

# Focus Groups: History, Epistemology and Non-Individualistic Consumer Research

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## Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the development and application of focus groups. It rethinks the conventional history associated with this approach in at least four ways. We reinsert a forgotten pioneer of focus groups, Herta Herzog, into our narrative. Secondly, we trace the emergence of group based research to the work of applied psychologists in the early twentieth century and argue that the conditions of possibility for the uptake of this method were contingent on the asking of “why” questions. We follow the thread of “why” questions from the applied psychologists through to motivation research and the promotion of focus groups by Herzog to practitioners. Exploring the literature on motivation research unearths a further novel contribution: we excavate the use of “interpretative focus groups” by this community of practice. In addition, our close reading of motivation research and focus groups permits us to problematise the distinctions made by Calder (1977). We subsequently trace the uptake of this methodology in the tobacco industry as a means of making an epistemological and political argument for the greater use of focus groups. Initially, we do so by charting the rise of social constructionism and non-individualistic consumer research. This enables us to navigate the highways and byways of discursive psychology, interpretive research, Consumer Culture Theory and on to feminist and Critical Marketing Studies. The engagement with focus groups with respect to the latter traditions is woefully underdeveloped. Our political argument is that focus group methodology can speak to the interests of many constituents in marketing theory and practice. It is not wedded to any specific social or political agenda. This means its potential contribution to the study of consumption, markets and culture is multi-faceted.

**Keywords:** Focus group; marketing theory; methodology; Herta Herzog; Robert Merton; Paul Lazarsfeld; consumer culture theory; critical marketing studies.

## Introduction

Focus groups have a long and complicated history. They have been defined “as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” or firm sponsoring the study (Morgan 1996, 130) and represent one of the most popular methodological approaches in industry circles (Bartos 1986; Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). To set the scene for our narrative, we begin with a slight detour, engaging with a very early contribution that heralded the use of focus groups within sociology. This is followed by Merton’s explanation of his involvement with focus groups at the behest of Paul Lazarsfeld and his subsequent methodological and conceptual innovations in this area. We question the idea that Merton is the “father of the focus group” by highlighting Herta Herzog’s<sup>i</sup> role in the development of this approach<sup>ii</sup> (Rowland and Simonson 2014). These narratives provide us with a shared understanding of what exactly a “focussed interview”<sup>iii</sup> entailed before it was transformed into a “focus group”. We then turn to the archives of multiple academic

disciplines – all of which engage with consumption, markets and culture – to document another forgotten history of group based research.

We trace the history of this methodological approach to the early twentieth century when the conditions of possibility for the arrival of focused interviews and group research were emplaced. It is suggested that we need to read the emergence of focused group interviews against developments in psychology, particularly applied psychology (i.e. “order of merit” research), as it was within this contextual and disciplinary orbit that the first movements towards the conduct of psychological and marketing oriented research within a group situation are found.

These studies were not yet focus groups as we know them, but focused experiments with an interview component – an approach that bears a “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein 1953) to Merton’s exposition of the focused interview approach. We say family resemblance here as the “order of merit” literature has some characteristics in common with later focus groups despite not being conceptualised as focus groups. There are elements of introspection, group discussion, acknowledgement of interpretive differences and critique, and these features were taken-up and translated by later scholars and practitioners even if they did not appreciate their connection or debt to this body of work. In exploring these resemblances we thereby move across multiple literatures that did not generally cross-cite each other, yet their intellectual parallels indicate a degree of analytical commensurability.

The limitations of “order of merit” studies, in particular, were appreciated by their key exponents. It was the recognition of the limited ability of “merit” research to answer “why” questions that cleaved a gap in our research foundations that Lazarsfeld (1937) filled by virtue of a series of papers that articulated an interpretive, qualitative approach, yet which also remained wedded to quantitative research. These forays into qualitative approaches were adopted by the motivation researchers and marketing practitioners most noticeably, whose use of focus groups ensured their survival until they were rediscovered by health, politics, education, and other researchers during the 1980s (Morgan 1996).

Arguably, focus groups still have unrealised potential within marketing and consumer research. As an approach, it speaks to the commitments of multiple constituents of our discipline, whether managerial, interpretive or critically oriented. In light of the critiques of epistemological and methodological individualism that have been prominent recently (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Moisaner et al 2009), and the rise of interest in research approaches that can tap into the structuring influences of cultural life, it is proposed that focus groups courtesy of their ability to explicate interactional elements of social discourse, might play a role in pushing forward the research frontiers of our more politically activist streams of marketing thought.

### **Sociology and Group Interviews**

To begin with, we need to undertake a slight intellectual detour in the interests of historical completeness into debates about the conceptual and epistemological importance of the group in sociological thinking (Bodenhafner 1923; Cooley 1909) and the value of “group interviews” (Bogardus 1926). These took place before the seminal work of Herta Herzog, Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld which set the “focused interview” approach firmly into motion (e.g. Merton et al 1956/1990, 135n1).

Within sociology, naturally enough, the idea that the group should be the focus of analytic attention has a long history. Simmel, among many others, carefully dissected the relationship

between the individual and group, stressing that the latter was not simply a quantitative extension of the former. For others, the individual and their behaviour had to be interpreted against the backdrop of the “social milieu” in which they were socialised and living (Bodenhafner 1923; Cravens and Burnham 1971). On this reading, people were not monads. They were not totally independent islands of perception and cognition adrift from the social environment in which they found themselves. They were constituted within a nexus of social relationships and interactions (e.g. Cooley 1902, 1909). It was only epistemological and methodological convenience that led to the focus on the individual rather than the group (Bodenhafner 1923), and group dynamics were not merely the collective articulations of a number of individuals. Rather, there was a qualitative difference in group articulations. This is an idea that would eventually feature significantly in focus group research whereby the group and their interaction is the centre of intellectual interest, not the individual.

It is within applied sociology that a historical precursor of focus groups is found. In his study of social distance (i.e. the extent to which people feel alien from those of other national and racial groups), E.S. Bogardus (1926) describes his use of the “group interview”. Initially, this is an individual interview based on fairly typical questionnaire research where respondents explain which groups they like, dislike or are neutral towards. They subsequently had to explain the reasoning behind their views to the rest of the group. This research was exploratory and used to identify those who should be interviewed in depth.

By contrast, in another study discussed in the 1926 paper, he labels his approach a “*discussion type of group interview*” (Bogardus 1926, 377; emphasis in original). This is similar to contemporary accounts of focus groups, inasmuch as it underlined the importance of the moderator, and was said to unearth information that an individual interview would be unable to access. Group dynamics were important in stimulating discussion and the result would not necessarily be a Habermasian style of consensus. While it might be pushing the frontiers of interpretation slightly, Bogardus’s assessment of the value and function of the group interview has some resemblance to discursive psychological attempts to unpack the social and relational nature of attitudes and cognitions. Within discursive psychology, these are not simply features of the individual psyche, but developed, affirmed and revised in social situations (discussed in more detail below). Bogardus (1926, 380) puts it in the following way:

“At nearly every group interview a question would elicit contradictory replies from two or more present. At once each would feel called upon to defend his position and in doing so would draw upon his store of reserve experiences in surprising ways. As a result of group discussion, certain persons [sic] present developed new points that had not previously occurred to them.”

It is fair to say that Bogardus’s group interview approach was mostly neglected in the history of sociology (although Merton et al (1956/1990) do cite him). What was to prove decisive in terms of leading to the “focused interview” and focus groups was the worsening political climate in Europe, the movement of European scholars to the United States fleeing Nazi persecution, and the Second World War (Lee 2008).

### **Robert Merton and the Focused Interview**

Merton’s contribution to what became known as the “focussed” or “focused” interview was somewhat serendipitous (Merton 1987). In 1941 Merton met with Lazarsfeld for supper. On arrival, an excited Lazarsfeld tells Merton that a government department, the Office of Facts and Figures, wanted to utilise his methodological skills in testing the effectiveness of morale

building propaganda efforts. In other words, this department was interested in “how” people responded to media broadcasts.

Both Lazarsfeld and Merton left their wives at home, heading to the studio<sup>iv</sup>. This is an interesting point in itself, as one of the major figures – perhaps the founding figure – in focus group research, Herta Herzog, was one of the pair (i.e. she was Lazarsfeld’s wife at the time) (Simonson forthcoming). At the studio, groups of consumers were being exposed to these communications and their responses registered using the Lazarsfeld-Stanton programme analyser. Via the respondent pushing the appropriate (green) button, this piece of technology recorded whether people liked a certain aspect of a broadcast. If they disliked it, they pressed the red button. If they were neutral, they did not press anything. This respondent material was used “to produce cumulative curves of likes and dislikes” (Merton 1987, 553). Obviously, such a graphical representation tells us very little about the reasons “why” people liked or disliked a particular segment of a radio programme. To elicit this information, Lazarsfeld prepared for a number of different groups to be interviewed about what specifically they liked (or not) about the media content they had commented upon. Merton, however, was not impressed with the moderator in charge of the group interviews. As he explained,

“I began passing notes to Paul [Lazarsfeld] about what I take to be the great deficiencies in the interviewer’s tactics and procedures. He was not focussing sufficiently on specifically indicated reactions, both individual and aggregated. He was inadvertently guiding responses; he was not eliciting spontaneous expressions of earlier responses when segments of the radio programme were played back to the group...I proceed to express my interest in the general format and to reiterate, at some length, my critique of the interviewing procedure. That, of course, is all Paul had to hear...he promptly co-opts me. “Well, Bob, it happens that we have another group coming in for a test. Will you show us how the interview should be done?”...and thus began my life with what would eventuate as the focussed-group interview.”

(Merton 1987, 553)

Merton’s involvement with this methodological innovation continued throughout the war period (e.g. Platt 1998, 24, 136). This research along with other studies conducted in association with the Office of Radio Research (founded 1937) and subsequently at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University (founded 1944) – both of which Lazarsfeld directed – enabled the refinement of the approach. But, as we shall question in more detail as this account progresses, Merton was not the originator of group interview research. From the late 1930s onwards, focused interviews, focused in that they relied on a stimulus (i.e. a radio broadcast or film) that helped direct the subsequent discussion, were being used in both single and group interview situations by Herzog and others (Simonson forthcoming; Fiske and Handel 1947, 391; Merton 1987, 554).

It is also important to appreciate that Merton and his co-authors did not invoke the terminology of “focus group” – some variant of “focussed” or “focused” interviews was always the lexicon of choice (Merton 1987). “Focus group” appears to be a result of authors reworking Merton’s ideas in conjunction with those drawn from literatures on the “group depth interview” (Goldman 1962), while shifting the analytic focus from the stimulus object used to elicit discussion to the constitution of the groups themselves (Lee 2010).

When reading Merton’s reflections on focused interviewing today and with knowledge of Paul Lazarsfeld’s writing on marketing, consumer research and the important role of interpretation in psychologically informed market studies, as well as Herzog’s

“gratifications” scholarship, we get a sense of the epistemological ground these authors were working. In their respective writings, they took the best insights from available theoretical (i.e. material drawn from behaviourism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, Critical Theory among many others) and conceptual resources (i.e. unconscious motives, the inferiority complex, repression, compliance, distortions, blockages) as well as from the various methodological traditions (quantitative and qualitative), using all to their advantage (e.g. Fullerton 1990, 1999; Simonson forthcoming).

Within Lazarsfeld’s (1934, 61) publications, for example, he unites “objective” and “subjective” data (see also Herzog 1941). In a sophisticated manner, he appreciates that: “Of course all data given by our respondents are subjective in the sense that they may be colored by the respondent’s attitude. But there are degrees of subjectivity. The price he paid last time or the brand he bought are in this sense objective data. Reasons for purchase, likes and dislikes, are subjective” (see also Dichter 1947, 438). In parallel fashion, Merton links objective data with subjective reactions. When conducting focused interviews with individuals or groups, he united content analysis of the particular stimulus object (i.e. objective data gathering) with the ruminations of the person or people concerned.

The elaboration of the focused interview process was a result of a number of factors. Theoretical influence was obviously important. Lazarsfeld was attuned to developments across the natural and social sciences, and well versed in mainstream and Critical Theory. The same can roughly be said of Herzog (cf. Simonson forthcoming). Merton, likewise, was developing a reputation as an important theorist and his interview stance was informed by the work of William Isaac Thomas and George Herbert Mead (Lee 2010). The contributions of these scholars directed Merton to the role of context and personal circumstances in defining the way we look at the world. In other words, they called attention to subjective factors shaping our worldview.

The traditional narrative maintains that Merton’s wartime research was further refined by involvement with Carl Hovland (Merton and Kendall 1946) and the seminal contributions to “gratifications” research undertaken by Herta Herzog (1941, 1944) (i.e. she did not assume *a priori* what function the media performed for audiences, but asked what benefits they received from their media consumption). Hovland was sophisticated on the quantitative front. Herzog in qualitative terms. Bringing their ideas together sparked theoretically and empirically nuanced research that tied quantitative approaches with methods that tapped into the perception of the respondent. Nonetheless, this narrative is not correct<sup>v</sup>.

As we have started to document, Herta Herzog was more than just a minor contributor to the development of individual focused interviews and their group variant. She was a “founding mother” of communication studies and “Madison Avenue legend” (Rowland and Simonson 2014). Herzog had been involved with Lazarsfeld<sup>vi</sup> since her Ph.D. research in the early 1930s, studying audience reactions to radio presenter voices and she knew Merton who worked for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at the same time as her (Perse 1996). In private correspondence, she registered the importance of Lazarsfeld’s (1935) reflections on, and promotion of, the value of interviewing (Simonson 2008; Simonson and Archer undated). But, as gestured above, it was Herzog who empirically developed these ideas, starting in 1933, when she began conducting individual and group interviews which continued as she moved into industry with the McCann-Erickson advertising agency in 1943; an agency that frequently used focus groups in its research (Samuel 2010; Simonson and Archer undated).

As such, Herzog deserves operational priority over Merton (without eliding the contribution of Bogardus). Bartos (1986, RC-4) attributes the first use of focus groups to Herzog and Rowland and Simonson (2014) assert in no uncertain terms that Merton has effectively written Herzog out of the history of focus groups:

“In addition to practicing the method earlier than Merton did, Herzog made the focus group a more central component of her research throughout her career...Despite this, Merton’s publications...on the focus group for the field of sociology progressively erased Herzog from the record. Purposefully or not, Merton, among the most influential American sociologists of the twentieth century contributed to the symbolic annihilation of Herzog and her work in establishing the practices of qualitative focused interviewing.”

(Rowland and Simonson 2014, 12-13)

What is of equal importance is that a close reading of her writing highlights that she works across a number of traditions central to this paper, without necessary registering it, including “order of merit” research – the psychological research specialism that forms a key but forgotten piece of the history of group based research.

### **The Individual and Group Interview Process**

Notwithstanding Merton’s historical amnesia, focused interviews as envisaged by Herzog, Merton and colleagues had to contain a quantitative and qualitative component. As Merton and Kendall (1946) explain, the initial quantitative element was the content analysis of the film or radio programme. This provided the objective data used for hypothesis generation and the production of interview schedules. The qualitative element tapped into the phenomenological lifeworld of the people being exposed to the stimulus. Survey research could extend the insights to a larger population (e.g. Merton et al 1946). This was not Merton and Kendall making the dubious case that qualitative research should be consigned to “exploratory” research. Somewhat pre-empting McCracken’s (1988) reflections in *The Long Interview* (McQuarrie 1990), Merton and Kendall appreciate the merits of both approaches, indicating the utility of qualitative research to make sense of “otherwise unintelligible” “previously ascertained experimental findings” (Merton and Kendall 1946, 557; see also Blankenship et al 1949, 425). This, of course, is an argument that has been used to legitimate the role of focus groups (e.g. Fern 2001) and ethnography in marketing research (e.g. Cayla and Arnould 2013).

In their 1946 paper, Merton and Kendall gesture to the limitations of content analysis when they write that understanding that people find a given programme “unpleasant” provided very little information. Generalities were not of interest, specificity was. The interviewer “must discover precisely what “unpleasant” denotes in this context; what further feelings were called into play; what personal associations came to mind; and the like” (Merton and Kendall 1946, 542). They had to be a “sympathetic listener” and “nondirective”, letting the respondent articulate what ideas and associations the stimuli evoked for them (Merton and Kendall 1946, 547).

Interviewers were encouraged to probe for specific data and stimulate the maximum range of ideas and perceptions from the interviewee possible. This is a theme of their paper which is much more developed in a later book project (Merton et al 1956/1990), especially in terms of their review of the benefits derived from group interviewing. They are interested in overcoming inhibitions (Merton et al 1946; Merton et al 1956/1990), encouraging people to recall “forgotten” material (Merton et al 1956/1990) and in expanding the range of

articulations in total (Merton et al 1956/1990). Interaction is a very marginal element of their book length discussion and it is greatly expanded in more contemporary explications of focus groups. Even so, whether examining the usefulness of individual or group interviews, they wanted to tap into the lifeworld of the people being studied: “The interview should bring out the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects’ responses, to determine whether the experience had central or peripheral significance. It should elicit the relevant personal context, the idiosyncratic associations, beliefs and ideas” (Merton and Kendall 1946, 545).

But this is not the type of phenomenological research that has recently been subject to critique for its individualistic epistemological commitments that stress the primacy of the individual over the contextual backdrop (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Moisander et al 2009). Merton and Kendall’s reflections on the value of focused interviewing provide us with methodological suggestions about how we should combine qualitative insights with culturally shaped perceptual patterns. When making sense of a text – whether a morale programme or other communication – we evaluate each part (i.e. we like and dislike certain elements) and read it against the whole (i.e. evaluate the programme as a whole against our background knowledge). Or, to put it slightly differently,

“...without inquiring into specific meanings of significant details, we surrender all possibility of determining the effective stimuli patterns. Thus our emphasis on “specificity” does not express allegiance to an “atomistic,” as contrasted with a “configurational,” approach; it serves only to orient the interviewer toward searching out the significant configurations”.

(Merton and Kendall 1946, 549)

These ideas were fleshed out in Merton, Fiske and Curtis’ (1946) study of the war bond drive undertaken by Kate Smith, a prominent celebrity at the time. This is a study of mass persuasion which sought to understand how the beliefs and behaviours of a population were shaped by a variety of factors including social interaction and the surrounding socio-cultural context.

In undertaking this research, they applied content analysis, used individual interviews, extrapolated interesting facets of the qualitative interviews via polling studies to wider populations and read the material generated against important contextual factors (e.g. the war). What the study reveals is the extent to which public sentiment is shaped and mobilised by prominent actors (e.g. Kate Smith), those producing the communications campaign she relayed – an ensemble Merton and colleagues call “tacticians in public sentiment” (1946, 179) – in ways that have to be broadly consistent with social norms and expectations (although these are malleable).

Combining multiple levels of analysis – content, qualitative, quantitative, cultural – was a means of comprehending how people are influenced by their social circumstances. In spite of this recognition, the mass are not as easily manipulated as might otherwise be supposed. Merton et al (1946) make numerous references to the critical interpretive skills of *some* of the audience for mass communications. This, they aver, is a function of the prominence of marketing and advertising in society. Because people are exposed to misleading communications on a daily basis, they become increasingly antagonistic to influence attempts perceived to benefit the profit-oriented coffers of various groups (e.g. Merton et al 1946, 10, 83, 142). This active and critical reading of communications, then, accentuated the utility of qualitative research. It served to illuminate discrepancies between the hypotheses generated through the content analysis and the actual responses of different groups, with the former

missing the “unanticipated symbolisms”, “private meanings” or “unanticipated responses” (Merton and Kendall 1946, 551, 554).

While Merton and Kendall appreciate that focused interviews can trigger a variety of responses ranging from yes/no answers through to rich descriptions, they, like Lazarsfeld (1934), are attentive to psychoanalytically inflected experiences being expressed by their respondents. These might be idiosyncratic, but nonetheless the task of the skilled researcher was to link these to broader social (i.e. occupational and class status) contexts:

“Personal and social contexts provide the links between the stimulus material and the responses. It is through the discovery of such contexts that variations in the meaning ascribed to symbols and other content are to be understood; that the ways in which the stimulus material is imported into the experience world of subjects are determined; and the self-betrays and self-revelations which clarify the covert significance of a response are elicited.”

(Merton and Kendall 1946, 555; see also Merton et al 1946, 18, 106, 147)

These discrepancies had to be interpreted via a relevant theoretical architecture. What is fascinating is that Merton appreciated that group interaction was not a contaminant, ruining the data by forcing a consensus position among members, but the major benefit to be derived from this approach: “interaction among the members of such pro tem contrived groups evidently served to elicit the elaboration of responses” (Merton 1987, 555).

Whilst Merton and Kendall’s focused interview was not directly targeted at marketing scholars and practitioners, Merton et al’s (1956/1990) book length treatment of this research strategy was reviewed in the *Journal of Marketing* to some applause. It was singled out for its potential contribution to research dealing with subjective consumer responses, that is, to motivation research. What disconcerted Merton was not the uptake of this research strategy by marketers, but its transformation. This entailed the jettisoning of Merton’s positivistically defined rigour in preference for “taking merely plausible interpretations deriving from qualitative group interviews and treating them as though they had been shown to be reliably valid for gauging the *distributions* of response” (Merton 1987, 557; emphasis in original; see also Blankenship et al 1949, 425).

### **Rethinking the Emergence of Group Based Research**

Having discussed the focused interview strategy, we might ask whether the history of group discussions is consistent with the level of consensus found in the major texts and articles in this area. These generally attribute intellectual priority to Merton and Kendall (1946), sometimes to Bogardus (1926), even less frequently to Herzog (Rowland and Simonson 2014; Simonson forthcoming) and occasionally make gestures to the early applied psychology literature. With respect to the latter, Stewart and Shamdasani (2015, 3) indicate that we might want to pay attention to E.K. Strong’s early work in the psychology of advertising. They suggest that it reflects a “milestone” in focus group research, but do not explain why. The purpose of the next section is an explication of why such studies may reasonably be considered an important thread in the tapestry of the history of focus group research, taking us towards a much greater emphasis on subjective responses and “reasons why” that would underwrite the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s work of Paul Lazarsfeld<sup>vii</sup>. He, of course, has already been highlighted as a key participant in the rise of focus groups. Our engagement with applied psychology puts his contributions within wider context and rethinks the history of focus groups at the same time.

## Applied Psychology and Order of Merit Research

Historically, deviating from the intellectual orthodoxy of psychology which prided itself on its distance from commerce and business funding was initially only undertaken by those untroubled by the taint of commerce and the whispering campaigns that accompanied the pursuit of applied psychological research (Benjamin 2006; Hollingworth 1938; see Baritz 1960, 48). Nonetheless, the number of people involved in this type of research did grow rapidly during the first thirty years of the twentieth century (Benjamin 2004).

What is interesting is how early applied psychologists only partly subscribed to epistemological individualism and also articulated a concern for social efficiency, particularly with respect to the rising wastes of advertising, positioning their research into what constituted effective communication as a means to reduce advertising expenditure (Hollingworth 1911). Within the context of the early twentieth century, “order of merit” studies were popular contributions to the nascent psychology and marketing literature, often drawing on a diverse range of theoretical traditions (see Kuna 1979). They were part of a movement to put advertising on a scientific basis using experimental evidence to inform practitioner understanding and decision-making (Hotchkiss and Franken 1927; Thomson 1996).

Genealogically, the narrative is quite complicated. Harlow Gale is credited with the origins of this approach as a result of an 1895 survey distributed to advertisers (Gale 1900; cf. Converse 2009, 88-89). This was followed by work conducted by James McKeen Cattell in 1898 (Kuna 1979). Other advocates of order of merit followed in quick succession, with Walter Dill Scott applying it circa 1908, Harry Hollingworth writing about it in a 1911 publication and E.K. Strong using it in his doctoral dissertation and a series of papers (Kuna 1979). Related research was conducted by R.M. Yerkes in 1912. Yerkes makes the narrative slightly more complicated, directing our attention to a 1910 paper published by Carl Seashore. All of these publications were psychological experiments. They focused on the individual within the group. Seashore’s study is non-marketing and dealt with the ability of students to recognise sounds which were juxtaposed against group norms (Seashore 1910). Yerkes adopted the methodological approach outlined by Seashore – the “class experiment” – and the order of merit stance taken by E.K. Strong.

Order of merit studies, like the focused interviews of Merton and colleagues, were reliant on a stimulus such as soap adverts (Strong 1911) or General Electric lighting ads (Strong 1913). Researchers asked groups of respondents to rate the effectiveness of advertising from the most persuasive to the least persuasive (i.e. literally ranked in their order of merit according to their own introspective ruminations). The results were tabulated for the group and compared against the financial figures provided by various industries. Invariably, the research studies conducted by H.L. Hollingworth or E.K. Strong found that their respondents were able to identify the most financially successful advertising campaign, thus underscoring the importance of psychological research for the marketing profession (e.g. Benjamin 2004) and highlighting how research can accurately identify successful communications before they were used in the field (Strong 1913). What we see here is greater appreciation of the fact that the interests of the company or their vision of what was appealing in marketing communications terms was not the axis around which the marketing world turned. Consumer perception, attitudes and appreciation were much more salient (Hollingworth 1938). Similar ideas are now articulated as the marketing concept<sup>viii</sup>.

However, Yerkes was not interested in using student insights to determine which adverts were most effective or in selling his services to industry. His interest was in conducting psychological research using advertising materials as a stimulus for introspection regarding the extent to which they “hold attention”. It is a contribution to psychology and an important precursor to the focused interview, group interview and focus group in that Yerkes wanted his student respondents to reflect on the individually produced introspections as a group.

As he explains, “The class is directed to arrange the advertisements according to their power to ‘catch and hold attention.’ Here, again, introspection should be insisted upon, and it should be made to reveal the essential facts of attention...Class discussions of the introspections are very important aids” (Yerkes 1912, 11). Methodologically, we are within the domain of qualitative approaches. On a similar point of emphasis, he writes, “Throughout these, and similar class experiments, it is necessary that the instructor insist upon faithful introspection, *allow much time for the presentation and discussion of introspective reports*, and constantly make use of opportunities to illustrate the facts and laws of mental life” (Yerkes 1912, 16; emphasis added). Yerkes, therefore, combines individual reflective analysis, with group discussion, using advertising as a stimulus. The managerial application of these ideas continued to develop, but Yerkes’ use of a group discussion appears not to have been adopted or through citation recognised as an important “milestone” in focus group research (e.g. Morrison 1998; Stewart and Shamdasani 2015).

What these order of merit studies underscore when read in series are epistemological moves that functioned as the conditions of possibility for the emergence of more interactive group based interviewing in the hands of Lazarsfeld, Herzog, Merton, Dichter and the motivation researchers (Curti 1967; Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). In the first place, merit studies marked a partial departure from the reliance of psychology on introspection towards a concern with whether individual insights and viewpoints were consistent across wider groups. Individual responses were aggregated much like nominal group research in the 1980s and an ability to generalise findings was desirable to practitioners. As Hollingworth (1911, 236) recalled, “The writer has repeatedly been asked...to state the relative strength of various [advertising] appeals...to say in how far certain interests are universal, to what degree certain general types are pronounced, how they are distributed, how such interests are conditioned by age, sex, occupation, locality, race”.

The reader of advertising was not a monolithic entity. Nor was their response to advertising executions presented as absolutely universal. There were some similarities discerned at the level of general appeal (i.e. for rational versus emotional appeals) and less so at the individual campaign level (with women apparently preferring images of children, kittens and so forth) (Strong 1911). Conceptually attitudes and opinions were depicted as stable entities for individuals and across groups (Hollingworth 1911), with studies revisiting their initial merit analyses to establish whether respondents’ perceptions had changed. In addition, order of merit research hinged on the kinds of cost and time rationales that are common with focus groups today. They could be done swiftly, with large groups, for minimal expense. For some observers, this dealt with the limited generalisability of psychological studies that drew from very small numbers of respondents (Strong 1911).

One of the key limitations of this type of study constituted an explicit gap in the academic literature that motivation research via Paul Lazarsfeld, Herta Herzog and Ernest Dichter – all of whom were focus group advocates – would fill. As explained by Strong (1913), the major limitation of merit research was that it could lead to the identification of those adverts deemed most persuasive, but it could not tell you “why<sup>ix</sup>” these advertisements were

persuasive: “The *why* is a different problem from the *what*, and seemingly much more difficult to handle” (Strong 1913, 403; emphasis in original).

For Strong, “why” could be partly explicated by introspection, but he was not confident that introspection would provide the appropriate foundation for knowledge about the “why” of persuasion (cf. Kuna 1979, 41): “Introspection has often given very valuable hints as to the *why*, and the writer employs it ordinarily in all his work. But at best, he has never felt it gave more than simple suggestions as to the real cause of the subject’s attitude toward the advertisement” (Strong 1913, 404). Arguably Strong pushes his point about the failure to answer “why” questions slightly too far. There was one qualitative effort that provides some detail on this front and this features in Yerkes’ (1912) study in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Part of his paper is devoted to a series of comments made by one of his students – a Miss C – who states the order of merit she envisages for a series of adverts. Her analysis is affirmative of ads she likes and critical of those that claim too much (e.g. Yerkes 1912, 4). In other words, she offers an analysis of “why” she prefers some and dislikes others. What makes this important is that her comments appear more detailed than those elicited by Harlow Gale<sup>x</sup> (1900) or Walter Dill Scott (1912). Moreover, her critical reading of advertising materials reminds us that we need to be wary about assuming that critical literacy skills are a function of the advent of “uses and gratifications” theory<sup>xi</sup> (O’Donohoe 1994), interpretive consumer research (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) or a more broadly defined “cultural turn” in marketing discourse<sup>xiii</sup> (Fitchett and Caruana 2015).

Methodologically, research aiming to explicate “why” questions needed to utilise whatever resources were available (Hollingworth 1912) and it is in the work of a pioneer motivation and “reason” analyst, Paul Lazarsfeld, that the kinds of articulations made by Hollingworth are refracted. Lazarsfeld is one of the linchpins between our discussion of applied psychology, motivation research and the promotion of focus groups to marketing practitioners (Herzog is the other). He shared with Hollingworth an appreciation for quantitative and qualitative research<sup>xiii</sup>. He was extremely adept with both approaches. And his concept of the consumer-respondent is close to that of the applied psychologists and remains at a distance from the motivation research of Ernest Dichter or focus group commentators who possessed a clinical psychology background (e.g. Goldman 1962).

Dichter and Goldman tended to believe that people would offer rationalisations for their behaviour and stress that they were not affected by advertising. This is one of the reasons why irrespective of the interest in “why” questions, it was not appropriate to pose such questions directly nor necessarily to take respondent views “at face value” (Blankenship et al 1949, 428). Asking people why they did something was likely to lead to justifications or abstract reflections (Goldman 1962), much as contemporary phenomenological researchers (e.g. Pollio et al 1997, 30) and some focus group moderators register today (e.g. Henderson 2008). This necessitated that interviewers or moderators deliberately couch their explorations of consumer practice in terms of actual experiences that could be relayed in detail or otherwise use indirect probing methods. In other words, they needed to explore the “what” (i.e. what people secured from consumption in terms of gratifications) and “how” of consumption (i.e. how people were influenced, from what sources, to what ends) (e.g. Blankenship et al 1949, 427).

Lazarsfeld largely thought that people were able to articulate how advertising influenced their subsequent buying behaviour (cf. Fullerton 1990, 320). In some respects, this is a position

also voiced by the Critical Theorists. Horkheimer (in Adorno and Horkheimer 1956/2010, 46) indicates that “People like advertisements. They do what the ads tell them and they know that they are doing so”. Lazarsfeld would concur with the first part of the statement. The second element is less realistic. Even E.K. Strong – who is often mistakenly interpreted as a proponent of the AIDA (Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action) model of advertising effects when he was actually only undertaking a literature review and going beyond AIDA analytically and conceptually (e.g. Strong 1925) – registered that people were critical of marketing communications and not moved to buy everything they saw (see also Benjamin 2004, 24). Accepting this, Lazarsfeld often asked lists of questions that were similar to order of merit approaches, extending their analytic purchase by probing for the reasons why people engaged (or not) in any given consumption practice (e.g. Lazarsfeld 1934, 59, 67n8).

In a similar epistemological move, the questionnaire that Herta Herzog used to explore why people listened to radio serials asks respondents to engage in multiple order of merit experiments (e.g. Herzog 1941, 92). Her work thus straddles order of merit and motivation research, with the function of the latter (and qualitative interviewing) to permit the probing of respondent answers, letting respondent subjectivity and experience guide the interview in ways that could not have been anticipated *a priori* (e.g. Blankenship et al 1949, 425). Epistemic warrant for the emerging tradition of motivation research could be buttressed by ensuring that the questions were approached from multiple directions to ensure a degree of consistency<sup>xiv</sup> in respondent attitudes and opinions (Lazarsfeld 1937) as well as through the use of large samples (Fullerton 1999).

In our next section we will highlight the politics surrounding the promotion of motivation research. This is important in rethinking the centrality of a contribution like Calder’s (1977) philosophically inspired review paper that is still widely cited in the focus group literature today, often forming the intellectual bedrock for even those studies that aspire to move focus group research in less positivistic directions (e.g. Fern 2001). This enables us to deepen our understanding of motivation research, continue following the thread of “why” questions in the history of marketing thought, and appreciate how this group of scholars and practitioners moved focus group research in a direction that has not been previously acknowledged, that is, towards “interpretive focus groups”.

### **Shifting the Benchmark of Scientificity**

While Lazarsfeld, Herzog and Merton’s contributions to the emergence of focus groups were not picked up by sociology or mass communications research, they did attract the attention of market research professionals around the world. This was particularly the case in relation to motivation research. These academics, practitioners and consultants were interested in the application of psychology to marketing (Dichter 1947) to better understand consumer needs, wants, fantasies and symbolically rich desires that might otherwise pass unacknowledged, unarticulated and remain tacit (Lazarsfeld 1935). Understanding these, it was well appreciated, was key in ensuring the success of the capitalist project by tapping into individual consumer desire which could be extrapolated to wider populations (Kvale 2003). Interpretive and qualitative methods like focus groups were major conduits through which consumer subjectivity could be explored, with the insights packaged up according to industrial and business needs (Wiebe 1958).

Researchers like Lazarsfeld and Dichter did not consider themselves psychoanalysts nor did they believe that their methodological approaches were consistent with psychoanalytic practice (cf. Yankelovich 1958). They were more subtle than this, prefixing their discussions

with references like “almost psychoanalytical” (Dichter 1947, 436), otherwise denying their links to Freud (Tadajewski 2006, 2013a) or underlining that “a clinical background is helpful but not essential” for those conducting focus groups (Goldman 1962, 65). Nor did their research have a similar objective to clinical research, that is, the amelioration of neuroses (e.g. Blankenship et al 1949, 427). It is for these reasons that we should treat simplified distinctions between alternative forms of qualitative focus group research as typified by Calder’s (1977) well cited study with some caution (Catterall and Maclaran 2006; Fern 2001).

Calder (1977), for instance, parses qualitative approaches into three broad categories: exploratory, clinical and phenomenological research with focus groups as the methodology of choice in each case. Calder’s understanding of exploratory focus group research hinges on the idea that the production of knowledge is oriented towards the production of constructs which are subsequently empirically verified. The second approach draws upon specialised “clinical” psychological knowledge to unpack motives, attitudes and opinions which are pre-conscious (e.g. Goldman 1962) or otherwise difficult to identify by survey methods. He indicates that this is typified by motivation research. Finally, the phenomenological strategy, seeks to “understand the everyday experience of the consumer” (Calder 1977, 355).

Although we have sympathy for what Calder was attempting to do, much of the literature that has been discussed above or will be examined below dealing with focused interviews and group interviews, cuts across these three domains, exploiting the benefits of exploration as well as the theoretical and methodological guidance provided by different schools of thought to illuminate subjective processes and everyday interpretations of consumers (see also Fern 2001, 5). These could then be subject to the kind of quantitative analysis that Calder (1977, 356, 358) considers largely ignored and enables him to make his hyper-positivist statement that none of the three approaches to focus groups result in scientific knowledge.

What would be more accurate is that they do not merit scientific status on his benchmarks (qualitative (e.g. Fern 2001, 10-11) and interpretive scholars make similar moves as well (e.g. Askegaard and Linnet 2011, 385). For prominent advocates like Lazarsfeld, Merton, Dichter and others, focus groups had the potential to be highly rigorous and result in the quantitative figures that Calder cites as totems of science. Deeply ironically, when he submits that “Focus groups should not be the exclusive technique. The nature of qualitative research does not limit it to any one best technique... Validity can be best assessed by multiple methods” (Calder 1977, 363), he is speaking a language which would be entirely familiar to many of the figures mentioned above.

It was the focus on understanding why people acted the way they did that led Lazarsfeld and Dichter to attempt to shift the definition of what constituted scientific inquiry in marketing research<sup>xv</sup>. They did so whilst attending to the needs of their audience by proposing that their research methods and interpretive techniques could facilitate “the control of markets” for practitioners (Lazarsfeld 1934, 68). Simply counting how many people bought a specific product or their articulated, standardised comments about an item failed to connect with the deeper psychological factors influencing behaviour (Goldman 1962). As Dichter averred, “any time a businessman is in doubt about why his customers act the way that they do, or, in other words, any time he must deal with a *why* question, a truly scientific approach to the problem is indicated” (Dichter 1947, 433; emphasis in original).

This study of the “why” of consumer behaviour was partly theoretically indebted to Herzog’s (1941, 1944) gratifications approach. And, for many of those working in the 1940s and

1950s, studying consumer motivations, interest and reactions entailed the use of individual and group focused interviews. Indeed, Dichter's (1947) outline of the interview methodology he employed mirrors Merton and Kendall's (1946) own recommendations for the use of a stimulus, content analysis, interviews with key respondents, and subsequent interpretation by skilled analysts (cf. Wiebe 1958). These findings, where necessary, formed the input into quantitative, survey research. Similarly, his writing somewhat echoes the point that Merton and Kendall (1946) made regarding the distinction between atomistic, individualistic research and that which took a more configurational approach, identifying shared cultural patterns which both enable and constrain agency (analogous links could be made to Lazarsfeld's later contributions to contextual analysis):

“...in the last analysis all social psychology is concerned with the individual, his attitude, his motivations, and his behavior, it uses all those methods which will help in [securing a] better understanding of the individual. At the same time, every scientific procedure has to be capable of yielding generalized statements about groups and populations. The single individual can only be understood because of his membership in human society.”

(Dichter 1947, 443)

Equally, Lazarsfeld (1934, 69) stresses a research agenda which is contingent upon the use of a multi-method approach. This commenced with qualitative, psychologically informed interpretations of depth interviews, and he adopts a strategy intended to make sense of the wider cultural diffusion of behavioural patterns by using his empirical data to generate archetypes of “the standard consumer” or “a sort of hypothetical housewife” (Lazarsfeld 1934). What he does here is distil the core attributes of the consumer into a manageable and managerially meaningful idea (see also Nixon 2009). In doing so, he anticipates recent debates in interpretive research that stress theoretically informed, “leaps of interpretation” (e.g. Askegaard and Linnet 2011, 399) or the production of performative representations of the consumer (e.g. Arnould and Cayla forthcoming). What we mean by this is that Lazarsfeld goes beyond the empirical data to construct an interpretation of consumer practice that does not necessarily reflect the empirical evidence provided by any single consumer. Furthermore, he is aware that a single interpretation of consumer behaviour or a single archetype will not reflect the wide differences of real consumers. Given this, he encourages the production of multiple interpretations for each of the groups that are under scrutiny.

It is in these reflections about the production of an appropriate interpretation that Lazarsfeld (1934) takes us into the domain of focus groups quite firmly, but in a way that has not been registered previously<sup>xvi</sup>. In a twist on qualitative member checking, he asserts that a market researcher should draw upon the knowledge and resources of his research team to generate interpretations of the data<sup>xvii</sup>. In effect, he is arguing for the use of what we can call “interpretative focus groups”:

“The interpretation is still up to the skilful student. Therefore, one other help can still be mentioned: the round-table conferences with the interviewers. It is a matter of fact that the good interviewer gets impressions out of his contact with the respondents which he cannot possibly fill into the questionnaire, partly because he is barely conscious of them. But if from time to time the interviewers or a group of them, are gathered together and asked to talk freely and without any responsibility for the trustworthiness of their statements, then they furnish some very valuable interpretative “hunches,”

chiefly when they incite one another to survey all possible factors which may exist in this market.”

(Lazarsfeld 1934, 62)

The interpretations generated could be used to produce, augment or revise questionnaires. Both Dichter and Lazarsfeld, therefore, articulate individual and group interview approaches that mirror (e.g. Dichter 1957d) those sketched out by Merton and Kendall (1946) and which found an appreciative audience in marketing research.

As a research approach, focus groups were used for reasons including speed of data collection and their relatively low costs by Social Research Incorporated (Levy 2006), the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS 1944, 1945), Alderson and Sessions (Catterall and Maclaran 2006), McCann-Erickson (Samuel 2010), the Grey Advertising Agency (Goldman and McDonald 1987), the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in the UK (Miller and Rose 1997; Nixon 2009) and Research Services Ltd (Abrams 1949). Dichter utilised focus groups (Tadajewski 2010a) in research for Folger’s coffee<sup>xviii</sup> (Dichter 1953), attitudes towards cereal (Dichter 1954), shampoo products (Dichter 1956), floor polish (Dichter 1957a), Clairol beauty products (Dichter 1957b), drug advertising (Dichter 1957c), hair tonic (Dichter 1958a), and consumer responses to Alka-Selzer advertising (Dichter 1958b).

In practitioner accounts of the period, there was a degree of sophisticated reflection on epistemological factors influencing the choice of “group interviewing”, especially with respect to their ability to tap into group interaction, opinion formation and revision, and the boundaries surrounding acceptable and appropriate social discourse (Goldman 1962). Reflecting the appreciation of the merits of focus group research, it was hardly surprising that many different industries sought to use this methodological tool to examine “why”, “what” and “how” questions.

### **Practitioner Uptake of Focus Groups**

During the late 1940s, growing in the 1950s, and expanding in the 1960s and beyond, focus group research merited a considerable degree of attention from practitioners. Some of this interest was courtesy of the extremely prominent position that Herzog had attained at the advertising agency, McCann-Erikson. She was hired for her skill with the Lazarsfeld-Stanton programme analyser and her extensive knowledge of and engagement in focus group research (Simonson forthcoming). Other supporting efforts were made by George Horsley Smith (Smith 1954). Advertising agencies took notice of these plaudits, with focus groups being used in a number of major firms around the world. Accompanying the incorporation of the methodology into everyday business practice, there was terminological slippage from “focused”, “depth”, “focused group depth interviews” (Dichter 1957a, 1957b), “focused group” (Dichter 1971), or “group” interview to “focus group” (Lee 2010).

Reflecting on research he undertook in 1948, for instance, a U.K. based market researcher, Mark Abrams, expressed similar arguments to those being made regularly by motivation researchers when he professed that survey research did not generate the level of insight he and his clients needed. He suggested that “routine commercial methods” did not plumb the depths of the consumer psyche. Group interviewing, by contrast, “enables the investigator to harvest material which lies latent in the informant’s pre-conscious and which is rarely tapped in the normal individual interview based on a short formal questionnaire” (Abrams 1949, 502; see also Goldman 1962, 62).

Much attention was devoted to the constitution of groups, the amount of moderator involvement, and the development of rapport. Group interviewers had to be well trained. They had to be alert, like good conversation analysts, to “inflections and nuances” (Goldman 1962), if they were to understand their participants’ points of view. For those interested in what passed unsaid in a group discussion, the skilled interviewer was able to read body language that was inconsistent with the overt discussion taking place (e.g. Goldman 1962, 66). Of particular note was the ability of focus groups to highlight the boundaries of appropriate social convention and discourse. Interaction led to the production of group opinions which were qualitatively distinct from individual opinions, having been discussed, revised and negotiated in the group situation. It was this process of interaction that illuminated the boundaries of social discourse, particularly when an idea is proposed which fails to resonate with the membership:

“Sometimes, and most significant of all, it [an idea] can be studiously ignored and avoided, despite the moderator’s reiteration of the idea. This behavior, when accompanied by indications of anxiety, such as lighting cigarettes, shuffling uneasily in seats, clearing throats, and so on, suggests that a particular idea has provoked sufficient psychic discomfort and threat as to require its rigorous avoidance in open discussion.”

(Goldman 1962, 62)

Abrams (1949) effectively argues against the type of research approach being invoked in public opinion studies which were based upon counting how many people in a given population subscribed to a particular political perspective, suggesting instead that group interviewing can explicate “the structure and dynamics of people’s attitudes” (Abrams 1949, 503). His comments exhibited a commitment to epistemological universalism. He refers to the use of a large number of focus groups in a single study and stresses that the attitudinal structure he believed could be excavated via group interviews was potentially generalisable to the entire population of interest – something that attracted practitioners.

### **Focus Groups and the Tobacco Industry**

So, during the 1950s and 1960s, practitioners were quick to adopt focus groups as a key methodology in their arsenal. However, Merton, who underlined his limited knowledge of how marketing practitioners were using focus groups (Merton 1987), would probably have been deeply unhappy with the enrolment of focus group approaches by a destructive industry whose ultimate impact on its customers is an early death: the cigarette industry (Kilbourne 1999). The attention given to focus groups by this trade can be traced to the late 1950s and motivation research conducted by Dichter (1957d) for Philip Morris (cf. Lee 2010).

We cite this industry as an exemplar of how focus group research can be used for purposes that are detrimental to the individual and society, not to suggest that it was the only industry using focus groups. It certainly wasn’t. But it does serve to underline the general thesis of this paper that focus group research can perform a status-quo function or have more emancipatory aims in the service of interpretive and critical research as we discuss below.

Combined with the usual battery of motivational techniques such as depth interviews and projective tests, group interviews were a feature of the studies for the cigarette and tobacco industry (e.g. Dichter 1957d, 1960, 1971). Since it is well known that cigarette firms are completely cognisant of the fact that consumers need to be attracted to their product by virtue of brand associations and symbolism initially, with physiological and psychological addiction taking grip sometime later (Kilbourne 1999), it is not surprising that research which could

understand motivations surrounding different types and brands of cigarettes was of interest (Lee 2010, 128). As such, focus groups merited the attention of multiple cigarette producers including Philip Morris, Amphora, Imperial Tobacco, American Tobacco and R.J. Reynolds from the 1950s until at least the middle of the 1980s (Lee 2010). In spite of this, there is no necessary linkage between a type of methodology and the affirmation of a highly deleterious status quo (Lazarsfeld and Stehr 1982; cf. Potter 2003). Focus group research does not need to reaffirm existing power/knowledge relations. It has been adopted by a variety of different groups with a diverse range of research agendas. The remainder of the paper explores these varied projects to indicate directions for future research.

### **Social Constructionism, Discursive Psychology and Focus Groups as Research Context**

There have been a number of innovations in focus group approaches. Often, the application of focus groups has been driven by a managerial agenda and positivistic research logic, that is, it has been overly structured in approach (Bartos 1986; Morgan 1996) in order to generate managerially useable insights that would enable better control over the marketplace. Much research has been produced which offers guidance about the format of successful focus groups, the role of the moderator, size, timing and their various functions as vehicles for creative stimulation, product development ideas, and explorations of brand meaning (see Catterall and Maclaran 2006; Cochoy 2015).

But within the social sciences generally and marketing specifically, there have been a variety of changes to the paradigmatic and epistemological structure of contributions to knowledge in the last thirty years (Shankar and Patterson 2001). There has been a growth in research that has drawn upon the language of social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991), humanistic perspectives (Tadajewski 2010b), and a vast range of qualitative approaches (Patterson 2014; Shankar 2000). Exposure to debates around the social construction of reality are relevant here, as marketing and consumer researchers often use the insights from this tradition in their work (e.g. Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Fitchett and Caruana 2015; Hackley 2001; Moisander et al 2009). Nor is it hard to see why focus groups could gain a larger audience within academia in light of the theoretical commitments associated with social constructionism. Let us explain.

As Gergen (1985) reminds us, this diverse body of thought assumes a non-individualistic epistemology, displacing the individual from the centre of analytic attention; it submits that the conceptual architecture we use to make sense of the world shapes what we see and how we negotiate our day-to-day experience (Potter 2003). Connected to this, our knowledge products are historically, socially, and culturally contingent. They are also a reflection of vested interests and power relations, with theory and empirical research possessing a performative force: they help constitute the things being described or explained (cf. Miles 1996). This has ramifications for marketing which remains indebted to cognitive psychology. As Gergen explains,

“From this perspective, then, all psychological theorizing and the full range of concepts that form the grounds for research become problematic as potential reflections of an internal reality and become themselves matters of analytic interest...Or, in a slightly different light, the contemporary views of the profession on matters of cognition, motivation, perception, information processing, and the like become candidates for historical and cross-cultural comparison.”

(Gergen 1985, 271)

According to Gergen, psychological science needs to ask “why” questions – just like we have seen with marketing and consumer research – but the why in this case is not a reflection of an internal mental state, but a function of relational interaction. The self is situational (Hollander 2004), interactional (Cooley 1902, 1909; Gabriel 2015; Kitzinger 2006; Miles 1996; Potter 2006) and permeated with power relations (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Miles 1996). This is an issue that marketing is starting to take seriously given its recent shift towards a non-individualistic concept of consumer practice (e.g. Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Borgerson 2009; Maffesoli 1996; Moisander et al 2009). Notwithstanding debates around brand communities, our discipline still largely conceptualises the consumer as an individual (Catterall and Maclaran 2006; O’Sullivan 2009), as a cognitive, not relational (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Borgerson 2005, 2009; Fitchett and Caruana 2015) or embodied being (Patterson 2014). Taking a social turn in marketing discourse would lead to seeing:

“...the self as a matter of how one is constructed in various relationships, to possess, an emotion is to perform appropriately in a culturally constituted scenario...In effect, all that has heretofore been defined as private and separated from the other is instead conceptualized as inherently relational – inseparable from communal activity.”

(Gergen 2001, 810)

These concerns have helped inform the discursive psychology movement which was influenced by developments in social constructionism, poststructuralism, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Discursive psychologists are interested in illuminating how our knowledge products such as those dealing with cognitive processing are fundamentally based in social interaction (Kitzinger 2006). They explore the “radically emic” (Potter 2003) processes that lead to the production of opinions, attitudes and cognitions (see also Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 10; Giesler and Veresiu 2014, 848; Pollio et al 1997, 35). These are not treated as entities that structure articulations (Potter 2012), rather they are produced through people talking to each other. What counts as a cognition is not contingent upon information processing – as marketing theory and practice generally assumes (Catterall and Clarke 2001) – but formed in interaction (e.g. Antaki 2006; Edwards and Stokoe 2004; Hollander 2004; Potter 2006).

The opinions and attitudes that marketing has attempted to explore through qualitative methods, especially focus groups, are thus transformed from individual mental-events or subjectively apprehended factors, to being intersubjectively generated (Edwards 2012; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Miles 1996; Potter 1998; Potter and Hepburn 2005; Warr 2005). People can be encouraged to talk (or argue) about specific perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, emotions (e.g. Chase and Walker 2012) or any other element of the consumer research lexicon (Siebert 2014). What they are not doing when talking about such conceptual architecture is giving us total access to their inner mental world (Potter and Hepburn 2005). Rather, we need to ask what role these ideas perform in the exchanges we have with the people we interview or moderate within a focus group setting (Potter 2003).

There are varying degrees of voluntarism in this literature (Potter 2012) ranging from studies which stress the micro-level “conversational pragmatics” (Potter 1998) that frame interactions through to research that explores the impact of ideology and social structure on discourse (Billig 1991; Potter 1998; cf. Potter 2003, 789). Generally, though, emphasis is on the normative framing of everyday life (Billig 2012; Edwards 2012; Fitchett and Caruana 2015; Potter 2012) and concomitantly on the decentring of the individual human subject: “DP [Discursive Psychology] avoids theorizing the human subject, agent or self (be it multiple or

unitary) as the prime object of investigation and theory, focusing instead on the range of discourse practices within which self, agency, passivity, and so on, are constructed and managed” (Edwards and Stokoe 2004, 501; see also Delli Carpini and Williams 1994, 76; Edwards et al 1995, 35; Lezaun 2007, 147).

While we are providing a very broad brush summation of discursive psychology, we can say that it links with some variants of Consumer Culture Theory and Critical Marketing Studies in situating consumer practice within conventional patterns of social interaction (e.g. Borgerson 2009; Fitchett and Caruana 2015; Miles 1996; O’Sullivan 2009; Patterson 2014; Shankar 2000). These provide ideological, theoretical, conceptual and other sedimented vocabularies that affect consumer practice in manifold ways and which can be explored through conversation analysis, discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis depending on the assumptions being invoked (de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013; Fitchett and Caruana 2015; Moufahim et al 2007).

Some of the methodological innovations associated with discursive psychology such as discourse analysis have been incorporated into marketing theory and consumer research in a number of ways. These have been reviewed elsewhere (e.g. Fitchett and Caruana 2015), but on a general level such techniques are suitable for application to focus group data (Potter 2003). More unusually, focus groups have been used as the context for studying how people interact and how certain lines of questioning can produce opinions and cognitions. In such work, opinions are produced through question and response interactions (i.e. asking more questions, ignoring responses that are not desirable) (Puchta and Potter 2002). What focus group research has revealed is that moderators vary in terms of how they ask questions, sometimes assuming a directive, “controlling” stance; at other times they are more oriented to the groups and their talk (Puchta and Potter 1999). Put simply, the moderator does not merely elicit the individual opinions and attitudes of group members. Through interaction they present a variety of stimuli intended to pattern and encourage articulations. This may mean they go against focus group guidance about using easily understandable, short questions, instead using “elaborate” or complex questions to generate the maximum range of possible responses. Put otherwise, the moderator is “manufacturing individual opinions” (Puchta and Potter 2002) and “managing opinion production” (Puchta and Potter 1999).

For others, the moderator is less powerful, but still an influential force in teasing out group dynamics and opinion formation. This does not mean the data is contaminated or invalid (Catterall and Maclaran 2006; Moisander et al 2009; Myers 1998). Interaction is a condition of possibility for the production of knowledge whether we are talking about survey research (e.g. Suchman and Jordan 1990), individual interviews (e.g. Antaki 2006; Potter and Hepburn 2005) or focus groups (Puchta and Potter 1999, 2002). It is a hinge for the production of opinions, attitudes, emotions and motivations (Moisander et al 2009) and there is a voluminous literature dealing with aspects of focus group interaction that are deemed less desirable (i.e. in relation to issues of “attitude polarization”, “compliance” and “group think” (Catterall and Maclaran 2006), the impact of the moderator’s gender and sexual orientation (Beetles and Harris 2005), “focus group monologues” (Cochoy 2015), the domination of conversation by certain group members, offensive language and speech patterns, or whether we should “trust” respondents) (e.g. Catterall and Maclaran 2006; Farnsworth and Boon 2010; Lezaun 2007; Merton et al 1956/1990). We should note, though, that attributing bias as a function of group interaction often stems from an ongoing epistemological commitment to individualism (Wilkinson 1998).

Myers (1998), for instance, conceptualises focus groups as interactive, collaborative affairs whose task it is to articulate opinions on subjects specified by the moderator (see also Moisander and Valtonen 2006, 76-78; Moisander et al 2009, 341). This does not mean focus groups are consensus oriented. The moderator can and does encourage disagreement and disagreement is generated amongst the group (Farnsworth and Boon 2010). Focus groups, like society itself, are riven with power, gender relations and politics, even when researchers try to ameliorate them. Nevertheless, focus group dynamics provide a highly useful context in which:

“...to reflect critically on what opinions are, and what people do with them. Focus groups can be seen as experiments in constituting a public forum...[and] The small moves of turn-taking – adding an example, giving a gist, disagreeing or attributing – are part of what defines a statement as an opinion about an issue. As we look more closely at these moves, we begin to question the existence of opinions and attitudes as pre-existing attributes of individuals, ready to be elicited by social science methods.”

(Myers 1998, 106)

Connected to this, focus groups have a great deal of potential to offer those interested in the political-economic, cultural and intersubjective formation of our value systems (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Catterall and Maclaran 2006; Catterall et al 1999; Moisander et al 2009; O’Sullivan 2009). They can illuminate “cultural talk”, that is, explore the cultural, historical, social and economic shaping of consumer discourse (Moisander and Valtonen 2006; Moisander et al 2009). What this literature proposes is that the interview and focus group situation is not a natural occurrence (Moisander and Valtonen 2006). It is staged. And the people involved are partly performing. They draw on their own experience, combining this with culturally acceptable and useful discourses to add flesh and interest to their own day-to-day experiences. The way people interact in focus groups, consequently, helps us identify individual and culturally shared narratives (Warr 2005).

Scholars have, as a case in point, unpacked how young people articulate and display behaviour patterns consistent with conventionally sanctioned indexes of heterosexual masculinity which reveal the constitutive force of the media, peers and pertinent cultural resources that are marshalled into defining a public sense of self (e.g. Allen 2005; Kitzinger 1994). Focus groups thus “transcend individualism” (Johnson 1996, 534). They “can give researchers valuable access to collective meanings and social contexts as issues are shared through group interaction” (Warr 2005, 221; see also Johnson 1996, 522, 534).

Similar themes are found in debates that heliographically direct attention to the “context of contexts” (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), encouraging us to use social theory to identify and articulate how wider contexts place limits upon and stimulate the meaning-making activities of consumers. Here the concern is with going beyond the empirical data – beyond what the individual respondent has said – to identify the factors that shape consumer discourse (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Borgerson 2009; Moisander et al 2009). There is a stream of literature empirically fleshing this point out. This links the articulations of research co-participants to the cultural, political, legal, and technological world that surrounds them (Brei and Tadjewski 2015), sometimes to the extent of losing contact with the voice of the consumer in preference for the deterministic valorisation of the words and practices of the power elite (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Examining some of this material occasionally takes the reader back to arguments for largely discredited linear models of communication (Patterson 2014) which do not stand up well to empirical evidence produced in the early

twentieth century, never mind now. Even so, there is good reason for postulating the powerful role of normative practices in shaping our lived experience (e.g. Giesler and Veresiu 2014, 841; Miles 1996, 148; Nixon 2009, 316; Patterson 2014, 25). Norms are profoundly important touchstones for social action and there is an emerging agreement that focusing on the individual and their perception of the influences on their behaviour is theoretically, conceptually, empirically and politically limiting (Borgerson 2009; Catterall and Clarke 2001; Chase and Walker 2012).

The history of the marketing of diamonds is one instance where the control of markets courtesy of an orchestrated series of campaigns have firmly linked the purchase of these products to romantic love, rarity, and commitment, which come together to texture the way people look at significant moments in their lives. The documentary, *The Diamond Empire* (Roberts 1994), unravels the cultural shaping of consumer behaviour, culminating in a series of clips (some individual, some group) with people wearing a huge array of expensive diamond clusters and literally letting the marketing communications discourses of the De Beers company that have been tracked throughout the film speak through them. This is one of the cases where Adorno and Horkheimer's (1956/2010) point about people knowing about advertisements, doing what they say, and being able to parrot the material that influenced them is a realistic portrayal of consumer practice.

Extrapolating from the foregoing, focus groups could help us identify the cultural patterning of normative guidance (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1999), the "lived ideology" of consumers (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) or the cosmologies that underwrite social relations (Borgerson 2009). After all, as Kitzinger (1994, 117) avers, the interactive nature of focus group participation helps illuminate the conjunction of personal and public discourse:

"We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Our personal behaviour is not cut off from public discourses and our actions do not happen in a cultural vacuum... We learn... through talking and observing other people, through conversation at home and at work; and we act (or fail to act) on that knowledge in a social context."

### **Focus Groups, Feminist Research and Critical Marketing Studies**

Focus groups, therefore, represent an appropriate methodology to be used in the service of research that has a managerial agenda (Liamputtong 2011). Alternatively, it has value for scholarship that explores the cultural patterning of speech and behaviour or which has a radical social and political orientation (Catterall et al 1999). What is obvious, though, is that focus groups have been massively underutilised by scholars who take alternative, feminist and critical approaches. This, in short, is a much needed direction for future research.

Critical Theory and feminist scholarship has adopted focus group methodology to forward their objectives of providing voice to those otherwise denied it (Johnson 1996; Morgan 1996). This method helps reduce unequal power relations between researcher and co-participant. For some, one of its virtues is that it can be used for the purposes of consciousness raising (Wilkinson 1998, 1999). The last point links with attempts to help people overcome individual isolation or the self-doubt felt as a result of our lack of success in life. Participating in a focus group scenario helps people comprehend the structural barriers that constrain their lived reality. It cultivates "collective awareness" of our limited agency (van Staveren 1997; Wilkinson 1999). This approach has been used successfully in a strand of research appearing within Critical Marketing Studies (e.g. Catterall et al 1999).

Related arguments motivate the consciousness raising efforts of research that uses focus groups in a dialogic fashion in line with the practices of the radical education pioneer, Paulo Freire (Padilla 1992). The same can be said of participatory research designs (Morgan 1996). Focus groups have been used successfully with lower socio-economic communities (Madriz 1998) and structurally marginalised populations (Padilla 1992). Both of these are groups which in spite of the recent attention given to the vulnerable consumer within our discipline are still underexplored in preference for middle-class (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) and white populations (Burton 2009). Focus groups might provide us with one methodological means of making our discipline reflect all facets of marketplace reality, rather than just one section of Main Street USA.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has traced the history and application of focus groups, offering a variety of indications of desirable future directions for this methodological strategy. The conventional history of this method was linked to Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton. This was questioned via the insertion of the contribution of Herta Herzog into our initial narrative. However, it was also argued that there was an intellectual debt that has not previously been unpacked in terms of the work of early applied psychologists. Their research required consumer introspection, group discussion and involved respondents taking a critical stance regarding advertising. These elements were a first movement towards a community of practice appreciating the importance of group based research; ideas that were subsequently developed without citation or apparent knowledge in the hands of early sociologists whose contributions to the development of focus group research are more widely cited. This marked one of the contributions of this paper.

The analytic attention given by early applied psychologists to “why” questions and their appreciation of the limited ability of their research practices to engage with these complex issues was ultimately progressed by motivation researchers. Registering this, we argued that the applied psychological foundations of “why” questions formed the unacknowledged conditions of possibility for motivation and focus group research. Importantly, those aligned with motivation research including Herta Herzog, Paul Lazarsfeld and Ernest Dichter all contributed to promoting focus group research, particularly among the practitioner community.

Herzog deserves more kudos than she has received to date on this front and warrants the title of the “founding mother” of the focus group (Simonson, forthcoming). Via her position in industry at McCann-Erikson she was a major advocate for motivation research and the use of focus groups. Like Lazarsfeld, Dichter and many others, she provided further impetus to ongoing attempts to answer not just “why” questions, but “how” and “what” questions as well. More than this, our examination of the motivation research literature disclosed another use of focus groups which has not previously been appreciated by historically minded scholars: interpretative focus groups. These were used to refine interpretations of research data by those engaged in industry and scholarly studies. Lazarsfeld appears to have been the prime mover in this regard.

Not surprisingly, focus groups were attractive to industry. As a means to highlight that focus groups can be used to advance status-quo oriented research or studies that seek to forward critical or emancipatory ends, we briefly charted the uptake of focus groups within the tobacco industry. Our point in doing so was to underline that a methodological approach does not entail a specific and singular set of social and political values (Lazarsfeld and Stehr

1982). Focus groups do not have to support a deleterious industry or the political status quo. Rather, focus group research has the potential to be used across varied paradigmatic stances from logical empiricist, Interpretive Consumer Research, Consumer Culture Theory, Transformative Consumer Research to Critical Marketing Studies. Engaging with the use of focus groups by a destructive industry was our vehicle for articulating the potential contribution of this method to interpretive and critical academic activism (e.g. Tadjewski et al 2014).

The final part of the paper argued that the interactional element of focus group research has much to contribute to epistemological, conceptual and empirical research in marketing and consumer research. Despite this, focus groups are still not widely used outside of managerial research. This is why the final section of this paper is the shortest: feminist and critical scholars within marketing have yet to appreciate the benefits of focus groups. This is a missed opportunity and hopefully scholars will take up the challenge.

### **Disclosure Statement**

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is partly a contribution to a broader literature that seeks to remember the contributions of female scholars and practitioners to our discipline. Recent research has firmly underscored quite how substantial these contributions have been while still remaining largely unappreciated (e.g. Davis 2013; Graham 2013; Jones 2013; Parsons 2013; Scanlon 2013; Tadjewski 2013b; Tadjewski and Maclaran 2013; Zuckerman 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> This is Rowland and Simonson's (2014) argument. We supplement it by connecting Herzog with "order of merit" research and by linking "gratifications" theory to both focus groups and motivation research more generally.

<sup>iii</sup> We should point out that the unusual reference here to the "focussed interview" was Merton's own preference and featured in early versions of his work, but one "s" was dropped by his publisher and the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

<sup>iv</sup> Thanks are due to one of the reviewers, Peter Simonson, for sharing additional information about focus group research and Herta Herzog.

<sup>v</sup> Susan Strasser (1989) refers to the use of focus groups in relation to Crisco (a shortening product) in the very early twentieth century. The information she provides is far too limited to determine whether or not this was the case. At most, she states that the research being conducted "probably sounded much like the focus groups that contemporary marketers convene" (Strasser 1989, 15).

<sup>vi</sup> She married him in the mid-1930s. They divorced ten years later (Simonson forthcoming).

<sup>vii</sup> There were a variety of different industry groups studying subjective reasons for the use of particular goods at this time (Fullerton 1990, 1999; Tadjewski 2013a) or utilised individual interviews (Schwarzkopf 2009). Tadjewski (2013a) finds threads of arguments that suggest qualitative motivation research was being used in the first decade of the twentieth century which logically should entail the asking of "why" questions. Schwarzkopf (2009, 2010b) calls attention to the use of qualitative methods in research conducted for J.W. Thompson during the late 1920s. He indicates that housewives were interviewed about their "attitudes" and "habits" regarding the consumption of soap. It appears to be a structured questionnaire that leaves some room for respondent articulations, but how much is not clear and this is compounded by his use of terminology like "survey" and gestures to large scale research (Schwarzkopf 2009, 13; see also Schwarzkopf 2010b). This said, studying the use of these products in "quasiethnological" form would presumably highlight some aspects of subjective views, opinions and practices. The interviews with retail staff that Schwarzkopf (2009) mentions seem more attuned to subjective factors. Requesting testimonials, calling for participation in "consumer competitions", and "slogan contests" (Schwarzkopf 2010b) might elicit some subjective responses, but not in a manner consistent with the follow-up questions and probes that exemplify the focused interview or later research strategies. We should note that both of the gestures by Tadjewski (2013a) and Schwarzkopf (2009) to the genesis of: in Tadjewski's hands, interpretive research, and in Schwarzkopf's, to qualitative methodology, are somewhat vague and neither document the first use of qualitative research in marketing studies. Intellectual priority regarding qualitative approaches can be attributed to the use of a loose variant of ethnography in the 1890s (Arvidsson 2006), "personal interviews with large advertisers" by Gale around 1895 (Gale 1900, 40), then introspection by applied psychologists from a similar period onwards. Moreover, Harlow Gale (1900) and James Cattell are generally attributed with developing the order of merit approach, with Gale pipping Cattell to the post. Gale's approach was initially a piece of survey research conducted in 1895 with advertisers – not consumers – and his focus is on particular media vehicles in

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the 1895 study, not specific advertisements, although his research does eventually engage with these (Gale 1900). As mentioned above, he followed this survey with interviews with advertisers and subsequently engaged in a form of qualitative “why” oriented research with students using self-produced advertisements (e.g. Gale 1900, 58-59). In his 1895 study, he does ask for “the best ways” advertising can be used to attract attention from consumers. This would elicit some subjective response from those surveyed as did his later research on toilet soap purchases (Eighmey and Sar 2007, 154), although he refers to a lack of clarity regarding the meaning of terms which suggests an absence of follow-up probes (e.g. Eighmey and Sar 2007, 156). Gale’s approach was modified by Walter Dill Scott, Harry Hollingworth and E.K. Strong, with additional inspiration taken from Yerkes (1912) in the case of Strong. Scott (1912) was interested in the introspections produced by respondents. His methodological approach mirrors Gale’s. He refers to the potential use of introspection, combined with seeking material regarding the effectiveness of advertising from the readership of a particular magazine (i.e. the type of information solicitation that J.W. Thompson engaged in much later). The use of a numerical weight of respondents versus one introspection seems to make this strategy more valid for Scott (1912, 154; cf. Wiebe 1958, 23). The problem was that the reasons people gave for finding particular advertisements more effective or persuasive were critiqued by Strong (1938, 216) for making little sense as “motives for buying”. Arguably, what we see here are practical movements that stress the importance of qualitative material as input into marketing decisions, with a slowly emerging awareness that distribution of responses will provide more managerially useable information for the development of advertising campaigns. Strong’s (1938) critique indicates the need for further research to explicate responses – that is, the function of qualitative interviews stressed by Herzog, Merton and the American Marketing Association’s sub-committee of Marketing Research Techniques which contained Herta Herzog as a committee member (Blankenship et al 1949, 425).

<sup>viii</sup> On a related matter, Harlow Gale (1900) basically pre-empts a number of later debates in marketing, most notably, relational perspectives. This has previously passed unnoticed in either the historical studies that engage with relationship marketing (e.g. Tadajewski 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2015a, 2015b; Tadajewski and Saren 2009) or in the limited literature on Gale’s writing. Gale refers to the importance of trust between firms and their customers, the generation of satisfaction, and the pursuit of long-term relationships between organisations and their client base rather than one-shot transactions. As he stresses, “as our informants told us, much advertising is not for gaining new customers, but to hold their old customers by not letting them forget the continued existence of those articles or firms which they have found trustworthy by experience” (Gale 1900, 59).

<sup>ix</sup> As mentioned in endnote seven, previously “why” questions had largely been the preserve of formalised questionnaire research (Lockley 1950) and partly qualitative and quantitative research (Eighmey and Sar 2007). Examples of quantitative “why” research include work undertaken by Thomas Balmer of the Butterick Publication Company who asked people what products they purchased and “why” they chose them (e.g. Calkins and Holden 1905, 297). Given the methodological format used by Balmer, the responses were *a priori* standardised. They did not leave room for personal experience and idiosyncrasy, a key feature of Merton and Kendall’s (1946) explication of the focused interview. Harlow Gale incorporated more room for qualitative “why” responses (e.g. Gale 1900, 58), but we are a long way from the experience oriented, specifically directed research associated with Lazarsfeld in his market research studies conducted initially in Vienna and later documented in a series of seminal papers in marketing journals (Fullerton 1990). Interestingly, the marketing and consumption literature parses in the 1920s and 1930s period, reflecting the contribution of Veblen among

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others. This literature is important in the sense that it went beyond reflecting on “why” people acted in the way they did, to arguing “how” they should act. It was normative in orientation. Hazel Kyrk’s (1923) work is an exemplar (see Tadajewski 2013b) and it represents a major contribution to an emergent Critical Marketing Studies (Tadajewski 2010b).

<sup>x</sup> This said, Gale’s (1900) research is more complex and nuanced than is often appreciated. While he does offer a very strong theory of advertising influence, in equal measure he refers to the critical reading skills of some of his respondents. Unusually, he made the case that advertising is not the sole source of information about companies and products. Friends and colleagues are often an important and trustworthy conduit of information in around 50% of buying decisions (Gale 1900, 59).

<sup>xi</sup> There are interesting politics surrounding the development and marketing of “gratifications” research. Herzog deserves intellectual, conceptual and empirical primacy. Her ideas were used with limited citation support indicating their origin and promoted as “uses and gratifications” research. The latter is the terminology that is invoked in the marketing and consumer research literature (e.g. O’Donohoe 1994). In the movement from Herzog’s initial research to the diffusion of “uses and gratifications” it undergoes substantial theoretical revision away from the psychoanalytic influences found in Herzog’s work to the more descriptive style associated with interpretive consumer research (Simonson forthcoming). This is not a criticism of interpretive consumer research, just a point of difference.

<sup>xii</sup> There were countervailing discourses in circulation at this time that underscored the suggestibility and malleability of consumers (e.g. Scott 1913). Indeed, there was a whole school of thought in this vein that John Dewey found deeply problematic for its mono-causal assumption base. We would do well to recall that there were also movements against the intrusion of advertising into public space as well as critiques of consumer naivety (e.g. Billings 1913). This, again, indicates a more critical engagement with marketing and advertising than is generally supposed (see Benjamin 2004; McFall 2004).

<sup>xiii</sup> Although Hollingworth did privilege the importance of quantitative analysis (Kuna 1979).

<sup>xiv</sup> Consistency seemed to be a major theme of interest to scholars across multiple disciplines. If attitudes and opinions were consistent, then they were more likely to be valid seems to have been the general argument (e.g. Edmiston 1943, 599). Some even took this slightly further, stressing that if the findings reflected those anticipated *a priori*, then they were more valid. This is a profoundly ego-centric perspective on the status of the researcher versus respondents.

<sup>xv</sup> Lazarsfeld’s interpretations of consumer buying motivations place the skills of many of those experimenting with qualitative methods at this time firmly into the shade in terms of their sophistication (Fullerton 1999). While Lazarsfeld, Dichter and Herzog did help shift the language and research approaches used within marketing and consumer research, with depth interviews and focus groups gaining considerable adherents as a result (Samuel 2010), motivation research was subject to a variety of critiques that called into question its scientific credentials in the United States (Tadajewski 2006; Yankelovich 1958), Great Britain (Nixon 2009) and Germany (Köhler and Logemann forthcoming). This is not to suggest it disappeared from marketing theory, consumer research and consultancy practice (Tadajewski 2006; Samuel 2010) – there are many ways it threads through our intellectual history from its promotion in the hands of Lazarsfeld, Dichter and Herzog to the present day in the figure of Clotaire Rapaille (2006).

<sup>xvi</sup> It should be noted that one practitioner has proposed that the history of focus groups can be traced to a research project involving Ivory Soap “in the late 1930s” (Henderson 2004, 38). This, however, is basically speculation. Nor is it correct if we factor in the use of focus group type activities – however embryonic they were – that took place within applied

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psychology circles, Herzog's use of them in the late 1930s (Simonson forthcoming), or in motivation research consultancy projects during a similar time period. It could, even so, conceivably be a project undertaken by Dichter in 1938.

<sup>xvii</sup> For those knowledgeable about focus group research, there are similarities between what Lazarsfeld is encouraging here and Fern's (2001) review of exploratory focus groups and their use for brainstorming activities.

<sup>xviii</sup> Access to the Dichter files was provided electronically via: <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-collections/collection/american-consumer-culture-1935-1965/detailed-information/>