

Conducting transnational focus group discussions: Lessons from the HEUREC project

HEUREC Discussion Paper 3

Dr. Inga Gaižauskaitė
Technical University Darmstadt
Residenzschloss 1
64283 Darmstadt
Germany
inga.gaizauskaite@gmail.com

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2 Introduction

The focus group discussion method allows for generating an interactive exchange between purposefully selected participants, resulting in expressions of collective reasoning about a specific topic. The discussion resembles a real-life conversation where one's perspective is expressed in relation and/or reaction to the perspectives of others. We therefore chose this type of communicative interaction as the most conducive for the HEUREC project which aimed to uncover how European citizens understand and debate issues of solidarity, reciprocity, and fairness in the European Union (EU). From previous studies, we know about citizens' attitudes towards the EU, solidarity, and related topics based on data from the representative, cross-country, cross-sectional surveys (e.g. Eurobarometer surveys (Eurobarometer n.d.); see also Bauer 2019; Dąbrowski et al. 2021; Gerhards et al. 2019; Lengfeld & Kley 2021; Reinl et al. 2023). However, surveys commonly include a limited number of standard questions on a selected topic. Such questions do not provide deeper insights into the meanings and respondents' reasoning behind categorised response alternatives. Resting against it, we conducted focus group discussions to uncover meanings, arguments, and underlying assumptions that average citizens make in their collective reasoning about solidarity. The main corpus of the comparative HEUREC data consists of 27 focus group discussions conducted in nine Eurozone countries: Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain. In each country, we invited participants from three sociodemographic groups to discuss their expectations of solidarity towards fellow European citizens, European-level institutions, and other EU member states. With the help of the focus group method, we were able to identify conceptions of solidarity and related statements about if, when, how, or why it is reasonable to be solidary in the EU. We were also able to trace some solidarity-related topoi or commonplaces and reconstruct two country storylines of European integration (for more details see Egner et al. 2024). For the purposes of this paper, hereinafter we refer to this component of the HEUREC project as “comparative focus group research”.

In addition, the HEUREC project planned to prompt a transnational dialogue, inviting people who initially participated in focus group discussions in their respective countries to jointly debate the same issues related to solidarity. Namely, we attempted to conduct “transnational” focus group discussions where participants from nine EU member states would gather and exchange ideas about solidarity in the EU with their fellow European citizens. We presumed that such a setup would provide unique insights into how perceptions of and reasoning about solidarity evolve in a communicative cross-country interaction.

Although scholars recognise the utility of the focus group discussion method in cross-national and cross-cultural research, it has been used in such research to a limited extent (Colucci 2008; van Bezouw et al. 2019). There remains “little literature and guidance on how to conduct cross-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-country focus groups” (Pinto da Costa 2021, p. 2). To our best knowledge, the configuration of truly transnational focus groups as applied in the HEUREC project is not common in social science research. Therefore, to contribute to the field, this paper presents a methodological reflection on the attempt to implement transnational, multi-lingual focus group discussions in face-to-face mode.

In the first part of this paper, I discuss the focus group discussion method in general and its application in cross-country environments in particular (see sections 3 and 4). Against this

background, I then describe our experience when implementing transnational focus groups and reflect upon the key challenges encountered and lessons learned (see Section 5).

3 What is focus group discussion method?

Developed by Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld as early as the 1940s, later focus groups disappeared from social sciences for a couple of decades and were mostly limited to marketing research, re-emerging in social sciences in the 1980s (Morgan 2022). Since then, focus groups have taken root in social research methodology (Krueger 1998; Morgan 1997) and are established as a self-sufficient method, producing valuable qualitative results in their own right and not only as an exploratory technique to be followed up by quantitative research (Morgan 2022). Focus groups are currently used across different fields of scholarly research (e.g. sociology, political science, social work, education studies, public health research) and by different organisations (e.g. governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, in community settings, see Barbour 2018; Colucci 2007; Krueger & Casey 2015).

Under qualitative research tradition, focus group discussions are a method of data collection in the form of an interactive, specific issues-focused discussion between a group of purposefully selected participants and steered by a trained moderator, commonly guided by a flexible questionnaire (Hennink 2014; Hennink et al. 2020). The added value of focus groups is the presence of group dynamics and the possibility of interaction between participants (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999; Merton et al. 1990; Morgan 1996). Participants are provided with an opportunity to express their individual beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours and to react to each other, for example, (dis)agree, question or prompt new ideas. The method allows capturing the active co-production of meaning in the group context and how meaning is negotiated between the participants (Barbour 2018; Wilkinson 1998). Interaction in a focus group discussion resembles how issues would be discussed in a real-life situation (Acocella & Cataldi 2021; Wellings et al. 2000) but at the same time is purposefully guided by a moderator to keep the focus on the issues relevant to research purposes. The interaction between group participants, therefore, produces data that would not be triggered when, for example, interviewing individual participants (Clark 2012; Morgan 1997; Wellings et al. 2000). As Acocella and Cataldi (2021) highlight, “through dialogical thinking and communication, the focus group allows the researcher to examine language, thinking and knowledge in action” (Ch. 1, p. 15).

The value and advantages of the focus group discussion method, however, do not come easily. Next to common struggles of conducting qualitative research (e.g. Flick 2007) focus groups have method-specific challenges. Among such challenges are sampling decisions, selection and recruitment of participants, and sample assessment (Carlsen & Glenton 2011; Krueger & Casey 2015). Managing the dynamics of group interaction (e.g. over-domination of individual participants; the emergence of a conflict) is another feature of the focus group discussion method that requires particular preparation and skills (Hennink et al. 2020; Stewart et al. 2007). It is hardly possible to foresee the characteristics of communication of individual participants and how the combination of them will work out in each discussion. Communication and interaction patterns emerge “on the go” thus keeping the position of the moderator strenuous throughout each discussion. Alongside, focus groups are prone to distinct ethical challenges (e.g. ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity are respected) (Sim and Waterfield 2019). Also, it can be difficult to organise the meetings: commonly, between four and twelve participants have to be invited to gather at the same time in the same place

(which, in turn, has to be appropriate to accommodate comfortable seating for a group of people) (Hennink et al. 2020; Krueger & Casey 2015). Whether organising a focus group face-to-face or remotely, coordinating people to be available at the same time and ensuring that they show up is not a trivial task (Gaižauskaitė 2012). Finally, although group interaction and dialogical thinking are among the main advantages of the focus group discussion method, Boateng (2012) warns to be cautious about the negative effects of groupthink, which may overrun “individuality, uniqueness, and independent thinking expected of respondents” (p. 56). Therewith, Barbour (2018) observes that focus groups may have a restricted capacity to elicit coherent narratives as several participants may be competing to tell their individual stories thus producing “noise”, making stories nonsequential and data analysis frustrating.

Furthermore, the advantages and challenges of focus groups “multiply” or “expand” with each additional discussion planned in individual research, even more so when the method is employed for cross-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-country research. The core of the method does not differ (Morgan 2019), however, collecting focus group data in culturally diverse settings presents “unique logistic and analytical challenges” (Pinto da Costa 2021, p. 1).

4 Focus group research in cross-country settings

There can be different configurations of focus groups conducted in cross-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-country research. If one only considers the dimension of language, it is possible to have diverse multi-lingual arrangements, for example, there can be a setup where the language of a researcher is different from the language of participants or also each participant speaks a different language. Each case will require a feasible solution to ensure efficient communication between all parties involved. It may be reasonable to find an intermediary language (e.g. Gaižauskaitė et al. 2021, where focus group discussions with international students from different countries were conducted in English), use some type of interpretation (e.g. Quintanilha et al. 2015 used real-time interpreters) or employ another solution of language assistance. To put it briefly, each configuration of languages, cultures, countries, and other circumstances in a planned focus group research leads to a specific set of challenges. For example, Hennink (2007) points out that conducting focus groups in developing countries may require unique solutions compared to focus group research in Western, developed countries.

Designing the multi-country setup of focus group research for the main part of the HEUREC project,¹ we relied on the presumption that such methodology provides with meaningful comparisons between the selected countries (van Bezouw et al. 2019). It is possible to ask participants from different countries the same questions, observe how their answers develop in national contexts, and further compare emerging cross-national differences and/or similarities. When planning and implementing such focus groups, researchers need to achieve a distinct balance: cross-national and/or cross-cultural focus groups require researchers to be culturally sensitive while still ensuring data comparability (Colucci 2008). For comparability, a level of standardisation of the research design has to be set (van Bezouw et al. 2019; Pinto da Costa 2021). For cultural sensitivity, a level of flexibility is unavoidable and researchers

1 To summarise briefly, the HEUREC project conducted focus groups in nine different countries, where selected participants in each country discussed the issue of solidarity with their co-nationals in their respective language.

need to carefully consider culture-specific contexts and influences (e.g. Hennink 2007; Morgan 2019).

Preparing to conduct the comparative focus group research within the HEUREC research, the international team of researchers from all nine countries worked together to ensure the comparability of the collected data. For example, we collaboratively developed the set of criteria for selection of the participants and coordinated the recruitment of participants in between country cases to ensure compositions of focus groups in all nine countries were as compatible with the required criteria as possible. Respectively, we aimed to standardise the discussion guide, guidelines for moderators, informed consent forms for participants, and other elements required by the method (for more details see Egner et al. 2024). Nevertheless, we also respected that there will be cultural and linguistic factors influencing organisation and implementation of focus groups in each country. Researchers in our international team were also responsible for organising and moderating the focus groups in their respective countries, applying their cultural and language competencies whenever needed.

The experience with comparative focus group research served as the basis to prepare for transnational focus group discussions, where *all* parties involved were of different origins and languages: participants resided in different countries, were of different nationalities, and spoke different languages from each other and from researchers (also, the researchers team was international) and were invited to meet face-to-face in a designated location abroad (i.e. Brussels). In the following section, we describe the process of planning and conducting transnational focus group discussions, sharing the main choices and challenges encountered.

5 The HEUREC attempt to conduct transnational focus group discussions

When envisioning the transnational component in the HEUREC project, we presumed that joint nine-country focus group discussions would create a version of a European debate space. We expected to generate fresh insights on how solidarity in the EU is negotiated when going beyond participants' national contexts. Additionally, we considered we may detect shifts in reasoning about solidarity as compared to discussions in the national contexts or identify some overarching European storylines.

To facilitate transnational dialogue, we used a face-to-face mode of focus group discussions (Hennink 2014). Considering the research topic (i.e. solidarity in the EU) and the fact that participants came from multiple EU member states, we chose Brussels as a feasible event location. Transnational focus group discussions took place on the 21st of October, 2022.

The setup of transnational focus groups relied on the previously conducted comparative HEUREC focus group research, therefore some of the methodological and organisational choices were pre-defined. Nevertheless, we experienced challenges specific to the transnational context. Below, we highlight the following: solutions for multi-lingual communication, involvement of participants, environment of the focus group event, moderation, and incentives to the participants.

5.1 Language as the key consideration

The value of focus group discussions relies on the quality of communicative interaction among the participants and the researchers' access to the views verbally expressed by the participants.

Ideally, a focus group discussion should be conducted in the language spoken (preferred) by the participants to ensure the easiness of interaction and authenticity of their speeches (Stewart et al. 2007). Correspondingly, it is preferable to avoid (or minimise) linguistic and cultural barriers between participants, the moderator, and/or, subsequently, the researchers (involved in the analytical cycle). It is recognised that translation and other language assistance can be sources of inaccuracy or misinterpretation in cross-language research (Tsai et al. 2004; Wallin & Ahlstrom 2006).

In the case of transnational focus group discussions, however, some kind of “linguistic intermediary” was necessary to enable communication among speakers of nine different languages. We decided to use simultaneous real-time interpretation between the languages of selected countries and the English language. Each participant could speak their native language and respectively (with the help of special headphones) hear the translated responses (speeches) of other participants. We used an interpretation service company that assembled teams of two interpreters for each language. This setup ensured that language-wise, our recruitment was not limited to those who spoke English and ensured that participants were able to express themselves freely in their native language. The informal feedback that we received from the participants at the end of the event confirmed that the possibility to speak in their own language facilitated their contribution to the discussions.

The potential downside of such a decision was that some of the authentic content was “lost in translation” as each expression by the participants was translated into English and then into each of the other nine languages. A specific challenge that we encountered and were unable to resolve was the permission to record and use English translation of the focus group discussions. We were not aware that recording of interpreters’ speeches (i.e. texts of English translations) fell under specific copyright requirements and thus needed to be specified in the interpretation service agreement (also, it was subject to additional compensation). This was not explained to us by the service provider in advance and became known during the focus group event. Therefore, the data could only be recorded as original speeches of participants, resulting in multiple hours of composite recording in nine interchanging languages. The capacity to further work on such recordings was limited in the HEUREC project and we had to rely on field notes and summaries of transnational focus group discussions made by the research team during the event.

5.2 Composition of focus group discussions and participant recruitment

The composition of focus groups and the recruitment of participants for the transnational discussions in Brussels were pre-defined by the earlier stage of the project (i.e. comparative focus group research). To outline shortly, in each country we conducted three focus group discussions within different sociodemographic groups: high-skilled, higher-paid employees and managers; lower-paid workers and unemployed persons, and young adults, mostly university students (see more details in Egner et al. 2024). Each discussion assembled between four and eight participants (Krueger & Casey 2015). The transnational focus groups kept the pattern of three sociodemographic groups: from each country, we invited three participants (i.e. one from each sociodemographic group). Respectively, we expected to have nine participants (one per country) in each discussion.

The written informed consent forms² that we used for the comparative focus group research already conducted in the national contexts already informed each participant about the possibility of being later invited to a transnational focus group discussion. Each participant was able to indicate if they agreed to be contacted about it or not.³ We therefore had a pre-defined pool of potential participants to be invited to Brussels. The invitation procedure combined methodological and pragmatical criteria. As mentioned before, the main requirement was to have one participant from each sociodemographic group per country. We also aimed to maintain gender balance: ideally, it should be avoided that all participants from one country were of the same gender. However, the pragmatic aspect was a crucial intermediary in the invitation procedure. Transnational focus group discussions required additional effort and dedication from participants: they had to be able to spare at least three days to travel and take part in the event. We constantly coordinated the invitation and acceptance process between our international research team members to ensure that the final composition of the three transnational focus groups corresponded to the country and sociodemographic group framework and were gender balanced. Eventually, we had the expected nine participants in each of the three groups and there were 15 female and 12 male participants. Overall, the logistics of assembling the desired composition of transnational focus groups was resource-intensive: next to the financial cost of international transportation and accommodation of 27 participants, there was a constant risk of untimely changes on the part of participants, requiring regular communication and sometime strenuous input from the international project team.

5.3 Environment for the transnational focus group discussions

The environment where focus group discussions take place can have an impact on the quality and style of the interactions (Hennink 2014; Krueger & Casey 2015). Commonly, it is suggested that the environment has to be welcoming and comfortable, making people feel at ease to interact and providing enough privacy for the discussion (e.g. Hennink 2014). Planning to have transnational focus group discussions in face-to-face mode and with simultaneous multi-lingual interpretation presumed special technical requirements for the space. Preferably, it had equipment for interpretation and communication for the participants (e.g. headphones, microphones) and special booths for the interpreters. We organised the transnational focus group discussions with the support of and in collaboration with the European Committee of the Regions. They agreed to host the event in one of their conference halls equipped for the simultaneous interpretation. The room could accommodate a large international project team and all transnational focus group participants. However, it did not provide the privacy that would normally be required for the environment of focus group research, give the “parliament-style” of the room setup (curved desks opposite of the president’s desk etc.). We knew in advance that we had to compromise about the environment to ensure the possibility of as efficient as possible communication between the multi-lingual participants. Respectively, the participants were informed in advance that the transnational discussions would be a partially open event where the project team and participants from other focus groups remained in the conference hall during their discussion. We acknowledge

2 For the transnational focus group discussions, we also used a written informed consent form, designed to address specific aspects of such an event format.

3 A majority of the participants expressed their interest in transnational focus groups. It is important to note that before making their decision some of them clarified that they did not speak English (or any other foreign language) and if they were eligible. Our decision to use simultaneous interpretation ensured that language was not a barrier in the recruitment and invitation process.

that such a setup could intimidate some of the participants and make their input in the discussions more restricted and formal than in a more private environment. Notwithstanding, all the participants were already familiar with the proceeding of a focus group discussion format from their national focus groups and thus knew what to expect in advance. Moreover, participants had a chance to interact and become more comfortable with their peers before the discussions (e.g. during their travel from home countries). The informal feedback from the participants showed that generally, participants liked the environment and they thought that we managed to create an atmosphere where they felt confident enough to express themselves.

5.4 Discussion guide and moderation

We kept the core of the discussion guide from the comparative component of the HEUREC research, namely, the three scenarios: we asked participants to discuss transnational solidarity in the case of a natural disaster; in the case of a financial crisis, and when dealing with social and regional disparities in the EU.⁴ It served to see if and how the ideas would shift when participants discussed solidarity in the EU with their European fellow citizens. However, we shortened the original discussion guide minimising the ice-breaking and wrap-up stages estimating that the number of participants (nine in each group) and simultaneous interpretation will require more time than a regular discussion. We kept the time of each transnational discussion to the commonly required limit of 90 minutes (Hennink et al. 2020).

To balance the workload, we assigned a different moderator from the project team for each transnational focus group. They mostly followed the moderator guidelines that were prepared for international focus group discussions. However, to adapt to the transnational compositions of the focus groups, the moderators had to lean towards a more directive style (see e.g. Duchesne et al. 2013; Myers 1998) of moderation to ensure that participants from each country expressed their ideas at least when the main discussion questions were raised. Otherwise, moderators allowed for spontaneous interaction between the participants when they wanted to comment in response to the ideas of other participants, for example, to counter-argue, agree, or contribute. Initially, we considered that a moderator could speak English as an overarching language while the participants were instructed to speak their native language. We noticed, however, that in such a case some of the participants also switched to the English language. To avoid disbalance or making other participants feel uncomfortable (e.g. pressed to speak English or embarrassed that they are unable to do it), moderators also switched to their native language thus relying on simultaneous interpretation equally for everyone.

5.5 Incentives for the participants

It is debated in the methodological literature whether participants should receive any incentives for contributing to the focus group discussions and what kind of incentives were preferable (e.g. Stewart et al. 2007; Krueger & Casey 2015). In the HEUREC transnational focus groups, we did not provide any financial remuneration to the participants. However, we covered all travel and accommodation costs. Considering the effort participants had to invest, as a thank you, we invited them to a restaurant dinner (together with the project team) after the event of the transnational focus groups. Based on the informal feedback, participants also

4 The discussion guide is available in TU Darmstadt's institutional repository TUDatalib. The HEUREC data set can be accessed via this link: <https://doi.org/10.48328/tudatalib-1346>.

experienced intangible rewards. From our conversations with participants, we found out that for some, it was the first trip to Brussels. For the majority, it was the first visit to an EU institution. Participants reflected that this experience made the EU more tangible and real. In particular, they appreciated the possibility to interact with their European fellow citizens, exchange ideas, and experience a sense of commonality with them.

6 Concluding remarks

If focus groups in multiple countries for comparative purposes already presumed methodological and practical difficulties, conducting transnational focus group discussions as a research endeavour proved to be particularly challenging. To support the implementation of the transnational component of the HEUREC project, we relied on the previously established international team of researchers, available in each of the selected countries. We built upon the methodological framework of the comparative focus groups research thus having part of the solutions and instruments ready for the transnational focus groups. We also relied on relevant guidance in methodological literature on cross-country and cross-lingual research. Nevertheless, when faced with the complexity of the implementation of transnational focus group discussions, we experienced dilemmas and hindrances that required unconventional solutions and compromises. Reflecting upon the lessons learned in the process, we can outline several key messages for future research.

Transnational focus groups do have the potential to produce a unique corpus of data and contribute novel knowledge about collective reasoning beyond one's national context. They could further broaden the perspectives if applied in combination with other methods (e.g. comparative surveys). However, to ensure valid, methodologically and ethically sound data, the planning and implementation of transnational focus group discussions require substantial material, human, and time resources. Transnational research can also bring unusual legal and/or ethical dilemmas, for example, ensuring respect for confidentiality and privacy or, as we learned, specific copyright regulations.

A trusted, culturally and linguistically competent international team is the key asset. It is the link between transnational participants and the research. Recruitment, communication, building trust and rapport, organisational matters, and many other tasks rely on team members available in each country. Building such a team in advance and establishing an efficient communication network is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of transnational focus groups.

Language and mode of discussion are the key factors to consider because other choices (e.g. location, time, moderation) largely depend on them. It is expected that a linguistic intermediary will be needed and there will be some losses of authentic meaning. The task is then to minimise these losses. We aimed to achieve it by having English as an in-field facilitator of the communication instead of relying on later multiple translations of transcribed recordings in original languages (also, it was a feasible solution with nine different languages being used in the field). Unfortunately, considering the unexpected unavailability of the English recording, it became a big limitation of our research as we could not employ the data to its full extent and potential.

Finally, purely pragmatic and practical aspects can have a huge impact on the success of transnational focus group research, particularly if it is planned in a face-to-face format. They include organisational tasks transcending the borders of multiple countries. Considering that our research was limited to the EU context, we avoided some of the obstacles (e.g. there was no need for travel visas). Nevertheless, the logistics of the event required intense preparation and readiness to manage emerging risks (e.g. replacement of last-minute dropouts among the participants).

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