

Teaching Sociology

<http://tso.sagepub.com/>

Teaching Focus Group Interviewing: Benefits and Challenges

Molly George

Teaching Sociology 2013 41: 257 originally published online 23 October 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0092055X12465295

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tso.sagepub.com/content/41/3/257>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



American Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Teaching Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tso.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tso.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 20, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Oct 23, 2012

[What is This?](#)

Teaching Focus Group Interviewing: Benefits and Challenges

Teaching Sociology
 41(3) 257-270
 © American Sociological Association 2012
 DOI: 10.1177/0092055X12465295
 ts.sagepub.com



Molly George¹

Abstract

Focus group interviewing is widely used by academic and applied researchers. Given the popularity and strengths of this method, it is surprising how rarely focus group interviewing is taught in the undergraduate classroom and how few resources exist to support instructors who wish to train students to use this technique. This article fills the gap in the teaching and learning literature in sociology by addressing focus group research. I describe how to integrate a complete research project with student-led focus groups into a single semester course. I outline the various stages involved in the research process and then consider how this approach enhances three specific areas: learning, teaching, and scholarship. The effectiveness of the focus group project was assessed through a one-group pretest-posttest survey of the student-researchers' experiences. I conclude with a reflection on the practical limitations as well as the considerable advantages of training students to conduct focus group research.

Keywords

focus groups, research method instruction, scholarship of teaching and learning, experiential learning

Focus groups have been used for a range of purposes and in various contexts by academic and applied researchers. As defined by Krueger and Casey (2009:2), "A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment." The origin of focus groups is often traced back to the eminent sociologist Robert K. Merton at Columbia University in the 1940s. Beginning in the 1960s, focus groups became the method *du jour* among commercial market researchers. It was not until the 1980s when focus groups reemerged and gained traction as a prominent research technique in academic settings (Bloor et al. 2001; Fontana and Frey 1994; Morgan 1996, 1997).

The pervasive use of focus groups is partly based on the time and cost savings compared to individual interviews. Beyond these pragmatic benefits, group interviews create an opportunity

for participants to discuss collectively normative assumptions that are typically unarticulated, thus providing insight into complex motivations and behaviors (Bloor et al. 2001; Morgan and Krueger 1993). The interaction between focus group participants has the potential to create a dynamic synergy that is absent in individual interviews. As Morgan (1996:139) explains, "What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other." A highly versatile method, focus groups have been used by sociologists across

¹California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Molly George, California Lutheran University, 60 West Olsen Road, Swensen #223, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360, USA.

Email: mgeorge@callutheran.edu

a wide range of subfields, including the sociology of health and health education (Kidd and Parshall 2000; Kitlinger 1994), the sociology of race and racism (McDonald and Wingfield 2009; Trepagnier 2001), and the sociology of work (Bobo et al. 1995), to name a few.

The strengths of focus group research are considerable, but the method is not easy to implement and has a number of weaknesses. A growing body of literature has focused on the methodological and analytical complexity involved in focus group research. Scholars have expressed concern about the reliability, validity, and generalizability of focus group findings (Carey 1995). There have also been legitimate questions raised with regard to the moderator's role in generating data as well as the impact of the group itself on focus group data (Morgan 1996). Furthermore, focus groups suffer from the dangers inherent in all research methods that rely on self-reported data; namely, participants may self-censure, underreport, or overreport. These tendencies may be compounded by the presence of multiple participants, requiring researchers to be mindful of how the issues of privacy and embarrassment may constrain data collection efforts (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Peek and Fothergill 2009). Scholars have also called for the need to recognize multiple, overlapping social contexts in any focus group (Hollander 2004). Certainly, then, focus groups may work well only under certain circumstances and for particular topics (Carey 1995; Jowett and O'Toole 2006). Despite these drawbacks, focus groups hold substantial power and potential for researchers and participants when used with careful research design and when combined with other methods (Morgan 1997; Peek and Fothergill 2009; Smithson 2000).

Given the popularity, flexibility, and value of focus groups, they have been surprisingly underutilized in the classroom. With the exception of lengthy texts primarily aimed at professional researchers (Bloor et al. 2001; Krueger and Casey 2009; Morgan 1998) and Collier and Morgan's (2002) contribution in *Teaching Sociology* about how students can use focus groups for a service-learning project, to date there are no published pedagogical reports that assist teachers in training their students to conduct focus groups. In contrast,

there are extensive descriptions of how to teach students to use a variety of other research methods, such as in-depth interviewing (Charmaz 1991; Healey-Etten and Sharp 2010; Raddon, Nault, and Scott 2008), survey research (Cutler 1987; Singleton 2007), content analysis (Taylor 2003), and field research (Broughton 2011; Keen 1996; Schmid 1992).

The project described in this article heeds the call from educators who have long advocated for the value of experiential learning in the social sciences (DeMartini 1983; Gary and Meighen 1980; Gondolf 1980, 1985; Grant et al. 1981; Greenberg 1989; Ripptoe 1977) and contributes to the consensus that students learn best by "doing" (Crull and Collins 2004; Longmore, Dunn, and Jarboe 1996; Takata and Leiting 1987; Teixeira-Poit, Cameron, and Schulman 2011; Winn 1995). In particular, this article adds to descriptions of how to provide students with a complete project experience from start to finish (Raddon et al. 2008) and directly addresses the relative absence of focus groups in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature.

First, I describe how the course-based, student-led focus group project was conducted in a research methods course. I provide detailed information about how students were guided through the various stages of the research process including ethics training, data collection, and analysis. Second, I discuss the associated advantages of implementing an undergraduate focus group research project with regard to learning, teaching, and faculty scholarship. To assess the effectiveness of the project, I report the results of a one-group pre- and post-survey evaluation of the student-researchers' experiences. This is followed by a thorough consideration of the practical limitations, and the potential extensions, of using focus groups in a research methods course.

THE UNDERGRADUATE FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT

Genesis of the Study

The study took place at California Lutheran University (CLU), a small, private, liberal arts school. The class project began as an effort to collect data for larger, campuswide research and

programming related to alcohol use. In 2009, the university received a grant from the National College Athletic Association CHOICES Program. The objectives of the CHOICES grant were to provide learning opportunities for students and to heighten awareness of campus norms and subcultures regarding alcohol consumption. The focus group projects conducted by students in my class served as a qualitative follow-up study to a quantitative survey that was conducted at the school the previous year.

During Phase I of the research project, the American College Health Association's (2011) National College Health Assessment II was distributed on campus during the 2009–2010 academic year to all traditional, full-time undergraduates at CLU. The National College Health Assessment II is a national instrument administered by the American College Health Association and among the most widely recognized instruments for gathering data on sensitive topics related to student social life with high validity and reliability (Douglas et al. 1997; Lorentson 2010). The web-based survey asked students questions about various health and wellness topics, including physical fitness, mental health, alcohol and drug use, academic performance, and sexual responsibility.

The survey shed light on important aspects of students' health, particularly risky behaviors, and yielded a 39 percent response rate on our campus, with data collected from 752 respondents (Lorentson 2010). While strong on breadth, the survey's quantitative question formats failed to capture in-depth data regarding the motivations and decision-making experiences of students. Furthermore, the very issues that might result in nonresponses in survey research, such as self-selection, become even more problematic when seeking to collect data from students who may report unhealthy behaviors. These drawbacks are compounded by the fact that specific subpopulations of students at CLU, such as transfer or commuter students, are hard to reach and thus underrepresented on the survey.

To address these gaps in our knowledge of campus life, we launched Phase II of the CHOICES (National College Athletic Association 2012) data collection. I was asked to serve as the primary faculty investigator charged with collecting

much-needed qualitative data on student health to augment our existing quantitative campus data. I brainstormed a number of methodological designs before deciding to involve students not only as respondents but as active researchers.

Research Design

In the fall of 2011, the CLU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved for students who were enrolled in my course to conduct focus group research with their peers. I also received approval to collect data on the student-researchers' experiences by distributing surveys to the class before and after the project. The IRB application included the primary questions to be asked during the focus group (included in the appendix). The research project accounted for approximately 60 percent of the requirements for a single-semester (15-week) course. The course itself was an upper-division research methods course and was required for sociology majors. All students enrolled in the course were majoring in sociology. The format of the course involved twice-weekly meetings for 1 hour and 45 minutes each session. Typically, one class period a week was devoted to lecture, and the other class period was reserved as the practicum aspect of the course. During the lecture period, I covered the fundamentals of research design, ethics, data collection, and analysis. During the practicum class periods, the students worked on various aspects of the focus group project, including strategizing for recruitment, practice moderating, and transcribing. The lectures and hands-on work were supported by a comprehensive, general research methods text (*Making Sense of the Social World* by Chambliss and Schutt 2010), the leading text for focus group research (*Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* by Krueger and Casey [2009]), and supplemental readings that consisted of empirical articles about student alcohol use and focus group research. There were 22 students enrolled in the course, with 19 women (86.4 percent) and 3 men (13.6 percent). All but 2 of the students were juniors or seniors. Thirty-one percent had taken at least one general introductory research methods course previously, whereas this was the first research methods course for 68 percent of the class.

A significant amount of attention in class was devoted to outlining the fundamentals of protecting research participants before, during, and after the focus group project. During the practicum sessions, students brainstormed about potential ethical problems, practiced ensuring voluntary consent from their participants, and received training for dealing with specific ethical issues during data collection. For example, students were given scenarios to practice during the practicum sessions to learn how to handle situations wherein inappropriate information is shared during a focus group interview. Students learned how to redirect discussions as well as warn and dismiss disruptive participants.

Student Research Teams

Students were divided into five research teams, which consisted of three to five students per team. Each team was responsible for the recruitment and facilitation of one focus group. The teams were divided by taking into account the students' grade level, prior achievement, and work habits. Rather than allowing students to self-select their teams, this method was chosen to avoid having some students feel left out and to maximize heterogeneity as well as distribute more able students evenly among the teams.

The central focus of the class projects remained on student alcohol use, but each research team was asked to identify a specific subpopulation of students on campus to study. The subpopulations the students selected included: (1) commuter students; (2) international students; (3) students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning; (4) students involved in campus ministry; and (5) transfer students.

The student-researchers received a handout that outlined the specific roles and related duties of the individual members of each research team, such as the primary moderator, note takers, logistical coordinator, and lead transcriber. The students were tasked with selecting or delegating their own roles. This clear division of labor thus became self-directed and encouraged students to develop ownership of specific aspects of their team's project. The goal was to make students accountable to one another, not just to the instructor, to combat the

diffusion of responsibility and social loafing that can occur in group projects.

The students implemented purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in focus group research (Miles and Huberman 1984; Patton 1990) and the most appropriate technique given the specific subpopulations targeted in the project. Similar to the recruitment strategies described in the focus group research of Peek and Fothergill (2009), a combination of researcher-driven, key informant, and spontaneous recruitment was used by the student-researchers. Students reached their potential participants in a variety of ways and relied largely on their campus social networks as well as student clubs, which were helpful in providing sampling frames. Each research team was required to produce a flier for its target population, which announced the focus group session's purpose, meeting time, and location. With support from the CHOICE grant, each team was able to advertise and provide incentives for participation. The funds covered pizza and refreshments during the session as well as a gift certificate for a smoothie for each participant.

The student research teams were required to recruit 6 to 12 participants for their interview, keeping within the range of the most effective size for focus groups (Morgan 1997). Beyond the group size and primary screen set by each research team for its respective subpopulation (i.e., international students), students were encouraged to seek diversity in group composition with regard to participants' gender, class year, race, and ethnicity. Recruitment proved to be the most challenging aspect of the project, which is common in focus group research (Krueger and Casey 2009; Morgan 1995).

Conducting the Interviews

Before conducting the focus group interviews, each student was required to produce an individual literature review. The literature review was an essential part of the research process, as it provided students with a more thorough grounding in scholarship regarding student alcohol use. In addition to the literature review, each team was required to develop four key questions and a stimulus activity (Kitzinger 1994; Krueger and Casey 2009) such as

a vignette, image, or game tailored to its population. After instructor approval, these questions and stimulus activities would be used during the focus group interviews to augment the primary focus group questions about alcohol use, which the instructor provided every team.

During class, students received intensive training before conducting their focus groups. Lectures covered the principles of successful interviewing, including a discussion of how Healey-Etten and Sharp's (2010) tip sheet for in-depth interviewing could be adapted and applied for group interviews. Students learned strategies for distributing informed consent sheets, moderating, and note taking. Students also received tips on how to create an inviting atmosphere during the sessions that would encourage participants to share a variety of opinions and viewpoints.

This training required extensive discussion of social-psychological phenomena specific to small-group interaction. For example, we discussed how "social desirability bias" may encourage participants to refrain from revealing negative information to present the most favorable impression of themselves (Goffman 1959). Similarly, we addressed how to minimize "groupthink," a hazard common in groups when participants may censure or withhold information for the sake of conformity (Asch 1956). Students learned how to combat groupthink, such as "playing the devil's advocate" during a focus group by having the moderator provide alternative perspectives, introduce different scenarios, or ask thought-provoking questions (MacDougall and Baum 1997). Students role-played these techniques during practice sessions that were observed and critiqued by the instructor. This provided each team with practice and concrete feedback for improving its moderating skills.

Large conference rooms were reserved for the student research teams to conduct their focus group interviews, each of which lasted for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. The instructor was available during each session but did not directly observe or participate in the data collection. This supervisory absence was an intentional aspect of the research design; it reinforced students' autonomy as independent researchers by allowing peer moderators to facilitate the discussion without

interference from a faculty member (Broadbear, O'Toole, and Angermeier-Howard 2000).

Data Analysis and Presentation of Findings

The remaining weeks of the semester were dedicated to debriefing with student-researchers, transcribing, analyzing, and presenting findings orally and in writing. As transcription is a notoriously arduous and time-consuming task, each student was required to transcribe a portion of the interview, approximately 25 minutes of the 90-minute recording. Each team member contributed to the transcript, but one student, the lead transcriber, was ultimately in charge of ensuring that all the transcription efforts were standardized and compiled into one document.

With their transcriptions complete, students were trained in data analysis. They learned how to use open and focused coding by subjecting their data to a line-by-line analysis to generate and refine analytic categories (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Students were also provided readings that specifically addressed how to analyze and interpret focus group data (Kidd and Parshall 2000; Krueger 1997a).

Independently, students first identified core themes or analytical categories in their interviews. The next step involved sorting quotes under each theme. One particularly useful method for teaching students how to code was by having them read the Findings section of an empirical article in class and then use backward or reverse outlining to identify the main points, progression of ideas, and integration of examples in writing. This technique allowed students to see how scholars use data to produce a narrative structure.

The final components of the research project consisted of a group presentation from each research team as well as a final report from each individual student. The report was a 10-page paper that followed an abbreviated outline of an academic article and included a revised literature review and analysis of the findings. Students were able to draw on their transcripts and field notes when describing what they learned from their focus group interviews.

ENHANCING LEARNING, TEACHING, AND SCHOLARSHIP

Student Benefits

The focus group research project provided a number of demonstrable benefits for students. One advantage was that the research design required students to work not only independently but in groups as well as with groups (Collier and Morgan 2002). The ability to work alone as well as collaboratively is a beneficial skill for students to acquire for almost any postgraduate job they are likely to obtain. Through cooperative work, students develop transferable skills for career development, such as written and oral communication, planning, conflict management, adaptability, and the ability to define and solve problems (Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund 2000). These tangible skills, in addition to critical thinking and complex reasoning, are necessary and often underdeveloped aspects of students' development and employability (Arum and Roska 2010; Hacker and Dreifus 2010).

Engaging students in group research projects can improve and deepen students' academic experiences. Experiential pedagogy has been found to be more enjoyable for students than traditional lecture formats (Rohall et al. 2004) and can help students acquire a fuller appreciation of the value and complexity of the research process (Hopkinson and Hogg 2004). In addition, the importance of research ethics is enhanced when students are required to undertake a project with human participants (Teixeira-Poit et al. 2011). Ethics becomes a concrete and consequential matter rather than a merely abstract concept. The focus group research project also linked research methods with a substantive issue (Cutler 1987). Students discovered how sociological investigation can illuminate real-world issues, such as student alcohol use.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project in more depth, I developed and implemented a one-group pretest-posttest survey.¹ The goal was to learn more about the student-researchers' learning expectations, experiences, and outcomes. The questionnaire was created and administered using Qualtrics, an online survey software program. The survey included 11 closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions. Apart from the demographic question regarding class year, students were asked

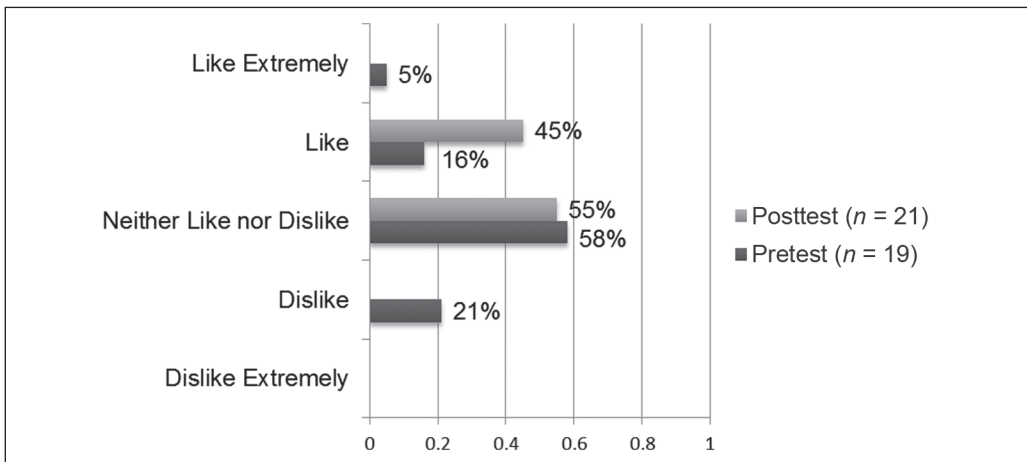
whether they had previously taken a research methods course, along with a number of items to assess students' attitudes toward group projects in general, their understanding of the procedures and assignments related to the focus group research project, their feelings toward their research teams' topics, whether they were satisfied with the individual role they fulfilled on their research teams, and the level of perceived difficulty associated with the project. The final items assessed whether students believed that their involvement in the project increased their general understanding of research methods and prepared them to work on collaborative projects later in their careers. The open-ended questions asked students to identify specific skills they learned during the class, as well as to describe the most challenging aspects of the project and to explain what would have supported or improved their overall experiences.

The pretest had a response rate of 86 percent (19 out of 22 students completed the survey), and the posttest had a response rate of 95 percent (21 out of 22 students completed the survey). The results for four of the most salient questions on the survey are listed in Table 1.

These results indicate that the focus group research project exceeded the students' expectations in many respects. For example, as reflected in Figure 1, before the semester, 21 percent ($n = 19$) of students indicated that they disliked working on group projects in general, and afterward no one ($n = 21$) reported disliking group work; in fact, by the end of the semester the students reported liking group projects more (45 percent, $n = 21$) than at the beginning of the semester (16 percent, $n = 19$), with a little more than half remaining neutral on the topic (55 percent, $n = 21$). The students also reported feeling happier about their participation in the focus group research project (25 percent very happy, $n = 21$) than they had originally anticipated (11 percent very happy, $n = 19$). As shown in Figure 2, when asked if participating in the focus group research project would enhance their understanding of research methods, students reported strongly agreeing (26 percent, $n = 19$) or agreeing (74 percent) on the pretest and were split 50/50 between strongly agreeing (50 percent, $n = 21$) and agreeing (50 percent, $n = 21$) by the semester's end. Finally, as illustrated in Figure 3, before the

Table 1. Summary of Results of Student Responses to Pre- and Posttest Questionnaire Evaluating the Focus Group Research Experience.

	Pretest (<i>n</i> = 19)	Posttest (<i>n</i> = 21)
Attitude toward group projects in general	5 percent <i>like extremely</i>	0 percent <i>like extremely</i>
	16 percent <i>like</i>	45 percent <i>like</i>
	58 percent <i>neutral</i>	55 percent <i>neutral</i>
	21 percent <i>dislike</i>	0 percent <i>dislike</i>
Feelings toward focus group research project	11 percent <i>very happy</i>	25 percent <i>very happy</i>
	39 percent <i>happy</i>	40 percent <i>happy</i>
	22 percent <i>somewhat happy</i>	30 percent <i>somewhat happy</i>
	22 percent <i>neutral</i>	0 percent <i>neutral</i>
	6 percent <i>somewhat unhappy</i>	5 percent <i>somewhat unhappy</i>
Involvement will improve general understanding of research methods	26 percent <i>strongly agree</i>	50 percent <i>strongly agree</i>
	74 percent <i>agree</i>	50 percent <i>agree</i>
	42 percent <i>strongly agree</i>	50 percent <i>strongly agree</i>
Involvement will prepare me to work on collaborative projects later	53 percent <i>agree</i>	50 percent <i>agree</i>
	5 percent <i>neutral</i>	0 percent <i>neutral</i>

**Figure 1.** My attitude toward group projects in general can best be described as . . .

project, students believed that their involvement would prepare them to work on collaborative projects in the future (pretest: 42 percent strongly agreed, 53 percent agreed, and 5 percent neutral, $n = 19$), and after their participation they believed it with increased conviction (posttest: 50 percent strongly agreed, 50 percent agreed, $n = 21$).

Pedagogical Advantages

Instructors also have much to gain by structuring a research methods course around a focus group project. It is useful to have one common, empirical study to refer to throughout a semester. It creates a community of learners (Macheski et al. 2008) and serves

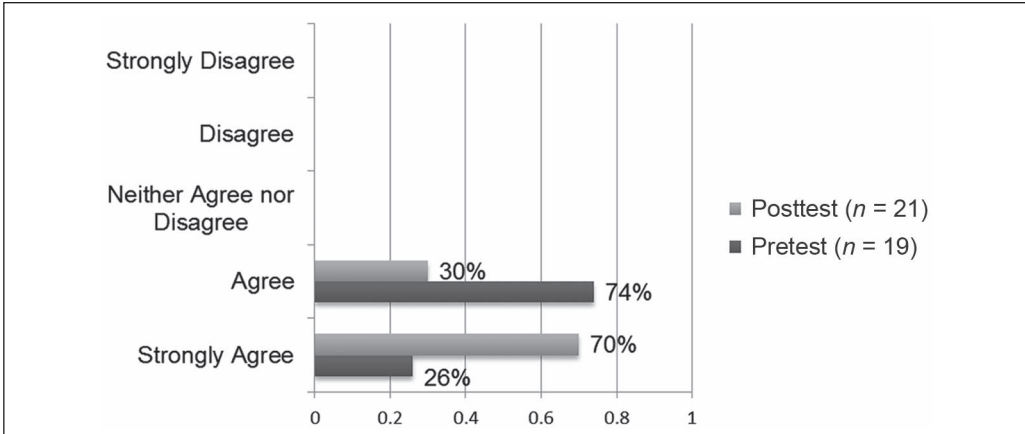


Figure 2. Involvement in the focus group research project will increase my general understanding of research methods.

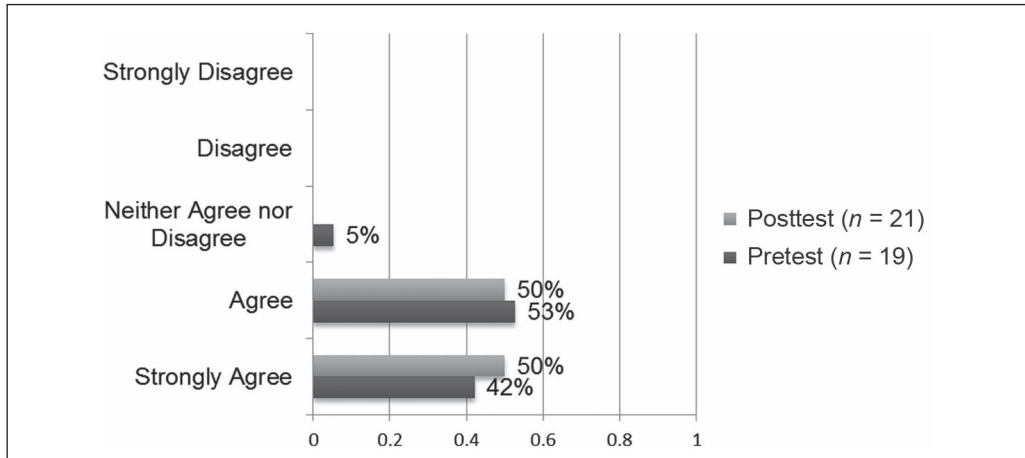


Figure 3. Involvement in the focus group research project will prepare me to work on collaborative projects later in my career.

as a constant source of examples (Singleton 2007) for illustrating methodological concepts and challenges. Having a concrete project to refer back to consistently is helpful when explaining complicated issues related to the overall research process, conceptualization, operationalization, sampling, literature reviews, research ethics, and the intricacies of data collection and analysis. Therefore, the substantive project served as a way to communicate the fundamentals of social research more generally and to teach the method of focus group interviewing in particular.

Another pedagogical benefit came from using a combination of individual and group work

throughout the semester. Dividing students into research teams was more efficient than supervising each student's individual project. This format will be particularly important for managing the logistics of a research project in courses with larger enrollments. Students were also evaluated on the basis of both their individual efforts and their group's efforts. For example; students were graded individually for portions of the group research project (30 percent), attendance and participation (20 percent), and periodic quizzes throughout the semester (20 percent). The remaining proportion of the group project was graded collectively (30

percent). And importantly, when assigning individual grades, students were graded against the standard and not other members of their group. Using these multiple methods of evaluation was useful, particularly for maximizing fairness and avoiding the difficulty of assessing the quality and quantity of individual students in a collaborative project. Furthermore, relying more heavily on individual work helps to minimize certain dangers of group work, such as social loafing and the diffusion of responsibility (Pedersen 2010).

One final pedagogical asset to using the focus group research project is that it can provide a variety of opportunities and extensions. For instructors who work in teaching-intensive environments, integrating research into the classroom may be the most effective strategy to maintain an active scholarly agenda. Countless studies have shown how teaching effectiveness and research productivity can be complementary and mutually supporting (Braxton 1996; Neuman 1992; Webster 1986).

Instructors could also partner with departments or programs on campus that have evaluation needs. The topic for the focus group research project can then be directed to collecting data for that particular campus client, such as student health services or the athletic department. Thus, beyond the topic of student alcohol use, focus groups that are conducted by and with undergraduates could generate insight into various aspects of campus life. Furthermore, the project could be extended off campus by partnering with local organizations, thus providing students the experience and benefits of community-based research (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011; Collier and Morgan 2002; Gondolf 1980; Marullo, Moayedi, and Cooke 2009).

In addition, instructors could continue certain aspects of the focus group project and carry it over into additional classes. I was able to use this approach with my students due to the sequence of the required methods courses at CLU. The research methods course in which students conducted the focus group interviews was offered in the fall and was a prerequisite for a quantitative methods course I taught the next semester. Most all of the same students from the first class were enrolled in the second class. The students were able to augment the qualitative data from their focus groups with quantitative data from the CHOICE survey.

This made it possible for me as an instructor to provide students with continuity in their coursework. The combination of research conducted in both classes also allowed me to mentor a handful of motivated students to present their research in an on-campus conference and ultimately produce independent senior thesis projects based on triangulated data.

Contributions to Knowledge

The focus group research project undoubtedly fulfilled the primary objective of the CHOICE grant by providing learning opportunities for both student-researchers and participants about alcohol use. The results shared by the students in their on-campus presentations contributed to an understanding of the campus culture and norms around alcohol use, particularly about harder-to-reach student populations that were largely absent from the earlier CHOICE survey.

The larger scholarly reach of such a project is possible but more complicated. The depth and breadth of the data were constituted by the research design and the use of student-researchers. Most of the students were doing empirical research for the first time, and no student had prior experience conducting focus group interviews. The validity of the research was reduced because students lacked advanced skills in data collection and analysis as well as an in-depth understanding of the literature on student alcohol use. Reliability was also diminished by the use of different moderators and researchers for each focus group. Also, the data from this research cannot be generalized to other settings.

Certain steps can be taken to protect against these weaknesses and improve the scholarly application of the project. Instructors could take a more central role in data collection and analysis to help raise the quality and consistency of the overall project. Instructors could be responsible for moderating each focus group interview and for coding the data while still involving students as research assistants. Student tasks could include identifying sources for the literature review, recruiting respondents, and serving as note takers and transcribers. This arrangement would reduce student engagement in the overall research project but

likely improve the odds of producing higher-quality data. These steps could then open up scholarly opportunities beyond the classroom. Instructors can actively collaborate with undergraduates on “real” research by copresenting findings at professional conferences and coauthoring papers to submit for publication.

I intend to build on the data that my students collected in their focus groups by continuing the project as a requirement of the research methods course and collaborating more actively with student-researchers. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the body of scholarly literature on student alcohol use. In particular, the class project can add to the insights of other scholars who have found the method of focus group interviewing to be effective for studying students’ attitudes and behaviors regarding drinking (Broadbear et al. 2000; Emery et al. 1993), as well as marijuana use (Warner, Weber, and Albanes 1999) and sexuality (Walden and Fennell 1995).

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the many benefits of having students complete a focus group research project over the course of a semester, there are certain challenges that must be considered. These are predominately pragmatic issues related to logistics and workload that are common to project-based courses (Keen 1996; Nyden 1991; Raddon et al. 2008; Takata and Leiting 1987; Winn 1995).

First, the project requires a significant amount of planning and preparation before the semester. It is recommended that well in advance of the course, the instructor select the substantive topic of investigation and apply for IRB approval to ensure timely progression of the project. This front work, in turn, curtails student involvement; with exclusion from the research design, students are unable to contribute their ideas about the research topic or interview schedule. As Singleton (2007:55) points out, “Student input is likely to affect their engagement with the project: the greater their role, the greater their sense of ownership.” Another issue related to instructor workload is the intensity and vigilance required to keep the students’ projects on track from week to week. Adherence to the lecture

and practicum plans can create a significant amount of inflexibility that can constrain both teachers and students.

This brings us to the second major challenge, which is the demand placed on students. The group research project requires regular attendance in lecture and practicum in addition to a substantial amount of work outside of class. Chronic student absences can create a serious problem for both an individual student and his or her research team. Furthermore, the course requirements and high expectations may be too heavy a burden for some students; students may be painfully shy, may be dealing with personal or health problems, or have learning challenges that prevent them from participating fully in the group project. Instructors must be prepared to accommodate such students and provide them with alternative requirements and necessary support.

Third, successful student research often demands institutional resources. Our funding from the CHOICE grant was used to create fliers and provide research participant incentives, such as the pizza, refreshments, and smoothie gift certificates. Some type of compensation for participants is crucial in focus group research. Without these tangible and unfortunately costly incentives, perhaps instructors in other courses would be willing to provide their students extra credit for participating as respondents. Students should also have access to digital recorders and a location on campus to conduct their focus group interviews.

The last and most important concern with the research project involves ethical issues related to student research projects. Throughout the course, students received training in ethics but were largely embarking on their first empirical research project. This inexperience, coupled with a sensitive research topic and the involvement of their peers as research participants, has the potential to create serious ethical problems. Furthermore, specific ethical dilemmas, such as limits to confidentiality and researcher control, are endemic to the method of focus group interviewing itself (Tolich 2009).

In focus group research, confidentiality cannot be absolutely ensured due to the presence of multiple participants. IRB protocol requires the student-researchers to maintain confidentiality by striking identifying information from the record

and using pseudonyms to protect participants. Ground rules are also set for participants before the focus group interview and in debriefing. Participants are reminded not to disclose personal or incriminating information about themselves or others and are explicitly asked not to share information with others about the focus group interview. Inexperienced researchers, however, may have difficulty enforcing these rules during the interview and may allow respondents to introduce new topics or overdisclose (Krueger 1997b).

Moreover, there are no formal ethical sanctions for a participant who reveals information shared by another focus group participant. Such scenarios are problematic for researchers and participants. These threats must be addressed during student-researcher training and explained to the participants prior to collecting data so that everyone is made adequately aware of the risks involved. Such ethical issues with student-led focus group research are unavoidable but can be minimized through strict adherence to IRB standards. This includes using best practices with informed consent forms (Morgan 1998; Tolich 2009), providing substantial training in focus group moderating, and simply encouraging student-researchers to study more-benign and less-fraught topics (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have provided a model for implementing a focus group research project into the undergraduate classroom. I described the logistics and practical limitations involved in structuring a research methods course around a substantive project to which students contribute individually and collectively. Applying this learning-by-doing approach with the underused method of focus group research provides advantages in learning, teaching, and scholarship. Evaluation of the project revealed that students improved their knowledge of research methods more generally and derived skills with long-term benefits. The potential disadvantages of such a project, including the substantial workload for the instructor and students, are outweighed by the advantages to be gained when faculty members infuse research and service into their teaching. Furthermore, such a project has the potential to contribute to advancing

knowledge about important issues on campus, in the broader community, and for academic audiences.

APPENDIX: PRIMARY FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The specific group interview questions fell into four major categories:

- I. Discussion of student social life
 1. Can you describe an average week-night for students who live on campus?
 2. Can you describe an average weekend night for students who live on campus?
 3. To what extent do students attend on-campus activities that occur after school hours?
 4. What are popular off-campus activities for students who live on campus?
 5. How does the university's dry campus policy affect student social life?

- II. Ratings of various drinking patterns on campus (questions developed following Fernler 2010)
 1. Please rate the following drinking patterns in terms of whether those patterns meet the definition of *regular use* to *binge drinking* on a five-point scale.
 2. For example, if students drink occasionally with parents, or consume alcohol anywhere from *twice a month* up to *four drinks daily*, which of these patterns qualify as regular use of binge drinking?

- III. Perceptions of risk factors related to drinking
 1. Can you describe some outcomes of student drinking here at the university?
 2. Are there positive effects that may arise from student alcohol use?
 3. Can you describe some negative effects that may arise from student alcohol use?
 4. How does alcohol use affect friendships and/or romantic relationships between students here?
 5. What effect do you think alcohol use has on student performance in school?

IV. Motivations for drinking and for abstention

1. Why do you think some students choose to drink alcohol?
2. What are the various reasons some students choose to drink only occasionally?
3. Why do some students abstain altogether?
4. Can you think of specific policies, programs, or activities our university could develop to improve the safety and quality of student social life?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Sally Sagen Lorentson for bringing the National College Athletic Association CHOICES grant to campus and to Amanda Namba, in the office of Student Life, for her assistance with focus group logistics. I would also like to thank Ben Diener, Kathleen S. Lowney, and the reviewers for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Finally, I appreciate the student-researchers and participants for their participation in this project.

NOTES

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Jeffrey C. Dixon and Patti Giuffre.

1. Please contact the author for further information regarding the surveys, including the pre- and post-questionnaires and additional data analysis.

FUNDING

This research was supported by the National College Athletic Association CHOICES Grant at California Lutheran University.

REFERENCES

- American College Health Association. 2011. *National College Health Assessment II*. Baltimore, MD: American College Health Association.
- Arum, Richard and Josipa Roska. 2010. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Asch, Solomon E. 1956. "Studies of Independence and Conformity: A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority." *Psychological Monographs* 70(9):1-70.
- Bach, Rebecca and Julianne Weinzimmer. 2011. "Exploring the Benefits of Community-based Research in a Sociology of Sexualities Course." *Teaching Sociology* 39(1):57-72.
- Bloor, Michael, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, and Kate Robson. 2001. *Focus Groups in Social Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bobo, Lawrence, Camille L. Zubrinsky, James H. Johnson Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver. 1995. "Work Orientation, Job Discrimination, and Ethnicity: A Focus Group Perspective." Pp. 45-85 in *Research in the Sociology of Work*, Vol. 5, edited by R. L. Simpson and I. H. Simpson. Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Braxton, John M. 1996. "Contrasting Perspectives on the Relationship between Teaching and Research." *New Directions for Institutional Research* 1996(90):5-14.
- Broadbear, James T., Terrence P. O'Toole, and Lisa K. Angermeier-Howard. 2000. "Focus Group Interviews with College Students about Binge Drinking." *International Electronic Journal of Health Education* 3(2):89-96.
- Broughton, Chad. 2011. "Making the Undergraduate Classroom into a Policy Think Tank: Reflections from a Field Methods Class." *Teaching Sociology* 39(1):73-87.
- Carey, Martha Ann. 1995. "Comment: Concerns in the Analysis of Focus Group Data." *Qualitative Health Research* 5(4):487-95.
- Chambliss, Daniel F. and Russell K. Schutt. 2010. *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage/Pine Forge Press.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 1991. "Translating Graduate Qualitative Methods into Undergraduate Teaching: Intensive Interviewing as Case Example." *Teaching Sociology* 19(3):384-95.
- Colbeck, Carol L., Susan E. Campbell, and Stefani A. Bjorklund. 2000. "Grouping in the Dark: What College Students Learn from Group Projects." *Journal of Higher Education* 71(1):60-83.
- Collier, Peter J. and David L. Morgan. 2002. "Community Service through Facilitating Focus Groups: The Case for a Methods-based Service Learning Course." *Teaching Sociology* 30(2):185-99.
- Crull, Sue R. and Susan M. Collins. 2004. "Adapting Traditions: Teaching Research Methods in a Large Class Setting." *Teaching Sociology* 32(2):206-12.
- Cutler, Stephen J. 1987. "The A.C.E. Freshman Survey as a Baseline Instrument for Survey Projects in Research Methods Courses." *Teaching Sociology* 15(2):121-27.
- DeMartini, Joseph R. 1983. "Sociology, Applied Work, and Experiential Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 11(1):17-31.
- Douglas, Kathy A., Janet L. Collins, Charles Warren, Laura Kann, Robert Gold, Sonia Clayton, James G. Ross, and Lloyd J. Kolbe. 1997. "Results from the 1995 National College Health Risk Behavior Survey." *Journal of American College Health* 46(2):55-66.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Emery, Eileen M., Gwendolyn P. Ritter-Randolph, Anne L. Stozier, and Robert J. McDermott. 1993. "Using Focus Group Interviews to Identify Salient Issues Concerning College Students' Alcohol Abuse." *Journal of American College Health* 41(5):195-98.

- Fernsler, Keith. 2010. "Risky Business: Youth and Underage Alcohol Consumption." Retrieved August 27, 2012 (<http://www.dickinsoncap.org/projectace/Files/focusgroupreport2010.pdf>).
- Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey. 1994. "Interviewing: The Art of Science." Pp. 361–76 in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gary, Paul S. and Phylis A. Meighen. 1980. "Learning Research Methods by Doing Research." *Improving College and University Teaching* 28(4):160–65.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Gondolf, Edward W. 1980. "Learning in the Community: An Undergraduate Training Program." *Teaching Sociology* 7(2):127–40.
- Gondolf, Edward W. 1985. "Teaching about Utopian Societies: An Experiential Approach to Sociological Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 12(2):229–41.
- Grant, Linda, Max Heinrich, Steven S. Martin, and Ellen Van Eck. 1981. "The Detroit Tours: Experiential Learning within the Framework of a Large Lecture Course." *Teaching Sociology* 9(1):15–29.
- Greenberg, Norman. 1989. "An Experiential Learning Approach to the Teaching of Criminology, Juvenile Delinquency, and Social Deviance." *Teaching Sociology* 17(3):330–36.
- Hacker, Andrew and Claudia Dreifus. 2010. *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do about It*. New York: Times Books.
- Healey-Etten, Victoria and Shane Sharp. 2010. "Teaching Beginning Undergraduates How to Do an In-depth Interview: A Teaching Note with 12 Handy Tips." *Teaching Sociology* 38(2):157–65.
- Hollander, Jocelyn A. 2004. "The Social Contexts of Focus Groups." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33(5):602–37.
- Hopkinson, Gillian and Margaret Hogg. 2004. "Teaching and Learning about Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences: An Experiential Learning Approach amongst Marketing Students." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28(3):307–20.
- Jowett, Madeleine and Gill O'Toole. 2006. "Focusing Researchers' Minds: Contrasting Experiences of Using Focus Groups in Feminist Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 6(4):453–72.
- Keen, Mike F. 1996. "Teaching Qualitative Methods: A Face-to-Face Encounter." *Teaching Sociology* 24(2):166–76.
- Kidd, Pamela S. and Mark B. Parshall. 2000. "Getting the Focus and the Group: Enhancing Analytical Rigor in Focus Group Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 10(3):293–308.
- Kitzinger, Jenny. 1994. "The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction between Research Participants." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16(1):103–21.
- Kitzinger, Jenny and Rosaline S. Barbour. 1999. "Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups." Pp. 1–20 in *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory, and Practice*, edited by R. S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, Richard A. 1997a. *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, Richard A. 1997b. *Moderating Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey. 2009. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lofland, John and Lyn H. Lofland. 1984. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Longmore, Monica A., Dana Dunn, and Glen R. Jarboe. 1996. "Learning by Doing: Group Projects in Research Methods Classes." *Teaching Sociology* 24(1):84–91.
- Lorentson, Sally Sagen. 2010. "Female Intercollegiate Athlete Alcohol Use: The Impact of Peer Social Networks on the Alcohol Use of NCAA Division III Athletes." PhD dissertation, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University, Washington, DC.
- MacDougall, Colin and Frances Baum. 1997. "The Devil's Advocate: A Strategy to Avoid Groupthink and Stimulate Discussion in Focus Groups." *Qualitative Health Research* 7(4):532–41.
- Macheski, Ginger E., Jan Buhmann, Kathleen S. Lowney, and Melanie E. L. Bush. 2008. "Overcoming Student Disengagement and Anxiety in Theory, Methods, and Statistics Courses by Building a Community of Learners." *Teaching Sociology* 36(1):42–48.
- Marullo, Sam, Roxanne Moayed, and Deanna Cooke. 2009. "C. Wright Mills's Friendly Critique of Service Learning and an Innovative Response: Cross-institutional Collaborations for Community-based Research." *Teaching Sociology* 37(1):61–75.
- McDonald, Katrina Bell and Adia M. Harvey Wingfield. 2009. "(In)visibility Blues: The Paradox of Institutional Racism." *Sociological Spectrum* 29(1):28–50.
- Miles, Matthew B. and A. Michael Huberman. 1984. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, David L. 1995. "Why Things (Sometimes) Go Wrong in Focus Groups." *Qualitative Health Research* 5(4):516–23.
- Morgan, David L. 1996. "Focus Groups." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22:129–52.
- Morgan, David L. 1997. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, David L. 1998. *The Focus Group Guidebook: Focus Group Kit*. Vol. 1. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, David L. and Richard A. Krueger. 1993. "When to Use Focus Groups and Why." Pp. 3–19 in *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of Art*, edited by D. L. Morgan. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- National College Athletic Association. 2012. "CHOICES Grant Program Home Page." Retrieved August 27, 2012 ([http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/\(ncaahome?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/ncaa/ncaa/academics+and+athletes/personal+welfare/health+and+safety/choices+grant+program+home+page\)](http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/(ncaahome?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/ncaa/ncaa/academics+and+athletes/personal+welfare/health+and+safety/choices+grant+program+home+page))).
- Neuman, Ruth. 1992. "Perceptions of the Teaching-research Nexus: A Framework for Analysis." *Journal of Higher Education* 23(2):159–71.
- Nyden, Phil. 1991. "Teaching Qualitative Methods: An Interview with Phil Nyden." *Teaching Sociology* 19(3):396–402.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation Method*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pedersen, Daphne E. 2010. "Active and Collaborative Learning in an Undergraduate Sociological Theory Course." *Teaching Sociology* 38(3):197–206.
- Peek, Lori and Alice Fothergill. 2009. "Using Focus Groups: Lessons from Studying Daycare Centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina." *Qualitative Research* 9(1):31–59.
- Raddon, Mary-Beth, Caleb Nault, and Alexis Scott. 2008. "Integrating the Complete Research Project into a Large Qualitative Methods Course." *Teaching Sociology* 36(2):141–49.
- Ripptoe, Joseph K. 1977. "The Undergraduate Education in Sociology: A Case for Experiential Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 4(3):239–50.
- Rohall, David E., Catherine L. Morgan, Cliff Brown, and Elizabeth Caffrey. 2004. "Introducing Methods of Sociological Inquiry Using Live-data Exercises." *Teaching Sociology* 32(4):401–407.
- Schmid, Thomas J. 1992. "Class-room Based Ethnography: A Research Pedagogy." *Teaching Sociology* 20(1):28–35.
- Singleton, Royce A., Jr., 2007. "The Campus Survey: Integrating Pedagogy, Scholarship, and Evaluation." *Teaching Sociology* 35(1):48–61.
- Smithson, Janet. 2000. "Using and Analyzing Focus Groups: Limitations and Possibilities." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3(2):103–19.
- Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Takata, Susan R. and Wanda Leiting. 1987. "Learning by Doing: The Teaching of Sociological Research Methods." *Teaching Sociology* 15(2):144–50.
- Taylor, Frank. 2003. "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books." *Teaching Sociology* 31(3):300–11.
- Teixeira-Poit, Stephanie M., Abigail E. Cameron, and Michael D. Schulman. 2011. "Experiential Learning and Research Ethics: Enhancing Knowledge through Action." *Teaching Sociology* 39(3):244–58.
- Tolich, Martin. 2009. "The Principle of Caveat Emptor: Confidentiality and Informed Consent as Endemic Ethical Dilemmas in Focus Group Research." *Bioethical Inquiry* 6(1):99–108.
- Trepagnier, Barbara. 2001. "Deconstructing Categories: The Exposure of Silent Racism." *Symbolic Interaction* 24(2):141–64.
- Walden, Chonda and Reginald Fennell. 1995. "Using Focus Groups to Assess the Sexual Health Needs of College Women." *Journal of College Student Development* 36(2):188–91.
- Warner, Jessica, Timothy R. Weber, and Ricardo Albanes. 1999. "'Girls Are Retarded When They're Stoned': Marijuana and the Construction of Gender Roles among Adolescent Females." *Sex Roles* 40(1/2): 24–43.
- Webster, David S. 1986. "Research Productivity and Classroom Teaching Effectiveness." *Instructional Evaluation* 9(1):14–20.
- Winn, Sandra. 1995. "Learning by Doing: Teaching Research Methods through Student Participation in a Commissioned Research Project." *Studies in Higher Education* 20(2):203–14.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Molly George is an assistant professor in the criminal justice and sociology departments at California Lutheran University. She teaches courses in research methods, the sociology of sport, deviance, and white-collar crime. Her research interests include immigration detention and enforcement, work and occupations, and gender.