions 1-2 are introductory, to get respondents talking. They also check individual context .
	3) In your opinion, what factors in the work environment affect staff morale in this facility or in Anambra state in general? Prompts: • Include both positive & negative influences/ <u>factors</u>	Question 3. Looking for mechanisms



Conducting Realist Focus Groups

The Classroom- Learners Group Cycle



Another Disclaimer: Focus Groups. A Reality Check

- “Some clients come to the qualitative research process with years of viewing experience. They've seen **great groups and lousy groups**. They've seen respondents say things **ranging from nonsensical to profound**. They've seen **confirmation** of a corporate belief, and they've seen respondents **shoot a great idea right out of the water**. They've seen **great moderators**, and they've seen **less than great moderators**. Some clients may have even said ***“I could do a better job of interviewing respondents than this moderator.”*** (Henderson, 1990)

Usefulness of standard textbook methods on how to conduct realist focus groups?

- Focus groups are conducted in different **analogue vs digital** settings to gather different kinds of evidence in different evaluation approaches for different programmes
- The **technical guidance and quality criteria on how to design and conduct focus groups vary according to all these different format and conceptual settings**
- Very little guidance for theory-driven group conversations.
- Go back to the classics!



Group discussion: Programme theory-refining with a group

- Robert “Freed” Bales (Harvard University) introduced in the 1950s the “Special Room” with architecture of one-way mirror and bank of experts observing.
- An intriguing phenomenon occurs, when earpieces are used to communicate and give instructions to moderators:
“often, the participants begin to talk to the mirror rather than to the moderator, since they feel the more important people are behind the mirror”(Greenbaum ,1998: 50).
- Realist bring that theory from the back to the front of the mirror! *“ I’ll show you my theory if you show me yours”* (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 169)



The classroom-learners group cycle:
Talking to groups like a realist

The learner-teacher cycle starts by the evaluator teaching the respondent 'the particular programme theory under test' who then 'is able to teach the evaluator about those components of a programme' (Pawson and Tilley, 2004: 12).

The 'cycle' refers to the interchangeable roles between the interviewer and the interviewee during the communication process of dyadic thinking (in an interview) or group thinking in a focus group.

I have an idea. Let's all show our cards. It will be much easier to decide if we should fold.



Facilitators, Moderators, Deliberators? The classroom-teacher cycle

- Realists do not 'facilitate' or 'moderate' groups discussions, **they deliberate with** the group. You think together.
- Realist evaluators **do not hide their knowledge** from the groups they are consulting; they 'deliberate', sharing their knowledge as a strategy to get group reasoning going.
- **They cautiously share their tentative hypotheses**, hoping that the nuggets of rough evidence **will be challenged, refined or discarded** by participant's own knowledge of the programme.
- The **group deliberates on the evaluator's theory**. This deliberation consists of the classroom becoming the teachers by helping the evaluator to confirm, falsify or refine those hypotheses.
- Subgroup consensus may naturally happen...or not. **It is not consensus that is pursued but disputation, contradictions and disagreements**



Starting the discussion: Warning the respondents?

- Topic Guide Itad Evaluation of the BCURE Programme “We’d like to talk to you about your perceptions of the XX programme. As you know, we’re not just interested in what is happening, but **also in your ideas about how and why** things have **changed**, or not, over the past few years. We’d like to **share our initial ideas** with you during the interview and get your thoughts.” (Itad, 2016)

Realist Facilitator

Be Prepared

Be Active

Be Reactive

Be Open

Be a Listener
but chatty

Be ACTIVE: Conversational tactical style

- Conversational style helps with the “learning” cycle”
- Tactical form of communication: Pay close attention to participants’ words and body language, which can provide valuable insights into possible Cs, Ms, Os
- Appropriate response to ideas /comments that may look as components of our initial working programme theories
- Promote debate and discussion by asking the others what they think? Asking for examples.
- Use prompts carefully; you do not need to ask all prompts for all questions. Use your judgement and apply probes when the respondents are not answering fully/ freely, or if they don’t appear to understand the question.
- Probe for specific examples from respondent’s experience(also comparisons in time/place/people)
- NEW TIP: Involve, your focus group assistant (observer), they can also talk or ask a question to the group



Evaluator: Where do the majority of women go for healthcare when they are pregnant?

P 2: They go to prayer camps and the informal sectors. When the pregnancy develops and they get complications, that is when they come to the hospital. Even when they are in labour, their first point is the prayer camp.

P3: The community that we are serving, they are like “she is my native and understands my language so whatever I say she will understand me better” and they are always in deceit, **they have to go to the prayer camp for protection so** if ..(Interviewer interrupts)

Evaluator: Is there something they hear about the fear of unknown?

P2: Generally, they have the fear that somebody will harm them that is why when the pregnancy is not visible, they will keep to themselves, they will not go anywhere. If you speak to them, they tell you that here when the pregnancy is not visible, you don't have to let anybody see it so is a socio-cultural believe.

P1: Also, they feel the nurses at the facility are small girls. Even when the pregnant women are young girls, they see it as they are coming for help from you, so you don't have to be young like her. She expects to meet an elderly person who is about the age of her aunty so they don't respect some of us because we are smallish



Tentative Mechanism



Mechanism Refinement



New tentative contexts
Also trust?

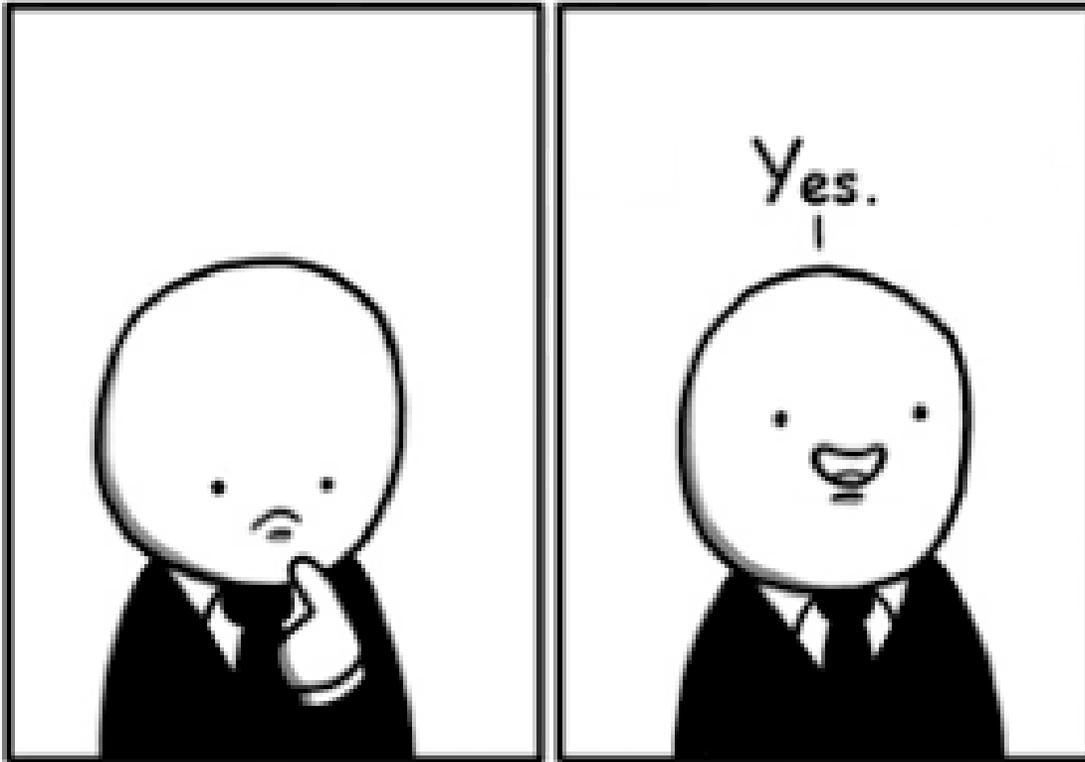
Excerpts from Ghana RESPONSE research team Data: Focus Group discussions with health care providers 2022

Learning Points

Is that refined mechanism consolidated? NO!! How can I consolidate it? Go back to the literature on pregnancy and beliefs in Ghana. Explore it in this focus group, the next one or the next interview.

Ideal necessary step to do this:
preliminary analysis of each focus group before going into the next one

On confirmation/positive/respondent bias



- What if they just say **YES to every theory?** This is unlikely, possibly a bit patronizing. More likely to say **NO!!**
- **Culture, power and the interviewer/interviewee relationship:** Confirmation bias? Power dynamics of interviewing government stakeholders, not only in low and middle income countries.
- Participants may **genuinely** feel that the programme contributed to a positive outcome, when in fact other factors were more important
- **DON'T FORGET:** This will be triangulated with other nuggets of evidence

Is this a real problem?

Some solutions

- “Positive Bias: There is a very real possibility of positive bias in the primary data arising from the **power dynamics of interviewing in developing country government settings**. Evaluators can be seen as representing the international funder, and positive messages may be given in an attempt to continue funding for the programme. We have **mitigated** this in three ways: in the interview process, by approaching the same topic from different angles with various interviewees; in the analysis, by triangulating between data sources (e.g. interviews and secondary data) within the same case; and by peer moderation of ratings across the cases. “ (Vogel & Punton, 2018: 18)



Comparative Report

Final Evaluation of the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) Programme

Date: January 2018

Authors: Isabel Vogel and Melanie Punton

Submitted by Itad

- P 6: Those who do not have mental health also go, others too family members take them there because of the mental health and they are pregnant as well so the pastors at the prayer camp will try to also take care of her throughout the pregnancy. What about someone who has come to the hospital and they schedule her to go for CS and they go to the prayer camp and the prayer is 'No knife will touch you in Jesus name' so I think is the mental health that will take them there
- **Evaluator: Is it because there are allegations that when they come here (public healthcare facility), then formal health sector stigmatizes them that is why they go to the alternative health provider?**
- P 1: **Is a perception, I think but in actual fact, I don't think is true.** When you come to the facility, there are professionals for every department, so if you are here and you need the professional in the other department to take care of them but their perception is that you don't want to take care of them but you want the other person to take care of them, then perception of stigmatization comes in but you know that you are giving them the best of care in the hands of the professional to take care of them
- **Evaluator: Do you explain this to them?**
- P 6: In as much as we explain to them, they wouldn't understand, they will go and never come back and go to the other places
- P2: It is their mind-set. It is what they are bringing as they are walking. They are thinking somebody is trying to harm them. So even if you look at them, they may think you want to come unto them. if you are not smart enough to check because they are walking with their own mind-set so no matter what you say, that is what is in their mind. You will have to convince them to think otherwise before they will take what you are telling them

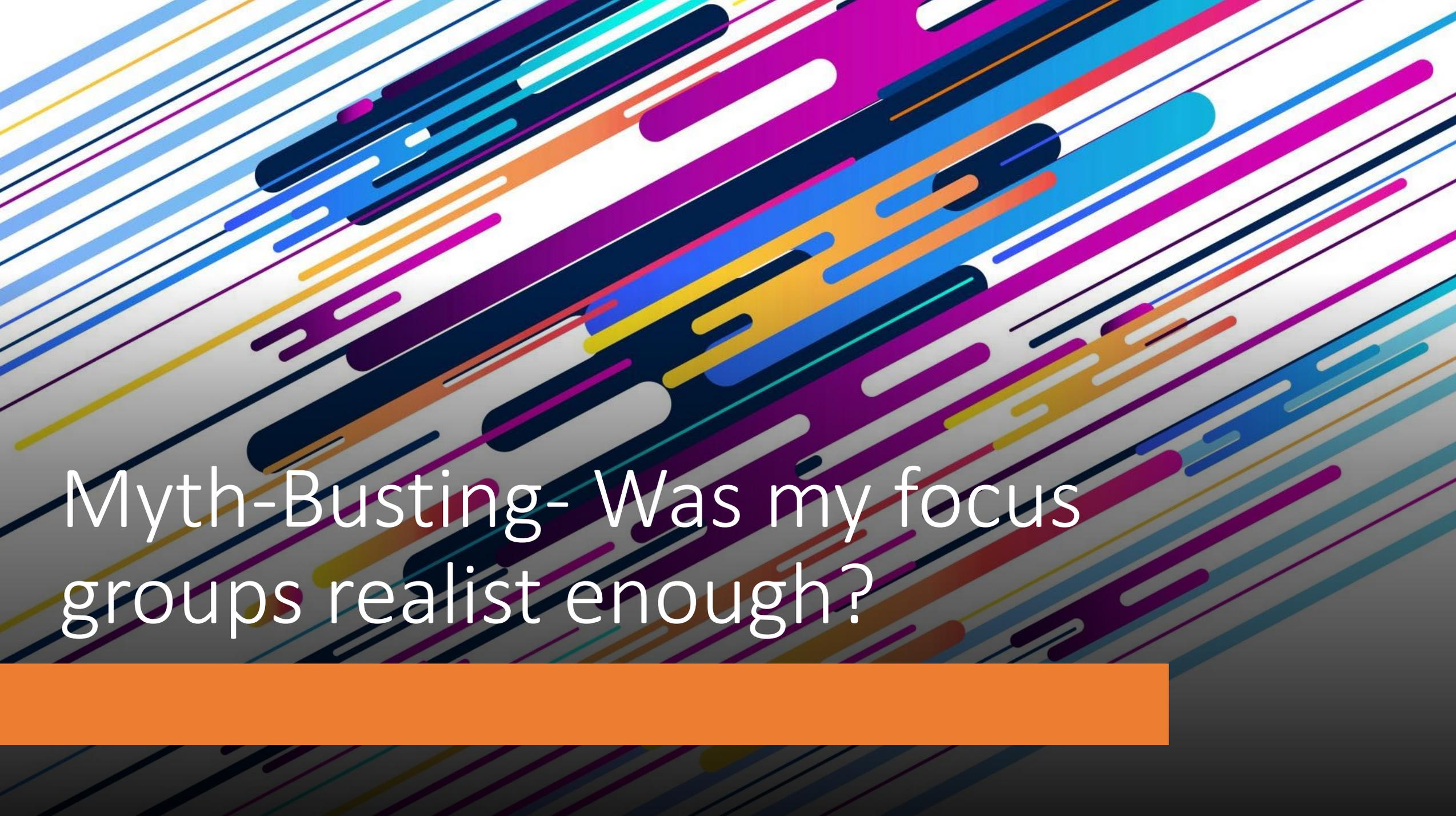


Tentative
CMO

Be Reactive: “Life Triangulation”

- Participants claims to be **triangulated within and across respondents** by asking for examples and further detail
- Claims need to be triangulated between primary and secondary data sources (RIGOUR)
- Consideration the **position, knowledge, analytical capacity, reflexivity of participants** (good news stories, waffle, “bullshit” theory (bullshit/humbug/lying (Frankfurt, 2009)
- Think **macro-meso-micro**: contextual macro dynamics of programmes, (understanding of the political context) so you are not over reliant on the explanations of programme participants.



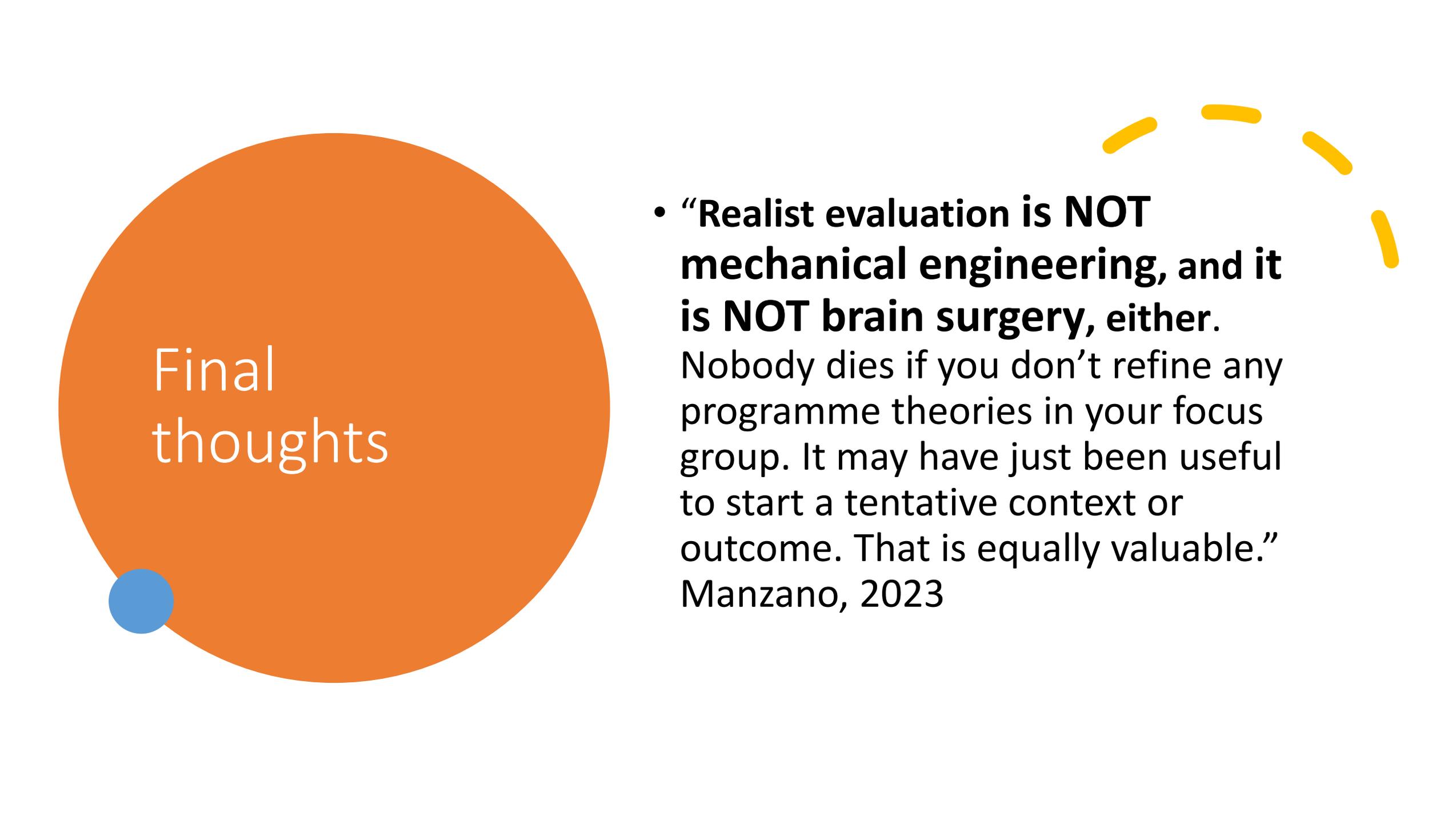


Myth-Busting- Was my focus
groups realist enough?

Myth-busting expectations. Do not expect:

- Every minute of every group to be meaningful
- Every question to have an immediate payoff in providing a C, M, O or CMO
- Every comment, or interchange to directly relate to the your programme, or programme theory
- Each subgroup within the group or each group to provide equal data relevant to your programme theories
- For a mechanism to emerge within each group or a CMO consolidation to happen in each group.





Final thoughts

- “Realist evaluation is **NOT mechanical engineering**, and it is **NOT brain surgery**, either. Nobody dies if you don’t refine any programme theories in your focus group. It may have just been useful to start a tentative context or outcome. That is equally valuable.”
Manzano, 2023

Prof. Wee Shiong Lim: If you only have one advice to a non-realist wanting to conduct a realist evaluation focus group, what would that be?

Marie-Hélène Lévesque: I conducted a few realistic focus groups as part of my doctoral project, and I sometimes felt that individual interviews would have enabled me to delve more deeply into CMO configurations (e.g. due to lack of time). In some groups, I also noted a low level of interaction between participants, each sharing their personal experience, **but not building on others' ideas**. So, feasibility considerations aside, **I'm wondering in which contexts it is preferable to choose a focus group vs. individual interviews.**

Nadege Uwamahoro: It would be great if the presenter could touch **on cross-cultural focus group interviews.**



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