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Agreeing about smartphones: making opinions in online focus groups

Abstract:

This paper is concerned with the situated production of opinions in human geography research. Drawing on an online focus group project in which university students were asked to discuss smartphone use in urban greenspace, I'm interested in how our methods can make opinions as much as collect those that are already assumed to exist. Why were these students inclined to speak of having and sharing opinions? How important should opinions be to us if they are not actively influencing the everyday lives of those who we hope to understand in our studies? And what does this all say about staging effective group discussion in the discipline?

Agreeing about smartphones

'Personally, I agree with Lana. I don't think you get much out of the nature around you if you are on your phone.'

The above opinion was confidently advanced by Rachel, a second-year geography undergraduate, during an online focus group with me. She, along with six others who were also taking a research methods course that I teach, had been asked to discuss what she'd do with her smartphone when visiting areas of greenspace either close to our university campus or near her London home. I'd organised these groups because some of my research rests on the suggestion that the wellbeing benefits of spending time in greenspace might be usefully studied with reference to broader

trends in everyday life (Hitchings, 2021). My thinking is that these trends will likely have significant impacts on whether people will continue to derive these benefits.[1]

Everyday technologies provide an obvious focus for this work. For many of us, smartphones, for example, are now almost always at hand – a situation that would have felt fanciful and futuristic only twenty years ago. So, how are these devices shaping the ways in which different social groups respond to greenspace? To explore this question, I decided to speak with a sample of the so-called 'digital natives', namely the young people who have grown up with smartphones. Since it is currently part of my job to teach some of them about qualitative research methods, I hit upon the idea of organising a series of focus groups with the students who were taking my course. Doing so, I reasoned, would help me to understand how they related to this topic and help them to develop a fuller appreciation of how focus groups work.

We met online because we had no choice. My study was also a response to the challenge of doing socially distanced social research as I, like many others, was made to adapt in response to Covid-19 restrictions. And so that was how I ended up sat on a friend's sofa in west Wales where I had been staying during one UK lockdown. There, through the magic of my laptop, I embarked upon a series of meetings with small groups of undergraduates who were also at home learning about research methods with me. We spoke for around an hour about various ways of engaging with smartphones in London's greenspaces before the pandemic. Though some studies have considered what developing patterns of smartphone use say about greenspace benefits in

[1] This project underwent ethical review at my host institution (ref:2442/002), one result being that the students were required formally to consent to taking part and encouraged to leave the discussion and listen instead if they became uncomfortable at any point. Pseudonyms are used throughout in this paper and the students were asked to treat these groups as confidential settings in which to explore their thoughts. Their contributions did not shape their module grades in any way, though they were asked to write a short reflective piece on their experience and what it suggested to them about the effective use of focus groups. These groups were carried out together with Antonia Hodgson who currently teaches with me on this course.

everyday life (Hitchings and Maller, 2022), none had yet taken such an approach. My idea was therefore to enter into these discussions with a relatively open mind about the right questions to ask so as to better observe how my students naturally talked together about this topic.

This paper uses my study to reflect on the lived experience of focus groups and, more broadly, how we handle 'opinions' in human geography research. One aim of this collection is to question some of our taken-for-granted ways of imagining what is happening when we speak to people in our projects. My suspicion is that, sometimes without us necessarily thinking very much about it at the time, many of us can be drawn towards the suggestion that our studies are serving to surface and evaluate the 'perspectives' and 'opinions' of those with whom we talk. But how does the experience of taking part in our projects act to produce these apparent opinions? And what are the implications of how they are made by our methods as much as contained within people?

Focus groups in human geography

To start, it is worth saying something about focus groups. I chose them as an established human geography approach. Focus groups often feature in methods courses, in textbooks, and in wider accounts of what we do as a discipline (QAA, 2022). In my own course, I tell my students that many geographers know that, if they've the organisational skills and are adept at managing discussions, focus groups can quickly generate a lot of insightful material. Yet, beyond beliefs about them being efficient and potentially illuminating, since Hopkins (2007) first noted this, advice about how to do focus groups in fields such as mine remains limited (Moore et al., 2015).

In textbooks, the social experience of focus groups, along with the project ambitions that have encouraged geographers to organise them, can, for example, be characterised quite differently. Cameron (2005) suggests that focus groups can be exhilarating for participants because they

provide an opportunity to articulate their views and debate their opinions. Yet she also notes how they can be exciting for researchers because they grant us access to how particular groups casually talk about our topics. Part of the attraction of doing focus groups is probably that both can be true. The point is to consider what it's like to be in one. Taking part might, on the one hand, be imagined to be less stressful for people than with other methods because the natural flow of discussion gives them more time to decide when and how they want to chip in. However, on the other hand, any contributions they make will likely be judged by the other participants as well as the researcher, and that could easily make focus groups intimidating.

We should also consider the discussion 'facilitator' not only in terms of their fixed personal characteristics, but also in terms of how they present themselves to the group – what we've elsewhere called the 'small p' positionality issues (Hitchings and Latham, 2020) of, in this case, whether we assume the role of a chairperson, a chat show host, or somehow become something else. Browne (2016), for example, in a candid account of how focus groups helped her to explore variations in how people use water for cleanliness at home, tells us about how she used humour to encourage her respondents to 'air their dirty linen' by lightening the mood. As her example nicely demonstrates, how we present ourselves, along with how we curate the social occasion, should depend on what we hope to achieve. Do we want this to feel like a support group, a public debate, even an amusing confessional in which participants settle into each other's company by laughing together about the idiosyncrasies of how often they wash their sheets?

Going online with groups

If we are interested in how the social occasion colours the experience, the implications of 'going online' are also worthy of comment. If there is no such thing as a 'neutral venue' for a focus group (Bloor et al., 2001), what difference does a video conferencing application make?

Understandably enough, these issues have been subject to recent scrutiny by social researchers after the pandemic pushed many projects online (see, for example, Bolanda et al., 2021 or Falter et al., 2022). On the one hand, these apps might help us to build rapport with our participants after getting a sense of their circumstances by observing their domestic lives behind them. They also allow people to speak from places in which many of them presumably feel comparatively comfortable. Yet, on the other hand, perhaps rapport is jeopardised by the fact that we don't get to relax into the experience by getting a hot drink together before 'it starts' (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). Apps also make it harder to manage the eye-contact that can be so helpful in terms of communicating when people are telling you especially pertinent and revealing things or signalling when the discussion has drifted and it's probably time to get back 'on topic'.

Some have concerned themselves with the timing of on-line interaction as an interesting feature of chat room discussion that is also very relevant to how researchers handle 'live' video exchange (Stewart and Williams, 2005). Once again, whether certain interactional sequences are desirable should probably depend on what we hope to achieve – do we want to give participants sufficient time to compose their answers or would we rather observe them bounce off one another as we slowly build an appreciation of how certain patterns of interaction sustain their social worlds? Many of us in recent years have incorporated video conferencing apps into our lives and, though the discussion on how best to use them in social research is still developing, many readers will have experienced how on-line conversations can lurch from socially bonding talk about everyday challenges when aspects of home life inevitably interrupt to a more structured debate between delegates who have somehow come to represent their allocated on-screen boxes.

So, there are many possible ways of doing focus groups in human geography. And we are all still coming to terms with what moving talk methods online can mean for our projects. This situation is probably all to the good in terms of encouraging individual researchers to settle on the format

that works for them. But it also implies that, in the absence of more defined templates, we should think upfront about how we want things to go. Otherwise, the discussion could easily drift towards patterns of exchange that may not necessarily be the most helpful to us.

Back to Rachel's opinion

I now return to my project. So, what would my students do with their smartphones in urban greenspace? I'm still analysing my video recordings. But one thing that I've been finding within them relates to how an exchange of opinions often ended up predominating in our discussions. One student, such as Lana who featured in the above quotation, would offer a view on situations such as 'scrolling through the apps' on a park bench or taking photos of the surrounding trees and plants on her phone as a way of enhancing the experience. Then another, such as Rachel, would offer their take on whether these were good things to be doing. And so on.

In other words, we fell into a certain rhythm of interaction. An initial view was offered. Then the others took a moment to reflect on how, and whether, they wanted to progress the discussion. If they did, they took a turn themselves. This rhythm gathered momentum. It became familiar and somewhat self-perpetuating. It also felt constructive, I think both to me and to them – a shame not to let it continue when we seemed to be getting somewhere. Each opinion was building on the last as we started to circle an overall conclusion. The focus group was working!

So far, so satisfying. But there was also a fly in the analytical ointment related to the times when I asked them about what they individually did with their smartphones. These questions acted as a brake on the building momentum, and they sometimes felt unwelcome. My students had things to say about my topic in a more abstract sense. But turning to their lived experience felt jarring and a little risky. This echoes other interview projects I've done. There was the 'in principle'

version of how things should ideally go that was comparatively easy to discuss. And then there was the 'in practice' matter of what really happened that was a bit more personal (Hitchings, 2021). My students were quite able to offer up views on the most desirable things to be doing with smartphones in urban greenspace. But often they individually did what the immediate situation suggested. What they thought they should do was sometimes quite different to what they did. The opinions that we had been happily exchanging didn't always inform their actions.

Why did we end up in this situation? Firstly, I think this was partly about the format. These students had already taken part in many online seminars with my colleagues in which they were asked to 'develop arguments' about the topics they were studying at the time. As a result, they were familiar with flexing their 'critical thinking' muscles in these sessions more than they were with the idea of sharing details of their lives that had sometimes never been spoken of before. Sticking with the debate format was probably also especially appealing for a cohort of students who, because of how we had been doing remote learning for a year already, had little prior opportunity to become familiar with one another through unmediated contact. Rachel's use of 'personally' was, I think, telling here – she was at pains not to position her view as necessarily correct or in any way superior to those previously advanced by peers she didn't yet know well.

Secondly, I think this was partly about the technology. When there are various subtle ways in which doing social research online is different, technologies designed to help us benefit from direct exchange can never entirely replicate the experience of being together 'in real life'. One way in which this was evident in my project related to the split-second delay when the application recalibrated in response to a new speaker. Partly because of how my students seemed well-aware of how the app needed a moment to adjust, they didn't often overburden it with interruptions. They waited until they were sure they had something to say before putting the app to the trouble of turning to them by highlighting their on-screen box and making it clear to us all

that the spotlight was now on them. If you are waiting for your turn, you'll likely make the most of it by presenting something comparatively considered when it eventually arrives. Opinions seemed to fit that bill very nicely even though they may have been formed only moments before.

Thirdly, I think this was partly about me. Consistent with the promise of focus groups, my idea was to see what my students would say instead of imposing any analytical framework upfront. But frameworks can also emerge during the discussion because they make the lived experience easier. Here I think I drifted towards an implied framework that originated with how I was already used to speaking with them. Without really thinking, I sometimes asked whether they 'shared views' or had 'further things to add' as though we were indeed developing a position together. Asking about the detail of what they practically did meant venturing into less comfortable conversational territory. So, we also spoke in this way because of my teaching habits, irrespective of how I had attempted to tinker with the tone at the start by sharing some of my own lockdown experiences – how I had ended up on that sofa in west Wales, for example.

A contextual account of opinion production

This article began with a short quotation of a type that is often seen sprinkled through qualitative human geography research papers. The difference here was that the idea was to focus on how the immediate circumstances produced the words, rather than seeing them as representative of what the speaker already felt about the topic. This leads me to question the ways in which we work with 'opinions' in our projects. It can be tempting to assume that 'opinions' are out there waiting for us in the world such that our job, as researchers, is to identify the most effective means of collecting and evaluating them. However, thinking in this way can encourage us to structure our discussions around views that may not always be actively shaping the everyday lives of those who we study. This is an issue common to many methods, of course. Surveys, for

example, can often effectively work as opinion making machines (Osborne and Rose, 1999). But this assumption is, I think, especially worth questioning when we all get socialised into certain shared ideas about what our projects provide which can mean that we think less about the stories of individual studies and the status that should rightly be accorded to 'opinions' within them. Given that geographers often pride themselves on being especially alive to how contexts kick in, we shouldn't forget to apply this sensitivity to how opinions are called forth in our projects.

Regarding the practice of doing focus groups, and doing them online, another point is that, by lingering over the story of my study, I was able to develop a more subtle appreciation of how my students related to the matter of what they would or wouldn't do with their smartphones in local greenspace. In other words, aspects of our interaction that I might otherwise have easily overlooked in my analysis and written outputs were actively making my findings (see also Hollander, 2004). How the app handled a new speaker, how I presented myself, and how my students usually spoke together: all of these played an important part. And whilst I clearly faced specific challenges in negotiating the difference between a seminar and a research study, I'd still conclude that we shouldn't pick focus groups 'off the peg' in our projects because they are commonplace in geography and potentially very illuminating. Rather we should anticipate the lived experiences involved when focus groups can easily drift towards certain interactional sequences that lead towards certain kinds of conclusion (see also Koch, 2013). I intend to give more upfront thought to ways of curating the occasion in future. I also plan to analyse my quotes in terms of the social situations that produced them as much as the words that were said.

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