The American Sociologist (2022) 53:364–373
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-021-09500-5

Robert Merton and the History of Focus Groups: Standing on the Shoulders of a Giant?

David L. Morgan[1]

Accepted: 8 June 2021 / Published online: 27 August 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

Abstract
This article uses a bibliographic analysis to examine Robert Merton's role in the ongoing history of the focus group. It begins by considering Merton's own suggestion that the lack of attention to his early contributions was due to "obliteration by incorporation," but the pattern of citation to his work does not fit the predicted pattern. Instead, it is a better match to a process known as the "reawakening" of a "sleeping" source. What does, however meet the criteria for obliteration incorporation is the work that helped reintroduce the focus groups to the social sciences, based on the increasingly widespread use of focus groups without any citation to the literature. After a brief consideration of Merton's preferred uses for focus groups, article concludes with a consideration of how focus groups represent a technique that become established outside of academia before making its way back into academia.

Keywords Merton · Focus groups · Obliteration by incorporation · Citation analysis · Qualitative research · Research methods

When Robert Merton died in 2003, his obituary in the *New York Times* headlined him as the "Father of the Focus Group." In contrast, the lengthy obituary in the American Sociological Association's *Footnotes* barely noted focus groups, and of the eleven "remembrances" that accompanied the obituary, only one mentioned them. Of course, both perspectives have a great deal of validity. As seen from the outside world, Merton's co-invention of the focus group (with Paul Lazarsfeld) looms large. But from the point of view of a professional sociologist, that was a much smaller piece of his legacy within the field.

Whether one sees it as a large or small part of Merton's academic life, the focus group is now recognized as a notable sociological contribution to social science research methods, and this article examines Merton's contributions to this method.

✉ David L. Morgan
morgand@pdx.edu

[1] Department of Sociology, Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA

After reviewing Merton's role in the history of focus groups, I use citation analysis to analyze his own explanation ("obliteration by incorporation") why his initial contributions were not appreciated until much later. After that, I describe what I consider to be a more likely account for the pattern of citations to Merton's work on focus group, which leads to a re-examination of obliteration by incorporation in the overall history of focus groups. After discussing Merton's feelings about the utility of focus groups, I conclude by reconsidering the question of how focus group researchers have made use of his original work.

Merton and Focus Groups: A Brief History

For present purposes, the history of focus groups falls into three basic periods. First, there was early work in the social sciences that led to focus groups in the form that we know today, from 1941 to 1956. Second, from 1965 to roughly 1985, there was a period in which focus groups were essentially limited to marketing research. Finally, from the mid-1980s onward, there has been a reawakening of social scientists' interest in focus groups. (For more information on the history of focus groups, see Morgan, 2019; Lee, 2010).

According to Rogers's (2004) interview with Merton, he and Lazarsfeld developed the basic format for focus groups on November 23, 1941 (Merton himself provides an account of these events in his 1987 article). Prior to that Lazarsfeld had been using a rather stiff form of interviewing that relied on leading questions; Merton's key input was to replace this with a less structured qualitative approach that he himself demonstrated that evening, based on his experience from a Works Progress Administration job that paid him to interview "just about all the hoboes and homeless men and women in Boston" (1987, p. 553). It can thus be said that Lazarsfeld contributed the group format, while Merton provided the techniques that established it as a qualitative method.

In the following years, Merton and Lazarsfeld employed focus groups to develop a number of programs (including instructional films) to benefit the war efforts. After the war, Merton and Kendall (1946) described this approach to interviewing, and over the years the two of them, along with Marjorie Fiske, published several mimeographed versions of the book that became *The Focused Interview* (1956). The publication of that book marked Merton's disappearance from the field of focus groups for the next three decades.

During that period, focus groups themselves did not disappear; instead, they became more prominent in marketing research than the social sciences. Merton himself was never active in that field, but Lazarsfeld was, and it was his students and coworkers who established the importance of focus groups in advertising and marketing (Morgan, 2019). So, just as there is a distinct irony in Merton the "theorist" contributing the qualitative approach to focus groups, there is equal irony in Lazarsfeld the "quantitative" researcher serving as the source for their migration into marketing.

Historically, focus groups have functioned as the primary qualitative method in marketing research (Catterall & Maclaran, 2007). Over time, the increased visibility

of this method in that arena led to its wider recognition in fields such as politics (Morgan & Fellows, 2008), and law (Finch & Munro, 2008). It is important to remember, however, how little contact there was between marketing research and in the social sciences. So, when Merton (1987) once again turned his attention to focus groups, he professed to be unaware of how widely used they were outside the social sciences.

Merton's renewed attention to focus groups was a reaction to the reintroduction of the method to the social sciences, and more specifically to a publication by Morgan and Spanish (1984). In that publication, we mistakenly called focus groups a "new method" for the social sciences and misattributed their origins to work done by marketing researchers. In his 1987 article, Merton set the record straight, and also wondered how it was that his work on focus groups was so little known. As just noted, however, focus groups were increasingly well-known outside the social sciences. So, it is hardly surprisingly that they would also eventually reappear in sociology, and that marketing research would serve as the basis for this "discovery."

Overall, Merton's (1987) criticism that focus groups were not new was certainly correct, but the reason they could seem to be innovative was how little attention they had received from social scientists. The situation has changed dramatically since then, and the seed of Merton's invention has now grown into a method that was cited by more than 5000 articles in 2020 in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). Thus, what Merton himself termed a "modest" innovation (1987, p. 562) has achieved a much more prominent location within the range of sociological methods.

Merton, the Sociology of Science, and Focus Groups: Issues of Priority and Obliteration by Incorporation?

Establishing Priority for Focus Groups

Merton's interest in the sociology of science was first evident in his dissertation, which was published as *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (Merton, 1938). One of his continuing concerns within this topic was the "reward system of science," which he discussed in some detail in his presidential address to the American Sociological Society (Merton, 1957). The key question there was how scientific researchers, who were largely unpaid for their specific accomplishments, were motivated to produce the kinds to original contributions that were essential to science itself. Merton's response emphasized the importance of recognition from one's peers. In particular, Merton (1957) used this link between individuals' contributions and the acknowledgement they received to explain why researchers devoted so much attention, and indeed contention, to the issue of priority. Deciding who should receive credit for originating some idea, experiment, or method was thus a debate who should receive the associated reward.

From this perspective, it is tempting to view Merton's (1987) article as seeking the credit due him for creating focus groups. Yet, in his earlier discussion of priority, Merton (1957) noted that science also expects an *institutional norm of humility,* which produces a paradox: "After all, to insist on one's originality by claiming

priority is not exactly humble and to dismiss one's priority by ignoring it is not exactly to affirm the value of originality" (p. 467). This may help explain why Merton's, 1987 article is more about his own curiosity with regard to the history of focus groups, with some of sense of amusement that they could be considered to be a "new" method.

Obliteration by Incorporation

Within the reward system of science, citation of one's work is another way that researcher's receive credit from their peers (Merton, 1979). In his 1987 article, Merton explicitly suggested that his work on focused interviewing might be an "interesting strategic research site" (p. 562) for a citation analysis of his broader ideas about "intellectual diffusion," and more specifically as an example of his work on "obliteration by incorporation" (OBI). Merton (1988) defined this phenomenon as "the obliteration of the sources of ideas, methods, or findings by their incorporation in currently accepted knowledge" (p. 622). In 1987, he gave a more detailed description:

> At the outset, the source of a particular idea or method is known and identified by those who make use of it. In due course, however, users and consequently transmitters of that knowledge who are thoroughly familiar with its origins come to assume that this is also true of their readers. Preferring not to be obvious or to insult their reader's assumed knowledgeability, they no longer refer to the original source. And since, in all innocence, many of us tend to attribute a significant idea, method, or formulation to the author who introduced us to it, the equally innocent transmitter sometimes becomes identified as the originator. (Merton, 1987, p. 564)

According to this account, OBI occurs in three phases: there is an initial recognition of the origin of an intellectual accomplishment, which is then taken for granted over time, until that recognition is ultimately assigned to the work of more recent scholars. Figure 1 follows up on Merton's (1987) earlier suggestion by presenting a history of citations to his work on focus groups. In particular, it uses the "cited reference" function in the Social Sciences Citation Index to locate all of the articles that cited the original article by Merton and Kendall (1946), the two editions of the Merton, Fiske, and Kendall book (1956, 1990), as well as all the intermediate mimeographed versions of that book, and Merton (1987).

Starting with obliteration, for a contribution to the literature to lose its citations, it has to be cited in the first place. Figure 1 calls that into question for Merton's work on focus groups. In the forty years from 1946 to 1986, this body of work received a steady average of four citations per year. Notably, there is not even a blip reflecting the publication of the original edition of the book in 1956. Further, the early work was not just about focus groups, but more broadly on focused interviews; so, as a record of citations to focus groups more specifically, the early years in Fig. 1 could be something of an over-statement.

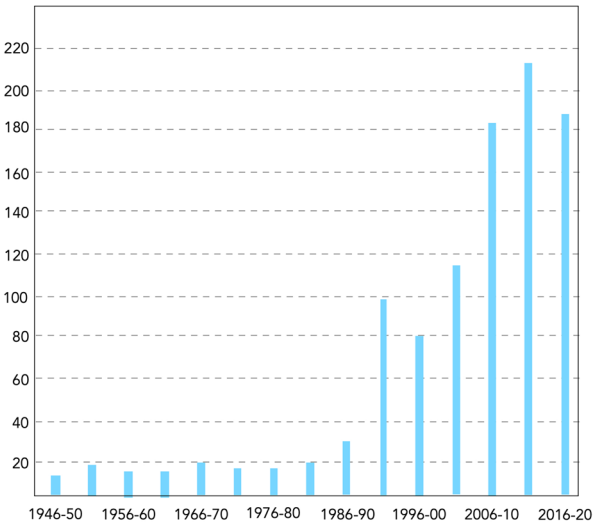

Fig. 1 Social Science Citation Index References to Merton's Work on Focused Interviews

Moving from obliteration to incorporation, Merton's thesis is that citations to the original work should gradually disappear, but Fig. 1 shows that this is hardly the pattern. Instead, the number of citations increases dramatically in the post-1990 period. Overall, this pattern is essentially the reverse of what would be predicted with OBI. Rather than moving from an initial period of recognition to a later period of assimilation, there is little acknowledgement of Merton's work on focus groups until nearly fifty years after its initial publication, at which point it increases dramatically. Of course, when Merton wrote his 1987 article, he had no way of knowing that the history of his work on focus groups would reflect something other than obliteration by incorporation, but that is definitely the case.

Merton and Focus Groups: A Re-Awakening

The broader literature on intellectual diffusion points to an alternative interpretation of Fig. 1. In particular, van Raan (2004) pointed out that some original contributions can go unrecognized for a noticeable period of time before they become the subject of increasing attention. He labelled this a period of "sleeping" before being reawakened by the attention that results from new citations. Li (2014) described this as a pattern of citation that was distinguished by minimal initial attention, followed by "delayed recognition." This matches the long "sleeping spell" on the left-hand side of Fig. 1 and the strong surge of new attention on the right-hand side.

This pattern raises the question of how a given contribution was re-awakened. In this case, the new interest in focus groups that began in the mid-1980s (Morgan & Spanish, 1984) had a noticeably longer-lasting impact than Merton's original work, but it also carried with it the delayed recognition of his pioneering status. Thus, the period from 1986 to 1990 saw the publication of three new textbooks, all of which highlighted Merton's contributions. One unusual feature of this reawakening

is Merton's own role in its occurrence, including both his 1987 article and the 1990 reissue of Merton, Fiske, and Kendall's book—although this is not entirely unknown in the literature (Gorry & Aichouchi, 2017).

Focus Groups: Obliteration by Incorporation Revisited

The literature on the reawakening of sleeping articles points to different roles, one for the source of the invention and the other for those who did the reawakening. This section revisits Merton's concept of obliteration by incorporation, but applies it not to his own work but to those responsible for its reawakening.

As noted previously, one of the major sources for the renewed interest in focus groups was the publication of a series of textbooks. An important feature of these books was their "how to" nature, which enabled readers to learn the use of the method without additional training. In terms of citations, this meant that authors who used focus groups could justify their practices simply by referencing one of these sources. This meant that as the popularity of focus groups increased, so did the citations to these textbooks.

Figure 2 charts the number of citations in the SSCI both to focus groups in general and to the major texts on this method, as listed in Table 1.

Figure 2 contains two curves, both from the SSCI. The solid line shows the growth in the number of mentions of focus groups, in either the titles, abstracts, or keywords of articles listed in the SSCI. Of course, some of this growth is due to the expansion of the SSCI to include more social science titles over this period, but

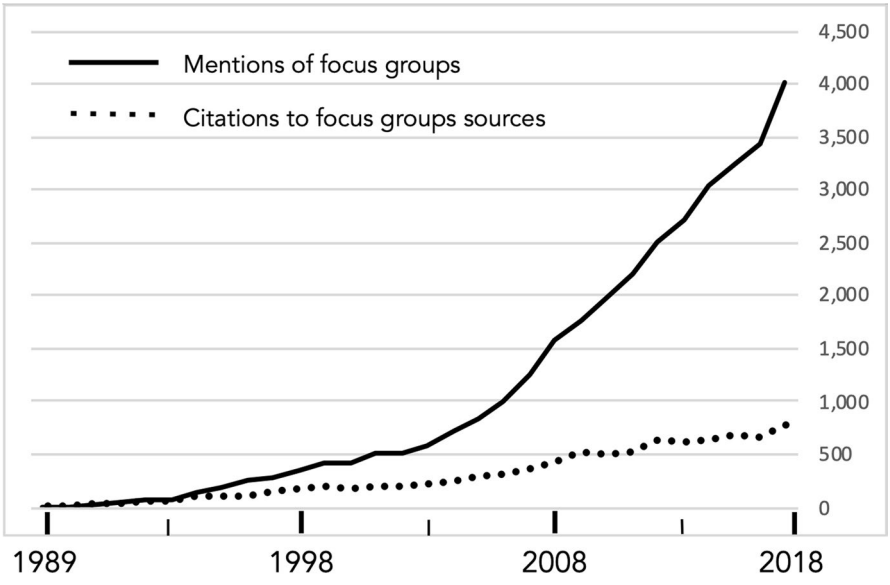

Fig. 2 SSCI Articles that Mentioned Focus Groups and that Cited Focus Group Textbooks

Table 1 Citations to Focus Group Textbooks, SSCI 1989–2019

Krueger (1988)	5229 citations
Morgan (1988)	3222 citations
Stewart and Shamdesani (1990)	1301 citations
Bloor et al. (2001)	494 citations
Merton et al. (1956)	431 citations
Vaughn et al. (1996)	315 citations
Barbour (2007)	255 citations

Where multiple editions of a book exist, the reference is to the first edition

taken in combination with the pattern in Fig. 1, it seems highly likely that much of the increase is indeed due to a renewed interest in focus groups.

This new interest is also reflected in the dotted line, which shows the number of citations to any of the eight textbooks listed in Table 1. Comparing the two curves, the upper line shows a much more rapid growth rate, with an increasing gap between the overall number of articles that mention focus groups and those that cite sources for the method.

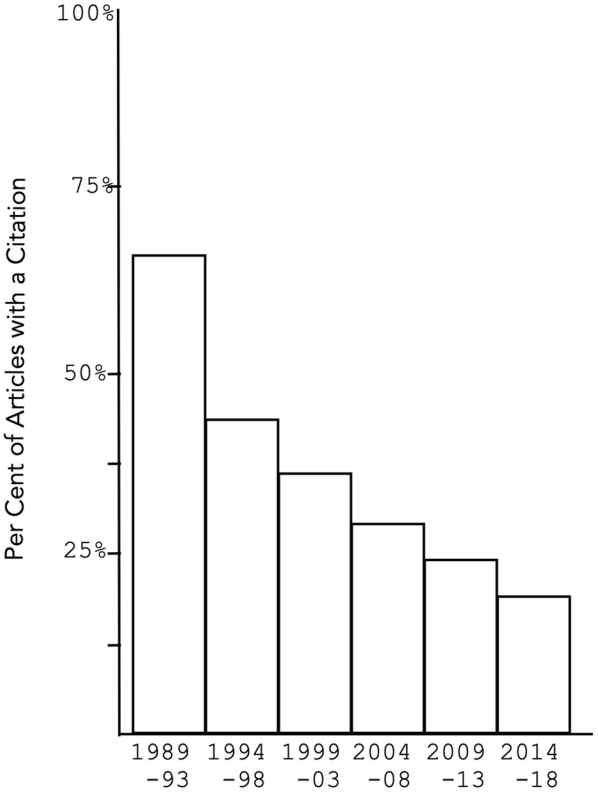

Fig. 3 Likelihood that an Article Mentioning Focus Groups Will Also Cite a Source for the Method

McCain (2012, 2014) identifies this as a classic indication of OBI. The pattern McCain identified compares the earliest articles on a topic, which are much more likely to cite a source, to later articles that take readers' knowledge of the topic for granted. In the earliest five-year period shown in Fig. 3, over 70% of the articles that mentioned focus groups also included a reference to a textbook. By the most recent period, however, this figure had dropped to less than 25%. In other words, the use of focus groups and its basic procedures became so well-known that there is less and less need for an explicit citation.

Combining the patterns shown in Figs. 2 and 3 indicates that those who reawakened Merton's original contributions saw the recognition of their work steadily decrease as the popularity of the method increased–a classic case of obliteration by incorporation.

Merton and the Uses for Focus Groups

One further topic that Merton addressed in his 1987 article was what he considered to be the "misuses" of focus groups. Referring to his team's original war-time application of the method, he stated "emphatically" that, "for us, qualitative focused group-interviews were taken as sources of new ideas and new hypotheses, not as demonstrated findings with regard to the extent and distribution of the provisionally identified qualitative patterns of response. Those ideas and hypotheses had to be checked out by further survey research" (pp. 557–558). In this particular context, Merton was speaking about marketing researchers who used focus groups as standalone sources of data, but his judgements would certainly apply to social scientists who did the same.

More than 30 years later, Merton's preferences about the uses for focus groups are more widely ignored than followed. Certainly, focus groups are often used to generate hypotheses, but the claim that those ideas need to be followed-up by quantitative research now seems quite old-fashioned. To be fair to Merton, he was specifically concerned about "the extent and distribution" of the qualitative findings, but the idea that qualitative results can be quite valuable in their own right is now well established, as are focus groups as a means to producing such results.

Conclusions

Overall, the data reported here show that the history of focus groups in the social sciences changed very little between the method's origins in 1941 and Merton's final remarks on it in 1987. Since then, however, Merton's modest innovation has grown in status to the point that it is the basis for thousands of articles per year. There is, of course, no way of knowing what Merton would think of this development, but it is beyond doubt that his role as "father of the focus group" made a major contribution to the field of social science research methods.

Further, as Merton suggested in his 1987 article, the history of focus groups is indeed an "interesting strategic research site…for intellectual diffusion" (p. 562). In particular, it is a noteworthy example of the process by which collective memory is actively constructed and reconstructed in the social sciences (Beim, 2007). Thus, in one of their earliest reintroductions to sociology (Morgan & Spanish, 1984), focus groups were identified as a "new" method that was a product of marketing research, a view which was almost immediately rewritten, once Merton's original priority was recognized.

It can be too easy to portray the history of research methods as relatively fixed, rather than as something that has a distinctive evolutionary path. Focus groups provide an especially visible counterpoint to that assumption. Merton himself enjoyed disputing such assumptions, as he demonstrated in his extended investigation of Newton's statement that, if he had seen farther, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants (Merton, 1965). It is thus a final bit of irony that focus groups researchers were only too happy to surrender their earlier claim of origins in marketing research and instead climb upon the shoulders of a giant in American sociology!

Authors' Contributions Single author.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Approved.

Consent for Publication Approved.

Conflict of Interest I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.

References

Barbour, R. (2007). Doing focus groups. Sage.
Beim, A. (2007). The cognitive aspects of collective memory. *Symbolic Interactionism, 30*, 7–26.
Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001). Focus groups in social research. Sage.
Catterall, M. & Maclaran, P. (2007). *Focus groups in marketing research*. In R. Belk (ed.) Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing research (p. 255–267). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
Finch, E., & Munro, V. (2008). Lifting the veil: The use of focus groups and trial simulations in legal research. *Journal of Law and Society, 35*, 30–51.
Gorry, P., & Aichouchi, A. (2017). *Sleeping beauty awakened by self-citation of a review: A case study of Judah Folkman hypothesis on angiogenesis. Presented at the international conference on*. Scientometrics & Informetrics.
Krueger, R. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage.

Lee, R. (2010). The secret life of focus groups: Robert Merton and the diffusion of a research method. *American Sociologist, 41*, 115–141.
Li, J. (2014). Citation curves of "all-elements-sleeping-beauties": "Flash in the Pan" first and then "delayed recognition". *Scientometrics, 100*, 595–601.
McCain, K. (2012). Assessing obliteration by incorporation: Issues and caveats. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 63*, 2129–2139.
McCain, K. (2014). Obliteration by incorporation. In B. Cronin & C. Sugimoto (Eds.), *Beyond Bibliometrics: Harnessing multidimensional indicators of scholarly impact* (pp. 129–151). MIT Press.
Merton, R. (1938). Science, technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England. *Osiris, 4*, 360–632.
Merton, R. (1957). Priorities in scientific discovery: A chapter in the sociology of science. *American Sociological Review, 22*, 635–659.
Merton, R. (1965). *On the shoulders of giants: A Shandean postscript*. Harcourt.
Merton, R. (1979). Forward. In E. Garfield (Ed.), *Citation indexing - its theory and application in science, technology, and humanities*. Wiley.
Merton, R. (1987). The focused interview and focus groups: Continuities and discontinuities. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 51*, 550–566.
Merton, R. (1988). The Matthew effect in science. *ISIS, 79*, 606–623.
Merton, R., & Kendall, P. (1946). The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology, 51*, 541–557.
Merton, R., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P. (1956). *The focused interview*. Free Press.
Merton, R., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P. (1990). *The focused interview* (2nd ed.). Free Press.
Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Sage.
Morgan, D. (2019). *Basic and advanced focus groups*. Sage.
Morgan, D. & Spanish, M. (1984). Focus groups: A new tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology, 7*, 253–269.
Morgan, D. & Fellows, C. (2008). *Focus groups and public opinion*. In W. Donsbach & M. Traugott (eds.), Sage handbook of public opinion research (pp. 340–347). Sage Publications.
Rogers, E. (2004). *A history of communication study: A biographical approach* (2nd ed.). The Free Press.
Stewart, D., & Shamdesani, P. (1990). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Sage.
van Raan, A. (2004). Sleeping beauties in science. *Scientometrics, 59*, 461–466.
Vaughn, S., Schumm, J., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Sage.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.