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The indirect approach of semi-focused groups

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Expanding focus group research through role-playing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative way of using focus groups in research – a role-play-enhanced focus group method – in which participants are presented with the challenge of dealing with a specific task while playing a familiar but nevertheless fictive role.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is performed through an experimental approach in which a focus group of small business owner-managers are assembled and presented with a prepared case exercise. The design is a role-play-like setting in which the participants are to act as the board of a company.

Findings – Carefully designed, well-prepared role-play-like activities can add substantially to focus-groups.

Originality/value – Adding an experimental dimension to focus groups offers the possibility of addressing topics indirectly and thus increases their usefulness.

Keywords Focus groups, Pragmatism, Role play

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

With some exceptions, like shadowing, social science methods tend to address the explicit knowledge of the respondents. Surveys and interviews are obvious examples of this, where questions are posed to the informants in a setting that decouples action and reflection. Thus, what the informants offer is their post-facto understanding of what they would have done in a specific setting. This means that survey or interview questions are presented in an artificial setting. Thus, it is presupposed that knowledge can exist decoupled from the actual setting of action. It has been argued, by ethnographers among others, that knowledge about an informant's presumptions and attitudes towards phenomena is best acquired in everyday situations. In many cases, however, ethnographic inquiries could prove difficult to arrange, which justify methodological experimentation with alternative approaches. Furthermore, as interviews are often used in ethnographic work, the method presented in this paper could also be used as an alternative complement to an ethnographic study. Inspired by pragmatism (Dewey, 1910; Peirce, 1905), this paper proposes an alternative way of using focus group interviews so that the spheres of knowledge and action are intertwined. In this paper we report on how and why we developed the focus group data collection technique by adding a dimension of role-playing. More specifically, we presented the participants with a task to be solved collectively during the session.



In this paper, we have named this method the indirect approach, and we will throughout refer to it as either a semi-focused group or as the role-play-enhanced focus group method in order to highlight that adding a role-play dimension to a traditional focus group session does in fact reduce the focus of the group.

We will present the empirical session through an excerpt from the transcripts and the use of role-play described in general terms. We will also briefly explain the research project that inspired us to develop a technique for indirectly approaching a subject. Section 2 offers a literature review on focus groups, followed in Section 3, by a description of our indirect approach. We then continue to present role-playing as a tool for our data-gathering. In Section 4, we reflect on the potential of the method, and finally, in Section 5, we summarize our experiences and draw some conclusions.

1.1 Introducing role-play

Moderator: OK, we have chosen a perhaps unusual set-up for today's session. You represent a board at a firm. There is a stressful situation at hand and you need to act immediately. The background to the board meeting today can be found in the handout in front of you. I suggest that you read this before we continue.

1.1.1 A few minutes' silence.

Moderator: OK, I see that you have read the papers. The only thing I will say to you now is that you are the board of this firm. At noon a car will pick up two of the members to go to the airport, so there's no time to waste; you have to be finished by then. How you organize yourself to manage that is up to you. If you don't have any questions, I hereby hand over to the board to start its meeting.

1.1.2 A few minutes' silence.

Participant 5: A very silent board, if I may say.

Participant 2: [Giggle]

Participant 5: And without a chairperson. [...] OK, I think one first needs to analyze the existing problems in the firm, and see if we agree what the problems are. I think the strategy of the firm is confused.

P4: To say the least.

P2: [Giggle]

P5: If you focus on the activities, I think one needs to figure out what one wants. So if we start by focusing on what we perceive as the major problems.

P2: From the text it's difficult to see what they want.

P5: No, there are many possible roads to choose.

P3: Mmm

P5: They have already decreased the range of products [...] Or, I mean we have already decreased the range of products, we are the board. And I guess we need to ask ourselves if that was right or wrong.

P3: Are you the chairperson P5?

P5: Oh, no!

P3: Well, it certainly looks like it.

P5: It's just, I'm just wondering how you feel about such an analysis. If we agree where the problems are in the firm, then I guess we have to see what we can do about them.

P2: The task for us is to evaluate each candidate and rank them.

P5: Yes.

P2: And finally to appoint a new CEO.

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This transcription of the first tentative minutes of the semi-focused group session provides the empirical basis of this paper. We invited five owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to discuss the “conditions and challenges of SMEs in contemporary Sweden”. When they arrived at the session, however, they were told that today they were to “represent a board” of directors for an SMEs in search of a new CEO. The task of the meeting was to appoint a new CEO. Apart from a handout – a description of the fictive company and fictive curriculum vitae (CVs) for the four leading candidates – the only clues on how to proceed with the task are included in the quotes above.

Role-play suggests something fictional. We constructed an entire scenario with a set of rules and roles and asked the participants to act upon it and play it out. A role-play has a script with rules and constraints, but it also leaves room for the group's decision-making abilities, analytic acumen, and, most importantly, the experience, emotions and imagination of its members. Our scripts also had rules, such as time limit to solve the problem, and the participants started their role-playing in a specific setting that they could not initially control or co-create (a board of directors has rules for how to act and how to make decisions). Not least, the “adventure” or problem at hand had a role-play construct; the four CVs constructed personality traits that they had to evaluate and create and develop characters around and choose which one was most suitable for the task of being CEO for the firm. To solve the task, or “to play the game”, the participants first had to accept the setting and script, and then they had to co-create it and give their own characters life (the board). The given script did not afford them enough information to do so; they had to play it out and co-construct the setting as the session developed.

We did not intend to study decision-making, the functioning of board meetings or how CEOs are chosen by owners of SMEs. Instead we were trying to indirectly address the rationale behind owner-managers' paradoxical decisions to time and again participate in support programmes, although these programmes unquestionably demonstrated negligible effects on growth and profitability (Bill *et al.*, 2008). Assuming that there might be a difference between how to talk about a phenomenon and how to act upon that phenomenon, we decided to develop a method to address this question in an indirect manner. We introduced support programs only as one of many topics to be discussed, rather than confronting the informants with specific queries. This, of course, meant that we neither gave them information about our purpose for creating the role-play nor did we tell the participants what we were looking for when we

observed them. As a result, they did not know why they were assembled. It was a fictional setting, an experiment with individuals. Of course, the participants were informed about this and consented to participate in the role-play.

To make up a fictional event and invite individuals to participate (without knowing what they were really doing) has a great many implications. What we intend to report in this paper is not an answer to our research question. Instead we focus on the development of the account-gathering technique – where we combine a traditional focus group with role-play – and therefore we concentrate on how the topics were discussed. By this means, we hope to offer insights into how groups can be constituted and the interaction and communication enhanced.

1.2 On the paradoxical SMEs support

Our specific problem with data collection stemmed from the puzzlement we felt when faced with public attempts to foster growth and prosperity by inaugurating various support measures for SMEs. Such public support measures have very little impact on the growth of targeted firms, at least there are no evident positive correlation between support measures and either firm growth or economic development (Norrman and Bager-Sjögren, 2006; Faoite *et al.*, 2004). This is true in a variety of national settings (Ankarhem *et al.*, 2007; Lambrecht and Pirnay, 2005). More significantly, it has been suggested that the probability of an individual becoming involved in entrepreneurial activities varies inversely with the attitude towards support programmes (Greene and Storey, 2004). Paradoxically, however, it would seem that this lack of scientific support for their effectiveness has not discouraged the support, funding and creation of support programmes and organizations. If this is not to be seen as mere irrationality, there must be effects and intentions besides those officially proclaimed, i.e. that support initiatives are primarily intended to improve the conditions and performance of business venturing (Bill and Olaison, 2006).

In order to dismantle this paradox, the taken-for-granted assumptions about these programmes must be challenged. However, with the rigorous evaluation literature in mind, it seemed rather pointless to ask the SME owners what they thought about support measures or why they participated. After all, previous attempts to do so have shown results similar to those of surveys and statistical-based studies. We concluded that we could not ask them about the “genre” of support measures at all. As soon as we mentioned support initiatives the respondents would be pointed in a certain direction, and we might even activate a pre-set frame of understanding among them. In fact, there might actually exist among the owner managers some knowledge regarding how to talk about public support measures. This knowledge could, however, be very different from the knowledge of how to deal with such initiatives in the practice of everyday action.

We have mentioned ethnography with its use of observation as perhaps the most elaborate attempt to gain access to everyday practices. The natural choice of research design seems to be that of following a support programme, observing its expected and unexpected effects. However, their long-term character makes using ethnographic approaches rather complicated. This is why the idea of using focus groups consisting of SME owners to “trigger each other” into conversations was born. We initially planned a session in which we would pose questions regarding what support programmes should be like, instead of simply asking the informants why they

had participated. Discussing what a support programme should be like in their opinion would, we hoped, cause them to indirectly address the rationale of participating. Even though there are several tools for designing such a study proposed in the focus group literature, like using words or topics as input, we concluded that raising the question of support measures would in itself be detrimental to our study. We wanted to study something that had hitherto been overlooked in the research/evaluation of support measures. Squeezed between the need of getting our informants to discuss “our” topic and the requirement of not getting involved in the discussions, we needed to develop a method that would facilitate such an arrangement.

2. The focus group as a research method

2.1 Introduction

Focus group interviews as a research method go back to World War II, where focus groups were used in military research on propaganda and morale (Cote-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy, 2005). To this day, focus groups are frequently used in both marketing and public health care (Bloor *et al.*, 2001), but also in communication, education, anthropology, psychology, and political science (Wall, 2001). In social science, however, focus groups were not generally used until the 1980s, which means that it did not develop alongside other methodologies. This historic development of the use of focus groups has had the consequence that the methodological development of focus groups does not have the same foundation in philosophy as other methods do, which may explain the lack of understanding and discussions about what actually occurs during a focus group session (Cote-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy, 2005).

Modestly described, a focus group interview is a “research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). The focus group interview is not primarily aimed at gathering data from the individuals in a group, but at using the discussions in the group as a means of reaching insights that the participants were not previously aware of and which they were thus not able to articulate. Through the discussion the participants are stimulated to reflect on subjects they have some knowledge about but are not normally conscious of (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups are said to be productive when “the goals of the research are general, call for qualitative data, require data that is not in the respondent’s top-of-mind, and when there is minimal prior knowledge about a particular problem and the range of responses that are likely to emerge” (Zeller 1993, p. 1; quoted from Hartman, 2004, p. 403).

2.2 Challenges to the method

Most literature on focus groups notes that a focus group interview differs from many other methods in that it does not take place in an environment that is natural to the participants. The group is originally put together by the researchers, who also define the topics to be discussed. It is the researchers’ responsibility to create a productive and friendly atmosphere (Cote-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy, 2005). We would like to add that any situation where a researcher tries to “extract” something from an informant is a non-natural situation for the participant. Meeting participants in their natural habitat, such as the informant’s office space, only partially solves this problem. It is always, not only in focus groups, the researcher’s task to create an environment where the participants feel inspired and free to discuss the subject in a fruitful way.

A group can be conceived of as a gathering of individuals sharing something, such as a profession or an experience. A group can also be seen as members sharing values, norms, or rules. Hydén and Bülow (2001) point out that a distinction can be made between a focused gathering – people that meet to agree to focus on a single thing for a while and then part, and a group – which has a life of its own. Their main argument is that the group participants may constitute themselves in many ways within the group, and perhaps not behave as a group at all. The formation of a group for Hydén and Bülow (2001) is a two-fold process: to establish a common ground for the group and to contribute to the common ground. From this perspective, most focus groups can be seen as “focused gatherings”, since they at least share the topic to be discussed. When such processes work, the participants “act and view themselves as members of a group sharing a common ground – as belonging to something that is more than the sum of its individual participants” (Hydén and Bülow, 2001, p. 311). This common ground is not solid but will be re-established during the session. For Hydén and Bülow this means that it will be possible for the participants to introduce new aspects, disagree with each other, and still remain members of the group. There will be an interaction between the participants by pragmatic markers such as “mm”; “I agree”; “correct”; laughter; asking each other for opinions; going back to things other members of the group have said (not necessarily something that the person agrees with) and so forth (Hydén and Bülow, 2001).

Hollander (2004) identifies two problems associated with the interaction in a focus group setting: problematic silences, which imply that the participants may not “speak their minds”, and problematic speech, which implies that the participants share information that may not represent their actual beliefs and thought. Hollander herself introduces a twist: the problem is not that participants fail to reveal their underlying beliefs; it is that researchers believe that there are underlying beliefs. Groups produce social contexts, and what happens there belongs to that context. That is, there are many layers of interaction in the group that will always limit the use of focus groups with regard to capturing individual attitudes, feelings, beliefs and so forth.

Group formation, interaction and the layered social context seem to be the greatest challenges to the focus group setting. Initially they must be dealt with before the sessions, and then of course, in the subsequent analysis. As a result, it has been suggested that the group should be homogenous and even that it should only consist of members who already know each other, because this will create a favorable atmosphere (Jonsson Ahl and Florin Samuelsson, 1999). Although this might be a solution to the “problem”, we would like to point out that such a move can also work against the very purpose of focus group interviews, which are about collecting various views and triggering a discussion. It might even streamline the possible conversations, because if the participants know each other too well, already established hierarchies and dynamics will be transferred to the focus group: it will already be determined who can say what. As Hydén and Bülow (2001) point out, it is not as much a question of selecting promising individuals to participate as it is a challenge to provide a (social) context where the participants, not the researcher, can formulate and re-formulate a “common ground”.

Asking too direct questions or outlining too precise problems can thus be problematic, since the way the questions are outlined can guide the participants too much towards what the researcher is looking for (Hartman, 2004). It is believed that if

the moderator is experienced, he or she can use questions in the discussions to trigger strong reactions (Lehoux *et al.*, 2006), or, if the discussions have moved away from the subject matter, direct the discussion “back on track”. From our perspective, every such interference will of course, have effects on the results. If the researcher is looking for spontaneous answers, we think that the moderator has to be patient, allowing the discussion to go back and forth. Every group has its particular way of reasoning and its flow of communication (Morgan, 1996). One way to work with the role of the moderator could be, according to Hartman (2004), to make notes, and if the discussion halts, the moderator can comment on what has been said and ask for more comments.

Asking too direct questions in marketing research, where focus groups have been frequently used as a tool to capture consumer behavior, has shown to be problematic with reference to the interaction in the group (Pearce, 1998). When facing, for example, products in a focus group, individuals make one choice, but when faced with the product outside the group (in a shop or even outside the room directly after the session) they make other choices. This has been analyzed through group dynamics and interaction. When faced with a problem in a group, individuals tend to answer in a way they think reflects their identity, what they would like to identify themselves with, or what they want others to think that they identify themselves with. Neither of these behaviours will necessarily coincide with choices they make in everyday life, or with how they conduct their lives (Penz, 2006). One proposed solution to this dilemma is to give the group various tasks or scenarios to deal with in order to make them focus more on the problem they are faced with than on how the other members of the group might perceive them as individuals (Pearce, 1998; Bloor *et al.*, 2001). How we formulated such a task – role-playing – is the topic of this paper.

2.3 The use of role-play in focus group settings

As a data-generating technique role-play is very rare. In fact, the only attempt we have come across so far is a study where it has been used to evaluate the language skills of non-native speakers (Halleck, 2007). Role-plays have successfully been used, however, in medical education, for example to teach communication with patients (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006). In medical education role-play is seen as a pedagogical tool facilitating problem-based learning (Menahem and Paget, 1990). In that capacity, role-play has been advocated for learning social values and decision making (Thorson, 2002). In management training, too, role-play has been adopted as a pedagogical technique (Sogunro, 2004); here it is used mainly for learning accounting and leadership skills and for improving the work place, both with students (to exemplify text-book knowledge) and by consultants (as a tool to activate clients). Role-play is advocated as a useful technique when dialogue is promoted as a teaching agenda (Morrell, 2004). When employed as a method for learning, the most common approach is to use a pre-written script that the participants play out (Alden, 1999), or a well-described realistic historical scene (Lyon, 2001).

One could argue these examples are not really role-play – as in playing out a certain game with certain roles and tasks, but rather various learning-exercises where a person in educational purpose learns to behave in accordance with a “role” corresponding to a professional role, such as a manager or a nurse. We use the term “role-play” slightly differently in that we allow the participants to form their own characters from their own experiences, something we will develop in the following section.

3. The indirect approach

3.1 Methodological foundations – pragmatism

Regardless of one's position regarding the dispute on the existence of an absolute truth, the pragmatist standpoint would be that theoretical knowledge cannot be severed from its practical setting. It is clear that despite contemporary pragmatism, which tends to be divided between subjectivists like Rorty (1982) and empirically oriented researchers like Putnam (1995), the idea of an objective truth is generally rejected within the framework. That is, no general truth can be arrived at, since truth exists only as a facet of action – and vice versa. Truth is thus an integral aspect of “successful” action and consequently an empirical fact; theoretical insights and normative statements combine in a unity and can only exist as parts of this unity. Putnam (1995) notes that the “holistic interdependence of fact, value and theory” (Putnam, 1995, p. 57) is apparent already in the founding of pragmatist epistemology. Furthermore, categories and typologies are not natural entities but nominal constructs that are invented to serve a specific purpose in solving certain problems.

Thus, in order to get access to information on respondents' understanding of a topic or problem one needs to observe the informant actually dealing with the topic in practice. This has previously been attempted through the use of ethnographic methods (Bill and Olaison, 2006). But a number of problems, especially as regards getting access to situations in which the relevant actions are carried out, have become apparent. It is, for example, difficult to assess beforehand when a certain topic will require action; it can also be very difficult to get access to relevant real-life situations. The second of these is especially problematic if external participants, like customers or suppliers, are involved in the situation where decisions are to be made. One way of getting round this obstacle is to stage a life-like situation and confront the informant with this setting.

It has been argued that the pragmatist answer to the challenge posed by the rejection of a single objective truth should be founded on action and anchored in a democratically conducted inquiry, since “the way in which we will find out where and how our procedures need to be revised is through the process of inquiry itself” (Putnam, 1995, pp. 74-5). This more experimental approach of staging the situations in which data-gathering is to be carried out also has the advantage of allowing the frame of the study and the input material to be developed over time and to be changed in calculated ways. Thus, it offers the possibility to allow the informants to participate in forming the inquiry.

3.2 Design of the semi-focused group session

Merging what we have learned from the extensive focus group literature with our thoughts on pragmatism and role-playing, we constructed a session with several parts. Here, it is important to point out that we did not use role-play alone; we added role-play as one dimension of a focus group session. Role-play satisfied the need to “ask without asking” and therefore allowed for an indirect approach to research SME-support by giving the respondents a task, a problem to solve (Pearce, 1998; Bloor *et al.*, 2001), but with the advantage of not having to direct them towards our research question. We conducted the session as follows:

- (1) A letter was sent to the participants, stating that we wanted to gather a group of SME owner-managers to discuss the conditions for SMEs in contemporary Sweden. That is, we did not tell them that what we really wanted to investigate

- was their rationale in participating in public support measures. We selected the participants with the help of an Application Level Multicast Infrastructure (ALMI) the regional development agency.
- (2) While having coffee, the participants introduced themselves with a brief biography. The purpose was to allow the participants to craft the social context. This was valuable for creating context to the role-play as well as for bridging between the role-play and the following discussion.
 - (3) Then, the role-play was introduced. It was announced that the participants were expected to take on the role of members of a board at an SME. This board-meeting had just one item on the agenda: to hire a new CEO for the company. We provided them with a two-page presentation of the company, and a half-page CV for each of the four candidates who, according to their applications, were the most qualified. As a board they were expected to evaluate each of the final applicants and then rank them (see the introduction quote from the session).
 - (4) When the group “closed” the board meeting, the moderator initiated a discussion and could use both the individual presentations and the conversation during the “board meeting” to pose questions. Here, the participants could motivate statements and, for example, explain why some issues were not dealt with. They were also asked about experiences from their everyday life and invited to compare those with experiences from the role-play.
 - (5) After the session we all had lunch together, where we – the researchers – could explain what our intentions were and how we had experienced the session.
 - (6) The participants were asked to reflect upon the meeting in writing.
 - (7) We, the researchers, discussed and reflected together after the meeting. Jonsson Ahl and Florin Samuelsson (1999) recorded the discussion they had immediately after the completion of the focus group meeting. We were, however, invited by one of the participants to visit her company. This demonstrates the possible tension between the need for rigorousness on the one hand and the need to take responsibility for dealing with processes begun in the participants on the other.

The whole meeting lasted two hours, one of which concerned the board meeting itself. About 20 min concerned the presentation round and 40 min were thus devoted to the more general discussion.

3.3 Experiences from the role-play, some examples

3.3.1 Introducing role-play demands patience from the researcher. To force the participants to take charge of the session, we hardly introduced the set-up to them at all. These are the minutes presented in the introduction of the paper. At first, they glanced towards us, as if they were searching for clues. We did not, however, acknowledge this and their response to this, we must admit, surprised us. They did not ask us any questions. The opening line “A very silent board, if I may say” followed by “And without a chairperson” shows, rather, that they took the moderator’s instructions seriously and turned to each other to decide what to do. In these first minutes of the session, all included in the introduction to this paper, the conversation is probing, as they try to agree upon how to proceed with the task. In that way the participants themselves had to create a common ground – and also try to contribute to it

(Hydén and Bülow, 2001). It is true that we provided the frame, but then it was up to them to organize and perform the role-play. Already here it was apparent that even if they were searching for clues about what to do, they engaged in the role-play, correcting themselves: “Or I mean we have already decreased the range of products, we are the board”.

The early phases of the role-play, in particular, demanded a lot of patience from us as researchers, careful not to break into their way of reasoning with each other, which was emerging. We think that this reticence is very important when creating a life-like environment that demands action.

3.3.2 Getting into the play. After deciding what to do, they started to analyze the firm as well as the participants. During these discussions, they increasingly identified with the task they had been given; the firm became theirs. They no longer needed to correct themselves into playing: “And then we also have the contacts with the EU, which we have failed to engage in”. Note that it is not the firm that has failed; it is now we.

Soon enough the fictional CVs were not fictional any longer:

P1: Further, I think that he [one of the candidates] is a bit sloppy in his applications. “I speak German as well as English.”

P2: Yeah, I know, I thought of that too. It is important to spell correctly.

P3: Yes. The least you can demand is that he edits his application.

P1: He might be dyslectic, but [...]

P2: Yes, I can certainly accept that. But that’s why we have computers to help us with that.

P1: Is he sloppy or is it something else?

P2: When you find such errors in an application it makes you wonder.

P1: Yes, he should have noticed this, in my opinion.

P2: Yes, to say the least.

This typing error was not intended by us to be a part of the game. However, for the participants it became very important in determining who the applicant was as person. We did not experience their conversation as an ironic discussion aimed at us as writers of the fictional applications. For them the typing error (“ad” instead of “as”) was as serious as the fact that the applicant stated that he could speak those languages. Further, their focusing on the possible sloppiness of the applicant is also symptomatic of much of the evaluation of the applicants. What they did search for most in the hand-outs were clues to what the applicants were like as persons.

3.3.3 Co-authoring the role-play. When they did not find enough answers in the handout, they discussed it and agreed upon how things really were. As in this example, discussing a candidate for the CEO post stated that had previously been a CEO at ALMI (a regional development agency, working with SME support):

P2: But what is it about him that you like?

P4: Let me just say, if we take this Arvid Karlsson, we are running the risk of

thinking that, well, since he has been working in the public sector, he is, really, disqualified to start with. But I think it's a shame, really, to read the text too fast, because if you look at it, you know, you can think whatever you want about ALMI [...]

All: Hahahaha [laughter].

P4: But he has shown, in any case, that he has been working, and also that he must have certain skills.

P2: Yeah, but, Arvid Karlsson has, in any case, no contact with, how should I put it, with what might be called the business world. It is just too much social insurance office and ALMI and [...] No, I put him last. It is a plus that he's mentioning his wife and that he wants to move back home, but [...]

P4: Well, one could say that, from an educational perspective, that he's got just a two-year high school business administration education, well that is [...]

P2: Yeah, that is certainly a deficiency.

P4: Yes, that is his big flaw, apart from that, I think, he has been working, I mean, he has been working also in business organizations, as Human Resource Director, and

P5: But he became a CEO at ALMI?

P1: Yeah, I thought about that too. Why him? I mean, out of 30 candidates. It makes me wonder: Who, apart from him, applied for that job?

P4: It is a bit strange, I agree, but you can view that from two perspectives, I think.

P5: Hmm, I don't know.

P4: Well, they might have chosen him because he made such an impression, regardless of his lack of education, he might have, you know, that kind of charisma, or whatever it is called.

P2: Yes, that must be it.

P4: Yes.

P2: He must have charisma.

P5: Yes, he must have, I'm sure is a good leader. But is that what we need right now?

P3: No.

Arvid, to a large part due to his post as CEO at ALMI, made an ambiguous impression, making it difficult for the board members to characterize and evaluate him. After trying several explanations, they add a new one; the consensus of the group became that he must have charisma and that that they (the now not so fictional firm) needed other qualities. They therefore could dismiss him as a candidate.

3.3.4 On the paradoxical SME-support. In the description of the company one could read that “the current CEO has not acted upon the possibility to join the cluster initiative, partly financed by EU that was launched a year ago”. We gave this information because research shows that regional development through, for example, cluster initiatives help SME’s to grow. In line with this research, we were rather sure that this clue would trigger discussions of cluster initiatives and support programs connected to them as a way forward for the firm. To our surprise the participants ignored this clue, they briefly touched upon it when they summarized and ranked the candidates. When we asked about why so little attention was given to support measures and the ability to interact with public agencies in the region, one of the participants offered a somewhat surprising answer:

P4: I might, I maybe think that we must have some kind of idea of what they should prioritize in this company; that is, I don’t think that anyone would come into this company and say that now we are to prioritize clusters. Instead, entering this company the task is to define the problems. What are required to get the sales going, to get our products out, to get the organization working, the quality of the products must work. These questions will become more important.

P2: Mmmmm [Unarticulated sounds of agreement].

P4: Then, when the foundation is laid for this platform, then we can start ponder to what degree we should be extrovert and in which contexts we should appear, and so on. I think it’s very natural [...]

The idea of the company experiencing a crisis of sorts was from our side intended to steer the thoughts of the participants toward support measures such as the cluster initiative mentioned in the case description. As the example shows, this had the opposite effect on the participants.

This example shows the difference between talking about a topic and dealing with it. If we had asked them for their opinions about cluster initiatives in, e.g. an interview, they would most likely have given us an answer corresponding to the dominating discourse on cluster initiatives – that cluster helps the firm. This is what we could call the “talk about” framework. Because of the experience from the role-play we could pin down certain things they did, forcing the participants to confront what they actually had done and said.

3.4 Role-play

In this paper, the term role-play is used to describe a situation in which the participants in a focus group session deal with a “case-exercise” while acting out a fictive character. The role and nature of this character is specified in a highly skeletal form, merely as a member of the board of directors, and it is left to the participant to develop it and imbue the character with life. The initial attempt by the participants to decide on a chairperson in a way marks the beginning of this process, which then continues throughout the session. In effect, this encourages the creation of characters representing the participants as a board member in the described company. Characters that straddle the boundary between reality and fiction are fashioned; in a sense, the participants impersonate themselves as they would act in the fictive setting.

This boundary area is further enhanced in that the task is not to simply deal with a defined problem, but also to do so while acting in character, i.e. as if they really were the board of the company described in the pre-prepared case.

Therefore, participation implies building a character by drawing on previous experience as owner managers. Maybe the difference between role-play and normal case-exercises becomes clearer if one thinks of a role-play as consisting of three parts:

- (1) a set of rules;
- (2) a script formulating the situation in which the participants find themselves; and
- (3) a session in which the participants play out their roles.

With respect to case-exercises, our version of role-play is different mainly with regard to parts (1) and (3), as developed below.

The set of rules (1) in our case was implicit in that the participants as owner-managers themselves all had experience with running companies as CEOs and board members. Nothing was said or related to them regarding this, so in effect it was up to the participants to formulate the rules for the session within the general framework of their experiences with running companies. They played out a fictive setting but doing so in accordance with rules adopted from their everyday experiences as owner managers.

The session (3) includes a more subtle but no less important difference in that it has no end beyond itself. The session is framed and there are clues in the material intended to guide the participants in certain directions, like the references to support measures. This is not to say that we as researchers did not interfere in the process. For instance, already in choosing a board of directors as theme for the setting, a set of rules was implicitly introduced – even though they are enacted by the participants rather than explicitly stated. In this form of “case-exercise” the participants are expected not only to deal with the problems posed by the case but also to simultaneously develop both their own character and the scenery in which the session takes place.

In our form, role-playing is dynamic in the sense that the very framework of the game is to some extent always under negotiation. The setting is ambiguous in that there is no apparent correct decision and there are no hard borders delimiting the choices of the participants.

3.5 The eight steps of the indirect approach

Finally, we would like to comment upon the session containing different parts. In order to help others who wish to use this kind of method, we will describe the eight stages in our use of the technique and how we created connections between them. The stages are, in sequential order: Preparation, Assembly, Introduction, External discussion, Internal discussion, Ownership, Debriefing, and Termination.

3.5.1 Preparation. The first stage is the composition of the input material and the selection of participants. In our case we wrote a case description of the company and a CV for each of the CEO candidates. The fictional company was from a region similar to the participants’ own, and its operations were rather straightforward in order not to distract the attention of the group towards technical complexity or long-term market ambiguity.

We wished for the candidates to demonstrate different strengths and weaknesses, primarily with regard to educational level, professional experience, international

experience and the experience of support programs and support agencies. The CEO candidates were all males of approximately the same age. The candidates ought to be equally good in order to encourage the participants to weigh the different competencies together. We realized as the session started that we had made one of the candidates a bit too strong, but the board still decided to really make a thorough evaluation of all of them.

The importance of this stage cannot be underestimated. The board meeting began, as is apparent from the opening quote in this paper, with the participants trying to understand the situation of the company. "OK, I think one first needs to analyze the existing problems in the firm, and see if we agree what the problems are. I think the strategy of the firm is confused." One of the participants also expressed this clearly at a later stage of the discussion: "When reading this document, I perceive this to be a company in a crisis, and if the company experiences a crisis a special kind of individual is required. It is not [. . .]" Creating the necessary tension between familiarity with the situation and difficulties related to balancing the possible solutions is very important, since the indirect approach requires the topic sought after to be one of several possible solutions to the problem. The idea of the company experiencing a crisis proved to be very influential in the discussion.

3.5.2 Assembly. The second stage was to assemble the group, and we decided on as neutral a setting as possible. The meeting was held in a meeting room at the municipal administrative building in the home region of the participants. Assembling at one of the participants' companies or at the university might have given rise to a host-guest relationship, disturbing the discussion by affecting the roles of the participants.

3.5.3 Introduction. The third stage is to introduce the task to the group and this is somewhat tricky since the participants tend to be clue-seeking. However, in order for the method to work, the researcher or researchers introducing the task need to motivate the participants without giving away clues to their interests. In our case we began by presenting ourselves and asking the participants to present themselves. The following conversation was geared towards the situations and conditions that you meet as a small business owner-manager. In this way, we could express our interest in and devotion to small business generally without giving away the specific area of interest.

During this stage it was also possible to judge whether the participants considered each other as legitimate owner-managers and respected one another's experiences. In our case we had no indications that made us suspect the contrary.

3.5.4 External discussion. In the fourth stage, the fictional board meeting commenced and during its first part the participants viewed the company from the outside. The company was initially referred to as by someone watching it from the outside. At a certain point this began to shift, however, and the perspective became blurred. First there was a conscious choice to say we and not they, as is demonstrated in the examples earlier. Following this, the perspective shifted between "us" and "they" for a while. This is a very sensitive phase of the session, since the participants must focus on the problem as a board rather than as a group of informants.

3.5.5 Internal discussion. When the participants begin to refer to the company as us without thinking about it, the session has entered the fifth stage. The owner-managers are slowly migrating from merely taking part in a study about a company to a mindset in which they are solving a problem – as if they were leading the company.

3.5.6 Ownership. In our study, it is only when entering the sixth stage, however, which we label ownership, that the participants actually ceased to consciously act “as if” they were directors and began to act like the board of directors. At this stage, the focus of the group had shifted away from the intention of solving the “puzzle” presented to them. Instead they tried to find the optimal CEO. It is of course, difficult to assess if and when the participants enter into this kind of mind frame. One of the incidents that convinced us was due to the aforementioned spelling mistake. During this sequence of the session, the participants were actually searching for information beyond what they have been given. Not only to rank the candidates, but to actually find the candidate best suited to run their company. It is when the session reaches this stage that the owner-managers really begin demonstrating the knowledge of how to do something rather than the knowledge regarding how to talk about something.

3.5.7 Debriefing. When the participants had finally ranked the candidates, we began the seventh stage of the study, a group discussion with the senior researcher as moderator. The moderator alternated between posing direct questions regarding what had passed and presenting topics for further discussion among the participants. The advantage of this step was that we could pick out sequences of the previous role-play and ask the participants about their rationale for arguing or proposing various ideas. As the example above illustrates, our presumptions about the research question – based on previous research – had the opposite meaning for the participants. This illustrates that the debriefing session following the role-play is very important both as a means of closing in the rationale behind the participants’ choices but also as a means of opening the eyes of the researcher to new ideas and hitherto unseen explanations.

3.5.8 Termination. The eighth and final stage is termination. Since the intention is to get the participants to behave as if they solved a familiar real-world problem together with a group of people that they do not know very well beforehand, the events taking place in the group can become very personal and emotional. Because of this it is important to terminate the session in a friendly manner, to get the feeling that no one leaves the setting with feelings/emotions that he or she may have a hard time handling.

4. Discussion

This paper presents an attempt to add a dimension of role-play to a focus group session in order to create what we label an indirect approach or a semi-focused group and addresses the feasibility of staging an executive board role-playing session in order to learn more about the way owner-managers in SMEs think and feel about public support programs. By adding a dimension of role-play, the participants are not only given a case-exercise, but they are also asked to deal with it while enacting a role or character that is partly fictive. This duality between fictive and real is important since it implies that the participants act on the boundary between them. They are role-playing themselves, as they would act in a fictive situation and this is one of the main reasons why the role-play enhanced focus group method is useful in indirectly addressing topics. In a situation where the purpose of the role-play is learning, it does not matter if the characters are completely fictional. In our case this is different. Since the intention of the role-play enhanced focus group, or semi-focused group, study is to address the experience of the participants, if doing so without asking them directly,

it is necessary that they create their characters in a way that allows these to express the experience and knowledge of the participants themselves.

As can be deduced from the discussion on pragmatism, we believe that knowledge manifests itself through actions as well as through words. This implies that there may actually be some specific knowledge regarding how to talk about something –, e.g. support programs. Owner-managers have learned over time the way to frame and discuss support programs among themselves as well as together with others. If we had asked our respondents directly what they think about support programs or why they have participated in such, they would offer this knowledge: the knowledge of how to talk about the topic we are investigating. The knowledge of how to speak about something might, however, differ from the knowledge about dealing with this same something. This is where role-playing becomes useful, since it allows us to study the owner-managers in a setting that is familiar to them and thus in a sense real while simultaneously being fictive and to some extent possible to guide in certain directions through altering the framing.

By placing the owner-managers in a rather familiar situation and allowing them to interact without interruptions from us researchers, we kept them in their “dealing with” mind frame. Considering the presence of us researchers, the participants were of course, aware that we intended to study them, but not knowing what we actually studied caused the situation to be ambiguous for the participants. Such ambiguity is necessary to prevent the participants from slipping into a “talking about” mindset. From our experience, this seems to be a definite risk, as demonstrated by the thorough way the participants dealt with the formal education of the various CEO candidates, where they stated explicitly the value of higher education. We are not trying to say that this was insincere, but that it could be considered as reflecting their knowledge of how to talk about education rather than their knowledge regarding how to deal with questions of educational level in their everyday work as owner-managers. This is in our experience one of trickier parts of using the role-play enhanced variety of the focus group method. In framing the session, in our case writing the company description and the CVs for the candidates, it is necessary to provide enough cues to get the participants to treat the intended topic while simultaneously not giving away the purpose of the role-play session. In our case, we made one of the candidates too strong and thereby caused the question of support measures to be downplayed during the session. When doing subsequent semi-focused groups, the framing could be continuously refined and adjusted in order to increase balance. Considering the effort required creating the empirical setting, and the time offered by the participants, we recommend letting someone with a background similar to the intended participants read the background material in advance. This may improve the balance of the material in advance and the focus group session may yield richer results, while simultaneously presenting more of a challenge to the participants – making it a more worthwhile experience for them.

Despite this dilemma of framing, we did not experience that our participants slipped into a “talk about” mindset. Owing to the indirect approach they did not have any reason to do so as far as support measures were concerned, even though we had included some information on the various candidates’ previous experiences of public support agencies and programmes as well as some information regarding a cluster initiative in the region. When we shifted to a more “traditional” setting after the

role-play session, we could thus go back to the comments made by the participants and ask them why they said this or that. In part of the session, the discussion was still centered on the previous statements of the participants. It would seem that, having their own remarks to relate to, the participants were at least partially prevented from slipping out of the mindset of “dealing with”. Taken together, we ended up with some unexpected ideas and insights into support measures. Owing to the indirect mode of studying the topic and the ability to confront the participants with their own remarks on support agencies and support programmes we for instance realised that the owner-managers did not primarily see support measures as a means of helping a company with problems. On the contrary, the case company, having some immediate concerns, was seen as directly unsuited for participation in, for instance, the cluster initiative.

The critical aspect of our method development effort resides in the idea of the need for a means of indirectly addressing the topic of our research. Where previous studies primarily addressed the “speaking about” dimension, we wished to reach the knowledge about support measures that manifests itself in action. This was done through creating a setting that was simultaneously real and fictive, getting the participants to act as if they were actually dealing with a problem rather than narrating how they would deal with a problem. Further benefits of this approach was that the participating owner managers developed the setting further by filling out the skeletal characters and descriptions offered in the framing of the session. This probably resulted in a more life-like setting than what we as researchers could have created, since we lack the vast everyday experience with handling a company that the owner managers possesses.

This is not to say that the creation of the background material is of little importance since it will anyway be developed by the participants. As we have discussed earlier, it is not self-evident that the participants will actually reach a stage when they claim ownership over the process. Our owner-managers initially referred to the company as “they” and only after a while shifted to using “we” when referring to the company. We have previously argued that this indicates a transition in the treatment of the company, from the internal discussion (fifth stage) where the participants refer to the company as “us” to the ownership stage (sixth stage) where they stop trying to solve the puzzle (or case) presented to them and starts to actually seek the best CEO for their company. As important as reaching this stage is, it cannot be taken for granted that a specific group of participants will actually reach this stage. In our case it seemed to be due to the company as well as the candidates actually being considered realistic in the sense that what was stated about them seemed reasonable and the need for additional information was primarily related to the personal sphere of the candidates rather than to clarifications of what was stated in the handed out CVs. It would also seem that we were fortunate in so far as the owner-managers took the task seriously and opted to make the most of the situation, while accepting each others’ experience and competence. The mixed age of the participants seemed also to be an advantage since the more experienced owner managers initially was the most active and talkative, while it took somewhat longer for the younger ones to start participating actively in the discussions.

5. Conclusion

This project suggests some general conclusions. First, the material gathered in sessions of the kind here described tends to be very rich because the indirect approach forces the participants to cover a wide range of topics. Having a clearly defined

purpose is therefore of the utmost importance when carrying out the analysis. Solid ground-work is of course, always important, but the intrinsic lack of focus in our method suggests that particular care be taken.

We have provided a few examples of the interaction between the “members of the board” in order to demonstrate how a role-playing can be used to indirectly address a research topic, and we have offered some insights into how we have treated the gathered material. In general, these examples show how role-playing developed in various ways during the session. We try to pinpoint especially how the participants moved from the external stage (fourth stage), where they talked about the company and its problems as though it were a “case-exercise”, to the internal stage (fifth stage), where they started to actually play their roles, conscious that they were to imagine themselves as the company, and finally the ownership stage (sixth stage), in which they started to act like the actual board of directors for the company.

We have shown how the participants accepted our rules without questioning them, while also bringing their own understanding of what it meant to be a board member into play. We were especially happy that they both made use of the clues we gave them and less apparent and unintended clues, such as a spelling mistake. Thus, allowing for the participants interpretations, the play moved forward as they started to co-author the role-play. Another example of this is the adding of charisma to one of the candidates.

We draw two interconnected conclusions from this. First, that one should not be overly concerned about introducing mistakes and ambiguities into the material that is initially given the participants. In our case, we spent much energy trying to create realistic accounts that included relevant information. This is of course, necessary, but what we learned is that the material also ought to stimulate the imagination of the participants so as to allow them to imbue the case with life. In our case, the spelling mistake did not generate much information regarding our research topic, but it was one hook that the participants could use to attach themselves to the situation. This leads to us to the second conclusion, since if done successfully this will add insights through the way it is done while simultaneously making it easier for the participants to reach the stage of ownership (sixth stage) during the actual session. The stage of the game when the participants stop thinking about the task given them (to rank the candidates) and engage with the task as such (looking for the best candidate), thus when they start the transition from talking about the topic to actually dealing with it.

Thus, our study demonstrates that, if carefully designed, adding a role-play dimension can add substantially to focus group interviews. Especially, in the sense that it allows researchers to address the knowledge and experience of the participants as it is manifested in everyday action rather than as it is framed in the narrations offered during for instance a normal interview. The role-play-enhanced focus group method, however, requires a lot of preparatory work when staging the session and for a great deal of patience among the researchers. Furthermore, it also requires of the researchers to realize that the participants, if allowed to do so, will be helpful also in improving the original script. Therefore, this data gathering technique positioned on the boundary between fiction and reality will allow the participants to act and talk as if they were dealing with a real task, rather than merely narrating their experience to the researchers. In circumstances where one might suspect that there exists one type of knowledge regarding how to talk about a topic and another type of knowledge regarding how to deal with a topic, this substantially improves the odds of obtaining useful insight.

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