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Using focus groups to study everyday narratives in world politics

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Abstract: Following widespread use in political marketing and polling, focus groups are slowly gaining recognition as a useful and legitimate method in political science. Focus groups can however be far more than just a secondary qualitative method to primary quantitative public opinion research: they can be used to study the micro-level process of social construction. The process in which key sub-groups collectively contest and justify the actions of elite political actors via shared values is one way to study how legitimacy is conferred. This article therefore argues that focus groups can be particularly useful for research that examines everyday narratives in world politics.

Keywords: focus groups, methodology, qualitative methods, ideas, legitimacy

Introduction

Legitimation is one of the perennial questions of political science. Whether implicit or explicit, there is a wealth of research that asks questions about how the powerful successfully obfuscate their actions, how social systems are maintained in spite of the manifest injustices they produce, why the public accept or resist contentious political change, and so on. One mechanism through which power is legitimated is the extent to

which it is justifiable in light of shared values. Political elites use a number of tools at their disposal – including rhetoric and political ideas – in order to convince the public that their rule is just. This brings us to the prickly question of audience and the specific puzzle of how and why ideas resonate with the public. Why do certain political ideas "work" in justifying power? Why do some soar and others fall? Despite there being an endless number of ways to chip away at this puzzle, this article argues that using focus groups to study everyday narratives provides a particularly useful tool for doing so. As Steiner Kvale asks: "If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii).

This is despite focus groups' strange reputation. The method – typically defined as "structured discussions among 6 to 10 homogenous strangers in a formal setting" (Morgan, 1996, p. 131) – is sometimes associated more closely with the shadowy techniques of corporate and political marketing than it is as a legitimate social science method (Parker and Tritter, 2006, p. 23; Savigny, 2007). This is accentuated by the methodological conventional wisdom of the discipline. The method continues to be viewed through the lens of quantitative public opinion research, i.e., aggregating individual preferences and attitudes from a systematically random sample in order to extrapolate about a wider population. If the aim is to study public opinion in this way, then focus groups will almost inevitably be negatively evaluated – downgraded from a primary method to one that must be supplementary to quantitative counterparts (e.g., Copsey, 2008). Yet despite the conventional wisdom, there are numerous examples of focus groups as a primary method in research about politics (e.g. Gamson, 1992; Hopf, 2002; Marsh, O'Toole and Jones, 2007; Jarvis and Lister, 2012). These studies appreciate that the purpose of focus group research is to understand how a particular population or group process and negotiate meaning around a given situation. This is a worthwhile aim that cannot be easily achieved, if at all, with quantitative methods.

Consequently, this article does not provide a practical how-to guide for organising and facilitating focus groups. Instead, it unpacks one particular methodology for using focus groups to study everyday narratives in world politics. My starting point is to challenge the assumed association between focus groups and those methodologies associated with quantitative public opinion research. As an alternative methodological grounding, I propose a Weberian approach whereby the practical and "analytical order[ing] of empirical social reality" (Weber, 1949, p. 63) is the central aim of scholarship. This foundational assumption of intersubjectivity has proximity with the standard theoretical assumptions of focus groups. Proponents of the method are usually interested in analysing intersubjectivity – the common-sense conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors (Calder, 1977, p. 358). Focus groups produce *"sociable public discourse"* in which participants tend to act as if "speaking to

a gallery" governed by the norms of public discourse (Gamson, 1992, p. 20). By carefully sampling salient sub-groups, the shared values drawn upon to justify political change can be reconstructed and analysed as an ideal-type everyday narrative. This can in turn inform us about how political change instigated at an elite level is conferred a degree of legitimacy.

In unpacking this approach the article argues that quantitative public opinion methodologies are counterproductive to focus group research. To get the most out of focus groups, researchers must reflect upon, rather than necessarily strictly adopt, a number of ostensibly radical methodological moves. These moves may seem jarring in comparison to the supposedly conventional methodologies of political science and international relations. Yet, without them, focus groups lose the majority of their added value. The threat is that the method will be consigned to a secondary role, answerable in principle and practice to quantitative studies in which collective meaning making is lost. The methodology outlined in this article is hopefully one way this fate can be avoided, but, to be clear, it is not the only way.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first situates the methodology within its intellectual heritage, namely, a critique of the theory of legitimation implicit in much constructivist and institutionalist literature. By reconceptualising legitimacy as a two-way process, we can analysis how political action and ideas are conferred legitimation via justification in line with shared values. The second section outlines a Weberian approach to the nature of scholarly knowledge. Section three introduces the key theoretical assumption of intersubjectivity. This provides the basis for theorising focus group interactions, the process of collective meaning making, appropriate sampling strategies, and the sorts of knowledge claims that can be made from the subsequent data. Section four highlights the practical implications of this methodology. Here, I draw upon my own focus group research to illustrate how this methodology may be implemented in practice. Finally, I conclude the article by calling to extend the reflexive turn beyond ontology to also concern the practical links between method and methodology.

Political ideas and the problem of legitimacy

Over the last twenty years or so political scientists have started to systematically conceptualise the role of "ideas" in explaining political change, with constructivist or discursive institutionalism one of the most popular of these approaches (Hay, 2006; Schmidt, 2008). These approaches explain political outcomes through the constellation of ideas and institutions. As in traditional forms of institutionalism, actors are still constrained and enabled by their context. But discursive institutionalism places agency

at the foreground. Actors can use ideas to create and alter institutions, as well as use those ideas to communicate and legitimise that institutional change or continuity. Although not at the forefront, the approach does conceptualise how ideas might resonate with the public. Both Schmidt and Campbell theorise how the ideas used by politicians to make sense of an issue and then justify particular action must resonate with "public philosophies" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306) or "public sentiments" (Campbell, 1998, p. 385). However, neither author offers concrete empirical strategies for exploring these issues. The question therefore remains: how and why do ideas resonate with the public? Questioning and theorising about the process of legitimation offers a potential key.

Leonard Seabrooke (2006) argues that this literature possesses a flawed but implicit underlying theory of legitimation. The approach assumes "auto-legitimacy", whereby elite narratives and the various social relations they underpin are assumed to unproblematically gain legitimacy "by proclamation" (2006, p. 40). Although not the primary focus of these approaches, this underlying theory of legitimacy-by-proclamation also implicitly claims that the public are the passive referents and recipients of elite legitimation claims (Seabrooke, 2006, p. 22). Although the legitimacy-by-proclamation thesis is a direct critique of this literature, it reflects a conventional wisdom about legitimacy: that is, the notion that legitimation is conferred through those without power having the perception that the actions of the powerful are legitimate (Beetham, 1991, p. 6-19). The result of this formulation is an underlying theory that focuses on how legitimation claims help propagate "perceptions of legitimacy" or the "construction of legitimacy", with little reflection on whether the legitimation claims in question have worked in convincing or coercing the audience of the justness or necessity of the action in question. The modern incarnation of this view is perhaps to be found in the popularity of survey research in social sciences, in which an aggregation of individual beliefs and preferences in favour of a certain system or a particular policy is sometimes provided as evidence of legitimacy.

David Beetham (1991) argues that this has a deleterious impact upon how legitimation is analysed. Scholars assume that if people believe in the legitimacy of those with power[1] then it must be because the powerful have managed to convince or trick people that they are legitimate. The question of legitimacy is therefore placed in the hands of the powerful themselves, without appreciating how the process is by definition a "two-way street" (Seabrooke, 2006, p. 9). The central mistake in the belief-in-legitimacy theory is to distinguish between people's individual beliefs about legitimacy from the

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[1] Although many scholars who study the process of legitimation focus on the authority of the state in the context of relations with society, there is no obvious reason why the sort of "power" discussed here cannot be extended to other forms of social relations.

intersubjective grounds or reasons for holding them in the first place (Beetham, 1991, p. 10). Unlike perceptions, these are not found in the aggregated individual minds of people but in the shared values of a society or social groups (Beetham, 1991, p. 10).

In place of the legitimacy-by-proclamation thesis, Beetham authoritatively claims that "a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs" (Beetham, 1991, p. 11). As Beetham (1991, p. 11) explains in more detail:

> This may seem like a fine distinction, but it is a fundamental one. When we seek to assess the legitimacy of a regime, a political system, or some other power relation, one thing we are doing is assessing how far it can be justified in terms of people's beliefs, how far it conforms to their values or standards, how far it satisfies the normative expectations they have of it. We are making an assessment of the degree of congruence, or lack of it, between a given system of power and the beliefs, values and expectations that provide its justification. We are not making a report on people's belief in its legitimacy.

If a set of social relations can be conferred legitimacy when they can be justified in line with shared values, then as society's conventions wax and wane so too does the legitimation of authority (Beetham, 1991, p. 11). Consequently, legitimacy is recast as a process rather than a classification, which runs on a spectrum as opposed via a binary condition.

This formulation of legitimation has important implications. For one, it suggests that the power of ideas cannot be reduced to the "means of power available to those who control their dissemination", but should be "measured" in terms of their credibility to the recipient (Beetham, 1991, p. 106). In other words, the actions or ideas of elites are not legitimate because those with power say so – an example of the legitimacy-by-proclamation thesis – but because those actions or ideas can be justified in light of shared values. Since focus groups are a particularly useful way of exposing and analysing shared values, the method fits with this theory of legitimacy. Before we get to the detail of the method itself, we must begin with some fundamental methodological questions regarding the sort of knowledge we are aiming to generate.

A Weberian approach

Political scientists are increasingly acknowledging that all social science is underpinned by a number of unsolvable assumptions about the nature of being and knowing (Hay, 2002; Bates and Jenkins, 2007; Stanley, 2012). There can be therefore no one right way of doing social science. Whatever means are being utilised to achieve whatever epistemic ends, both those means and ends should be fully justified. In this vein, the aim of this section is not to outline substantive theoretical assumptions about the make-up of the world or how best to specifically collect or analyse data. Instead it

aims to outline the most basic principles that underpin the design and data collection of this methodology. This is especially important when such values deviate considerably from the mainstream.

My methodological starting point is Weber's observation that social science is inherently value-laden (Weber, 1946). This statement invokes at more than one meaning. For one, it suggests that a "neutral" social science is impossible due to the inescapable values of the researcher and that there is no objectively correct or right way to produce social scientific knowledge. Yet, Weber's statement can also be read in a third way, namely, that social science is value-laden because the very definition of social scientific knowledge is itself contested. To be "scientific" should be separated from adhering to the values of the common-sense standard of (in this particular case) quantitative public opinion research. In ensuring a fair evaluation of scientific knowledge, the only criteria we can propose then is the internal validity of methodology for systematically producing facts (Jackson, 2010, p. 22-24). Guaranteeing this, in turn, means being upfront about one's foundational assumptions and the basis on which empirical claims are based.

The methodology outlined here rejects the object/subject distinction, and therefore foregrounds the intersubjective nature of crafting scholarly knowledge itself. In regard to this latter concern, the philosophical starting point is that all observations, scholarly or otherwise, are dependent upon theories and concepts. As a result, we cannot make a meaningful distinction between "knowing" and "being"; or, in Rodney Barker's (2000) terms "thinking" and "doing". This runs contrary to the orthodoxy of the discipline (Barker, 2000, p. 223-4), whereby it is typically assumed that there is a distinction between object and subject, and therefore scholarly knowledge should be judged on its ability to represent an external reality. This may appear as common sense, and, in a way, that is exactly the point.

Yet this perspective can and has been successfully challenged since even before the inception of social science (on which, see Jackson, 2010). Although there is not space to review these disputes fully, the rejection of a split between knowing and being often begins with restating that 'there is no way of getting outside the concepts in terms of which we think of the world … The world is for us what is presented through those concepts' (Winch, 1958, p. 15). With this mind, we must question the extent to which we can we ever "access" an external reality on which to judge how well knowledge represents reality if we assume that the world is mediated through concepts. From this foundation, we can envisage a different set of methodological values to those that are typically associated with quantitative public opinion research. Here, what really matters when producing scholarly knowledge is the useful "analytical order[ing] of

empirical social reality" (Weber, 1949, p. 63). This Weberian approach therefore seeks to order the experiences from practical research activity through crafting analytical narratives – involving the deliberate over-simplification of ideal-typical concepts in exploring historical contingencies – to make empirical claims with "pragmatic explanatory utility" (Jackson, 2010, p. 37).

It is illustrative to turn to Weber's explanation of ideal-types to get a better grasp of this methodology:

> An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasised viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia (Weber, 1949, p. 90).

This quote is worth fleshing out. Due to the "infinite richness of events" (1949, p. 111), all explanations are by definition imperfect. This is what, in part, makes science so value-laden, because all scholars are forced to focus on just a relatively limited aspect of explaining a historical event equating to their specialism and interests (Weber, 1949, p. 71). All explanations are necessarily one-sided or, more accurately perhaps, selective. However, an explanation may also be "free from the charge of arbitrariness to the extent that it is successful in producing insights into interconnections which have been shown to be valuable for the causal explanation of concrete historical events" (Weber, 1949, p. 71).

This methodology looks to isolate ideal-typical factors that can adequately account, causally speaking, for a historical event through counterfactual reasoning. These analytical "concept-constructions" (Weber, 1949, p. 101) are not supposed to be "tested" by comparing them to reality, because, as Weber makes clear in his use of "utopia", they cannot be found. The only way they can be judged is as means to an end. As Patrick Jackson explains, the only meaningful way to evaluate such constructs is pragmatically: "that is, to examine whether, once applied, the ideal type is efficacious in revealing intriguing and useful things about the objects to which it is applied" (2010, p. 146). Such explanations should be judged as valid to the extent that "our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated and hence as 'objectively possible' and which appear as adequate" (Weber, 1949, p. 92). The end, in this particular case, is a concrete analysis of the role of everyday narratives in legitimating change in a case study within world politics.

Focus group research in theory

This section builds on the Weberian approach from the previous section by fleshing out some of the detail regarding how focus groups can be used to make knowledge claims about the legitimating function of everyday narratives in world politics. This includes discussion of what sort of knowledge focus groups can produce, the theoretical assumptions that underlie this, and the type of sampling strategies appropriate to this methodology. It therefore outlines some guidance over what can be "accessed" with focus group interviews, and the extent to which claims can be made beyond just the specific participants interviewed. The notion of intersubjectivity intersects all of these concerns.

Before conducting focus group research, one must decide what we are aiming to "access" via a focus group. Kvale and Brinkmann's distinction between the interviewer as a miner or as a traveller illustrates two contrasting ideal-types for interviewing. While the miner's aim is knowledge collection, the traveller's aim is knowledge construction (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48). For the miner, knowledge is understood to lie in the minds of interview participants. It is thus akin to "buried metal"; something that lies in a potentially deep interior for the interviewer to unearth as cleanly as possible (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48). The interviewer "digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions [which] may be understood as objective real data or as subjective authentic meanings" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48).

Alternatively, the traveller interviewer can be thought of as on a journey. The interviewer is a traveller, in line with the original Latin meaning of conversation as "wandering together with", who "talks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48). Knowledge, then, is not merely discovered in or mined from the minds of people. It is instead actively created through the process of questions and answers; the product of interviewer and interviewee (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 54). It is for these reasons that Kvale (2009, p. 2) describes the interview as literally an inter-view: "an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" .

These categories of miner and traveller highlight the different theoretical approaches that can be taken to interviewing. An interview or focus group that is driven by the assumptions of quantitative public opinion research may seek to create a "pure" interview (Hollander, 2004, p. 611; Munday, 2006, p. 95). A Weberian approach that foregrounds the intersubjectivity of both scholarly knowledge and of the social world will be more comfortable with (if not actually encouraging of) the use of "familiar narrative constructs" in the place of seemingly genuine beliefs in the minds of people

(Miller and Glassner, 2004, p. 125-7). As a result, the interview can provide insights beyond just the individual and instead provide knowledge about the intersubjectivity of sub-groups too. Indeed, "all knowledge is seen as dependent on the social context of its production [which] also points in the direction of actively including the social interaction", rather than worrying about biases and cross-contamination of individual beliefs (Halkier, 2010, p. 74).

The mining metaphor reflects the assumption of intersubjectivity, whereby the shared norms and meanings of specific sub-groups is the central unit of analysis. As Bobby Calder recounts in his seminal article on focus groups, intersubjectivity "refers to the common-sense conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors" (1977, p. 358). This is exactly why the focus group literature talks of "how people construct and reconstruct their stories" (Barbour, 2007, p. 42) or "the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed" (Bryman, 2008, p. 476). The collective element goes hand-in-hand in intersubjectivity, and is an advantage focus groups have over individual interviews. As Gamson recounts, focus groups represent "sociable public discourse" in which participants tend to act as if "speaking to a gallery" whereby the norms of public discourse constrain and enable discussion (Gamson, 1992, p. 20). The clear value added of focus groups lies in their ability through sustained "retrospective introspection" to reveal previously taken for granted assumptions that underpin our rarely articulated but common sense stock of knowledge (Bloor, et al., 2001, p. 5).

But where, exactly, do these meanings come from? How are they shared? And who shares them? Calder (1977, p. 358) points out that a key factor in intersubjectivity is "the actor's assumption that others see the world in the same way … Intersubjectivity is thus defined socially, not individually". Intersubjectivity is thus closely related to common patterns of socialisation: "The key variable is the degree of personal contact and similarity of socialisation, which is basic to all social groupings, such as those based on social class, geographic location, race, or whatever" (Calder, 1977, p. 358). This has two important implications for sampling strategy.

First, if we assume that intersubjectivity is dependent on socialisation (similar upbringing, similar experiences), and that focus groups are being used to study intersubjectivity, then it is crucial that focus group participants share a number of key characteristics. This is the reason the focus group literature consistently recommends using "homogenous" participants (e.g. Morgan, 1996, p. 131; 1997, p. 35; Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 10; Wilkinson, 2004, p. 179). Second, with intersubjectivity as the key level of analysis, we then must decide which and whose intersubjectivity we are to study. Therefore it makes sense to sample "theoretically" (sometimes also called

"purposefully" or "paradigmatically"): that is, "theorising – albeit at an early stage – about the dimensions that are likely to be relevant in terms of giving rise to differing perceptions or experiences" (Barbour, 2007, p. 58). I return to this issue briefly in the next section.

Recall that a degree of legitimacy is conferred when elite actions or ideas can be justified via shared values. This notion of shared values must be disaggregated in order to operationalise it for research. William Gamson's (1992) Talking Politics is a particular inspiration here. In the discussion of his study into how working people negotiate and discuss politics, Gamson urges us to think of each political issue "as a forest through which people must find their way" with various cultural sources providing "maps indicating useful points of entry [and] signposts at various crossroads" (Gamson, 1992, p. 117). Gamson then categorises these "maps" as originating from one of three possible sources: the media, popular wisdom, and everyday experiences. Given the limitations of the focus group method, the latter two of these sources are the most important to unpack.

The second of Gamson's sources in everyday sense-making is popular wisdom. Popular wisdom refers to taken-for-granted knowledge and maxims that are often used to make a point in conversation and are reliant upon the assumptions that are shared. The shared aspect is important since popular wisdom depends on those very basic and foundational beliefs and assumptions that 'everyone' knows. However, "the greater the degree of homogeneity of life experience among a group of people, the greater the popular wisdom available to them as a resource" (1992, p. 123-4). More specifically, popular wisdom is often utilised through (1) rules of thumb and (2) analogies to everyday life situations (Gamson, 1992, p. 124; for examples see Stanley, 2014).

The third of Gamson's sources in everyday sense-making is experiential knowledge. Gamson found that people frequently made points in his focus groups "by telling a story" (Gamson, 1992, p. 122). While these stories were sometimes from secondary sources such as from television or from a newspaper, the majority of the anecdotes were about themselves or at least someone that they know personally (Gamson, 1992, p. 122). More specifically, experiential knowledge is often utilised through emblematic anecdotes that seek to make a broader point about how the world works (Gamson 1992: 122). Experiences in the form of anecdotes have a privileged place in conversation. Although experiential knowledge relies less on sharedness and is thus unique to the individual, it can still be important in collective meaning making – especially when participants sometimes offer corroborating stories.

To summarise up to this point, political elites use ideas to justify and make space for political change or to maintain the status quo. Yet, most political elites, to differing extents, are not merely speaking in a vacuum in which their actions are conferred automatic legitimacy. Legitimation is a two-way street, between those in formal positions of power and everyday actors. Beetham identified justifiability as one key mechanism of legitimation: the extent to which political change can be justified in light of shared values. If facing challenges to their legitimacy, governments may intervene with policies or discourses that seek to assuage the public. By promising to, say, make life fairer through means that can be justified by shared values, they can begin to halt the erosion of their legitimation. Focus groups are of particular use here. By analysing the sociable public discourse they produce, we can reconstruct ideal-type everyday narratives based on shared values that illuminate the process of legitimation.

Narrative analysis can be used to highlight the intersubjective bases of these justifications. Since shared values allow individuals to comprehend and organise experience, we can look for patterns across different instances of everyday talk from similar people for evidence of such shared and stable understandings (Quinn, 2005, p. 40-43). "In general", according to Claudia Strauss, one should "take what your interviewees say and consider what else they have to assume for those statements to make sense" (2005, p. 208). The aim is thus to "peel back" from the cacophony of everyday talk to the shared values that make those justifications possible. Narrative analysis, in particular, reconstructs the stories told during interviews or focus groups through working out the key players and a basic structure or plot (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 222). If these stories may not be told explicitly then a coherent narrative can be constructed from different elements and points made throughout the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 222). Just like how when someone tells a story it always has a point, when someone discusses one topic in connection with another (even without any explanation for the connection) they take for granted the norms and conventions that link those topics (Strauss, 2005, p. 208). We can call this the assumption of contiguity: "if topic B follows topic A when a speaker is allowed to talk without interruption, then A and B are linked" (Strauss, 2005, p. 208). The aim of this analysis is then to reconstruct the many tales told into a ideal-typical narrative that is "a richer, more condensed and coherent story" than the data provides alone (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 202). These narratives do not exist in the sense that they can be discovered because they are a form of ideal-type analysis. It is therefore important, where space permits, to analyse and describe alternative narratives.

Claims about everyday narratives from focus groups can be extended beyond just the participants interviewed. It is important to note the differences in "scaling up" between empirical generalisability and analytical generality (Yin, 2003, p. 10). Quantitative

public opinion research will typically use empirical generalisability to scale up a series of individual preferences derived from a survey through a representative sample in order to make claims about a wider population. Since the level of analysis in this alternative methodology is not the individual, a different method is required based on "producing context-bound typicalities" (Halkier, 2011, p. 788). This is where the Weberian ideal-type methodology and the theoretical assumptions about intersubjectivity and sense-making most clearly collide. The popular wisdom and experiences drawn on by participants are not necessarily located in their minds, but emerge in a form of sociable public discourse with a group of similar people (Halkier, 2011, p. 792). We can therefore look for both agreements within each discussion and similarities between focus groups in order to build an ideal-type justificatory narrative. It is a therefore a narrative based on a type of collective experience. It is for this reason that using homogenous participants from a relatively specific sub-group is seen as so important in both focus group research more generally, and within the particular methodology outlined here (Fairweather and Rinne, 2012, p. 476). Claims can be strengthened, where possible, by corroboration with secondary data or academic literature. Although the epistemic basis for the claims is different (and weaker) compared to quantitative public opinion research, using this sort of methodology results in insights and analyses otherwise impossible.

This specific methodology has two significant weaknesses that are important to flag up. Specifically, this form of analysis does violence to individual, subjective and idiosyncratic narratives by imposing a "utopian" order and coherence upon proceedings. This can be politically and ethically troublesome, because those subjective and idiosyncratic narratives may reflect the experiences of the systematically underprivileged. By excluding questions of intersectionality this sort of research can, in principle, be complicit in reinforcing undesirable power relations and the continued exclusion of marginalised experiences. Due to the logic of this methodology, this is difficult to counteract. Recall how intersubjectivity represents one of the key assumptions in the research design: instead of accessing individual beliefs, the aim is to analyse shared norms from specific sub-groups. In the example research discussed in the next section, those sub-groups do include women and ethnic minorities as members both abstractly and specifically within the sub-groups that were targeted. However, those individual marginalised experiences cannot be assumed to be typical of a type of experience (of, say, women). To do so would logically contradict the methodology outlined. To remedy this, one would need to conduct separate focus groups with a specific marginalised sub-group. However, this itself is often not possible because resources are often limited (as they were in this case). When using focus groups, scholars must therefore be sensitive to the variegated experiences of the

systematically underprivileged when space permits, and, above all, demonstrate the practical utility of the analytical ends despite the potentially troublesome means.

Focus group research in practice

This section draws on a focus group research project, conducted by the author, in order to illuminate the methodology outlined above. The main aim of the research was to investigate the everyday politics of austerity in the UK and, in particular, how and why significant segments of the public seemed to accept implications of budget deficit reduction as necessary. Specifically, the project aimed to discover how members of the public justified austerity through holding a series of focus groups. The sampling strategy was theoretically driven by these concerns. Homeowners from middle-income areas [focus groups A1-A4] were selected as a theoretically likely group to justify austerity, while volunteers in impoverished areas [focus groups B5-B6] were selected as a theoretically likely group to oppose austerity.

Six focus groups, with a total of 39 participants, were conducted between May and October 2012 (see appendix for details). The first sub-group was recruited via the electoral register, while the second sub-group was recruited via local advertisements and word of mouth. All participants were offered a £20 gift voucher as an incentive. The groups contained a mix of those employed in the public and private sectors – as well as unemployed – and a mix of genders and ethnicities. A limited facilitation approach taken by the author, meaning that questions and interventions were limited to allow the discussion to flow relatively freely. Towards the end of each group it was always asked whether they believe spending cuts in the name of austerity was necessary. Each discussion was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was conducted in NVivo.

Within the focus groups, it was generally established that "debt" was one of the central problems facing the British economy and society. Looking over the examples of how each group identified debt as the problem, it is striking just how ambiguous and far-reaching the understandings of debt are, even just in these excerpts from each focus group:

> **Jerry**: When you asked "do we need to cut back?"… I think we do. I think we have a structural deficit, which means we're making less every year, so I think we do. I accept the argument, as much as I hate them [the government] for that.
>
> [Focus group A1]
>
> **Kyle**: I don't know how else you do it [reduce the deficit through spending cuts], because if you do it … the only other way is taxation. I just think if you tax us anymore we're already bleeding dry.

Nicholas: I tend to agree with that.

Linda: Yes.

[Focus group A2]

Sarah: I think they [the spending cuts] are necessary.

Rachel: I think we need to claw back somewhere … no doubt about that.

Lucy: I think probably, yes … the deficit should be partly made up from elsewhere – like very profitable businesses. I think people who make a lot of money should be made to have a bit more of a social conscience.

[Focus group A3]

Caitlin: They're [bankers] nothing fantastic. They're one the reasons we're in the mess we are. I think, y'know, I think I'd say we'd go and start fresh really.

Interviewer: What is the mess we're in?

Caitlin: I think we've got too much debt.

[Focus group A4]

Interviewer: Why now? Why have the government suddenly decided that they want to save so much money?

Felix: Well, the banking issue was a big issue wasn't it.

Jilly: They're saying it was the debt.

Rose: The country is in debt.

Felix: …misappropriation has gone somehow, they are responsible for that.

Rose: They don't like us being in debt, do they? The Conservatives' don't like the country being in debt.

[Focus group B1]

Mary: An interesting question ["what is the "problem" with the UK?"]. I don't think there's a single-word answer for it.

Jo: Everything. That's a single-word answer.

Laughter

Mary: Debt is a problem.

Jo: Yeah.

Mary: And y'know […] whether you go from individuals, to nations, to the globe. Debt is a problem […] [and] essentially you cut back on spending, but you have to do some spending to generate more income. So it's finding that balance isn't it.

Identifying the problem of debt is significant in and of itself. This is for the simple reason that if one believes that debt is a problem, then one is likely to posit spending cuts as a way to pay what one owes as the logical solution. Participants used shared values to justify this, drawing on rules of thumb about the morality of debt and using experiences from managing household finances to make wider points about the state (for more on this, see Stanley, 2014). The process of identifying debt as a problem conferred a degree of legitimation in and of itself, due to the causal chain it created in the sociable public discourse produced by the groups.

Once debt was established as a problem within the groups, attention shifted onto questioning how state had become indebted by debating various sources of profligacy. This was done implicitly rather than explicitly. It appeared at times as if participants were implicitly answering a question: assuming that we accept that the state must cut back to reduce debt, then we may naturally want to contemplate how and why the state managed to overspend in the first place. Welfare, bank bailouts, military spending were just a few of the reasons given by participants. One of the most common discussions, however, drew on experiences of state profligacy to make a point about the sources of state indebtedness. The comments from Rose, below, highlight this:

> **Rose:** Yeah! Vote Labour! They're giving money away left, right and centre. Let's give you some because you haven't got a job, and let's give you some because you've got 5 kids. And the next kid some too, because you've just arrived in the country and we feel sorry for you. You can't just go out giving money to everybody.
>
> [Focus group B5]

There was a sense, especially in the B groups, that the state "gives money away" in an unsystematic, arbitrary, and unfair manner.

Similar to this was the relatively more nuanced sense that public money is being misspent. As opposed to "free money", these discussions, which chiefly took place in the A groups, were more squarely focused on the illogical banalities of state profligacy that are apparent in everyday life. The example below is particularly illustrative, because it was in response to a question about controversies over local spending cuts. The logic behind the question is that it would invite participants to discuss struggles in the local area, opening up space to discuss struggles on a more national level. That this was purposefully interpreted in this way, is interesting:

> **Nicholas:** I would be the opposite. I would say my controversy is spending money round here on the roads, throwing money around – and I'm thinking, what are they doing that?

> **Duncan:** On street lights…or…?
>
> **Nicholas:** Well, just on… that business down there towards Manor road and towards your road, there's a bridge. And they've put that, they've extended the pavement. What have they done for!? I've got no idea.
>
> [Focus group A2]

This reflected similar discussions about the wasteful practices of state spending that took place in all the A groups.

These example discussions of state profligacy tell us three things about how the participants' sense-making processes confer a degree of legitimation onto austerity measures. First, given that these discussions almost always followed from identifying debt as a problem, these discussions implicitly justified austerity measures by identifying areas of wasteful state spending. Second, these anecdotes can be used to excuse and justify the potentially harmful consequences – whatever they may be – of reluctantly accepting spending cuts. If one makes the connection between state indebtedness (and thus overspending) and inefficiency and profligacy, then it gives the sense of something palpable and relatively harmless to be cut. Third, these discussions suggest that the narratives surrounding austerity give sense to concrete experiences of the public. Experiences in which public money is deemed to have been wasted "stick" and later help make sense of, and to an extent confirm, stories of state indebtedness and overspending. Given that what is being accessed in the focus groups is not individual subjective beliefs but sociable public discourse from two disparate sub-groups that justifies austerity on the basis of shared cultural resources, it is plausible to describe this everyday narrative as (ideal-)typical. Taken together, this shows one way in which a degree of legitimacy is conferred onto the austerity programme.

Concluding remarks

This article has outlined a methodology for using focus groups to study everyday narratives in world politics. Although adopting this methodology involves making ostensibly radical epistemic assumptions in contrast to the conventional wisdom, it has a number of advantages. The methodology – consisting of a Weberian approach to the nature of knowing and being, and more substantive theoretical claims about intersubjectivity – aligns particularly well with the sociable public discourse generated by the focus group method. The focus on legitimation, meanwhile, ensures that the methodology can analyse everyday narratives while still contributing to debates about elite-driven political change. This methodology is just one way to use focus groups in political science and IR. It is not necessarily the most useful approach, as that will depend on the nature of the research being undertaken. Yet, the article argues that the

general epistemic moves made by this methodology should at least be considered and reflected upon if political scientists are to get the most from focus groups. Indeed, doing so is essential to ensure focus groups are considered a primary research method in and of itself.

If there is a wider point to take from this article it is this: think critically about methods and methodology, because there is no need to involuntarily accept or instrumentally acquiesce to orthodox positions. There are now numerous accounts that encourage political scientists and IR scholars to reflect upon the ontological choices we make (e.g. Hay, 2002; Jackson, 2010). Although these philosophical interventions have been productive, it is also important to similarly reflect on actual methods of data collection and analysis. In particular, political scientists should consider what type of knowledge they wish to generate when conducting interviews of any sort (whether, for instance, they wish to "mine" or "travel") and how that knowledge should be judged (knowledge about ideal-type patterns are underpinned by a different logic to the methodology of quantitative public opinion research). If they decide that they are interested in interviewing to access a type of collective experience as opposed to personal beliefs, then I would encourage them to critically reflect on a number of radical epistemic choices this article has outlined. This is particularly the case when analysing everyday narratives in world politics.

Appendix

Table A1. Description of focus group participants

Focus group A1. Kings Heath, Birmingham, May 2012.

Name[1]	Age	Occupation
Paul	51	Agricultural researcher
Damien	47	English tutor
Denise	52	Teaching assistant
Maureen	52	Unemployed
Waheed	52	Unknown
Jerry	50	NHS manager

Focus group A2. Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, June 2012.

Name	Age	Occupation
Duncan	46	Banker
Kyle	50	Driving instructor
Linda	56	Housewife
Nicholas	51	Car trader

Focus group A3. Solihull, Birmingham, July 2012.

Name	Age	Occupation
Sarah	52	Child-minder
Lucy	50	Part time sixth form lecturer / carer
Rachel	51	IT support at local college

Focus group A4. Moseley, Birmingham, July 2012.		
Name	**Age**	**Occupation**
Caitlin	48	Part time researcher and craftsperson
Mandy	60	Retired teacher
Michael	38	Broadcast journalist

Focus group B5. Aston, Birmingham, September 2012.		
Name	**Age**	**Occupation**
Lynn	46	Community organiser
Felix	36	Unemployed / volunteer
Jo	20	Volunteer
Rose	42	Volunteer
Linda	N/A	Unknown
Shauna	40	Events / community work
Eric	58	Unknown
Poonam	N/A	Retired
Beemal	34	Unknown
Jill	27	Mother

Focus group B6. Shard End, Birmingham, October 2012.		
Name	**Age**	**Occupation**
Joanna	N/A	Unknown
Louise	37	Unknown

May	46	Care worker
Jamie	18	College student
Yangun	18	Retail assistant
Jilly	30	Unknown
Jo[2]	20	Volunteer
Clare	N/A	Volunteer
Mary	77	Retired
Nicola	18	Student

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[1] Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

[2] This participant appeared in two focus groups.